Workplace Papers

WORKPLACE PAPERS

Sojourner Truth Organization
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PREFACE

Sojourner Truth Organization came into existence in the winter of 1969-70. For its first five years, it existed only in the Chicago area. During a good portion of that time, it was thought of in movement circles as "the people who organize in factories." (Almost no one else on the left in Chicago was then following a policy of industrial concentration.) Our "corner" on this sort of work had its advantages and disadvantages: it meant that we were able to recruit a number of people from the movement who were moving toward working class politics and impressed by the seriousness of our commitment; it also meant that many of these people came to us with little understanding of the differences between our approach to the workplace and the various alternatives which existed in theory, if not, at that actual moment in Chicago, in practice.

Over the next five years we were able to establish a political presence in a number of work centers, including the following: International Harvester Tractor Works, IH Melrose Park, IH Broadview, Grant Hospital, Montgomery Ward, Intercraft, Motorola, Stanadyne, Western Electric, Appleton Electric, American Can, U. S. Steel Gary Works, U. S. Steel South Works, Inland Steel, Methodist Hospital (Gary), South Chicago Hospital, Bell & Howell and Stewart Warner.

Our experience included work in heavy industry and light industry, in plants with a "good" union, a "bad" union and no union, in predominantly male, predominantly female and mixed environments, in plants with a tie to the surrounding community and in plants with no such tie; we participated in union organizing campaigns and union ousting campaigns, in wildcat strikes, slowdowns and sitdowns; we used sabotage; we published newsletters, held social affairs, showed films and conducted study groups — in short we had a breadth of experience which I believe to be unequaled by any group of comparable size and few of any size.

From the beginning we counted among our possessions more than a traditional commitment to the working class as the principal agent of social revolution; we also had a political line, which we had come to through individual and collective study of the writings of Antonio Gramsci, W. E. B. DuBois and C. L. R. James, as well as through an examination of the recent experience of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969 and the 1968 French General Strike, and the earlier experience of the Industrial Workers of the World. Briefly stated, this perspective was as follows: in modern industrial societies, bourgeois rule depends on the development of a variety of "systems" that channel the outbreaks of the exploited class and allow their absorption by capital; that the specifically American framework for this process is the white-skin privilege system — the conferring of a favored status on the white sector of the proletariat; and that the trade unions cannot be understood apart from this framework. It was this political perspective — to which we remain committed to this day — and specifically the critique of trade unions, that led other sectors of the left to criticize us as "dual unionist" or "anti-union" and to instruct us with the proper quotations from Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism.*

On the Lenin business, there are two opinions in STO: one holds simply that Lenin was wrong (gasp!) and the proof is that he changed his mind and helped organize the Red International of Labor Unions only a year after he wrote that unfortunate pamphlet. The other (I may be alone in believing this) holds that Lenin is universally misinterpreted, and that while he certainly argued (correctly) the need to work within the right-wing unions, he never put that forward as the only, or even the main, work of communists. Whatever the result of the debate (and I'm sure Lenin's reputation will survive it), one thing we are all agreed upon (and I have instructed the typesetter to put it in boldface in order to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation), is that **STO is not dual unionist in principle and it is not anti-union.**

Now, I am not so naive as to think that a simple declarative statement, even one set in bold type, can lay to rest all doubts on this score. Just as sure as God made little green apples, some reader of this preface and of the articles to follow will deliver yet another attack on STO as "dual unionist." Nevertheless, owing to a defect in my character, I persist: STO cannot be dual unionist in principle, because the question is not one of principle but of tactics. There are times when it makes sense to break with an existing union and organize another; one example of this is the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers, which is made up of people who seceded from the Teamsters Union. (The Teamsters Union will probably offer up

additional examples in the next few years.) The Committee for Industrial Organization (later Congress of Industrial Organizations) was originally a dual union in relation to the American Federation of Labor, as was the AFL in relation to the Knights of Labor. Other times it makes sense to work to bring about a change in leadership and policy in an existing union; the recent experience of the United Mine Workers gives a picture of the possibilities and limitations of such a course. There can be no dogma on this matter, and those who oppose dual unionism "in principle" should be aware that in so doing they are opposing the trade union movements of virtually every country in Europe, where the rule is that competing unions and union federations exist within the same enterprise.

Unions are instruments workers use to improve their living conditions under capitalism. By representing the interests of groups of workers within the wage system, they provide a means of mediating conflicts that threaten to disrupt the system, in addition to being an arena in which conflicts develop.

One can search diligently through the left press, encountering page after page of denunciation of this or that union official, without ever coming across a statement such as the above, which seems to us undeniable. Fortunately for its continued rule, the bourgeoisie has been able to bring forth class conscious ideologists who are not bound by inherited dogmas as are most of our leftists. Two of these ideologists, Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, both on the faculty at Harvard University and Research Associates at the National Bureau of Economic Research, have published a study entitled, "The Two Faces of Unionism."*

They begin with the observation, "Trade unions are the principal institution of workers in modern capitalist societies, as endemic as large firms, oligopolistic organization of industries, and government regulation of free enterprise."

"In modern industrial economies," the writers observe, "and particularly in large enterprises, a trade union is the vehicle for collective voice — that is, for providing workers as a group with a means of communicating with management." Writing in the purest sociologese, they say: "By providing workers with a voice both at the workplace and in the political arena, unions can and do affect positively the functioning of the economic and social systems."

The writers take up the arguments against unions that have been traditionally put forth by management interests — that they raise wages, introduce new work rules, lower output through strikes, etc. — and show that these objections to unions, while not entirely without foundation, are outweighed by the beneficial effects of unions in actually increasing productivity by reducing quit rates, regulating the time workers spend on breaks, and in general providing a more stable work force. They conclude that, "the positive effects of unions are in many settings more important than their negative effects," and that "the on-going decline of private-sector unionism — a development unique to the U.S. among western developed countries — deserves serious public attention."

Three cheers for Harvard. Now we in STO, similarly unbound by traditional dogmas and in addition motivated by something other than the search for industrial peace, have gone even further than the two professors. We have noted that although labor unions at times have grown out of mass struggles which had a revolutionary component, unions, as *such,* do not play a revolutionary role. This consistency (it cannot be called a failure) is the logical consequence of their character as institutions structured to bring about an improvement in the terms of the sale of labor power, while the aim of the proletarian revolution is to abolish the sale of labor power. In fact, unions which develop as working class institutions, even if not as revolutionary institutions, increasingly become separated from working class interests and become the structures within the working class that support the hegemony of capital over it.

We have come to the conclusion (I do not wish to anticipate the articles that follow) that work within the unions cannot be the center of a communist labor policy, that something else, which embodies the revolutionary aspirations of the proletariat, as distinct from the reform interests of groups of workers, is needed. To discover the character of that "something else" and to help bring it into existence is the central feature of STO's labor policy. But it by no means follows that we wish to destroy or weaken the present unions in general (we do wish to weaken or destroy some of them, in certain aspects) or that we are indifferent to the quality of a particular union in a particular place, or any of the other things that could conceivably be implied in the charge of being "anti-union." Indeed, a necessary consequence of the development of a mass revolutionary working class current will be the revitalization of the trade unions. This will be impelled both as a direct response to the radicalization of their constituency, and because of the heightened interests of capital in maintaining their legitimacy as a structure able to confine the working class within the capital relation.

We observe that unions are not revolutionary institutions. Immediately our opponents attack us as

*_The Public Interest,_ Number 57 (Fall 1979), pages 69-93. The issues raised in this article will be analyzed at greater length in a forthcoming book, _What Do Unions Do ?_ to be published by Basic Books.

"anti-union." We say that something is needed to represent the mass revolutionary aspirations of the proletariat, and they accuse us of "dual unionism" since the only form of organization of a mass character which could possibly exist in the workplace is a union.

Trade unions our leftists can understand. Speak to them of revolutionary organization and they respond on cue with a lecture on the "Marxist-Leninist Party." But the notion of developing an organizational form which encompasses and focuses the mass subversive destabilizing motion of the working class — an organizational form which is mass, but is not a union, which is revolutionary, but is not a party — is beyond the scope of their categories of thought. In their view, the masses of the working class will only be revolutionary at the moment of the seizure of power, and, even then, this content will be expressed for the most part in an identification with a vanguard party.

In our view, it is not only possible, but absolutely essential, that the class that must "emancipate itself" be organized in forms which permit it to play an active creative role in the revolutionary process.

What did our experience show?

We began in 1970 with the estimate that the working class was getting ready for a big upsurge comparable to the May '68 or the "Hot Autumn." We had the evidence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and some indication that the ferment was reaching out to white workers as well. It seemed to us a relatively simple matter to bring into existence out of the spontaneous movement some form of mass revolutionary workers' organization. (I remember writing out a model constitution for such an organization, based on the expectation that it would shortly have chapters in all the major plants in Chicago and be widely recognized as a force in industry. Fortunately, that document has been lost.)

It didn't happen that way. We found that, while we were able, for pedagogical purposes, to clearly distinguish between the autonomous and subordinated aspects of workers' behavior, in practice the distinction wasn't so clear. We found direct action mixed up with inner-union maneuvering, sabotage along side of legalistic activities, etc. — and we found that the workers we encountered were unwilling to make a categorical separation between one course of action and the other.

Time and again we encountered workers, with whom we had cooperated in shop-floor battles and who understood that no fundamental change could come through union reform, being drawn into unproductive inner-union squabbling — usually starting with the notion that it was purely tactical but, after a time, being wholly absorbed by it.

Now, if this happened regularly over a period of years in a number of different industries, it could not be attributed to individual backwardness, or poor methods of work, or any such accidental consideration. The workers were saying to us by their actions that they doubted the workability of our perspective.

The groups we were able to develop assumed a mass character and were able to exert an important influence over the struggle for only short periods of time; when they were able to maintain an existence over a fairly long period of time, their mass impact, at best, was of a propagandistic nature. In no case were we able to develop groups that exerted an important influence over events over a long period of time.

I can hear our opponents now: Practice is the test of theory, they say, and here are these ultra-left dual unionists who admit that in five years of trying they were unable to build stable organization of the type they claim is necessary. Shouldn't that convince them of the error of their ways?

Not quite. Practice is the test of theory only over the course of history. Only at moments of historic shock, at moments of crisis and qualitative change, when social forces are polarized and masses of previously atomized individuals are acting together as classes, will valid theories be *conclusively* proven and mistaken ones *decisively* refuted. In the normal routine of political work, we will constantly be reminded that every theory, no matter how sublimely improbable, can find some justification in practice; just as every type of political practice will be articulated in some form of theory.

We are laboring away at the development of organization which embodies the revolutionary aspect of the proletariat. We are doing this at a time when the proletariat is under the intellectual domination of the bourgeois class, when the expressions of its revolutionary aspect are isolated, fragmentary and sporadic, when its organizations have turned into fetters. Is it surprising that revolutionary organization built under these conditions should be fragile? Tomorrow, when the workers smash all routine, when millions break with current patterns of behavior and hurl up forms beyond the imagination of the boldest thinker, we shall see who made the greatest contribution to the emergence of the new society — those who spent their time ferreting within the structures that maintained the subordination of the workers to capital, or those who strove, under difficult circumstances, to give a fleeting existence to those forms which foreshadowed the coming upheaval.

To return to my story, the result of our work was nothing to write home about, but it wasn't too bad, given the times and the fate of other left groups coming out of the sixties. But beyond the task of

developing independent workers' groups, STO faced a problem to keep itself together. We had recruited a number of people out of the left who went to work in industry with the expectation that their labors would lead, in the short term, to the creation of a large, organized current. If such a thing didn't happen, why so far as they were concerned, the hunt was over and they were going home.

And that is what they did. In less than a year, from the fall of 1974 to the summer of 1975, STO went through two major splits, which cost it three-fourths of its membership and most of its industrial concentration, and left those who remained with little but their bodies and shadows to comfort one another. These splits certainly involved political differences, but the severity of them can only be understood against a background where a majority of the membership of STO felt that the work was not going as it should and that it was not worth the effort to stick around and figure out why.

Those of us who were left decided that we had to re-evaluate our approach to work. As a part of the process of re-evaluation, we decided on a temporary withdrawal from the workplace as a major focus of activity, in order to give attention to other areas of work which we had been more or less ignoring. Specifically, we decided to put a much greater priority on internal education and the development of a theoretical conception of the period in which we were working; we decided to attempt to intervene in ongoing debates on the left towards the goal of developing an organized conscious anti-imperialist current among those sectors which were already radicalized; we decided to put major effort into developing working relations with leading forces from among the national liberation movements in this country — relations which had eroded to pretty much nothing during our period of overwhelming workplace concentration; finally, an important part of our new direction was to attempt to reach out to co-thinkers in the revolutionary left in other countries, particularly in Europe.

It was during this period of tactical reorientation that STO was invited by a group of activists in New York City to speak publicly there, and to meet informally with small groupings of people who were interested in its general line and immediate estimate of the situation. We accepted the invitation, and in the fall of 1977 I addressed a meeting there on the general topic of strategy for revolution.

The meeting was "reported" by William Gurley in the November 23, 1977 *Guardian*. The published account carried not one word from the talk I gave, which lasted for three quarters of an hour and ranged over a number of strategic questions; most of the column space was devoted to quoting fragments from STO documents dealing with the "white-skin privilege." Gurley's sole reference to the talk I actually gave was the following:

> "The problem is to get white workers to resign from the white race," says Noel Ignatin, a leading spokesman for STO.
>
> Ignatin defended STO's position at a recent talk on "Strategy for Revolution" in New York City, at which he formally announced the organization's switch from factory organizing to liberation support work.
>
> He stated that STO's concentration on factory organizing was a "major mistake." STO "had lost contact with the Black and Puerto Rican movement," Ignatin said. He announced that STO's main work would now be to provide material support for national liberation movements in the U.S.

Gurley concluded his "report" with the summary, "Whereas before STO had abandoned the working class in theory, it has now abandoned it in practice."

That was all. (We note, however, that even that little bit was enough to stimulate several letters to us from persons we had not previously known, explicitly supporting our positions as against the *Guardian's.)*

Was the decision we made in 1975, to make a temporary, tactical shift in our work, the right one? We do not know and do not expect a conclusive answer from events, but we do note that in the ensuing years we have regained the numerical strength we had prior to our splits and defections, we have changed from a local Chicago organization to one with a national presence, we have reached out to a number of new friends and allies on the left — and all this at a time when most of the smaller left groups have undergone a shrinking and fragmenting process.

The last general membership meeting of STO resolved that it was time to reactivate an organizational concentration in production work. The publication of this pamphlet is part of the process of achieving that end.

This pamphlet brings together documents published during the first five years of STO's existence. All are out of print and have been unavailable for some time. Together, they represent the theoretical and analytical foundation for STO's intervention in workplace situations.

The *Theses on Workplace Organizing,* which open this collection, were adopted at a general membership meeting in 1973, when STO was still only a Chicago organization. It is placed first in the collection, out of normal chronological order, because of its character

as Theses, an attempt to state, in barest possible form, the elements of a position.

The second piece in the collection, *A Call to Organize,* was the first document STO published. It was written in 1970 and was published over the next few years in several different versions, including one with the title *Mass Organization At the Workplace.* The present version is a composite of several of the earlier ones, assembled with the aim of leaving intact both the most forceful arguments and most obvious mistakes, while avoiding duplication.

Reflections on Organizing, which appears next in order, was written later in the same year for a discussion within STO of methods of work; it is a challenge to another approach which then enjoyed a certain vogue within the movement in general and within STO as well. *Reflections on Organizing* was published in *Radical America* in March-April 1972; an important "not" omitted from that version has been restored to its proper place.

Review of "Reflections on Organizing" was a response to the *Radical America* piece, written by a member of the English organization Big Flame. STO learned of the existence of this review only in 1978.

Black Worker/White Worker was previously published in the STO collection *Understanding and Fighting White Supremacy,* as well as in *Radical America,* July-August 1974, and as a separate pamphlet by both STO and the New England Free Press. As the title indicates, it deals with a subject that plays a crucial part in determining STO's labor policy, with implications that go beyond the workplace.

The Steward's Position was written by someone who was at the time of writing a member of a group with which STO was associated. The writer is today a member of another left organization whose line is totally contrary to the line of this article, and would in all likelihood be embarrassed were his/her authorship of this piece to become known. Although it is somewhat rigid and one-sided in its conclusions, we are including it here because it poses sharply certain considerations which are routinely ignored.

Trade Unions/Independent Organizations was written as a contribution to an internal debate in STO. It was an attempt to examine the organization's experience in implementing its line, and to correct some unrealistic expectations which had arisen from an over-simplified critique of trade unionism. It was previously published in an earlier, poorly typed and poorly printed collection of workplace papers.

A Golden Bridge was first published in the collection referred to above, and reprinted in *Political Discussion* number 2, April 1976.

The American Labor Movement in 1974 is the final piece in this collection. It was originally prepared for the National Lawyers Guild's labor conference in Atlanta on March 22, 1974. After its initial distribution there, it was reprinted in the April 1974 issue of the Guild's *Labor Newsletter.* Some minor errors were corrected when it was reprinted in *Political Discussion* number 1, December 1974, from which it was taken for this collection.

As an appendix to this collection, we are including a selection of leaflets and shop papers. These are not STO leaflets or "line" papers. In every case they are the product of collaboration between STO members and workers who have no affiliation to any Marxist organization. They are included here to give the reader some of the "flavor" of STO's notion of independent organization at the workplace.

Noel Ignatin
March 1980

THESES ON WORKPLACE ORGANIZING (1974)

1. Socialist movements in advanced capitalist countries have traditionally been based in organization at the point of production. At point of production, workers experience the exploitation and irrationality which is capitalism. They also experience the process of social labor which is the foundation for socialism. The mechanism of capitalist production "disciplines, unites and organizes" the working class in ways which undercut the national, racial, sexual and age divisions that the ruling class fosters as a matter of policy.

2. Participation in large-scale capitalist production gives rise to certain perceptions and ideas which represent the elements from which a socialist world-view will emerge. In the ordinary course of life under capitalism, these ideas are submerged by the bourgeois ideology which is able to call upon vastly superior resources, tradition and organization to impose itself. The development of these revolutionary elements of working class life is the primary responsibility of communists and these elements cannot be sufficiently developed to permit their triumph without mass workers' organizations able to clarify their features and give them distinct form.

3. Trade unions are not adequate to fulfill this function. Unions are a necessary development out of workers' spontaneous struggles against their oppression. While many of those who fought and died to build unions were moved by far loftier aspirations, for particular historical reasons, in this country the purpose of unions has come to be the attainment of better terms in the sale of labor power through a written contract with the employer. The unions have emerged as institutions which channel workers' discontent into paths which are compatible with bourgeois rule. The U.S. trade union movement, in particular, has developed ways which even undercut the workers' ability to wage the reform struggle. Most important of these is the widely recognized complicity of U.S. unions in maintaining and promoting national and sexual divisions in the working class.

4. Our stress on independent organization does not entail opposition to struggles in the union arena. When union struggles involve masses of workers, communists should be there. However, at times when the level of mass struggle is not high, and the revolutionary current among the workers is weak, communists must be particularly conscious of the danger of entrapment in schemes of union reform, which, in fact, isolate them from the workers. In such conditions, particular care must be used to distinguish the position of revolutionaries from that of reformists in practice, not just in rhetoric. Essential to this is the development of mass organizations able to deal with the problems of workers from a position of independent strength. Furthermore, such an external challenge to the union provides the best conditions for union reform.

5. The degeneration of the unions in this country has led to a general alienation from union procedures and the union apparatus by the masses of workers, especially the unskilled, the young, the Black, non-white workers generally, and women workers. Many workers are searching for means to deal with their problems which by-pass the established union forms and procedures. It is undoubtedly true that such extra-union struggles, except in some cases involving Black workers, still usually represent group rather than class interests and may even take a reactionary turn. Nevertheless, such struggles represent a starting point for the work of communists. Their responsibility is to help the workers involved in such struggles develop mass organizations that break with the trade unionist, reformist framework of the existing unions; it is not to channel these struggles into a program of union reform.

6. It is Utopian to attempt to lay out detailed characteristics of an organizational form whose shape must be concretely determined in the course of the class struggle. However, we can indicate three basic features which it must contain in order to solidify and extend its challenge to capitalism.

a. Through dealing with the immediate issues facing workers, it cannot capitulate to the legitimacy of capitalist property.

b. The organization must be self-motivated and the stands and actions it takes must be a true reflection of the will of its members. In no sense can it be regarded as an arm of the "party," nor can any such Marxist group be permitted to impose a line by virtue of its organization, technical skills and resources.

c. Only a group formed with a firm and unshakeable commitment to full equality for non-whites will be able to evolve sound positions on all issues of concern to working people, and a group that hedges on its commitment in this regard will inevitably find itself compromised on other issues.

These points must guide the approach of communists to their work, or the potentials to which that work is directed will not be realized.

A CALL TO ORGANIZE (1974)

by Don Hamerquist and Noel Ignatin

"The working class and the employing class have nothing in common."

Despite all the propaganda to the contrary, these words are as true today as when they were first written in 1906, in the Preamble of the Industrial Workers of the World. Peace, the equality of the darker peoples with the white, equality of the female sex with the male, economic security and the full development of human creativity are beyond reach so long as the vast majority of humankind — those who labor to produce wealth — are subjugated by the small minority who own and control the mines, the banks, the land and the factories.

Capitalism has attained technological marvels in production, transportation and communications, but the benefits of these have been denied to the people. It is up to the working class to break the power of the capitalist class and gain the benefits of modern society for all of the people. In order to do this, the working people must organize themselves as a *class,* politically and economically. Such organization involves two tasks:

(1) defense of the day-to-day interests of the working people;
(2) preparation of the working class to abolish capitalism.

Many workers in the past have looked to the labor unions to solve their problems. It has become increasingly obvious in recent years that the unions fail to meet the needs. The reason for their failure is that they are guided by the principle of collaboration with the employers instead of struggle against them.

Labor unions in this country hardly deserve to be called unions. Those in which members enroll voluntarily are generally not open to all of the workers in their industry — the building trades unions, which deny membership to Black workers and often to any workers but the relatives of members, are the best-known example of this type of "union." On the other hand, those unions which are open to all in the industry usually have compulsory membership based on the dues check-off system — the UAW is an example of this type. Neither the existing craft nor the industrial unions meet the qualifications for a labor union — freely open to all workers in a given industry.

Bankruptcy of Contract Unionism

All existing unions accept the contract system, in which labor and management agree to certain terms of employment for a given time period. In a contract, management agrees to provide a certain standard of wages, fringe benefits and working conditions. The union, for its part, agrees to keep its members working at the agreed-upon terms. The role of the union is to gain and enforce a contract with the employer. Its ability to do this depends, first, on its ability to pull a strike during negotiations and, second, on its ability to prevent strikes and slowdowns during the life of the contract.

Thus the nature of the contract demands that the union do what no workers' organization should ever do — maintain labor discipline for the boss. The unions become a part of the company's apparatus, present at every point of grievance in order to prevent any disruption of production.

At the heart of the union's regulatory role is the grievance procedure, whose effect is to make direct action by the workers "illegal." Behind the grievance procedure is the arbitration machinery which has built-in conditions encouraging collaboration instead of struggle.

Even the ability of a union to fight at contract time is limited by its acceptance of the contract system. Employers, for example, are able to prepare for strikes by building up inventories through compulsory overtime during the last months of a contract. The unions are forced to accumulate huge treasuries to sustain a long strike, and these treasuries make them more vulnerable to injunctions and legal suits. They also make the unions into banks, insurance companies and real estate holders — with a stake in the status quo.

The pillar of all this accumulation of wealth is, of course, the dues check-off. This measure, which was originally aimed at providing the unions with a sound financial base, has become a means of removing them entirely from any control by their members. What can one say about such an institution as the United Auto Workers, whose treasury is totally dependent on the multi-million dollar checks it receives every month from General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, the checks being called "dues" by virtue of a slip of paper that every worker is compelled to sign if he wishes to be hired?

We could go on and on. But the point is that every one of the great gains of the CIO drive to organize the mass production industries — seniority, the

grievance procedure, the written contract, dues check-off, paid time for officials — has been transformed into a means of strengthening the authority of management. It is not possible in this paper to review the steps in this transformation. For now, it is enough to note that the regulating role which unions always fulfilled to some degree has become their dominant aspect.

It is easy to cry "sell-out" at the typical labor agreement. Certainly sell-outs are common. But the root of the problem does not lie in bad leadership — although there is plenty of that — but in the institution of contract unionism itself. Indeed, one could well argue that the more conscientiously, within its own lights, the union defends the contractual interests of its members the more firmly it "rivets the laborer to capital" as "the wedges of Vulcan did Prometheus to the rock."

Union Reform No Solution

No solution will come through working within the existing union structure. Consider the minimal demand for the abolition of the "no strike" clause, which would not fundamentally alter the role of the union, since it would legalize strikes in cases of the employer's violation of the contract but not in cases where an inadequate contract needs amendment. In spite of its minimal character, winning the abolition of the "no strike" clause would represent an advance for the workers.

Why has the "no strike" clause, universally hated by the workers, persisted as a fixed part of virtually every union contract? The employers generally insist on its inclusion in the contract because it ensures smooth operations. Union officials tend to support it because frequent strikes make their work harder, expose them to closer examination by their constituencies and jeopardize their prerogatives. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, some union locals have passed resolutions calling for the abolition of the clause.

These resolutions have remained on paper. The reason is not hard to discover. Those moments at which the "no strike" clause is the greatest barrier to struggle — when the workers wish to strike during the term of the contract — are precisely the times when it cannot be negotiated out of the contract. And those times when it can be negotiated out — when the contract has expired and strikes are legal — the "no strike" clause fades into the background as an issue with the potential for mobilizing large numbers of workers. It is the old story of the leaky roof: when it is raining you can't fix it and when the sun is out you don't have to.

Time and again, opposition caucuses with the primary goal of winning union elections have been proven either futile or dangerous. They are futile because the masses of workers, particularly the unskilled, the young, the Black and the women workers, are rightly cynical about unionism, and will not respond to any programs, no matter how good they sound, which offer only another version of trade unionism.

On those occasions where inner-union opposition caucuses are successful in attracting a large following, they prove to be dangerous because they can and do pull the most militant workers away from struggle with the employer into inner-union politics, thus undermining the growth of working class consciousness.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

To our knowledge, the most significant exception to the sorry state of the labor movement is the League of Revolutionary Black Workers — made up of its component groups DRUM, ELRUM, FRUM and others — with its main present base in the Detroit auto plants. The program of the League, of ending racism and fighting for workers' power in the plants, is in the interests of all workers. This program, combined with its militant practice of direct mass action and its systematic efforts at raising the class consciousness of the workers, makes it an instructive contrast to official unionism.

Of course, the League, as its name indicates, is an organization of Black workers. We feel that it is necessary in many situations for Black workers to organize separately. It would be wrong to expect them to wait for white workers to repudiate their racial privileges and join in the fight against racism. By organizing themselves and carrying on a fight against white supremacy, Black workers are making a tremendous contribution to the struggle of the entire working class. In addition, the special oppression and experience of the Black workers makes it possible for them to provide leadership for the whole working class.

Need for a New Organization of Workers

The separate organization of Black workers is not sufficient to build a working class movement able to take power in industry and in the country generally. Something else is needed, not in competition with the organizations of Black workers, but in addition to them. That something else is an organization open to all working people, that is based at the work place and that carries on a constant struggle, using all forms of direct action, in the political and economic interests of the workers as a class.

What would such an organization look like?

Membership should be universal — a member

once in one industry, a member always in all industries. The structure should be built along plant and industry lines — that is, there should be locals in each organized place of work, and locals in the same industry should be grouped together in an industrial council.

Dues should be low — an organization that relies on direct action and on-the-job strikes does not need a large war chest. Under no circumstances should the organization sign an agreement with an employer which limits its freedom of strike action in any way. Nor should "winning" pension and welfare plans which tie the worker to his present employer ever be a goal. Instead, the fight must be for universal pension and welfare plans for all workers, regardless of service to any one employer.

Aside from locals formed along purely industrial lines, the organization should encourage locals of Black and Spanish-speaking workers, and locals of women workers, as well as Black and Latin caucuses and women's caucuses within mixed locals, and any other forms necessary to ensure the freedom and independence of action of these specially oppressed groups.

It should strive to establish the closest relations and organic unity among all sections of the working class, recognizing that the principal responsibility for achieving such unity rests with the privileged group — the white male workers.

"Solidarity Forever" Means "Privileges Never"

One of the greatest crimes of contract unionism is that it has given legal force to the color and sex privileges of white male workers. Contract unionism, in this regard, has been both a result and a reinforcement of their tendency to place their own immediate individual and group interests over the interests of the entire working class, and to act in ways that amount to scabbing on the class as a whole. White and male supremacy, which have been built in through "seniority," "training," "qualifications" and other devices, have given a virtual monopoly of the better jobs — better in terms of pay, conditions and security — to white men. Their racism and chauvinism leads them to fight to preserve and extend these privileges. This attachment to special favors from the boss is the real underlying cause of disunity within the working class, which works to the detriment of the entire class, including the sectors it is supposed to protect.

A programmatic challenge to the exclusion of Black and women workers from full equal job competition with white men, which includes a challenge to all the mechanisms by which such exclusion is enforced, is a central feature of the workers' organization that we are committed to build. Without such a challenge, all talk of "revolutionary class unity" is empty.

And we must be clear that while these privileges cannot be broken down without a challenge to contract unionism, their elimination will not come automatically from such a challenge. Special attention must be given to ensure that demands which presently are seen, especially by white male workers, as demands *of* the Black or women workers become demands of *all* workers *for* the Black and female members of the working class. The slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all," must be applied literally to the fullest extent.

Political Action

The political face of contract unionism, which consists of electoral and legislative maneuvering within the framework of capitalist politics, is as bankrupt as the economic face, and for the same reasons. A workers' organization must represent the interests of the working class in the political, as well as the economic, arena. Such issues as opposition to aggressive, imperialist war, and domestic repression of the people, the winning of full freedom for the Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and other oppressed peoples, equal rights for women, the defense of the socialist countries, and the general fight to improve the people's livelihood are questions of the deepest concern to wage workers.

In the political, as in the economic sphere, the stress must be on direct action by the workers, to make the bosses pay for their crimes against the people. The recent mass walkout by Black workers at the Ford plant in Chicago in response to the police murders in Augusta and Jackson State is a fine example which should be extended through U.S. industry.

The central weapon of the organization we are projecting is the general political strike, and by more limited actions and propaganda and agitation the workers must be prepared to use this tactic effectively.

Those Who Agree Must Begin

People who appreciate the need for an organization along the lines we have described must begin to build the foundations for it immediately.

How do we propose to work toward such an organization?

The masses of workers haven't ceased to struggle for an instant. Beginning with individual goofing-off, pilfering and absenteeism, including sabotage of production and the organized evasion of work standards, increasingly taking the form of rejection of contracts negotiated for them by their union officials,

now and again breaking out in wildcat strikes and violent confrontations with government authority — the workers daily demonstrate that where there is oppression, there is resistance.

We recognize the limitations of such spontaneous struggles. Except in some cases involving Black workers, they usually represent group rather than class interests and sometimes even take a reactionary turn. Without a clear idea of how local struggles fit into a total picture, the tendency of the workers involved is to fall back into the usual patterns of contract unionism and acceptance of the employers' control over their lives.

We propose to start with the struggle that exists. We do not propose to channel the energies generated in such spontaneous actions into a program of union reform. Instead, we propose to build a revolutionary mass workers' organization which can take part in on-going struggles and initiate new ones, which can develop these struggles both tactically and politically, coordinate them, transform them from group to class struggles, and change their character from spontaneous to conscious acts . . . until they are seen as a part of the path to the smashing of capitalism and the taking of power by the working class.

We expect attacks from the union officials, who will see us as a threat to their elaborate structure which guarantees "good relations" between labor and capital. To these officials we answer, "Exactly!" You have got yourself in command of a ship, the ship of contract unionism, and it is sinking. We don't intend to go down with it, and we don't think the masses of workers will either. We have begun work on a new ship and, if in the course of our work we have to tear a few planks out of your vessel, or even blow the leaky old barge to hell, so be it. As for your soft jobs and big expense accounts and fancy dinners with the bosses, we couldn't care less.

Aside from the union officials, other forces who can see no further than inner-union caucuses will call us "dual unionists," and the charge will be made that we propose isolating the most advanced workers and abandoning the mass of workers to the official union structure. But in the first place, since membership in most existing unions is compulsory, the question does not arise of individuals "leaving" them — their dues will still be checked off from the paycheck, right next to the federal income tax.

In the second place, we are not suggesting that work in the unions stop. Agitation within the union can often be a useful means of helping the workers overcome their illusions about what can be done within them.

The fact is that few workers are active in the unions. Most don't bother to vote in union elections, and the recent spectacle of an open meeting of Local 65 of the United Steelworkers, "representing" 11,000 people at the South Works of U.S. Steel in Chicago, being attended by a total of *sixteen* members ought to teach us something. But in cases where participating in union elections, organizing to run and support candidates, fighting over union policy and other such activities within the union can be useful in organizing workers to strengthen a mass revolutionary workers' organization, by all means such activities should be undertaken. The main point is that the aim is to build an organization that can confront individual employers and the capitalist class on the basis of independent power, not to build caucuses to influence union officials.

The great labor upsurge of the 1930's led to the pushing aside of the old craft unions and the formation of the CIO. The coming upsurge of the 1970's represents a challenge to the past more profound even than that which produced the CIO. If it is to have any lasting impact, it must lead to the pushing aside of the old unions, more thoroughly than was done by the CIO, and the formation of new-type organizations. It is the task of revolutionaries to recognize this process, align themselves with it and help it to fruition.

REFLECTIONS ON ORGANIZING (1970) by Don Hamerquist

The revolutionary potential of the working class flows from its role in a system of social production that requires interdependence and co-operation. This class role provides the social basis for workers to first sense, and then understand, that they have a position of power to use against their oppression. They have the power of being collective producers without whom there is no production. Individual actions, even those which border on the heroic — and most of the ones that we are considering are quite the opposite of heroic — do not make the workers more aware of this power. They manifest the fact of the workers' oppression without showing the possibility and the efficacy of collective action by the workers. Thus they can't be used to draw general lessons about both the necessity *and the possibility* of independent working-class organization. Since this awareness is vital to our perspective, and since it cannot be lectured into the workers, some experience of collective action, no matter how minimal, is the necessary social condition — the only real base — for our perspective.

The spontaneous individual actions at the point of production are separated into a few different categories. The practical reasons why none develop logically into collective struggle will become clearer. Three such divisions are logical: actions which damage the final product, actions which cut down on production, actions which challenge the authority of the management. Though in practice these categories of individual struggle seldom appear very distinctly, it is helpful to make the separation here in order to clarify different sorts of limitations of spontaneous individual struggle.

The first case amounts to either direct or indirect sabotage, and the end result of sabotage of the product is to the benefit of the capitalist class in its role as the major consumer and taxpayer. Capitalism spends a great deal of effort to artificially maintain its profits by marketing unnecessary and shoddy goods. Sabotage by the workers only adds a statistically insignificant quantity to the mass of defective merchandise that capitalism produces deliberately. For example, it doesn't begin to compare with the deliberate pressure by the management to get the workers to work harder and faster. So long as the amount of workers' sabotage is fairly uniform across the economy, even individual firms can't be hurt very much by it. And in the event that such a variation exists for a while, at most it could only mean a few plant closures and company failures — minor readjustments for the system as a whole and of no advantage to the workers one way or the other.

Individual actions that restrict output and lower productivity do hurt management, and it will immediately take retaliatory action to change the situation. If we assume that the individual action is covert, that it does not involve a direct challenge to the authority of the management (a legitimate assumption since we will consider this aspect separately), then the management response will be to fix blame on a group of workers and take punitive action against the group as a whole. This can take many forms, but it usually means either that other workers will have to do the job of whoever is screwing around, or they will have to force him to do his share. Beyond this, such a situation is bound to bring down additional supervision, perhaps even undercover cops posing as workers, and jeopardize all the little ways that workers find to make the job more tolerable: sitting in the John, walking around and talking to other workers in slow periods, reading or eating on the job.

When a major disruption of production occurs, like the sabotage of an important piece of machinery as opposed to spending too much time in the toilet, the danger to other workers is even greater. They can be put in a position where their own job is in jeopardy, where they must choose between risking their job or fingering someone else. In any case, all examples of such covert individual actions involve risks for other workers that they haven't agreed to take, not to mention putting extra burdens on other workers.

There is another factor at play. Both variants of individual action involve screwing up the work in one way or another, and this makes the time pass slower and the work more difficult for everyone. Most workers, especially the more conscious ones, take pride in being able to do their job well. If they choose to do it badly for a while, that is one thing; but if somebody else prevents them from doing it well, they get irritated. Since workers are hostile to these sorts of individual actions for partially justifiable reasons, not just company-sucking inclinations, there is no reason to think they form a basis for initiating organized struggle.

What about challenges to the power and authority of management — usually in the person of the foreman? On the surface it would appear that these are forms of individual struggle which would demonstrate

to all workers the possibility of resisting oppression on the job in an organized way. Unfortunately it is not the case. Most of these challenges concern just one worker's particular area of competence and responsibility. And often this worker has some particular ability or some other peculiar feature that makes it possible for him to challenge the authority of the management while it is not possible for every worker to do it. Sometimes it is a question of a more experienced or skilled worker, sometimes a worker who is able to get another job, sometimes a worker who is white or male when most of the work force is Third World or female, sometimes a worker who knows that the union will support him. Any of these sorts of things can give an individual worker more latitude in defending his own interests than the average worker will have. And because this is the case, the average worker will not learn from watching such confrontations that he also has the power to stand up for his rights successfully.

Often these challenges are not really challenges with the management as such, but just with an element of it. For example, it is not uncommon for a worker, particularly an older one, to appeal over the head of the foreman to someone further up the management hierarchy, bolstering the illusion that the problem is that some people in management are "fair," but others are "chickenshit." A smart manager from time to time will over-ride a foreman who gets too zealous just to encourage such notions.

In one way or another all of these individual confrontations are channeled away from any area where they might encourage collective action. You can yell at the foreman, but do it in the office, not out on the floor. When an attempt is made to use a confrontation as a means of organizing a struggle, the latitude that is normally allowed is quickly taken away. For example, a worker can refuse to work at a job because it is not safe, and it is likely that the foreman will just try to assign someone else to do it. But if the same worker tries to make an issue out of the unsafe condition and to get everyone to refuse the job, he'd better be ready for trouble.

The conception of the omnipresence of class struggle in "Call to Organize" (a 1970 manifesto by Sojourner Truth), although necessary to counter the widespread idea on the Left in this country that the point of production is a sea of tranquility, is too Utopian to provide a firm basis for a plan to work. The spontaneous resistance at the point of production which has just been discussed has two features which both must be taken into account. It is action, struggle — but it is individualistic. This dual character means that any attempt to mechanically transfer such individual forms of resistance to oppression into a base for a coherent struggle against this oppression is bound to understate the real difficulties and to lead to an uncritical submission to spontaneity or to silly attempts to provide "leadership" by providing "models of individual militance."

What are really important are the examples of *collective* struggles in the factory and the conditions for further developing these. Though this narrows the initial base, the base is still there, more evident in some factories than in others, of course. So the question is: *How can a mass independent working-class movement be built from these elements of collective struggle?* Where do we begin? How do we work? These are the issues I will deal with in the rest of this paper.

Almost all Left groups have standard advice for people who are doing production work. It generally goes something like this: Learn the job and the grievances; single out the natural leaders and most advanced workers; make friends, but keep low until you have some time on the job and people will listen to what you have to say. Then try to get the advanced workers together, perhaps in a discussion group, so more general political issues can be raised; maybe at that time it will be possible to begin pushing a definite program, circulating some leaflets, and so on.

Usually this advice is put within the framework of the inner-union caucus perspective, but that isn't essential. Then there are variations depending on the Left-wing group involved. In the Communist Party the emphasis will be put on studying the contract, attending union meetings, and getting on a committee. Other groups will stress developing cadre through communist education as a pre-condition for mass work or involving the advanced workers in the "movement."

Depending on the conditions, any or all of these bits of advice can be all right. But they leave all of the real questions and all of the difficult problems unanswered. In the first place, any job has a number of more or less distinct groupings among the workers, not uncommonly with a good deal of hostility between them. Once a worker gets identified with one of these groupings, it is difficult to break that identification down. The reason it is important to be aware of this is that there are at least three or four social groupings which have the potential of providing an initial cadre of people to work with. There are the younger workers, the Black and Latin workers, the various opposition groupings within the union local, and the de-facto leadership of various department struggles. Each of these social groupings presents specific possibilities and problems for pulling together a working cadre. This is not understood by most Left groups. Their tendency is to select one or another of

these social groupings to work in, ignoring its limitations and the potentials elsewhere.

For example, it is very common to find Left people who argue that Black and Latin workers are more open to struggle in general, and to revolutionary organization in particular, than are workers generally. The same basic argument is commonly extended to young workers. In fact, it is often claimed that the organizing potential in the basic industries flows almost exclusively from the influx of young and Black and Latin workers into these jobs. The implication is that the experience which these workers have gained outside of the process of production — in the ghetto communities, in the schools, in the army — is what makes them potentially more revolutionary inside of the factory.

What does it mean to say that a worker is open to revolutionary ideas? Fundamentally it means that he is open to seeing that working people are a class that has the power to make a revolution (a socialist revolution, that is). Are Black, Latin, and young workers more open to such an understanding? The answer is that they are more open to some aspects of it and less open to other aspects of it than most workers.

These workers have a relatively vivid experience of aspects of the capitalist structure where the contradictions are sharper and the crises more advanced than at the point of production. Certainly this makes them more aware that the only real answer to their needs and grievances is a revolutionary answer. But it does not necessarily make them more aware that the working class and only the working class can make the revolution. It is true to say that Black, Latin, and young workers (not to ignore the differences between the three groups) are more open to general revolutionary propositions than are the masses of workers, but it does not necessarily follow from this that they are more open to the specific forms of revolutionary organization and action which are suited to the point of production.

In fact, it is quite common for such workers to define their revolutionary position in distinction to the non-revolutionary, or even counter-revolutionary, essence of the masses of workers. This inevitably leads to sectarianism, avoiding the grievances flowing from the work process and the fight for the programmatic leadership of the masses of workers, and seeing the revolution occurring independently of any of this. Beyond this, many of the struggles that these workers have experienced have been in arenas where mass mobilization was a tactic that didn't immediately raise the issue of power in the way it does at the point of production. Thus many of these workers don't understand the importance of mass participation in struggle, and are likely to counterpose various Leftist military or semi-military tactics and small group conspiratorial organization to a mass line and mass organization.

This is not to deny the tremendous positive impact on the consciousness and activity of workers that struggles outside the point of production have had — particularly the struggle for Black liberation. Certainly it is a greater advance that a large percentage of Black workers in basic industry consider themselves "revolutionaries." Workers have learned a lot from these struggles, but, to repeat, nothing they have learned will magically create the specific forms of revolutionary organization and action which are suited to the factory.

Wherever there is any life in the local union there will always be a number of individuals or groupings that make up more or less of a "Left" or militant opposition to local leadership forced to be "mature" and "responsible" by the terms of the contract and by the web of working relationships with the management that are a part of their offices. Since in most situations there is little alternative to the union for those workers who want to be active on economic issues, it would be foolishly sectarian to discount the possibility of recruiting some workers from this grouping into an initial cadre. This is particularly true since almost every older worker who has some contact with socialist ideas and many of the leaders in dealing with departmental issues and grievances will be in the union opposition.

But care is needed in relating to this grouping of workers. A lot of militant talk has got to be discounted as rhetoric, and a lot of activity has got to be examined for various opportunistic and careeristic motives. The local union leaderships are filled with people who were known for their militance and activism — until they were elected. That in itself should rule against taking such workers at face value. Two important tests when considering such workers as potential cadre are whether most of their work is organizing against the management or whether that is subordinated to a fight against the union leadership, and whether the agitating and organizing that is done actually develops the involvement and participation of other workers and doesn't just build blocs for campaigns for union office. Most important, a communist should never get so involved with the inner-union opposition that he or she becomes isolated from the workers who are cynical about union politics.

The last grouping from which members of initial cadres might be recruited is the leadership which develops in departmental or shop struggles. (Though sometimes this group is thoroughly mixed in with the union opposition, that isn't always the case, particularly if there has been a lot of job action.) At first it might seem that these workers are already engaged in

direct struggle with the management and should easily see the importance of building independent organization. In fact, there are Left groups which argue as if the revolution would be successful already if various union bureaucrats and self-proclaimed socialist vanguards would just leave these militant workers alone. But that is just another brand of utopianism. Though these workers have a good sense of the power of collective action and the importance of unity, they lack any clear perspective which could take job actions out of the framework of reactions to oppression and incorporate them into an offensive strategy. This limitation of leadership is one of the reasons why virtually all job actions fail to develop a continuing momentum that can place a constant pressure on the capitalist control of the production process. And, as should be expected, the lack of any perspective for the activity on the job is paralleled by a confused and contradictory position on all general political issues.

In short, the initial cadre of workers must have a number of different characteristics which show up among different social groups in the factory. It must be open to a general revolutionary critique of capitalism; it must be aware of the importance of organization; it must be able to provide leadership for the struggles that develop on the job. Workers radicalized outside of the job are more likely to accept a radical critique than they are to see the possibility and necessity of building mass struggle and organization. The trade-union opposition might want to get organized and even accept a few revolutionary propositions, but they won't see why this should go beyond a struggle for control of the union. The leader of job actions is likely to be great whenever a spontaneous struggle arises, but to have no idea of what to do in other situations or how to relate job issues to general political issues. Each of these limitations in areas of possible support for our perspective help spell out the sorts of political problems that are involved in implementing it.

The first goal of a communist in a factory is to become a political center so that his or her ideas and approaches are more than just talk, so that after a few months they have the force and prestige that ordinarily would come only after years of experience on a job. In the future it is likely that this will be easier because of the possibilities of identifying with known and admired struggles in other factory situations, as, for example, identification with the Flint Strike would have been possible and helpful in the early CIO period. Now, however, it is a difficult and delicate problem.

Still, there are a number of ways to approach the difficulty, any one of which may work depending on the circumstances. At this point also it is necessary to stress the fact that there are a number of different ways to achieve the end, because every Left group seems to have a favorite tactic which it puts forth as a necessary first step in factory organizing. Such fixation on a certain tactic is dangerous because it maximizes the chance of a mistake, and a mistake involves more than just wasting some time or even getting fired. It can mean polarizing the workers in the immediate area in such a way that no work is possible.

It is often argued that revolutionaries are obligated to make their positions known to other workers, to keep their "politics up front," as the phrase goes. This then, assuming that the proper politics are kept up front, is supposed to coalesce the advanced workers around the source of such wisdom. There is a little validity to this notion, but it shouldn't lead anyone to hasten to publicize his revolutionary credentials. Besides the clear danger of being fired before being prepared to make an issue of it, there is the greater danger of not being taken seriously by the more conscious workers, while being taken too seriously by the most backward workers. Then the potential base regards you as a nut while the opposition thinks that you are a real threat — and that's bad.

The stress on arguing politics on the job needs to be overhauled. It is a hangover of a movement that functioned primarily among students. This doesn't mean that it is wrong to confront political positions directly and that one should skirt around the edges of the touchy issues. It just means to use good sense. Don't feel obligated to challenge everything you don't like; don't confuse stating your own mind with changing someone else's; don't waste time arguing with lost causes; don't overestimate the importance of "winning" or "losing" arguments. It is a lot easier to win arguments, or even to make verbal converts, than it is to change the way the workers act. But the fundamental way that consciousness is changed is by changing social practice. Unless this is done, polemical victories and ideological converts are not going to be very meaningful. In fact, talking too much can polarize the workers over abstract or peripheral issues in a way that inhibits direct action.

There are no magic "raps" which can transform a new worker into a leader on the job, and there are no heroic actions which can accomplish this either. If a communist is so careful about risking his job that he takes a lot of crap from the foreman, other workers are going to have some questions about him. But on the other hand, getting a reputation for "not taking any shit" won't automatically change his status either. In the first place, that posture is likely to involve the political mistake of putting too much stress on the foreman or other low management figures. Then, most workers aren't impressed with

confrontations which appear to be over pretexts rather than real issues, and a clever foreman can make this appear to be the case most of the time. In fact, the foreman can easily make it appear that what is actually wanted is preferential treatment. But, of course, the most serious drawback of the confrontation approach is the risk that your neck will get overextended and you will get suspended or fired. Then that is the issue, and it is hard to organize around yourself, especially at the beginning.

Another common idea should be brought in at this point. Many Lefties begin work in a factory convinced that there are one or two issues which they must emphasize. These issues might be valid ones, for example the denial of equality to women workers and workers of color or the necessity to expose the role of the union, or they might be foolish. But assuming that they are issues of over-riding importance for a production organizing strategy, that does not mean that they must always be the initial or the most important tactic when the work is just beginning. Here again good sense is needed. There will be times when taking a clear stand on such issues, either in discussions or in a leaflet, either on the job or at a union meeting, will be absolutely essential. But this will not always be true. On this point as on all others, any time a communist allows a sense of moral obligation to over-ride political judgment, a mistake is being made. That point has to be made, but it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that certain organizing issues do have a strategic importance, and the strategy must always determine the tactics. Any approach which evades these issues when they are relevant is opportunistic — and historically that has been the main weakness.

A traditional way to begin work is to attempt to take advantage of the union structure by filing a lot of grievances; or, perhaps, running for shop steward or trying to set up a department grievance committee. At times this sort of work can help, but it must be combined with more independent forms of activity, or no basis will be laid to explain the sharp break with the union structure that must occur relatively early in the work. Unless this kind of activity is undertaken very carefully, it can raise false hopes that basic changes in working conditions can be won through the grievance procedure. Then, when this illusion is shattered, the result can be an even greater cynicism and sense of futility. Two other implications of this approach should be recognized. It will involve a lot of reliance on the inner-union opposition — usually not a good idea — and it will make it more difficult to address all of the issues which cannot be directly attacked at department level, and these of course are usually the most important issues.

Perhaps the most popular initial approach to factory work is to "put out a leaflet," to begin distributing in-plant agitation and propaganda. Just the ability to lay out a more or less coherent line, put it in writing, and handle the technical problems of producing and distributing a leaflet or a newsletter will give a communist some political leverage, assuming, of course, that other workers know who is responsible. But this won't exist forever, and, more important, it can be effectively canceled if the material has bad or incomprehensible politics. But beyond the problem of bad politics that don't improve because they are written rather than spoken, there are several other issues involved in this approach.

The first is the problem of security. It is almost always risky just to distribute leaflets and newsletters, and it is even more so to let it get known by the management and union leadership involved in the preparation of them. But, on the other hand, if we want the written material to be of maximum help, it is important that the workers be generally aware of who is behind it. If this is kept secret, much of the political potential will be lost, particularly the possibility of getting support when the union and the management combine to suppress the material, as they almost inevitably will.

Since the function of leaflets and newsletters is not just general education or agitation, but to help create a base of independent organization, they must aim toward mobilizing the workers for certain specific struggles. It can easily happen that the literature can make threats, pledges, and calls to action that it can't back up with a base of real strength. This hurts. When something is put on paper, the authors are committed to it; and if they can't deliver, the credibility of their organizing work is damaged.

If written material is too heavily relied on, a few mistakes of this sort can lead to pulling back from a practical program toward more general and sometimes more "revolutionary" propaganda. But then, instead of linking together a cadre of workers around a definite plan of action, the literature attracts a circle of contributors and readers who agree with its general stance on the issues but are not necessarily committed to — or even interested in — doing any organizing work in the factory. While the production and distribution of literature will definitely help to stir things up in the plant, by itself this work will not pull together the elements of an independent organization. Because this can often be the path of least resistance, it is necessary to be constantly on guard against the tendency to let the written work become a substitute for the other sorts of organizing work which are also necessary. Generally on this point it is important not to let the rhetoric get out of hand; to develop a practical program that flows from the general perspective; and to avoid letting the analysis

outstrip the program or the program outstrip the actual base of support among the workers.

Once a beginning is made and a group of workers begins to pull together around our perspective, then what do we do? Though this question raises a host of issues, this paper is basically concerned with just one: the role of direct action on the job. The "Call to Organize" placed a great deal of emphasis on direct action, treating it as the direct opposite of parliamentary legalistic maneuvering inside the union structure, which in turn was the essence of everything that we opposed.

There is a base of growing struggle, of direct action, in the factory, though as pointed out earlier the "Call" exaggerated this base. But this is a base of spontaneous struggle, and some attention must be paid to just what that word "spontaneous" means. A spontaneous action is not held together by a leadership which sees it as part of a general strategy for sharpening the class struggle. Lacking such leadership, its demands are seldom clearly stated and related to its tactics. Because it is not incorporated into a conscious class-struggle perspective, by a combination of some selective concessions and repression by the management and union working in tandem the action will be absorbed and its energy dissipated over a period of time. The management seldom has to respond to spontaneous direct action, even when it reaches the stage of large-scale wildcat strikes, with blanket repression: firings, suspensions, transfers, not to mention injunctions and police.

It makes a great deal of difference, however, when a conscious grouping is deliberately organizing direct action as a part of a strategy to supplant the union and make things tough for the management. The leadership of such direct actions can expect management to use all of its resources to isolate and crush it. "Direct action" organized as a part of a perspective will entail an entirely different risk-benefit calculus for the workers than the direct actions that occur spontaneously as a response to the conditions of work. It is clear that the risks will be increased enormously. This leads some people to argue that we can't afford direct action, or that we will only be able to afford it after we build a strong organization. But along with increased risks go increased benefits, so that direct action, while more difficult by far than the "Call" would lead us to expect, is no less essential than it claimed.

The following selection from Gramsci helps to lay a theoretical base for this argument.

> Philosophy in general does not in fact exist: various philosophies and conceptions of the world exist, and one always makes a choice between them. How does this choice come about? Is it merely intellectual, or is it more complex? And does it not often happen that there is a contradiction between the intellectual fact and the norm of conduct? What then will the real conception of the world be: the one which is logically affirmed as an intellectual fact, or the one which results from real activity of a certain person, which is implicit in his action? And since actions are always political actions, can we not say that the real philosophy of anyone is contained in his politics? This conflict between thought and action, that is the co-existence of two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other explaining itself in effective actions, is not always due to bad faith. Bad faith can be a satisfactory explanation for some individuals taken singly, or even for more or less numerous groups, but it is not satisfactory when the contrast shows itself in the life of large masses: then it cannot be other than the expression of more profound contradictions of a historical and social order. It means that a social group, which has its own conceptions of the world, even though embryonic (which shows itself in actions, and so only spasmodically, occasionally, that is, when such a group moves as an organic unity) has, as a result of intellectual subordination and submission, borrowed a conception which is not its own from another group, and this it affirms in words. And this borrowed conception it also believes it is following, because it does follow it in "normal" times, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but precisely subordinate and submissive. (Antonio Gramsci: *The Modern Prince,* page 61)

The working class as it exists under capitalism has two conceptions of the world. One is essentially capitalist. It accepts private property as necessary; sees competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and selfishness as basic characteristics of "human nature"; and does not challenge the notions of right, justice, and freedom which serve to maintain the dominance of the capitalist class. As Gramsci says, this capitalist conception of the world is not just an intellectual fact. It is a pattern of conduct. The working class, in ". . . 'normal' times when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but precisely subordinate and submissive . . ." acts as if capitalism would be here forever. But not all times are "normal" times. There are instances when sections of the working class move "as an organic unity," as part of a potential ruling class, and in the process demonstrate in action that

class's "own conception of the world, even though embryonic."

When do workers act as an organic unity? Clearly, individual workers can, and do, participate in collective activity outside of the factory, as Black or Latin people, women, consumers, taxpayers, students, or even "citizens." But even if these struggles are totally composed of workers in a sociological sense, they don't develop conditions where the participants in them become aware that they are members of a class that has the capacity to make a revolutionary transformation of the entire society. This happens when workers struggle in an area that is closer to their collective social role of producers.

The place where workers, as workers, can move in "organic unity" at this stage of the political development of the class is at the point of production. Does this mean strikes, for example? It does, and it doesn't. Some strikes involve mass participation in struggle, but most clearly do not. No alternative conception of the world is manifested in those strikes where the union and the management co-operate in the orderly closure of operations; where picketing is only a dull and tiring public-relations chore; and where the bulk of the workers just disappear till a new contract is signed. And this is the character of most present-day strikes.

It is in the course of the struggle of the workers themselves to gain some control over the large part of their lives which is spent at work where the alternative conception of the world is most likely to show itself. Such direct actions, as opposed to most officially sanctioned strikes, allow workers to directly participate in defining the problem, setting the goals, working out the tactics. This makes them a party to the various confrontations with the other side. And it is through such participation and confrontation that the "embryonic" alternative conception of the world manifests itself in changed ways that workers think, act, and relate to other workers.

While job action is the necessary basis for building a mass revolutionary movement, in itself it is not sufficient. Gramsci is very careful to use the adjective "embryonic" when talking about the new attitudes and relationships which materialize during a struggle. Like anything embryonic, these characteristics will not survive unless proper conditions for their survival are created. For present purposes, only one such condition needs to be mentioned. There must be a conscious leadership that puts the lessons of the particular struggle into a form in which they can be understood and socialized — made into the basis for a new sort of "normal" behavior for the workers. Without such a leadership, both reason and experience indicate that the job actions will peter out and the routine of capitalist control over production will be speedily re-established.

If the direct action is not integrated into a revolutionary perspective, it will just buttress one or another aspect of false consciousness among the workers. Either it will support exaggerated reformist ideas about what is possible to win ("if we just stick together"), or it will support cynicism and resignation ("the workers won't stick together when the going gets rough"). Either direct action is integrated into a revolutionary perspective, or it is absorbed within the framework of capitalism. There is no other alternative.

Direct action at the point of production creates the conditions for the workers to begin to appreciate the necessity and possibility of socialism, but this lesson will only be learned to the extent that there is some grouping attempting to teach it. In the absence of such teachers, the various lessons that capitalism constantly beats into the workers (you get what you deserve, look out for Number One, take it to the union, nobody gives a damn about anyone else) will be the lessons that are learned. Any Left group which relies on direct action to develop an autonomous working-class consciousness and an independent revolutionary workers' movement by itself, is going to wait forever.

Though this last position is present in the Left in this country, it is not a big factor. Perhaps this is because production organizing is in such a primitive stage here that most groups haven't discovered all of the ways of relying on spontaneity in this area. However, the opposite position, that direct action is only one among a number of possible tactics and approaches toward building a mass revolutionary working-class movement, not an essential part of any such attempt, is very popular.

It is easy to see how conditions support this position. On one hand, it is extremely difficult to build a base of direct action in a factory situation in a short time. Management repression is immediate and harsh. The issues at hand for such actions — departmental and shop issues for the most part — are often not the issues which concern the workers most. On the other hand, there is a growing group of workers radicalized by experiences outside of the production process who are already open to revolutionary ideas and organizations. So it seems that the risks far outweigh the benefits, and that a revolutionary mass movement can be built without taking the risks involved in emphasizing organized job actions.

Without downgrading this process of radicalization at all, it is no substitute for the sort of collective experience involved in direct job action. A grouping whose individual members all regard themselves as "revolutionaries" is not necessarily a revolutionary group. This is the case, not so much because the individuals may be mistaken or hypocritical about

their own politics, though that is far from uncommon, but because the test of whether a group of workers is revolutionary is whether it is able to find a programmatic link between the immediate needs of workers and the struggle for socialism. No amount of propaganda and education will build such a link by itself. It comes through the workers' experiencing in struggle their distinctiveness from the capitalist class; the weakness of the capitalist class; the possibility of working-class unity; and the possibility of constructing a society of freely associated producers — socialism.

But the argument goes even further. Direct action is also needed in order to develop a cadre of workers who can provide the skeleton of a future mass movement. Why is, this true? Because we can't take an individual's politics at the value he or she places on them. A worker is revolutionary because he shows in action that he can act in the way necessary to create the conditions for making a revolution, not just because he is willing — or even anxious — to be called a "revolutionary."

Members of any sort of cadre group must be constantly tested, not by seeing if they can re-state the "correct" position on all of the major questions, but by seeing if they can develop a revolutionary practice and provide leadership for the masses of workers. Everything said in the course of this paper means that this practice must involve developing and leading job struggles of masses of workers in ways which maintain and strengthen the revolutionary potentials that are manifested in such struggles. What should be thought of a worker who claims to be a revolutionary but who is constantly opposed to attempts to generate and lead struggles of the workers? — who always argues that such actions are "premature," that "the workers aren't ready"? We should think that it is best to look elsewhere for cadre, that's what we should think. If the program doesn't stress direct action from the outset, how can potential cadre be put to this sort of test? As was said earlier, it is not necessarily the case that the workers most ready to adopt a generally "revolutionary" political stance are also those workers most ready to act out a revolutionary political practice.

Up to now mass struggle, mass organization, and mass movement have been used loosely, but they are not interchangeable. We must consider the general issue of organization: what we mean and what we don't mean by mass revolutionary organization; the relationship between mass organization and cadre groupings of revolutionary workers, and the relation of communist organization to both.

If all that was needed was a change in the leadership of the existing trade unions, a caucus of all those interested in fighting to reform the union and get a different leadership would be all the organization necessary. To expand the base of support for the caucus, communists would urge the masses of workers to participate more fully in the existing unions. It is quite conceivable that the goal would be to get revolutionaries into the union leadership, in which case the caucus would be limited to those willing to work on such a program.

However, it is necessary to do more than just change the leadership. (If more evidence of this is needed, consider the European labor movement, where much of the leadership is composed of various types who would be indignant at any suggestion that they weren't revolutionaries.) The problem with the unions isn't primarily bad leadership — and the solution isn't to replace it with good leadership. The problem is that the existing unions are more of a buffer between classes than an instrument of the workers, and this class collaborationism of the existing trade unions is so deeply rooted in their historically developed structure and function that organizations must be built that are a real alternative to the trade unions for the masses of workers, that are independent of the existing trade-union structure, and that aim at supplanting it. Such organizations will have two distinct characteristics: They will be revolutionary organizations, and they will be mass organizations. It is important to understand just what is — and what is not — entailed by each of these characteristics.

In the current movement, virtually anything that appears to be worthwhile is called "revolutionary," so naturally the term is losing any distinctive content. In applying the term to mass workers' organizations, something more specific is meant here. Such an organization is revolutionary if it rejects the bounds and limits placed on the class struggle by capitalist legality, which is fundamentally based on the current requirements for maintenance of capitalist property relations. It is revolutionary if it sets its goals and determines its tactics according to what the workers think is necessary and not what capitalism says is possible. The other side of the sloppy popular talk about revolution is the revisionists' attempt to restrict its relevance to the direct struggle for state power, which, of course, is not currently "on the order of the day." That too conveniently eliminates any distinction between revolutionary and reformist methods of work in a non-revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation. On one hand, everything is revolutionary; on the other hand, nothing can possibly be revolutionary.

To supplant the existing trade unions, we need a form of organization that struggles for reforms, but does not confine that struggle according to capitalist

criteria of practicality and rationality. In other words, these organizations will not go along with the management-rights clauses, the labor-management harmony crap, and the no-strike agreements; and that, in practice, will make them objectively revolutionary.

It is important to realize the significance of calling such organizations "objectively" revolutionary. It means that communists will be involved in a constant struggle inside such organizations with a whole gamut of non-revolutionary ideas and approaches, trying to prevent the revolutionary characteristics of the movement from being submerged. Beyond this there will be a constant struggle with various non-Marxist revolutionary as well as quasi-revolutionary positions.

Let me use the Flint sit-down strike to clarify my point. On one level the strike was a major reform struggle aimed at improving the wages and conditions of the General Motors workers and forcing GM to recognize the United Auto Workers as the representative of the workers. Most of the workers who participated in the strike did not see themselves as revolutionaries. Their goals were certain basic improvements of their immediate conditions. Even the strike leadership, many of whom were communists, did not see the struggle as a revolutionary one. In fact, GM was saying more about the revolutionary implications of the sit-down than the workers were.

But on another level, the Flint strike was a revolutionary struggle. The workers took possession of the means of production — not, it is true, to operate them for the common good, but in order to get some power over the work process. This was a challenge to the institution of capitalist private property that was clearly recognized as such by the capitalists. It was "illegal"; it went far beyond the permissible bounds and limits of labor organizing at a time when even picketing was of dubious legality. Beyond this, the way the strikers organized themselves — particularly their refusal to accept any external authority, even that of the local UAW leadership — foreshadowed the possibility of workers' self-government.

What happened was that the revolutionary potential of the struggle was lost in the wake of the attainment of some of its reform demands. As time passed, the UAW leadership presented the struggle only as a dramatic tactic to win a reform victory, and no communist leadership tried to teach the workers the various ways that the struggle had demonstrated their revolutionary potential. The mass-participation characteristics that were developed during the struggle were gradually replaced by typical inner-union parliamentarism. But this happened not just because of the strength and resilience of capitalism, but also as a result of the choices, mistakes, decisions, policies of the workers and union leaders involved. There was no clear struggle between a reformist and a revolutionary approach to the activity and organization that was developed during the strike — and there certainly could have been. Of course, that possibility was much harder to see at a time when the right to organize unions hadn't been won in basic industry, and thus the limitations of trade unionism weren't such a clear part of the workers' collective experience. But now it is clear that such struggles create conditions to build mass organizations which move increasingly out of the orbit of capitalist hegemony.

This clarifies the notion of "revolutionary" organization, but we must also spell out what is meant by "mass" organization. Lenin argued that workers' organizations should be trade unions and that these should be open to all workers who understand the need to struggle against the management and the government, and that they should function as publicly as possible. That in a nutshell is what is meant by the concept of "mass" organization.

But isn't this a foolish idea, considering that any attempt to set up such an organization will immediately lead to repression by management and the existing union? Doesn't this situation require that the organization be much more secret and conspiratorial, and that membership be closely restricted? It is true that the labor contract for practical purposes makes this type of mass workers' organization illegal, if and when the management decides to take action against it. This is a fact that must be taken into account, but it shouldn't dominate the perspective.

The general characteristics of trade-union organization mentioned above were developed by Lenin at a time when trade unions were totally illegal in Tsarist Russia. Even so he argued for organization as open and public as possible, saying that the problem of maintaining security should be met by keeping the movement "so free and amorphous that the need for secret methods becomes almost negligible so far as the bulk of the members is concerned." That should be the response now also. As the movement gains strength, it will be able to win some de-facto legality and can use this to develop a more explicit organized form. But even while conditions prevent us from functioning in a completely public manner, the aim must be to utilize the possibilities that exist to the maximum in order to involve masses of workers and not just a small conspiratorial cadre. The reason this emphasis on the mass character is vital is that there is a major tendency to let the difficulties in functioning openly, the de-facto illegality of organizations of the type we aim to build, turn the work away from the masses of workers toward the development of a cadre group through internal education and so on.

Though the difficulties in functioning openly are certainly real, there is no alternative to using whatever possibilities exist and working to expand these

possibilities as rapidly as possible. This follows from the absolutely essential role of direct action spelled out in a previous section of the paper. There is no way that direct action can be developed if a conspiratorial cadre grouping becomes a substitute for, rather than a means to, a mass organization.

It is true that generally a relatively small group of workers will initially accept the perspective and begin to try to implement it. These will be those workers with sufficient commitment and understanding to spend the time and effort needed to test out political programs and approaches in periods when the overall struggle is at a low level. In effect they will constitute a cadre group, and at times this cadre group will be the extent of the organization — perhaps even of the movement. As the struggle develops these workers will form the leadership and the backbone, the core, of a mass trade-union form of workers' organization. It is a political mistake to organize this cadre group as rigorously and conspiratorially as the party organization of "professional revolutionists." That would damage both the leadership role of the party and the autonomy of the workers' organization — not to mention undermining all of the work to establish more open organization. It is the cadre groupings that serve as the social basis for developing a factory organizing perspective and as a primary source of recruits for the party of revolution.

REVIEW OF "REFLECTIONS ON ORGANIZING"

by Paul Thompson

Introduction

This article is worth commenting on in depth for a number of reasons. Sojourner Truth are an American group intervening in factory situations in Chicago. The growth in Europe of revolutionary interventionist organisations with a working class orientation, but outside traditional Leninist and Trotskyist currents, is a factor related to the explosion of working class autonomy, especially in France and Italy in recent years. Such groups as Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio have provided a rich source for us in terms of ideas and practice. But equally important are the groups with similar political orientation working in countries yet to have such explosions — like West Germany, USA and Britain. These groups are in a sense trying *to create through their intervention some of the pre-conditions for the development of class autonomy.*

There can be no mechanical parallels drawn between the experience of Sojourner Truth and Big Flame on the evidence of this document alone. But there are similarities, and the lessons they draw in many cases seem like ours. A critical evaluation of their document may help us to write our own "Reflections on Organising."

Individual and Collective Action

The first section of the document deals with the relevance of various types of individual action against capital, such as sabotage. The author seems to feel that the tendency towards the glorification of such acts is strong in some sections of the U.S. left. The document goes to great pains to point out that there can be

> no mechanical transfer of such individual forms of resistance to oppression into a base for coherent struggle.

It's pointed out that such tendencies lead to uncritical worship of spontaneity and "leadership models" based on individual militancy.

This seems quite straightforward to us, but then there develops a one-sided and partial view of individual action, and over-counterposes it to collective struggle. For instance, sabotage against the final product is criticised because it hurts the class as consumer and is a numerically insignificant part of commodity production as a whole. But surely this misses the point. Individual action against the product whether finished or in completion can be an expression of collective discontent, and is related dialectically to collective action. There is often a conscious combination of collective struggle or even collective "sabotage" with independent/individual actions that reinforce to collective level and are understood in that way by other workers. The degree to which individual actions are actually related to a collective process is dependent on the consciousness of the participants.

In this sphere the document is again one-sided, not taking into account the complexity of the issues involved. It is put forward that individual resistance to management is nearly always based purely on the particular needs of that worker — "one worker's particular area of competence and responsibility."

This seems to say that the average worker doesn't even partially generalise his or her grievance or experience, but challenges the management only when their job situation is threatened. But in our experience, the best shops learn precisely how to utilise individual grievances to generalise the struggle against management. And individual workers are well aware that if they fight or even conceive of their fight as a singular one, they are on a loser. The degree to which a general consciousness of collective responsibility will vary from shop to shop as the process of organisation and struggle is dependent on the history of the shop, and the number of more advanced workers. But in general, individual and collective action shouldn't be so polarised. Some individual actions do "show the possibility of collective action," not only manifesting the fact of oppression, which the document seems reluctant to believe.

Intervention and Collective Struggle

This section deals with many different points, the common theme being on the methods of intervention, how to operate inside the plant, etc. Like Big Flame, Sojourner Truth insist on the necessity of NOT accepting the natural and accepted contours and patterns of the work situation. Most groups, reflecting their Leninist models of class and class consciousness, have a priori methods of intervention, accepting in advance limits on their type of intervention and on the type of struggles and limitations of consciousness that can be achieved. They aptly describe the typical way of working:

> Learn the job and the grievances, single out the natural leaders and most advanced workers, make friends, but keep low on the job for some time until some people will listen to what you have to say. Then try to get the most advanced workers together, perhaps in a discussion group, so more general issues can be raised. Maybe at this time it will be possible to begin pushing a definite programme, circulating leaflets, etc. Usually this advice is put within the framework of a union caucus perspective, but this isn't essential. Then there are variations according to the left wing group involved. In the Communist Party the emphasis will be put on learning the contract, attending union meetings, getting on committees, etc. Other groups will stress developing cadres through communist education as a precondition for mass work or involving the advanced workers in the "movement."

Also like Big Flame, Sojourner Truth seem to reject the distinction between political (led by the party, against the state, offensive) and economic (defensive, the sphere of the Trade Unions, for the betterment of wages and conditions). If the proletariat is to develop political and organisational autonomy (that is, a sense of its separation from the needs and development of capital, and a sense of its historical task in overthrowing capital) — then it has to reject the contours of the existence that capital gives it. As Marx said, it cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. This doesn't mean just "during the revolution" but continually in the struggle against capital in all its forms, in production and out.

That means that those who see the struggle within production as economic by nature (the proletariat left to itself in Lenin's terms) naturally fit their political strategies around the ground capital gives us to fight. On a political level this means the whole "right to work" orientation at the present time, which is precisely within the ideological framework the ruling class is able to deal with and recuperate, making it impossible to raise revolutionary ideas and programmes.

Organisationally this means union structures of politics, the problem being seen in terms of the leadership of the unions and in the need to democratise the form. But as the document says, it is not a question of the leadership or democratisation of the unions but the actual role that unions play under capitalism, as mediators of the class struggle, which is not something which is temporary or dependent on the politics of specific people or groups but is

> deeply rooted in their (i.e., the unions') historically developed structures and functions.

They say that in the U.S. they must be supplanted by mass revolutionary organisations that

> reject the bounds and limits placed on the class struggle by capitalist legality . . . that sets its goals and determines its tactics according to what the workers think is necessary, not what capitalism says is possible.

There is a danger here in terms of mass organisation. It is wrong to pose the need for mass organisations that are in fact only revolutionary trade unions. The form of the mass organisations that reflect developing autonomy of the class can not be a fixed thing. Already in Italy and France they have taken different forms according to the specificity of the situation. We are talking neither about revolutionary alternative unions nor workers' councils nor Soviets in situations of dual power, but differing organisational forms

that will express the need of the class to control and determine its own struggles against the control and power of capital.

As it is impossible to talk of such mass organisations at the moment in Britain, the small groups that we have active in the factories must in some way prefigure the future development. Sojourner Truth are clear, as we are, that these groups cannot be based on the obsolete model of cells of "professional revolutionists" defined according to their ideological separation from other similar groups. They say:

> A grouping whose individual members all regard themselves as revolutionaries is not necessarily a revolutionary group . . . not so much because the individuals may be mistaken or hypocritical about their own politics but because the test of whether a group of workers is revolutionary or not is whether it is able to find a programmatic link between the immediate needs of workers and the struggle for socialism. . . . Members of any sort of cadre group must be constantly tested, not by seeing if they can re-state the "correct position" on all major questions, but by seeing if they develop a revolutionary practice and provide leadership for the mass of workers.

To develop such perspectives such groups need to break down the false distinctions between economic and political struggle, agitation and propaganda, minimum and maximum programmes, etc. We must seek to act as reference points for the struggle, drawing out and developing its revolutionary potential, providing organisational means of bringing together militants, who are genuine initiators of the struggles and who seek to push them in an autonomous direction. Big Flame has only begun this process, which is still in a very experimental stage for us, with its idea of base groups which link together internal and external militants and try to create a unity between the differing layers of workers that can be potentially involved on the basis of specific factory strategies, rather than trying to create unity on the basis of agreement on the already-given world view of the political group. This strategy precludes the potential constant re-creation of the politics of these units, which for us are autonomous parts of the group as a whole. Our task at the moment is to develop this programmatic link between the immediate demands of the workers and the struggle for socialism, a programme of self-abolition of the class that sees the need for the class to struggle against itself — its conditions of existence, for us at the moment primarily expressed in the struggle against work, that is, its domination, ideology, conditions, etc. The traditional groups' strategies are based around and subordinated to the concept of work within the factories. Outside of production, in the claimants' unions, the women's movement, the community struggles, etc., they are simply incapable of ideologically grasping the developments taking place. The need is for concrete strategy for the "right to live" which links up the various sectors of the movement.

Strata in the Factory

The document is at its most useful when dealing with the importance of the various strata in the factory, attacking the mistakes of the traditional groups' orientation to union oppositions, etc. — but also "leftist mistakes" of a priori identification of younger (and in the U.S. case, Black) workers as the ones with the most revolutionary potential in terms of getting together an initial group of people. They say that younger workers are more open to *some* aspects of revolutionary ideas and struggle. Some already have been influenced by radical ideas outside of production, in the area of youth culture, etc. Also, they are more combative inside in most cases; they have fewer responsibilities and are more willing to take action. But they are not necessarily open to specific forms of organisation and action. That is (and this has been Big Flame's experience to some extent), most fail to see the need for revolutionary organisation at best, but more seriously fail to see the need for their own involvement in struggles, except within their own existing patterns of combativity. They are also often sceptical of the possibility of mass participation of other workers, characterising them sometimes as "sheep." It may be that our approach to young workers is wrong, and even where we try to reach and organise with them. But the problems described by Sojourner Truth remain if, as we do, they want to organise in the factories.

They then deal with the union opposition (in the case of Britain, it is more likely to be the opposition within the shop stewards) — saying that it is wrong to discount this strata. Many of these workers have rich experience of the struggle, and often their political understanding is high, and in that sense they can be reference points for other workers. But this is also their weakness, as the document says:

> A lot of militant talk has got to be discounted as rhetoric and a lot of their activity has got to be examined for various opportunistic and careerist motives.

This doesn't come from their personalities; they haven't betrayed the struggle or anything like that.

It is something that follows their function in the factory. Shop stewards in Britain developed as piecework negotiators; there is a tradition of them fighting *for* their sections. Most politically advanced workers become stewards, as it gives them influence and a "piece of the action." But their objective role as mediators of the struggle and appropriaters of the initiative of their sections gradually push them away from any attempt to develop involvement and base initiatives. And this is the political stewards, who are not quite as riddled with the ideology of labourism. The rest are a direct and continuous blockage to any revolutionary or even "militant" action. Nevertheless, some workers from the "oppositions" can and should be encouraged to break with the worst parts of their role. As the document says, political workers will continue for some time to seek steward-type positions. And they can be a help, if a great attempt to change the normal pattern of relationships and attitudes to the struggle is made. But if these positions are not combined with other independent forms of activity,

> No basis will be laid to explain the break with the union structure that must occur relatively early in work.

This break cannot be made if, as the document suggests, the fight against the management is subordinate to the fight within the unions and their organising and involving other workers continues to be orientated towards building blocs for the union branch or within the stewards' committee.

A good analysis is also given of what they call the departmental leaders. To us the militants who take the initiatives on the sections and are most hostile to management, without necessarily being the most advanced in terms of political understanding, have a good sense of collective power and unity, but

> . . . often lack a clear perspective which could take job action out of the framework of defensive reaction . . . towards an offensive strategy: . . . job action fails to take a continuing momentum that can place constant pressure on the capitalist control of the production process.

But in a sense this is the most important strata in a factory, for groups who are not simply out to recruit cadres to "ideologise" them and send them back in to influence others. They are the most important because of their understanding of the needs of the struggle, and that is political too! It is easier in most cases to widen in the struggle the political scope of this strata, than it is to break the union-orientated workers from a lifetime of accepting the passivity of those around them, with the inevitable and understandable feelings of cynicism and isolation that brings. So, in conclusion the document says that the initial group of workers should

> . . . be open [though not necessarily committed — B.F.] to a real critique of capitalism, aware of the importance of organisation and be able to provide leadership for struggles on the job.

Pitfalls Inside the Factory

The rest of this section in the document deals with some important points about everyday activity inside the factory. They criticise those who make a fetish of "putting your politics up front." Often, people unused to factory situations challenge every remark made, and make political interventions in every situation, trying to situate themselves as "sources of political wisdom." Apart from the fact that this makes you appear pretty boring, it could

> . . . polarise the workers over abstract or peripheral issues in a way that inhibits direct action.

There is of course a hidden danger in this: it could be a cop-out from challenging racist or male chauvinist tendencies. But anyone who has worked in a factory knows what the document means. Challenging these tendencies and others is a long, patient process which involves understanding the positive and negative of the way your workmates think. Ideological arrogance sounds to most workers like lecturing and also misleads you into thinking ideas are changed by argument instead of by social practice.

Another pitfall is cultivating a reputation for "not taking any shit." Individual combativity on the job has to be a careful part of your overall political work, otherwise, as the document points out, "there is a danger that you make the political mistake of putting too much stress on the foreman or lower management figures."

There is some good advice given on the relationship of propaganda in leaflets, etc. to the rest of your political work. It is easy to let analysis outstrip the program or the program outstrip the actual base of support in the factory. For those groups that are trying to involve themselves in, and shape events inside, propaganda must avoid threats, and agitation must avoid pledges that can't be kept, calls to action that can't be backed up with real strength and are unrealistic. Mistakes like these we've found can only be eradicated through learning from experience: they

can be costly, but there is no other way around it.

Consciousness and Direct Action

We would start to disagree with the document in its view of consciousness: they draw directly from Gramsci's more sophisticated Leninist model. But the model is still far too simplistic and leads to a distorted political practice as the over-emphasis on direct action will show. A long quote from the document on the question of consciousness illustrates the position:

> The working class as it exists under capitalism has two conceptions of the world. One is essentially capitalist — accepts private property as necessary, sees competitiveness, acquisitiveness and selfishness as basic characteristics of human nature; and does not challenge the notions of right, justice, freedom, etc. — which serve to maintain the dominance of the capitalist class. As Gramsci says, this capitalist conception of the world is not just an intellectual fact, it is a pattern of conduct. The working class "in normal times when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but precisely subordinate and submissive . . ." acts as if capitalism would be here forever. But not all times are "normal" times. There are instances when sections of the class move as "an organic unity," as part of a potential ruling class; and in the process demonstrate in action that class's "own conception of the world, even though embryonic."

This Gramscian formulation of the possibility of anti-capitalist ideas developing when the parts of the class move in fusion at the height of their power, avoids the cruder Leninist model: where the proletariat is completely dependent on the party for its subjectivity, its consciousness of its real existence and historical tasks. Sojourner Truth utilise their model to place a healthy if over-stress on direct action as the most likely way of the class developing its consciousness as "fused groups." But the model is still too mechanical as a theory of class consciousness. There is still too much of the picture of the working class living its life completely dominated by bourgeois ideas (e.g., private property, selfishness, etc.) and only breaking from them and becoming open to revolutionary ideas under certain situations. For Lenin this was when the class is exposed to the opposite ideological pole to bourgeois ideology; when the "naturally limited" struggles of the class are politicised, by theory necessarily "brought from the outside" — for Gramsci and Sojourner Truth, when revolutionary ideas interact with the class moving *in action* and organic unity.

It is impossible to go into all the aspects of a theory of consciousness in a review article, but we will try to outline the main components. We start from Marx's concept that "social being determines consciousness." Social being is what we mean when we talk about the many factors that shape the patterns and contours of working class life: cultural, work, home and community, etc. It also crucially is a dynamic concept in the sense that social being refers to living as action, as constant movement and struggle; so consciousness should never be conceived of in a static way. It seems strange to us that revolutionaries can talk of the working class living its life — a life dominated for most by varying kinds of struggle against the ruling class — by using bourgeois ideas to relate and integrate thought and action in living: to make their lives meaningful, as all strata must do. Such bourgeois notions of "freedom," individualism, etc., for the most part in their pure form (i.e., as the ruling class would use them), directly contradict the experience of working class life. This does not mean that the working class in rejecting them chooses a revolutionary alternative to explain the world *but* that bourgeois ideas are mediated through the life situation of the working class. So it becomes foolish to talk of two ideologies, bourgeois and socialist, with nothing in between.

The working class has a structural antagonism with the bourgeoisie in capitalist society. It is forced with varying levels of intensity, according to the elements at work in the historical situation, to struggle against them, not just industrially but at all levels. Thus most parts of the class exist as and have a consciousness of a *class against capital* — a class in itself rather than a class for itself, lacking political autonomy, aware of class society and its conflicts but not aware/unconvinced of the need/possibilities of changing it.

We cannot call this consciousness of the class, in itself, bourgeois. It has contradictory aspects, some of which depending on the strata and struggles of the class will be more bourgeois; other aspects will not. We only have to look at attitudes to, say, parliamentary politics or law and order to illustrate this contra-dictoriness. There has always been a cynicism in the class about "politics" and politicians. This has been re-inforced by their ability to win substantial gains in the factories and communities through their own working class struggle, since the war. This distrust and cynicism is at one level a healthy thing; it illustrates the estrangement of the class from representative democracy. "You can't trust politicians; they're only in it for themselves"; "the working man never gets a

thing from either party." These are the common sentiments of a class in itself. What is missing of course is a consciousness of the possibility of direct democracy, an understanding of what it can achieve —that capitalist-type institutions are not "natural and inevitable." Or take law and order. Anyone who has lived in a working class community knows what most people think of the police or even law. People in these communities are constantly breaking the law and modes of accepted conduct, so they need their own way of understanding that process. Most at the moment don't take a revolutionary view of law, but then neither do they utilise the same views as Heath or Wilson, etc. The working class view of law and order is structured around their own experience of it. So to many, student demonstrations or the struggle in Ireland is outside that experience and understanding. Thus they may agree with or be acquiescent about the use of law and order in these situations, whilst still conceiving the police and courts as hostile.

So class consciousness is made up of mediated bourgeois ideas in some cases, in others mediated ideas of other social forces, hopefully the section of the working class and other allied strata that consciously uses a revolutionary critique of society, or possibly the petty bourgeoisie, etc. In other words, working class consciousness contains within it ideas which have been generated in common with other classes, e.g., the notions of "freedom" and "democracy" that shaped themselves in the struggle of both classes against the then-ruling class, the aristocracy/ feudal landowners, etc. These ideas are posed as universal and part of a general ideology/culture by governments and the ruling class. Their applicability to working class life, as we said before, in pure form, is doubtful so they exist in a changed sense, from the "national ideology" — but no longer merely a mirror of it. So as ideologies crystallise around the struggles and institutions of major social forces, the working class from these various sources shapes its own ideas and consequent social relations. It is from this perspective that we can talk about a specific, if ever variable, working class consciousness. The interpenetration of these various levels of ideas is so complex, set in the light of the developing social relations between the classes, that to talk of even a dual consciousness as Gramsci et al. do is ridiculous.

So working class consciousness is in a constant state of flux. Its use of bourgeois or revolutionary poles will depend on the intensity of the structural antagonism between the classes, not the vulgar concept of consciousness reflecting the economic crisis, but from the being of the class: a comprehensive synthesis of all factors at work in society, that make the levels of crisis at its deepest. Any break in the unity of Marx's set of concepts, a break in our understanding of the constant interpenetration of the inherent antagonisms in class society and the consciousness the classes have of them, inevitably leads to false polarisation, a situation where theory is thought of as something outside the consciousness of the class, to be brought in by the party and tested *in action* by the proletariat, in political terms, the formulation of *programmes for others,* abstract to the real needs of the class.

Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation

The working class does not develop "naturally" towards a socialist consciousness in the way we would like. The task of the revolutionary organisations is to identify the positive aspects in working class consciousness, to push them in a revolutionary direction and to fuse them in a political process from a position embedded in class struggle. The working class is not a passive object to be "politicised." Only if we realise this can we avoid the situation where the class is in a passive and dependent relationship with the party.

Even as a class in itself it is capable of developing a real critique of capitalism and taking highly combative action against it. It often surpasses the limitations even revolutionaries put on it, like the absurdly a-historical and mechanical idea that left to itself within production it can only reach trade union consciousness. France and especially Italy have shown in the past few years how wrong this idea is. In Italy large sections of the class (without reference to the old groups who said it couldn't happen without them) broke far beyond the political and organisational bounds of the unions; to demand equal pay rises for all, the abolition of the categories and grades of labour, the refusal of union or line delegates to mediate their struggle and the creation of mass assemblies instead of traditional union structures, etc. The revolutionary groups who did understand the new developments and attempted to live with and develop the new autonomy, were comparatively small (although far bigger than the old currents) — and this weakness in the situation contributed to its partial decline. But the lessons of the possibilities of class action and consciousness remain.

The working class doesn't jump spontaneously to socialist consciousness; but when the antagonisms are so great that the existing levels of ideas cannot explain the social being, the lives and struggles of the class: then they will begin to break from the limitations of the class in itself and the corresponding patterns of thought and turn towards more revolutionary ways of thinking and acting. But just as the working class is not a passive component of the situation, neither are the revolutionary organisations. We have the vital role, in systematising the developments

in consciousness, in giving direction to the struggles: in being inside the situations to develop the necessary strategies to overthrow the rule of capital. We are not spontaneists — there is a need for revolutionary organisation to help make the revolution! The very complexity of the varying levels of consciousness, the different categories and strata in the class, the differing historical experiences give us our role.

The class is not an abstract ideal type that can magically fuse together its objective role with the necessary subjectivity. The class is only specific groups of proletarians with different developments and needs, not just industrial workers but women, youth, etc. The working class moving together in unison, the identical subject-object of history dominated by one goal is unfortunately a Utopian dream. Only the revolutionary organisations can break through and structure this complexity to break the power of capital.

Direct Action

This seems to have brought us a long way from the Sojourner Truth article. The previous section was not an attack on the document. They see the need for self-managed struggles and class autonomy and the right role for revolutionary organisation. It's just that in the document the conception is too narrow-based as it is, around direct action (because of the narrow conception of consciousness).

But what about direct action? As a means of raising consciousness in struggle, they correctly counterpose it to

> strikes where the union and management co-operate in the orderly choice of operations, where picketing is just a dull and tiring public relations chore . . . where the bulk of workers just disappear until the new contract is signed.

Direct action is

> struggles of the workers themselves to gain some control over the large part of their lives.

But direct action is only the *structural component,* i.e., the social relations of the revolutionary process we try to initiate (although social relations implies ways of thinking as well as acting). Revolutionary consciousness does not necessarily flow out of direct action, even when these "spontaneous" struggles are given conscious direction by revolutionaries in the factory. Overemphasis on the form of the struggle is dangerous; the content is the crucial component. The reason for stressing this is that traditionally Leninist groups have ignored the problem of how the struggle is organised, posing the ideological component as everything — good structures were a nice luxury. In reaction to this, non-Leninist groups went overboard on the form of the struggle (drawing on an old syndicalist tradition) whilst underplaying conscious strategy and political line. In our early broadsheets such examples can be found; now the contradictions in that position for an interventionist organisation have forced us long ago to move to a more dialectical understanding of the process, something that is missing from the Sojourner Truth document.

BLACK WORKER/WHITE WORKER (1972)

by Noel Ignatin

In one department of a giant steel mill in northwest Indiana a foreman assigned a white worker to the job of operating a crane. The Black workers in the department felt that on the basis of seniority and job experience, one of them should have been given the job, which represented a promotion from the labor gang. They spent a few hours in the morning talking among themselves and agreed that they had a legitimate beef. Then they went and talked to the white workers in the department and got their support. After lunch the other crane operators mounted their cranes and proceeded to block in the crane of the newly promoted worker — one crane on each side of his — and run at the slowest possible speed, thus stopping work in the department. By the end of the day the foreman had gotten the message. He took the white worker off the crane and replaced him with a Black worker, and the cranes began to move again.

A few weeks after the above incident, several of the white workers who had joined the Black operators in the slowdown took part in meetings in Glen Park, a virtually all-white section of Gary, with the aim of seceding from the city in order to escape from the administration of the Black mayor, Richard Hatcher. While the secessionists demanded, in their words, "the power to make the decisions which affect their lives," it was clear that the effort was racially inspired.

At a large farm equipment manufacturing plant in Chicago, a Black worker was being tried out for a repair job on an assembly line. The foreman had been harassing the man, trying to disqualify him during his three-day trial period. After two days of this, the majority of the workers on the line, Black and white, walked off their jobs demanding that the man be accepted for the job. The company backed down and work resumed.

Later on, some of the same white workers took part in racist demonstrations at a Chicago high school. The demonstrations were called against "overcrowding" in an attempt to keep out several hundred Black students who had been transferred to the school as a result of redistricting.

Civil War

The foregoing anecdotes indicate some of the complexities and contradictions operating within the lives and within the minds of the white workers in this country: on the one hand, displays of democratic co-operation and fraternal relations with Black workers, and, on the other hand, examples of backwardness and selfishness which are unbecoming to members of a social class which hopes to reconstruct society in its image. What is taking place is a "civil war" in the mind of the white worker. In the community, on the job, in every sphere of life, he is being faced with a choice between two ways of looking at the world, two ways of leading his life. One way represents solidarity with the Black worker and the progressive forces of society. The other way represents alliance with the forces of exploitation and repression.

I'd like to speak a bit about this "civil war" and examine some of what it means for the development of revolutionary strategy.

In order to understand the contradictory, often bewildering behavior of people, especially white people, in this country, we must take up two questions. The first question is — on what does capitalist rule depend?

There are groups, radical groups, which seem to operate on the premise that capitalist rule depends on the monopoly of guns and tanks held by the employing class and its ability to use them whenever it pleases against the exploited majority. This view explains why some groups put such great efforts into building alliances with all sorts of liberals to preserve constitutional forms of government. They hope, through these alliances, to limit the ability of the ruling class to use force against the people.

I do not share this view of the secret of capitalist rule. I do not agree that capitalist power rests, at present, primarily on guns and tanks. It rests on the support of the majority of people. This support is usually passive, sometimes active, but nevertheless effective.

Competition Among the Wage Earners

I contend that the key element in the popular acceptance of capitalist rule is the ideology and institution of white supremacy, which provides the illusion of common interests between the exploited white masses and the white ruling class.

Karl Marx wrote that wage slavery rests exclusively on competition among the wage earners. He meant that the existence of competition among the

working class is responsible for the continued rule of the employing class and the inability of the working people to overthrow it and establish their rule.

Why do people compete? They compete in order to get ahead. The fact must be admitted that, from a certain point of view, it is possible to "get ahead" in this society. Years and years of unquestioning loyalty and devotion to the company will, in a certain percentage of cases, result in advancement for the employee — advancement to a position of lead man, foreman, soft job, high bonus job, etc. Working people have various uncomplimentary terms to describe this sort of behavior. Yet large numbers of them live their lives in this way, and for a certain portion of these, it "pays off."

Because of the peculiar development of America and the nature of capitalist policy in this country, there is a special element added to the general competition which exists among all workers. That special element is color, which throws the competition on a special basis, that raises color to a special place in the competition among workers.

All workers compete; that is a law of capitalism. But Black and white workers compete with a special advantage on the side of the white. That *is* a result of the peculiar development of America, and is not inherent in the objective social laws of the capitalist system.

In the same way that some individual workers gain advancement on the job by currying favor with the employer, white workers as a group have won a favored position for themselves by siding with the employing class against the non-white people. This favored status takes various forms, including the monopoly of skilled jobs and higher education, better housing at lower cost than that available to non-whites, less police harassment, a cushion against the most severe effects of unemployment, better health conditions, as well as certain social advantages.

We're trying to explain why people act as they do, and particularly why white workers act as they do. White working people aren't stupid. They don't act in a racist fashion simply out of blind prejudice. There are much more substantial causes — the system of white-skin privileges — which lead them to behave in a selfish, exclusionary manner.

A Black steel worker told me that once, when he was working as a helper on the unloading docks, he decided to bid on an operator's job that was open. All the operators were white. He had worked with them before in his capacity as helper. They had been friends, had eaten together and chatted about all the things that workers talk about. When he bid on the operator's job, it became the task of the other operators to break him in. He was assigned to the job, and sent to work with them on the equipment, and given thirty days to learn the job. It quickly became clear to him that the other workers had no intention of permitting him to get that job. They operated the equipment in such a way as to prevent him from learning how. Workers are very skilled at that sort of thing.

After two weeks, one of the white workers came to him and said, "Listen, I know what's going on here. You work with me on Monday and I'll break you in." The person who told me this story agreed — at least there was one decent white worker in the bunch. Friday afternoon came around, and the white worker approached him. With some embarrassment, he admitted that he had to back down from his offer. "It's bad enough when all the guys call me a n— lover, but when my own wife quits talking to me, well I just can't go through with it."

The man who told me that story never succeeded in getting that job.

What made those white workers act in the way they did? They were willing to be "friends" at the workplace, but only on the condition that the Black worker stay in "his place." They didn't want him to "presume" to a position of social equality if and when they met on "the outside." And they didn't want him to presume to share in the better jobs at the workplace. Those white workers understood that keeping themselves in "their place" in the company scheme of things depended upon helping to keep the Black worker in "his place."

They had observed that whenever the Black people force the ruling class, in whole or in part, to make concessions to racial equality, the ruling class strikes back to make it an equality on a worse level of conditions than those enjoyed by the whites before the concessions. The white workers are thus conditioned to believe that every step toward racial equality necessarily means a worsening of their own conditions. Their bonus is cut. Production rates go up. Their insurance is harder to get and more expensive. Their garbage is collected less often. Their children's schools deteriorate.

This is how the white-skin privilege system works. If a small number of white workers do manage to see through the smoke screen and join in the fight together with the Black workers, the ruling class responds with bribes, cajolery, threats, violence and pressure multiplied a thousand fold to drive the thinking whites back into the "club" of white supremacists. And the purpose of all this is to prevent the white workers from learning the Black example, to prevent them from learning that if Blacks can force concessions from the boss through struggle, how much more could be accomplished if the white workers would get into the struggle against the boss instead of against the Black workers.

A common approach to the problem posed above is that of the white radical who goes into a shop which has a typical pattern of discrimination against Black workers. Instead of directly taking up that issue and attempting to build a struggle for equality, he looks for some issue, like speedup, which affects all workers to one degree or another. He aims to develop a struggle around this issue, to involve all the workers in the struggle. He hopes that in the course of the struggle the white workers, through contact with Blacks, will lose their attitudes of racial superiority. This is the approach to the problem of unifying the working class which prevails within the radical movement today.

I don't think it works. History shows it doesn't work. The result of this sort of false unity always leaves the Black worker still on the bottom. It always seems to be the demand for racial equality, the last one on the list, that is sacrificed in order to reach a settlement and celebrate the "great victory" of the struggle.

Present-day unions are, to a considerable extent, the end product of this sort of approach. It is Black and white together on the picket line, and after the strike is over the white workers return to the skilled trades, the machining departments and the cleaner assembly areas, and the Black workers return to the labor gang and the open hearth. Every "victory" of this kind feeds the poison of racism and pushes further off the real unity of the working class which must be established if significant progress is to be made.

There is no way to overcome the national and racial divisions within the working class except by directly confronting them. The problem of white supremacy must be fought out openly within the working class.

Hug the Chains of an Actual Wretchedness

Over eighty years ago, Tom Watson, the Georgia agrarian protest leader, wrote the following words, full of profound meaning:

> You might beseech a Southern white tenant to listen to you upon questions of finance, taxation and transportation; you might demonstrate with mathematical precision that herein lay his way out of poverty into comfort; you might have him "almost persuaded" to the truth, but if the merchant who furnished his farm supplies (at tremendous usury) or the town politician (who never spoke to him except at election times) came along and cried "Negro rule," the entire fabric of reason and common sense which you had patiently constructed would fall, and the poor tenant would joyously hug the chains of an actual wretchedness rather than do any experimenting on a question of mere sentiment . . . the argument against the independent movement in the South may be boiled down into one word — nigger.

These words are as true today as when they were first written. They apply with equal force to workers as well as to farmers, and the truth of them is not limited to the South. Ted Alien has put it that white supremacy is the keystone of ruling class power, and the white-skin privilege is the mortar that holds it in place.

There are two points in what I have been saying so far that are distinctive and that I wish to emphasize.

The first point is that, for revolutionary strategists, the key problem is not the racism of the employing class, but the racism of the white worker. (After all, the boss's racism is natural to him because it serves his class interests.) It is the support by white workers for the employers' racial policies which represents the chief obstacle to all social progress in this country, including revolution.

The second point is that this support has its basis in real conditions of life. It is not simply a matter of ignorance and prejudice, to be overcome by exhortation and appeals to reason.

The second question I wish to take up is: where does socialism come from?

To Impose Order on Chaos

In their daily activities, working people express the drive to reorganize society so that they become the masters of production instead of the servants of production — the essential meaning of Socialism. I would like to cite a few examples of this striving of workers.

One of the characteristics of steel production is that it must be continuous: to stop the furnaces is a costly and time-consuming operation. (I heard a story that once in Colorado around 1912 the IWW pulled a strike at a steel mill and, instead of banking the furnaces, simply walked off the job. According to the story, that furnace stands today, over sixty years later, with a solid block of iron inside of it, unusable.)

Steel is a continuous operation and has to be maintained that way. What the steel companies do is operate a system of three shifts, and a system of relief on the job: a worker can't leave the job until his relief shows up. The workers take advantage of

this in various ways. There is one mill I know of in which the workers have organized a rotation system among themselves, in which they take turns calling off, allowing the person they are scheduled to relieve eight hours overtime in their place. There are a couple of dozen people involved in this, they have it organized in turns and it would probably take a professional mathematician several weeks of studying attendance records to figure out their system. It allows each worker to get an extra day off every few weeks, and then receive, in his turn, an enlarged paycheck — without working a single hour more than normal. You see, the company posts its schedule of work, and then the workers proceed to violate it and impose their own.

Of course they don't have everything their own way. When the absenteeism gets too severe the company cracks down and threatens reprisals, and the workers are forced to slack off for a while. Then, when the heat is off, they go back to their own schedule.

Another example. One of the characteristics of the capitalist scheme of production *is* the division between maintenance and production workers. This is universal under capitalism. There is one category of workers who perform the same operation minute after minute for their entire lives, and another category of workers who go around fixing machines when they break down. In the United States this division has been adapted to serve the system of white-skin privileges. White workers are generally given preference for the jobs in maintenance, which are usually easier, cleaner, more interesting and higher paying than production jobs.

The workers respond to this division in ways that at first sight seem bewildering. When they get angry at the company, production workers will not perform the simplest and most routine maintenance task. They will stop an entire operation waiting for a maintenance worker to change a fuse.

A Black worker in maintenance, one of the few, told this story. He was called to repair a piece of equipment that had failed. Unable to locate the trouble, he called his foreman to help. The foreman was also unable to find the trouble, and so he called a higher-up. They stood around for a while scratching their heads and then decided to go back to the office and study the schematic drawings of the equipment to see if they would reveal the trouble. After the foremen had left, the Black maintenance worker asked the production worker, who was also Black, what was wrong with the machine. He replied that he had thrown the wrong switch by mistake and blown some obscure control device. He pointed it out, after swearing the maintenance worker to secrecy, and it was fixed in three minutes. His attitude was — no one had asked him what was wrong, and if they treated him like a dope he would act like a dope.

This is one side of the workers' response to the arbitrary maintenance-production split. On the other hand, they make efforts to overcome the barriers in their way, to master the entire process of production in order to express their full human capacities. Production workers do everything they can to learn about their equipment. On some occasions they go to great lengths to make repairs themselves without calling the maintenance department.

Maintenance workers also show this striving to break down artificial barriers. Many times they voluntarily grab a shovel or perform other tasks which are outside of their job requirements. But if the foreman orders them to do it, they will curse him and refuse.

These efforts by both production and maintenance workers to break down the barriers erected between them represent the striving of working people to master the equipment which makes the things they need, to gain control over the work process so that labor itself becomes a source of satisfaction to them.

There are many other examples that indicate the efforts of workers to impose their order on the chaos of capitalist production. If we want to know what socialism in the United States will look like, we should carefully study the activities of the working people today, because the ingredients of the socialist society appear right now in embryonic, subordinated ways.

The Ultimate Exploited

Now I must tie together the two lines of argument I have been pursuing so far, and pose the question — where does the Black struggle fit into all this? Please note: by Black struggle I mean the autonomous Black movement. I do not mean any particular organization, although a number of organizations are part of it. I am referring to the tendency on the part of large numbers of Black people, especially workers, to find ways of acting together independent of white control and white approval, and to decide their course of action based simply on what they feel is good for Black people, not what serves some so-called larger movement.

The elements of such an autonomous Black movement exist. They are repressed and subordinated, just as the autonomous efforts of workers generally are repressed. The conscious and determined efforts of the white ruling class to flood the Black community with drugs are one indication of the serious threat the Black movement poses to official society.

In spite of all the efforts of the ruling class to suppress it, the Black movement exists. How does it fit into the general movement of all the oppressed

to revolutionize society? I wish to make three points.

First of all, the Black workers are the ultimate exploited in this country. They have no possibility of rising as a group to oppress anyone else. In spite of what many whites think about such subjects as welfare, Black people receive no favors as a group from the capitalist class.

In the second place, the daily activities of the Black people, especially the Black workers, are the best existing model for the aspirations of the workers generally as a distinct class of people. Other groups in society, when they act collectively on their own, usually represent partial and occasionally even reactionary interests. The activities of the Black workers are the most advanced outpost of the new society we seek to establish.

The Challenge to White Workers

In the third place, the autonomous movement of Black people poses a constant challenge to white workers to, in the words of C. L. R. James, "take the steps which will enable the working people to fulfill their historic destiny of building a society free of the domination of one class or one race over another."

The Black movement poses a challenge, not merely to white workers in general, but to those white intellectuals, workers or not, who regard themselves as in some sense radical or revolutionary. This is a challenge which, in the past, they have generally not lived up to. This challenge is not something limited to history either; it continually comes up, in new ways as well as old ones. Let me offer a few examples.

The system of seniority was originally fought for by the unions as a defense against individual favoritism and arbitrary discipline by the boss. Through a fairly involved process, seniority has been adapted to serve the needs of white supremacy. The boss decided whom to hire first, and the seniority system placed the union label on the practice of relegating Blacks to the status of "last hired, first fired." As Black workers press forward with their demands for full equality in all spheres of life, they increasingly come into conflict with the seniority system and other devices which uphold white supremacy, such as certain types of tests, and so forth. The white workers often react defensively. In many cases they insist that their resistance is not due to any prejudice against Black people, but is merely an objection to bypassing what has become the regular procedure for advancement. On more than one occasion, Black workers have forced the employer to open a new job area to them, only to run up against the rigid opposition of white workers.

White revolutionaries must understand, and help the masses of white workers to understand, that the interests of the entire working class can only be served by standing firmly with the Black workers in such cases.

Or consider the dispute over jobs in the construction trades, which reached a peak several years ago in a number of cities, and is still going on in some places. In Chicago it took the form of, on one side, a community coalition led by Rev. C. T. Vivian, a number of elements around SCLC and Operation PUSH, and various diverse forces from among the Black community and youth, along with, apparently, some financial backing from the Ford Foundation and the Chicago Northwestern Railway. The aim of the struggle was to gain entrance for Blacks into the construction trades. The means used was to surround various on-going construction sites with mass picketing in order to stop work on them until Black workers were admitted in proportion to their numbers in the city. On the other side was a united front of the construction unions and contractors. Of course their defense was that they do not practice racial discrimination; that Black workers simply had not applied for or passed the tests for admittance.

What is the position of radicals to be in a case like this? There have been arguments that the Ford Foundation and other such forces are using the Black movement to weaken the construction unions and drive down the cost of labor. That argument is not without validity; it is difficult to believe that the Ford Foundation and the Chicago Northwestern Railway are unselfishly interested in the cause of Black workers.

Some radical groups, from a lofty position of supposed objectivity, took it upon themselves to advise the Black coalition that instead of directing their struggle against the admittedly unfair assignment of jobs, they should recognize the fact that there was *s* shortage of jobs in construction and should join with the unions to expand the number of jobs, which would benefit Black as well as white and avoid the danger of "dividing the working class" as the present struggle was allegedly doing. This, of course, was merely a radical-sounding version of the argument given by the construction unions and contractors themselves, who would welcome any support from any quarter which offered to expand the industry.

The response of the Black masses to this argument was to press forward the struggle to open those jobs up or shut them down. Their actions showed their confidence that it was they who were using the Ford Foundation and not the other way around, and that as for the problems of the construction industry, these could not be of concern to them until they became part of it.

Some listeners may sense the justice in what I have been arguing, and at the same time question its

practicability. Wherein lies the basis for establishing solidarity among the working class? Is it possible to expect white workers to repudiate privileges which are real in the interests of something so abstract as justice?

Poison Bait

The answer is that the system of white-skin privileges, while it is undeniably real, is not in the interests of white workers as part of a class which aims at transforming society to its roots. The acceptance of a favored status by white workers binds them to wage slavery, makes them subordinate to the capitalist class. The repudiation, that is, the active rejection, through struggle, of this favored status is the precondition for the participation by white workers in the struggle of workers as a distinct social class. A metaphor which has been used in the past, and which I still find appropriate, is that white-skin privileges are poison bait, a worm with a hook in it. To be willing to leap from the water to exert the most determined and violent efforts to throw off the hook and the worm is the only way to avoid landing on the dinner table.

Let me offer a historical parallel. Back in the 1930's when people were organizing the CIO, one of the problems they had to face was that many workers in the plants had worked out a means of survival which consisted of gaining advancement for themselves in return for favors for the boss. Old timers still talk about how, back in the days before the union, if you wanted a promotion or even wanted to keep your job in the event of a layoff, you had to mow the boss's lawn or wash his car or give him a bottle of whiskey at Christmas. In order to bring a union into those plants, that sort of activity had to be defeated. It was undeniably true that those who washed the foreman's car were the last workers laid off. On what basis was it possible to appeal to the workers to renounce this sort of behavior which they felt was necessary to their survival? The basis of the appeal was that it was precisely that sort of behavior which bound them and subordinated them to the company, and that the interests of solidarity of the entire work force demanded the repudiation of such individual arrangements.

The appeal fell on deaf ears until it began to seem that there was a real possibility of making some basic changes in those plants. Until the CIO was present as a real force, until the momentum built up, until people began to feel that there was another way to live besides mowing the boss's lawn, they were not willing to repudiate the old way.

Today, as a result of the CIO, in vast areas of American industry, any worker who was suspected of doing the sorts of favors for the foreman that were once taken for granted would be ostracized and treated with cold contempt by his fellow workers. (Some people may argue that the previous statement is an exaggeration, and that the spirit of togetherness and combativity has deteriorated over the years. To the extent that they are right, it should be noted that this deterioration is in large part due to the habit of subservience encouraged by the general acceptance by white workers of racial privileges.)

The time will come when the masses of white workers in our country will regard with disdain those among them who seek or defend racial privileges, in the same way they now have only contempt for someone who would wash the foreman's car in return for preferential treatment.

A Powerful Magnet

Today the Black movement represents an alternative to the dominant mode of life in our country, in the same way the CIO represented an alternative to the old way of life in the factory. The relations which Black people, especially Black workers, have established among themselves, and the culture which has arisen out of their struggle, represent a model for a new society. The Black movement exercises a powerful attraction on all those who come into contact with it.

Consider the matter of the position of women and relations between the sexes. Black women, as a result of their struggle for freedom as Black people, have achieved a great sense of their independence, not merely from one man but from men in general. This has forced Black men to accept a degree of independence for women that is rare in the rest of the population. Anyone who has observed the changes undergone by white, Latin or Asian women once they go to work and come into contact with Black women can see the extent to which the old way of women's unquestioned subservience to man has been undermined. The men may resent this process, but it is irreversible.

The rise in general working-class militancy, observed by everyone in the last few years, is directly traceable to the influence of Black workers, who are generally recognized by all, including white workers, as the most militant and combative group of workers when it comes to taking on the company. The Black workers are drawing on the experience they have gained in their struggle for national freedom, and are beginning to transmit the lessons of that struggle to the white workers with whom they come in contact.

The same thing is true also for the insurgent movement within the military, where the GI resistance, led by Black GIs, reached such proportions that

it forced major changes in official government policy.

This is true also for the insurgent movement within the prisons, where the resistance and courage of Black prisoners has pulled whites into the struggle for decent conditions and human dignity.

For decades, politics, to white workers, has been a dirty word. It has meant nothing more than the right to choose every four years which gang of thieves is going to loot the public treasury for the next four. Beginning in 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott, when an entire city organized its own system of transportation as well as of public discussion and decision-making through the direct participation of thousands of people, the Black movement has created a new concept of citizenship and community. Continuing through the sit-ins, freedom rides, mass marches and urban rebellions, the Black movement has given new meaning to politics, and helped the American people in general to rediscover their tradition of self-organization and revolt.

Many examples of this phenomenon could be cited from the only community in this country whose members greet each other as brother and sister. But the point is made: in spite of all the obstacles placed in its way, the Black movement, expressed in the patterns of life arising from struggle, represents a powerful magnetic pole to vast numbers of workers looking for a way out of the mess which is modern life.

Recall, if you will, the anecdote with which I opened this talk: the case of the white workers acting in solidarity with the Black crane operators. Consider the position of the white workers in that case. They are under conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they see a group of workers preparing to strike a blow at the company and, like all workers everywhere, they want to deal themselves in, to hit back at the enemy which is oppressing them. On the other hand, to join with the Black workers in such a situation means turning against habit, against tradition, against their own status as racially privileged workers.

They are faced with a choice, between their identity and interests as whites and their identity and interests as workers. What was it that made that particular group of workers in that situation decide, in the words of one activist, to be "more worker than white"?

Their actions can only be explained by the fact that, whether or not they express it in words, the Black movement represented for them an alternative way of life, a way that was better and more attractive than the usual passive, subordinated life they were accustomed to. Anyone who has ever taken part in collective struggle knows that, regardless of how they may have acted afterwards, the experience left a lasting impression on them.

What about the tasks of revolutionaries, and in particular white revolutionaries, in regard to this vital task of unifying the working class around its class interests?

Things have changed in the last twenty years. It is no longer possible for any group which claims to be revolutionary to openly oppose the Black movement. Not if it hopes to have any following. There are one or two groups in the country that do, but nobody pays any attention to them. The point today is to define the relation between the Black movement and the general class struggle. And that is where the differences come out.

Everybody in the movement is opposed to racism, everybody chants the litany that racism is the greatest barrier to class unity. Every group puts out propaganda against racism and sincerely strives to win the workers to the struggle against it.

But what about those cases where the struggle of Black workers and Black people against racial discrimination appears to conflict with the desire to unify the largest possible number of workers behind what are called "general class demands"? For example, as sometimes happens, when the aggressiveness of Black workers in pursuing their fight for equality tends to alienate white workers who might be willing to join with them in common efforts to achieve some reform of immediate and direct benefit to both groups? Then the trouble begins. And we must admit that some left-wing groups, especially those dominated by whites, are all too willing to set aside the special demands of the Black struggle.

A Bad Choice

A recent example of this might serve to clarify the difference between the two approaches. At a large electrical appliance manufacturing plant in Chicago, one of the radical groups, the Revolutionary Union, sent a few people in. The radicals began putting out a plant newsletter which raised the issues of speedup, safety, low wages — all the various grievances of the workers — and also carried on a fairly aggressive campaign against racial discrimination, against the exclusion of Black workers from the better departments, etc.

The group managed to build up considerable support, most of it among Black workers, which wasn't surprising since Black workers made up almost half the work force and were most victimized by the oppressive conditions the group was agitating against.

After some time had passed, the strategists in the group who, it is safe to surmise, were the white radicals who had initiated it along with one or two newly radicalized workers from the plant, decided that, as a tactic, they ought to try and throw out the present union, the International Association of Machinists,

which is one of the worst unions in the Chicago area, and bring in the United Electrical Workers union. That is the UE, the old left-led union expelled in 1949 from the CIO and still under what is called progressive leadership.

Anyhow, they took a group of workers down to the UE hall and met with the organizers there. The staff people were delighted that they were interested in bringing in the UE, but they observed that there weren't enough white workers in the committee. If they ever hoped to win the plant for the UE, they would have to involve more white workers in the organizing effort.

That was certainly a logical effort. And so, what did the group do? They went back into the plant and began campaigning for the UE, using the newsletter as their chief vehicle. But now there was a change. The main aim became to reach the white workers, and so the line of the newsletter now became: all workers unite, the boss makes no distinction between Black and white, do not let race feeling divide us, bringing in the UE will benefit us all, our interests are all the same, etc. As for the exposures of racial discrimination and the campaign to abolish it in the plant, which had occupied so much of the group's attention prior to the decision to bring in the UE, that was laid aside in the interests of appealing to the broadest number of workers who could be won to the immediate goal, getting a better union.

What is there to say about a story like this? What is there to do besides shake your head? Doesn't this represent, in capsule form, the whole history of labor movement in this country — the radicalization of the workers followed by the capitulation, on the part of the leadership, to the backward prejudices of the white workers? How many times does this experience have to be repeated? Apparently an infinite number until we learn the lesson.

By the way, the upshot of the organizing campaign was that the group didn't succeed in. fooling any white workers; they still considered it a Black power group and kept it at arm's length. But it did succeed in cooling the enthusiasm of the Black workers who were its initial base.

Was there an alternative course that could have been followed in the particular situation? I think there was.

Nothing Less Than a Total Change

The alternative would have been to encourage the group along its original lines, determined to fight consistently against white Supremacy regardless of what came up or came down — to develop the group as the core of a fighting movement in the plant that carried out struggles on the shop floor around all issues of concern to its members, including the issue of racial discrimination.

It's probably true that such a group could not have been a majority movement at the beginning, or perhaps even for a considerable length of time. Most likely, as the group pushed firmly against racial discrimination it would alienate some white workers who could have been won to it otherwise. That's a choice that has to be made. The group in the plant made the wrong choice.

I think that a group such as I describe, made up perhaps in the beginning almost entirely of Black workers, could have developed as a center of struggle in the plant, and a center of opposition to the company and the rotten union. As time went on, it could have attracted to itself white workers who were so fed up with their situation that they were looking for radical solutions — and would even identify with a "Black radical" outfit, so long as it seemed to offer a way out of the mess they were in. The very things which would make such a group repulsive to some workers would make it attractive to that increasing number of workers, Black as well as white, who are coming to sense that nothing less than a total change is worth fighting for.

The course I advocate offers great difficulties — no doubt about it. It is likely that the repression directed against a radical group that relentlessly fought racial discrimination would be greater than against a more moderate group. It is possible that a group such as I describe could never have gained admittance into the UE. I freely concede all the difficulties. But then, who ever said that making a revolution was easy?

As for the alternative, the course that was actually followed, we know all too well where that leads.

THE STEWARD'S POSITION (1973)

In recent weeks a number of people at work have suggested that I run for shop steward and replace the one we presently have, whom most of the workers find inadequate. This is not the first time the question has come up, but now it calls for a decision on my part. My tentative decision was no. I told people this but also said I would think about it. I have been thinking about it and talking to other members of the organization.

I have come to the conclusion that it would be counter to our goal of building independent workers organizations and the best revolutionary strategy for me to take the steward's position. In this paper I will argue that this is the correct decision, not only for my situation, but for any communist doing workplace organizing anywhere in the U.S., regardless of company, industry or union.

The Most Obvious Thing To Do ...

For the revolutionary who is doing production work it may at first seem obvious that if the majority of people in the department want him/her to be the shop steward he/she should do so. The call itself is the recognition that he/she is a militant fighter and respected by his/her fellow workers. To refuse would seem to be withdrawing from the fight. If the reasons why are not adequately explained, the workers will not understand and the revolutionary might lose creditability.

And as shop steward the revolutionary would have a number of advantages. It would be easier to organize job actions, newsletters, committees, etc. because he/she would be the recognized leadership in the shop. The steward has more mobility and access to information about the company and the union. And through union functions he/she will have contact with other stewards who are likely to be militants.

But these are just tactical advantages. None of them are absolutely necessary for good work. None of them are things that can't be gotten around or accomplished in other ways, with difficulty perhaps, but done nonetheless. And it is best that they be done in other ways because the steward's position has such strategic limitations that it is much more of a hindrance than a help in building revolutionary class consciousness.

Before we can discuss the validity of the above statement, we need a strategic perspective by which we can analyze and discuss the various pros and cons of the communist as shop steward. Below is my understanding of the theory upon which we base our strategy of working mainly outside of the trade union structure and building independent workers organizations based on the shop floor.

Another Side To This Life . . .

The consciousness of working people is made up of many competing and complimentary forces, each of which finds its material base in bourgeois society. Some of these, like individualism or white supremacy, are a product of a particular culture or privileges to a part of the class. Many are even more transitory, rooted in a particular area or era. But there are two forces within the consciousness of working people which are so general and important that they deserve to be called class consciousness. They both find their roots in the capitalist mode of production, and are a result of the roles workers play as wage earners on one hand and as producers on the other.

Trade union consciousness is based in the role workers play in capitalism as wage earners. Its practical manifestation in workers' activity is the struggle for better terms in the sale of labor to the capitalist. While it does struggle to better the conditions of the lives of workers, it accepts the permanence and legitimacy of capitalism. Trade union consciousness does not go further than that to call for a change in the system because it is based in transitory fact, the present relationships of production.

Revolutionary consciousness is not a higher form of trade union consciousness. It's not trade union consciousness taken one step further. It is the consciousness of workers as producers. It finds its motivating forces precisely because, as Marx put it, the forces of production (workers) find the present relationships of production to be a fetter. Since it is based in permanent fact — workers are producers — it drives toward the understanding that production, and society, can be better organized by the autonomous power of the producers without the capitalist class.

In normal times the revolutionary aspects of workers' consciousness remain submerged. The sale of labor is fact, while the possibilities of society organized by producers is just that, a possibility. But often in instances of mass activity and class struggle the revolutionary aspects of workers' consciousness come to the fore. And even in more normal times their manifestations can be seen in the daily activity

of workers.

Where Do We Fit In?

The primary tasks of communists are to separate out those autonomous aspects of class consciousness from those features which accept class rule, to bring to the fore those aspects of revolutionary class consciousness and crystallize them into a world view that seeks to change capitalist property relationships and organize production in the interest of the producers, and to build organizations that embody the working class's ability to function as a potential ruling class.

Better Job, Bigger Money Too . . .

Trade unions are the organizational manifestation of trade union consciousness, and even at their best they do not go beyond it. Even when trade union demands go beyond the pure economics of wages and hours to issues of health and safety, speed up and seniority, they are demands for better conditions in the sale of labor and nothing more. The struggles for these demands, even when they reach mass proportions, remain well within the capitalist framework. This is not to deny the importance of these struggles for a better price; within them, divisions within the working class can be combatted, the self-confidence of the workers will increase, and a solid and united class can be forged. But left to itself, trade union consciousness or its organizational manifestations do not go far enough.

It is from this theory that we see the need to build independent organizations in the workplace — organizations which not only attempt to defend the day-to-day interest of workers under capitalism, but see as their main focus (or at least the primary focus of the revolutionaries involved) the preparation that is needed to seize state power.

It is from this perspective of building independent workers organizations and the theory behind them that we should look at the question of the steward's position. I will argue that it is counter to a strategy of building independent workers organizations and a hindrance to building revolutionary class consciousness.

A Second Look At The Steward's Position

Every shop steward I have ever known has performed two separate functions to a greater or lesser degree. First, he/she has defended workers in their day-to-day struggle with management. Usually he/she is just enforcing the contract, but occasionally trying to expand its meaning or even going beyond it. He/she derives his/her power to do so from the contract, union, and the legal structure behind them, and in rare cases from his/her ability to mobilize support on the shop floor. He/she also derives a great deal of his/ her ability to win grievances because of the second function he/she performs — enforcing labor discipline for the boss.

In the microcosm of the department, the shop steward is subject to the same dynamics of the trade union compromise that the union is. Except to the extent that he/she is able to win grievances on a strictly legal basis, his/her ability to win victories on the shop floor is closely tied to his/her ability and willingness to keep his/her people in line. Perhaps the dynamics of this can be better understood by examining some not-so-hypothetical situations.

A foreman sends a worker home early for not wearing safety shoes. The steward wins back pay for the man because the contract does not specify safety shoes. But he tells the man in the grievance meeting that he should know better next time and won't have any defense.

Some people on a particular job complain about safety hazards. The steward argues with them that the job is not really that dangerous and is only of a short duration anyway. On another job the men have stopped work because of safety conditions. Before the foreman does anything himself, he goes and gets the steward, who convinces the men to go back to work. In a third case the same steward is able to get an unsafe condition corrected merely by making it clear he is going to fight it.

Someone asks the steward if he can get out of working overtime since the company has posted it incorrectly and instead of an answer receives a lecture about why he should help the company out by working it anyway. The steward is then able to get someone else relief from overtime even though there is no contract violation by pleading hardship.

The steward informs a worker, who is bragging to his co-workers about a victory in a particularly important grievance, that he shouldn't say anything because it will make it harder for him to win again if management knows people will make a big thing out of it.

A person has come in late, drunk, has missed too many days, has turned out bad work, etc., and is about to be disciplined for it. The steward gets the man off by saying he will talk to the man and it won't happen again.

Management is willing to allow the steward to win some victories because he is performing the important function of keeping his people in line. Management understands that the steward will be unable to maintain discipline unless he is able to deliver some victories to his people, and the steward will win victories only so long as he delivers something of value

to the bosses.

Alternatives

I have been talking here about how stewards usually operate. It is a product of forces on the shop floor to which any who accepts the legitimacy of capitalism is likely to fall prey. It is by no means the only method of operations which the steward is limited to. In fact I find the acceptance of the trade union compromise by communists so unthinkable that I won't deal with it further as a real alternative.

Instead I will look at two other ways in which the steward can attempt to defend the day-to-day interest of the workers he was elected to serve. As stewards, we would probably be using some combination of the two.

The first is the legal defense of workers, by which I mean the use of the contract, grievance procedure, arbitration, and NLRB to defend workers. This method limits itself to defending gains already won in the contract. Since it is dependent on bourgeois legality, it is inadequate for raising demands that go beyond bourgeois legality. Its narrow dependence on expertise and skill run counter to the needs of building workers' self-confidence. And in the practical sense, it is almost wholly dependent on the support of the union to be effective, a factor which the revolutionary can not count on.

The second and more obviously revolutionary method of defending workers is to depend on the mass activity of the workers involved. Direct action on the shop floor, or the threat of it, in the day-today defense of workers is a large part of the best revolutionary strategy whether one is a steward or not. But for the communist steward there is a rub.

The Revolutionary Steward

The workers elected the communist to the steward's position because they believe that he/she would be better able to defend their interest on the shop floor. The communist has shown him/herself to be a militant and consistent fighter in the defense of the workers. He/she has some good ideas about how to go about things and is knowledgeable about workings of the company and the union.

There are also some more backward motivations that must be considered as having more or less weight in the specific situation. The call to become steward may not be a push for militant leadership so much as it is a call for someone who can better take care of business for them. This particular aspect of backwardness is part of the push for all inter-union work, and since the union, with its dependence on expertise, only serves to reinforce those feelings, it is a particularly bad arena in which to combat them. To the extent that the push is for someone to "take care of business," the communist steward is immediately faced with the task of turning the steward's position into something it is not — a leadership position. Another reason why workers would want many of us to be the steward is because of our superior ability to verbalize ourselves and deal with things like contract legality — a product of our educational and class background, and the over-emphasis workers place on those qualities.

In any case, if it is not the popularity contest it often is, workers elect the person they think can best defend their immediate interests. Now if the communist could consistently defend their interest by relying on the mass activity of the workers, there would be no problem. But if the workers are able to consistently defend their interest through mass activity, and have the level of consciousness and organization that that implies, the question of shop steward becomes a moot one.

In anything short of a revolutionary period, mass activity is likely to be sporadic at best; here today, gone tomorrow; coalescing around some issues and not around others. So that the shop steward will be unable to provide a consistent defense of the workers based on mass activity, and if he/she tends to rely more and more on legal defenses, he/she teaches bad political lessons. Also, since the tactics of a revolutionary steward will come more and more into conflict with the collaborationist role of the union, it is unlikely that, over time, he/she will receive the support of the union necessary for even a minimal defense of the contract through the grievance procedure.

No matter where he/she turns, the communist steward is likely to find that he/she can not consistently defend the workers and still provide the best revolutionary leadership in the shop — a fact that both the company and the union will make full use of in teaching the lessons they want the workers to learn.

Of course if the revolutionary is not a shop steward, he/she will still face the same objective limitations, but in this case he/she can pick his/her own turf. He/she can fight around some issues and not around others, and he/she does not bear the burden of winning or losing every grievance that comes up in the shop. He/she can fight around issues that have mass support but not be expected to win every grievance.

There is also something of a safety in having someone else be steward. *When the revolutionary rises to the leadership in any mass struggle, or his strategy is adopted, it is because the workers support a new way of doing things — not because as steward he has foreclosed on the otd way.*

To be sure, the revolutionary who runs for shop steward should make his/her politics clear. He/she should try to make it clear that he/she does not accept the compromise and intends to do things in a new way. But I submit that no matter how much we prattle about socialism, workers' control, direct action and the limitations of trade unionism, these ideas and especially their immediate implications will not be clear to workers who have not fully thought them out and experienced their own self-organization. When they elect us as stewards, they think they are electing militant trade-unionist leadership, not revolutionary leadership. They don't think they are throwing the industrial compromise out the window.

And it is unlikely that they will throw the compromise "out the window." In a shop where there is dual leadership — the trade-unionist steward on the one hand, and the revolutionary cadre on the other — it is more likely that for a long time they will vacillate between the two — choosing now to fight the boss with direct action, choosing then to make the compromise; choosing the leadership of the communist when they decide that, in this case, they want a new way to do things, and not when they feel the old way will suffice. It is inconceivable that the communist as steward can do things either way according to the inclination of the workers and still represent a clear alternative to the old way.

One Step Backwards, Two Steps Backwards ...

Even with all these limitations, taking the steward's position might be seen as an interesting experiment if it did not carry with it certain long-term liabilities.

Taking the union position, no matter what is said about its limitations, will make the union a more important area of his/her work and teach people that he/she thinks changes can be made through the union structure. People learn as much, or more, from what you do than from what you say. It is likely that a lot more people in the shop will hear that a revolutionary took a union position than will ever hear him/her talk about the limitations of work within trade unions. I don't argue that communists must abstain from work within the unions, but that we shouldn't consciously push the work in that direction. The relatively low level of consciousness and self-confidence of the working class assures that more than enough work will be done in the trade unions. The task that falls to communists is to consistently point out the limitations of that work and devise alternatives to it.

If the revolutionary steward is seen as a good fighter who is failing because the union won't back him/her, then the problem will be seen not so much as a result of the inherent contradictions of the trade union compromise as it will be seen as bad leadership higher up. What is likely to develop then is a demand for a strategy of taking over the union.

In any case, it is likely that the revolutionary steward who doesn't compromise will do an even worse job of consistently defending the workers than the steward who did. In this case he will either have to step down or be removed, and the workers will learn, not that the steward was a bad person, not the limitations of the trade union, but that the steward's revolutionary strategy was at fault.

Another Approach . ..

The call to stewardship will probably be heard by any communist who is doing good mass work. It should be accepted for what it is, a recognition that the communist is a fighter and a call to take a greater role of leadership. It is framed in the steward's position because it is the only type of leadership position currently in existence.

To the extent that it is a call to leadership, the communist should respond not by taking the steward's position but by creating an alternative to it.

If the demand that I become steward is raised again in a mass way around election time, I will propose instead, making my position on the union clear, that if a sufficient number of people desire it, I will act as a representative of the workers in the department and intervene in struggles on the shop floor by consciously trying to organize the workers for their own defense. By making such a proposal I will deal with the question in such a way that I won't appear to be withdrawing from the fight and lose creditability. And if such a proposal is accepted, I can be a clear alternative to the leadership of the steward and bring people closer to developing their autonomous power.

TRADE UNIONS/INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATIONS (1973)

by Don Hamerquist

PRODUCTION WORK

Our ideas and our practice of workplace organizing have undergone a good deal of changing since we originally laid out some assumptions and directions in the *Call to Organize* (1970). On some points the change has occurred through a continuing consensus. For example, we have abandoned our original stress on cross-plant workers organizations as unworkable and unnecessary, and although this change has never been formally recognized, it is generally understood and accepted. However, there are many much more important questions where we now recognize that our initial positions were inadequate, misleading, and even wrong, and where we have not developed adequate and accurate alternatives. More specifically, these questions concern the assessment of trade unions and the strategic conception of independent workers organizations that are both mass and revolutionary. On these questions we haven't drifted in one common direction, leaving only the minor task of stating formally where we are and how we have gotten there. Instead, we are spreading out all over the political landscape and developing numbers of divergent and possibly incompatible tendencies.

A Critical Context

A review of some of the basic points in our production work perspective helps to clarify both its strengths and some of the sources of its weaknesses. We began from an emphasis on the strategic significance of divisions within the working class, pre-eminently the division between white and non-white workers. On the one hand this division was presented as an obstacle to the development of revolutionary class consciousness and organization which had to be directly confronted on a programmatic level by communists . . . at the expense of the relative advantages of white male workers. On the other hand, the special oppression which was the source of these divisions also provided grievances and issues for mass movements and struggles which could add — and had added — tremendous strength and new political dimensions to the class struggle in the workplace.

Our perspective stressed the need for mass organizations able to provide a struggle framework for the direct actions of workers against capitalists on their immediate needs and grievances. It opposed spending energy on parliamentary maneuvering within the existing trade unions with the argument that there was no connection between such work and the development of an organizational framework for class struggle that some seventy years of work by radicals within trade unions had uncovered.

Our perspective projected a conception of the revolutionary role of communist organization which avoided the twin pitfalls of being the "best" reformists, or of injecting consciousness from outside by "educating" the workers about state, revolution, dictatorship, etc.

In opposition to all variations of these half-truths, we argued that communists must discover and develop into a base for continuing struggle the elements of workers' collective experience which foreshadow socialism, and that this required a direct challenge to the dominance of bourgeois ideology, culture, and organization, within the working class. The role of communists was not only to help workers comprehend the systematic nature of their oppression and exploitation, but also to clarify to them their collective potential to build a new society without oppression and exploitation.

These positions were developed in a political context that has changed dramatically since that time. Now, all left groups at least talk about the importance of workplace organizing and some are even more guilty than we are of seeing it as the end-all and be-all of revolutionary organizing. In the late sixties, however, all kinds of new left notions about the docility and complacency of the working class still had currency. Even more widespread were the ideas that working class people could best be "organized" outside of the workplace … in the streets, or the schools, or the community, or the army. With all the mistakes and exaggeration on that side of the debate, our mistaken romanticization of the amount and the character of the spontaneous struggle within the workplace is certainly understandable.

Furthermore, at that time the inner-union reform perspective which we were attacking was pretty much the property of the Communist Party. This C.P.

variant was so vulnerable and easy to defeat (in left circles) that it put little strain on us to examine our own assumptions rigorously. Flabby arguments work against an unworthy opponent, and we were misled into thinking that disproving the line of the C.P. was equivalent to demonstrating the validity of our own position. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Finally, though, the members of STO had some individual experience in production work, and some general knowledge of the experience of other organizations — the C.P. and the POC — and we had no *collective* experience of our own. Without such a base of collective experience, any attempt to be more precise about the conditions, problems and potentials of workplace organizing would probably have degenerated into exercises in academic futility. Now, however, we both can and must elaborate our perspective with a great deal more precision and comprehensiveness.

The point of this background review is to avoid the danger of overlooking the basic points on which we were, and, I think, are still, correct, and on which the great majority of the left is mistaken. This can easily happen in the sort of thorough-going re-examination of a line which is in order for our production perspective, if the context in which it was developed is forgotten.

Trade Unions and TRADE UNIONS

The guts of our workplace organizing perspective is the analysis of trade unions contained in the *Call to Organize, Mass Organization at the Workplace,* and *Reflections on Organizing.* On the descriptive level, these documents accurately depict current U.S. trade union reality, in particular the weaknesses and limitations of attempts at union reform. It is true that U.S. unions are so integrated into the capitalist production process and political structure that their ability to defend the immediate interests of their members has been seriously compromised. In many instances the union structure and officialdom appears as a more implacable and more effective enemy of the organization and struggle of workers than does capital.

But such a description does not explain what caused the current state of the trade unions in the U.S. It does not really deal with the question of whether the process of degeneration was a necessary one or not, and whether and how it can be reversed.

The question which we must ask is this: to what extent are the unions a cause of the present backwardness of working class consciousness and organization, and to what extent are they an effect — or, more accurately, an index — of this backwardness?

The production papers imply a set of answers to this question, but these implications of answers are vague and misleading at best. At worst, they are just wrong.

The production papers picture unions as an immediate barrier to class struggle, as a straitjacket on the workers' tendency towards collective activity and organization. Then, it is asserted that this role played by the unions has led to such an alienation among the workers that organizations which are independent of, and more or less hostile to, trade unions should be able to gain a mass following quite easily. These premises provide the foundation for the argument for the necessity of mass organizations independent of the trade unions, as well as for the assessment that such organizations will be viable.

The problems with such a position lie in a combination of an overestimation of the current role of trade unions in this country with an underestimation of the role that changed conditions would enable them to play. From the beginning of our work, we have had practical evidence that we were wrong in the assessment that the unions would be an important initial obstacle to organizing workers along our perspective. On the contrary, the reality of low levels of struggle, of primitive forms of struggle, and of a sporadic and episodic character to struggle, have been much more striking than has the ability of trade unions to suppress struggle. Frankly, there isn't all that much to suppress. Generally our major problem has been to isolate and attack the factors which inhibit the workers from initiating sustained collective struggle, and the union is seldom an important one of these factors. This is evident because these problems tend to be the greatest in situations where the union is either non-existent (Motorola, B. & H., etc.) or where the union is little more than an adjunct of management and most workers scarcely realize that it exists until after they initiate a struggle (S.W., Western Electric). In steel and auto, where the union plays a much more important role in the worker's life, there is substantially more shop floor activity.

It is once struggles begin that the union is able to play a significant role in diverting and containing them. In this way they provide a barrier against sustained collective activity, and, generally speaking, the "better" the union, the more significant the barrier. Nevertheless, to repeat, this has not been much of a consideration in terms of the major problems we have faced of initiating struggle. Beyond this, there are obvious circumstances which make it possible for the unions to absorb and dissipate struggles. So long as the class struggle is manifested mainly in isolated and sporadic activities which are a break in the routine of the job for the workers who participate, and so long as reformism, individualism and, pre-eminently, white supremacy, dominate working class consciousness

without effective challenge, the unions will be capable of continuing the class struggle. It is not at all self-evident that unions would — or could — play the same role if these negative factors were changed in the course of class struggle. Finally, it is an analytic mistake of the first order to regard the union structures and policies as a major cause of the social conditions which allow them to suppress class struggle. They are a support, but they are not the cause.

I want to argue for a different and, I think, more accurate conception of trade unions. The following four points summarize my position on the issues pertinent to this discussion:

1. Trade unions are a historically necessary instrument of the working class to gain better terms in the sale of its labor power . . . that is, to enable groups of workers to enter the capitalist market with some bargaining power. The viability of individual unions depends on two factors. They must be able to win some concessions from capital to maintain credibility with their membership. They must be able to enforce their agreements with capital on their membership or management will have no reason to recognize their legality. Both of these functions must be fulfilled. If a union fails to perform either one for any substantial time, it will lose its ability to fulfill the other and will eventually lose its solvency. The inability to handle this dual function was at the roots of the problems of such diverse union formations as the IWW and the AFL in the late 20s and early 30s.

2. Trade unions vary tremendously between different capitalist states, and to a lesser degree, between different sections and industries in a given country. There are two general political conditions which explain most of this variation. Where the ruling class has seen the necessity and the utility of granting industrial legality to trade unions, the pressure towards collaboration is maximized irrespective (pretty much) of the political coloration of the union leadership. In most Western European countries, the incorporation of the trade unions within the political and economic structure — even when their leadership is nominally communist — is the political policy of the decisive sections of capital. In the U.S. only peripheral sections of capital have not accommodated themselves to the existence of trade unions, but in those areas which have not (the South, agriculture, etc.), trade union struggles tend to go well beyond the routine of collective bargaining in basic industry.

The role of the trade unions also varies in accordance with the sharpness of contradictions and the resulting level of mass activity and consciousness within a given country. More flexibility and responsiveness is apparent in situations where there is a definite revolutionary potential in the situation (consider Quebec). When this is not the case, the unions tend to withdraw into their bureaucratic structure and to smother any insurgent potential with all sorts of barriers to mass participation and mass pressure.

These two points are rather obvious, but we have not always drawn the necessary conclusion from them. That is, there is no inherent tendency towards class collaboration either in the structure of unions or in the necessities of their relationship with capital that is strong enough to significantly counter-balance these, and other, considerations of the relationship of class forces. If it happens that a specific trade union is too rigid to respond to changing political conditions, as, for example, the AFL of the early 30s was too rigid, then new trade union forms will emerge — sometimes as a result of extensive conflict — which are eventually incorporated within the overall trade union institution. Neither the elasticity, nor the efficacy of any given trade union structure, and more importantly, of trade unionism in general, can be predicted independently of a concrete treatment of the political forces and levels of consciousness. Unfortunately, we tended to characterize unions and unionism in isolation from this political context, treating characteristics which could well be accidental and temporary as necessary and defining features of unionism.

3. Trade union reform is not a viable focus of revolutionary work. If the conditions which make it possible for class collaborationist unions and union leaders to exist are changed — first among which are the general lack of collective struggle and the general hegemony of bourgeois consciousness — then union reform will be a byproduct of this change. However, the process will not work in reverse. Changes in union leadership, structure, and policy have no inherent strategic significance . . . what appear to be reforms and reformers will turn into new obstacles and new misleaders. More important, a political program aimed at union reform is almost always a diversion from work aimed directly at changing the terms and conditions of the class struggle.

4. No matter how responsive, progressive, militant, and even revolutionary, trade unions are too limited a mass form in which to accomplish the political work at the point of production essential in the development of a revolutionary working class. Struggles may begin within the trade union framework, but, for their full potential to be realized, a framework must exist in which workers can begin to develop an understanding of themselves, not just as underpaid and overworked wage earners, but as a potential ruling class . . . as producers without whom

there is no production.

(The balance of this section of the paper will be concerned with the first two of these four points. Points three and four have been argued for in a number of other documents and I think those arguments are adequate. Therefore, the second major section of this paper — independent organization — will not attempt to justify them at length but, instead, will deal with how they should be implemented, given a changed conception of trade unions and of the relationship between independent organizations and trade unions.)

These four points rely heavily on the early Gramscian conceptions of trade unions, workers councils, and the party. Gramsci's conception of the development of trade unions is relevant here.

> Objectively, the trade union is the form that labour as a commodity necessarily assumes in a capitalist regime when it organizes to dominate the market . . . to establish an advantageous balance between the working class and the power of capital. The development of trade union organization is characterized by two facts: 1. the union embraces an ever larger number of workers; 2. the union concentrates and generalizes its scope so that the power and discipline of the movement are focused in a central office. This office detaches itself from the masses it regiments, removing itself from the fickle eddy of moods and currents that are typical of the great tumultuous masses. The union thus acquires the ability to sign agreements and take on responsibilities, obliging the entrepreneur to accept a certain legality in his relations with the workers. This legality is conditional on the trust the entrepreneur has in the *solvency* of the union, and in its ability to ensure that the working masses respect their contractual obligations. The emergence of industrial legality is a great victory for the working class, but it is not the ultimate and definitive victory. Industrial legality has improved the working class's material living conditions, but it is no more than a compromise — a compromise which had to be made and which must be supported until the balance of forces favours the working class. (Gramsci, *Soviets In Italy,* STO pamphlet, pp. 14-15.)

This is a very different conception of trade unions than the one presented in our production papers. Specifically note the description of industrial legality as a compromise which "had to be made" and which "must be supported until the balance of forces favors the working class." Our attitude towards industrial legality (which we treated in terms of its U.S. form, contract unionism) was always ambiguous. While we implied that it once had been a positive gain for the working class, our approach to current questions stressed only its negative aspects — the acceptance of capitalist control of the production process totally obscured the fact of a minimum floor under wages and conditions. More important, when we cross over from the estimate of trade unions to our projections concerning mass independent workers organizations, we abandon any conception of the historic necessity of this compromise, or of the necessity for revolutionaries to support it "until the balance of forces favors the working class." The assumption is that there would be necessity for an independent organization to bind itself to a certain "legality" in its dealings with capital . . . not even if the independent organization succeeded in supplanting a union. But this could only be the case if the balance of forces had swung permanently and decisively towards the working class — which is clearly not the case. This lapse in logic is the reason why our assertions that independent organizations would not "sign contracts," enter into "pension plans, etc." have such an arbitrary and Utopian character. It is mysticism, not Marxism, to assert that through the simple substitution of a "good" organizational form for a "bad" one, political problems which are rooted in the current consciousness and behavior of the working class can be resolved. Of course, our position did not argue this baldly, but, clearly, it was the tendency.

Gramsci mentions that in Italy it was common for trade union officials to regard industrial legality as a "permanent state of affairs," not as a temporary compromise, and to defend it . . . "from the same viewpoint as the proprietor . . . seeing only chaos and wilfullness in everything which emerges from the working masses." This conservative character is evident in this country in a particularly corrupted form, but it is a reality in every capitalist state where the struggle for industrial legality is no longer really in doubt, and the memory of that struggle fades in the working class. This conservatism has deeper roots than the inherent logic of the labor sale compromise which unions must enforce and administer. Basically it rests in the proletarianization of the petty bourgeoisie and the rural population, and the consequent erosion of the mass political base for private property which had existed among these strata.

As a consequence of these changes, it is hardly conceivable that the mass pro-capitalist mobilization against the major labor struggles of the late 19th and

early 20th century — or even the Flint Alliance of the Sit-Down Strike period — could be developed under present conditions in the industrialized sections of the country. This makes the ruling class much more dependent on its hegemony over the working class, or, in other words, on developing political support for capital out of working class false consciousness.

The growing necessity for this support is easy to see. At the same time, as more and more social strata come into conflict with monopoly capital, the growing concentration of capital is robbing all plausibility from any ideas of the possibility of rising into the ruling class. As the Manifesto pointed out, but as took a long time to become obvious in this country, the important process under capitalism is not for workers to "make it" out of the working class, but for rural people, small proprietors, and professionals to be forced to sell their labor power in order to survive. The dilemma for the ruling class is how to maintain popular allegiance to a set of property relations in which the overwhelming majority of the people have no conceivable vested interest.

This dilemma is particularly acute with respect to the working class which, for a variety of reasons in this country, is not too beguiled by any of the options available within the capitalist parliamentary framework. So ways are needed to convince workers that their interests are being represented, that they will get what they merit through the system. It is here where the basic political role of the trade unions is determined.

In all developed capitalist countries, the unions function to channel every rebellious tendency into legalistic and quasi-parliamentary arenas where the power and hegemony of capital is most difficult to isolate and attack and where the workers have the most difficulty gaining a sense of their own collective potential. In this country an even more important, though related, function of unions is to freeze the divisions within the working class which obstruct any real steps towards class unity by institutionalizing the privileges of white male workers through job category definitions and the seniority system, if not outright exclusionism.

Though our position has always recognized the co-opting role played by trade unions and the roots of this role in the necessities of capitalist rule under current conditions, we have failed to clarify some distinctions in the way this role is acted out. The general function of trade unions is not the suppression of class struggle, it is the containment of it within the framework of capital. The conservative role of unions is not typically manifested through their becoming an immediate barrier to the initiation of struggle, but through their mediation of the struggle to prevent it from developing in revolutionary directions. To repeat, this role is played by unions with relatively "good" leadership as well as by those with overtly class collaborationist and gangster leadership. In other countries, a similar role is played by unions with leadership which proclaims itself to be Marxist and revolutionary.

The production papers imply that unions are basically just a police arm of the employer that is given some legitimacy by workers' illusions. This is an example of a conclusion drawn from the current practices and characteristics of U.S. unions (circa 1969-1970) which assumes that these practices and characteristics are necessary and defining ones. My argument, which I will develop in the course of this paper, is that we have mistaken temporary and accidental features of the current U.S. unions for essential features of trade unions in general.

Certainly no union which its members will tolerate is too "backwards" for the ruling class. However, when the patience of the rank and file of a given union wears thin, the union structure will find itself faced not only with pressure from its membership, but also with pressure towards reform from decisive sections of the ruling class which are concerned that an important political tool not lose its usefulness. An immediate example of this was the .recent election in the UMW. After the victory of Miller and the reform slate, it was widely reported in the press that the larger mine owners were happy with the defeat of Boyle. Miller, they calculated, would be sufficiently responsive to his membership and militant in pursuing their demands so as to be able to prevent the widespread wildcats and abandonment of the grievance procedure. And Miller, of course, announced that this was just his intention. (He has not been all that successful.)

In short, the role of unions does become increasingly conservative and pro-capitalist, but not in such a blatant way that workers will flock to any plausible alternative.

This leads into the question of the flexibility of the union structure in this country.

When we base our arguments, as I think that we do, on an estimate of trade unions which confuses accidental and quite possibly temporary features with basic and defining characteristics, we are bound to have a distorted view on this issue. Our production papers imply that the U.S. trade unions cannot absorb a major insurgency because they are so corrupt that they cannot and will not even handle the routine defense of their members' interests.

The evidence does not support this assumption. Though the AFL in the early thirties was as bankrupt as the current unions, the upsurge of the thirties was contained within the general trade union framework without any great strain. However, since the CIO

organizing was largely concentrated within an unorganized sector of the working class, perhaps it is not the most relevant parallel to our situation. So let's consider two others:

The British shop stewards movement has existed for decades as a more or less autonomous section of the English trade union structure. Stewards Councils have almost total jurisdiction over issues of working conditions, piece rates, etc. and are based soundly on the concept of direct action which they employ regularly. Their relationship with the official unions is often minimal and characterized by a good deal of hostility (see ENV pamphlet for an example of this relationship). In fact, the shop stewards movement in the most advanced plants has many features similar to what we project for our independent workers organizations, though they are certainly not a model for what we hope to achieve.

Nevertheless, the British unions have been able to tolerate the stewards organization, and, over time, have developed an informal division of responsibilities and powers. Now, with the level of class struggle in Britain having increased dramatically during the past months, the programs and demands of the stewards groups are more and more being adopted by the trade unions. More important, so are their tactics of mass political strikes and slowdowns.

Before considering the implications of the British situation, let me introduce another example. During the "hot autumn" of 1969 in Italy, the institutions of mass assemblies developed as alternatives to the unions in the large Fiat and Alfa Romeo auto plants. These assemblies were in the tradition of the Italian factory councils of fifty years before and had a definite revolutionary cast. At the height of the struggle, the assemblies almost totally supplanted the unions as the locus of workers' organization and activity. What has occurred subsequently is instructive. Both the unions and the factory management have taken steps to incorporate the assemblies, not in their initial mass uncontrollable form, but as "responsible" delegated assemblies with elected leadership. Now, the delegate assembly is recognized by the management and incorporated within the union's bargaining structure where its mass participatory character, not to mention its revolutionary potential, is under constant assault.

More examples are not really necessary. Without substantial evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the U.S. trade union structure, when and if it is put to a test similar to the ones undergone in Great Britain and Italy, will prove to be similarly elastic. Furthermore, the defined and influential reformist strategy for socialism which is provided by the C.P.s in France and Italy is a factor acting against union flexibility, not in favor of it, since the unions are expected to confine themselves to a definite limited role within the anti-monopoly front. The political amorphousness and immaturity of the U.S. unions will increase their susceptibility to pressure from major insurgencies even though it increases their resistance to minor demands for internal reforms.

These examples demonstrate that we must argue very carefully for any notion that mass independent organizations can be a viable general alternative to the established trade unions for any substantial period of time. This the production papers do not do. I want to make it clear that my intention is to place our stress on building mass independent organizations at the workplace on a sounder footing, and not to argue for a different priority. Nothing that has been said supports an inner-union reform perspective. Just the opposite. While changes in popular consciousness, in the relative strength of class forces, and consequently, in the level of class struggle, can force major changes in the trade unions — including personal transformations of the sort undergone by John L. Lewis — no amount of pressuring and maneuvering within the union to replace one set of officials and policies with a different set can force such a change. The factors integrating the unions within capitalist hegemony far outweigh any counter-pressures which can be developed within the trade union framework alone. (The next section will go into more detail concerning the essential limitations of inner-union work.)

In conclusion, if we ask ourselves the cause of the current backwardness of activity and consciousness among U.S. workers (perhaps some in the organization will dispute this backwardness), it should be obvious that a number of factors going far beyond and, indeed, determining the role of the trade unions must be taken into account. Among these are the relative "good times" since the beginning of World War II (since this was originally written the good times have gotten quite dubious), the mass acceptance of bourgeois hegemony on the crucial issue of workers' collective potential, new production patterns and the disorienting impact of new technology, and changes in the composition of the workforce. The most important of these factors, of course, has always been and still remains the acceptance of white supremacy on the part of the overwhelming majority of white workers. Though it is always a danger to consider cause and effect in abstraction from their reciprocal mutually determining inter-relationship, I still think that it is correct to say that these factors I have enumerated above have a lot more to do with the state of the unions than the state of the unions has to do with them. Unfortunately, we have given the opposite impression by the way we have formulated our perspective on workplace organizing.

Trade Union Consciousness

Before discussing the issue of independent organization, I want to deal with a part of the trade union question that goes beyond debates over trade unions as institutions — trade union consciousness.

Lenin argued that the material conditions of workers lead them to combine to struggle against the capitalists for better conditions in the sale of their labor power. The ideological reflection of this process is trade union consciousness. Trade union consciousness is embodied in the formation of trade unions, but beyond this, it is expressed in all kinds of actions and attitudes which never take on an organized, much less an institutionalized, character. Trade union consciousness is that level of awareness of workers in which they realize that they are oppressed and exploited in common with *some, but not all,* other workers, but do not realize their collective membership in a class with the capacity to make a revolution. It is the ideological underpinning for militant reformism . . . for fighting for the interests of workers within the framework of capitalism.

Since *What Is To Be Done* was written, this concept of trade union consciousness has played an important, but not always a helpful, role in Marxist theory. Many people on the left have a lot of trouble understanding our workplace organizing perspective because we do not make it clear that we disagree fundamentally with all those hopeful Leninists who think that all one must know about the way the working class thinks and acts is whether it should be labeled "trade union consciousness" or "revolutionary class consciousness." If we were to accept this way of looking at the working class, then we would be clearly bound to say that the U.S. working class has trade union consciousness (often treated as a form of mental illness which can be cured with a dose of M.L. agitprop). Aha, our critics would say, your talk of independent workers organizations which are both "mass" and "revolutionary" is so much nonsense. If mass organizations are developed, they cannot be revolutionary, since the masses of workers have trade - union consciousness. Indeed, such mass organizations could be nothing other than trade unions themselves, subject to the same objective inherent limitations as existing unions. On the other hand, if revolutionary .groups are formed, they cannot be mass organizations, but must be party formations since mass consciousness is trade unionist . . . etc. Finally, such critics reduce our position to an argument to use dual unionist tactics to develop a more militant trade union movement, and counter this with the aphorism from *Left Wing Communism* and all of the silly old chestnuts from W. Z. Foster.

The weaknesses and one-sidedness of our production papers contribute to this doctrinaire foolishness among their antagonists, some of these issues will come up later, but here I want to clarify where we disagree with this approach to the problem of consciousness that masquerades as Leninism.

Lenin's polemic was directed against a political tendency in Russia which argued that the working class would arrive at socialist consciousness, and at socialism, as the logical development of its experience of direct struggle with capital over the terms and conditions of work. He argued that the highest understanding which could develop from this direct experience fell qualitatively short of what was necessary to make a revolution. To go beyond this point, the intervention of disciplined communists organized into a party was essential. However, in arguing that the workers' "spontaneous" struggles would not develop into a struggle for power through their internal momentum, Lenin was certainly not denying that these struggles exhibited the revolutionary aspects and potentials of the working class. On the contrary, his basic fear was that the organizational and theoretical backwardness of the revolutionaries would prevent them from building on these features of the class struggle.

At the present time, no serious Marxist doubts that the organized intervention of communists is needed to prevent the class struggle from being contained within the framework of capitalist property relations. It is the political content of this intervention which is in dispute. Our production papers are a part of our strategic approach to this different issue.

When we ask the question, "What is the consciousness of the U.S. working class?" not only is it a very different problem from the one facing Lenin in Russia in 1902, it is a very complex and contradictory problem with no simple and unitary "correct" answer. Consciousness is not just ideology, most particularly the consciousness of an oppressed and disorganized social group. Working class consciousness is not coherent and consistent, but fragmentary and internally confused and contradictory. It is not so much articulated as it is implied in attitudes and patterns of behavior.

Trade union consciousness is an aspect of the general consciousness of the workers, not its totality. For example, there is widespread acceptance within the working class of elements of capitalist ideology which could not be called trade union consciousness without making the concept so broad it becomes meaningless . . . consider white and male supremacy or bourgeois individualism, or various interest group conceptions which cut across class lines. Clearly these are not only distinct from trade union consciousness, they are often more backwards than it is.

More important, in all of the production papers

we have made it clear that at moments of sharp struggle (trade unionist struggle, if you will), elements of organization and consciousness emerge which foreshadow the potential of workers to rule. These elements may even, for a time, be the defining features of a struggle. The task for revolutionaries is to help develop these aspects of working class experience and consciousness — for that is what they are — as the base for and alternative to the bourgeois aspects of working class experience and consciousness which always grow stronger as the struggle subsides.

Thus in our conception, working class consciousness is not trade unionist or revolutionary. It is both and therefore neither. We focus on the contradictory and dynamic internal essence of working class consciousness because it is where our political problems and potentials are clarified. It is certainly important that we remedy any weaknesses of our public position on workplace organizing that create misunderstanding of this approach.

One final comment. If reading Lenin becomes a substitute for thinking, as has been known to happen, it is possible to get all worked up over passages in *What Is To Be Done* which define trade unions so broadly that any anti-capitalist workers organization that is not a party (Leninist) is a trade union. We do not find this definition helpful. This is hardly anti-Leninist heresy, since Lenin, himself, abandoned it after the 1905 Revolution produced distinct forms of working class organization that were mass — the Soviets. Gramsci, of course, goes into great detail to examine the distinctions and the relationships between these two different forms of mass working class organizations.

INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION

For as long as we have existed, the central feature of our production perspective has been the attempt to develop mass organizations at the workplace — organizations independent of the union structure, although they may choose periodically to work within it; organizations which we have characterized as both mass and revolutionary. I believe that this conclusion about the basic direction of our work is correct. Unfortunately, it is a correct conclusion that rests on an inadequate and erroneous basis of argument. And it is the argument and the analysis, not the conclusion, which is decisive in dealing with the political issues and dilemmas involved in putting this general approach into concrete practice. I think that we have discovered that this general conclusion neither provides nor even implies adequate and realistic criteria by which to gauge our work.

In the previous section, two points were made about work within the trade union framework: inner-union reform via the formation of caucuses is not a viable political program; the trade union is too limited an arena for the work necessary to develop a revolutionary working class. Though the production papers made both of these points, they were jumbled together as if they were merely different ways of making the same point.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming weight of the argument focuses on the first point, a point which is fairly easily supported by a factual description of the existing unions (but only at the price of the methodological errors involved in this form of argument), and a summary of attempts to reform them. The second point, which is the most important of the two by far, receives very skimpy treatment.

To put these two points in another context, the priority on independent organization can be justified both tactically and strategically. The former argument emphasizes that even if one's aims are just union reform, the reform of the present unions would require a base of independent power. Participation in unions — if more is meant by participation than merely paying dues and voting occasionally — is so minimal and tentative, so corrupted by careerism and cynicism, that any ideas of centering work here should be rejected as entailing isolation from the masses of workers. In fact, Lenin's famous injunction against such self-imposed isolation of revolutionaries applies more to those who advocate work within the existing unions than it does to us. Even the old dual unionists had a more defensible position than their present-day critics in this regard. If their attempt to create "pure" revolutionary unions was Utopian, how should we regard those who urge that work be centered within corrupt and reactionary organizations which are just as "pure" in their isolation from the masses of workers?

The type of tactical argument just made is the substance of the production papers. The problem is not so much that these arguments are wrong, but that they are sadly inadequate . . . for two different reasons. First, as I have said repeatedly, they rest too heavily on characteristics of the present U.S. unions, implying that this necessarily was the trade union reality which we would have to deal with. On the contrary, it is much more likely the changing political situation will result in trade unions periodically developing a mass representative character. In fact, such "periods" will also be those in which our approach gains the most support, and one indirect result of any successes which we will enjoy will be to increase the objective pressures towards trade union reform. Second, and far more important, this type of tactical argument clarified only the most general guidelines concerning the nature and role of the mass independent organizations and their relationships to specific

union formations.

So long as our approach is mainly based on these tactical arguments, it is quite possible to fit what we call "independent organizations" into a number of different frameworks. They can be seen as the nuclei of revolutionary dual unions, with the IWW and the TUUL providing two relevant antecedents in this country. However, they can also be seen as the groundwork for a mass, but non-revolutionary, dual unionism such as occurred in the CIO period in this country and at many times in other capitalist countries. Then, independent organizations can be seen, not as union forms at all, but as Soviets, with the models of the early factory councils or the recent mass assemblies in Italy. Perhaps the Shop Stewards movement in Great Britain, which is quite different from all of these alternatives, might be our mode. Finally, of course, we need not limit ourselves to these alternatives, or any combination of them.

At this stage of our work, the best remedy for such lack of precision is to put our stress on independent organization in clear theoretical and strategic terms . . . and the fundamental argument for our approach, in my opinion, is a strategic argument that doesn't depend on any specific features of U.S. unions, including their potential — or lack of potential — to be "reformed." The essential argument on this point is clearly stated in the Gramsci pamphlet *Soviets In Italy:*

> The proletarian dictatorship can only be embodied in a type of organization that is specific to the activity of producers, not wage-earners, the slaves of capital. The Factory Council is the nuclear cell of this organization. For all branches of labor are represented in the Council in proportion to the contribution each craft and each branch of labor makes to the manufacture of the object the factory produces; it is a class institution and a social institution. Its raison d'etre is in labor, in industrial production, i.e., in a permanent fact, and no longer in wages, in class divisions, i.e., in a transitory fact — and precisely the one that we wish to supercede. (page 11)

In the famous passage in the Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy,* Marx states that the period of social revolution begins when the relations of production become a fetter on the further development of the forces of production. In this context, the distinction which Gramsci draws between the role of workers as "wage-earners" and their role as "producers" becomes a critical one. The working class is the most important capitalist force of production, a force which is both developed and thwarted in its development by capitalist property relationships. However, workers also are one side of the defining production relationship of capitalism — the relationship between wage labor and capital. The wage labor-capital relationship is not only the main framework in which the class struggle is "spontaneously" pursued, it is also the main framework confining that struggle within capitalist property relations. This confinement will continue until the objective development of the working class as a force of production is manifested subjectively in a revolutionary consciousness of its potential to totally re-order society . . . it will continue until trade unionist struggle is superceded by genuine class struggle between workers and capitalists as representatives and embodiments of mutually exclusive modes of production. Trade union organization, and trade unionist struggle, is not an adequate base for the development of this mass consciousness, just as certainly as it is not the necessary and sufficient condition for the articulation of a revolutionary proletarian worldview. This does not mean that trade union struggle cannot create a basic understanding of collectivity of interest. It can do this, and, although this understanding is typically limited to the common interests of only a section of the class, it can and has developed into a general appreciation of the exploitation of wage labor. However, such an understanding is not revolutionary class consciousness until it includes a realization of workers' collective potential to organize production independently of the capitalists — the understanding that "in the factory you either have everything or you have nothing," a proposition whose truth is only evident when the wage worker-capitalist frame of reference is transcended.

There is a prevalent assumption among left groups in the U.S. that these necessary ingredients of revolutionary consciousness will be developed through the agitational and propagandistic intervention of the party within trade unionist struggles. Thus they instruct communists to "never forget the final goal" in their involvement in mass reform struggles. While there must be no denial or denigration of the importance of clear socialist agitation and propaganda, there must also be an understanding of the fundamental limits of such activity. The most that the party can hope to "teach" the working class through such efforts is the desirability of socialism as an abstract and ideal goal. This is not sufficient to bring socialism from the realm of Utopias to a goal which masses see as workable and attainable. Only through struggles which foreshadow the possibility of socialism can workers gain the assurance that it is a tangible goal within their reach. Clearly the "experience" of being the object of communist agitation and

propaganda is not this sort of a mass learning experience. The point is that there must be a base of social practice within which a revolutionary party can lay bare those working class characteristics which Gramsci calls "producer," separated from those characteristics which flow from workers' role as "wage earner."

It is inconceivable that the process of separating the autonomous aspects of mass struggle from the aspects in which class rule is accepted implicitly or explicitly can occur without specific organizational frameworks designed to facilitate it. Independent organizations can be part of such a framework, trade unions cannot. This is the fundamental justification for our stress on building independent organizations, as well as for our emphasis on the inherent limitations of trade union work. It provides the approach in which we see communists able to develop a counter-hegemonic working class culture of struggle based on the liberating potential of the elimination of both capital and wage labor.

This indicates why we place such importance on the development of independent workers organizations, what we mean by terming them "revolutionary," and why we argue that the goal must be to develop them into mass popular organizations, not cadre formations. However, there is a whole range of questions and problems which remain. I want to single out three of these for more detailed treatment. First, what reason is there to believe that such an approach is viable? Second, what is the relationship between mass independent organizations and unions? Third, what is the role of the communists within the mass independent organizations?

From this point forward I will substitute the word "council" for the awkward phrase "mass revolutionary independent organization." This substitution might easily be misunderstood, so some initial clarification is in order. It is not our intention to set out to build little Soviets. As the context will make clear, the real organizational formations to which we relate will not have any such "pure" character, but will be composites of different tendencies and different conceptions, operating under varying sets of objective limitations. We use the term "council" to clarify what we see as the responsibilities and the potentialities of communist work within such independent formations. It is self-evident that independent organizations, if they are to have any mass character, must, under present conditions, be heavily influenced by the reservoir of essentially trade unionist militance which currently finds little outlet within the union framework. Further, there is nothing inherently revolutionary (or even non-trade unionist) in the mere fact of organizational independence from the existing trade unions. What there is is a revolutionary potential for communist work which does not exist for inner-union work.

Issue of Viability

The general line of attack on our position by much of the rest of the left holds that since the working class has only reached trade union consciousness, it isn't possible to develop organizations which in any real sense are both mass and revolutionary. Either they will not be mass organizations, or they will not be revolutionary organizations. In fact, as the criticism goes, real mass revolutionary organizations will only be possible in a revolutionary situation . . . which the present situation clearly is not. Consequently, our independent mass organizations can be nothing beyond a tactic to revitalize the trade union movement from outside of the trade union structures, and it is logical to accuse us of tactical fetishism for our "dogmatic" exclusion of other tactics — specifically, inner-union caucuses — aimed at the same goal of union reform and revitalization.

The failure of the production papers to deal directly with the political consciousness of the working class did leave the impression that if only the trade unions could be supplanted by independent workers organizations, the backwardness of the workers would evaporate and they would conduct themselves as a potential ruling class. Our critics realize that the process is not going to be this simple. But this weakness in our arguments does not support the position they advocate. In fact, such criticisms rely on factually mistaken estimates of working class reality and non-dialectical methodology. As was said in an earlier section, any accurate estimate of working class consciousness must center on its varied and contradictory aspects. Broad generalizations about what working class consciousness is — or what it is not — obscure these different elements and their relationships with each other.

(This would seem elementary for any Marxist position, but we have "Marxist" estimates of the working class which are blind to all existing elements of revolutionary potential; and we have other "Marxist" positions which cannot see that such elements are both linked with and subordinated to, capitalist ideology and capitalist culture. The pseudo-problems created by such one-sided analyses lead to grotesque conceptions of the role of communists. Either the "teaching" function of the party is grossly exaggerated, or the role of party is reduced to nothing.)

Nevertheless, we should deal directly with the charge that our approach is inherently unworkable . . . that mass revolutionary workers organizations will only exist in a revolutionary situation. I want to deal with the issue of viability in two parts. The first is the general argument for it, and the second sets

certain limits on this viability.

As soon as it is seen that the development of the working class as a material of production entails elements of consciousness and behavior which foreshadow socialism long before the masses of workers become self-consciously revolutionary, the objection to the viability of our perspective is refuted in principle. The dialectical axiom of uneven development implies that the political development of the working class will not be a uniform process. Instead, the process will involve events like a Flint sitdown strike, the "hot autumn" in Italy, the French 1968 strike, or, closer to home, the Farah strike. These situations develop capacities and potentials among their immediate participants, moving them far ahead of the rest of the class. Such areas of sharp struggle do have a positive effect on the class as a whole, of course, an effect that takes the form of an increased combativity and openness to revolutionary ideas. However, it isn't possible to draw the same revolutionary lessons for workers generally that can be drawn for the workers who are immediate participants in the struggle, because it is the reality of active participation — not just support — that allows these lessons to take root.

Long before anything approaching a revolutionary situation exists in this country as a whole, revolutionary lessons can be learned by masses of workers involved in specific struggle situations. In fact, this process is integral to the creation of the subjective preconditions for the revolutionary situation — a situation in which the "masses are unwilling to continue in the old way." Such conditions will never develop until a substantial portion of the working class knows that a "new way" is possible. The party's role largely consists of its responsibility to synthesize such subjective conditions for revolution by welding the working class potentials which are manifested in sporadic struggles within the framework of capitalism into a mass movement for, and of, socialism.

It would be possible to write at length about tactical considerations involved in this approach. However, the issue here is only whether our perspective is theoretically and strategically consistent and viable, and this is easily indicated with an example. There are many we could choose from, but the Seattle General Strike of 1919 provides an exceptionally instructive example.

According to the testimony of participants in the Seattle struggle, the Seattle workers shared a general sentiment that the workers should run the society. The strike, then, provided them with a period of a week in which they could, and did, run "their" society. This situation in Seattle was not paralleled anywhere in the rest of the country. There may have been some communities with a comparable degree of working class consciousness, but nowhere, besides Seattle, was there such an immediate potential to embody this consciousness in social practice. (The same point might be made about the Sit-Down strikers in Flint some two decades later.) Now, were the conscious revolutionaries in Seattle, and there were numbers of them, to tie the development of mass revolutionary organizations in Seattle to the existence or non-existence of a general revolutionary situation in the country as a whole, they would be in a terrible dilemma. No general assessment of the U.S. in 1919 could support the conclusion that socialist revolution was on the immediate agenda. Therefore, to make this a governing consideration would prevent the revolutionaries from working in Seattle to keep the potentials generated locally from quickly dissipating after the height of the struggle. To put it another way, it would lead to the Seattle revolutionaries behaving in the same manner as did the French C.P. in 1968.

It is clear that the responsibility of the Seattle revolutionaries was to develop the forms and tactics of struggle which would maximize the revolutionary development of the Seattle workers, and not to link this mechanically to the possibility for the seizure of state power in the country as a whole. Stated this way, probably no left group would disagree with the conclusion. However, as usual, it is not so simple. The end can only be fully achieved if the means have been developed. In Seattle, and elsewhere, it is not possible to effectively capitalize on possibilities which may rapidly achieve mass dimensions if there has been no preparation — if the conscious revolutionaries haven't somehow anticipated this development in their practical work. Part of such preparation involves the development of organizational forms which can stimulate and articulate the revolutionary features of the workers' struggles prior to a mass explosion, in this way helping to create that explosion and shaping its concrete modalities. Failure to do such preparatory work is nothing but reliance on spontaneity, no matter how "Leninist" its justification.

It is easy to exaggerate the points I have been making about the possibility and, indeed, the necessity of councils until we lose contact with the other side of working class reality. The revolutionary aspects of the working class's experience and outlook are normally subordinated to capitalist ideology and culture. But more important than this subordination is the fact that they are all tangled together with non-revolutionary aspects — and even counter-revolutionary aspects — of working class behavior and consciousness. This is particularly evident in the common connection between the militance of white workers and their commitment to the institution of white supremacy. While this particular interconnection poses the major practical problem facing the

work of revolutionaries, it does not pose any great theoretical difficulties. The right course is difficult to pursue, but not so difficult to perceive. However, there are interconnections which are more subtle and complex. In specific, the revolutionary elements within working class experience in this country are very closely tied to ideas and tendencies which could be more accurately called trade union militance — ideas and tendencies which, as I have said, currently find difficulty being expressed in any real way through the existing trade unions. These considerations make it Utopian to expect that council forms can be stable organizations under present conditions. This would only be possible if it were also possible to define them by the workers' collective role in the production process. To attempt to force such a self-conception on independent organizations would be sectarian silliness.

This has two implications, one of which the production papers have considered and one which, I think, they failed to consider. As the production papers argue, in "normal" circumstances the councils will be organizational points of reference whose main role is to provide an interpretation and explanation of workers' experiences which is an alternative to trade unionism, and is a part of the process towards a counter-hegemonic self-consciousness. During sharp mass struggles — circumstances which are obviously not normal at the present time — the councils may temporarily provide the form in which the class organizes and expresses itself. But even at the abnormal moments, so long as the struggles are isolated and sporadic, the council will be narrower than the active participants in the struggle, and much narrower than the total constituency of the struggle. We will have to go further along the road to revolution before councils will or can become the legitimate and organic mode of self-organization of the class even in the most developed instances.

Councils and Trade Unions

The implication not spelled out in the production papers is that independent organizations are going to be constantly torn between the role of council and the role of trade union or alternate union. This leads into the issues involved in the relationships between unions and councils. As has been implied, it will not generally be possible or desirable for the party to build independent organizations on a clear counter-hegemonic basis. Instead, they will be composed of workers who share only one basic thing: they see the independent organization as a workable alternative to their present situation. Their immediate motives for participation may be only to build a militant union or to reform a corrupt one, or they may be much more developed, but in any case, in practice we will not be building councils (mass revolutionary independent organizations) in the strict sense, but will be building or relating to independent organizations while struggling to develop their council potential.

This raises issues which are more "practical" than those with which we have been dealing and it may be helpful to proceed in terms of a hypothetical situation which is not really so far removed from work situations we have experienced and is even closer to situations which could easily develop in our work. This will give more reality to a whole number of political issues and make it easier both to criticize what our present production papers have to offer in the way of guidance, and to present a more adequate alternative.

Whenever we begin, our initial activity is directed toward either building a group or finding an existing one to work in that is independent of the union structure and willing to fight the company. Since we want the group to be much more than a device to recruit individual workers to our political position and, eventually, a communist organization, it is always important that it be sufficiently broadly based that its character is not in our exclusive control. That is, we want a situation where our opinions and perspectives will be only a part of the factors determining the stance of the group.

Other Marxist positions do not share this perspective. They see the union as the arena of *mass* activity and organization. Left groupings are seen as a lever to influence the union in the direction which the communists want it to go and as a recruiting form. Such an approach is concerned with gaining or holding left groupings as power factors in their particular perspective, not with encouraging its autonomous character. There is nothing particularly reprehensible in this position, indeed it makes perfect sense in view of the general "Marxist" conception of the relationship between mass struggle and revolutionary struggle in a non-revolutionary period.

Central to our differences with these perspectives is the fact that our aim is to develop independent organizations which attempt to provide a framework for the activity of the entire workforce. Of course, they will almost always begin on a much more modest scale. Even when the independent workers group is not a central factor in the life of the plant — when its role is mainly agitational and propagandistic since the bulk of the workers, though they may sympathize and empathize with it, do not see it as an alternative to the existing relationships in the plant — our stress on autonomy will create a certain set of difficulties for us. For the most part, these will concern the tactics of fighting for our positions and programs within

the group without imposing them by virtue of our superior organization and other resources. The goal of such ideological struggle is to help the workers and ourselves think clearly and critically, not to strike poses or make cheap victories. Though these difficulties are not small, I think that with more time and experience we will learn how to handle them.

The most important issues come to the surface when we assume that the activity of the independent organization leads the workers in a particular workplace to see it as a real alternative. Look at the situation this way. The organization will be confronted with workers with a range of immediate needs and grievances. For the workers, these are an initial; test of the independent organization. If workers believe that it can be an instrumentality in these, the independent organization will get support. Of course, the groups and the communists within them will inevitably tend to put their best face forward, emphasizing the possibilities not the limitations. After all, our aim is to demonstrate their viability in struggle whose outcomes depend in large part on the consciousness of the workers. In such a situation, it would be absurd to predict defeat, or even to present a "balanced" picture. This would undermine the development of collective morale and could mean the difference between relative success and absolute failure..

Before workers opt for independent struggle, they will consider two types of factors. First, the independent organization, particularly if it has strong communist leadership, will certainly advance demands and forms of straggle which more closely fit with the workers' sense of oppression and anger than anything, which any present union; could conceivably offer. Second, such a program and such an emphasis on open confrontation and protracted struggle will certainly meet much, more serious management opposition than normal union activity — opposition which quite likely will be augmented by the antagonism of the already existing union apparatus and the intervention of the state.

Given the pervasiveness of collaborationism and cynicism and the law level of mass struggle in most cases, when workers consider these factors, they opt for the status quo or for work within the safer framework of an established union. Still it is possible that in some situations such an assessment could lead the mass of workers to the decision that their interests were best served by participation in and support of the independent organization!. Under current conditions this is most likely in situations where there either is no union or where the union is totally unresponsive. Clearly we have been and still are in such situations.

Let me spell out such a hypothetical situation in more detail. An independent organization with communist leadership gains mass support primarily, though not totally, because workers see it as the best available instrument to advance the terms and conditions under which they sell their labor power. One probable effect of an extended struggle with an intransigent employer would be to undermine this basis of mass support — would be to convince the workers that they had been mistaken about the potential of the independent organization. Therefore, pursuit of maximum, demands for a long time would erode the mass support and thus reduce the possibility of gaining and consolidating more minimal advances — but advances which the workers would regard as significant improvements.

Clearly, in such a situation, the independent organization and the communists would have to consider some sort of a temporary settlement — of a compromise. And in fact, that compromise would necessarily include many of those institutional characteristics of the present trade unions of which we are the most critical — and rightfully critical. Capital makes no concessions without extracting a price. It is likely that only a small minority of the workers would understand the negative side of the situation. The majority would regard winning exclusive bargaining rights, a pension plan, a seniority system, a grievance procedure, as victories, as a partial resolution of their grievances. But for our perspective, a real dilemma would arise. How can the capacity of the independent organization to crystallize the revolutionary aspects of the workers' struggles be maintained when it has been forced to become a party to a compromise with management which accepts the permanence and legitimacy of capital?

Here we must decide if this is a dilemma which can be avoided or one which must be confronted. Suppose we steered dear of this box by developing groups which did not attempt to provide a real and immediate alternative to workers, but only an ideological center around which the most advanced workers could be organized and educated. Obviously this approach would contradict our basic strategy. It is one thing if the masses of workers are not ready to accept cm alternative; it is quite another if the alternative is intended to be unacceptable to all but a few. It is one thing if workers refuse to accept our leadership on immediate issues; it is another entirely if, hoping to steer dear of becoming over-extended, we refuse to provide such leadership when it is within our capabilities.

One focus of our conception of the role of communists is to demonstrate to workers their collective capacities and potentials. On the most basic level, this is the demonstration that workers can stick together — an ability about which most workers are profoundly cynical. How would communists draw

such lessons through an organizational form which abstains from the struggle and comments from the outside on its limitations? Just as important, such an abstentionist role could only be enforced on a genuinely mass organization if the communists played an absolutely destructive and manipulative role. The organization's worker membership would necessarily try to lead the struggle for immediate demands. Thus the independent group would take on a mass character under circumstances which created difficulties for its "revolutionary" character. But if we are serious about developing mass organizations which would not just be "better" representatives of the workers, but a method for them to represent themselves, such difficulties cannot be mechanically resolved by preventing the full participation of the workers in determining goals and tactics — in deciding when and how to advance, when and how to retreat, when and how to compromise.

The only other possible route for avoiding the dilemma is even more easily rejected. If the independent organization became a union with "revolutionary" leadership, all that was previously said about the objective determinants of unions would apply to it as well. Insofar as the revolutionary aspect of the organization extended beyond general rhetoric of its leadership, the reform gains that had been achieved would be jeopardized. Management is hardly likely to make or respect agreements with a union leadership which threatens to unleash struggle at any time with no defined goal short of the elimination of capital. In the absence of revolutionary consciousness throughout the class, such gains can only be maintained through the industrial legality compromise, which, as has been said, is premised on the acceptance of the legitimacy of the private ownership of capital. But if revolutionaries allow their work to be essentially contained within such a framework, there is no effective way for them to develop the counter-hegemonic social bloc necessary for a meaningful challenge to this legitimacy.

This example is applicable to a situation where for all practical purposes there is no union. However, the same dilemma will occur where there is .an active and more or less responsive union. In such a case, it will be manifested in pressures on the independent group to become a caucus with the aim of the eventual capture of the local. Of course, in such a situation there are likely to be organizational forms other than the independent organization which will attract this sort of trade union militance, and thus the alternatives will not be posed in such a stark fashion. Nevertheless, they will be there.

This dilemma is an unavoidable feature of our work. Our organizing perspective must give us the tools with which to deal with it, but the production papers do not do this. Instead, they imply two different, but equally mistaken, attitudes toward the issue. On the one hand, they imply that such problems are not likely to come up until the general political situation is drastically changed in our favor. On the other hand, they imply that it is possible for an independent organization to supplant an existing union without being subject to the limitations affecting all unions. This utopianism, for that is what it is, has its roots in the inadequacy of our strategic conception of independent organization.

This leads directly into the relationship between independent organizations and the existing unions, as well as that between independent organizations and union formations which are likely to emerge with the sharpening of class contradictions. It is in this area that our strategic confusion is responsible for the most immediate practical problems. The production papers present a major and a minor theme on these relationships. First, the independent organization should aim to eventually supplant the existing union, both as the instrument of the defense of immediate class interests, and as the struggle framework in which the development of revolutionary consciousness can take place. Second, until it is actually possible to supplant the union, work within it is permissible insofar as it helps develop the base for independent organizations.

My first observation is that these two general guidelines don't combine well at all. One aspect of the political reality within which councils must be developed is the currency of illusions about the potential of trade unionism, if it were rid of the present corruption. A major task of communists is to struggle against such notions insofar as they are illusions. In practice, this takes the form of struggling against pressures to participate within the union on trade unionist terms. It is difficult to reconcile such a struggle with any notion that work within a union can help build the base for councils. Of course, if the assumptions about the inflexibility of the trade unions made in the production papers were correct, then we could rely on the failure of all attempts to work within this framework to demonstrate the general worthlessness of the unions. However, the assumptions were mistaken. No such cooperative response of the union structure can be predicted. What is more likely is that participation inside the union, instead of exposing the limitations of such activity, will open up a range of possibilities, some illusory, but others not, for further inner-union struggle. Such possibilities will take forever to exhaust.

To put it bluntly, our perspective could only advocate struggle inside the union when the probability was that it would be unsuccessful . . . better yet, sold out. However, on any issue which workers see as a

point of struggle, the outcome cannot be predicted so easily. More important, if communists attempt to maneuver workers into situations where they can "learn" the right lessons by being defeated, not only will they be sadly disappointed communists, but they will have acted in contradiction to the autonomous working class movement, which is the essential revolutionary vehicle in this country. No support for independent organizations will be built by communists attempting to minimize what has been, and can be, done through the unions; or, more specifically, by communists acting to limit what can be done in this arena.

The treatment of this point in the production papers is not integral to their basic argument. It is tacked on as a defense against some of our left critics who charge us with dual unionism and syndicalism, and breaks with the entire frame of reference of the papers. Instead of talking about how an independent organization might work within a union, the production papers shift to a discussion about the attitudes and approaches of communists and communist organizations. For communists, the advice to work within the unions is superfluous. Communists should use all chances to gain support for their politics, and it would be silly to deny that such opportunities can be found in work within unions. But it is not true that a perfectly correct approach for a communist organization is applicable to a mass independent organization of workers.

In fact, when we talk about the independent organization working within the union, we are talking about it assuming the role of a caucus. This should be understood precisely. Work within the union might be meant to refer to certain isolated occasions — strike and contract ratification discussions and votes, picket line tactics, situations where it is possible to confront and expose reactionary leaders and policies. Independent organizations must participate in these situations, if they intend to be relevant to workers. However, these situations are mass events in which the union structure is only one factor. When .difficulties develop is when an independent organization becomes a part of the structure, becomes an opposition caucus and develops a more or less systematic plan for gaining union leadership. In the strict sense, this is what inner-union mass work for an independent organization must be.

Whenever the independent organization functions as a caucus, it will buttress the trade unionist illusions which virtually all of its members share to some extent. The pressure for the independent organization to assume this caucus role is an index of the lack of revolutionary consciousness among its membership. It is an index of the illusions that changing the union leadership would make a tremendous difference and that it would not be so difficult — that possession of the union apparatus would provide extra power not matched by new liabilities. All of these ideas are examples of the tendency shared by workers and leftists alike to look for some short-cut answers to the problems involved in developing mass revolutionary working class consciousness and organization. Though this is not an absolute argument against an independent organization becoming a caucus, it stands as a warning that such a role always entails a political price. This price is nothing but a weakening of the unique potentials of independent organizations to provide a base for the development of councils.

If we were considering the role of communists, not of mass workers' organizations, this argument would be mistaken. Communists may be working on a correct or an incorrect strategic line, but presumably they can evaluate their work in terms of this line, no matter what the nature of the work. A mass organization, however, will not have explicit agreement on political line, and the process of gaining more substantial agreement on such questions, as well as the nature of the agreement which is gained, will be greatly influenced by the arena in which the struggle is pursued.

Of course, the communists cannot unilaterally dictate the arena of struggle. In some cases, perhaps most of them, under present conditions the pressure towards becoming an inner-union caucus will be too great to be resisted without the communists playing an essentially disruptive and destructive role in the independent organization. I want to postpone consideration of that problem until a later section. Here, the important point is that the production papers are wrong in saying that work within the union is permissible for the independent organizations on a tactical basis. There are no circumstances when inner-union caucus work — as defined above — will build a base for councils. Independent organizations may assume such a role but it should be only when communists are unable to convince its mass membership of the importance that it remain an alternative to trade unionism generally. Of course, this is not to say that a part of the initial base for independent organizations will not be found in and around the union, the proportion varying from union to union.

As I have said, this point was the minor theme in the production papers' treatment of the relationship between independent organizations and trade unions. A far more important point was that the independent organizations should attempt to supplant the existing unions. This point was the political heart of the papers.

This notion underwent some changes in the course of the revision of the production papers. In the first version it was presented as the immediate

goal of the work. The primary definition of the independent organization was as a hostile alternative to the union. In the later versions we tended more to *predict* that independent organizations would supplant unions, but only "eventually," almost simultaneously with the emergence of a general revolutionary crisis in capitalism. But to say that councils will eventually supplant the unions is no more meaningful or helpful than to say that socialism will eventually supplant capitalism. It tells us nothing about how to relate independent organizations to unions now. Our early position had the virtue of telling us something definite about how to work. But in spite of the vagueness of these versions, their overwhelming impact, accepted by both adherents and opponents, is to "supplant" unions.

From the outset, we must recognize that the notion of "supplanting the union" in any literal sense is a hindrance in dealing with the practical problems which we are facing now or will likely be facing in the near future. This is true whether or not the goal of supplanting the union is publicly proclaimed and becomes the agitational focus of the independent organization, that is, whether or not it defines itself as a dual union.

I began this section with a hypothetical example which was not all that hypothetical. It posed a situation where the independent organization, and not any existing union, either one already recognized in the plant or one willing to be brought in, appears to the workers as the vehicle most likely to advance their immediate interests. This sentiment, then, forces the independent organization to either assume the role of a militant class struggle-oriented union or to refuse to fight for the workers' immediate interests.

It is an illusion to think that the communists within the independent organization could steer it away from situations where a choice must be made between assuming mass leadership under important limitations and refusing to accept this role. The condition for independent organizations developing autonomous working class potentials is that they be genuinely representative. They cannot be held aloof from such tactical dilemmas because their constituency will demand that they make a choice. In fact, in most conceivable situations this constituency will demand they assume the role of an insurgent union.

So it will sometimes happen that an independent organization can and will supplant an existing union. But as has been pointed out earlier, this does not mean that a *council* has supplanted an existing union. In fact, short of a revolutionary situation, this cannot happen since the industrial legality compromise and thus unions are essential for the workers to advance and defend their position as wage workers. Until there is a revolutionary situation, workers will not move beyond this to a coherent conception of themselves as producers. This means that under present conditions, it is the pressure of trade unionist sentiment within the independent organizations that is the impetus towards supplanting the existing unions. When this pressure is successful, one of the consequences will be to provide a material and institutional base which further strengthens, at least in the short run, the general influence of trade unionism. The production papers have a totally inadequate treatment of this entire range of issues, and in fact develop a conceptual framework in which they appear insoluble, though they are far from that.

The source of this difficulty, too, is the production papers' inability to clearly distinguish between their institutional critique of the existing U.S. unions and their concept of the political categories — trade union and trade union consciousness. In no way is the former the only possible crystallization of the latter that is viable in this country. In fact, if the existing unions, or some of them at least, are considered, the probability is that they can and will be supplanted by independent organizations. But when we are dealing with unionism as a set of general organizational and ideological categories, the process of supplanting will not seem so easy and purely "organizational," and the scenario mentioned above will be seen as a change in the form of unionism, rather than its transcendence.

Though the independent organizations should consistently criticize the class collaborationist character of the existing unions, the communists within them should take care that this criticism doesn't create unreal expectations about what the independent organizations can accomplish. Exposing, isolating and replacing the union in a given situation will not necessarily transform the balance of class forces in that situation. Presumably such a development will leave the workers in better shape but it will not usually make it possible to transcend the labor sale compromise for even a short time. More specifically, it is unlikely that such an independent union will be able to move beyond the particularly rotten features of U.S. unionism. It is apparent, therefore, that centering our work within organizations which are independent of the union structure will not guarantee our ability to avoid the very pitfalls which face the inner-union caucus perspective. In our chosen arena, as well as in the union arena, it is easy to exaggerate the potentials which would be opened up by an organizational victory against the existing union.

It is wrong to see the relationship between independent organizations and unions as the attempt by the former to organizationally supplant the latter with a "revolutionary union" or some type of soviet structure. It is also wrong to see the relationship as one where the independent organization functions as

an inner-union caucus with an independent base of activity and support and with revolutionary leadership. So what, then, is the correct view of the relationship? The point of beginning must be that unions do, and will continue to, provide the framework for the day-to-day struggle for better terms in the sale of labor power. Independent organizations can only fulfill this role by becoming unions. This does not mean that independent organizations cannot struggle for reform demands without becoming unions. It means that they cannot become the institutional framework in which the workers pursue these goals without becoming unions. The reform struggle has two sides: the increased combativity and openness of the workers who participate in it, and the limitations of their conceptions of what is needed, what can be won, and how to struggle. In specific instances, independent organizations can fight for better terms by building on the positive side, but if they become the framework for this struggle — responsible for retreating as well as attacking, consolidating as well as achieving — they will be bound up by the negative side.

The production papers concentrate exclusively on the antagonism between independent organizations and the unions. I want to concentrate more on the complementary side of the relationship. First a word of warning. The trade union attracts reformists, both the overt and the "revolutionary-realism, one-step-at-a-time" variety. And currently, the institution is in the hands of forces which would be complimented by being called reformist — largely in those hands. Independent organizations will naturally attract the revolutionaries, those workers who want to struggle as much for the sake of fighting as for any specific immediate grievance or demand. Thus when I speak of a complementary relationship, there is no denying that there will inevitably be great hostility, antagonism, and competition. There will be no smooth cooperative process of working together. The trade union leadership and those leftists with an inner-union line will be blind to the complementary side of the relationship. Nevertheless, we should not be.

The objective conditions, which allow independent organizations to develop and allow this activity to have some success, will stimulate the entire class into greater militance and struggle. This will constitute a pressure against the collaborationism of the existing union structures and leadership. Any successes gained by the independent organization will further increase this pressure. So, as workers engage more widely in struggle, and as radical ideas develop a larger and more appreciative audience, one consequence must be the development of struggles inside the union framework and against the current leadership. In many cases these will meet with some success.

In no sense should communists with our perspective be hostile to these developments within the trade union framework even though every success in sloughing off the most collaborationist features of the U.S. unions will make inner-union activity much more attractive to a large portion of the membership and constituency of independent organizations. Developments within the unions that make them into organizations more capable and willing to fight for the reform interests of the workers, including fighting for these demands which have been initially raised by independent organizations, are in the interests of the class and all of its organizations, even if we are deprived of an opportunity to teach cheap "revolutionary" lessons.

Let me tie up some conclusions about the relationship between independent organizations and unions. The preparation of the workers to rule and the defense of their immediate interests are distinct tasks despite all of the interconnections between them. It is wrong — short of a revolutionary situation — for communists to pose them against each other, and it is a syndicalist illusion to think they can both be accomplished in a single organizational structure.

The independent organizations will define themselves by direct collective action as the cutting edge of a critique of class collaborationism. This provides a framework in which communists can begin the work of supplanting trade union consciousness and other aspects of bourgeois culture with revolutionary class consciousness and culture based on the changed social reality provided by the process of supplanting parliamentary-legal forms of pressure on the union with direct collective action against the company. One outcome of this process, and of the general heightening of class conflict, will be more militant trade unions.

Under such conditions — where the unions are being revitalized and the work of the communists to develop the council character of the independent organizations is only one tendency at work within these organizations — it is not likely that independent organizations and trade unions will exist as clear dual structures. Specifically, there will be a tendency for independent organizations to become unions in situations where the existing unions are not responsive, and for an overlap in constituency, program, and perhaps even in membership, between independent organizations and inner-union caucuses in situations where the unions are more viable.

Independent Organizations and the Party

(This area contains a number of crucial questions. Because of limitations of time and space, I am only going to touch on a couple of points, and in a very

general way. Some of the most important problems will not be dealt with at all, because they are not particularly relevant to the main concerns of this paper.)

Communists have a dual political responsibility in their work in all areas. First, they must expose, isolate, and defeat the main forms of capitalist ideological and cultural hegemony within the working class. In this country, this entails a frontal assault on the institution of white supremacy. Second, they must build a mass revolutionary alternative to capitalism, based on the elements of mass struggle which foreshadow and prefigure socialism. These are not separate tasks, but form one integral program of struggle.

This dual responsibility is particularly crucial in production work. Without in any way compromising a relentless attack on capitalist ideas and institutions, particularly as they are expressed and supported by workers, communists must build on the forms of struggle and organization which manifest and embody the potentials of workers as producers. Without communist intervention, if they develop at all, such council forms will certainly not be stable. This strategic priority on the development of councils entails a tactical priority on mass independent workers organizations and some general guidelines and priorities for communist work within them.

It is wrong to think that such mass organizations can only be developed under communist leadership. The role of the communists is not only to help develop such groups, but to prevent those that they have helped develop and those which have emerged more or less spontaneously from collapsing or being absorbed into the trade unions after the peak period of mass mobilization. Either of these alternatives means the loss of any revolutionary potential. This responsibility opens up two questions: given the present low level of our work, how should we see the process of developing revolutionary potentials; what should be our attitude towards the interpenetration of council and trade union which will exist in the independent organizations?

We have constantly and correctly stressed the importance of direct collective action to supplant the individualistic and legalistic machinery with which U.S. unions handle workers' grievances — if they handle them at all. This is the only way to bring home the fact that the relationship between workers and capitalists is based on power, not on some set of reciprocal rights and duties. And, of course, currently, it is also the only way to get anything done on most grievances. However, direct collective action has a more general importance. Some base of collective struggle is the necessary foundation for a mass understanding among workers that their interdependent role in production is not only a source of further dehumanization of the individual worker, but is also a potential source of collective power and thus, individual worth and dignity.

But how should we advocate direct action . . . against what sorts of obstacles? We have tended to see only the most obvious obstacles. First, the tendency to choose "safer" methods of struggle, and second, the tendency to wait to take direct action until a sufficient base of strength has been built up so that the successful outcome of a struggle can be predicted. Neither of these tendencies pose any real theoretical difficulty, however big a problem they may be in practice. Far more important, I think, is the tendency among both communists and more advanced workers to advocate direct action in a form which severely restricts its potential out of a fear of the "backwardness" of the majority of the workers.

When direct action becomes merely a "technique," that is, when the questions of what sort of direct action, when it is to be applied, and for what ends it is intended, are presented to the participants in the struggles as facts which they can only accept or reject, most of its revolutionizing potential is lost. We must remember that only in this country and a few others is direct action not a common characteristic of trade unionism. In most of the rest of the world, trade unions still rely heavily on this form of struggle, but they do it by as much as possible limiting it to a technique in order to minimize the problems which genuine mass participation would pose.

There is a real dilemma here because the "backwardness" of the workers is not a fiction but a reality. Most workers have yet to be convinced that any form of collective struggle is really possible, and the best way to begin to convince them they are mistaken is by demonstration. However, unless the demonstration involves genuine participation — unless it is actually an example of self-organization — it will not go to the heart of the backwardness, which is cynicism about, and individualistic and chauvinistic hostility to, collective self-organization.

This role could be carried to such lengths that the communists would be paralyzed and the leading role of the party liquidated. However, I think that there are some immediate practical implications that make sense. An emphasis on direct action can be an argument for restricted participation in the independent organization just as well as opposition to direct action can be. Nevertheless, the temptation to keep the independent organization closed, both organizationally and ideologically, so that it will not stray from the right path must be resisted. Otherwise it can only develop to where most workers see it as the "better" alternative, when our goal is to have them see it as

their "own" alternative.

One final point about direct action. This form of struggle can and often is a mode of expression of reformist positions and illusions which fails to confront the general sources of class disunity. Reformism is not expressed solely through overt collaboration by any means. This also is made apparent by looking beyond this country or by looking at other arenas of struggle within this country. Advocacy of direct collective action doesn't take care of the communist's responsibility to confront white supremacy and male supremacy. Tactical unity on a given struggle, no matter how militant the form it takes, only provides a broader base from which to attack the roots of the disunity of the class in the relative privileges of sectors of it. In itself, it is never such an attack.

Beyond their advocacy of direct action, communists can develop the council potential within the independent organizations by making their implicit challenge to bourgeois hegemony concrete and explicit. In a sense this amounts to "supplanting" the union, in that we try to clarify a "we-they" separation between workers and capital as a fundamental fact — an antagonism extending to every aspect of social existence, while, at best, trade unionism involves a "we-they" antagonism limited to a particular plant and often included within a larger "us." But supplanting unionism in this sense has little relationship to the organizational substitution of independent organizations for unions. Rather it involves the workers transcending unionism insofar as it constitutes a limitation on their conception of what is and what can be.

Generally speaking, such counter-hegemonic activity must be done through an independent organization. It cannot take place within the union in any effective way without undermining the union's ability to defend the immediate interests of its membership. No matter who is in leadership, it is foolish for the union to challenge capitalist control over production agitationally, if it lacks the power to back it up programmatically. The only results would be increased intransigence on the part of capital and anger by the workers whose main concern was still tangible reforms, or, even worse, those sorts of "self-management" concessions which further tie the union into capitalist production. Nor does it make sense for the union to minimize the strength of the company or to ridicule its policies. All of these, however, are important forms of counter-hegemonic struggle which can be implemented through independent organizations.

A similar argument follows about raising general class issues through the union. Clearly, raising such issues is a fundamental responsibility for communists which is not at all met by resolution-passing in an organization whose capacities and concerns are dictated by the industrial legality compromise and by a necessary preoccupation with the problems of "its" workers as wage earners in a particular plant. None of these limitations hold for independent organizations. They are only restricted by the level of understanding and involvement of their membership and constituency.

From everything which I have said, it follows that mass independent organizations are not going to be pure and simple expressions of what we think is best for the workers. Even in groups which we directly initiate, we will only be one political tendency as soon as they achieve any genuine mass character. Thus we must be prepared to lose leadership and fight to regain it. There will be no gentle tranquil process towards unanimity around our position, and it would undermine our whole conception if we attempted to enforce it.

The most important issue in this internal struggle within the independent organizations will be the union question. Here, our position will be in opposition to both the spontaneous trade union sentiment of the independent organization's mass constituency and to the perspectives of other left tendencies which will inevitably be present. This means that our efforts to maintain a maximum revolutionary potential through keeping the organization independent will not be successful, and that in many cases the independent groups will either supplant or take over the trade union, or, if none exists, become a trade union.

A number of things follow. First, since there is a valid role for trade unions short of a revolutionary situation, and since the potential for revitalizing U.S. unions cannot be written off, it would be absolutely wrong for communists to regard the trade unionist sentiment within the independent organization as reactionary, with all that that would signify for the methods which we would use to oppose it. In no way should we put ourselves in a position of opposition to union reform. What we can do is try to explain why that is not our priority.

Therefore, we must avoid becoming so wedded to a particular organization that when we lose hegemony within it and the possibilities for developing it into a council become increasingly restricted, we either drift along into unionism, forgetting our strategic priorities, or become a disruptive minority. Our strategic priority cannot be tied to a particular organization. We must work so that in cases where independent organizations lose their potential, it isn't a sharp break in our activity to decide to begin the development of a new mass formation without such limitations. Finally, and possibly most relevant, we cannot be so fearful of the possibility that unionism will take over the independent organization that we don't do everything we can to see that it develops as a mass force — a programmatic alternative for the masses of workers and not merely a center for left agitation and propaganda.

A GOLDEN BRIDGE

by Noel Ignatin

A new look at William Z. Foster, the Great Steel Strike, and the "boring-from-within" controversy

by Noel Ignatin

I — Why A New Look Is Necessary

"It sounded silly to hear grown-up 'militants' still talking about 'boring from within.'" So writes Ralph Chaplin in his autobiography, *Wobbly*. Chaplin, best remembered as the writer of "Solidarity Forever," was describing his reaction in about 1920 to the efforts of William Z. Foster, Jack Johnstone and Joe Manley to build the newly formed Trade Union Educational League as a center for militants seeking to expand their influence in the American Federation of Labor.

Over half a century has passed since Foster launched his T.U.E.L.; and that was by no means his first attempt along those lines. One would expect events since that time to have settled the argument between those who went with Foster in his attempt to "bore from within" the AFL and those who stuck with the policy of the Industrial Workers of the World of striving to organize the unorganized into new, revolutionary industrial unions.

Not so. The argument is still pursued on the left. And it is not merely a matter of interpreting a dead past. A vital question facing the left today is whether it is more rewarding, from the standpoint of revolutionary gains, to put effort into penetrating and influencing the existing unions or, alternatively, in concentrating on the creation of new forms of mass organizations at the workplace outside of the existing unions. Naturally, the partisans of the former position look to Foster for inspiration; those who hold the latter view regard the IWW as an important model for their own work.

At the present time, the "Foster-ites" are clearly in the majority. It is axiomatic in nearly all left circles that the main task in mass work is to transform the character of the existing unions. Those who question this principle, on grounds both of achievability and decisiveness, are considered hopeless sectarians.

One of the sharpest arrows in the "Foster-ite" quiver has been the experience of the Great Steel Strike of 1919, organized and led by Foster himself. That strike has been offered as the outstanding example of what could be accomplished by a skilled and determined militant group operating as a faction within a reactionary union. As a vindication of Foster's approach and a refutation of IWW objections, it is all the more convincing since the most spectacular results were achieved by Foster operating almost singlehandedly, the majority of leftists being then under the poisonous influence of IWW "dual unionist" policy.

So runs the argument. Those who stubbornly insist on the essential soundness of the IWW position on this question — a number which definitely includes this writer — have no choice but to take up the challenge of the 1919 steel strike: to discover, first, whether all that is claimed for it by the "Foster-ites" is true; and, second, whether it actually proves what they suppose it to.

That is the first reason why a new look is necessary.

There is a second reason. As is well known, Foster, shortly after the steel strike, joined the Communist Party and assumed a position of prominence in it which he held until his death. In the last few years he has been adopted as something of a model by many of those who identify themselves as the "new communist forces." They hark back to a time when, so they think, the C.P. in this country was generally sound and progressive; and they associate this "golden age" with the name of Foster.

This is pathetic. An object less worthy of such high esteem would be hard to find. One result of the practice of glorifying Foster's role in history is that people are led to glean, not the best, but the worst from C.P. history and tradition.

The desire to counter such a harmful effect provides the second reason why this new look is necessary. Of course it will not be possible in a work as short as this to set the record completely straight regarding the career of anyone whose public life was as long and active as that of William Z. Foster. But we shall make a beginning, and perhaps in the course of this effort suggest a few potentially rewarding directions for future investigation.

II - The Debate in the IWW

Almost from the day of its birth, the IWW was the target of criticism from some on the left, mainly from within the Socialist Party, for what they called its "dual unionism." While paying tribute to its militant spirit, these critics contended that its policy of withdrawing from the AFL meant abandoning that organization to its conservative leaders and sacrificing

the revolutionary aspirations of labor to a futile, stubborn, self-isolating "purity,"

The general response of the IWW to these criticisms was scornful. The AFL "is not a labor organization," wrote one IWW, .and -*even* if its leadership "is succeeded by 'Socialists' of the S.P. type the A.F. of L. would be almost as yellow as it is today. The S.P. proves this itself, as it is becoming more reactionary every year."

In 1911 the question was again raised, this time from within the ranks of the IWW itself. The initiator was Foster, a former S.P. member who had joined the IWW two years earlier fallowing the Spokane free speech fight. Foster says he had been won to the policy of "boring from within" while on an extended overseas visit, made for the purpose of studying the European labor movements. {During the visit, he had acted as IWW delegate to an international labor conference in Zurich.) In lengthy discussions with Leon Jouhaux, the leader of French syndicalism, he had been introduced to the concept of the "militant minority," which supposedly determines the course of the labor movement. He was also favorably impressed by the example of Tom Mann, the British syndicalist who had gained considerable influence within the reactionary British trade unions by pursuing the policy known in Britain as "permeationism."

On his return to this country, Foster set himself the task of winning over the IWW to his newly acquired views. Following the IWW convention in September 1911, where he managed to convert a handful of delegates, he opened his campaign in the organization's press. He had been nominated for editor of the *Industrial Worker*, and chose to run on a platform of a "boring from within" policy. In a letter to the *Industrial Worker* and *Solidarity* he wrote the following:

> The question: "Why don't the I.W.W. grow?" is being asked on every hand as well within our ranks as without. And justly, too, as only the blindest enthusiast is satisfied with the progress, or rather lack of progress, of the organization up to date. In spite of truly heroic efforts of our organizers and members in general and "that the working - class is rotten ripe for industrial unionism," the I.W.W. remains small in membership and weak in influence.

The reason for this failure, Foster argued, was the insistence on the necessity of building a new labor organization because the existing craft unions were incapable of developing into revolutionary unions. He, too, had accepted this "dogma" until he visited Europe. In contrast with the failure of "dual unionism," he pointed to the tactics of the French C.G.T., which "literally made a raid on the labor movement, captured it and revolutionized it and in so doing developed the new working-class theory of Syndicalism. . . . By propagating their doctrine in the old unions and forcing them to become revolutionary, they have made their labor movement the most feared in the world."

Foster cited even greater triumphs in Britain using the tactics of "boring from within" and concluded: "I am satisfied from my observation that the only way for the I.W.W. to have the workers adopt and practice the principles of revolutionary unionism — which I take is its mission — is to give up its attempt to create a new labor movement, turn itself into a propaganda league, get into the organized labor movement, and by building up better fighting machines within the old unions than those possessed by our reactionary enemies, revolutionize these unions."

The *Industrial Worker and Solidarity* opened their columns to the debate. Most of the letters published rejected Foster's suggestion. Their arguments broke down into the following basic ones:

(1) The AFL was not a labor organization, but "a job trust and nothing else." Why waste time trying to capture a corpse?

(2) The IWW was not building a dual union; it was building the only organization open to the "unorganized and hitherto despised millions of workers." The writer cited its policy of "low initiation fees, low dues, universal transfer card system, no age, sex or color limitations, no apprenticeship laws and no closed books. …"

(3) The majority of workers were unskilled and were thus ineligible for membership in the AFL. Even the majority of the IWW could not join the craft unions. How were they to pursue a policy of "boring from within"? Instead of boring into the ten percent of the working class in the AFL, "let us bore into the 90 percent unorganized. …"

(4) Active IWW members had had sufficient experience in the AFL, with the main result being that they had been expelled. What guarantee did they have that things would be different now?

(5) The best way to influence the AFL in a progressive direction was by pressure from without. Already .there were many AFL members who carried IWW cards; it was their job to struggle in the AFL.

(6) The growth and influence of the IWW was greater than Foster claimed, but most important it was sound. It was better to "grow slowly with the right tactics than to create a fake industrial union by using the wrong methods."

After two months, *Solidarity* announced the discussion closed when it became apparent that there was little support for Foster's position. The summary of the debate expressed the hope "that Fellow

Worker Foster himself will abandon the idea when he becomes better acquainted with the American situation."

Needless to say, "Fellow Worker Foster" did nothing of the sort. After some additional efforts to gain adherents within the IWW, Foster withdrew from the organization and formed the Syndicalist League of North America, to which we shall return.

Two things should be clarified concerning the context of the debate. First, Foster's ideas made hardly a ripple in the IWW. He won over almost nobody, the question didn't come up again, and the organization went on to achieve its greatest successes in the years immediately following his withdrawal from membership.

Second, while Foster was certainly in a minority in the IWW, such was by no means the case in the socialist movement in general. Of course, the "socialist" credentials of some of these "borers from within" might be open to question: for example, Max Hayes, who ran as a Socialist for president of the AFL against Samuel Gompers, and whose Machinists' Union was lily white.

One historian, sympathetic to Foster, claims that he was displeased with the rightist character of many of those who shared his "bore from within" strategy. Some of Foster's later statements and actions, however, provide considerable reason to doubt this, as we shall see.

Ill — Previous Attempts to Form Unions in Steel

The decade following the 1892 defeat of the Homestead strike was marked by two changes in the labor force: one, the elimination of the old type of skilled labor and the substitution of a system of task divisions suitable to modern technology; and, two, the gradual replacement of the native Americans and older immigrants from the British Isles by Slavs, Hungarians, Italians and Greeks who were assigned to the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs now prevailing.

In 1901, the board of the newly organized U.S. Steel Corporation passed a resolution which read in part: "We are unalterably opposed to any extension of union labor and advise subsidiary companies to take a firm position when these questions come up."

The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, which had had considerable strength among the skilled workers prior to Homestead, feared that the steel trust intended its total extinction. Deciding to act before the Corporation became stronger, the Amalgamated demanded that three Corporation subsidiaries sign contracts for all their mills.

This demand precipitated the strike of 1901, which failed and led to one of the most humiliating settlements in labor history, in which the Amalgamated pledged itself not to accept members from the non-union mills or to try to change their status.

In 1909 American Sheet & Tin Plate, in a fourteen-month struggle, wiped the union out of the last of the Corporation's mills, leaving it almost defunct, with perhaps 8,000 members, exclusively skilled, scattered around minor plants.

Then in July 1909 a strike broke out at the Pressed Steel Car Company, a U.S. Steel subsidiary at McKees Rocks, Pa. The strike was important for at least two reasons: it was a model of IWW methods which were to become more widely known at Lawrence, Mass.; and it was the first victory against the steel trust (in fact the only victory prior to the CIO).

Space does not permit an adequate recounting of the events of this remarkable strike. It began as a spontaneous revolt against a chain of abuses which led the Pittsburgh *Leader* to denounce the "Pressed Steel Car Works as the most outrageous of all the industrial plants in the United States." It ended six weeks later with 5,000 workers organized in the Car Builders' Industrial Union, IWW.

The strike involved mass meetings with speakers in sixteen languages, battles with mounted police at which strikers' wives told their husbands, "Kill the Cossacks! If you are afraid, go home to the children and leave the work to us," gun battles which prevented a steamship from landing with strikebreakers, 24-hour picketing, a funeral procession of 5,000 for a striker killed by police, 13 dead and hundreds wounded, wagon loads of food from workers in Pittsburgh for strike relief, active support from European labor movements which temporarily halted immigration from some areas, the intervention of the Austro-Hungarian vice-consul, solidarity from trainmen and street car operators who refused to haul scabs into McKees Rocks, a mass meeting at which Eugene Debs called the strike "the greatest labor fight in all my history in the labor movement" and, at the end of it all, the triumphant singing of the "Marseillaise."

The tremendous victory at McKees Rocks — hailed by the IWW as "the event of prime significance in the industrial history of America during the past year" — greatly enhanced the prestige of the organization. Within a few months the Wobblies carried "the spirit of McKees Rocks" to East Hammond, Indiana, where they succeeded in establishing Car Builders' Union No. 301 among the workers at the Standard Steel Car Co., another subsidiary of U.S. Steel. The strike there featured the basic elements of mass picketing, active and militant participation of women, unification of American and foreign-born workers which had proven successful at McKees Rock.

At about the same time, in New Castle, Pa., the IWW got involved in supporting a strike initiated by AFL unions against the American Sheet & Tin Plate

Co. Although the IWW entered the fray too late to salvage a victory from the mass of craft union narrowness (this was the strike that wiped the Amalgamated Association out of the Corporation's mills), its efforts there aroused widespread interest in industrial unionism and considerable concern among AFL reactionaries.

By late spring of 1910 the IWW was the only functioning labor organization in the steel industry. Recognizing that its locals at McKees Rocks and East Hammond would not be able to hold out alone, the IWW set forth to organize a national industrial union of the slaves of steel. The campaign made little headway. The organization was very limited in resources, and besides was concentrating its main efforts on the free speech fights and the battles out west.

The steel trust focused its attacks on McKees Rocks and East Hammond. Within a year after its great victories there, the IWW was little more than a paper organization in the two places. How did this happen? The answer is known to every worker who has seen the fruits of valiant struggle eaten away by company persistence, and watched powerful organizations destroyed by intrigue, dissension and favoritism.

And so, a heavenly peace descended on the steel industry, and the Monongahela and the Ohio once again meandered uneventfully through their green valleys, and the waves of Lake Erie and Lake Michigan lapped quietly at placid shores, and the Pennsylvania Coal & Iron police ministered the divine order. And if, on occasion, mangled or scorched bodies were dragged from the infernos, and if in the milltowns women, in order to keep their men-folk working, were again forced to submit to the foremen, none raised their voices except a few "women and meddlesome preachers."

> In the gloom of mighty cities, mid the roar
> of whirling wheels,
> We are toiling on like chattel slaves of old, And
> our masters hope to keep us ever thus
> beneath their heels, And to coin our very
> life blood into gold.

IV — First Efforts to Bore From Within

Foster's efforts to win the IWW to his policies met with little success, partly owing to the impact of the Lawrence textile strike, which was brought to a triumphant conclusion just when he was arguing against "dual unionism." So he and a few followers in the Syndicalist League of North America withdrew from the IWW and began to enter the AFL.

The principles of the S.L.N.A. were set forth in two documents: a brief outline of principles adopted by the Chicago chapter, which, in the absence of a convention, was empowered to act as the national leadership; and a pamphlet, *Syndicalism,* about which we shall hear more later, written by Foster and Earl C. Ford. The League was strongly anti-parliamentary, and advocated the general strike both to force concessions and to overthrow capitalism. According to Foster, it "advocated industrial unionism, but laid less stress upon this organization form than did the I.W.W. . ." and proposed to achieve it through the amalgamation of related craft unions.

During its two years of existence, the League published a number of weekly or monthly papers in several cities, took part in some strikes and organizing campaigns, and gained considerable influence within AFL ranks, winning control of the Central Labor Council in Kansas City and a few other places.

It waged a defense campaign on behalf of the McNamara brothers, accused of dynamiting the Los Angeles *Times* building during a strike, and helped build a national tour for the British trade unionist, Tom Mann.

Its numbers never exceeded 2,000, and since membership was limited to those who belonged to "conservative mass trade unions," it may be safely inferred that the 2,000 were virtually all native-born, white, male skilled workers and union officials.

In 1914 the League went into decline. That same year its national center was liquidated, leaving behind isolated groups in different places working within the AFL.

"So, hardly had the S.L. of N.A. collapsed than we began to move to organize a new national organization." The International Trade Union Educational League was formed at a conference of a dozen delegates, held in St. Louis in January 1915. Chicago was chosen as national headquarters; Foster was elected Secretary.

The structure and policies followed the general lines of the S.L.N.A.; the one important change was a step to the right, away from some of the revolutionary positions which still clung to Foster from his IWW days. Here is how Foster himself describes I.T.U.E.L. policies:

> The most significant of these new conceptions was the far less stress the I.T.U. E.L. laid upon the importance of class consciousness among the workers. We took the position that the trade union movement, whether animated by a revolutionary theory or not, is by its very nature driven on to the revolutionary goal. We held that in all trade union movements, conservative as well as radical, there is going on a double-phased process of strengthening their forces and increasing their demands accordingly,

> and that this process of building constantly greater power and making bigger demands inevitably pushes the unions on, willy nilly, to the overthrow of capitalism. . . .
>
> All this constituted a theory of the spontaneously revolutionary character of trade unionism as such, regardless of its expressed conservative ideology. Consequently, we discounted such conservative A.F. of L. slogans as "A fair day's pay for a fair day's work" and "The interests of Capital and Labor are identical," as being only so much protective camouflage designed to obscure the basically revolutionary tendencies of the movement. . . .
>
> Logically, from this argumentation, I concluded that the main revolutionary task was the building of mass trade unions. All else was subordinate to that.

The above passage, along with the other information about the S.L.N.A. and the I.T.U.E.L., is taken from Foster's book, *From Bryan to Stalin,* written twenty years later, after he had established himself as a Communist leader. In that same book, he admits that the I.T.U.E.L. "had in it, likewise, traces of Bernsteinism" — referring to the German Social-Democrat Bernstein who, at the turn of the century, propagated an evolutionary socialism, and summed up his views in the famous dictum, "The movement is everything, the final aim is nothing."

To describe the I.T.U.E.L. as containing "traces of Bernsteinism" is a bit like characterizing the pope as "influenced by Catholicism" or hell as a "warm place."

Like its predecessor, the I.T.U.E.L. never amounted to much and fell apart after two years. Undoubtedly its greatest achievement, one that would prove significant for the topic of this study, was its leading to a working relationship between Foster and a group of leaders in the Chicago Federation of Labor, headed by John Fitzpatrick.

V — Meat Packing

On July 11, 1917, the Chicago District Council of the Railway Carmen, Foster's own union, endorsed his proposal for a joint organizing campaign of all trades in the meat packing industry, and two days later the Chicago local of the Butcher Workmen also approved it. The Chicago Federation of Labor unanimously adopted a similar resolution and on July 23, less than two weeks after the idea came to Foster, the Stockyards Labor Council, consisting of a dozen local unions with jurisdiction over packinghouse workers, was formed with Foster as Secretary.

He proposed calling a national conference of packinghouse workers to formulate demands. The AFL unions agreed, and the story was carried with predictions of a strike in the industry. The effect of this publicity on the mass of workers was electric; they began pouring by the thousands into the AFL unions, not only in Chicago but in Sioux City, Omaha and other centers.

This mass response terrified the AFL officials, who, according to Foster, were quite unprepared for anything like a major confrontation with Swift, Armour and the other giants of the industry. They therefore proceeded to invite the government in to arbitrate the dispute.

"Yielding to superior force . . . against our will," Foster and the other organizers went along with government mediation. After six months of consideration, Federal Judge Altschuler handed down his award: in a war-time situation, with the demand for meat at an all-time high and with a powerful strike mood pervading the workers, he granted about 85 percent of the unions' demands. Thus, 125,000 workers of the five big packers won improvements without a strike, although small actions were needed to force the lesser companies to accept the terms of the Altschuler award.

Foster hails the result as a great victory, terming it "a glowing justification of our boring-from-within policy. . . ." Over the next three years, reactionary gangster officials of the Butcher Workmen's Union, in collaboration with Gompers, managed to restore open shop conditions to the industry by expelling some 40,000 workers from the unions they controlled and murdering two organizers. This experience did not shake Foster's confidence in his "boring from within" methods, although he does refer to the packinghouse episode as "one of the most shameful stories of betrayals in American labor history."

There is another aspect to the meat packing campaign which is significant because it reveals something of Foster's political views at that time, as well as something of his personal character. The organizing campaign was conducted, of course, after the U.S. entry into the World War. One of the slogans current at the time was "Food Will Win the War." This was a period when the government was jailing and persecuting IWW's and other opponents of the War by the hundreds, so it may be imagined how seriously it took developments in the packing industry. Several years later, in Senate hearings on the steel strike, Foster was asked about his attitude toward the recently terminated War. He replied that he had supported the War, had bought bonds, had made dozens of speeches supporting it as part of the organizing campaign, and that he identified himself with the "patriotic" elements in the international labor movement.

Now that was no small question for a professed socialist; in fact it was the central question which split the Second International into revolutionary and opportunist wings and gave rise to the Communist Parties. To have taken a pro-War stance was often enough in itself to bar one from subsequent membership in the Third International and was, at the very least, a definite handicap to someone aspiring to leadership in it.

Foster was very much aware of this and makes strenuous efforts to excuse himself, especially in his previously quoted work, *From Bryan to Stalin.* After explaining that the Senate hearings were held during a time of anti-red hysteria — the Palmer raids — and that their aim was to substantiate the charges of subversive influence behind the steel strike, he cites his determination to avoid giving a pretext for this by revealing his true views; thus he claims to have testified falsely before the Senate. He admits, however, that his position was "highly opportunistic," and explains that, "The error of my war-time position originated in my false syndicalistic conception that the decisive revolutionary task was the building of the trade unions and that to this end all other activities should be subordinated or eliminated, including even direct agitation against the war."

"Qui s'excuse, s'accuse." Foster's policy had come full circle since he split with the IWW in 1912; then the difference supposedly had been over tactics, how best "to have the workers adopt and practice the principles of revolutionary unionism"; now the main task was to get the unorganized workers into the reactionary, class-collaborationist, chauvinistic, pro-imperialist, corrupt and gangster-ridden American Federation of Labor. The lengths to which this policy would lead him will become clearer as we investigate the Great Steel Strike.

(By the way, Foster's attributing this opportunism on the War to his "false syndicalistic conception" is more dust thrown in our eyes; many syndicalists, both in Europe and the U.S., in spite of their erroneous conceptions of the state, distinguished themselves for their courageous opposition to the War.)

VI - The Steel Campaign

If the War had created a favorable situation for unionization in the meat packing industry, this was doubly so in steel. For one thing, the furnaces were on full blast to meet the increased demand for steel. For another, the War, with its attendant demand for national unity, elicited various measures from the federal government aimed at solidifying the support of "organized labor." The general effect of such gestures — which included several decisions from the War Labor Board protecting unions' rights to organize and also establishing minimum wage scales — was to enhance the prestige and respectability of the conservative unions. Lastly, the propaganda about the War being fought to "make the world safe for democracy" was bound to influence the steel workers, who could not help but observe the contradiction between fighting autocracy and tyranny in Europe while submitting to it at home.

"Labor unrest" had broken out as early as 1916 in Youngstown and Pittsburgh, where for several days the threat of general strike hung over the city. Even the moribund AFL unions gained membership with no effort on their part. As the old Amalgamated Association expressed it in 1917, "In the history of the American trades union movement, there was never a better opportunity to organize the skilled and unskilled workers. …"

On April 7, 1918, one week after Judge Altschuler's decision regarding the meat packing industry, Foster presented a resolution to the Chicago Federation of Labor calling for a national campaign to organize the steel industry. The resolution was adopted unanimously and forwarded to the AFL. There it was discussed with the Amalgamated Association officials and then submitted to the St. Paul convention of the AFL, held in June.

In his previously cited 1936 book, Foster tells a tale of the most incredible wheeling and dealing, which he says was necessary to gain official AFL sanction for his organizing plans, summing up his experience by saying, "After this maneuver I felt as though I had been swimming in a sewer and future prospects for the work seemed most unpromising."

The episode is entirely missing from his book *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons,* which he wrote immediately after the strike was over. In that book it merely states "a number of conferences were held during the convention, at which the proposed campaign was discussed and endorsed," and there is no mention of the foot-dragging and outright sabotage on the part of Gompers and other officials he makes so much of later. It is a curious omission, until one realizes that in 1920, when the earlier book was written, he still had hopes of maintaining his position with the AFL hierarchy.

In any case the St. Paul Convention led to a Conference on steel, which was held in Chicago on August 1 and 2. Representatives of 15 international unions (later expanded to 24) set up the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. Gompers agreed to accept the post of chairman (later withdrawing in favor of Fitzpatrick from the CFL); Foster was chosen for his customary post of secretary-treasurer. In his 1920 book, Foster praises the "progressive spirit" of those at the Conference, declaring that they met "many difficult issues squarely

with the proper solutions," and "realized fully the need of co-operation along industrial lines. . . ."

Needless to say, he writes quite differently in 1936.

At the Conference Foster outlined his plan for a whirlwind campaign, conducted simultaneously in all the major steel centers. Since a new, industrial union was out of the question, the campaign would take place along federative lines, workers being organized by the National Committee and then assigned to whichever of the 24 participating unions had jurisdiction over their particular task. Each of the constituent unions was to assign organizers to the work and to contribute proportionately to a fund that would total $250,000.

The aim was to "catch the workers' imagination and sweep them into the unions en masse despite all opposition, and thus to put Mr. Gary and his associates into such a predicament that they would have to grant the just demands of their men." The success of the plan would depend on taking advantage of the favorable situation which then prevailed: "The war was on; the continued operation of the steel industry was imperative; a strike was therefore out of the question; the steel manufacturers would have been compelled to yield to their workers, either directly or through the instrumentality of the Government. The trade unions would have been re-established in the steel industry, and along with them fair dealings and the beginnings of industrial democracy."

Can anyone discover even a trace of revolutionary thought in the above, cited from pages 21 and 22 of Foster's 1920 book? Is there anything there that could not be supported by a clever AFL business agent with a nose for larger dues income? Is there anything left in these lines of the man who once carried a membership card in an organization, the Preamble to whose Constitution stated, in part: "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. . . . Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system"?

In recent years C.P. publishing houses have been bringing out attractive, popularly priced editions of some of Foster's books which had been out of print. This writer is willing to bet that there are at least two of his books which will not be making their reappearance under those auspices: his 1920 book on the steel strike, because it was so right-wing as to be embarrassing; and his 1936 book, *From Bryan to Stalin,* because it is so full of tortuous apology and self-serving distortions that it must turn the stomach of any careful and knowledgeable reader.

The Conference approved the general outlines of Foster's plan, until it came time to assign organizers and provide funds, at which point, as he put it, "it failed dismally. The internationals assessed themselves only $100 apiece; they furnished only a corporal's guard of organizers. . . . The slender resources in hand at once made necessary a complete change of strategy. To undertake a national movement was out of the question."

And so, the organizers trimmed their sails and began work in one district only, the Chicago area. The response of the workers was tumultuous. At the first mass meeting in Gary, 15,000 attended, and similar turnouts occurred in South Chicago, Joliet and Indiana Harbor. Workers joined by the thousands, and Foster estimates that at the end of a month's time the Committee could have, if it wished, struck all the Chicago district mills.

Encouraged by their initial success, the organizers moved eastward to Cleveland and the Pittsburgh area. In the latter, at the time the heart of the industry, they faced especially stiff resistance.

For one thing, the War ended and recession set in, just at the time national headquarters were moved to Pittsburgh. For another, the Corporation ruled the steel towns of western Pennsylvania more directly than it did elsewhere. City officials frequently were company employees, and the right of assembly was simply denied. Organizers were shadowed and harassed, and one, a woman, was murdered. The situation was aptly described by one steel town mayor: "Jesus Christ himself could not speak in Duquesne for the A.F. of L." In addition, the companies granted four successive wage increases, formed company unions, fostered Ku Klux Klan movements, set in motion an elaborate spy network, and carried out mass discharges of union members.

Foster writes, in 1936, "But, of our multiplying difficulties, the most serious was the steady sabotage we suffered from within our own ranks, from the affiliated union leaders. They systematically and shamelessly betrayed the steel workers into the hands of the steel trust."

On reading Foster's oft-repeated howls of "betrayal" by the AFL officials, one can't help but recall the story of the man who was engaged to a woman for fifteen years, during which period she had three times married other men; after the third wedding her "fiance" commented, "If she does that once more, I'm going to break off the engagement."

In spite of all obstacles placed in its way, the National Committee continued to enroll members in the unions. By the spring of 1919, over 100,000 had joined.

What did the union mean to those who joined? Jeremy Brecher, in his book *Strike!,* cites several observers to the effect that the issue was broader than simple economic demands. He quotes Mary Heaton

Vorse's remark, made after numerous talks with strikers, that "What they believed was not formulated into a dogma. It was not narrowed down to trade union bargaining," and also a remark made by a steelworker in Youngstown: "If my boy could give his life fighting for free democracy in Europe, I guess I can stand it to fight this battle to the end. I am going to help my fellow workmen show Judge Gary that he can't act as if he was a king or a kaiser. . . ."

It is always difficult to isolate and articulate the motives of the participants in a great mass movement. Yet it does seem likely in this case, when so many of the workers came from countries embroiled in revolution and had, in addition, the recent example of the Seattle General Strike, that one journal was fairly close to the truth when it wrote that, "The real question is, Who shall control our steel industry?"

IWW leader Bill Haywood once remarked that, "Industrial unionism is socialism with its work clothes on," and while that naked comment has since proved to be an exaggeration, it is true that the conservative union officials labored diligently to maintain the craft union form of organization. Brecher cites the Interchurch World Movement report on the strike to the effect that "in many plants the instinct of the immigrant recruit was to associate with his shopmates of different 'crafts' rather than with his 'craft' mates from other shops," but that Foster and the other organizers "combatted the natural tendency of sections of the rank and file toward industrial unionism" by conscientiously parcelling out new recruits among the twenty-four international unions.

The National Committee was trying to avoid a strike, but pressure built up as more workers joined the unions. It was decided to call a conference with no decision-making power, in order to "give the men who have waited so long something tangible to look forward to. It would operate to hold the men in line."

On May 25, 1919, 583 delegates, mostly rank and file steel workers representing all the important centers, gathered in Pittsburgh. In spite of the conference's lack of power, it pushed forward the impulse toward a strike. This impulse was encouraged further by the arrogant action of Judge Gary, who spurned an offer by the officials of the Amalgamated Association to come to a separate agreement with the steel trust.

"All over the entire steel district the men are in a state of great unrest," reported Foster on July 13. "Great strikes are threatening unless some means are found to prevent them." The next week he read a telegram from Johnstown threatening to go on strike alone unless a national action were called. Resentment flared against the National Committee, and dues payment dropped off sharply.

In order to hold the men together, the National Committee authorized the taking of a strike vote. Since each union polled its own membership, the balloting consumed an entire month. On August 20 the vote was tabulated: an estimated 98% favored strike action should the companies refuse to accede to the union demands. The main demands were: right of collective bargaining, reinstatement of all those fired for union activities, the eight-hour day, one day's rest in seven, seniority, a wage increase, dues check-off, and abolition of company unions.

The National Committee made additional efforts to avoid a strike, including a visit to Judge Gary, who refused to see the delegates, and an appeal to President Wilson to arrange a meeting with management. Finally, a strike date was set for September 22.

And then, a bolt from the blue: Wilson requested a postponement of strike action and was joined in this request by Gompers. When word of the possible postponement got out, it unleashed a flood of protests. Telegrams poured into the National Committee demanding that the strike go ahead as scheduled. In his 1936 book Foster cites several of the barrage of angry messages from the field and claims responsibility for their being sent. His 1920 book, however, makes no mention of them.

Unable any longer to resist the pressure for a strike, the Committee sent a letter to President Wilson, in which it expressed its "regret" and declared that, "This strike is not at the call of the leaders, but that of the men involved."

In testimony before the Senate, Gompers explained why he changed his mind and went along with the strike: "Notwithstanding what any of the officials of the trade unions would have done, regardless of what the Committee would have done, the strike would have occurred anyway, a haphazard, loose, disjointed, unorganized strike, without leadership, without consultation, without advice. It was simply a choice whether the strike would take place under the guidance and leadership of men who have proven their worth, or under the leadership of some one who might spring up for the moment."

The reader may find it difficult to believe, but Foster, the "revolutionary," the "syndicalist," quotes the above testimony approvingly, on page 93 of his book, *The Great Steel Strike.* For his part, Gompers made it clear in later speeches that the "some one" he had in mind was none other than the "I.W.W., the Bolshevists of America."

And so, on September 22, 1919, the strike began.

VII — The Strike: Some Notes

There is no need here to recount the story of the strike; that has been done widely and well. Twenty-two dead, hundreds beaten and shot, thousands

arrested and over a million and a half made hungry are eloquent testimony to the heroism and steadfastness of the steel workers and their families, and the heartless cruelty of the steel companies. Finally, on January 8, 1920, with over 100,000 still on strike of the estimated 300,000-plus who responded to the call, the National Committee declared the strike over and authorized those still out to return to work.

Here we wish to consider another item, the manner in which the National Committee, including Foster, dealt with the problem of red-baiting. Part of this subject involves the question of the relations between Foster and the top AFL officials, especially Gompers.

Predictably, the steel companies responded to the strike with cries of a "foreign plot" to "sovietize the steel industry." Amid the lurid tales of gun battles in western Pennsylvania between IWW's and state police, it was only natural that Foster, because of his radical past, should come under suspicion. More than that, he quickly became the principal focus of industry efforts to pin the "red" label on the strike leadership.

Foster's radical past was well-known in top AFL circles. The general attitude was that he had "reformed." When he was attacked by a right-wing labor paper in the spring of 1919, the National Committee gave him a vote of confidence.

Then a reporter for *Iron Age* came across a copy of his old pamphlet, *Syndicalism,* referred to earlier. When he was confronted with the pamphlet, Foster downplayed its importance, stating that it had been written eight years earlier, and said, "The important point is, not whether I have done this or that, in the past, but have I today the absolute confidence of Samuel Gompers? . . . He trusts me and that is enough."

As the walkout began, headlines appeared across the country: "Steel Strike Leader is Called Advocate of Anarchist Ideas." Newspapers printed excerpts from the long out-of-print pamphlet. Congressmen cited various inflammatory passages from it as evidence of "Bolshevik influence" in the strike.

While Foster kept silent, other labor officials responded to the attacks, point out that Foster had long since dropped his youthful radicalism and defying anyone to produce a single remark made during his tenure with the National Committee that would indicate he still held his earlier views. Moreover, he was only a paid functionary working under the direction of the National Committee composed of 24 AFL unions, of whose respectability there could be no doubt.

The denunciations, however, continued to rise in pitch and at the beginning of October several labor officials made their way to Washington to testify before the Senate committee investigating the steel strike. The stenographic record of those hearings was published under the title: "Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries; Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate — Sixty-sixth Congress, first session. Pursuant to S. Res. 202 on the Resolution of the Senate to investigate the Strike in the Steel Industries." Excerpts follow:

> *Fitzpatrick:* He [Foster — ed.] is not preaching and is absolutely confining himself to the activities and scope of the American Federation of Labor, and has done so for the years that I have known him.
>
> *The Chairman:* Have you ever discussed this book *[Syndicalism* — ed.] with him at all?
>
> *Fitzpatrick:* Oh, he joked about the views he had in his younger days, when he associated with men who were actuated with radical thoughts, and he was imbued by it, but when he got both his feet on the ground and knew how to weigh matters with better discretion and more conscience, he had forgot all of those things. . . . (pages 75 and 76)

> *Gompers:* About a year after that meeting at Zurich — no, about two years after the Zurich meeting [where Foster had represented the IWW — ed.], and about a year after that pamphlet had been printed, I was at a meeting of the Chicago Federation of Labor, conducted under the presidency of Mr. John Fitzpatrick. I was called upon to make and did make an address. One of the delegates arose after I had concluded and expressed himself that it would be wise for the men in the labor movement of Chicago and of the entire country to follow the thought and philosophy and so forth which President Gompers had enunciated in his address. I did not know who was the delegate. He was a new personality to me. I might say that I was rather flattered and pleased at the fact that there was general comment of approval of not only my utterances but of the delegate who had first spoken after I had concluded.
>
> Much to my amazement, after the meeting was over I was informed that the delegate was W.Z. Foster, the man who had appeared in Zurich and the man who had written that pamphlet. I think I addressed a letter to him expressing my appreciation of his change of attitude, his change of mind, and pointing out to him that pursuing a constructive policy he could be of real

service to the cause of labor. He was a man of ability, a man of good presence, gentle in expression, a commander of good English, and I encouraged him. I was willing to help build a golden bridge for mine enemy to pass over. I was willing to welcome an erring brother into the ranks of constructive labor, (pages 111-112)

The Chairman (to Foster): But at that time, when you were advocating the doctrines of the I.W.W. through the country and abroad, you were running counter to the policies of the American Federation of Labor?

Foster: Yes, sir.

Chairman: Mr. Gompers, however, has not changed his views concerning the I.W.W., but your views have changed?

Foster: I don't think Mr. Gompers' views have changed — only to become more pronounced possibly.

Chairman: And you say now to the Committee that your views have so changed that you are in harmony with the views of Mr. Gompers?

Foster: Yes, sir. I don't know that it is 100 percent, but in the main they are. (page 423)

Not a whole lot needs to be said about this performance. James P. Cannon, who quotes from the testimony at length in his book, *The First Ten Years of American Communism,* sums up Foster's role as follows: "The facts are that the Foster group did not amount to a tinker's dam as a revolutionary factor in the AFL. They actually followed a policy of ingratiating adaptation to the Gompers bureaucracy, not of principled struggle against it."

Foster explains his behavior by the now-familiar reasoning cited earlier in regard to his support for the War (which was expressed during these same hearings): namely, that everything had been justified, in his mind, by the over-riding need to expand the trade unions. He also asserts that his "whole work was aimed at smashing the Gompers regime . . ." but offers not a shred of hard evidence that the target of his "flank attack," whom he characterizes as "a keen old fox," was even aware of the threat. The whole nauseating *apologia pro vita sua* can be found in the section entitled "Regarding Some Criticisms," which makes up pages 126 to 131 in *From Bryan to Stalin.* This section was omitted from the collection of his writings published *as American Trade Unionism.*

(Over two decades later, after Earl Browder fell from favor in the C.P., Foster claimed to have opposed him all along, but did not produce a single document in the public record to support his claim. It was a trick he had learned in the school of trade union politics.)

There is a myth abroad, begun by Foster, cultivated by the C.P. and swallowed by most of those in the "new communist movement" who consider themselves opponents of the C.P. The myth is that Foster was an early American revolutionary, who waged a lonely battle against IWW dual unionism until he was at last vindicated by the Russian Bolsheviks, whose teachings matured him as a revolutionary and enabled him to take the final step along the path he had been traveling — toward communism.

The truth is that as of 1920, insofar as anyone could possibly discern from his public statements and actions, Foster was not a revolutionary, not an internationalist, not even a right-wing socialist (for they, at least, talked about something they called "socialism"). On every major question dividing the left from the right in the labor movement — the War, industrial unionism, attitude toward the Gompers machine — Foster lined up with the right wing. He was, at best, a conscientious, energetic, skillful pure-and-simple trade unionist.

The fact that within two years after the end of the steel strike Foster was fighting for leadership in the Communist Party should not, of itself, cause one to question his sincerity. Dramatic conversions have been known to take place before — remember what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. But one must be clear that it was a conversion, not an evolution.

There is one remaining aspect to the steel campaign that is so crucial in determining its outcome, so representative of the general policies of the AFL and so revealing of Foster personally that it was thought best to leave it entirely to the end, where it could be treated in isolation. That aspect was the role of the Black workers in relation to the strike.

VIII — "The Essence of Principled Politics"

Black workers first entered the northern steel industry in large numbers during the First World War. They were by no means wanted: "It would be better," said the President of Inland Steel after the War, ". . . if the mills could continue to recruit their forces from (Europe). The Negroes should remain in the South." Nevertheless, the increased demand for labor combined with the drying up of European immigration forced the industry to open its doors to them, although they were rigidly confined to the lowest categories of unskilled labor.

By the time the National Committee began its work, the Black worker was no longer regarded as a

mere makeshift. Figures vary somewhat, but Black workers seem to have made up between 10 and 15 percent of the work force in Illinois, Indiana and Pittsburgh. In the South, of course, they formed a much larger share, perhaps as much as half.

For forty years these southern workers had experienced jim crow exclusion on the part of their fellow white workers and the various unions in the industry. At its first annual convention in 1877, the newly formed Amalgamated Association had refused to definitely declare Black workers eligible for membership. This was a continuation of the policy of earlier unions such as the Sons of Vulcan.

The effect of this exclusionary policy was to hasten the Black worker's entrance into the northern mills. The first Black workers to enter the steel industry in the North, so far as is known, were a group of puddlers who were brought from Richmond to Pittsburgh in 1875 to take the place of white strikers. Almost every labor disturbance between 1878 and the middle eighties saw Blacks used as strikebreakers. In every instance the men who were brought in had been trained in mills in the South.

These hard lessons soon taught the union that the Black worker could not be ignored. In 1881, the Amalgamated changed its policy and declared Black workers eligible for membership. However, the real attitude of the union was shown in its efforts, whenever possible, to organize the Black men in separate lodges. One can imagine the cynicism thus generated among the Black workers, who could see clearly that they were regarded, not as workers, but as potential scabs.

In 1918 an attempt was made to organize the steel industry in Alabama, when the machinists, blacksmiths, sheet metal workers and other metal trades unions launched a campaign in Birmingham. While the metal trades unions were all white, the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers entered the field and attempted to organize the miscellaneous employees, white and Black, in the ore mines, blast furnaces and steel mills. The Black workers at first showed themselves willing to join the movement, but after one Black organizer was carried out to the woods and beaten and another's home was dynamited — with no action taken by local authorities — they dropped away. It is probably a reasonable surmise that the character of the metal trades unions, in whose interests the strike was being chiefly waged, did not encourage Black support. In any case, Birmingham and the South generally was hardly affected at all by the bigger strike the following year.

To entrust the task of organizing Black workers in Pittsburgh and Chicago to the 24 AFL unions was truly a case of assigning the goat to guard the cabbage patch. The Amalgamated, well-known among southern Black workers for its jim crow policies, was more liberal than some of the others, such as the machinists and electrical workers, which barred Blacks entirely.

The effect of this sort of "union" on the Black worker was predictable. Foster writes, "In the entire steel industry, the negroes [sic], beyond compare, gave the movement less co-operation than any other element, skilled or unskilled, foreign or native." (By the way, Foster's refusal to capitalize the initial letter of the term "Negro" — consistent throughout his 1920 book — was an insult to Black people and a defiance of Dr. DuBois and others of their most distinguished leaders. Is it possible that Foster, after his experience with Black civic and church organizations in the meat packing and steel campaigns, was unaware of this?)

". . . in most places," writes Foster, "and exactly those where their support was needed the worst, they made a wretched showing." This was the case throughout the Pittsburgh district, and in Pittsburgh itself, "a dozen would cover those . . . who walked out with the 25,000 whites. . . ."

At the South Works in Chicago at least 85 percent of the Black workers walked out initially, but they soon returned to work. This was due partly to the fact that they lived far from the mills, did not attend union meetings and little effort was made to reach them.

The attitude of the National Committee was that no special appeal to the Black worker was necessary or desirable; in some cases it was worse than that, with active measures taken to discourage union membership on the part of Blacks. For example, in Youngstown, one Black machinist walked out and stayed out for the entire duration of the strike but was never permitted to join the machinists' union.

Aside from the failure of those Black workers already employed in the industry to support the strike, Black workers made up a large share of those brought in to take the place of strikers. According to the Interchurch World Report, imported strikebreakers were "principally Negroes." While this may have been an exaggeration, it is certainly true that Blacks played a prominent part in the defeat of the strike. The National Committee reported that something like 30,000 Black workers were used to replace strikers, and Foster puts the figure somewhat higher.

One interesting exception to the general picture was Cleveland, where Black workers organized and struck almost 100 percent, and where, furthermore, the steel companies were unable to recruit strikebreakers from among the Black unemployed. The writer has been unable to discover anything in the Cleveland situation that distinguished it from the national picture, but research in that direction might prove rewarding.

jim-crow laws, lynchings, and every other form of vicious attack on the Negro as a race. This is the only way we can make the Negro masses see that there are two sorts of white men, proletarians (friendly) and capitalists (hostile).

It is not enough to merely admit him to the IWW, most of the Negroes won't hear of this. We must go farther, and make a demonstration of solidarity for him.

IX — A Few More Words

And so we are back to our starting point: the IWW. Would their way have worked any better in the steel industry than Foster's way? We can't know; it was never tried on a sufficiently large scale to provide a fair test. One thing we do know: that when unionism finally did come to the steel industry, it came not through a federated campaign of the craft organizations but through a brand new industrial union that pushed them aside like deadwood.

And one thing more we know: that regarding the consideration that matters above all others to revolutionaries, "the ever-growing union of the workers," Foster's way was bound to fail, for it was built on the elements of dis-union and surrender that were responsible in the first place for the subjection of the steel workers.

X — A Note on Sources

The writer of this article has primarily aimed not at the discovery of new facts but at the laying bare of hidden relationships among facts already known. No new research has been done, and the only primary source utilized in the writing has been the work of Foster. For this reason the writer felt it unnecessary to clutter the text with footnotes. Important citations are identified in the text itself, and this note should supply any missing information on sources used.

Section II is based entirely on a chapter in Volume IV of Philip S. Foner's *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1965). The "historian" referred to at the end of the section is Foner.

Section III is drawn from *Steel — Dictator* by Harvey O'Connor (New York, 1935) and from Foner's book.

Section IV is taken entirely from Foster's own description of the work of the S.L.N.A. and the I.T.U.E.L. contained in *From Bryan to Stalin* (New York, 1937).

Section V comes from the same place. Foster's remarks before the Senate on the War were summarized by me from the testimony cited by James P. Cannon in *The First Ten'Years of American Communism* (New York, 1962).

Section VI is drawn from several sources: *Labor in Crisis* by David Brody (Philadelphia and New York, 1965); Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!* (Greenwich, Conn., 1972); and Foster's two books, *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons* (New York, 1920) and the previously cited *From Bryan to Stalin.*

Section VII is drawn from Brody, Cannon and Foster.

Section VIII is taken from *The Black Worker* by Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris (Atheneum edition, New York, 1969) and Foster's 1920 work. The quote from the Vern Smith article was furnished by Ken Lawrence.

Since much of the information in this article was drawn from Foner's volume on the IWW, some additional remarks are necessary lest anyone carry away the impression that this writer considers it a good book. Foner's commitment to defend the C.P. version of history leads him into a number of stupidities. I cite one here, by way of example.

In his chapter, "America's Entrance into World War I," Foner declares that, "Many anti-war groups were now intensifying their activities to halt America's entrance into the conflict. But the I.W.W. was not among them." To substantiate this charge, he quotes an article by the editor of the *Industrial Worker,* as follows: "I attended a peace meeting the other day at which one of the strongest advocates of anti-militarism was a pudgy parasite given to waving a hand, carrying the two-year wages for a worker in diamonds. I said to myself, 'I am an anti-militarist because I am an internationalist, but you, damn you, peace or no peace, I am against you.'"

Every class-conscious worker will applaud this bold statement. Foner cites it as an example of the IWW "relegating the struggle against the war to the background." Thus the very heart of a Leninist position on war, namely that imperialist war can only be halted by the waging of class war, is dismissed as one more evidence of "serious flaws in its ideology."

Foner's supporters claim that he stands in the tradition of Leninism. If this claim is true, then one could well argue that, in his efforts to build a world-wide revolutionary organization, Lenin's greatest mistake was his attempt to enroll the IWW in the Communist International rather than the other way around.

THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT IN 1974:

Problems and Perspectives for the Left

by Ken Lawrence

Foreword

The following article was written, originally, as a speech, which I had intended to deliver at the National Lawyers Guild labor conference in Atlanta on March 22, 1974. But that didn't happen, because members of the agenda committee felt that it was "too much of a political line, and not enough practical information." (They were later criticized for this decision.)

Some of my friends, feeling that the information contained in the paper was important for the conference participants, labored the better part of the night to stencil and run off copies of the article for everyone. Under those circumstances, it was inevitable that small errors crept into the text, which also appeared in the April 1974 issue of the Guild's *Labor Newsletter*. I have taken this opportunity to correct them.

i

This also is my excuse for some, but not all, of the article's shortcomings. Obviously the notes for a twenty-minute speech differ considerably from what I would have written, had I intended originally to publish the article. For one thing, I would not have had to keep each discussion so short; for another, I would have achieved emphasis differently. But now that the article has developed something of a life and following of its own, I have not tampered with it except to correct typos and factual errors, none of which were very significant.

ii

Mao Tse-tung says, "No investigation, no right to speak." All of the hostile criticism I have received not only fails to investigate the aspects of the labor movement that I discuss here; they imply that it is incorrect to undertake such an investigation. This type of criticism isn't worth answering — certainly not until it is published, at least.

iii

Other criticism has been offered in a more serious vein. The biggest shortcoming that people seem to feel is that I failed to break down the financial statistics, union by union. People want to know if the United Mine Workers, for example, is as heavily involved in capitalist finance as, say, the United Steel Workers. Specifically, they want to know if there is a measurable correlation between the financial condition of a particular union and its militancy. So do I.

Finding answers to questions like these requires a great deal more investigation, which can only be undertaken in the Washington, DC, area. But anyone who can do it should be encouraged to do so; it is a very important task.

iv

Another criticism that has merit is that I failed to commit myself — to make my prediction of what all this means. But I have challenged others to do so. Generally speaking, I would say that the period we are in now is similar in many ways to the situation that prevailed in the late twenties. At that time the official labor movement (the AFL) was bankrupt (to use William Z. Foster's term), though some important struggles were carried on by workers in AFL unions. In most cases, however, the really exemplary struggles were conducted by independent revolutionary unions: commonly the TUUL unions, but also the IWW and Musteite unions.

But that didn't mean that those organizations were "the answer," around which a perspective could evolve. The usual situation in which the red unions functioned was extremely repressive and/or isolated, which necessarily limited their effectiveness. But at the same time their very existence provided vital experience for the movement that really did represent the next stage of advance — the CIO.

Similarly, it would be a mistake to generate an overall organizational perspective from the peaks of the class struggle that we have seen in the past few years. These experiences all contain important lessons, which we must learn to the best of our abilities. But it would be a mistake to try to make the next *stage* of struggle correspond *organizationally* to any of the particular recent examples of working class insurgency.

Though the existing unions will inevitably be the battlegrounds for many of the struggles to come, it is safe to say that the next stage of struggle will lead either to their complete transformation, or else, more likely, to their replacement. They will not be "captured" by the rank and file.

v

Finally, in my discussion of the special features of the South, which was inexcusably brief, I failed to indicate one of the most important facts of all: the labor that capitalists are seeking is Black, and they are locating in the South to get it, but they are willing to set up shop only in white-majority counties.

The meaning of this should be fully examined, as soon as possible — particularly from the historic standpoint and especially the lessons of Slavery, the Freedom War, and Reconstruction.

December 1, 1974

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyze some aspects of modern capitalism, and particularly of the modern labor movement, which are new — which have never been faced before. I have stressed these aspects at the expense of others which have undergone less change, in order to unearth the areas in which I believe the left *must* unload some of its old baggage if it is to be relevant to the coming American revolution.

Some will pay no attention, and will answer by reciting their favorite lines from *Left Wing Communism.* Those I answer as follows: The bourgeoisie has learned a great deal since 1920. Were Lenin alive today, he would have learned a great deal too. I see no good reason why today's communists and progressives cannot engage in a serious discussion of revolutionary perspectives based on today's realities.

I

The last AFL-CIO convention was held October 18-23, 1973 in Bal Harbour, Florida. Despite the call for Nixon's resignation or impeachment, the AFL-CIO's reactionary reality wasn't even slightly concealed. As one indication, the convention upheld George Meany's suspension of the Colorado Labor Council for having endorsed George McGovern for president in opposition to George Meany's pro-Nixon "neutrality."

Its traditional support for imperialism was underscored by the favorable response given to Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, the only Administration official to address the convention. Delegates enthusiastically adopted a pro-Israel resolution calling on the U.S. government to provide an airlift of military supplies and equipment. Even Cesar Chavez joined in the anti-Arab jingoism. The president of the International Longshoremen's Association, Thomas Gleason, unwittingly told the truth when he spoke of the "AFL-CIA."

Charles Hayes of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters pointed out that fewer than *2%* of the 868 delegates were Black, despite the AFL-CIO's approximately 10-12% Black membership. (In spite of the traditional policies of exclusion and discrimination by most unions, employed Black workers are more unionized than white: Black men 29.0%, white men 27.6%; Black women 13.8%, white women 9.8%.)

While the convention passed a resolution supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, fewer than twenty of the delegates to the convention were women (approximately 2%), though nearly one quarter of all AFL-CIO members are women. The membership of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers is 75% female, yet all of its delegates were men (as are all of its top officials).

But racist, sexist, and imperialist policies and practices, and the lack of representative or democratic structures, are not the only failings of the AFL-CIO. The 1973 convention refused to deal with the fact that the labor movement is being *smashed.*

Jerry Wurf, president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, offered a very mild resolution calling for a commission to consider restructuring the AFL-CIO in order to facilitate organizing the unorganized. The resolutions committee recommended against adoption of Wurf's resolution, calling it "unnecessary and unwise," and the proposal was rejected.

A resolution that did pass called for an "experimental program of expedited arbitration in appropriate industrial centers" patterned after the no-strike agreement between the basic steel companies and the United Steel Workers' I. W. Abel — another step in the direction of giving up the right to strike.

II

The labor movement has been in a constant state of decline since the mid-fifties. In 1954, more than one third of the U.S. working class was unionized (34.7% of employees in non-agricultural establishments). In 1972 the figure was 26.7%. If the present trend continues, unions will represent less than one fourth of the working class by the end of the decade.

The decline has been greatest among workers in the manufacturing industries, the "most proletarian" sector of the working class, where the unions have experienced an actual decrease in membership as well as a proportional decline. One large union, the United

In spite of this exception, it was generally acknowledged that the failure to win the support of the Black worker was one of the key reasons for the defeat of the strike, and widely bandied around in the Black community that it was Blacks that had "broke the great steel strike."

Foster in his 1920 book admits that, "For the tense situation existing the unions are themselves in no small part to blame." He criticizes them for drawing the color line, and calls upon them to "open their ranks to negroes, make an earnest effort to organize them, and then give them a square deal when they do join."

But then comes the kicker: "They know little of the race problem in industry who declare that it can be settled merely by the unions opening their doors to the negroes. It is much more complex than that, and will require the best thought the conscientious whites and blacks can give it. The negro has the more difficult part to solve, in resisting the efforts of unscrupulous white employers and misguided intellectuals of his own race to make a professional strike-breaker of him."

There you have the basic argument of every white labor chauvinist: namely, that the burden is on the oppressed Black worker to "take his place where he belongs in the industrial fight, side by side with the white worker."

Foster observes that the employers "are deliberately attempting to turn the negroes into a race of strike-breakers, with whom to hold the white workers in check; on much the same principle as the Czars used the Cossacks to keep in subjection the balance of the Russian people."

What a comparison — the Black people of North America, victim of thousands of lynchings and mob attacks, subjected everywhere to the most humiliating forms of segregation, denied the bare minimum of legal protection . . . and the Cossacks, the favored of the czar's minority nationalities, used as his shock troops against the workers' movement. This great crusader for labor solidarity goes on to predict that, "Should they succeed to any degree it would make our industrial disputes take on more and more the character of race wars, a consummation that would be highly injurious to the white workers and eventually ruinous to the blacks."

In case the implied threat is not clear to every reader, let it be recalled that Foster's observations were written on the heels of the Chicago race riot and on the eve of the Ku Klux Klan sweep of the North in the 1920's, both of which are traceable, at least in part, to tensions between white and Black labor similar to those manifested in the steel strike.

Naturally, Foster's later writings omit any reference to his blatant racist attitudes of 1920. Those leftist historians sympathetic to him, for example, Bimba, or Boyer and Morais, simply avoid all mention of the special role of the Black workers during the 1919 strike, perhaps thinking that by concealing traces of what they undoubtedly consider "backwardness" on the part of the Black workers they are performing a service for labor solidarity.

For our part, we take our cue from something written by C. L. R. James in a 1956 article entitled, "Negroes and American Democracy." In that article, James wrote: "This is the essence of principled politics, to let the class of which you are a member and the country in which you live go down to defeat before an alien class and an alien nation rather than allow it to demoralize and destroy itself by adopting means in irreconcilable conflict with the ends for which it stands."

Those Black workers who, through their actions in the 1919 steel strike, showed their determination to join the union as complete equals or not join at all were every bit as heroic and acted every bit as much in the interests of the working class as those workers who struck. They were not "backward"; they were posing a challenge to white labor, a challenge which, unfortunately, it did not meet. They were practicing "the essence of principled politics," while Foster and the rest of the leadership of the National Committee were practicing the essence of un-principled politics.

Just so every nail is in place: let no one come forward to defend Foster's record with the argument that his views on the race question, while obviously inadequate for today, were advanced or progressive for their time. There were active, at that time, numerous genuine champions of labor solidarity whose writings offer an instructive contrast to Foster's. Many of these were Black; a few were white. Listen to one of the latter, from an article by Vern Smith published in the April 1924 issue of the IWW paper, *Industrial Pioneer:*

> The radical portion of the White proletariat must at once sharply define its break with the White bourgeoisie, and the ideology of 'Superior Race.' The only way we can do this at all is to emphasize and over-emphasize the fact that we have absolutely no part in the discrimination against the Black skin. We will have to go considerably out of our way to make this clear. We will have to sit with the Negro in the street car by choice, and not by necessity . . . we must [carry on] a vigorous, public, defiant defense of all Negro workers in whatever trouble they find themselves, and never tire of protesting against, striking against, and struggling in every way possible against

Steel Workers, registered a gain in 1972, but only because it absorbed the International Union of District 50, Allied and Technical Workers, which had been expelled from the United Mine Workers a few years before.

The only important growth of unions in recent years has taken place among service and government employees. Though there have been and continue to be outstanding struggles waged by recently organized workers — farm workers, Farah workers, and Oneita workers are some AFL-CIO examples — none of the organizing drives have kept pace with the increase in the total workforce.

III

In 1922, describing a similar situation which he called *The Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement,* William Z. Foster wrote that Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor,

> is the undisputed world's prize labor reactionary. . . . In many respects he is more reactionary than the very capitalists themselves.

The same words could be truthfully applied to the AFL-CIO's George Meany today. Foster attributed the situation to

> the fatal policy of dual unionism which has been practiced religiously for a generation by American radicals and progressives generally. Because of this policy, thousands of the very best worker militants have been led to desert the mass labor organizations and to waste their efforts in vain efforts to construct ideally conceived unions to replace old ones. In consequence the mass labor movement has been, for years, drained of its life-giving elements. . . . Dual unionism has poisoned the very springs of progress in the American labor movement and is primarily responsible for its present sorry plight.

Many leftists have attempted to draw parallels between the situation described by Foster in the 1920's and the problems they face today. Let us examine the similarities.

Of approximately 19.4 million trade union members, only 16.4 million are members of AFL-CIO affiliates. The rest, for the sake of discussion, can be considered "dual." Where are they?

The two largest unions, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Auto Workers, are outside the AFL-CIO. The International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, the United Mine Workers, the Distributive Workers of America, and the United Electrical union (UE) are other important unions outside the AFL-CIO. There are also new unions like the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association and the Mississippi Poultry Workers Union, which have chosen to remain independent.

Why are these unions outside the AFL-CIO? The Teamsters were expelled for "corruption."

The UAW left ostensibly because of Meany's refusal to organize the unorganized, and because of the clash between Meany's conservatism and Reuther's liberalism. More realistically, Reuther split because Meany wouldn't retire as AFL-CIO president to make way for him.

The UMW has been independent ever since the CIO endorsed Roosevelt while John L. Lewis was campaigning for Willkie. The CIO expelled the ILWU and UE for being "Communist-dominated," and DWA was too militant for its parent, the AFL-CIO's Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union.

AFL-CIO unions refused to organize pulpwood cutters and haulers and many workers in chicken plants. But after they were organized, established union representatives graciously volunteered to sign them up and collect their dues, while giving them little or no control over even their own locals. Under those circumstances, the workers' lack of interest isn't hard to understand.

But realistically, none of these unions could be described as making "efforts to construct ideally conceived unions designed to replace the old ones." The Teamsters are infamous for their attempt to destroy the United Farm Workers union, as well as their leadership's increasingly fascistic line politically.

It is the "liberal and democratic" UAW that recently mobilized a thousand goons to smash a militant strike of its own members after criticizing the Chrysler Corporation for being too lenient on UAW members in an earlier wildcat. And the racist privileges in the skilled trades rival those of the most backward building trades union.

The ILWU's militant and democratic traditions are found today only in history books. Until last fall, the same could be said for the UMW, the only difference being that you would have had to look further back in history.

That leaves us the UE, DWA, GPA, and MPWU. Wildly exaggerating, you might convince a careless listener that all together they have 350,000 members, hardly a serious contender to replace the AFL-CIO. Nor has anyone I know suggested that they try. The only shred of truth in the suggestion that any of these unions are "dual," in the way Foster meant, regards UE, which refused to be destroyed when the

Communist Party wanted UE members to surrender to the red-baiting attacks during the fifties.

IV

In fact, the last genuine dual union movement was the CIO, which not only sought to replace the AFL, but for all practical purposes succeeded. That was a generation ago. It is certainly unfortunate that so many leftists, particularly members of the Communist Party, opposed the formation of the CIO and dragged their feet about affiliating with it. No doubt this "tailism," the failure to anticipate that the CIO would become *the* industrial union movement in the United States, had a great deal to do with the inability of the left to survive the post-war purge within the CIO. Thus, "labor unity" was only consummated in 1955, after the isolation and destruction of the left had been completed.

And the last revolutionary dual union in the U.S. was the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which existed from 1929 to 1935. It played an important part in laying the groundwork for the rise of the mass industrial unions of the CIO. The TUUL was headed by none other than Wiiliam Z. Foster, who in other periods was the leading opponent of dual unionism in the United States.

V

Actually, I think the hue and cry about dual unionism is misplaced today. As I have shown, there are indeed some parallels with the situation described by Foster in 1922. But the differences far outweigh the historic similarities.

Back then there was a direct correlation between trade union strength and working class militancy. Not only was the trade union movement in a state of decline at that time, "bankrupt" to use Foster's word, but class struggle itself was at a low ebb. There were fewer strikes in 1922 than in any year of the previous quarter century.

The exact opposite is true today. While the unions have undergone an uninterrupted decline, the last five years have averaged more strikes per year than any previous period of history. The number of strikes in 1970 and 1973 were exceeded only once since 1880 — in 1919, the year of near-revolutionary struggle when 20% of all U.S. workers participated in strikes. Today, while unions decay, the class struggle reaches an all-time high.

VI

How can we account for this contradiction? Some writers have shown that "labor relations" today have transformed unions from organizations of struggle into organizations whose primary duty, once a contract has been signed, is to discipline workers to enforce contractual obligations. Uninterrupted work is what unions give in exchange for a particular package of wages and fringe benefits.

When a worker complains about conditions in the plant, his committeeman can be counted on to say, "Sorry, Buddy, you've got a gripe but not a grievance." (Meaning, "We didn't write that into the contract, so forget it and get back to work.")

Victories, such as the dues checkoff (which served to remove company pressure from weaker workers) or full time for union representatives (to protect stewards from company pressure and discrimination), have been transformed. Today they serve to shield unions and union officials from pressure from rank-and-file members.

So workers, who can't withhold dues from unresponsive unions, or who have "gripes" instead of "grievances" but who feel just as offended, are increasingly resorting to strikes rather than grievance procedures.

Often strikes are precipitated by racial discrimination. Or the issues will be "specific local grievances," such as production rates and standards, scheduling, more or less overtime, health and safety, etc.

VII

All of the above factors are important, and help to explain the contradiction. But there is another factor which has received practically no attention, one which signals the onset of a new stage in the history of American trade unionism. It developed gradually and quietly, but has finally matured.

In the past, no matter how strong the conservative pressures became, the simple equations of dollars-and-cents business unionism forced unions, albeit reluctantly, to act like unions. In other words, no members equals no dues. No dues, no power. And so on. That explains why the CIO, even as it entered a period of decline, made a feeble attempt to organize the South, and why certain unions still do.

In 1970, the assets of the American labor movement totaled more than $2V6 billion. Only a small handful of the world's largest corporations are that wealthy. (And control of that wealth is distributed about as equitably among trade unionists as the control of General Motors' wealth is distributed among stockholders.) Furthermore, liabilities total only 10% of assets.

(I have thought about this often, particularly when members of the United Steel Workers tell me how their union is trying to persuade them to end a strike and get back to work, in order to end the

"drain" on the treasury — the $10 weekly strike benefit.)

But something else happened in 1970, a new plateau for the labor movement. For the first time ever, a majority of the income received by national and international unions came from profits on investments — stock and bond dividends, interest on loans and bank deposits, rent on real estate holdings, etc. (The total was approximately $713 million, while income from dues or per capita tax, fees, fines, and assessments came to $667 million.) [See table.]

So unions don't have to have members to make money any more, and investing the union's assets in securities actually brings in more profit than investing in organizing, for the first time in history. Actually, members are more expensive to have than it seems, since about half of the money *they* pay in (approximately $333 million in 1970) gets returned in the form of benefits from the national and international unions, whereas none of the other does.

National Unions — Receipts by Type 1960 -1970 [in millions of dollars]

Year	Dues or Per Capita Tax	Fees, Fines, Assessments & Works Permits	Other Receipts	Total
1960	268.3	34.4	189.2	491.9
1961	303.5	37.9	200.5	541.9
1962	333.6	41.2	219.7	594.5
1963	350.9	43.5	240.5	634.9
1964	355.4	39.1	214.5	609.0
1965	381.3	47.8	255.2	684.3
1966	409.3	49.5	269.5	728.3
1967	475.7	52.1	353.7	881.5
1968	564.9	50.4	443.8	1,059.1
1969	581.4	62.3	563.7	1,207.4
1970	606.9	59.9	712.7	1,379.5

VIII

What does all this add up to?

First of all it means stop blaming backward workers and/or ultra-left dual-unionist conspirators for the sorry state of the unions. They aren't responsible.

Instead, look at the change in capitalism, and pay particular attention to the change in the unions themselves. (It would be strange indeed if the unions had not changed in fifty years, or twenty-five years, or whatever.) As in every dialectical process, a quantitative change, which has taken place gradually, turns suddenly into a qualitative change. Unions, once labor, have become their opposite, capital.

For those who are ready to jump up with examples to prove that I'm wrong, hold your breath a while longer. Certainly the process is uneven and incomplete. That is an essential element of dialectics. Another aspect is the apparent return to the old stage — the negation of the negation.

What I am striving for here is not a theory that can explain every eventuality, but one which will help us to unlock the door to the next stage of development in the class struggle. If we can succeed in this, we won't repeat the error of so many leftists when the CIO appeared — first to oppose it, and later to tail behind it.

While we have not seen the full flowering of the new working class movement, a lot of indications concerning its content and direction have already appeared, particularly since the emergence of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

In the overwhelming majority of workers' struggles in the last few years (as in every other period of proletarian upsurge in the U.S.), Black workers have been in the vanguard of the entire class. In many cases they have fought and won major advances entirely by themselves.

In the sharpest clashes, the unions have sided with capital, for all the reasons discussed earlier. While workers have often struggled to transform their unions into instruments of struggle, and will probably continue to do so, they have not hesitated to bypass the unions whenever it became necessary, and to develop new forms in the process. The most recent example of this was the wildcat of 27,000 West Virginia miners who struck to protest gasoline restrictions despite Arnold Miller's campaign against wildcats.

Battles are more and more being fought over control over production itself, and these are the struggles in which the meaning of socialism most clearly emerges.

IX

The special features of the South are particularly important to us today. The rural masses of the southern United States have been forced into the proletariat more rapidly than any other in history. (For example, the proportion of Mississippi's work force engaged in agriculture has plummeted as follows: 1950, 43%; 1960, 22%; 1970, 7%.)

The majority of the Black population in the U.S. — 51% — lives in the South. Thus the vanguard layer of the working class is most prominent here.

The industrialization has special features not seen before. In 1970, for the first time in history,

manufacturing jobs outnumbered farm employment in southern *rural* areas (i.e., more than 50 miles from metropolitan centers). Industry did not locate in cities, but increasingly moved to the rural areas.

The type of industry locating in these areas of the South is no longer primarily the traditional labor-intensive variety. A much larger proportion is the advanced, capital-intensive variety, especially electrical machinery, transportation equipment, and non-electric machinery.

X

Obviously these new realities will require careful consideration in order to develop strategies suitable to the new period of class struggle.

As one example, it will be important to consider the meaning of the first proletariat in history which did not have to suffer the massive trauma of urbanization. What strengths will this arm the workers with? What will be the weaknesses? These are the kinds of questions we have to find answers for.

About the only sure thing is that the old tried and true formulas won't be adequate. The biggest question of all is whether the left will take up the challenge in time.