

*“Consider these two units of time: 36 seconds, the rest of your life. The job that takes 36 seconds to do that you’re going to do for the rest of your life. I don’t know a better definition of alienation than that. The job can be quiet, which they rarely are; it can be clean, which they are usually not; it can be light and easy, but 36 seconds to do a job for the rest of your life— nobody will ever convince me that higher wages, fringe benefits, a vacation cottage, a motor boat, a second car, and sending your kids to college will reduce the oppression of that reality.”*

## UNIONS



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# OUTSIDE AND AGAINST THE UNIONS

## A communist response to Dave Douglass' text "Refracted Perspective"

by Wildcat (UK)

### INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is written in response to the pamphlet "Refracted Perspective" (available from: 121 Bookshop, 121 Railton Road, Brixton, London SE24). As you may have guessed, this is mostly a flimsy excuse to make a general critique of the trade unions -- something we in Wildcat haven't done for quite a while. It focuses on the situation in Britain in recent years, particularly the 1984-85 miners' strike. This is not because of some nationalistic obsession with what goes on in these islands but because we want to make our analysis as concrete as possible - this means writing about things we know from reliable sources or were actually involved in. We also want to refute Mr. Douglass' arguments as thoroughly as possible so we can't avoid talking about particular things done by the NUM.

A detailed article on the origins of modern trade unionism in Britain, focusing on the crucial year of 1842 when the Miners' Federation was founded, can be found in Wildcat No. 16.

In the British Isles and North America at the present time (late 1992) the trade union question may seem a bit irrelevant given the low level of workplace class struggle. Since 1979 membership of TUC-affiliated unions in Britain has declined from 12 million to 8 million. We can be sure, though, that once workplace struggle starts to pick up again trade unionism will once again rear its ugly head and wherever workers are struggling as workers, be it Germany, South Africa or South Korea, the issue is as important as ever.

### THAT SPEECH

The purpose of Douglass' speech at the Class War international conference (the text of which was published as "Refracted Perspective") was quite clear. It was to stifle criticism of trade unionism in and around the anarchist movement. Before getting stuck into some serious criticism of what he said we should point out that he was not just expressing his opinion but defending his role in society. He is not, as he likes to describe himself, a "Yorkshire miner" but a full-time NUM delegate.

The main way he attacks criticism is by means of the classic Stalinist "amalgam technique". This means deliberately mixing up two or more very

different political positions which you don't like in order to create confusion and uncritical support for your point of view. For example during the Second World War the Communist Parties referred to "Trotsky-Fascism".

Similarly, Mr Douglass tries to amalgamate idiotic lefties like the Workers' Revolutionary Party with people he calls "Situationists" - this is obviously a code word for class struggle militants who are against the unions from a communist point of view. I assume he calls us Situationists because he wants to give the impression we're a bunch of misfit art students. This is not what the Situationists were but its a popular stereotype of their followers, which has some truth in it.

The amalgam technique at its crudest is shown when he claims that the Socialist Workers' Party are "venomously anti-union". Since when? The SWP don't just support unions, often it's SWupPies who keep union branches going. The same goes for his "The Leninist with his [sic] vision of the trade union as an obstacle to the struggle..." comment. Most Leninists stare at you in amazement if you suggest that the unions are anti-working class. Try it sometime. You might even say that "The Leninist intellectuals of and by themselves can only achieve a trade union consciousness".

To be fair though, a lot of what he says about lefties and the 1984-85 miners' strike is true. For example, the SWP believes that the only thing wrong with the mass picket at the Orgreave depot in S. Yorkshire was that it wasn't big enough. This view is still supported by SWupPies to this very day. His description of some icepick head selling "Workers' Power" in the middle of a riot is both amusing and familiar.

## ANARCHO-LENINISM

Dave Douglass attacks the lefties for arrogantly telling the workers what to do and for seeing workers' struggles as just a means of spreading their politics. But what he's really slagging them off for is for being too honest - they openly try to push their ideology and present themselves as leaders. Dave Douglass would like to see Class War do it more subtly. That his perspective is not much different from the Leninists is shown by his attitude toward Orgreave. He gives a really good account of what's wrong with trench warfare against pigs on a terrain they have chosen. BUT he publicly supported it (and therefore encouraged participation in this defeat at the hands of the pigs). This is not much different from those lefties who encourage workers to do things that they know are a load of crap - like voting Labour and calling on the TUC to call a general strike.

No doubt those of us who said at the time that Orgreave was a waste of time were just "vanguards" who were "telling ordinary workers what to do".

His attitude is further revealed in the last paragraph of his Really Fucked Perspective when he defends the classic Leninist separation between the masses and the Party - "THEY ARE NOT WAITING FOR US". Who are

“THEY”? Who are “US”? “We should assist them in the way THEY wish to be assisted” - This is patronising drivel. What if “THEY” want us to help “them” lobby the Labour Party conference? We would tell them this was a stupid thing to do. If this makes us “vanguardists” then, Yes, it’s a fair cop, guv.

Why should one section of the working class put itself “at the disposal” of another? If our comrades in struggle makes mistakes we have to criticise them and sometimes even physically stop them from doing what they want to do. The reason for this is simple: if they fuck up it fucks up things for all of us. There can be no question of “self-determination” for any section of the class: we’re all in this together. If this approach means we don’t sell as many papers as we’d like, that’s too bad.

## THE UNIONS

What Douglass doesn’t talk about at all in his reminiscences of the 1984-85 Great Strike is the antagonism that existed between the union apparatus and the unofficial actions of the miners and others in the mining communities which he thinks were just extensions of the unions.

Let’s start with an example from before the strike. In mid-1983 Arthur Scargill, NUM President, was about to meet then Coal Board Chairman Derek Ezra in Pontypridd. Some Welsh miners on wildcat strike against pit closures occupied the regional NCB office. Scargill came along in person to order an end to the occupation. Later in the day, though, he did maintain his reputation as a militant by “storming out” of the meeting with Ezra, revealing the Board’s hit-list of threatened pits.

Obvious examples from the strike were:

1) Anyone seriously involved in the miners’ strike who didn’t live in a mining area very quickly worked out (sometimes from bitter experience) that the only way to get money to where it was needed was to give it directly to the strikers and their families. Money given to the union bureaucrats generally never reached strikers at all and certainly didn’t reach those known to be trouble makers.

2) The union threatened to discipline and fire miners who threw bricks at the police at Gascoigne Wood.

3) Throughout the strike McGahey and his cronies issued orders forbidding mass pickets in Scotland.

4) At the beginning of 1985 the Yorkshire Area NUM took its minibuses away from the Fitzwilliam miners to stop them indulging in aggressive flying picketing.

5) In March 1984 in Ollerton, Notts. a picket was killed by a scab lorry. Scargill stood on top of a car and called for two minutes silence in order to

fundamental changes, you might as well retire and leave the struggle. It just doesn't work that way. Revolutions are made; the CIO upsurge was made, by ordinary people with all the limitations of the society — driven by 36 seconds for the rest of your life. If you can live with that daily reality, there will not be any fundamental change.

One of the problems sociologists have is that we tend to look at ordinary workers as inferior beings. We wouldn't stand for all that crap, right? That is why we are in the academy. Why should we think workers would stand for that? They never have, they never will, and that, it seems to me, is the future of the American working class and the American labor movement. And when that upsurge takes place, all these moribund bureaucratic unions are going to rush to get to the head of the parade and say, Yes, we are going to lead you, and also we are going to control you, and we can get new, better contracts, and so forth. A lot of the things which unions can't do now, they may be able to do then. Whether that will be possible, I don't know. I don't think history is simply a continual repetition of the past. But in the reality of work is the motive power for change. If someone can change the nature of work in capitalist society, then the impetus for change might decline and disappear. But I have not seen anything to indicate such a possibility. The latest attempt at "reforming" work is Quality Circles, the so-called Japanese model. But the latest statistics show that when Quality of Work Life, or Employee Involvement, as at Ford, are introduced, industrial accidents go up, which is another indication that it is a very refined way of saying speed-up.

That remains, and the struggle remains, and change remains.

stop the strikers from taking revenge against the cops and scabs.

I could go on...

It should be obvious from these examples that his metaphor about the workers driving the union bus as far as it will go is rather misleading. It's not just a case of the bureaucrats applying the breaks - more a case of them turning the bus around and using it to run over the workers!

In fact when he's writing about "the union" he conveniently forgets (most of the time) that there is a union apparatus at all. He talks as if the union was just a collection of autonomous union branches. This makes it much easier for him to repeat the classic lie of every left-wing union hack - "It's your union, you can do what you like with it. It's a democratic organisation and if you've got enough support from the membership you can give it any policies you want".

The lie that the union is its members is continually exposed in practice. The NUM is no exception. The 1977 productivity deal initiated by Tony Benn, which did so much to divide miners between regions, was forced through by the NUM executive despite a National Ballot rejecting it. In 1983 NUM leaders ignored an 80% strike vote in South Wales. In April 1984 the leaders of Lancashire NUM held an area delegate meeting to try to find a way to send the Lancs. miners back to work. Thirty of the miners who had been lobbying the meeting organised an occupation of the NUM headquarters in Bolton. They wanted to prevent further meetings, saying "you don't need a meeting to run the strike -only to call it off".

## WHAT ARE UNIONS?

Dave Douglass would have us believe that unions are workers' self defence organisations. This is the traditional lefty view which you can read in every Trot paper ever written. It's also believed by millions of workers but not by us.

If unions don't defend workers' interests (even badly), what do they do? The answer is that they negotiate with the bosses. They negotiate the rate of exploitation.

We're not taking a moralistic "Death before negotiation" stance here. As long as wage labour exists workers will be forced to negotiate with employees from time to time, particularly when struggles are defeated. Most workers negotiate with their bosses individually in one way or another ("I'll let you go home early if you get this finished").

Negotiations, though, always involve an agreement to play by the rules of the game, for example by agreeing to honour productivity deals. It is a form of class collaboration. As the institutionalisation of the negotiating process unions must inevitably hold back workers' struggles. It is no surprise that unions have almost always condemned forms of struggle which are difficult to negotiate, such as theft and sabotage. This is not a

recent phenomenon. In 1889 Tom Mann, the famous leader of the London based Dockers' Union, signed several appeals for the men to work more enthusiastically. They were trying to force the bosses to increase manning levels and were making wide-spread use of "ca'canny" (going slow). In 1892 Tom Mann even suggested to the Royal Commission on Labour (of which he was a member) that piece rates be brought in!

Negotiation is not just an economic activity, it is a political one as well. Negotiating with the bosses on behalf of workers is a form of political representation. Representing people is not about fighting for their interests. It is about maintaining the loyalty of a passive "constituency". This can clearly be seen from union recruitment policy which is to try to sell membership to anyone who will pay the membership dues, no matter how reactionary they may be, as long as they work in the right trade/industry. It should be obvious that no working class organisation could ever operate this way.

It is no coincidence that the democratic ideology is promoted more vigorously in the unions than anywhere else in society. Workers' own struggles, though, almost always begin with militant action by a minority. They make nonsense in practice of "majoritarianism" (the idea that nothing should take place unless a majority agrees) and the separation between decision-making and action that is enshrined in democracy. Democracy, with its fetish for the airing of opinions, and the moment of decision as a preliminary to acting, offers nothing to workers. It offers everything to those who would divert, institutionalise or block their struggles, whether it's the Right with their secret ballots or the Left with their delegate conferences and mass participatory democracy.

## CORPORATISM

Corporatism is the identification of workers with their workplace or industry. It is not just an idea. It is a material force resulting from the absence of solidarity between workers in different sectors and between workplaces and other areas of society (particularly where proletarians live). Unions are the corporatist organisation par excellence. The attachment of the NUM to the "Plan for Coal" was just one expression of this.

Admittedly corporatism can't simply be blamed on the unions. When workers on a picket line express suspicion toward "outsiders" who come to show support it's not just because they believe in "the union" (although it's usually the shop steward who's the first to ask "What union are you in, then?") Nor, unfortunately, is it just because "they don't want to be told what to do by middle-class students" as many apologists for working class conservatism would have us believe.

Any workplace struggle can fall into the trap of corporatism as long as it remains just a workplace struggle. Against the workerist lefties who claim that workers only have power at the point of production we would say that it is territorially based struggles which have the greatest subversive potential.

out that one month later the Hungarian working class was going to take over the means of production. The same thing would have been true in the working class suburbs of Paris in April of 1968. Why? Because the workers didn't know. That is not the way fundamental revolutions or uprisings or massive changes in society take place. But it seems to me that that is the direction we have to look to see what the future holds in store.

In the United States the working class has been defeated many times and it has been revived many times. There was the Knights of Labor, which declined after a massive strike wave in 1877. There was the beginning of the AFL and its decline in the 1920s and its later revival. Related to these developments is something that Marx indicated in his view that capitalism was revolutionary. He attributed that to constant revolutions in technology and the means of production which led to continual changes in all the social relations. In the famous strike at Homestead in the 1890s, in which the growing steel workers' union was crushed, the basic cause was the invention of a new process of making steel, the Bessemer furnace, which downgraded the power of the skilled steel maker. Akron today is no longer a major tire making center because of the development of the bias tire. Printing unions are falling apart because of the replacement of traditional printing with the new technology of word processing.

## Militancy Will Emerge

That these things happen should not be a surprise. That labor unions do not seriously resist them, given the bureaucratization of the labor unions, should not be a surprise. But it also shouldn't be a surprise that there will once again emerge a militant American working class which will create organizations that it feels it needs, not necessarily consciously, not particularly consciously, to take back what it has been losing and, hopefully, to go further. Something Marx wrote can help put this in a fundamental theoretical framework. In *The German Ideology*, one of his early writings, he wrote:

"Both for the production on a mass scale of the communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."

I suggest that this is the opposite of what most people think Marx said. Marx didn't say we have to create new people in order to make a revolution. He said we have to make a revolution in order to create new people. Where does the revolution come from? Do you mean that the American working class, the sexist, racist, American working class can make fundamental changes in this society? It has over history. But if you think that you are going to reinvent the American working class first, and then make



## Alienation

Let me give you instead two other categories, units of time. A long time ago Robert Blauner wrote a book on alienation in which he dealt with several industries, chapter by chapter. In the chapter on the automobile industry he noted, this was in the early sixties that the average job in the industry took a little less than 60 seconds to do. By the time that the Lordstown plant was built, the average job on the assembly line at Lordstown took about 36 seconds to do. While obviously, jobs vary even within a particular factory, depending upon whether you work on a machine or on an assembly line, the basic drive is for greater productivity. The point is to reduce the time it takes to do any job.

Consider these two units of time: 36 seconds, the rest of your life. The job that takes 36 seconds to do that you're going to do for the rest of your life. I don't know a better definition of alienation than that. The job can be quiet, which they rarely are; it can be clean, which they are usually not; it can be light and easy, but 36 seconds to do a job for the rest of your life— nobody will ever convince me that higher wages, fringe benefits, a vacation cottage, a motor boat, a second car, and sending your kids to college will reduce the oppression of that reality. It is that alienation, which Time saw years ago, which is at the root of working class resistance and working class struggle. It is the kind of thing which is virtually impossible to measure. There are certain things you can't count. You can't operate on the principle that if you can't count it, it ain't true; or, if you can't count it, it doesn't exist.

Let me give you, again, a couple of examples from the modern world. In 1956 the working class of Hungary in 48 hours (there were things leading up to it in the preceding day or so) created workers' councils and took over control of all industry, offices, shops, etc.. In effect, the Communist Party was overthrown and had to be reorganized under another name. The workers councils were destroyed, not by anything in Hungarian society, but by an invasion of Soviet tanks.

In 1968, just to keep the balance even, in western Europe, after two weeks of street fighting between students and police in Paris, there was a wildcat strike in a little aircraft factory in Nantes, where young men and women workers imprisoned the management in their offices and, again, within 48 hours, 10 million French workers occupied all the factories of France and came within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the de Gaulle government. I think that the basic difference between Hungary and France was that in Hungary the army clearly fell apart and much of it went over to the side of the revolution, whereas in France de Gaulle kept the army intact and there weren't the signs of cracks in the military structure. So, while the workers weren't defeated, they only went so far and then the movement receded and it ended with traditional trade union kinds of gains.

Let me submit that if a sociologist did a survey in the working class suburbs of Budapest in September of 1956, he or she would never have found

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This was undoubtedly one of the strengths of the anti-poll tax movement (despite the obvious problem of "localism" - usually involving sentimental notions about "our local community"). In the miners' strike too the high points were when the whole of the working class in a particular area became involved - e.g. defence of pit villages against the police. "Territory" includes workplaces and it is often strategically very important to disrupt, seize and/or destroy them. Workplace occupations, for example, are an important opportunity for undermining the role of the workplace as an "enterprise" separate from the rest of society - by inviting other proletarians into the site besides those who normally work there, by reappropriating resources such as printing and communications, by giving away useful products stored at the site... Then there's straightforward destruction - denying it to the enemy! The miners who responded to coal-faces collapsing during the Great Strike by saying "to hell with the pits!" were expressing a real break with NUM corporatism.

## DEGENERATES

An organisation can start off defending workers' interests and degenerate into a trade union. That is, it can start off organising and extending the struggle and end up negotiating it away. This has often been the fate of independent strike committees in France, Italy and Spain (in Britain they usually just end up integrated into the official unions).

The question of when to stop participating in such a committee and start denouncing it is always a tricky one but with officially recognised trade unions there is no such ambiguity.

Certainly unions have to be flexible to stay in business. Under rank and file pressure they will often adopt a militant stance and to some extent will even allow workers to use the local union apparatus to conduct struggles - e.g. branch meetings, strike funds, picket caravans. Trying to "take over" the apparatus, though, is a dead end. Even on an organisational level a union is simply not designed for advancing workers' struggles. The most basic rules of branch procedure are designed to hinder them. In mid 1984 some striking miners from South Kirkby tried to organise a team of miners who could not easily go out picketing due to stringent bail conditions. They were to go out knocking on doors trying to convince passive strikers to become active pickets. They started doing it anyway but tried putting a resolution to the NUM branch. It was rejected by the branch committee. It could still go through as correspondence so they tried packing the meeting with their supporters. The branch committee ruled it out of order. One of the strikers concluded "I think that shows you we've got to know the rule book...". This is rubbish. What it shows is the need to throw the rule book out the window and the authority of the branch committee with it.

Unions are certainly not designed for spreading strikes outside the industry or sector where they start. Quite the opposite. On many miners'

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picket lines non-NUM members were regularly allowed to cross and in Lancashire there was no attempt to close down opencast pits in the area - these were not owned by the NCB and their workers were in the T&G not the NUM.

During the Great Strike NUM leaders (particularly Scargill) certainly made appeals to support from other groups of workers but this never went beyond meetings with other union leaders and televised public speeches. To have appealed directly to other workers would have breached the democratic etiquette between unions - one set of "laws" that the oh-so-radical Mr. Scargill has no intention of flouting.

## BUREAUCRACY

Many people say that the trouble with the unions is that they are too hierarchical and bureaucratic. This misses the point. Unions don't serve the interests of capital because they are bureaucratic. They are bureaucratic because they serve the interests of capital. The very process of negotiation fosters specialists in the sale of labour power. It inevitably involves a small team of active negotiators and a lot of workers hanging around waiting for the result. The negotiators and bosses need to develop personal understandings, to trust each other. Usually this is all done by union bureaucrats but even where strikers elect their own representatives, these almost immediately start to fight the control and revocability exercised over them. They will want to assume the role of leaders on a basis of equality with their opposite numbers in negotiation, and will be supported by strikers themselves who will want to be led by people who reassure them that everything is going well. When a deal is finally done there will no doubt be those who cry "sell out!", but it is the workers who have sold themselves out by accepting the logic of negotiations.

Some people say that unions are infected with reactionary ideas, such as parliamentarism and statism (affiliation to the Labour Party in Britain for example). This also misses the point. It should come as no surprise that those who run capitalist institutions usually have shamelessly pro-capitalist ideas. But even where they don't the fact of running a union imposes its own logic. In the years before the First World War the syndicalist Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) in France had passed numerous motions at its congresses calling for a general strike in the event of war. It had even distributed handbooks informing its members of detailed practical steps to be taken to sabotage the war effort. But when war came the CGT rushed to join Poincare's union sacree. This was a popular front in support of the war.

Closely related to these ideas is the commonly held view that there are "real unions" (such as UCATT and NUPE) and "scab unions" (such as EEPTU and RCN) and that it's better to be in a real union than a scab union. This hardly stands up to the most superficial historical investigation. Every union has blatantly encouraged scabbing at some stage in its history. In the

in most major companies of employee suggestions. Your pay increases, your merit increases, literally depends on your regularly bringing suggestions to management. Again, this assumes that workers know about work and managers don't. That is the reality.

An aside: I have learned over the years that if I want to find out how militant the American workers are, I don't read the radical press, I read the Wall Street Journal, I read Fortune, etc.. They don't fool around with that stuff and are not burdened by a party line that insists on the backwardness of the workers. They are supposed to know and they talk to each other. They assume that they don't have a popular audience, which is true enough. They will describe worker unrest and workers' movements the way Time talked about alienation in relation to Lordstown and similar situations.

What about the future? The problem with the future is that sociology is not really equipped to deal with it. We can count pretty good, but we can't predict the future. Back in 1963, in his presidential address, Everett C. Hughes, the president of the American Sociological Association had as his theme (remember, this is 1963) why sociologists did not predict and did not expect the emergence of black militancy, the civil rights movement, etc.. He said:

"Why did social scientists — and sociologists in particular — not foresee the explosion of collective action of Negro Americans toward immediate full integration into American society? It is but a special instance of the more general question concerning sociological foresight of and involvement in drastic and massive social change and extreme forms of social action...

"Some have asked why we did not foresee the great mass movement of Negroes; it may be that our conception of social science is so empirical, so limited to little bundles of fact applied to little hypotheses, that we are incapable of entertaining a broad range of possibilities, of following out the madly unlikely combinations of social circumstances.

"It is sometimes said that sociology deals only with those processes of social behavior which are repeated again and again...

"Perhaps we failed to foresee present racial movements because our whole inward frame is adapted to study of the middle range of behavior, with occasional conducted tours toward, but not dangerously near, the extreme."

I don't think that has changed particularly. Sociology has a very particular character, a particular role. I was looking at a table of the ASA and there was a little folder on jobs available in sociology, and it includes industrial relations, human resources management (which always sends a chill up and down my spine.) In other words, among the functions of sociology are to manage people, to keep order in the society, to improve productivity, and so on.



of absenteeism, there was sabotage, there was dope in the plant, etc.. At one point, in the discussion of general unrest, of which Lordstown was typical, Time made a significant observation: that everyone knows that what Marx said was wrong, but what is forgotten is that one thing he talked about was true and is still relevant — and that is alienation. That is what workers at Lordstown and elsewhere are experiencing, the kind of alienation in work that Marx talked about. What emerges is different stages of how to deal with that. There was Taylorism. In the 60's and 70's there was job enrichment. That was the Scandinavian model. The idea at Volvo was that if you get a team of six people together, each one, not with a specific job, but sharing the work of putting an engine together, you would get workers who were much more satisfied than otherwise.

That it didn't quite work the way it was supposed to was reflected in the fact that Swedish auto plants could not find enough Swedish citizens to take these supposedly enriched jobs and they had to depend heavily on imported labor. The reasons are not hard to find. One of the American plants that was written up frequently as an example of job enrichment was a Gaines dog food plant in Topeka, Kansas. An examination of that experience would illustrate the limitations of such a program. To begin with, the plant had 90 workers, which is not exactly the Ford assembly line. The workers were given the right to organize the work in ways that suited them best. They even had the right to interview and pass on new hires — to make sure that new workers were compatible with the regular work force. But the basic problem was the nature of the work itself. Dry dog food pellets were poured into sacks automatically, the sacks were sealed and then placed on a loading dock. A simple question would be: how enriched could that job ever become? I had visions of a young worker, passing muster with his fellows and hired to be part of the work team. After a couple of weeks I could picture this worker grumbling that this was a lousy job, dull and meaningless. His fellow workers would try to correct him and tell him that this used to be a lousy job, but now it was much better. And this young worker would say that he didn't know how the job used to be, but he did know that it was a lousy job. The end of the story is that after a number of years, job enrichment was abandoned by the company.

## The Japanese Model

Now job enrichment has run its course and you have the Japanese model, Quality Circles. One of the things they have in common is something which Taylor saw and which most people do not relate to Taylorism. Taylor understood that workers know how the job is done and managers don't. The key to Taylorism was that you first had to find out what the worker knew, and then management appropriated that and reorganized the work. That is the point of job enrichment that is the point of Quality Circles that is the point of the Japanese system. In fact, in Japan there is an enforced program

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construction industry in Britain, for example, its certainly true that EETPU members have crossed UCATT picket lines but it's also true that UCATT members have crossed EETPU picket lines - sometimes justified on the grounds that EETPU is a scab union so its OK to scab on them!

## BASE UNIONISM

The particular brand of rank and file unionism put forward by DD isn't the usual Trot variety. He doesn't call on workers to lobby the union leaders. He even criticises Arthur Scargill at one point (a serious offence in the eyes of most lefties and militant miners!).

His view is that workers involved in subversive actions (hit squads, surprise pickets, organisation involving the whole of the working class not just miners ...) should still be encouraged to see themselves as part of the union and still try to act within the framework of the union. They should still be loyal to it even if they have their disagreements. So when Heathfield, the leader of the Yorkshire NUM, condemns them for defending themselves against the police, or the area NUM takes away the branch minibus, they should still respect the authority of these people.

Like many anarchists, DD has a lot of respect for "ordinary people". He wants them to stay ordinary, that is: submissive to capital. At one stage he asks "which has more loyalty FROM the class"? Unions or obscure lefty groups? The Royal Family have more loyalty than either.

## THE NUM

It's true that during the 1984-85 strike the behaviour of the NUM posed real problems for revolutionaries. It didn't seem to fit pre-conceived notions of how unions are supposed to behave. Outside one or two traditional industries (what's left of mining, what's left of craft unionism in the print industry ...) the working class experience of unions in Britain is pretty straightforward. They almost always oppose any strike until they realise they can stop it or it's been balloted to death. The anti-strike (so-called "anti-union") legislation passed under the Thatcher governments has made them sabotage workers' struggles even more blatantly than they used to. In short, The NUM is not the T&G. It is a radical, left wing union. The main reason for this is simple - the existence of a militant rank and file. An area official in the NUM who tried to behave like his counterpart in NUPE or NALGO would simply lose control. This doesn't in any way alter the fundamental nature of the NUM.

The militancy of the miners has been a real obstruction to capital accumulation - a blockage which could only be removed by closing the pits. Miners' militancy goes back a long way. In the 1930's the number of days "lost" (to the bosses) in strikes by miners equalled the number lost in the whole of the rest of British industry. After nationalisation in 1947 they were still accounting for a third of the days lost. It has not been an unbroken

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tradition though. Throughout the sixties hundreds of pits were closed and many miners left the industry. In other words, full employment at first enabled the economy to be peacefully restructured; mining was no exception, by 1970 the workforce was 47% of what it was in 1960. But full employment and the central importance of coal mining in providing energy for a still-expanding economy created the conditions for a massive upswing in militancy in the '60's and early '70's. The example of the miners undoubtedly inspired many millions of workers to confront the bosses.

Since its formation on January 1 1945 the NUM (just like its predecessor the Miners' Federation) has always played an indispensable role in managing capitalist exploitation. After nationalisation in 1947 the National Executive of the NUM pledged itself to "do everything possible to promote and maintain a spirit of self-discipline ... and a readiness to carry out all reasonable orders given by management". In this period there were numerous wildcat strikes opposed by the NUM. When, seven months after nationalisation, a strike which began at Grimethorpe spread to 38 pits the Yorkshire Area General Secretary said that the men must choose "between industrial democracy and anarchy". Another union bureaucrat, Will Lawther, said that the NCB should prosecute the strikers "even if there are 50,000 or 100,000 of them".

A major factor in miners' militancy is that mining is about the only industry left (just about) where workers still live in a community which exists almost entirely to serve that industry. This means that links of solidarity are forged not just at work but in the street and the Miners' Welfare Club as well. The involvement of the union in the community means that it is much more a part of daily life than elsewhere. This makes it much harder for miners to even think about acting independently of the union. Contrast this with the situation for most workers, where "the union" consists of a membership card, cheap insurance deals and a group of hacks who attend an iniquorate branch meeting every month.

This makes it easier for the NUM leaders to put across the classic lie that "we can't fight without our union". That this is a lie is shown by the history of workers' struggles. As we've seen, many of the important strikes in the coal industry have been unofficial, or at least started off that way. An even better example is the dockers in Britain before "decasualisation" (casual labourers being given permanent jobs) in 1967 who were a notoriously stropy group of workers. After World War II the T&G (the main union on the docks) didn't make any strike official until 1961 despite over a dozen major stoppages. In the mid-60's a third of Liverpool dockers weren't even in unions despite the high level of union control over hiring. From around the world we can think of far more dramatic examples: of mass strikes which have had nothing to do with union organisation at all - from the 10 million workers who went on strike in May '68 in France completely against the wishes of the 'Communist' Party controlled unions (to which most of them belonged) to the Iranian oil workers on strike in 1979 who stayed out despite

management and labor had a meeting several months ago and we agreed that we could not run the plant without each other. Why do you come to me after this guy is fired? What you should have done was come to me before he was fired and tells me the problem. Then I go over to him and put my arm around him, and I say, hey, buddy, we don't work like that here. So I straighten him out, you don't have a problem, I don't have a problem, and we don't have to write a grievance.

In other words, he won his case, he won my case, because the foreman did not permit him to participate in the management of the employees. I have been a committeeman and I have been a steward, and that is part of the reality. You see a guy fast asleep in the toilet. You can let him sleep, or you can wake him up and say, hey, buddy, if you get caught there is no way I can save your job. What is the difference? What I am doing is enforcing the contract, enforcing the company rules. That, it seems to me, while not exactly what Michels said years ago, is fundamentally the objective basis for the bureaucratization of the union movement. It is based on contracts in which the company and the union work out ways of living together.

## Decline of the Social Compact

Why then the decline, why isn't the social compact working? There is one specific element that has to be seen in the social compact. That is the militancy and the resistance of ordinary workers on their jobs. If the workers weren't militant and the workers didn't resist, there would be no basis for the compact. Why should a company agree with the union to grant concessions if they did not need the union to help discipline workers and keep workers at work? So the underlying reality is a working class that is consistently resisting its life at work and the union which gets concessions outside of the work process and provides discipline inside the work process.

What has changed in recent years? First, obviously, a much more conservative, a much more reactionary, anti-labor administration. Secondly, a long period of substantial unemployment. Thirdly, the growing possibility to move production, originally to other parts of the United States where labor is cheaper, but also to move production abroad. As a consequence, it was possible for companies to smash unions and to break strikes in ways which were not possible in the 30's or 40's or 50's or 60's. The labor movement has been weakened because the fundamental basis of the compact, that each side brings something substantial to the table, was no longer as true as it was in the past.

Another sign of that reality is the continual change in the way corporations try to deal with working class unrest. In 1991 there was a strike at the Lordstown plant of General Motors which, in a matter of days, began to shut down more and more plants of GM. Lordstown has a very interesting history. When it was a new plant in the 60's and 70's, there was a lot of unrest there. It was new, many of the workers were young, there was a lot

in the early years of this century. Essentially it is an arrangement, some times formal, sometimes informal, by which the unions receive for their members wages, fringe benefits and so on, and in return give to the employer workers who work. At the height of the militant 1930's John L. Lewis, the head of the CIO, announced publicly, with great pride, that a CIO contract was a guarantee against strikes. It was not true then, and it probably won't be true now or in the future. Nevertheless, it gives a sense of what was involved. You give us wage increases, you give us fringe benefits (although that came somewhat later)— in other words, you give us things outside the process of work and we will see that our members behave in a disciplined way and work and don't wildcat and don't sabotage and don't take days off and so on.

## Social Unionism

One of the things that you hear in discussions of the American labor movement is that we ought to go back to the days of "social unionism." What is forgotten is that social unionism is essentially a form of the social compact and it is associated most strongly with Walter Reuther. What Walter Reuther did was propose all kinds of plans; plans for the restructuring of the automobile industry for war production; plans for the restructuring of the automobile industry for conversion to peace-time production. He marched in civil liberties parades in the South and in Washington. (He did not fight for upgrading blacks inside the plants, inside the unions which he controlled.) And what he created in the UAW, and what exists, more or less, in most large industries is what has been called by labor relations people a one party state. That is, there is a certain formal democracy, but one party rules.

If you permit me a little leeway, I would like to give you an experience out of my own past. Years ago I got a job at a General Motors plant in Detroit. The day before I was to get seniority and be protected by all the elements of the union contract, the foreman called me over and told me I was fired. Which was a mistake, because all he had to do, since I had no rights at all as a probationary employee, was to tell me I was no longer needed and lay me off. But he said I was fired, so I asked him to call the committeeman. The committeeman came over — it was a hot Saturday, and I remember I had the pleasure of sitting in the foreman's air-conditioned office while he and the committeeman wandered around the plant discussing my fate. They returned about an hour or two later and the committeeman told me that Joe here will not fire you if you agree not to do all these terrible things you were supposed to have done. Well, since I didn't admit that I had done them in the first place, although some were done and some were not, I agreed. I agreed to stop beating my wife, so to speak. I kept my job and I came in to work on Monday and I had seniority and a totally different relation to the company. I could not be fired easily; I could only be disciplined in a long process.

This is the union at its best. But what never left me is the argument that the committeeman used to win me my job back. He said, look,

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being offered pay rises of hundreds of percent (they wanted to bring down the Shah's regime not just win a pay rise!).

## BUT WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE ...?

This is the question lefties and trade unionist always ask of us weirdoes who are for workers' struggles but against the unions. The short answer is: we're not proposing an "alternative to the unions". If you want to negotiate the rate of exploitation and reinforce working class corporatism the unions are an excellent way of doing it. Just like the cops, union hacks are doing a difficult job and doing it very well under the circumstances. That's why we hate them.

A more relevant question is: "How should we organise in work-places to fight for our immediate needs and undermine capitalism?". The short answer to this is: the same way we organise anywhere else. We are not interested in representing anybody but in building up groups and networks of activists who want to escalate the class war by whatever means are necessary. The links we develop between class struggle militants now will be useful when mass struggles do break out, in terms of spreading and coordinating struggles, circulating information, seizing resources and so on. It should be clear from what we've said so far that this process can only take place outside and against the unions. How many more times do union officials have to promise to grass up workers involved in sabotage to the police before this becomes obvious to every class struggle militant?

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## Glossary of British Trade Unions mentioned above:

COHSE: Confederation of Health Service Employees  
workers disorganised: hospital ancillary workers, some nurses  
EETPU: Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union  
workers disorganised: electricians, printers, building workers  
NALGO: National and Local Government Officers Association  
workers disorganised: Local govt. office employees  
NUM: National Union of Mine Workers  
workers disorganised: miners  
NUPE: National Union of Public Employees  
workers disorganised: hospital ancillary, some nurses  
RCN: Royal College of Nurses  
workers disorganised: nurses  
TGWU(T&G): Transport and General Workers' Union  
workers disorganised: transport/doctors but mostly general unskilled  
UCATT: Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians  
workers disorganised: building workers

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# Social democracy: No future?

## Introduction to articles on the retreat of social democracy

from *Aufheben* #7 (1998)

### Relating to the retreat

The question of how we grasp social democracy and its current retreat is now more than ever a practical one. The institutions of social democracy continue to be the focus of many contemporary struggles. In the UK context, this is exemplified in recurrent conflicts over privatization, employment rights and cuts in welfare spending. Hence we face the question of how we relate to these struggles: what do we want and how should we fight?

The question always arises because our immediate experience as proletarians of the institutions of social democracy is characteristically twofold. Consider the example of the welfare state. In the first place, the organs of the welfare state - benefits, health care, free education - present themselves simply as a means of survival. But our experience of such organs is also one of domination, control, objectification. These institutions do not belong to "us"; their processing of us often seems to be for alien and bureaucratic aims and purposes - for ourselves only as bourgeois citizens, or in the interests of "the public", "the law" or other such abstractions.

Leftists, emphasizing the first aspect of this immediate experience, campaign for the maintenance and extension of the conditions of the post-war settlement: full employment, the restoration of "trade union rights", reversal of cuts in the health, education and benefits systems, plus a meaningful minimum wage. Yet "defence of the welfare state" and the other leftist demands represent either adherence to reformist social democracy as progress or a misconceived and disingenuous strategy of "transitional demands".

An anarchist or "ultra-left" analysis often emphasizes instead the second aspect of our immediate experience of social democracy: social democratic institutions as control mechanisms. Some anarchist types claim that, without the welfare state, genuine forms of mutual aid will necessarily develop, and thus that we need not resist attacks on the welfare state. However, while it is undeniable that the welfare state has served to atrophy working class community traditions of mutual aid, given the present absence of growth of militant networks and organs of support, this kind of analysis is simply ahistorical posturing. The restructuring of the welfare state is taking place at the initiative of capital and the bourgeois state - albeit in response to previous rounds of working class struggle. This is a time of chronic weakness in the working class and revolutionary movement. Simply to accept the present programme of "welfare reform" is a capitulation to the autonomy of global finance capital and its ideology of neo-liberalism - a force which is

the division of powers, the separation of federal and state, the separation of legislative, judicial, executive, and so forth.

## Legacy of the Founding Fathers

It strikes me that one of the reasons the United States tends to be at least twenty years behind the rest of the industrial world in things like social welfare, labor legislation, etc., is that legacy. The founding fathers were brilliant and they built very well. They did what they intended to do, namely, prevent a popular majority from easily and quickly winning control of the government.

The tendency always, even among sociologists, is to blame the victim. The reason the American labor movement is in trouble, it is claimed, and the reason the United States is backward is because of the backwardness of the American working class. We do not have the political parties, we do not have the kind of union movement, and we do not have the same history as the working classes of Europe. Not quite. American workers built labor parties, called workingmen's parties, in the 1820's and 1830's, before the British working class had even won the right to vote. They were quickly absorbed into the existing bourgeois parties, the Whigs, the Democratic-Republicans, etc... They were co-opted, as we would say today. Perhaps that was because the American working class in that period was still young, still not fully formed. But, in any case, it seems to me that it is impossible to describe that working class as backward. American workers are a product of American history, as we all are. But backwardness is not one of the characteristics of the American working class.

The point also needs to be made that the European labor and socialist parties are not particularly superior to the American Democratic Party. They invariably support their own national imperialisms, they supported NATO and the cold war, and, if one looks at Great Britain, they are not especially adept at fighting off right wing strike-breaking and anti-labor legislation.

Will the election of Bill Clinton, the governor of a right-to-work state, make a difference and begin to turn things around? Perhaps, but not by much. There will be some differences resulting from new appointments to boards and agencies that unions have to deal with. There may eventually be further differences resulting from new appointments to the federal courts. But the attempts of the union movement to modify some of the existing anti-labor legislation, such as Taft Hartley and Landrum-Griffith, could not even get through Democratic controlled Congresses before the Reagan-Bush administrations. Are the chances for pro-union legislation improved? Perhaps, but not by much.

In the United States there is another factor which has been amply documented, particularly in labor history. One of the characteristics of the American labor movement is something which labor historians have called the social compact. It goes back at least to the garment unions in New York



# Unions and Workers: Limitations and Possibilities

by Martin Glaberman

We are dealing with a complex and controversial question. The question of labor, of the working class, of the union movement, has always been controversial. The first problem is to try to understand the reasons for what everyone clearly sees, and that is the decline of the organized labor movement in the United States. Membership in the unions has gone down, the power of the unions has gone down, and the influence of the unions in politics has gone down, and on and on.... The tendency of many people, from the left, from the center, from the right, is to lay the blame on individual union leaders. Better leaders mean better unions. More militant leaders mean more militant unions.

I believe that sociologists need a little bit of history. In 1911 a book called *Political Parties* by Robert Michels appeared, describing the bureaucratization of the working class movements in Europe. It was based on a study of the German Social Democratic Party. But bureaucratization has been a characteristic of labor organizations, political parties, trade unions, etc., ever since. It has been true of the socialist parties of Europe, it has been true of the trade unions, and it has been true of the trade unions in the United States. If it can be traced back that far, it seems to me it is somewhat superficial to blame it on union leaders or the quality of union leadership. Why do such organizations always choose bureaucratic leaders? There has to be something objective, something fundamental, something that is continuing in the world that leads to the bureaucratization of working class organizations.

I want to deal with three aspects of the decline of the union movement in the United States; not simply bureaucratization, but decline. One element is the role of the government. It is clear that in the United States the government has been on the whole less sympathetic to labor, labor movements, labor organizations, than countries in Western Europe. That, of course, is not an absolute. All one has to do is look at the Thatcher government in Great Britain to see equivalent records of anti-labor activity in Europe. But what people fail to realize is something that is distinctive about American history and American development. In Number 10 of the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison made a very interesting point in his argument that people ought to vote in favor of the new constitution. Essentially, what he said was that we, in the United States, are a country of small property holders, primarily farmers. But we can look across the sea and see the rise of a populous working class in the major cities of Europe. What we need to do is protect ourselves from the inevitable change to a majority of propertyless workers. His argument for the constitution was that the constitution would make sure that a popular majority could not easily win control of the government. This was accomplished by

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currently growing in self-assurance and audacity. This kind of account seems to see the working class as passive and in need of a good kick up the backside to get it to do anything - the more life-threatening the kicking the better. The present New Labour Government's abandonment of social democracy will not in itself bring us closer to communism: only the self-activity of the proletariat can do that.

## The nature of social democracy

The practical questions we face and the one-sidedness of the responses of some so-called revolutionaries each points to the importance of a deeper understanding the nature of social democracy. In previous issues of *Aufheben*, we have already given a basic definition of this social form: social democracy, in all its variants, can be considered as the representation of the working class as labour within capital and the bourgeois state - politically through social democratic parties, and economically through trades unions.

Social democracy therefore presupposes both the state and democracy itself. In terms of the state, social democracy is the representation of the working class within national boundaries. On the one hand, social democracy sets the interests of a postulated national working class against that of other national working classes. On the other hand, within national boundaries, social democracy seeks to act on behalf not just of the working class, but all classes. Rather than being abolished, the bourgeoisie will be taxed to pay for services for the working class. In terms of democracy, social democracy can be conceptualized as the extension of the principle of democracy - political equality between individual citizens - to the relations between classes.

The function of social democratic parties is to represent the working class as wage-labour in the bourgeois political-legislative realm. The social democratic party in power therefore operates to include the interests of the working class within the state form through institutional intervention against some of the excesses of the market.

Trade unions represent the working class economically, as labour-for-capital. Their role is to mediate between the owners of capital and the individual sellers of labour-power as a social category. They negotiate the price of labour-power and they therefore presuppose that labour takes the form of wage-labour - a commodity. Their function is thus premised on alienated labour. As such, trade unions unite the working class in the form that it is constituted by capital - that is, as individual commodity-sellers and by specific trade or industry.

From the working class perspective, what was progressive about social democracy, first as a movement then as a state form, was its recognition of different classes with opposing interests. Social democracy begins from the recognition that it is the whole working class, not just individual owners of the commodity labour-power, that exists in relation to capital. Social

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democratic parties therefore gave the working class as such an independent voice (i.e., separate from relying on progressive bourgeois parties such as the Liberals and, in the USA, the Democrats). When in power, such parties were seen to be able to transform society to reflect the needs of the workers (qua workers) not just those of the bourgeoisie: hence nationalizations, employment rights and welfare state services. The practical importance of social democracy for working class militants, then, was that it provided an organizational form through which concessions could be demanded and won from capital for the national working class as a whole.

Yet in recognizing and representing the working class within capital, social democracy is essentially in a contradictory position. On the one hand, to assert its power against that of the bourgeoisie, social democracy must mobilize the working class: the organs of social democracy are animated by the working class, who join and vote for parties and unions, and who take part in union-organized industrial action. On the other hand, social democracy must prevent the working class from mobilizing too far - from becoming a class-for-itself - since it must preserve the capital relation. Social democracy must therefore both mobilize and demobilize the working class if it is to represent it. The working class is recognized and enabled to act as an agent but is simultaneously reified. As such, social democracy functions to recuperate proletarian antagonism but is also vulnerable to such antagonism.

Social democracy embodies the tensions of the commodity form itself. The production of commodities requires subjective activity, but also that such subjectivity be subsumed within an alien subject - be alienated and hence objectified within capital. However, such subsumption is necessarily provisional; in order to objectify labour, capital must confront labour-power as a free subject - a free seller of the commodity of labour-power - on a daily basis. The daily reproduction of alienated labour means the daily possibility of rupture in the labour-capital relationship. What is specific to social democracy as a political-ideological expression of the commodity form, however, is that it proposes to extend the bourgeois principle of fair exchange between individual commodity-owners to the relationship between the classes.

## Social democracy as an historical form

The requirement of capital politically to mediate working class needs within itself emerged, developed and reached ascendancy in conjunction with the threat of the proletariat to go beyond itself. To maintain the continued existence of the working class as such, and hence its own existence, capital had to find a form adequate to satisfy some of the desires of the working class from within capital. It is worth pointing out in this context that the requirement to mediate working class needs within capital does not have to be achieved through the social democratic form. Thus Mafia protectionism and philanthropic liberalism each represent alternative forms of capitalist

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- [3] See the opening section of 'Kill or Chill: Analysis of the Opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill' in *Aufheben* 4 (Summer 1995) and the Editorial in *Aufheben* 6 (Autumn, 1997).
- [4] Demarcation into particular trades and sectors might be said to encourage inter-working class struggles over wage differentials. While this is an example of the channelling by social democracy of proletarian antagonism, struggles over wage differentials may have the potential to go beyond themselves and threaten capital. As we discuss further below, social democracy produces its own grave-diggers.
- [5] As we shall see, the historical distinction between social democracy as a movement coming out of the working class and its institutionalization as a form of government is an important one.
- [6] As we discuss further below, the dominant form of social democracy in advanced capitalist states in the post-war boom period has entailed the use of Keynesian economics - harnessing working class subjectivity in the form of demand for commodities as the motor for capital accumulation.
- [7] Indeed, in the UK, it was enlightened (and threatened) liberalism in the form of the Liberal Party that made most of the early concessions to the working class, paving the way for the full development of social democracy, before the Labour Party was mature enough to do these things for itself.
- [8] However, this well-known split in social democracy between reformists and revolutionaries obscures a more interesting current - the communist left - that broke from social democracy at this time but which also came to reject the radical social democracy promoted by Moscow. See our forthcoming article on left communist accounts of the USSR.
- [9] The former existed as a meaningful wing within the Labour Party until the 1980s. In Europe, the situation was slightly different, but a similar 'democratic socialism' is expressed in the Communist Parties and in particular their 'Eurocommunist' wings.
- [10] For a useful discussion of the antagonism and limits of the 'counter-cultural' movements, see 'On the Poverty of Hip Life' in Ken Knabb's *Public Secrets* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997).
- [11] By no means all of those in the British labour movement accepted the 'inevitable'. A number remained within the Labour Party. Some left and formed the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), referred to with some accuracy by some who remained within the Labour Party as a 'stillborn Stalinist sect'.
- [12] Strictly speaking, the forms of mediation hankered after by New Labour are not new at all; New Labour are redefining themselves as an old-fashioned liberal party.
- [13] The space we give here to links between these groups and non-workplace struggles should not obscure the fact that the direct links with other workers were typically far more important. For example, in the Merseyside case, the boycott actions of dock workers in other countries regularly put economic pressure on the Merseyside Docks and Harbour Company.
- [14] The sickie is catching. The UK Cabinet Office recently reported that public sector sickies cost £3 billion last year (*The Guardian*, 15 August 1998).
- [15] For example, the London executive of the RMT union, dominated as it is by the SLP, is politically distinct from the union as a whole; and some of the link-ups seem due to personal relations between a small number of individuals rather than reflecting a militant mood in the union membership as whole.
- [16] Our recent text *Dole Autonomy versus the Re-imposition of Work: Analysis of the Current Tendency to Workfare in the UK* is intended as a further contribution to an understanding of the retreat of social democracy.

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democracy serve as the basis for a resurgence of this social form? Any successes, however radical, might legitimize a new class compromise and thus marginalize any revolutionary struggle. The present crisis and weakness of the left means that it is today less of a threat to the class struggle. Indeed, there is little at the present time for the left to recuperate! But, of course, working class struggles may produce their own leftism; so the weakness of existing leftist organizations should not lead us to assume a clear path to communism. Social democracy could still be revived as the dominant form of working class mobilization.

On the other hand, could struggles over the “gains” of social democracy, which typically revolve around mundane needs, promote militant activity more generally, develop new movements, and take us beyond both social democracy and its “neo-liberal” counterpart? The retreat has been taking place for over 20 years, but there is still much at stake. Understanding social democracy and its dynamic remains an urgent task.

With this issue of *Aufheben*, we therefore begin a series of articles on the retreat of social democracy. We have raised rather than answered the question of how we should respond to the various skirmishes and struggles taking place over the retreat of social democracy. This is because we believe that each type of struggle needs to be analysed in itself and in some depth. This is the aim of the present series.

We also recognize that the present Introduction has focused largely on the UK, which is in many ways a special case. In certain other European countries, for example, the Communist Party has assumed a far more important role than here in entrenching social democracy; this might help explain the fact that social democracy remains stronger in certain other countries across the channel. There is a need, therefore, to look at the struggle over social democratic organs and institutions in the form of analyses of particular cases.

For all its peculiarities, however, the UK case is seen by some European governments as a model for their own restructuring, and may indicate a possible future for them. The restructuring in the UK, in turn, is modelled on that in the USA, the subject of our first major article in the present series. Social democracy was never so well established in the USA as in most of Europe. Yet at the present time, both unions and militant workplace struggles in the USA are currently undergoing a renaissance.

## Footnotes

[1] We use the term ‘survival’ in Vaneigem’s sense when he distinguishes it from ‘living’. See Raoul Vaneigem (1967), *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books).

[2] In fact, of course, it is mostly workers’ ability to strike rather than their right to operate in unions that has been attacked. While union membership has declined overall, the bank-balances of many unions - now operating as little more than mediators of services such as insurance - has been enhanced.

mediation of working class needs. In order to grasp the crisis, retreat and possible future of social democracy, it is therefore necessary to briefly trace out how and why it came to its moment of triumph.

Historically, social democracy emerged in the bourgeois democratic struggle against the reactionary forces in the nineteenth century as the distinct voice of the working class. The political weakness of the bourgeoisie in some places meant that social democracy had to take the lead in the bourgeois revolution - for example in Russia and to a lesser extent in Germany. In 1917, social democracy split between reformists and revolutionaries, although these two wings shared a Second International conception of socialism as state control of the means of production. Following the second world war, the dominant reformist wing of social democracy split again between democratic socialists and the revisionists who sought to reform capitalism through Keynesian economic policies. This latter form of social democracy was the basis of the post-war settlement.

The triumph of social democracy in the UK though the post-war settlement was a crucial class compromise. Pressure from the working class, and ruling class fear of revolution - in light of the revolutionary waves that swept Europe at the end of first world war - forced the provision of comprehensive and inclusive welfare, full employment, rising real wages, wealth redistribution through taxation, and corporatism - tripartite organizations and trade union rights. The new “consensus” was both political and economic. By enforcing rising wage levels against individual capitals, the trade unions ensured the rising effective demand necessary for the general accumulation of capital under the Fordist mode of accumulation.

In return for these concessions, the working class as such gave up the desire for revolution. The triumph of social democracy therefore meant that class conflict became both mitigated and fragmented. In the first place, with the provision of comprehensive welfare, the stakes were seen to be lowered: unlike in the 1920s and ‘30s, losing your job no longer meant the threat of starvation. In the second place, with the working class as such giving up the idea of revolution, a split was created between everyday demands over issues such as wage levels and the “ideals” of a free society. In the old workers’ movement, bread-and-butter demands and “utopian” desires had been seen as inextricably linked. Now the first was largely institutionalized and de-politicized through the machinery of the trades unions and the second had to find new forms to express itself. The various “counter-cultural” movements - beatniks and hippies for example - were such forms of expression. Despite the truth of their critique of capital, all the time these movements remained largely estranged from the working class qua the working class, they developed no means of realizing their desires for “freedom” beyond travelling, drugs, communes, festivals, mysticism etc.

However, as class struggle rose across Europe and the USA in the late 1960s, and with the subsequent crisis of capital accumulation, this situation changed. Workers’ demands for more money and less work

began to exceed the limits of the social democratic compromise, and even questioned the terms of this compromise. The fruits of Fordism - televisions, cars, washing machines, steady employment and rising real wages - were not enough. At this point, there was a convergence of everyday needs and “utopian” desires - as best exemplified in the French and Italian movements of 1968 and 1969-77 respectively. This was a creative time for the working class and revolutionary movement, for the convergence of tendencies and desires opened new possibilities and developed new revolutionary analyses of capitalism.

Across the world, capital responded by taking flight from traditional bastions of working class power. Finance capital became increasingly autonomous, outflanking areas of working class entrenchment by shifting to regions where labour was cheaper and more malleable. Social democracy served to tie the interests of national capitals and working classes; but, with the upsurge in working class struggles against the social democratic compromise, capital in the form of finance capital began to free itself from national boundaries and their particular regulations and restrictions. This became reflected in the ideas of those politicians who recognized that the working class and the social democratic forms in which its needs were expressed had to be confronted. The politics of “neo-liberalism” is thus the ideological expression of this new freedom of finance capital.

In the UK, the flight of finance capital led to crisis for sectors of the British economy, most notably in manufacture and heavy industry. Unemployment rose, and it became one of the key weapons used by the Thatcher Government explicitly to restructure the terms of the post-war settlement. The defeat of the miners, the strongest section of the working class, was the turning point in this project.

The subsequent development and election of “New Labour” represents the recognition by the political wing of British social democracy that the renegotiation of the post-war settlement begun by Thatcher et al. was irreversible. The project of “New Labour” is to create a new “one nation” consensus on the basis of the “neo-liberal” encroachment on wages, conditions and welfare.

## **The future of social democracy?**

Does the retreat of social democracy mean that capital will develop new forms of mediation of working class needs? Certainly, this is New Labour’s hope as they scabble around for ideological clothes to gloss over the brutal indecency of “neo-liberalism”. Appeals to patriotism, and use of terms such as “communitarianism” and “third way” are examples of this.

Or will the rejection of social democracy by the bourgeoisie see its eventual re-emergence from within the working class - perhaps in a more radical form? This is what the left is hoping. For our part, of course, we want to see new forms of struggle, politicizing everyday needs and connecting

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them with revolutionary desires, developing in the space vacated by both social democracy and Stalinism.

In the UK context, there is only limited evidence to support both the leftist analysis and our own aspirations. The most iconic industrial disputes of recent years - Magnet, Hillingdon and Merseyside - took place with little or no official union support, despite the wishes of their participants. These small groups of workers in struggle instead had to approach other workers directly, and to look to others outside of the unions and workplaces - most notably Reclaim the Streets (RTS) - to find the forms and networks of support necessary for their struggles. Similarly, London tube workers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union looked to RTS occupations and Critical Mass bike blockades for support in 1996. In January 1997, 2000 tube drivers took militant direct action themselves by occupying the Department of Transport building at Victoria. A further interesting development was the use of the “sickie” by British Airways workers in summer 1997.

However, some of these examples may represent isolated local incidents rather than a growing trend. Moreover, whereas the convergence between “basic” workplace demands and “utopian” desires in the late 1960s was due to a growing sense of possibility, hope and strength, with Governments on the defensive, today’s celebrated acts of unity are based on mutual weakness. Today, working class and small “utopian” movements come together out of self-defence against the growing attacks from state and capital. This is particularly clear in the case of the Liverpool dock workers’ dispute. In the past, the sacking of 500 dockers for refusing to cross a picket line would have brought half of the major ports in the country to a halt and the economy to the brink of crisis. But, in the present case, even the dockers’ own union - the Transport and General Workers Union, the largest union in the country - refused to officially recognize the dispute for fear of legal penalties. It was this lack of traditional trade union support within Britain that led the dockers to make the links with the small but high-profile militant ecological movement and to other dockers abroad.

In sum, the retreat of social democracy has so far seen only a limited convergence of struggles over bread-and-butter issues with the desire for revolutionary social change. Thus while the working class (qua working class) gains preserved within social democracy are being rapidly eroded, there is as yet no sign of the return of what was lost with the triumph of social democracy.

## **The present series of articles**

Class struggle today appears fragmented and the working class itself relatively weak. But the tendency to antagonism is of the essence of the capital relation, and inevitably appears. The issue then becomes one of grasping and relating to the trajectory of antagonistic forms from a communist perspective.

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Will working class struggles over the institutions of social