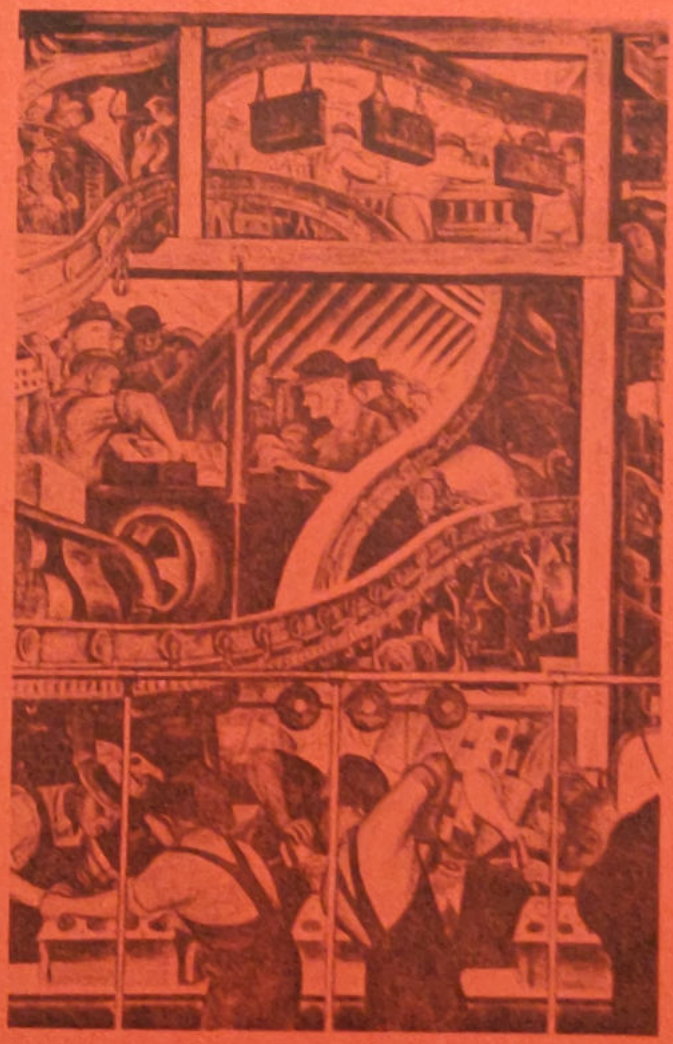
THE WORKING CLASS & SOCIAL CHANGE



by Martin Glaberman

THE WORKING CLASS & SOCIAL CHANGE

Four essays on the working class

by Martin Glaberman

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Preface

The question of the working class, as Martin Glaberman notes in this pamphlet, is an old and honoured one on the left. But actual class analysis, as opposed to its mere invocation, one might add, is a practice that has tended to be more honoured in the breach than in the observance. It is therefore a welcome sign that the question is being looked at with renewed critical interest by at least parts of a socialist movement which needs to seriously re-examine traditional assumptions and ways of looking at society. Welcome, also, because it is unfortunately true that many of the conceptions of the left have hardened into dogmas that now function more as barriers to creative thought than as flexible guides for developing radical analysis and strategy.

For some, the process of questioning traditional formulations has led to pessimism or to reformism, or to the dismissal of the working class as allegedly "bought off" by affluence, while various marginal social groups are promoted as the new standard-bearers of revolution, their purity presumably guaranteed by their poverty or by their marginality. (Indeed, one form of this argument asserts that nothing can be done in the advanced capitalist countries except to wait—and cheer—for the liberation armies of the third world as they ready themselves to engulf the heart of the imperialist system.)

But those who are unwilling to accept any of these different ways of abandoning the Marxist revolutionary project find themselves being inevitably led back to the centrality of the question of the working class: the central class of capitalist society. To this discussion, Martin Glaberman makes a valuable contribution. His experience of more than 40 years in the socialist movement, and more than 20 years as a production worker in auto plants gives him solid roots in a Marxist tradition which unabashedly insists that a socialist revolution must be a working-class revolution, and that the predominant—although not only—force in any working class revolution must be, precisely, the working class. This "traditional" view, however, does not fetter him to a version of Marxism that is blind to social developments. On the contrary, Glaberman insists that there can be no revolutionary analysis that ignores the fact that capitalism, the working class, and the working class' forms of struggle have changed significantly in the century since Marx. It is his ability to use the Marxist method to analyze new developments and draw lessons from them that make Glaberman's essays creative contributions to a living Marxism. One need not agree with his every word to appreciate that his way of posing and examining such seemingly simple questions as "what is the working

class?", "who is in the working class?", and "what is the role of the working class in social change?" comes from a much richer tradition than 'scientific' sociology, yielding results more fruitful than any number of learned treatises.

One of his first concerns is accordingly to define the working class (a much more complex and politically significant question than it might appear at first glance). He then sets out to examine some of the key components of working class reality—first and foremost *work*—and the formation and transformation of working class consciousness and methods of struggle. Especially noteworthy in this context is his argument that workers' interests are now separate from and indeed contrary to those of the unions. That this is true in general, although not in each and every individual instance, is the central theme of especially the second essay of the pamphlet.

This is followed by two essays in which he discusses the views of two American writers who have made important recent contributions to the theory and history of the working class, Stanley Aronowitz and Jeremy Brecher.

Glaberman finds much to praise in Aronowitz's *False Promises*, but he argues that the book fails to overcome a traditional view of the working class which essentially sees workers only as victims rather than as active participants in their own history. He also maintains that Aronowitz tends at times to understand consciousness in too narrow a way, as being simply equivalent to verbalizations.

Glaberman similarly considers Brecher's *Strike!* a valuable work which "helps considerably to counteract the almost universally bureaucratic attitudes of labor historians" but he argues that in some ways it poses working class reality in terms of an overly simplified workers-versus-organizations dichotomy which fails to fully consider the role of workers themselves in creating bureaucratic organizations like unions.

He sees both books as important contributions to a fruitful ongoing discussion on the working class under capitalism. His own essays help to carry that debate forward as well.

The first essay, "Marxist Views of the Working Class", was given as a lecture in Toronto in the fall of 1974, as part of a series on "The Working Class in Canada". The second, "Unions vs. Workers in the Seventies: The Rise of Militancy in the Auto Industry" first appeared in *Society* magazine in November-December 1972. The review of Stanley Aronowitz's *False Promises* first appeared in *Liberation* magazine in February 1974, while the final essay was part of a symposium of Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!* which appeared in *Radical America* Vol. 7, No. 6. The versions of the essays which appear in this pamphlet are all slightly different from the originals.

UD for NHP

Marxist Views of the Working Class

The question of the working class is an old and honored one in the Left generally, although it has fallen on lean days. There are various points of view about the working class which are considered Marxist. I have a particular point of view which I consider Marxist, but I will not get into any of the sectarian business of, "I am a better Marxist than you are." A point of view has to be valid in the ways in which it reflects reality, in the way in which it provides useful ideas with which people can view reality or deal with reality. It is only in that sense, and in the sense that discussion is limited that I indicate my theoretical viewpoints. We are not talking about any view of the working class; we are talking about variant possibilities within a broadly left or Marxist framework.

The question has certain built-in problems. The first problem is not the easiest one: who or what is the working class? It is clearly not a cohesive entity. There are many contradictions and differences. There is the problem of where to draw the line, who is in and who is out of the working class. Apart from that, there are clearly differences in skill, in sex, in age, in nationality, in race, in income. My basic emphasis is not in terms of the differences, but, because in any discussion there is an inevitable tendency to oversimplify, I think it is necessary for people to be aware of the fact that we are not talking of a homogeneous entity. We are talking about a very complex, contradictory, constantly changing entity, but yet one which can justifiably be viewed as an entity. It is not simply a sum of various kinds of people. There is such a thing as the working class, no matter how you define it. Although the differences and contradictions within the class have to be recognized and dealt with, the overriding characteristic is not homogeneity, that is too strong a word, but a consistent, even if complex, totality.

We are not discussing the working class because we want to find out what the noble worker is all about. We are concerned with social change. The fundamental problem of how you define and how you view the working class is the problem of whether the working class is a viable instrument for social change. There is a classic Marxist point of view that defines the socialist revolution as the proletarian revolution. That is, society can only be transformed fundamentally by the working class no matter who else participates. If there is no working class revolution, there is no socialist revolution, although there may be a political revolution or changes of various kinds. In classic Marxist terms socialist and proletarian are interchangeable, they are identical.

Before World War II that classic definition, although very often abstract and meaningless, was almost universally accepted. After World War II, however, this view of the working class began to disintegrate and various points of view began to appear. There appears within the left in the United States the whole business of the "hard hats," the Wallace movement, the so-called reactionary, racist working class. There is the idea of the affluent working class, the working class transformed into middle class, and so on.

A certain amount of care has to be exercized in working out a definition. A definition is not a fact. It is not true or false. It is useful or not useful. Which means that the working class can be defined with some legitimacy in different ways. It can be defined usefully, or it can be defined in ways that conceal elements of reality. Marx did not have one all-inclusive definition of the working class. The definition of a productive laborer, in Marx, for example, is not the same as his definition of the working class. There were people who were clearly members of the working class who were not productive laborers, that is, who did not produce surplus value. Pretty clearly, Marx's definition of class is based on relation to the means of production. And yet it is also used by Marx, by Engels, and by Marxists generally, in a much broader sense to include the families of workers, that is, the working class housewife, working class children, and so forth. And that is also a legitimate use.

In brief one cannot talk, and one should not think, in terms of some fixed, absolute definition that can take care of everybody in the world. (You either are or are not a member of the working class and that's it. Tough, you didn't make it, kid.) It is much more complex and much more flexible than that. And, if you are going to view it dialectically, that is, in a Marxist way, it is a definition, or a series of definitions, which has to change if, as seems true, the working class itself changes. The definition of a worker in 1850 is not the same as that of a worker in 1950. The composition, the size, the character of the class changes and, therefore, the definition of the class changes.

In particular, it is not the sociological view that feels it has to account for everybody. The classic sociological definition is one of income: from 0 to $5000 a year is lower working class, $5000 to $10,000 is upper working class, $10,000 to $15,000 is lower middle class, $15,000 to $20,000 is upper middle class, and so on. That is, of course, very neat—it takes care of everybody; nobody is left out; everybody belongs to some class. But in real life there are a lot of marginal people. In which class is the guy who runs a gas station, puts in 80 hours a week, pumps gas, gets his hands dirty, but also employs half a dozen people and makes a profit?

If you really have to define everybody, then you are not in the business of making revolutions, you are in the business of defining people.

And what I want to get away from is the idea that unless every living soul is taken care of, there is something wrong with the theory. We are dealing with social categories, which are abstractions, and which are only approximations of reality. They can never include every human being in any kind of definition.

In recent years, there have been essentially two views that tend to counter the traditional Marxist view of the working class. They are too different versions of the disappearance of the working class. One is the view that the working class is literally disappearing. It arose, especially in the late fifties and early sixties, with the development of automation and the apparent disappearance of blue collar jobs. It is not entirely a view of the disappearance of the working class, but, rather, a view that the blue collar working class is disappearing.

The other tends to do the same thing in the opposite way. It tends to see all of society becoming working class. We are all workers together, students, teachers, blue collar workers, white collar workers and salaried people of various kinds. So the working class is eliminated not by disappearing, but by having everybody join it except for a handful of capitalists at the top. It is a definition that tends to be limited in usefulness because it blurs significant distinctions that still remain in this society.

The first view has to be dealt with in terms of specific facts. Everybody knows that the service sectors, the government sectors, of the modern economy have expanded tremendously at the expense of traditional production and transportation sectors. There is an interesting article by Andrew Levison, in the December 13, 1971 issue of *The Nation**, that indicates how these things get distorted in government statistics. His evidence is based on the American government statistics, but I'm sure that those categories are pretty much the same in Canada, Western Europe, and so on. There is the following switch in categories. To begin with there are the major sectors in the society, manufacturing, agriculture, service and government. There is a relative decline in manufacturing and an increase in service and white collar employment. Even in terms of these categories, however, there is not an absolute decline in manufacturing employment although the substantial increases are in categories such as hotels, insurance companies, government employment, etc. Levison takes the major categories one step further. When government employment is broken down into sub-categories, some startling information emerges, specifically, that the blue collar working class is not disappearing.

*See also, Andrew Levison, "The Working-Class Majority," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 3, 1974.

With the decline of urban transportation in the United States in the nineteen-thirties, for example, city transportation systems were municipalized, so that bus drivers became civil servants. Did they thereby lose their character as blue collar workers? Are mail workers, or people who handle the sacks or drive the mail trucks, blue collar or white collar? Are garbage collectors blue collar or white collar? Are janitors in public schools blue collar or white collar? In short, there is a range of categories which is blue collar, but which is contained in the expanding category of government employment. The same thing is true of the service trades. There has been a tremendous expansion of hotels and motels. Except behind the desk, where you have a clerk or two, hotel employees are chambermaids, bell hops, busboys, waiters, and other occupations, which can not reasonably be called white collar.

There is another aspect to this change in the nature of the working class and the concealment of that change. There has been a substantial increase in certain kinds of white collar occupations, particularly in banks, insurance companies, offices and the expansion of central offices of manufacturing concerns. But there is also an element of change in the nature of the work which contradicts the expansion in the category. That is, there are many more people who are concerned with bookkeeping today than ten or 20 years ago, but instead of being bookkeepers who enter figures in a ledger, they tend to be IBM machine operators, computer operators and punch card operators. The increase in the number of secretaries replaces individuals who have a one to one relation to the boss with rows of women behind desks who are essentially machine operators. They sit at their typewriter with a dictaphone machine strapped to their head, never seeing the source of the material that they are typing, and are supervised by a forelady who makes sure that their breaks are not too long. Except for the fact that it tends to be cleaner, lighter, and a little bit quieter, this new kind of white collar work is less and less distinguishable from factory work.

It is only a matter of time before many of these so-called new categories which are destroying the old reality of the working class will lead to the kind of ideology that corresponds to the new reality. That is, a machine operator, is a machine operator, is a machine operator. And, while there is a difference between a punch press and an IBM machine, the difference is not as great as the difference between a punch press operator and someone taking shorthand or entering figures in a book. It is dangerous to be glib about the nature of the concrete changes that are taking place. There is not and there is no evidence for, any decline in the levels of blue collar employment. By blue collar employment I mean manual work, as opposed to clerical or retail trade. The latter is also working class but has always been viewed differently as less potentially revolutionary be-

cause it is less related to central matters of production and transportation.

The second view of the nature of the working class is that, because of the all-pervasive nature of alienation in modern society, everybody can be defined as a worker. More and more sections of society are suffering from the same or similar ills that workers have traditionally suffered, exploitation, alienation, etc. My own view of this question is not universally accepted, but I present it because I think it is a necessary antidote to some of the very glib formulations of what is revolutionary in this society. To begin with, I do not think it is necessary, in order to justify the validity of a movement, to define it as working class. An anti-war movement, such as the anti-war movement in the United States during the Vietnam war, was a perfectly legitimate movement even though it was overwhelmingly a middle class movement. Student movements have an independent validity, working class or not. Women's movements, national movements, and so forth, have a validity in combatting this society which does not require them to be defined as working class for them to be justified. But what *is* involved is, that if you begin to define all of these movements and all of these individuals, because they suffer some ill under capitalist society, as working class, you begin to lose sight of very important distinctions. In another article Andrew Levison* reports what a young worker said in regard to defining everybody who is alienated in some way as working class, in this case the popular notion among intellectuals that a college professor who is forced to prepare mundane and insignificant papers is a victim, like the factory workers, of alienation, epitomizes the complete lack of understanding that exists. The young worker studying under the GI bill who encountered this argument suggested that the professor would begin to understand how a factory worker feels if he had to type a single paragraph, not papers, from nine to five, every day of the week. Instead of setting the pace himself, his typewriter carriage would begin to move at nine and continue at a steady rate until five. The professor's job would be at stake if he could not keep up the pace. For permission to go to the bathroom or to use the telephone, the professor would have to ask a supervisor. His salary of sixteen thousand dollars for a full professor would be cut by nine thousand dollars, and his vacations reduced to two weeks a year. He could also be ordered to work overtime at the discretion of the company or lose his job. If unlucky, he might have to work the night shift. Finally, if he faced the grim conclusion that his job was a dead end, his situation would then approximate that of an unskilled young worker in a contemporary auto factory." That is one level of difference. The reality of blue collar work, factory work, or even white collar work, is somewhat different than the various other forms of alienation which exist in this

*"The Rebellion of Blue Collar Youth," *The Progressive*, Oct. 1972.

society. But there is another element involved.

There has clearly been a change in the classic middle class in modern society. The middle class used to be a self-employed middle class, the independent farmer, the independent professional, and so on. The bulk of that has disappeared and has become transformed into a salaried middle class, which performs similar, and, sometimes, not so similar, functions, but essentially functions of social control.

An important distinction between teachers or social workers and manual workers is that workers manipulate things and teachers and social workers manipulate people. And although they are exploited and underpaid and should unionize and strike, they perform certain functions of control in this society which cannot be ignored by simply defining them as working class. If that distinction is lost, then a very important distinction that relates to various tactical and strategic questions is lost. If you define everybody that is getting low pay (and many teachers get less than many workers; there are tool and die makers that make much more than grade school teachers) then, unless you go back to a definition in terms of income, that does not change the reality of one being essentially middle class and the other being essentially working class. Both have reason to resist and revolt against this society. There is no social revolution in the modern world that I know of that can take place with simply the working class. Other sections of society are bound to participate. The French events of 1968, for example, were touched off by student demonstrations, students battling police in Paris and elsewhere for several weeks. Society is an integrated whole. But that is another type of question. The difference is that street demonstrations become transformed into a social revolution if the industrial working class intervenes and moves to take over the means of production. Unless we keep in mind that there are different types of work with different relationships to the process of production, important distinctions are lost.

But definitions and distinctions are only the beginning. There is still the question which derives from the classic Marxist view of whether the worker is the key to the revolutionary overthrow of this society. Is the worker so exploited that he will revolt?

What is there that will make a worker revolt? People have heard about the affluent society, the well-paid worker, who has become middle class, owns a car, maybe two cars, can send his kids to college, has a summer home, a boat, and any number of things. Some of that is exaggerated. Most workers do not have all these things. Many workers work all year long and get paid under official poverty levels. But in the fundamental areas of basic industry which are crucial to Marx's theory, the auto industry, steel, mining, and so forth there are, in fact, in Canada and in the United States, the best paid industrial workers in the world. There is still insecurity—it is pretty obvious today with the levels of unemployment. But, when work-

ing, particularly with forced overtime, the pay is fairly good. Is that kind of supposed affluence enough to transform the traditional revolutionary working class to defenders of capitalist society, defenders of the status quo?

A brief look at the reality of life in production will indicate that that is not likely and has, in fact, not taken place. The General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio, is the most automated automobile factory in the world. It is made up overwhelmingly of young workers with an average age in the twenties. They have been having certain difficulties there, strikes from time to time, and terrible things like that. One of the things that they bragged about was that over a hundred cars an hour came off that Vega line; that a job on that assembly line took 36 seconds to do. That means that on a hot summer day when the temperature is in the nineties and the drinking fountain is about 10 yards away, you can not get a drink because by the time you get there and back, a car will have gone by. If you want to stop and light a cigarette, a car will have gone by. But to that category of time must be added another category. A blue collar worker at the Lordstown plant knows that that is where he or she is going to be for the rest of his or her life. Workers who have accumulated a couple of years seniority know that they will have their job, or one like it, for the rest of their lives. There is nothing in terms of payment or fringe benefits or pensions that compensates for the kind of alienation and exploitation which is universally characteristic of blue collar work. This does not mean that all jobs are on the Vega assembly line. But the 36 seconds is not too startling. In *Alienation and Freedom,* published in 1960, Robert Blauner noted that the average job in auto was under one minute. So what is involved is the change from about 58 seconds to 36 seconds in 15 years. 58 seconds is not much of an improvement over 36 seconds. The auto industry is much more rationalized than many other industries, but the fundamental character and drive of all industry is the same. It is to rationalize production to get rid of workers to reduce the amount of time it takes to do any job. In that context, the only thing that would be surprising would be that workers did not strike or resist or revolt. The belief that $5.50 or $6.00 an hour compensates for that kind of alienation, is the belief that workers are an inferior breed, not like ordinary people. We, obviously, wouldn't stand for that kind of nonsense, but workers—they do not know any better. And, it should come as no surprise that, in fact, they do resist.

There are some interesting letters, from executives of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada in Windsor to Leonard Woodcock, President of the UAW, Douglas Fraser, a Vice-President, and C. Brooks, President of Local 444 of the UAW in Windsor, Ont. The letters complain to the union about the miserable behavior of these damned Chrysler workers. The letter to Woodcock and Fraser is dated Sept. 8, 1973. "Dear Sirs, You are fully aware without my detailing them, of the extremely unsatisfactory

record of illegal, unauthorized and unwarranted strikes that we have had in our Windsor plants in recent years, the most recent of which consisted of massive walkouts on August 27, 28, 29, 30 and Sept. 4." (September 1, 2 and 3 must have been a holiday.) "This unsatisfactory record was the subject of a lengthy conference with you today . . . You urged us nevertheless to rescind the disciplinary action which we took yesterday against 1447 employees who took part in the most recent series of strikes. And so, in view of your strong assurances and our firm belief that you will carry them out, we will comply with your request and rescind the disciplinary action we took with respect to Windsor employees yesterday."

A letter of May 6, 1974, to Mr. C. Brooks, President, Local 444 states: "On April 26, 1974, the Corporation, as a result of representations made by officers of the Local Union, agreed to the reinstatement of six individuals who had been discharged for their participation in an illegal work stoppage . . . "

The unrest continues. And again, the corporation fires a lot of people, the union says, no, you can't do that and give us all a bad name, so they rescind some of the firings. In this letter they announce reduction of some of the discharges to 60 days off.

Several letters are addressed to Mr. D. McDermott, Vice-President and Director for Canada of the International Union, UAW, from Mr. J. H. McGivney, a Chrysler official. They are dated April 18, May 22, November 26, November 27, 1973 and March 28, April 2, 1974. Each letter begins with the sentence: "This letter is written to inform you that on (here each letter lists no less than three dates and as many as eleven dates in the weeks preceding the date of the letter) the following incidents occurred: "There follows, in each of the letters, a detailed listing of acts of resistance and sabotage. They make fascinating reading:

From the letter of April 18, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant, April 2
All 11:16 p.m., a 16-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9303, Body-in-White Division. A body bolt was found jammed in the No. 3 drive. Eighteen units were lost. Attempted sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of May 22, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant,May 7
All Shifts—Dept. 9075, Millwrights. Beginning with the midnight shift (normal starting time 11:30 p.m.), 28 employees punched in prior to 11:00 p.m. and punched out one-half hour early at 7:30 p.m. On the day shift, 25 employees punched in prior to 6:45 a.m.

and punched out at 3:15 p.m. Normal hours are 7:45 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. On the afternoon shift, 18 employees punched in prior to 3:00 p.m. and out at 11:30 p.m. Normal hours are 3:54 p.m. to 12:24 p.m. In most cases, supervision did not put employees to work until normal starting times . . .

May 8

Day and Midnight Shifts—In Dept. 9075, Millwrights, the employees were again arriving for work an hour early and leaving an hour early. Early arrival and quitting times were experienced in this department on the midnight shift on May 9, 10, 11 and 12.

The millwrights (joined by the carpenters on May 10), perhaps after attempting to negotiate the matter with the company, were simply organizing a change in shift hours. There is no indication in the letters whether the attempt was ultimately successful.

From the letter of November 26, 1973:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant, November 7

Day Shift—A 19-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9131, Motor Line. A bolt was found jammed in the line. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of March 28, 1974:

Windsor Assembly Plant,March 20

Afternoon Shift—At 8:42 p.m., a nine-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9308, Metal Line, Body-in-White Division. A dunnage pin had been jammed in the line. Production lost—nine units. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of April 2, 1974:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant,March 25

Day Shift—At 8:45 a.m., a two-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9121, Frame Line. A spring clip had been threaded through the links of the drive chain. Production lost—1/2 job. Sabotage is extremely likely.

One thing that is distinctive about these itemized lists at one complex, three plants, of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada, is that it is recorded. Another thing about this is that they do not really want to make it public because the situation can get out of hand. There were also charges of sabotage in the Lordstown situation. The workers said that the speed of

the line forced them to make defective cars, because they couldn't do a proper job of assembling them. The company said that the workers were sabotaging the cars. That is the kind of dispute that corporations never want to escalate because they can not win. So, instead, there are long, detailed, confidential letters to union bureaucrats asking, in effect, what are you going to do about these damned people? There is sabotage throughout industry. That tends to be a lot closer to the reality of what the modern working class is like than anything that would be learned by looking at a worker's paycheck or by finding out about his fringe benefits. There is, literally, a continual civil war going on in modern industry. This relates to a range of problems and possibilities which speak directly to the question of whether the modern industrial working class, the post-world war II working class, is a viable force for social change.

One of the elements that goes into this kind of struggle is the various levels and kinds of consciousness that move a modern industrial worker. Consciousness is a very tricky word. One of the problems in dealing with the working class, as opposed to "labor movement," "labor leaders," and so forth, is that you are dealing with people who do not have vocal or written expression of their ideas and beliefs. Labor leaders make speeches, workers do not. It is very natural to assume that when George Meany, AFL-CIO President, or Leonard Woodcock or any other labor leader makes a speech or makes a pronouncement, he somehow speaks for the workers he is supposed to represent. The fact of the matter is that they do not.

There is another element. Working class reality is a totality that goes far beyond the ordinary intellectual view of consciousness. The usual way to view consciousness is in terms of formal statement of belief. Unfortunately, or fortunately, in terms of the working class and its living reality, that simply does not work. The following is an example of how it does not work.

In the nineteen-forties, during World War II most of the labor movement gave a no-strike pledge. Labor leaders agreed to put patriotism before class interest and said that during the course of World War II workers would not strike. There was much resistance and opposition to this. If corporations did not agree to give up profits, why should workers agree to give up the right to strike? In one union, the UAW, this struggle over the no-strike pledge had a very open and formal character. In the 1944 convention of the UAW the dispute came to a head in a very strange way. There were various resolutions presented, against and for the no-strike pledge. All of them were defeated, leaving the union without a no-strike pledge. The bureaucrats on the platform were thus humiliated in the presence of government dignitaries because they could not deliver their membership anymore. They did what has become traditional in the UAW,

the cure for democracy being more democracy. If workers vote the wrong way, they are made to vote again, and to keep on voting until they learn to vote the right way. The bureaucrats said that the convention was not really representative enough (which it would have been, obviously, if it had reaffirmed the no-strike pledge). And since this is a very important question, what is needed is a membership referendum.

They had a membership referendum, which was the perfect sociological survey. Every member got a secret ballot which was filled out in the privacy of a kitchen or living room and which was mailed back in. The secrecy was protected because both sides were represented on the committee that ran the referendum. It was a pretty fair count as these things go. When the ballots were counted, the membership of the UAW had voted two to one to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. It was rather reasonable to draw the conclusion that the consciousness of auto workers was that they placed patriotism before class interest; that in a major war workers should not strike; no matter what the provocation, war production had to continue.

There was, however, a slight problem. Before the vote, during the vote, and after the vote, the majority of auto workers wildcatted. What then, was the consciousness of the auto workers? Were they for or against the no-strike pledge? There is a further problem. As in most votes, most people did not vote. The majority which voted for the pledge was not a majority of the members of the UAW. But the strikers did include a majority of the UAW. Experience in a factory can give you insight into how these things work. Some guy sitting in his own living room listening to the casualties and the war reports, votes to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. The next day, going in to work, the foreman cusses him out, and he says, "To hell with you," and out he goes. And you say, "I thought you were for the no-strike pledge." And he says, "Yeah, sure, but look at that son of a bitch." To workers, workers do not cause strikes. Capitalists cause strikes. So if strikes are to be prevented, the thing to do is to get rid of all these grievances. It's these lousy foremen who do not want to get rid of all these grievances who cause all these strikes.

> What then was the consciousness of auto workers? Were they patriotic or class conscious? It seems necessary to say, as a start, that what workers *do* is at least as important as what workers say. But much more than that is involved. The whole idea of consciousness is more complex and is a much larger totality than simply formal statements of belief, which would be sufficiently dealt with by having a survey, or that postcard ballot, or whatever.
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> The problem is compounded by the fact that those who

study the problem of consciousness are intellectuals, not workers. They tend to assume that consciousness is overwhelmingly a matter of the mind, of verbalization. (Workers, however, do not have a public platform or a press. Unions do, but that is another matter.) But verbal responses to formal questions, given the limited range of alternatives allowed to workers in such situations, inevitably give a picture of working-class consciousness that is much more conservative than the underlying reality. It has the tremendous advantage, however, of being immensely satisfying to the intellectuals (whether radical or conservative) because it buttresses their own sense of superiority. There is a reality in which often, when not given any other choice, workers appear to be saying things which are conservative or reactionary.

It is also true that many workers have very reactionary views on a whole range of subjects, like race, sex, age, skills, and so on. Workers are not the noble savage, all pure and honest and forthright and revolutionary. But reality, which is a 36 second job for the rest of your life, reality, which is sabotage recorded every single day in the Chrysler plants in Windsor, Ontario, is a reality which forces workers to behave in contradiction to their own stated beliefs. Unless that behavior is included in the understanding of their consciousness, there is no sense of what the working class is capable of doing, or the ways in which it explodes, or the ways in which strike waves or wildcat strikes appear. And it is that reality which sustains the belief that the working class is a viable force for social change.

However, there are also other elements. People tend to view workers as victims. They are exploited, they are alienated, they have 36 second jobs, etc. I talked to workers on a wildcat strike at a Chrysler stamping plant about 15 miles outside of Detroit a few years ago. It was the first day of the strike and there were a few guys on the picket line—you don't really need a great effort to shut a plant down in the Detroit area. This was a stamping plant making parts for various Chrysler cars. What the workers were saying was, if we're out one day, Chrysler Jefferson, Dodge Main, and the Plymouth plant in Detroit shut down. If we're down two days, Windsor, Ontario, shuts down. If we're down three days, St. Louis, Missouri, shuts down, and so on. One of the realities of working class existence is not simply victimization, but power, and an awareness of that power when it seems to be appropriate, or when the possibility opens up. Not all workers have that power. In a plant making trim with 16 other plants making the same kind of trim, workers can go out for six months without being noticed. But in a crucial kind of plant, or on a railroad, or if the auto industry is shut down, or the steel industry, or some other industry, workers become aware of a social reality which is different than what is available to middle class radicals or anyone else.

If teachers or students shut down a school, the school is shut down. But when five thousand people in some small town in Ohio shut down a stamping plant, within two weeks two-thirds of General Motors is shut down and steel plants begin to lay off and railroads begin to lay off and so on. Those workers who have access to that kind of power are aware of that reality. That is one of the elements that makes up the totality that has to go into the kind of social crisis that makes a revolutionary change in society possible. It is the element that distinguishes, in very classic Marxist terms, the industrial or blue collar working class, (although not all blue collar workers) from the reality available to other sections of society no matter how hostile they might be to their own immediate conditions of life. There are limitations to what they can do about it until this perspective of fundamental change and fundamental power is opened up.

There has been a growing recognition of this reality, that is, the resistance of workers to their conditions of life. It has taken various forms over the years. The current form is "job enrichment." Everyone knows now that workers do not want to work. They are absent half the time, they sabotage, they go on wildcat strikes, they vote against contracts—and the term alienation has suddenly become reputable. There have been programs on television, articles in newspapers, articles in academic journals and other places, about job enrichment and blue collar blues and how to overcome it and how to make workers satisfied with their jobs. Perhaps the best known American example was a General Foods plant in Topeka, Kansas. It was a Gaines Dog Food plant and it got a lot of publicity because those jobs were really enriched. The workers even interviewed prospects to fill vacancies. But, there are some other details about these fantastically enriched jobs. First, there are only 72 workers in that plant. It is not exactly the Ford assembly line. Secondly, all that this plant produces is dry dog food. This is as easy to picture as a 36 second job. All that happens in the plant is pellets of dog food are poured into sacks, the sacks are sealed mechanically and piled on the loading dock. How rich can these damned jobs get? Working there now may be better than previously, because you choose your fellow workers and you can take a break when you want to, etc. But it isn't hard to picture a young guy who gets hired after being interviewed by his fellow workers two or three years from now. He looks around and says, boy, this is a pretty shitty job. And the other workers say, you're crazy, it used to be bad but now it's a great job. And he says, well, I don't know about how it used to be, but it's a *lousy* job.

This may be an extreme case but there are limits to enrichment. The basic limit is that it cannot be allowed to interfere with productivity. On a reduced scale, either on a smaller scale of production or on sub-assembly units, it is possible to allow a certain amount of workers' control of the job without interfering with productivity. However, it cannot be done on very

rationalized production lines. All that has been done is to set the clock back a number of years. Cars used to be made with everyone standing around and working as a team, in an enriched way. Did anyone praise work before Ford invented the assembly line? If that is the model, then work will tend to become as bad as it was in 1910 or, depending on the industry, in 1950 or 1940 or 1930.

What job enrichment amounts to is two things. One is a recognition of the continual resistance of workers to the nature of work in capitalist society. But, two, it is at the most, a stopgap, a change that might satisfy people or at least have them quit struggling for a few years, until the reality once again catches up with them.

All of this seems to be in a very limited economic sphere. One of the things frequently heard from Marxists is that these are merely economic struggles. What about politics? What about a successful revolution? What about parties and soviets? The process involved is the following. Ordinary workers are in no position to think about the socialist society. If they thought about it too much they could not get to work the next day, not if their jobs took 36 seconds to do. If they thought how great socialism was, they would never make it through the day. So they blur their minds; and think about sex, about sports, about Saturday night, about getting drunk on the weekend, about the family, about anything at all, but not about the job and surely not about socialism.

However, the reality forces workers to fight. If the resistance reaches a certain point, workers walk out. If attacked by the police, they fight back. Suddenly they see that they have shut down half an industry. They see that people in other plants are coming out. The reality of struggle frees them to think about other possibilities. That is when workers begin to think about a new society—in the process of struggle for it. It is not an abstraction that when 51% of the workers have finally decided that they are for socialism and against capitalism, the time for the revolution can be set. No revolution has ever taken place in that way. Unless someone can demonstrate that workers are no longer willing to struggle against their conditions of life, then the fundamental prerequisite for working class socialist revolution is constantly present. The way it appears is in massive social upheavals.

There are two relevant examples from the post-World War II world. There is no conceivable sociological survey that could have given advance indication of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. With all the advantages of hindsight to formulate the questions, if someone had gone into the working class suburbs of Budapest in October of 1956 and asked the workers what they thought there would have been no inkling that one month later a socialist revolution and workers councils would have covered Hungary and the Hungarian Revolution would have taken place. No survey in the

working class suburbs of Paris in March or April of 1968, would have revealed that one month later ten million workers would have occupied all the factories of France and brought the DeGaulle government virtually to its knees. How can a strike that begins in an aircraft plant one day, in opposition to all the organizations of the working class, the unions, the Communist party, the Socialist Party, lead in 48 hours to that massive kind of social upheaval?

In a society which was totalitarian for ten years, where the only education, the only press, the only organizations, were the official organizations of the Communist Party and the Communist government, how could the workers, following a student demonstration, create workers councils all across Hungary, take control of the means of production and destroy the Communist Party? How could that take place unless that living reality of struggle is an inherent characteristic of the modern industrial working class?

The ability of the working class to transform society relates both to the reality of that struggle and where it is located. That is, all of the resources, which everyone associates with wealth, with capital, and with the government—means of transportation, means of communication, newspapers, railroads, factories—belong to the ruling class only as long as people permit it. What happens when the workers do not want to run the trains, or send their own messages on the telegraph, or print their own newspapers? All of a sudden this vast power and wealth disintegrates. That is the reality of social revolution and that is the reality of the modern industrial working class.

Marxism has been around for 100 years. Che Guevara said that Marxism is now part of the general heritage of mankind. There are all sorts of ideas which were the property of Marxists, say in 1917, which are now the property of humanity generally. The idea of government regulation, the idea that government owes something to the population—that was not the general conception in the 1920s, for example.

And society has changed. We have been, since Marx, and since Lenin, through a major depression in the thirties, a major world war in the forties, the colonial revolution, the atom and hydrogen bombs, and so forth. People no longer think the way they did before.

That doesn't mean that the source of revolution is ideas brought to the working class from the outside; because certain ideas can't come from the outside. Some of the ideas most fundamental to Marxism come from the working class and not from the Marxists. For example, the French working class of today—or 1968—has the experience of 1934, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Paris Commune of 1871. What did the Parisian workers of 1871 have? What made them create the Commune? Not a Marxist organization. The reality of social revolution is that the form of the worker's state is the spontaneous creation of the working class. There

was no such thing as a Commune in Marx's ideology until Parisian workers created it. Lenin never heard of soviets until Russian workers created them in 1905. And then again in 1917. That does not mean that the political party didn't play a certain role in 1917. But what it does mean is that one of the fundamental aspects of Marxist theory is to see where the working class has reached and to see what that means for theory. People asked Marx, what is this dictatorship of the proletariat you're talking about, what is this socialist society? He refused to answer the question. He made comments about not making recipes for the cookshops of the future, or the like. When the workers of Paris created the Commune, Marx wrote about the Commune and that became the classic Marxist work on the workers state. And then in State and Revolution we have Lenin on Marx on the Commune and Lenin on soviets.

It is in the best classic Marxist tradition to base theory on the peak that the working class has reached in any stage of society. And the reality of the post-World War II world is typified by what has happened in France in '68 and Hungary in '56. That is the basis for our theory. If a theory that is valid in 1871 is still valid today, or a form, or a political party that is valid in 1917 is still valid today, then there is some fundamental weakness in dialectics. Dialectics, as Marx understood it, implies that capitalist society is continually changing and being revolutionized. The social relations are changed; the capitalist class is changed; the working class is changed. It would be a miracle of dialectics if everything else changed but something Lenin wrote in 1902, in *What Is To Be Done?* remains eternal. It doesn't make any sense. Lenin was not afraid to say that Marx's description of capitalism in the middle of the nineteenth century was no longer valid. Things had changed in 50 years. And he defined the new stage as Imperialism. Well, we're 60 years beyond that. Do we have to forever stay in 1917? It seems to me not. And concepts of organization have to change in correspondence with changing concepts of the working class and changing concepts of capitalist society. So where do we look? We look at the highest peak that the working class has reached. That, in the post-World War II world, is France in '68 and Hungary in '56. I don't know any place where they have gone further than that.

Another aspect of methodology is involved. Marx thought that the Paris Commune made a lot of mistakes. They don't appear in his classic work on the Commune. He said the contribution of the Commune is its own living existence. In private correspondence he wrote that they should have nationalised the bank, or should have done this or that. It is always easy to find out why the workers did not make a revolution. It is all around you. But the business of a revolutionist is to find out why they will. One of the characteristics of the dialectic view of the world—in fact, any view of the world—is that people tend to find what they look for. Those who are interested in finding out why the French revolt of '68 was a failure will

have no trouble finding reasons. But I am interested in finding out why it was a success, why it happened. What everybody in the world around me tells me is that it can't happen. And I say it can—and there's the proof, it did happen. Was the Paris Commune a failure? Lenin celebrated when the Russian Revolution outlived the Commune by one day. That is a revolutionary attitude. The weaknesses of the working class are all around. The press, radio, television, the schools, everyone is insisting how backward people are, how incapable people are of transforming society. And when people attempt it, that is what a Marxist bases his revolutionary theory on. That is what we are living for, so to speak. We are living for the peak, and not the valley. I do not mean that we ignore it in our day to day work, but in our fundamental theory we say that what the working class in the modern world is capable of is demonstrated by France and Hungary in '68 and '56. It is not demonstrated by a lot of other things which are happening all the time but which are characteristics of bourgeois society and which the working class is not immune to because it lives in and suffers from all of the distortions and contradictions of bourgeois society. But because it has to resist that society, these peaks appear. And if it were not for the peaks there would not be any revolution. I believe that the revolt is inevitable, but victory is not inevitable. The nature of society forces workers to revolt and resist—but the man can push the button and drop the bomb and that ends modern civilization as we know it and there is no socialist revolution. There are no guarantees of victory.

What forms are available to the working class? The union movement is not a force for revolutionary change. I do not think it can be transformed. Workers tend to use what is at hand. Mostly they boycott and ignore unions—they do not go to meetings, they do not vote in union elections, and so forth. Occasionally they will use the union. They might vote on the contract and occasionally will vote a contract down. They will occasionally, but rarely, participate in opposition caucuses. Whether the workers become revolutionary or not does not depend on what the union leadership does. There is no other instrument available except the creation of new organizational forms, and those are the equivalent of workers' councils which take over production on a national scale. I have no idea when that will happen, I have no idea how that will happen, I have no idea of the particular forms it will take in Canada, the United States, France or England or anywhere else. But, in general, the outline is indicated by what has happened in Hungary and in France.

So long as workers resist alienation and oppression they will revolt. And these revolts will emerge, as they always have, with remarkable power and suddenness. It would be a pleasant change from past experience if, for once, it was not the revolutionaries who were most taken by surprise, most caught unprepared, by the revolt of workers.

Unions vs. Workers in the Seventies: The Rise of Militancy in the Auto Industry

On the morning of July 16, 1970 the *Detroit Free Press* featured on its front page a large picture of General Motors Vice President Earl Bramblett and UAW President Leonard Woodcock shaking hands as they opened negotiations for a new contract. The headline beneath the picture read: "Negotiations Begin; Auto Talk Key: Living Costs."

The banner headline that morning, overshadowing the ritual start of negotiations, was: "Ousted Worker Kills Three in Chrysler Plant Shooting; 2 Foremen, Bystander Are Slain." A black worker at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Axle Plant, suspended for insubordination, had killed two foremen (one black, one white) and a Polish setup man.

The timing of the events was coincidental—but it was the kind of coincidence that lends a special insight. What is at issue—not only in the auto negotiations but in most relations involving workers, unions and management—is not living costs but *living*. Involved is not just dollars and cents, important as always to workers, but an entire way of life.

Take a close look at the union's demands.

The UAW left out only one thing: the demand to turn the plants over to the workers. Apart from the usual wage increases and financial improvements, some of the issues raised by the UAW bargaining teams included: pensions after 30 years instead of after a specific age; restoration of the escalator cost-of-living clause to its original form; ending time clocks and putting production workers on salary; inverting seniority so that older workers could take the time off at nearly full pay in the event of layoffs; the problem of pollution, both in the plants and in the community; changing production to deal with boredom on the assembly line.

Many of these issues were raised purely for propaganda effect with little intent to bargain seriously over them.

But taken as a whole, they provide an interesting picture that reflects, if only in a distorted way, the extent of the worker's concern for the nature of his workplace.

A technique in bargaining developed by Walter Reuther and being continued by Woodcock is the public show of militancy. It gives the public appearance of great militancy but it means something very different.

While the leadership of the union goes through the motions of accepting all the workers' demands and pressing them on the companies, the tactic of publicly demanding almost everything that could be thought of at the beginning of negotiations is intended to get the workers off their backs and keep them quiet when the serious negotiating begins in secret sessions. It leaves the union leadership free to work out any settlement it

thinks reasonable and to establish its own priorities in the negotiations.

The range of union demands in the negotiations also reflects something else. It is a sign that unionism is reaching its limit. Not because they will win so little, but because they will win so much and it will prove to be so little.

It will not make the life of the black worker at the Eldon Avenue plant of Chrysler or the white worker at the Chrysler plant in Windsor one bit more tolerable.

That is one of the reasons that the union leadership has such a hard time with the new generation of young workers in the plants. They tell the workers about the great victories of the union in the past and what it was like in open shop days.

They tell the truth—those were genuine victories. But they have become transformed into their opposite by virtue of becoming incorporated into contracts and the whole process of what is called labor relations.

(Labor relations, it should be noted, has nothing to do with workers; it has to do with relations between company representatives and union representatives.)

The *Detroit Free Press* published the following report in August 1970:

> Some 46 percent of General Motors' hourly workers are below age 35. They have never known a depression, they have had more schooling than the man who lived through the last one, and they aren't impressed by the old Spartan idea that hard, repetitive work is a virtue.
>
> They are less responsive to authority than even the men who seized the Flint GM plants in the historic 1936-1937 sit-down strikes.

That is precisely the background against which discontent is surfacing throughout the industry today, discontent that has reached its most advanced stage in the auto industry.

The formation of the CIO in the 1930s settled once and for all the idea that owners or managers or stockholders had the right to run their plants any way they saw fit. Sit-downs, strikes, wildcats, direct on-the-job action, sabotage and violence established the power of workers in the plants. The tactics used and the extent of that power varied from plant to plant and from industry to industry.

Sabotage and violence have long been a part of the auto industry. There were reports of the murder or disappearance of foremen at the Ford Rouge plants in the days before the union; the recent murder of two foremen at a Chrysler plant is not an especially new development.

Other forms of sabotage are less severe but nonetheless effective. On some assembly lines where the links are exposed, an occasional rest

period or slow down is achieved by the simple (and virtually undetectable) tactic of putting the handle of a long open-end wrench into the chain to shear the pin and stop the line. Sometimes the light bulb that signals the line breakdown is unscrewed or broken so that an extra few minutes are gained before the stoppage is discovered.

Not uncommon is the sabotage of the product. Sometimes this increases the amount of the repair work coming off the lines. Sometimes this saddles a customer with a built-in rattle in a high-priced car because some worker welded a wrench or some bolts into a closed compartment.

The nature of violence and sabotage as a tool of workers provides an insight into the problems caused by the extensive technological changes of the past 20 years. Although generally called automation, something else is involved: the first and basic reason for technological change is the struggle against workers' power by the employers. Technological advance is designed, directly or indirectly, to eliminate workers or to make them more subservient to the machine. And most changes made in plants are made solely to increase production rather than out of any concern for the workers.

For example, Chrysler stamping operations are now centered in the Sterling Township Stamping Plant, about 15 miles outside Detroit. The plant now does operations that were formerly done at the Dodge, Plymouth and Chrysler plants.

Separating 4,000 or so workers from most of their fellows seriously reduced the power and effectiveness of the workers. The shutting down of old plants means that formal and informal organizations are broken up or abandoned.

And it takes time for new relations and new organizations to be worked out. Workers at Sterling have indicated that it took approximately four years for the plant to be transformed from just an accidental combination of workers to a relatively well organized and disciplined force.

In the early days of the union the power of the workers could be wielded more openly and more directly. Workers negotiated directly with the lower levels of management and were able to settle things right on the shop floor. How easily they were able to do this depended, of course, on their relative strength and the nature of the technology involved among other things.

As an example, the workers in the heat-treat department at the Buick plant in Flint had an especially strong position.

One time, shortly after the union was established, they felt themselves strongly aggrieved. But the early contracts did not rigidly define the grievance procedure. So instead of locating the violated clause and leaving their fate to a bureaucracy, they simply sent the steward to see the general foreman.

Since their interest in this discussion was very great, they accompanied the steward and stood around outside the foreman's office while the discussion was going on.

The time they picked for this meeting was just after they had loaded a heat into the furnace. The heat was scheduled to emerge from the other end of the furnace 20 minutes later. If the heat was not pulled at that time the damage to both the steel being treated and to the furnace itself would have been irreparable.

In the early stages of the discussion the foreman was adamant. He would not accede to the demands—"and you'd better get those guys back to work." As the minutes sped by, the foreman became less and less adamant until, finally, with a couple of minutes left to go, he capitulated. The steward then signalled the workers standing outside and the heat was pulled.

That might be an extreme situation but it was not an unusual one. Workers are very aware of how their jobs fit into the total process of production.

To change the scale and to change the time: almost 30 years later, during a wildcat at the Sterling Stamping Plant of the Chrysler Corporation in 1969, the workers made clear their awareness of how their plant fit into the scheduling of Chrysler plants in Detroit, Windsor, St. Louis and elsewhere. They knew when and in what order the Sterling strike would shut down other Chrysler plants.

The knowledge of the workers' importance in the overall framework is both an instrument in the day-to-day struggle and the essential basis for a new society.

The instinctive assertion of their own power on the shop floor that workers managed in the thirties was extended in the forties when war production requirements and the labor shortage forced the government and the corporations to make concessions to workers' control.

But that was also the period during which the separation of workers from the union structure began. The last major organizing success marks the turn to bureaucracy.

When Ford fell to the union in 1941, both the check-off and full time for union committeemen were incorporated into the contract.

But the apparent victories only created more problems. Workers wanted full time for union representatives to get them out from under company pressures and discrimination. Getting elected steward often got you the worst job in a department and stuck away in a corner where you couldn't see what was happening.

But full time for stewards did more than relieve union representatives from company pressure—it ended up by relieving representatives from workers' pressure. The steward is less available than he was before, and

you have to have your foreman go looking for him should you happen to need him.

The check-off produced a similar situation. Designed to keep the company from pressuring weaker workers to stay out of the union even though they were sharing in its benefits, the check-off ended up reducing worker pressure on the union officials.

No longer does the steward have to listen to workers' complaints each month as he goes around collecting the dues. Once a month the dues are delivered in one huge check from the company to the union and the worker never sees his dues payment.

World War II finished what the Ford contract had begun. The top layers of the union leadership were incorporated into the government boards and agencies that managed and controlled war production. In return certain concessions were made in terms of union organization.

Union recognition was often arranged from above without the participation of the workers in strike or other action. At this point in time the lower levels of the union leadership were still pretty close to the workers and very often local union officials participated in and supported the numerous wildcat strikes that took place.

This process of bureaucratization was completed with Walter Reuther's victory and his substitution of the "one-party state" in control of the union for the democratic kind of factionalism that had been the norm in the UAW before.

And with the Reuther administration the union moved to participate directly in the management and discipline of workers in production. All through the fifties, with intensive automation and decentralization going on in the auto industry, the union collaborated in crushing the numerous wildcat strikes, in getting rid of the most militant workers, in establishing labor peace in the industry.

In the other industrial unions the pace of bureaucratization was much more advanced. In steel, for example, Phil Murray kept a tight and undemocratic hold on the Steel Workers Organizing Committee until after the basic contracts had been negotiated with United States Steel. It was only then that the Organizing Committee appointed from the top was replaced by an autonomous union which could vote on its own officers or contracts. Any worker can illustrate the bureaucratic history of his own union.

The grievance procedure became virtually worthless to the workers. In 1955 at the termination of a contract presumably designed to provide a grievance procedure, there were in some GM plants as many as *10,000 unresolved grievances*.

The situation has not improved since then. GM complains that the number of grievances in its plants has grown from 106,000 in 1960 to 256,000 in 1969 or 60 for each 100 workers.

What are these specific local grievances? They involve production standards: the speed of a line, the rate on a machine, the number of workers assigned to a given job, the allowable variations in jobs on a given line. They involve health and safety standards: unsafe machines, cluttered or oily floors, rates of production which prevent the taking of reasonable precautions, the absence or misuse of hoists or cranes, protection from flames or furnaces, protection from sharp, unfinished metal, protection from welding or other dangerous chemicals or fumes, the right to shut an unsafe job down until the condition is changed.

They involve the quality of life in the plant: the authoritarian company rules which treat workers like a combination of prison inmate and kindergarten child, the right to move about the plant, the right to relieve yourself physically without having to get the foreman's permission or the presence of a relief man, the right to reasonable breaks in the work, the right to a reasonable level of heat in the winter or reasonable ventilation in the summer. And on and on.

The grievances that crowd the dockets of General Motors and of other companies cover the total range of life in the factory. The fact that they are called grievances helps to conceal what they really are—a reflection of the total dissatisfaction of the workers in the way production is run and of the desire of the workers to impose their own will in the factory.

The UAW and the Ford Motor Company recently have been discussing the problem of boredom on the assembly line. The only reason they are discussing it at all—it is by no means a new development—is because more and more workers are refusing to accept factory discipline as a law of nature.

And it is not boredom but *power* which is at stake.

The same worker who for eight hours a day attaches belts to a motor and can't wait to get out of the plant will spend his weekends tinkering with his car and consider it rewarding work. The difference is in who controls the work.

It might be worth noting a couple of things. All workers are exploited to one degree or another. But office workers on the whole do not have to walk past armed guards going to and from work and have a certain amount of freedom in scheduling their work on the job. The coffee break is not a blue-collar institution.

It is clear that historically bosses never thought that workers would work without the severest external discipline and control. And they still don't.

In addition, no matter what all the theoreticians of capitalism may say, workers are treated very differently from anyone else. The industrial Division of American Standard has a plant in Dearborn, Michigan which manufactures industrial air conditioning. The company places ads in trade journals urging employers to air condition their facilities.

The office section of the facility is air conditioned. The plant is not. The only thing that makes this situation unusual is that the company manufactures the equipment. But even that isn't enough to get them to provide for blue-collar workers what office workers, engineers, managers and professionals now take as a matter of course.

The reorganization, technological change and decentralization that characterized the fifties and culminated in the depression gave way to a new expansion which brought significant numbers of young workers into the industry in the U.S. These are workers who couldn't care less about what the union won in 1937. They are not more backward (as the union bureaucrats like to pretend) but more advanced. They are attuned to the need to change the nature of work, to the need of human beings to find satisfaction in what they do.

It is this new and changing working class that was the basis for the new level of wildcat strikes, for a doubled rate of absenteeism, for an increased amount of violence in plants. It is a new working class that no conceivable contract settlement can control or immobilize.

Both unions and industry are aware of their problem to some degree. "The UAW believes," says the *Free Press*, "that a better-trained corps of union stewards would be better equipped to cope with these issues and with gut plant problems like narcotics, alcoholism, loan-sharking, weapon-packing, pilfering and gambling. 'A bunch of armed guards isn't the only answer,' said one committeeman."

After 33 years of unionism, they have suddenly discovered that armed guards are not the answer. To put it plainly, they have suddenly discovered that armed guards are not enough.

The slowdown of automation in the sixties (a consequence of the shortage of capital) has led to a relative stabilization. That is, workers in new installations and in old ones that have been reorganized have now had a few years to work out new forms of organization.

The complaints against the young workers who make up a crucial force in the factories indicate that the wildcats of the past may be replaced, or at least supplemented, by something new.

The tightly knit structures of the big industrial unions leave no room for maneuvering. There is no reasonable way in which young workers can use the union constitution to overturn and overhaul the union structure. The constitution is against them; the money and jobs available to union bureaucrats are against them. And if these fail, the forces of law and order of city, state and federal governments are against them.

If that were not enough, the young workers in the factories today are expressing the instinctive knowledge that even if they gained control of the unions and reformed them completely, they would still end up with unions—organizations which owe their existence to capitalist relations of productions.

The impossibility of transforming the unions has been argued by a number of observers. Clark Kerr has noted, without disapproval, that "unions and corporations alike are, with very few exceptions, one-party governments." That is the phrase usually reserved for Stalinist or fascist totalitarian governments. But it is not overdrawn.

Paul Jacobs has documented this in the case of the unions:

> A study of 70 international union constitutions, the formal instruments that rule a membership of almost 16,000,000 workers, shows among other things that in most of these 70 unions power is generally concentrated in the hands of the international presidents, with few restraints placed upon them, that discipline may be enforced against union members with little regard for due process, and that opposition to the incumbent administration is almost impossible.

And all of this is what young workers are revolting against.

That means that the course of future developments in the factories has to be sought outside the unions. Caucuses and factions will still be built and, here and there, will have temporary and minor successes. But the explosions that are still to come are likely to have the appearance of new revolutionary forms, organizations which are not simply organs of struggle but organs of control of production. They are a sign of the future.

False Promises: A Review

False Promises:
The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness
by Stanley Aronowitz
McGraw Hill, 1973
465 pp., $10.00

Aronowitz's book is a substantial departure from the usual intellectual view of working-class consciousness. In the first place, he does not equate workers with the unions that claim to represent them. "The unions," says Aronowitz, "have all but abandoned the fight for decent working conditions, and, insofar as they are perceived as staunch defenders of the status quo in terms of the organization of work, they are increasingly looked upon as enemies." (p. 409) Although I have certain minor reservations with respect to his analysis, the fact that he sees unions as inherently or institutionally conservative is a substantial advance over the usual wisdom of the left.

Many years ago I was hired in at the Detroit Transmission Division of General Motors. On the last day of my probationary period, I was called in by the foreman to be told that I was fired. I asked for my committeeman (whom I had never seen in 89 days of work) and then became witness to a remarkable exchange. I tried to tell the committeeman my side of the story, but he dismissed it cavalierly and simply assumed that all of the foreman's charges were valid. Yet, when they had finished their bargaining (most of it not in my presence), the committeeman informed me that if I promised not to violate the rules anymore, the foreman would not fire me. This, seemingly, was the union at its best—probationary employees have no rights whatever that either the company or the union is bound to respect; and simply by reporting to work the next day I achieved a new status that protected me from such haphazard firing.

But what most impressed me about this experience was the fundamental argument used by the committeeman to win my case. He charged the foreman with being unwilling to share responsibility with the union for discipline in the plant. He told him that the time to call the committeeman was not after he had fired a worker and left the committeeman no alternative but to defend him, but when he first saw the worker "going wrong." Then the committeeman could come over and tell the worker that what he was doing was not the way things were done around here, whether it was washing up early, taking an extra break, or whatever. That way the

worker was reformed (disciplined), the foreman was content and the committeeman did not have to write a grievance. This incident gave me some insight into my own earlier experience as a steward and as a committeeman. Assuming that I was a militant union representative and not concerned with maintaining discipline, suppose I entered the toilet and found a worker asleep. I could ignore him, or I could tap him on the shoulder and tell him that if he were caught there was no way I could protect his job. How was this fundamentally different from the role of a conservative union representative?

It is always nicer, I suppose, to have pure motives than to have reprehensible motives. But fundamentally the function of the union representative is to enforce the contract. And, while the contract spells out certain rights of workers (mostly in terms of dollars and cents), it also spells out certain rights of management. It is these rights of management which workers are not prepared to accept, and the union's enforcement of these rights, often enough, gives them their view of the union as enemy, as "them," as opposed to "us."

A second sense in which Aronowitz's book is a departure is that it grasps much of the totality and complexity of working-class consciousness. "We must examine daily life," he says, "for it is in the structures of everyday existence that the social structure is reproduced in the minds of its participants." (p. xi) In the opening section of the book Aronowitz combines a very astute description of the new reality of work at the Lordstown, Ohio, GM plant (he scoops the *New York Times* which only last December discovered the Lordstown practice of "doubling up" (Workers covering for each other and performing two jobs so that unauthorized breaks can be taken)) with an extensive review of working-class social reality outside of work as embodied in education, play, sports, entertainment, film, and so on. The interplay of his own personal experience, attention to historical development, and familiarity with major intellectual figures makes for a richness of material and perception, although sometimes at the expense of rather arbitrary judgments. The main emphasis, not only in this earlier section, but throughout the book, tends to be the socialization of the working class into capitalist society.

The central section of *False Promises*, "The Formation of the American Working Class," continues this richness of treatment but concentrates on those factors which divide the working class and limit its development: ethnic divisions above all, but also divisions along sexual, religious or racial lines; craft divisions; and the influence of workers' European peasant origins. There is a kind of climax to this development in his treatment of trade unionism and its limitations. His critical perceptions are especially unusual (and difficult) for someone who has experienced union activism in the direct way that Aronowitz has.

There are some chapters on the changes in the middle class in the direction of a "professional servant class," and the creation of white-collar proletarians, which seem less relevant to the main theme of the book. The conclusions are prefaced by an interesting study of the "unsilent fifties," a combination of Aronowitz's personal experiences in and out of the labor movement, the problems of McCarthyism, and the changes in the labor movement during this period.

But, while Aronowitz goes far beyond most other commentators on the labor scene, there are some fundamental weaknesses which distort his analysis. To begin with, he asks the wrong question: "The fundamental question to be explored in this book is why the working class in America remains a dependent force in society and what the conditions are that may reverse this situation." I do not mean to imply that it is an unreasonable question. But, taken by itself, it is a limited question and will inevitably bring distorted answers. The problem is that the worker is viewed essentially as victim. Whether Aronowitz is discussing the important spheres of popular culture and entertainment or industrial militancy, the worker is everywhere the victim, unable to exercise significant influence on his or her own social reality.

In dealing with education, for example, the book is quite perceptive, except for its view of the historical origins of compulsory popular education: "The movement for reforms such as child and female labor restrictions, factory laws that required a minimum standard of health and safety to be maintained by employers, and free compulsory schooling were motivated by both the short-term and long-term interests of the rising capitalist classes." (p. 72) This view is also applied to the origin of unions; it is false in most respects and is not helped by the relative ambiguity of a term like "motivated." The fact of the matter is that workers formed unions, workers fought for factory reform, and workers fought for compulsory, free, popular education. They were assisted by rather small numbers of middle-class reformers. They were opposed by capitalists essentially because it was not in their short-term interest.

What is involved is a relatively simple contradiction. All reforms that stop short of overthrowing the capitalist system become co-opted by that system and turned to its advantage (but not necessarily to the advantage of any particular capitalists). All that says is that if the system isn't overthrown it continues to function. But that is a far cry from viewing massive social movements as capitalist manipulations. That schools or unions today are institutions for the socialization of children and workers into this system does not mean that they were created by the capitalists to fool the workers. That conspiratorial theory of history lies just beneath the surface of Aronowitz's book.

Something more important than historical credit is involved in this. If

the working class has been nothing but a victim (except for narrow questions of hours and wages, etc.) then it is hard to see what possible sources of radicalization exist. But if the working class has continually attempted to transform society, and has succeeded in transforming capitalist society, then it is that continuous struggle which transforms the working class itself and makes it capable of ultimately overthrowing capitalism. But here another problem is posed. Aronowitz cannot finally abandon the intellectual conception of consciousness as verbalization and throughout the book, in discussing massive social struggles, he ultimately dismisses them because they weren't "conscious" or "self-conscious."

The workers' growing resistance to work, their attempts to control the workplace, are minimized: because they seek "only" to control the workplace, they are not revolutiounary. It is startling that a radical intellectual like Aronowitz should have a more conservative view of working-class activity than Establishment sociologists. In *Work in America*, a report of a special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, published by M.I.T. Press in 1973, workers' alienation is seen as a direct source of political radicalization: "The result of alienation is often the withdrawal of the worker from community or political activity or the displacement of his frustrations through participation in radical social or political movements." (p. 22) According to this report, "there is now convincing evidence that some blue-collar workers are carrying their work frustrations home and displacing them in extremist social or political movements or in hostility toward the government." (p. 30)

The same problem appears in the discussion of mass culture. Aronowitz comes very close to a traditional elitist view of culture, although he modifies it by defending a presumably older "popular" culture (implying popular participation) as opposed to "mass" culture. The distinction between popular culture and mass culture, however, is artificial and is not a matter of "participation." The audience did not "participate" in the production of Shakespeare's plays or those of Aeschylus. But the audience, consciously or unconsciously, was constantly in the mind of the artist who had to depend on the vote of the Athenian citizen or the thruppence of the Elizabethan English for acceptance of his work. Great art has, often enough, been produced in response to an audience. Is it too much to think in terms of the same relationship in the movie (Chaplin, Eisenstein, etc., etc.)? Is the audience, whether of a motion picture, a football game, or a television show, purely passive victim? Or does it exercise its own influence—always and obviously within the framework of the existing social system? If Aronowitz thinks, as he seems to, that the music of the young is somehow anti-capitalist, or at least more revolutionary, than a film such as *Viva Zapata* or *The Wild Ones*, then he hasn't noticed some of the racist rock and folk music or the sentimental pie-in-

the-sky songs of good feeling which seek to opt out of this society and all political activity. It is not a matter of quality. Most entertainment that is produced for profit (as well as most amateur entertainment) is junk. What is involved is the perception that changes in the popular media, changes in sports, are at least in part responses to the pressure of the audience. Radicals need to explore that element in popular culture along with the bureaucratic, profit-making, manipulative forces which control the production of entertainment. How else to understand how the black community used the Muhammed Ali-Patterson fight for its own ends?

Seeing the worker only as victim leads to a very strange conclusion. The answer to the question originally asked, "what the conditions are that may reverse this situation" of the working class as a dependent force, is—none. Aronowitz sees the American working class as overwhelmingly fragmented by divisions of sex, ethnicity, and race, and, most important, by the division of labor in the factory itself. In this I believe he too easily confuses multiplicity of job classifications with the hierarchy of *management*. As a matter of fact, one of the characteristics of the American factory which often surprises Europeans is the limited range of wage differentials among production workers. But Aronowitz's conclusion is a total reversal of the role of the working class. Two passages illustrate this: "I believe that [Lenin] and Marx were too optimistic and underestimated the alienation of workers from one another embedded in the division of labor and the factory system," (p. 417) and "The redundancy of large portions of the labor force, especially women and children, created by labor-saving technologies has led to the increased importance of institutions whose central role in society is the transmission of values and ideologies that reproduce capitalism within the consciousness of the working class in the absence of experiences in the workplace that formerly performed this function." (pp. 420-1)

This last is hard to believe. Aronowitz is not modifying or adjusting Marx's and Lenin's "optimism." He is directly contradicting them. He is not saying that the work experience does not lead to sufficient class or revolutionary consciousness. He is saying that the work experience leads to the exact opposite, to the acceptance of capitalist society.

Where, then, is the basis for a revolutionary perspective? "The infection of democratic ideology and the social legitimation of erotic needs by mass culture among this generation of young workers constitutes the permanent roots of the revolt. These impulses are the material basis for hope that a new working class strategy can transcend both trade unionism and particularistic demands." (p. 423) We will leave aside the problem of a generation of the young providing the permanent roots of anything. The only thing permanent about a younger generation is their inevitable replacement by another generation. We will also leave aside the problem of

how ideology and culture can be the *material* basis for anything. What we cannot put aside is the fact that the word "workers" after "young" is purely gratuitous. We are not talking about workers at all. We are simply talking about the young. After all, the only thing that distinguishes young *workers* from their peers is that their potential class consciousness is fragmented by their work experience. So that we are not even talking about class consciousness; we are talking about youth consciousness. And that brings us to another problem: what is the nature of the revolution? Does it require workers at all?

But first, a digression. Aronowitz does not deal extensively with Marx—there are relatively few references to Marx in his book. But I think it is necessary to note that his reading of Marx tends to be superficial and, therefore, deceptive. Most references to Marx are rather general and have no specific citations. There is one exception, and it is instructive. Aronowitz says, "Marx's belief that large-scale industry provided the social political basis for the working class to be the first exploited class in human history to take control of society was expressed in his analogy of the power of the industrial workers to the 'offensive power of a squadron of cavalry'." (p. 416)

Marx says, "Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of a regiment of infantry, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual cavalry or infantry soldiers taken separately, so the sum of the total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workmen differs from the social force that is developed, when many hands take part simultaneously in one and the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch, or removing an obstacle. . . . Not only have we here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of cooperation, but the creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses." (*Capital*, 1, pp. 357-8, Modern Library edition) Not only is Marx not talking of anything more than mechanical or productive power, he is not even talking about heavy industry. This section appears in the chapter on Cooperation, two chapters prior to the one in which he begins his discussion of Machinery and Modern Industry.

To return to the problem. The working class is crucial to the socialist revolution for essentially two reasons. One is that the process of production, the production and transportation of food, clothing, shelter, etc., is fundamental to any society and the section of society which can gain control of that process can gain control of the society as a whole. For example, a strike of students, of teachers, or of bank tellers, may have considerable political impact but it brings nothing but the immediate activities to a halt. But workers in a steel mill, on a railroad, in an auto plant, can affect the economy far beyond their own specific workplace.

Moreover, they are aware of that reality and that awareness is an integral part of working-class consciousness.

The second reason for the centrality of the working class is that the socialist revolution must involve the transformation of work and the workplace or it is not a social revolution at all. What transformed the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 from street demonstrations and guerrilla fighting to a social revolution was that the working class took over the means of production and formed workers' councils. What transformed France in 1968 was that several weeks of student battles with the police gave way to the occupation of the factories. If that does not happen there is no social revolution. Whatever else may happen—and a revolution is a vast, complex totality—if the workers do not gain possession of the means of production, then governments may have been overthrown, but society has not been transformed.

What is amazing is that Aronowitz documents that capacity and that reality but refuses to accept it for what it is.

"In both America and Britain," he writes, "recent experience has demonstrated clearly that the sheer social power of workers within the factories or the offices to transform production or to challenge the rule of capital is beyond question." What more could one want? Well, Aronowitz wants culture. "American workers have perfected the strike weapon to a degree unknown in European countries, but it is their cultural level that prevents them from transcending corporate domination . . . ." (p. 428)

Writing about the struggles of the Thirties and earlier, Aronowitz says, "The employers in Minneapolis, Seattle and Detroit were well aware of the spontaneous and dangerous quality of the strikes of the thirties, and of their further implications. They demanded that all legal machinery of the state be mobilized to prevent the seizure of factories and transportation systems by the workers and that the strikes be suppressed by arms if necessary." (p. 424) (One might interject—what "further implications," known to the employers but kept safely concealed by Aronowitz?) But how does Aronowitz sum up the experience of the Thirties? " . . .the Great Depression of 1929 prevented the emergence of mass working class consciousness until the postwar era." (p. 402)

False Promises is a strange book. Despite a certain carelessness of presentation, I recommend it to all concerned with the working class for its extensive documentation of the working-class experience, at work, in the larger society, and in the unions. It is imbued with the conception that freedom is the fundamental quality of revolutionary change and it rejects the strangling doctrines and structures of the union movement and of the vanguard parties. Yet it cannot overcome a conception of working-class consciousness which reduces workers to victims and consciousness to verbalizations.

The American Working Class in Historical Perspective

Strike! fills a substantial gap in the history of the American working class and brings to its material a point of view that helps considerably to counteract the almost universally bureaucratic attitudes of labor historians. It is extremely rare to find a historian who does not equate the working class with the organized labor movement, or, even worse, with the leadership of that movement. And when that rare exception is found, it is even rarer to find someone who thinks that the absence of organizational institutions is anything but a sign of weakness.

Brecher brings to his book deep democratic convictions, without which there can be no revolutionary convictions. He also brings a sense of the political and historical importance of working-class struggles that are more often dismissed with the adjective "economic". The meaning of these struggles clearly derives from the activities of the workers themselves and the ways in which these activities threaten capitalist society. The absence of formal organizations with formal programs is not and cannot be the test of revolutionary significance.

Having said this, however, I want to deal with Brecher's book critically, to indicate its limitations and weaknesses.

The problem that pervades the whole book is the problem of organization. *Strike!* is a documented critique of the role of labor organizations of all types and of labor leaders in restraining and limiting the militancy and revolutionary capacity of ordinary workers. That is fine as far as it goes. But it never deals with the question of organization in a fundamental way. Unless you accept a conspiratorial theory of history—that labor organizations are everywhere introduced to restrain and defeat workers—you have to deal with the question of why labor organizations of various types arise. "Arise" is too abstract a word. Labor organizations are created by workers, by ordinary rank-and-file workers. George Rawick noted a few years ago that "The unions did not organize the strikes; the working class in and through the strikes organized the unions."[1] This was written about the formation of the CIO. The principle, however, is true of any stage of the American working class. Brecher documents the same phenomenon in relation to the 1877 strikes and the Knights of Labor. Whether it was the unions or political parties of the pre-Civil War period, the Knights of Labor, the AFL, or the IWW—and no matter what these organizations later became—they were created by ordinary workers.

There is a need to perceive the development of the American working class in terms of contradictions that are more subtle than a simple workers-versus-organizations dichotomy. Workers create organizations

out of needs and possibilities, not out of principles. In the pre-industrial period of the American working class, workers created unions which were essentially local in compass. National unions were not possible, given the level of technology and transportation (although the creation of local unions was a national phenomenon). These unions were organizations of self-defense. The idea of a new society appeared from the very beginning in embryo form. But it could only develop in activity, being shaped by continuing struggles, by victories, and by defeats. It could not develop as an ideology.

The working class is inherently revolutionary. This is not a matter of formal consciousness. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."[2] It is a matter of developing in practice the capacity to create a new society. That development takes the form, of necessity, of exhausting the possibilities of bourgeois society. That is, workers create organizations of various kinds in order to struggle for whatever seems useful to them. These struggles, whether they take place within the framework of formal organizations or not, win for the working class whatever it is possible to win under capitalism. Whether these victories are wage increases, or free universal compulsory education, or child labor laws, or anything else, they are never granted without struggle. That is, they are never—in the first instance—tricks to deceive the working class.

However, the victories of the working class and their organizations all become transformed. There is a dialectical process at work. So long as the struggle ends short of the socialist revolution, every codification of victory, every kind of organization, becomes absorbed and institutionalized into capitalist society. In a sense the class struggle consists of overturning past victories. This is not simply a theoretical view of past history. It bears a current reality. Unions have exhausted their possibilities in American capitalist society. But that is a one-sided abstraction. What does one say to migrant farm workers, or to hospital workers, or to workers in chicken-processing plants, all of whom earn (or earned) income for full-time work that was well under the poverty level? Is anyone prepared to say that they should wait until the socialist revolution makes bureaucratic unions unnecessary? It seems evident that workers have to go through a certain experience, if only to give themselves a little breathing space, a little elbow room. Not absolutely, not every last worker and work place, but in general.

But there is more involved than an accumulation of experience, of victories and defeats. It is in these struggles that workers develop their capacity to transform society—and they begin by transforming *capitalist* society. The period that precedes the point at which Brecher begins has some interesting examples. Two of the major labor demands of the period before the Civil War, particularly about the time of Andrew Jackson, were

free compulsory education and objective incorporation laws. Both of these demands were won, and won largely, though not entirely, through the efforts of the working class and working-class organizations. Both demands obviously served to strengthen and expand American capitalism, by providing an educational system that trained a working class suitable to capitalism and by breaking away from the earlier, monopolistic forms of incorporation by legislative fiat. What is the significance of these victories for us today, and for the working class? Is it that workers were stupid and tricked and did the work of the bourgeoisie and were co-opted into bourgeois society? Or is it rather that workers showed and developed the capacity to transform society—to whatever extent was objectively possible? To put it another way, did these victories show that socialism is impossible, or did they show that socialism is inevitable?

The problems raised here, or rather the failure to deal with them, leads to some awkward consequences in the last few chapters when Brecher is discussing current possibilities and future perspectives. These are compounded by a tendency, which is not apparent in the historical sections, to view consciousness in narrowly intellectual terms. For example, Brecher says that "Workers, out of their own weakness, felt the need for strong leaders . . ." (Page 285) That is an interesting phenomenon—that workers should produce their strongest leaders (John L. Lewis, for example) when they are themselves strongest (the period of the creation of the CIO). The strength of the leaders, in fact, derives from the strength of the workers, and has to be viewed both as a creation of the workers and as an antagonist to the workers.

Brecher's failure to see the duality, the contradiction, within the working class and to see consciousness as activity leads him to reintroduce the idea of working-class backwardness. "From 1969 to 1971," says Brecher (Page 290), "workers, like the rest of the population, developed an overwhelming opposition to the Vietnam war." But that is only part of the picture, the part that deals with verbalized consciousness. The fact is that well before 1969, ordinary American workers, in the pursuit of their "narrow" class objectives, interfered with and prevented more war production than all of the anti-war demonstrations put together. In strikes at North American Aviation in Missouri, at Olin-Matheisen in Illinois, on the Southern Railway System, and on the Missouri Pacific, workers refused to succumb to patriotic pressure from politicians, union leaders, and business executives and went their own way—not because they were anti-war, but because they put the class struggle first. (It was Lenin who said, a long time ago, that "We cannot equate the patriotism of the working class with the patriotism of the bourgeoisie.")

"All historical writing," says Brecher (Page ix), "is a matter of selecting a limited number of significant facts from an infinity of others."

It is curious that in discussing the current scene he should use different standards of judgement from those he uses in discussing past history. In describing the past he seeks out the events and the statements that indicate the revolutionary character of the struggles. That obviously does not mean that that was all there was. It does not take into account the millions of individual incidents of racism, of sexism, of patriotism, of plain ordinary stupidity that workers (like everyone else) are guilty of. Does that result in a distorted picture? Not at all. It is not especially significant that in their day-to-day lives workers are weighted down by what Marx called "all the old crap". It would be miraculous if it were otherwise. What is significant is the evidence that in periods of struggle workers can break out of that and overcome the limitations that bourgeois society imposes on them.

Why, then, does he revert to the methodology of academic labor historians when he discusses the present? "It is often suggested that today's renewed labor militance differs from that of the past in that today's strikers are 'only out for themselves', rather than seeing their actions as part of a broader struggle. This is often expressed in the phrase that today's strikers are not 'socially conscious'. There is considerable truth in this view . . . ." (Page 281)

I don't want to exaggerate. Brecher indicates reservations that modify this view. But basically he accepts the charges of racial and sexual division, lack of class consciousness, and so on. It leads him into the trap of economism. To reply to the charge of affluence as a conservative influence, Brecher turns to the Old Left dependence on the inevitable depression. (What depression led to the Hungarian revolution of 1956 or the French revolution of 1968?) What is more serious, he turns to a re-definition of the working class, some of it justified, most of it not justified.

He seems to accept the charge of affluence as a source of conservatism by indicating that only a small part of the working class is affluent—the unionized white male workers. The majority of the working class, he says, is black, female, or young, and is not affluent. That argument simply will not do. First, if you exclude the skilled trades, construction, and the like, the best-paid and most-thoroughly-unionized areas are the basic and heavy industries. They are so crucial to society, and particularly to revolutionary potential, that they cannot be brushed aside and their place taken by service workers, migrant farm workers, clerical workers, and so on.

But the point is that this is not needed. There are substantial numbers of black workers in auto, steel, transportation, and the like. No one believes today that high auto or steel wages water down their militancy (although that was a widespread belief before the 1967 Detroit rebellion).

Why should black workers be immune to the evils of affluence while white workers inevitably succumb? Obviously there is a difference rooted in racial discrimination and oppression. But how deep is that difference? Does the black auto worker with 10 or 20 years' seniority, making over $5 an hour and working considerable overtime, have an absolute empathy with the unemployed ghetto youngster? Or an absolute antipathy to his white fellow auto worker?

Black workers are likely to be more militant than their white fellow workers. Young workers are likely to be more militant than their older fellow workers (white or black). But these differences are only relative, and simply indicate where the initial sparks tend to come from. Struggles tend to be initiated by the young and the black. That was probably just as true a hundred years ago as today (if you substitute immigrants for blacks). But the rest of the working class tends to follow these more aggressive elements.

Trying to shift the discussion to the so-called new working class, Brecher falls into further distortions. First of all, he equates salaried workers with the working class. Simply because some traditional middle-class occupations have shifted from self-employed to salaried does not make them working-class. The form of payment is an insecure test of class. Objective function in relation to production or the society as a whole would seem to be a better test. It would seem to me that professionally-trained people (such as teachers or social workers) whose basic role is to manipulate others in order to secure the smooth functioning of society are best defined as middle-class. The fact that they are also exploited and alienated and that opposition to bourgeois society appears within their ranks is evidence of the decline of bourgeois society and the ability of revolutionary impulses to appear anywhere. Their objective role remains (even when it is unwilling) social control.

Secondly, Brecher accepts too readily government statistics that seem to indicate the relative decline of blue-collar work. The Government's own figures, when properly broken down, indicate that the majority of the working class are still blue-collar and are likely to remain that way for at least another 10 years.

The problem is that Brecher is not aware of the roots of the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat, and tends, in the last chapters of his book, to fall back on "consciousness" or—what amounts to the same thing—"will" as the basis for a revolutionary perspective. "Only the will to keep in their own hands the power they have taken can protect ordinary people from losing it." (Page 308) That is nonsense, and if it were true the cause would already be lost.

What is the source of the revolutionary capacity of the working class? It is the fact that workers are at the point of production, that their work

itself teaches them how to run production, and that the conditions of their work force them to struggle against the existing relations of production, and therefore against capitalist society. The fundamental indicator of revolutionary capacity is not political belief, much less demands and slogans, but rather the capacity to organize production and to defend the new social relations from attack. Brecher's criticism of the Russian Revolution is totally misplaced. (I disagree with the details of his criticism, but I don't see the point to raising that discussion in the present context.) What led to the defeat of the Russian Revolution was not Lenin's evil ways, but the inability of the Russian working class to take control of the means of production and run the society. This inability did not stem from lack of will. If there was lack of will, it was because "will" was obviously not enough. If you compare the Russian Revolution of 1917 with the Hungarian revolution of 1956, it becomes evident that in all the things that matter in creating a new society the Hungarian workers were far in advance of the Russian. They were not a tiny minority in a vast peasant country; they were literate and had access to and familiarity with the most modern technology and the most advanced means of communication. They took hold of the means of production and began to build a new state and a new society. Nothing in Hungarian society could defeat them. That took an invasion by a foreign power.

Brecher says that "There is a natural tendency for responsibility to re-centralize in the hands of a few individuals, accepted leaders, who then come to do more and more of the movement's thinking and deciding for it." (Page 307) There is nothing natural about it. And in any case it is not a tendency that will be countered by "will". The centralization of power is the tendency of the counter-revolution to step in to fill any gaps or lacks that are permitted by the working class. That is to say, there are two "natural" tendencies—that of workers to decentralize and democratize, and that of capital (no matter who speaks in its name) to discipline and centralize. To raise the Stalinist overthrow of the Russian Revolution in the way that Brecher does is to assume that 50 years of history have brought about no changes in capitalist society and in the working classes of the industrial nations.

In this context the American working class are not less advanced than their brothers of 50 or 100 years ago, but more advanced. Better educated, better organized (not by unions, but by production), with the most advanced means of communication available to them, without the loyalty to old established labor parties that still inhibits European workers... American workers—and particularly those in transportation and heavy industry—have the capacity to transform American society. Brecher sees this only dimly, and the result is that in the last chapters of his book he departs from the methodology that sustains and informs most of what he writes. Instead of seeking out the evidence of revolutionary capacity and

inherently revolutionary activity, he begins to look for substitutes for it. That is not much help to either history or the working class.

Marx and Engels wrote in their earlier days: "Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*. This revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."[3]

It is the real, existing, American working class, with all its limitations, that will make the American revolution. But in making that revolution, it will be transformed.

FOOTNOTES

[1]George Rawick: "Working-Class Self-Activity", *Radical America*, Volume 3, Number 2 (March-April 1969), Page 27.

[2]Marx and Engels: *The German Ideology* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1968), Page 61.

[3]Ibid., Page 87.

About the Author

Martin Glaberman spent more than twenty years as a production worker in the auto industry in the United States. He is a long-time socialist activist. Originally a member of the Trotskyist movement, he belonged to the Johnson-Forest Tendency which eventually rejected Trotskyism and a number of its key concepts including the vanguard party. The group, later known as Facing Reality and associated especially with the name of C.L.R. James, is best known today for a number of pamphlets it has produced, including "The Invading Socialist Society", "Facing Reality", and "State Capitalism and World Revolution". These outlined a non-dogmatic form of Marxism. More recently Glaberman has taught at Wayne State University and at the Free University of Berlin. He is the author of a number of pamphlets and articles including "Punching Out" and "Mao as a Dialectician". He currently lives in Detroit.

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