



PERSPECTIVES ON LABOR

by Los Angeles Branch

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I. The Nature of the Period

The current period is overwhelmingly dominated by 2 developments. (1) First, the capitalist crisis -- a crisis of profitability, productivity, investment -- which began to become evident around 1970, shows no sign of abating, but is in fact deepening. The result has been an ever-sharpening offensive by the employers against all sections of the working class to offset their declining returns.

(2) The highly organized sectors of the class, in the trade unions, have up till now been able to mount relatively little, and mostly ineffective, resistance. These two developments -- the employers' offensive cutting into the standard of living of the entire class and the relative inability of the class to fight back -- color the entire political scene, extending far beyond the shop floor.

II. Why the Weakness of Workers Resistance?

The ineffectiveness of workers resistance is explained by the near total lack of preparedness, in either organizational or political terms, of the rank & file in the face of the sudden appearance of the new conditions of the employers' offensive. Certain forms of struggle and organization seemed to serve the organized working class reasonably well during the post war era of prosperity, and they came to depend on these forms. But in a short space of time, these forms have become inadequate to maintain the working conditions, standard of living, even their basic organizations of defense, their trade unions.

For a whole period, with class struggle at a low ebb, it seemed to the large sections of the organized working class that a certain relationship to their union and a certain relationship to their employers at the level of the shop floor were adequate to insure a continuing improvement in their standard of living. In this period, therefore, class struggle and working class organization and struggle took a two-pronged character:

(1) On the one hand, the rank & file allowed (or was forced to allow) the labor bureaucracy to take care of the national bargaining for wages and fringe benefits. During the capitalist prosperity of the late '40s through the early '60s, the bureaucracy seemed able to deliver the goods, and the organized working class came to rely on the bureaucracy at every level.

(2) On the other hand, the bureaucracy gave power over the production process to the capitalists, rule over the shop floor. For this reason, organized resistance by the rank & file tended to take the form of opposition to deteriorating conditions (technological change, speed up) at the immediate shop floor level -- but rarely beyond this. Again, the immediate shop floor struggle -- the various forms of guerilla warfare at the level of the shop, including small scale sabotage, slowdowns, shoddy work, often organized by small work groups -- seemed to function at least passably well to prevent a collapse in working conditions.

Therefore, for most workers, the self-organization of the rank & file did not extend beyond the shop. Insofar as there were regional or national struggles, classically over the contracts, these were tightly controlled by the bureaucracy. This was the meaning of class struggle for a whole generation.

But these forms of organization and struggle have become increasingly inadequate in the face of the accelerating offensive of the employers.

First, throughout the 1970s, the bureaucracy has by and large caved in to the demands of the capitalists. This was to be expected. For the bureaucracy, as a distinct layer, indeed a relatively self-conscious layer, cut off from the working class, accepts the capitalist system. It understands that for the economy to function prosperously (and for the workers to benefit, ultimately) profits must be restored to the capitalists. ("What's good for GM is good for America.") Therefore, they will not take actions which seriously threaten capitalist profitability. Indeed, up until now, the bureaucracy, as a whole, has seen, as its most important priority, the restoration of capitalist profits, and throughout the '70s in industry after industry has consciously and directly collaborated with the capitalists in stopping workers resistance (see, e.g. auto, mines, teamsters, steel). The workers were long used to depending on the bureaucracy for leadership and organization beyond their immediate workplace, and have therefore been caught off guard.

Second, throughout the post-war period, and in accelerating fashion during the '70s, the capitalist class has reorganized itself, to sharply increase its flexibility over and against working class organization. This has occurred through the massive concentration of capital; through growing nationalization and internationalization of capitalism (runaway firms); through the growing technological sophistication (mechanization to destroy militant workforces, as in Longshore); the rise of anti-labor laws (Taft-Hartley, Landrum Griffin, recent Supreme Court rulings), and countless other ways. In the face of this reorganization, the old forms of struggle through which the workers organized themselves became increasingly ineffective. For these forms, again, were extremely localized, often confined to merely a section of a shop; they were dependent on relatively non-violent and relatively legal tactics; they required a minimum in political strategy (i.e. strategy concerning the class beyond the shop). Above all, the recent miners strike has shown in the most graphic terms that to stand up to the employers today requires, to an ever increasing extent, the most militant and illegal forms of struggle, the organizing of broad masses in combat, and the most political forms of organization which reach out not only beyond the shop but beyond the industry.

It needs to be emphasized that U.S. workers have not sat idly by while the employers have run over them with a truck... but rather that their readiness to fight has been impaired, and their actual fight has so far been unsuccessful because they lacked the ideological and organizational weapons. In particular, it needs to be emphasized that during the early '70s there was, in fact, a very significant response to the employers' offensive. The miners defied the NEP to win a 40% wage gain in 1971. The Longshoremen struck against Taft-Hartley in 1972. N. Y. Telephone workers wildcatted. Public workers waged battle after battle in the cities in these years.

Perhaps most significant, the auto workers -- at the heart of the economy -- fought bitterly in 1972 and 1973 against the imposition of the GMAD speed up system, a center piece of the employers' strategy. There were long and bitter strikes at Norwood, Lordstown, St. Louis. But GM was largely able to beat these back, especially through the flexibility of their production system, the ability to shift work from struck plants to working plants (in effect making some auto workers scab on others). Naturally, this fact did not escape the auto workers. There was a big push in 1972 to force the UAW top bureaucracy to call an all-GMAD strike, shutting down the whole system. This was a potential way to win. But the UAW bureaucrats were able to beat back this drive. The rank & file did not, on the other hand, have the organization to pull off such a strike

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themselves, as their organization beyond their own plants did not really exist...but depended upon the bureaucrats. Instead, Woodcock (head of the UAW) was able to smash the auto workers movement entirely. He called a series of "Apache strikes". These were strikes of 2-3 days only, held at different plants, on different weekends, announced to GM in advance, with a guarantee that they would not go on for more than the stated time. Naturally, their effect was merely to disperse the energies of the rank & file and undermine their morale. The bureaucrats delivered the coup de grace the following summer when now-UAW President Fraser sent 2000 paid UAW officials to smash a sitdown strike against deteriorating conditions at Chrysler's Mack Avenue plant. The defeat of the auto workers was a turning point...and, indeed, points up the vicious circle in which the mass of organized workers now find themselves.

III. Weakness at the Point of Production Has Led to Increasing Political Unpreparedness

The inability of the workers to successfully respond to the employers' offensive at the industrial level has tended, in turn, to undermine the workers' ideological resources (i. e. note the rise of a New Right base among workers). Most of the reforms of the '60s came through the expansion of state services. These were paid for by increased taxation of the working class. As long as wages were rising, taxes were at least tolerable. But with the onset of the capitalist crisis and the employers' success in increasing their share of the pie, the organized working class has often turned to protecting themselves at the expense of other sections of the class. If you can't get better wages, why not try to increase income through lowering taxes? Thus, sections of the organized working class have turned to "fiscal responsibility" -- cutting state services via cutting taxes -- as a way out.

But cutting taxes and the state sector is really a scarcely veiled attack on the worse off sections of the class, above all blacks, latins, women. The attack on preferential hiring (Bakke, Weber, etc.) to save jobs for white men is an even more blatant manifestation of the attempt of the better off sectors of the class, unable to attack the capitalists successfully, to defend themselves at the expense of the worse off. These racist and sexist policies thus have a material base. Inevitably, when people act in a racist and sexist manner, their ideological commitment to racist and sexist views of the world increases correspondingly. This poses a further barrier to the development of a successful fight back.

IV. Our Starting Point (No more than that): Militant Direct Action for Reforms/ Struggle Against Reformist Strategies

Now, in the long run, there is only one way to break out of this downward spiral: mass, direct action by the rank & file. This is because there is an indispensable connection between the actions people take and the ideas they can hold. The workers' dependence on bureaucratic leadership, their attachment to reformist politics, their increasing openness to right wing ideology, are all bound up with their apparent inability to struggle. There appears to be no alternative; they feel, appear powerless, especially powerless to change the system. So, the ideas of workers power which are at the center of our politics -- because we think they are indispensable for the workers to improve and transform their condition -- appear to most workers not so much wrong as impractical and unrealistic. To the workers, seeking small gains within the system (congressional reforms and the like) and letting the bureaucrats represent them seem eminently practical...and so does slashing the government budget with tax cuts...because they are so weak.

We understand, however, that reformist bureaucrats and reformist approaches, in the face of the employers' offensive, will not only get them nothing, but open the way to fascism; that, on the contrary, the only practical possibilities for them are the apparently utopian ideas of a rank & file movement independent of the bureaucracy, a mass revolutionary party, workers management of society. Thus, at a very general level we have a double task. First, we must unceasingly argue that reformist strategies and reformist leaderships (not, of course, the struggle for reforms) are an absolute dead end for the workers. Second, we must understand that we cannot get across these ideas to many workers unless we are able to struggle alongside them in explosive direct actions against the bosses and bureaucrats -- for only in such struggle will our ideas and strategies and organizational suggestions appear to make sense. So, mass work, organizing direct action, are indispensable to our work.

These basic ideas need to be repeated because they are so difficult, in this period, to operate in terms of; because they impose upon us in this period such a sobering perspective; and especially because, in the face of our difficulties, there is such a tremendous pressure to give up these ideas, or to see reality differently from the way it is. There is a relatively unbreakable connection between people's ability to accept class struggle ideas and their ability to engage in class struggle; if they cannot struggle, they usually cannot accept the ideas. Given the low level of struggle in this period, and given our own limited forces (indeed the limited forces of the entire left) to set off class struggle, this means that we will not have large numbers of opportunities to win large numbers of workers to our conceptions. It means that we will be to a large extent dependent on the small molecular changes now taking place within the class to lead to relatively explosive struggles -- a qualitative change in the pattern of class forces in a given area (or overall) -- in order to win people in struggle.

While attempting to set off new struggles, and attempting to position ourselves for the development of forces essentially beyond our control, there is no choice but patience and, in some areas, an emphasis on propaganda. Instead, however, the organization has avidly searched for shortcuts.

1. We see election campaign after union election campaign, in which the workers attempt to change their situation by getting in "more honest", real reformers. We know, or at least used to know, that this method has very great limitations indeed. Moreover, the resort to this method is in general in this period (not always) actually a substitute for doing what is necessary, building the workers' own self-organization. Workers turn to elections because they do not see they can do it for themselves and (therefore) believe (or want to) that others will do it for them. In this situation, there is every temptation (a) to avoid stating how limited is the electoral strategy, since we will be understood by only a relatively few people (in many, not all, arenas); (b) to actually begin to believe that this method can "work" -- that we (or the rank & file candidate, or the reformer) can take office and in this way get power; (c) to generalize from this to the idea that election campaigns -- nationally and locally -- are determining or can determine a real change in the balance of class forces, open a new era. Thus, we tended to overestimate what Sadlowski could or would do, especially in our press. In particular, last fall, at the time of the teamster local elections all over the country, the national leadership put forward the line of "going for power" -- giving the impression, and sometimes stating explicitly, that taking union office is getting power.

2. Similarly, we have seen the emergence of more sophisticated, ideologically "left" labor leaders on the scene, with more developed operations -- extending, e.g., beyond a single election campaign. We know, or at least used to know, that they (like we) see the enormous gap that has arisen between the reactionary bureaucratic machines and an angry, but so far disorganized, rank & file. They try to fill the vacuum with a better line (sometimes they subjectively mean it), but basically they use the same old methods of electoralism, substitutionism, reformism. Again, there is every pressure to (a) avoid stating what these reformers really are; (b) to actually believe that these new reform operations are different and can do things that we never previously thought electoral reformists could do; (c) to generalize from this to the idea that there is actually a new movement afoot. Thus, we have discovered a "new reform movement" (MFD, Sadlowski, Balanoff). We now systematically run together this reform movement with rank & file movements independent of the bureaucracy (like TDU); correspondingly, we have in fact given up our indispensable strategy of "critical support" to relate to the reformers.

3. Finally, we hear the big bureaucrats beginning to talk about the class struggle. We know, or used to know, that this was just words. This was because they are wedded, in the most systematic way, to the capitalist system. They accept that capitalists must profit first, so that workers can prosper after. We used to know, moreover, that to cover themselves they did need to give the impression of taking the lead. For this reason they would look for every sort of possible "progressive" alliance and set up every possible progressive committee precisely in order to avoid, and to substitute for, the industrial struggle. These committees, of course, would be kept firmly under their thumb. We used to know, most importantly, that although it was important to participate in all sorts of committees which were controlled by the bureaucrats, we would usually have no hope but to use them to reach a small number of people with our political ideas ... and, in this way, to bring them outside the bureaucrats' framework. This was not only because of the strength of the bureaucrats administratively in these arenas, but because, in this period, there is not enough mass motion to be able to take over a bureaucratic initiative and use them for our own good. But now, we are told of a new "move to the left" from corporate liberalism to social democracy. We are saying that it is not just words, but a real ideological shift. We, moreover, are trumpeting the rebirth of coalition politics (the same tired old liberal coalitions), and announce that we will fill these old bottles, with our own militant rank & file action and ideas.

The point is a simple one. It is not that we should not participate in elections which we know will not bring changes in themselves; that we do not support "reformers"; or that we do not try to use the left talk of the bureaucrats. However, we do these things under 3 conditions: First, that we ourselves know that in themselves these are not "progressive" steps and will lead nowhere unless the rank & file gets itself organized. Second, that we say this to people we are working with, even if it means we have to concentrate on a tiny handful. Third, that we do not expect to make much impact until we can make class struggle -- something that is very often beyond the capability of our small forces, that requires changes beyond our control.

V. How to Intervene

Politicizing Our Interventions

All our interventions should have a double aspect: on the one hand, there is

strategy -- the necessary method or tactic which will take the struggle forward at a given point; on the other hand, there is the analysis, the interpretation of the world and the immediate situation, which explains the strategy, and fits it into the broader world of the party.

Ideally, we intervene in action, win people to our strategy for fighting, as they carry out the strategy, they are open to the world view, the analysis which was behind, which inspired it.

In this period, given the analysis sketched above, there are 3 key points of weakness in the working class we want to get across to try to overcome major weaknesses in the working class' response up to now: (1) need for rank & file organization, independent of the bureaucrats; (2) the need to extend the workers organization beyond the primary work groups and immediate shop floor organization to broader organizational forms, which can prepare to use more militant, more mass tactics; (3) the need for the rank & file to take the lead in struggling against the special oppression of blacks, latins, women, and other oppressed groups. The point is, these strategic points of departure obviously flow directly from our understanding of the economic crisis, the employers' offensive, and the imperatives this has imposed on the class. As a result, this entire analysis would constantly be brought forward in the course of our interventions (i.e. crisis, employers' offensive, why workers were previously unprepared).

The advantage of this period is that in more cases than in the past the workers, having experienced such big attacks and having seen the bureaucratic sell-outs, will understand on the basis of their own experience the correctness of our strategic ideas. A lot more has become very obvious. To this extent, we are better able to intervene successfully and especially to connect our intervention with our analysis and then to socialism and the party. (On the other hand -- and this is a big point -- there is tremendous cynicism and defeatism in the class, so that, in some areas, any sort of action will be difficult to promote, and thus our strategies and analysis will be difficult to get across.)

Agitation

Now, whether or not we can actually agitate, or must confine ourselves largely to propaganda, in either case, our interventions should include the foregoing elements: i.e. the presentation of a strategy necessary to break the current impasse and the analysis behind that. In this period, probably our most consistent opportunities to intervene in actual struggle against the employers will be in teamsters, and the organization's concentration on this area is quite correct. To intervene successfully, the presentation of a clear strategy is important. For, in this area, perhaps more than in others, the workers are angry and have not yet been defeated; the bureaucracy is rigid and far away; there is, therefore, a chance to fight, if teamsters can be shown there is a way to win in the face of increasingly well-organized and vicious company attacks.

Thus, in the case of the National Master Freight Contract of 1976 we were, on the basis of minimal forces, able to set off a mass movement. This was because our strategic proposal for broad organization (TDC) corresponded to the desire of teamsters to fight around the contract (the teamsters had not been defeated in the early '70s as had the

auto workers in the GMAD strikes, or the steel workers in the imposition of the ENA); and, to the need for national organization to fight the contract, which was not only "objective" but obvious to many teamsters; and to the understanding on the part of many teamsters that the bureaucrats would not lead.

In Los Angeles, we were able to accomplish an intervention similar to TDC, on a much smaller scale--in grocery. Here, a small number of TDUsers organized in grocery, from the start, on the basis of the platform that they needed allies to stand up to that monstrous corporation. As a result, the LA Safeway workers themselves organized a support petition when a strike broke out in grocery in Phoenix; went to Phoenix to get the strike spread to LA; and organized the LA end of the strike (a pure solidarity strike) in the teeth of opposition from all of the officials. Our leaflets and Grapevine editorials have, in this context, emphasized competitive pressure and profit squeeze on the companies and why they must try to screw the workers; the analysis of the bureaucracy, why they won't fight; the need for 1930s type struggles. We have, moreover, gone to great lengths to analyze the weaknesses which are now leading to the disaster in the Bay Area grocery strike (see last Grapevine editorial). We have, furthermore, written up a fairly large pamphlet on "The Lessons of the Grocery Struggle".

Teamsters is not, of course, the only place where there's action. But what is true about this period is that struggles tend to break out in the most unexpected places, and often where we have no people. It is therefore necessary to revive (as has been done in auto, e.g. around the Romeo strike) our strike support work, from the outside. This, however, cannot be done very well with our present numbers. But we can't grow unless we change our methods of recruitment, especially unless we broaden the sphere from which we recruit (for more on this see below).

Propaganda

Of course, even in teamsters there are some key aspects of our strategy which are not immediately actionable. This is especially the case with the special demands of the oppressed. Here, serious propaganda work is necessary. In the Bay Area TDU, a membership meeting discussed the current initiative of the right wing in California, the Briggs anti-gay proposition. Through this sort of discussion we can get across our conceptions of the meaning of the right wing attack. Similarly, meetings are scheduled to discuss affirmative action. This is a question which many teamsters can now see has special importance. Blacks were used systematically as scabs in the recent grocery strike, and some teamsters are beginning to see that unless they fight for the rights of blacks in the union, they cannot expect blacks to respect the needs of the union's struggles.

In Los Angeles, we have begun to raise the issue of undocumented workers in TDU, even though probably a majority of TDU members support their deportation at this point. Because of continuing Immigration Service raids on factories during union organizing drives, including the Teamsters', a small movement defending undocumented workers has grown up in LA. It has called demonstrations protesting the deportation of these workers to break up unionizing efforts. The union busting role of the Immigration Service gives us a good way to show that the teamsters cannot rely on the state to protect them...just the opposite. On the other hand, the role of undocumented workers in the unionization drive, which the teamsters do understand, shows the need to get protection for these workers. Unprotected, ununionized undocumented workers are now being

brought in to undermine the IBT, especially where the union is somewhat weak. The TDU obviously cannot become a talk shop, a revolutionary body. But understanding the divisions in the class is at this point a very practical matter. It is crucial for us to legitimize these issues in TDU -- for IDUsers to understand that their own interests demand not just "trade union consciousness", but a broader social approach. By bringing up issues like these, on a regular -- though not continuous -- basis, we can legitimize through practice this alternative conception.

In other arenas, more than in teamsters, it may be necessary to put our strategies and analysis forward largely as propaganda, because we do not have the potential for implementation we have in teamsters. All this means is that, for the moment, we will be getting a hearing from ones and twos, but the content will be largely the same. To do this successfully, IS needs to publish and include in the monthly analytical paper, articles which put forward ideas that will not win the immediate acceptance of those we are working with, but give a full, Marxist analysis. In particular, the recent pamphlet on coal, Battle Line, seems to have fallen into the old Workers' Power trap of only describing and cheering on the struggle (which are fine in themselves). It does not confront the reader with the full picture, including the limitations of the past strategies (especially the MFD) as a way to promote more successful struggle in the future (this point is taken up in the accompanying document "The Rank & File and Reform Movements in IS Labor Work"). The same can be said for the steel pamphlet, where it is said that there is a rank & file movement, including Balanoff, in District 31... setting this operation up as a model without explaining its strengths and weaknesses (failing especially to criticize the electoralist approach, and to point out the exposed position of high officials with weak bases in the face of the employers' offensive and a vicious USW machine).

VI. Party Building and Labor Perspectives

The IS has for long distinguished itself from other forces on the left by the seriousness of its commitment to the point of production struggle. Our industrialization policy is one token of this. Nonetheless, the fact remains that in the drive to maintain our basic politics of the centrality of the industrial struggle, we have, in specific instances, again and again, distorted our ability to intervene with flexibility and build the party.

The IS must state flat out that we do not expect to recruit a great deal from our industrial work. We must state flat out that though our prioritization is necessary, it has one big problem: that to the extent everyone is tied up in the priorities, we are increasingly inflexible. We cannot take advantage of the struggles that break out where we have no one in. These struggles, scattered brushfires in many different areas, are in this period inevitably going to predominate, and we have to be able to intervene in them. They occur in 2 different places: in industry and in the communities of the oppressed. For too long, the IS has given the impression, not only that industrialization is a necessary strategy for positioning ourselves in the areas of greatest strategic significance (with which we agree), but that it is the only worthwhile area of work. It will be said that this is an exaggeration; it is. But it is nonetheless the impression of many of those outside the group who have been interested in our politics, but not interested in industrializing in heavy industry.

Thus, in our recent women's perspectives, we have tended to look at the possibilities for intervention in the women's movement from the vantage point of women in the heavy

industry unions. This has been disorienting both politically and practically. For, in failing to look at the autonomous women's movement as a whole, we have not developed a full analysis of its dynamics. In concentrating so totally on the unions we have missed chances to intervene in the radical women's/gay movement outside.

The point is we have to learn to walk and chew gum at the same time.. And fortunately these are not in contradiction. Many of the people who will want to join IS to work in the radical women's movement will not want to industrialize. OK. We should use them for systematic intervention in, say, the movement for reproductive rights (see our women's document amendments). The same thing can be said for black work. We have chances for connections with activists in the community struggle. We should not make it seem like the qualification for being in the IS is that they transfer to heavy industry. We may be able to politically convince them that it is the right thing to do. But we must be open not only to their personal desire to continue work in their communities and try to help them with this. But we should be ready to be politically convinced by them that their potential to organize the mass movement and build the IS is actually greater there.

In sum, our top priority must be building the party. We cannot build the party rapidly enough on the basis of our work in the priorities, recruitment there. We have been, however, afraid to really confront this situation, for fear of losing our main political emphasis on the class, for fear of undermining the necessarily slow and tedious, but indispensable work, of those in industry ...and of adding to our industrialized cadre.

We have to build up our group to include pro-working class activists who are not necessarily willing to industrialize but who want to work in strike support work, in black community work, in the autonomous women's movement. These people will, in most cases, come out of the left.

We need to have more confidence in our politics: we can recruit on the basis of a full understanding and commitment to these politics. We need to recruit first to increase our flexibility. Over time we will, in addition, deepen and widen our industrial core.