

## UNIONS, STRIKES AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS TODAY

by Sheila Cohen & Kim Moody

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto, the 'spectre' of Communism can no longer be said to be haunting Europe – whether in the form of mass parties devoted to revolution or the states that inaccurately claimed that title. But class struggle, the inextinguishable source of everything the authors of the Manifesto meant by Communism, is, it seems, as irrepressible as ever. Despite ever-stronger siren calls by social democratic and union **leader-**ships for 'partnership' and 'co-operation' with capital, old-fashioned mass strikes have recently stalked not only Europe but almost every other continent.

By the **mid-1990s**, this could be seen in the dramatic confrontations between major labour federations and the neoliberal, populist, and even social democratic governments of such seemingly dissimilar capitalisms as France, South Korea, South Africa, Canada, Peru, Brazil, **Argentina**, Belgium, **Italy**, and a dozen others. Alongside, sometimes preceding, and often following these political outbursts was a return to militant confrontation with capitalist employers far **larger** and more powerful than any Marx and **Engels** could have envisioned in 1848. If no manifestos appeared, no barricades were thrown up, and the red banners typically bore the initials of a trade union federation rather than a revolutionary party, the dynamics dramatically evoked throughout the original Manifesto were nonetheless clearly at work and a renewed class consciousness was evident across much of the industrial and semi-industrial world.

Despite all the real and apparent differences between Europe 150 years ago and today's capitalist world, two fundamental issues remain equally unresolved: the lack of fully-fledged and widespread socialist consciousness, and the absence of large-scale organization directed at fostering such consciousness. If **Marx** and **Engels** saw in the rise of class

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conflict the birth of such organisation, the moves cited above towards some resurgence of class struggle may offer the opportunity for its rebirth – providing, of course, the socialist left can overcome its own isolation from the reality of this struggle. In many ways, we are faced with the same problems and limitations within the socialist movement itself as were the authors of the *Manifesto*.

### I

In 1848 as now, the socialist movement consisted of a variety of 'socialisms' ranging from the idealist/populist/utopian to the avowedly revolutionary, or at least insurrectionary. The *Manifesto's* survey of 'Socialist and Communist Literature' identified the three categories of Reactionary Socialism, Conservative or Bourgeois Socialism and Critical-Utopian Socialism or Communism, and the forceful rejection by Marx and Engels of all these forms of 'socialism' had one common theme; their mistaken abnegation of class. 'German or "True" Socialism', for example, prides itself in representing 'not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of human nature, of man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy.' While more aware of 'the working class, as being the most suffering class', utopian socialists like Fourier and Owen are equally castigated for considering themselves 'far superior to all class antagonisms . . . Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class . . .'.<sup>2</sup> The sectarians of the era receive no gentler treatment: 'They hold fast by the views of their masters [i.e. Fourier, Owen, et. al.], in opposition to the progressive historical development of the proletariat'.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the apparently revolutionary era when the *Manifesto* was written, then, the class-oriented politics of Marx and Engels placed them at a peculiar distance from many of the other socialists of their time. One of the most central features of this difference revolved around their consistent adherence to what they referred to as 'the real working class movement'; and this was shown most clearly in what was then an almost unique focus on, and endorsement of, trade union organisation.

The general absence of this orientation within the intellectual and political milieu of Marx and Engels – mirrored in an equivalent distaste for 'economistic' struggles in our own era – is recognised by Hal Draper: 'Marx was the first leading figure in the history of socialism to adopt a position of support to trade unions and trade-

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unionism, on **principle**'.<sup>4</sup> Most other socialists, as Draper points out, were often not only indifferent but positively hostile to trade unionism; and he shows this was even true of Owen as well as Proudhon, who 'not only condemned trade unions and strikes on principle but vigorously approved gendarmes' shooting down strikers as enemies of society, that is, enemies of small **property**'.<sup>5</sup> Even the leading Chartist Ernest Jones rejected trade unionism as a 'fallacy', despite the fact that his views were published only a few years after the mass Chartist struggles which centred, at their height, on a general strike and the attempt to found the Grand National Consolidated Trade **Union**.<sup>6</sup> Marx and **Engels** were in effect unique, then, among their socialist contemporaries, in consistently following an orientation towards basic trade union organisation and struggle as expressions of what they referred to as the 'real class movement'.

But were they correct? Richard Hyman, in his 1971 pamphlet on 'Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism', comments that despite their lifelong involvement with both theoretical and practical aspects of trade unionism, the attention of Marx and **Engels** to this question is 'remarkably slight'. Although he acknowledges that they provided a sufficient base in their writings 'to be considered as a coherent theory of trade unionism', Hyman evidently regards this theory as essentially naive. 'One need scarcely document the failure of subsequent experience to validate [the Communist Manifesto's] optimistic prognosis; yet Marx and **Engels** never produced a comprehensive revision of their earlier **analysis**'.<sup>7</sup> This view is echoed in John Kelly's comment, in *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, that '... despite their contact with, and interest in, trade unionism they left behind no systematic or coherent analysis of the limits and possibilities of trade union action'. The 'array of seemingly contradictory insights and arguments' said to be presented by Marx and **Engels** on the question is contrasted, critically, to the sustained and internally consistent logic of **Marx's** economic analysis and his 'constant endeavour to penetrate between the 'surface appearances' of capitalism and its underlying essence'.<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, no unified 'underlying essence' to the character of trade unionism; it is an essentially *contradictory* phenomenon, and this is what accounts for Marx and **Engels**' apparently 'contradictory' responses to the class struggle (or lack of it) taking place around them. The contradictory character of trade unionism, and the dialectical nature of the necessary political response, is not sufficiently or explicitly theorised in the writings of Marx and **Engels** on trade

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unionism. Yet the distinction between the consistently subversive potential of basic industrial organisation, the grass roots of trade unionism, and 'trade unions' *as organisations* and, incipiently, bureaucracies, was the underlying reason for their apparent vacillations between feverish excitement about union struggles during working-class upsurges and strong disapproval of the **general** orientation of the trade unions during periods of acquiescence.

This instinctive 'nose' for the class struggle potential of grassroots trade unionism is evident in Engels' delighted response to the eruption of basic class conflict into the New Unionism of the late 1880s; a development which, though sadly too late for Marx, was greeted by **Engels** like a **draught** of water in the desert of 19th century craft trade unionism. As he wrote excitedly to **Lafargue** in 1889: 'These new trades unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organisations of the working class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways . . . In them I see the *real* beginning of the movement **here**.' His estimation that these new unions could not 'fall into the same conservative ways' was before long revised by **Engels** himself, with a disillusioned re-assessment of leaders like John Burns and Tom Mann as symbolising 'the bourgeois "respectability" which has grown deep into the bones of the **workers**'.<sup>10</sup> But his instinctual awareness of the always subversive undercurrents of exploitation-based grass-roots class conflict had ensured that the *potential* for undermining the labour 'aristocracy' was, in Engels' mind, always a possibility. This class-centred 'optimism' is more than a simple naivety; it challenges the essentially *static* conception of class consciousness frequently embodied in assessments of the 'the unions' as implicitly monolithic organisations.

Twentieth century analysis of trade unions is, of course, more sophisticated in its understanding of the internally stratified nature of unions as social phenomena. Yet, in most of the renditions of economists and sociologists, 'modern' analysis is far more one-sided than Marx and Engels' instinctive understanding. The internal dynamics and contradictions of trade union life have been buried in a series of static theories, from the Webbs' **glorification** of union bureaucracy and Michels' declaration of its inevitability in his 'Iron Law of Oligarchy,' through the 'institutional' analyses of the American Wisconsin School and the 1950s 'maturity' theorists. All shared a belief in the inevitability and desirability of bureaucracy and stable labour relations. All imagined the direction of development to be a one-way street toward order and the **professionalization** of labour relations." Marx

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and Engels, in contrast, saw something deeper beneath the organizational surface, in the living force of the workers themselves. The focus on the working class as the fundamental force in the struggle against capital; the recognition of the common interests of that class which lend it the potential, through struggle, to grow from 'class-in-itself' to 'class-for-itself'; the orientation, through this focus, towards the potential of basic trade union struggles as an aspect of class activity – all these aspects of Marx and Engels' analysis both flowed from, and led to, their consistent awareness of where the class was, rather than where they, and certainly their contemporary fellow-socialists, might have liked it to be.

This crucial orientation towards existing class realities is expressed in the Manifesto in its presentation of the 'theoretical conclusions of the Communists . . . [which] merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes'.<sup>12</sup> As Engels wrote later, discussing the impact of the concept of historical materialism, ' . . . communism now no longer meant the concoction, by means of the imagination, of an ideal society as perfect as possible, but insight into the nature, the conditions and the consequent general aims of the struggle waged by the proletariat'.<sup>13</sup>

This orientation on the part of Marx and Engels towards the 'actually existing' consciousness and organisation of the working class, rather than towards some separate, idealist construction of socialism, has been widely dismissed as implying a simplistic conflation of class activity with revolutionary consciousness. Certainly, the blithely determinist logic of the *Manifesto's* statement that 'What the bourgeoisie . . . produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the fall of the proletariat are equally inevitable' appears to sum up the crude historicism for which Marxism has been most frequently lampooned.<sup>14</sup> But what intervenes between such 'inevitability' and the reality of reformism is, of course, the issue of class consciousness; the subjective arena of which objective social and material realities can at best be regarded as an erratic and unpredictable undercurrent – a 'determinant in the last instance'. The consistent orientation of Marx and Engels towards such objective material conditions as generators of working-class struggle and organisation has been well noted; their awareness of the complex balance between such factors and the nature and progress of working-class consciousness and realpolitik has perhaps received less attention.

While, as we have pointed out, Marx and Engels failed to develop

any explicit theory of the mutually influential relationships between concrete working-class conditions and class interests, activity and consciousness, **they** were clearly aware of the importance of more than simply the 'economic base' in conditioning such relationships. The essentially dialectical nature of the Marxist view of class consciousness, though never **fully** explicated, was rooted firmly in an awareness of the interrelation between material realities and the uneven, erratic but always materially-based development of such consciousness. In *The Poverty & Philosophy*, written a few years before the *Manifesto*, Marx developed the famous distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself, which bases the development of class consciousness not in theoretical abstractions but in the concrete requirements of capitalism and the organisational forms thus **generated**: 'Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital had created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, *of which* we have noted only a *few phases*, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class **interests**'<sup>15</sup>.

The crucial reference here is to some earlier **paragraphs** in which Marx enunciates a description of the **significance** of working-class 'combinations' very similar to that put forward in the *Manifesto*: 'In England **they** have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, trade unions, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the **employers**'<sup>16</sup>.

The significance of this argument is that 'economistic' struggles are not dismissed, as by so many socialists in **Marx's** time and since, as removed from any connection with political consciousness and socialism; rather, they are identified as the central element in the development of more explicit class consciousness and thus, potentially, a wider politicisation. In this sense the conception of 'class for itself' does not have to be confined to those historical moments when the working class consciously recognises its historic mission at the wholly political level of state power; it refers to a transitional dynamic, a pull through the materially-based necessity of basic struggles for what are objectively class interests towards the beginnings of a conscious, subjective awareness of class identity.

Of course, this **'pull'** does not automatically take the form of an uninterrupted progress towards class unity, as implied by the enthusiastic young authors of the *Manifesto*. But the crucial insight around

which **Marx** and **Engels** built their political lives was that the roots of any meaningful movement towards socialism by the class defined in terms of its potential for social transformation lie in the objective realities of class conflict which push workers, whatever their subjective consciousness, into resistance against capital.

Whatever the optimism of the clarion call rolled out in the Manifesto, it is these crucial insights we invoke in calling for a return by the left to 'class consciousness' – for a shift of emphasis away from programmatic rectitude on the one hand, and theoretical fixation on text or 'discourse' on the other, to the perhaps difficult recognition that the **key** to socialist advance lies in that most despised and least acknowledged expression of 'socialism from below', basic material class struggles.

## II

The zeitgeist of the 1840s, when meetings of thousands of workers inspired by the 'People's Charter' took place on the Yorkshire moors, and even of the second decade of the 20th century when American workers travelled miles across the Great Plains to attend socialist tent meetings in equal numbers, seem to **belong** to another world from that of late 20th-century consumerism and individualism. In this 'post-modern' age, consciousness of so 'fundamentalist' a category as class appears to have shrunk to a scarcely discernible pulse, a sluggish bleep on the blank screen of a commodity-based culture pushed relentlessly to the wildest shores of the 'global village'. And yet there remains a countervailing force, all the more **significant** for swimming against this overwhelming ideological stream. The persistence of highly conflictual economic struggles entered into by workers whose subjective consciousness may be **profoundly** reformist, not to say conservative, continues to confound prophets of 'post-industrial' stability and to demonstrate, as we argue below, a transformative potential in terms of both consciousness and praxis.

Recent events in the US such as the change in leadership of the AFL/CIO, the waging of a number of climactic strike struggles and, at the time of writing, a key national **victory** – in a strike for jobs and greater pay equality – have opened up a new receptiveness to class thinking in that most individualistic of cultures. During roughly the same period, the simmering anger provoked by years of neo-liberalism has been reflected in open political protest on the streets of France, South Africa, South Korea, and many other countries. Such develop-

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ments can be taken to illustrate the potential for renewed class-based revolt even after years of apparent quiescence.

How and why do apparently 'hegemonised' workers achieve such qualitative leaps into outright conflict with employers and the state? Marxist theoretical development in the wake of the distortions of Stalinism has concentrated almost entirely on the domination of such 'superstructural' factors as ideology, culture, and political process, and their role in structuring consciousness and blanking out dissent. In urging a more thorough exploration of the complexities of working-class consciousness and 'common sense', our own argument sets out to challenge this widespread assumption of the uncontested hegemony of ruling ideas.

We begin by reversing the critique. Just as a crude determinism of economic structures and interests cannot be assumed in the trajectory of class consciousness, nor can an uncontested 'overdetermination' of ruling-class or even reformist ideology be assumed to be a stable property of the capitalist system. Rather than positive endorsement of the ruling ideas of the epoch, a 'dull compulsion' to accept the apparently inevitable may be a more accurate description of at least some strands of working-class response to the prevailing system. And if we substitute fatalistic acceptance for coherent and positive consent, it becomes possible to sight gaps – potential breaks in the apparently seamless canvas of late 20th century 'common sense'.

We start by citing an absence: the absence of ideology. What is being proposed here is not that workers do not subscribe to ruling-class ideas wholly or in part, or that they do not accept, in one or other sense, the parameters of reformist ideology; the boundaries of that acceptance, and the pervasiveness of reformist ideology, are realities which if anything deserve much greater recognition in many segments of the left. Yet the impermanence, the instability, in many ways the fragility of this acceptance is also indicated when we probe more deeply into the precise nature of 'actually existing' working-class consciousness. Here we discover, rather than coherent and explicit assent to a consistent set of ideas and 'values', a more complex mix; one characterised less by undifferentiated ideological domination than by inconsistency, contradiction, and lack of information.

The essentially incoherent nature of working-class social and political attitudes was noted in a cluster of studies produced in the 1970s which united in indicating that workers' views on general social issues tend to exhibit a mixture of indifference and inconsistency rather than active 'legitimation' of the status quo.<sup>17</sup> The term 'pragmatic

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acceptance' was used by Michael Mann to express the essentially fatalistic, rather than actively participatory, dimension of workers' outlooks.<sup>18</sup> Later, Scott Lash provided strong grounds for a dismissal of workers' perceptions of class and similar political concepts as **confused** and **incoherent**.<sup>19</sup> But workers' consciousness is also **contradictory** – a crucial feature allowing a corresponding potential for struggle and subversion of ideology. Edward's and Scullion's 1982 study of workplace organisation shows shop stewards subjectively endorsing the profit-related ethos of their management while objectively undermining it with their own actions: 'There was, as it were, an unconscious form of resistance whereby stewards' everyday actions challenged managerial rights in many ways even though their articulated ideology involved commitment to the same aims . . .'.<sup>20</sup>

More recent research is less directly concerned with 'consciousness' but touches nevertheless on workers' outlooks and attitudes. For example, David Croteau's 1995 study of the apparently unbridgeable gulf between 'radical' and working-class politics shows that these (primarily white) workers' apparent dismissal of socialist ideas had little bearing on their endorsement of the prevailing ideology; in fact, as Croteau points out, the workers in his study were often considerably clearer as to the corrupt realities of present-day capitalism than were their 'radical' counterparts. Rather, workers' perceptions of society revealed a profound cynicism and fatalism, a sense that there is nothing you can do about these problems and that it is best simply to concentrate on one's **family** and **private concerns**.<sup>21</sup>

This essentially abstentionist outlook confirms our hypothesis of an 'absence' of ideology or indeed any positive, coherent conception of social structure. Nevertheless, the fragile balance between 'pragmatic acceptance' and the **underlying** resentment indicated in the details of Croteau's study do not augur well for any prognosis of **stability** in the conduct of capitalist relations. While the issue of **struggle** is unexplored by Croteau, who leaves his workers as fatalistic and powerless as they began, such apparent resignation stands in sharp contrast to his interviewees' anger over issues of working time and labour intensification; issues which have propelled many similarly 'non-political' groups of workers into major industrial **struggles** in both Britain and **America**.<sup>22</sup>

The attempt to draw links between such material conditions and potentially subversive action has led in recent years to a revival of the old refrain about 'economic determinism'. Chantal Mouffe, for example, writes: 'How can it be maintained that economic agents can have interests defined at the economic level which would be **repre-**

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sented a *posteriori* at the political and ideological levels? . . . that amounts to stating that interests can exist prior to the discourse in which they are formulated and articulated'.<sup>29</sup> The problem with this kind of argument is that it in itself advocates a crudely 'deterministic' relationship between different levels of operation of capitalist production relations. Workers do not take part in resistance because of, or through, a 'discourse' which explicitly rejects capitalism in political and ideological terms. Such resistance, or disillusionment, occurs as a result of the material impact – on those who, because of their class position, have no alternative – of the contradictions operating within capitalist production.

Many of these are expressed in the collapse of the mythical 1980s 'prosperity' of Thatcherism, swallowed whole by British 'New Times' discourse theorists but cruelly undercut for workers by factors which were starkly, non-'hegemonically' economic. A 1992 study of British workers in the same 'Reagan Democrat' social stratum as those in Croteau's research (known as 'C2s' from their position in British socio-economic census categories) sheds light on the essential *instability* of skilled workers' adherence to the 'hegemony' of the Thatcher years.<sup>34</sup> Rather than the 'prosperity' and individualist 'consumerism' emphasised in postmodernist analysis,<sup>35</sup> the overwhelming message that emerges from this research is one of widespread, and growing, economic insecurity. Respondents' 'perceptions' were only too well-founded on direct experience of redundancy, short-term contracts, house repossessions and the joblessness of their teenage children. The sense of insecurity and demoralisation conveyed in the words of these erstwhile working-class Tories – 'We are now going backwards . . . struggling to survive' . . . 'There's always that fear at the back of my mind' . . . 'It's dire – we've hit the bottom and can't go any further' – is potent testimony to the lack of permanence of apparently impregnable hegemonic structures. Disillusionment with Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy', once acclaimed as the pinnacle of a new culture of 'individual aspiration', is compounded by the massive intensification of labour, alongside pay freezes and other pressures on living standards, experienced by those lucky enough to retain 'core' employment.<sup>36</sup>

But there is another side to the coin of this bewildered demoralisation – the propensity of such economic factors to propel even the ideologically conservative 'C2's into action which challenges both capitalist production relations and the state. The relatively well paid and secure workers who, in addition to the much-vaunted 'self-

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employed', made up the subjects of the 1992 study were from the same stratum as those workers involved in key anti-employer struggles during the worst years of Thatcherism. The printworkers who fought the savage anti-Murdoch struggles at Wapping would fall almost entirely into the category hailed by post-modernist writers as swallowing whole the 'consumerist' bait of Thatcherism, as would Ford workers at Dagenham who staged a significant strike in the late 1980s which revealed the vulnerability of 'just-in-time' work arrangements. Many of the ambulance workers who took part in the protracted national dispute of 1989 were characteristic South-Eastern 'Tory waverers'.<sup>27</sup>

While the 'Reagan Democrats' and 'C2s' of our analysis so far, as predominantly white and (at least traditionally) 'privileged' workers, are **generally** presumed to be the most socially and politically conservative, the absence of coherent ideology and the presence of contradictory ideas is by no means exclusive to this stratum. In the face of very real fears of detention **and/or** deportation, immigrant workers such as farm labourers around the U.S. and Latino construction workers in Southern California have rebelled against their working conditions despite holding socially conservative ideas on reproductive rights, **family** 'values', and other 'hot button' issues. The point, however, is the same; struggles and confrontations based in class experience are seldom preceded by ideological clarity or 'political correctness'. If anything, it is the struggle that opens the way to new ideas and ways of viewing the world.

The lesson to be drawn would seem to be that no amount of conservative social ideology in the heads of workers is, ultimately, proof against their intermittent propulsion in an entirely different, and contradictory, direction. Yet it is the *economic circumstances* of these workers, rather than their initial consciousness, that propels them into resistance with the potential to challenge some of their most basic assumptions about the nature of the world. In this sense the struggle is not *chosen*, but neither is it, in certain circumstances, avoidable. **Ideology** may have **lifted** these workers out of their actual position in capitalist production relations; economic contradictions put them firmly back again.

Our focus on working-class consciousness or 'common sense' in terms of an *absence* of ideology, a 'pragmatic acceptance' of existing structures in contrast to any more positive endorsement of ruling-class ideology, needs to be complemented by a recognition of the impressive capacity of basic economic struggles for opening up, as it were, an

'epistemological break' in working-class consciousness. This has been testified to over and over, from the revolutionary upheavals of 1905, sparked by a dispute over composers' piece-rates, to late 20th-century class insights gained by midwestern American workers through their involvement in struggles such as the strikes and lockouts at A.E. Staley in Decatur, Illinois, the Detroit Newspapers, and elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

For well over a decade, a new 'common situation' (to borrow Marx's phrase in describing the formation of the early working class) has been experienced by ever wider sections of workers in both industrial and semi-industrial nations through drastic upheavals in the organization of work, labour markets, and even capital itself. Mergers, acquisitions, and transnationalization have produced ever more universal and visible organizations of capital. On the other hand, downsizing, contracting out, work intensification, and generally 'lean' norms of work organization now affect most working class people directly or indirectly across the world.<sup>29</sup>

This 'common situation' has had its impact in a measurable rise in class consciousness. A recent British survey showed the proportion assenting to the question 'Do you think there is a class struggle?' rising from 48% in 1964 to 81% in 1995.<sup>30</sup> In the U.S., the attitude toward strikes appears to have changed dramatically. While a 1984 poll showed that 45% of those questioned about strike situations supported management and 34% the strikers, in 1996 a nearly identical poll found a reversal of opinion as 46% sided with strikers and only 25% with management. More specifically, the recent wave of strikes at General Motors plants and, above all, the 1997 strike by 185,000 Teamsters against the United Parcel Service, gained majority 'public' support as more and more working people saw themselves in the same situation; polls indicated that 55% were for the UPS strikers and 27% for management. The fight for full-time jobs had become a social issue for much of the working class.

### III

The story behind the successful 15-day strike at the United Parcel Service in August 1997 provides an almost laboratory-style example of the impotence of explicit capitalist ideology in one of its most contemporary and 'hegemonic' forms – when the company launched a concerted ideological offensive in preparation for 1997 collective bargaining – and, in contrast, of the impact of an alternative agenda of ideas and organization among rank and file activists.

The UPS workforce includes just about every level of the working class. The drivers, although not exclusively white or even male, are among the **highly** paid full-time workers described as 'Reagan Democrats' or '**C2s**', while the sorters and loaders are racially diverse, mostly part-time, and fairly **low-paid**. The company believed that unity among these workers would collapse in the event of a strike, and large numbers of part-timers would cross the picket lines. What happened was the opposite. The strike was characterized by high levels of participation and mobilization, and a unity the company could not comprehend.

In the two years preceding the strike, the company mounted an ideological offensive meant to assure that disunity would be the order of the day. In 1995 they launched a new team concept programme, which like all such programmes was meant to win key sections of workers over to the company's ideology of 'competitive' goals – or at least to promote internalization of this piece of up-to-date bourgeois ideology among enough workers to head off an effective strike. The company overestimated the **degree** to which UPS workers would buy into this view of the world and the company, because they underestimated a process that had gone on among these workers for years – specifically, the long-term role of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the more recent dynamic of reform within the Teamsters as a whole in preparing the workforce for a fight.

When it was formed in 1976, UPS workers were already a major constituency for TDU. The number of UPS workers who became active **TDUers** over the years was small in relation to the rapidly growing workforce, but the group provided a core of knowledgeable rank and file leadership among both full-timers and **part-timers**.<sup>31</sup> UPS workers were no less likely to accept the pro-company logic of team concept than any others; but they had access to an alternative 'common sense' in the form of the TDU activists, the **regular** publications of TDU, and the critical literature on the topic developed by Labor Notes, an independent trade union magazine and education centre in Detroit which was widely used by TDU and later the Teamsters Union. At the same time, the broader reform process, with TDU as its **backbone**, brought an entirely new leadership, headed by former UPS worker Ron **Carey**,<sup>32</sup> to power in the Teamsters and initiated a process of **change** across the union that affected many UPS workers. The new leadership was one of the few in the U.S. to explicitly reject team concept and the whole 'partnership' notion.

Mike Parker tells how **TDUers** reacted to the launch of the UPS team concept programme:

**In January 1995, UPS moved a trailer into its yard at the Ceres centre (outside Modesto, California) to be used for Total Quality Management (TQM) and self-directed work teams. Activists responded by getting *Labor Notes* and TDU material (which arrived promptly over-night via UPS, they point out) and prepared to deal with the programs from the beginning. Although the company controlled how the workers were divided up, the activists had sufficient numbers and training that they were able to effectively counter management in every team it set up.<sup>13</sup>**

The union itself soon took up the TDU-initiated opposition to the team concept offensive. It directly **confronted** the pro-company ideological assumptions of team concept and in effect turned the entire company initiative around – against the goals of management. Teamster staffer Rand Wilson described the impact on the 1997 contract **fight**: 'The team concept campaign foreshadowed the contract campaign. UPS geared up its team concept activity as its preparation for the contract and by necessity we had to take them on as part of our **preparation**.'<sup>14</sup> Capitalist ideology not only failed to carry the day, it actually allowed or forced the union to campaign for a higher class consciousness.

The strike itself was not about team concept ideology, but about decidedly material issues and demands—above all the transformation of **thousands** of part-time jobs into full-time jobs, the reduction of the gap between part-time and full-time wages, and continued union influence over the pension plan. While there was a pay increase for the drivers, they had much less to gain in the most immediate sense than the part-timers who composed about 60% of the workforce. Yet they were as fervent as the part-timers.

Equally interesting in this respect was the more remote, yet sharply ideological fight over control of the pension plan. UPS workers in much of the country were part of a broader, multi-employer Teamster pension plan. UPS demanded its workers be taken out of the 'inefficient' union plan and put under a company-controlled plan, which, they claimed, would pay higher benefits. While the company's attempt to capture the pension plan may have been a bargaining ploy, the strikers took it seriously even though a certain leap in consciousness concerning the collectivist nature of the multi-employer plan was required. By the time the strike took place, that kind of collectivist consciousness was in place. **UPS's** attempt to convince them they could do a better job with the plan, because they were an efficient business, flopped completely. Union solidarity across company lines prevailed, a

mini-triumph for working class collectivism.

The UPS strike victory was followed by a strong ideological reaction from the big business media and conservative politicians in the U.S. In the wake of the strike, the court-appointed officer who had overseen the **1996** election that put Carey back in office by a 52% vote declared the election invalid due to campaign **funding** irregularities she had uncovered earlier. Although Carey himself was not implicated, consultants he had hired had in fact broken the rules. For the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and other papers, this was a heaven-sent opportunity. They published a barrage of anti-Carey editorials and articles, **often** recycling the same news, in an attempt to discredit Carey and pressure the court into **disqualifying** him, thus in effect throwing the election to Hoffa. The media barrage was joined by pro-Hoffa Republicans in Congress – a chorus of ruling-class outrage at the effectiveness of a rank-and-file leadership that had actually been able to fight effectively for its own side. Yet, while the negative publicity was bothersome, it did not reverse the sense of achievement or the deeper class **understanding** which had been **gained** by many UPS workers over the past couple of years.

The argument here is not that workers are not susceptible to appeals for labour-management cooperation or the superiority of business efficiency. There are too many examples of company successes to deny that and, of course, these ideas abound across society as today's common sense. The point is, workers are no more possessed of these ideas than **they** are of the working class alternatives, which tend to already be present. When they are in struggle even over simply economic demands, the alternative ideas can make more sense. When, as in the unusual case of UPS, the ideas have an organized rank and file advocate and a leadership committed to them, it can be the working class 'common sense' that prevails. In this case, the working class 'common sense' became a counter-hegemony that allowed the union to buck what many thought to be an irreversible trend toward low-wage contingent work.

A similar scenario – or what, with conscious organisation, has the potential to become one – is suggested in the **1996** strike by British postal workers against the introduction of teamworking by their employer, Royal Mail. While these rank-and-file trade unionists **fought** the Royal Mail 'Employee Agenda' proposals with a tenacity that might suggest (as indeed much of the media darkly hinted) an explicit political agenda, the reality is that their struggle was rooted in basic material resistance to **proposals** which ultimately threatened their job

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security, working conditions and living standards.<sup>35</sup>

'Teamworking' (as team concept is usually called in Britain), along with many similar programmes, has of course been accepted by countless union leaderships despite these **implications**.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the postal workers, an unusually clearheaded and determined rank-and-file leadership, particularly in the London area, made a conscious effort to alert an already combative membership to the real meaning of the proposals in terms of their concrete effects on working conditions, in contrast to the 'empowerment' gloss invoked by management: 'The truth is it is not a case of workers having more control, but managers being in total control and workers just having to accept 'flexible' working but never **having** it really defined what **they** are accepting, because the parameters are so enormous and totally defined by the **Business**.'<sup>37</sup>

The series of strikes carried out by postal workers during the summer of 1996 succeeded, through a level of unity and cohesion similar to that at UPS, in removing every line of the 'Employee Agenda' from the bargaining table. The dispute is **by** no means over, of course; a management philosophy which has been in clear evidence since the 1980s suggests that temporary worker victories are now met by more concerted attacks, rather than consolidation. London Underground workers' combined resistance – uniting two normally rivalrous unions – to the company's 'Action Stations' plan in 1988 was followed by wave after wave of management offensive until the proposals were finally implemented – a melancholy example of the success of this retrenchment policy.

To maintain the kind of conscious class approach shown by the postal workers' local leadership in the face of such management aggression and strategic clarity<sup>38</sup> requires more than simple 'militancy', **although** the mobilisation of the membership and its willingness to fight are of course central elements. It also requires a level of awareness of the overall meaning and direction of management strategy which in effect exposes its roots in capitalist production relations centring on exploitation. Such a perspective is, of course, the opposite of the 'co-operation' and 'social partnership' approaches with which British and American trade union leaderships forlornly aspire to court the employers' non-existent benevolence. **It denotes** a sharp awareness of which sides you, and they, are on; an undeviating cleavage to independent, class-based forms of worker organisation.

This kind of explicit class perspective cannot be left to chance. It requires a **strategy** of **grass-roots** activist organisation of the kind which informs Labor Notes and similar projects in other countries and, more

immediately, the sort of rank and file organisation exemplified in the TDU example above. But it is also important to be clear that the possibilities of class 'consciousness-raising' invoked in such activity are not the product of socialist wishful thinking, but of the material roots of resistance arising from class relations and conditions themselves. The political implications of 'everyday' working class struggle are not imposed from without, but are inherent.

Looked at from a **purely** 'political' perspective, the implications of the postal workers' resistance to teamworking, for example, are remarkable. Not only did they succeed in thwarting the goals of a multi-million pound 'corporation' in a struggle based on workers' rejection of supposedly **all-powerful** management ideology; they also resisted **teamworking** in direct defiance not only of their own union leadership but of the closely aligned 'modernist' perspectives of the (then) prospective Labour **government.**<sup>29</sup> The tradition of rank-and-file militancy which made this struggle possible was itself rooted in a series of spontaneous walkouts by postal workers which consistently flouted the draconian anti-union laws introduced by the Conservatives but stoutly backed by 'New Labour'. For workers supposedly colonised by (if not ruling-class then at least reformist) capitalist ideology, this stand must carry massive **potential** political significance. It remains to develop ongoing organisational vehicles through which such potential can be realised.

We have already referred to the impact of cataclysmic, long-fought struggles like the Staley dispute in transforming the consciousness of their participants – in a small number of cases, with permanent effect. Yet less prolonged and dramatic strikes like the postal workers', and more recently, that of British Airways cabin crew and catering workers, are linked to the same dynamic of detachment from both the material and ideological constraints of capitalism. Such 'breaks' in hegemony, which can be acknowledged to be an **ordinary** fact of capitalist class relations, do not stem from any pre-existing opening-up of consciousness amongst the workers concerned. Rather, in many ways they reflect the **ongoing** nature of working-class consciousness in its many-stranded character which both resists and admits the potential of a wider conceptualisation of existing **socio-economic** structures.

British Airways staff, particularly the cabin crew involved in one dimension of the dispute, are **hardly** the standard cast of working-class rebellion. Yet, like countless other groups of workers propelled into struggle, they were forced to transcend subjective conformity and conservatism by the brutal **reality** of (in their case) a 'Business

Efficiency Programme' based on a £1 billion cost-saving pay and conditions package which effectively freezes pay and removes overtime enhancements. In the words of one senior cabin crew member: 'We are **being** forced to strike for our basic **rights**'.<sup>9</sup>

The point here, then, is not that workers need to be 'incited' to resist capital by a corps of eager socialists. Rather, what is required of socialists is a commitment to focusing on and developing the implications of *existing*, contradictory, conflictual worker consciousness. The observation made by Lenin among others that the working class is ultimately far *more* revolutionary than any socialist 'vanguard' when it comes to **fully-** fledged **struggle** may seem absurd within today's round of undramatic, economically- motivated confrontations. But the point we are making here is that it is not the *readiness* of the working class to resist which is in question, but the **understanding**, channelling, development and sustaining of that readiness – and its potential for challenging labour movement reformism from within – by a socialist leadership locating itself within the class rather than reading that class politically-correct programmes from without.

#### IV

In making this point we are **arguing** for a reversal of standard left conceptions of socialist politics. Rather than proceeding from a carefully-worked out, analytically correct programme to the dissemination of such analysis to the masses (of one sort or another), this shift in perspective would abandon the pursuit of programmatic rectitude in favour of a focus on, and engagement with, existing levels of **working-** class consciousness and conflict.

The practical corollary is full adoption of a focus on working-class interests and struggle; a focus which has traditionally proved difficult for the **left**. The recent 'resurgence' of labour has been enthusiastically greeted by many socialists, perhaps particularly in the U.S., resulting in a welcome stimulation of debate between left union officials and radical intellectuals. Unfortunately, even this degree of left turn towards some aspects of working- class *realpolitik* may not be adequate for what we would define as the task **in hand**; that of building an alternative, explicitly class-based, current of resistance to capital within at least the 'advanced' sections of the class.

Such an approach calls for a consistent orientation towards the everyday 'economistic' demands and actions of a working class which may exhibit, for principled socialists, a discomfiting conservatism on

many issues, or at least the kind of **gulf** between its own conceptions and those of middle-class socialism shown in **Croteau's** study. Where this gulf relates to issues such as racism or sexism, it must of course be confronted; but confronted in context. Even given such difficulties, the kind of 'sacrifice' of principles and programme required of socialists in starting from where the working class is, rather than where they might like it to be, is in our view indispensable if existing patterns of working class resistance are to realise their objective potential and meaning. Any such process requires from socialists the ability to see, and draw out, the political and class implications of what may appear on the face of it to be decidedly 'non-political' struggles.

Encouraging a process of *transition* from acting on basic economic demands to the explicit understanding of the class meaning of such demands may require forms of organisation which are themselves 'transitional'. The concept of transition is central in shaping a politics which, through its necessary roots in working-class concerns and conditions, can act to build a 'bridge' between the material conditions which continuously propel workers into struggle and a **political** perspective which can address and make sense of that process.

Historically, structures like *soviets* have been the most revolutionary forms of organisation that encapsulate this transitional dynamic in arising from basic mass strike movements, while pointing toward class power. Such structures are of significance not least in terms of their *spontaneous* eruption during major episodes of working-class struggle. As such, they have been a feature not only of the revolutionary era of the first world war period but also of more 'up to date' upsurges. In 1972, Chilean workers set up *cordones* to fight for the **Allende** government; in 1979, Iranian workers created *shoras* to safeguard the overthrow of the Shah. The Portuguese revolution in 1974 almost immediately threw up workers' commissions which united workers across union barriers within the workplace; these developed rapidly into *inter-empresa* (inter-factory) committees which clearly mirrored the Russian *soviets*, from necessity rather than conscious imitation.

There has also been a history of political attempts to create cross-union transitional formations **along** the lines of the Minority Movement of the 1920s in Britain (with the Comintern encouraging similar efforts in the U.S. and Canada in the Trade Union Educational League, and with less success in France through the 'friends of unity' in the **CGT**).<sup>4</sup> The Minority Movement explicitly saw itself as 'a "transitional" organisation, a means of broadening the political consciousness of discontented trade unionists. . . . The main idea was

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not immediately to push 'the union leadership into militant actions from below' but rather to relate the Communists' '...work in the trade unions directly to the creation of a revolutionary consciousness *in preparation for* the acute crisis which would arise with the outbreak of conflict in the mining industry'.<sup>43</sup>

Along similar lines, the need to build a class-conscious, independent leadership, rooted *within* the labour movement in *anticipation* of future upsurges, is now being explicitly taken up in a growing number of countries through cross-union formations of various kinds, usually based around a publication. One of the oldest of these is *Labor Notes* in the U.S., but to the list of such publications and cross-union centres has been added *Trade Union News* in Britain, *Solidariteit* in the Netherlands, *Trade Union Forum* in Sweden, *Labour Notes* in New Zealand, and *Labour* in Taiwan, alongside the Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE) networks in Germany, Brazil and North America among *others*.<sup>44</sup> Such publications set out to make coherent what rank and file union activists do less visibly day in and day out as they operate on the terrain of their members' basic interests and need for class organisation.

Projects like those listed above, by publishing reports of struggles and issues across the class, providing support contacts in other sectors for those in dispute, and bringing activists across employment together in schools and conferences, begin to demonstrate to rank-and-file trade unionists the class *meaning* of their everyday activity, without the need for principles and programmes dictated from above. Such initiatives cannot be sufficient to *complete* the transition to a 'class for itself' consciousness by the activists involved; but they are a necessary beginning for such a process.

The issue of membership control over even workplace union leaderships is another central focus of these cross-movement organisations, as indicated in the interactions between US *Labor Notes* and union rank-and-file caucuses like Teamsters for a Democratic Union.<sup>45</sup> The constant flux identified above between the bureaucratisation of unions as organisations, and the subversion of this by the concerns and demands of the membership, has been *consciously* confronted by rank-and-file union activists in such formations with the deliberate adoption of strategies structured to pull in the *opposite* direction – towards the creation of organic links between the workplace-based concerns of the membership and the policies and actions of their representatives. In a few cases, like the rank-and-file based involvement of Teamsters for a Democratic Union in the demands and organisation of the UPS strike,

the threads come together with a **powerful** result.

We have seen that, with or without the support of socialists, workers will continue to organise on the basis of their own necessary, if sporadic, conflict with the system to create 'ramparts' of resistance and, whatever their apparently conservative consciousness, intermittently enter into outright confrontation with employers and the state. Socialists have never been required to **generate** class **struggle** and **organisation**; where **they** may be **useful** is in pointing out its class meaning and potential. Existing efforts to adopt this approach remain slight in comparison to the yawning gaps in consciousness and organisation they confront; yet they present a crucial perspective, and example, of **cross-movement** currents of opposition and resistance, rooted in the labour movement, which can begin to build towards a class response to the **deepening** social crisis.

## NOTES

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