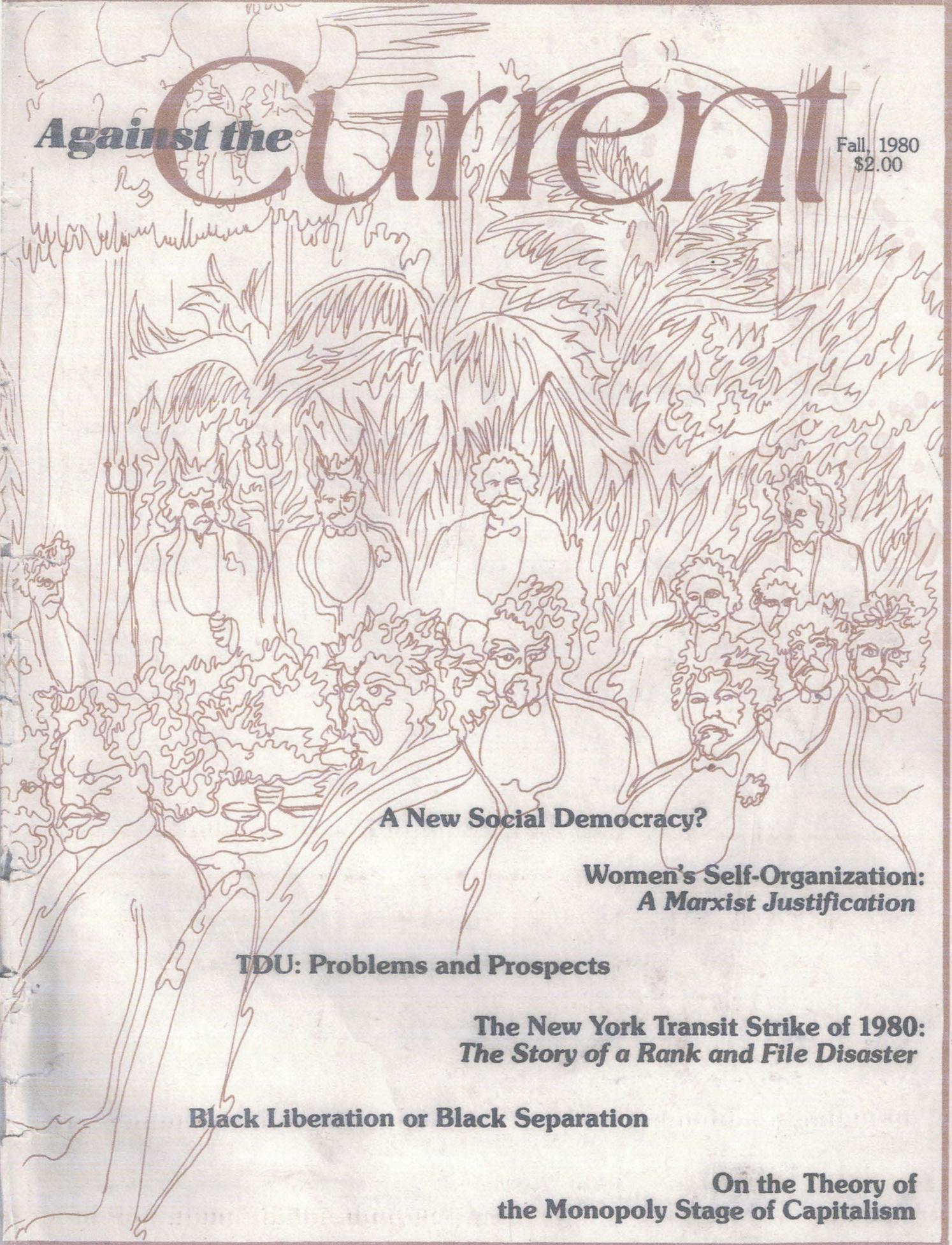


Against the

Current

Fall, 1980
\$2.00



A New Social Democracy?

**Women's Self-Organization:
A Marxist Justification**

TDU: Problems and Prospects

**The New York Transit Strike of 1980:
The Story of a Rank and File Disaster**

Black Liberation or Black Separation

**On the Theory of
the Monopoly Stage of Capitalism**

Cover illustration by Richard Lichtenstein



X-523

Against the Current

a socialist quarterly magazine sponsored by Workers Power

Fall, 1980

Vol. 1, No. 1

Against the Current	4
A New Social Democracy? <i>Robert Brenner</i>	6
The New York Transit Strike of 1980: The Story of a Rank and File Disaster <i>Steven Burghardt</i>	18
Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification <i>Johanna Brenner</i>	24
TDU: Problems and Prospects <i>Dave Wolfensohn</i>	33
On the Theory of the Monopoly Stage of Capitalism <i>Steve Zeluck</i>	44
Black Liberation or Black Separation <i>Joel Jordan</i>	53

Editors

Robert Brenner
Steve Zeluck

Editorial Associates

Alice Amsden
John Amsden
Eric Berg
Johanna Brenner
Mike Davis
Tod Ensign
Sam Farber
Carl Feingold
Sam Friedman
Hedda Garza
Jack Gerson
Lorin Goldner
Lil Joe Johnson
Nancy Holmstrom
Seymour Kramer
Dick Logan
Ed Ott
Alice Peurala
Charles Post
Steve Rose
Alan Schiffman
Michel Schoen
Anthony Thigpen
Juliet Ucelli
Milton Zaslow

Art Production

Richard Lichtenstein

Production Manager

Susan Armbruster

Against the Current

The 1970's have been a baffling, paradoxical and at times disastrous period for the American Left.

On the one hand, by 1970, the U.S. had entered a period of profound crisis in which its long-time hegemony on the world scene was being severely undermined. The fundamental character of the crisis is expressed above all by the steady decline of the nation's industrial heartland. From Boston to Chicago, the cities decay as they watch the decline of their industrial base in steel, rubber, auto, electrical manufacturing, to name only the most prominent. The unparalleled inflation and negative balance of payments are just the monetary expressions of this crisis. Indeed, the increased dispersal of U.S. capital to its industrial plants abroad has raised the spectre of the U.S. entering upon that road which England has been treading for half a century—a tendency toward, and danger of, deindustrialization.

This structural crisis has its ideological and political counterparts. Viet-Nam, Watergate and the "energy crisis" have contributed to widespread alienation and a sense of impotence and cynicism about American political institutions. Massive voter abstentionism is just one manifestation of this disenchantment.

The working class movement in general, and the Left in particular, confront this situation in a confused and disorganized condition. The trade unions labor under the control and disorientation of a leadership whose degree of bureaucratization is unprecedented. This leadership is committed to business unionism, which today assumes the especially virulent form of acquiescing in the attacks on the nation's workers in recognition of the "need to maintain profitability". The promising rank and file upsurge in the late '60s and early '70s was beheaded by the bureaucracy. As a result, the working class, unable to find either political or organizational solutions to its crisis, has retreated, unsure of a way forward, unable to adequately combat the employers' economic offensive.

Outside the unions, the picture is no more reassuring. Despite limited defensive struggles, the movement of Blacks and Hispanics has not retained the great power it displayed in the sixties. Nor have they solved the problem of their isolation from their necessary allies, the powerful sectors of the organized working class, although they can hardly be assigned full responsibility for this.

The women's movement has continued its ideological and practical challenge to sexism and patriarchy. But it is weakened by its inability to establish deep roots among working class women. It is in fact

experiencing defeats today, with its difficulties regarding ERA approval, and the setback on abortion.

Finally, the Left is still working in a situation that was created by its historical and more immediate failures. It is divided into a hundred competing groups. Some of them are separated only by differences which, because of the Left's isolation, cannot be tested in practice. None of them has an organic, not to mention healthy, relationship with the working class. And none has a body of theory rooted in the specific historic experience of the American working class. The Left affected vigorous interventions in the sixties, its struggle against the war in Viet-Nam and its pioneering contributions to the Black, women's and gay movement. But it did not find a way to integrate these struggles into a working class movement for socialism.

Instead, in many ways, the Left has continued to be dominated by various forms of substitutionism—the attempt to avoid or get around the fundamental premise that the "emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself".

In the '60s, substitutionism largely took the form of Third Worldism. Making the simplistic assumption that the working class in the advanced countries had been "bought off" and integrated, revolutionists were diverted from the building of a working class movement in the U.S.

Others, revolutionized by the events of '68, have retreated in recent years to a dependence on left trade union leaders (the new social democracy), and away from the mobilization of the working class rank and file.

Finally, substitutionism has taken the form of "partyism". One group after another, largely isolated from the working class, has proclaimed itself "the party". Invariably, these self-appointed vanguards are bureaucratic centralist. They attempt to make their organization *take the place* of the self-organization of the working class, instead of tapping the power and creativity of the workers autonomous organizations, from rank and file movements to workers councils.

There are however more positive developments. New currents have emerged which, though divided from each other by experience, tradition and often vocabulary, may, over a period of time, be able collectively to build a revolutionary socialist organization—one which is democratic in its practice and internal life, and oriented to the working class at the workplace and in the community.

Scattered regenerative forces open to this project have arisen in several quarters. One has its roots in the best of the democratic, open, self-reliant tradition

of the New Left. This trend is best exemplified by collectives doing working class organizing in both the community and the workplace. Paralleling and intermeshed with these groups are many socialists whose politics were inspired by Third World ideologies and the revolutionary images of the cultural revolution. In the last years, events in China have led many to reevaluate their positions. The consolidation of bureaucratic rule in China, and its increased international links with the most reactionary currents in American and European capitalism, can no longer be seen as isolated errors but must be understood as organically interrelated. As a result, there exists a growing readiness to explore the meaning of these developments for the construction of a revolutionary, democratic politics.

The emergence of these revolutionary currents, searching for political coherence and organization is occurring in a period in which the international economic and political crisis of capitalism gives every evidence of being both sustained and substantial. This is not to say that we can expect any automatic or immediate eruption of a new workers movement. But in view of the long-term loss of confidence in American political institutions, there can be no return to the stability and consensus of the '50s, and we can expect openings for the intervention of socialists.

It is the possibility of drawing together the emerging revolutionary elements in the face of the deepening social crisis which encourages us to assume the task of creating a magazine to be an instrument for open exchange, regroupment and rearming of the movement for socialist revolution. This magazine will seek to establish revolutionary Marxism as a clearly demarcated pole of attraction to the non-sectarian Left. It will be distinguished by its commitment to the following principles: (1) Workers' self-emancipation as exemplified by the role of workers councils in

Russia in 1917, in the Spanish Revolution in 1936, in Hungary in 1956, as well as in the embryonic workers councils and neighborhood councils which were built by the masses in Chile and Portugal in the last revolutionary upsurge; (2) a radical break with reformism and social democracy; (3) the rejection of Stalinism and all forms of bureaucratic and elitist rule; (4) unconditional support for independent organization by oppressed groups.

We do not see the magazine in isolation from the indispensable task of building a revolutionary socialist organization in the U.S. For we do not believe that theory can develop apart from involvement in the class struggle. Consequently, we believe that the growth, effectiveness and ideological quality of the magazine will depend upon the emergence over time of a revolutionary political organization. We see the regroupment of emerging revolutionary elements as part of this process—a process in which **Against the Current** hopes to play a catalyzing role.

The development of a theory and strategy for revolution in America being the central question, the magazine will place special emphasis on the specific character of American capitalist development and, above all, on the evolution of the working class—how that evolution shapes its current practice as well as the intervention of socialists.

We do not have the illusion, even if our numbers were greater than they are, that we alone can carry out the task of political rearming the movement. It will therefore be an essential concern of the magazine to involve other groups and individuals in our work by means of contributions, exchanges and debates. Indeed, the magazine must have as one central purpose the encouragement of a dialogue with other sectors of the revolutionary Left without which the regroupment of revolutionary forces in the U.S. can only be stillborn.

Please enter my subscription to *Against the Current* for one year. I have enclosed a check for payment of 4 issues including Vol. 1, No. 1.

- \$7.00 individual \$15.00 institutions
 \$12.00 other countries
 Send for information about airmail and first-class rates.
 \$25 sustainer's subscription

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Make checks payable to: *Against the Current*: 45 West 10th Street (2G), New York, N.Y. 10011

A New Social Democracy?

by ROBERT BRENNER

I. A STRATEGY FROM THE TOP DOWN

These have been difficult times for the American Left. Understandably, we seek indications that the situation is changing, that the recent experience of low levels of opposition by the working class and oppressed groups is ending. But whether we look at the response of the rank and file of organized labor to the economy-wide attacks on wages and working conditions, at the efforts of unorganized workers to get rudimentary union representation, or at the struggles of Black and Latino communities to combat the vicious attacks on their basic services and their standard of living, the picture remains relatively bleak. Resistance does go on; flare-ups continue to occur within the unions, at the workplace, and in the community. Nonetheless, there have been few struggles of any scope, and even fewer victories.

Given our apparent powerlessness, it is perhaps not surprising that some leftists have managed to find promising "signs" of forward motion in unexpected places—notably, up above, most especially among the leaders of the "left wing" of the trade union movement, but also on the "left" of the Democratic Party and among the official leadership of the Black community, ministers and politicians. In one of the most widely-hailed statements by a labor leader in many years, UAW President Doug Fraser revealed that there was a "one sided class war" going on against the U.S. working class. Accordingly, Fraser felt obliged to withdraw from John T. Dunlop's Labor Management Group (the rather explicit goal of which was indeed labor management), where he had toiled alongside the chairmen of Bechtel Corp., General Electric, General Motors, Jewel Companies Inc., du Pont de Nemours, U.S. Steel, Mobil Oil and the First National City Bank, as well as the presidents of a number of other major unions. In his resignation speech Fraser announced his intention to "reforge links with those who believe in struggle: the kind of people who sat down in the factories of the 1930s and who marched in Selma in the 1960s." Subsequently he convened the "Progressive Alliance"; and at its first meeting, some 100 representatives from a number of labor unions, as well as from women's, racial and ethnic, civil rights, environmental, consumer and social action groups turned up, and proclaimed their intention to return to the grass roots.¹

Part of the same tendency, William Winpisinger, president of the International Association of Machinists, has adopted an even more militant sounding stance than Fraser. He has joined the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (to which Fraser is also linked), and as a self-styled socialist, has come out in favor of "curbing corporate control of the economy," especially by "fine tuning capitalism with a little dose of socialism." Winpisinger has demanded nationalization of food and energy companies, socialization of health care, tax reform that will soak the rich, full employment, defense budget cuts, a break up of monopoly corporations, and organization of the the unorganized. On occasion, he has proclaimed it necessary to bring new pressures to bear on Democratic Party congressional representatives who have failed to live up to their reform programs, and he has even considered the formation of a labor party.²

It is clearly in response to developments such as these that a section of the New American Movement (NAM), which emerged in the early 1970s out of the New Left as a self-described revolutionary socialist organization, has declared its intention to work closely with DSOC. The latter is a frankly social democratic organization, which has long had an explicit strategy of building a working class base by forging links with "left" trade union officials and pursuing an electoral strategy within the Democratic Party. This move is less important in itself than for what it represents. The low level of militant workplace and community activity has led a growing number of leftists to despair of the chances of building rank and file and community movements. So they have sought more "realistic" and "hard-headed" alternatives. To them, the

"motion" of leaders like Fraser and Winpisinger prefigures the rise of a new kind of movement. This new, or more precisely, this revived theory and strategy for the American Left is not always well-defined, nor are the tactics which flow from it clearly elaborated. Nonetheless, its basic elements can easily be summarized, for it is a theory which has ancient roots.

In the more sophisticated version of this approach, the leaders of the labor movement, especially the "left wing" of labor officialdom, are "politically" in advance of their own rank and file. They understand, in particular, that there is a wide-ranging employers offensive under way. Beyond this, these leaders are aware that the employers offensive poses a life and death threat to the basic institutions from which they themselves draw their lifeblood—that is, the trade unions and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. On the rampage, the employers are undermining the strength of the unions, discrediting the leadership with the rank and file, and cutting the officials' cherished dues base. Through their new PACs (Political Action Committees), the capitalists are actually isolating the unions even in the Democratic Party—which the unions see as their major lever for winning reforms within the system.³

Thus, according to this line of thinking, the trade union left wing, along with its Democratic Party allies, has no choice but to resist, for their own position is at stake. They will therefore have to initiate actions, to put masses in motion, or at least create the conditions which will bring this about. Such motion will, in turn, generate a source of power which can be applied within the electoral arena, to force the Democratic Party to push for reforms . . . or, eventually, to

organize a new Party of Labor. On this basis, it will be possible to put forward a broad ranging program for change, a veritable "transitional program", which will encompass major restrictions on corporate power and large scale re-distribution of income. In this context, so goes the theory, it will once again be possible to place the question of socialism on the agenda.

The tactics which follow from this analysis are clear in their direction, if not always in their specific implementation. It is necessary to support the projects of the left moving trade union officials, leftist Black politicians and Democratic Party mavericks, and in particular to help them to elect the most "left" politicians. However, we are warned not to expect too much. For, we are reminded, these people are reformers, not revolutionaries. They will set in motion the struggle for reforms. It will *then* be up to us to provide a more radical political vision. But whatever their long term shortcomings, so it is said, we must give these people a chance, for they represent *the next step*, a veritable *social democratic stage*. "They will create the reformist sea in which the socialist fish can swim."

II. SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, A UTOPIA

Unfortunately, the strategy of building a "social democratic stage" as a prelude to, and as a basis for, a more radical movement down the road is a profoundly misleading one. For it is based on a failure to understand the nature of social democracy itself—and, in particular, what might be termed the classical paradox which has characterized its development since early in the 20th century. Thus, on the one hand, the rise of social democracy has depended upon tumultuous mass working class struggles. On the other hand, to the extent that social democracy has been able to establish itself, its leading representatives—drawn above all from the ranks of the trade union officialdom and parliamentary politicians—have inevitably attempted to win a secure place for "their" organizations within capitalist society. This however can only occur if these working class organizations can gain the tolerance and acceptance of the capitalist class. Consequently, the overriding tendency within social democracy has been not only to relinquish socialism as a goal and revolution as a means, but to set strict limits to working class struggle and the development of working class politics, even though, in the long run, this undermines the very foundations of social democracy itself.

To rely today, therefore, upon "emergent social democratic forces" in the U.S. is to insure one's inability to confront the fundamental, and difficult, problem facing the American Left: how to begin to transform the profoundly unfavorable balance of class forces by rebuilding the self-activity, organization, and socialist politics of the working class. Those erstwhile *revolutionaries* who today look to a *social democratic stage* in order to begin to achieve this end, disarm themselves in advance for the task. For they must base themselves upon social forces, above all the "left" trade union officials, and "social democratic" politicians, who are in fact profoundly antagonistic to the idea of mobilizing working class self-activity. At the same time, in allying with such forces, they are compelled to adopt their favored strategic options—most especially the parliamentary approach. In the absence of mass working class action against the employers, these tactics have proven completely ineffectual against the growing attack from capital in crisis. To adopt

parliamentarism as the key to one's strategy is to ratify the current situation of working class powerlessness.

In turn, to the extent that these ineffective reformist strategies continue to predominate within the active sections of the working class and Left movements, they will lead—inevitably, as they already have—to a strengthening of the political Right. To the degree working people are unable to fight back against capital, sections among them—most especially the better off, unionized, white male sections—will inevitably attempt to safeguard their economic position by allying with their "own" corporations at the expense of the worse off sections of the working class—the unorganized, the blacks, the latinos, the women. This can only pave the way to the further rise of racism, sexism and national chauvinism.

All this is not just logic, or ancient history. Perhaps the greatest irony of the current trend in the U.S. toward a "new social democracy" is that it appears after a decade in which social democratic forces of one type or another moved to center stage and were found wanting. By the mid 70's, throughout most of Europe, the social democratic and Communist parties had succeeded in channeling the tumultuous energies of the mass movements of the previous years into the parliamentary arena in order to achieve practically unprecedented positions of *apparent* power. How did they use this power? They helped impose policies of sacrifice upon the working class, while undermining its fighting organizations. The consequence has been *not* an opening to the left, but a vast demoralization in the working class, which has naturally hurt revolutionaries as well as social democrats. Thus again we have our paradox: any emergence of a new *social democratic stage* will depend upon the rise of a newly-militant and newly-political working class movement. But this necessary movement will have to develop largely *outside and against* social democracy itself.

FROM TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY TO SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?

A. Activity, Power, Consciousness

It should be a commonplace within the Left that the indispensable condition for beginning to reconstruct working class power and *political consciousness* is direct action by working people against the employers in the factories and the offices, as well as in the streets. For, in general, it is only where working people have, *in fact*, broken through their own passivity by developing their own power through collective struggle that ideas for transforming the world can appear at all realistic, or practical. Indeed, classically, it is, at those junctures when working people, in the course of their struggle, have succeeded in forging alliances with groups beyond their own established organizations (e.g. the unions)—to the unorganized, to the unemployed, to the neighborhoods—that strategies based on socialist assumptions appear most relevant. In other words, it is in the course of actually constituting themselves as a class, that the ideas of class struggle come to seem a sensible way to grasp the world.

For these reasons, abrupt changes in the scope and depth of working class activity (changes generally beyond the power of any particular group of socialists to initiate) have tended to be the condition for *qualitative* transformations of political organization and consciousness, such as the break-

Against the Current

through from craft to industrial unions, and the rise of the mass social democratic parties. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, more than three quarters of a century ago, as a rule, "the unconscious movement precedes the conscious movements." As she described the dynamics of the classical "mass strike" development: "*the first direct action reacted inward . . . as if for the first time awakened class feeling and class consciousness . . . This awakening of class feelings expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian mass . . . quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was that social and economic existence which they had endured for decades.*" The result, as she goes on to describe, was not *merely* the emergence of unprecedented forms of organization, involving previously disorganized layers, around novel demands, but the placing of socialism itself once more on the agenda.⁴

It is the profound link between the workers' self-activity and their changing consciousness, as well as the episodic and explosive character of major working class action, which makes a mockery of all gradualist and stagist political strategies. The persistent attachment of social democratic organizations to such approaches, despite their continuing failure, cannot however be attributed to bad judgment, which might be subject to change. For social democratic politics can only be understood in terms of the specific place of social democratic organizations within capitalist society today—above all, their roots in the modern trade union bureaucracies.

B. What is the Trade Union Bureaucracy?

Any political strategy which depends upon a revitalized social democracy must look to the trade union officialdom, especially its "left wing". As the best organized sections of the working class, the trade unions have naturally provided much of the muscle behind the socialist and Communist parties, around the world. In turn, the leaderships of the trade unions have shaped and implemented the policies of these parties.

The trade union bureaucracy is a contradictory phenomenon. It is shaped by conflicting forces, which pull it in conflicting directions. The labor bureaucracy needs, in fact, to be understood from two sharply opposing angles simultaneously. *On the one hand*, it grows from the very soil of class struggle; it reflects workers consciousness and organization; and, in the last analysis, it finds its only *real* material base in the organized working class. *On the other hand*, the labor bureaucracy constitutes a distinct social layer, a distinct social interest, separated from the working class, and seeking to free itself from dependence upon it by securing the acceptance of capital. It, therefore, tends to pose a powerful obstacle to the development of working class struggle, even though—and this is the ultimate contradiction of its position—that struggle is its ultimate source of sustenance.

The Trade Union Bureaucracy as Reflective of Class Struggle

Of course, the basic condition for the existence of the trade union officialdom is the establishment of the trade union itself. Normally this takes place through conflicts in which the union is imposed upon the employer. Indeed, unionization tends to take place in spurts, in the context of explosive working class struggles. Nevertheless, although trade

unions are generally *formed* at a high point of class struggle, they more normally operate in an environment shaped by the relatively low level of working class activity and by relative capitalist stability. Indeed, in "normal" times, trade union activity is by its very nature, sharply limited in scope: the trade union organizes workers only from a particular firm, craft, or industry. Attempts to spread struggles beyond these confines or give them a more political thrust do not as a rule meet with success. In such periods, the *limited character* of working class activity *appears* to be its "natural" and "permanent" character. It, therefore, tends to form the material basis, the starting point, for the formation of working class consciousness. Class-wide attacks upon the prerogatives of the capitalists appear off the agenda. A majority of working people conclude, therefore, that they must accept the basic ground rules of the capitalist system—especially the requirement for capitalist profitability as the basis of the system. Thus arises reformism in the working class—the world view and strategy for action which sees the capitalist property system as essentially unassailable, but declares the "right" of workers to get their "fair share" within it. This view finds practical support in the real experience of working people, in certain limited historical periods such as the post-war prosperity, when limited struggles can yield positive gains.

Under the foregoing conditions, *any* trade union leaders, no matter what their ultimate political goal, will be obliged to make certain compromises with capital. To do otherwise would be to ignore the unfavorable balance of forces at that moment and invite suicidal defeat. The recognition of this dynamic—which is in certain periods the dominant one—constitutes the element of realism in the argument of reformists. They see the actions of labor officials, in particular the labor "lefts", as *merely* reflecting the balance of class forces and expressing the reigning working class consciousness. At the same time, this is the aspect of capitalist development and class struggle which is persistently overlooked by those leftists who insist on living in a fantasy world where, at every moment, the working class is chafing at the bit to fight the capitalists, and is being held back only by the misleadership of the union officials.

Nevertheless, the viewpoint that the political limitations of today's trade union officials are simply a mirror of the political limitations of the rank and file—and that the "left" officials would do a lot more, if only the ranks weren't so politically backward—is a static conception that is profoundly misleading. Although the trade union bureaucracy, and its political conservatism, tend to develop as working class self-organization, militancy, and political consciousness tends to decline, the reverse is not true. As the class struggle ascends, the transformation of workers' self-activity creates the potential for large numbers to transcend reformist consciousness. But the trade union bureaucracy does not correspondingly dissolve. On the contrary, it forms a powerful barrier to the movement's development. Certainly, in the face of growing workers' struggles, some sections of the trade union officialdom can be expected to adapt by "moving to the left." But even as they do so, and thereby attempt to maintain their leadership of the movement, they can be expected to try to keep it under their control, within certain definite limits. It is this profoundly conservative pattern of action which expresses the emergence of the trade union leadership as a distinct social layer.

THE TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY AS A DISTINCT SOCIAL LAYER

Thus, the rise of the trade union bureaucracy reflects not merely a negative shift in the balance of class forces faced by trade union leaders, but a *change in their social position, social activity, and above all, their social interests*. Labor officials no longer work alongside those they represent. This is fundamental. The conditions of their very survival are no longer immediately and directly bound up with that of the rank and file workers. They are not *directly* affected by the pressure from the employers upon working conditions and wages. Nor is their ability to defend their own conditions of life, as it is for the rank and file, *immediately* dependent upon their capacity to build a counterforce by organizing their fellow workers. Instead, the *apparent* social basis for the existence of the trade union officials becomes the union organization for which they work and, in that connection, the increasingly self-conscious group of trade union officials who tend to operate the union. It is easy to understand how, in this situation, there is an irresistible *tendency* for the trade union officials to treat the union organization as an end in itself, rather than a means to defend the workers—to come to confuse the interest of the organization upon which they depend with the interests of the workers.

The trade union officials naturally understand that the fundamental threat not only to the workers whom they represent, but the organizations on which they depend is the capitalist class—a class “permanently” self-organized, “permanently” dominant. The indispensable condition for the trade unions’ survival, and, therefore, the officials own continued existence as officials, is “recognition by the capitalists”. Of course, the cause for such recognition *in the first place* is the power, or potential power, exerted by organized workers. Apart from this power, the capitalists would have no reason to recognize the union, as anyone who has ever tried to organize a non-union shop knows.

Nonetheless, the trade union leaders understand the fluctuating strength and potential weakness of the organized workers who are their initial and ultimate source of strength. They also understand that even at the height of class struggle, especially at that point, there is an enormous risk of defeat, indeed the destruction of “their” organizations. More and more, therefore, to the extent that they are allowed to do so by their membership, they attempt to protect the organization (and, in their minds, the membership) by pursuing a course designed to secure the employers’ tolerance. By the same token, they aim to prevent, at all costs, confrontations set off by militant workers, which could call forth potentially catastrophic reprisals from the employers.

Of course, to actually secure the tolerance of the employers for the union, the officials must be prepared for a “trade-off”—a concession of some sort to the needs of the capitalists, inevitably the pledge to reduce labor disturbances and to enforce labor discipline. This is not to say, that the trade union officialdom is invariably capable of carrying out such a policy. To the extent that working class organization and initiative at the base is maintained, the independence of the bureaucracy may be limited. Correspondingly, the capitalists are willing to make this “deal” only under certain conditions, since it is not without cost to them. Thus, for the trade union officials to be able effectively to enforce labor discipline, they must, simultaneously, be able to maintain the allegiance of the majority of the workers, and be able to iso-

late the militants. This means the capitalists must be prepared to make concessions to the workers, for which the officials can take credit, thereby strengthening their own position vis a vis the rank and file. The capitalists will pursue such a course only to the degree that they are forced to by the organized strength of the workers and/or to the degree that it is worth their while to insure smooth production under conditions of high profitability. In any event, the overall tendency on the part of the officials is not in doubt.

The characteristic processes which led to the actual consolidation of the trade union bureaucracy have become broadly familiar. Indeed, the U.S. unions are so organizationally hardened, that *compared to them*, European unions are democratic and responsive havens. So that if it is difficult to make a case for dependence upon a “left” leadership in Europe, for the U.S. it borders on the absurd.

Thus typically, there was, *from the first*, a tendency on the part of the officials to renounce those broader forms of struggle which provide the ground for the rise of radical politics and organization. They rejected not only militant direct action which threatened private property prerogatives, but especially organization going beyond the immediate workplace in order to link organized with unorganized, employed with unemployed, etc. Of course, the fact is that the movement which established the CIO unions depended precisely upon these sorts of struggles from the general strikes of Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco, which broke the ice in 1934, to the sitdowns in auto and rubber which created the UAW and the URW in 1936-37. Those struggles were carried out almost entirely by initiatives from the rank and file, with revolutionaries playing a critical role. They were almost unanimously opposed by the existing AFL trade union officialdom. True, a group of officials, led by John L. Lewis, did “break to the left” and align themselves with the mass movement which became the CIO. But even as they did, they did their best to keep the struggle within bounds (as we shall demonstrate below). They were wedded from the first to conservative methods of organizing. Already, by early 1937, they were setting their weight against sitdowns and wildcats, and in the process contributing mightily to the movement’s loss of momentum and growth.

Part of the attempt to curb the mass movement was the union officials’ drive to rid *themselves* of all excess ideological baggage. Socialists are fine for the union movement, so long as they confine themselves to “organizing” and put “politics” aside. Otherwise, they pose a danger which must be eliminated. It was no accident that as early as 1940, the CIO officials were enforcing both anti-wildcat policies and anti-Communist loyalty oaths in their unions. Symptomatically, it was the self-styled “progressive” and “social democrat”, Walter Reuther, who took the lead in actually throwing the “reds” out of the unions in the later 1940s—and the UAW was the most militant and radical of the CIO unions.

Finally, as the broader forms of struggle and ideology were undermined, there was a push to curtail local militancy. It became possible to impose the new relations between the union officials and the companies, which have allowed the officials to substitute their functions as mediators for their task of organizing working class action.

Thus, the turning point in the consolidation of the trade union bureaucracy in the U.S. industrial unions undoubtedly-

Against the Current

ly took place during World War II. At this point, the union officials, having agreed to enforce the wartime no-strike pledge and wage controls saw their own membership base eroding. Why join a union, if it couldn't strike and wouldn't fight? In response, the CIO officials proposed, in the words of CIO President Phil Murray, to direct their "energies to the smoother operation of labor relations and the improvement of production" if the companies would, in turn, grant "union security", i.e., the union shop with automatic dues check off. In view of the enormous war profits being netted by the corporation, the government had little difficulty in convincing the corporations to accept this agreement.⁵ This deal served as the model for post-war industrial relations . . . modified, however, by the understanding that the companies had to be prepared to grant steady gains to the union membership, in order to allow the union officials to retain their authority and keep their side of the contact.

In this context, the union officials have been freed to develop more and more their own "organization within the organization" and their own special role. They negotiate a contract; there is an agreement not to strike throughout its duration; instead, officials settle disputes through grievance procedure and ultimately compulsory arbitration. It should therefore be crystal clear that the specialized jobs of the officials emerge as a result of the rise of the bureaucracy and as an expression of their interests as bureaucrats (and not that the bureaucracy arises to fulfill a necessary function). We are not, it should be emphasized, arguing for some abstract "iron law of bureaucracy." Nevertheless, it is our underlying premises that every "special interest" or "particular group" which can constitute itself within capitalism, will inevitably attempt to do whatever is necessary to adjust to the needs of capital—for *this is the only way it can survive*. Only the working class has another option, for the working class is the only "special interest" in society which has the potential for actually destroying and replacing capitalist production relations, rather than adjusting to them.

In any case, the officials "service" the rank and file, enforcing the contract in grievance procedure; but, as the other side of the "deal" they must also compel the membership to agree to and adhere to the contract. In order to impose these procedures on a routine basis, it becomes necessary to undercut rank and file organization at the shop floor level, as well as rank and file control over the trade union itself—to curtail union democracy. Only in these ways can the trade union officials free themselves, to the extent necessary, to be able to guarantee the agreements they make with the capitalists.

Yet, the labor officials never lose sight of their precarious position between profit hungry employers and an unreliable rank and file membership. In so far as they are allowed to do so, therefore, the bureaucracy inevitably and desperately seeks *external* guarantees for its position by turning to what it hopes can function as a neutral party, the state. It is to the state, conceived as standing above society with an interest above all in maintaining order, that the bureaucracy looks to step in and enforce the arrangements, formal and informal, between capital and labor. Such intervention, it should be clear, is conceived to be needed not only against the rebellious ranks, but against capital itself. As the bureaucracy leans less and less upon a demobilized rank and file, they look to the state to provide the necessary counterweight. Thus the AFI-CIO is no longer keen on fighting to repeal

anti-secondary boycott laws. (They actually forced the Farmworkers union to back off from plans to do so.) The proposed Labor Reform Bill of 1977 actually included, as a *labor proposal*, a provision that the courts issue injunctions against wildcats. The unions were not offering this as a concession to employers or Congressmen, but as an (*admitted*) aid to labor stability. And public employee unions privately assure legislators that they don't really want the right to strike. A government ordered Agency Shop is what they really want.

In this context, it must be emphasized that we need attribute no special cynicism to the labor bureaucrats in pursuing the policies they do. On the contrary, they view their interests as coinciding with the interests of society as a whole, and think their ideology expresses the "general interest." They are the prime apostles of piecemeal reform without conflict, and they are thus the leading architects of the institutions and policies that could conceivably make that possible. This means that they seek to build the classical labor-employer "collective bargaining" machinery. But equally important, they propose, for society as a whole, systematic intervention by the government to regulate the economy. Thus, perhaps more than any other group, they are the leading proponents of government attempts to regulate the dislocations they see as caused by capitalism's anarchy and its mal-distribution of income. They support government efforts at "planning" and especially, government deficit spending to solve the "problem of effective demand"—in short, the system of stopgaps that have come to be known as "Keynesianism." Through this approach, they intend to insure the continuance of capitalist profitability and thus economic growth, for that, in their view, is the indispensable condition for the survival of unions, and thus the security of their own and their members' interests.

Of course, in periods of real prosperity, the arrangements and policies upon which the unions depend can appear relatively solid, and seem to work. Thus for 20 years after WWII, the bureaucracy appeared to rise to great heights as the self-conscious agent of social peace. But in doing so, they succeeded in eroding their only real base, the organization and politicization of their membership. Thus they left themselves wide open to the attacks of capital, as the crisis deepened. It is to this development that we now turn.

III. SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE EMPLOYER'S OFFENSIVE

A. The Classic Dilemma:

To the extent that the advocates of a new, "social democratic stage" seek, as they must, to base themselves on the layer of "left" union officials, they pose for themselves a classic dilemma. The trade union officials offer them their only access to the working class. It is through the officials that they hope to propagate *their own "left" politics* in the working class. But these same officials have, in the U.S. and around the world, systematically set themselves against the rank and file movements which have periodically exploded within the unions. They react with horror at the prospect of the "mass strikes" in which socialists have naturally placed their hopes.

DSOC chairman, Michael Harrington recognized this dilemma in a recent interview. "If you say to me, 'Is it possible that someone who is now a member of DSOC in the union movement will be so fixed and anchored in the

bureaucracy they will be appalled by that rank and file movement and try to put it down?,' I guess; sure, its happened before and I suppose it will happen in the future. What will we do then? I hope we will go with the rank and file . . . but I'm sure that some of us might fail the test. There's no way you can anticipate."

In fact, classically, even those revolutionists who would pursue a strategy of first going through the social democratic "lefts", are forced to choose. They can base themselves on the development of working class activity, and relinquish their ties to the masses through the union bureaucracy. Or they can maintain their ties, but in doing so, they must accept the limitations imposed by the union officials.

The stage-theory socialists answer this dilemma by arguing that, under the threat of the employers' offensive, the officials will *have* to shift and seek support, even mobilize the ranks, if only to safeguard the bureaucrats *own* interests. But this analysis is mistaken both analytically and historically.

In the crisis, the 'left' union bureaucrats have characteristically pursued an optimizing strategy designed to cut one's losses. They have accepted certain setbacks, in order to minimize the risk of even greater losses. Thus they have refused to stand up to the employers for this is to risk total annihilation. Rather, they have absorbed without resistance long series of defeats in the hope that they can preserve their organizations (and their own positions) at least partially intact. Meanwhile they pray for better days down the road—a new period of economic expansion, which will allow them to resume their former roles and deals.

Let us now see how this has worked in practice.

B. Trade Union "Lefts" and the Economic Crisis

We can start with Fraser's famous walk-out, and complaint of the 'one sided class war'. Even in his moment of defiance, Fraser could hardly have been more clear about the role the officials had played for some thirty or forty years . . . and, indeed wished to play still. "The leaders of industry, commerce, and finance in the U.S. have broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a past period of growth and progress", he stated. The unions had done their part, but the employers have failed to hold their side of the bargain. General Motors, said Fraser, "has received responsibility, productivity, and cooperation from the UAW and its members. In return, GM has given us a Southern strategy designed to set up a non-union network that threatens the hard fought gains won by the UAW. We have given stability, and have been rewarded with hostility." Finally, came the scarcely veiled threat: "if corporations like General Motors want confrontation, they cannot expect cooperation in return from labor." Does this mean that Doug Fraser, and other labor officials, especially among the left wing, are preparing resistance to the corporate onslaught? There are more than a few reasons to doubt it. The one sided class war to which Fraser refers has been going on for more than a decade . . . with hardly a murmur of protest from the ranks of labor's officialdom, least of all its ostensible "left" or "social democratic" wing.

The imposition of Nixon's New Economic Policy, in the wake of the recession of 1970-71 was the definitive sign that the employers offensive was well under way. The NEP could not have been more clearly designed to re-distribute income away from the working class to the capitalists. Wages were frozen under the control of the wage price

board (with the help of hundreds of thousands of capitalists). Prices were allowed to rise (as no real mechanism was provided to enforce the mythical price freeze).

Meanwhile, in tandem, the employers were stepping up their attack in almost every industry. The result was significant worker rebellions. But in almost every case, workers had to take action in defiance—indeed against the direct opposition—of their officials. In March, 1970, over a quarter of a million Post Office employees defied the law and the National Guard, as well as their union "leaders." They shut down the mails in over 200 cities across the country, and won big gains. A couple of months later, thousands of teamsters covered by the National Master Freight Agreement conducted the first nationwide truckers strike ever. It was no accident that this unprecedented action was a wildcat strike—directed against the employers and the IBT bureaucracy. Over the next couple of years, there were similar struggles with similar opponents; the New York telephone wildcat in 1971, for example, and, of course, the exploding wildcat strike wave in the mines.

Was it any different in the bastions of the "left," above all, the UAW and the public workers unions, associated from their origins with militancy and social unionism?

The UAW

In close conjunction with the NEP, GM introduced its famous GMAD speed up system in its auto assembly operations. This made headlines around the world and helped make the question of "work" the center of national discussion. It also provoked a wave of working class revolt. Most famous, perhaps, was the six-month fight at Lordstown, Ohio, where GM had tried out its 100 car per hour assembly line. But an equally long and bitter, 26-week strike took place in Norwood, Ohio. Toward the end of 1972, rank and file pressure actually forced representatives from St. Louis Local 25 to demand a national strike of all GMAD plants. And, at a meeting of the UAW's GMAD council in Detroit, local presidents went so far as to ratify this plan.

The response of UAW President Leonard Woodcock and of the UAW staff could not have been more destructive. Instead of organizing a national strike, they instituted the so-called "Apache strategy." This called for strikes, *announced in advance*, to run in successive weeks at different GMAD plants for two or three days at a time. Given the advance warning and the shortness of the strikes, GM was naturally able to adjust its operations to make sure that these were not disrupted. On the other hand, it was hard to conceive of a tactic better-fitted to disorganize and demoralize worker militancy. For it broke their embryonic drive for unity; forced them to face the employer one at a time; and was pre-designed to prevent victory. It showed the workers precisely where their leaders stood, and succeeded in its purpose of breaking the movement.

If auto workers had somehow failed to get the message, things were made perfectly clear over the next several years, as Doug Fraser himself took the center stage. In the summer of 1973, black workers dramatically seized control of a Detroit Chrysler plant, protesting deteriorating conditions, terrible overheating, and racist foremen. To everyone's surprise they won an initial victory. But when the same sit-in tactic was tried a second time, the officials were ready. Fraser led more than 1000 UAW staffmen to physically smash the picket line outside the occupied plant and dis-

Against the Current

perse the operation.

This process of social unionists sellout, of course, reached its natural climax in the recent contract to save Chrysler.

The Public Worker Unions

The pattern in the public sector has paralleled that in auto: Here a "social democratic" or "left" leadership has assumed command to an extent probably unequaled anywhere else in the labor movement. Jerry Wurf, president of AFSCME and Victor Gotbaum, leader of New York's giant District 37, are both members of DSOC, and, District 37 is loaded with DSOCers at the local president and staff level, as well. Nonetheless, these "leftists" constitute the hard-core of the conservative wing of the public sector unionism. The irony is that it is the "apolitical" locals who have been most responsive to the pressures from the ranks within AFSCME. The militant strikes waged by public employees locals in response to the city and state governments' version of the employers offensive have had to take place independent of the "more advanced" and more "radical" leaders.

This has been above all true in New York, which had entered the 70's as perhaps the greatest stronghold of public employee unionism. When the crisis really hit in 1975, the rank and file responded vigorously, only to be crushed by their "left" leaders. In that year sanitation men went on a near unanimous wildcat. The leadership refused to budge and allowed the strike to be smashed. In the teachers union, the membership actually voted an official strike, but were forced back to work after one week by the bureaucrats (this time headed by conservative "socialist" Albert Shanker). In the wake of these, and other defeats, the social democratic officials have been freed to help turn the city over to the direction of the banks and corporations via the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC). They have concurred in the gutting of municipal service to the working class poor, with barely a rhetorical whimper. Over the past 5 years, 30,000 jobs have been surrendered, the remaining ones Taylorized. Class size of 40 in the NYC schools are common. Firehouses have been closing, while the number of fires has risen. One fifth of the public hospital beds are being eliminated. Libraries are on half-time. For this cooperation, the union leadership has not even received token recognition. Wages have gone up an average of 4% per year over the past five years.

Hero Winpisinger of the IAM

If Fraser-Gotbaum images are somewhat tarnished, what about the new hero of socialism, IAM President William Winpisinger? Wimpy has never tried to conceal his opposition to rank and file self-organization, past, present or future. "The leadership of a union is almost always an accurate reflection of the view of the membership," he said in a recent interview. What about the Teamsters, he was asked, surely a different sort of case? "Perhaps not", he replied, "it is up to the membership to change the situation." Then, concretely, does Winpisinger support the rank and file movement in that union? No. TDU and PROD are, to him "outside forces". "They asked me to back them", he said, "but I ask myself, 'Hell, what's to stop a bunch like that from coming in here and doing the same thing?'" In addition, Winpisinger denounced moderate steel workers union reformer Ed Sadlowski, and said he supported that union's notori-

ously reactionary leadership. He added that he saw no merit in Sadlowski's charge that the USW staff had been undemocratically mobilized against Sadlowski by asking "What's wrong with that? Doesn't the staff have democratic rights too?" Winpisinger added that Sadlowski had "burned his bridges" by running on a 'screw management' platform. "I view that as a kind of irresponsible populism."

C. The Two-Pronged Approach

Recognizing the problems of depending on the left trade union officials, some of the more sophisticated advocates of a 'tactical' turn toward the social democratic forces have put forward a more nuanced, two-pronged strategy. Ally with the "progressive" bureaucrats, but, at the same time, organize the ranks, independently, from below. There would be of course nothing wrong with such a tactic, if there existed a strong, independent rank and file movement. Then, and only then, might a tactical alliance be made—an alliance from strength, not dependence. But today no such movement exists. The question, therefore, is whether at the present moment a focus on allying with social democratic forces will not in fact prevent the organization of a rank and file movement which can retain its organizational and political independence of the bureaucracy. Can anyone seriously contend that the Frasers, Wurfs, Gotbaums, et al, will, at this juncture, ally with people on a political project, when they know that these same people are simultaneously opposing them in "their own unions"? To ask the question is to answer it.

D. Are Social Democratic Officials to the Left of The Ranks?

In the foregoing context, the argument commonly put forward that the ostensible "political" leftism of the trade union officials could be a significant tool to build a socialist politics among the rank and file workers is misguided in the extreme. Harrington, echoed by many others, has argued that the "labor bureaucracy, the labor leadership is . . . often to the left of the rank and file, particularly on social issues." He asserts, moreover, that having the bureaucrats publicly declare they are socialists "creates the possibility" for the rank and file, in Harrington's words, "to consider themselves socialists."

Nevertheless, the fact is that leftist, anti-corporate talk can carry little weight unless accompanied by a clear project for organizing direct action, hopefully mass action, against the corporations. This is because the major barrier today to working class adhesion to radical program and ideology is that these appear to be impractical. Despite all the fashionable talk about the need to build a "counter hegemony" to that of the capitalists, it is not, in the last analysis, just the barrage of the media or even capitalist control over the schools, however critical both of these are, which keeps the mass of working people in the U.S. "pro-capitalist." It is rather the belief, verified in all aspects of their day-to-day existence, that they do not have the power to make changes, which makes them indifferent or passive to programmatic or ideological alternatives.

For this reason, unless linked to projects for actually carrying out class struggle, all talk by social democrats like Harrington and his friends from the labor leadership of a "transitional program," of "structural reforms", or "new agendas"—however dressed up in pseudo-Gramscian lan-

guage—must end up as a cover for the officials' continuing refusal to organize to confront the employers. It is easy to call for some sweeping reform, at a *national* level through legislative action (and, therefore, beyond the responsibility of the individual trade union official). It is much harder to fight for and win some gains in working conditions or benefits at the local level of the plant or the union. Indeed, we can expect that even relatively conservative trade union officials will increasingly be "demanding" national health insurance, "30 hours' work for 40 hours' pay" and even a "labor party" (as did recently John Henning, head of the California Federation of Labor), long before they consider calling out their own membership in militant strike action over deteriorating working conditions, let alone a factory occupation of a closed down factory. Indeed, we should interpret the former as a *substitute* for the latter, designed to give the *impression* to the membership that the officials are fighting in their interests. The grand projects and programs of social democratic politicians such as Harrington only end up serving the same function. Is it an accident that Doug Fraser's Progressive Alliance, launched so short a time ago, amid such hoopla, and with such rhetorically impeccable intentions, has so quickly relinquished all pretensions of organizing a movement and transformed itself into a think-tank?

III. ILLUSIONS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ROAD

Because the proponents of a revived social democracy depend upon the labor officials as their primary political base, they are, in turn, forced to rely upon a parliamentary strategy as the main road to reform and to building a working class movement. Through the electoral/legislative process it appears to be possible to overcome the central dilemma facing the labor officials: how to retain their working class base of support without actually having to organize their membership for direct action. In election "campaigns", isolated individuals can be mobilized to cast their ballots, privately and individually, for the "pro-working class" candidates. In this way, it *appears* that power can be amassed, while the risks entailed in mass struggles such as strikes are avoided. Thus, contrary to the wishful thinking of some of the proponents of a new social democratic stage, labor officialdom has classically viewed parliamentarism as a *substitute* for mass action, and *not* a complement to it.

A. Why Parliamentarism Doesn't Work

Nevertheless, as has been shown time and again, to adhere to a primarily parliamentary strategy is to fall victim to the classic social democratic illusion. That is, that a balance of class forces favorable to the working class can be constructed "inside the state" through elections, *without* strengthening the workers against the capitalists in the shops and on the streets—and, worse still, that through the former, the latter can be achieved. This approach is illusory, for contrary to appearances, power in capitalist society is *not* exercised on a day-to-day basis primarily through the state. The capitalist class rules by virtue of its control over production. So long as capitalist property relations hold, the capitalist class, through its control over the decision to invest or not, holds the key to the development of the productivity of labor and to economic growth, and, in turn, to economic prosperity, social stability, and state revenue. Since capitalist investment depends on capitalist ability to make a profit,

then, short of revolution, all elements of society find it, sooner or later, in their long-term interest to ensure capitalist profitability. "What's good for GM is good for everyone" captures an important aspect of reality under capitalism.

In this context, it is easy to see why those who hold positions in the state, *even those elected on a program of representing the interests of the workers*, are under huge pressure to push policies which will safeguard profits. To do otherwise is to risk the malfunctioning of the economy. The politicians are aware that, short of challenging capitalist property itself—taking control of production away from the capitalists—it is impossible to carry out, *over an extended period*, anti-capitalist policies, without inviting the withdrawal of investment funds and ultimately economic chaos.

In fact, social democratic politicians can "capitulate to reality" even more easily than union leaders. Like the trade unions, the social democratic parties have evolved a bureaucratic apparatus to allow them to evade the anti-capitalist demands periodically put forward by the party rank and file. Moreover, the gulf which separates the social democratic politicians from the working class as a whole tends to be greater than that between union leaders and their members. The Party supposedly represents the "class as a whole". But since, in fact, the workers are able to organize themselves as a class only very rarely, the official party and its machine are generally under far less pressure from, or control by, their base than are the union officials. For union leaders must, at least in many cases, represent "sectional" groups of workers, who have been brought together in production and who have had experience of collective struggle in their unions and on the shop floor. Such workers are therefore sometimes in possession of at least some weapons to bring their leaders into line.

B. John L. Lewis and the Parliamentary Road The 1930's Upsurge:

From the very beginning, the parliamentary road has been the political strategy of U.S. union officials. This was the case even at the height of the class struggles of the 1930's. Even that handful of AFL officials who "broke to the left" in response to the labor upsurge to form the CIO, looked at every point to the government to achieve their goals. This was, above all, true of John L. Lewis. Lewis not only shaped the initial politics of the CIO. His approach was exemplary for a generation.

Thus, Lewis had felt from the early 1930's that unless some unionization was allowed by the employers, workers might easily turn to communism. His view had been shaped by his own experience within the UMWA. During the late 1920's and early 1930's, he watched a dual development. In this period, the employers essentially destroyed the UMWA, a debacle largely prepared by Lewis' own bureaucratic and class collaborationist policies. Meanwhile, Communist Party members invaded the coalfields in the early 1930's to organize, independently of the UMWA, a series of desperate and heroic mass struggles at a time when most of the rest of U.S. labor remained passive. As a result of this experience, Lewis became even more confirmed in his conviction that the state would have to be brought in to hold back profit-mad employers who did not understand their own long term interests, and to create the conditions for unionization.⁶

Against the Current



John L. Lewis

It was a policy of reliance upon the state, and ultimately therefore, upon the Democratic Party, which guided Lewis' actions throughout this period—precisely because he conceived of reliance upon rank and file initiative as utopian and dangerous. His aim was to establish a powerful labor interest inside the Democratic Party, alongside the Dixiecrats and city bosses who had hitherto held the reins of power. On this basis, Lewis hoped to exert the leverage to win reforms, in particular to get the state's help in establishing unions.

In any case, Lewis played a key role in getting inserted into the National Recovery Act of 1933 the famous section 7(a) which offered the workers "the right to form unions of their own choosing." The Act as a whole was framed primarily to further the concentration and rationalization of industry. Lewis approved this strategy because he thought a healthy industry was the precondition for stable unionism. To Lewis, the NRA code and section 7(a) were an organic whole.

NRA section 7(a) did provide a rallying cry, if little actual legal backing, for the union organizing fights of the early 1930's. It helped Lewis to get his own UMWA reorganized ("the President wants you to form a union"). Nevertheless, when the struggle to organize coal was spread, under radical leadership, to the captive mines owned by the steel companies in late 1933, Lewis and his henchman Phil Murray did all they could to break this movement. It was only through one after another acts of direct defiance of Lewis and Murray, that the workers of the captive mines were able to organize. Even so, in these years, events

were generally unfavorable for the working class, despite 7(a) and an ostensibly pro-labor administration. As Roosevelt gave his implicit approval, the capitalists applied massive force to crush one after another massive strike for unionization in 1933 and 1934, while the AFL officials stood idly aside and helped contain the rebellion. The United Textile Workers strike of 1933-4 is a classic example.

Certainly, Lewis and his colleagues' break from the AFL to form the CIO did make a contribution to the key organizing drives in rubber and auto, which essentially turned the tide for industrial unionism between 1935 and 1937. They lent a certain amount of prestige and apparent sanction to the workers struggles of that era; they gave the impression that there was a real strategy for organizing these industries; and, at a key moment in the climactic struggle at Flint against GM, Lewis made a dramatic and decisive personal intervention. Nevertheless, the fact is that Lewis' plan was actually to organize steel first. His other famous interventions were reactions to workers' initiatives, not Lewis's initiatives.

Lewis' approach was expressed in the formation of Labor's Non-Partisan League to win the vote for Roosevelt in 1936. Lewis and his friends in the CIO raised some \$770,000 for Roosevelt's campaign. At the same time, they helped swing the vote in certain key industrial states behind Roosevelt. This "purposeful mobilization of labor behind the Democratic candidate was an innovation: it transformed the old Gompers policy of casual and largely symbolic endorsements of labor's friends, to open a new chapter in the unions' political involvement."⁸ It manifested Lewis's reli-

ance on state support as a *pre-condition* to the organization of the working class.⁹

Not surprisingly, Lewis's electoral strategy had little to do with the organizing successes actually achieved in 1936-37; and, indeed, the intervention by Lewis and Co. was often sharply counterproductive. Thus, in rubber, as in auto, it was the *spontaneous* sitdown wave, which began in late 1935, with *no leadership from the CIO*, which won unionization. Lewis intervened through his agent Adolph Gemrer who tried to stop the militancy, as he tried to discourage sitdowns. Gemrer wanted to build up centralized control over the workers' actions, and ultimately, to construct a rubber union along the dictatorial lines of the UMWA. Fortunately, Gemrer was unable to impose his will. The rubber militants, led by political radicals of various stripes, consistently went against his advice, and built the URW for the CIO, almost in spite of the CIO leadership itself.

Meanwhile, in auto, one of Lewis's first steps was to cut short the movement in the UAW toward political action by labor *independent* of the Democratic Party, for this policy was naturally directly counterposed (based on different strategic assumptions) to his own. At the UAW's founding convention in April 1936, Lewis prevailed upon the new UAW leadership to reverse the decision, *already overwhelmingly approved by the convention*, to refuse to endorse Roosevelt.¹⁰

Again, as in rubber, the CIO leaders' ideas about organizing auto had little in common with the militants who actually carried out the sitdowns which brought GM to heel. But when the first strike in auto assembly, which broke out in Atlanta, was quickly followed by a sitdown wave in Detroit, and, in turn, by the decisive takeover by militants in Flint, then Lewis and Co. did give strong support. On the other hand, shortly after the victory over GM, Lewis sharply put on the brakes. He directly crushed a sitdown at Chrysler initiated by socialist and Communist-led rank and filers which aimed to capitalize on the momentum established at Flint to win union recognition for *all workers* at Chrysler.¹¹ This would have represented an *even greater success* than that achieved at GM. But Lewis pulled the workers out, and then signed an agreement identical to the one at GM, much weaker than that which had been demanded by the Chrysler sitdowners. Through the rest of the year, he and his colleagues campaigned to muffle the explosive militancy of the auto workers.

Finally, as is well known, Lewis attempted to organize the steel industry in an entirely top-down bureaucratic manner on the basis of the strategy, "trust in Roosevelt." But the employers were in no mood for compromise. They openly trained an army of goons in preparation for a violent confrontation. The result was tragic. In one city after another, Lewis's strategy proved criminally bankrupt, as one after another Democratic Party mayor and/or governor dispatched the police and/or National Guard to crush the strikers. The "Memorial Day Massacre" in Chicago was only the most infamous case in point. The defeat of the little steel strike in mid-1937, coupled with the growing crackdown by CIO officials on quickie strikes and sitdowns, marked a turning point. Especially with the onset of a new depression, beginning in mid-1937, the dynamic of the great labor upsurge of the 30's was rapidly dispersed, and a long process of erosion initiated.

The Failure of PAC

Nonetheless, despite the decline of the struggle, which they helped bring about, the CIO leaders stuck closely to their strategy of electoral/legislative intervention, naturally with decreasing success. In 1943, they established the so-called Political Action Committees as part of a general drive to build a local level machine which would turn out the vote for "pro-labor" (read any Democratic Party) candidate. But if the labor movement could not win a place as co-equal with the dixiecrats and city bosses in the Democratic Party *at the height of the upsurge*, it was unlikely to succeed in doing so as its strength waned in the later 1930's and during World War II. As early as 1943, Congress passed the Smith-Connally Act, which curtailed labor's weapons of struggle (providing for "cooling off" periods, injunctions "in the public interest", etc.). By the end of the War, what was left of the New Deal social program had been junked. Finally, in 1947, labor was unable to stop the passage of the Taft-Hartley, and, despite strenuous efforts, failed ignominiously in the subsequent years to get this act repealed.

The Bankruptcy of Parliamentarism in the 70's

The onset of economic crisis in the 70's further demonstrated the political impotence of labor when it was unaccompanied by mass struggles. Nevertheless, the proponents of a revitalized social democracy continued to propose the same *failed* strategy.

As recently as 1976, liberal and social democratic forces hailed the election of what they termed a "veto-proof" congress. The Democratic Party had a crushing 2-1 majority over the Republicans, and the party as a whole, as well as many of its individual candidates, were committed on paper to a wide ranging programs of social reform. Nevertheless, the results of the Democratic congresses have been nil. Almost every single piece of pro-working class legislation, however mild, has been destroyed.

Thus, the Humphrey Hawkins bill for "full employment" was first totally gutted, and then passed (as if to rub the noses of its sponsors in the dirt). The bill for common situs picketing was soundly defeated. National Health Insurance, the rallying cry of the Democratic Party left wing, has never had a hearing. Perhaps most humiliating, the so-called Labor Law Reform bill was crushed.

In light of this series of failures, many of those still wedded to the same approach have tended to explain their defeats in terms of the increased organization of the capitalist class. They point to the use of single issue campaigns by a well-organized right wing to defeat liberal legislation and to increased funding for right wing candidates financed through the new corporate PACs. No doubt these are real phenomena. Nonetheless, to view them as at all fundamental is to retain the illusion that the basic electoral/legislative strategy can work, in the absence of a real movement, if only it is carried out more vigorously. This is to continue to ignore the long-evident structural weaknesses of the entire approach.

Indeed, as should be obvious to anyone, the basic cause of the drastically disintegrating parliamentary strength of the working class in the U.S. is the long term decay of the unions' power, and the virtual disappearance of organized labor as a social or political movement. Until this movement is dramatically revived, it is ludicrous to believe that reforms

Against the Current

can be won at the ballot box, especially in the face of a deepening economic crisis.

Thus, in the first place, and most obviously, the organized working class represents a small, and shrinking share of the total labor force. Today, only about 20% is organized. The long-awaited southern organizing campaign has stalled. In the late 70's, the unions were winning less than half of their collective bargaining elections, as compared to 70% in the early fifties. Thus, there is today only the most limited identification with the unions on the part of their membership. No doubt most unionized workers still realize that, even now, the unions' existence stands in the way, at least momentarily, of an even worse debacle. But they can hardly view these organizations as instruments of economic, let alone political, struggle. It is really conceivable under such conditions of decline in their "on the ground" strength vis a vis the employers that the forces which could today conceivably constitute a "new social democracy" could command significant strength in the electoral/legislative arena?

IV. FROM "FAIR SHARE" TO "AUSTERITY," AND THE OPENING TO THE RIGHT

The fact is, that, far from moving to build the mass movement without which a social democratic politics cannot be revived, the trade union "lefts", as well as the "social democratic politicians," have become systematically more reluctant to combat capital. They know that the slowdown of the economy is in the last analysis a *crisis of profitability*. They realize, in turn, that this has enormous consequences for their own strategy. Indeed, the fact is that in the early 70's, the rate of return on invested capital in the U.S. had fallen to 9.5%, from a level of 14.2% in the mid-60's. Despite the efforts of the capitalists, the old levels have not been restored. The crisis of profitability is bound up with a long term stagnation in the accumulation of capital and the productivity of labor (the causes of which cannot be explored here). It is sufficient to note that during the period 1950-1975, the rate of growth of the productivity of labor in the U.S. industry averaged 2.2%. The comparative figures in the same period were 8.4% for Japan, 5.8% for Germany, 4.7% for France. Correspondingly, the percentage of the GNP devoted to investment in new plant and equipment in the U.S. (1960-75) averaged 12%. The comparative figures were 29% for Japan; 22% for Germany; 19% for France.¹²

As the trade union leaders, and their political friends, are well aware, these figures have enormous significance. Cumulatively, they represent a huge decline in the competitiveness of the U.S. economy, in comparison with others, making the U.S. economy an increasingly unattractive place to invest. The declining relative efficiency of the U.S. productive system as a whole means that the relative costs of producing in the U.S. have steadily gone up. The result has been expressed, as everyone is now aware, in an enormous flight of capital and accelerating disinvestment. This has reached its climax over the past several years, with massive sections of what was once the industrial core of the U.S. economy—auto, steel, rubber, textiles—entering into profound crisis.

These developments have forced a drastic reappraisal of the "Keynesian" approach, which was the received religion of the "left" labor officials, as well as their allies among the politicians, throughout the post-war boom. It is not simply that government deficit spending is today *perceived* by everyone as hyper-inflationary, and thus counterproductive

for all classes. More to the point, any attempt to re-distribute income away from the capitalists toward the working class is considered counter-productive. Therefore, "left" labor leaders have come to believe that to attempt to force capital to give higher wages, better conditions, or increased services, is today, likely only to make things worse. Wedded to an ideology of "fair share" within capitalism, the labor officials, *both right and left*, have thus been accepting "austerity" as the economy declines, just as they demanded "a piece of the pie" in the period of growth.

The long term political trends are more ominous. Unable to launch an attack, the labor bureaucrats, left and right, have slid toward policies of helping "their own" capitalists protect their profits in order to safeguard the union membership's position. Such an approach inevitably comes at the expense of the rest of the working class, domestic and foreign, and cannot but further divide it. Thus, in recent months, "leftist" Doug Fraser pressed the government simply to hand over tax money to the Chrysler corporation, making no attempt whatsoever to place conditions on how this money was to be used by the company, or where it was to come from. Meanwhile, Fraser has also moved to demand protection for the U.S. auto industry against foreign competition, thus adopting a policy long accepted by most other unions, but for years resisted by the UAW. U.S. workers' jobs should be saved, in this view, at the expense of Japanese and German workers. Finally, in continuing to develop the "productivity" deals which have saved "their" corporations countless manhours, while simply accepting the massive layoffs that have accompanied recent plant closures, the union movement has, as a whole, essentially satisfied itself with safeguarding the jobs of the high seniority workers—almost inevitably older, white, male—at the expense of those lower down on the seniority lists—who tend to be young and from the oppressed sections of the working class.

In parallel manner, those "left" politicians who have continued to demand improved social programs, have nevertheless systematically failed to show how the capitalists can be made to bear their naturally high costs. In so doing, they have opened the way to discrediting in advance any nascent social democracy. Today, the great mass of workers have come to assume that any social gains won in Congress will be paid for by themselves. Thus, many working people have tended to give up the struggle for reforms through the state and turned instead to ameliorate their condition directly by trying to cut taxes through cutting government spending. Proposition 13 in California is, of course, the prototypical case. In taking such actions, the better off sections of the working class thus enter into alliance with the capitalists, whose profits also benefit from the "tax relief", in order to maintain their share of the social pie by cutting into the share of the weaker, poorer sections of the working class who get some benefits from government programs—inevitably, Blacks, Latinos, women, etc.

It is true that many working people who thus attempt to protect their position—through subsidies to their companies, through protectionism, or through defending the seniority list in a "color blind," "sex-blind" manner, as well as through supporting tax cuts—may not *intend* to gain at the expense of other elements in the working class. The fact is, however, that this is what they are doing. Their actions are, in effect, objectively racist, sexist, and chauvinist. Inevitably, therefore, they are opened up to the reactionary ideas which can rationalize their conduct. These are, of course,

the ideas of the Right. No doubt, the drift to the right in the working class today is hesitant, contradictory, and as yet far from definitive. Still, in the absence of actual direct struggles against capital—struggles which require ever higher degrees of unity among all sectors to succeed—we can expect the rightward trend to continue.

Lacking a strategy for fighting in the interests of their "constituencies" "leftist officials" in the labor movement and their political allies have thus opened the way for the undermining of their own position. Not surprisingly, the reactions of many of them to their own plight has often been schizophrenic. Continuing to mouth a leftist rhetoric, they increasingly take up right wing policies in practice. This is the "Doug Fraser phenomenon". At the same time, many other former leftist politicians, have, more straightforwardly, rushed head over heels to adopt the Right's program of "tax revolt" and "budget cuts"—for this is the way to garner votes. In the absence of class conflict this "Jerry Brown phenomenon" can be expected to be multiplied a hundredfold, and to appear in even more malignant forms (watch the evolving career of Tom Hayden). Those who, in this period, insist on relying in social democratic fashion on the labor bureaucracy for their power and electoralism as their strategy, are thus paving the way for the collapse of their own already disintegrating strength.

V. CONCLUSION: THE WORLDWIDE CRISIS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

What finally and above all makes an orientation toward a "new social democracy" so implausible in the U.S. at this time, is the disastrous failure of social democratic organizations on a world scale throughout the 70's, under very favorable conditions. From the late 1960's, Europe was rocked by one after another explosion of worker resistance of a scope unprecedented since the immediate aftermath of World War II. In France, we had May '68. In Italy, there was the "Hot Autumn" of 1969, which set off more than a half dozen years of intensified struggles through broad layers of Italian society, and which brought radically increased powers to the workers movement. In England, there was a big outbreak of strikes by low paid workers in the early 70's, which led into the great mass struggles by the miners in 1973 and 1974, that ultimately brought down the Tory government. In Spain, the exploding attacks on the Francoist regime in the mid-70's appeared at times to be leading to the brink of revolution. And, of course, in Portugal in 1974-75, there was a workers revolution which witnessed the rise of factory committees and even the embryo of an alternative workers government, with the brief appearance of the Workers, Soldiers and Sailors Councils.

These movements, in almost every case, were initiated *outside* the traditional organizations of the working class—i.e., outside the Socialist Party or Communist Party, or the trade unions which they dominated (Spain is a partial

exception). Moreover, throughout most of Europe, the movements gave rise, for the first time in fifty years, to small, but significant, revolutionary organizations to the left of social democracy and the Communist parties, "the extra-parliamentary left." The fact remains that, in every case, after the wave of militancy had reached its crest and begun to subside, it quickly became clear that the major political beneficiaries of the general movement had been the "official" workers parties. By making a temporary "left" turn to recoup their threatened base, they were able to redirect the energies of the mass movement toward parliament. In England, the Labor Party came to power in 1974. In Italy, the Communist Party, by the late 70's, had received the largest proportion of the vote in history, a staggering 35%. In Spain, Communists and Socialists together emerged as a sizeable opposition. In France, the Socialist and Communist parties, working together, appeared in 1978 on the verge of an electoral victory and the formation of a popular front government.

But what did these parties make of their apparent opportunities? In every case, expressing the interests of the trade union and parliamentary bureaucracies which govern them, they have supported policies designed to make the working class pay for the developing world crisis. In Italy, there was of course, the Historic Compromise by the Communist Party with the Christian Democrats leading to the Communist Party's support of austerity. In England, the Labor government put in a program of cuts in public services and voluntary wage controls. In Spain, there were the Monchloa accords to hold back wages, firmly backed by both Socialists and Communists.

Thus, across the board, powerful social democratic organizations, catapulted to power on the basis of powerful workers struggles, proved unwilling to challenge capitalism, but anxious to preserve their place within it.

Nonetheless, they have not been able to escape the consequences of their actions. In pursuing anti-working class policies, they have naturally disappointed the hopes of their own followers. Indeed, the result of the ascension of social democracy and Euro-communism has been to help throw the European working classes into a generalized state of confusion and demoralization. The consequences are hardly surprising: In almost every case, the defeat and decline, in the last couple of years, of social democratic and Communist parties on a European scale. The Labor government was defeated at the polls in 1979. The Italian Communist Party suffered its first decline in its proportion of the vote since World War II. The Communist parties of Spain and Portugal are in crisis.

The social democratic/Eurocommunist beacon which appeared, such a short time ago, to have offered a way forward to growing numbers of American leftists has, for a time, been dimmed. Does any one truly believe it can be re-litigated here by the feeble American equivalents of Callaghan, Carillo, and Berlinguer?

NOTES

1. See Stan Weir, "Doug Fraser's Middle Class Coalition", *Radical America*, (Jan.-Feb. 1979).

2. Ben Bedell, "Winpinger's Wimpy 'Socialism'" in *The Guardian*, February 20, 1980.

3. For presentations of this view, see labor documents of the International Socialists, by Kim Moody, 1977-1978. For an attempt to implement this approach, see publication of *Labor Notes*. Emphasis in these writings is on lower level officials, as well as leftist ones.

4. *The Mass Strike* (1906).

5. N. Lichtenstein, "Defending the No-Strike Pledge: CIO Politics During World War II," *Radical America* (July-Oct. 1975).

6. See Melvin Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis* (1977).

7. S. Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel," *Radical America* (November 1972).

8. Bert Cochrane, *Labor and Communism* (1977), p. 107 and ff.

9. L. L. Cary, "Institutionalized Conservatism in the Early CIO: Adolph Germer, A Case Study" *Labor History* (Fall, 1972).

10. R. R. Keeran, *Communists and the Auto Workers. The Struggle For a Union, 1919-1949* (University of Wisconsin, Ph.D. dissertation, 1974), p. 215 and L. L. Cary "Institutionalized Conservatism", p. 493.

11. Keeran, *Communists and the Auto Workers*, p. 292.

12. See *Productivity and the Economy*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1977.

THE NEW YORK TRANSIT STRIKE OF 1980

The Story of a Rank and File Disaster

by STEVE BURGHARDT

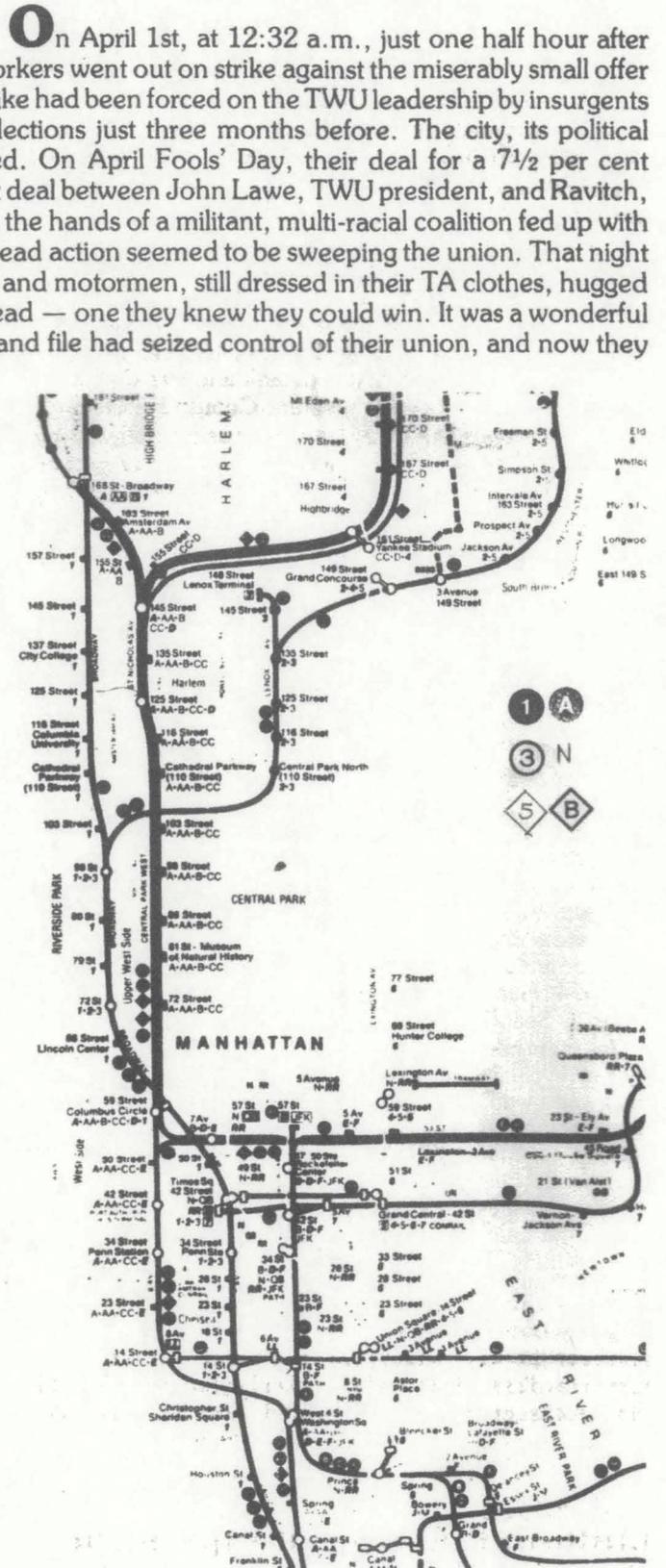
On April 1st, at 12:32 a.m., just one half hour after their old contract had expired, New York City transit workers went out on strike against the miserably small offer from Richard Ravitch and the Transit Authority. The strike had been forced on the TWU leadership by insurgents who had won a majority of the executive board in elections just three months before. The city, its political leadership, and the trade union officials were stunned. On April Fools' Day, their deal for a 7½ per cent settlement lay in ruins, publicly exposed as a sweetheart deal between John Lawe, TWU president, and Ravitch, TA chief. The union executive board was apparently in the hands of a militant, multi-racial coalition fed up with such sweetheart deals, and the momentum for widespread action seemed to be sweeping the union. That night at the hotel where negotiations took place, conductors and motormen, still dressed in their TA clothes, hugged each other in the joy of anticipation over a *real* fight ahead — one they knew they could win. It was a wonderful moment in New York labor history — the transit rank and file had seized control of their union, and now they were leading it, on *their* terms.

Unfortunately, it was a very brief moment. After 10 days on the picket lines, the strike was over, with very modest gains for the membership — so modest that their real income will drop by at least 15% over the two years of the contract (assuming a 10% inflation rate). In addition, the rank and file coalition is dead — its leadership discredited and split. John Lawe has resumed control over the union apparatus, dominating executive board meetings and daily affairs of the union as if the rank and file rebellion had never happened. It is almost as if the strike hadn't taken place — only it did, with disastrous results for the oppositionists who were expected to lead this strike.

To understand why the New York transit strike was such a disaster we have to look at the coalition's policies. What actually occurred in the strike will then be no surprise. Everything points to one primary lesson of this strike: to be a genuine alternative to present trade union leadership, oppositionists must, for a start, be able to offer a different conception of how to organize their union membership against the city politicians. Given the fact that the general employers' offensive is being expressed with particular brutality against public employees, the old business union methods will no longer work. The rank and file coalition leadership, who thought that just getting elected would give them the power to change things could not provide the new kind of leadership and new kind of ideas that were needed and thus went down to defeat.

1978: The Beginning Formation of Rank and File Opposition

The actual organized opposition to John Lawe and old TWU leaders began in 1978.¹ Transit workers had suffered with losses of real income from their previous two contracts, and were tired of their leaders' ineffectiveness. Furthermore, those leaders were overwhelmingly white and Irish, while transit workers are predominantly black and Puerto Rican. As a result, rank and filers were increasingly hostile to the TWU officials. Just how hostile became clear when the ratification vote on the 1978 contract was taken — the subway workers actually voted the contract *down* by a 3-to-2 margin. Given the TWU's tradition of "no contract, no work," this should have guaranteed a strike, but an adroit maneuver by the bu-



reaucocracy — counting the bus drivers division (MABSTOA, for Manhattan/Bronx Surface Transit Operating Authority) for the first time in the vote — guaranteed a victory for Lawe and Co. Even with their vote, the victory was narrow: 12,200 to 10,900. They were now on the defensive, and they knew it.

More importantly, insurgent leaders seemed to be offering an alternative. At the time of the 1978 vote, the most important militants were Henry Lewis and Frank Troia, head of the Coalition of Concerned Transit Workers. Lewis, a black motorman of the Moslem faith, and Troia, an Italian conductor, had been the first to initiate mass actions against the contract. Their meetings at first were enthusiastically attended by hundreds of workers, as Lewis's charismatic personality and militant opposition to the "sell-out misleaders" won popular approval. Two other groups were also active, but not as well known; however, their leaders had some following. Both were based in cars and shops, the maintenance/crafts division. One, called the Rank and File Coalition, was led by an ex-Vietnam veteran, George MacDonald. The other, called the Unity Caucus, was formally led by Arnold Cherry. In 1978, however, these latter groups were attempting to work with Lewis and Troia, attending their meetings, making overtures for support, etc.

There were problems in coalescing from the start, however. As no group had a clearly identified platform other than opposition to the sell-out leadership, there was little substantively to bring the groups together.² MacDonald was not trusted by Lewis or Troia because they (rightly) perceived him as an opportunist and a racist. The Unity Caucus seemed to have more potential, but that group never held open meetings. This closed and undemocratic style made Lewis and Troia equally skeptical about their intentions. The understandable tension that existed between the two groups was further exacerbated by Lewis's confrontational and often demagogic style, creating personal animosity between different group members that only fed later conflicts.

So from the beginning, oppositional activity was on shaky foundations. The groups tended to drift into 1979 with no clear focus other than the removal of Lawe from office.

The dynamics within the future coalition were shifting, however. Lewis's erratic behavior, coupled with Troia's decreasing involvement due to outside pressures, had left their group a shell of its 1978 self. Indeed, there had been a complete turnover of the group membership in one year — three times! The other two groups, however, continued to grow, especially the Unity Caucus. While having no clear-cut program, its low-keyed style, multi-racial membership, and well-organized cohesiveness (albeit undemocratic), had proven attractive to increasing numbers of rank and filers. MacDonald's group likewise had been growing, serving primarily as a pole of attraction for whites dissatisfied with Lawe's leadership. (MacDonald did have support from blacks and hispanics however, primarily because of his combative style.)

The TWU Local 100 Presidential Elections: Precursor of the April Strike

The growth of all three groups was symptomatic of the low regard in which Lawe was held. To observers, it appeared

certain that a new leadership could be elected to office — if the vote wasn't divided between them. And in fact, in the 1979 election Lawe was re-elected with only a plurality of votes. The three opposition leaders — Cherry, MacDonald and Lewis, in that order — shared over 60% of the vote. (If Cherry and Lewis had been together, they would have been elected.) The three groups had not been able to work together; indeed, it seems as if there was a desire on some people's part not to even try.

How little desire was revealed at a crucial eleventh-hour meeting between the three groups to try and work out a common slate. There was little or no discussion of platform differences; the key issue was who would run for president against Lawe. To his credit, Lewis, perhaps the most politically conscious and rank-and-file-oriented of the three, agreed to withdraw from the race and run for a lesser post. His action would have guaranteed the election of someone other than Lawe, as the combined slates easily would have the image of a unified opposition, thus adding to the attraction of their already popular support. *Amazingly, neither MacDonald nor Cherry would accept the arrangement, each preferring to run separate slates without the addition of other known leaders.* When questioned on this at a public labor forum some two months later, Cherry's response was telling: "Why didn't I work things out with Lewis and run together? Listen, there's been so much talk of democracy for the members that they were tired of it. The members wanted leadership." Of course, what the members got was leadership — in the person of John Lawe.

Nevertheless, the local elections did provide one major breakthrough for the opposition. A majority of anti-Lawe candidates were elected to the union executive board. If one included two long-time and somewhat isolated MABSTOA oppositionists to 12 Unity board members and 9 from MacDonald's group, then 23 of 45 executive board members were no longer under the old leadership's control. If they could work together, there was a very good chance a transit strike would occur for the first time in 14 years. There was a mood of expectancy and excitement within the transit workers union for the first time in years; people sensed that a real fight was about to break out.

At this point John Lawe was clearly on the defensive. He knew from the last contract that he had to deliver more than before, and therefore his posturing included the oppositionists' call for a 30% wage hike over the next two years, refusal to consider productivity changes, etc. As the executive board majority had formed a Coalition for a Better Contract, his only hope for survival in March appeared to be a strong stand, including a possible token strike, to be followed by some capitulation (or at least the appearance of it) from management on wage demands. The fact that Lawe might even need a strike to defuse the militants was widely understood by the TA and the politicians.

Operating in classic business union style, a special dinner was thus arranged between Lawe, Ravitch, and Theodore Kheel, the well-known labor arbitrator. Eating gourmet meals and sipping the finest of wines at one of New York's best restaurants, the three worked out a scenario that maintained the image of militancy without costing the Transit Authority an extra cent. As later explained publicly in both the *Village Voice* and the *New*

Against the Current

York Times,³ Ravitch would present the Transit Authority's "final offer" of 6%, which Lawe would take to the executive board and angrily turn down. At that point, the labor arbitrator, Walter Gelhorn, would step in and a 7½% solution would be demanded by the TWU and accepted by the TA. Certain productivity givebacks would be expected, of course (such as doing away with coffee breaks, cutting out clean-up time, etc.), but Lawe would claim a hard-fought, militant victory.

This scenario worked to a tee — except for one problem: the executive board majority would have nothing to do with *either* wage package, and they let Lawe, Gelhorn, and everyone else within earshot know it. The call for "STRIKE!" could be heard echoing in the halls of the Sheraton Centre Hotel from behind the union's locked doors. New York was about to have its public transportation stopped — and stopped not by a Mike Quill (the TWU's fiery but politically adaptable founder), but a nameless, black and white coalition of dissidents who seemed to be going against what their elected leaders wanted.

From Euphoria to Disaster in Five Easy Steps

April first was a euphoric day for many trade union militants. The image of a multi-racial, oppositionist, and seemingly more militant coalition leading a major strike had not been seen in New York for decades, and there were hopes in a number of city unions that they could follow in the TWU's footsteps. What followed, however, provided the wrong answers to all the right questions on how to wage a rank-and-file-led strike. Four major errors were committed which, over a two-month period, led to the destruction of whatever rank and file movement existed inside the local. Those errors were: (1) the opposition's fear of taking the initiative and control during the strike; (2) an unwillingness to organize the TWU membership for active intervention in the strike; (3) a refusal to work for support from other workers and unions; (4) individualism and sectarianism.

1. Failure to seize the initiative and control:

Beginning with the strike, the initiative for leadership had shifted, potentially, from Lawe to the new 23-person majority on the executive board. The membership was as much in favor of the strike as they were tired of John Lawe. With its new majority, the opposition had to act fast to prevent Lawe's inevitable sell-out attempt. The first thing to fight for was a decision that workers would vote on the contract *before* going back to work. Once back to work, it is hard to get strike momentum back. The executive board majority could also have voted to have the membership vote at a huge meeting in Madison Square Garden. (UFT contracts are settled that way!) The chances for militants are always improved this way. These policies, if widely publicized in the ranks would have made it easier to resist, if not block entirely, the tactic Lawe used to end the strike unilaterally.

Secondly, the opposition majority could have taken control of the day-to-day operation of the strike, expanding the existing network, or building a new one, their own. That too would have made it easier to resist, and organize opposition to Lawe's illegal order to return to work.

Instead, one of the first motions the new majority put forward was a *declaration of support for John Lawe's leadership*. Part of their motivation was understandable. Given the attack from the media and local political and economic leaders, the union needed to appear united. However, the opposition thought of strength in terms of individual leaders, not in terms of the union membership itself. Rather than admitting to the reality understood by all — that Lawe was not supported by the majority of the membership (and developing that awareness to create a new consciousness about who was in charge, the membership itself) — the Coalition for a Better Contract immediately put out a leaflet stating their support for Lawe, his work in the negotiations, and so on. There was no awareness of how critical support within a united front would work. It means, to stand united with all those who fought for the strike's success and yet openly to push their own conception of how to win the strike (through mass mobilization of the ranks, etc.). This was never considered. Instead, as a member of the Unity Caucus put it, "We only have one president, and in this situation we back him." "Backing" meant, unfortunately, that the opposition would make no efforts to take the political and organizational leadership of the strike away from Lawe. And they didn't.

2. An unwillingness to organize the rank and file:

As the above political conception would suggest, the Coalition was unwilling to organize its ranks for active intervention in the strike. With a majority of the executive board, people suggested that the Coalition use that majority to call for union meetings to discuss the strike, develop tighter support and communication networks, etc. A few leftists having some credibility with some of the Coalition leaders proposed mass mobilizations that included press conferences, a rally at City Hall, and pressing for support from other unions, as well as buying TV time, etc. For example, it was proposed that instead of emphasizing the traditional picket line march at every work site (which was unnecessary due to the strike's support and also inherently divisive because the 220 places of work are far apart and removed from public view), mass rallies should be called that would involve the transit workers and their families, other locals, etc., in a far more exciting and unifying way. But even this modest suggestion to the Coalition fell on deaf ears.

Instead, opposition leaders focused on pressuring Lawe and the other negotiators to be more militant; indeed, much time was spent jockeying to replace various Lawe members on the negotiating team as a way to win a better contract. While this latter maneuver was a necessary prong in any takeover strategy of the strike, the tactical demands ended there. The necessary, additional prong of mass intervention was never seriously considered.

On the next-to-last day of the strike, the Coalition half-heartedly played with a demonstration. Only 70-80 workers participated in a TWU march across the Brooklyn Bridge to combat Koch's statements about the union and the strike. However, as there had been no major effort to build the march beyond a press release (no press conference, no vote of the executive board to carry this out and thus arm the march, etc.), the 70 to 80 people were

considered adequate for the task. As one of Cherry's Unity members said, "the guys are needed at their picket stations, too. We just want this to be symbolic anyway." The concrete meaning of such small symbols was not lost on anyone who witnessed the effort.

(One minor tactic related to contract negotiations procedure was considered and rejected by the Coalition: opening up the negotiations publicly. While Henry Lewis was in favor of such a move, the majority of the Coalition saw such an action as "politically undermining" the effectiveness of the leaders to do their work, as it "would confuse the membership"!)

3. A refusal to develop cross-union and community support:

If any errors had seemed understandable because of inexperience, it would be the Coalition's lack of initiative in gaining support from other unions and community groups. The level of involvement and previous experience in important rank and file actions here in New York, at least within the public sector, has been quite thin. Anyone who was not active in the TWU 15 years ago would not have learned the lessons of how the press and public officialdom exploit strikes through divisive "city versus worker" language and tactics. Considering the sudden responsibility to run a major strike, deal with contract negotiations, and keep their very shaky coalition together, all under the glare — and attraction — of media headlines and lead TV time, there is little wonder that the nuances of developing public and other-union support did not receive top priority. At the same time, public sector workers can learn some crucial lessons from the TWU's oversights.

First, the Coalition *waited* for other unions to come to the executive board to offer help, rather than directly asking for support (from material aid to statements of solidarity, joint rallies, etc.). It never came. It is common knowledge that transit is the wage pacesetter for the rest of the public city workers. So this joint solidarity makes clear sense. But waiting for the likes of Vic Gotbaum and Albert Shanker, whose methods of leadership are no different from Lawe's, is no better than waiting for Godot.

At no time did the opposition-controlled executive board publicly call on the labor movement for real help — for money for TV-time; for joint mass rallies; for *direct action* support when the Taylor Law penalties were invoked. There *were* lower level officials, from stewards to individual board members of various locals, who openly informed the coalition of their availability for help if it were asked for, but nothing happened.

Likewise, no attempts at winning public support occurred throughout the entire strike. Most people assume there is a serious fiscal crisis created in large part by high labor costs. This makes them more willing to follow the lead of politicians like Koch, Coleman Young, etc. So every effort had to be made by unionists to combat these misconceptions. Instead, the one "public intervention," in part inspired by George MacDonald's rhetoric, was an attempt to dismantle buses *once they were loaded with passengers*. Instead of stopping the scab buses at their point of origin, efforts were organized to run them off the Major Deegan Expressway. This frightened the passen-

gers — many of them city employees previously hospitable to the strike — and gave the press and Mayor Koch a bonanza of anti-union propaganda.

4. Individualism and sectarianism:

A major source of these errors was the classic union reformer's theory that the key to victory was to put him in office with as little rank and file involvement as possible, other than voting. Their motto is, "Elect me. That'll do it." As a result, most of the Coalition's patchwork quilt of career-oriented individuals ended up undermining the strike, even with the best of intentions. The following is a partial list of some of the individualistic (and at times sectarian) actions that undermined the strike from the start.

(A) During the strike there were three different meetings called by the Coalition leadership to discuss strategy, usually at the initiative of Henry Lewis. In each instance, either Cherry or MacDonald cancelled at the last minute, often after promising they would attend only hours before. This erratic behavior undercut strategic efforts and left Lewis both frustrated and demoralized in his attempts to engage in more militant, mobilizing actions.

(B) Two of Lewis's main coalition partners went on vacation and left the area for the duration of the strike. "They chose to play while the rest of us busted our asses off," as one Coalition member put it disgustedly. Such individualism discredited both people as potential leaders for the future.

(C) On the Executive Board, as members of the Unity Caucus, are several representatives of the Communist Party. These "communists" followed Cherry's strategy all the way. At no point did they fight for a policy involving the ranks, or involving other unions, or taking control of the strike away from Lawe and his machine.

There was one substantive attempt by the Coalition to block one of Lawe's tactics. They wanted to go to court to enjoin Lawe from holding private meetings with Ravitch, since such meetings violate union by-laws. Their slim majority would have had the votes to get this legalistic but effective (in the short run) maneuver passed. But one executive board member, a member of the Workers League, voted against the action because "the courts are representatives of bourgeois democracy." He did not, however, propose an alternative way of stopping Lawe — a mass membership meeting, rally, etc. Instead, he consistently followed the lead of the Communist Party in the Unity Caucus.

(D) And then there is the case of Arthur Morris, the executive board member who decided to go on weekend reserve duty on the 19th day of the strike and didn't bother to check with the Coalition. (He could have cancelled his tour of duty easily, given his number of years of duty.) Instead, he relied on two of Lawe's most well-known officials for guidance. They naturally informed him that it would be fine if he attended to reserve duty, saying that "nothing would be happening over the weekend." Nothing except the end of the strike.

The Morris case is the best known example of the inco-

Against the Current

herency within the coalition itself. In fact, he can't be blamed entirely for his actions, for the Coalition for a Better Contract rarely had met and almost never had acted as a collective unit. So when Morris had to decide about his guard duty, he checked with the only well-maintained organization inside the union — the union bureaucracy. His actions, viewed as somewhat comical and foolish by the public, were merely the last, sad symptom of an opposition's failure to lead its membership on a militant and effective strike. The Coalition's history created Morris's "mistake", not the reverse.

Strike Outcome and Its Aftermath Inside the T.W.U.

In terms of wages and benefits, the transit workers would get a 9 percent pay increase retroactive to April 12th, the day they went back to work. There would be a further 8% increase on April 1, 1981, and a cost of living increase that over the life of the contract will add about 3% more, for a total package increase of about 20% over the two years. This was much more than the 4% Koch was holding out for, and large enough for the mayor to publicly call the settlement a defeat (for him). At the same time, the state Taylor Law penalties which are designed to stop all public union strikes in New York, had levied fines of "two days' pay for every day out" against each worker, thus entirely negating the first year's increase, and the union had no plans to seriously stop the fines. The actual wage increase, then, was one-half the rate of inflation — a dramatic loss of real income.

The TA also extracted an important precedent regarding productivity as well. For the first time, the union openly gave back certain contractual rights won in previous contracts, running from limits on overtime, an end to two extra hours off on Election Day, to, most importantly, a trimming of wash-up time, coffee breaks, and "check cashing" time that can only lead to higher productivity demands on the membership. The Transit Authority wants "productivity" because it refuses to invest in needed capital improvements that would make the transportation system more efficient and the work less dangerous.⁴

The contract was hardly what the dissidents had wanted. However, with Morris away on reserve duty, Lawe had quickly convened the executive board, taken a tie vote (22-22), and "for the good of the union" sent the membership back to work. The Better Contract Coalition was outraged. Lewis at a public meeting began arguing for a work slowdown. But it was too late, and he quickly quieted down.

No serious effort was made to keep people from following Lawe's directive. For one, the executive board had failed to create the rank and file machinery for doing it, and had failed to rule that a vote had to be taken *before* a return to work. For another, the ranks weren't listening to the Coalition by now anyway. The only "alternative" left was a court suit, one designed to block Lawe's action as having overstepped the constitutional by-laws.⁵

The vote for ratification further demonstrated the return of Lawe's strength inside the union (or, at least, the lack of viability of the Coalition). The pre-vote skirmishes were along predetermined lines: the union hierarchy pushing for settlement, including with each ballot a flyer suggesting that a rejection of the settlement meant possible retaliation

from the TA, with stiffer fines and perhaps even lower wages. The Coalition fought against both the size of the settlement and the undemocratic methods used by Lawe to end the strike. They also insisted that a "vote no" did not mean a return to the streets, but that a reconstituted negotiating team would be able to do better than the past team's efforts.

The Lawe faction expected to win ratification by about 2 to 1. The Coalition publicly expected victory, but in private expected to lose by about 3 to 2. Instead the results were a sharp rebuke to the Coalition. By a 3-to-1 margin (16,718 to 5,477) the rank and file voted to accept the package as it stood.

With that, the leadership of the Coalition completely broke apart. Cherry and MacDonald started competing for a vacated vice-presidency. This full-time union position had been vacated during the strike. The winner was George MacDonald, who switched sides and simultaneously announced his candidacy and his support for the end of the strike. Lawe, not surprisingly, supported him.

As for Lewis, because of his erratic behavior, he was now isolated in his position as chairman of the conductor's division. This is a potentially excellent, middle-level slot from which one could build active rank and file activity, but it is also one far too constraining for someone with Lewis's ambitions and inconsistent style.

The Unity Caucus itself, which had appeared to be the strongest rank and file group, also quickly crumbled. As it turned out, the original slate of Unity Caucus members had not been developed around anyone's commitment to specific policies, but around individual "electability." Some of these well-known militants, spread out over the six divisions of transit and many not known to each other, were in fact honest rank and file activists who sought to turn their union around. Such people were on all slates, and are the kind of people who could turn the union around if their organization and strategies were better developed. But they had been in the minority. Instead, each slate had been dominated by people seeking their own position within the union hierarchy.

The competition between the Coalition's leaders for the vice-presidency has completed the process of killing whatever image of rank and file insurgency had existed. It left the rank and file with the image of the Coalition leaders as no more than highly individualistic, careerist-minded opponents of John Lawe — in essence, no change in leadership at all. As Mark Spivak, one of the early Lewis supporters, disgustedly put it, "It's nothing but a sorry mess. I'm afraid we have to start all over again, and I don't know if the guys have the energy to try. When you believe in certain people and all this (the poorly run strike and divisive vice-presidential elections), you just don't know what to do. It's too bad too, because things are only getting worse." Such pessimism is understandable and can only be combated by clearly drawing the lessons of the strike.

The Road Ahead: Rebuilding From Disaster

An analysis of the errors and false strategies followed by the Coalition reveals at the same time the direction which the rank and filers have to take if they are to successfully counter Koch and the bankers. These are:

1. Elections are not enough: Electing and then relying on new "better" union officials guarantees just as little as electing new politicians to office. Even reform union officials cannot be relied upon to do the job needed. Indeed, even the most well-intentioned leaders cannot do the job, because beating Koch, or General Motors for that matter, is impossible today without the active intervention of the organized rank and file. That is the key to winning. And because the Coalition leaders didn't or wouldn't understand that, transit workers lost a chance for a breakthrough victory.

So in rebuilding the rank and file movement, it is essential to make the shop floor committees the core of the movement. Committees which function not just for elections, but which organize the ranks for day-to-day struggles in the barns and shops. It is such deeply rooted, active structures which can become the base for an effective rank and file strike committee, which is the only real insurance against the back-stabbing maneuvers of Lawe and others like him.

2. Unity in action: Winning in NYC requires a united strategy and supportive action (up to and including a common strike if need be) by all city employees and their unions. Because the leaders of the Coalition didn't or wouldn't fight for that, they undermined their own chances for victory.

Of course, fighting for such unity and winning it is not easy, especially in the absence of significant rank and file groups in the other city unions. But a campaign to aid in the growth of opposition in other unions, and to develop consciousness of such a strategy in the city unions is indispensable. Had there been even modest opposition groups, able to force the hand of the officials in those unions, the TWU opposition could have considered some options. It could have considered postponing the strike for two months, until the expiration date of the other city contracts. By openly posing and publicizing to the ranks of all unions the potential for a united strike, the pressure on the city and the union officials (from both their own members and the TWU majority on the executive board) would have been immense.

Such a unilateral extension of the contract could have been accompanied by a decision not to accept fares from

the public while working without a contract, and waiting for the common expiration date to arrive. In this way, the union would be educating the public to the union's concern with *their* interests, thus facilitating the process of winning public sympathy to the workers' cause. Indeed, united action would also have immensely strengthened the unions' capacity to force the city to waive the penalty clauses of the anti-strike Taylor Law (which fines workers two days' pay for each day on strike). This would effectively kill the Taylor Law.

These are the kinds of considerations and strategies which any city union opposition will have to consider and educate around, if it is to take on the banks and politicians in this period.

3. Public employees versus the public: Because public employees are paid through taxes, it is easy for the politicians to pit city workers against the public. The strategy to overcome that has to include: (a) persuading the public, by word and deed, that the services rendered by the city employee are valuable, so the union should have campaigned for safer subway cars, and for lowering the fare; (b) the idea that the banks and corporations, whose share in the tax burden has been falling steadily, are the ones who are most able to foot the tax bill. Because the Coalition leaders talked about these things, but would not mobilize the ranks or the public for them, transit workers and all city workers missed a major opportunity for building the rank and file movement.

4. Fighting discrimination: On the important issue of race and sex discrimination, the local opposition movement may be promising. It was quite common in events leading up to and during the strike, for blacks to be leading whites and vice versa. Even a racist such as MacDonald had black supporters because of his aggressive militancy. But the union is capable of being, and has to become, a major force in the city for racial and sexual equality. Action in this direction is necessary, not just to consolidate the rank and file movement, but to win support from the public.

It will not be easy to build a rank and file movement based on strategies such as these. But then, there are no short-cuts to the emancipation of the working class. Better to begin the long trek, than to remain mired in defeat.

notes

¹An earlier important rank and file opposition existed in the 1960's. Led by an extremely effective and highly political black leader, Joe Carnegie, its platform made the serious error of calling for decertification of the union on grounds of racism. The racism was obvious, but the call for decertification led to charges of dual unionism, thus subverting Carnegie's group's efforts, even among blacks.

²The CCTW did have a platform. However, it was never kept in terms of organizing the membership, developing campaigns, etc.

³The *Times*' article was held for publication until after the strike vote had been taken, conveniently aiding Lawe's position.

⁴Presently, the TA has instituted a plan of "deferred maintenance" where a car is operated on only under emergency conditions or if at least five years has passed since its last major overhaul. The result has been a layoff of 2,000 maintenance workers, and a 21% rise in breakdowns — the largest number of failures in a decade, according to Carol Bellamy, City Council President.

⁵One again sees the direction of the Coalition membership by the institution of this suit. There was no consideration given to using their majority to vote sanctions against Lawe's action, or scheduling a new by-laws campaign, a recall vote, or constitutional amendments campaign. Instead, all efforts focused on the use of the courts. This again reflects both the political direction of the different groups inside the coalition, and its dwindling support among the membership itself.



WOMEN'S SELF-ORGANIZATION: A Marxist Justification

by JOHANNA BRENNER

Increasingly, Marxists are coming to the view that an autonomous women's liberation movement and independent organization of women within mass organizations and political groups (women's caucuses) are indispensable. At the same time, the traditional Marxist theory of the source of women's oppression under capitalism implicitly underestimates the need for women's self organization.

Thus, Marxists have understood oppression of women in today's capitalist society in terms of the contribution the family makes to capitalism—its function. They have argued that the family under capitalism, and particularly the division of labor between men and women—women's role as childrearers and housewives—is the source of women's oppression today in capitalist society. In this view, men workers have no material stake in women's oppression. *Worker's* male chauvinism is then regarded as simply false consciousness—just “mistaken” ideas imposed by capitalism on men. But if workers have no material stake, then

there is no need to organize a struggle against the sexual division of labor within the family, against male authority, against female inequality and passivity (in addition to the struggle against capitalism). To do so would unnecessarily divide the working class even more than it already is.

As a result, feminist theory in its various forms has *appeared* to provide a more adequate point of departure for a strategy of independent organizing by women. It begins from the correct observation that men benefit from their position vis a vis women, from the recognition that there is a conflict between them, and thus from the understanding that women need to organize together to fight for their needs.

Nevertheless, feminist theory has fundamental weaknesses. In particular, feminist theory tends to tie women's oppression to a theory of patriarchal domination which persists through all forms of human society. Women's oppression must be explained then in some biologically given and unchanging human nature (men are physically stronger, naturally more aggressive, etc.). But to tie male domination

to biology leaves unaccounted for the substantial differences in the degree and character of the inequality between men and women in different societies. And by failing to see how the subordination of women to men has been conditioned by class and production relationships, feminist theory has failed to recognize the potentialities for achieving women's liberation through socialist revolution.

In spite of these weaknesses, feminist theory has forced Marxists to think in new ways about the connection between institutions that are at the heart of women's oppression—such as the family and the class system—especially capitalist class relations. The intention of this article is to take off from recent contributions to begin to show *the material basis* for a combined strategy for women's liberation: a strategy which begins by recognizing the need for an autonomous women's movement but, at the same time, ends up by demonstrating why women need to connect their struggle to the fight for socialism.¹

THE FAMILY'S FUNCTIONS FOR CAPITALISM CANNOT EXPLAIN ITS PERSISTENCE

Marxists have developed many valid descriptions of the way in which the family benefits capitalism.

The first Marxist feminist writings tended to explain the family in terms of the socializing and integrating functions the family performed for capitalism—women's roles as rearers of children, as consumers, and as enforcers of the dominant value system. Women raise children to be passive and to accept the authority of their fathers, and, by extension, of their employers. They are the primary agents of the consumerist drives that hook the family into the capitalist system, and their political conservatism (conditioned by their isolated position in the home) tends to counteract militancy by their husbands (based on solidarity at the workplace).

More recent Marxist feminist writings have concentrated on the *material* contribution of the housewife to capitalism: how women's domestic labor maintains and reproduces labor power, replacing the old generation and helping to restore the current generation of workers after each day of hard work. Women care for very young children and are responsible for turning them into adults who can go onto the labor force. Women, including working wives, cook for men, wash their clothes, take care of their sexual needs, etc.—thus renewing their capacity to work another day. The family, from this vantage point, is interpreted in terms of its contribution to capital in reproducing the labor force, and in the cheapest possible way.

Unfortunately, to point out the working class family's usefulness to capitalism cannot really explain its origins and persistence. For this kind of argument leads us inevitably to overlook the contradictory character of capitalism's ties to the working class family, and the class conflicts inevitably bound up with it. In particular, in attempting to fulfill their needs to accumulate capital, we shall show that capitalists have tended to *undermine* the family by undermining the ability of the labor force to reproduce itself.

Far from growing simply and directly out of the "needs of capitalism", the family should be seen, to an important degree, as an outcome of working class action, of workers

struggles to support themselves and their children, through the fight for a family wage. To guarantee its labor force, the capitalist class must pay workers a wage which not only covers the worker's immediate subsistence costs, but the cost of bringing up his/her children. In one way or another, more or less, the working class must get a "family wage". This is the condition for the survival of the working class, and correspondingly, the condition for the rise and persistence of the working class family.

Nevertheless, there tend to be powerful pressures on each *individual* capitalist which push him to cut wages even below subsistence. For in order to compete the capitalist must sell as cheaply as possible. He must therefore produce at the lowest possible cost, and must for this reason try to pay the lowest possible wage. The *individual* capitalist would like to try to make the workers live on air. But, to the extent that the capitalist actually succeeds in cutting wages so far, he is in fact under-cutting the workers' ability to reproduce the next generation of workers. Moreover, even when faced with this threat of the non-reproduction of the workforce as a whole, no individual capitalist could afford to pay his workers a higher, more adequate wage, just to remedy the situation. For an individual capitalist to pay such a wage would be a form of investment—an investment in labor power. But the problem is that under capitalism no individual employer can rationally choose to invest significantly in labor power. This is because wage labor is free labor, which means that a worker can always leave one employer for another. No capitalists who invested in labor power (by paying a subsistence or family wage) could be at all sure of capturing the fruits of their investment. They could not, for instance, guarantee that the employees whom they paid enough to survive or the children of the employees who emerged to adulthood as a result of their parents receiving a family wage would come back to work for them. Their investment could easily be lost.

Labor power, therefore, differs in a fundamental way from other "factors of production". The capitalist can afford to invest in machinery—because he can be reasonably sure he will get the fruits of his investment. Indeed, the capitalist as a rule must invest in machinery in order to cut costs and compete. But, in contrast, any capitalist who tried to provide for his future labor power needs by paying a subsistence, or family wage, would be in danger of being forced out of business by other capitalists who had lower labor costs because they refused to pay this wage. Whereas capitalist competition forces *investment in improved machinery* and sets up a dynamic toward increasing productivity, capitalist competition tends to be a *barrier* to increased *investment in labor power* and leads in the opposite direction—toward driving the wage below subsistence, toward destroying labor power rather than improving or developing it.

It may appear that the foregoing analysis ignores a basic premise of Marx's interpretation of capitalism—that labor power must be paid the cost of its reproduction (a historically determined subsistence), ultimately including the reproduction costs of the wife and children. Marx argued that if capitalism paid less than this, sooner or later population would decline, leading to a shortage of labor. Capitalists, competing to hire scarce workers, would bid up the price of labor. Eventually wages would be high enough to guarantee the reproduction of labor power, so that workers

Against the Current

could afford to have children again, and those children grow into adulthood. Moreover, capitalists are constantly trying to force wages below subsistence and very often find the conditions which allow them to do this. For example, this occurs when rural producers are cut off from their means of subsistence and forced into the urban labor market (as is the case in South Africa, in the American South, and in the historic "enclosures" movement in England). The army of unemployed which this produces makes it possible for capitalists to avoid paying wages adequate for the reproduction of the labor force over an extended period of time.

Marx himself was obliged to admit this important counter-tendency to his law of wages. As he wrote: "... [we have] constantly presupposed that wages are at least equal to the value of labor power [reproduction costs of labor power]. Forcible reduction of wages below this value plays, however, in practice too important a part for us not to pause upon it for a moment. It in fact transforms, within certain limits, the laborers' necessary consumption fund into a fund for the accumulation of capital."² Given this tendency, the survival of the family is not assured by the operation of capital itself. So there is a tendency within capitalism to absorb women into the labor force and to drive the male wage down.

Finally, the fact is that even if the working class ends up receiving the equivalent of the family wage, the capitalists still cannot insure the reproduction of the labor force by their own actions. Thus, even if the male worker receives enough wages to potentially support a wife and children, it is, in most cases, a sacrifice for the female worker (and the male worker for that matter) to forego the income she could receive so that she can stay home and have children. Of course, the lack of birth control has, historically, meant that through most of the history of capitalism working people have not been able to choose to have children or not to have them. Nonetheless, in the last analysis, the reproduction of labor power is, under capitalism, in the hands of the working class. The capitalists can in no way assure this reproduction through their own efforts. For the labor force to maintain itself and expand, the working class must have not only achieved a level of income which allows for the support of the family but also be willing to go about forming one. This is a contradiction of capitalism whose implications have only begun to be felt. Today, with modern contraception, workers do in effect, limit population growth and the size of the workforce. Thus, from 1982 onward, the number of young people entering the U.S. labor force will decline each year as a result of the declining birthrate. Already there are calls for guest worker programs from Mexico, in the form of temporary work permits.

Ironically, it is the working class, not the capitalist class which has taken "responsibility" for the long run need of the capitalist system for the reproduction of the labor force. Indeed, the working class has had to fight to be able to live and have children and has, in the long run, accomplished this through winning a family wage.

Nonetheless, this victory has had terrible consequences for women. Women have been confined to the home, and came to depend on men for their survival. In turn, women's attachment to domestic labor formed the material base for women's political, social, and psychological subordination to men. It is therefore, necessary to understand not only the

ways in which the working class was able to insure its reproduction, but why it did so through re-constructing a family of a special type—one in which women were oppressed, and not through more egalitarian relationships.

A. The Dissolution of the Family?

There is a contradictory relationship between capitalism and the family which is expressed by the fact that capitalist relations of production tend to undermine the family even though the family performs crucial functions that allow the system to continue. This can be brought sharply into relief when we consider the historical processes through which the modern working class family was formed. In this process, the pre-capitalist patriarchal family based in the peasantry was destroyed by the rise of capitalist relations of production, only to reappear under capitalism, but with many of its essential characteristics intact.

The subordination of women in feudal society had a clear material basis in the way property was distributed and production was organized. The peasant household was the essential unit of production in the feudal economy. But, as a rule, only men owned and inherited the land upon which the household produced its livelihood. The fact that men had the property rights determined that women had to depend on them for their economic existence. As a result, women were forced to submit to the patriarchal authority of their fathers and husbands.

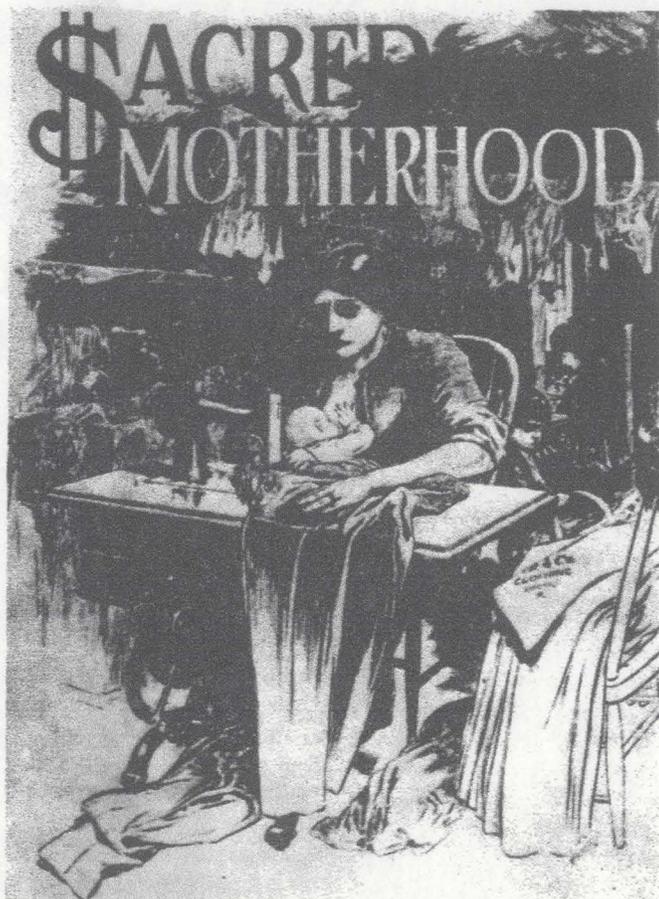
With the rise of capitalism, the material basis of patriarchal control by peasant men over women was deeply eroded. For the emergence of capitalist class relations meant above all that the peasantry was deprived of its possession of land. Peasant families were expelled from their plots and robbed of their means of subsistence. The result was the creation of a class of propertyless men who could survive only by selling their labor power for a wage. Paradoxically this expropriation—brutal as it was—tended in the direction of at least potentially equalizing the relationship between men and women. Both men and women had to rely on wage labor for subsistence. As men were deprived of their property, they lost, at least temporarily, their strongest lever for subordinating women. (Thus there arises a new huge gap and distinction between the bourgeois family which is based to this day in large part on property ownership and inheritance, and the working class family.)

During the period of early capitalism, before the development of factory production, manufacturing was carried out in the home (the putting-out system) and men and women cooperated as joint wage earners in production. For example, in textiles they used complementary skills—spinning and weaving—to make cloth for their merchant employers. In this domestic form of production, the family not only depended on women's labor every bit as much as men's labor (this had also been true in the old feudal household) but women as wage earners also had access to income independent of men. Relatively greater economic equality between men and women appears to have led to important changes in relationships within the family and brought more freedom to women. Unlike the classic capitalist family, women could choose whom they would marry instead of marrying according to their fathers' wishes; husbands and wives appear to have often shared housework chores so that wives could complete their wage-earning tasks; and women appear to have participated more equally in work-

ing class social life. (Contemporary accounts deplored the sexual liberty of working class women, frequenting public houses, smoking and drinking along with the men.)³

This is not to say that there was some "golden age" for the emerging working class. The merchant masters drove hard bargains, and life was far from easy. But still, in the putting-out system, the family as a whole could control its division of labor, and could regulate the pace of work to make room for domestic tasks that needed to be done to keep themselves fed and clothed.

The rise of the factory system destroyed the hold of the new proletariat over the conditions of their labor. Continued expulsions of peasants from their land and the destruction of craft production in the household created a desperate and starving class. Indeed, the rise of the factory system in the early 19th century not only challenged the existence of the family but the very physical survival of working class people.



Men, women and children entered the new mills and factories. They worked fourteen hours a day until they could work no more. Women concealed their pregnancies, giving birth on factory floors. Children were left at home—with an indifferent adult or an older child. Infants were given drugs to keep them quiet. Six- and seven-year-olds went to work with their parents. More than one half of the workers' children died before the age of five. In all the manufacturing centers of France and England "infant mortality rates were appreciably higher where mothers worked for long hours away from home." Children were killed by domestic acci-

dents twice as often in Manchester where factory work prevailed than in Liverpool where it did not. Midwives reported that female factory workers experienced more difficult childbirth than other women and that miscarriages were far more frequent among them than the rest of the population. The use of bottle-feeding instead of breast-feeding among working women was another source of high working class infant mortality, since the unsterilized milk and bottles resulted in often fatal gastroenteritis.⁴

The early factory system carried the logic of capitalist production to its conclusion. Women and children, as well as men, were brought into the labor force. The old patriarchal powers of men were eroded, and the family itself seemed to be disintegrating. In the abstract, women had gained equality. After all, they were equally wage earners. Yet this "freedom" was only an abstraction. For, with women and children thrown into factory labor, the ability of the working class to reproduce itself was in question.

B. Rebuilding the Family

In response to this kind of moral and physical degradation, the working class waged a struggle throughout the 19th century for protective legislation for women and children and for a family wage. While it is true that men were interested in eliminating competition, it is also true, as we shall demonstrate below, that men also struggled to free women and children from the horrors of factory labor, so that mothers might survive childbirth and children might survive infancy and childhood.

These goals were expressed over and over again in actual political demands, union newspapers, and speeches by union leaders in both the U.S. and Britain. A worker writing in the *English Trades Newspaper* in 1825 argued: "The labouring men of this country . . . should return to the good old plan of subsisting their wives and children on the wages of their own labour, and they should demand wages high enough for this purpose . . ." In 1841, committees of male factory workers called for the "gradual withdrawal of all female labour from the factory." An official of the Boston central Labor Union declared that "the demand for female labor is an insidious assault upon the home. It is the knife of the assassin, aimed at the family circle."⁵

In 1846, the *American Ten-Hour Advocate* stated:

"It is needless for us to say, that all attempts to improve the morals and physical condition of female factory workers will be abortive unless their hours are materially reduced. Indeed we may go so far as to say that married females would be much better occupied in performing the domestic duties of the household than following the never-tiring motion of machinery. We therefore hope the day is not distant, when the husband will be able to provide for his wife and family without sending the former to endure the drudgery of a cotton mill."⁶

By the beginning of the 20th century, it seems that the family wage for men had become a social norm for many working class families.

The achievement of the family wage was conditioned by and tied to the very rapid development of the forces of production which occurred in the second half of the 19th century. Increasing productivity allowed higher wages to be paid without cutting too far into profits and threatening investment. At the same time, the rapid pace of industrial

Against the Current

expansion created a high demand for labor, making higher wages possible. Thus capital accumulation helped to create the conditions which allowed men's wages to rise to the point that the family could at least survive without wives and children working.

But to create the *potential* for a family wage was not enough. The family wage also had to be fought for—and in fact it was only very gradually that the working class as a whole was able to extract from capital a barely adequate existence.

C. An Ambiguous Victory

The struggle for the continuity of the family and for the family wage for men was certainly in the interests of the working class threatened by the horrors of the early industrial system. And it represented a defeat for the capitalist class. Now wives' and childrens' labor would no longer be available to the capitalists to exploit. And insofar as the family wage for men equalled what men, women and children had previously earned together, the family wage meant a decisively higher standard of living for working class people.

Yet, ultimately women paid very dearly for this victory. As capitalist society developed its new form of family, the ideas, attitudes and personality structures associated with those distinctive roles of male breadwinner and female homemaker were established. These roles, originally possible only for the middle class, became increasingly universalized as the material conditions for realizing them extended into the working class.

The sexual division based upon the split between home and work created a material base for a new ideology of female inferiority and subordination to men. The male domain, the public world of production was an aggressive, tough interchange between male labor and male capital. Home, the world of the family and reproduction was nurturant and private—it belonged to woman. Old aristocratic ideas of courtly love reappeared in a new romanticism of personal fulfillment and emotional satisfaction which can be enjoyed in the nuclear family of all classes. The family became a haven in a heartless world of economic competition and survival of the fittest. Childhood emerged; and with it the occupation of mothering. No longer regarded as either infants or mini-adults, children were seen to require an extended period of development in which they were given a socializing guidance that "only a woman can provide." While the other side of woman's domesticity was the notion of "man as the sole provider" aggressively competing in the outside world. The whole complex of modern sexual roles—what a woman is, what a man is—developed in this period. Thus, as women became dependent on men in new ways, a new ideology corresponding to that reality developed, but it remained, as in the pre-capitalist feudal society, an ideology centered on women's biological differentness and therefore her "natural" (necessary) dependence on men.

But if the family under capitalism was restructured through the struggle between capital and labor over the question of the standard of living of the working class, the defense of the family is not the only form that the struggle for survival might have taken. Conceivably, the working class might have fought instead for higher wages for women as well as men, for full paid maternity leave, for day care, for

the "socialization" of domestic duties. Why did the working class struggle embrace the family wage for men?

Several recent writers, Heidi Hartman and Ann Foreman especially, have argued that the family wage became the goal of the working class movement, because it was in the interest of working class men. They argue that the 19th century witnessed a conflict between working class men and ruling class men over who would control and benefit from female labor. Working class men wanted to keep women at home to service them and to eliminate women's competition for their jobs. Capitalists, on the other hand, had an interest in exploiting women as wage labor, pulling them out of the family. In the absence of patriarchy, Hartman says, a unified working class might have confronted capitalism, but patriarchal social relations divided the working class, allowing one part (men) to be bought off at the expense of the other (women): "The family wage may be understood as a resolution of the conflict over women's labor power which was occurring between patriarchal and capitalist interests at the time." Ann Foreman argues, similarly, that the dynamic behind the family wage was men's drive to escape their alienation as workers through their relationships with women. This drive lay behind the creation of "femininity", of the female as passive, nurturant and emotional. For women, the family wage meant enforced sexual roles (woman as domestic slave and sexual servant), while men held full-time occupations that allowed them to organize themselves at work without competition from women.⁷

While this "construction" of men's interests seems all too real, the question remains, was it primarily men who imposed these stark terms on women?

Hartman and Foreman argue that superior access to organization—especially the unions—and political skills allowed men to project class demands in their own interest. Rather than organizing women into their unions, male workers excluded them from membership, and offered instead protective legislation—not to improve women's working conditions but to discourage employers from hiring them. The skilled workers' exclusion of women from their unions and apprenticeship programs *did* limit women's access to craft work and helped to push them into the lowest paying, dead-end jobs. The more women were deprived of the opportunity for economic independence, the more they were thrown into marriage, reinforcing motherhood and domesticity as women's main goal in life. And, when the unions adopted the Victorian ideal of "true womanhood" to justify denying women craft jobs, they helped to spread to the working class the bourgeois view of women as helpless dependents.

Nevertheless, as we shall show, in a large number of cases neither trade union organization nor the fight for protective legislation were successful in preventing women from working. For the unions were not particularly strong throughout the 19th century and protective legislation was often not won, or when won was very poorly enforced.

For example, the president of the Cigar Makers Union argued in 1879 that protective legislation was the best way to push the (lower-paid) women out of the industry. If employers were forced to follow strict rules that applied only to women, they would undoubtedly prefer men. In spite of the union's opposition, however, the percentage of women continued to rise—from 17% at the time of his speech to 37% in 1900. The Molders Union faced a similar problem:

Women coremakers—a job which required two years to learn—generally earned half the wages of non-union men and one-third the wages of union men. The Molders Constitution barred women from membership and imposed a fine on members who taught women workers any aspect of the molding trade in order to restrict “the further employment of women labor in union core rooms and foundries, and eventually [to insure] the elimination of such labor in all foundries.” The effectiveness of the Molders’ strategy may be judged by the fact that in 1907 women were 25% of Pittsburgh coremakers while all fifty workers in the core room of the city’s largest foundry were women.⁸

This view that the patriarchal attitudes of working class men determined women’s position in the labor force is an oversimplification not only because the unions often did not have the strength to impose exclusion but also because they were not consistently hostile to women’s employment or unionization. Generally, where women were brought into the same jobs at lower wages than men, the men reacted by trying to exclude them from employment rather than organizing them. But where women worked in jobs already defined as female, they were often supported by the male-dominated unions.

For example, the Molders Union, so hostile to female employment in the steel industry, seems to have supported women’s union organization elsewhere. When the all-women Collar Laundry Union of Troy, New York, went on strike in May, 1869, the Iron Molders voted \$500 strike support and pledged “to continue the same for weeks to come rather than see such a brave set of wenches crushed under the iron heel of these laundry nabobs.” Later, the predominantly female shirtwaist workers general strike of 1909 (which established the ILGWU), was led by women rank and filers, and won financial support from the Central Labor Councils and AFL unions throughout the country. See also the mutual support between the Knights and Daughters of St. Crispin, the unions in the shoemaking industry, which organized men and women who had complementary jobs. The largest group of women members of the Knights of Labor were the women shoebinders.⁹

This apparent contradiction is resolved once we remember that the elitist craft unionism of the AFL was not so much an effect of “patriarchy” as it was a response by skilled workers to capital. The whole strength of the craft unions and their strategy against capital depended on limiting access to their skill and thereby controlling the supply of labor. This strategy was directed not only at women but at other groups of workers—blacks as well as many European immigrants. In the absence of a broader movement for industrial unionism, the strategy of skilled workers for protecting wages and working conditions tended to be exclusionist. It disregarded not only the interest of women but of the great masses of workers who were unskilled and semi-skilled. On the other hand, patriarchy *did* fit and *did* contribute justifications for excluding women in the same way that racist and national chauvinist ideologies justified the exclusion of blacks and southern and eastern European immigrants from the unions.

Finally, even if the unions were able to limit to some extent women’s access to skilled jobs, they could hardly keep them out of work entirely. For up into the 20th century most of the working class—men as well as women—was

employed in non-unionized industries. Women’s exclusion from the skilled unions and the opportunity to acquire high-paying skills cannot entirely account for their confinement in the family, for if they were barred from the highest paid jobs, so were the majority of working class men. Nor can the male domination of the union movement account for the persistently lower pay of women and when and where they did work. Even in non-unionized industries, women were consistently paid less than men for the same work and concentrated in the lowest paying jobs.

All in all, it is not sufficient to explain the “creation of the housewife” in terms of a victory of the male part of the working class over the female part. This is not to say that men had no interest in the *result*. They had very definite interests—material as well as psychological—in making the home a place where women take care of men. But whatever men may have wanted, it does not seem they had the organization and power to keep women out of wage work *against women’s will*. Therefore, we must confront the question: what were women’s needs and interests and how did these fit in with the demand for family wage? To begin to answer this question, we should look at the historical conditions within which women as well as men conducted their struggle.

The Logic of the Sexual Division of Labor

Both material and subjective conditions made a division of labor between men and women difficult to avoid and pushed women toward support for the family wage. On the one hand, the lack of effective birth control, the low level of housekeeping technology made it very difficult for women to work outside the home. On the other hand, the traditional patriarchal ideas that the working class brought from pre-capitalist culture shaped the way people thought about their world, their problems and solutions to them.

The preoccupation of Hartman and others with the way women’s domestic labor maintains current labor power and benefits men has led these writers to neglect the other side of reproduction—the production of a new generation of laborers. Yet, it seems that more than anything else, the fact that women bear children was key to determining, under the specific historical conditions of the 18th and 19th centuries, the way women as well as men tried to organize their lives to endure their survival. Women’s role in biological reproduction ultimately determined women’s subordination under capitalism.

Constant pregnancy, nursing and the demands of infant care, made work a terrible burden for women—especially with the low level of health and medical care available and the horrible working conditions of the 19th and early 20th century. Not surprisingly, married women resisted factory work. After the early period of industrialization, that is from the first part of the 19th century, in both Britain and the U.S. most married women were not employed outside the home.¹⁰

Late 19th century statistics on women in the U.S. workforce demonstrate how women were discouraged from entering the labor market by childbearing. While 20% of all women were working, the vast majority of these were single. Three-quarters of factory women were under 25, fewer than one in twenty were married. Seventy-five per cent of all sales women were 14-25 and unmarried. Women

Against the Current

working in heavy industry were universally young and unmarried. In Britain, whereas 25% of married women worked outside the home in 1851, by 1911 the figure was one in ten.¹¹

Married women's resistance to working outside the home did not depend, moreover, simply on a male wage sufficient for supporting wife and children. Women found other ways of generating income for the family. In particular, withdrawal from work outside the home was facilitated by the development of a large home (tenement sweat-shop) industry which included seamstressing, laundressing, cap-making, cigar-making and paper-flower making. It was also accomplished by means of continued labor force and participation of their children. Supplementary wage earners in the family tended to be older children rather than the wife. For the 19th century working class family, survival was often based on women exploiting themselves and their younger children unmercifully in the home, while their older children grew stunted working long hours in factories and shops.¹² For these families there was a real logic to the family wage. There seemed no way for women to escape the home. It therefore made sense to push for higher male wages for the benefit of the entire family.

The low level of the forces of production further reinforced the sexual division of labor, pushing women out of the labor force, since it encouraged women to combine housework and wage-work *in the home*. Keeping a household going was a full time job, both because the machines used in housework (refrigerators, washing machines, etc. were not yet available and because industries that could replace domestic tasks (canning) were not yet developed. As long as men and women were solely responsible for themselves and their children, one adult had to be assigned to housework to keep the family from falling into absolute misery.

Of course, the division of labor between home worker and wage worker did not determine by itself that women would stay at home. Men could have stayed home. But women's inability to control their fertility made it very likely that they often would be pregnant or nursing once they became sexually active. This made work outside the home much harder for women than for men, and pushed in the direction of women rather than men taking up the domestic role.

The material conditions faced by the working class in the period of early capitalism determined that women as well as men had an interest in the preservation of the family. In the absence of social institutions to provide for the care of the children, equal wages and equal access to skilled trades for women would hardly have solved women's problems. A full range of support services for women was necessary—including the provision of maternity leave, job site care for infants, nursing breaks for mothers and full day child care. Yet, where working conditions for men were barely supportable, where employers were consistently hostile to trade unions, where unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, occupational safety, etc. were practically unknown, the provision of such services could only be a utopian dream. A working class barely strong enough to establish simple weapons of defense was in no position to wrest these enormous concessions from capital.

Understanding that there was a material basis for the strict sexual division of labor provides an explanation of why

women were cheated of the apparently liberating potential contained in the destruction of feudal property relations. Of course, in addition to the material barriers to women's full participation in wage labor, subjective factors also pushed in favor of the patriarchal family and the right of working class men to earn enough to allow *their* wives to be *just* housewives like wives in the middle class.

Ideas of male superiority, male control over the family, and male responsibility for the family were all part of the patriarchal culture of feudal society out of which the working class emerged, and were naturally carried over into the new order. Men remained in control of property. Men represented their families in village life and organizations. The split between public and private life which dominates capitalist society was much less developed in feudal society, but insofar as it existed, men—and not women—were already identified with public life. Thus patriarchal ideas still structured the way people thought about the world and how they constructed their goals, and the ideology was easily transferred from the old society into the new because it fit in with, rather than contradicted, actual experience.

What Keeps The Family Going Today?

But if the sexual division of labor had an unavoidable logic in the 19th and early 20th century, this is not so clear today. Just as capitalism created the necessity for the sexual division of labor, capitalism is also beginning to break that division of labor down. Indeed, in view of recent technological and economic developments, it is necessary to pose the question of what keeps the family intact and why women's oppression continues.

The appearance of widely available birth control technology has allowed women to limit their pregnancies. The rapid expansion of the economy has opened up whole areas of employment for women. Labor-saving devices for the home as well as the growth of capitalist enterprises that substitute for work formerly done at home—laundries and dry cleaners, fast food restaurants, canning, freezing and preserving, etc.—have cut down the labor time necessary for maintaining a home. While creating a "double burden" for the majority of women—as both wage earners and housewives—these changes have, in fact, loosened women's ties and opened the way to important improvements in women's position.

The increased availability of birth control, backed up by legal abortion, has meant that women can "have their sexuality" without forfeiting their independence—at least unwillingly. Because, more than in the past, women can plan their children, they have, at least potentially, much more choice over when they marry, who they marry, and even if they marry.

Alternatives to cohabiting with and being dependent on a man have become more realistic. A single parent cannot live very well, but she can live on her own because she can work and keep up a home for her children. This relative increase in women's access to an independent life has formed the basis for the increasing divorce rate, and the growing proportion of families headed by women. It also formed the ground for the rise of the feminist movement of the late 1960's and early 70's. Women can dare to take men on, to demand changes from men, because they have a basis in practice for a life independent of men.



A German Poster by Kathe Kollwitz (1924) protesting the anti-abortion penal code.

Nevertheless, women's oppression continues today because in the last analysis women still remain by and large tied to childrearing, are therefore disadvantaged on the labor market relative to men, and thus, under continuing pressure to remain dependent on men.

Thus, women's responsibility for raising children prevents women from being equal to men in the labor market. Confined by childcare responsibilities to the home, women will prefer work that can be combined with home duties—part time work for example. Their inability to remain continuously in full time work prevents them from developing skills and working up career ladders as well as men. Women's domestic commitments make it more difficult for them to organize, perpetuating women as a low-paid labor force. As

a result, women earn 57% as much as men when they do work, and we get a vicious cycle which reinforces women's disadvantaged position. Because a woman earns less, her job is more easily sacrificed. She will take off work to stay home with a sick child, visit the teacher, quit her job and move if her husband gets another job and so forth. Because women must be mothers first and foremost they learn to nurture but they do not prepare themselves for competition in the labor market. This is partly because they aim at traditional, low-paid women's jobs where they can be sure to get hired, but it is also because they expect that their wages will be a second income, supplementary to a man's.

Women's role in the family determines their lack of success in the labor force; their ability to get only low-paid,

Against the Current

dead-end jobs conditions their acceptance of women's traditional role.

But why do women continue to be defined primarily by family commitments? While working class men were not responsible for imposing the sexual division of labor, they have a real interest in its preservation. Men benefit very directly from traditional family roles. They are not only spared having to do the work necessary to take care of themselves, but they can also avoid most of the responsibilities of raising children. And they have a claim on their wives emotional support, respect, deference and sexuality. For men to share equally the work of childcare and household chores—and to take equal responsibility for nurturance and emotional support—they would have to give up a very large advantage.

But above all because reproduction is still an individual, not a social, responsibility, the sexual division of labor retains a determining logic. For good quality childcare is very scarce, its cost prohibitive except for a small minority. One parent must still stay at home until children are in school, and one adult must work part-time or with flexible hours. Women continue to be the ones who do this, because men resist doing it . . . but also because the same logic that brought the family wage in the first place is still operative. Thus, women are still "naturally" tied to children; women are trained to care for children; women are therefore at a disadvantage in the labor market, and men have more opportunities for more income. If one adult is going to stay home, it "makes more sense" for the woman to do so.

CONCLUSION

As feminists we do not have to deny that capitalism creates the conditions for women's oppression in order to justify support for the self-organization of women. As socialists, we do not have to deny that men are a barrier to women's liberation in order to work with men to build a movement for socialist revolution. Men do benefit from the traditional family arrangements and for this reason cannot

be expected to lead the fight to end them. Women must organize themselves. Organized, we can make gains. Over the last decade, there have been real—even if partial—improvements in our access to jobs and to political resources. Despite setbacks, positive cultural changes have left an indelible mark on many women's lives. The women's movement made this possible. The self-organization of women in a movement which fights against the special oppression of women is indispensable to the achievement of women's liberation.

But it is not sufficient. Capitalist class relations set up an impassible barrier to women's liberation. This is not because the capitalist class conspires to keep women in the home to reproduce the labor force. On the contrary, the capitalists leave the responsibility for reproduction of the working class to the workers themselves, within the context of a wage system which splits production from reproduction. Working people are left with little choice but to provide for their survival in individual families, creating the unbreakable logic of the sexual division of labor.

The only way out of this oppressive structure for women is through socially organized child care which offers children at least the same quality of care that their individual parent would give and which includes infant care at the work site for nursing mothers, full paid parenting leave for both men and women, flexible work time and time off for family duties for both men and women, etc. Anything less than this leaves women no choice but to shoulder individual responsibilities for mothering.

To organize reproduction in this way would require an enormous transfer of income from the capitalist class to the working class as well as an enormous break from the individualistic modes of organizing social life which are inherent in capitalism. Such changes are unlikely to be achieved short of socialist revolution. Ultimately, women cannot hope to be freed from being determined by their biological nature until they, along with men, can win collective control over production and society as a whole.

NOTES

1. Especially, Irene Bruegel, "What Keeps the Family Going?", *International Socialism*, Series 2, Number 1, July 1978. I would also like to thank Nancy Homstrom for her help in working out the ideas expressed in this article and for her contribution to the part on women's oppression in contemporary capitalist society, and Barbara Zeluck and Cheryl Stanwood for their criticisms and suggestions.

2. *Capital*, Vol. I, International Publishers, 1967, p. 599.

3. Hans Medick, "The Proto-Industrial Family Economy," *Social History* Number 3, October 1976, pp. 311-314.

4. Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978, pp. 132-133; Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Stanford University Press, 1968, pp. 123, 161, 182.

5. Jane Humphries, "Class Struggle and the persistence of the Working Class Family," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Volume 1,

Number 3, September 1977, p. 252; Ann Oakley, *Women's Work*, Vintage Books, 1976, p. 43.

6. Heidi Hartman, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," *Capital and Class*, Number 8 (Summer, 1979), pp. 15-16.

7. Hartman, pp. 14-17; Ann Foreman, *Femininity as Alienation*, Pluto Press, 1977, especially chapters 12 and 13.

8. Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, *We Were There*, Pantheon, 1977, pp. 166, 210.

9. Wertheimer, 170-174; 304-305.

10. Jane Humphries, p. 251; Tilly and Scott, pp. 124-129.

11. Oakley, p. 44; Wertheimer, pp. 212, 217.

12. Wertheimer, p. 209; Tilly and Scott, pp. 114-121.



TDU: PROBLEMS & PROSPECTS

by DAVE WOLFINSOHN

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, American industry was shaken by a broad wave of wildcat strikes, unofficial job actions, and locally led struggles. In the face of an unresponsive trade union bureaucracy, a new generation of workers began to take into their own hands the struggle against inhuman and unsafe working conditions and inadequate wages. From Dodge Main to Lordstown, to Sparrow's Point to Cabin Creek, and even the post-office workers, rebellion spread especially among auto, steel, and mine workers.

Of course, most of this discontent remained fragmentary. Nonetheless, it encouraged confidence within the left that the class struggle in the U.S. was in the process of transformation. This was the period when an important section of the radical left which had originated in the anti-war and Black Power movements of the 60s was attempting to reorient itself, and to build roots in the struggles at the workplace. It was also the time when it first became evident to many that the long post-war boom was ending and that we were entering a new period of economic crisis. There seemed to be good reason for optimism that resurgent socialist politics and a resurgent rank and file movement could be linked together.

Now, almost a decade later, a more sober balance sheet has to be drawn up. In auto, the rank and file struggle was defeated (e.g., the nationwide fight against GMAD speed-up in auto). In the UMW, the rank and file was forced to retreat to a purely local basis. In steel, the movement failed to break beyond the confines of electoral reformism (e.g., the Sadlowski campaign).

Only one grass roots labor insurgency has managed to grow and gain a tenuous foothold on a national scale. The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) remains a striking and hopeful exception. Building on the energy generated in the early 1970s, especially out of the explosion of the

national teamster wildcat strike of 1970, TDU has, since 1975-76, forged a national organization, with a monthly national newspaper, about 40 local chapters, a string of rank and file local teamster newspapers, and a real cadre of rank and file militants, a number of whom identify themselves as revolutionary socialists.

The continuing strength of TDU, in the face of tremendous difficulties, was evident at its last national convention held in November 1979. This meeting showed that the basic core of the rank and file leadership was slowly expanding. Moreover, the membership nationally had grown to around 6,000. Four hundred rank and filers attended, representing

Against the Current

some 25-30 chapters. The convention also ratified TDU's formal merger with the Professional Road Drivers (PROD), a Nader-type lobbying group which had transformed itself into a small, but significant rank and file organization (about 1,000 members at time of merger). It is true that the feeling of the assembled rank and filers was less optimistic, less evangelical, less excited by the immediate prospects for change than in the past conventions. At the same time, however, the mood was more realistic and more patient. The rank and file appeared more fully prepared than ever before to conduct the necessarily long and difficult struggle to build a broad rank and file movement which would be able to decisively transform the struggle against their employers.

Overshadowing the convention were the problems of maintaining rank and file initiative in a period where a hardening of the employers' offensive goes hand-in-hand with the demoralizing impact of the recession. In addition, the basic fact of life in the rank and file teamster movement over the recent period has been the defeat of almost every rank and file contract campaign initiated by TDU. The demoralizing effect of those defeats culminated in a very low level of participation in the 1978-79 campaign around the pivotal National Master Freight Agreement (the national truck drivers and dockworkers contract). To add to the difficulties, workers throughout the union face increasing layoffs. Meanwhile, the continuing lull in the class struggle, not just in teamsters, but throughout the U.S. working class, is a danger signal for TDU. Uncertain that they can spur direct action against the employers, some TDUers have tended to seek substitutes for building the mass movement. In particular, there is a tendency to look to union elections, to alliances with dubious union officials, and to protracted lawsuits, rather than to a strengthened reliance on their own efforts and those of their fellow workers. These tendencies are "natural" in the face of the low level of rank and file activity today. But if they continue to develop, they could prove fatal for the young movement.

In this situation, it has become more important than ever for the TDU membership to develop a full understanding of

the forces at work against them, and of the kind of movement required to win. Indeed, it is not surprising that there have developed some serious differences among TDUers as to how to go forward under tough conditions. These have surfaced at the annual conventions, in the local chapters, and in the continuing dialogue between local militants and different elements of the national TDU leadership at the TDU center in Detroit. It is aim of this article to place these current debates in the context of TDU's history, as well as to discuss certain strategic possibilities for the movement's further growth.

I. THE ROOTS OF THE RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT IN TEAMSTERS

TDU was born out of the fight around the 1976 National Master Freight Agreement. This is by far the broadest and most important nationwide teamster contract. It covers the intercity and intracity truck drivers and dock workers—who form the heart of the union. It was around these groups of workers that the IBT was built in the mass organizing drives of the later 1930s, and it is they who have traditionally formed the spearhead for action within the IBT. By the mid-70s, the drivers and loaders in the IBT faced the same sharply deteriorating conditions as workers elsewhere. But more than most other sections of the U.S. working class, the ranks in particular retained a conviction that they could fight and win. There were, indeed, good reasons for their confidence; for in terms of the power of their enemies and their own fighting resources, they still maintained a relatively favorable position for struggle.

A. The Hoffa Legacy

The original impetus that transformed the IBT from a lethargic craft organization into a dynamic mass union was provided by the great rank and file movements of the 1934-38 period. Under the leadership of Farrell Dobbs, the Dunne brothers, etc., Minneapolis Local 574 became a bastion of rank and file power. It conducted one of the most successful general strikes in American history and constructed a network of militant drivers committees which unionized over-the-road trucking in the Northwestern states.



A battle between police and striking teamsters during Minneapolis strike

After a massive campaign of repression, spearheaded by an unholy alliance of the employers, the IBT national leadership, and the federal government, Local 574 was put into receivership and its leadership imprisoned under the anti-radical Smith Act in 1940. The new generation of business unionists who took power in the Central Conference area uprooted union democracy while at the same time preserved the industrial union structure which had been created in the 30's upsurge. Thus, under the leadership of Jimmy Hoffa and Dave Beck, the IBT continued to grow, from the top down, exploiting the unusually favorable economic conditions of the postwar boom and the spectacular expansion of the trucking industry.

In particular the trucking industry received two enormous gifts from the U.S. government. First, a direct subsidy through the construction of the massive, multi-billion dollar interstate highway system beginning in the late 1940s. As a result, trucking was able to take a growing share of the total freight business from the railroads, increasing its share of total ton-mileage in the U.S. from 11% to 25% between 1946 and 1968. In this period, the volume of trucking business grew by five times! To top things off, the trucking industry benefited enormously as a result of regulation by the Interstate Commerce Commission. The ICC set rates and limited competition by limiting entry of new firms into the industry.

Under these extraordinarily favorable economic conditions, Jimmy Hoffa was able to employ the highly organized and tremendous potential disruptive economic power of unionized drivers against thousands of relatively small scale and disorganized employers. Yet the fact remains that Hoffa was the consummate business unionist. He avoided strikes if at all possible, and kept the profitability of the trucking industry at the forefront of his considerations. His strategy was to organize the employers into regional associations. He could then sign agreements which would ensure uniform conditions (uniform costs) for each employer. In this way, he helped the companies to further regulate competition within the industry, and both the workers and the employers could benefit, especially since the ICC was usually willing to pass wage increases on to the consumers in the form of rate increases.

Meanwhile, Hoffa increasingly centralized power at the top of the union: by moving first to regional, then a national trucking contract (the Master Freight Agreement); and by constructing an "open ended" grievance procedure, in which final appeals went through the union president's office. But despite the national contracts, the union remained a relatively de-centralized structure, with a lot of power still in the hands of local and regional officials. In any case, the Hoffa system worked extremely well for everybody, so long as prosperity lasted. With easy money to be made for many years in the trucking business, the union officials at all levels were able to fill their pockets through bribes, as well as by ripping off the union pension fund. At the same time, however, the average teamster was enjoying a rapidly rising standard of living, with relatively good working conditions, and Hoffa was able to take the credit.

B. The Employers' Offensive in Trucking

From the late 1960s, however, trucking, with most of the rest of U.S. industry, began to experience economic difficulties. From 1968, trucking ceased to bite further into the rail-

roads' share of the freight business. Its own rate of growth dropped dramatically, reflecting the general economic downturn. Meanwhile, increasing political pressure was being applied by the freight industry's customers—a vast section of U.S. business—to force rates down. In the face of declining and increasingly insecure profits, the trucking bosses, like their counterparts elsewhere, launched an offensive, which ultimately has come to encompass almost every aspect of the drivers' and dock workers' conditions.

During the boom days of the 50s and 60s, the trucking industry exerted remarkably little control over its labor force. Especially with steady growth and government regulation, many firms were satisfied to run an incredibly "loose ship." Even in the late 1960s, it was a near universal condition in the freight industry that drivers pretty much determined their own speed of work and the way they ran their routes, with practically no interference from management. The obverse side of weak management was a strong union at the shop floor level. In fact, as late as 1970, every shop retained the right to call twenty-four hour strikes (once during the life of the contract) on its own authority. This represented a degree of local control which was practically unheard of in U.S. industry.

"Scientific Management" thus came late to the trucking industry. But over the last ten years, almost every aspect of the old, lax system has been subject to drastic revision. Increasing supervision and control have been reinforced by the widespread application of rigid productivity standards and work schedules. Drivers work is measured in stops per hour and dock workers are expected to load and unload certain tonnages per hour. Fall below an average, and you are fired. As part of the massive drive for speed-up, drivers have been forced to radically increase the size of their loads with a resultant increase in the number of accidents and job-related injuries. Similarly, in order to limit premium pay, thousands of teamsters have lost the right to a normal week-end, being forced, instead, to work so-called 'flexible weeks' (e.g. any five day period chosen by the boss). Thousands of drivers now have no fixed starting time and must stay within reach of a phone 24 hours a day, waiting to be called to work.

Meanwhile, the threat to destroy the union outright has been growing. In open defiance of the union, employers are making increasing use of non-union owner-operators. They are opting out in droves from the Master Freight Agreement, signing separate contracts with the union which cut wages up to 50%.

It must be remembered: The workers in the freight industry, unlike steel or auto workers, have *not* had to stand up to the biggest and most powerful corporations in the world. Although there is some tendency to concentration, trucking is still carried out by a great many firms (at least 16,000 I.C.C.-regulated companies). Even such giants as Roadway, or Consolidated Freight, or Yellow Freight control only a small share of the total market. The companies have, therefore, been ill-placed to unleash the kind of coordinated and concentrated attack that the auto workers, for example, faced with the introduction of the GMAD speed-up system.

Of course, the IBT has barely pretended to resist the employers' demands. Of all the giant industrial unions, the teamsters are unquestionably most "in bed" with the employers. Nevertheless, despite their well earned reputation for corruption, violence and gangsterism, the IBT official-

Against the Current

dom is neither well-organized nor efficient, and probably has been less effective in controlling their rank and file than, for example, the well-oiled and sophisticated bureaucratic-centralist machine of the UAW. The teamster bureaucracy still remains largely divided into somewhat autonomous local baronies, and sporadic competition between them has, from time to time, opened up room for the rank and file. Hoffa, for example, for years protected the biggest West Coast drivers' Local 208, winning their grievances and protecting their local actions, so he could retain a base in a region still heavily influenced by Dave Beck's followers.

Finally, the fact is that top teamster officials, even down to the district level, tend to be so involved in the "business" side of the union and so cut off from the rank and file that they are hampered in their efforts at control. The teamsters' ranks have had in consequence, plenty of room to maneuver . . . where they have been able to get themselves organized.

C. Deregulation

The employers' offensive has been profoundly aided by the U.S. government's own offensive. With the pressure growing to reduce freight rates, there is legislation on the verge of passing to deregulate the trucking industry. The union and most rank and file activists see this as the greatest disaster in the history of the union. They believe that it will drive down wages and conditions and will force many union carriers out of business because they will be unable to compete with all the new carriers who can come in and underbid them by paying less than union scale. (This is very important in trucking because it is a particularly labor intensive industry.) While the outcome they predict is no doubt true, the cause is *not* deregulation. The cause of the present and future erosion of wages and conditions in the industry is the union itself.

Actually, deregulation began in a very mild form in the late 1950s when a few agricultural commodities were deregulated. This meant that the trucking companies could not fix rates on what they charged to ship these *special commodities*. The trucking companies (mostly owner operators in this case) began cutting rates. The teamsters neither tried to stop them from running what formerly had been their freight nor did they attempt to organize them. They just let that sector of the business go non-union and let wages fall about 40% below the prevailing union rate. This creation of *special commodities* has proliferated in recent years so now almost everything (including all full trailer loads) is considered *special commodities*. The union has either rolled over and played dead or was on the take and taking the leadership of setting up these schemes in the first place. In any case, the problem was not deregulation but the failure of the union to keep its jurisdiction organized. With the total decay of the Teamsters in the Fitzsimmon era it was obvious that regulation was the final prop holding up the structure of high union wages because the union which originally had forced the wages and conditions up was now almost a hollow shell. That was the lesson of the 1979 Freight strike when the strike of the regulated section of the freight industry barely caused a ripple because everything important was being shipped as *special commodities* by both non-union and sub-standard union carriers. This total weakness of the union whetted the shippers' appetite and has led to the virtually total deregulation that will no doubt be law as we go to press.

D. The Initial Rank and File Fightback

It was the survival of militancy at the base, in relationship to the relative weakness and disorganization of both employers and bureaucrats, which gave the rank and file confidence to fight back against the first wave of the employers' attacks. The nationwide wildcat strike of 1970 was one of the largest 'unofficial' strikes in American history, mobilizing nearly 50,000 rank and file teamsters in a bitter six week struggle against employers' associations in Ohio, Illinois, and California. On the one hand, the rebellious rank and file had to face perhaps the most formidable use of state repression and employer violence in a generation; in Cleveland, for instance, the local teamsters had to battle the National Guard for almost a week. On the other hand, the rank and file suffered from the lack of preparation and overall strategy—one of the many negative legacies of the loss of socialist influence in the union. At the same time there was a huge absence of coordination as the struggle tended to be conducted on a city-by-city basis with little initial contact between isolated rank and file contingents.



National Guard invading Kent State campus after attacking teamsters on wild cat strike in 1970.

Nonetheless, through the experience of the struggle itself, the rank and filers began to relearn the methods of class struggle unionism. Nothing in the strike was quite as dramatic, for instance, as the bold move of the Los Angeles rank and file to extend the strike to Oakland, where with the massive solidarity of local teamsters, they succeeded in closing down the entire freight industry. This powerful action brought immediate concessions from the employers. Ironically the strike was finally lost, not at the picket line, but at the bargaining table, where the rank and file were cold-bloodedly sold out by supposedly pro-Hoffa, secondary-level officials, in whom they had placed their trust. This stab in the back by these so-called 'allies' in the bureaucracy cost some 400 L.A. teamsters their jobs.

The bitter lessons of the 1970 wildcat were the ones around which TDC was organized five years later: you need coordinated national action to win; you can't trust the officials but have to rely on yourselves. Unfortunately these lessons are not easily learned or implemented. In particular, numbers of militants from the '70 wildcat went through the demoralizing experience of building TURF (Teamsters

United for Rank and File) and seeing it collapse when it was quickly taken over by second level bureaucrats who hoped to make it their personal vehicle.

II. THE EMERGENCE OF TDC/TDU

In the summer of 1975, about 40 teamster militants met in Chicago. They forged plans for a nationwide fight around the upcoming Master Freight Contract, to expire April 1, 1976. This was the beginning of Teamsters for Decent Contract (TDC), later to become TDU.

The Role of Socialists

Among those in attendance at this founding meeting were a handful of militants from the International Socialists (IS). The IS had ideological roots in the American Trotskyist movement of the 30s and 40s, their traditions and especially their role in the great Minneapolis teamster strikes. But, like many other socialist groups in the U.S., it actually built its organization out of the student and anti-war movement of the late 60s, holding a "founding convention" in 1969. Like a number of other groups, IS also began to "industrialize" some of its cadres in the early 70s, sending a number of people into telephone, auto, steel, post office, as well as trucking.

Nevertheless, the IS was distinctive on the left in the 70s, in that its central organizing strategy was to "build the rank and file movement." The IS took its inspiration from several sources: from the British shop stewards' movement of WWI; from the Minority Movement in Britain and the Trade Union Educational League in this country (both of which were organized by the Third International in the early 20s); and from the workplace tactics and strategy of the contemporary British International Socialism group (now the Socialist Workers Party), with which it maintained fraternal links. It, therefore, sought to build a movement "from below" which was fiercely independent of the trade union bureaucracy, yet at the same time much broader than a mere trade union caucus of the IS itself. The IS, therefore, rejected the strategy of the official Communist parties, derived from the Popular Front period (and before), which looked to the "progressive wing" of the trade union officialdom for leadership in the labor movement. The IS viewed all sections of the currently constituted union bureaucracy (whatever their differences) as elements of a distinct social layer separate from the working class, functioning as intermediaries between the working class and the employers, and destined to play a pro-capitalist role. At the same time, the IS rejected what it viewed as the sectarian strategy of building "socialist caucuses," because in *this period*, such groupings would be simple extensions or "fronts" of the "parent" organization, incapable of building real ties to indigenous workers, let alone intervening in the struggle.

What the IS hoped to do was to *stimulate* a level of struggle out of which rank and file workers could develop the capacity to cohere their own fighting organizations, hopefully on a union-wide basis. Such organizations would aim to build up enough influence among the membership of the unions so that they would take on the employers. The minimum precondition of such rank and file groups would be an acute consciousness of the need for self-reliance and independence from the bureaucracy and an understanding of the need to build the broadest sort of

connections, within the unions and beyond them, to other groups of workers—most especially, to begin to confront the divisive effects of racism and sexism within the working class. In terms of its own rather slim resources, as well as the "objective conditions," it turned out that the IS had the best chance to carry out this strategy inside the Teamsters union, although it attempted to implement the same policy in all the areas of its workplace activity.

Some of the I.S. cadres had had experience with the teamster rank and file movement in the early 70s, originally on the West Coast, beginning with the 1970 wildcat. A number of them, as well as others, had taken jobs in the trucking industry, particularly in the midwest. They were, therefore, well-placed to play a catalyzing role. In their view, there was enough discontent to build a struggle around the upcoming freight contract. To make this possible, however, it was necessary to allow the isolated militants in their localities to link up with one another so they could see the potential for challenging the bureaucracy and, in turn, the companies. What was required above all was a visible center, and in particular a national newspaper. One could, in this manner, actually "begin" by building an organized movement at the national level first; if it was successful, it would then be possible, on this basis, to go on to build local branches. This was ultimately what happened.

Teamsters for a Decent Contract

TDC originally was organized around a national petition campaign, in which the signers pledged to vote "NO" on any contract that didn't come through on a "minimum" set of demands. On the basis of the petition drive, it became possible in some places to set up local "chapters." These took responsibility for organizing on a barn-by-barn basis and for distributing the national newsheet *Convoy*. In the months leading up to the national contract, TDC's strength grew. It held a series of coordinated national demonstrations in quite a few cities. TDC actually forced IBT President Frank Fitzsimmons to call the first national strike in the history of the Teamsters in April 1976. Of course, this strike was mostly a charade, for TDC lacked the organization and support to run a national strike on its own steam. Meanwhile, the bureaucracy's efforts were aimed largely at disorganizing and confusing the ranks. Nonetheless, TDC showed itself to be a force to be reckoned with.

Moreover, TDCers and future TDCers played a major role in a series of significant wildcat strikes and other direct actions that followed close on the heels of the campaign around the national contract. Perhaps the most important of these was the walkout by Detroit City freight teamsters in local 299. Out of this battle, TDC got a foothold in the strategic center of the IBT, the home of both former President Hoffa and current boss Fitzsimmons. Shortly thereafter, there was a bitter wildcat struggle by car haulers throughout the midwest, also centered in Detroit. Then came a lengthy unofficial action against Schneider Transport, based largely in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Finally, in June 1976 Los Angeles teamsters organized a small, but significant demonstration at the Teamsters national convention in Las Vegas. At the convention, teamster goons helped put TDC on the map when they slugged Pete Camarata, a TDC activist from Detroit local 299, who was one of the few rank and filers nationally to win a position as delegate to the convention

Against the Current

(delegate positions are usually monopolized by the officials).

These original actions were of critical importance to TDC, not only in establishing an original base of support, but in setting a direction. TDC's aim was to begin to rebuild the fighting capacities of the rank and file. It did not, therefore, view the reform of the union (let alone the election of more responsible officers) as an end in itself, but only a means—though an important one—to more effective direct action against the bosses. The goal was to “build a rank and file movement.” In this respect, TDC clearly distinguished itself from the sort of “union reform” campaigns of Arnold Miller and “Miners For Democracy,” or Ed Sadlowski’s “Fight Back Organization” in steel, which, in direct contrast, put the primary emphasis on the election of new officers and the reform of union procedures.

III. THE CONSOLIDATION OF TDU: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

From TDC to TDU

In September 1976 TDC felt strong enough to convert itself into TDU and held its founding convention in Cleveland. With almost 200 rank and filers present, the convention laid a solid foundation for TDU. A constitution was adopted with the highest power vested in a yearly national convention. A national steering committee was elected which meets three to four times a year. The convention also hammered out a political program, including opposition to relying primarily on union elections, the courts or politicians; support for affirmative action for minorities and women; an end to casualization of work; restoration of local and stewards' right to strike; reform of the union structure, etc.

Prophetically, TDC leaders warned against trying short cuts: “People sometimes want a ‘savior’ to do things for them. It might be a new face in office who will make things right. But it just doesn’t work that way. Many good guys have gotten into office, but they accomplish very little . . . Once people get into office they get a lot of unexpected ‘opportunities.’ Some are corrupted. Some simply knuckle under to very real pressure from above.

“The only answer is pressure from below—an active rank and file movement that is dedicated to a clear program, holds its leaders responsible to it, and that advances leaders as part of the movement to rebuild the union. We must take union elections seriously, but the important point is not just winning the office, but in organizing the membership to control its officers and electing officers with a serious commitment to the movement which made their election possible.” In a few short years, this question of union elections would become a center of controversy in TDU.

After the convention, TDU activists attempted to consolidate local chapters in the face of considerable harassment by Teamster officials. One of TDU’s initial tactics for building local chapters was initiating campaigns to reform the by-laws of the locals. While the IBT Constitution places strict limits on local autonomy, nevertheless the rank and file has some room for maneuver at the local level. In several locals, TDU members proposed by-laws changes for elected, rather than appointed, Business Agents and stewards; lower salaries for local officers; elected, rather than appointed, local union committees; etc. In Detroit Local 299, Teamster offi-

cially retaliated by attempting to kick Pete Camarata out of the union for fomenting the Detroit carhaulers wildcat the previous year. After hundreds of Teamsters demonstrated against this harassment, the Michigan Joint Council decided to drop the charges.

At this early stage, most of the by-laws proposals were defeated, often because they needed a 2/3 vote to pass. At the same time, these campaigns taught hundreds of rank and filers many lessons about how to take on their local officers.

Most of these by-laws campaigns were built upon TDU’s original strength in freight and carhauling. But TDU also attempted to expand into other jurisdictions, such as grocery, beer, and construction, which are also generally characterized by a relatively high level of union organization and strength versus the employers. However, these jurisdictions were experiencing an employers’ offensive even more severe than in freight. While the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania TDU chapter was building demonstrations against a productivity drive at Jones Motor, TDUs were active in opposing wage cuts directed at road drivers from Kroger, the nation’s second largest grocery chain. Southern California TDU attempted to stop a union busting campaign led by Coors Beer against Los Angeles beer drivers by organizing mass picketing to stop scabs and for an elected strike committee. TDU organizing could not in most cases prevent the employers from having their way. Nevertheless, these struggles brought TDU respect and influence among a new layer of rank and file Teamsters.

The Erosion of Militancy

While TDU grew in terms of membership and strengthened its organization in the period 1976-1979, it also experienced a decline in the levels of action it was able to initiate—or participate in—against the employers. The employers’ offensive intensified. But, in the face of the total capitulation of the Teamster officials at every level, the rank and file did not, in general, succeed in generating sufficient self-organization to launch an effective counterattack. Militancy had declined.

The situation became particularly acute in Freight during the contract round of 1978-79. This was the year which TDU militants had been pointing toward since the organization was founded, especially because it would mark the expiration of the Master Freight Agreement. The MFA, of course, had been the focus of TDU’s original, fairly successful organizing efforts. And, with three years to prepare, TDUs hoped that this time they could force a real battle. “Objectively,” it seemed the right moment to try to organize. Conditions had deteriorated for the freight workers probably more rapidly than for any other group of workers in the union (although they began at a very high level). On the other hand, many freight workers could see that their power was being rapidly eroded. In particular, as a result of the rise of non-union operations, of owner operators, and the loss of freight workers to other lower paid jurisdictions, as well as the general productivity drive, the number of workers covered by the freight contract had fallen by at least a quarter in the previous five years. Meanwhile, if deregulation passed Congress, there might not even be another contract three years hence. It seemed like the time to make a stand, and 300,000 truckdrivers and freight-

workers still retained, potentially at least, a good deal of power.

Nevertheless, there was almost no rank and file activity anywhere in the country around the MFA, despite the efforts of TDU to mount a national campaign. There was an official strike led by the union bureaucracy, but it was patently a phony one, and hardly interrupted the shipment of freight. The contract which resulted failed to address any of the issues, but there was no significant protest. In contrast with the powerful strike in 1970 and the weaker, but still significant struggle of 1976, the movement in freight in 1979 failed to get off the ground.

Of the other three major centers of TDU activity—UPS, grocery, and the steelhaulers—the first two provided a repetition of the freight contract fight, while the third pointed to lessons of a different kind.

UPS: This corporation is the largest single employer in the trucking industry, with 70,000 employees. It is at the most oppressive end of the spectrum in terms of working conditions. In contrast to Master Freight workers, who for years were able to go about their routes at their own pace, UPS drivers are subject to strict supervision, and often literally have to run from their trucks to their delivery points and back to make their quotas. The widespread use of part-timers in UPS barns and distribution centers has helped to divide the workforce, and has led to a situation in which many workers do close to a full day's worth of work for a half-day's pay.

In 1976, there was a massive rank and file movement against UPS around the contract, with some links to TDC/TDU. And for a brief period, the energies of a great many younger militants flowed into the UPSurge organization which came out of this struggle. Yet, over the following years, UPSurge was able to retain only a shell of its former self. And in 1978-79 the UPS rank and file remained largely inactive around the contract.

Grocery: In the grocery industry, where the contracts were mostly local, the pattern was again the same. Grocery employers, especially Safeway on the West Coast, have been forcing through the most vicious sort of productivity drives at many warehouses. Under these programs, the jobs are so physically wearing that few can survive them for more than a few years. In response, TDU was able to make some strides in organizing West Coast grocery workers, and even carry off a couple of dramatic direct actions. But overall, they were unable to break the grip of the union officials, who, in city after city, from Portland, to Phoenix, to the Bay Area, to Los Angeles, successfully led the ranks to the slaughter.

Steelhaulers: The general trend toward lower levels of activity and defeat over the past two and a half years was broken by the steelhaulers (as well as the carhaulers, to whose struggle we shall have to refer later). Indeed, the steelhauler struggle of 1979 was, in many ways, an inspiration for all teamsters; for, it showed what can, even now, be accomplished through militant action, if the ranks are solid. The steelhaulers fight marked a continuation of a battle that has raged for many years between the predominantly owner-operator steelhaulers, on the one side, and the companies and the IBT, on the other. In the recent period,

the strategy of the steelhaulers had been to get out of the Teamsters Union, and operate through their own, independent Fraternal Association of Steelhaulers (FASH). There were many good reasons for the steelhaulers' wish to be free of the Teamsters—in general they got lousy representation from the union. Nevertheless, the strategy of going independent was a loser, for it meant that the steelhaulers had to face opposition not only from the employers, but from the IBT as well. The Teamsters, indeed, were usually willing to take violent and armed action against the steelhaulers, in order to protect their jurisdiction; so, despite the militancy of their struggles, the steelhaulers had usually gone down to defeat.

In the spring of 1979, however, much of the steelhauler rank and file leadership affiliated with TDU. They attempted to carry out a rank and file strategy independent of the bureaucracy, but this time they remained formally within the confines of the IBT. The strike which followed marked their first real success. Because the steelhaulers were now staying with the IBT, they were able to force the International to sanction their struggle; to neutralize a section of the local officials; and to broaden their base among the steelhaulers themselves. The strike resulted in their winning most of their demands.

Unfortunately, the contract victory was short-lived. Within weeks of the settlement the companies, with the active collaboration of the union, systematically began to break the contract. Soon, conditions were much as they had been before the strike.

IV. THE POLITICS OF TDU

A. The Differences Within TDU

TDU's experience, therefore, has been contradictory. The movement has grown in size, expanded to new localities and jurisdictions, and built up its core of activists. Nevertheless, it faces the same crisis which afflicts almost all working class movements in the U.S. today: a declining level of militancy in the face of worsening economic conditions. Not surprisingly, all TDUers feel the growing pressure to win victories or to make the kind of dramatic gains which would bolster morale and sustain members' commitments. The result has been a very definite, although uneven tendency within TDU to adapt to the widespread illusion that there can be some more direct and less arduous substitute for the independent organization of the rank and file. In particular the temptation has arisen to reorient TDU's strategy toward the possible gains to be made through union elections and/or alliances with 'reforming' union officials.

This trend grew from two different sources. First TDU had never clearly developed an analysis of the role of electoral campaigns in relationship to the consolidation of rank and file self-organization. There remained widespread illusions that elections could be fundamental levers for changing the balance of forces and achieving rank and file objectives. This current of thought tended to be submerged in the early days of TDU when possibilities for rank and file initiatives seemed greater; now that actions are harder to organize, the attraction of electoralism has grown stronger. Secondly, elements within the TDU leadership, especially among some of the ISers who helped found the group, have taken an increasingly 'pragmatic' approach in their efforts to keep the organization energized. Indeed, their

Against the Current

turn toward electoralism and reliance on 'out' officials, precipitated a split in the IS itself which led to the formation of a new group: Workers Power. A number of members of Workers Power in turn, including the author of this article, have become principal opponents within TDU of the incipient turn toward electoralism and away from building rank and file action.

Thus, the debate in TDU has been shaping up beneath the surface for several years. On the one hand are those who have pushed the view of TDU as a "union reform group". On the other hand are those who want to stick to the original "build the rank and file movement" line. The more sophisticated proponents of the union reform approach, including elements from the IS, appear originally to have drifted in this direction because in this period it was frequently easier to run (and win) an election or challenge union by-laws, than to stand up to the employers at the very start. It was necessary, they thought, to show people that something could be done, in order to recruit them to TDU, and then into more militant action. Yet the fact is, that over time, the advocates of these tactics have also moved to alter TDU's (and their own) fundamental analysis. They appear, on and off, to equate winning office with real effective power. They have advocated at times that by simply getting people into office, it is possible to get power, and actually win significantly better conditions for the rank and file. And some will add, by winning the elections, they can then proceed, more effectively, to build a rank and file group. On this basis they have come increasingly to adopt a strategy of orienting to what they call the "reform layer" of union militants and officials, who at their best, have this same view, though most often they seek election, in the hope and illusion that they can "do it" for the ranks, and do not see the need to build and maintain a rank and file movement.

But advocates of this strategy ignore a critical fact demonstrated by hundreds of union election "victories". Anyone who takes top office, i.e., responsibility for a local, without having first built an independent organization of the rank and file (not just voters) committed to direct action by the ranks, will reign, but not rule, will hold office but not be able to do anything with it. Such a leadership, irrespective of its intentions, is headed for disaster, and for "good" reasons.

First, anyone taking office in this period is immediately subject to enormous pressures from both the bureaucrats and the bosses. The bureaucracy has a huge arsenal of weapons it can use to bring "uncooperative" low level officials into line. Since the top leaders control the grievance procedure in the IBT, on national and regional agreements, they can see to it that the local loses all its grievances, thereby discrediting any official who bucks the machine. At the same time of course, the trucking employers today face growing economic pressures. They will not grant concessions without a fight, and will go to great lengths to discredit any militant local officials. There is therefore every reason to expect that even the best-intentioned rank and filer who takes office will be forced to cave in over a period of time unless they are part of and under the control of a powerful, conscious rank and file organization with a well worked out strategy. This is, unfortunately, not yet the case today even in locals where TDU is strong.

Second, building the kind of base we have in mind (not

just passive voting support) is difficult in the absence of powerful struggles against the employers. It is in the context of the fight against the bosses that rank and filers come up most sharply against the inadequacies of the union and therefore see the need to break the bureaucracy and transform the organization. It is only in this context, moreover, that it seems, to most workers, worthwhile to make the necessary effort. This is the lesson of the CIO, wherein during the formation of unions like the UAW, the most wide-ranging struggles for union democracy were intimately tied and accompanied by the most powerful, most militant confrontations with the bosses.

Indeed, a failure to integrate the fight for union democracy with the fight against the bosses can create dangerous illusions, and thus disasters. A clear case in point is that of the recent history of the UMW. Only a few years ago, union reformer Arnold Miller replaced the corrupt Tony Boyle, and promised to clean up the union and defend the rank and file. Miller ran in the context of a level of class struggle in the mines which was incomparably higher than that which currently exists in the IBT. Moreover, after he took office, the struggle actually deepened and broadened. Nevertheless, as everyone knows, Miller, who was no doubt an honest reformer, and well-intentioned, sold out. As a liberal reformer, he was entirely unprepared for the heavy pressures which came down from the employers and the government and so, from his viewpoint, he had "no alternative" but to sell out.

Those of us who have opposed the conception of TDU as a "union reform group" do not of course oppose running for office. No doubt even now TDU can at times use fights to reform union procedures or run for non-salaried posts such as steward or executive board to build TDU and get out the word about the group; to publicize the idiosyncrasies which are necessary to fight around; and to build the kind of rank and file group without which power in the local is illusory.

Indeed, at a certain stage, we do not, on principle, preclude temporary alliances with reform officials. But today, given the state of TDU in most cases, and given the level of militancy in the union, seeking to take power through elections, or through alliances is not at this time likely to accomplish our goals.

B. What the Differences Mean in Practice

Four events can illustrate the practical consequences of these differences in strategy: The Patrick Affair, the election 'victories' in 1978-79, the defeat of the carhaulters; and the West Coast grocery workers strikes. We shall look at each briefly.

I The Patrick Affair: By the 1977 TDU convention, there were already clear signs of the conflicts soon to surface. The TDU national office invited Harry Patrick, UMW Secretary-Treasurer, to give the keynote address. After his speech, Patrick was made an honorary member of TDU. To many of us, putting the spotlight on a top official in this way was certain to heighten the already existing tendencies among the membership to look to "honest leaders", and the TDU leadership was making no effort to educate the ranks on this occasion concerning the problems which go along with office. What made the invitation to Patrick particularly objectionable was that in fact Patrick was a classic case of a union reformer succumbing to the pressures of office; for at

the very time of his speaking to TDU, Patrick was collaborating with the MFD leadership in attempting to put down the miners mass wildcat strike to save their health and welfare benefits. What's more, the TDU leaders knew this.

2 The TDU election victories of 1978: At the 1978 convention, the organizer of TDU, Ken Paff, actively pushed the position that the major activity for TDU in the coming year should be "going for power" in local union elections. He advocated running full slates and attempting to take the top spot in the local elections. While this position was not formally accepted by the convention, it was in fact encouraged through *Convoy*, TDU's national newspaper, which continually put its emphasis on local electoral fights. A significant group of TDU leaders and activists, in particular Pete Camarata, who was TDU co-chairman, opposed this strategy on the grounds that it would encourage a substitutionist strategy. Subsequent events fully vindicated their view.

During 1978, TDUers entered a number of major electoral contests and won sweeping victories. In Flint, a TDU slate swept every position, while in Boston, Oklahoma City, and St. Louis, TDUers won top offices (full-time positions). Nevertheless, not a single one of those elected even showed up at the 1979 convention of TDU, or are presently members of TDU or building the rank and file movement. Each one, to one extent or another, has forsaken TDU and capitulated to the pressure of the IBT bureaucracy. (The only clear exception to the rule are the officers of Spokane Local 690. They came out of a relatively strong TDU chapter and as of this writing are doing a good job.) The effects of "going for power" strategy were so disastrous that Paff and others who held what might be called the electoralist position appear for the present to have partially retreated, urging a policy of primarily running for part-time office. For the 1979 TDU convention, Paff wrote, "Too often elections change the faces, but little else. The power of the local is small compared to the power of the employer, and the International often smothers the locals as well." Still the fact is that while TDU thus maintains a good paper position on elections, the rank and file of the organization will be unable to act consistently along these lines until they fully understand the problems of the electoral road. This requires a detailed acquaintance with the specific experiences which TDU has had with local elections, as well as a full analysis of why they failed. So far, this explanation has not been forthcoming, and *Convoy* continues to cheer on electoral efforts, encouraging TDUers on the local level to continue to be drawn into the electoral trap.

The rank and file leaders of TDU are however becoming more aware of these problems. The Steering Committee passed a resolution at its April 1980 meeting to criticize those TDU officers who have betrayed TDU principles. This will be done in an internal TDU newsletter and in *Convoy*. The official editorial policy on criticizing officers is that *Convoy* will criticize them if the majority of the local chapter involved feels that their actions warrant it. As a result we may expect such criticisms to appear in *Convoy*.

3 The Carhauled Campaign of 1979: The Carhauled Contract Campaign (CCC) was one of the few areas where TDU has in the recent period been able to organize a real mass movement. Yet, activists remain divided over the strategy which was pursued, in particular, the way in which TDU related to key IBT officials.

There was a tremendous amount of interest from the start in the Carhaul Contract Committee (CCC). In 1976, a series of spontaneous wildcat strikes in carhauling occurred in Cincinnati, Flint, and Detroit. TDU gained many of its earliest activists from among these wildcaters. With the benefit of these experiences, TDU helped build the CCC at the 1978 TDU convention. At that convention, the 250 carhaulers attending began to map out a strategy. Over a thousand carhaulers (out of a total of 23,000 in the country) formally joined TDU. Virtually every carhauling terminal in the country had CCC representatives and every major carhaul union local officially passed the CCC program. For the first time, it looked like the carhaulers might be able to pull off a national wildcat strike.

Nevertheless, the national leadership of TDU apparently disagreed with the focus on organizing for a national wildcat even though that was the initial premise of the carhaul organizers. Instead, the TDU leadership pursued a strategy of pressuring the local officials into forcing an official strike. They even appeared to believe that this strategy could succeed until just a few days before the contract expired on June 1. But then came the betrayals from local officials who had pledged themselves to go along with the CCC program. Having decided on a tactic of pressuring the leaders, the CCC was caught unprepared. The CCC leadership decided it was too late to switch to a wildcat strategy (possibly by then it was too late—massive layoffs were already beginning.). Nevertheless, wildcats did occur spontaneously in New Stanton and Linden, and there was a particularly bitter two-week struggle in Lordstown. When it was all over the contract remained the same as in 1976.

There was nothing wrong with trying to get the local officials to back the CCC. This was quite a legitimate tactic, and could have contributed to building the movement. But what the TDU leadership failed to do, especially in *Convoy* and at the many local meetings held during the campaign, was state very explicitly that the officials could not be counted on to come through, even though they had pledged to do so, and moreover, that the rank and file had no way to hold the local officials to their word. Consequently it had to be emphasized that the only way the rank and file could win was to prepare to carry out a wildcat strike, i.e., a strike led by nationally and locally organized elected strike committees. This is not to say that it was necessary to argue that the carhaulers should wildcat come hell or high water, but merely that the CCC had to attempt to be well-enough prepared to do so, if they were to have any chance of winning a good contract. Then, when the sell-out contract was negotiated, the carhaulers would have to decide whether they actually had the strength to try to carry off the wildcat. But at least CCC would have done everything they could to make it possible. And they would not have created the illusion that the carhaulers might just possibly win through the actions of their officials.

4 The West Coast Grocery Strikes: In 1978-79, there was a long chain of bitter struggles primarily with the Safeway Grocery Corporation on the West Coast. They all focused around rank and file resistance to intensive speed-up campaigns. That the International was in league with the employers is too well-known to require documentation. What is less appreciated is the inability of local leaders, including prominent, aggressive reform-types, to

Against the Current

resist this betrayal.

First, the Portland and Seattle locals took a nose-dive. In the Spring of '78, it was the turn of the Phoenix workers. But almost from the start, TDU people in Los Angeles worked to make LA grocery workers aware of the importance of the Phoenix struggle in determining their own fate in the upcoming LA contract talks. TDUers were instrumental in organizing a solidarity strike in LA, in support of and with the cooperation of the Phoenix rank and filers. They succeeded in carrying off this action not only against the wishes of the International but against the local officials in both Phoenix and LA. Nevertheless, the Phoenix strike was ultimately crushed, with heavy losses.

In the Bay area, the situation was different and, some thought, more promising. The local leadership, especially in Local 315, was in greater control of the ranks because of its militant reputation, and because conditions were among the best in the country. But the defeat there, after 18 weeks of strike, was shattering. The local leaders refused to wage the fight that was needed. They refused to involve the ranks; refused to organize them for action, and actively discouraged TDU efforts to do so; rejected mass action; refused to stop scabs and trucks at the distribution centers; rejected all attempts to picket and stop incoming trucks from other grocery locals.

Here, as nowhere else in grocery, the impotence and capitulation of reform-type leaders was demonstrated to the hilt. But the TDU national center refused to shed its own illusions in the local leadership. As a result, when TDU published a pamphlet on the grocery strikes they placed sole blame for the defeat on the International and absolved the local officers. In doing so, they unwittingly contributed to the illusions which many workers retain in these local officials.

The line of the pamphlet was an inevitable consequence of a theory which sees local officials as simply "caught in the middle" between the rank and file and the International. The pamphlet conveniently ignores the potentially total bureaucratic role of "reform" leaders, who are tied to the bureaucracy as a whole even if more immediately subject to the pressures of an organized rank and file.

V. THE ROAD AHEAD FOR TDU

TDU began by emphasizing the need for building a rank and file movement and rejecting an electoralist strategy, with its implicit reliance on good leaders "to do the job". But we also need to develop strategies to fight the job-destroying effects of deregulation and the attack on workers in all sectors of the union.

The fact of the matter is that TDU is at a critical juncture. The recession and unemployment, the general move to the right politically in the working class in the last year and the general passivity of the working class, have made prospects for mass rank and file movement right now very small. We know that a successful rank and file movement can only be based on mass participation and class struggle. We also know the short term prospects for such struggle are small.

Unfortunately there are no pat answers which can guarantee a solution to these problems. Consequently, on the whole, regardless of serious reservations, we must maintain a level of activity in TDU which will keep TDU going. Given the limited amount of mass direct action, TDU activity will

inevitably contain more "union reform" content that we would like. We recognize the dangers. By-laws campaigns are useful mobilizing tools. They also contain the danger that the source of the trouble will be seen as merely the lack of democracy (as in the case of the Miners For Democracy). We recognize too that this course creates the danger of turning TDU into a "union reform" organization, with an electoralist orientation. TDU would then become incapable of carrying out the necessary tasks of class struggle in the long run.

That is why it is necessary not only to be aware of these dangers, but to educate the ranks about them, and what the necessary long term tasks are. TDU must therefore begin to raise the following kind of policies now to prepare its members and the rank and file in general.

1. Deregulation and Legalism. The destructive effects of deregulation will never be overcome by a policy of dependence on the courts or the legislatures, not to speak of contract arbitrators. The rights of labor—the Wagner Act, the Civil Rights Laws, laws protecting women, or laws giving public employees union rights—were only passed by the politicians after great mass movements took their rights in action. Then, and only then were the laws passed—laws which did not give rights, but merely confirmed rights already won, already taken. It will be the same with the fight against deregulation.

One tactic is the use of the secondary boycott. It was this instrument which was largely responsible for organizing the teamsters union in the 1930s. It was the failure of the Farm Workers Union to use this same instrument which prolonged their decade-long battle. And it is the refusal of the labor leaders to use this method which is largely responsible for the failure of the textile organizing campaign in the South.

Union leaders tell us that secondary boycotts are, "against the contract" and are illegal. So are strikes by public employees. So is mass picketing to stop scabs and fight injunctions. But that only means we have to stand up to the pro-capitalist nature of the courts and Congress, and face up to the need to win our rights in the streets.

In the trucking section of the Teamsters there is also a much publicized, though slightly exaggerated, tradition of organized direct action to stop trucks by cutting tires, air hoses, popping radiators and placing .357 shots into engine blocks (along with more spectacular ways of accomplishing the same goal). But given the monumental task of virtually reorganizing the trucking industry from scratch and the greatly enhanced power and centralization of government forces that will be mobilized against a militant rank and file movement in trucking, tactics like this may be necessary on a broad scale. Trucking is a widespread and mobile industry. The tactics used against it have to be the same, and rank and file militants will have to develop a cautious contempt for the legal niceties.

2. Run-away-shops, sit-downs and sit-ins: It is time the labor movement stopped thinking that nothing can be done about run-away shops. CIO workers invented the tactic of the sit-in to win union recognition. Today that tactic can be used to great effect to fight the run-away shop, especially in that section of the IBT which is in manufacturing (canneries, Honeywell electronics, CBS records and hundreds of others).

3. Unemployment: The fight against even voluntary

over-time is necessary, but it is just a start. As the recession and the effects of deregulation intensify, TDU will have to show that the fate of the union rests with the union's defense of the rights of unemployed teamsters as well as those still working. That means we will have to lay the foundation for a fight down the road, for a shorter work week at full pay, so that no jobs are lost, and jobs for the unemployed are created.

4. Unity in Action: The IBT has organized hundreds of thousands of workers in small shops and in partially organized industries. In these shops there are three main problems:

First, many IBT organized shops have miserable wages and poor conditions. This is partly because they were organized *from the top* by sweetheart agreements, and partly because these plants are in industries which are only partially organized. This means that even with an honest union, the wages are likely to be low and conditions poor because a high-pay employer could not compete with the unorganized sweatshops. So organizing the unorganized has to be a top priority. But organizing these shops and industries will require a whole range of tactics and strategies which business union leaders refuse to use, like secondary boycotts, sit-ins, mass picketing, etc.

Second, in many of these shops, organized and unorganized, the majority of workers are women, blacks and hispanics, who are generally discriminated against by employer and union. So often apathy and cynicism result. (That is why a majority of NLRB elections are lost by the unions.)

It will be impossible to overcome this apathy and cynicism even among those already unionized, unless the TDU and the union actively wage a fight to redress the existing inequalities, defend the rights of these workers on the shop floor and in the community as well (as the CIO did in its earlier days). TDU has a good paper policy on these issues including support for affirmative action but has done too little so far to put them into effect.

Third, to organize and build effectively in these non-

trucking jurisdictions it is essential to seek and win support of other teamsters in the area. This means teamsters of other locals, and, equally crucial, even teamsters from the same local, but in different jurisdictions. Non-trucking workers are often members of large general locals whose officials pay little attention to their problems. This strategy of an alliance between truckers and the other, usually weaker jurisdictions should become a central aspect of TDU's strategy.

Unity In Action has still another vital aspect. Critical to TDU's capacity to link-up the various sectors of the union is its ability to pose itself as part of a broader struggle for workers power in society as a whole, as well as showing the link between teamsters and other oppressed groups in society.

The Teamster's union is potentially fertile ground for this conception because teamsters represent an extraordinary, exceptionally wide cross-section of the American working class. As a result their movement has a certain potential to go beyond the narrow limits of trade unionism, speak to the needs of all workers, and provide leadership in this direction for the entire labor movement.

It is the task of socialists in the labor movement to introduce and reintroduce strategies such as the above which the labor leaders fear and would like to forget. It is also our task to make explicit the class struggle roots and anti-capitalist logic of these strategies. It is no accident that socialists were at the center of nearly all the great successful struggles which formed the modern labor movement in the 1930s—the general strikes in Toledo, San Francisco and Minneapolis, as well as the sitdowns leading to the formation of the CIO unions. Socialists were able to play these roles because of their understanding of the nature of the capitalist system—of the needs of the capitalists for profits at all costs; of the collaborationist role of the union bureaucracy and thus of the need for organization independent of it; of the role of the government, its courts and its police in standing behind the capitalists. The task of socialists is to bring these understandings (in many cases to *restore* these understandings), into the workers movement. And we can start within the TDU today.

LONGSHOREMEN'S PLEA

In 1963, Stan Weir and 81 other longshoremen lost their jobs through collusion between the top officials of their union and the employers.

The International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union, was negotiating a contract with the PMA (Pacific Maritime Association) which would allow increased automation and containerization at the expense of jobs.

This policy was actively opposed by many longshoremen, among them the group of 81 longshoremen in the B-category, who would be most immediately affected. Thereupon they lost their registration, and with it, their jobs.

The union officials' action against them was taken in absentia. When they appealed, it had to be to the same officials who had expelled them in the first place. At the appeal, they were denied the right to counsel or even the right to present witnesses. The local union membership overwhelmingly passed a resolution urging reinstatement of the men to their jobs and union rights, but to no avail. When, according to the contract procedure, the men appealed to the joint-union-industry Area Labor Relations Committee, the union official voted with the employers to deny the appeal.

The case then went to the courts, and after 17 years is now on its way to the US Supreme Court. Funds are desperately needed to support the appeal costs. Checks may be made out to: Longshore Jobs Defense Committee, and sent to: LJDC, c/o Willie Jenkins, 1319 105 Ave., Oakland, CA. 94603.

ON THE THEORY OF THE MONOPOLY STAGE OF CAPITALISM

by STEVE ZELUCK¹

One of the oldest and strongest ties which binds together liberal and 'radical' analyses of American society is the concept of 'monopoly capital'. On the one hand, monopoly is seen as a universal explanation of the economic ills of contemporary capitalism. It is the common wisdom of left-liberals that both inflation and the energy crisis really stem from the monopolies' ability to set administered prices, pass on costs and reap super-profits at the expense of workers, consumers and small business. In short, it is capitalist *monopolies*, not capitalism, which are at fault.

Unfortunately, many socialists adhere to a similar, if more sophisticated, version of the same theory. They maintain that contemporary capitalism is best understood as an expression of a presumed monopoly stage of capitalism. This theory of a 'monopoly stage' as an inevitable phase of the development of capitalism has become so deeply identified with Marx that any suggestion to the contrary strikes one as a preposterous surrender of one of Marx's major insights.

Nevertheless, the aim of this article is to challenge this conventional wisdom. I will try to show that Marx never advanced a monopoly stage theory and that empirical proof of the existence of this stage cannot be found in contemporary capitalism. I will also try to demonstrate that the logic of this theory is such that it is hard to resist the temptation to liberal politics if one starts with 'monopoly theory'.

In addition, unless it is clear that it is the capitalist mode of production, not its monopoly stage, which is the source of inflation, the energy crisis, etc., socialists will lack the political tools to convince the working class of the need for socialism. In what follows, I will present Marx's views on monopoly; offer a critique of the monopoly stage theory, and provide empirical and analytic evidence supporting the critique.

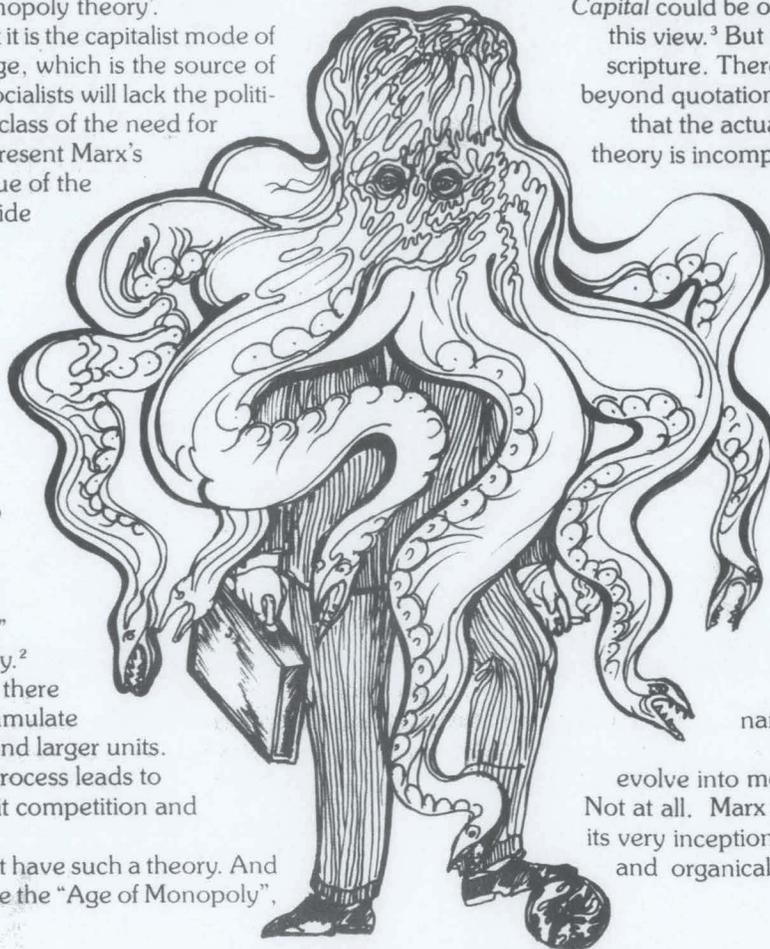
I. MARXIST THEORY AND MONOPOLY

One cannot be surprised at the popularity of a 'monopoly stage' theory among Marxists. For in the process of attempting to popularize Marx, it is all too easy to slide imperceptibly from his theory of the concentration and centralization of capital into a seemingly "obvious" and "implicit" monopoly-is-the-next-stage theory.²

Of course, Marx *did* argue that there was a tendency for capital to accumulate into fewer hands and into larger and larger units. But he did not contend that this process leads to monopoly—i.e., the ability to limit competition and control prices and profits.

Quite the contrary. Marx did not have such a theory. And not simply because he wrote before the "Age of Monopoly",

as Paul Sweezy insists. As a careful reading of Marx will show, he repeatedly and explicitly denied a tendency to monopoly (as distinct from a tendency to concentration). Even more importantly (for theorists of 'monopoly capital'), Marx actually believed that as capitalism advanced, it would tend to be *less* monopolistic, not more. Many quotes from *Capital* could be offered in support of this view.³ But the devil can quote scripture. Therefore it is vital to go beyond quotations and demonstrate that the actual content of Marx's theory is incompatible with monopoly theory.



The Coexistence of Monopoly and Competition:

Capitalist economists sharply contrast competition and monopoly. Marx had a more integrated view. It was *not* the view which is so commonly attributed to him, namely that capitalism would inevitably evolve into monopoly capitalism. Not at all. Marx saw capitalism from its very inception as *simultaneously* and organically *both* competitive and monopolistic.

Capitalism is simultaneously monopolistic and competitive in *three* senses: *First*, *competitive* capitalism rests on the capitalists' total *monopoly* of the means of production as the indispensable basis for the system's functioning. It is only because the workers as a class are systematically separated from the means of production—i.e., unable to combine their own labor power with the means of production and thus enter production themselves, that they must sell their labor power on the market to the capitalists. Capitalist economists deny this. They tell us that workers can also, if they wish, hire capital in the marketplace, just like anyone else. But this notion obscures the fundamental condition of capitalist profit-making and accumulation.

Monopoly is built into "competitive" capitalism in a *second* fundamental way. The search for an assured profit in a market economy compels capitalists constantly to seek technological changes as a way of cutting costs, beating out competitors, as well as a way of countering wage increases and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Capitalist innovation means that the innovator acquires, even if only temporarily, a real technological monopoly relative to the other capitalists producing the same commodity. As a result, the innovator's costs of production are reduced, while he continues to charge the *normal* market price of the commodity (a price equal to the average value of the commodity). Thus, his technologically induced lower costs result in an above-average profit, even if he cannot charge a price greater than the value of the goods. The innovating capitalists' above-average profit is balanced out by the less-than-average profit of the *least* efficient producer in the industry. As a result, the rate of profit *for the industry as a whole* remains unchanged, and tends to equal that in the rest of the economy.⁴

But the innovator's extra ("monopoly") profit is only temporary! Sooner or later, competition will rear its ugly head again as the new technique is acquired by other producers attracted by the super-profits of the innovator. So the first capitalist loses his competitive advantage and with it, his temporary monopoly profit. But under capitalism, this process is permanent—and absolutely essential for growth and accumulation. Capitalism is characterized by both this constant struggle for monopoly position and the constant loss of that monopoly position through competition. This dynamic interaction continues to characterize capitalism whether the economic units are small or giant. This process is not halted by the concentration or centralization of capital. In fact, *with the maturity of capitalism, this competitive struggle will intensify despite the increasing concentration of capital* (see below).⁵

Just as the constant tendency to cut costs through innovation generates temporary monopoly, so does the constant tendency to an imbalance of supply and demand. This imbalance is not an exception, but, once again, a norm, growing out of the very nature of competitive capitalism as a system characterized by anarchy of production.

Such a situation arises, as a rule, when a new commodity is introduced and "catches on". The original innovating firm enjoys a temporary "monopoly" as demand initially outruns supply. But soon, greater production inevitably forces down the original "monopoly price". The initial high price and profits of the mini-computer industry a few years ago serve as an example of this supply-demand condition. (The sub-

sequent falling prices reflected both increased supply and also the falling costs in the industry due to the high rate of technological innovation in the information industry.) The same sort of situation can also arise when special circumstances result in a temporary gap between supply and demand even in the case of long-established commodities.

In both of the foregoing cases—temporary technological advantages, and temporary supply-demand imbalance—super-profits result because the price of the commodity is temporarily greater than its value. The situation, however, cannot last because in both cases corrective actions occur which are *built into the system*, forcing the individual "monopolist" producers to undermine their own temporary advantage.

Thus, each individual "monopolist" would like to do nothing to interfere with the under-supply and the ensuing higher profits. But the individual knows that this is impossible. He knows that the above-average rate of profit will stimulate the flow of capital into the industry, resulting in increased supply, *at least* to the point where supply balances demand (and perhaps, due to the anarchy of capitalism, even beyond that point, causing an over-supply and falling prices and profits). Consequently, the individual "monopolist" has no choice but to participate in this process of capital "entry". So in addition to new competitors, the individual "monopolist" producer has no choice but to invest more of his own capital, and thus increase the total capital in the industry, increasing supply and forcing down the price. In this way, like it or not, the industry is returned to the average rate of profit characteristic of the economy as a whole.

The Source of Monopoly Profits

Of course, Marx was not blind to the existence of the more *conventionally perceived* forms of monopoly and monopoly profits. These exist in the "natural" monopolies, such as the utilities; industries protected by government patents, such as the drug industry; regulated industries, such as most of U.S. transportation. In every case, other producers are prevented from entry by *directly political*, not economic, barriers.

But how is it possible that these classic monopolies can actually impose prices which are greater than the value of the commodities? Or, to put the same question another way, "Where do these super-profits come from?" To say, "From higher prices, of course", is just another way of saying that super-profits exist, and does not explain them.

Monopoly prices and profits come at the expense of the "other," competitive capitalists, whose profits are cut for two reasons: first, as these "other" capitalists buy from the monopolists at price-above-value, their costs of production rise. But these competitive capitalists cannot compensate for their rising costs by raising their own prices (and thus passing their increased costs on to the workers), because the competitive capitalists are not in a monopoly position. So while their costs rise, their prices remain set just at value. And competition keeps them there. Consequently, with *rising* costs and *fixed* prices, their profits are cut, to the gain of the monopolists. (We shall see below what happens if *all* capitalists are in a monopoly situation.)

The inability of the competitive capitalist to pass off his increased costs onto the backs of the workers by raising his prices, seems to violate experience and common sense. **But**

Against the Current

that is only because it is so easy to forget that the workers' labor power is a commodity much like any other commodity. That means that labor-power's value (its wages) is determined not by what the capitalists want to pay (that would be zero!), but by the real costs of maintaining and reproducing the worker. This cost includes a standard of living to which workers are historically accustomed—a standard which is in part due to class struggle, and in part due to the increased costs of producing and training modern productive labor. It is also a standard of living which *already includes* goods sold by both monopoly and competitive capitalists.

The competitive capitalist is therefore seldom in a position to change this situation, and certainly not at will, however much he would like to, or even need to. As for the monopolist, his super-profits at times even make it somewhat less urgent to fight to cut wages.

All this is not to say that *in the short run* workers may not bear the burden of monopoly pricing. That can happen, and does happen especially whenever *new* monopolies come on the scene and workers have to buy these new high-price goods instead of the formerly competitive goods. There is a second reason why the monopoly surplus profits can only come from the pockets of the competitive capitalists. It is because the monopolists have not generated any *additional* values. This means no additional surplus value, and thus no additional profits for the system as a whole. Such a situation emerges because the total profits (and surplus value) in a system available to the capitalist class as a whole depend on the total labor time spent in production. The more labor time used, the more surplus value generated in the system. If the amount of labor time is not changed by the monopolists (and, if anything, that amount tends to be cut, not increased under monopoly), then there is no other source of super-profits except through a reduction of the share of the competitive sector, i.e., a transfer of surplus value from the competitive sector. If this is the case, then it becomes apparent that monopoly surplus profits can *not* be the source of generalized inflation, since the increased price and profits of the monopoly are balanced by declining profits in the competitive sector.

"Universal Monopoly?"

But what happens if monopoly is not the exception (as has so far been the case)? What if monopoly were to become the norm? And indeed, monopoly-as-a-norm is the usual, *though incorrect*, interpretation of our situation today, a situation in which 0.1% of all the corporations employ 70% of all wage earners, and where 80% of most major industries are dominated by four or five firms in each case.

At first sight one could think that the more monopolies, the greater their collective ability to set prices above value and collect super-profits. But only at first sight. We can start by taking the extreme, pure case of universal monopoly—every industry with just one monopoly producer. In such a situation, each monopolist, in his capacity as seller, sets his own price above value. His price is determined not by his cost, or by the average cost in the industry, but is limited only by the buyer's ability to pay. In short, the monopolist sets an administered price. But this *selling* monopolist will quickly discover that in a world of other monopolies, the results are not the same as in a situation in which the monopolist is the

exception. For now the same monopolist must also *buy* from other monopolists, who can also (apparently) set their prices above value, and try to gain pure monopoly profits. Clearly, in such a case, each monopoly balances off the other, and none of them ends up gaining. As a result, the price of commodities will not turn out as intended, *above* value, but will end up determined *by* value after all, just as in competition. Indeed, that is just the point. *Universal* monopoly *eliminates* the potential gains of isolated, single monopolies. Universal, or generalized monopoly becomes its own negation, turns into its opposite, competition. More monopoly becomes less.

However, to the extent that (due to time lags between price increases by the different industry-monopolies) some monopolies could appear to succeed *initially* in raising their prices, the result could only be general inflation, as the other monopoly prices "catch up", with no net gain. Of course, no monopoly theorists claim that capitalism today is composed solely of monopolies. But the general claim is made that the decisive parts of the system are monopolist in character. And that claim *must* be made. Otherwise monopoly theory would be peripheral, secondary, and not the central core of economics that it appears to be to some. Once one makes the claim that ours is a generalized monopoly system, (however qualified, imperfect and incomplete), then the *difficulty* of the generalized monopoly system's attempt to raise profits, prices, etc. comes to the fore. The more widespread, the more generalized the monopolist economy, the *less* price can actually be set above value. One cannot have it both ways. *Generalized* monopoly theory and monopoly profits are incompatible. They can not coexist under capitalism because, if the monopoly sector were predominant, the secondary competitive sector, would be unable to provide much of its share of the profits for transfer to the monopolies. (We shall see below that the rates of profit of the competitor versus "monopoly" sectors support this assessment.) As a result, as the quantity of monopoly increases, its qualitative significance decreases, and in fact reverses itself, tending to turn any monopoly-administered prices into their opposite, competitive ones.

II. CENTRALIZATION, CONCENTRATION AND MONOPOLY

The main argument for a tendency to increasing monopoly as capitalism develops, is the view that monopoly is a natural result of increasing concentration and centralization of capital. The logic of this position is simple. As firms tend to grow larger and larger, as each industry becomes increasingly dominated by a small number of companies, it becomes more and more difficult for new firms to enter the industry, due to the huge amount of capital needed. The result of this "entry" difficulty, so the theory goes, is that the few big companies which do dominate the industry are freed from the threat of competition. They can therefore reap profits above the average rate by setting prices above their value, especially if they can collude to regulate the competition among themselves. What truth is there in this popular and eminently reasonable thesis?

That "entry" into highly concentrated industries can in fact be prevented in special cases, (utilities, drugs, trucking) through government intervention is well-known. This is a *political* barrier. The question is, does the purely *economic*

barrier of size-of-capital-required also prevent entry? Here we shall see that for the rest of the "monopolies"—the concentrated industries—the facts of post-war economic history contradict this central "no-entry" premise of "monopoly capitalism" and reveal that it is largely illusory. The impediments to "entry" have been largely negated by the radical increase in the degree to which capital can be amassed, and moved as capitalism has developed.

1) Today, banks gather in almost the entire capital of society (including close to \$200 billion in pension funds). With the internationalization of national banks, the *national* bank can, as never before, draw upon the capital of the entire world. Vastly improved international communication and international banking increase the *mobility* of capital as well as its accumulation. These tendencies increase the ability to mobilize capital, and enter an industry wherever there is the potential of good profit. With this development, the tendency of concentration to lead to monopoly is drastically undercut.

The most dramatic manifestation of the role and effect of increased mobility of capital is surely the rise of the multinationals. Unfortunately, the multinationals are popularly associated with monopoly. But the contrast between the modern multinationals and the big corporations which operated before World War II is very significant. The goal of the latter, especially those which organized cartels in that epoch, was to fix prices and market shares, resulting in monopoly profits. The efforts of these pre-WWII monopolies in many cases were vastly facilitated by the fact that, at least in the colonial markets, their respective governments intervened *politically* to prevent competition and the free flow of international capital.

In the age of colonialism, the goal of monopoly was, at times, realizable, at least in part. Today, the end of the colonial system (not the end of imperialism) has helped to undermine the *political* control of "entry". At the same time, according to Ernest Mandel,⁶ it is much more difficult to set up cartels which can fix prices and market shares. Indeed that process has radically declined. All this because capital can now be so easily mobilized and moved. This process has restored a competitive dimension to world economy which had been partly lost in the imperialism prior to WWII.⁷

2) The capitalist economy is a world economy, especially in basic commodities. The negative effect, if any, of large capital requirements in restricting entry must therefore be judged on a *world*, not national scale, even in evaluating *national* industry. With the falling costs of transportation in the post-war years, and the increasing relative efficiency of non-American manufacturers, foreign imports came into great demand. *In effect, the number of firms in the industry which provides the U.S. steel market has increased*, as it has in auto and other "monopoly" industries with high capital requirements. Internationalization of production thus helps remove one more prop to the "entry" problem, and thus to the theory of monopoly capitalism.

3) The lack of capital flow into an industry (giving the appearance of a monopoly), often has little to do with the size of capital needed. The steel industry has little capital entry because its rates of profit are lower than average for industry. In fact capital is fleeing the steel industry through investment of steel profits in other industries—diversification, instead of reinvestment in steel. The key role of

adequate profits (not size of capital needed) in controlling entry is seen in the communication-information industry. With high profit, vast sums of capital flowed into the industry even when it meant competing with giants such as IBM and AT&T.

4) Capital can overcome "entry" problems in many ways. It need not take the form of new plants. An industry with high monopoly profits due to the cost-of-entry, can witness an influx of capital in the form of buying the firm's stock on the market. This drives up the *cost* of stock (the stock price-to-profit-ratio rises). That increase in effect reduces the return to capital from the "above-average" back to average. (Though of course, the old holders of the stock, the speculators, do make their super-profits, but this time, via the rise in value of their stock, i.e., via capital gains instead of dividends. But note that these original owners of the stock are getting their super-profits from the *new* capitalists buying into the industry.

5) The fact that steel and other "monopoly industries" require vast amounts of capital did not prevent "entry" in the past. Of course, it can be argued that entry costs were less of a problem in the past. But that seems doubtful. Steel was always a relatively high-capital industry. If the absolute amount of capital needed to enter was small by today's standards, it was large by the standards of the past. Furthermore, entry difficulty was compounded in the past by the fact that the capital had to be raised by an individual or a small group of capitalists. But then, as now, when profits are high, somehow the entry difficulties disappear. Today, the increase in size of capital needed can be even more easily matched by the increased availability of capital due to processes described earlier.

In short, if the argument for the existence of monopoly profits rest on the assumption of restricted entry due to the size of capital needed, then the case is on very weak grounds indeed. But there are in fact several further developments, over and above the ease of "entry" question which work against the rise of monopoly and support Marx's expectation of a decline in monopoly.

1) *Improved Transportation and Communication*: The undeniably steady and dramatic improvement in these areas clearly discourage the emergence of monopoly. In an age of *poor*, i.e., *expensive*, rail or other communication links within and between countries, monopoly had a much better chance. Even a small retailer could be a monopolist by virtue of his relatively isolated situation. As a result of the railroad, then the truck and airplane, and finally the computer, "foreign" competition from a neighboring area or country can increase. Technological change therefore increases both the movement to concentration (a larger market area and a larger optimum plant), and at the same time, serves to *decrease* monopoly possibilities.

2) *Capital cheapening*: Some technological innovations, such as the electronics revolution, create a tendency to cheapen capital goods. This in turn makes it easier for a capitalist to raise funds for investment, and thus combat any tendency to monopoly.

3) *Commodity Substitution*: Modern science is a powerful anti-monopoly instrument. It creates new products and materials which can substitute for those materials in which there may be a danger of monopoly: plastics in place of natural fibers, synthetic oils as well as shale, etc., in place of

Against the Current

OPEC oil, aluminum and plastics to replace steel and rubber. In addition, gas, electricity, and coal are clearly competing substitutes.

The Degree of Monopoly Today:

Let us now take some empirical soundings in order to determine the actual degree of monopoly today. Four questions will be addressed: Has increased concentration resulted in increased competition or monopoly in the economy as a whole? What about in the case of specific industries? What evidence is there that would indicate the existence of generalized monopoly profits? And lastly, what about the self-evident phenomenon of administered prices and a whole catalogue of similar techniques used by capitalists to by-pass competition?

The Economy as a Whole

It is important to call attention to the history of monopoly in the US in the post-World War II period. Last year, one of the last true private monopolies, Western Union, passed from the scene. The 40-year-old monopoly situation in the trucking industry is clearly on the road to extinction as a result of "deregulation". AT&T, the monopoly par excellence, is in the throes of losing its monopoly. (AT&T's long distance lines must now be shared for use by AT&T's competitors; the submergence of the telephone industry into the larger area of information-communication as a result of massive technological innovation, changes the telephone's role in communication-information transmission.) As a result, AT&T has been forced into a titanic battle with IBM and others. Before World War II, there was one aluminum company. Today there are four. The US banking industry, contrary to expectations, is by far the most competitive, least monopolized banking industry in the capitalist world. IBM, which a decade ago controlled 65% of the information industry, is now sharply cutting prices as its share of the market is falling toward 45% (and Japan is just entering the market!). The railroads, monopoly and all, have lost out, largely to airplanes, trucks and buses. The airlines have shared in the decision to deregulate and are now a highly competitive industry, within the borders of the USA. (International flights remain regulated by a government sponsored cartel.) The revolutionary change in merchandising, the supermarket, etc., give few signs of monopoly profits or price fixing. And lastly (in this brief list), one can not forget that the giant Xerox corporation was a monopoly, but only briefly, when it was a small innovator. Today, it is surrounded by competitors. In short, concentration and centralization have not resulted in an increasingly monopolized economy.

A closer look at some of the particulars can be even more illuminating in demonstrating that concentration and centralization are not organically "monopolist".

The Trucking Industry.

While concentration is indeed taking place in this industry, the *regulated* part of the industry is still composed of some 14,000 companies, with the overwhelming majority being relatively small. (There are 100,000 more, mainly owner-operated, in the unregulated part of the industry.) Despite this enormous number of companies, i.e. lack of concentration, the industry does actually function like a

monopoly. It legally sets administered prices, under the auspices of the Interstate Commerce Commission. The regulated part of the industry has consequently enjoyed a 20% rate of profit, which is a full 50% higher than the average for all manufacturing corporations—a real hallmark of monopoly. This high rate of profit eats into the profits of those who are *served* by trucks, and who, by and large cannot pass on the high costs of trucking. That is why the ruling class is so determined to deregulate the trucking industry. Deregulation, however, and the consequent increase in competition will at the same time eliminate the weakest truckers and encourage the concentration of the industry into larger firms. Thus we have a case in which demonopolization of the industry will simultaneously bring about both intensified competition and increased concentration in the industry. Of course, it will be argued that the ultimate fate of this competitive but increasingly concentrated trucking industry will end up as a monopoly to all intents and purposes. The entire weight of this article suggests that this "common sense" expectation will not materialize. As for those who maintain the contrary, the burden of proof is on them.

Concentration and Centralization in the Grocery Industry

The post war period witnessed the explosive growth of the supermarket chains and the decline of the small mom-and-pop grocery stores. And yet, can it really be said that the new giants are also more monopolistic? To the contrary, the supermarket chains are hardly monopolistic in the sense of setting prices at a point which yields monopoly superprofits. The largest chain, A&P, experienced profit losses for almost a decade. Other giants have faced steady difficulties. The rate of profit in the industry has actually been substantially below the average rate of profit in manufacturing; indeed, some 20% less.

This is in contrast to the small grocery. There is a sense in which one could perceive them as in fact often more monopolistic than the chains. These groceries can and do charge more than the supermarkets, not *because* of their higher costs (that normally means economic death under capitalism, and would in addition, be a violation of the law of value). Rather, they can successfully charge higher prices due to their actual, if minor, monopoly position which permits them to survive and make a profit *despite* their higher costs and lower efficiency. This is because they often sell specialized, not easily obtained commodities (ethnic foods, delis, etc.); they are often the *only* stores open all hours. Similarly, they are often the *only* stores which will provide credit. It is these circumstances which paradoxically make these small groceries more monopolistic in some ways, than the giant concentrated chains, which have lower *prices* and profits and are hardly recognizable as monopolies.

The Conglomerates:

This new form of the organization of capital is an outstanding example of centralization of capital. But it is not a step toward monopoly. Quite the contrary. A single conglomerate often contains many corporations providing hundreds of distinct, unrelated commodities in dozens of factories. The Emerson corporation (once just a producer

of radios) now has 40 divisions making over 200 products. These organizations are formed for several reasons which on the whole improve the ability of each of the producing units to compete more effectively in their own markets.

The conglomerate serves as a hedge against the financial ups and downs that face any one of the individual component factory-products. The goal is to stabilize the *average* rate of profit over the long run. In addition, there can be some sharing of common services among the corporations, resulting in cost cutting: bulk purchases, common management, common and cheaper financing, including easier self-financing (by using temporary capital surpluses from one firm to aid another) and the use of the better credit rating of the larger corporation. In addition, there are often tax advantages and short term stock market advantages resulting from consolidation.

The foregoing advantages of the conglomerate are similar in effect to temporary technological innovation. Their monopoly gains are just as temporary, since the conglomerate form is rapidly becoming the norm in the US economy.

In passing it might be noted that while the result of conglomerates is to increase the official statistics on the degree of concentration, this statistic can also be deceptive. Conglomerates, by virtue of being *cross-industry* organizations of capital, do not necessarily increase the actual concentration within any one industry.⁸

Administered Prices – Theory and Fact:

Despite the foregoing, the concentration equals monopoly thesis persists. For “facts is facts”, and to most radicals, administered prices are a self-evident fact.

We shall deal with this “fact” analytically and then empirically. But first a warning must be offered. We are faced with a case of appearance versus reality. No one can really observe prices being administered. We can only deduce this fact from some theory. With a different theory, different “observations” might follow. In which case, administered prices might be a delusion which capitalists may share with some Marxists. All that glitters is not gold. Nor monopoly either.

Administered pricing is an expression and outgrowth of monopoly capital theory. The argument is made that “monopoly” firms can set prices (above value) at a level high enough to ensure super-profits. In such a situation, even when demand declines, there is no need to resort to competitive price cutting. Instead, prices are simply raised to compensate for the decline in demand and profits. In our view, our earlier arguments against monopoly capital apply to its derivative, administered prices, as well. But in addition, one might consider the following difficulties for the theory.

In recent years, the “self-evident” administered prices have been in effect, and yet, they have not prevented many of these same “monopoly” corporations and industries from experiencing falling profits, even over a long period of time. If this is the case, one has the right to wonder if administered prices are more apparent than real.

The contradiction between the theory of administered prices and the reality of *falling* profits is nowhere as clear and unquestioned as in the steel industry. There, despite the “fact” of administered prices, profits in the industry have

been lower than those in manufacturing as a whole, *even in the heyday of the 1950's!*⁹ “Foul Play”, we will be told. Everyone knows that the steel industry is a sick industry. True. At least it is true today. But if the state of the industry (and other considerations) can counterbalance the effect of administered prices in determining steel profits, then why doesn't the same argument apply in evaluating “administered prices” in other, healthier industries? Perhaps (as we believe, and as non-monopoly theory suggests), the higher profits in those healthier industries are due *not* to administered prices, (the *seemingly* obvious reason) but to more fundamental sources, such as the state of the industry, the demand for its products, the effect of innovations, changes in the quality of the product, etc.

The weakness of administered price theory is further revealed in still another more crucial industry, auto. The industry is widely believed to follow the basic rule of administered prices, and avoid price competition. When demand falls, the Big Three simply compensate for their loss of profit by raising prices, thus restoring profits. And yet, the history of the industry over the past decade does not bear this theory out at all. In the two periods of sharply declining demand in the industry, 1974, and today, the Big Three did not, (as administered price theory requires) raise prices to compensate for the decline in demand for autos, thus stabilizing their profits and even ensuring super-profits. Instead, when demand for U.S. cars fell significantly, the manufacturers cut their prices, in the form of rebates. All this despite the fact that Ford (let us not speak of Chrysler) lost a billion dollars last year, and will lose more in 1980.

It is, however, possible to see “administered prices” in another, fundamentally different, non-monopoly framework. The appearance need not be a total violation of reality. One can see these prices not *primarily* as products of collusion, but as products of concentration *within the framework of a competitive economy*.

Indeed, it should not be surprising that a high degree of concentration does quite naturally create difficulties for the pricing mechanism of a competitive economy.

The classic, impersonal market mechanism is a result of a situation in which there are a large number of producers. For them, the price is “given” by the market independent of their will because each of them produces too little to be able to affect the total supply, and thus to affect the market price. In a perfect, pure case of such a market, say, the grain market, prices can change hourly, and by fractions of a cent. But perfectly competitive markets, in this sense, have *never* been general under capitalism even in the period universally recognized as the “competitive stage”. (Nevertheless, prices were essentially market determined even in those imperfect markets.) It is therefore not unreasonable to explore how the *form* of the market may be affected when an industry is dominated by four or five producers (oligopoly).

A relatively small number of producers means that they appear to themselves to be in a position to, and to have to, determine the price of their commodity, i.e., to *make* the market. In fact, it must appear so to them, since they do, technically, set the price, or at least announce it, while in reality they may well just be confirming a price set by forces beyond them, i.e., by the market and the law of value.¹⁰ But given the “necessity” for their conscious intervention in price determination, it is inevitable that the response of these pro-

Against the Current

ducers to the market is more hesitant, more inflexible, and slower than in a classic competitive market structure. (See empirical evidence below.) This is not surprising since the producer in a concentrated industry, in deciding how much to produce, can influence the short-term supply, and therefore the price (in the way in which an individual farmer, for example, cannot do). As a result of the decisions of these individual giant firms, short-run market prices can be affected (going higher or lower than "normal"), *even without collusion* or administered prices.

Naturally, the situation of four or five producers in an industry does create the potential for collusion and the consequent superprofits. But these situations are at best temporary, and not just because of the potential for capital entry into the industry. For this normal and narrow degree of temporary superprofits which can arise through collusion or even when market prices are set in a concentrated industry is further limited by another consideration. We must not forget the customary four or five firm dominance is an increasingly *incorrect* picture. For most markets one must now include the half-dozen or more foreign giants in the same industry who compete within the US as well (auto, electronics, steel, and dozens of other "monopolies"). This effective doubling of the number of "independent" firms in the market can only have the consequence of further *weakening* whatever superprofits potentially exist for the domestic four or five biggies and their capacity for collusion. And the fact that these firms operate in different national contexts, with different national interests and responsibilities, only further strengthens the role of markets and weakens either deliberate collusion or any attempts at administered prices.

The Empirical Evidence:

What is the empirical evidence on the question of administered prices? And what is the evidence for superprofits for concentrated industry?¹¹ The most obvious way of testing monopoly theory would be to examine the prices in a "monopolized" industry such as steel, aluminum, etc. But to do so is difficult. For instance, how do we find a standard against which one could tell if the prices were "excessive". Or, how do we treat industries ("monopolies") whose prices fluctuate radically, such as copper (and, for some, sugar and coffee)? Consequently the effort must shift to the search for evidence of monopoly *profits*, instead of prices. Unfortunately, it is almost as difficult to offer conclusive evidence for surplus profits as for excessive prices. Nevertheless, much empirical work has been done by economists on this question. Those studies which do show some correlation (not necessarily a causal relation) between the degree of concentration and profits are, to say the least, inconclusive.¹² The result of these studies suggest the following, at best:

1) That oligopolists' super-profits, *if they do in fact exist*, are normally very small (perhaps 5-10% above average). This is in contrast to the 50% super-profit in the monopolized, regulated part of the trucking industry.

2) That there may indeed be an effect of oligopoly on prices and profits. But it is due less to collusion and more to the fact that monopoly prices respond more slowly to changes in costs and demand. Consequently those studies which show any effect (many show no effect at all) indicate that *in a recession* oligopoly prices, administered prices, if

they fall, *fall less* than competitive prices. On the other hand, *in an economic upsurge*, prices in concentrated industries *rise less* than prices in competitive industries. The effect of the oligopoly type market and pricing seems then to be primarily to rigidify prices, reduce flexibility, and not to produce significant superprofits. Over the business cycle, profits in concentrated industries tend to be more stable and fluctuate less. But that does not mean that the average profit is any higher.

Even Ernest Mandel, who believes that monopoly superprofits do exist on a large scale, nevertheless admits that, despite increasing concentration, there is a steadily declining difference between the profits of monopolist and competitive firms, at least since World War II. (See his *Late Capitalism*, p. 535).

Lastly, no focus on administered prices dares ignore the fact that the US and world capitalism have been in an inflationary stage, essentially since World War II. In such a period, it is indeed true, but hardly surprising, that dollar prices rose even when demand fell. In an inflationary period that fact is hardly evidence of administered prices, especially when one does not forget that *prices rose more dramatically* in the competitive sector than in the so-called monopoly-administered price sector. In summation, what we appear to have in the concentrated industries is not, essentially, monopoly-administered prices, but a necessarily special way of determining a market price under conditions of oligopoly.

III. THE POLITICS OF "MONOPOLY CAPITALISM"

We have tried so far to "disprove" the monopoly theory in the following way. We have tried to show that actual monopolies which can charge a price above the value of their commodities are a secondary, but necessary mechanism under capitalism, but with only short-run, temporary monopoly effects at best. It appears furthermore that any attempt to project a generalized system of monopoly will end up not with administered prices and profits, but with a decline in superprofits and a return to competition. Lastly, we argued that the increased mobility of capital is such that capital flows with increased ease into potential monopoly situations, thus effectively curbing monopoly tendencies.

But the attempt to impose a monopoly theory on capitalism has other profound theoretical implications as well. The theory compels its adherents to move toward bourgeois politics, bourgeois economics, and bourgeois philosophy. Thus we shall show how the monopoly theory of crisis leads logically to reformist politics. Also, that the monopoly theory's *de facto* surrender of the law of value as the basis for price determination (replaced by arbitrary monopoly price setting) leads to the theory that the state in advanced capitalist economies is "state capitalist" instead of just "state interventionist" in character. Lastly, in monopoly theory's refusal to go beyond "facts" and appearances, it reveals its methodological roots in empiricism. To be specific:

Monopoly and Crisis Theory:

If one takes monopoly theory seriously, if one believes that the dominant parts of the US economy can administer prices, set prices above value, and can respond to wage increases by raising prices, thus accumulating and retaining

super-profits, then a question must arise: How can there be a serious crisis in the economy? At best there might be periodic mild recessions. But deep crises? No.

The painful facts of life, however, contradict this perfectly sound logic of monopoly theory. Marxist monopoly theorists therefore do believe that capitalism is crisis ridden. They recognize that "monopoly and administered prices", in the process of solving the immediate problem of profits, may also generate a new form of crisis, despite, and in part, because the monopolists can fix prices and generate super-profits. But theirs is a theory of crisis which leads unavoidably to reformist, not anti-capitalist, solutions (despite its supporters' subjectively revolutionary intentions). Let us see how.

In solving the problem of falling and insufficient profits, monopoly creates, we are told, a new source of crisis—stagnation. First, monopoly prices and profits supposedly cut into the income of workers making it even harder for workers to buy back the commodities they produce. Consequently, for most monopoly theorists, this compounds an already existing tendency to underconsumption by workers. As a result, an ordinary economic depression tends to be intensified by monopoly super-profits.

The effect of monopoly on crisis is compounded in a second way. For monopoly surplus profit creates a situation of uninvestable surplus, (because each monopoly is presumed to be able to restrict entry into its own sphere of production). As a result, once again, normal recessions are intensified, this time by the capitalists' inability to "consume", i.e., invest their surplus profit.

But if the problem of capitalism is *not* inadequate profit and insufficient capital, but *too much* profit and capital, then two giant openings into reformism are created.

First, why should there be any crisis problem at all? Why not simply spend the surplus, if necessary through the state, via taxes? Spend it on hospitals, welfare, etc. Or spend it even on waste, arms for example (instead of Keynes's holes and pyramids).

During the boom, one Marxist school of thought (Sweezy and others) actually did suggest that *that* was the role of arms spending—to consume the surplus. (Another school, the Permanent Arms Economy theorists, drew similar conclusions, but on somewhat different grounds. This school offered arms as a substitute for the workers' lack of consumption and/or the capitalists' lack of investment due to low profits, and *not because of surplus profits*. This is a classic, non-monopoly, underconsumptionist theory.)

But if the problem is capital surplus, and if arms or hospitals consumed the surplus, and avoided a crisis for a generation, then what is to prevent arms and/or welfare expenditures from continuing to do so? In short, what is wrong with the liberal Keynesian "spending" solutions to the crisis?

Second, the reformist logic can take another form. One can take the bolder, more directly anti-monopoly position. If monopoly can administer prices upward, why not use the state to administer prices downward?

Both of these "solutions" are implicit in monopoly theory, and both lead to a common conclusion, namely, the reform of capitalism, and its corollary, a primary focus on capturing the capitalist state. Or, to put it into plain English, why not join DSOC or the Democratic Party, both of which favor such Keynesian solutions? (In Europe, this same logic leads

to support for DSOC's ideological cousin, *Eurocommunism*.) So just as generalized monopoly turns into its opposite and becomes competitive, now generalized monopoly also leads *politically* to Keynesian, i.e., bourgeois solutions.

In short, if monopoly theory were correct, it would "prove" that socialism is utopian, and unnecessary since monopoly capitalism can resolve its crises via liberalism and state intervention.

Faced with this reformist logic of "monopoly capitalism", some Marxists object that the reform road is only an apparent, not a real option, because the capitalists and their government will refuse to go along that road. Why? Because, we are told, the capitalists are shortsighted. Capitalists, these Marxists insist, can reluctantly be brought to agree to arms expenditures, despite the fact that they perceive them as a waste, economically, as a drain upon their profits. Arms expenditures at least have the saving grace (for capitalists) of furthering imperialist goals. As for spending the capital surplus which monopoly supposedly generates (and can't get rid of) on welfare—schools, hospitals—in order to avoid stagnation of the economy, the capitalists perceive this as a total waste compared to arms. As a result, to monopoly capital theorists, the capitalists' resistance to welfare boils down to mere stupidity or short-sightedness. Presumably, capitalism could work, if the capitalists could be forced (by the state) to see their own long-run class interests.

This reformist logic inherent in the theory of monopoly capital goes further. It leads to a denial of the revolutionary capacities of the working class in the advanced industrial societies. For if state intervention is capable of 'absorbing' the surplus (which is supposedly the source of crisis), then the objective underpinnings of working class radicalism in the metropolis are removed. It is therefore no surprise that Baran and Sweezy turn toward the third world periphery in search of a new revolutionary agency. In this schema, the interdependence of the class struggle in the developed and underdeveloped countries disappears, and is replaced by a simplistic, ahistorical opposition of city and countryside, of metropolis and periphery.

Our critique of monopoly theory is only a beginning. What is required beyond this negative critique is a positive theory of how the growing concentration of capital in the post-war period has affected the forms of crisis in a still competitive economy. One approach, central to much of contemporary Marxist analysis, is to stress the expanded role of the state in the economy. But such an emphasis has its own problems. That the contemporary state has a greater capacity to intervene in the regulation of the economy is obvious; but at the same time, the *effectiveness* of this capacity remains in question, since the vast postwar expansion of trade and the internationalization of capital have simultaneously imposed new constraints upon the national state's *effective* power.

But all this is for another occasion. For the present it is necessary only to re-emphasize a final point: The alternative to monopoly capital and administered prices theory (however "self-evident" they may appear), must begin from an examination of tendencies to falling profits, intensified competition, and a constant alternation of capital surplus and shortage within the business cycle. From such a vantage point it is easier to understand why government spending on welfare and even on war-waste tends to be

Against the Current

resisted by capitalists. It is not a question of their stupidity or short-sightedness, as liberals would have it, but rather of a real material contradiction—a matter of capitalist resistance to government programs which eat into already low profits, and interfere with capital accumulation.

This alternative theory is not only free of the reformist illusions of monopoly theory but has an *inherent* revolutionary logic. Such a theory would therefore be an invaluable support for the development of revolutionary politics.

NOTES

¹I am much indebted to Bob Fitch for many discussions of this subject. But he is, naturally, not responsible for the shortcomings, not to speak of the errors which may remain.

²Regrettably Lenin also contributed to this confusion. His is an ambiguous legacy. He based his theory of imperialism on monopoly-capitalism theorists, such as Hilferding, Kautsky and Hobson. But at the same time, Lenin insisted that monopoly capitalism intensified competition instead of weakening it. The inconsistencies of his theory and their consequences demand elaboration, but that is beyond the scope of the present argument.

³"There can be no doubt, on the other hand, that aside from unessential, incidental and mutually compensatory distinctions, differences in the average rate of profit (i.e., monopoly profits—S.Z.) in the various branches of industry do not exist in reality, and could not exist, without abolishing the entire system of capitalist production." *Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 153.

"Capitalism succeeds in the equalization (of the rate of profit) to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the extent of capitalist development in the given nation". *Ibid.* Vol. 3, p. 196.

"But in theory it is assumed that the laws of capitalist development operate in their price form. In reality there exists only approximations: but this approximation is the greater the more developed the capitalist mode of production". *Ibid.* Vol. 3, p. 175.

"And although the equalizing of wages and working days and thereby, of the rate of surplus value, among the different spheres of production, and even among different investments of capital in the same sphere of production is checked by all kinds of local obstacles, it is nevertheless taking place more and more with the advance of capitalist production and the subordination of all economic conditions to this mode of production". *Ibid.* Vol. 3, p. 142.

⁴Of course, if the new technology means a higher organic composition of capital, a greater ratio of capital to labor used, then the total surplus-value, and so total profit to industry may actually fall, (even if the decline is partially compensated by an adjustment via the prices of production mechanism).

⁵There is a parallel here to the Marxist theory of the state. The state does ultimately express the needs of the ruling class as a whole. But this rule emerges only out of a process of struggle between different, competing sectors of the class (and between different classes as well)—an unending and constantly shifting struggle despite the fact that the intra-class struggle tends to end up with class-wide interests dominant and having their way just as the constant attempts at monopoly end up with competition.

⁶In *International Firms and Modern Imperialism* by H. Radice, p. 144.

⁷The temporary increase in monopoly at certain points in the evolution of capitalism is not new. Indeed, great turning points in capitalist development have repeatedly encouraged monopoly forms, at least temporarily. Thus, in its early period, capitalist society is closely dependent on state-monopoly guarantees, protectionism, etc. With increasing maturity, capitalist economy tends to drop these forms and,

like England, to revert to the more capitalistically efficient, i.e., competitive modes. Later, as capitalism acquired, and required an increasingly *international* character, it first realized that character via the seizure of colonies, i.e., monopoly, (to protect early, risky capital and commodity export). And then once again, as international capitalist economy matured (under the "controlling guidance" this time of US capital) it became possible to re-assert the more purely capitalist competitive mode replacing colonial politico-monopoly. That this pattern may be repeated in the future is hardly precluded. It is in the light of these ebbs and flows of competition-monopoly-competition that it is easier to understand Lenin's quite ambiguous, and inconsistent theory of imperialism prior to WWI.

⁸Another datum which can be a source of error (statistical) in the opposite direction. National statistics on concentration/centralization cannot include the impact of multi-nationals on concentration. This uncertainty in the data can give rise to the question whether in fact concentration/centralization are increasing. In this connection it is necessary to keep in mind that this tendency, like the others (elimination of the middle class, etc.) is a tendency and no more. Its importance lies in that it points to the pressures and dynamic within an economy, and in that way, helps us to point to the future.

⁹Of course, it can be argued that profits would have been even lower without administered prices. But it is not easy to see how one could support or demonstrate this claim empirically.

¹⁰The actual seeming determination of prices in this way (i.e. the emergence of a market price seemingly through the conscious decision-making of capitalists) is pre-figured in Vol. 3 of *Capital* as part of the theory of prices of production.

¹¹Information in this section was derived mainly from three sources: *Industrial Market Structure and Economic Performance*, by F. Scherer; *Concentrated Industry Administered Prices and Inflation*, by Council on Wage Price Stabilization; and *Concentration and Price-cost Margins in Manufacturing Industries* by N. R. Collins and Lee E. Preston.

¹²Prof. David Schwartzman is author of a classic monograph which demonstrated a strong link between concentration and profits. But, as he admits, that link disappeared in a follow-up study covering a larger number of industries.

The famous TNEC (Temporary National Economic Committee) of the US Congress prior to WWII, suggested that administered prices do exist, but that they were independent of the degree of concentration. Instead they derived from temporary technological advantages (an example of the first case of monopoly in Marx discussed earlier in this article.)

Other studies suggest a correlation between profits and relative size of firms within an industry. But the source of the higher profits in the large firms could, it is admitted, just as easily be due to economies of scale, not "monopoly".

Still another study shows that contrary to expectations, the *long-run* profit structure of middle-size corporations was higher than that of the giant companies. But it is uncertain what this proves, since conceivably the medium size firms could be part of an industry whose optimum size was smaller, but in which a few firms still dominate.

Black Liberation or Black Separation

by JOEL JORDAN*

It is undeniable that a correct analysis of the Black liberation movement and the relation of that movement to the working class is pivotal for any socialist movement in the U.S. The more than proportional weight of Blacks within the working class and the profoundly revolutionary passion of their fight against racist oppression give the Black movement an immense revolutionary and detonating potential.

The Black liberation struggle involves a range of questions and options which have generated a variety of ideological currents around issues such as: (1) Are Blacks a nation seeking self-determination and separation, or is their struggle basically a struggle for equality? (2) Is independent Black self-organization consistent with a strategy of Black-and-white-unite-and-fight? (3) Does independent organization for Blacks mean separate Black parties or Black caucuses within multi-racial revolutionary groups? These questions are the objects of the present inquiry.

I. A Black Nation?

The question of whether or not Black people constitute a nation is an important question because it can help us to understand the character, direction, and potential of the Black struggle. However, the answer cannot be "deduced" from the revolutionary character or potential of the Black struggle. After all, male supremacy, like racism, cannot be eliminated under capitalism; the women's struggle must therefore be revolutionary to succeed, but that doesn't make women a nation. On the other hand, there is nothing necessarily revolutionary about national liberation movements per se: that is, they are not necessarily pro-socialist or even anti-capitalist. Whether or not they are revolutionary in this sense depends upon a variety of historical factors, in particular, the weight of the working class in those struggles, the nature of the leadership, and the character of its politics.

Of course, the criteria for a nation cannot be arrived at mechanically. The biggest drawback on this question is the lack of concreteness and historical perspective. It has become customary to smuggle in every manner of contraband under cover of general phrases. Some believe, therefore, that a few statistics will prove anything but superfluous.

A "few statistics" on the position of Black people in the United States today can tell us a great deal about claims for a Black nation.

Up until 1910, it might have been possible to speak of Black people as an oppressed nation. At that time, almost 90% of the Black population lived in the South, and constituted a majority or near-majority in a number of states. Almost 80% of Blacks in the South lived in rural communities, mostly working as sharecroppers. In other words, up until 70 years ago most Black people were still peasants, not proletarians, concentrated in the most economically backward region of the country. It was at least conceivable at that time to classify Blacks as a nation, insofar as they had so many features in common with other oppressed nations.

But if there was conceivably a material basis for a Black nation before 1910, and therefore for a Black nation-state in the South, capitalist development has totally destroyed that

material basis. The fact is that, today, Black people are *the most thoroughly proletarianized, urbanized racial grouping in American life*. By 1960, the proportion of Black people living in the cities surpassed that of whites. By 1974, over 75% of the Black population lived in urban areas, compared to 67% for whites. Only 3% of the Black population was still engaged in agriculture, while almost 60% were directly engaged in manufacturing, construction, transportation, and service industries (56% for whites). Whereas in 1910, a tiny percentage of Black people were union members, by 1970 the percentage of Blacks in the unions (15%) exceeded the percentage of Blacks in the population (11%). Moreover, Black workers are especially concentrated in the key areas of manufacturing, transport, and service. This change is reflected in the dramatic increase in real income of Black workers. In 1964, the median wage of Black male workers was *seven times greater* than in 1939 (compared to five times for white male workers). In 1960, more than 57% of Black people in Detroit owned automobiles and 41% owned their own homes.

In more recent years, Black workers have come to interact with white workers at the workplace as never before. Especially since the last great Black migrations of the 1940's and 1950's, there is now at least the physical basis for class unity between white and Black workers. We are all aware of the political potentialities (and problems) which emerge when large groups of workers of different nationalities are brought together. In the development of U.S. capitalism, this process was belated in the case of Black workers, as compared to the European immigrants, and only began with the first great Black migration from the South beginning in 1912. By the 1960's, this process was completed, though its political potential was somewhat dulled by the inequality of Blacks within the labor market (e.g., worst jobs; last hired, first fired; limited promotional opportunities; continued union discrimination, etc.) and the segregation of the Black communities. For instance, by 1970 around 9 million Black workers were part of the work force, with some 2,700,000 in basic industry. Black workers made up from one third to one half of the blue collar workers in steel and metal fabricating, retail trade, food processing and meat-packing, railroad, medical services, and communications.

*Another version of this article is appearing in the current issue of "URGENT TASKS", a publication of the Sojourner Truth Organization, and is part of an ongoing dialogue with STO.

Against the Current

Yet, a disproportionate percentage of Black workers are concentrated in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

In short, the tremendous expansion of U.S. capitalism in the past 70 years has totally transformed the social and economic foundations of the Black community. To speak of a struggle for a Black nation-state in the South today, where Black people are a far *smaller* minority than ever before, and where only half the Black population lives, is a fantasy bearing no relation to these material conditions.

American leftists have had a tendency to romanticize Black people because of their centuries of oppression, without taking into account the degree to which Black people have participated in U.S. capitalist growth and prosperity, despite their *continuing* inequality and oppression. Not to understand this "subordinated integration" into the U.S. economy is to seriously misunderstand both the material conditions under which Black people live, as well as Black consciousness. But it is precisely this historical duality within the Black community, of rapid progress combined with extreme discrimination, which must provide the framework for a Black liberation strategy. It is a uniquely American phenomenon.

What emerges from this overview is that the vastly transformed social conditions of Black people have also vastly transformed the nature of the Black struggle. In Lenin's day it could still be said that the object of Black aspirations was ownership and control of land. But today the object of Black aspirations is *equality* at the workplace and an end to social and economic discrimination in the community. Because of the overwhelmingly proletarian composition of the Black population and its concentration in the major U.S. cities, combined with extreme (and growing) oppression, the Black question must be viewed today as a class and race question, not a "national" question. As Robert Allen wrote in his important book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*:

The black and white worlds, although separate and distinct, are too closely intertwined—geographically, politically, and economically—for the social maladies of one not to affect the other. Both must change if either is to progress to new and liberating social forms.

II. The Changing Face of Black Nationalism

We might be forced to alter our conclusions, based on the above analysis, if we saw evidence that the mass movements of Black people, up to the present, aimed at self-determination (i.e., separation) rather than toward full equality within the U.S. But, on the contrary, our understanding of Black history indicates that there has been an ever-increasing orientation of the Black movement toward the struggle for equality and, in embryonic form, toward the class struggle to overthrow capitalism. In fact, we would argue that especially since the material base for a nation-state has eroded, Black separatism has been fundamentally a *defensive reaction* to white racism—a reaction forced at various points when there was no other choice—rather than a reflection of primary aspirations or of a real material base for a Black nation. Consequently, we find that by the 1960's, even the so-called "revolutionary Black nationalist" movements of that period did not aim at self-determination for Black people—i.e., separation and a Black nation—but

rather toward a struggle for equality through the development of Black power and Black consciousness.*

The strength or weakness of Black separatism has always depended upon the prospects for Black-white unity in alleviating the inequality of Black people, and *not* on the objective material foundations which existed to construct a Black nation. This observation is well-illustrated by the writings and career of Dr. Martin Delaney, considered by many to be the father of Black nationalism. In 1852 he wrote, "We love our country (the United States), dearly love her, but she doesn't love us—she despises us, and bids us be gone, driving us from her embraces."¹ In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, the white abolitionist, he added:

I am not in favor of caste, nor a separation of the brotherhood of mankind, and would as willingly live among white men as black, if I had *art. equal possession and enjoyment* of privileges; but shall never be reconciled to live among them, subservient to their will—existing by mere sufferance, as we, the colored people, do, in this country.¹ (Delaney's emphasis)

These quotations give us an early indication of the real source of Black nationalism in the United States and help to explain its subsequent development. As soon as the Civil War broke out, for instance, Delaney ceased advocating emigration to Africa and instead looked to recruiting Black troops to fight the war. During the Reconstruction period, Delaney worked for the Freedmen's Bureau and became a politician in South Carolina, where he wound up supporting Wade Hampton, a notorious white racist Democratic Party politician. With the defeat of Reconstruction, Delaney resumed his emigrationist activities. Delaney doubted the chances for equality in the U.S., although this was what he wanted. When he saw a possibility to struggle for equality during the Civil War and Reconstruction, he did so. When that struggle failed, he turned again to separatism.

Another Black nationalist leader, Bishop Henry M. Turner, had a similar career. During the Civil War he worked to recruit Black troops and afterwards became a Republican Party organizer in the Georgia Reconstruction government. When whites tried to disqualify Blacks from holding elective office, Turner expressed the same sentiments as Delaney on the floor of the state legislature:

The Anglo-Saxon race, sir, is a most surprising one . . . I was not aware that there was in the character of that race so much cowardice, or so much pusillanimity . . . We [Blacks] have pioneered civilization here; we have built up your country; we have worked in your fields, and garnered your harvests, for two hundred and fifty years! . . . We are willing to let the dead past bury its dead; but we ask you now for our RIGHTS . . . The black man cannot protect a country if the country doesn't protect him;

* Throughout this article we use the terms "separatism" and "nationalism" synonymously when referring to Black people. This is because we regard "nationalism" as an ideology which aims at the creation of an independent nation-state. For Black people in the U.S., then, "nationalism" implies "separatism". Terms like "self-organization", "Black consciousness", and "Black power" should not be confused with nationalism because they do not imply the demand for an independent nation-state.

and if, tomorrow, a war should arise, I would not raise a musket to defend a country where my manhood was denied.²

Like Delaney, Turner advocated emigration to Africa after the defeat of Reconstruction and by the 1890's had built up something of a base among poor Southern Blacks at a time when nothing else appeared possible. Black separatism in the late 19th century was clearly a response to racist reaction following Reconstruction. *But it was fundamentally limited by the lack of a realistic territorial alternative or economic base.*

By the end of World War I, these conditions had changed somewhat, setting the stage for the growth of the largest Black nationalist movement in American history: the Garvey movement. The real significance of this movement, however, lies not so much in its separatist program, but in its ability to pose itself as the effective instrument of Black self-organization and Black pride in a hostile, racist environment. On the whole, Black people did not want to go "back to Africa," but to assert their humanity in the United States. Very few of the 2-4 million members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Garveyite organization, actually applied to leave the country. But they were quite willing to stand up for their race.

The Garvey movement can only be understood against the backdrop of unrealized expectations experienced by Black people in the cities in the early 1920's. Black people had gotten a toehold in the industrial proletariat, as a result of the demand for Black labor before and during World War I. However, their hopes for improvement and equality were dashed by the racist reaction which immediately followed the war. The organized labor movement, never a consistent ally of Black people and usually an opponent, had already been thrown on the defensive by capital by the war's end. The Socialist movement, which in fact had never taken into account the special oppression of Black people in its program, was in disarray and in retreat. The conditions for a united fight-back among Black and white workers against the growing employers' offensive were simply not there. On the contrary, there was massive resistance from white workers to working with Black people. White workers, unable to take on the capitalists, attempted to protect their position by attacking the gains of the Blacks. This culminated in over 20 major race riots after the war involving white attacks on Black communities, as well as the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

These experiences represented a violent rebuff to Black aspirations in this period. In addition to hopes for better employment opportunities in the cities of the North and South, Black soldiers during the war came in contact with many new ideas in Europe. Thinking they were helping to make the world safe for democracy, they came home to find the "same old crap." Confronted by a solid wall of white opposition, Black people responded by asserting their dignity and pride in a way they couldn't in the rural South. Insofar as the Garvey movement had a social program, it was no accident that it was anti-labor, anti-communist, and pro-capitalist—given the betrayal by the white working class. Socialism and communism were not strong currents in an urban Black community just a few years removed from the countryside. Besides, these socialist currents could offer little practical alternative to Black people. They had to sub-

stitute a vision of unity somewhere in the distant future for the pressing needs of equality in the present. So, the Garvey movement concentrated on a program of racial uplift and self-help, through the creation of Black-owned businesses, enterprises, and associations. In this sense, the real Garvey program in the U.S. was a continuation of the self-help tradition of the European immigrant communities. Its fundamental dynamic was not separatist, leading to the establishment of a Black nation, no matter what Garvey himself may have intended.

The Great Depression and the subsequent class struggles of the '30's mark the low point of Black nationalism since 1920. And the reasons are not hard to find. The capitalist crisis and the subsequent industrial union struggle revealed to millions of white workers the need to make common cause with Black workers, and undermined the attraction of a strategy of white racial solidarity. To fight the capitalists, white workers were forced to forge unity with Blacks—or risk seeing the Blacks used (as scabs or replacements) by the capitalists against them. The struggles leading to the establishment of the CIO brought hundreds of thousands of Black people into unions on a permanent basis for the first time in American history.

This industrial union struggle set the stage for the second great migration from Southern rural areas during and after World War II. While white workers sought again to restrict the entry of Blacks into the work force during and after the war, this reaction was not nearly as strong as after World War I. Blacks were already an important part of the work force and better established in the unions. Besides, the post-war period was characterized by extremely rapid industrial expansion, with the U.S. as the pre-eminent capitalist power in the world. The demand for Black labor continued and grew.

In this context, it was not surprising that the first Black protest movement after World War II and the Korean War would take an integrationist and confrontationist, rather than a nationalist, self-help form. Black people, primarily from the Southern cities, saw their opportunity to sweep away all the legal and semi-legal forms of discrimination which restricted their ability to share in the American "dream." They were able to forge alliances with liberal and labor leaders who were willing to see the most glaring forms of discrimination eliminated.

Once legal equality (though not actual material equality) was achieved, through the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, there was a curious convergence of forces. On the one hand, radical elements in the old civil rights movement were dissatisfied with the limitations placed on the movement by its middle-class leadership and so-called allies. Now that formal democratic rights had been largely achieved in the South, and with rebellions breaking out in Northern cities, it was apparent to these forces, mainly around SNCC and CORE, that racism had far deeper structural and institutional roots in American life than mere legal equality could affect. These forces declared "Black Power," asked white people to leave their organizations, and sought a more radical program to confront what came to be called institutionalized racism. At the same time, some dissident members of Black nationalist groups, most notably around Malcolm X, began to oppose the accommodationist and non-confrontationist tendencies of their leaderships, and to

Against the Current

look for more militant strategies for Black liberation. In the late '60's these two currents combined to form groups like the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), as well as many other local organizations of Black struggle.

These Black liberation movements of the late '60's, especially the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, represented the most politically advanced Black groups in U.S. history, in that they were at the same time anti-racist and anti-capitalist. In getting this far, they both had to reject reformist integrationism and reformist nationalism. But the ideology they developed—"revolutionary nationalism"—had no internal consistency. It was instead an amalgam of a number of conflicting ideologies. Ultimately, these groups broke apart over these conflicts. But one thing is clear. Neither the Panthers nor the League ever organized around a strategy of self-determination leading to the establishment of a Black nation, but attempted to adapt their strategies to the actual social-economic position of Black people. For instance, very early on the Black Panthers, after Malcolm X, called for a U.N.-sponsored plebiscite among Black people to decide whether or not to separate from the United States. But they never really organized around it. In his letter to the Republic of New Africa in 1969, Huey Newton explained why the Black Panther Party rejected a self-determination, Black nation strategy:

... if Blacks at this very minute were able to secede from the union, and say have five or six states, it would be almost impossible to function in freedom side by side with a capitalist imperialistic country. We all know that Mother Africa is not free simply because of imperialism, because of Western domination. And there is no indication that it would be any different if we were to have a separate country here in Northern America. As a matter of fact, by all logics, we would suffer imperialism and colonialism even more so than the Third World is suffering it now . . .

So taking all these things into consideration, we conclude that the only way we are going to be free is to wipe out once and for all the oppressive structure of America. . . we do not want to be in an enclave-type situation where we would be more isolated than we already are now. We are isolated in the ghetto area, concentrated in the North, in the metropolitan areas, in the industrial areas, and we think this is a very good location as far as strategy is concerned in waging a strong battle against the established order.³

Nationalism was a more prevalent force in the League, but here too self-determination was put off until after the socialist revolution. In the meantime, the League's main thrust was organizing Black workers at the point of production to fight the company and, where necessary, the union officials. By 1971, there had developed two main factions in the League, one being anti-nationalist, the other pro-nationalist. The first faction, which eventually resigned from the League, stressed the need for a multi-racial party and movement to destroy capitalism; the second felt that the

racism of white workers meant that Blacks would have to lead the revolution, and then build a separate Black socialist state. But how they would be able to make this revolution without white workers was left unclear. At any rate, both factions understood that the main strategy was to build a workers' revolution against capitalism. They just disagreed on the role of white workers.

Just how far both the Panthers and the League diverged from a nationalist strategy is indicated by their attitudes toward other Blacks and toward working with whites. Whereas Garvey attacked as assimilationists any Blacks who advocated a struggle for equality in the U.S. and attempted to make an alliance with the Ku Klux Klan, the Panthers and the League attacked as accommodationist Blacks who served as front men for the companies, the Democratic Party, or the union officials, and formed alliances with white radical groups. So it is clear that neither group put race before class. Rather, they struggled to find a strategy which would put forward Black liberation within an overall movement against racism, capitalism, and imperialism. This strategy reflected the objective position of Black people.

However, the League and the Black Panther Party never did develop a full working class strategy which could mobilize large sections of the Black community. Responding to the fighting mood of the Black masses in the aftermath of the ghetto rebellions, Black militants tended to borrow heavily from the ideologies and strategies of the Third World countries: urban guerrillism and armed struggle. In particular, these strategies provided a natural focus for resistance to racist police whose brutality toward Blacks was, and is, a major source of outrage in the Black community.

If anything, both the Black Panther Party and the League were somewhat ultra-Left, and this reflected their ambivalence as to whether they were mass organizations or organizations of revolutionaries (necessarily much smaller, minority organizations, given the generally non-revolutionary consciousness of their base). It also reflected their failure to develop a full working class strategy. Rather than orient to the Black working class, which they thought was bought off by imperialism, the Panthers looked to the lumpen-proletariat, the "brother on the block," as the key revolutionary force within the Black community. In somewhat similar fashion, the League looked to the younger Black auto workers and largely ignored the others. As Mike Hamlin, a League activist, wrote:

One of our problems was that we ended up alienating a lot of workers . . . our approach was such that we turned off what I would call the moderate worker, certainly the backward workers, and certainly the white workers.⁴

The Panthers made similar self-criticisms but unfortunately wound up in the Democratic Party by the early 1970's.

Despite these and other weaknesses, the Panthers and the League represented the highest point reached by the Black movement. Reflecting the immediate needs of Northern Black workers at the point of production and in the community, the League especially was able to pose the need for a revolutionary working class strategy for Black liberation. If

it was hostile towards white workers, this was undoubtedly a reaction to the indifference and/or racism of these workers. There can be no doubt, on the other hand, that the presence of a large, predominantly white, anti-racist, anti-war movement in the Northern California area had a profound anti-nationalist influence on the Black Panther Party. In sum, the politics of these groups were highly contradictory and unstable. On the one hand, their orientation toward organizing workers and community people around their immediate needs led them to look outward for allies. In this respect, they were not "nationalist," in any traditional sense. On the other hand, the indifference and hostility of the white workers forced them to stay with a predominantly Black orientation. By the early '70's, the economy, though showing signs of trouble, had yet to experience a major downturn. It would still be a while before white workers would be forced to move. Meanwhile, the Black movement had gone as far as it could go on its own, winning some gains in industry through affirmative action and the growth of the public sector, as a result of ruling class attempts to pacify the ghettos.

But as the U.S. economy went into crisis in the early seventies, Black gains began to be rolled back. All workers were on the defensive, but hadn't developed the organizational instruments to fight their employers effectively. The union officials failed to organize a fight, choosing to accept "takeaways" in union contracts, rather than risk mobilizing the rank and file. Without a class struggle alternative, white workers were open to strategies of alleviating the crisis on to the backs of less-well-off workers and the poor, by voting for regressive tax cuts (Proposition 13 in California) and for increasingly conservative politicians, supporting police repression in the Black and Brown communities, etc.

The effects of the capitalist crisis on the Black community have produced a small fightback, especially over issues like police repression and Klan activity. But by and large, the Black movement itself has been substantially rolled back. With the overall decline of protest movements in the 1970's, the seeming futility of direct struggle and confrontation around basic social and economic questions, and the continued passivity of white workers, the stage was set for a mild resurgence of Black separatism, with an emphasis on self-help and even nation-building. At the same time, small numbers of Black activists of the '60's joined multi-racial revolutionary groups with the understanding that only a socialist revolution made by the entire working class could lay the material basis for the elimination of racism.

The Black nationalism of the 1970's has represented a political *retreat* from the politics of the Black movements of the 1960's. As such, it needs to be politically combatted. While a number of nationalist groups claim to be revolutionary, internationalist, and socialist, their actual strategies tend to counterpose a class approach to a national approach, rather than attempting, as the League or the Panthers did, to find a synthesis between them. The underlying assumption behind those groups that support self-determination in the Black Belt is that white people, all white people, are the enemy, regardless of class potential. As such, they reject a strategy of building a united working class revolutionary movement including white workers because they think the white workers are too entrenched in the system of white skin privilege.

The Black nationalism of the '70's bears a close resemblance to Zionism, or more precisely, to labor Zionism, except that the "new" Black nationalism is even more backward looking and utopian. This is because its strategy is so patently unrealistic, as well as counter-productive. Whereas in the final analysis the Zionist state was made possible (though never viable) by a deal with imperialism and with the considerable financial support of world Jewry, such a possibility is remote for Black people. They lack both the imperial "connections" and/or the capital to make such a state an attractive alternative for the Black people they want to settle in the Republic. The Provisional Government of The Republic of New Africa would have us believe that the United States government can be "convinced" not only to give Black people a nation in five Southern states, but also to pay reparations for past wrongs, thereby providing Black people with the necessary capital to build a nation. Somehow, the "spontaneous" actions of Black urban guerrillas in the North will force the government to do this. Just at a time when the potential power of Black people has reached its height, due to their position at the heart of the capitalist economy, the new nationalists have centered their strategy on the most economically backward areas of the U.S.—as Imari Obadele of the RNA put it, "taken together, the poorest states in the nation." This is obviously not a strategy for Black independence but for increased Black dependence on U.S. imperialism. It is well known that many Black African states, including some of the most radical, have been forced to "moderate" their anti-imperialism in order to encourage capital investment in their countries. Is it conceivable that in the unlikely event it could be established, a Black nation in the South could be less dependent? The new Black nationalism is perhaps the most utopian ever.

Most importantly, the new nationalist strategy, like Zionism, only *re-enforces* white racial solidarity and *undermines* the struggle for equality. This is because nationalism takes it for granted that racism is a more or less *permanent* feature of white consciousness; consequently it makes little sense to directly combat it. Insofar as separatists do take part in struggles for equality (i.e., busing, affirmative action, against police abuse), they do so half-heartedly precisely because their own separatist program can only be successful as a product of the *failure* of these struggles and the resulting cynicism of the Black masses toward the struggle for equality. Why should Black people want to separate from the U.S. if they think they can gain equality where they are?

One final postscript on the artificial origins of the Black Belt nation thesis which should serve as a warning for all revolutionaries. The decision of the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 that communists should raise the demand for self-determination in the Black Belt was made without any prior discussion inside the U.S. Communist Party and appears to have originated with Stalin. Reflecting the bureaucratization of the communist movement at that time, American party leaders were only too willing to fall all over themselves parroting the new line, even though the party had never referred to Blacks as a nation or to self-determination in the Black Belt until after the Congress. It was therefore no accident that this position received so little support among Black people, "made in Moscow" as it was, and it was generally dropped as a slogan particularly after the adoption of the popular front strategy.

Against the Current

III. Secession vs. The Right to Secede

In order to lend authority to their support for Black separatist movements, some socialists would have us believe that Marxists in every case support the self-determination demands of oppressed nationalities. Even leaving aside the question of whether Blacks are a nation, this belief is mistaken. Precisely because Lenin strictly subordinated all democratic demands, including self-determination, to the needs of the class struggle, he was not so quick to support every demand for secession. In fact, throughout his career he opposed separation or secession because of its tendency to further fragment and atomize the working class along national lines, thereby harming the struggle against capitalism. That is one reason why he put so much emphasis on fighting any form of oppressor-nation privilege and supporting the *right* to secede to prevent such fragmentation. The distinction between the right to secede and actual secession was important to Lenin:

The right of nations freely to secede must not be confused with the *advisability* of secession by a given nation at a given moment. The party of the proletariat must decide the latter question quite independently in each particular case, having regard to the interests of social development as a whole and the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat for socialism.⁶ (my emphasis)

The class-conscious workers do not advocate *secession*. They know the advantages of large states and the amalgamation of large states and the amalgamation of large masses of workers. But large states can be democratic only if there is complete equality among the nations; that equality implies the *right* to secede.

The struggle against national oppression and national privileges is inseparably bound up with the defence of that right.

We have always advised and shall continue to advise all the oppressed classes in all the oppressed countries, the colonies included, not to separate from us, but to form the closest possible ties and merge with us . . .

If we demand freedom of secession for the Mongolians, Persians, Egyptians and all other oppressed and unequal nations without exception, we do so not because we favour secession, but only because we stand for free, voluntary association and merging as distinct from forcible association. That is the *only* reason!⁸ (Lenin's emphasis)

As we shall see below, Lenin actually believed that the advocacy of secession can even play into the hands of bourgeois nationalism.

IV. Parallel to Colonial Nations?

It has become fashionable to speak of American Blacks as an "internal colony."

The preceding discussion indicates just how different the position of Black people in the U.S. is from that of colonial nations. In the first place, American Blacks, unlike

oppressed people in the colonies, have always comprised a relatively small percentage of the total population (around 11% throughout the 20th century). This fact already had a profound effect on the potential for successful slave uprisings. Since emancipation it has also set strict limits on the potential for a Black movement for a separate nation. Blacks are a relatively small minority. Consequently, the potential for separate struggle has been sharply limited—and thus is seen so by Blacks.

In the second place, ex-colonial nations like Vietnam, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau are poor, overwhelmingly peasant countries, whose people and economies have always been peripheral and marginal to the world capitalist system and the world market. Imperialism tended to retard national development in many of these countries because it propped up, and in part transformed the pre-capitalist ruling classes (i.e., the landlords, etc.). Thus, national liberation movements arose to expel imperialism, especially because it fettered development. However, the same conditions of backwardness which generated the anti-imperialist struggle now lay the basis for neo-colonialism, as the capital-starved Third World nations seek foreign investment and loans to develop their economies. It may have been possible to speak of similar conditions in the South following Reconstruction when the Northern bourgeoisie allied itself with the former slave-holding classes. But the rapid development of U.S. capitalism from the late 19th century on transformed to such an extent the social and economic conditions of Black people that the conditions which might have given rise to a Black independence movement were removed. Black income may be 55% of white earnings at the present time, but compared to the income of workers or peasants in underdeveloped countries, they are "privileged" indeed. More pertinent is the fact that they are entirely integrated into the modern industrial economy.

V. Towards a Black Liberation Strategy

Within the United States, the Negroes are undoubtedly powerless to achieve their complete or even substantial emancipation as an independent factor in the struggle against American capital. But such is the historic role of the Negroes in the United States: such today is their proletarian composition and such is their interrelation with the American proletariat itself that their independent struggles form perhaps the most powerful stimulus in American society to the recognition by the organized proletariat of its real responsibilities to the national development as a whole and of its power against American imperialism.⁹

The American revolution can only come about through a revolutionary socialist movement which combines, dialectically, the workers' struggles against capital with the struggles of all oppressed groups for equality. Neither struggle can succeed independently against the most powerful capitalist class the world has ever known. More than any other group in this society, Black people, as exploited workers and as an oppressed race, have a direct and immediate interest in waging both these struggles. The peculiar conditions of racism and economic growth in the U.S. have combined to put

Black people in a unique position to wage both the anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles. As a result of their increased integration in the U.S. proletariat since the 1940's and the rich experience of Black self-organization and struggle in the '50's and '60's, the potential for Black people to play a leading independent role in both struggles has vastly increased. As the world capitalist system goes deeper into crisis in the 1980's, revealing to more white workers the necessity for class struggle, the possibility for developing such a combined movement will also increase.

The problem with most theories on the Left is their mechanical approach to both the anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles, which they counterpose to one another. But the struggle against racism cannot succeed without destroying capitalism, nor can the struggle against capitalism succeed without a determined fight against racial inequality and its counterpart, white skin privilege. Therefore, a combined strategy is necessary: on the one hand, independent self-organization of Black people, at the workplace and in the community, to fight racism and oppression and for their special needs and demands; on the other, a class-wide, multi-racial movement to attack capital. Both movements, starting from different dynamics, must interpenetrate one another to create a revolutionary working class, anti-racist political movement for socialism. The greatest task for revolutionaries in the 1980's will be to further develop both the theoretical and the practical bases for such a strategy. Without it, the struggle against American imperialism is doomed to failure.

Given the fragmented and uneven character of the Black struggle today, the implementation of such a strategy requires a number of different approaches. First, there are the mass struggles that arise in the Black communities (i.e., for better and equal schools, housing, health care, and against police abuse). These struggles are critical, and may possibly detonate broader Black movements, as in the past. However, they have built-in limitations. The basic decisions affecting these communities are made outside of them: by the corporations and the various levels of government. But the people involved in the communities have little leverage they can exert against capital and the state. They do not, for example, have the strike weapon. Their ability to bring force directly against the state and the companies is very limited. Without allies they have little chance to win.

When the capitalist system was expanding, as throughout the '60's, there was enough of a surplus to make certain concessions to the Black communities in response to the urban rebellions. This came in the form of expanded social services, job creation, and so forth. But in a period of crisis, even this pitiful "war on poverty" is coming to a halt as the ruling class imposes austerity and sacrifice. Even the smallest gains will be hard-won, and require the exertion of a massive movement against the capitalist class.

More than ever, Black struggles in the community will need to link up with other progressive struggles to make any headway. Even in the relatively short-run, it will be necessary to connect the Black struggle to a class-wide working class offensive.

In particular, it will be necessary to link these community struggles with the struggles of rank-and-file workers at the point of production. At the level of the workplace, it will be more possible to build multi-racial forms of struggle, pre-

cisely because the workplace brings together diverse racial groups and forces cooperation, even if limited, against the employers. At the same time, because of the special oppression of Black workers at the point of production, it will be necessary for them to organize themselves—in caucuses, etc.—within these broader forms of struggle to fight against that oppression. Alliances between these rank-and-file movements and community struggles will work to strengthen each and lay the basis for a broader anti-capitalist, anti-racist fightback movement.

In many ways, the objective conditions for such a movement are being laid. Unlike the '60's, when the economic basis for reformism was still strong, the 1980's will see the continued intensification of economic instability and crisis, with deepening unemployment and rising inflation. This crisis has a disproportionately disastrous effect on Black workers. Many Black workers who shared in the prosperity of the '50's and '60's and who gave only passive support to the Black movement, will be increasingly open to the need for struggle. If Black activists give the proper attention to organizing Black workers at the workplace and in the community, it may be possible to build a more stable, cohesive, militant movement with the social power to pose a real threat to the system. Only such a development has the potential to overcome the two main weaknesses of the Black liberation movement: its isolation from the masses of Black working people, and its inability to enlist the support of white workers. While the second weakness was ultimately the fault of the white workers, and not of the Black movement, the fact is that a Black movement with roots in the multi-racial workplaces would have a profound effect upon white workers, especially in the current economic situation. Unlike the '60's, when the economy was still expanding, the present crisis has shaken the confidence of white workers in the system, though to a lesser degree than Blacks. This disaffection among white workers can go in either direction, however. Right now, the drift is to the right. Klan and Nazi organizing is on the rise, based in part on workers. Ronald Reagan is getting a fair degree of support from white industrial workers as he tours the country. As competition for scarce jobs and services becomes more acute, white workers are particularly susceptible to adopting white supremacist, protectionist, and/or American chauvinist strategies.

But the coming period may well see a resurgence of struggle on the part of the union rank and file, which will provide opportunities to overcome racism in struggle. Such a possibility would be enormously aided by a working classed Black movement, whose self interest would be served by fighting against the exploitation of all workers, as well as against Black inequality. Such a strategy would have the best chance of closing off racist options to white workers.

In any event, the Left must do its best to facilitate the development of the Black movement: by organizing trade union opposition to Klan and Nazi activity, organizing movements against cuts in jobs and services; organizing defense for actions like the Miami rebellion.

We recognize that today it is difficult to carry out such a strategy, but it is possible in certain areas. In such groups as Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), which revolutionaries helped to build, revolutionaries have proposed and implemented anti-racist demands and struggles, around affirmative action, against police abuse, against rac-

Against the Current

ist firings, and against the mistreatment of undocumented workers. Revolutionaries have also been able to link up TDU with anti-racist community struggles, such as the Coalition Against Police Abuse in Los Angeles. White workers have not always been willing to take these anti-racist positions, but due to the necessity for alliances to strengthen their struggle, and because revolutionaries with a clear anti-racist position have provided day-to-day leadership in TDU, most TDU activists have been won to these anti-racist positions and activities.

The key link between multi-racial workplace and Black community-based movements is Black workers. It is they, more than anyone else, who can inject working-class politics into Black community movements, thereby creating the basis for a political movement of workers and oppressed groups. Black workers now make up the overwhelming majority of the Black community and are today an indispensable, if numerically a minority, section of the working class. As a result, the growth in consciousness of their unique role in this process is quite likely, especially once white workers go into motion.

This strategic approach to Black liberation must be sharply contrasted to that of so sophisticated a socialist organization as STO. Where we seek to combine building the independent Black struggle with a class-wide struggle against capitalism, STO poses a separatist strategy which would further *isolate* both struggles, rendering them each ineffective. If the main thrust of the Black struggle is toward separation, as STO maintains, then why build alliances with progressive whites? Why should Black workers join multi-racial caucuses if their main goal is independent nation-building? Why confront racism at all if you are trying to convince Blacks that the struggle against racism is hopeless in the U.S. and separation is required?

Indeed, a separatist strategy can easily, if unintentionally, play into the hands of the capitalist class and the white racists. They, more than anything, fear the appearance of a united movement of workers and oppressed people, and would welcome any strategy which could deflect that possibility, no matter how revolutionary-sounding. A movement which strives for a Black state in the most economically backward region of the country and encourages Black migration there must certainly appear the "lesser evil" to the capitalists and racists. We have seen that Black people have taken advantage of whatever opportunities capitalist expansion has created, so that they now form an integral part of the American working class. But rather than build upon this historical source of strength for the Black community, nationalists would have Black people retreat to the weakest possible position to wage the struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and racism. It is no accident that Black people themselves have rejected this strategy in the past and will continue to reject it.

This is not to say that we oppose the *right* of self-determination for Black people, if in the future they should demand a separate state. We would, on the contrary, support that right. But at the same time we would argue against Blacks exercising it to form a separate nation. However, unless we are clear that Black people have the right to decide that question for themselves, and that we will fight for that right, Black people would not listen to our advice. Yet the fact remains that Blacks are *not* fighting for separation. The

reason for this is that they, quite correctly, do not see it to be in their interests.

We see our strategy of combining the class struggle with the struggle against inequality as part of a larger question, the fact that only by supporting the struggles of the oppressed could the working class win them to an alliance, and forge a united movement against capitalism and for social revolution.

VI. National Liberation Movements: Co-equal with the Class Struggle?

The Third Worldist conceptions which shape so many socialists' vision of Black Americans has produced the theory that struggles for national liberation are now somehow "co-equal" with the working class struggle. The view is that *irrespective of the class forces leading the national liberation movements*, they are inherently anti-capitalist, and therefore presumably develop automatically in a revolutionary socialist direction. This claim can only arise in the absence of a class analysis of these movements. In particular, this claim ignores the fact that other social classes, besides the working class, have been quite capable of *leading* these movements, dominating their politics, but *not* in a consistently anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist direction. The fact is that in the past 30 years, most national liberation movements have not been led by revolutionary internationalists, but by *nationalists* whose primary aim, no matter how revolutionary their rhetoric, was to establish independent nation-states *without* mobilizing the working class of their nations for an all-out struggle against world capitalism. It was inevitable then that these nationalists, whether they were bourgeois or Stalinist, whether they established independent capitalist states or non-capitalist bureaucratic states, eventually made some kind of accommodation to imperialism.

What is wrong with this theory of co-equality of class and national liberation struggles is that it envisions the possibility, indeed the inevitability (!), of a consistent anti-imperialist struggle led by anti-working class forces and without the independent organization of the working class. This false expectation leads some to play down the importance of the *class* character and politics of these movements.

The implication of this for Black liberation strategy is therefore to ignore the absolute necessity for a working class orientation within the Black liberation movement, and the impossibility of Black liberation without it. For, as we have seen, the character of Black people today is such that Black workers will only be mobilized against their racial oppression if they can also put forward their independent *class* demands, which in turn leads them to look outward to the whole working class. By contrast, the Black nationalists, because of their separatist perspective, do *not* see the necessity for independent Black worker organization. They tend to choose cross-class organizations in which the needs of Black workers are strictly subordinated to the interests of separate national development.

Nationalist ideology can therefore be an obstacle to the struggle against national oppression precisely because it puts a brake on the working class struggle to the extent it is dominated by other classes. The struggle of the working class alone is capable of destroying imperialism, and therefore national oppression, once and for all.

National liberation movements are critical precisely because they *play such an important role in detonating working class struggle*. As Lenin wrote in 1916:

... The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the *real* anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene.¹⁰ (Lenin's emphasis)

One of the "bacilli," one of the "ferments," but definitely not "coequal" with the class struggle. Indeed, Lenin repeatedly refers even to the "subordination" of the national struggle to the struggle for socialism.

To single out, in this respect, one of the demands of political democracy, specifically the self-determination of nations, and to oppose it to the rest, is fundamentally wrong in theory. In practice, the proletariat can retain its independence only by subordinating its struggle for all democratic demands, not excluding the demands for a republic, to its revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.¹¹

... for the class-conscious workers every democratic demand (including self-determination) is *subordinated* to the supreme interests of socialism.¹²

The argument for the "subordination" of the national struggle to the working class struggle rests on three reasons. First, only the working class can be counted on to carry through the national struggle. Second, only if the working class jealously guarded its political independence could it *combine*, as is required for victory, the struggle for national liberation with the class struggle. Third, only the working class has the potential to be consistently *internationalist*; only the working class will link its fight to the worldwide struggle vs. capitalism.

Lenin was far from supporting any form of *nationalism*, even as he gave his unconditional support to the struggle against national oppression. While he always recognized the *progressive side* of the nationalism of oppressed peoples, in its capacity to mobilize them against oppression, he was just as clear about its *reactionary*, anti-working class side, a limitation which ultimately restricted its ability to consistently prosecute the national struggle itself.

That is why Lenin concluded that Marxists must, at all costs, build an independent proletarian movement, no matter how small, and which should under no circumstances merge with the bourgeois-democratic movement.

VII. On the Role of Revolutionaries and Revolutionary Organization

The foregoing discussion on self-determination bears heavily on the way we view both the role of revolutionaries in building an anti-racist, anti-capitalist movement in the U.S. and how to view the development of party formations. However, the nature of the struggle imposes somewhat different tasks on Black and white revolutionaries.

White revolutionaries must demonstrate to Blacks that they can organize white workers without capitulating to their racism and conservatism. This is no easy task. Many white

leftists are either white chauvinist or Third Worldist, opportunist or sectarian. They either succumb to the immediate pressures of organizing at the lowest common denominator, which means avoiding controversial issues like racism, or in their anxiety to "prove" their anti-racism, they ignore the significance of the immediate struggle itself, rendering themselves no good to anybody. How to avoid either extreme, especially the first, must become a central concern of any revolutionary organization.

Black revolutionaries are subject to other pressures, depending upon the type of movement they are part of. Black community-based movements and Black worker caucuses often have strong anti-white tendencies and are reluctant to seek out alliances with predominantly white groups. On the other hand, especially in the wake of the decline of the Black movement, there has been a tendency among Black workers to opt for an adaptationist approach to white workers, rather than risk alienating them by pressing for their own special demands. In the first instance, Black revolutionaries will need to argue for the necessity of principled alliances between Black and white workers, and, in general, a strategy of working class unity as the only way to win. In the second instance, they will need to argue that adaptation to white workers' consciousness only reinforces the conservatism and unwillingness of the white workers to fight the boss at all, especially since racial privilege serves as a hedge against the ravages of capitalist exploitation.

Whatever the division of labor between white and Black revolutionaries, however, the thrust is the same: to lay the basis for principled unity between white and Black workers and other oppressed strata.

Our conception of a Black liberation strategy therefore supposes a multi-racial party in which Blacks (and other oppressed groups) are encouraged to organize themselves in caucuses, etc., to fight for their special needs within the party. This view of the party is based on the dual character of our strategy: to wage a united struggle against the capitalist class and to wage a struggle against inequality based on race, sex, etc.

Self-organization is needed within the party for two reasons. First, Blacks need to be organized to combat the external racist pressures on the party, and especially on the white members, to water down or drop their anti-racist demands. Second, Blacks need self-organization to combat white chauvinism among party members, which will always be present to some degree within the party as long as the system itself is racist. Revolutionaries cannot pretend that these problems do not exist just because they are revolutionaries. Rather, the material basis for racism must be taken into account within the party as well.

Only a party structure which takes into account *both* objective needs of the Black struggle—self-organization and unity with white workers—can hope to make the socialist revolution.

However, it cannot be denied that the task of constructing a multi-racial organization today is most difficult. This is especially due to the largely justified distrust on the part of Black activists and groups. Thus, where there is general political agreement between white and Black groups, it may be necessary at first to form federations, as a transitional form, before complete unity can be achieved. This is not a desirable tactic, but it may be unavoidable. A federation

Against the Current

would give the Blacks, in particular, an opportunity to test out their relationship with the whites without fully giving up their independence. Only when completely satisfied that a closer working relationship is desirable would both groups move toward a merger.

But the goal must be a unified organization of which an integral aspect would be the self-organization of Blacks (and women, etc.). We believe that this dialectical relationship between self-organization and unity offers the only hope for socialist revolution.

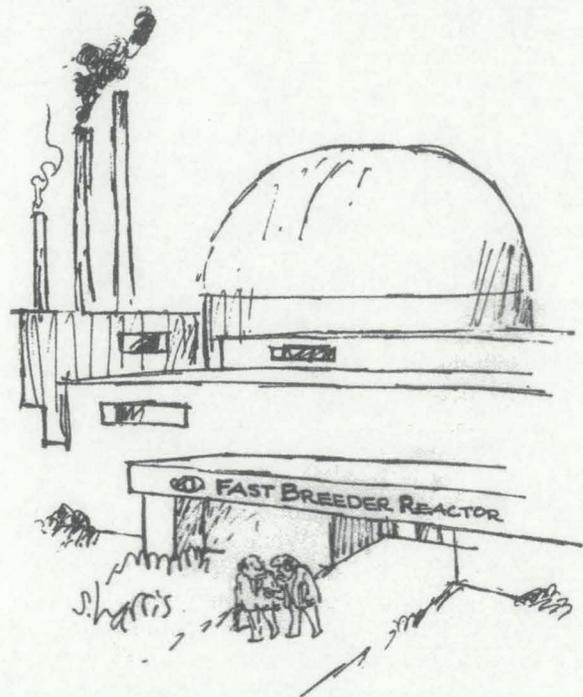
NOTES

1. Quoted in Pinkney, *Red, Black and Green: Black Nationalism in the U.S.* p. 24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
3. Huey Newton, "To Die For The People," p. 97-99.
4. Quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p. 180.
5. Imari Obadele, *Foundations of the Black Nation*, p.4.
6. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 24:303.
7. *Ibid.*, 20:110.
8. *Ibid.*, 23:67.
9. C.L.R. James, *New International*, Jan. 1945, p. 16.
10. Lenin, 22:357.
11. *Ibid.*, 22:149.
12. *Ibid.*, 23:57.

Cross Currents



"Gentlemen, we're facing a business crisis. Our profits have returned to normal."



"What we must decide is, if there is an accidental nuclear explosion that wipes out this entire part of the country, do we pass the cost on to the consumer?"

WIZARD



© Field Enterprises Inc 1980

Gardner

Future Articles:

- Why the U.S. Working Class is Different
- Which Way for the Black Liberation Movement?
- Is Democratic Centralism Democratic?
- Energy and the Working Class
- The Rent Control Movement—Experience and Potential
- The Politics of Sheila Rowbotham
- China: Where From, What Next?
- NAM-DSOC "Merger"
- History of Rank & File Movement in the 70s

Please enter my subscription to *Against the Current* for one year. I have enclosed a check for payment of 4 issues including Vol. 1, No. 1.

- \$7.00 individual \$15.00 institutions
 \$12.00 other countries
 Send for information about airmail and first-class rates.
 \$25 sustainer's subscription

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Make checks payable to: *Against the Current*: 45 West 10th Street (2G), New York, N.Y. 10011

Against the Current
45 West 10th Street - 2C
New York, N.Y. 10011

BULK RATE
U.S. Postage
PAID
New York, N.Y.
Permit No. 6010



Richard Hillman