

# Workplace struggles in Kansas

## New union at Structural Steel

By Anonymous

Almost from the start STO's political approach to organizing among workers had four axioms.

First, workers' consciousness is a mixed bag containing competing and contradictory notions interwoven with each other — generally reflecting the dominant (bourgeois) social relations and the embryonic forces that represent their supersession, the principal instrument of dominance being white supremacy.

Secondly, the development of mass class consciousness was given the highest priority and set our strategic tasks.

Thirdly, the point of production is the place where mass class consciousness is most likely to develop. Relations among all classes and sectors, most importantly their own role as producers and potential rulers and not just wage-laborers, would become realizable.

Fourth, such realization can only come through a critical understanding of their own (workers') experience.

In addition STO developed an analysis of the trade union as an institution within capitalist society that leaned very heavily on Gramsci. (See *Soviets in Italy* by Antonio Gramsci, reprinted by STO.) "Objectively, the trade union is the form that labour as a commodity

social relations such as white supremacy and male supremacy. They can also reflect high levels of struggle present at other points in society.

Therefore any mass radicalizing of consciousness as a break with bourgeois consciousness must take place outside of the trade union structure — particularly in unmediated relations of conflict, such as direct action or shop floor activity.

The above axioms and analysis are not widely accepted on the left. Instead, workers' consciousness is either treated as a blank tablet to be inscribed upon by communists, or as totally dominated by bourgeois ideology. In either case, development is treated in a linear fashion, one step at a time. Militant trade unionism is thus considered a step along the way to "class consciousness."

Further, with the appropriate quotes from Lenin, the majority of workers are considered to be too poisoned by capitalism to cross into the Promised Land except by dint of a vanguard which *alone* has compass and map.

Generally, trade unions are considered workers' organizations temporarily taken over by bureaucrats and/or labor aristocrats. It is these bureaucrats/aristocrats who are considered to be the bearers of bourgeois ideology among the workers. If only they can be

*Paper of the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee* (November 1974), one of the five features of class struggle unionism is:

*Schools of Communism:* The trade unions should seek to educate their members as to the basis of the capitalist mode of production and to the inevitability of the proletariat's exploitation as long as capitalism exists. The trade unions should consistently use the spontaneous economic struggle to elevate the consciousness of their membership and their class. Obviously, the highest level of attainment of that consciousness is Marxism-Leninism, the science of the proletariat. This should be the goal of every trade union. Every trade union should seek to draw its membership close to the communist party, [page 22, italics in original]

In his article *The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions under the New Economic Policy*, Lenin says something quite similar and describes the trade unions as "a school of communism" with tasks of "raising the level of the masses," providing the "transmission belts from the Communist Party to the masses," etc. [*Lenin on Trade Unions*, pages 476-7] Lenin's account obviously provides the sour-

## workers' consciousness is a mixed bag

necessarily assumes in a capitalist regime." [*Soviets*, page 14]

Although STO underwent some shifts along the way, the trade union institution with its contracts, labor laws, appeal boards, and seniority lists, was seen as *actively* working to integrate workers' struggles into the capitalist system. A corollary was that trade unions mirror, and sometimes promote, other

thrown out and replaced by "class struggle unionism" the trade unions can take their rightful place as revolutionary vehicles.

There is a pernicious variant of the above position which should be dealt with here. That is, that trade unions are or should become "schools of communism" under capitalism. For instance, in *The Trade Union Question: A Position*

ces and the basis of the popularity of the "school of communism" notion.

What is forgotten is that Lenin is speaking of the trade union in a specific period — the transition from capitalism to socialism after the working class ostensibly had state power. Such a role could not be universal. It certainly could not be the role of an institution which

arises to market a commodity, labor-power.

A school of communism must be based on the actuality or potentiality of workers as freely associated producers. A school of communism is not a lecture hall. It is an arena of critical self-consciousness that seeks to destroy the marketplace, not sell at it.

PWOC's, and others', notion of a school of communism dovetails nicely with their version of labor/aristocrats/bureaucrats as the source of bourgeois ideology amongst the class. If the backwardness of the trade unions is due to bad leadership, rather than the reverse, then communist leadership must mean revolutionary trade unions.

Finally, there was one other conception, mostly an estimate, that dominated much of STO's production organizing for some time. It was expected that the seventies would be a period of heightened class struggle

which would surpass in scope the Black rebellions and student demonstrations of the '60's, and that it will arise — indeed has already arisen — outside of the existing organizations which manage discontent: the labor unions, [editorial, *Insurgent Worker*, Spring 1974]

It was believed by STO that almost any real struggle would spill outside the trade unions because of their moribund character. The heightening of struggle and the death of trade unions were seen as inextricably linked. As the events at Kansas City Structural Steel show, reality is more complex than that.

In 1973 the workers at Kansas City Structural Steel decided they had had enough of the cowardly (continued on page 16 )



## Fighting white supremacy at General Hospital

By Marty Delgado

The title of this article reflects the deliberate way I went about organizing at Kansas City General Hospital (KCGH), not because of a prescribed formula, but because of all things that divided and held back KCGH workers, the most damaging was white supremacy.

The system of subtle and not-so-subtle privileges for whites that reinforced this split had to be attacked head-on if we were to struggle successfully against the other obstructions — male supremacy, professionalism, and just plain fear — and take on the management. KCGH is only one case of uncountable others where white supremacy is decisive in political organizing, but it is one where I as an STO member, with the support of my branch, put into operation this guiding strategy with some success.

An initial and crucial point is this: not all that happens in the hospital comes from the hospital, a fact especially important in organizing among whites and Blacks together. Black workers at KCGH have a life not only inside, but also outside the hospital, which is *distinct* from white culture — an obvious fact, but one all too many white activists ignore. School segre-

gation, busing, racist attacks, police brutality, church, who is aware of the latest gunshot case, etc., are issues common to a Black culture: a life situation which transcends the hospital's treatment of its workers and helps to shape the actions of Black workers there.

This culture, shared by Black workers, can best be seen as part of a common struggle against *national* oppression. At KCGH the struggle sometimes emerges in open, clearly articulated forms involving broad issues. More often, it is seen in spontaneous responses to the actions of doctors and supervisors.

Far from narrowing the struggle, the spontaneous, nationally oriented actions — those focusing on independent Black grievances and Black workers' solutions to them — not only emerged as a stronger unifying force among Black workers, but also were critical in developing the broader class struggle of Blacks and whites together. This was true *both* because the struggle for Black demands represented a pole of resistance and militance to which exploited white workers could turn *and* because both white leftists and Black members of the *Transmission*, our underground newsletter (continued on page 12 )

## Hospital

(continued from page 11)

for two years, moved to organize white workers who were willing to support Black initiatives.

It is not the intent of this paper to try to "prove" our line. Rather, I've attempted to give a glimpse of what our work looks like within the working class, although KCGH is just a small example.

Over a year ago Irwin Silber of the *Guardian* hoped to bury us when he referred to our strategy for revolution in the U.S. as the "discredited white-skin-privilege line." Recently, STO has been accused by the *Guardian's* William Gurley of abandoning the working class both in theory and in practice (November 23, 1977). What this paper aims to do is to give people a *real* example of our workplace organizing, although to listen to Silber and Company, you'd think we weren't doing anything there anyway except telling white workers that they weren't exploited but were "benefitting" from the oppression of Blacks!

I worked at KCGH mainly as an orderly from January 1975 to March 1977. I also worked a short time as assistant printer, messenger, and dietary aide. Half my total time as an orderly was spent "on the floors," assisting nurses with patients. The other half was spent in the surgery recovery room, mostly transporting patients. Internal transportation jobs are ideal for getting around, meeting people, and making contacts, which is what I did.

At the time, this hospital work was a project of Kansas City Workforce, a Marxist-Leninist Collective that was part of the now-defunct "Federation." Although Sojourner Truth Organization wasn't formed as a national organization until April 1976, Chicago STO was a Federation member, and by January 1975, Kansas City Workforce had already begun to operate in line with STO politics.

My first task at KCGH was to begin publishing a monthly newsletter we called the *Transmission*.

I worked with two other white leftists, and together we attracted a core of Black and white workers who helped put out the paper and initiated and carried out job actions. All told, besides myself there were four leftists, nine Black workers, and two white workers in and out of this core group during these two years.

The make-up of the hospital workforce, almost 1,000 workers, was roughly 50 percent white, 50 percent Third World (mainly Black), and 75 percent women. Before moving to a modern structure, Truman Medical Center (TMC), in December 1976, we worked in a decrepit, roach-infested old building — the prototype city hospital.

Our first few newsletters attracted a lot of interest because of our analysis of city hospitals in capitalist society: administrative waste, budget cutbacks, and layoffs. Our emphasis in each case was on the white supremacist character of the hospital's actions. Specifically, we tried to focus on how Black workers and patients were more adversely affected than whites by each squeeze and the extent to which this differential effect was used to control not just Black people, but whites as well.

Using this approach, we built a stable nucleus, as well as a solid base of support within the next few months. Our base was initially among Black workers but expanded in time to include substantial numbers of white workers as well. Although we managed to reach numbers of white workers, the whites in our core group tended to be more peripheral (except for me and one other). The Black workers were the driving force behind the newsletter; they saw it as "their paper."

The paper had a lively, popular style, and sparked discussion and debate throughout the hospital whenever it came out. After we began publishing regularly, more and more workers looked forward to the next issue, mainly, I think, because they saw it as reflecting their views and aspirations. Finally

they had a voice to counter the official company propaganda.

But our audience didn't write us too many letters, and a fraction of the staff did most of the actual writing. It was the job of the whole staff, therefore, to collect oral accounts of events, and verify, discuss and interpret them before finally putting them on paper. We were trying to win workers to our politics, as well as inspire direct actions.

### Direct Action

Besides producing the paper, we carried out direct actions: several marches by Black and white workers on the personnel office to protest firings of Blacks; an unsuccessful "independent union" drive; a women's march on the security director's office; a worker-community meeting held at a local Black church; disruption and walkout of a kangaroo union election meeting; various spontaneous job actions on the floors which we led or inspired; and the standard legal maneuvering in and out of the EEOC and NLRB.

Of all these struggles, the last was the least important. Consistent with STO's position that it is the *process* of struggle as much as its outcome which shapes workers' consciousness, what I tried to promote was direct action and participation by the workers themselves. This approach caused head-on conflicts with our liberal lawyer, who tried to channel our struggles into constant legal dead-ends. The lawyer's tactics were varied, and he went to extremes, including using anti-communism, in his fight for control — a fight he ultimately lost as the group moved in a more nationalist direction.

### White Supremacy and Male Supremacy

While there isn't space to give adequate treatment to our work around male supremacy, I want to raise it briefly, particularly as it related to the question of white supremacy. A women's march on the security director's office involved Black and white women



united in opposition to discriminatory enforcement of parking regulations. The security director was forced by the women to back down — a victory we were able to write up as a model for other white workers. In addition, the struggle helped build confidence among women workers and encouraged them to take more initiative in our group.

White women tended to be more militant in departments made up mostly of Black women, who stood as a pole against the "may I help you?" servility that many white nurses take on. I think workplaces like hospitals, where women make up a majority of the workforce, are the best arena in which to organize women, to bring more of them into the struggle, and to develop women's leadership. This is true despite the fact that for these women, as for all women, their main oppression is at home — a fact that inhibits their participation in the struggle at the workplace.

Because of our strategic emphasis, however, we did not organize women primarily as women. Nor did we make the fight against male supremacy co-equal to the fight against white supremacy. While we did struggle with many backward ideas in our group and in the hospital, my observation was that "women's issues" were seen by the women (particularly the Black women) as mainly class and national issues.

Despite numerous discussions about the male chauvinism they experienced at home and at work, many of these women understood without any socialist analysis that the fight against male supremacy wasn't a strategic issue. Black women felt no compelling reason to unite with white women "as women," where they did feel compelled to unite with Black men.

### Organizing an Independent Union Drive

In the fall of 1975 we began trying to organize an independent all-workers' union. The campaign fol-

lowed the momentum we'd built up by our previous fight against discriminatory layoffs. The proposed independent union was in opposition to the existing service employees union, a company operation which was invisible in the hospital. Our objective was to raise the level of struggle and to use the drive, in addition to (and distinct from) the *Transmission*, to provide a larger organizational framework for anti-white-supremacist organizing.

Though an alluring organizing device, it was a mistaken tactic from the beginning. To succeed, we would have had to organize three separate city health institutions — and there still would have been no guarantee of an NLRB election. The inevitable defeat, plus the legal machinations involved, caused us to lose a lot of momentum and demoralized a lot of people.

On the other hand, the union drive helped in some ways. It made the whole *Transmission* staff into organizers, in addition to writers and distributors of the paper. These new forms of struggle raised a lot of questions for discussion (sort of like "mass work within mass work"). The drive brought to a head an internal debate on how to organize: fighting white supremacy vs. dollars-and-cents reformism.

Our organization, the Health Workers Organizing Committee (HWOC), also gave us an up-front cover to stage various actions, although it was fairly obvious to people that the same folks were putting out the underground paper. (Actually, this wasn't *exactly* true — at its peak HWOC consisted of twenty workers, most of whom *weren't on* the paper.)

Despite my efforts to keep HWOC a separate grouping from the *Transmission*, versus our lawyer's efforts to make the paper the organ of the union (which had its own newsletter), most workers identified both as the same! This was true primarily because of the similar line against national oppression and white privileges and the need for a united opposition to both.

Most white workers initially viewed HWOC as an exclusively "Black union." It was the Black workers on the *Transmission* who insisted on a strong critique of that view, which they correctly saw as causing divisions. This did not interfere with their assessment, however, that *their* main activity was among Blacks, and that whites had the responsibility to organize white workers.

The fact that Black workers saw these tasks as distinct, does not imply that they viewed them as antagonistic. They were clear that this form of separatism and autonomy were not the same as white-initiated separatism, the ruling-class-fostered division in the class *which most white workers still accept*.

### Expansion into New Forms of Struggle

By the spring of 1976 the union drive was running out of gas. Our work shifted to creating new forms of struggle, including trying to expand into the community. During this period we also went through an internal ideological struggle — reformism vs. socialism — which was muddied by some petty-bourgeois individualism and anti-communism and marred further by my own failure early on to raise socialism as an issue before the whole group.

With Black workers' position worsening at KCGH and a rash of injustices to Black patients, there was more consolidation around specific Black issues and demands. This trend manifested itself in an attempt to organize the community based on a growing realization that it was friends and families of the Black workers who suffered the most from cutbacks in care and services at General.

The form this struggle took was something more than the "fight for equality" or minimal "special demands" of Black workers. When an article appears saying "It's Nation Time" (with no apparent relation to Jesse Jackson's original use of that phrase), when an elected leader of the group says outright that he



workplace, absent motion in the working class generally? Can we prove — or disprove — our line in this period, through limited examples of its use at the workplace?

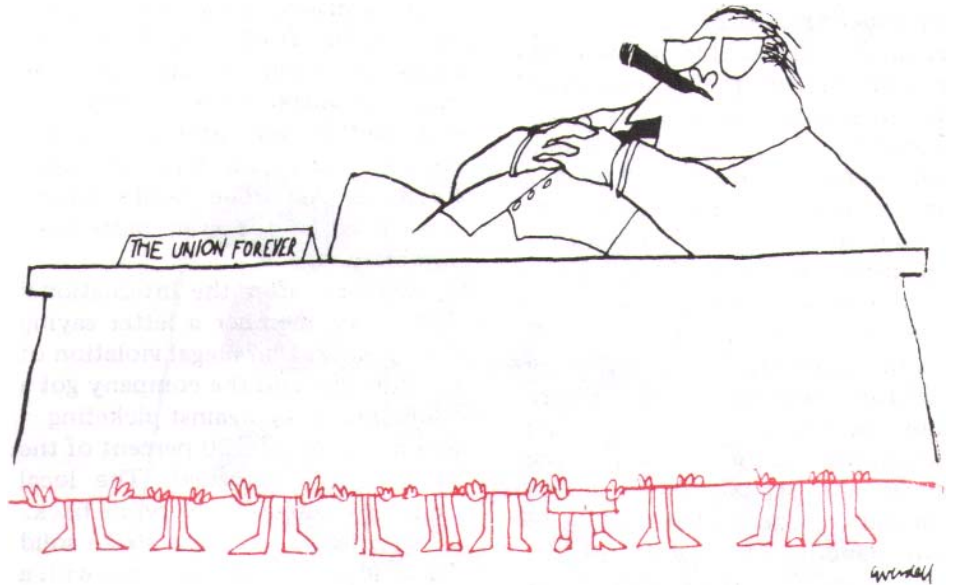
### Conclusion

The most significant observation I made during my two years at General was that those white workers we were able to win to fighting white supremacy were convinced not by abstract reason or simple exhortation, but by the militant, independently organized struggles of their Black co-workers that we helped develop. This activity posed the question of class and race most sharply: which side are you on? What helped broaden this base was whites seeing other whites, even a few, in motion alongside Blacks (with no concomitant watering down of politics to accomplish this).

Those white workers who were turned around by these struggles were *convinced* of the correctness of their actions. I think we were pretty successful, especially with the more advanced, though to a much lesser degree on a mass level, in exposing how privileges work to keep us divided, and how national oppression/white privilege exist in tandem.

When workers draw these lessons from the act of struggle, it is a one-sided distortion — though one often made by the U.S. left — to conclude that the struggle is suicidal because it ends in firings. A person who has been coherently and impressively convinced one time retains his/her newly learned convictions and understandings and applies them to new situations. This is the stuff of which working class leaders are made. On a broader level, one may ask: would it be suicidal if we could help inspire that kind of activity en masse? Of course not! When we do, we will know we are winning.

On the other hand, I do not want to draw any extravagant conclusions from my experiences at KCGH. As I said earlier, I cannot



prove our line with this paper. My experiences are very limited: limited resources from my branch, only two years on the job, a non-industrial workplace, and a period of relative quiet in the class struggle. Furthermore, I doubt that any group can prove that they can move masses of workers to revolutionary consciousness.

At this point most workers are denying *everybody's* line. Mass work in this period raises more questions than it answers. In that sense it is more useful for cadre development and party-building than for trying to prove a line. But even if it yields more questions than answers, gains made among white workers can be important, and I think they are *expected* by Third World groups.

This approach follows Lenin's dictum that oppressor nation communists raise constantly the issue of national privilege among workers *within* the oppressor nation. In line with that, it seems to me that there are three ways to react to a spontaneous national struggle like the one we found at KCGH: ignore it, try to corral it, or encourage and develop it. If you hold, as we do, that the struggles of oppressed peoples have been the motor driving the class struggle in this historical period, then you'll encourage its development.

### Postscript

As a postscript, or "this is where I must have come in," three months after I'd left the hospital some Black nurses from the old *Transmission* staff called me for help putting out the first (and unfortunately the only) *Transmission* at the new Truman Medical Center. (We'd stopped printing before the move from KCGH.) These nurses worked on the floor I had worked on and wanted some technical and political assistance putting out a new issue, because there had been new firings and repressive policies.

While I did the printing and outside distribution, they assembled all the Black nurses from the floor and collectively wrote the new issue, under the headline "LPN Phase-Out Begins With Blacks!" and with the slogan "It's Nation Time." They later called our former lawyer for legal advice, but it was clear whose approach had made the biggest impression on them as to the best form of struggle (mass vs. legal). Within a week several hundred *Transmissions* appeared all over the hospital, many of them traveling aboard the sleek new telelift cars normally used to transport supplies.

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