

THE RANK AND FILE STRATEGY

By Kim Moody



Building a Socialist Movement in the U.S.

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Labor Donated

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Introduction: The Problem

America, it has been said, is the exception. It is the only developed industrial nation where no mass socialist movement took root in the working class in the twentieth century. To be sure there have been times of mass upheaval and even the growth of sizable left organizations with a significant working class membership. In the years before World War One and in the 1930s, Socialist, Communist, Trotskyist, and anarcho-syndicalist organizations had some impact on the development of organized labor and even on U.S. politics. But, then, unlike their European counterparts, they would shrink to be marginalized as political relics or sects.

Some scholars saw the problem as one of "American exceptionalism." The United States, it was argued, had too much upward mobility, too much available farm land, too regular a turnover as old ethnic groups worked their way up into the "Great American Middle Class." While these theories always had limited powers of explanation, much of the period of economic expansion that followed World War Two lent them credibility. Not only did the so-called middle class grow and prosper, but even much of the traditional industrial working class achieved a living standard never before achieved by blue collar or even most white collar workers anywhere in the world. African Americans, Latinos, and other people of color were largely excluded from this upward march to prosperity, which is one reason why the enormous movements of Black and Latino peoples exploded in the 1950s and 1960s. For the majority of white working class people and those people of color lucky or forceful enough to break into the unionized blue collar workforce in those years, the "American Dream" seemed within reach.

Today, the upward mobility theories look as outmoded and irrelevant as a "Dick and Jane" first grade reader with its all-white, tranquil world. Only the top twenty percent of U.S. families have seen anything like upward mobility in terms of income. For the vast majority, today's forced march is down hill all the way. For African Americans, Latinos, and single women it is more like a free fall. The proportion of poor people is on the rise. The gap between the rich and the rest has grown to obscene and highly visible levels. Even the wages of unionized workers in the big corporations are lower in real terms than they were in the 1970s.

There is no more "American exception," no more "American Dream." There is no more upward mobility for the vast majority. A highly internationalized capitalism is dragging most of us down, here and abroad. The crisis of capitalist "globalization" was never more evident. And all across the world, we see growing resistance to the power of capital and its neoliberal political allies. Even in the U.S., there are signs of revitalization and renewed militancy in organized labor. This is not just a matter of more strikes like those at UPS (1997), General Motors (1994-98) and US West (1998), although, as we shall see, they represent something very important. We also see more and more attempts by rank and file union members to make their unions more democratic and more effective in fighting today's highly aggressive employers and in organizing the unorganized. At the same time we see the beginnings of class independence in the political sphere, with the formation of the Labor Party by several national and scores of local unions in 1996.

Yet at no time since the 1950s has the isolation of socialists from the working class been greater. Socialist organizations in the U.S., including Solidarity, remain small and largely populated by people with an educated middle class background. Many socialist groups' connection with the working class is limited to support work for various strikes. The gap between the socialist organizations and the active sections of the working class who are the organizers of much of the resistance to the employers and rebellions within the unions is too great. The gap has many facets: some arise from different class origins, others from the habit of defeat on the left and the proclivity for symbolic actions and campaigns that flows from it. Most of the gap, however, is one of consciousness. The left with its highly theorized, often moralistic politics, and the worker activists with an un-theorized pragmatic outlook are often like trains passing in the night. This can be true even where left groups or individuals work within the unions.

The Rank and File Strategy attempts to bridge that gap. We call this the Rank & File Strategy because it is based on the very real growth of rank and file activity and rebellion that occurs in periods of intensified class struggle. The theory behind the strategy tells us that the conflict inherent in capitalist social relations of production becomes more intense under conditions of increased competition and crisis. The experience of this conflict, the reality of intensified exploitation,

contradicts older imbedded conservative ideas. The old ideas are not so much a clear pro-capitalist ideology as a mixture of contradictory ideas and sentiments held by most people in our society. Within the working class rudimentary democratic and collectivist ideas coexist with and sometimes combat both socially conservative ideas (from racism to cynicism and feelings of powerlessness) and a general acceptance of things as they are.

The task of socialists in this situation is not simply to offer an alternative ideology, a total explanation of the world, but to draw out the class consciousness that makes such bigger ideas realistic. The notion of a transitional set of ideas is key to this strategy. The socialist analysis of capitalism and what capitalism is doing to workers today relates directly to the daily experiences of more and more working class people. But the fact that the vast majority of working people lack even a consistently class-conscious way of looking at the world makes it difficult for socialism to get a hearing. The gaping lack in the U.S. at this time is the lack of a sea of class-conscious workers for socialist ideas and organizations to swim in. How do we help create that sea (with all due respect to Mother Nature)? Socialists can build transitional organizations and struggles that help to raise the class-consciousness of activist workers, in order to enlarge the layer of workers in the class who are open to socialist ideas. The existence of a strong current of active, class-conscious workers is a precondition for the development of a strong current of socialist workers—and a socialist party. We need to be, at the same time, bringing our socialist ideas directly to workers who are already ready to hear them, and also helping to create the struggles that produce more such workers.

Such struggles and such organizations are expressions of worker self-activity and self-interest. But capitalism attempts to demobilize and disempower workers; our experience is that it often takes people trained in organization, with a commitment and perspective of worker organization—that is, socialists—to take the lead in pulling ongoing organization together.

Transitional organizations include rank and file reform movements and caucuses rooted in the workplace and the unions. The best known example is Teamsters for a Democratic Union, but there are many others. Community based worker organizations, sometimes called workers centers, that organize on a class basis

usually in specific racial or ethnic communities are also transitional worker organizations. Some examples of these are The Latino Workers Center in New York, the Black Workers For Justice in North Carolina, and the Xicano Development Center in Detroit. At a slightly higher level are organizations that cut across union, industry, racial, and gender lines and give a class-wide perspective to the daily workplace and union experience. This includes organizations and projects like Jobs with Justice, Labor Notes, local cross-union support committees, or more political organizations such as local living wage campaigns or the new Labor Party.

This pamphlet will explain why such organizations and rank and file rebellion in general are the result of real social forces. It is this social reality that makes rank and file rebellion key to a successful strategy for building a revolutionary socialist workers movement in the U.S.

This strategy starts with the experience, struggles, and consciousness of workers as they are today, but offers a bridge to a deeper class consciousness and socialist politics.

Most of all, it is a strategy for ending the isolation of socialists and socialist organizations from the day-to-day struggles and experiences of the organized sections of the working class. It is not a panacea, a quick fix, nor guaranteed of success. . The strategy does not assume that socialist consciousness flows automatically from “economic” struggles. If it did, no strategy would be necessary. Those looking for a way out of the dilemma of socialism’s isolation from its natural base are urged to join the discussion this pamphlet aims to provoke.

The Setting: Why the Unions?

The Rank and File Strategy for socialism in the United States focuses on the unions and the workplace. This is not because these are the only places where consciousness is formed or struggles conducted. We are well aware of the many community-based campaigns, organizations, and struggles by working class people. Indeed, some of these play a role in the Rank and File Strategy. We also understand that one’s identity or consciousness in this society is shaped by many forces in many different settings. Class consciousness never exists alone; it is accompanied by the consciousness of other oppressions, such as that of race or gender, or their mirror images in the relative

advantages of “whiteness.”

Indeed, part of the transitional approach involves projecting a labor movement that is more than the unions. We see the working class movement as composed of a variety of organizations, each with a distinct role to play in creating the sort of diverse, class-based movement that points toward a new society. Socialism, of course, will not be based primarily on union organization, but on a range of democratic organizations and structures that bring all the exploited and oppressed to power. The movement we build today will in some degree prefigure the goals of the future. The unions take a central role in our conception of a broad working class movement by virtue of their size and their place at the heart of capitalist accumulation, a position that gives them great potential power, but our vision of a labor movement is far broader.

We want to make it clear that we do not proceed from some faceless, raceless, neutered idea of the working class. We endorse the thoughts of the Caribbean revolutionary Aimé Césaire who rejected the crude Stalinist version of class “universality” held by the French Communist Party when he resigned in 1955. In his resignation letter he wrote, “I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particularities there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.” Nowhere does diversity shape the particularities of the working class more than in the U.S. Nowhere is this diversity more central to the divisions, diversions, and strengths experienced by working class people in different ways. No where do working class people see themselves and one another in such different, usually distorted, ways. The prism of race, in particular, is highly distorting of class perceptions, even though in different ways for different groups—although it is also a source of class strength for many people of color. Indeed, the problems and potential of diversity is a theme we will return to again and again as we address questions of consciousness and organization.

One reason for focusing on the unions is that with some notable exceptions they are the most socially integrated organizations in American life. African Americans compose 15% of union members compared to 11% of the employed workforce. Latinos make up 9%, slightly less than their share of the workforce. They are, however, the fastest growing ethnic group in the unions. Women, who were only 25% of union members in the 1970s, now

account for 40% of union membership, just under the 45% of the workforce they compose. In 1987, two-thirds of all union members were white males. Today they are just half, albeit due largely to the decline of once male dominated industries. As America and its workforce changes, so do the unions.

An even more basic reason is that unions bring people together at the heart of the social relations of production. This is where both class formation and class conflict begin. Except on those rare occasions when the class struggle breaks into open political warfare, it is at the workplace that the tug of war between labor and capital is sharpest and most recurring. It is at the workplace that the conservative ideas and assumptions that blunt class consciousness are most consistently confronted.

This confrontation is typically social in nature. Not only in the sense of labor versus capital, but of working people functioning together. In this context people from different races and backgrounds are most likely to join forces to combat the employer. The education received in class conflict on the job or originating in work is a social one. Some, of course, will learn faster, while some will not care or participate actively except in rare moments of struggle. But here is where the activist layer of the unions takes shape.

Finally, the unions provide a political/organizational setting in which on-going education, organization, and struggle can be conducted. While most union work is done at the local level, the union also provides a national or international context that cuts across workplace lines and these days, with most unions recruiting in many industries, even across industry lines. Unions also provide the most concentrated working class organization for intervention in community affairs. The living wage campaigns of recent years are a good example of union organized or backed political action. The cross union activist organization Jobs with Justice is another. Union backing has made the Labor Party, founded in 1996, a viable project with the potential of creating a genuine class politics in the U.S. for the first time in decades.

Unions, of course, are far from perfect political organizations. They are bureaucratic. They often embody or protect racist and/or sexist practices. Their official ideology, which we will call business unionism, is a mass of contradictions, including the idea of labor-management partnerships. Their leaders generally do

their best to straddle class conflict. Yet it is precisely some of these contradictions that makes the Rank and File Strategy realistic. Today those contradictions within unions are interacting with the pressures that come from employers' efforts to remake the workplace and with the intensified competition of world capitalism. It is that interaction—between employers' pressure on workers and union leaders' inaction or collaboration—that creates rank and file rebellion—and potential for the Rank and File Strategy.

The Deep Roots of Working Class Self-Activity

The roots of worker self-activity and self-organization in opposition to the employer lie, in the first place, in the reality of exploitation; i.e., the wage relationship—the very heart of capitalist accumulation, expansion, and growth.

Put simply this means that workers produce more value or wealth than they make in the wages and benefits that make up their standard of living. So, for example, in 1995 manufacturing companies made \$5.39 of value added an hour for each \$1.00 in hourly wages they paid production workers.

This ratio is not constant. While we hear much from the capitalists' about their competition for market share, the fact is that growth in profitability (the rate of profit or return on investment) actually comes from increases in this ratio. So for each dollar capital paid to workers in the U.S., capital skimmed \$2.47 in 1947, \$3.23 in 1967, \$3.73 in 1977, \$4.64 in 1987, and \$5.39 in 1995. This rip-off ratio grows in spite of the fact that hourly wages also rise. The reason the ratio rises is that productivity increases.

While this neutral sounding economic category seems harmless, it is not. Over time the workers' increased productivity reduces the amount of time they spend producing their own wages and benefits and expands that devoted to producing the surplus from which profits are taken. This might be the result of new technology which eliminates workers' jobs or of increased effort by the workers or, typically, a combination of both.

New technology is hardly ever introduced without attempts to increase worker effort as well. The introduction of lean production methods in the last twenty years has emphasized increased effort along with downsizing and work reorganization. To put it

simply, capital does not get these increases without putting enormous pressure on the workers.

More and more workers, facing the pressure for more production and all the rhetoric about competition these days, understand that it is they who create this profit. One UAW member expressed this in an ironic way when he wrote to his union newspaper, "Believe me, we know how hard it is to make a profit—we spend 50 to 60 hours a week at the company working to make a profit for our employers." [1]

The struggle over what workers produce does not take place only at the workplace. The government backs capital with policies that redistribute the surplus between classes, limit the social safety net, impose greater market discipline on workers through deregulation and "free" trade agreements, and limit union action. Broad political struggles around these and other social issues play an important role in the development of class consciousness. At critical moments, they can make the difference between mass mobilization and fragmented struggles—even revolution or defeat.

Communities, too, are an important site of struggle. National, racial, or ethnic identities and neighborhoods often provide a place to mobilize against oppression. The workers centers mentioned above provide one form of resistance, consciousness, and organization for working class people of color and women—particularly those not working for wages or outside the unions. Like the workplace, these are essential pieces of the class puzzle.

But it is in the workplace, in the basic social relations of production, that the fight over the extra product of productivity occurs most sharply on a regular basis, and where even perceptions of bigger events can be shaped in a class perspective. The workplace is also, of course, where workers have the most power to act on their class consciousness, whatever its source may be.

Karl Marx analyzed these relationships and saw them as the basis of worker self-activity in resistance to all the employer attempts to increase the rate of exploitation. Trade unions and other working class organizations arose in the 19th century around this most basic struggle between labor and capital over the surplus. Trade unions are a natural outcome of capitalism. These organizations expand beyond the workplace into

labor federations and workers' political parties, but it is the experience of exploitation and its intensification that lies behind the great labor upheavals of the last century and a half.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were the first leading socialists to see in the trade unions the potential for a growing class consciousness and organizational experience that would make socialist ideas common currency across the working class. They didn't think unions were revolutionary organizations themselves. They understood well, long before most economists, that their basic purpose was, as modern labor economists put it, to "take labor out of competition" in the fight to prevent falling wages. Engels noted this early on in his 1845 *Conditions of the Working Class in England*, when he wrote:

The active resistance of the English workingmen has its effect in holding the money-greed of the bourgeoisie within certain limits, and keeping alive the opposition of the workers to the social and political omnipotence of the bourgeoisie, while it compels the admission that something more is needed than trade unions to break the power of the ruling class. But what gives these unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition.[2]

This reminds us of just how closely linked were the origins of trade unions and the socialist movements of the time in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. For the abolition of competition is certainly a classic socialist goal. The difference, of course, is that unions only reduce competition among workers, not among capitals, and leave industry in the hands of capital.

Additionally, however, Marx and Engels saw the unions that arose in the 19th century as "schools" in which workers learned the realities of the system first hand, but also developed the organizational, tactical, and political skills needed to take the struggle further to the political and revolutionary levels. Marx and Engels' assessment of just how well trade unions performed these tasks waxed and waned with the level of struggle, the rising conservatism of the craft unions, and, in Engels' lifetime, the explosion of the "New Unionism" that brought tens of thousands of unskilled workers into more struggle-oriented unions. But the notion that unions had a role in capitalism beyond their obvious economic collective bargaining function, a role

in raising class consciousness, remained basic to their view of society.

The notion that unions could raise consciousness and train workers in various political skills rested, of course, on the assumption that the members and not only the officials actually played an active role in the conduct of unionism—that they are democratic organizations. Most of today's unions appear to fall far short of that assumption. They are hierarchical and bureaucratic. At the national level they are typically dominated by full-time officials, appointed reps, and staffers. The members tend to be excluded from the union's administration and decision-making. So long has this been the norm that most members judge the effectiveness of their union by how well it "services" them, rather than by how well they themselves are using it to pursue their goals.

It should be said that some national unions are more democratic than others and that the vast majority of the 50,000 or so local unions in the U.S. are relatively democratic organizations—certainly in contrast to the corporations that employ their members, to the dollar-drenched national and local elections that claim the name of democracy in this country, or, indeed, to most voluntary organizations. But these local unions typically function in the context of a national or International union culture that is top-down by design, politically dead by habit, and narrowly focused on contract administration by labor "professionals."

The evolution and consequences of this sorry situation are central to the Rank and File Strategy. For this bureaucratic reality gives the political conflict within unions a certain "sociological" character. Ranks versus Tops to put it crudely. While the social aspect is real, it can also be deceptive. Just as not every leadership contest in a union has much in the way of political content, so not every shop floor gripe or expression of distrust or hatred of the union leadership is an incipient rank and file rebellion. But where opposition to the old regime arises in the grassroots of the union, drawing into action at least much of the active membership, and resting on the support of the majority, there is almost always an authentic political difference over the direction, culture, and politics of the union and the way it fights (or cooperates with) the employers.

It is here, whether it is a strike movement, prolonged workplace campaign, or union reform caucus that the "school" Marx and Engels saw in the early unions

in England comes back to life. It is here that the institutional attempt to suppress competition among the workers through contract administration turns into living solidarity. It is here that the opportunity for consciousness to deepen and grow presents itself again and again. It is also here that socialists have the chance to reconnect with socialism's natural base—the active working class.

The Roots of “Common Sense”

The question of bureaucracy in workers' organizations is linked to consciousness as well as to material, historical, and cultural conditions. Indeed, it is impossible to pick these elements apart completely. We will begin with the question of consciousness and then proceed to the conditions that produced the uneven consciousness of the American working class and the phenomenon of bureaucratic business unionism that is unique to the United States and, to a lesser degree, Canada.

Here we stress that while we think consciousness is crucial in building a workers and revolutionary movement, we are not saying that great upheaval and even revolutions require or are likely to depend on a thorough-going, complete revolutionary consciousness across the class. People act on their understanding of the moment, but the logic of struggle can carry them farther than that consciousness. Furthermore, consciousness is always uneven within the class, or any of its sections, even when everyone is moving in the same direction. That in fact, is why understanding the relationship of action to consciousness is so important. In many situations, including revolutionary ones, action may well precede total consciousness. The proposition that social movements or revolutions are only made by people with a total understanding of social reality or some compete “political correctness” is not validated by the history of any of the great revolutionary upheavals of the last two centuries or more.

While there are many different Marxist approaches to the question of class consciousness, we will look critically at two of the more popular explanations among socialists, those of Lenin and Gramsci.

Lenin's most famous statement about the limits of trade union consciousness was in *What is to Be Done?* where he wrote, “the history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness...”[3] Trade

union consciousness was bourgeois conscious he argued later. Revolutionary socialist consciousness had to come from outside, from professional revolutionaries trained in socialist theory. Three years later in 1905 a trade union struggle grew into a mass strike movement and a revolutionary confrontation with Czarism. Lenin revised his view allowing for the “spontaneous” development of socialist consciousness. Yet, he knew that sections of the working class everywhere remained mired in reformism.

Lenin was one of the first Marxists to explicitly draw the link between reformist consciousness and the economic impact of capital's expansionary imperative. In *Imperialism*, written in 1917, he saw the problem of backward and uneven consciousness as a function of the development of a privileged layer of the class. Although he didn't use the term, it has generally become known as the “labor aristocracy” explanation. (The term was first used by Engels.) Lenin attributed the growth of imperial expansion to the economic surplus generated by monopoly profits. This same surplus, Lenin argued, allowed capital to buy off a privileged section of the working class, which became the base for reformism. The economic analysis, borrowed from a British liberal economist as well as from the Austrian Marxist Rudolph Hilferding, that imperialism is the result of a “monopoly” surplus doesn't accord with the facts of the time. A far more plausible explanation for the expansion of overseas investment and the rush for colonies, above all in Africa, that began in the late 19th century was the falling rate of profit that was at the roots of the world-wide crisis of the 1870s.

Lenin's view can't explain, either, the enormous employer resistance to craft unions of skilled workers in most countries throughout the entire period he writes of and after. This was the era of Taylorism (deskilling), Homestead, and the “Open Shop” drive in the U.S. and of skill “dilution” everywhere. Such a vicious employer offensive directed at skilled workers is better understood in the context of the repeated crises and profitability problems of the era and contradicts the picture of the corrupting hand of capital passing out raises to craftsmen. Additionally, the “labor aristocracy” approach can't explain why these same skilled workers can become revolutionary in outlook as they did in many countries during and following the First World War. Finally, it doesn't explain why the mass of unskilled industrial workers can and did become just as conservative in outlook in the years following the

Second World War.

The problems of differing skill levels and the pay differentials inevitably attached to them are inherent in a capitalist labor market. They can and typically do produce a narrow "job trust" consciousness among skilled craftsmen. At the same, however, capitalism is always attempting to dilute or eliminate these same skills and replace them with cheaper labor attached to technologies that incorporates yesterday's skills. The attempt to dilute, eliminate, and degrade skills can produce a radical consciousness, as it did even under Lenin's nose. The process of degrading skills is very much at work today.

This is not to say that Lenin wasn't right about the connection between capitalism's colonial expansion, material conditions, and conservative or reformist consciousness. Imperialism, conquest, and continental expansion are certainly major factors underlying the fact that socialist ideas have never won over the majority of American workers. Lenin's contribution remains critical because of the confusion of so many socialists over questions of national liberation then and now. The wealth extracted over the decades by these activities as well as by slavery has played a big role in the accumulation of capital in the United States. In the period following World War Two, this allowed U.S. capital to make extensive concessions to a majority of the working class. It is not monopoly, but the reality of capitalist competition, however, that drives this process, as well as the fight over the ill-gotten gains of imperial expansion. We will discuss the ways in which this worked and its impact on worker organization and consciousness shortly, but first we want to look more closely at consciousness itself.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci also attempted to analyze the problems of working class consciousness and reformism in particular. His emphasis was on the ability of the ruling capitalist class to maintain its rule through ideological means. Gramsci called this "hegemony." Many neo-Gramscians and "hegemony" theorists have turned this into an absolute, undialectical domination of working class consciousness by bourgeois ideology. Here we want to employ a more contradictory concept of "hegemony" using Gramsci's idea of "common sense."

By "common sense" Gramsci meant the contradictory accumulation of ideas, beliefs, and ways of viewing the

world that most people carry around. "Common sense" is not some consistent capitalist ideology. It was, as he noted, "fragmentary, incoherent." [4] It is usually a clashing collection of old ideas handed down, others learned through daily experience, and still others generated by the capitalist media, education system, religion, etc. It is not simply the popular idea of a nation tranquilized by TV and weekends in the mall. "Common sense" is both deeper and more contradictory because it also embodies experiences that go against the grain of capitalist ideology. It is, nevertheless, capitalist "common sense" in that it tends to embody an acceptance of the capitalist system as the natural background of life. Gramsci counterposed to common sense "philosophy," meaning Marxism or socialist consciousness. While Gramsci's prison writings were necessarily highly abstract and aesopian, his answer to the transition from "common sense" to "philosophy" or "understanding" appears to lie in the "feelings" or "passions" of the masses. Here we will interpret this to mean the drive to resistance that comes from the experience of exploitation.

Working class life, after all, also embodies experiences that contradict many of the old ideas and assumptions. As we have argued, these contradictions tend to be sharper and more frequent at the point of production, but they can and do break out in other realms of life as well. The experience of exploitation and the intensification and reorganization of work and/or falling real incomes that inevitably accompanies it push workers into collective conflict with their employers. People will put up with a lot when they feel they have to, but sooner or later some people begin to fight back, then more join in. The experience of collective struggle against the boss challenges much of the old "common sense" even more directly as people begin to think through the real power relationships they are confronting and start to feel their power as a group.

Class consciousness is a slippery item to investigate. Gains in consciousness can be gradual or rapid, partial or more or less total depending on the magnitude of the experience that shakes up the old ideas and the alternative ideas available. But consciousness can slip back into old habits as well. While we will talk about different levels of consciousness, we do not mean to imply some stage theory of consciousness. The means by which thoughts and perceptions of the world change within an individual are clearly complex. We won't try to deal with this "psychological" side of consciousness

here.

Marx made the distinction between the consciousness of being a class “in itself” and “for itself.” The first is the simple recognition that the working class is a distinct class with interests opposed to the capitalist class. This is something like what Lenin saw as trade union consciousness. It involves an awareness of class conflict and the need for organization, but a more or less unquestioned assumption that “the system” is here to stay and all that is to be done is to make it better for the workers. The consciousness of being a class “for itself” is the awareness that capitalism can be replaced and that it is the task of the working class to emancipate itself by doing just that. This is socialist consciousness.

For Marx and most twentieth century Marxist theoreticians in Europe, class consciousness “in itself” was assumed to be a natural product of capitalism and class conflict, at least among organized workers and their communities. The great problem of the twentieth century, that which Gramsci addressed, was how to get from this given “in itself” consciousness to a revolutionary consciousness of being a class “for itself” with the historic task of abolishing capitalism and establishing socialism. Viewed in this way, as most European Marxists did, the answers tended to focus on political organization—the tasks of the revolutionary party.

In the United States and in many other countries, this consciousness of being a class “in itself,” however, cannot be taken as given. Not that it is totally absent all the time. There have been times like the 1930s when this sort of consciousness rushes to the fore in the minds of millions. It is, not surprisingly, in such times that a small layer of the class moves beyond to socialist consciousness. In more “normal” times, however, even the “in itself” level of consciousness recedes to a small section of the class. It is this situation that underlies the isolation of socialists for the last half a century.

At least four major interrelated factors more or less unique to the United States underlie the fragility of “in itself” class consciousness within the American working class. The first is the ability of American capitalism to continue its expansion over the past century and a half regardless (or because) of depressions, wars, or the emergence of new competing powers. Second is the distorting effect of racism in U.S. society and its deep

roots in that historical accumulation process. The third is the American “business union” ideology that is largely the result of the course of capital accumulation in the U.S. and which attempts to deny the importance of class. The fourth, a consequence of all the preceding, is the lack of an independent mass working class party to perpetuate rudimentary political class consciousness beyond sectional trade union awareness and business union ideology.

Accumulation, Class Formation & Consciousness in the U.S.

The development of capitalism in what is now the United States differed from that of Western Europe and much of the Western hemisphere as well in two major ways. First, its ruling class had to remove and/or eliminate (not, as in Europe, employ) the indigenous population in order, by the late nineteenth century, to gain uncontested, low cost access to the land to feed and clothe the new working class as cheaply as possible, to extract the natural resources which fed and fueled industry, and to build the canals and railroads that tied it all together.[5] This is not just a matter of continental expansion, per se, which might have been accomplished on a live and let live basis as was somewhat more the case in Canada, but of the possession of the land and natural resources. The resistance of Native Americans to the advancing white population was as much a barrier to accumulation then as the resistance of indigenous people in Chiapas is to agribusiness and oil interests in Mexico today or as the land rights of Canada’s First Nations are to extractive industries there.[6] As a result of eliminating these human barriers, burgeoning U.S. capitalism had little need of expensive imported food or raw materials. The uncalculated wealth this contributed to accumulation in the nineteenth century was certainly enormous.

The second equally unique and involuntary contribution to U.S. capital accumulation was African slave labor. Slavery is, of course, the opposite of capitalist wage labor. Nevertheless, the unpaid labor of millions of Africans provided the cash crops which supplied industry and a good deal of the population, but also brought in foreign exchange through trade. To be sure, British and French capitalism got a big leg-up from slavery, but their slave labor force was housed in the Western Hemisphere thousands of miles from their white populations. In the U.S., the fact of racial slavery

within the same nation as the dominant white settlers laid the basis for a domestic racial division of labor that has never gone away completely—even though as Jacqueline Jones has shown, that division of labor changed shapes and rationales from time to time.[7]

The ideology of modern racism took root in this historically unique social phenomenon as the slave owners and policy-makers sought to justify the institution and to sell that justification (racism as a consistent ideology) to the population as a whole. It mattered little whether or not the white merchants, farmers, and artisans of the early U.S. Republic absorbed the whole pseudo-scientific rationale of eighteenth and nineteenth century racism. It became part of the “common sense” of the white population and, hence, of the new working class as it took form. Naturally, the conquest of the Native American nations, of Mexico, and later Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands also fed into racism as part of the rationale for the “Manifest Destiny” of the white settler nation’s ruling class.

In this unique situation, as David Roediger and others have shown, where almost all wage earners were of European descent, the social construct of “whiteness” spread first by the slave owners and their apologists became part of the very definition of “free” wage labor. For decades following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, this attitude went largely unchallenged as the vast majority of African Americans remained tied to the land in the Old South where large scale cheap labor was still needed to mass produce cash crops. While racism was common to all classes, for the working class of the nineteenth century the very idea of class identity was intertwined with that of race. Each new wave of European immigrants would learn this bit of white American “common sense.” When competition between Black (or Asian or Latino) and white workers did begin to emerge, racism and the old class “common sense” provided the rationale for the exclusion of workers of color from many jobs and for the segregation of social institutions in much of the country.

The Rise of Bureaucracy and Business Unionism

There are many theories that attempt to explain the rise of trade union bureaucracy. One-time socialist turned fascist admirer Robert Michels and elitist Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb saw union bureaucracy as the natural outcome of organizational growth and efficiency. Michels’ “Iron Law of Oligarchy” still informs

much of the sociological thinking on the topic. Early in the twentieth century, the University of Wisconsin spawned two generations of institutional theorists who continued this tradition. In the 1950s and 1960s, academic “maturity” theorists reasoned that unions follow a natural pattern of development from earlier rebellious behavior to “mature” collective bargaining. This latter stage requires bureaucracy to build stable bargaining relationships.

At best these “theories” are descriptive. They are all apologetic and meant to make the phenomenon of bureaucracy in workers’ organizations of any kind seem inevitable—and a democratic socialism, thereby, impossible. The anti-socialist uses of the “Wisconsin School” in the early part of the 20th century and Cold War convenience of the “maturity” theorists should be clear enough. These theories, however, live on past their original applications in the minds of many academics for whom the idea of a radical, democratic working class movement is the relic of another era. And, of course, these ideas justify the thinking of many a high-level union leader as well. Virtually all of them assume an immutable capitalism, perhaps not free of problems, but inherently stable over the long run.

It is surprising that neither Marx and Engels nor the great Marxist theoreticians of the early twentieth century attempted anything like a systematic theorization of trade unions. To be sure, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, and others had things to say about unions and certainly observed the bureaucratic and conservative tendencies of the labor bureaucracy of their day. As people deeply involved in revolutionary struggle, it is perhaps understandable that they were so dismissive of unions. But for Marxists in countries then and now where revolution was not “around the corner,” such a luxury does not exist.

Bureaucracy and conservatism in the trade union leadership are by no means unique to the U.S. To a certain extent, bureaucracy is the product of the intermediate position of full-time union leaders as negotiators and mediators between the members who work for capital and the capitalists or their representatives. In times of economic growth the temptation to stabilize bargaining relationships by insulating this intermediate position from the rising expectations of the members is great indeed. If some sort of political “machine” already exists among the leaders, as it usually does, the leaders’ ability to institutionalize their independence

from constant member influence is increased. If there is no counterposed “machine” or organization in the ranks, the path to gradual bureaucratization is fairly open. If this insulated and growing machine can deliver the goods to the members, as it did for many years in the U.S., it is likely to go unchallenged by a majority of the members, although it seldom goes completely unchallenged.

What is somewhat unique to the U.S. is the extent and depth of bureaucracy and the explicitly pro-capitalist ideology that justifies it among other things. While a general theory may explain the rise of permanent union bureaucracy, it cannot explain the particular development of either trade union ideology or the dominant forms of working class “common sense” that have been influenced by it. For this, we must turn to the history of trade unionism in the formative years of business unionism and its struggle first with the radicalism of the post Civil War era and then with the explicitly socialist and revolutionary ideas presented by the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World after the turn of the century.

The first two decades following the Civil War were hard on both the newly freed slaves of the South, the remaining Native American nations, and the emerging working class still mostly in the North, though their experiences were still separate and distinct. African Americans lost the fight for Radical Reconstruction and land and faced the onslaught of “Jim Crow.” The “Indian Wars” of this era saw the final military defeat of these nations. Early attempts by workers around the country to form unions generally failed. A financial crisis beginning in 1873 threw many workers onto the streets and into poverty. From the late 1870s to the mid-1880s, the growing working class turned to various forms of radicalism, including the radical and racially inclusive unionism of the Knights of Labor. This period saw the insurrectionary strikes of railroad workers in 1877, the fight for the eight-hour day that culminated in the May 1, 1886 general strike and Haymarket incident that followed, the proliferation of labor and farmer-labor parties, and the rise of socialism within the working class movement.

Looking at these developments, Engels was astounded at the rapidity with which this new working class radicalism took shape in the U.S. in these years. He wrote, “no one could then (1885) foresee that in such a short time the movement would burst out with such

irresistible force, would spread with a rapidity of a prairie-fire, would shake American society to the foundations...”[8] This story has been well told by Jeremy Brecher in *Strike!* and won’t be repeated here. [9]

Despite the crisis of the 1870s, this period was simultaneously very good to capital. In his 1947 work analyzing the rise the business unionism, Sidney Lens summarized the incredible growth of American capitalism from the beginning of the Civil War to the end of the century well when he wrote:

The growth of American capitalism was phenomenal. From 1859 to 1899, the number of capitalist establishments tripled; the number of wage earners quadrupled. The value of its products went up sevenfold, and the amount of capital invested in industry increased ninefold. In the same period in England, the value of its products increased by only approximately 50 per cent; in France by approximately 45 per cent; in Germany, 65 percent. [10]

To this must be added the dramatic expansion of the rail system, which by 1900 totaled more miles than those of all other nations combined. To a greater extent than in Europe, which was engaged in the race for colonies abroad, this expansion took place within the nation’s, by now, continental boundaries. Fueled by a combination of the exploitation of millions of new immigrant workers, the surplus of Southern Black agrarian labor, and the land and natural resources taken from Mexico, Spain, and the indigenous population American capitalism, though by no means every capitalist, flourished indeed.

Lens, in one of the few attempts to provide a material basis for the rise of business unionism, sees this expansion as a sufficient explanation. It is certainly the background that made the success of the new unions of the 1880s possible, and allows us to understand the anti-socialism that became central to business union ideology. But it would be an enormous oversight not to integrate the impact of the pre-existing racism that informed the whole strategy of the new business unionists—the strategy that gave them the upper hand in the fight with the radicals in the late nineteenth century. As we argued earlier, this racism was part and parcel of the process of accumulation as it unfolded in what is now the United States. Business unionism, largely a product of the rapid expansion that followed the Civil War, also incorporated the “common sense”

racism of the pre-War period.

Craft unionism was not unique to the U.S. It had existed in Britain for some time and would evolve elsewhere as well. But almost everywhere else it would be accompanied by some kind of class-based political party and socialist ideology by the late nineteenth century. The major alternative in Europe and Latin America was Christian, i.e., Catholic, unionism not business unionism. Indeed, even in the U.S. many of the founders of the new craft unions of the 1880s regarded themselves as socialists, and socialism would contend with business unionism and a small organized Catholic presence as the ideology of these unions for some time. The first political contest within organized labor, however, was not primarily that between socialists and business unionists, but between practically minded craft unionists, both "pure and simple" and (reform-minded) socialist, and the labor radicalism of the 1880s.

The answer to why business unionism triumphed, however, lies in the intersection of American capital's incredible expansion with the way the new craft unions attempted to protect their members. The period following Haymarket in 1886 was one of growth. Capital, however, did not see this as a reason to be generous to the existing unions. In fact, the employers launched a mighty anti-union offensive that destroyed the Knights of Labor in short order. This offensive also destroyed or drove underground those craft unions that had carved out a place in industry. In the early 1890s, great strikes that involved both craft and unskilled workers like those at Homestead and Pullman were defeated.

The unions that survived and grew the most in this period were those based in local labor markets in the new and growing large and small industrial cities of the period. Primary among these were the building trades unions of the new American Federation of Labor and various local transport unions such as the Longshoremen and Teamsters. These unions dealt with small local employers in local labor markets, not with the emerging industrial corporations. As industrial cities large and small arose across the country, these small employers had plenty of work and plenty of income building homes, the new office buildings, and factories and in the growing transportation networks within and around these cities.

The craft unions regulated their wages by restricting the supply of labor to a limited union membership,

rather than organizing all the workers in a given trade. Their central method was to limit and control the local labor market. The strike was used primarily to bring recalcitrant employers into line. Each craft bargained on its own, but a picketline by any union would usually be honored by all. They expressed cross-craft and industry solidarity through central labor councils composed of delegates of most local unions whether AFL or not. These CLCs called strikes when necessary. In the earliest days these new craft unions expressed some of the same egalitarian ideals embodied in the Knights of Labor. Members initiated into early AFL unions pledged, "I promise never to discriminate against a fellow worker on account of color, creed, or nationality." There would be monumental struggles in which Black and white workers in AFL unions would fight side by side, most notably the New Orleans general strike of 1892. Some unions, notably the United Mine Workers and Longshoremen, while by no means free of racism, recruited Black workers and had African American officers and organizers. The state AFL in Alabama fought for the inclusion of Black workers. These were, however, the exceptions.

Obviously, a restricted labor force in a growing market characterized by small, local employers feeding off the enormous expansion of capitalism in the U.S. gave these building trades and other local craft unions a shelter from the bigger offensive of the increasingly national corporations. It also gave them the ability to keep wages up and rising while the employer passed the cost on to cities, corporations, the wealthy, and the new middle class consumers flush with money. None of this is to say that these craft workers were handed big wages voluntarily by their bosses. Strikes were frequently necessary. Nevertheless, the practice of collective bargaining would change significantly for these unions over the next decade or so.

First of all, the practice of limiting the labor supply of skilled workers rather than organizing all workers in a given industry rapidly took on a racial character since most such skilled workers outside the South were white to begin with. This was soon codified in the constitutions of several craft unions. Given the unique economic context in which it arose, this exclusive craft unionism worked, where the radicalism and egalitarianism of the Knights had failed. If the ideology of the Knights and of most of the embryonic labor parties of the 1880s had been classless and often rooted in monetary and land reform, the ideology that began to take shape in the

craft unions was clear and well in line with much of the “common sense” of American capitalism.

Calling it “pure and simple” unionism, the bolder of the AFL leaders rejected any grand mission like socialism in favor of limited collective bargaining. The putative father of business unionism is not Samuel Gompers, but his friend Adolph Strasser, a fellow cigar maker, and for a while a socialist, who in the 1870s spelled out a practical and centralized version of unionism he thought compatible with the pragmatic outlook of American workers. It would be over a decade before his ideas could be put into practice. Samuel Gompers, however, did more to develop this as a self-conscious “philosophy” of labor and by the economic crisis of 1893, it was well developed and widespread. Its main rival in the early years of the new century would not be vague radicals but socialists of various stripes, from reformists to revolutionaries.

Strasser, Gompers, and the other “pure and simple” unionists did not reject politics, but had little chance to practice them at the national level until the unions began to grow after 1896 when recovery set in and the employers turned nasty. The first major entrance of the AFL into national politics was a lobbying effort in 1895 to win legislation to limit the use of injunctions against unions and for the eight-hour day.[11] After this it was a short road to the practice of hoping to win legislative influence for labor by “rewarding our friends and punishing our enemies,” which meant staying well within the two-party system that had come to prevail after the Civil War. Anticipating Lenin, the “pure and simple” unionists unashamedly embraced bourgeois politics as trade union politics in a uniquely direct way. The British Labor Party might practice bourgeois politics from an independent working class position when it emerged at the turn of the century, but American business unionists went directly to the bourgeois parties. This fact, of course, left an indelible mark on the rudimentary class consciousness that flared up from time to time.

As the AFL grew and a new kind of liberal bourgeois politics emerged at the end of the century as “Progressivism,” the practical experience of the leaders of “pure and simple” unionism led them to support the “progressives” in the two major parties rather than following the minority of trade unionists into the new Socialist Party. The relative success of the building trades unions and other locally-based

unions in this formative period gave them and their approach credibility. They spread this ideology and where applicable the practices to other unions through the city central labor bodies and state federations of the AFL.

Racism and racial exclusion were built into this ideology. It is not just that the racism of the society spilled over into these unions as it did into early industrial unions like the United Mine Workers, or other unions that did not exclude Blacks, it was in the constitutions and collective bargaining agreements of a growing number of craft unions. It was in the publications of the AFL and most of these craft unions.

The triumph of business union ideology was given an additional boost by the simultaneous development of the embryo of bureaucracy and “machine” rule in the AFL. While in most of the theories mentioned above, the development of a labor bureaucracy is associated with large organizations, the development of corporations, and bargaining stability, the actual roots of American labor bureaucracy were initially the result of conflict in local labor markets.

Following the Haymarket incident, American capital went on an anti-union rampage. The new craft unions were not spared the rage of capital or even of that of the small employers for whom many of these skilled workers toiled. Union members were frequently dismissed out of hand, particularly if they raised any grievances on the job. To protect themselves, they began to select the more vocal militants as “walking delegates,” the first full-time union negotiators. We know them today as business agents. This in itself was hardly bureaucracy. But as bargaining regularized itself in the years of growth before 1893, the delegates settled into routines and the city-wide local unions sought to bring them under their control rather than that of the members who had originally selected them. If the members attempted to replace a complacent business agent, as they sometimes did, the business agent and local officials could turn to the employers to get rid of the troublemakers, as they increasingly did.

This period also saw the rise of the national unions, which up to now had played little role. These were the major carriers of business union ideology. But on top of that, like the local leaders, they saw in these new full-time business agents the possibility of a political machine not unlike that of the urban political

machines they increasingly dealt with. All of this was further intensified as the national business union leaders of the AFL brought the formerly autonomous central labor bodies and state federations under their control. Increasingly, these practices spread to other AFL unions taking on the characteristics of normal union practice. By today's standards this machinery was pretty minimal, but it did aid the entrenchment and insulation of business union leaders and their ideology from a rank and file that would become increasingly restive and radical as the new century opened.

The AFL and most of its affiliated unions had survived and grown through employer repression and the disastrous depression of 1893-96 where the Knights, the labor parties, and the Populists had failed. Reflecting both this reality and the goal of stability so important to business unionism, Gompers could say with pride at the 1900 AFL convention:

It is noteworthy, that while in every other previous industrial crisis the trade unions were literally mowed down and swept out of existence, the unions now in existence have manifested not only the power of resistance, but of stability and permanence.[12]

Business Unionism's Defeat of the Socialists

When the crisis of 1893-1896 ended, American capitalism took another leap forward. In 1898, for the first time U.S. productivity surpassed that of its major commercial rival Britain, as well as all other industrial powers. Despite recessions, from 1870 through 1913 the growth of real per capita Gross Domestic Product in the U.S. outstripped that of any industrial nations save its neighbor Canada. Unionism, too, grew rapidly and the AFL went from 280,000 members in 1898 to 1.6 million in 1904. This time, unionism reached deep into the manufacturing industries. Along with the growth of the craft unions came the rise of new industrial unions such as the United Mine Workers, the radical Western Federation of Miners, the socialist-oriented garment workers unions, and the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. On the railroads, the craft unions turned from mutual assistance and insurance to collective bargaining.

The return of economic growth, the vast merger movement of capital, and the growth of unionism brought a quick response from the employers in the form of a national "Open Shop" drive led by the new National

Association of Manufacturers. The years after the turn of the century through World War One saw intense class conflict, new forms of cross-craft organization in industry, and the growth of regional bargaining.

In the wake of this new class-based radicalism came the growth of the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs. Unlike in Europe where both unions and parties shared a socialist outlook, however, the major trade union federation, the AFL, was ideologically hostile to the SP. Inside the unions and the AFL, Socialist Party members fought business unionists for control or at least influence. Workplace-based rank and file rebellions in this period typically took on a more political character as SPers challenged the "pure and simple" unionists who were increasingly aligned with the "progressives" of the Democratic and even Republican parties. By 1912, Socialist typographers' leader Max Hayes won a third of the votes in a contest with Gompers for leadership of the AFL.

Debs, himself a former union leader, an advocate of industrial unionism, and leader of the Pullman strike, held the conservative craft union leaders in contempt. He noted their separation from the ranks, their change in dress, habits, and associations—notably with employers and politicians. Debs remained a supporter of the IWW. The Socialist Party, however, had no trade union policy. It made no demands and put no pressure on members who became high level union officials—other than that they support the SP electorally. It was a simple matter for these Socialist union leaders to separate the running of the union from their politics, to become business unionists in practice while retaining their "Socialist" membership and identity. While some Socialists held on to leadership of AFL and independent unions such as those in garment and textile, the Socialist Party itself split, faced the general repression against all radicals, and then shrank after the First World War.

The triumph of the business unionists was, however, guaranteed more than anything by the impact of the First World War. As one labor historian put it:

World War I, in fact, helped make the American Federation of Labor a permanent and lasting organization by giving it the strength to survive the 1920s.[13]

It did so in three ways. First was simply the growth in number of members caused by war production, to 5 million by 1920. Second were the wage gains that came with the swelling of war orders after 1914. These secured

the loyalty to incumbent leaders in many cases. Third was the government's policy of favoring AFL unions in war industries, while at the same time conducting violent repression against the IWW and SP. A corollary of this relationship with the government was the further bureaucratization as war-time decision-making moved up the hierarchy into various tripartite bodies and as attempts were made to regularize grievance handling. Business union leaders, practices, and ideology were now deeply entrenched, while the radicals were on the defensive and their organizations severely weakened.

The First Experiment in Rank and File Strategy

The last years of the war and those immediately following saw sharp class conflict and industrial upheaval in the United States as in much of the developed capitalist world. In 1918, it looked as though German workers would follow the example set in Russia a year earlier as workers councils spread across the country and revolution seemed an accomplished fact—though in fact the leaders of the Social Democratic Party would soon derail the revolution.

Across the industrial world, new forms of rank and file-based worker organization sprang up to deal with the massive changes in industry and work the war had brought on. The Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement in Britain, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Germany, factory committees in Italy, and similar organizations in France exemplified the workers' effort to take on issues the old leaders, even so-called socialists, shrank from. Indeed, by 1920 the newly formed Communist International based its strategy for revolution on these rank and file upsurges that swept across industry in the developed nations. As one study of this period put it, "...in the Communist International's own judgement—which we share—it is primarily in the industrial struggle that the opportunities for intervention by revolutionaries are to be sought, and it is a party's performance in relation to these opportunities on which it is primarily to be judged." [14]

The U.S., too, saw intense class struggle. An attempt to organize the steel industry in 1919 with a coalition of craft unions led to a strike of 365,000 workers. Soon a strike of 400,000 coal miners followed. A general strike in Seattle led to a near "Soviet" situation as the unions took charge of the city. In 1920-21 600,000 coal miners struck leading to a virtual civil war in West Virginia and central Illinois. In 1921 the Typographers waged

a year-long strike, while 100,000 textile workers in New England hit the bricks. In 1922, 400,000 rail shop craft workers struck.

This explosion was made possible in part by the enormous growth of the unions and the rapid economic expansion associated with the war. But it was also a response to the industrial speed-up that had underlain the entire period of growth from the end of the Civil War through World War One and the carnage it produced. Industrial death rates in the U.S. were estimated at two to three times those in Europe. On the railroads some 75,000 workers perished from the Civil War to the beginning of the First World War. In construction the industry itself said that each story of the new skyscrapers cost a worker's life. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 underscored this reckless disregard of life. Alongside of this and partly responsible for it were the constant and deep changes in work associated with Taylorism, skill dilution, and work intensification that drove workers to resistance.

Altogether, from 1919 through 1923 over 8 million workers struck. Almost all of the strikes, however, were defeated. In the wake of these defeats, union membership plunged from its 5 million highpoint to 3.6 million in 1923, stabilizing at around 3.4 million later in the decade. All the issues that had led to industrial rebellion remained unresolved, the political position of labor weaker, the unions less and less able to resist while relying on the conventional methods of business unionism and of craft unionism in particular.

The political state of business unionism was aptly summarized by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in the African American socialist weekly, *The Messenger*, where they described the 1921 AFL convention:

The recent convention of the American Federation of Labor held in Denver, Colorado, was colorless except for the fight for the presidency between Gompers and John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers. The convention opposed trade with Russia; refused to condemn the unspeakable Ku Klux Klan; ratified Gompers' withdrawal from the Amsterdam Labor International; closed the door in the faces of Negroes and women; reelected its archaic pilots; then adjourned... [15]

While the triumph of the business unionists and their ideology had not really been in doubt, it is natural that thousands of union activists should question these

leaders and their methods, including craft unionism itself. At the same time, this was the first time that capital had inflicted such a massive defeat on labor without destroying the unions. Despite the setbacks, union membership remained well above its pre-war level, allowing for the growth of opposition within the unions. A symbol of this new mood was the rebellion in Gompers' home local of the Cigar Makers that blocked his election as a delegate to the 1920 AFL convention. Opposition groups grew in several unions, notable the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Fur Workers, the Machinists, the Carpenters, the Iron and Steel Workers, and the United Mine Workers. Though they were often led by radicals, they tended to take on a broad, rather than partisan (SP, IWW) character.

In 1919 in the midst of the industrial upheaval, following a long and destructive fight in the Socialist Party, the former SP Left Wing formed the Communist Party (two of them at first). After the defeat of the 1919 steel strike, its organizer William Z. Foster, and other like-minded veterans of the steel and other struggles, organized the Trade Union Educational League in 1920 to do revolutionary syndicalist work within the AFL. After a couple of years of infighting and underground existence, the new Communist Party (called the Workers Party for a while) recognized the potential of the TUEL for establishing and expanding the party's roots in the organized working class.

By 1921, when Foster like many syndicalists around the world, joined the CP and abandoned his anti-party position, the program of the TUEL took shape. It stood, above all, for industrial unionism and a labor party—two ideas that made enormous sense as the craft unions faced one defeat after another. The TUEL also stood for the end of all racial barriers to union membership, equal status within the unions for African Americans, and for union democracy. At the same time, it supported the young Russian Soviet republic, as did many trade union militants in its earliest years. It was endorsed by a broad cross-section of militants and officials, including Debs.

Labor historian James Barrett summarized the orientation of the TUEL aptly as follows:

The TUEL mobilized in more than a dozen industries but built its strongest and most durable movements in the needle trades and coal mining. In each industry economic problems and competition led to dramatic

confrontations with employers, while conservative union policies precipitated rank-and-file opposition movements. League militants built united fronts with these groups by addressing genuine industrial problems and confronting unpopular leaders.[16]

There were no dues. Membership was established by subscribing to its national paper, *The Labor Herald*. The TUEL had both industrial and local geographical organizations. Its major campaign was for industrial unionism through the amalgamation of craft unions or their industry divisions, such as rail. Resolutions favoring amalgamation passed in thousands of local unions, seventeen state federations, and twenty international unions. These same militants brought their local unions into the new movement for a labor party, where TUEL also worked with progressive officials like John Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor.

TUEL activists, however, didn't just build the TUEL or its campaigns. They got involved in the issues confronting each industry, sometimes led strikes, and participated in or led the various rank and file movements of the time. Several of the TUEL industry groups were based on existing rank and file movements and on the new shop delegates and shop stewards movements. These included rank and file oppositions in the ILGWU, the Fur Workers, the Carpenters, the Machinists, the Amalgamated Iron and Steel Workers, and the United Mine Workers, all of which had considerable success.

The TUEL demonstrated the power of rank and file rebellion and the ability to organize beyond those already loyal to the left. Their day-to-day work focused on workplace issues and union democracy as well as industrial unionism, a labor party, and, less consistently, racial equality.[17] The combination of this very basic program and the activities of the TUEL moved tens of thousands of workers to action and many more to vote for resolutions and candidates backed by TUEL activists. It also linked the various rank and file opposition movements into a broad progressive current across the labor movement giving these efforts a class-wide framework, a shared vision of what unionism could be, and a common basic program.

By 1924, however, the TUEL class-wide experiment lay in shambles, with the Communists isolated from the mass of activists they had helped to motivate and organize. Probably the major reason was the vicious counter-mobilization of the business union bureaucracy across

the AFL. TUEL and CP activists were expelled right and left with no means of recourse. Despite big votes for opposition candidates in several unions and strong bases in many locals, the entrenched AFL leaders maintained control over the expanded machinery of their unions. For the expelled rebels there was no place to turn.

At the same time, the reaction of the bureaucracy was made all too easy by the policies of the CP and the weaknesses of the TUEL. One weakness was the revolutionary nature of its central campaign, that for amalgamation. While TUEL activists had great success in getting resolutions in favor of amalgamation passed across the labor movement, they had almost no success in actually forcing or carrying through amalgamation toward industrial unionism. Resolutions can not be a substitute for organization and the ability to follow through on a goal. There isn't much doubt that most of the activists, including party members, who participated in the TUEL campaigns wanted such organization and influence, but the way in which the CP "ran" the TUEL made this difficult.

The greatest weakness of the TUEL was that it was controlled top-down by the CP. It never really developed a democratic structure of its own, nor an independent rank and file leadership to combat the growing sectarianism and erratic behavior of the CP. The TUEL's lack of independence was signaled among other things by its affiliation with the Moscow-controlled Red International of Labor Unions. More importantly, virtually all the leaders of the various TUEL bodies were CP members. Both of these realities left TUEL without a self-organized base and unnecessarily open to red baiting.

The problem of party control was compounded by the sectarian direction that came from the party's central leadership in New York. Far from the daily course of class struggle and preoccupied with internal factional matters and Russian policy requirements, these leaders attempted to push their line on the CP leaders of the TUEL. This was particularly sharp in the case of Foster's work in the labor party movement. There, the CP leaders pushed for a premature launching of a farmer-labor party, which led to a break with non-Communist leaders and the collapse of the whole project. In 1924, the CP leadership guaranteed the end of the TUEL as a broad rank and file-based movement when it took the absurd step of merging the TUEL's paper, the Labor

Herald, with two other CP controlled papers, the Soviet Russia Pictorial published by the Friends of the Soviet Union and The Liberator, the CP's official paper, into the Workers Monthly, which was supposed to serve as the official publication of both the TUEL and the CP.

It must also be said that Foster himself was part of the problem as well as the initiator of the solution. He had realized that the only way the new CP could overcome its isolation was to work in the AFL building rank and file movements to replace business unionism with a class-struggle brand of unionism. Unlike most other top CP leaders, he understood this to be a long process. At the same time, he had a certain elitist view of this work as well as a tendency to maintain personal control of the operation. In 1922, he wrote that most rank and file workers were "ignorant and sluggish." In 1924, he told the socialist Scott Nearing, "Revolutions are not brought about by the sort of far-sighted revolutionaries you have in mind, but by stupid masses...goaded to desperate revolt by the pressure of social conditions... led by straight-thinking revolutionaries who are able to direct the storm intelligently against capitalism." [18] This is far from Marx's idea of trade union struggle as a school in which the masses learn political skills and come to a clearer class consciousness—though not so far from the Stalinism Foster and the CP would soon adopt. In the end, the combination of CP control and elitist outlook killed this first experiment in conscious rank and file rebellion.

By the second half of the 1920s, the bureaucracies of the AFL, its affiliates, and the independent unions in garment and rail were safely entrenched. The price paid for the failure of the TUEL was high. The unions lost more members, real wages slumped, they adopted labor-management cooperation schemes, and the number of unions excluding workers of color constitutionally or by ritual actually rose from 11 in 1920 to 24 by the end of the decade.

The Lesson of Transitional Politics

In his assessment of the problem of CP control and the failure of the TUEL Sidney Lens wrote:

By permitting this state of affairs the TUEL obviated the original purpose for which it was established, to become a bridge between the Communist party and the trade unions, to offer an instrument that could neither be accused of "dual unionism" nor of being a radical

force outside the unions. It was to be a class-struggle left wing, rather than a revolutionary dual union. It was to advocate militant strike tactics, democracy within the existing unions, amalgamation into industrial forms, a policy of spreading strikes to make them more effective, no faith in government arbitration machinery, and other such union strategies based on the theorem of "class against class." It was not to be the instrument of the revolution itself, as was the conception of the I.W.W. by Vincent St. John and his successors. It was to avoid the recurring difficulty of having new members endorse the idea of revolution. The TUEL in life itself, however, was so indistinguishable from the Communist party that it isolated itself from all but party members or the closest of sympathizers.[19]

In other words, the TUEL could not serve as a bridge between the basic class consciousness of most workers and the class "for itself" politics of the revolutionaries if it was itself solely the revolutionaries' possession. That it showed so much promise in doing just this for the first three years of its brief life is testimony to the viability of this strategy. Yet, the leaders of the early CP, still heady with the model of the Russian revolution and obsessed with internal party matters, bombed their own bridge to the activist layer of the class.

The notion of a bridge between rudimentary class consciousness or trade union militancy and socialist consciousness is the corner stone of transitional politics and the Rank and File Strategy. The notion of a transitional program and politics was meant to replace the old idea of the minimum and maximum programs of classic social democracy, where the minimum program became the real practice and the maximum (revolutionary) program a ceremonial artifact. Sometimes employed by the early Communist International before its corruption into Stalinism, it was resurrected in the late 1930s by Leon Trotsky who incorporated it into the founding document of the Fourth International in 1938. Formulating it primarily as a program of demands, Trotsky wrote:

It is necessary to help the masses in the process of daily struggle to find a bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's consciousness to wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat. [20]

For Trotsky in 1938 capitalism was in its inescapable "death agony," and the revolution blocked primarily by the degeneration of working class leadership in the form of social democracy and Stalinism. Capitalism's obituary proved premature in the extreme and the reduction of the problems of the working class movement to one of misleadership insufficient. We can also question whether any system of demands can by itself lead "unalterably" to revolutionary consciousness.

It is important to locate the purpose of such a transitional program. Trotsky's program was designed for a situation in which revolution seemed imminent if only effective leadership were in place. The 1938 transitional program was meant to provide direction for a new revolutionary leadership. The far more limited program of the TUEL had a more modest purpose, to raise the general class consciousness of the activist layer of the unions and to bring the revolutionaries into a common organization and movement with these militant, but still largely trade union-minded worker activists.

The idea of a transitional politics and program that can serve to bridge the gap we described in the beginning of this pamphlet, between today's "common sense" and genuine class consciousness is an important tool in overcoming both the isolation of socialists from the class and the limits of leadership within the class. Such a program for today is not so much a list of demands as a combination of demands, goals, and actions.

Before developing the idea of a transitional politics for today's labor movement, we want to look at the major competing left wing strategy for work in the unions, permeation or the attempt to gain influence by sidling up to the incumbent bureaucracy or its alleged progressive wing. This was, above, all the strategy of the Communist Party in the new CIO unions of the 1930s.

Permeation & The Hijacking of the CIO

The outlines of the story of the industrial upsurge that led to the formation of the CIO are well-known. Most of the craft union leaders of the AFL has learned nothing from the experience of the 1920s. In the face of growing rank and file outburst in the unorganized basic industries, they offered patch work aid and solutions when they offered anything. The first wave of strikes from 1933 through 1935 were mostly examples of rank and file self-organization. Some of these workers seized on moribund local unions to create new mass

organizations, other got temporary charters as AFL “federal local unions,” while others simply created their own unions. The massive 1934 strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and in the textile plants particularly in the South were led by men and women with no more than a local title, little in the way of money, and even less in terms of staff or “labor professionals.” Many of them were radicals who saw the need for industrial unionism as a priority and a training ground for a new generation of union leaders and activists—and revolutionaries.

The radicals, however, were not the only ones to read the hand writing on the wall. A handful of AFL leaders following the lead of John L. Lewis of the Miners began to push for industrial unionism. Lewis was no radical. In fact, he had been a life long Republican and as dedicated a business unionist as Gompers or anyone else. But his union was organized along industrial, not craft lines. He had also learned a few things in his long fight against the TUEL-supported opposition movements of the 1920s. So, he, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and a handful of other top leaders formed the Committee for Industrial Organization to push the AFL toward organizing the mass production industries along industrial lines. They got no where and left to form the new Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1936.

The men who launched the CIO as a new federation were not out to make the revolution. Rather, the new CIO leaders presented themselves as an alternative not only to the moribund AFL, but also to the rank and file leadership already in formation throughout industry. They did not have to do much organizing, as we think of that today, for workers were already pouring into or creating unions on their own or with the help of radicals and their organizations. Indeed, as industrial struggle grew and became more confrontational the new unions became schools of class consciousness and leadership development. The 1934 strikes in Toledo, San Francisco, and Minneapolis had all been led by socialists of one kind or another.

It would be overly simple to say that Lewis and the new CIO parachuted into this situation to save the day for capitalism. No doubt many of these leaders, like many in the ranks, saw the chance for a change in the balance of class forces within American capitalism through the organization of the mass production industries. Some, like erstwhile socialist Sidney Hillman, even brought the

elements of a new labor ideology that would distinguish the CIO from the pure and simple business unionists of the AFL for many years—social unionism. Yet, this meant that from day one, the CIO was a contradictory movement with a self-organizing rank and file in its new unions, but a full-blown bureaucracy at the federation level, and within those old unions that joined, that did all in its power to keep this movement within the channels of capitalism, orderly collective bargaining, and the Democratic Party.

It would take almost two decades to turn the CIO with its social unionist outlook into a modern business unionism similar enough to the AFL unions, some of which now had a more industrial character themselves, to make possible the 1955 merger that gave us the AFL-CIO. There were too many radicals and radicalized workers entrenched in the locals of the new unions, with too much support in the ranks, and too good a track record in the midst of the big struggles of the second half of the 1930s to make their taming easy. Furthermore, most of the new unions were too democratic, with plenty of open political debate and competition, to easily succumb to the bureaucratic norms of the Mine Workers or the CIO itself.

Almost all of the left organizations of the time played a significant role at one time or another: the Trotskyists in the Minneapolis Teamsters’ strike, A. J. Muste’s American Workers Party in the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, the Communists in San Francisco’s general strike, the local Socialist Party in the Flint Sit-Down, and so on. Had all these organizations worked together, as they often did in specific struggles like the Flint Sit-Down, in an autonomous TUEL-type rank and file project the history of U.S. labor might have been very different.

Indeed, the potential of radicalized rank and file mobilizations to create a class conscious labor movement was evident not only in the new CIO unions, but even in the old AFL unions, as the example of the Minneapolis Teamsters showed. Here, a small group of Trotskyists transformed a moribund craft union of truck drivers and helpers into an industrial union in the local and eventually regional freight and local cartage industries. When the process began, the entire Teamster Joint Council in Minneapolis-St. Paul had only one full-time official and less than a thousand members. Each step in this process of transformation involved accelerated rank and file mobilization, not only of the members of Teamsters Local 574 but eventually of the

entire labor movement in Minneapolis in the dramatic 1934 strike. The approach used by the Trotskyists is spelled out in Farrell Dobbs' book *Teamster Rebellion* and represents a classic case of the application of the rank and file strategy to the conditions of that time and place.

Dobbs notes that, "Workers were radicalizing under the goad of economic depression. To mobilize them for action it was necessary to start from their existing level of understanding. In the course of battle a majority could be convinced of the correctness of the Communist League's trade union policy." ("Communist League" was the name of the Trotskyist organization at that time, later the Socialist Workers Party.) He pointed to the contradictions of the union bureaucracy, but made the important point that the direction of the struggle in these circumstances was against the employers. In all likelihood, the bureaucracy, particularly in the persons of Daniel Tobin General President of the Teamsters and Cliff Hall of the Minneapolis Central Labor Council, would get in the way. As Dobbs put it, "Thus, the indicated tactic was to aim the workers' fire straight at the employers and catch the union bureaucrats in the middle." [21]

Using this approach, Dobbs and the Minneapolis Trotskyists went on to lead a massive organizing drive followed by three mass strikes. These strikes were models of rank and file mobilization, innovative tactics such as "cruising pickets," and alliances with other unions and farmers organizations. In the face of massive police and vigilante violence, the strikers mounted their own escalations with rallies reaching 40,000 people. In effect, the Trotskyist Teamsters, working with other militants, had turned a mere organizing drive into a major political confrontation with all the powers-that-be.

The 1934 strike victory did not end the problems faced by workers in the Minneapolis trucking industry. Local 574 was still burdened with conservative officers. The role of the Trotskyists in the strike movement, however, made them recognized leaders in practice. Dobbs and the other went about organizing a broad rank and file caucus with the object of bring in a consistently militant leadership. But they didn't simply run for office. Once again, Dobbs explains what is still an important lesson for rank and file rebels:

From the outset the building of a broad left wing in the

local was rooted in the programmatic concepts essential to a policy of militant struggle against the employers. Although this perspective entailed an ultimate clash with conservative union officials, their removal from office was not projected at the start as an immediate aim. That could have given the mistaken impression that the Trotskyist militants were interested primarily in winning union posts. To avoid such a misconception a flanking tactic was developed. Instead of calling for a quick formal change in the local's leadership, the incumbent officials were pressed to alter their policies to meet the workers needs. [22]

Dobbs and the other socialists allied themselves with non-socialists who had supported their strike strategy and eventually changed the leadership of the local. Their rank and file approach didn't stop there, however. They realized that most of the trucking industry was still nonunion and that they would have a hard time holding on to wages and conditions if this remained the case. Dobbs developed a strategy for organizing the over-the-road truckers and the freight workers in other towns in the region. In effect, Dobbs did what more and more unions are finally doing today. He recognized that the best organizers are not necessarily professional staffers, but committed members. So, each trucker became an *de facto* organizer. The campaign to organize the central states (Midwest) trucking industry is told in Dobbs' book, *Teamster Power*. It was no easy matter. The rank and file Teamster organizers met with violence from the employers, police, and governments. The president of the International Union, Daniel Tobin, opposed them all the way. Their fight was, of necessity, almost always a dual one against the employers and conservative union bureaucrats. The main enemy was always capital, but the business unionists were always in the way.

Although the militant leaders of Local 574 would eventually face enormous repression, the victory of Local 574 in Minneapolis and the organizing strategy that followed, were a clear demonstration of the power of rank and file unionism under the leadership of revolutionaries who understood both transitional politics and the potential of a mobilized and informed rank and file. It was an alternative kind of unionism to the top-down brand favored by Lewis, Hillman, and other CIO leaders. In embryo form it existed across the labor movement of the time. But this potential would be sidetracked by the abandonment of a rank and file orientation by much of the left in the second half of the

1930s.

By far the largest left organization was the Communist Party. While it is clear that the CP of the 1930s was a thoroughly Stalinized, bureaucratic party, it was also a contradictory movement. On the one hand, the CP and its thousands of worker members played a major role in building the new CIO unions from the bottom up. They and the unions they came to lead were usually well ahead of other left groups on matters of racism. And while some CP-led unions showed the same top-down tendencies as those led by liberal social unionists, others were or would become more democratic than most.

Nevertheless, the Popular Front policy adopted around 1936, just as the big struggles were heating up, precluded any real united front with the other left parties, much less a rank and file strategy like the TUEL. The Popular Front meant building alliances with the leaders of the new CIO wherever possible and supporting the Roosevelt Administration in the name of fighting fascism. This meant abandoning the idea of a labor party in practice and orienting more and more toward the Democrats. Such alliances inevitably led to attempts to permeate the highest levels of both government, which were not very successful, and the bureaucracy of the CIO and a number of its unions, which were more so.

The most famous case of the CP's permeationist policy was that of Lee Pressman and Len De Caux who became, as the joke went, "left hand men" to "The Three" as the CIO's top leaders, John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and Philip Murray, were known. Pressman was general council for the CIO, while De Caux was its publicity director. Pressman may have dropped formal membership in the party after 1935, but he continued to have those politics for a decade or so. While only a few could insinuate themselves at the top of the labor movement in this manner, many more Communists became staffers helping to build the apparatus of the CIO and some of its affiliates.

The vast majority of CP members, of course, had no hope of permeating their union's leadership or staff. They either ran for office, often successfully, or remained rank and filers. But the Popular Front alliances and the permeationist orientation that flowed from it meant that the largest group on the left had checked out of any fight against the growth of bureaucracy in the new unions and in some places contributed to it. Rank and

file CPers might still be militants in their workplace, and might even resist authoritarian moves by the leadership when those leaders weren't CPers themselves, but their party had its sights set higher on the big alliance with Roosevelt, Lewis, et al.

The Second World War accelerated the process of bureaucratization and the formation of a modernized business unionism, much as the First World War had. A series of government labor boards set the precedents and patterns of bureaucratic labor relations that shaped the whole post-World War Two era. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein summed up the impact of these boards when he wrote:

For the next four years, these boards were instrumental in setting for the first time industry-wide wage patterns, fixing a system of "industrial jurisprudence" on the shop floor, and influencing the internal structure of the new industrial unions. They were a powerful force in nationalizing a conception of routine and bureaucratic industrial relations that had been pioneered in the garment trades but that the Wagner Act and the NLRB had thus far failed to implement fully.[23]

The CP, by war time far and away the largest left organization, saw the war not as an imperialist war, but as an anti-fascist war for democracy. Its vigilance in supporting the war effort and war production surpassed that of ordinary anti-fascists or American jingoists to include opposition to any and all disruptions of production. Indeed, when Lewis broke with Murray and Hillman (and Roosevelt) first rejecting government mediation in the miners contract in 1941 and then leading four miners' strikes in 1943, the CP sided with Hillman and Murray. They fully supported the CIO leadership's no strike agreement. And when strikes against the inhuman pace of work or other issues began to spread in 1943 they opposed those.

The CP's elite alliance also hurt the African American liberation struggles in which they had previously played a major role in communities like Harlem. With the coming of the war, however, they played down racial struggles. They didn't support A. Philip Randolph's proposed march on Washington to demand jobs for African Americans in the burgeoning defense industries. Nor did they support the Double-V campaign for victory over fascism abroad and racism and segregation at home.

With the entrance of the U.S. into the war, the number of workers involved in strikes dropped dramatically

from 2.4 million in 1941, the highpoint of the pre-war years, to 840,000 in 1942. In 1943, however, the number shot up again to nearly 2 million workers and kept rising until 4.6 million workers joined the huge 1946 strike wave. Except for the coal miners strikes, the strikes from 1943 through 1945 were almost always rank and file actions, frequently led by stewards willing to buck the increasingly entrenched CIO bureaucracy and the government. These were the greatest counterweight to the bureaucratic trend accelerated by the war time institutions. Yet, the largest left party opposed them—although it is likely that many rank and file CPers participated.

Ironically, one of the pithiest descriptions of what came next comes from Len De Caux's memoirs:

Once the CIO won all that capitalism would allow it...sitdowns and mass struggle gave way to union administration, dues collection, labor board briefs, detailed negotiations. The swivel-chair tribe began its own long-lasting sitdown in union office. This tribe rode to office on the broad shoulders of Lewis and the backs of the agitators, the militants, the reds. Once they arrived they turned—dutifully, patriotically, devoutly—to kick in the face those on whom and over whom they had scrambled.[24]

The Popular Front, permeation, and war time patriotism were repaid with Cold War purges of the Communists and then other leftists as well. When the alliances at the top shattered, the lack of an independent rank and file base left the radicals isolated. The Communists faced the additional problem of having lost a lot of credibility for their war time collaboration. For the CIO as a whole, the swivel-chair crowd rapidly completed their insulation from the ranks in most unions and established the norms of modern business unionism that are still dominant. To be sure there was plenty of rank and file resistance to the loss of democracy, the increased length of union contracts, the increasingly infrequent and ritualized conventions, and the cozy and stable relations with employers that more and more leaders sought. But the resisters fought alone with few experienced political leaders among them and little or no contact with the oppositionists in other unions. The marvelous fighting democracy that had been the unions of the early thirties and then the CIO had been hijacked by leaders who soon made their peace with capital and institutionalized labor relations as the property of a layer of professional labor leaders and

staffers to a degree few had ever dreamed possible.

Modern Business Unionism & The Problem of Consciousness

The stabilization of collective bargaining and the institutionalization of modern business unionism were aided by another period of economic growth and expansion for American capital—this time as the world's leading economic and military power. This allowed a labor movement that now covered over nine million workers, as De Caux put it, to win "all that capitalism would allow it," which in this period was more than most workers anywhere had ever seen. This, in itself, partly explains the uniquely conservative consciousness that swept most unions and their members. The Cold War repression and a political atmosphere that equated any form of leftism with the Stalinist regime of the Soviet Union was another big factor in delegitimizing any brand of socialist politics. On top of this setting, the practices of modern business unionism contributed many of the specifics to the new post-war working class "common sense."

The knot between the new CIO and the Democratic Party had been tied by 1936. Nevertheless, labor party sentiment reemerged during the war. In 1943, Hillman and Murray set up the CIO Political Action Committee (PAC) specifically to combat local and state labor party initiatives and to mobilize the union ranks right down to the precinct level for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in the 1944 elections. Thus, the new unions entered the post-war era with a political practice virtually identical, though far more organized, to that of the AFL, with its own Labor's Non-Partisan League. This, no doubt, eased the way to the 1955 merger with the AFL. Any idea of class politics was abandoned or squelched, a fact that would shape and limit working class consciousness enormously for decades.

By the end of the 1940s, the CIO had surrendered its political program of full employment, national health care, generous social security, civil rights for African Americans, and public housing for all who needed it, when it became clear their Democratic "allies" had no interest in such reforms. This political choice meant that the liberal social unionist ideology of the CIO turned away from the political arena and toward the narrower field of collective bargaining. The new benefits bargaining for pensions, health care, and other items previously seen as part of an expanded welfare

state like those in Europe, created what some have called a “private welfare state” tied to the employers.

This had at least two long term affects. The first was to increase the professionalization and hence the bureaucratization of collective bargaining as contracts became incredibly complex and their administration more expert-heavy. The number of full-time “International Reps” grew and their power over contract administration increased. The notion and practice of the union as a service agency took root. Along with this came the erosion of basic democracy as conventions, once annual affairs, became every three or even five years in many unions.

The second was the fragmenting affect this “private welfare state” had on the consciousness of union members, along with the growing separation of their living standards from workers in weaker unions or in no unions. With benefits flowing from company coffers, the idea that the well-being of the company is a union goal was given a previously unknown economic underpinning. At the same time, just as any idea of a distinct class politics had been squelched, so too had the idea of the labor movement as a class movement been laid to rest. It was now a bureaucratic agency dependent on employer well-being (i.e., productivity dragged out of the workforce) to deliver services to it members and them only. Narrow “interest group” consciousness was certain at most times to beat class consciousness as a contender for this period’s “common sense.”

The replacement of social unionism, in all but convention-time rhetoric, by a top-down service model and fragmenting “private welfare state” was accompanied and sometimes preceded by the abandonment of the CIO’s commitment to racial equality. While this commitment had always been limited and seldom carried into white bastions like the skilled trades, the alliance with the progressive organizations of the African American community had contributed to a racial egalitarianism largely absent in the older business unionism of the AFL. But, when organizing, striking, and mobilizing were replaced by orderly professional bargaining in the context of economic growth, there was little need for such active alliances. When African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph proposed that the merged AFL-CIO ban racial exclusion by any union at the 1955 merger convention, not one white CIO leader voted with him. It was not that they

believed in exclusion, but that they valued the alliance with their new conservative colleagues more than that with the Black community.

All of these features of modern business unionism and the economic context in which it solidified combined to bury, if not completely obliterate, the kind of basic class consciousness that arose in the 1930s and lasted well into the 1940s. The fragmented consciousness was reinforced by the rise in real wages and, at least for a large minority, the new benefits that brought a middle class life style to millions. Average real hourly earnings in manufacturing rose by 50% from 1950 through 1965. The new benefits, furthermore, meant that more of these growing wages were available for direct consumption than had ever been the case before. All this was made possible by the continued growth of the economy. From 1947 through 1967, industrial production more than doubled, while productivity grew by over 50%.

While many on the left like to talk of this period as one of a “social compact” in which capital willingly handed over wage and benefit increases in exchange for increased production, the fact is that even in this period it took a high level of strike action to win this new standard of living. There were more strikes and more workers on strike in the first half of the 1950s, while the new standards of collective bargaining were being carved out, than during the years 1935-1939.

There was, however, a big difference. The strikes of the 1930s had been enormous battles seen by millions as part of a bigger class struggle. By the 1950s, strikes tended to be orderly affairs with token picketing. With some notable exceptions, strikes became as routine as collective bargaining itself. Furthermore, the solidaristic movement-wide pattern bargaining of 1945-1946 had given way to a much looser system in which each union was on its own. Most studies showed that even by the early 1950s the affect of major patterns set by the UAW or the Steelworkers was fading. The idea of solidarity was reduced to one’s own union and one’s own “private welfare state.”

All of this produced the kind of consciousness, the “common sense,” thought to be the natural state of mind of workers and union members in the U.S. Neither class as an active concept nor any vision above the level of collective bargaining was a part of this consciousness for the vast majority. But the conditions that underlay the stability of this whole arrangement were beginning

to change by the mid-1960s.

Fragmented Rank and File Rebellion

By most accounts U.S. capitalism's rate of profit began to fall (or fall more rapidly) around the middle of the 1960s. Production actually accelerated at first due largely to the War in Vietnam. Whereas industrial production had risen by about 50% from 1953 through 1963, from 1963 through 1973 it rose by 68%. Nevertheless, the falling rate of profit that corporations were beginning to experience more severely brought on both inflation and a push for increased productivity across much of industry. Inflation and speed-up, in turn, brought forth a new period of increased resistance and rebellion within industry.

While we tend to think of the 1960s and early 1970s as the era of the mass anti-war and "new" social movements, it was also one of considerable labor unrest. Millions of public sector workers poured into unions and for a moment, on the eve of Martin Luther King's assassination, it looked as though the labor and civil rights movement might converge. The new Black Power consciousness of the late 1960's found expression in auto assembly plants and steel foundries as well as in rebellious communities.

At the same time, the number of workers involved in strikes rose steadily from just under a million in 1965 to 2.5 million in 1971. A growing number of these strikes were wildcat strikes in violation of the contracts and against the will of the now entrenched and routinized leaderships. The strikes were typically against speed-up and other management practices, but just as Dobbs had pointed out in the 1930s, the union bureaucracy—now a much bigger target—stood in the line of fire. Once again, rank and file rebellion was on the agenda. In the wake of these strikes came several rank and file based organizations such as the Teamsters United Rank & File, Miners for Democracy, and the United National Caucus in the UAW. In addition, Black caucuses spread across the auto and steel industries, of which the most famous is the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). The connection of DRUM and some other Black caucuses with both Marxism and revolutionary nationalism was direct, but the exception. While leftists played a role in many of these new rank and file movements, there was no significant organized left in the unions in this period.

The organized left of this period was largely student-based and focused on the anti-war and social movements. While these movements also had an impact on the working class in various ways, the socialist left, except for Black radical groups like the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers, paid little attention to this rising tide of rank and file rebellion. Yet, the rebellion became highly visible as strikes swept the coal fields in the late 1960s, when national wildcats broke out among postal workers and Teamsters in 1970, when the Lordstown GM plant became the focus of national attention for the militancy of its young workforce, when 40,000 telephone workers in New York State struck against Nixon's wage freeze for seven months in 1971-72; and when the Miners For Democracy overturned a corrupt and murderous leadership in 1972 and reshaped the United Mine Workers.[25]

The absence of a well-organized socialist left in most of these movements meant that the fragmented consciousness inherited from the modern business union practices of the post World War Two years, though challenged by action, was not displaced with a broader class consciousness or significant movement toward independent working class politics. Even the more visible rank and file organizations had little contact with one another. They fought their battles with their employers largely within the spheres of their own "private welfare states." Furthermore, they fought from a position of assumed job security, while the new militancy kept real wages ahead of inflation for most groups. As noted above, the economy was growing fast and the impact of falling profit rates on the economy as yet marginal. The "common sense" of the period had been challenged by the actions taken by millions of workers, as well as by the anti-war and social movements. But there was no socialist left within the working class, nor even a left focused on workers' struggles, that was big enough to bring these strands together.[26]

The 1974-75 recession, the deepest since the Great Depression, brought the militancy to an end and wildcat strikes virtually disappeared. Some rank and file movements lasted past this turning point and the Teamsters for a Democratic Union was actually born in 1976, but the militancy and sense of confidence that made this period of rank and file rebellion possible and gave it its particular character was swept away as a new era of economic turbulence took shape. The

fragmented consciousness encouraged by modern business unionism not only survived, but was now reinforced by a sense of economic insecurity across the class that allowed the bureaucracy to re-impose its authority and to open a new period of retreat and concessions bargaining in the 1980s.

The Rank & File Perspective: A Contemporary Synthesis

If the fact of and the reality and importance of rank and file movements and rebellions is clear, the relationship of socialists to these is still not clear. There have been three different problems rank and file movements of the 20th century confronted. The first was a party-controlled attempt to provide a program and class wide framework in the early 1920s through the TUEL. This had a promising start but came to grief largely as a result of the CP's control, on the one hand, and its erratic politics, on the other. Party control meant that no independent, growing leadership was developed that would give the movement the strength to replace the business union leadership.

The second was the industrial upheaval of the 1930s. Here the major left organization, the CP, pushed an alliance with the CIO bureaucracy, or what they imagined to be its "progressive" wing, as well as with the Roosevelt Administration. This meant permeation where possible, but also a certain passivity toward the bureaucracy by rank and file CPers. This crippled the possibility of independent rank and file organization in most CIO unions, and meant the substitution of the party for an intermediate or transitional cross-union organization. Under these circumstances, the CIO bureaucracy and those of its affiliates were able to gain or maintain control, close down the rough and tumble democracy of the first decade or so of the CIO, and then expel their Communist allies.

The third was the rank and file rebellion of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The many actions and organizations of this period had very little contact with one another, let alone cross-union organization or a shared view of the changes needed to beat the speed-up and inflation of the period. This rebellion, while exemplary of the self-activity and power of the working class in many ways, was hurt by the almost total absence of a political left or socialist wing within the movement. It remained the captive of the narrow consciousness of modern business unionism.

Drawing on the lessons of these major periods of class activity and rank and file rebellion, we need a synthesis in which socialists play a leading role in these rebellions without subjecting them to the control of any "party" or socialist organization. At its most basic, this leadership means confronting the bureaucracy within the unions and its policies by focusing on the fight with the employers over real conditions on the job and in society. This leadership role also draws on the concept of transitional politics to provide a bridge from today's consciousness to deeper and wider forms of class consciousness and organization. This requires some institutional or organizational means of bringing a class-wide perspective to the various rank and file groups in order to transcend the fragmented consciousness encouraged by the "private welfare states" and the intensified competition that increased international economic integration has brought. This would include cross-union formations, community-based worker organizations such as workers centers, and steps toward active class politics.

While the pressures of capital on working class life are always present, there are obviously times when such a perspective offers greater possibilities. The rest of the pamphlet will argue that today's unfolding conditions do offer such possibilities, that rank and file rebellions are a common contemporary response to the realities of changing conditions and bureaucratic inertia, and that there are specific things that socialists and socialist organizations can do to maximize the potential of the period and to minimize the gap between convinced socialists and the majority of worker activists.

The Roots of a New Revolt

The closing of the twentieth century seemed to bring a resurgent hegemony to North American capital in the post-Cold War world economy. Every crisis appeared as an opportunity for the United States and its leading transnational corporations to break down barriers to its accumulation goals and impose new political/economic structures and relations that enforced its new advances. From the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement to the new World Trade Organization, from the "Drug War" on Latin America to the criminal bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia, no force seemed able to counter U.S. power. The recurrent economic crises of Latin America, the financial collapse in East Asia, and the overall meltdown of Russia all provided

opportunities for North American capital to extend its already massive global reach. Despite the circus around Bill Clinton's scandalized presidency, big business could rest assured that the same center-right political consensus that had ruled in Washington for years was intact no matter the President's fate or which major party sat in Congress or the White House.

But the 1990s' apparent deepening of U.S. economic and political hegemony was not a rerun of its post-World War Two rise to dominance. Two major changes in the world made this renewed surge of U.S. power far more fragile than the period of growth experienced by the United States and other major industrial nations in the quarter of a century after the end of World War Two. The first was that neoliberalism, the policy of most of the world's governments, stopped working, both as a political phenomenon and as a stabilizing force for capitalism. The economic turmoil in East Asia and, above all, the prolonged and seemingly irreversible stagnation of Japan's formerly powerhouse economy were the certain signs that any hope for global stability was fading as fast as the century itself.

The symbol of neoliberalism's crisis as a political movement was the return, in the last few years, of significant opposition, primarily from the working class and proletarianized peasantry across much of the world. Mass strikes in opposition to neoliberal policies and their consequences erupted across the globe. The similarity of these mass actions in such diverse settings as Zimbabwe, Colombia, France, Greece, Russia, South Korea, Canada, and many more reminds us that while a majority of those who toil in capital's uneven global system remain outside the formal relations of wage labor, the working class has continued to grow on a world scale. Indeed, even by the narrowest measure, that of industrial workers, the industrialized OECD countries, where industrial decline and downsizing was widespread, saw a slight growth from 112 million in 1973 to 115 million in 1994. In the economic South, including the former Communist countries, the industrial workforce has risen from 285 million in 1980 to 407 million in 1994. Organized labor movements that were repressed in the 1960s and 1970s, arose again or for the first time in much of the Third World, as well as southern Europe. Fascism was overthrown in Greece, Portugal, and Spain and unions emerged and were legalized again. By the late 1990s, these movements, new and old, were expressing their opposition to the crushing impact of nearly two decades of neoliberalism.

The second difference in North American capitalism's fin de siècle resurgence is that, unlike the post-World War Two boom where American living standards rose on average, this expansion of U.S. corporate power has seen the living standards of the vast majority sink for twenty years. Indeed, Wall Street insider Stephen Roach calls the U.S. economic expansion of the 1990s a "labor crunch recovery." In 1998, for example, the real wages of those who work for wages and salaries in the U.S. remained 12% below their 1979 level. This general decline has been accompanied by a sharp division between the bottom three-quarters of the population whose incomes have fallen and the top quarter whose incomes have risen. The higher one goes, furthermore, the greater the increase in income and wealth. Income measures, however, only scratch the surface of what the majority of the working class has experienced in the last two decades. While there have been no mass or general strikes in the U.S. in recent years, the return of high profile class struggle is now apparent and the reasons for it clear. Far from providing the material basis for the continued loyalty and ideological submission of the working class majority, the new power of North American capital is purchased in part by the increased degradation in working and living conditions of the vast majority within the U.S.

One aspect of this change was the profound workplace and labor market reorganization associated with "lean production." The promised brave new co-managed workplace of the future turned into a top-down, well-lit Satanic mill. Whether you worked in a hospital or an auto plant, a post office or post-industrial techno-office, more than likely your job was worse than it was a decade ago—if you were lucky to have one that long. Whether or not it is decorated with the trimming of employee participation, TQM, or the like, it was certainly more stressful, probably harder, and definitely more dangerous by the 1990s. U.S. injury and illness rates in the first half of the 1990s were running anywhere from 9% to 100% higher than in the first half of the 1980s measured by the number of cases reported. Contributing to this rise in occupational illness and injury are changing work time patterns. Full-time manufacturing workers were putting in more overtime, while millions were becoming part of the precarious workforce that fills the country's growing number of part-time, temporary, or casual jobs.

The monthly figures published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics put the number of "part-timers" (those

working less than 35 hours a week) at 21 million in mid-1997, or about 18.4% of the workforce, up from 16.6% in 1975. But including those in the 35-40-hour range, over 38 million people actually work less than 40 hours a week, while an uncounted number of “part-timers” earning part-time pay work 40 or more hours week-in and week-out. More startling is the growth of temporary workers. Those who work out of “personnel supply agencies” have grown from 640,000 in 1987 to over 3 million in mid-1999. An undocumented additional number of temps work directly for a growing variety of firms. A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute puts the total proportion of “nonstandard” jobs at 29.4% of the workforce, 34.4% for women workers—figures that adjust for the overlap of part-time, temporary, and contract work. With the arrival of “modular” production at the end of the 1990s, which emphasizes outsourcing and sub contracting even more than its “lean” predecessor, still more full-time and well paid jobs will be turned in for temporary and/or lower wage jobs.

All of this has not gone unnoticed by the majority that compose both the shrinking middle-income and growing lower-income working class—and they are angry. Whatever glow may have accompanied the early days of labor-management partnership or workplace participation faded rapidly for many workers, as their jobs were cut and/or intensified to boost profits, stock prices, and top salaries. Contesting with this anger and disillusionment, however, is fear of job loss by the same forces: downsizing, outsourcing, facility closures, or scab herding. As a Multinational Monitor editorial put it recently, “A ruthless employer class blends these multiple sources of job insecurity into a whole greater than the parts.”

The other side of the downsized coin, however, is work intensification. If no one with power listened to the workers who complained about this, at least a few ears perked up when Wall Street insider Stephen Roach wrote in the Wall Street Journal, “the so-called productivity resurgence of recent years has been on the back of slash-and-burn restructuring strategies that have put extraordinary pressures on the workforce.” Roach predicted a “worker backlash.”

There comes a point, after all, when the pressures and inevitable indignities of intensified exploitation outweigh the fear of job loss, as it did in the Great Depression. As Marta Ojeda, director of the U.S.-

Mexico-border-based Committee for Justice in the Maquiladora’s put it eloquently at the 1997 Labor Notes conference in Detroit, “The hunger is stronger than the fear—hunger for justice, not only for food.” First one group, then another tests the waters and open conflict returns to labor relations—despite the trimmings of company unionism or labor-management cooperation schemes. That is the meaning of the bitter strikes of the last few years in the U.S. Some lose, as at Caterpillar and A.E. Staley. Some are more or less draws, like that at Wheeling-Pittsburgh. Others win something, as at UPS in 1997, at several telecommunications companies in 1998, in the seventeen local GM strikes of the last two-and-a-half years, the brief strike at Dunlop, the 69-day Boeing strike, the week-long general strike of Oregon state employees, the on-again-off-again strike at Yale University, and the 54-day confrontational struggle at WCI Steel in Warren, Ohio.

Then there are the massive strikes of immigrant and Latino workers on the West Coast: janitors, dry-wallers, and carpenters in Los Angeles; waterfront truckers in LA and Seattle; and in the last days of the twentieth century casualized waterfront workers in Southern California. To these should be added the struggle to organize 20,000 strawberry pickers in California, the smaller number of apple pickers and processors in Washington state, and those harvesting cucumbers in North Carolina. These and similar struggles of immigrant and Latino workers around the country also point to something new—the rise of Latinos not only in the workforce, but in the unions. While union membership overall continued to decline from 1992 through 1996, the number of Latino union members grew by 12%.

Thus, in the long economic expansion of the 1990s militancy returned to many sections of the U.S. working class. What arose, however, was not the old rhythm of U.S. collective bargaining, with a large number of relatively short, conventional strikes aimed at winning wage and benefit improvements. The strikes and struggles of the 1990s were largely defensive in nature, often very long and bitter, mostly focused on workplace and labor market changes, and increasingly “political,” in the sense that they made demands that all workers could identify with (sometimes deliberately), and thus struck a sympathetic chord in the working class public and often appealed directly for broader support. The Staley, Detroit Newspapers, and UPS strikes all did this, and the 1998 GM and telecommunications strikes also garnered majority public sympathy.

The strikes of the last few years revealed the contradictions of business unionism and its limitations in today's world economy. They also often showed the new power that many organized workers have. Strikes at Staley, Caterpillar, and the Detroit Newspapers were lost partly because local or national leaders pulled their punches or even helped derail the strike. (It is impressive that the struggle against the newspapers continued despite this, with an impressive core of activist resisters.) At General Motors in 1998, where it was clear that the union had enormous power to shut the company down, national leaders refused to use the strike to make serious gains at the national or even local levels. Instead, they settled for small, often reversible, gains that didn't resolve the bigger problems of outsourcing and downsizing. Where some important things were won, as in telecommunications, it was largely because new tactics, member mobilization, and public outreach were deployed.

In 1995 a significant change occurred in the leadership of the AFL-CIO. Throughout the 1990s, rank and file rebellions occurred in many unions, and took power for a time in the 1.4 million-member Teamsters. There would be major setbacks to these gains, but it was clear that union politics were changing as the new century approached.

Internal Union Dynamics

Most of this new consciousness and militancy comes from the activist layer of the unions. These are workers, workplace representatives, and local level union officials who keep U.S. unions going from day to day. They work between the upper layer of career officials and staffers, on the one hand, and the majority of members on the other. Some are full-time, paid officials, many are not. They are forced to confront the reality of the workplace, as opposed to its ideology, whether or not they accept this current partnership ideology in whole or part. A significant minority of this layer, however, rejects the labor-management ethos that comes from employers and career union officials alike. It is in this layer that the return of resistance has gathered the greatest force and, now and then, breaks through the passivity of the members and the backward-looking immobility of the top officials.

The activists and the top leaders are often at odds over how to respond to the changing workplace and labor market. Unlike in some European countries and at past

times in the U.S. there is only one labor federation. There is no division by political loyalty: socialist, Communist, Christian. Differences in direction or political outlook must be expressed within a union that has sole representation rights in its bargaining unit. In addition, most unions in the U.S. have developed bureaucratic structures beyond the reach of labor leaders in much of the world. So, political conflict tends to take an almost sociological character: ranks versus bureaucrats. The forms of this clash may be many. Pressure from the activist layer to act is one, a major factor in the GM and Boeing strikes. Another is turnover at the top. The Association for Union Democracy (AUD) estimated that about a dozen union presidents were ousted in contested elections from the late 1980s through the 1991 victory of Ron Carey.

The ferment continued into the 1990s. Labor democracy attorney Paul Levy summarized it in a speech to the National Lawyers Guild in the Fall of 1996 when he said:

There is extensive intra-union activity in a large number of national unions, much more than ever before. In service unions such as the Food and Commercial Workers, the Service Employees and the Hotel Workers, construction unions such as the IBEW (Electricians) or the Bricklayers and the Carpenters and the Laborers, government unions like the Letter Carriers, the AFGE (Federal Employees) and the Treasury Employees, industrial unions like the Machinists and the Auto Workers.

To this list of challenges in national unions can be added similar movements in large local unions such as the New Directions caucus in the 30,000-member Transport Workers Union Local 100 in New York's transit system, the Caucus for a Democratic Union in the California State Employees/SEIU Local 1000 that has twice won control of this 40,000 member union, the successful rebellion in Atlanta's transit union, or the reform group in the similarly large union of New York City janitors and doormen, SEIU Local 32J/32B—John Sweeney's home local. Even the famous Justice for Janitors local union, SEIU 399 in Los Angeles, saw a massive opposition movement of Latino and African American workers, called the Multiracial Alliance, replace the old guard executive committee—only to be placed in trusteeship by John Sweeney who was still SEIU president at that time. The split of the militant California Nurses Association from the more conservative American Nurses Association in 1996 represents another form of

rebellion from below. Recently formed local opposition caucuses, as opposed to traditional caucuses of the “in” and the “out” opportunist union politicians, have appeared in unions as diverse as the Auto Workers, Steelworkers, Teachers, Hotel Employees, Carpenters, and the IBEW.

Nowhere was the challenge from below more successful or the process of union reform deeper than in the Teamsters. It seemed as if the reelection of Ron Carey over Jimmy Hoffa “Junior” in 1996 not only spelled the end of the corrupt old guard, but it opened a new phase of transformation. As Ken Paff of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) explained, “We won the political battle over the value of a clean, democratic union. Hoffa had to adopt our program and promise to do even better at it. But we have not yet won the battle over the need for a new kind of union that derives its power from a mobilized and involved membership.”

The dynamics of the Teamster revolution, as many TDUs call it, had brought TDU a long way from 15 years in the wilderness as a clear-cut opposition to five years on the front lines defending the reform regime and defeating the old guard. Now the most difficult question of all was posed: how to go beyond the norms of “clean” American business unionism? For most activists, the key to anything new was an informed, activated membership. Whether speaking of winning a strike at UPS, organizing the unorganized, or building broader coalitions for bigger social goals, success would depend on mobilizing the tens of thousands of workers on whom the real power of the union rests.

This dynamic suffered a serious setback when outside consultants hired by the 1996 Carey campaign organization along with the union’s political director were caught in a illegal scam to direct union money into the campaign coffers. Carey was disqualified from the election and eventually expelled even though it was never proven that he was directly involved. In the wake of this turn of events, the union reform coalition around Carey fell apart. It took months for the TDU-backed union reform movement to pull itself together. The slate that it ran in the 1998 election rerun reflected the thinking of those prepared to go well beyond “clean business unionism.” But its presidential candidate, Tom Leedham, was not well known and had only six months to campaign. Furthermore, the union members were made cynical by the allegations against Carey; voter turnout, at 28%, was no higher than in the Teamsters’

first election, in 1991. The old guard candidate, Jimmy Hoffa, son of the famous Teamster leader of the 1960s, had campaigned for four years and had the best known name in the union. He won by 54%.

The central role of TDU in both the reform movement and the UPS strike was no fluke. It survives the Hoffa victory. It exploded in 1999 in the strike by 1,000 immigrant meatpacking workers at IBP’s plant in Pasco, Washington. Here, TDU leader Maria Martinez was elected chief shop steward. Opposed by the old guard white leadership, the TDU-led coalition fought the intolerable working conditions in the plant and eventually forced a strike. The spirit of rebellion could also be seen at Anheuser-Busch, where members repeatedly rejected deals pushed on them by old guard leaders and the Hoffa-led International.

While the TDU-backed rank and file movement will have to fight to regain leadership over the union, the question that faces the Teamster reformers is essentially the same question that faces the entire labor movement: what kind of unions, what kind of movement can be built that is adequate to the challenges of corporate power, international competition, and the dominance of conservative politics.

Many of today’s struggles have taken a certain political character. As we noted, the UPS strike captured the attention and support of the working class public. Many of the struggles mentioned above, brought the state into action on the side of the employers—a fact that politicized many union activists. The struggle of members of the Transport Workers Union Local 100 in New York City’s transit system illustrates another way in which “simple” union-employer conflict turns political. The fight for a new contract in late 1999 became a four-way conflict. The simple negotiating process between the union and the Transit Authority would never have taken center stage in New York as the holidays approached if it had not been for the New Directions caucus in Local 100.

New Directions began back in the 1980s as a small dissident newsletter called Hell on Wheels. By the late 1990s, it was a powerful movement that controlled about 40% of the executive board of this 35,000-member local union and dominated the subway division. It’s candidate for president of the local had come within a few hundred votes of winning in 1998. As during past contracts it conducted its own contract campaign.

The size and influence of the organization by this time, however, meant it played a significant role in the now complex negotiations. Reacting to the fear that New Directions would push the union into a crippling strike in late December, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani entered the fray by getting a court injunction not only against a strike, which was illegal in any case, but against the use of the word strike by any union member. The daily press in New York carried endless stories highlighting both Giuliani and New Directions leader Tim Schermerhorn.

New Directions had become more than a powerful rank and file movement, it was the center of city politics for a time. The main reason was that the transit contract was the first in a series of labor contracts for the city's tens of thousands of employees. For these union city workers, New Directions played the role that the UPS strike had for the country. Indeed, rank and file caucus activists from several of the city's public sector unions had formed a coalition and met together for some time. Giuliani, who actually has no part in the negotiation with the Transit Authority, panicked at the idea of a series of struggle in which the outcome was an accelerating city payroll—not to mention a re-energized labor movement. A genuine class against class conflict was taking shape.

The Tasks of Socialists in Today's Resistance and Rebellion

Thinking about the tasks of socialists in today's United States can be overwhelming. From Reagan through Clinton, the U.S. government has been able to launch an endless series of high-speed wars that deny us the time to organize effective opposition. The racist politics of prisons and punishment have reached such tidal proportions they, too, seem to laugh at opponents. The growth of poverty, the servitude of workfare; the threat of ecological disaster; and the seemingly unstoppable drift of mainstream politics to the right all taunt the left and tempt it to do everything at once.

To be sure, there are good signs as well. Not only rebellion in the workplace and unions, but a proliferation of community-based worker organizations, the rise of cross-union campaigns and organizations, and a new generation of student and youth activists taking on sweatshops, "free trade," and many other important issues. All of these and more came together in Seattle at the end of November 1999 to stake out their place in the global political landscape. Here and there,

there are victories. But the basic problem remains one of power. The multinational corporations and the politicians they so generously fund (and, of course, the state and multilateral institutions they direct) have a lot of it and we don't.

This brings us right back to where we started, right back to Karl Marx and the working class. Marx didn't look to the working class because of some supposed moral superiority, the clarity of their ideas at any particular moment, or the infinite effectiveness of their trade unions. We have already argued that these things can be as absent among workers as individuals as among members of any other class. No, Marx looked to this class because in capitalist society they were the only other class, besides the bourgeoisie, who had the potential power to change things. Their power flowed from their position in the economy and from their numbers. "Ye are many, they are few," as the poet Shelley put it. More than that, this class has the power to create society's wealth and, acting as a class, to bring society and its production to a halt. "Without our brain and muscle not a single wheel would turn," the Wobblies sang. We might add: "not an inch of fiber optic cable laid, no just-in-time delivery made, not a whole ball season played." You get the picture.

The problem has always been organizing that power and giving it conscious expression for a common purpose. What is being argued here is that there is already a starting point in the form of the rank and file resistance and rebellions, community-based organizations, and transitional formations discussed above. While socialists can and do play an important role in building and providing direction for such movement, they don't have to invent them. The existence of the organizations, networks, projects and activists that make up this rebellion and resistance, of course, do not solve the problems of power, or rather the left's lack of it, immediately. This is a long range, multi-faceted strategy. It is a perspective that requires a division of labor, for which reason it is most effectively conducted by organized socialists even though there is plenty for individuals to do. It is a strategy that focused primarily, though not exclusively, on the unions, so it follows that most of those carrying it out will be union members, although there are roles for those not in unions.

In summary, the tasks of socialists in the labor movement include:

1. Building the rank and file movements and organizations that are fighting for a more effective, democratic, and inclusive union in the context of the main fight with the bosses—the Farrell Dobbs approach of letting the bureaucratic old guard get caught in the cross fire. Realistically, however, the bureaucracy is far more omnipresent and in the way these days than in the early 1930s, so that there is no hope of avoiding internal union conflict if any progress is to be made. People are compelled into struggle by real conditions and these are mostly shaped by capital and its endless attempt to regain or improve profitability. These efforts to increase exploitation impact in all areas of working life including the different position of white and Black, men and women in the workforce and the union. We build these rank and file groups, acts of resistance, and movements on their own terms, but offer an analysis of the roots of the problem and a bigger vision of how to address them when appropriate. We call this social movement unionism: a unionism that is democratic, acts like a movement and not just an institution, and reaches out to other working class and oppressed people to build a mass movement for change.
 2. Building the growing number of cross-union, hence by implication class-wide, transitional organizations, publications, and projects that help provide a broader class vision for the work within the unions and direct links between activists in different unions and industries. These include both union-backed and explicitly oppositional groups. Among them are Labor Notes, Association for Union Democracy, Jobs with Justice, strike support campaigns, and single and social issue campaigns where relevant. The on-going organizations and projects, in particular, provide opportunities to raise transitional ideas like shorter work time as well as a living demonstration of aspects of social movement unionism.
 3. Building and allying with community-based working class organizations. We have mentioned workers center as important, but others like the environmental justice movement based mainly in communities of color are also important. The significance of these organizations is both that they bring to the overall movement sections of the working class, mostly people of color, not in unions. Like rank and file movements, these organizations and campaigns train working class leaders and activists needed to enhance the power of all working people and to deepen the reach of the broader labor movement we seek.
 4. Building active international workers' solidarity. There are a growing number of opportunities to build direct links between workers in different countries as well as engage in solidarity actions at home. The Transnationals Information Exchange, the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, Labor Notes, the U.S./ Labor Education in the Americas Project, and other groups make worker-to-worker contacts to foster internationalism.
 5. Building alternative class-based politics. This would include working in and building the Labor Party, local independent campaigns with a working class base and politics, and efforts like the living wage campaigns that promote transitional class politics. Through these efforts transitional ideas such as national health care gain legitimacy and can be brought back into our daily work in appropriate ways.
 6. Building socialist organization that relates to all of these levels of working class activity as well as promoting and acting on a broader socialist politics covering the entire range of social, economic, and political issues. To the degree that a significant portion of the members of the socialist organization are involved in one or more of the first four areas of activity, the organization will have the roots in the life of the activist layer of the organized working class that lay the basis for bigger developments as events unfold. To the extent that others of its members are involved in the whole range of issues and politics, they can enrich the vision and analysis of the labor activists. Overall, socialist organization also makes possible the coordinated division of labor of its activists that is essential to the rank and file strategy. It is also the organization that carries the transitional ideas to their socialist conclusions; the organization that makes and trains socialists.
- Each of these points begins with the word “building” because the kind of socialist politics we are talking about involves building movements, struggles, and organizations that can make a difference. Explicitly

socialist education and political work must be done in connection with such work in the world of the working class. It must be done in a nonsectarian manner in which socialists from different groups work together where they agree, along with union and community activists who haven't yet drawn socialist conclusions.

Solidarity, as a revolutionary socialist organization, attempts to follow these prescriptions in its labor work as well as in other areas of political activity. We are a multi-tendency organization with a wide range of views on many questions, including the rank and file strategy. We are a "work in progress" that recognizes that the road to the type of mass democratic revolutionary socialist party (or parties) needed to end the disastrous rule of capital and usher in the rule of the working class is still a long one. While we don't claim to have the road map, we do claim to have a compass. It points to the working class and the means to expand and deepen class consciousness and organization in such a way as to make socialist ideas credible in American society. This route leads first to the active rank and file of the unions and the struggles they are engaged in. If we carry out this rank and file strategy intelligently, if we can win large numbers of leftists and union activists to this strategy, and if socialism becomes the outlook of more and more of these activists, we can put socialism back on the political agenda in the United States.

Notes

1. Solidarity, December 1996, United Automobile Workers, p. 5.

2. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1978, pp 91-92.

3. quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin, Volume I: Building the Party*, Pluto Press, 1975, pp. 79-80.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 419.

5. The particularly rapacious nature of U.S. capitalism stems in part from its origins in English capitalism. As Ellen Wood argues in *The Origins of Capitalism*

(*Monthly Review*, 1999) in the 17th and 18th century England was still the only country with a truly integrated national market based on competition and accumulation. Its trade and colonial systems, unlike those of France and Spain, ran on capitalist principles of expansion, economic compulsion, and agrarian "improvement," i.e., productivity. It was John Locke who, in the 17th century, provided the capitalist rationale for expropriating Native American lands in the name of "improvement," basically the same as that for the land enclosures within England. The distinctly un-English rough and tumble culture of the U.S. flows in part from the decidedly "English" nature of its continental expansion from the 17th century through the 19th, unmitigated by the direct rule of England's highly centralized state even in colonial times.

6. For this point I am indebted to Deborah Simmons, whose "After Chiapas: Aboriginal Land and Resistance in the New North America," brought this point home to me.

7. Jacqualine Jones, *American Work*.

8. Frederick Engels, "Preface to the American edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, January 26, 1887, in Kenneth Lapides (ed.), *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions*, International Publishers, New York, 1990, p. 141.

9. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, South End Press, Boston, 1997, passim.

10. Sidney Lens, *Left, Right, and Center: Conflicting Forces in American Labor*, Henry Regnery Company, Hinsdale, Illinois, 1947, p. 33.

11. Labor's first major political effort in the 1870s and 1880s was the disgraceful campaign for state and national legislation excluding Asian workers from the U.S. This occurred prior to the formulation of the AFL, but was supported by most of the unions that would join it and by the otherwise egalitarian Knights of Labor.

12. Thomas R. Brooks, *Toil and Trouble: A History of American Labor*, Delta Books, 1965, p. 97.

13. Brooks, *ibid.*, p. 133.

14. James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party*, Pluto Press, London, 1975, pp. 10, 23.
15. Philip S. Foner, *The History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, Vol. 9, International Publishers, New York, 1991, p. 323.
16. James R. Barrett, "Boring from Within and Without," in Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie (eds.), *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working Class Experience*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1998, pp. 315-316.
17. Their success in the amalgamation campaign and the labor party movement contrasted, according to the historian Philip Foner, with their general failure in the fight for racial inclusion and equality. Foner, *op. cit.*, p. 338.
18. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
19. Lens, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
20. Leon Trotsky, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, Pioneer Publishers, New York, 1964, p. 9.
21. Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, Monad Press, New York, 1972, pp. 41-43.
22. Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, Monad Press, New York, 1973, p. 24.
23. Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1982, p. 51.
24. quoted in Roger Horowitz, *Negro and White Unite: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-1990*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1997, p. 143.
25. An account of this period can be found in Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism*, Verso, London and New York, 1998. For a somewhat different view of this period see Glenn Perusek and Kent Worcester, *Trade Union Politics: American Unions and Economic Change, 1960s-1990s*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1995.
26. An exception was the Independent Socialist Clubs, which became the International Socialists (IS) in 1970, whose members chronicled the events of that period and played a role in some rank and file movements. The IS was one of the groups, along with Workers Power and Socialist Unity, who founded Solidarity in 1986. The Sojourner Truth Organization and some Maoist groups also had a small presence in the working class towards the end of this period.

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