

spouting anticollaborationist slogans against those on the left who believe that coalition work at the top can, under some circumstances, be a valid move.

As a result, the 'left' tendency of socialists working in the unions has become narrowly economist. That is, the left maintains a sharp separation between trade-union and political and cultural questions, except when it gathers around itself a few workers who are interested in broader questions. In practice, the left tendency stays aloof from both electoral politics (except the SWP which supports its own candidates), and political questions that do not directly impinge on trade union concerns. It is the union leadership that asks the rank and file for support for such measures as national health insurance, labour-law reform, and full-employment legislation. For some left tendencies, action around these issues is considered 'social democratic' or 'reformist' and unworthy of socialist intervention. Thus, the far left is (unwittingly to be sure) part of the process of depoliticisation among the working class. Lacking an approach to the neighbourhood or community as well as the workplace it was rendered silent on some critical issues of working-class struggle over the past several years: inflation, especially in food and housing; taxes; and the environmental issues of pollution, occupational and community health and safety, etc.

The Problems of Coalition Work

The other main tendency, represented by the Communist Party, DSOC, and many independent leftists, (including some individuals in NAM), holds the position that socialists must work at all levels of the labour movement, including cooperation and coalition work with progressive top leaders (Fraser, Winpisinger, UE, ILWU). While placing some emphasis on supporting rank-and-file movements for democratic unionism, these groups have often taken the corporate offensive to signal a need to bury their differences with the labour leaders, blunt their criticisms, and place coalition work *above* building rank-and-file organisations.

The CP vacillates between these two orientations (rank-and-file vs coalition work). In its 'left' periods it is perfectly capable of shrieking as loud as the Maoists about 'collaboration' by the top leaders, and forming and joining coalitions from below. But the dominant tendency of the CP, since the cold war became an anti-communist purge, has been to seek support for progressive issues at the top, to play a progressive role in the political coalitions of labour and liberals that surround the Democratic Party, and to act as staff employees within the labour bureaucracy or to assume elected union posts as *militant trade unionists rather than socialists*. The CP is perhaps the classic case of the separation of economics from politics; thousands of party members have functioned and still operate as good trade unionists, following the **official** policies of their unions, and trying

to push them to the left on a few issues such as the Vietnam war or struggles against joblessness. Since it has been the largest of socialist groups, the CP must be held responsible both for whatever reputation the left has earned (or suffered) in the labour movement, and for the general left tendency to subordinate socialist politics and culture to trade-union reform concerns.

The Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee has perhaps of all socialist groups dedicated itself most consistently to the policy of unity of the most progressive forces in the labour movement with the liberal, minority, and women's coalitions in the Democratic Party. Its membership is sprinkled liberally with middle and top officials of the progressive unions. Though it supported Sadlowski's challenge to the **Abel-McBride** leadership of the Steelworkers, it functions primarily as an influential leadership caucus within the left wing of the Democratic Party. It cannot be said that DSOC is particularly narrow; on the contrary, its concern with electoral politics and legislative action seems to dominate its activity to the detriment of any serious programme on issues bearing on the internal life of the labour movement.

The fundamental problem of DSOC's emphasis is not its specific policies regarding the Democratic Party nor its attitude towards the progressive unions. The basic issue is that DSOC has decided that these are not the times for a mass politics based on the assumption of the possibility of political radicalisation among the workers and portions of the middle strata. On this premise it has opted for coalitions from above and a rather cautious programme of political education around the issues that historically propelled the left-liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

DSOC's 'united front from above' strategy can be defended on the basis of the political realignment position according to which even the most modest liberal positions become radical these days, because the contradictions of American capitalism have forced the moderate as well as conservative Democrats closer to the Republican antipathy toward social reform. DSOC has entered the Democratic Party as the only practical way to conduct politics in a period when the working class and the trade unions show the propensity towards political action outside the two-party system. This posture has made DSOC something less than a radical organisation. Instead it functions as an organiser for the left wing of the Democrats, who seem to lack the energy to mobilise around their own concerns. What is implicit in DSOC's approach is the view that the workers and their unions are really not socialist-minded, or even hospitable to radical ideas. The premise is that the liberal alternatives have not been exhausted. Although the CP functions, in practice, on the same assumption, it has not been willing to own up to it.

It is not the substance of the CP's or DSOC's position that is necessarily

objectionable, so much as the way in which the position is carried out. Anyone can find in the resolutions of both organisations support for the position of work at *all* levels. In practice, these groups tend to work primarily at the top because of their estimate of the current situation as well as their composition (both have relatively large numbers of officials among their members and their periphery). These organisations allow a socialist sympathiser in the labour movement to be a member of a socialist organisation without performing responsible political work. Their members in the trade unions are often exempted from recruiting tasks, selling literature, and conducting socialist education, and from advocating the policies of the organisation where those policies depart from the line of the progressive wing of the labour leadership.

Of course, this laissez-faire attitude is more prevalent in DSOC (or NAM) than in the CP. The CP encourages 'secret memberships', undoubtedly a carryover from the repressive period of the post-war era and from the experience of the international Communist movement where secrecy was the sine qua non of personal survival in many countries. Perhaps the CP has had reason for its circumspection under some circumstances, but I believe its hesitancy to conduct overt socialist education and propaganda among workers is a product of its belief that socialist ideas have no currency in the working class and that efforts to speak of socialism would result in certain isolation from the workers. (This aspect of CP practice is gaining ground among far left groups as well.)

In sum, most left groups have based their labour activity on one of the variants or styles of economist activity: on the one side, a rigid line on overturning entrenched union leaders and replacing them with democratic rank-and-file caucus leaders; the political and ideological role of these caucuses remains ambiguous. On the other side, there is in most instances a subordination to progressive leaders, an emphasis on making alliances that in practice unnecessarily limit what is politically possible.

To be sure, some left activity in both modes has produced valuable work. The role of parts of the left in helping to democratise the UMW, advancing the rank-and-file opposition in the Steelworkers union, and organising and building public employees' unions has been important. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) is perhaps a model for building a national workers' organisation that sees itself as independent of the bureaucracy (though it has not evolved a programme that addresses workers' needs beyond the union). A number of left groups have made significant contributions, and continue to infuse their work with dedication and seriousness.

Yet almost all left groups have built whatever strategic and programmatic base they have among the working class within the confines of *contract unionism*. In effect the left is a tendency among the trade unions and has failed to grapple with problems of the class they may go beyond the capacities of the unions. Further, even in relation to union work, the

policies of the left are not built around *class demands*, are not directed to development of class as well as trade-union consciousness. Finally, the left is not playing a *political* role in the unions or among the workers. Instead, its practice is *trade-union* politics, informed by the ideology of democracy and militancy and little else. There is little socialist politics within the working class, either at the level of concrete struggles or at the level of education.

PART III

PROBLEMS OF A LEFT LABOUR POLICY AND STRATEGY

What follows is written from the perspective of someone active in one socialist group, NAM, and is necessarily an argument about how that organisation ought to view the present situation **and** its own activity. Yet it is also written with a clear understanding that **NAM** is not by itself capable of undertaking all the tasks suggested, and that a broadly cooperative left effort would be necessary to have a major impact, however dim the prospects of such cooperation often appear.

If the previous analysis of the economic and political position of the workers, their unions, and the middle strata is correct, we cannot avoid recognising that the labour movement is itself under attack. Because of the deterioration of democratic forms within the unions and the falling away of their active base, the unions have become less able to defend the elementary interests of their members on the shop floor, in legislative arenas, and in the community. Unions are no longer adequate defensive organisations of the workers, much less offering a road toward offensive activity. This does *not* imply that unions can be replaced either by dual revolutionary **organisations** or by the left itself. But it implies that the left must take an active role in union revitalisation.

The left should direct its labour activity to breaking the ghetto-isation between workers' struggles in the economic sphere and politics. The job is to create or join in those forms that engender the politicisation of workers, the development of workers, the development of their power in the electoral, community, social, and cultural arena, so that offensive action and, above all, socialist and class-conscious elements may arise within the class.

Revitalising the Unions

Unless unions are revitalised to become defensive organisations capable of meeting the challenge of capital's attack on workers' living standards, there is a chance that the 1980s may reproduce the conditions of the 1920s. I do not mean to draw a mechanical parallel between the two periods. Unions will probably not lose membership, because members have come to regard them as *necessary* evils. But they have lost their character as *social*

movements capable of mobilising their members for political as well as contract struggles. The union halls are empty, except for a few officers and their followers. They fill only during negotiations, when strikes appear likely or contract approvals must be secured.

In the coming period, the unions cannot be adequate defensive instruments unless they are popular organisations with an active rank and file, especially when the corporate offensive demands that workers defend, with their **jobs** if necessary, hard-won gains. In turn, there are not automatic formulae for making sure that the rank and file emerges; if not, their gains will be eroded by inflation, lost and costly strikes, and relative passivity when capital moves to greener pastures. The unions can only become vital if they regain their social vision, if they are dedicated to building a unified membership that understands the large corporations and the national administration as class enemies, and is capable of extending the struggle politically as well as on the shop floor—in short a *movement* as opposed to a series of organisations.

It is not determined *in advance* that this task can be accomplished, even if the left were much more powerful and influential than it is. Nor is the union leadership capable of reorganising the unions into a movement, even the progressive leaders. For unions are in a bad way. The deterioration has gone so far that the old progressive union ideology is partially discredited among the rank and file, because new ideologies have emerged to describe and explain the weakened position of the workers. There has occurred an ideological shift among large sections of the working class. The anti-business ideology that motivated the upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s has been replaced by an anti-black and anti-government ideology that argues for the old values of individualism rather than collective action. To lose sight of this fundamental change is to keep our heads in the sand. The progressive leaders have no marching hymns capable of attracting a following. They are fairly isolated and have relied for nearly twenty years on well-oiled machines or full-time officials that are often sustained largely by the indifference of large sections of their ranks to whatever they do. While workers want union protection, it is not clear that they want a labour movement in the old established sections of the unions. The new groups of Southern workers embattled by voracious company attacks, farm workers, and many public workers have a different conception of their unions—for them the union is still a movement, in many instances. But the older segments of the labour movement require revitalisation because of the fissure between the members and the traditional ideology of unionism.

In connection with the task of union revitalisation, the struggle to democratise the labour movement should go hand in hand with the fight to democratise the workplace. Most fights for union democracy are at best implicitly directed towards building workers' power at the workplace. In

the example of the miners, the reforms introduced by Miners for Democracy into the union structure were substantial. Workers have the right to vote on the contract, to hold regular conventions, and to elect all of their officials directly. But the union leaders who emerged from the reform struggle became reluctant to fight for such workplace issues as the right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions, the right to strike over grievances, etc. The fight for democracy involves change—both within the union and on the job. Offensive efforts for demands such as narrowing the pay differential between lower and higher job classifications, rigorous enforcement of job health and safety rules, and an active steward system able to deal with grievances on the shop or office floor are all part of a left programme.*

Union revitalisation involves organising the unorganised, especially among clerical workers and in the growing industrial South and Southwest. Rank-and-file organising committees could be joined to caucus movements or urged upon an officialdom completely absorbed in its own maintenance and committed to professional paid organisers for expanding their membership. Under some circumstances, leftists may become paid organisers, but should see their task (as distinct from those organisers who work as bureaucratically as the officials) in terms of building the **active** rank and file, even where not connected to caucus movements. In the 1930s many unions and left activists were trained in organising campaigns rather than caucuses. They learned how to give a speech, write a leaflet, meet with a committee and train it, and how to fight against employer resistance in unionisation campaigns. Among the sources of the decline of the labour rank and file has been the reluctance of the leadership, even in progressive unions, to draw their members into any kind of activity, even when this activity benefits the union, such as in the case of organising. When a union is prepared to undertake a campaign, the left should not stand off on the grounds that we do not approve of the leadership. If our analysis of the growing role of the right, the offensive of the corporations, and the weakness of the unions in the working class is correct, then any efforts to bring new workers into the unions must receive strong left support.

In the current situation, with the efforts of the Business Round Table (now the leading corporate political action group) and members of the Carter administration to make the labour movement an official arm of the **corporate-government** alliance, any forces within the labour unions willing to preserve the independence of the unions by shaping a legislative and bargaining programme that challenges corporate priorities must be

Even where there are elected stewards, few unions have retained vigorous educational programmes to train them in grievance handling, much less providing opportunities for stewards to understand labour's legislative and political programme. One reason for this decline of union education is that the stewards system has been replaced by business agents and other full-timers.

supported. At the same time, we can learn from the mistakes of the past; we should *never* abandon our policy of helping to build rank-and-file forms; to abandon it creates the conditions for the hegemony of bureaucratic styles of union leadership, the class collaboration of leaders, and the depoliticisation of the membership. Where the rank-and-file movement has successfully elected a democratic leadership to union offices, it should be helped to retain its autonomy, its ability to propose its own policy and to have an internal political, cultural, and educational life. Its attitude toward the *union as an institution* cannot be one of complete confidence because contract unionism—with its no-strike provisions, its full-time enforcement of restrictions on worker actions, its complex grievance procedure, and its economism—will still tend to erode the spirit and the independence of the rank and file.

Unions and Politics

We should work to broaden the scope of the rank-and-file movement beyond its traditional programme of democratic unionism. Socialists should help rank-and-file movements to get involved in community struggles and, in certain circumstances, electoral action. At the same time, the rank-and-file movement could be a force for making the union a political voice of its members' needs. Legislative battles for a national health programme paid by the government, for lower prices, against wage-freeze policies of government, and around international issues such as nuclear survival and against war could be encouraged by socialists. Our expectations of the rank-and-file caucus movement exceed those of many workers who wish merely to replace the existing leadership with a new, honest and democratic administration of the union. Electing leaders is insufficient for solving the problems inherent in bureaucratic unionism that has become enmeshed in administering contracts on a businesslike basis, no matter how honestly. Of course, we should enter whatever movements workers have created to make their unions more responsive to their needs, but our approach should always be to raise the level of programme and action of these movements without unprincipled attacks on the existing caucus programme.

Many leftists active in the labour movement are reluctant to make such efforts to broaden the scope of whatever democratic movements exist, in part because of fear of appearing to wish to impose a narrowly sectarian political agenda on what are most often fragile organisations. It is important to recognise that alongside the routine economism of most of the efforts of left parties to intervene in the labour movement, there has been a related tradition of demanding adherence to one or another political position for organisational purposes, when the issue is not directly relevant to the problems facing the union or caucus. These demands have often caused destructive splits within the left organisations

themselves, when members within the labour movement simply refused to go along with organisational directives.

Given this history, it is necessary to be extremely sensitive in raising broader political issues. At the same time, the analysis of the state of the labour movement presented here indicates that this broadening is crucial for the accomplishment of even the most minimal objectives in a period in which the labour movement is internally weak and isolated from many of its traditional allies.

Consequently, a series of questions that are usually held to be of importance not for left activity within the labour movement but for general strategic orientation are immediately relevant for whatever programme is conducted within the contemporary labour movement.

The question of the relation of mass work to recruiting individuals to socialist organisations, one which has never been solved by any American left movement, suggests some of the issues at stake. The history of the CP and the SWP is replete with examples of deep involvement in popular struggles. The role of these organisations in building the CIO in the **1930s**, and helping to organise civil rights, women's, and youth movements down to our day was both important and often heroic. Yet neither was able, in the main, to function consistently as an openly socialist organisation within mass movements. Their critical role in building the labour movement subordinated the function of the development of socialist education and culture.

I believe that most of today's left shares in the reticence of our forebears to make our socialist politics integral to our mass work. Among the reasons for such reluctance to deal boldly with the ideological and political consequences of opposition to capitalist policies is that we are not sure that those we work with are sympathetic to socialism. We have revolutionary aspirations, but these do not seem to correspond to the situation. To be blunt, workers are not socialist-minded, nor sympathetic to socialist organisations.

Among the causes of this anti-socialism is that the Soviet Union has been held up by many leftists (and anticommunists) as the model of socialism against which we must measure our own conditions. The legacy of attacks against Communists combined with blind and often mindless pro-Sovietism (or anti-Sovietism in the case of social-democrats and Trotskyists) has turned many workers off. The subordination of the left to either the politics or the vision of the Soviet Union, China, Cuba or any other country calling itself socialist has had disastrous consequences for building a socialist movement in the United States. While we cannot adopt the political lines of these countries, we must have a balanced critique of their history and their role in world affairs. Working people cannot respect, much less join, a socialist organisation whose members have not grappled with the realities of socialism as it actually exists, with the working class in

those countries, the problems of democracy in the actual socialist world, and our relation to those realities. Thus we must commit ourselves to dealing with these issues as a crucial part of spreading socialist ideas and encouraging organisational affiliation.

One thing is certain: despite the decline of virulent anticommunism in the United States since the **1960s**, no socialist movement can grow unless it deals with socialism as it really exists. This is particularly true within the working class with its high proportion of people from eastern and southern European backgrounds, where communist and socialist ideas and politics have dominated since the end of World War II.

Any possibility of a substantial expansion of the role of socialists in the labour movement requires, among other things, a fairly sophisticated and balanced analysis of actually existing socialism. In the present juncture, when many of the crucial questions within the labour movement concern efforts to establish, redefine, and expand democracy, it is not possible to function effectively as socialists without deciding some elementary questions regarding the problems of socialist transformation if we are to have more than a marginal effect even in the immediate situation, when an actual socialist transformation is far away.

There is a growing body of discussion in other advanced capitalist countries on these questions. The ideas grouped around the label 'Eurocommunism', while not a recipe, may offer some assistance, given a careful examination of American history." Because of the achievement of universal suffrage in our country after 1920, the legalisation of trade unions in 1935, and the enactment of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s (for the second time), there is no longer any question of whether socialists should declare their full support of all democratic rights and forms. **We must declare** that *both* parliamentary and industrial democracy are crucial in a new society, that free trade unions independent of the state are to be strengthened and that the right to strike is inviolable. Further, we do not endorse a one-party socialist state, but anticipate the participation of many socialist parties (and of parties that do not accept socialist ideas) in the democratic process.

If we are committed to democracy as an end, not just as a slogan or a 'transitional' position, can we speak of the dictatorship of any class and expect American workers to respond affirmatively to programmes in which socialists play a significant public role? I believe that it would ignore both the specificity of the struggle for democracy as an end in itself in Western capitalist countries, and the contradictory experiences of actually existing socialism, to think so.

The Labour Movement and the State

Beyond affirming—and practising—a basic commitment to democracy, contemporary socialist involvement in the labour movement requires a

theory of the state that does not rest content with the formulation that the state is the instrument through which a ruling class assures the continuation of its rule by force. The development of the modern state in nearly all countries has enlarged its functions considerably; a substantial portion of the working class is now employed directly by the state, and many industrial jobs in the private sector depend on their creation and maintenance on the 'contract' state.

From the point of the view of the industrial worker in the pre-New Deal era, the state was clearly an instrument for the preservation of class rule, by coercion at all times, and by force if necessary. The image of the state was the swinging billy club and the repressive courts that regularly granted employers injunctions against mass picketing, threw radicals in prison, and declared unions a conspiracy to restrain trade. From the perspective of union and radical militants struggling for their elementary rights, the state appeared as just another arm of the capitalist effort to prevent workers from organising on their own behalf, and to preserve private property at all costs.

Unfortunately this conception of the state, born of the practical experience of thousands of militants in the pre-war era, has changed little for most of the socialist left in the past forty years. It was always only a partial truth that the state expressed the ruling class's drive for profits and domination. For the state preserves more than property; it preserves a *system of social relations* that has to do with the reproduction of labour power as wage labour, *the reproduction of the ideologies of domination* as well as its material *side*.¹² It consists in a wide variety of institutions such as schools, the media, health institutions. The state is also the coordinator of the economy, and a major source of investment. In short, its enlargement since the New Deal has touched the lives of all people well beyond its repressive apparatus. As a matrix of *ideological* apparatuses and a source of capital accumulation, it has become part of society in a way that obliterates the traditional base-superstructure distinction.

The enlargement of the state's intervention into the economy and daily life means that our posture towards it must decisively change. Public employment accounts for more than one of every six jobs. Public investment accounts for more than half of all investment, first of all in the war sector, but second in health, education, and transportation. The expansion of the state bureaucracy has taken place in a new way, compared to the nineteenth century when only important elements of the middle class entered public employment as a vocation, and workers became employees of the state mostly via the armed forces and police. Moreover, the expansion of health, education, and social welfare has brought millions of people into the state both as political actors and workers. The state becomes, in this period of capitalism, a new and important arena for contestation. It does not only *mirror* the contradictions of capital, it *constitutes* a new set

of contradictions.

First among these is the contradiction between the state's accumulation functions and its ideological functions. We can see this operate with the cutbacks in public services that result from the primacy of accumulation in the context of world economic competition and conflicts. The development of struggles within the public sector to preserve existing 'social programmes' challenges the priorities of capital that privilege investment in arms, energy, and a general cutback in state expenditures not directly useful to accumulation. This has become perhaps the key political issue of our period.¹³

Second, there is a contradiction between the tax burden on working people and the need to generate as much capital as possible for **durable**-goods investment to meet international competition. The large public sector helps cause inflation at a time when American production of material goods is limited by sharp competition from abroad and a stagnant market at home. Yet the private sector cannot absorb the employees released by cutbacks from public-sector work. One of the consequences of this contradiction is that large numbers of workers become persuaded by the ideology of 'big government' as enemy because they perceive that high taxes are produced by a large public sector. In any inflationary economy racism and anti-bureaucratic ideologies constitute adequate explanations for the decline of real wages. At the same time, 'buy American' campaigns and import curbs are viewed as serious answers to foreign competition that results in job migrations.

The question of how to fight in the public sector has become increasingly complex in the past five years. Socialists have a chance to work among public employees faced with job losses due to cutbacks. Alliances with client groups, tenants, and others adversely affected by cutbacks may be forged where socialists are involved in public-sector unions and community organisations. But the problem of developing a class alliance has become infinitely more difficult since many workers in the private sector have shown interest in fighting for tax cuts under conservative banners such as were provided by Proposition 13-type initiatives in the 1978 elections.

These are difficult issues to resolve with a simple slogan or two. The division of labour and fragmentation of the working class into **sectoral** ghettos makes a united programme impossible to envision except on the basis of some rather fundamental redistribution of the tax burden from individuals to corporations, the elimination of taxes on small property, and a determined effort to prevent runaway shops from cities like Cleveland, Los Angeles, and New York.

It is evident that the left must intervene in struggles to maintain **public**-sector jobs and services. But it cannot rest content with a merely defensive posture, as insistence that jobs simply be preserved, as most **public-sector**

unions have done. The fact is, union demands for the status quo are not popular, even among union members. The uniformed services (police and fire and sanitation) have managed barely to hold their own through strikes and job actions, in part because administrative employees and many service workers have not resisted the cutbacks with the same determination. In the long run, defensive strikes among public-sector workers have their limits unless they become general strikes at a city-wide scale. Unions must take the political offensive if their defensive programme to preserve jobs is to succeed. This entails an examination of the federal and local policies of the business groups that have been demanding cutbacks, and a political struggle to fashion a pro-labour programme on taxes, economic development, and other issues bearing on the urban crisis. Socialists have a role here, but only if they understand how crucial the attack on public-sector unions and the cities really is. Forming unions has been a major focus of many left groups in the past decade. But too many socialists, many of whom have been elected to office in public unions, have settled down to bargaining postures, leaving behind not only their socialism, but also their vision. As militant trade unionists they have mobilised some struggles against cutbacks, but have not succeeded, except in a very few instances, in building **community/political** coalitions around health and education.

The relative failure of socialists to struggle within the public sector beyond purely trade union demands for jobs and salary increases may be partly attributable to their misunderstanding of the specific configuration of the capitalist crisis in the present period. Armed often only with the myopic vision of the primacy of the industrial proletariat under all circumstances, many sections of the left have abandoned or otherwise downgraded the significance of struggles in the public sector. The public sector is where the crisis of capital accumulation in Western capitalist countries has become concentrated, rather than in basic capital and consumer-goods sectors.* The crisis is manifested in several different ways: first, large cities are saddled with a 'fiscal' crisis which is merely a displacement of the movement of industries to the periphery, the concomitant exodus of large sections of the middle strata and the skilled workers, and the severe reduction in federal aid. Second, the 'unproductive' character of the underclasses that remain in the core cities removes the impetus for providing social services on an expanded scale. Large sections of these underclasses appear more or less permanently displaced from the industrial and private service labour force and can only find work in the public sector, if at all. This situation places considerable pressure on city finances, especially as revenue sharing requires local government to match federal funds in order to receive them. Thus the cutbacks in social welfare, education, and even **police** and fire departments.

*There is a crisis of overproduction in most Western-capitalist countries, but it is made more complex by the unevenness of its effects in different sectors

The business right-wing offensive is largely successful in the wake of the decline of liberalism. In the first place, many organised workers in basic industries and services are no longer residents of large cities and cannot be counted on to support the programmes that have sustained the **under-**classes, even at low living standards. Second, the public-sector unions have rarely attempted to forge alliances with left-liberal forces who remain in the cities among the middle strata, and the underclasses who find themselves isolated from other classes. The role of the left within the unions should be to advocate the formation of alliances with other forces around the defence of services and jobs, and to develop alternative policies to those of the banks and the right wing. Although this is not the place to suggest specific programmes that might constitute an effective counterweight to budget cutting, the first step is to recognise that such programmes must emerge if jobs, salary levels, and services are to be preserved.

The involvement of socialists in struggles within the state, including the army and the police force, as well as the administrative apparatus as a whole, was important during the Vietnam war and the 'war on poverty'. Now, most socialists in the public sector have helped form unions; while the creation of trade unions is necessary, it is not sufficient to define our relation to the state.

Socialists can help to develop, as a task that concerns the entire labour movement, both a theory and a strategy for conducting democratic struggles within the state at the level of its administrative functions as well as its legislative role. **In** this regard, a **coherent approach** to electoral work is urgently needed.

Many socialists continue to disdain the electoral process on grounds that are not novel. Elections are a sham, it is argued, and more and more people are recognising this by abstaining. There are times when socialists might boycott elections—when they really are nothing but a sham conducted by an authoritarian regime, or when, in certain revolutionary situations, they express only the tactical efforts of a parliament that is nothing but an organisation of the ruling groups in the face of popular organs of political and economic power.

Yet neither situation now exists, and the attitude of abstention is inappropriate. It amounts, in effect, to a replication of the economism that has plagued the left's efforts in the labour movement. We are in a period of widespread depoliticisation among broad sections of the population, born largely of a sense of isolation and powerlessness. The right has seized the time to use the electoral process to roll back social-welfare gains won by the working class in the past forty years and to attack the social and cultural gains made by women, by youth, and by gay men and lesbians in the 1960s.

Moreover, the Congress has, after more than a decade, become a major

arena for the defence of the right to strike, for workers to defend their living standards, and for the ability of unions to organise. Blacks and other minorities are locked in combat to force Congress to pass a full-employment bill, and we are all suffering the lack of national health insurance.

For the left to abdicate the electoral arena is tantamount to betrayal of the interests of minorities and women as well as the working class as a whole, since it is in this sphere that the anti-popular forces have mounted their most effective offensives. Socialists must be among those who encourage the trade unions to wage an aggressive struggle in their members' interest in the electoral arena, especially on crucial issues that affect labour's rights and the living standards of working people. At the same time we should advocate a labour politics that is independent of the Democratic Party, is not narrow and parochial, and involves work with environmental, women's, and gay rights groups on the broad issues of democratic liberties and social advances.

Labour and the Democrats

What is an independent labour politics in relation to the Democratic Party? Historically, much of the left has defined this as the formation of a labour party of the British type as a necessary, transitional step towards revolutionary struggle. The argument for a labour party consists in the contention that all electoral politics in a non-revolutionary period is necessarily social-democratic and that leftists need such an arena for the promulgation of revolutionary ideas among larger constituencies than are available to the revolutionary left in its own name. Second, working people need a party through which they may participate in their own name in the struggle for reform. A labour party, in the traditional socialist view, educates workers towards their class, rather than **sectoral** interests, and provides a forum for combat with the forces with whom alliances can be temporarily made.

In the United States, such thinking has had little practical relevance since the Roosevelt administration because the Democratic Party, operating within the context of long-term economic expansion and abetted by the disdain for ideological politics among wide sections of the population, has performed many of the functions of the British Labour Party. (This is not to claim that the two parties are entirely similar—but their relationships to the working class have shared many features.) Under these circumstances, the slogan advanced by sections of the left for a labour party was merely agitational and had no practical result. The sharp turn rightward by the Carter administration and the festering split in the Democratic Party impels a re-examination of labour's perspectives on political action. As noted earlier, the realignment perspective of DSOC is predicated on an assessment of the realities of labour's unwillingness to consider seriously

forming its own party at this juncture, despite the considerable evidence that the Democrats have become distinctly inhospitable to labour's demands over the past decade. Whether progressive unions and rank-and-file forces make the fight to reform the Democrats via demanding that substantial programmatic commitments be taken seriously, or choose to break away, will not be determined by the desires of the socialist left. In this context, the issue of independent progressive political action must still be raised, without reducing that issue to the question of the organisational relationship to one or another section of the Democratic Party.

The first element of an independent politics is for labour to develop its own programme that goes beyond its narrow self-interest. The Democratic Agenda, inspired by DSOC, corresponds at least in its broad outlines to this concept. In essence, it means that the labour-progressive forces would have coherent programmatic alternatives to the two party platforms. For example, a different posture on arms spending would imply a different position on many international issues. Another example: demands for the nationalisation of rail transportation, municipalisation of power, a programme of serious energy alternatives, etc. This perspective would go beyond the traditional demands for expanded health care and education, but would include them, and would entail a new tax programme. Over a period of years the Democratic Party will either reintegrate the unions by making substantial new concessions, or will move further right, opening the way for new electoral possibilities, not the least of which would be an independent **labour/progressive** party.

We must place the relationship between electoral and extra-electoral action in a broader perspective. Struggles in shops, offices, and **neighbourhoods** for greater popular control over the conditions of work and community life are primarily undertaken outside the electoral arena; yet most of these efforts, even narrowly defined, have an electoral component, which at some points may be primary. If we understand that a labour strategy is only partially a trade union strategy, but entails an approach to the multiple problems of the working class, its social and cultural life as well as its working life, in the community as well as in the shop or office, then we must think through a wide variety of problems: taxes as well as the runaway shop, the quality of schools, day-care facilities and recreational centres in the city or town, marriage and family life when both partners work.

Not a single left organisation currently possesses the range and size to deal with the totality of everyday life, without a division of labour that often results in one-sided political development. The 'working-class' organisers become pure and simple trade unionists who are willing to fight the boss, but cannot get a handle on capitalism, and who tend to view issues around sexuality, family life, and personal relations as foreign territory,

while other activists struggle around reproductive (or tenants') rights, but plead ignorance on 'workers' ' issues.

PART IV PROSPECTS

The strategic considerations contained in this article have centred on the argument that the fundamental break that needs to be made involves consciously going beyond contract unionism in the left's conception and practice of 'labour's strategy'. These considerations are grounded in two basic arguments. The first is that economic labour practice has reached the limits of its effectiveness, not only in socialist terms, but in terms of the ability of the unions to conduct wage and benefit **struggles—the** heart of contract unionism. Political intervention by labour is necessary to maintain existing living standards, to achieve what bargaining used to be more or less sufficient to win.

Second, I have argued for union revitalisation as a key task of the left, even if one must remain pessimistic that even the most progressive unions—who recognise these problems—can act to change their situation. The left here is defined as both socialist organisations and those who consider themselves radicals or socialists, but work either as individuals or in small, local groups. The possibilities are probably limited for the established left to agree on a broad strategy of revitalisation on the basis of a programme of independent labour political action, establishing and assisting rank-and-file movements that can address both the problems inherent in the undemocratic and class-collaborationist drift of large numbers of unions and the political and cultural development of the rank and file.

The reasons for this pessimism involve both the extent of antagonisms between existing socialist organisations, and the unhappy fact that many left groups are stuck in a series of propositions about American reality that are at best half true and at worst entirely out of phase with what is happening. The history of these propositions is linked to the notion of a 'key sector' and ranges from a mechanical adherence to the view that the industrial working class is the only properly revolutionary force in our country to a view that only blacks and other third-world peoples are revolutionary while almost everyone else is infected by the virus of 'white skin privilege' (a tepid reformulation of Lenin's labour aristocracy thesis).

In the present period, an 'industrial' concentration policy would amount to a reflexive return to (the errors of) the past, applying abstract criteria to the development of labour strategy. The question of both the middle strata and organisation among **public-sector** and administrative employees cannot be relegated to second place; the growing significance of services and administration in the politics and economy of the United

States shapes crucial aspects of the immediate political situation.*

With the exception of the International Socialists, who have taken a lead in the formation of several rank-and-file caucuses, most left groups work at the local level, contenting themselves with vying for union office, recruiting some workers to their organisations, and becoming good trade union militants. But there are few instances of growth in genuine socialist influence among workers or systematic political and cultural education by these groups. Even the Teamsters for a Democratic Union suffers from contractitis, a dearth of leadership, and no perspective on a broad range of political questions. Not all of these weaknesses are attributable to the IS leaders, since the workers themselves have emerged from several generations of reliance on contracts, strikes, and bargaining to safeguard and advance their interests. The IS has been a valiant catalyst, but is clearly caught up in the mechanics of organising the caucus, its strategy limited to winning local offices, projecting an opposition to the incumbent president, and building for the long run, around job dissatisfaction.

And the IS is head and shoulders in advance of all the rest in understanding the need for national coordination of rank-and-file opposition. Elsewhere, in Detroit, Chicago, New York, and West Coast cities, local affiliates of established left organisations are getting involved in union work to a degree unprecedented in the past twenty years. Yet it cannot be claimed that the influence of the broad left wing is growing within labour's ranks. The gradual decline of the West Coast longshore union, the relative stagnation of the United Electrical Workers, and the virtual disappearance of the Mine Mill union into the Steelworkers has deprived the left of important institutional bases. If some progressive weight remains in the Meatcutters and Machinists, it is not a rank-and-file phenomenon, but a function of the survival of the old left leadership of the Fur and Leather Workers and the Packinghouse workers in one case and the survival of dim socialist traditions in the case of the Machinists.

Perhaps the most interesting new development has been the rise of the rank-and-file movement in the Steelworkers, led by persons who had some ties to the Chicago left-liberal traditions. As I have noted, there are signs that this movement goes beyond the limits of contract unionism and may become a stable force for a broader left-progressive coalition in that region.

***In stressing the growing politicisation of trade union struggles, it is possible to point to almost any aspect of labour activity. In struggles around the introduction of new technologies and occupational health and safety programmes, the site of conflict has shifted somewhat from the shop floor (where the battle cannot be won, but must be waged) to political and international trade union cooperation. In a sense, the question is not whether this politicisation will occur, but over whether it will be possible for the left to assist in the development of a political orientation different from that implicit in the willingness of substantial sections of the labour movement to accept a new kind of subordination to government and corporate plans, in the hope that such cooperation might prevent the worse.**

But the extent of political development among the rank and file remains circumscribed by fear of red-baiting, a lack of middle and low-level leadership within the Fight Back organisation, and the ambiguous traditions of the union itself.

It is in the public and clerical sectors that much of the new left's influence has been felt, in the teachers' unions, AFSCME, SEIU (Service Employees International Union), and the Office and Professional Employees, a medium-sized union of private-sector clerical and technical employees. Many socialists have been elected to local union offices in these sectors. **NAM**, for example, has a rather large number of members who are on union staffs or are elected officials in these unions, in addition to a greater number who belong to the AFT or other **public-sector** unions. But most NAM people and other leftists are not elected as socialists; they become respected fighters for the everyday interests of the members and are logically put forward for union office or staff jobs.

Becoming a *socialist* union member is a long process in the light of the past thirty years. Nobody in her or his right mind would enter a workplace announcing radical—much less revolutionary—sympathies, not only because dismissal might immediately follow, but because it might arouse either suspicion or antipathy among co-workers. But unless one has an approach to becoming an open socialist, the tendency to become a progressive (literally, a liberal) union activist is hard to resist. In a time when workers are not seeking socialist solutions to their problems, the task of finding a way to make these solutions available and palpable is not easy.

Dissatisfaction is now widespread throughout labour's ranks, but in only a few places is it organised. One of the reasons is that there is no organised left presence in the unions that has a broad vision of what the tasks are in this period. Leftists do not develop such long-term theoretical and strategic perspectives because they don't think such work is important, compared to the practical day-to-day tasks of organising among workers. Even if we wanted to define these tasks in the light of the economic, ideological, and political tendencies of our period, the left would still have to face its own theoretical and historical impoverishment. Until there is a commitment to strategic thinking and theoretical assessment these problems will not go away because the 'situation' will not by itself produce radicalisation.

The pragmatic orientation of the left, its reluctance to engage in political debates except about questions of 'the party', has been debilitating. We are stuck with the classic texts and have a clear aversion to facing reality. Some of us are stuck on the shop floor around issues of workers' power over production and seem oblivious to the syndicalist implications of such a position. Others are stuck at the intermediate level of the union

office—processing grievances, **organising** the unorganised, and engaging in the necessary political machinations within a local union. Some leftists are the best grievers in the labour movement because they have political experience. But they never look below or above the ranks of middle-level trade union leadership. Others are swimming in union staff jobs trying to influence progressive leaders to do more and better things, but have not figured out how to connect with the rank and file or with their socialist conscience. Finally there are a few socialists at the top, most of whom function 'as left liberals. These leaders are not to blame for the 'opportunism'; since socialist consciousness is, by definition, not an individual matter, but depends on the demands of the class as well as the quality of socialist leadership within the class, we can only try to encourage these forces on the basis of what we do below.

The most realistic assessment of the current situation centres on the ideological shift within the working class, a shift qualitatively different from any in the recent past. Here the triumphalism of the left becomes a serious barrier to grappling with difficult problems. In my opinion, we can no longer assume a propensity among sizeable sections of white workers towards progressive social attitudes and conceptions of the social world on the broadest level. The success of consumerism and racism as ideologies consists in their ability to provide *imaginary* explanations and suggest general courses of action for the decline of real living standards, the growing turbulence in the economic and social situation, and the sense of transition to an uncertain new situation.

The left has no explanation for these phenomena that can capture the imagination. Since the left aims its efforts against the corporate capitalist class, and not within the working and underclasses, and the concrete conditions do not favour class unity but instead lead toward further fragmentation, left ideology is headed for even greater marginality unless it admits that the *class* is **turning** right-ward, rather than ascribing **right-wing** influences to purely external or conspiratorial factors. It is not because workers are happy that the right grows in influence. It is precisely the opposite: workers grasp at right-wing programmes because they offer a way out of the dilemmas of inflation and insecurity. They blame the victim, the underclasses, the gays and lesbians and other groups who have challenged familiar ethical systems.

Yet most of the left persists, in practice, in downgrading personal life within working-class struggle. No serious left influence in the working class is possible without addressing the issues on which the right has attacked. What do we think of the ethical systems (hard work, family life, **hetero**-sexuality) and what alternative can the left offer to the tax revolt, which is grounded in the right-wing critique of centralisation and bureaucracy?

An authoritarian left is helpless to address these questions except with

the most stereotyped arguments against libertarian right-wing programmes, such as: 'socialism will bring solutions through collective ownership', 'the state is necessary in the transition period and bureaucracy will go away as private property is abolished', 'democracy is **reserved** for the progressive forces and consists more in true economic security than in free speech', 'repression and central planning and power are necessary to save the revolution from its enemies'.

Thus a break with the authoritarian and bureaucratic elements of traditional life ideologies (both Leninist and social-democratic) is a political imperative. It is necessary not simply to 'have' but to develop practically a critique of bureaucracy and centralisation, and to counterpose a political vision that (1) agrees with parts of the libertarian **right-wing** critique of bureaucracy, while parting with it on the question of free enterprise; (2) acknowledges that the family is crucial for many people who have lost community ties, without trying to conceal the ways that the conventional family is no longer viable; (3) defends freedom of sexual preference while understanding why people experience sexual misery and find themselves attracted to repressive attitudes toward gay and lesbian preferences; and (4) agrees that taxes are too high and government is wasteful while criticising the attitudes toward social services and their recipients often implicit in such statements.

Most of the established left seems unable to do more in the present period than organise resistance to the efforts of the corporations and national government to make the workers pay for the crisis. The resurgence of socialist influence within the working class cannot be projected onto a new depression, mass strikes, or other apocalyptic events. Traditional liberalism is unlikely to rebuild an active mass base of the type that developed during the depression and immediate post-war periods.

That is to say, a hard, realistic view of the current situation is required. The prospect of a significant long-term decline in living standards for perhaps a majority of workers is apt to move them to the right, sometimes radically, given the present alignment of political and social forces. And the ideological points of combat will not be concentrated, necessarily, within the economic sphere, even though an increase is likely in defensive strikes and rank-and-file opposition to established leaders. To those who object that my insistence that questions of personal life, concepts of **de-centralised** popular socialism, and education for political as well as economic action at the base fails to provide specific strategies for the left, I would argue that the theoretical and strategic debate is now as important as tactical plans, and that the latter can only make sense in the context of general strategic agreement in relation to groups and organisations that have some chance of implementing them.

NOTES

1. Sidney Lens, *The Crisis of American Labor*, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1961); Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).
2. See Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: A n Infantile Disorder*.
3. Lens, *Crisis*.
4. For theoretical discussions of this point see Mario Tronti, 'Workers and Capital', *Telos* 18; also Stanley Aronowitz, 'Marx, Braverman, and the Logic of Capital', *Insurgent Sociologist*, Winter 1978-79.
5. See Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971).
6. Thomas Hogue, *The American Steel Industry*, vol. 4.
7. This is the standard position of the 'new communist movement' adopted from Communist Party leader William Z. Foster's post-war writings See especially his *Negro People in American History*, (New York: International Publishers, 1970), and *History of the Communist Party of the United States*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968); and *History of the Three Internationals*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).
8. For a typical formulation, see Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1971).
9. Aronowitz, *False Promises*, ch. 4.
10. There are two comprehensive histories of the Party: Foster's *History of the Communist Party in the United States*, and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party*, (New York: De Capo, 1974). These books may be regarded as two sides of the same coin. One is relentlessly apologetic, while the other is thoroughly vituperative.
11. See Santiago Carrillo, *Eurocommunism and the State*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), and Fernando Claudin, *Eurocommunism and Socialism*, (London: New Left Books, 1977).
12. See Claus Offe, 'Theses on the State', *New German Critique* 4.
13. James O'Connor and Jürgen Habermas have, in different ways, pointed to this 'legitimation' crisis See O'Connor, *Fiscal Crisis of the State*, (London: St James Press, 1973), and Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, (London: Heinemann, 1976).

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE LEFT IN THE UNITED STATES*

Stanley Aronowitz

During the 1960s and early 1970s, majority sentiment on the American left held that the American trade union movement had become a relatively conservative interest group. It fought within the Democratic Party, and in direct bargaining with corporations and government, for an increasingly narrow vision of its interests. For example, when confronted with the demands of blacks for full equality within the unions as much as within society as a whole, labour leaders responded with a dual position. The unions remained committed in general to civil rights at the legislative level, but were primarily protective of their members' immediate interests in higher pay and job security. When these interests were in conflict with the demand for full equality, some unions abandoned all but a *legislative* commitment to civil rights.

On the question of the Vietnam war, most unions were either bellicose supporters of the Johnson policies, or remained silent, due either to the ambivalence of some leaders about the war or to unresolved debates among members. The left was aware **that** a section of the trade union leadership distinguished itself from the generally conservative policies of a section of industrial unions around the ILGWU, the building trades, and most of the old-line union leaders (all of whom grouped around George **Meany**). This more liberal wing of the labour leadership was led by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and included most of the old CIO unions except the Steelworkers, as well as some former AFL unions (notably, the Amalgamated Meatcutters, some sections of the Machinists, and the State, County, and Municipal Employees). These unions were motivated by at least **two** different impulses: their ideological antipathy to the persistence of cold-war alliances into the 1960s when reflex red-baiting seemed beyond reason, even in the midst of the Vietnam war; and the influx of large numbers of youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and women into the ranks of the industrial unions. These influences combined with power struggles against the **Meany** administration to produce a (loyal) opposition at the leadership level of the labour movement. Yet in almost no case outside the public-sector unions, where organising the unorganised took on

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the dimensions of a crusade, was the leadership of the 'progressive' unions committed to qualitatively different policies from those of the dominant wing of the AFL-CIO on issues at the level of the shop or office floor. The opposition was largely confined to different positions on national political questions and international cooperation against multinationals. For the most part, there was no effort to secure membership participation in any mass activities against the war, although, in the early 1960s, the progressives mobilised for civil rights.

The predominant left view was that following World War II, after a brief period of militancy engendered by wartime wage- and price-freeze policies, the unions had settled down to riding the new wave of American world economic and political hegemony. The trade unions had been able to win substantial concessions in union contracts until the late 1960s despite four post-war recessions. Union leaders had joined in the cold-war chorus that resulted in the expulsion of Communists, the easing out of militants, and the erosion of internal union democracy. Unions had become bureaucratic and their social vision was blurred, if not obliterated¹; they were mired in business practices, and even the elements of social-democratic ideology that infused the CIO during the 1930s were gone.

It was acknowledged that organising and strike activity had not disappeared in 1946-70. Wildcats (unauthorised strikes that were directed as much against the unions as against the company) and authorised long-term strikes such as the 116-day steel walkout in 1959 or several lengthy rubber and auto strikes continued. And there were rank-and-file movements formed, for the most part, in protest against the abrogation of democratic practices or the loss of militancy among union leaders. But for most of the American left, these signs of militancy were far outweighed by the evidence that the unions increasingly played the role of labour lieutenants of capital, in Daniel **DeLeon's** famous phrase.

With the growth of Marxism among new leftists in the late 1960s the tendency to write off the working class became untenable. To be sure, there were signs that the situation had altered somewhat in a few sectors: the most notable change was the rise in union membership among public employees in the 1960s, spearheaded by teachers' union organising and the phenomenal growth of administrative employees' unions, particularly AFSCME and the Government Employees.* Postal workers were also growing restless during the early 1970s inflationary spiral. The massive entrance of blacks and women into public employment also helped to produce the largest wave of union organising since the 1930s in the public sector.

As dramatic as the 1970 national postal strike proved to be, and the

¹This growth was as large as that of the recruitment of the CIO in the late 1930s.

almost annual strikes by teachers in many major cities, it cannot be claimed that the inspiration for a resurgence of left-wing interest in the working class was based on an understanding of the new features of class struggles or the changing composition of the working class. At a time when millions of women were entering both the labour force and the labour movement, the left discovered the working class through its reading of Marxist theory. For most, the working class was defined as those who produced surplus value, or even as only those engaged in the process of the production of material goods. And, in the classical formulation, a special interest focussed on those who produced the means of production—the miners, steel-workers, transport workers, and, because of their centrality to all these industries, the consumer-goods-producing auto workers. The argument for 'concentration' on these sectors has been that the 'basic' industrial workers hold the key to the economic mechanism. Their unions, the UAW, USW, Teamsters and the UMW, are the **most** militant, are largest in the American labour movement, can stop production in many other sectors, are the most advanced detachment of the whole class, etc.

Whether these arguments correspond to the reality of contemporary developments within the class, the economy, or the unions has been largely irrelevant to the left debates. The majority of the left parties (the CP, Maoist or neo-Maoist groups, and the Trotskyists) have adopted theoretical and practical perspectives on a rigidly doctrinal basis. The white-collar and public-employee sectors of the working class are either labelled 'secondary' in importance or are dismissed as petit bourgeois who are little more than 'allies' of the working class. (Some attention is conceded to consumer goods industries where black, Chicano and Puerto Rican workers predominate, because these are among the most 'advanced' workers despite the marginal character of the industries within which they work.)

Moreover, citing Lenin, the trade unions are regarded as 'schools for communism' despite their 'reactionary leadership' or their 'reactionary character'. For most of the socialist left, working-class organising has effectively meant work in trade **unions.**²

Neighbourhoods, community colleges, informal work groups, women's and poor people's organisations are not viewed as arenas of working-class activity, even when they are acknowledged to have some importance. Thus much of the left has reproduced, on the basis of no concrete analyses, perspectives based on the experience of European and United States communist and socialist movements of the last century, until World War II, perspectives that do not take account of the actuality of the last thirty years in the United States (as well as Europe). The analyses of the new left that did offer **insight** into the new configurations of work, politics, and culture within the working class have remained marginal to virtually all of the practical activity of the left in relation to the labour movement in the

last decade.*

In what follows, my intention is to discuss the specific problems faced by the working class in this historical period, its changes, possibilities, and limitations. I will first look at the labour movement in its overall social context as a constellation of institutions that have arisen in response to these problems. On that basis, I will examine the main features of the strategic perspectives of the major existing left organisations, before presenting my own views on the questions involved.

Two points are particularly important throughout this article. First, it is argued that there exists a many-sided crisis of the labour movement in the framework of a tendency for the political and economic power of the working class to decline. Second, while much of what follows centres on the trade unions, they are treated as a specific form of workers' organisation, which even if the main form, does not exhaust the range of organisational settings that are of vital importance for any left strategies.

PART I

THE WORKING CLASS AND ADVANCED CAPITALISM

The American working class and its unions struck a definite bargain with the corporations and the government after World War II. While not surrendering the right to strike, or to oppose management policies on the shop floor or at the level of public policy, the labour movement became part of an alliance that aimed to maintain the United States' economic and political hegemony in the capitalist world **while** opposing the class struggle on the political level at home. This bargain did not extend with uniform success to the economic level or to the workplace, despite the efforts of most of the labour leadership to promote class collaboration within the collective bargaining process. Although rank-and-file unionism declined appreciably after the war³ as most unions became more centralised, more businesslike and bureaucratic, in thousands of factories and offices, an eroded rank-and-file steward system of militant local union leadership battled the attempt of capital to dequalify 'free' labour from the workplace by means of automation, changes in work organisation, and mechanisation.

In many instances, notably the steel, auto, and mining industries, new management strategies met with stiff resistance. Workers defended their work rules made on the shop floor with line supervisors, and only yielded to new processes under severe pressure from their union leadership and the 'starve them out' policies of a resolute management willing to take long strikes in order to gain full control of the labour process. To this day, the

*There are, of course, some exceptions, but virtually none concern the traditional left parties

efficiency experts and the engineers have not succeeded fully in taking power away from the workers in many industries. The class struggle has determined the shape and the pace of technological changes as well as the forms of work organisation.⁴

Yet anticommunism and union bureaucracy have largely been successful in integrating the working class into advanced capitalism. Of course, the powerful world position gained by American capital enabled the emergence of another crucial force: the ideology and practice of consumerism. New patterns of industrial decentralisation produced the exodus of workers from the cities and resulted in their relative isolation in suburbs and smaller cities. The political, social, and class solidarity produced by the concentration of capital in a few large units that had contributed decisively to the industrial union successes of the 1930s and early forties in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, and San Francisco was now challenged by the advent of mass one-family private housing, cars, and, above all, the fragmentation of working-class life away from neighbourhoods into suburban tract housing and isolated forms of social life.

If the segmentation of plants within the same or related industries was the necessary condition for the break-up of class consciousness, the ideology of consumerism was its sufficient condition. The displacement of the conflict between labour and capital to consumption had the effect of depoliticisation within the working class in the postwar period.⁵ Workers became privatised, concerned chiefly with the house, car, and other payments, and thus came to regard high wages as the central trade-union demand. In the process, many hard-won gains at the shop floor were systematically, if slowly, surrendered. Many workers came to regard their unions as insurance societies (**Marx**) at best, and often viewed them with hostility, even if they remained loyal to the trade union principle itself.

By the late 1960s the last of the generation of union leaders who had been formed by the period of mass organising and relative radicalisation were gone from the scene: John L. Lewis retired and yielded his mantle to a corrupt business unionist, Tony Boyle, whose demise was to be closely associated with the resurgence of the movement for democratic unionism a decade later; Walter Reuther was killed in a plane crash as the 1960s decade came to a close, a tragedy symbolic of the end of an era. Reuther and Lewis were honest, but also had been engineers of the collaboration between the unions, the corporations, and the state. Lewis gave up the workers' and unions' control over working life, permitting the industry to mechanise rapidly in the 1950s in return for health and retirement benefits. Reuther and his steel union counterpart, David McDonald, never tired of insisting that the fate of the workers had to be tied to their willingness to yield to productivity in order to safeguard their living standards and job security. The class struggle was seen as anachronistic, although Reuther often

backtracked from this line during bargaining.

By the early 1970s, it became apparent to many observers that the honeymoon between labour and capital was also coming to an end. America's world economic position was severely challenged by Germany, France, and above all Japan. In addition, nationalist claims to oil resources in the Middle East placed in question the dominant position of American corporations in that area. At the same time, European capital was matching and exceeding United States production in 'durable' goods sectors such as autos, steel and electrical instruments.

The development of conglomerates and multinational corporations changed the shape if not the substance of class struggles. It was perfectly consistent for a multinational corporation to be based in the United States but in control of a major electronics manufacturer in Japan, and, at the same time, be adversely affected by the rising proportion of imports threatening its domestic operations. Companies like General Electric and General Motors maintained large operations in both home and foreign countries, often choosing to divert capital abroad in order to safeguard their corporate position. But the gradual de-industrialisation of the United States and other advanced capitalist countries in the wake of competition from both the Third World and Japan began to corrode the balance-of-payments position of the United States, and became a serious factor in the inflationary spiral beginning in the 1970s putting enormous pressure on the working class and the trade unions.

Structural Changes in the Working Class

These general tendencies have occurred in the context of a major recomposition of the working class; the two primary features of this process have been the relative decline of the industrial working class and the vast expansion of the service and administrative sectors.* At this point, only the most narrow conceptions could deny that the size and character of the industrial labour force is rapidly changing. With few exceptions, old skills have been made obsolete and the industrial labour force has been materially reduced by the movement of plants overseas and to the southern and south-western parts of this country, in combination with the rapid mechanisation of key industries.

For example, in 1947 there were more than six hundred thousand workers in the basic steel industry. Today fewer than four hundred thousand produce twice the amount of steel their counterparts made thirty years ago. Not only are older plants shutting down (Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Bethlehem's **Lackawanna** plant), but the existing mills are being modernised. Not all mills have introduced new processes, but

*The absolute number of workers in manufacturing has not declined, but the labour force has expanded from about 60 million in 1947 to more than 90 million in 1977.

.those that wish to compete with the Japanese, the French, and the Germans are forced to move in the direction of modernisation.

Similar developments in the chemical, electronics, and information industries and in auto parts manufacturing forecast sharp reductions in size of the operating work force, while many of the functions usually performed under the old technology by semi-skilled and skilled workers have been transferred to maintenance and 'inspection' processes. The inspector becomes the representative of the engineering and scientific function, which has now become the major productive force in continuous operations industries.

These developments do not signify the disappearance of the industrial worker, but do signal a change both in qualifications and in function. The worker performs either a traditional 'technical' role in the production process or is responsible for keeping the automatic machines running. The old skills are reduced, new skills are introduced. The steel mill of the future will have a majority of workers with some kind of technical training, either in community colleges or four-year postsecondary technical and liberal arts schools. And there will be fewer workers, even if they occupy the central position in the labour process. The number of persons in the industrial labour force will continue to decline because of the more rapid introduction of *processes* that eliminate whole stages of production, in contrast to mechanisation, which may only reduce the number of workers required in each stage.⁶

The trade unions view their situation with alarm, but have agreed, in the main, to heavy investment programmes. Many militant unionists and democratically-run internationals with honourable traditions have been obliged to go along with management programmes because of the shut-down or plant removal threat, which is no longer merely a bargaining tactic by the corporations, but a serious challenge to the assumptions of 'class-struggle' unionism. Class-struggle unionism requires not only an expanding economy both in production and employment, but also a stable configuration of industrial possibilities. These are precisely the conditions that are being removed by international competition and productivity changes. Multinational corporations control American production just as they control the major productive forces in every leading capitalist country of western Europe and North America, if not Japan. The widening of their net also signifies the widening of their operations and the intensification of the *international* division of labour. With the growth of the secondary (industrial) sector in the Third World and those countries like Spain that may be said to lie in the semi-periphery, both basic and consumer-goods industries in this country are threatened, even in good or boom times.*

*In a recent visit to Kaiser Steel I was struck by the limits imposed on trade unionism by the investment programme of that corporation to bring production up to the level of sophistication of Japanese competition. The union has not insisted

In many cases, workers have been forced to cooperate in management's productivity efforts, as in the machine-tool industry, where bidding on both private and public contracts is now world-wide. These developments indicate clearly that the national union, one whose vision is confined to the borders of its own country, social conditions, and political life, is simply archaic in an increasing number of cases. Although there are a few cases where unions in the United States have joined in some consultation with counterparts, notably the Metal Workers and Chemical Workers federations, the progress is slow and the membership has been dimly apprised of these developments.

The Public and Service Sectors

The productivity rise in manufacturing that has accompanied reorganisation of the work processes and mechanisation means that fewer workers can expect to become employed in the production of goods, where unions are relatively strong, working conditions relatively enforced by collective action, and the level of wages higher than in other sectors. Since 1947, the increase in the size of the public sector together with the growth of service industries has matched the growth of the labour force.* There are no significant manufacturing sectors except chemicals that account for the creation of new post-war jobs. Now almost one of six workers is employed in the public sector, and another fifth in retail, wholesale, and financial **services**. Added to the five million workers in administration, almost 50 per cent of all employees are in public and private administration and services.

Two main conclusions follow from this growth: first, the size of the labour force employed in activities of coordination approximates those

on enforcement of that provision of the contract that insists on observing '**past practices**', a euphemism for union control over the introduction of new labour processes. With half of the plant shut down due to archaic processes, the only hope for the corporation is to 'modernise'. The hope of the members to keep their jobs is to cooperate at least to the extent of permitting **attrition** rather than layoffs to become the key mechanism for reducing the work force, and to save the jobs of the remaining workers by relaxing past-practices clauses. Of course, seniority and other protections still exist in the plant and the union has fought for more stringent safety measures. Yet it cannot be denied that in the interest of saving jobs by preventing plant shut-downs and removals, some sections of the union have cooperated with management to raise productivity by relaxing certain work rules. In one instance, 'workers' participation' has been the vehicle for raising production. In the tube mill, a plant hard hit by competition, the workers saved the mill by agreeing to abolish their informal work quotas; the mill is producing more, and layoffs have been reduced to just a few workers in the past several years.

*At the end of World War II there were about 4 million public employees in the United States, not specifically related to defence industries and the armed forces. By 1975, the number had increased to 16½ million. Service employment grew similarly.

who are being coordinated. This function, centralised in the state, large financial institutions, and corporate headquarters, includes a considerable number of the women who have entered the labour force in the past thirty years. These 'unproductive'* workers administer production, distribution, marketing, and consumption activities to a degree unknown forty years ago. Thus the role of these groups is not merely a drag on capital accumulation: they are absolutely necessary for the accumulation process itself; a need is also a constraint. The attack on the public sector and administration by the large corporations (organised to some degree by the right) is an attempt to reduce the costs of coordination and also, by cutting back social services and therefore some taxes (property as well as income) to lower the cost of the reproduction of labour power. This is a solution to the crisis of accumulation that produces the economic basis for right-wing politics and ideology.

The second consequence of the growth in the unproductive sectors is the decline of trade unionism as a political as well as economic influence in the country as a whole. Most of the new, employment growth sectors are

TABLE I
TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES
1930-1974

	<i>Union membership (in millions)</i>	<i>Percentage of the labour force</i>	<i>Percentage of the non-agricultural labour force</i>
1930	3.4	6.8	11.6
1935	3.5	6.7	13.2
1940	8.7	15.5	26.9
1945	14.3	21.9	35.5
1950	14.3	22.3	31.5
1955	16.8	24.7	33.2
1960	17.0	23.6	31.4
1965	17.3	22.4	28.4
1970	19.4	22.6	27.5
1974	20.2	21.7	25.8

In 1974, 12 per cent of women in the paid labour force were in unions; 30 per cent of men in the paid labour force were in unions. By sector, 42 per cent of union members were in manufacturing, 44 per cent in private non-manufacturing, and 14 per cent in government.

SOURCES: *Directory of National Union and Employee Association*, 1975 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1977); *Handbook of Labor Statistics*, 1975, Reference Edition (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics).

*'Unproductive' in the **Marxian** sense, that is, workers who do not directly produce surplus value.

non-union, with the notable exception of public employment.* In fact the decline of union representation in the work force may be in large part ascribed to the non-union status of this sector, since manufacturing, transportation, and public employment have either maintained union strength since the end of World War II or increased union membership (see Table I above).

The Labour Movement during and after Vietnam

These changes in the structure of the working class and the international balance of forces among capitalist countries began to have serious effects on the labour movement in the mid-to-late 1960s. For some sections of the working class, it became clear that the post-war formulas would no longer assure even the maintenance of their living standards.

The wave of union militancy that broke out in the heavy industrial sectors in the late sixties was determined, in part, by the international problems confronting American capital, and partly by the contradiction between the new generation of workers not accustomed to work degradation and the increasingly repressive trade union leadership. Workers fought on three levels: in the late sixties there were many efforts to slow down or prevent plant removals in the machine, food, and auto industries, with varying success.† Second, workers organised rank-and-file movements for union democracy with the aim of electing **officers** who would be responsive to the membership and more militant. Third, workers rejected **union-**negotiated agreements in growing numbers until 1974, and used the strike weapon in preference to more conciliatory methods of dealing with grievances and contract disputes.+

But these moves have not resulted in the development of a comprehensive labour programme to deal with the chronic issues of structural unemployment (where layoffs are not due to the slow economy alone, but also to specific investment decisions that produce technological unemployment and runaway shops), health care, and labour reform. The majority of labour unions remain tied to the liberal, anticommunist wing

*One outstanding exception to this pattern is the retail food field, where the Retail Clerks union has organised a majority of chainstore employees together with the Meatcutters, who represent most butchers in retail chain stores

†One example: in the 1967 struggle to keep the Schaefer brewery in Brooklyn, workers chained themselves to machines to dramatise their refusal to accept the closing of this large plant. On the other hand, there were a **number** of uncontested closings of oil refineries in the same period.

+Some 'rank and file' movements in the 1960s were really palace revolts, such as within the Teachers, Oil and Chemical Workers, Government Workers, and State, County, and Municipal Employees. Although the new leaders were recruited from large local unions, most of them had already been full-time **officials**. It is estimated that about one-third of all proposals were turned down by members from 1967 to 1974 (see the various issues of Monthly Labor Review).

of the Democratic Party, and have refused to ally themselves with even the reform elements who captured the party in 1972 (which remain a strong but declining force). In the wake of a more or less concerted **corporate-led** assault on labour's legal rights as well as contract protections, the unions have found their alliance ineffective to win even minimum demands; Democratic leaders in Congress and the Democratic administration are now wedded to 'anti-inflation' policies such as wage and social-welfare restraint, and cutbacks. The dominant mood of the large corporations, to 'take back' many contract protections won by workers and to force concessions by the federal government in tax and import levies is reflected in the refusal of the 'moderate' wing of the party to wage a struggle for labour reform legislation that would ease somewhat the way for union organising, for a national health insurance programme needed by workers, poor people and retirees to offset the skyrocketing health costs, as well as other measures traditionally associated with liberal-state expenditures.

Part of the problem stems from the disintegration of the *active* base of the unions, which, as late as the **1950s**, could still be mobilised for legislative action. This base, developed during the upsurge of the **1930s**, left the plants and the offices in the late 1950s and 1960s or was forced out because of the conservative turn in union politics. Apart from the growth of retail and public-sector unionism, which has only partially restored the membership base of union activism, only the Teamsters, Steelworkers and Mine Workers have shown much evidence of an active rank and file, and then only in some districts where an opposition to the leadership has emerged. In many cases, this opposition has confined itself to demands for democratic unionism, concentrating on a programme of rank-and-file approval for union contract settlements, regular conventions, and militancy at the bargaining table. With a few exceptions, notably District 31 of the Steelworkers, the new impulse for democratic unionism remains *economistic*, that is, confined to issues bearing on wages, benefits and working conditions.

The Decay of the Unions

The disintegration of the active base of the unions resulted from multiple sources rather than from a single cause. For most left-wing commentators on the post-war labour movement, the decline of the unions as a significant social force in American life has been ascribed nearly completely to the severity of the political repression of the first post-war decade. This central ascription is combined with a 'misleadership' thesis according to which the 'social-democratic' (Reuther) or conservative (**Meany**) leaderships were responsible for both expelling the left-wing **rank-and-file-oriented** leadership of the movement and 'the bureaucratic evolution' from democratic, social unionism to business unionism.'

According to this view, the split in the **left/centre** coalition that had built the CIO and many AFL unions was fundamentally a cold-war phenomenon. A variant of this position is offered from the Trotskyist perspective: the **CP's** collaboration with the wartime policies of the Roosevelt administration after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 was the decisive cause of the decline of the labour movement. The Stalinist left's interpretation of the strategic requirement to form a united front against fascism produced, in this view, the gradual move of the unions away from class-struggle politics both in the shops and at the ballot **box**.⁸

In fact, the success of the collaboration between the unions and the employers and the unions' support of the cold war cannot be accounted for by a theory that looks *exclusively* to policies of this or that wing of the labour movement, or even to the repressive policies of the state. The partial eclipse of labour's rank and file was linked to changes in the character of social life after the war: the unique position of American capital in the world that permitted nearly thirty years of expansion; the break-up of traditional centres of working-class power by industrial decentralisation; the rise of consumerism as a social force; and, linked to these, the long-time tradition of American ideology that privileges the practical over the theoretical, the short-run over the long-run, the expedient over the principled. Union members were increasingly discouraged from participating in the everyday activities of their organisations. Discouraged, for example, by the increasingly large number of union agreements that reduced the power of the stewards and established company- or union-paid full-time grievors in the **plants**,⁹ discouraged by the routinisation of **union affairs** and their reduction to matters of contracts and bargaining; discouraged by the loss of the social ideology of the democratic unions that had emerged in the **1930s**, an ideology that was incipiently democratic and class-independent.

Within the context of the bureaucratisation of unions, the concept of the union as an insurance society grew dominant among the vast majority of members. Where rank-and-file committees once formed the core of union **organising** efforts, the task was now relegated to full-time officials. Where workers fought directly to protect their measure of shop-floor control over the labour process, contract unionism urged, cajoled, and sometimes forced them to change their orientation to wage demands, and to permit corporations to take command of the plant by means of new methods of work organisation and technological innovation.

The 116-day steel strike of 1959 and the 1955 auto wildcats only served to illustrate the degree to which some workers remained dedicated to their power at the workplace. But auto and steel were not typical of the working class as a whole. By the mid-1950s oil refineries and chemical plants were firmly in the hands of management and a plethora of new industries and processes were introduced that circumvented the class

traditions. Electronics and computers began to be the motive force, not only of administration, but also of production.* The great, militant traditions of the brewery workers were destroyed by plant removals and electronically-based processing; the food-processing industry became a model of the 'continuous flow' operation and literally buried another long-time socialist-minded sector of the working class. The Packinghouse Workers and the Bakery Workers unions, whose traditions had been models of class-conscious struggle, were beaten not primarily by red-baiting or bureaucracy, but by the 'march' of **labour-saving** technology.

The West Coast Longshoremen's union suffered from a gradually aging and collaborationist leadership, which has been weakened by its relative isolation from the mainstream of the labour movement. Yet, next to the mechanisation and modernisation agreement of **1960-62**, the issue of the subjective character of the leadership or left policy pales. There were no alternatives proposed to an agreement that purportedly secured the well-being of **most of** the workers in exchange for permitting the Pacific Maritime Association to load cargo by containers rather than human muscle. In the wake of the international introduction of this method, the long-time left-wing president of the union, Harry Bridges, saw no way of holding back assent. It appeared that despite the legendary solidarity of the longshore workers, the rank and file was not prepared to hold out against a degrading technology that undermined the foundation of their social **power**.† How was this possible, when on many occasions the leadership had been unable to enforce its policies among the membership?

These multiple determinations produced a new ideological and political orientation among the membership of even the most progressive of the unions. The working class lost the confidence in itself that had been acquired in the 1930s and early **1940s**, particularly in its ability to take the initiative. Organised defensively into **trade** unions whose normal method of operation was to pick up the pieces created by the logic of capital, it became more open to regressive ideologies of racism and sexism on the one hand and to **consumerism** and privatisation on the other. The

*This process is still under way and meeting with considerable resistance in the machine-tool industry, in contrast to steel, where automation has moved much more rapidly. numerical controls are still incompletely introduced in the **machine-tool** industry, in part because of skilled workers' resistance.

†The mechanisation and modernisation agreement provided guarantees of full-time work for remaining union members, a liberal pension programme, and safe working conditions. In recent years, those guarantees have been seriously undermined by the employers, especially in the San Francisco Bay **area**. Among the most important of union conditions that have suffered erosion is the tradition of almost no permanently hired workers. The union's power was reinforced by the **hiring** hall, a device that gave workers primary identification with the union. Recently, stevedore companies have been employing permanent people, an issue the last contract negotiations did little to resolve.

basis for the development of these **ideologies** was the position of American capital in the world as much as the bureaucratic development of the unions. Yet the autonomous role of the ideological shifts among the working class in causing its decline as an active class cannot be ignored. Explanations for the disintegration of the active base of the unions that rely on misleadership and political or corporate repression assume that the workers are always ready to fight, are class-conscious, and are democratic, but are only deterred from the outside. My contention is exactly the opposite. On the one hand, the American working class is heir to a variety of influences that stem from the development of American capitalism and its specific ideologies, the most important of which is that the class was constructed out of immigrant and black slave sources in the nineteenth century. The fragmentation of the American working class remains a crucial element in its historical development. On the other hand, the changes in social life after the war meant that the working class was re-divided internally by a new way of life that subordinated production to consumption at the ideological level. As work and living places were widely separated and the cultures created in the bars and social, fraternal, and political clubs were disrupted, white male working-class culture disappeared from many places. For women, the situation was even more difficult. Once a majority of working-class women shared a neighbourhood life that was closely linked to certain industries, particularly garments, textiles, and food processing. Now these industries disappeared from most neighbourhoods and moved to company towns in the South and Southwest where communities still exist to some degree, but without the links to militant working-class traditions or even Democratic liberal political traditions. Working-class women's culture has shifted decisively to the workplace, although women still form the base of church organisations and parent groups.

Industrial workers' wages and benefits have barely succeeded in keeping up with inflation in the monopoly, unionised sectors such as auto, steel, and electrical. In the unionised competitive manufacturing sectors such as clothing, shoes, and textiles, where the extent of union organisation has slipped badly over the past decade and international competition has had a material impact on employment and prices, union wage settlements have failed to keep up with inflation. In non-union sectors (now 80 per cent of the wage and salary labour force), only the threat of unionisation has succeeded in enabling workers to make wage gains. (This is particularly true of the textile industry, largely a non-union Southern employer.) For workers on **fixed** salaries or where the political climate prevents unions from winning wage increases, such as in the public sector, particularly at the local level, the decline in real wages has seriously **affected** living standards. In sum, the working class is undergoing a severe loss of economic, social, and political power. The corporate offensive that

followed the boom years of the Vietnam war is succeeding, due in no small measure to the ascendancy of right-wing ideological and political initiatives, as well as the growing gaps between union leaders, the rank and file, and the leadership of the Democratic Party.

The Labour Movement and the Democrats

In contrast to the New Deal and Fair Deal periods (1933-1968), when a majority of union members voted Democratic and an even larger majority of unions were oriented to the Democratic Party and exerted a considerable influence over its policies, if not always on its candidates, the **Nixon** presidency was accompanied by deep and perhaps permanent splits in the party. Splits have always existed, but were reserved for conventions and congressional battles. The traditional Democratic division had been between its conservative southern wing and its northern 'corporate-liberal' majority, which was dominated by a sector of the capitalist class but included a coalition of labour, black, and middle-strata forces. Organised labour always played the role of junior partner, but retained its independent legislative position. It has been the coalition's driving force on almost every piece of social legislation, including civil rights, social-welfare programmes, and labour rights.

The Democratic primaries and convention battles of 1968 witnessed virtual labour unanimity behind the candidacy of Hubert Humphrey despite his identification with the war policies of the Johnson administration. But by 1972, the **McGovern** candidacy produced the first major split in labour's ranks since John L. Lewis refused to back FDR in 1940. Most of the progressive union leaders supported the South Dakota senator, both because of his anti-war stand and because he had become the candidate of the Democratic Party. The bulk of union leaders refused to back McGovern, but could not overtly support Richard **Nixon** either. Labour's official abstention may not have changed the votes of most rank-and-file union members (who stayed with McGovern), but it withdrew moral and financial support from the Democratic challenger, and was part of the reason for the enormity of his defeat. (**McGovern's** percentage of the popular vote was only 3 per cent less than that of Humphrey in 1968. The main source of **Nixon's** wide margin was the absence of George Wallace or another major third-party candidate.)

Labour's 'neutrality' was part of a widespread election defection of the so-called Jackson wing of the party and much of the Humphrey wing as well. Following the 1972 elections, George **Meany** and a majority of his executive council began to support Senator Henry Jackson's bid for the 1976 nomination. When that campaign failed to get off the ground in the wake of the Carter blitz, the unions united solidly behind Carter, but the fissure in the party and the union ranks widened despite the 1976 Democratic victory. **McGovernites** and progressive unions stayed close to

the traditional liberal policies of the party and were joined shortly after the election by **Meany**, who began to perceive the Carter administration as a captive of big business. But the party had split in a new way: the liberal ranks went in two directions. One drew closer to the administration's strong anti-inflation programme and energy programme, both of which implied substantial cuts or stagnation in social programmes.* The other, headed now by Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, insists on the old programme, even if it cannot mount an effective attack against Carter's policies.

Today union influence in the Democratic Party is quite muted owing to the convergence of Democratic and Republican economic policies that call for both wage and social austerity. The question raised by the new developments among Democrats is whether the Democratic Party can any longer be the arena through which the traditional liberal coalition may operate.

The Corporate Offensive

To some degree, the corporate offensive and the right-wing resurgence overlap, but are not identical. The large corporations have mounted a major assault on Congress and have thwarted nearly all liberal social legislation. At the bargaining table, company policies have resisted major improvements in pension and health plans and have insisted on long strikes in many cases rather than acquiesce to union wage demands. In some instances, there have been 'take backs', such as in the steel industry where the Experimental National Agreement requires the workers to forsake the strike weapon for six years, to relax enforcement of limits on work **rules** and past-practices changes, and to tie their wages to increased productivity on a more global scale than ever. In the public sector *de facto* wage-freeze policies are in force in many localities, with the reluctant agreement of the unions. While some uniformed service employees (police, fire, and sanitation) have successfully broken away from wage restraints, and at least 15 per cent of the country's teachers went on strike to win their demands for higher wages, thousands of administrative employees were laid off or had their wages frozen, gutting their pension and health programmes to save jobs in many instances.

The attack against the public sector is determined by a number of factors: first, small and medium-sized employers in the private sector have insisted on tax breaks as a price to stay in town or in the United States while many others have escaped to regions at home and abroad offering lower wages and other concessions. Second, the revenue-sharing programme

*Glenn Watt, president of the Communications Workers, joined Carter's anti-inflation crusade, prefiguring his probable emergence as a leader of labour's pro-Carter forces in the 1980 primaries

introduced during the **Nixon** years requires local communities to match federal funds on a **dollar-for-dollar** basis, with few exceptions. With shrinking revenue bases, federal spending for subsidies to local areas in the field of social welfare has declined in real terms, even if dollar amounts remain the same. Third, many working people and middle-strata employees have been attracted to the tax revolt led by the rentier class of savings and loan associations, real estate boards, and landowners who have supported, financially and politically, the programme of the right wing to cut or eliminate property taxes. (Proposition 13 attacked this regressive form of taxation, but in such a way as to benefit property owners.)

The decline of real wages and the urgent need experienced by many workers to find some relief has been crucial. This is not to **minimise** the extent to which racist ideology has influenced the success of right-wing efforts, or the role that sexist and sexually-regressive ideologies play in the ability of rightist appeals to find a mass base. I would only argue that the economic malaise constitutes the detonator for bringing these fears and prejudices to the surface. Since the left and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and the trade unions have conducted only ritual education on the ideological level and have paid little attention to problems of social and private consumption, the economic crisis was displaced to the social level where a vacuum existed; and the response has been a mass turn to the right.

One of the distinctive features of the present period is the split between the organised workers and the middle strata, whose alliance formed the basis of traditional liberal Democratic politics and public support for labour's rights. Labour has not relinquished its own liberal position, even if there have been some rank-and-file breakaways to the right. It is the middle strata that have become politically unstable in proportion as labour has failed to make its own power effective politically and ideologically. Right now, labour has found itself isolated, both to its left and to its right, and there are few signs of efforts to rebuild or create alliances.* In the main,

*Some exceptions can be noted. The best examples of a labour-middle strata alliance have been the boycott campaigns of the United Farmworkers and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers in recent years and the limited success of the environmental-utility coalitions in attracting some labour support, particularly among progressive unions outside the construction industry. In the first instances, unions found that their weakness at the picket line or their weak legal position demanded another approach to winning union recognition, one that required 'public' backing. The heartfelt support rendered by young people and professionals to farm workers and textile workers attests to the large reservoirs of sentiment for workers' struggles that exist among some sectors of the middle strata. In the latter case, the issue groups, composed largely of members of the middle strata, approached unions for support, sometimes urged by socialist members of the coalitions. In many localities these two types of coalition efforts have helped bring **liberals**, socialists, and trade unionists closer together and paved the way for joint work on other issues. But these examples are still sporadic, and do not signal a more broadly based rapprochement between labour and its erstwhile allies.

unions still operate at the top with the leaders of the Democratic Party rather than at its mass base. Labour has no independent political role, and seems incapable of conceptualising, much less implementing, an independent line around its own demands.

PART II

LABOUR AND THE LEFT

At present, the largest left groups in the trade unions are the Communist Party, Democratic Socialist Organising Committee, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the International Socialists (IS), and the two 'new left' Marxist-Leninist groupings, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and the Communist Party (**M-L**) (formerly the October League). A group with some local influence is the Communist Labour Party. The New American Movement's influence is confined to **public-sector** unions, particularly in health and education.

The following short sketches of the origin and development of these groups will necessarily be incomplete. To those readers familiar with these groups, my apologies for too simple characterisations. In discussing these groups and their roles in the labour movement, two points should be kept in mind. First, the influence of even the largest among them is very small within the labour movement as a whole, and is generally concentrated within a few sectors and geographical areas. Second, there are many individuals active in various parts of the labour movement who share the general perspective of one or another of these groups, but are not organisationally affiliated.

The *Left* Groups

The Communist Party is still the largest organisation with a stated socialist perspective. Founded in **1919** out of the left wing of the Socialist Party, it has always had some fairly substantial working-class roots, particularly among immigrant minorities, blacks and Chicanos, and American-born white workers in some basic industries such as steel, electrical, and mining.¹⁰ It reached its membership peak in **1937-47** at the time when the Party's participation in labour and popular struggles was extensive. Its size has been drastically reduced since then by ideological anticommunism among the workers, state repression, and its own policy of unyielding support for the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Nevertheless, its working-class membership is relatively high, at least in comparison with other groups. It still retains influence in widely scattered sectors of industry. Its policies have ranged from warm support of progressive union leaders to oppositional union politics.

The criterion of class struggle or democratic unionism does not seem to play a dominant role in its labour policy; more important is its conception

of overall issues. For example, the Party is now militantly anti-Carter and has taken a left turn because of Carter's apparent anti-Sovietism. On other occasions it has restrained its dedication to class-struggle unionism when it believes that overreaching issues preclude such leftism. The CP, of all left groups, has the most flexible policies, depending upon conditions of time and place, within a framework of general defence of the Soviet Union, and uniting with progressive forces in the Democratic Party and the labour movement. The Party has spoken much of its independent role, but became reluctant to use it after the **1940s**, partly because of the fear of repression, and partly because of the limits imposed by its small size.

The SWP was formed in 1938 out of defeated or expelled members of the CP, and retains many of the Leninist principles of party organisation and political orientation. Its composition historically resembled that of the CP, and it played a similar role in the organisation of the industrial unions in the **1930s**, but on a smaller scale. Its membership is now far more composed by younger people from the middle strata formed in the new left, because it was decimated in the 1950s both by government attacks and by numerous internal splits. Once a respectable force in the labour movement's left wing, with a fairly consistent commitment to rank-and-file democracy and labour militancy, the **SWP** is now rebuilding its base in the unions by means of 'colonising', *i.e.*, sending people into 'key' industries. This represents a real switch from the 1960s concentration on students and other members of the middle strata.

The IS made its 'turn to the working class' earlier than the SWP. The historical antecedents of the group date from an SWP split in 1940 which gave birth to the Workers' Party. The Independent Socialist League, the **WP's** successor, played an active role in the post-World War II struggle to rid the unions of Communist influence, and has had its own splits: to the left, a recent series of 'pure' Trotskyist tendencies have accused the organisation of a flagging commitment to class struggle; and to the right, in the **1950s**, many, including its founder, decided that Marxist-Leninist socialist politics had to give way to democratic socialism and efforts to influence the left wing of the Democratic Party and the trade unions. (Michael **Harrington** joined this split and has since helped to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee.) The present-day IS is a small organisation with one redeeming activity: its single-handed initiative in building a mass organisation of rank-and-file teamsters, and its active support of the rank-and-file movements in communications, auto, and other industries where it has had some members

The RCP and Communist Party (**M-L**) are both, in various ways, products of the love affair of sections of the new **left** with the Chinese Revolution in the late 1960s. They both have entered the labour field with implacable anti-leadership perspectives. Far more energetic than some of the other organisations, they suffer from no historical legacy or perspectives

and have succeeded only in a few places in doing sustained trade union work.

The Communist Labour Party grew out of black and Chicano struggles in Detroit and other places, where some of its leading figures came directly out of the shops and had engaged in mass rank-and-file national presence.

The Rank-and-File Perspective and its Limits

Today, there are two lines pursued by left-wing organisations and militants. The first, dominant among Maoist and Trotskyist groups and some sections of the independent left, has been to enter the unions (primarily in the basic industrial sectors) with the strategic goal of transforming them into democratic, rank-and-file-controlled institutions capable of leading a 'class struggle' approach to collective bargaining. This objective is often made ancillary to the long-range goal of making unions 'schools for communism', or transforming the trade unions into revolutionary or at least socialist-minded organisations. In practice, this position has led those of the left who adopt it to work towards the organisation of rank-and-file caucuses that contend for leadership against the entrenched bureaucracy. In some cases, these caucuses are little more than 'fronts' for the particular left vanguard that creates them, since the real objective is not to change the unions, but to recruit among the 'advanced workers' in the plant or office for the socialist group. In others, work by leftists in the rank-and-file movement is genuinely oriented towards electoral struggle within the union. Many groups work together within a caucus provided its aims are restricted to union democracy and militant unionism (not always the same thing).

The 'sectarian' side of this **position** consists in using the caucus form for narrowly organisational ends. Even though some workers are temporarily attracted to the group, believing its criticism of the union leadership and democratic aspirations are genuine, many quickly fall away when they learn that the left group is interested mainly in organisational aggrandisement. One can often detect the signs of this approach in the propaganda of the caucus, when it is strident and doctrinaire and lacks an effort to understand the history of the plant, the historical role of the union and left groups (if any) within it, and the specific grievances of the workers. The tendency of the left sectarians is to make wanton attacks on the manifestations of collaboration and bureaucracy without shedding light on it theoretically or politically.

Even when left intervention is motivated by a serious commitment to provide the means by which democracy may be restored to the unions, much rank-and-file activity suffers from other problems, principally the lack of understanding of workers' consciousness and of the role of unions both at the shop level and in society as a whole. A major tendency in left-wing union policy is to make the assumption that the workers, or at least a large portion of them, are 'instinctively' revolutionary, or at least radical,

and that they are aching to be liberated from their bad leaders. On the basis of this assessment, strategy and tactics in trade union and factory work aim *exclusively* toward the formation of oppositional rank-and-file caucuses whose object is to win union leadership.

Rank-and-File Movements

Forming rank-and-file movements is one proper focus for left strategy in the workplace. But whether these movements enter the unions in order to overturn the leaders depends on the specific situation. A workers' organisation is not simply a union caucus. At certain times, an independent workers' organisation such as TDU or Miners for Democracy may enter the fight for union leadership on a programme of class-struggle unionism and union democracy. But its reason for being cannot be confined to these objectives. Workers' organisations have other functions: to educate on problems of **shop-floor** control; to fight the tendency of technology to pull workers apart by isolating them spatially, by creating hierarchies in job classifications, and by reducing, if not destroying, skills; to provide social and cultural life for their members; to undertake political education on general issues of local and national concern as well as on those that immediately affect people as workers; and to remain an independent force in the workplace that is friendly to the union. Such organisations may elect members to union leadership but do not confuse themselves with the union apparatus. *

To many accustomed to considering the role of the left in the working class to be primarily, if not exclusively, that of building rank-and-file movements that can transform the unions into democratic organisations that express workers' class as well as **sectoral** demands, this position may appear confusing. First, let me say that I believe that building rank-and-file opposition to an existing leadership is not a question of principle. The formation of such a movement presupposes at least two conditions: a militant union history that is perceived by the membership as highly desirable, combined with a widely-held belief that the existing leadership has violated these traditions; and a core of militants with sufficient sophistication to withstand the co-optation and the repressive moves of that leadership. (Co-optation is likely because, in a union with democratic traditions, the leaders are usually fairly able, having come up from the rough-and-tumble of the mass meeting, the shop floor, and the picket line.)

'During the first half of this century, this form of **organisation** was important among ethnic minorities. The Nationality Federations associated with the left wing of the Socialist Party and later the Communist Party were workers' clubs that supported militant unionism without being a part of the union itself. The nationality organisations often constituted the core of CIO organising committees in steel, electrical, and auto campaigns in the 1930s, especially in cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo.

Unless the union has retained many of the forms of democratic process, even if bureaucratic procedures derived from contract unionism have subverted their content, neither the legal nor the political basis is likely to exist for anything more than the fight to create these forms. Thus, the steelworkers' and the teamsters' movements for democratic unionism may be considered a necessary step, since in neither case does the rank and file possess the legal power to decide on the disposition of the agreement between union and management. The fight for democratic unionism *concentrates* the ideological and the political splits between the membership and the leaders, but it is a *displaced* demand from class issues. It becomes necessary because these unions are not avenues for broad cultural and political development of the membership. At the same time, because the members of these unions have not acquired the skills of political combat and ideological disputation, the rank-and-file movement finds itself with no leadership depth. After the few key people at the top, and some in the locals, it cannot supply its own cadre needs. This requirement for leadership within the movement raises the question of whether the rank-and-file opposition can hope to succeed without a broad programme of political education and cultural development. That is, the extension of the opposition to the cultural and political realms is not external to its democratic demands, but most likely a condition of their victory.

In many unions bureaucracy has so eroded the forms of membership participation that trying to form a rank-and-file movement is really more light-headed than developing a programme and institutions that train workers to be in a position to run their unions. Thus, the 'simple' demand for rank-and-file-run shop committees, or for some kind of educational programme for stewards, may be a necessary precondition for even raising the question of oppositional politics.

A different type of situation is presented by unions in which traditions of democratic participation are more or less intact. The auto workers' union has deteriorated in the past twenty years in this respect, but it is far better than the Teamsters, for example. Here, the question of 'advanced' organisational and ideological forms may be raised both within the rank-and-file movement and in the union as a whole. In auto, electrical, and West Coast longshore unions, broad issues of policy (the relation of the union to the split in the Democratic Party, the relation of the union to the multinational corporations that run the industry, etc.) can be raised. Since forms exist to open these debates, whether the left can connect immediate issues (of shop-floor control, health and safety, etc.) to broader questions may depend on its ability to overcome its own economism.

The unevenness of the development of the working class and its unions demands a multi-layered approach to the intervention of socialists within

the factories and offices. In one place the task is to help form a trade-union-conscious membership and a group of militants able to take care of the business of the union rather than relying on full-time leadership. In another place, the condition for building a viable union is connected to electing a new leadership. In a third place, the problem is that the rank and file has lost interest in its union, even though the tradition exists and the forms for democratic control are available. So to raise the slogan of the rank-and-file caucus around the demand for democratic unionism is not appropriate in every instance. In some cases, for example, building a strong stewards' council within the existing framework is far more important and practical than the abstract demand to throw the rascals out.

What I am opposing is the prevalent tendency of radicals to ignore the key problem: in most cases, there is no rank-and-file base in the unions possessing the ideological outlook and the political skills to contest for political power either in the workplace or in the unions. The development of that group of activists takes place as a result both of the experience of militant opposition to the company and the union leaders (if they are collaborating with the company to defuse the rank-and-file thrust) and of the cultural development of the membership so that it has a grasp of how to fight around its own problems and take control of its own organisations. Sometimes that grasp is best gained within the existing union framework. At other times, workers' organisations oriented toward the union but independent of it are a better vehicle for such development.

Many left groups consider that their organisations are the appropriate forms through which political, educational, and cultural development of 'advanced' workers best occur. (Advanced workers, in the jargon, are defined as those who have class rather than trade-union consciousness, and are interested in becoming socialists or at least learning more about the socialist movement and its programme.) But in the recent period few left organisations have performed the function of cultural development among workers. They have, in the main, constituted themselves as **organisers** of rank-and-file movements, contenting themselves with day-to-day involvement in union struggles on the shop floor or in locals.

Maoist and Trotskyist groups share a total antipathy to elements within the union officialdom who call themselves socialist or progressives. While they correctly insist that the existence of a rank-and-file caucus or independent workers' group is necessary within unions that have espoused 'social' rather than business unionism (even where, as in the case of the **UMW**, the democratic forces have succeeded in capturing leadership), their policies regarding coalition work remain inflexibly sectarian. In effect, they have adopted the old slogan of 'united front from below' without regard to specific circumstances. The idea of working with sections of the leadership around legislative issues or trade union demands, finds most in the 'new communist movement' and some in the Trotskyist tradition