

POST-WAR CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CRISIS OF LEFT POLITICS

George Ross and Jane Jenson

The mass labour movement is in disarray throughout the advanced capitalist world. Its utopias, generations-old visions of a better social future, have ceased to mobilise. Its organisations—unions and parties—are in retreat. Its social base is more and more fragmented. Its erstwhile allies look in new directions. Its politics range from dogged defensiveness of past victories against powerful new capitalist opponents to 'reformulated' positions which, in fact, promise to do much of what these opponents desire. What has happened?

The argument presented in this essay is meant to provide a very general answer to this question based on an analysis of the development of class conflict in recent times. In the period immediately following World War II a new class compromise was reached in capitalist societies, one which reconciled many of the pre-war goals of social democracy, broadly construed, with capital's determined pursuit of a new accumulation strategy. During the extraordinarily long period of post-war economic growth the dynamics of this compromise mutually modified the character and behaviour of capital, labour and the state. Part I shows how class structures and the cutting edge of class conflict were reshaped in important ways. When economic and social crisis finally broke the back of the post-war boom, it did its work not on any abstract situation of class division, but on these specific structures and relations of class conflict. What came apart in crisis for the labour movement were the very things which had been created in the post-war compromise, as Part II discusses. The results of this have been devastating. To the degree to which the post-war boom exhausted social democracy's stock of programmes the present crisis of the post-war compromise has left the mass labour movement bereft of creative perspectives. Part III reviews the political options which exist in this unprecedented situation.

I. CLASS CONFLICT REMODELLED: THE POST-WAR BOOM

Out of the turbulence of the Great Depression, World War II and the popular (and generally social democratic) political victories which immediately followed it, came a substantial reconstruction of capitalism. Along with this reconstruction came one of the longest continuous

moments of growth which capitalism has known. Fordist mass production by large corporations finally triumphed after its promising debut had been cut short by depression. Disposing of the product of such corporate juggernauts necessitated deepening domestic markets to make relatively expensive goods widely available to new sectors of the population. Working this new system also demanded new institutions, a new politics, and major changes in the role of the state. If class conflict was never abolished in all this, it was nonetheless substantially reshaped. Indeed, the post-war period in many advanced capitalist societies looked like the long-delayed denouement of a script which the social democratic Second International had begun to write in the later 19th century. At the centre of this enactment was a complex new workplace compromise between big capital and much of organised labour, in which certain more vicious exploitative practices gave way to rising wages and greater work security, in exchange for labour cooperation to enhance productivity.

The focus of working-class concerns was altered by this new deal and by its consequences in the realm of consumption. In many ways the power of the organised working class—manifested in unions and political parties—was greatly strengthened. In turn, such strength was essential to promote the Keynesian and welfare state politics needed to provide the regulatory backbone to the post-war order. Workers' organisational and political strength was in itself not enough to make this politics happen, however. As always these organisations needed allies in their political quest. These allies were found, at least temporarily, in the new middle strata whose size and influence exploded in the post-war period in response to the need for new kinds of work in the circulation and administrative spheres of both the private and public sectors.

Post-war reconstruction was as much a new class compromise as anything else. Workers won substantial industrial and political power which affected the nature of working-class consciousness and capacities for mobilisation. At the same time, oligopolistic and monopolistic capital, with new space derived from post-war workplace and political deals, was able to pursue an immensely profitable Fordist-consumerist accumulation strategy. The state acquired new importance as the overseer of different aspects of this huge social deal. The entire compromise was remarkably successful while it lasted.

The complex system of class conflict and conciliation upon which the post-war compromise was built was not without its own specific contradictions, however. If the specific focus of workplace class conflict was altered in many ways, as we will see, such conflict never disappeared. The fragmentation of the working class which came out of the new compromise created new areas of unpredictability. The capacity of the state to perform necessary regulatory functions was premised on the maintenance of a class alliance between workers and middle strata which, in specific circum-

stances, might unravel or be politically defeated. The new deal depended upon containing such contradictions, yet generating such containment was never easy. What follows will explore the problems which did emerge.

Resettling the workers

Arguably the key element in the post-war remodelling of conflict between capital and labour was a new compromise in the workplace. The consolidation of new industrial relations systems almost everywhere—a major working-class, and particularly trade-union, victory—was the core of this new deal. Recognition of union legitimacy, the generalisation of seniority and work security rights for workers, the development of rules and procedures limiting certain of the prerogatives of capital on the shopfloor and the negotiation of fringe benefits were all goals for which workers and their unions had struggled for decades. The core of this compromise was, of course, a trade-off between capital and organised labour in which workers received predictably rising wages while allowing capital a relatively free hand to invest in increased productivity.

The coming of new industrial relations systems changed the shape of the workplace class struggle. The package of seniority, work security, and fringe benefits tended to tie workers to specific places of work. Where victories on such rights correlated with longevity in the firm they indirectly made the union more the 'property' of older workers. The collective bargaining of ever more complex contracts, the requirement of rank-and-file discipline to honour contracts once negotiated and for periodic 'punctual' strikes when needed, the place of expertise in interpreting and enforcing complex rules as well as to staff and administer protective institutions such as grievance procedures, taken together with the underlying effects of **Fordism** on the structure of work, crystallised unions as strongly formalised organisations. Over time grass-roots activism and spontaneous participation tended to lose their place and appeal. In all of this ordinary workers learned to perceive unions less as collectives for mutual struggle than as distinct and separate agencies which acted *for* them, to be sure, but more often than not in *their place*.

These workplace arrangements had important consequences for the creation of working-class consciousness and identity. By providing tickets of access to mass consumerism for many workers it altered their life situations dramatically. This, in turn, had important consequences for the balance between workers' private and point-of-production lives. One can easily discard facile 'ernbourgeoisement' theses, of course; essential class boundaries did persist. Nevertheless for major parts of the working class aspects of life did change and one result was a greater tendency for individual workers to 'instrumentalise' their work—to deemphasise its centrality and importance for their personal identity and instead to affirm themselves in private and family spheres. These were, of course, the chosen

merchandising targets of the vanguard industries of the boom—housing, household appliances, the automobile, and, later, leisure. Although such changes could never abolish conflict in work, they did contribute to changing its cutting edge. Because higher incomes were the major avenue to the acquisition of the new goods which shaped private lives, the wage issue assumed a burning importance for workers. However wage demands might be separated from the daily social world of work, which could be 'instrumentalised' rather than collectivised.

Capital's post-war goal of 'deepening the domestic market'—plus, it must be added, demography—contributed to other changes in workers' lives and consciousness. Social geography itself changed with **suburbanisation**, resettlement following new growth centres and the like. Work culture and neighbourhood culture were therefore less and less likely to overlap. This, plus the effects of the electronic media and extended schooling clearly attenuated earlier practices of ghettoised working-class culture. In the household itself contradictions developed for some workers. Consumerism stimulated family-centredness and reinforced traditional definitions of the domestic division of labour. Yet, on the other hand, the boom rapidly drew more and more women into the wage labour force in ways which granted wives greater potential for economic independence.

The workers whose situation we have just described—male, unionised, deeply implicated in consumerism—were only part of the working class. As analyses of segmented labour markets have made abundantly clear, the post-war compromise decomposed and recomposed the working class into different major fractions, a process with its own significance for class identity and consciousness. Alongside the workers we have just discussed were others, a clustering of 'minorities'—women, recent immigrants, racially different groups, 'guestworkers' and the like. Often these 'minorities' were located in different labour markets and were much less protected in the workplace (low job security, rapid turnover, fewer rights), less well paid and more marginal to consumerism, less implicated in the trade off of rights and higher wages for productivity and less directly the target of capital's strategy to 'deepen the domestic market'. Although the size and conditions of this bloc of workers varied greatly from place to place here one found relative and absolute poverty and disproportionate resort to new 'safety net' social programmes.

Alongside such marginal workers were large numbers of service-sector operatives in new or greatly expanded sectors of clerical work, tourism (food, travel, lodging) and merchandising. Here one found numbers of feminised occupations in which, because of this fact and because unions found it persistently difficult to organise in such areas, working conditions, job security and wage levels were inferior to those in the blue-collar unionised sphere. The class conflict implications of such class fragmentation depended upon its specific national structures, of course. In general,

however, one found working classes divided between those to whom socialists and unionists referred to rather hastily as 'the workers', full participants in the post-war compromise, and those who fell outside it in one or another way. In some places this latter group grew large enough to present a challenge to labour's right to speak on behalf of 'all the workers'.

For the 'fully included' segments of the working class the combined effects of the new workplace deal and changing relationships between workers' private and point-of-production lives were impressive while the boom lasted. Nevertheless, the package had its contradictions. One essential dimension of the industrial relations deal, for example, was the **tradeoff** by monopoly capital of collective bargaining, relative job security and predictably rising wages for a free hand in making productivity-enhancing investment. Yet the rush to increased productivity which ensued created one of the more important arenas of workplace class conflict in the post-war period. **Fordism** produced disagreeable work situations in the best of circumstances. Investment to enhance productivity tended over time to turn the merely disagreeable into the infernal. However conservatising the consequences of collective bargaining and higher wages, resistance to such 'infernalisation' occasionally broke through.

The 'high wage' part of the deal was contradictory in different ways. In the post-war order there was no natural equilibrium between rising wages and rising productivity. In contrast, there were limits to the amount of productivity increase possible in any period. Given inequality and the nature of consumer capitalism itself, the more money one could procure, the more access one could gain to what seemed, to most people, to be an infinitely expandable cornucopia of goods, services and lifestyle options. Thus workers were always likely to 'want more' than they could be 'reasonably' granted by capital. But rapidly rising wages would threaten profitability, other things being equal. Here, despite the fact that union organisations were often successfully enlisted as intermediaries to explain what was 'reasonable' to the rank and file, problematic outcomes were always possible. Sometimes unions and their members lined up against capital and there were strikes. When capital 'colluded' with unions and workers to pass on the cost of wage increases to consumers, inflationary trends already built into the system were enhanced. In either case some degree of instability followed.

Struggles around productivity questions and for higher wages were built into the post-war system. Nevertheless, even if these struggles were disruptive to capital in serious ways, they were usually cut off from any radical or system-transforming thrust. Work and private lives were more dissociated than they had been earlier and parts of personal identity *were* sought in consumerism. Changing workplace-private life boundaries combined with the reconstruction of industrial relations *within* the workplace meant that central working-class organisations such as unions, and

parties in the electoral sphere, became less participatory and more distant, bodies which did things *for* workers rather more than being animated by workers. More generally, class identification became more abstract and less immediate.

Here there was huge irony. The contours of the post-war compromise represented precisely one kind of class compromise towards which Social Democracy had been pointing since the late 19th century. Yet one of its main effects was that workers became much less 'encapsulated' and 'encapsulatable' by the 'counter-society' of organisations which had been at the base of social democratic and other Left strategic assumptions. In general, then, workplace class conflict was contained both by tradeoffs made possible by growth and by the bureaucratisation, distanciation and de-radicalisation of the most salient working-class organisations. As against this, however, the conflict behaviour of groups only partially included in the post-war compromise was quite unpredictable.

Uncertain new actors: The new middle strata

The politics of the labour movement has almost always depended upon alliances with other classes and class fractions for **success** because workers and their organisations have never had enough weight alone to make deals in the workplace stick or to influence political regulation decisively. Post-war changes were also important for the possibility of alliance politics. Fordist-based accumulation developed in ways which presented workers with new potential allies. The basic facts are, quite clear. The post-war boom brought a tremendous explosion of new intermediary social **strata**—salaried, educationally-credentialised non-manual workers. The bureaucratized large corporation advanced the decomposition-recomposition of capital's tasks into a multiplicity of hierarchically-organised managerial, administrative and technical occupations. In the circulation-finance (banking, insurance, advertising, marketing) areas, and in state bureaucracies there was much demand for the same kind of work. Finally the expanded provision of public and quasi-public goods and services—healthcare, education, social work and the like—created large numbers of analogous jobs.

What positions were new middle strata likely to take in the reformulated but still very real post-war class struggle between capital and labour, particularly in its political manifestations? To avoid the interminable disputes on this question, let us here be arbitrary. First of all one can draw a horizontal line across the internal stratification hierarchy of private and public-sector middle strata to exclude obviously bourgeois elements. Above this line there was clearly an expansion of non-proprietary fractions of the ruling class, of considerable interest to sociologists but unlikely **candidates** for alliance with workers. Then one can draw a vertical line between private and public-sector groups. Those of the private sector

were likely to side with capital against labour because, for the most part, they were involved in the managerial incentive structures which prevailed within large corporations, even if there were exceptions to this among certain technical and scientific workers. Those groups which remained after these lines were drawn, who were neither near-bourgeois nor, because of their private-sector situation, prone to seeing things in 'corporate' ways, were potential allies for the working class.

Potential did not mean certain, of course. Such middle strata had very different outlooks and goals from those of workers. Those in public-sector occupations were often educationally credentialised, hence placing **their** incumbents on the 'other side' of the massive cultural divide created by the enhanced social importance of post-secondary education in the post-war period. Moreover, work in such areas was more a 'career' than a 'job', a biographical assumption which tended to individualise social outlook and, moreover, one which was reinforced by specialised and **pseudo**-specialised professionalism. On the other hand, given certain post-war economic conditions, such groups had reasons to entertain at least electoral alliances with workers. They benefitted directly from the growing Keynesian welfare state which working-class struggle had largely created and whose expansion workers' votes fostered. Moreover, to the degree to which they unionised to ensure their own **pie** of the expanding state-provided pie, they moved closer, at least organisationally, to the unionised part of the working class. A 'progressive' sociopolitical coalition was therefore conceivable between such groups and workers around the promotion of Keynesian methods to stimulate growth and **full** employment and on the desirability of redistribution of at least a part of the surplus generated by such growth into expanded social services.

Politics and the State

The state provided the economic and social glue which kept the post-war compromise on track. Keynesian macroeconomic manipulations (demand stimulation and contraction through fiscal and monetary policies) and the use of large state expenditures (which also provided leverage for sectorally directed industrial policies) tinkered with the general market framework within which the huge private 'locomotives' functioned. The new Keynesian state was thereby empowered to protect private capital from the more dangerous implications of its own activity. It also generated and re-distributed resources through taxation to provide a broad range of public services. Here there were not only 'welfare state' programmes strictly speaking, like healthcare, retirement pensions, disability payments, income supplements and 'safety net' provisions for those unable to work, all programmes in which the public sphere assumed responsibility for smoothing over the roughest edges of a capitalist market civilisation. There were also a range of 'reproductive' state activities which provided direct help for

capitalist enterprises—education, research and development subsidies, information services and the like.

No divine ordination stood behind the post-war compromise creating symmetry between the needs of private capital and the new role of the state. In fact, the successful harmonisation of post-war capitalism through the state was the product of *politics*, or, to be more precise, of electoral class conflict which possessed its own stock of contradictions. For the post-war compromise to stick more or less intact there had to be a reasonably solid 'progressive' social and political alliance between labour and middle strata. To the degree to which an opposing 'conservative' **alliance**—capital, the traditional petite bourgeoisie and whatever middle strata and working-class recruits could be drawn into the electoral fold—was too strong, retreat from aspects of the post-war political deal was likely. There were problems as well should the 'progressive' alliance become *too* strong, relative to capital—an unlikely but conceivable situation, at least at some moments. Persistent Left political strength made full employment pledges operational, for example, and this, in turn, was likely to cut into profitability and enhance inflationary trends, 'taxing' different groups in ways which had domestic political and international economic consequences. In either case counter-cyclical state policies were indicated, but such policies, because they enjoined sacrifice rather than creating benefit, were difficult to achieve and politically costly. It was no accident, then, that in social democratic settings with very strong unions and sturdy 'progressive' political alliances between workers and middle strata **'neo-corporatist'** arrangements were struck. Here tradeoffs between continuing union power and wage restraint—the conscious assumption by organised labour of the necessity for maintaining equilibria which would ensure capitalist profitability—were institutionalised. Needless to say, however, such arrangements were difficult to sustain over time.

There were other tendencies built into the post-war setting which also undercut the political strength of the 'progressive' political alliance upon which the Keynesian welfare state depended. The politics which emerged everywhere after 1945 was essentially a complex of large public bureaucratic organisations which, in day-to-day ways, dealt principally with similar large private bureaucratic organisations like corporations and unions. In all this the distance between individual citizens and public decisions expanded greatly. Politics became an arena in which public officials, politicians or non-public bureaucrats perhaps acted on one's behalf, but usually at several degrees removed from one's own involvement. 'Representation' tended to become a form of delegation to large bureaucratic organisations. In all this grass roots politics became simple electoralism with very little mobilisation, activism and participation.

Thus if the post-war compromise involved democratic advances against capital based on hard-fought and long working-class struggles, these

advances remained profoundly contradictory. The representation of workers even by their own organisations easily became substitution for them. And social democratic 'substitutionism'—which, it must be said, had been immanent in social democratic politics for generations before 1945—had pitfalls. Passivity, quiescence and demobilisation of 'the base' were generally sought-after goals, allowing those who 'knew better' or were 'more responsible' to deal unhindered with one another. Yet the decline of mobilisation placed the labour movement at a distinct disadvantage in dealings with capital and the state. Capital, with the omnipresent 'mobilisational' logic of the accumulation process on its side, was bound to gain the upper hand.

The basic political equilibria of most post-war compromises were therefore much more precarious than many observers realised at the time. The balance between 'progressive' and 'conservative' political coalitions, as well as the actual substance of Keynesian welfare state policies, all revolved around continued stable growth. Growth transformed a potentially zero-sum class game into a situation in which class compromises could be mutually advantageous to most major actors. Growth could prod the kind of expanding productivity which would allow capital to pursue a high wage strategy in the workplace. Growth also allowed taxation policies which could facilitate some redistribution of surplus to public services in ways which ensured the positions of new middle strata. Without growth, however, the whole edifice might come crashing down.

II. CHANGING CLASS CONFLICT AND THE COMING OF CRISIS

All social things—good and bad—come to an end. The chronological beginning of the end of the post-war compromise is difficult to situate precisely, since much depends upon the theoretical eye of the beholder. At some point in recent years—the 1970s—the Fordist **workplace-consumption** deal began to unravel under pressure from capital's modified accumulation strategy. At about the same moment the Keynesian welfare state politics which had facilitated the post-war compromise ceased being effective. Contemporaneous was a progressive breakdown in the alliance between the working class and new middle strata which had been the prerequisite for such politics. Underlying all of this were processes of decomposition in the working class itself and altered perspectives among new middle strata. Not only did the long period of post-war economic growth conclude, then, but the complex and delicate social setting which had fostered it began to disappear.

Precocious signs of unravelling

Recent obsession with the 'economic crisis' as the root cause of all problems is misleading. In fact it was in the prosperous 1960s, a decade

during which Keynesianism swept away alternative perspectives and Professor Galbraith's pronouncement that 'the economic problem has been solved' became conventional wisdom, that the contradictions in the post-war class compromise first began to intensify. In an atmosphere of exceptionally high growth almost everywhere, to which American international economic and military actions added great strains, the 'high wage' concession of monopoly capital revealed its contradictory side. In **heated-up**, close-to-capacity economies the wage demands of unions, fuelled by strong rank-and-file militancy, were hard to resist. With other costs rising as well, capital began to price goods in anticipation of higher wage bills. Not surprisingly, unions and workers responded in kind. With everyone anticipating the behaviour of everyone else in this way, inflation rates began to climb. Simultaneously, the intensity of Fordist **productivity-enhancing** labour processes grew as well, reaching intolerable levels of psychic and physical tension for workers involved. Strikes and other forms of working-class militancy increased almost everywhere.

During roughly the same period, and sometimes (as in May–June 1968 in France) virtually simultaneously, parts of the new middle strata also exploded in protest. Here one saw a confusing mixture of phenomena, of which the so-called 'new social movements' were the most spectacular. 'New social movements', whose content and objects varied greatly were most often sparked by younger members of new middle strata. These strata were 'single issue' oriented (belligerently insouciant about alliances with others, in fact), and often highly moralistic in their appeals. Activists also seemed as much or more concerned with their personal identities as with collective goals, in particular with a strident cultural liberationism against restrictive **social** codes. Tactically and organisationally the new social movements behaved in unorthodox ways, gathering militants and masses together for punctual and often provocatively illegal actions, then demobilising without creating any significant membership **organisa-tion**. These new movements defied the norms, procedures and goals of the mass organisational, representative politics pursued by all actors in the social democratic tradition.

At the time, the meaning of both sets of movements—working-class and middle strata—was unclear. Workers' militancy was often mistakenly interpreted as a return to a revolutionary tradition which had been momentarily undercut by the social democratic post-war compromise. Moreover, it was very often the case that new middle strata presented themselves as **leftish-gauchiste**, even—using old-fashioned revolutionary vocabularies that blurred distinctions between their cultural foci and more traditional working-class demands. It was easy to misperceive the moment, **then**. Renewed revolutionary radicalism was not on the horizon, **how-ever**. Instead, the social democratic post-war compromise was beginning to break down.

Whatever their deeper meanings, these movements of class conflict and cultural protest were both economically and politically destabilising to the post-war compromise. Spiralling inflation taxed those who could not keep up and fed incipient international monetary and competitive problems. Increasing tax burdens pursuant to the expansion of the welfare state were unpopular. Strikes and protests, if they paid off in many ways, also provided political fuel to the Right against unions and for 'law and order'. More generally, the political life of many advanced capitalist systems had grown much more volatile by the early 1970s, reflecting such turbulence. Changes in government occurred more frequently while social and electoral alliances which had looked reasonably solid for many years began to be more shaky and less manageable. *The* crisis had, in fact, already begun.

The Crisis

As everyone knows, the post-war economic boom ended in the 1970s. Since the jury is still out on theoretical explanations for this major change, we will here simply list its symptoms. Inflation grew beyond tolerable levels in most advanced capitalist societies, both for domestic reasons and because of changes in the prices of critical raw materials, most notably oil. A moment of 'stagflation' (roughly from 1975–1980) followed, in which governments faced a policy choice between the equally unpalatable alternatives of pursuing relatively full employment at the cost of high inflation or lower levels of inflation with rising unemployment. Politics pushed towards the former, while the realities of international competition pushed to the latter. The ultimate result was simultaneous high inflation, low growth and rising joblessness. The gradual collapse of international monetary norms exaggerated the policy dilemma. Simultaneously the newly industrialising countries appeared on the scene—products of the internationalising thrust of capitalism—fully armed to compete effectively with advanced capitalism in product lines like steel, shipbuilding, automobiles and textiles which had earlier been the exclusive preserve of Western economies.

Productivity growth in advanced capitalist economies dropped precipitously. Domestic economic policies and international trade levels began to fluctuate unpredictably, while unemployment rose steadily. Eventually, with exceptions in only the most die-hard social democratic states, failed Keynesianism gave way to neo-liberal deflationary and monetarist policies designed to restore price stability at whatever the cost in jobs. Beside the obvious fact that an era had come to an end, two things were clear in all this. First, capitalist accumulation had become a global process. National-centred accumulation perspectives for 'deepening the domestic market' gave way to capitalist visions of the entire planet as labour market, production locale and marketplace. This, plus the

increased volatility of international trade and monetary uncertainty, made it more and more problematic for national governments to pursue Keynesian policies, since such policies demanded a margin of control over economic flows which could no longer be assumed. Secondly, the transnationalisation of capitalism either brought, or coincided with, an explosion of new technologies which had far reaching consequences for the balance of economic power between societies, for the nature of work and for the structure of the working class. Capitalism was not only 'in crisis', then, it was also 'turning a corner' both spatially and technologically.

Decomposing the working class

These changes in the character of accumulation called into question many of the most important components of the post-war compromise in very dangerous ways for trade unionism. Perhaps most dramatically, the combined effects of employer retrenchment, international competition and the coming of new technologies hit hardest in just those sectors—mass production, capital-intensive areas—where union victories and strength had been greatest in the boom years. With declining productivity growth, came reduced firm willingness to pay higher wages. Capital, often helped out by government policies, took the offensive. At first, in the 1970s, this involved simply closing down wage growth. As the crisis deepened, however, 'slimming down' the labour force and 'making it more flexible'—i.e. firing and circumventing hard-won provisions for job security and control—rose to the top of capital's agenda. In certain privileged places where powerful social democratic parties and union movements sustained much of their strength (Sweden, Austria, to a degree West Germany), 'neo-corporatist' retrenchment was the major manifestation of such trends. In other places, changes were more brutal.

Premised on growing union weakness, sophisticated new tactics were developed to roll back the post-war compromise. Concession bargaining fostered hard-nosed union-busting (two-tier wage structures, abridgement of security rights, anti-union litigation, 'give backs' and the like). The increasing use of part-time, temporary, sub-contracted and even black-market labour had similar purposes. Other initiatives were undertaken to reassert control and revamp workplace social structures. The 'quality circles' which swept the advanced capitalist world like a prairie fire were only the most publicised of a number of class collaborative schemes designed to weaken unions and enhance productivity. Redesigning job and pay classification schemes to individualise employer-worker relationships (often in conjunction with lifetime 'career' lines modelled on Japanese arrangements), using supervisory personnel as communications conduits for grievances, suggestions and 'happy talk' (rather than discipline), profit-sharing and the like were all at least partly designed as union-busting tools.

The ways in which labour movements had adapted to the post-war years made response to this new situation quite difficult. The union bureaucratisation which had occurred limited mobilising for resistance. Moreover the structure of the workplace deal in most places intensified any natural tendencies the rank and file felt to respond 'particularistically' to crisis. Jobs were threatened, therefore what had to happen was that as many of them as possible had to be protected. In practice this came down to a notion that those who had work, and within this larger group those who had substantial seniority, should be protected in the first instance, almost whatever happened to anyone else.

This particularistic pressure, which union leaderships often encouraged and responded to, cut in a number of ways, many of which were negative. Depending upon political contexts, unions might thereby find themselves trapped in a spiral of 'concession bargaining' (the term is North American but the phenomenon is international) in which dwindling union resources were deployed against capital to consolidate some jobs in exchange for the loss of others, often with added concessions in areas of earlier-won seniority and fringe benefits. Inevitably such bargaining whet capital's appetite for greater concessions. It also undermined the morale of the union rank and file—especially younger union supporters with less seniority—and undercut their confidence in the effectiveness of unions and unionism. More generally, it played into the pro-capitalist portrayal of unions as 'special interests' and 'cartels' with little concern for anyone but their own members.

The situation was a trap for more militant unions as well. When they engaged in strikes and other forms of anti-crisis militancy, such struggles were often defeated. Even when they were not clearly defeated, they could still be used by capital and the state as weapons in a rapidly intensifying ideological struggle with union 'selfishness'. Public-sector unions, which were often very strong (largely because their post-war victories had statutory as well as contractual dimensions) were particular targets of this ideological campaign. To the degree to which public-sector unions were able to maintain employment and prevent retrenchment, governments and employers invariably broadcast messages to the public at large about the excesses of 'redundant' jobs and costly subsidies.

For unions, the new setting was perverse, then. Even short-run victories stood a good chance of becoming longer-run defeats. The post-war compromise had consolidated a form of unionism whose major purpose was to provide job security and produce higher wages. The changing conditions of accumulation made it more and more difficult for unions to produce what their bases expected. To the degree to which they nonetheless continued to try they did so at considerable damage to their public position. But when they did not try, they failed even more easily. The mildly positive-sum game established by the post-war class compromise

between capital and labour had, in crisis, become a zero-sum one. That unions almost everywhere became weaker in the crisis was not surprising, even if they held out better in solid democratic settings like Sweden and Austria. Memberships declined from their 1960s heights (sometimes catastrophically, as in France and the USA), mobilising power waned and general union credibility was severely tarnished. And, of course, to the degree to which unions were weakened, the political power of the working class was indirectly undermined.

What was at issue was not simply a temporary retreat from the post-war order. Underlying changes in the structure of the working class itself meant that unravelling the post-war workplace deal would bring permanent change. The character of that class was first and foremost shattered by unemployment, of course, which everywhere shot to 10% and above, and in some places reached Great Depression levels. Workers with jobs were reluctant to be militant while the growing presence of 'reserve armies', both the unemployed at home and the employable abroad pressured wages and other bargaining items downwards. Rising unemployment also accentuated pre-existing tendencies to dualism. Whereas during the boom years such dualism had been visible mainly in the USA and other societies with domestic 'North-South' problems, it emerged virtually everywhere during the crisis. Thus many European societies discovered their own 'minorities' (often recent immigrants with accumulated citizenship rights) and their own endemic poverty. Ugly racist movements such as the British and French National Fronts sometimes came with this discovery. High levels of youth unemployment had their own sinister implications. With a disproportionate burden of unemployment on young people, whose bitterness and cynicism deepened commensurately, youthful workers gravitated less and less to the Left. In the medium run, organised workers in both political parties and unions, risked losing access to those very young people it needed to reproduce itself. When one put together the diverse components of this secondary segment of the labour force—minorities, youth, women, the 'new' poor—the potentialities for increased internal division in the working class were great. Racism, sexism and inter-generational hostility were but the most obvious forms.

One other decomposing tendency is worthy of mention, even if its implications are far from clear. The rapid introduction of high technology into industrial and circulation sectors, in addition to the expansion of industries producing 'high-tech' goods themselves promised changes in the structuring of the working class. At the high end of 'high-tech' employment lay task recomposition and higher qualifications for certain workers, setting them off from more traditional Taylorised operatives as perhaps a new labour aristocratic stratum.

This partial decomposition of the post-war working class, with no recomposition in sight, occurred in the face of an international re-

structuring of capital itself. Organised labour's post-war acceptance of a 'hands off' attitude to productivity-enhancing investment by capital made less and less sense in this changing context because by leaving the investment planning to capital it permitted recourse to a range of new options such as moving to another country, restructuring to eliminate employment, national deindustrialisation and the like.

New middle strata in crisis: Striking out on their own?

Imperceptibly, beginning in the 1960s and extending into the years of economic crisis, the new middle strata seemed to move onto another political trajectory. As we earlier noted, social democrats and Marxists had always seen selected middle strata groups as essential allies for workers. While workers were the vanguard class of progressive change and middle strata would never completely share the progressivism of workers, at least some of them could be won over to a high common denominator of reformism with an anti-capitalist edge. Critical in all this was the position of intellectuals. Following *The Communist Manifesto* itself, it was expected that many intellectuals would recognise the vanguard status of labour and move directly to the side of workers' struggle. More often, intellectuals could help in accrediting the working-class cause ideologically among the middle strata themselves.

As the boom ended there were strong reasons to doubt these classic assumptions. Protest politics in the 1960s had a confusing face. While often making very strong pro-working class claims—as in Maoism, Third Worldism more generally and neo-Trotskyism—it was at the same time almost always stridently scornful of existing workers' organisations. Social Democrats and Communists, where they existed as plausible actors in mass politics, were routinely excoriated as 'revisionists' and 'stolid, unresponsive bureaucrats'. Moreover the social movement side of this protest, with its hit-and-run, disband and reassemble tactics, and its cutting edge of cultural liberationism was sometimes quite baffling to the traditional labour movement.

The 1970s brought rapid retreat from any veneer of ultra-Left **workerism** and the fragmentation of new social movements into single-issue crusades in which personal and cultural liberationism became the distinguishing characteristic. The list of such movements is very long, ecology, regionalism, communalism, consumerism, anti-nuclear energy, gay liberation, 'human potential'/quasi-psychotherapeutics, health foods, frenetic physical exercise, Oriental quietism, squatting, etc.

We here do not mean to pass judgment either on these movements or on the needs of the groups which they mobilised. What is essential to note, however, is that taken together they amounted to a distinctive form of *middle strata* politics. In the vast majority of cases, the notion that alliances with labour were necessary, or even particularly useful, disappeared, to be

replaced, more often than not, with the proposition that labour, particularly in organised forms, was likely to be on the side of the enemy. In the case of several important social movements attempts were made to devise theories which discarded class analysis and posited new causal relationships as key historical variables. Intellectuals took up as well as contributed to this escape from class analysis. We think here, somewhat *francophonically*, of Michel Foucault's analyses of power, Gorz's farewell to the working class, Touraine's welcome to post-industrial society and Laclau and Mouffe's dissolution of class into discourse.

The emergence of a quasi-theorised independent protest—and later electoral—politics located in new middle strata had a decisive effect on the political propensities of much of the radical intelligentsia. Tendencies to align oneself with the working class came to a rapid end. To the degree to which the emergence of an independent middle strata politics with radical pretensions could convince critical segments of the intelligentsia that the working class was *depassé* as an agent of change, then intellectuals ceased moving 'to the side of' workers. Not only did generations-honoured alliance notions become less plausible, then; equally traditional sources of intellectual and ideological support for working-class struggle tended to dry up as well.

What is different here from the post-war compromise period is not, to be sure, the fact of middle strata indignation, but rather the development of what seemed to be an *independent* form of *radical* new middle strata politics. If not denied altogether, the hegemony of labour and labour struggle was simply disregarded as archaic and irrelevant. Labour was not only not seen as the vanguard of progressive change, but in many, if not most cases, was regarded as an *arrière garde*, a 'special interest' standing obdurately in the way of needed social change. While independent and radical middle-class politics was not unprecedented in the history of capitalism—one thinks of North American populism and progressivism, for example, or various European small business movements—the coming of *this particular form* of independent middle class radicalism had the effect of undermining prospects for the political alliance which had underpinned much of post-war politics.

Such a schematic analysis does not altogether explain either new middle strata radicalism or its particular concerns with personal identity and cultural liberation. Without venturing too far into detail, let us suggest that the personal self-affirmation inherent in such politics may be embedded in the force-feeding of individualism which occurs in middle strata socialisation. Extensive education, progressive specialisation and quasi-professionalism may promote a very strong sense of an individual's own centrality in the social world and a belief that the world *ought* to conform to preconceived visions of it. To the degree to which such groups had unequal access to income, they also gained privileged access to consumerism

in ways which also accentuated individualism. Indeed, the 'grey flannel suit' era of conformity clearly gave way in the later 1960s to efforts at esoteric and individualised consumption as an avenue to unique self-definition (exotic food, furniture, clothes, travel and the like). Add to this the inevitable frustrations following from long-promised work autonomy turning out to be deeply limited by bureaucracy and the *salariat*. Self-affirmation in work turned out to be largely mythical. Careers turned out to be nowhere near as universalistically open as advertised—'merit' and 'science' may be less important in advancement than connections, social skills, sexual identity and the like. To the extent to which expectations and aspirations inculcated in schooling and socialisation turned out to be unrealistic, disillusionment followed.

Disillusionment, in turn, fed demands for *control* and participatory democracy as an avenue of self-realisation but with declining attention to the massive structural reforms proposed by the Left and social democratic tradition. Indeed, new middle strata perceptions of Left-promoted reforms often were that they pointed to a *uniformisation* of social situations, statisation in either its welfare state or 'existing socialist' forms. As a background for this analysis, the greyness, massification, social uniformity, bureaucratisation and lack of democracy under existing socialism became common new middle strata wisdom in the 1960s and 1970s as a decades-long intellectual flirtation with the Soviet Union finally came to an end. The renewal of Cold-War anti-Sovietism in the late 1970s hastened this. In a profound sense, new middle strata indignation grew completely out of phase with the utopias, both social democratic and communist, which had been the stock in political trade of the labour movement for a century. All the more reason for an independent new middle strata politics, then, which stressed diversity, difference, self-expression and pluralism.

There is another important dimension to this. The century-old tradition of the labour movement was one of mass collective organisations and politics based on unions and parties. In this tradition one sought broad unity around the primordial importance of a number of essential demands for political democracy, workplace rights, social services, and decent living standards. In this unity *point-of-production* concerns and their political ramifications were presumed to be paramount, the vanguard concerns of the vanguard class. In all this demands which were based on *differences*—i.e. which were not unifying—and demands which aimed to redress specific on-workplace grievances were toned down and subordinated to such vanguard concerns. Women's issues were a classic case in point. As a rule, the labour movement had been historically progressive on such issues. But when it had raised and struggled around such issues, which few other political traditions had deigned to do, it had consistently reshaped them to be part of the broader package of workers' demands. By so doing it had tended *a priori* to define women's issues as those of women workers or of

women in working-class families, thereby subordinating any other concerns. Thus when middle strata radicalism turned to just such issues of *difference* it could anticipate and, more often than not was likely to find, misunderstanding from the labour movement. At best unions and parties would try to incorporate issues of difference into preexisting concerns, coalition building in ways which undercut the real purposes of those advancing such issues. At worst they would simply be hostile.

Crisis politics

Much of what we have already said points to the political changes brought by the crisis. Welfare state politics depended upon two things, the persistent power of a social democratic or 'progressive' political coalition composed of workers, their organisations and new middle strata, and the capacity of the national state to regulate essential economic flows. Both were undermined by the crisis. Working-class organisations were severely challenged as underlying structures of the working class itself were altered. The most essential component of any progressive social and political coalition thus lost resources needed to put forward its positions. Simultaneously its erstwhile allies began to do politics on their own. Even had the strength of progressive coalitions not been sapped in such major ways, however, the changing accumulation strategies of capitalism would have made the perpetuation of the post-war compromise extremely difficult. Simply put, even the largest national states proved no match for the internationalisation of economic processes. The leverage needed to regulate critical economic flows proved virtually impossible for single governments to generate.

The symptoms of all this are well known. Keynesian demand management techniques proved less and less effective as the 1970s went on. Under attack both politically and theoretically, they finally gave way to monetarism and neo-liberalism, both under social democratic and conservative regimes. Pledges to maintain close-to-full employment were abandoned willy-nilly in the process, again almost no matter what the political stripe of the government. Wage rises were deliberately and politically disengaged from rises in the cost of living. In many places there were direct and indirect attacks on key institutions of industrial relations and collective bargaining in the name of 'flexibility' and 'de-regulation'. Likewise in many places there were attacks on welfare state services in the name of 'budgetary integrity'.

The specific forms of crisis politics varied. The worst onslaughts on the post-war compromise occurred in those societies—mainly Anglo-Saxon—where post-war reforms had been grafted or forced upon a capitalist class with virulent free market ideologies, societies in which social democratic notions had never been victorious. In such places when crisis **emerged**—bringing with it the weakening of progressive coalitions—older doctrines

reemerged with a vengeance. Here one found the most dogmatic monetarism, state complicity in union-busting, frontal attacks on the welfare state and a renaissance in explicitly anti-egalitarian political thought. In contrast, there were other societies where social democratic coalitions maintained themselves and where 'neocorporatist' social alliances held firm. Here retrenchment occurred under social democratic auspices in ways which kept the most reactionary forms of *revanchard* politics at arm's length.

Perhaps the most puzzling form of 'new politics' to emerge in the crisis was the rise of a 'socialism without the workers' in Latin Europe (in France and Spain most notably). Here one found Left parties campaigning and being elected in mid-crisis on social democratic platforms—in the French case, at least, of quite a radical kind. Promises were made to stimulate domestic growth, work major reforms, reduce unemployment and expand the welfare state. Then, after but brief moments of hesitation, there were sharp shifts towards a very different programme which had very little to do with social democracy at all. The political core of this new programme was the use of state policy, often quite vigorously, to make the national economy more competitive in the changing international division of labour. Thus one found strong efforts to generate new labour market 'flexibility' by overturning earlier workplace victories now labelled 'rigidities'. And one also found a quite un-social democratic willingness to allow unemployment to rise rapidly. On the other hand, advocates of 'socialism without the workers' were more reluctant than the new Right to attack the welfare state, insisting only on better management.

Thus what many had argued to be a general convergence of capitalist politics around the forms of the social democratic post-war compromise rapidly gave way to a new pluralism of political strategies. On one extreme one found anti-egalitarian neo-liberalism à la Thatcher and Reagan, where emphases on 'freeing the capitalist market' coexisted with open repudiation of the compromise as a massive mistake. At another one found 'socialism without the workers', mainly in societies where economic *dirigisme* had deep roots. Here technocratic elites—often backed by new middle strata—seemed able to appropriate the political legacy of waning social democracy, *via* attacks on a national bourgeoisie which was allegedly incapable of making the turn towards effective international competition, in order to use statist levers to begin the same turn themselves. In all this the 'traditional' politics of the post-war compromise were fast becoming a memory in most societies, an old tableau to be visited only in small, esoteric museums like Sweden and Austria.

III. LEFT POLITICS AND THE EROSION OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC COMPROMISE

This much seems clear. Except for a few small societies the post-war era

of social democratic solutions—here meant in the broadest of ways—has come to an end. What was to become of Left politics in this unprecedented new and difficult situation? Politics, so far in the crisis, has been tremendously fragmented, constructed, as it has been, on top of a very fragmented class struggle. The notions of 'one working class' and 'one Left' have always been activists' myths because political pluralism has always existed on the Left, following the contours of a class struggle which has inevitably been complex. Yet for the better part of a century such myths could be sustained because it did seem as if historical tendencies to unification out of pluralism were stronger than those pushing towards fragmentation. Indeed, with all allowances duly made, the trajectory of social democracy, the dominant form of mass politics in capitalist societies in the 20th century, bore out such optimism. What ought to be sobering, indeed terrifying in some cases, about the current crisis is that it points to a *reversal* of such unifying tendencies. Moreover earlier crises of capitalism—that of the 1930s, for example—were, despite their horrible dimensions, moments when the labour movement kept faith with its own programme for the future. The current crisis is characterized not only by the collapse of political unification but also by the retreat of programmatic optimism about the future. The Left not only faces the material context of crisis, then. It does so with great new scepticism about its strategic and theoretical links with a better new society to come. This, plus the appearance of pro-capitalist strategies proposed in Left vocabularies, makes the situation difficult indeed.

The contradictions of defending social democracy

With social democracy and analogous movements under political siege in many places, a politics of 'defending social democracy' might seem, at first sight, to be justifiable. Experience demonstrates that such is not always the case, however. Where social democracy is under threat it has tended to react by giving up more and more of what counts—full employment, union rights, the welfare state, etc.—in order to 'protect the rest'. This has usually meant protecting the party itself. Put another way, the task of defending social democracy politically is often defined as moving rightwards in search of centrist voters in ways which tend to throw out both the post-war compromise baby and the bath water. No better example of this is to be found than the recent history of the British Labour Party which, led by its right wing, in its quest to stay in power in the later 1970s, held down living standards, attacked the welfare state, and discarded Keynesianism in the interests of monetarism. Meant to keep Mrs Thatcher out of power, this course paved the way for her and made it much easier for her to pursue her own nefarious projects after 1979. The strategy of 'doing what is unpleasantly necessary to save our party's chances' is destined to fail, ultimately undercutting such parties them-

selves. Similar arguments and strategies have been used to shore up President Mitterrand's political race towards the Centre and the analogous course followed by the American Democratic Party (a functional equivalent of social democracy), with similar long-term results. Confronting the problems raised by the evident halt in the 'forward march of labour' by eviscerating social democracy even of the political meaning of the post-war compromise, can only lead to a downward spiral. When one advocates the same policies as the Right, one helps the Right.

Another and quite different formula to 'save social democracy' is sometimes advanced by left social democrats. It involves pasting together a patchwork alliance of workers and 'new social movements'. As we have noted, relatively autonomous new middle strata politics is a perplexing new reality in the crisis. The question is whether old working-class politics and such new middle strata politics can be patched together as is. To be sure, there are often parts of new social movements which persist valiantly in trying to connect the 'old' and 'new' Lefts, to use the condescending vocabulary of the 'new politics'. But such elements have been far from dominant. In fact, the 'new Left' is profoundly contradictory. The politics of peace, ecology and other movements, and their electoralist propensities, are often radical and progressive—in the sense of being change-oriented, while *simultaneously* harbouring deep anti-working-class feelings. At best such new middle strata politics seeks, in an interesting historical change of focus, to *subordinate* the workers' movement to its goals. At worst it simply disregards workers and their needs. Whereas denial of the progressive role of the working class and, even, denial that there *was* any such thing as the working class were favourite bourgeois arguments in the halcyon years of post-war compromise they have since been adopted by many 'new politics' advocates in the name of progress. It follows from all this that a political position which advocates that the labour movement strike deals with the 'new politics', as is, invites new problems. To the degree to which the labour movement is sufficiently strong to insist upon pro-working-class priorities in alliance, the alliance will be unstable. To the degree to which, out of organisational or ideological weakness it ends up 'tailing' such new middle strata movements simply because they seem 'radical' the result is likely to be very dangerous for workers.

Saving social democracy in more or less pure post-war compromise terms where there is some reasonable prospect that these different political downward spirals can be avoided is, of course, more plausible. In places like Sweden and Austria where strong labour movements tied to social democratic parties made unusually successful advances in taming local capital and in creating a general consensus around advanced welfare states, concessions such as consensual wage restraint may not lead to dramatic new weakness. But there are very few places where such strategies are feasible.

The new danger of 'socialism without the workers'

The technocratic politics which we have earlier labelled 'socialism without the workers' provide no solution at all. Here, in essence, **everyone**—workers and new social movement activists—are being told that 'nothing can be done until national capital accumulation is regenerated'. The supposed hard realities of new technology and the changed international division of labour are designated the primary obstacles to any progressive politics. What usually follows such assertions are propositions about 'industrial policy' and 'restructuring'. Such policies, which everyone acknowledges will harm workers' interests, are an inevitable bitter pill which must be swallowed. Somewhere further down the line, it is claimed, when national accumulation has been regenerated, the post-war compromise system of consumerism and the welfare state can be reinstated.

Here, of course, we must avoid know-nothingism. International capitalism is in a tumultuous period of change to which national economies and the labour movement, barring the discovery of any new strategy for transition to socialism in crisis, must pay serious and consciously adaptive attention. Technocratic 'socialism without the workers' à la François Mitterrand or Felipe Gonzalez is something different from this, however. It is rather a conscious abandonment of most principles of social democracy accomplished under the flag of 'socialism' itself and promoted by technocratic elites on the borderline between new middle strata and bourgeois class positions. Its purpose is not progressive social change but to supplant or complement the national bourgeoisie, portrayed as incompetent at working 'necessary adjustments', with new technocratic elites. It is far from clear, of course, whether it is even possible to regenerate national capitalism in such ways. The situation which would result if it were might be marginally more 'humane' than that proposed by Reagan and Thatcher but it would almost certainly also seal the doom of those limited principles of egalitarianism and redistribution which had characterised the post-war compromise.

The problematic optimism of the ultra-Left

It will take more than a huge crisis to destroy the faith of the ultra-Left. Imbued with a transhistorical vision of the revolutionary mission of the working class, this small, fiercely fissiparous cluster of intellectuals has historically always refused to give in to the prevalent gloom of crisis. Here uniquely one continues to find confidence that the future is bound to be better than the present, given the ineluctable contradictions and the likely eventual decline of capitalism. Moreover, for much of this ultra-Left the contemporary difficulties of both Social Democracy and Communism come as no surprise. The class collaborationism of the first and the revisionism, bureaucratism and Stalinism of the second have been roundly denounced for decades.

course, had some judicious remarks about the limits of simple, even militant, workerism which have lost little of their trenchancy. Unions, however militant, were unlikely to pursue radical change strategically and, because of this, would, sooner or later, create openings for capital to blunt or co-opt their struggles. Such thoughts remain pertinent in the crisis of the 1980s. Workers and their unions are particularly vulnerable in this crisis, given the declining power of unions, fragmentation of the working class and the decline of alliance support from middle strata.

Workerism is, therefore, a politics with little promise for positive change. Still, a huge amount is at stake in struggles to protect working-class victories in the workplace and in terms of broader political and social rights. Strong arguments can be made, therefore, in favour of **workerist** politics in a situation marked by the immediate absence of any broader strategic outlook. It is evident that the most determined 'roll-back' thrusts of the Right and capital are directed towards dismantling the workplace dimension of the post-war compromise and undercutting the legitimacy of unions and hard won workers' rights to a minimum of security in work. It is also clear that major, quite influential, segments of the new middle strata see workers and their organisations as mere 'special interests', and 'barriers to progress'. Whatever the limitations of workerism, then, in the absence of a general strategy for the Left which could build beyond existing conditions, workerism at least tries to defend what is most important. Without such a strategy, however, it will become more and more difficult to defend class positions through simple workerism. In short, unalloyed workerism is at best a politics of cutting losses in crisis in the hope that a recomposition of the working class and a regenerated Left strategy will ensue before the anti-labour politics of capital and the Right can achieve their goals. For the moment, however, it may be one of the few plausible Left positions we have.

Options for an agenda?

The present fragmented setting of mass Left politics is likely to be destructive of the solidarity needed to prevent the new politics of reaction from reversing some, if not a great deal, of what has been won by workers over the last century. Fragmentation facilitates capitalist strategies of dividing and ruling. The glaring new contradictions between workers and new middle strata provide new material for such strategies. The decline in social democratic alliance prospects for building opens the way to further fragmentation and separate new middle strata politics. This situation, in turn, gives a political hunting license to the Right. Better-off parts of the working class may be targets for 'populist' mobilisation by the Right, as the American and British examples show. Populist alliances including some workers, white-collar employees, capital, and cultural conservatives will be difficult to manage over time, however, given the complexities of conciliat-

course, had some judicious remarks about the limits of simple, even militant, workerism which have lost little of their trenchancy. Unions, however militant, were unlikely to pursue radical change strategically and, because of this, would, sooner or later, create openings for capital to blunt or co-opt their struggles. Such thoughts remain pertinent in the crisis of the 1980s. Workers and their unions are particularly vulnerable in this crisis, given the declining power of unions, fragmentation of the working class and the decline of alliance support from middle strata.

Workerism is, therefore, a politics with little promise for positive change. Still, a huge amount is at stake in struggles to protect working-class victories in the workplace and in terms of broader political and social rights. Strong arguments can be made, therefore, in favour of workerist politics in a situation marked by the immediate absence of any broader strategic outlook. It is evident that the most determined 'roll-back' thrusts of the Right and capital are directed towards dismantling the workplace dimension of the post-war compromise and undercutting the legitimacy of unions and hard won workers' rights to a minimum of security in work. It is also clear that major, quite influential, segments of the new middle strata see workers and their organisations as mere 'special interests', and 'barriers to progress'. Whatever the limitations of workerism, then, in the absence of a general strategy for the Left which could build beyond existing conditions, workerism at least tries to defend what is most important. Without such a strategy, however, it will become more and more difficult to defend class positions through simple workerism. In short, unalloyed workerism is at best a politics of cutting losses in crisis in the hope that a recomposition of the working class and a regenerated Left strategy will ensue before the anti-labour politics of capital and the Right can achieve their goals. For the moment, however, it may be one of the few plausible Left positions we have.

Options for an agenda?

The present fragmented setting of mass Left politics is likely to be destructive of the solidarity needed to prevent the new politics of reaction from reversing some, if not a great deal, of what has been won by workers over the last century. Fragmentation facilitates capitalist strategies of dividing and ruling. The glaring new contradictions between workers and new middle strata provide new material for such strategies. The decline in social democratic alliance prospects for building opens the way to further fragmentation and separate new middle strata politics. This situation, in turn, gives a political hunting license to the Right. Better-off parts of the working class may be targets for 'populist' mobilisation by the Right, as the American and British examples show. Populist alliances including some workers, white-collar employees, capital, and cultural conservatives will be difficult to manage over time, however, given the complexities of conciliat-

ing anti-labour economic policies and the search for support, often on cultural grounds, from parts of the working class itself. Populist coalitions are therefore unlikely to be stable. They are, however, serious threats as agents for the further disaggregation of existing social democratic coalitions.

'Socialism without the workers', seen as one variant of capital's politics of crisis, may also spread because of Left fragmentation. Where technocratic elites are able to gain control over social democratic parties, they are then free, for a time, to manipulate an ambiguous stock of social democratic symbols in the interests of 'industrial adaptation' and the like. Perhaps more important, because of their position at the head of nominally Left political formations, they can also profit from long-standing electoral reflexes that 'socialists, no matter what their programme, will be better than the Right'. Here again, however, the problem of reconciling the maintenance of workers' electoral support with antiworking-class politics is likely to be difficult to resolve, as the contemporary French situation demonstrates best of all.

The path to such divide-and-rule strategies will remain open until the Left is able to devise, or reconstruct, a plausible mass political strategy which goes beyond appeals to restore the high points of the post-war compromise. Here the need for political creativity is immense. As a starting point one can construct an agenda of issues to be raised. Left utopias, plausible models for a substantially better society, desperately need rejuvenation. One can hardly mobilise large numbers of people for change unless one can inspire them with a vision of how such change will build new bridges to a more desirable world. The post-war compromise was, in many ways, the end of history for social democracy, a basis for a broad coalition of social groups to the degree to which it 'produced the goods' but which no longer pointed to a better future. When the 'goods' ceased to be forthcoming, therefore, social democracy lost much of its already limited capacity to inspire, especially because it then had little to offer except struggle to restore an unrestorable *status quo ante*. The main 'utopian' alternative to social democracy in the 20th century, Communism, has suffered a similar fate. 'Existing socialism', however one draws up its balance sheet, has clearly ceased to be a goal for anyone in advanced capitalist societies. Other minoritarian utopias on offer are, at best, the visions of sects. Why should workers and others take risks when the results are obscure. What might a socialism for our time look like? The problems which any open-minded progressive person would have in answering this indicates the huge need for new thought.

Needed as well is a Left strategy which would promote national economic integrity and social progress in an international context which has raised great barriers to both. Socialism in one country is, now even more than in the past, an illusory possibility. Complete affiliation with the bloc of 'existing Socialist' countries is also too costly. It is a dangerous

form of know-nothingism to assert that political voluntarism will overcome the deep structures of the international market and division of labour. Movements for progressive change must therefore find space for manoeuvre in the interstices and contradictions of the new international setting. The neo-classical orthodoxy of the moment is that there is no margin for manoeuvre in this setting—one can only find ways to work astutely within a corset of near-complete international constraint. There is a great component of surrender to pro-capitalist ideology in this. Still, the Left needs policies, and not simply voluntaristic rhetoric, which will allow confrontation with the new international situation in ways which will open up, and not close down, progressive possibilities.

Alas, one finds only disconnected bits and pieces of plausible new strategies in the world today. Versions of the Meidner Plan—Employee Investment Funds—might be part of such a strategy of democratising capital *and* democratising economic and other decision-making, were it not for the facts that in Sweden such initiatives, in watered-down form, are being taken by labour bureaucracies in the place of workers for the purpose of restoring the basic conditions of the post-war compromise. Mobilisation from below to impose 'new criteria of management' in the economy and in political institutions, as proposed by the French Communists, is an intriguing prospect at present bogged down in France in workerist defensiveness and electoralism. Other formulations of essentially similar notions can be found which attempt to conciliate the need for genuine Left approaches with the control of economic and political decisions. They may point the way to alliances to move out of crisis towards better societies, with stress on the need for democracy in the ways such decisions are made. Proposals of this kind may be a way of addressing the problems of class fragmentation and mobilisation associated with the crisis. In these ways, a new basis for the construction of working-class identity may be found. There are some progressive flowers blooming. At present however they occupy only an alarmingly small corner of the garden.

The working class must be recomposed. What will help this along? Alliances between workers and middle strata must be reconstructed. How can this be begun? Beyond what we have already suggested, approaches which focus on democratic control over basic social decisions, beginning with those about work and the economy, seem the most promising path. Without major democratic advances in the shaping of fundamental economic decisions it seems clear that capital will attempt to regenerate accumulation on the backs of workers. Here, then, workers can be engaged beyond the boundaries between different fractions of the working class. Demands for democratic control are likewise the progressive side of the contradictory package of concerns which have come to motivate new middle strata politics. Demands for new democracy and personal freedom are thus shared across presently tenuous class boundaries, although

recent developments in new middle strata politics have tended to move away from a focus on the workplace. The Left could bring to these movements both an analysis of and an insistence on the fundamental need to change working conditions in order to change any other life situations in a meaningful way. Stress on the democratic content of struggle for such goals of control may also begin to reverse the mobilisation problem created by the social democratic propensity to substitute organisational actions for those of people themselves. The involvement of workers and their organisations, in that order, in struggles for new beach-heads of control over central economic decisions about investment, national trade policies, industrial location and the structures of work and social programmes may be the beginning of the way. Adaptation to a changed international setting need not be the working of brutal social surgery by elites—whether technocrats or capitalists. It can also be social innovation promoted by workers and their allies in actions cemented by principled agreements. However, the Left's garden must be cultivated a great deal before such things grow.