



**TRADE UNIONS**

**PILLARS OF CAPITALISM**

**Internationalist Perspective**

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A series of articles debating the nature of trade unions in capitalist society and how revolutionary workers should relate to them.

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## **How the unions became enemies of the working class**

Many of us can agree that the unions are an integral part of the capitalist system. Not just the corrupt ones and those with a heavy bureaucratic apparatus but also those who profess a belief in "grass roots democracy" or even in "revolution". The arguments given for that position have been mostly empirical. Indeed, time and time again, the unions have screwed the workers, contained and defanged their struggle, have spread capitalist ideology in the working class and acted as capital's police on the shop floor. But empirical arguments are not enough. Indeed, on the basis of past experience alone, one could very well conclude that global revolution is impossible, as Paul wrote. Some have argued that it's the union's function within the capitalist economy - to manage the sale of labor power- which inevitably ties it to the system and hence opposes it to the class whose fundamental interests are irreconcilable with those of that

system. That is true but it's not sufficient either. One could argue that as long as the goals of the struggle don't go beyond obtaining better wages and working conditions, or preventing their deterioration, and as long as those goals are achievable within capitalism, the irreconcilability is not immediate and the existence of permanent institutions to negotiate a better price for variable capital remains in the interests of the workers. In short one could argue, as does Adam [Buick of the Socialist Party of Great Britain], that despite the empirical evidence and despite the integration of the unions in the structure of the capitalist economy, the existing unions are bad but unionism is good.

Moreover, despite the widespread disillusion, many workers still see the unions as their (imperfect) organisations, and sometimes the most combative workers are active in them. And sometimes capitalists fight the unions and try to get rid of them. When they attack a union and the workers rise up to defend "their" organisation, should

revolutionaries who understand the real role of the union tell them not to wage that fight, even though the attack is clearly meant to defeat the workers and have a free hand to impose more exploitation? What to do when the workers most willing to fight are shop stewards and others who ardently defend the unions - not the leadership but the organisation? Should we simply call upon workers to leave the unions? And what do we offer as alternative, not just in times of open struggle but also when the conditions for collective struggle aren't ripe while the pressure from capital continues? Is the 'outside and against' directive more than an empty slogan when the only meetings where workers gather are those organised by the unions?

To answer those and many other questions pertaining to the practical aspects of class struggle and the defense of workers' immediate interests, the question why unions are not just counter-revolutionary but against the working class in their daily practice, must be answered first.

The answer is not that obvious. After all, it is a logical reaction of workers, who are utterly powerless as individuals towards their employers who seek to exploit them as much as possible, to band together in permanent organisations to defend the price of their labor power. The first unions were clearly created by the working class even though many

did bear the corporatist imprints of the guilds (professional organisations from the pre-capitalist era). Their existence as permanent organisations was a necessity, not only because of the permanency of capitalist pressure, but also because of the need of permanent preparation for confrontations with the capitalists, confrontations which often look the form of wars of attrition which the workers were doomed to lose without this preparation (the build-up of strike funds etc). Likewise, the growth of unions into bigger organisations, operating on a national scale, reflected the need of workers to increase their power by extending their class solidarity. So the growth of the unions reflected and stimulated class consciousness. Capitalists feared and loathed them and fought them bitterly.

Yet very soon, the permanency of these large organisations posed a problem. The class struggle goes through ups and downs which reflect the contradictory tendencies to which the workers, as an exploited class, are subjected. The conditions of exploitation push the workers to fight collectively and thereby to assert itself as a class with interests separate and opposed to those of capital; but those same conditions also create competition among workers, atomisation, alienation, passivity, receptiveness to the ideology of the dominant

class. Those two tendencies do not neutralize each other but give the class struggle a very non-linear character, with sudden advances and retreats, moments of rising class consciousness and stretches of 'social peace', as one or the other of those tendencies dominate. During those periods of no collective struggle, when atomisation and alienation prevail, these big permanent organisations cannot express what isn't there, a class collectively fighting. It does not mean they immediately become bourgeois but they inevitably acquire an autonomy from the class they are supposed to represent. As autonomous institutions they inevitably develop hierarchical, authoritarian attitudes and relations and come to have interests which are distinct from those of the class as a whole. Thus the source of conflict of interests between the working class and the unions is already potentially present in the permanence of unions as social institutions.

I write 'potentially' because from this does not yet follow that these institutions must side with capital against the workers. For this to happen, these institutions must first become part of capital, absorbed into the social fabric weaved by the law of value. This did not happen immediately because the extension of the law of value throughout society was a slow, gradual process. In the early stages of this process, the

domination of capital over society was only 'formal'. The work process itself was at first not yet intrinsically capitalist, capitalism only squeezed as much surplus value as possible from it by making the working day as long as possible and keeping the wages as measly as possible. It took a long time for a specifically capitalist method of production (based on machinism, which reversed the relation worker-technology: the tool was an extension of the worker's hand but now the worker became an appendage of the machine) to develop and become dominant. The giant leaps in productivity which technology-based production unleashed created mass production and set the stage for capitalism to transform the totality of society in its own image, which meant that the law of value came to determine social relations not just in the sphere of production but also in distribution, education, entertainment, culture, media and every other aspect of human life.

But before that process (called the transition to real domination of capital) amassed critical weight, there remained a large space within society that was not yet penetrated by the law of value. Therein, not only expressions of pre-capitalist classes survived but organisations of the fledgling working class too could maintain a relative autonomy. Unions were not the only permanent workers organisations that flourished in

that space: there were workers' cooperatives, mutual aid societies, political mass parties, cultural organisations, newspapers, etc. that were genuine expressions of the working class. The modest size of the bourgeois state apparatus also reflected the merely formal control of capital over society. The fact that the state's policy towards the unions was largely repressive shows that capital had not yet developed the means to organically integrate them; the unions were still by and large standing outside the state.

As the real domination of capital progressed and the complexity, technification and interwovenness of the capitalist economy developed, the state gradually fused with the economy and its tentacles spread over civil society. It's striking how this transformation of the economy and the integration of the unions into the structure of capitalist society went hand in hand, in particular towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

The test of that integration came when the interests of capitalism and those of the working class (and humanity) became diametrically opposed as never before. What was at issue was not the price of variable capital but its survival or destruction. In the first world war, many millions of proletarians were slaughtered and it happened with the active collaboration of the unions. This epochal event

signalled a new paradigm in which both crisis and war meant something different than before: they became both catastrophic and global in nature as well as essential to the continuation of capitalist accumulation.

Today more than ever, there cannot exist any large permanent institution outside of the fabric of capital. That is true not just for unions but also for churches, political parties, cultural institutions and so on. The market either absorbs them, accords them a specialized function within its overall operating structure, a niche according to what they can do for the valorisation of capital, or marginalizes them, makes them disappear. When the class struggle heats up, the market shifts, a demand is created for a company of management of 'human resources' that has a more radical market image, which is quickly filled, either by a new union or by a radicalisation of the existing ones. Neither represents a gain for the working class. Today, there are no longer any progressive factions of capital. The unions' interests are inextricably bound to those of capital, to those of the nation. The logic of capital makes them complicit in trying to impose the worst possible fate on the working class. In the revolutionary struggle, which is a defensive struggle, the working class will have to take on the entire capitalist machinery, including the unions.

It is true that this does not mean that every act or every word of the unions are opposed to the immediate interests of the working class. The productivity-increases made possible by the progress of capital's real domination allowed capital to accord improvements of the living standards and to increase exploitation (increase the portion of the labor day that is unpaid) at the same time, at least in period of expansion. It doesn't like to do this, of course, since every wage gain is a profit loss, but over time it came to realize that this can be in its own interests. The main reason is that the production process under real domination, with its huge assembly lines and increased specialisation and thus interdependency, became more vulnerable to interruptions, to class struggle. That was a powerful incentive, especially in the post-world war two period, to grant better wages and to give the unions a bigger say in the management of the economy.

The unions have their own particular interests. As companies that manage the sale and the smooth exploitation of variable capital, they compete among themselves and have a market image to defend, both in regard to the workers they seek to represent and in regard to the enterprises with whom they seek to negotiate. Their credibility is their most valuable asset and if it's necessary to protect it, they can sometimes

drive a hard bargain with the buyers of labor power. The most intelligent capitalists realize that unions can only fulfil their capitalist function if they have some credibility as defenders of the workers and must do what they have to do to maintain it.

The international waves of class struggle in the '60's and '70's which repeatedly broke through the dykes of unionism and did great damage to capitalist profits and to the myth of unions as defenders of the working class, was a powerful stimulant to the restructuring of the capitalist economy that followed it. The 'post-Fordism' in which it resulted, with its increased automation, the computerization of labor, the decentralisation of production, the explosion of outsourcing, subcontracting and temp work, the increased mobility of capital (vastly expanding the use layoffs and closings, and the threat thereof, as social weapons) decreased the vulnerability of production to industrial action considerably. By decreasing that vulnerability, capital also decreased its dependence on the unions. This allowed for more anti-unionism among capitalists, and led to a marked increase of 'union-busting'. But this also helped the unions to shore up their credibility in the eyes of the workers somewhat, because the enemy of your enemy can seem to be your friend.

The unions resisted the post-



Fordist trend, in part to maintain their credibility in the eyes of the workers and in part because it was and is a threat to their own power. But since the trend reflected not a mere policy choice but the direction in which capitalism, of which they are a part, was going, their resistance was doomed to be ineffective. The alternative of the unions to this trend is conservative, to resist changes in capitalism. As this is impossible, they end up almost invariably defending 'capitalism lite', layoffs, but less layoffs than the bosses are demanding, wage cuts, but with a percentage and a half shaved off. But, they need a culprit, a scapegoat for the worker's anger, and since they are tied to national capital, the scapegoat is usually foreign competition (foreign workers really). That makes the unions the most ardent defenders of protectionism. As an economic recipe that is plain stupid and sometimes really annoying to other factions of capital, but politically it is very useful to capital because it makes them work tirelessly to spread the nationalist poison into the working class.

- *Sander*

## **The role of unions today: the discipline and control of the working class**

It seems to me that the discussions about unions amongst revolutionaries, generally mix two separate, though related discussions. One concerns the role of unions today: are they enemies of the working class; an integral part of the politico-economic and ideological apparatus of capital. The other concerns the problem of how revolutionaries are to forge links with the working class, involve themselves in its struggles, become active factors in the battles waged by workers. These two questions should not be confused. Even if we conclude, as I believe we must, that unions are today formidable obstacles to the unfolding of the class struggle, institutions of the class enemy, the issue of how revolutionaries are to forge links with the working class must be confronted. At the same time, the need to forge links with the working class must not lead revolutionaries to conclude that -- in some fashion or other -- they must work within the unions, because that is where the workers are. Our conclusion as to the role of unions today, should not be driven by the need -- understandable though it is -- to physically engage in class struggle. Rather, the mode of our intervention in the class struggle

should – in large part – be shaped by the conclusions we draw as to the role that unions play in the present epoch of the real domination of capital.

One more point before I turn to the issue of the role of unions today: I am deliberately not using the language of the class “nature” of unions, or speaking of their “essence.” That is because I believe that the role of determinate institutions, such as unions, is shaped by historical development, and is not reducible to a fixed nature or essence. Marxism is a genetic or genealogical theory; it analyzes and explains the historical role of determinate institutions, the historical trajectory of social relations – with a view to revolutionary intervention. Thus, in the case of unions, for example, the focus must be on the role they play in the historical unfolding of the class struggle, and their relation to the reproduction of the dominant social relations; a role that changes as capitalism undergoes its transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labor to capital. While such a genealogy of the unions is necessary, this text can do no more than indicate the broad outlines of the development of unions over the past century; a more thorough genetic account remains to be written.

If we turn back to the first decade of the twentieth century, the social landscape included two distinct types of unions – each of them

organs of the working class, instruments of its struggle. There were the trade unions, exemplified by the [AFL](#) in the US, which limited themselves to the struggle for reforms (higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions) within the capitalist system. And there were the revolutionary syndicalist unions, exemplified by the [IWW](#) in the US, the CGT in France, the [CNT](#) in Spain, which waged the class struggle to overthrow the capitalist state and the social relations determined by the system of wage labor. While the trade unions were not revolutionary, in contrast to the syndicalist organizations, they were organs of class struggle, expressions of the working class, not yet an integral part of the apparatus of capital.

Over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, both types of unions were incorporated into the politico-economic and ideological apparatus of capital – a process integrally linked to the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital (see the text of Sander, “How The Unions Became Our Enemies,” for a more thorough analysis of this process). This transformation of the unions did not occur from one day to the next (with the outbreak of World War I), but filled an era that spanned several decades. In the case of revolutionary syndicalism, the IWW, for example, played a



vital role in the Seattle general strike of 1919, probably the high point of the revolutionary wave in the US. And even in 1923 with the Centralia strike, or in the coal miners strikes of 1926 in Colorado and in “bloody Harlan,” the IWW could still be the instrument of class struggle – albeit a class struggle in its ebb phase. To take one more example of the vitality of revolutionary syndicalism beyond 1914, the AAUD and the AAUD-E in Germany (the former linked to the KAPD) numbered tens of thousands of revolutionary workers and engaged in massive struggles throughout the early 1920’s.

However, by the end of the 1920’s (with perhaps a last gasp in Spain with the decision of the CNT to support the Republic in the civil war in Spain in 1936) syndicalist unions either became revolutionary political organizations, as opposed to mass unions (this was the case with the KAUD in Germany in the early 1930’s with its few hundred members), or became mass industrial unions, like the French CGT, in which case they were incorporated into the apparatus of capital (in the case of the CGT, as the organ of the Stalinist party). The quintessential industrial union of this epoch, the CIO, in the US, the model for industrial unions in the Fordist era of capitalism, was from its very inception an organ of capital – and this despite the bitter opposition of a part of the capitalist class to the unionization of the

industrial working class that the organizing struggles of the CIO produced. If Henry Ford and the steel barons originally fought the CIO, the Roosevelt administration recognized that industrial unions were a necessity for capitalism as it sought a way out of the depression, and as it prepared for war. It was this latter tendency that prevailed, just as Keynesianism prevailed over the doctrines of laissez-faire in economic theory and policy.

The result was the emergence of industrial unions whose role was the discipline and control of the working class. That is the reality of unions in the present epoch, whether their origins are to be found in the craft unions of the AFL, the revolutionary syndicalist unions of the CGT, or the mass industrial unions of the CIO; a reality that manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways, economic, political, and ideological.

The need to discipline and control the working class has of course always been a problem for capital. In the epoch of its formal domination, capital could rely on traditional means of ideological control, such as the church and patriarchal social relations, together with the brutal violence of its Pinkerton’s and company police to control its labor force. In the epoch of its real domination, with the dramatic shift in the organic composition of capital attendant on the growing weight of technology

in the productive process, more sophisticated means of discipline and control have become necessary. External forces (Church or goons) cannot be depended on to assure the needed level of discipline and control; instead, internal means, the way the worker is “constructed” as a subject, ideologically interpellated (subjectivated by capital), become the veritable basis for capital to discipline and control the working class. The unions have become vital factors in this process, the arm of capital within the physical ranks of the working class. This can be seen in the economic, political, juridical, and ideological domains. Economically, unions have become an important factor in the management of capitalist enterprises (co-management, for example, in Germany, where union representatives sit on the boards of the largest corporations), and important shareholders in the firms that employ “their” members (in Sweden, for example, the unions are among the biggest shareholders in the largest companies, thanks to legally mandated investments by the union pension funds). Politically, the unions, through the political parties of the left in which they play a preponderant role, have entered the government in most liberal-democratic regimes, thereby shaping policy, especially with respect to labor issues (imposition of austerity on the

working class during periods of economic crisis; mobilization for the army during war). Juridically, the labor contract, negotiated and enforced by the unions, has become the guarantee of “labor peace” for its duration, incorporating the unions directly into the legal apparatus of the capitalist state. Ideologically, the unions have become a privileged vehicle for the subjectivation of the worker as citizen of the democratic state, loyal to its constitution, devoted to the nation. Indeed, the unions, as institutions, are congenitally tied to the nation, and to nationalism, the two most formidable obstacles to the class struggle.

In an epoch where the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production, threatens the whole of the human species with catastrophe, the unions must be judged on the basis of their incorporation into the apparatus of capital, the role they play in the discipline and control of the working class, not on the basis of their capacity to deliver a better contract to a diminishing portion of the global working class – and that in exchange for the “labor peace” that permits capital to continue to ravage the planet. In an epoch when only autonomous class struggle, with the potential for extension, constitutes the basis for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the unions must be recognized for what they have

historically – though now irretrievably – become: organs of capital, enemies of the working class. Without clarity on this point, it seems to me that revolutionaries have nothing to offer workers by way of intervention in the class struggle – and therein lies the enormous importance of the present discussion of the role of unions.

- *Mac Intosh*

## **The formal and real domination of capital and the unions**

In a series of articles that are part of an ongoing discussion on the role of unions today, we have linked our claim that unions in the present epoch constitute agents of capital, powerful weapons of the capitalist class and state, to the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital. Adam has responded by asserting that, according to Marx, the transition from formal to the real domination of capital is simply “the replacement of manufacture by machinofacture,” that this process was already complete by the 1840’s (long before we claim that the unions were transformed into agents of capital), and that in applying the terms formal and real domination of capital to domains of society other than the economy, we are speaking of a different phenomenon than the one he (and Marx) are referring to: the phenomenon of “culture,” which pertains to a very different transition than that from the formal to the real domination of capital. We believe that Adam is mistaken on all these points, and that his mistakes have profound implications for how revolutionaries understand the role of unions today, and for their intervention in the class struggle. Let us explain.

When, in the manuscripts of *Capital*, Marx speaks of the

transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labor to capital (the transition from a virtually total reliance on the extraction of absolute surplus-value to an increasing reliance on the extraction of relative surplus-value in the English textile mills of the 1850's-1860's), he is providing a theory of a process that was only at its very inception in historical actuality. What Marx articulated was a tendency in the production of capital that would only seize hold of the actuality of capitalist production on a broad scale over many decades; a tendency that would only come to fruition globally in the course of the twentieth century (even as the extraction of absolute surplus-value would never completely disappear while capital reigned supreme, and under determinate conditions would even experience a renewal). Marx's theorization constitutes a genealogy of capital, a theory of the immanent tendencies of the production of capital, not an account of a process that was already complete. This distinction between theory and historical actuality, between the production of theory by Marx (or by Marxists) and the production of capital in historical actuality, is crucial to the task at hand. The latter cannot be reduced to the former, as Adam seems to do, so that, for him, Marx's theoretical account of the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labor to capital

becomes tantamount to the actualization of that tendency in historical time and space.

That what Marx designated as the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labor to capital (or the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital) was only at its very inception in historical actuality in the mid-nineteenth century - however prescient was Marx's theorization of that phenomenon - is clear to economic historians (bourgeois or Marxist). A few citations should suffice. Thus, according to A.E. Musson: "Even as late as 1870 about half the total steam horsepower in manufacturing was in textiles .... In many trades power-driven mechanization had as yet made comparatively little impact. The great majority of industrial workers in 1851 and perhaps in 1871 were not in large-scale factory industry but were still craftsmen in small workshops. The massive application of steam power did not occur until after 1870." (Musson, "Technological Change and manpower," *History* 67, p.240) R. Cameron, in his *Economic History of the World*, points out that "Agriculture was still the largest employer of labour until as late as 1921, with domestic service second. The textile industries accounted [in 1851] for less than 8 percent of the labor force. Blacksmiths outnumbered workers in the primary iron industry; shoemakers were more numerous

than coalminers.” (p.226) Here both Musson and Cameron are speaking of England, by far the most industrialized country in the nineteenth century. Beyond England, with its transition to machinism, at least in the textile industry, in the mid-nineteenth century, the methods and tools of production did not yet fundamentally differ from those that shaped the pre-capitalist workshop, and the transition to the real subsumption of labor to capital had scarcely begun. Thus, as Cameron shows, in France, to take but one case, “as late as the Second Empire [1860’s] handicrafts, artisan and domestic industry accounted for three quarters or more of total industrial’ production.” (p.238) And most laborers did not then work in capitalist industry. Indeed, at the outbreak of World War I, peasants still composed the largest segment of the working population in every country of the world, and a near majority in all the developed countries, except for England and Belgium. For Ernest Mandel: “When Volume I of Capital was first published, capitalist industry, though predominant in a few Western European countries, still appeared as an isolated island encircled by a sea of independent farmers and handicraftsmen which covered the whole world, including the greater part of Europe.” (“Introduction” to Marx, Capital, Volume I, Penguin Books, p.11)

Beyond the very limited extent to which the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital had progressed at the time that Marx published volume I (1867), it is necessary to add that Marx’s analysis in that volume was focused on the production of capital, ignoring its circulation, as well as the process of accumulation in its totality. Yet despite what Adam seems to think, the transition from formal to real domination was never conceived by Marx to be limited to industrial production alone. Indeed, if one studies all the manuscripts for Capital, including the crucial 1861-1863 manuscript, only recently published and translated in its entirety, as well as the Grundrisse (the first draft of Capital, 1857), and “The Results of the Immediate Process of Production” (not completed until 1866), it is clear that Marx envisaged the transition from formal to real domination to encompass the whole of the economy, and not just industrial production.

To limit the phenomenon of the real domination of capital to industrial production, or even to the whole of the economy, constitutes a denial of the depth and scope of the transformation of the human and natural world wrought by capitalism and the operation of the law of value. We are asserting that, beyond capital’s real domination of the economy (the historical actualization of which shaped the twentieth

century, and is still not complete even today), it is no less important for Marxists to provide a theoretical account, and genealogical analysis, of the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital in all the other domains of human existence (politics, law, art, science, ideology (not conceived simply as false consciousness), the symbolic realm, and the very “construction of the human subject. While Marx provides important theoretical insights in these domains, this is a task that has only begun to be addressed by revolutionaries. Adam, however, relegates all that to the “cultural” domain, implicitly reproducing the disastrous base/superstructure model of the economic determinist version of Marxism; the version of Marxism that came to dominate the Second International, as well as the Third and Fourth, and from which Marxist revolutionaries must extricate themselves under pain of falling into theoretical sterility and political irrelevance.

For us, the real domination of capital entails not just the penetration of the law of value and machinism into every facet of the cycle of the accumulation process, but also into the once autonomous realms of culture, civil, society, and private life. Indeed, this is the same transformation that has occurred in the economic domain, but which does not cease there. The development of capital

necessitates its domination and control not just of the economy, but of all of society. It makes no sense to separate these several aspects of the same process, as does Adam. Indeed, it is the reconstitution of the productive and industrial process by machinism that constitutes the veritable basis for the penetration of the law of value into the politico-cultural domains. Indeed, this latter is the continuation of the processes of quantification, instrumentalization, commodification, abstraction, and the universal reign of the exchange mechanism and the market, that was first instantiated by the triumph of machinism in the industrial and productive process. And the seizure of the political, cultural, and symbolic realms has become a lynchpin for the real domination of capital, the site for the extension of the domination and control by capital over the totality of human life. These extra-economic facets of working class existence, no less than the point of production in the narrow sense of the word, becomes the locus of the class battles of the present epoch. It is here that the link between the real domination of capital and the unions must be forged.

It is not surprising that Adam wants to separate these processes and limit the transition to real domination to just industry (and if we were to take his assertion that that transition had been completed by the 1840's seriously, that would



mean basically only the English textile industry) and reduce the analysis of the wider implications to a mere “cultural critique” that has nothing to do with the transformation of capitalism at its industrial core. The understanding of the transition to real domination as a much wider and deeper phenomenon leads to conclusions he cannot accept: that the penetration in depth of the law of value establishes an intrinsic capitalist *modus operandi* not only in industry, but in all sectors of the economy, and that means everywhere, since it also integrates all sectors that were standing outside of it, into the economy. In other words, it means that the unions, mass parties and all other institutions that once enjoyed a relative autonomy in a civil society that was only formally controlled by capital, have all become, irreversibly, part and parcel of capitalism.

Adam seems to believe that unions and probably also electoral politics, are a terrain that is neither intrinsically capitalist or proletarian, part of a civil society that can be used by both. If that were the case, obviously revolutionaries would have to be in those arenas and try to use them for the defense of the workers’ immediate interests as well as for revolutionary propaganda. That is a variation upon a main theme of capitalist propaganda: that “democracy” creates a “marketplace of ideas” in which all viewpoints can freely

compete. The part that is true in that claim is that “civil society” is indeed a market. It operates according to market mechanisms, i.e. the law of value, which determines how it does and does not function. Like every market, it is part of a wider web, the global market, the fabric of capitalist society. So when the unions scheme against workers, they do not betray their class, they act in self-defense, as an intrinsic part of capital. There is a terrain in which both the working class and the capitalist class are acting. But it is not the unions or electoral politics, it is the working class struggle in which capital acts through the unions.

But what about the claim that the workers need permanent mass organizations to help stave off the downward pressure on wages, since that pressure is permanent too? That claim rests on the dubious assumption that unions really do help stave off the downward pressure on wages. They may do so when their credibility is at stake but in the end they are part of the capitalist system that they help to manage, and when capital needs wage cuts, they are the ones that coat the bitter pill and make the workers swallow it. They are the ones who dress up our defeats as victories.

But what about the good unions, those yet to be founded? The claim that we need unions, old or new, to defend our working conditions

outside of periods of open collective struggle assumes that it is possible for workers to defend themselves without open struggle. We think that is a big mistake. When there is no open struggle and no threat thereof, there is nothing that stops capital from imposing what it wants. And when there's no danger of open struggle, because workers are scared or demoralized or confused or for whatever reason, that is certainly not the time at which the unions feel a great need to defend them. It is only when the workers want to struggle, that the unions adopt a combative camouflage.

But what about the money collected by the unions, isn't that an essential weapon to win strikes? Naturally, that is the workers' money, coming out of their dues, they have a right to it. But that doesn't make the unions "their" organizations, any more than the insurance companies that provide them with health care are really theirs. Besides, as Eric has already pointed out, money is not the decisive factor in struggles today. If a struggle becomes a battle of attrition, going on and on thanks to the union's deep pockets, it almost always ends in a crushing defeat. The capitalist wins because he can count on the solidarity of his class, on the state, its courts, its police, on bank loans, on whatever it takes. It is not the puny sums the workers can obtain to avoid starvation while striking that can

decide the outcome of the struggle. It is because their struggle shows their determination and is pushed by the active participation of the mass of workers, and because they are reaching out to other workers, because their struggle has a real echo in the class and implicitly or explicitly carries the seed of extension, that workers sometimes can resist that downward pressure on their wages and working conditions. That kind of struggle is not be waged by unions, by permanent mass organizations, integrated into the politico-judicial system of the capitalist state. It is waged despite them, by the workers collectively. The self-organisation of the workers struggle manifests itself in general assemblies, in elected and revocable strike committees. Such organs of the working class either dissolve when that struggle ceases, to be reconstituted again when the struggle erupts, or become the embryos of worker's councils if and when the class struggle assumes a revolutionary form. There is no other way. It would be nice to have permanent institutions that contain that pressure on wages in our place. But it would be foolish to think that we have them! Or could have them, just because that would be nice. Indeed, the historical trajectory of the past century provides abundant evidence, theoretical and empirical, to show that unions have become an integral part of the real domination of capital.

## **It's not just a few bad apples**

Adam points to the "faults" committed by existing unions: corporatism, class collaboration, being undemocratic, hierarchical, bureaucratic. I don't believe that these are "faults," which implies that they are transient and/or correctible, but rather integral to the role that unions play under the conditions of the real domination of capital and its political forms. The hope that unions can become democratic, internationalist, militant, is one of the bases for enrolling workers in the struggle to reform the unions. But the characteristics to which Adam points are not transient or incidental features of the union form today, but necessary features, linked to the economic, political, juridical, and ideological structure of capitalism. That structure is not the same as the one prevailing when Marx wrote *Capital* -- though *Capital* provides the basis for understanding the change in the structure of capitalism that has taken place, and therewith the genealogy of unions as organs of capital.

Adam insists that unions today can "resist downward pressures and arbitrary actions from employers." By contrast, it seems to me that the primary role of unions today is to insure that capital and the state will be able to discipline and control the working class. The

issue revolves around which of these two roles, overall, defines the unions in the present epoch.

Adam says that he is in a union, "not as a revolutionary," but as "a worker selling my labour-power." In fact, most workers are in unions because they are legally obliged to be: union or closed shops in liberal-democratic regimes; the legal obligation of all workers to belong to the union in Stalinist or fascist regimes in the past. The fact of legally obligatory unionization should in itself tell us volumes about the bond that exists in the present epoch between unions and the state. That said, the distinction between what we do as revolutionaries and what we do as workers who must sell our labour-power is, indeed, crucial. Our involvement in political activity, indicates that we are acting -- in this respect -- as revolutionaries. And it is as revolutionaries that we need to evaluate the unions: not are they revolutionary organs, but are they or are they not obstacles to revolution; are they or are they not a barrier to the kind of class struggle that contains the potential to escape the control of capital, to develop in the direction of revolution. If unions are such a barrier, such an obstacle, as I believe, then they must be recognized as enemies of the working class.

Does that mean the by virtue of the fact that a worker is in the union he/she is an agent of capital? Not

at all! Because I shout for a cop, when I am being mugged, does not make me an agent of capital. Because I take my unemployment check when I am out of work does not make me an agent of capital. And because I take my union benefits does not make me an agent of capital. However, that does not change the fact that the police, unemployment compensation, and unions, are agencies of capital; the means by which the operation of the law of values is imposed upon the social world.

What then, of the class struggle ? History, I believe, has demonstrated that in the present epoch it is through elected and revocable strike committees, the embryo of workers councils, that the class struggle can be prosecuted - whether this ultimately leads to an insurrectionary situation or just to a vigorous defense against the imposition of savage austerity. While such strike committees are not inherently revolutionary, they do possess that potential.

And because they disappear when the conditions of struggle that gave birth to them are no longer present, they cannot be incorporated into the apparatus of discipline and control that the operation of the law of value requires.

Finally, the last thing that one can say about unions today is that they

are "irrelevant," as Adam claims revolutionaries often say. They are, rather, essential to the operation of the law of value, necessary to the domination of the working class by capital. My claim is not that unions are irrelevant, but that they are among the most formidable weapons that capital has in its arsenal to use against the working class.

- *Mac Intosh*

## Intervening 'outside and against' the unions

It would be a huge mistake for revolutionaries to fight for more democratic, more radical or more revolutionary unions or to join solidarity campaigns for unions under threat such as the [ILWU](#) in the US (yes to solidarity with the dockworkers of course, but let's not blur that line). If we have the opportunity to intervene in open, collective struggles, we should not focus primarily on the theoretical denunciation of the unions, but on how to make the struggle as effective as possible. Despite the unions overwhelming advantage in propagandistic means etc, we have the advantage that there is no contradiction between what is needed to make a struggle for immediate workers' interests more powerful and what is needed to fight capitalism, while the unions are boxed in the contradiction that they must pretend to fight something of which they are a part. The strength of a workers struggle clearly depends on the number of workers that join it and on their active participation. The more workers do away with all the divisions imposed on them (between union- and non union workers, workers of different trades and qualifications, workers of different races, men and women, immigrant- and non-immigrant workers, blue collar' and white collar', workers of different companies, sectors, nations...) and

the more they take the struggle into their own hands instead of passively relying on leaders and specialists, the more firepower a struggle acquires. It's not necessary that workers understand the true nature of unions or the need to fight the capitalist system for them to see the need to organize their struggle effectively, the need for general meetings in which they are not just 'informed' by union-leaders but in which they discuss collectively on how to rush the struggle forward, the need for strike committees whose members are elected and revocable by all instead of manned by union specialists, the need for roving pickets, mass delegations to other workplaces, aggressive demonstrations and collective self defense that don't fold in the face of court orders and other legalistic attacks, instead of the appeals to the media and the Democrats and the left wing of capital and the petitions, boycotts of products, media-campaigns and other ineffective forms of pseudo-struggle the unions propose.

Real solidarity rather than theoretical insight is where such tactics and organizational forms originate. The expression of real solidarity in struggle implicitly opens the possibility of revolution, because the revolution is nothing else but solidarity taken to its logical conclusion and that is what unions are trying to block. There's another angle from which to look

at this. One can describe the post-revolutionary society in glowing terms and exalt how 'democratic' it will be and so on. But the organizational structures of power in that society, whether called workers councils or any other name, will not fall from the sky after capitalism is defeated. They cannot exist if they are not created in the struggle and they cannot arise in the revolutionary phase of the struggle if they are not being developed in the lab of the struggle for more narrow, immediate interests that precedes it. Despite the interruptions, cons and flows, it is one process of the proletariat asserting itself as an autonomous class, freeing itself from its shackles, of which unionism is one of the heaviest and most insidious.

As for the question of how to deal with the unions when there is no open struggle, I'm not sure what the problem is. Revolutionaries cannot do much more in their workplaces at such times than having individual discussions, in which of course it's important to be honest and forthright. Whether they want to be a member of the union so they can use the services it provides or not, is not an issue.

At a meeting [Loren \[Goldner\]](#) talked about what to say in response to the position that revolutionaries ought to agitate in the unions "because that's where the workers are", and said that revolutionaries ought to defend unionization in some cases. The

example he gave was of a small chicken processing plant in Arkansas or Mississippi. The workers there, he argued, could really improve their living and working conditions by becoming part of a national union, so if we would have the opportunity to discuss with them, we should not argue that they ought to fight 'outside and against' the union. And Adam, in one of his contributions to this discussion, talks about the strike of the fire-fighters in Britain, in which the role of the union (FBU) was, according to Adam, beyond reproach; so he asks us: "what's wrong with Ibis strike? Do you really think a national strike could be organized by some ad hoc unofficial strike committee? And will you really be "intervening" on the picket lines with a leaflet saying "the FBU is an organ of the state which is only working to preserve capitalism ""?

All this harks back to the post of Paul that launched the union-discussion, in which he criticized the "outside and against the unions" position as too schematic. It indeed risks becoming so, if the 'outside' aspect is taken too literally. If it is really true that there is an opportunity for a revolutionary to "agitate" within a union, I suppose he/she would be foolish not to take it. But I assume 'agitating' means to discuss with other workers and defend, honestly and as clearly as possible, one's



views on the future that capitalism has in store, on the need for workers struggle and its obstacles, including the unions. Few, if any unions will allow that kind of agitation. Furthermore, outside the open struggle or the build-up to it it's simply not true that the union-apparatus is the place "where the workers are", and if it's true before and during a struggle (to the degree that union holds meetings, etc), it is because it fears and wants to contain the self-activity of the workers. So that makes it all the more important to state clearly what the union's role really is. In intervening in the strike of the fire-fighters in the UK for instance, the focus should be: what are the needs of the struggle?

How can we make it stronger? That would also imply pointing out the real function of the union and warning against its manipulations. As indeed left communists in the UK are doing, as the following quote from a leaflet of 'No war but the class war' shows:

However, the unions stand between the workers anger and the bosses and act as a buffer. The current militancy in the base of the unions forces the leaders to be radical, to keep the support of, and so control over, the rank and file. The unofficial action in 20 London fire stations on the day of the proposed strike showed Gilchrist that if he made too many deals, the struggle could gel out of his hands. Now that the strike has

started it will take on a momentum of its own through the experience of the fire-fighters and their supporters.

The FBU leadership has to make compromising deals and postpone action when negotiating with the government in order to maintain their own role as mediator, and therefore their own union jobs and the whole existence of the union. If workers just look action themselves the legitimacy and existence of the unions would be threatened. They play the game with the bosses, as much as try to 'Lead' the workers. This has led to the recuperation of workers' dissatisfaction into union-boss deals over and over again in recent years, or 'selling out'. The basic contradiction of exploitation is thus smoothed out and 'managed' by the unions, but they also act as a focal point for struggle. This contradictory position can lead to the recuperation of anger into smoother exploitation or to wildcat strikes and workers' self-organization.

Adam's question, "Do you really think a national strike could be organized by some ad hoc unofficial strike committee?" seems to imply that organizing a strike on a national scale is beyond the capacity of the working class's self-activity; that for this it needs the help and protection of the union apparatus. But if the idea of workers organizing a strike autonomously on a national scale

stretches credibility, who came up with that wild and crazy idea of workers organizing their own revolution? Won't it need a state or party organizing it in their place? And, by the way, we never said that a mass strike can or should be organized by a committee, whether union or non-union. It is in the workers' immediate interests as well as in the fundamental interests of humankind that a mass strike is waged and organized by the mass of workers. The reason that the unions are an obstacle to this, is not just their authoritarianism but that they are part and parcel of capitalism. For Adam, they are not and neither are they "organs of the working class". They are simply "instruments that the workers can sometimes use (...) and that revolutionaries can join". We would have to repeat what we have stated in earlier posts on this list to explain why, in the era of capital's real domination, there are no longer such instruments, large permanent institutions that retain an autonomy from capital, that the workers can use for their own class interests.

They don't exist anymore. But that does not mean that membership of the unions cannot have, in certain instances, specifies benefits for workers. The unions provide certain services, like other institutions do, and help enforce regulations. It is in their interest, as "companies" which grow through the expansion of their

membership, to tie certain benefits to that membership provided those are no threat to capital, to the wider fabric of which they are an integral part. The capitalist class is a unified class only when its class interests are threatened by a common danger. Otherwise, it is divided by competition. Small capitals compete against big capitals and the only way they can obtain the same rate of profit is by imposing lower wages and worse working conditions. It is then in the larger capitals' interests that collective bargaining agreements are imposed on the sector as a whole. So it's often the smaller capitals who are the most anti-union.

The unions have their own specific interests. As companies, their capacity to grow or even just to survive depends on their market image towards capitalists, as smooth managers of exploitation, but also on their market image towards workers, whose membership they need. This position makes the practice of the unions sometimes seemingly contradictory. I am not saying that there are no instances in which workers can obtain something from the union's need to maintain its buffer position even when this requires it to "radicalize". But I'm saying that revolutionaries who understand the function of unions always should warn against any illusions in them, any "faith" or confidence that they can be used

as organs of anti-capitalist struggle.

Because when it counts, they are always on the class enemy's side. To come back to Loren's chicken-processing plant in Arkansas: no, were we there we would not argue against unionization, since the workers in that plant would clearly temporarily benefit if an industry-wide contract were imposed (unless the plant closes, or moves off shore, a distinct possibility in a global market). But we would say to them, when you join the union keep your eyes wide open. The union is not your "tool;" it has its own corporate interest to serve, and the wider interests of the capitalist system to protect! In the end, your strength is derived from your capacity as workers to stick together, to overcome divisions, and to extend class struggle beyond corporatist boundaries (the very boundaries inscribed in the functioning of unions). The union is right when it says, in its recruiting campaigns, you're either organized or you are nothing; together we are strong and alone each worker is

powerless. In every powerful ideology there is always some important truth at the core that gets denatured. The union dresses up as the organization of the working class but in reality it is capital that is organizing the workers.

The trouble is that these illusions can only be shattered by experience. But that is no reason for revolutionaries to hold their tongues. Our articulation of what may be only a vague suspicion, can only help to clarify what experience will teach.

- *Sander*

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Taken from [http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/ip-archive/ip\\_41\\_trade-unions.html](http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/ip-archive/ip_41_trade-unions.html), with numerous corrections by libcom.org

- 1. libcom note: we have corrected a large number of scanning errors in this text, however this word we have left uncorrected as we are not clear what it should be

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