

**Socialist Community Organizing**

# **RADICAL AMERICA**

**Vol.13, No.1**

**\$2.00**

**auto in the eighties  
pornography**



*cover: City Life tenants committee meeting in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston. Drawing by Nick Thorkelson.*

Editors: Frank Brodhead, Margery Davies, Marla Erlien, Phyllis Ewen, Linda Gordon, Jim Green, Allen Hunter, Anne Kenney, Neil McCafferty, Jim O'Brien, Nick Thorkelson, Ann Withorn.

Editorial Intern: Amy Wenger

Thanks to Dorothy Klubock for her help on this issue.

Associate Editors: Peter Biskind, Carl Boggs, Paul Buhle, Jorge C. Corralego, Ellen DuBois, Barbara Ehrenreich, Dan Georgakas, Martin Glaberman, Michael Hirsch, Mike Kazin, Ken Lawrence, Staughton Lynd, Mark Naison, Brian Peterson, Sheila Rowbotham, Annemarie Troger, Martha Vicinus, Stan Weir, David Widgery.

RADICAL AMERICA: Published bi-monthly by the Alternative Education Project, Inc. at 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, Massachusetts 02143 (MAILING ADDRESS: P.O. Box B, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140). Copyright © 1978 by Radical America. Subscription rates: \$10 per year, \$18 for two years, \$7 per year for the unemployed. Add \$2.00 per year to all prices for foreign subscriptions. Double rates for institutions. Free to prisoners. Bulk rates: 40 per cent reduction from cover price for five or more copies. Bookstores may order from Carrier Pigeon, 88 Fisher Ave., Boston, Mass. 02120. Typesetting by George Curran, Richard Waring and Sasha Alyson.

Second class postage paid at Boston, Massachusetts.

# **RADICAL AMERICA**

January-February 1979

Vol. 13, No. 1

|                                                                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION                                                                      | 2  |
| LOOKING AT PORNOGRAPHY: EROTICA AND<br>THE SOCIALIST MORALITY,<br>Gregg Blachford | 7  |
| DOUG FRASER'S MIDDLE CLASS COALITION<br>Stan Weir                                 | 19 |
| AUTO IN THE EIGHTIES: UNCARS AND UNWORKERS<br>Al Fabar                            | 31 |
| CITY LIFE: LESSONS OF THE FIRST FIVE YEARS<br>Kathy McAfee                        | 39 |
| RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY<br>Mark Naison                             | 60 |



# INTRODUCTION

## PORNOGRAPHY

Slowly and unsurely, the U.S. feminist movement is developing a political program about pornography. It is a difficult issue, because it collides with concerns about sexual freedom and civil liberties. Although all feminists have been sharply critical of the sexism of most porn, unity around programs of action has been difficult. In the first place, we have no commonly accepted definitions. We are only just emerging from a period in which the law defined *Ulysses* and *Catcher in the Rye* as obscene; fundamentalist Christians today campaign to get sex education and poetry with "bad words" out of the schools; the most elegant magazines advertise perfume and diamonds with rape images. Thus we have to define our targets with care.

In the second place modern pornography is sometimes dished out in a wrapper of female sexual liberation. Victorian pornography usually featured men playing out their fantasies with prostitutes or servants, women who were obvious class inferiors, without denial of the exploitative nature of the sex. Mid-20th-century porn sometimes features allegedly liberated women as sex partners; it has become extremely widespread and easily available since its legalization, and some of it even claims to represent women's fantasies.

The feminist critique of pornography has exposed issues which are far from simple questions of vulgarity: Pornography often connects sexual pleasure with violence towards and humiliation of others, especially women; just as media where the emphasis is on violence often associate those images with sexual success. The misogynist and rape content of pornography and advertising appears to have increased in the last decade, to the extent

---

that many feminists consider porn to be a form of terrorism, used like rape itself to enforce women's subordination. At the same time porn has become a more profitable and mass industry than ever before. And the images of sexual activity in almost all porn, gay and straight, are completely male-defined.

It is not easy to figure out appropriate demands for action. As an example, a recent New York City conference on pornography broke into a polarized debate between civil libertarians, mostly male lawyers, insisting on the absolute preservation of first-amendment free-press rights, and feminists demanding the suppression of porn. This is a ridiculous and false choice. The conference also revealed another problem in anti-porn feminist activity: alliances. The left is not strong enough to fight such battles without allies, nor should we isolate ourselves. But we may find ourselves in strange company if we are not careful: at the conference, for example, the only non-feminist support against porn came from a fundamentalist morality group!

We are reprinting here an article from the small British publication *Gay Left*, and we hope that it will further the political debate about appropriate socialist-feminist responses to pornography. Gregg Blachford's article represents the perspective of gay men, a perspective by no means identical to that of feminist women. Blachford is attentive to the implications of porn for the continued oppression of women but his article is also concerned with the right to "cruising." Gay activists have pointed out that straight radicals and liberals equate casual and varied sexual activity with exploitive activity, and have responded to the open sexuality of many gay men with prudish and anti-sexual attitudes, couched in a moralistic insistence on "meaningful relationships." Casual and fleeting relations need not be exploitive, and can have "meaning", though the meanings

are different from those among long-term partners. Blachford criticizes feminist analysis for a loose use of the Marxist concept, "objectification." By extending it to all forms of oppressive relations, and turning it into a moralistic concept, he argues that we are weakening our analysis of human possibilities.

Feminists, now and in the past, have been guilty of some prudish responses. Much of the reason for this lies in the particular problems women face in heterosexual activity itself: Women are often oppressed and damaged by the emphasis on genital sexuality in relationships; given the structures of male supremacy, the emphasis on sex and on sexual beauty has tended to reduce the social conception of women's capacities and often a women's own self-conception. Gay men sometimes share the problems stemming from the patterns of domination that invade sexuality; but they are still men and have not experienced the *systematic* oppression of male supremacy, nor have they always been critical of the sexism in 'gay subcultures. Understandably, then, feminists have emphasized the importance of committed and close friendships within sexual relationships, have seen greater safety and dignity for women in the intimacy and mutual dependence of marriage, and have been suspicious of the general oversexualization of our mass culture. But to approach issues like porn adequately, we need a theory of sexuality that encompasses women and men. Exploring the differences between feminist and gay male perspectives could, we think, contribute to understanding the complex relationship between repressed sexuality and the oppression of women. And more immediately, political threats from the right require strengthening the potential alliance between gays and feminists. So it is important for socialist-feminists and socialist gays to listen closely and respectfully to each other's points of view. We hope our readers will respond to



---

Blachford's ideas.

## LABOR

On October 17, 1978, United Auto Workers' President Doug Fraser convened a conference in Detroit to consider a "new alliance of progressive forces." Preceded by Fraser's "class-war" rhetoric in the summer when he resigned from the Labor Management Group (a high-level council of big business and big labor), the conference attracted attention from leftists. Our associate editor, Stan Weir, attended the conference and offers here a detailed report on it. He emphasizes the limited political possibilities of a progressive electoral coalition organized bureaucratically — from the top down. It is clear from Weir's report that left forces should not expect to seize leadership in the coalition Fraser wants to create. Even if the leftists in attendance represented mass constituencies, their influence would be limited by Fraser and the other labor bureaucrats whose vision of a progressive or social-democratic coalition does not involve rank-and-file control. Since Fraser and his supporters do not question the bureaucratic assumptions of contract unionism, their coalition will not, Weir argues, produce new ideas about socialism, and will not generate enthusiasm for left activity among workers. The Detroit conference suggests the possibility of a realignment of political forces on the left wing of the Democratic Party, but it is not the beginning of a renewed socialist movement.

In "Auto in the Eighties," Al Fabar looks at the future of the U.S. auto industry in the context of the world political economy. The position of the industry is being threatened by foreign competition domestically and internationally; there is a shift toward small-car production due to the economics of energy and foreign competition; and the relations of production in auto will be undergoing major changes.

Fabar also develops a hypothesis about the implications of the last point — changes in the relations of production — for workers' consciousness and changes in class struggle in the industry. Fabar's conclusions are tentative, but he raises important questions. Capitalists often attempt to predict how workers, consumers and other capitalists will respond to economic developments, while left political economists are often content with maintaining separate and disconnected analyses of the production system and class consciousness and struggle. We value Fabar's attempt to overcome this false dichotomy.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING!

Our "From the Movement" article for this issue is an account of the history and experiences of "City Life," a small socialist organization in Boston. For five years City Life, formerly the Jamaica Plain Tenant Action Group, has been organizing in a racially mixed section of Boston. Like many city or neighborhood organizations begun in the early 1970s, it had its roots in the exodus of many New Leftists from the campuses to working-class neighborhoods. Part of the value of this account, therefore, is that it describes one version of an experience which was shared by many ex-students in the last decade. Concentrating primarily on tenants' issues, during the last five years City Life members have attempted to integrate themselves into the community, broaden their base both in terms of class and race, and develop a socialist politics appropriate for a time of declining black and campus activism, amidst the crisis of the urban political economy.

City Life is admittedly somewhat atypical in that it has survived these difficult years. The most important part of this article, we feel, is the discussion of how City Life met the issues it faced: reformism, organizational democracy, and the wide range of class and educational

backgrounds among members — issues common to most organizations. Part of the value of this article, in fact, is simply that it exists, because there are few organizations emerging out of the New Left which have both amassed enough experience and presented it publicly in a way which can be useful to people doing similar work in other cities. We hope that this account will encourage other organizations to share their experiences.

Appended to the article on City Life is a short position paper which evolved from one part of the organization's internal education. The paper places City Life in relation to the Leninist tradition, reviews past attempts to build working class power through mass organizations, and outlines a revolutionary strategy which is compatible with, and indeed flows from, the long-range goals of the organization and the kind of socialism that it envisions.

It is a bit of a departure for *Radical America* to print a position paper, and we would like to make a few comments on it. We are dubious of the value of such papers. We see writing them as an activity that reflects, and primarily grows out of, a period of a low level of struggle. Placing oneself in relation to a tradition that is understood primarily through a body of literature, through a process of reading and discussion, is not a simple process. It maximizes the chances for a kind of idealism in which class or social struggles become struggles among competing ideologies, which in turn become a battle between texts. Dependent on available source material, moreover, these struggles inevitably overemphasize the importance of leaders and intellectuals, and increase the extent to which we search for the roots of our political weaknesses exclusively through arguments over line and strategy.

This said, we feel that this is one of the best such papers that we have seen recently. We support the emphasis given to the need for building a socialist base and culture now, and

not deferring this work until after a seizure of power and the expropriation of private property. Such activity, we agree, requires not only internal organizational democracy, but a conscious effort to ensure that experience in socialist politics be made as enriching and empowering of individuals as possible. The narrow militant of today, who is rewarded for faithfully implementing the organization's line, is tomorrow's bureaucrat and petty dictator. Furthermore, we appreciate the paper's attempt to broaden Marxism, and to learn from revolutionary developments in the half century since Lenin's death. For example, the paper explores the tradition of workers' councils which most groups operating in a Leninist framework neglect. We also support the emphasis on broadening the organization's political work beyond economic demands to include schools and culture, family and sex roles.

We should also point out, however, that we think the paper does not take into account enough of the lessons and insights of the New Left, or unnecessarily recasts these lessons in Leninist terms. Furthermore, the position paper does not take into account enough of the experiences of City Life itself and draws too many of its conclusions from theoretical work of other historical periods and other countries with different conditions. Although there is a legitimate and important debate about exactly what Leninism is, many of us feel that the vanguard party of the Leninist tradition should be seen as a relic of the past, incapable of creating the kind of revolutionary activity and leadership that our period demands. Finally, it is striking that the organization's strong positions on feminism and gay rights, both in theory and in their history, should find little or no reflection in a paper which places City Life in relation to a revolutionary tradition and attempts to differentiate it from other organizations on the left.







# LOOKING AT PORNOGRAPHY

## Erotica and the Socialist Morality

Gregg Blachford

One of the main contributions of feminism to socialist political practice is its stress on the necessity of taking the ideas of our political activity and theory into all aspects of our private lives. Feminism has stressed the importance of breaking down the artificial barrier between the personal and the political. We, as gay male socialists, have accepted the validity of this. For us, many areas of our personal lives have changed greatly over the last few years because of our involvement in socialist and feminist political activity, such as how we relate to the people we live with, to our lovers, to those we work with, etc. But many areas of our personal lives still remain unexplored in terms of connecting them to our political practice. They are mainly connected with sexual behaviour and include masturbation, cruising, cottaging, S/M sex and pornography, not unimportant parts of many gay men's, including gay socialist men's, lives. Much work still has to be done to analyze these activities from a gay socialist perspective, especially since many of them are certainly sexist.

Having accepted the idea that 'the personal is the political' it becomes necessary to evolve a socialist morality. The idea of creating a morality (or passing judgment on what should be considered as 'proper' or 'improper' behaviour) would have been abhorred by the 'do your own thing' libertarians of the '60s and early '70s counter-culture. Also, the strict, anti-sex morality that is imposed in so-called socialist countries like those in Eastern Europe, Cuba and S.E. Asia tends to make us wary of the whole concept of morality. But a commitment to eliminating the personal/political split requires an examination of our

personal lives. We must consider the effect that our seemingly 'personal' behaviour has on others.

In this article, I want to examine how pornography can be analyzed from a socialist perspective. The definition of it must come first before looking more concretely at the attitudes of political groups to porn and their attempts to get it on or off the shelves of bookshops. What should our attitudes as gay male socialists be to these struggles and especially to the perspective of many feminists? Can pornography have any place in our own lives as we are committed politically to a fight against capitalism and its manifestations in terms of economic exploitation and sexism?

#### DEFINITION

Writing about pornography is difficult because of its problematic nature, its emotive connotations and because of the many forms that it takes. What is considered to be pornographic varies from culture to culture and from time to time. It cannot be analysed as a concept or as a reality on its own. It must be placed firmly within the structural and historical network of the economic and social relationships from which it springs.

The term pornography itself was first used in the 1860s, meaning literally the photography of prostitutes, but it has its present origins in the 17th century and has persisted, developed and flourished throughout the 19th century to the present. Steven Marcus claims that the growth of porn is inseparable from and dependent on the growth of the novel. Both depended on urbanization and industrialization which provided an audience of literate people (while England's population grew fourfold in the 19th century, its literate population grew 32 fold) and a process for mass printing and distribution. During these times of rapid change, there was also the possibility of increased privacy and

private experience (an essential element of porn) in the urban areas especially. Sexuality, at the same time, was being confined to a separate and insulated sphere of one's life.

A large part of pornography has to do with fantasy. But how are images of sexual fantasy constructed in our minds? People's fantasies do not materialize randomly, although many people commonsensically believe that their sexuality (images and behaviour) is private and therefore under their total control. But since all societies have to organize and structure sexuality to some degree, values will emerge dealing with how people should handle and think of sexuality. But the exact relationship between these dominant values and the actual behaviour and fantasy that people engage in is not a direct one and quite complicated. Even the limits of acceptable behaviour are not clear-cut. Also, the extent to which people feel guilty or embarrassed if their behaviour or fantasies go beyond that limit is unknown.

Despite the lack of *biological* limits at the level of imagination, it seems necessary that limits on the extent of our sexual behaviour and imagery are set (to some unknown extent) by the ideological values of society. If sexuality is socially constructed at all, it will of necessity be culturally limited.

But saying that sexual fantasy and its concrete form, pornography, are constructed within an ideology is not enough to provide a full definition. It is also necessary to note that the nature of pornography is inherently secret, furtive, guilt-ridden and essentially private. Its subject matter often involves power and violence in a sexual context.

It can be argued that erotica differs from porn in this respect. Erotica can be what is defined as sexually exciting but it may have little association with feelings of guilt or degradation. Art in certain times and societies has been blatantly pornographic by our cultural



norms but there are few indicators as to whether it would have been associated with disgust or depravity in the society from which it came. Nevertheless, the line between porn, erotica and art is not clear and is problematic.

#### ATTITUDES TO PORNOGRAPHY

Responses to porn vary considerably and are often related to an individual's political perspective. The conservative, liberal and libertarian arguments have been aired sufficiently and don't need elaboration here. Suffice to say that, although they may seem quite different, they all share the same notion of a 'sex drive', of a biologically rooted 'sexual instinct' which is fundamentally selfish, pleasure-seeking and anarchic. Liberals think that only children and 'sick' individuals are apt to give way to this 'beast' of anarchic selfishness, since socialization is usually a sufficient check. Therefore porn should be available to those who have been insufficiently socialized so as to provide a safe sexual outlet for them. Conservatives are less optimistic and see this beast lurking very close to the surface in everyone and therefore it needs to be kept closely and continually in check or the social order will be threatened. Therefore porn must be carefully controlled or eliminated if possible, or else it may act as a catalyst to the release of the beast.

The libertarians see the sex drive not as a beast but as a means of creative self-fulfillment, if it was not twisted and repressed by an oppressive state for its own ends. They would advocate that porn should be published without limits, if there is a market for it, to allow the demand to be satisfied. Whatever forms of sexual pleasure an individual desires should be catered for.

The feminist attitude to pornography and sex is what I want to investigate in most detail as I believe it raises issues central to porn in particular and to "the socialist morality" in general.

#### OBJECTIFICATION AND EXPLOITATION

The basic starting point of many feminists is that society is sexist, a place where men and women are taught and expected to behave differently in all matters and especially in the sexual. Men are given the power to exploit women economically, emotionally and sexually (although not all men use this power). Socialist feminists go further and say that the purpose of this relationship between women and men is for the production and reproduction of social relations in the capitalist mode of production which leads to the maintenance of the status quo. This perspective influences the way in which some feminists view pornography. Their argument can be divided into two sections.

##### *1. Sexist elements of pornography*

The publicly available content of sexual fantasy is almost totally defined by male needs, as is the content of pornography. Porn is made by men and for men. Even depictions of lesbian sexual behaviour is sold to men for their titillation. It reinforces the male-dominated view of sexuality which sees men as aggressive and active in sex and women as passive, willing victims. Susan Brownmiller expresses a feminist contempt for porn by seeing it as a reflection of America's cultural output which gives an ideological base to the continuation of female oppression in promoting 'a climate in which acts of sexual hostility directed against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged' (p. 395). She claims that women are disgusted and offended by porn not because they are sexually backward or more conservative by nature, but because of 'the gut knowledge that we and our bodies are being stripped, exposed and contorted for the purpose of ridicule to bolster that "masculine esteem" which gets its kick and sense of power from viewing females as anonymous, panting playthings, adult toys, dehumanized objects to be used, abused, broken and discarded' (p. 394).

Brownmiller links this to the philosophy of rape and says that instead of porn being a 'safety valve,' it in fact encourages men to rape or use women whom they have learned are not 'real.' She would also reject the libertarian view and say that individuals are not simply 'doing their own thing' when masturbating to sexist images of women. They are, by extension, objectifying and therefore oppressing all women.

Men have recently been displayed as 'sex objects' in slick American soft-porn magazines such as *Playgirl* and the early *Viva*. One might conclude that the tables are turning. But femin-

ists point to the different ways in which men and women are displayed in these heterosexual mags. The nude men are personalized and their hopes, ambitions and dreams are shown. They are sensitive, creative and deep, absorbed in their own activities, thoughts and bodies. But, at all times, their masculinity is reinforced by the text which underlines the butch message. Stunt man Nick 'takes to chicks and violence the way a duck takes to water.' Shep, a soccer goalkeeper, finds the joys of sex in sport — 'a climax and a feeling of conquest' — and vice versa. There is usually at least one outdoors shot to establish how healthy and natural, how basic they really are.

Women, on the other hand, are most often displayed as being conscious of being looked at by men, as being passive, waiting for a man. Little is known or said about them personally and what is said is bland and mundane. 'Sexy Susan is a secretary and loves looking after her boss. Her leisure interests include sports, fun and sun.' Her personality is relatively unimportant compared to her naked body with breasts and genitals exposed. Therefore the way in which women and men are shown in porn reflects the way in which they are expected to behave in all other areas of their lives.

Gay porn is often no exception to this as it repeats the pattern of one partner dominant; the other submissive:

*Eventually, he turned Marley onto his stomach and pressed his lips into the crevice between the throbbing cheeks. The whole frame of the smaller man began to tremble, and he begged weakly for Dick to spare him. 'I hardly ever get fucked,' he whispered, 'and by God, baby, you're hung like a couple 'a horses....'*

*Dick held him firmly against the bed, removing his mouth from the tender channel just long enough to answer. 'They all get fucked,' he said simply. 'There hasn't been a toy in this room that hasn't gotten this iron up his ass!'*



Reinhard Herbig, Pan, Der Griechische Bocksgott [Frankfurt am Main, 1949].



So, most porn, instead of challenging bourgeois notions of sexuality, goes all the way in reinforcing the most traditional views of sex and gender. 'Hard-core pornography is not a celebration of sexual freedom; it is a cynical exploitation of female sexual activity through the device of making all such activity, and consequently all females, "dirty" ' (p. 393 — Brownmiller).

## 2. Exploitative elements of pornography

The socialist feminists have not only argued against porn from the sexist angle but have also been concerned with the way in which porn exploits its consumers.

Porn has become a big, multi-million pound industry. It has grown along with the development of capitalism. The continual search goes on for higher profits. The method for doing this has become quite sophisticated because what is being sold, especially in soft-core, is more than sex as a commodity itself, but sex as part of a whole lifestyle. A world is conjured up in readers' minds that is slick, glamorous and romantic. And that world is for sale. Sexual success is linked with the professional or business success that is necessary to finance a glamorous lifestyle that will attract the beautiful people in these magazines to the bed of the reader.

America has seen a profusion of mags similar to *Playboy* oriented to a gay market such as *Blueboy*, *Mandate*, *In Touch* and *Playguy*. Homosexuals, feeling less self-oppressed than in previous decades, have reached a point where they are 'open' enough to purchase products that are being marketed exclusively for a gay market. As a result, 'Gay is Good' begins to mean 'good for business.' The following are quotes from advertising magazines:

*Gay money. Twenty-five thousand dollars. That's how much your average gay worker earns in a year. Multiply that by 20 million gay consumers, and you've got an affluent and very*



Michel Simeon

*"Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar"*

*powerful market. Gay dollars are just as green as anyone else's. And West American Advertising will help you make sure that they stack up in the right place.*

*What people do in the privacy of their homes is their business — big business.*

This gay lifestyle, though, does not speak to or for women or third world peoples or drag queens or anyone else who does not have the privileges needed to exist happily under capitalism.

In conclusion, both the sexist and exploitative elements of pornography set up an ideal world of objects that the readers are expected to

desire. Like advertising and the ideology which encourages infinite expectations for 'valued' goods, porn both sets the standards of the commodity market and denies the satisfaction of needs by encouraging insatiable wants and only temporary satisfactions through the creation of an illusory facade of both material goods and physical bodies, which is unobtainable, mystifying and alienating.

In this way capitalism, as it exists, comes under very little real threat from the 'sexual freedom' advocated in porn. Social relations remain stabilized. It shows the ability of capitalism to co-opt potentially threatening groups or attitudes. Its markets can be expanded while ideological control is kept over the thoughts and actions of those in the society. Instead of liberating people sexually, as it claims to do, porn manages to continue to influence sexual thoughts and fantasies which most people believe to be their most private domain, under their own control.

#### WHAT TO DO

Unfortunately, knowing the problems with porn does not automatically tell us how to go about solving them, in the same way in which knowing that the image you are masturbating to is sexist, does not stop it from being sexually exciting. The immediate reaction is to ban all forms of pornography by having stronger obscenity laws, a proposal suggested by both conservatives and some feminists. I want to outline some problems that will inevitably follow this course of action.

Firstly, efforts to legislate porn out of existence on the grounds of obscenity have always failed, not least because of the essentially subjective nature of all attempts to define it.

Secondly, attempting to enforce stronger obscenity laws would necessitate stronger and more repressive state apparatuses such as the police, courts, stiffer sentences, etc. This would be dangerous for the freedom of expression of

ideas in areas other than porn. If censorship becomes acceptable, it will not be too difficult for the state to move it into political areas as well. And when the state goes in for control of sexual behaviour, it does not only centre on pornography. Birth-control information, access to abortions, prostitution, male homosexuality and the hard-fought-for rights of women are attacked at the same time.

Thirdly, the ends of both the Whitehouse morality campaign and feminist campaigns are exactly the same — no porn — even if their reasons for doing so are opposite to each other. Will the mass media be able to understand the differences in the arguments? I doubt it. For example, the campaign by the NUS against sexist student revues was reported by the Press as a prudish anti-sex morals campaign.

Fourthly and finally, as with any commodity in short supply, a black market is bound to emerge which will make porn even more degraded and furtive and may even increase the demand for it. And it will still be available to those with money who will never question why it is being banned. The real basis of sexism would remain untouched while the sex shops in Soho have their front windows smashed.

If the existence of porn is to be threatened, then it must be only part of a much wider campaign to alter sexist social relations. Then men with some knowledge of what sexism means might reflect on the implications of porn for the situation of women and consider not buying it or using it. The threat of a ban could become a form of consciousness-raising and could be more effective than an actual ban.

#### GAY MALE PORNOGRAPHY

Although gay porn has many similar elements to heterosexual porn, there are differences that need to be examined. As I mentioned earlier, gay porn includes the commercially slick American magazines and the broadly similar British *Q International* and *Him Exclusive*.



These are aimed primarily at middle class gay men who have money to spare and who want to buy all manner of things befitting a 'gay life-style' — much of it unnecessary. But many working class men who see themselves as homosexual also buy them because it is through these magazines that they find a very acceptable alternative to the only other image of homosexuals that they have seen in the past — the limp-wristed John Inman and Larry Grayson. This may go part of the way in explaining why many working class gay men become middle class in their behaviour and attitudes if they get involved in the gay subculture. Therefore, I believe that these magazines cannot be dismissed so easily out of hand as their heterosexual equivalents because, although the context is clearly exploitative, the images presented are important to many gay men because they furnish evidence that gay male sexuality actually exists! I remember the very exciting feeling I got when I first saw one of these magazines before I came out. There I saw men kissing and holding and loving each other; something that I never thought possible as the mainstream culture manifests itself in overwhelmingly heterosexual and macho terms. It was proof of a

homosexual community and it was through porn that I learned of its existence.

The opposite to this is a magazine called *Straight to Hell: The Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts*. It is published periodically (over 37 issues to date), has a circulation of over 3,000, costs \$1 and is definitely not slick. It is printed by just one man in photo-offset on cheaply colored paper. It has two types of articles. In the first type, the anonymous editor lists the crimes that straight men commit, sexually, in business and in politics. He sarcastically attacks their machismo and bashes unmercifully at their hypocrisy and violence. They are 'homo but not sexual,' professing love for the women they only use as trophies, hiding their fear of homosexuals in hatred of homosexuals.

The second part of the magazine consists of stories from readers who write in and explicitly describe sexual situations that they have been in and enjoyed. It probably can be assumed that some exaggeration does occur in the telling of these stories but it does not seem to matter. The editor continually compares the activities of straight men with these self-reported sexual activities of homosexuals and asks how you can feel *S.T.H.* dirty and sick in comparison to the

Stone pipe from Cherokee Indians of Georgia.



'real filth from the straight world'. In an answer to a reader who complains about 'too much politics' in *S.T.H.*, the editor answers that he 'must cater to both those who like to read obscenity (the political news) and to those who like inspiration (the sex news)'.

But how inspiring are the stories? It's difficult to pick out one that is representative, but an example follows:

*INDIANA: It was a very hot, humid night in northern Indiana. 3:00 A.M. and still 94°. And to top it off I was starving for a load of hot come. While walking the streets in search of some horny stud I came upon Jeff, Reggie, and Terry — 'straight' rough trade dudes that I bought grass from once in a while. Reggie asked me if I'd like to take a ride with them and try some of his new pot. I hopped in the car and noticed that they are only wearing swimming suits. . . .*

*By the time we got to the beach I was so high on pot and horny from being with the guys that I was slobbering. We went to a clearing. One of the guys told me to get down on my knees. Terry looked at the other two and said, 'Hey man I gotta take a piss but there's no toilet around. I'd sure hate to get this pretty sand all wet with my nasty piss.' Jeff said, 'Man here's our fuckin' toilet right here.'*

Is this liberating? It has been claimed that it offends and therefore threatens bourgeois morality because it redefines 'sickness' and calls on us to celebrate sexual behaviour as a mutual exploration of pleasure in the human body without reference to marriage, property or 'social normality'. I question the strength of this claim because it ignores the question of what makes these types of sexual fantasies exciting and, more importantly, it doesn't ask whether we should be challenging or attempting to change these fantasies.

But we can learn something about the nature

of our fantasies by looking at the contradictions that are blatantly evident in *S.T.H.* itself. Most of the stories are written by gay men, but a large majority describe well-liked sexual experiences with the same straight men that the editor castigates in the rest of the magazine — the 'straight rough trade dudes'; the sweaty hardhats on the construction site; the nice, humpy married Italian guy from down the street; the East End Teddy Boys. This is a dilemma that clearly confronts us as gay, male, middle class socialists. We hate macho behaviour and all its manifestations but like it as far as sex or at least sexual fantasy is concerned. *S.T.H.* is significantly sub-titled 'Love and Hate for the American Straight'.

The class element of the stories cannot be ignored where middle class men are still fantasizing about working class straight lads. Why? Andrew Dvoisin gives his explanation in a *Gay Sunshine* article when he says that 'each one wants what the other has: faggot class and cultural superiority on the one side; on the other, straight macho supremacy'. What possible links with feminism and socialism could this attitude have?

So, although it vaguely links sex and politics, *S.T.H.* does not have a vision of what structural changes are necessary to bring about a society that does *not* have an ideology that is anti-homosexual, anti-women and anti-children. Do readers even begin to see that sex has something to do with politics? *S.T.H.* is, as yet, crude propaganda for sexual tolerance and awareness but it takes us nowhere in our struggle against sexism and for socialism.

*S.T.H.*, though, cannot be dismissed because it does show us clearly what many gay men's sexual fantasies are and these cannot be wished away. We may abhor them rationally but they continue to exist. Also, its importance, although not primarily ideological, is structural as it has set up a production and distribution system quite independent of commercial inter-



ests. This advance is not at all unimportant.

### OBJECTIFICATION AND THE SOCIALIST MORALITY

Sexual objectification is a concept and a reality that has come up very often in this article and is continually being discussed in feminist and gay men's groups. In this final section, I want to examine it in more detail because it raises broader issues beyond pornography about a socialist morality and how men and men and women and women should form relationships with each other.

As I have said, one of the strongest arguments against porn is the feminists' claim that it objectifies and therefore exploits women. It encourages men to think of women only as bodies and not as whole individuals. The gay subculture also stands continually accused of encouraging sexual objectification by putting stress on physical appearance and not on 'getting to know people as people'.

Inherent in the argument when presented as above is, I believe, a moral implication about the way in which women and men *should* relate to each other; that is, as whole or complete individuals: their personalities, ambitions, thoughts, beliefs, etc. must be known before they can see each other as possible sex partners. Sex only belongs within a relationship built on a strong emotional base where people see each other as equal individuals.

To me, this argument has two implications.

Firstly, it seems too close to the absolutist notion of sex that the conservatives have where they say that sex is only allowed within the context of marriage and that any form of sexuality outside of that framework is perverted or criminal or sad; somehow degrading of 'the real thing'.

It can also become a denial of the erotic, an eroticism that, despite its problems, has only just been allowed to surface ever so slightly over the last 20 years. It denies that sex can be a number of different things and used in a variety

of ways all of which have the potential of being non-exploitative and mutually enjoyable if there is an understanding of the meaning of the sex act to those who are involved. This means that sex can vary from a brief encounter initiated by an erotic interest in each other's physical selves all the way to sex being used as the basis of a long-term monogamous relationship.



*Caesar and Augustus.*

It is clear that this is much easier for a gay man to say and women, who have been treated exclusively and dishonestly as sex objects, may find it difficult to understand the open and prominent place that sex, especially casual sex, plays in many gay men's lives. Carl Wittman in *A Gay Manifesto* attempts to explain what sex means to us. 'Sex is precisely what we are not supposed to have with each other. And to learn how to be open and good with each other sexually is part of our liberation. . . . Objectification of sex for us is something we choose to do among us, while for women it is imposed by their oppressors.'

A second interpretation of the argument is that objectification is *inherently* 'bad' or 'wrong'. But in our highly specialized society,

we objectify people all the time. When we purchase goods, we make the sales clerk into an object to satisfy our needs. Marx did not refer to objectification as inherently bad but generally as man's natural means of projecting himself through his productive activity into nature; the production of the worker. But in wage-labor (that is, labor in the capitalist mode of production), 'the object that labor produces, its product, confronts it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer.' The worker has no control over the created object because of the nature of the capitalist relations of production.

Can we in the same way see sexual objectification as not inherently bad in itself? Instead the problem could be seen as resting in the *power* that men have been given over women and the way in which that power is used in the daily contacts and relationships between men and women institutionalized as sexism in the structures of society. So, what is objectionable is not objectification itself but the power that exists in one person (the male) to determine the nature of the sexual and emotional relationship<sup>1,2</sup> and retain control over it: in the family (husband/wife); in the advertising business (adman/nude women used to sell products); on the streets where men feel justified in whistling at women or even in raping them.

This view of objectification is summarized by Carl Wittman when he says that the use of human bodies as sex objects is legitimate (not harmful) only when it is reciprocal. Objectification to work must be open and frank. People are sexual objects, but they are also subjects, and are human beings who appreciate themselves as object and subject.

What is reflected in pornography is the *unequal* distribution of men's power over women. Porn is a symptom and a reflection of a sexist society characterized by its anti-women bias and violence. This has to be the target of the attack, not the emphasis in some porn on the potential for joy in sexuality.

## GOOD LOOKS

But this objectification, while admitting the power differential between men and women, ignores another form of power that enters into relationships with regards to differential physical attractiveness. Human beings in the sexual market place are evaluated according to their 'exchange value' in the market, some being systematically denied opportunities for sexual behaviour because of the unequal distribution of the socially defined marketable capacities. So even the 'honest' objectification as put forward by Wittman may be seen as alienating because some may not even get the opportunity to objectify someone else even if it were to be on an equal basis.

A second criticism of Wittman's approach is that it has the inherent assumption that both male and female sexuality inherently needs an object. As Freud says, there is a need for a detached object 'from whom sexual attraction proceeds' (p. 45). This assumption ignores the argument that since men and women are socialized differently with respect to gender expectations, then there is the possibility that it is only men who need objects and that women may not *need* objects to get sexually excited. If this is true it might explain women's objection to being used as an object when they, in return, do not receive any pleasure from a similar objectification of men. Evidence pointing to this might be given by the example whereby seeing more and more of the bodies of naked women in men's porn mags was considered to be better and more exciting whereas women seem to have less need to see men copulating or with erections and may in fact be able to achieve sexual satisfaction without reference to an outside object or even an image. Kinsey reports that a majority of males (77%) were 'aroused' by visual depiction of explicit sex while a majority of females (68%) were not aroused. Further, 'females more often than males reported "disgust" and "offence"'. (p. 394 Brownmiller).



Objectification then, as a concept, needs further clarification and explication before moral conclusions can be drawn. There needs to be continuing debate about the positive and negative aspects of objectification in porn specifically and in relationships generally.

At the present time in this society, a struggle is going on over pornography on two levels. The first is within capitalism itself where porn is consistent yet contradictory with dominant values. As a commodity, it has exchange value — that is, surplus value can be extracted from its production. But it also has a use value for its consumers that is contrary to some aspects of ruling class ideology with respect to sexual behaviour.

Secondly, there is a struggle going on in our lives as socialists who may find certain aspects of porn exciting despite the fact that the images are sexist and involve exploitation that may carry over into the 'real world'. The question remains, can we retain the erotic elements of sexual images and eliminate the sexist and

exploitative elements? Can we wrench porn from its ideological moorings? Can we turn porn into art: that is, something that is utopian, ideal and therefore anti-status quo? These are the questions that must be tackled in our continuing struggle to integrate our political theory and practice into our personal lives: an evolution of a socialist morality.

This article ends with many questions and very few answers. The issues of socialism, morality and objectification are just beginning to be aired. More work must be done. In the formulation of these questions, I want to thank Andrew Hodges, John Marshall, Frank Pearce, Ken Plummer, Steve Smith and the Gay Left collective for their assistance. Ideas from written sources are credited at the end of the article.

---

*GREGG BLACHFORD, Canadian, has taught sociology at various British colleges, has been active in trade union and socialist gay politics, and, until he recently left London, was a member of the Gay Left collective.*



*Danae by Rembrandt.*



*United Auto Workers president Douglas Fraser (2nd from left) at press conference with Benjamin Hooks of NAACP, Eleanor Smeal of National Organization of Women, and Cesar Chavez of United Farm Workers. Photo from UAW Solidarity.*



# DOUG FRASER'S MIDDLE CLASS COALITION

Stan Weir

On July 19, 1978, UAW President Douglas Fraser resigned from the Labor Management Group. The group is a technically non-governmental committee organized by former Labor Secretary and Harvard Professor John T. Dunlop. It contains eight representatives each from management and labor. On the employer side are the chairmen of Bechtel Corp., General Electric and General Motors, Jewel Companies Inc., duPont de Nemours, U.S. Steel, Mobil Oil and the First National City Bank.

Minus Fraser, the labor members are the international presidents of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers, Teamsters, Seafarers International Union, United Steelworkers, and Plumbers and Pipefitters, plus Lane Kirkland and George Meany, the Secretary-Treasurer and the President of the AFL-CIO.

Fraser's long and unusual letter of resignation says that he has the "highest regard for Dunlop, my colleagues on the labor side, and, as individuals, those who represent the corporate elite in the Group." But that "attractive as the personalities may be, we all sit in a representative capacity. I have concluded that participation in these meetings is no longer useful to me or the 1.5 million workers I represent as president of the UAW."

"For a considerable time," Fraser continues, "the leaders of business and labor have sat at the Group's table — recognizing differences, but seeking consensus where it existed. That worked because the business community in the U.S. succeeded in advocating a general loyalty to an allegedly benign capitalism that emphasized private property, independence and self-regulation along with an allegiance to free, democratic politics."

But there is now a "new approach of the business elite", says Fraser: "...with few exceptions, they have chosen to wage a one-sided class war today in this country — a war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society. The leaders of industry, commerce and finance... have broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a past period of growth and progress."

As examples of what Fraser calls the shift of the business community toward "confrontation rather than cooperation," his letter points to the fight that business waged against the Labor Law Reform bill as the most "vicious, unfair attack on the labor movement in more than 30 years." After making clear that the corporate members of the Labor Management Group finally wound up supporting some of the most anti-labor segments of the business world on the matter of labor reform, Fraser's letter contains one of its most revealing paragraphs.

"GM, the largest manufacturing corporation in the world," Fraser says, *"has received responsibility, productivity and cooperation from the UAW and its members.* In return, GM has given us a Southern strategy designed to set up a non-union network that threatens the hard-fought gains won by the UAW. *We have given stability and have been rewarded with hostility.* Overseas, it is the same. General Motors not only invests heavily in South Africa, it refuses to recognize the black unions there." (Emphasis added, S.W.)

"My message should be very clear," Fraser adds, "if corporations like GM want confrontation, they cannot expect cooperation in return from labor." He feels that there is "no chance" that the business elite will join the fight for national health insurance, that instead business will continue to blame inflation on workers, the poor and the consumers, that it

now wants tax laws that create "even wider inequities," and that it will continue to build "barriers to citizen participation in elections."

Fraser comes to the resolution of his long letter with the statement that there is no point continuing discussion inside the Group "when we on the labor side have so little in common with those across the table."

*"I cannot sit here seeking unity with the leaders of American industry, while they try to destroy us and ruin the lives of the people I represent.*

*"I would rather sit with the rural poor, the desperate children of urban blight, the victims of racism, and working people seeking a better life than with those whose religion is the status quo, whose goal is profit and whose hearts are cold. We in the UAW intend to reforge the links with those who believe in struggle: the kind of people who sat down in the factories in the 1930's and who marched in Selma in the 1960's.*

*"I cannot assure you that we will be successful in making new alliances and forming new coalitions to help our nation find its way. But I can assure you that we will try."*

The week after Fraser resigned from the Group the *UAW Washington Report*, the newsletter that goes to every UAW official down to the rank of committeeperson and steward, reprinted the full text of the letter under the caption: "Doug Lays Down The Gauntlet." Shortly thereafter, reprints of the letter were distributed among the general membership. On September 19, Fraser put out a call to well over 100 unions, liberal and left organizations. He asked that they attend a one-day planning meeting in Detroit's Cobo Hall on October 17, the purpose being "to consider and plan formation of a new alliance of progressive forces." As the following excerpts indicate, the tone of Fraser's call letter was as aggressive in tone as his resignation from "the Group."



*"...as the American political system now exists it does not and cannot respond to the people's needs and demands."*

*"The time has come... for a vigorous counterattack against the right wing corporate forces and the political system they dominate."*

*"...we do not have true democracy through which to achieve equality and economic justice, because they have subverted its processes."*

*"...the current crisis facing us cuts across virtually all the issues and calls for an overall alliance that hopefully will yield a broad comprehensive program for the rest of this century."*

We live in one of the longest periods of discouragement about the prospects for social progress known to modern times. If ever there were phrases consciously designed to lure liberal and left forces from their demoralization, they are those contained in the two Fraser letters mentioned above. Reading without care and a skepticism grounded in a careful examination of the limitations put upon Fraser by his position as a top union official, one could easily build the importance of Fraser's call to false proportions.

The first grounds that give one pause when reading Fraser's resignation and subsequent call for a "coalition of coalitions" is his view that American capitalism was in some way working for the "have-nots" until sometime in the early months of 1978. The second reason for not letting one's hopes mount is found in one of the contradictions in Fraser's new coalition idea. The logic of his appeal for independence from forces dominated by business leads to the conclusion that labor, liberal and left forces should break with the two major parties. Yet Fraser, like the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) with which he has close public ties, is for concentrating political reform efforts inside the Democratic Party.

The third and most demanding cause for lowered expectations is that Fraser is the captive of forces that have victimized generations of labor union officials. Like all other American labor leaders he is the signatory to a very conservative contract. It automatically creates a divorce between leaders and ranks. It demands of Fraser that, as he himself calls it, his efforts remain a "coalition from the top."

An hour before the October 17 Cobo Hall conference opened, Douglas Fraser met the press flanked by Eleanor Smeal, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers; Benjamin Hooks, head of the NAACP; and Roy Pomerantz, chairperson of Friends of the Earth. It was 9 a.m. But that couldn't account for the total lack of enthusiasm in the room. There wasn't a new or original idea being put forth. Everyone had been over the same ideological ground many times before. Fraser began by announcing that only one of the unions that had been invited had refused to come, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). He added, for openers, that George Meany had called him and apologized for not attending because it is "AFL-CIO policy not to participate in the life of political parties." From there Fraser and the other four speakers stuck mainly with the theme that the parliamentary system is breaking down and that a revival of grass roots voter registration is needed.

Hooks lauded Fraser for his membership in the NAACP and then explained that his organization went to the conventions of both parties with the same program. He said he preferred a position which would allow him to work with both parties. A reporter asked if any labor candidates would come out of the actions taken by the conference that followed. Eleanor Smeal answered, "This is a bi-partisan effort."

One reporter asked: "Won't all this (coalition activity) eventually point to the need

for a Ted Kennedy to bring it all together?" Fraser: "That's not what I have in mind."

In his opening statement Fraser had said, "We are on a collision course with the Democratic Party." Shortly thereafter a reporter asked: "When you quit the Labor Management Group you mentioned labor party. Why not now? Fraser: "We are not in favor of a labor party. It cannot work and is not viable in the U.S. at this time."

Question from another reporter: "What's the next step you see if efforts to reform the Democratic Party fail?" Fraser: "I don't think we will fail. Both parties should put out their programs and if the one that's elected fails to put programs into action then the people should turn it out of office and try something else."

The formal postures usually adopted at press conferences were dropped only once. At one point Fraser looked right and left at his colleagues sitting with him on the dais and asked, "Am I the only one up here on the stand who is a member of the Democratic Party?" The body language response of Cesar Chavez indicated that there was one more. Two out of five were labor leaders and two out of five were Democrats.

None of the reporters were warming to their work. The press conference wasn't producing much to give them a story. There seemed a sense of relief when Fraser announced press time at an end so that he could move immediately to the larger hall next door. The conferees were assembled and waiting for him to make the opening speech.

It was 10 a.m. As the conference opened there were almost 300 present counting the press and visitors. Just under one hundred labor, women's, racial and ethnic, civil rights and civil liberties, ecology, consumer, farmers, numerous other social action groups, and two socialist organizations (DSOC and New American Movement) were represented in the room, two delegates each. By midday the number of



*Douglas Fraser [right] with Tom Hayden. Photo from UAW Solidarity.*

organizations would grow to 115. No such gathering had occurred in any way for more than three decades. As Fraser made his keynote speech on the need to gather in the Democratic Party in order to stem the new offensive of the right wing and the corporations, there wasn't a sign that anyone in the audience was experiencing a ripple of excitement.

It appeared that the representatives divided roughly into three groupings. The largest group was from 33 labor unions. Most of their representatives wore business suits and ties, and were on the average somewhat older than the other representatives. The second group was composed of liberal left-of-center Democratic Party people who made their presence felt every bit as much as the unionists. Finally there was the miscellaneous grouping composed of representatives from all the other special issue organizations, each with a separate identity, but with politics that made their presence meaningful to the conference.

The featured speaker who followed Fraser was Berkeley congressman Ron Dellums, representative of the New Democratic Coalition and DSOC member. Dellums is both a capable speaker and an attractive personality. He began his remarks by posing a series of questions in the process of which it became clear he was



addressing the delegates as the "left" of American politics. The representatives began to stir. Projecting his voice, he was going beyond Fraser's statement that there is no turn to the right in this country, but rather a well-organized right efficiently pushing its views on the nation. Dellums was telling the audience that "the middle is diving for cover. The left must now emerge and pick up on the decisive issues." "Who are our enemies? Not the Bakkes, but the system." "In the 60's and early 70's it was the quota system. For every 10 hired, 5 could be white and the rest had to be blacks, browns and women. The issue for now and into the 80's is, will those 10 jobs even be there?" After hitting at the reactionary role of war and the Pentagon, Dellums closed with the idea that the "civil rights movement didn't require an ideology because the people in it believed they could get inside the system and make it work" and that now a different series of questions has to be faced.

Dellums received a standing ovation. The excitement he stirred was to be unique to the conference. Mike Harrington, chairperson of the DSOC, was the first speaker from the floor as the applause for Dellums died down. He made it clear that he agreed with all that Dellums had said and went on to argue that "we have the issues" on which to develop a viable new movement. "There is the issue of a National Health Program." "We should have been out in front on Proposition 13. We haven't done a job on inflation. GM can raise the sticker price on its cars in the middle of a recession when auto workers are being laid off." "We have to approach these issues in language that Americans can understand."

Light applause. Bella Abzug took the microphone right behind Harrington. "At last", she said, "we are responding positively. We must find a couple of common issues in this group. National Health, inflation, oil monopoly. We should set up a Commission on Issues to select

and formulate them."

After Abzug, the delegate from the Environmentalists for Full Employment made the point that would be made by a number of others throughout the day. "The conference should attempt to build a grass roots organization as well as an issues coalition."

Saul Stettin of Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers changed the course of the discussion and offered the audience one of the few opportunities of the day for a laugh, even though of the sort that is used to hide other feelings. "I have been in the labor movement for 45 years. I've been through Labor's Non-Partisan Political League and other labor political moves. In the Democratic Party meetings at the lower levels it's people looking for jobs in a machine and not a cause. I'm beginning to wonder if it's best to sit on the sidelines. This group should either get into the Democrat Party fully and completely or get out and form our own party. One or the other, not neither. I don't know what's right, but I know one thing, right now we are neither."

"Worse than being on the sidelines in the Democratic Party, is to be in the Democratic Party being used by them." The speaker was Ed Donahue of the Graphic Arts International Union. "We should pick two issues only to move ahead together on. Congress is owned and controlled by oil. The issues should be taxes and oil."

While the speaker from the National Council of LaRaza was stating that he came "with both hopefulness and skepticism because the speeches sound good, but the racial minorities usually get treated as minorities", a special attentiveness documented the seriousness of the statement. The main focus of the speakers, however, was still on the question of the Democratic Party.

Veteran civil rights and labor attorney Joseph L. Rauh Jr. is a force to be contended with whenever he appears. He played a major role in

helping Arnold Miller take over and "Reutherize" the UMW leadership operation. He received some mention in the campaign to put Ed Sadlowski at the head of the Steelworkers' union. He is often to be found wherever there is potential threat to his party, whether it be from conservative or progressive forces.

Speaking for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights he hit the mike with this opening statement: "I don't agree with all this stuff about the powerlessness of the Democratic Party." "I want to make the party we have work. We don't need a new platform. The one we have has never been initiated. The real problem in this Congress is the absence of presidential leadership. Quit talking about a new program and pass some of the program we already have. Send Carter a message that he should live up to his promises. Put him on the spot, not tell him we are going somewhere else."

Shortly, it was time for lunch. An hour later Doug Fraser reconvened the conference by introducing the second and last featured speaker, balancing out the morning speech by Ron Dellums. It was Don Fraser, the former congressman from Minnesota, recently defeated in an attempt to win the Senate seat vacated by the death of Hubert Humphrey. His speech was an extension of Joe Rauh's. "The Democratic Party Chairman is picked by the incumbent in the White House, and that has to be changed. The party works best when it doesn't have an incumbent in the White House. It's then more responsive." "Our first challenge is to improve on the rules of the quadrennial struggle. And, we need to reduce the number of states holding presidential primaries." "I chair the Democratic Conference. The Democratic National Committee lacks the broad base to get the money to operate. Our challenge is not to make the party more progressive, but more effective." "The enemy is single issue politics and pre-primary endorsements."

The good lunch was weighing on us all and Don Fraser wasn't helping any. There had been a feeble attempt at a standing ovation when he was introduced. There was less general enthusiasm when he sat down.

"Single issue organizations are not the problem. It's the multiple issue organizations. They make trade-offs." "If a labor grouping wants support for one of its bills it has to go along on the issues favored by those who gave them the support." A delegate from the Citizens Labor Energy Coalition was being heard from. "Common Cause is into so many things, is so spread out, that it can't do anything."

The representative from the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was brief and to the point. "We won ERA extension. It shows that the system does work if you work hard enough."

"We in the labor movement have abdicated." It was a representative of the Democratic Agenda who had the microphone. "We have lost touch with the ranks. Maybe we are too far away from our base." (Very mild applause.)

"I'm Johnny Brown of the Operating Engineers and I'm the Legislative Director for my union on Capitol Hill. The rep from the Laborers said it right. Corporate power is the problem. There have been no labor bills passed in two years. Unions aren't given a fair shake. Don't even have a committee in the Senate. Not even a sub-committee. It was taken away from us. You won't have your ERA's if the unions go down the drain as in a fascist country. You won't have anything left."

Bill Means of the American Indian Movement spoke of the plight of the Indians and finished by saying: "I want to welcome you all to the fight. We have been in it longer than anyone here. It has been threatened that troops could be used to break the postal strikes. We have known this action many times."

The representative of the Americans for



Democratic Action took the floor to say that he "agreed with everything" he had heard during the day and added: "We need a coalition to do the long hard labor it takes to build a real political party in this country. We can't get progress on issues until we get a party. I hope Doug Fraser undertakes the job of forming continuing committees. I move we agree to give him that authority."

It was getting to be that time. The representatives had been sitting long enough. An impatience had appeared. Tom Jones of the National Union of Farm Workers had taken the floor to say that the conference had to make clear "how I can keep my autonomy" while working with the rest of the groups here. And, "Do I have to loan the coalition one of my staff members? What are the mechanics of getting this thing going?"

Right behind Jones, Roberta Lynch of the New American Movement (NAM) echoed Bella Abzug. "Let's get a couple of good issues. What is the mechanics here that we can use to do these things. What can we do now to build something concrete." The same and similar points had been made by several others and would be made again and for the last time at the conference by Heather Booth of the Citizen

Labor Energy Coalition and the Midwest Academy. "I'm looking forward to the boring work of developing grass roots organizing." Directing her remarks at Doug Fraser she added that she felt it of importance that he had "declared class war."

Two commissions had to be set up to do the continuing work of the coalition in the next period. This had been made clear in copies of a UAW press release available to all before the conference started. An Issues Commission would be formed to develop "new strategies and approaches to the substantive social and economic goals shared by progressives." A Political Reform Commission would "develop efforts for governmental and party reforms such as an end to the filibuster and strengthened party accountability." Fraser reminded the representatives of the need to form the commissions and explained that he plans to report to his constituents about what happened at the conference. He went further to make clear his intention to carry the word of the conference to Congress and to build organizational arms of the coalition at the community level.

Marcus Raskin of the Institute for Policy Studies congratulated Fraser and moved that the body give Fraser the authority to move



Cobo Hall conference. Photo from UAW Solidarity.

ahead as indicated. The motion carried unanimously by a standing vote. Fraser closed the conference by telling the representatives that he would communicate with them in relation to actions to be taken and that he would convene the two commissions shortly after the November elections.

That was it. The conference was over an hour ahead of schedule. The Democratic Party activists held a fractional meeting and the rest made their way to the parking lots. As I walked out I overheard someone say that they had noticed the presence of Tom Hayden and James Farmer and that they were sorry that neither of them spoke. Others could be added to the same list, such as Dave Selden, former president of the AFT and James Herman, new president of the International Longshoremen's and Warehouseman's Union. And then there were others whose absence spoke to the limitations of the coalition, popular black leaders like Ken Cockrel. A black man and a socialist, he was the only candidate elected to the Detroit City Council in 1977 without UAW and Democratic Party endorsement. He was the lawyer for the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and other black Revolutionary Union Movements in Detroit.

But the main question on the minds of those filing out of Cobo Hall was undoubtedly Douglas Fraser. It really had been mainly his show. His authority is established because he leads a union that deals with GM, the largest corporation in the world, and its competitors. How far will he be willing to carry what had been started on October 17th in Cobo Hall? In auto, aircraft, aerospace, agricultural implement and electrical products plants around the country his union has a membership of almost a million and a half. The decisive question is, will he make a sincere effort to stimulate their direct involvement?

It is unlikely in the extreme that the president of the UAW will mobilize the ranks of his

union to "fight back against reactionaries who today possess so much momentum." In the first place, Fraser has picked the Democratic Party as the arena in which to make his fight. That is clear from all his public statements and the materials printed by the UAW for use at the October 17 Planning Meeting. It may well be that millions of American workers vote the Democratic Party ticket, but it is not an arena that a mass of people can get into. The party is consciously structured to make it possible for it to accept votes, but not mass participation of the kind that determines party policy.

In the second place, Fraser could not and dare not make a real and general appeal to his ranks, asking their participation. Most auto workers today reject the international leadership of their union. The rejection is a complex one. They do not reject their union despite their oftentimes disgust and even hatred of its officials. It is the only official weapon they have going for them. But the leadership of the union refuses to champion the demands they need most to fight for. They have been openly fighting the officials at Solidarity House (UAW International headquarters building), Reuther, then Woodcock and now Fraser for a quarter of a century, trying to get them to lead a struggle to obtain some control over unchecked production speeds. Fraser and his staff, like those of the UAW presidents before him, are experts at out-manuevering and coercing the ranks into accepting contracts they don't want, contracts in which "packages" are substituted for improved working conditions. In short, the leadership has become the seller of bribes.

Around the country today are hundreds of former auto workers who were once popular rank and file leaders in their work places. They led rebellions against contracts the ranks rejected. Finally, they were fired and the ranks were forced into temporary acceptance. The participants in the rebellions knew and know that the buffer standing in the way of their fight



against the employer was the international union. They were denied the leaders of their own choosing, leaders of the sort that would have been officially hailed as union heroes and heroines in the 1930's, now the victims of firings in which due process was a mockery.

Fraser has an international union field staff of almost a thousand people. He has the power to fire any one of them. In addition, in many local unions there are members who would like to obtain staff jobs. Fraser *can* involve these employees and prospective employees in the activity of the coalition. But if he sought the open help of his regular rank and file, he would then owe them. He would in turn have to make some important concessions to them. And it is certain that the ranks would turn the coalition into an arena for airing their case against Fraser and the international.

In order to counter the "one-sided class war" that Fraser says is now being waged against the working class, he cannot involve the workers themselves. He is not free to do so. Neither is any other labor union official in this country. It is not that they are bad people. The institution of collective bargaining as it has come to operate in this country is reactionary. Until it is changed the men and women that we elect to lead our unions will continue to have no choice but to act as the disciplinarians of the ranks.

During World War II the employers learned the great advantage to be had in signing collective bargaining contracts which gave arbitrators the final authority in all local grievance disputes. With the aid of the conservatism created in the top labor officialdom during the war, the Taft-Hartley Act and numbers of anti-labor judicial decisions, by the late 1960s over 90 per cent of all union contracts contained unconditional no-strike pledges. That is, the local right to strike was denied and could not be used to back grievances that arose during the life of the contracts. In the place of that right came arbitration, which in 99 per cent of all cases is

conducted by male university professors or industrial relations lawyers.

Two complicating factors should here be explained. Many contracts entered into prior to 1942 contained no-strike pledges, but the violation of those clauses was not backed with heavy penalties, contractual and legal, for the individual violators. There are many contracts today like those that the UAW has with the Big Three auto manufacturers which have a conditional no-strike pledge. They allow the right to strike over grievances involving speedup and lack of safety. But the right to use that "right" requires the sanction of the international union and so is seldom exercised.

Contract unionism of the sort that denies the ranks the right to decide to strike to back a grievance at the local level creates an automatic gap and conflict between ranks and officials. The officials are put in the position of going before the employer to represent the ranks without being able to use the power of the ranks. This puts the employers at even greater advantage than at first meets the eye. It allows them to remove themselves, in appearance, one step away from the conflict. They say no to a grievance demand and the union has to report that no back to the ranks and enforce it. But there is a cost to the employer connected with the advantage. The arrangement manipulated by the employer requires that there be some stability in the union leadership. In turn, this requires that the employer make just enough concessions to the ranks, through the officialdom, to keep down rebellion. The arrangement has become a national plague within the unions, a boon to the worst sort of bureaucratization processes.

Part and parcel of the manipulation that alienates ranks from officials is a fraternization process which the employers open to the officials, providing them with status and prestige in the community. This is accomplished in many ways, but the most common and effective way



is provided by the two-party political system. It happens at all levels, through committees formed at the behest of mayors and presidents. It is precisely groups and committees like those formed by John T. Dunlop that have sustained the arrangement for corporate employers with top union officials.

It took until the late 1940's for the American employer community to drop its previously "hard" approach to unions. Until that time it had usually fought leaders and ranks alike. When post-war prosperity became assured, employers across the nation began to enter into collaborationist relationships with the union officials in their industry. No-strike contract unionism was a necessity and prerequisite of the collaborationist development.

In the last two years there have been increasing signs that employers are experimenting

with a change of approach. Some are beginning to make moves that would lead them away from the "soft" industrial relations of the last 30 years. Due to the economic "squeeze", long-time collaborations are being threatened. Fraser's break with the Labor Relations Group of John Dunlop is a major incident in this new development. It is both fascinating and important. Nothing like it has happened since the "hard" approach industrial relations era of the 20's and 30's. It is to Fraser's credit that he made a partial break. He has yet to make the big one, the break that both Reuther and Woodcock promised to accomplish and couldn't, to take on GM, in particular, and support the fight of the ranks on the question of production standards.

In order for the auto workers to gain some controls over production speeds and working conditions they have to get the right to strike at the local level. With that right the entire dynamic of intra-union relationships would change. The gap between ranks and officials could narrow to a point where an aggressive leader could lead, be a champion. A Fraser, if he chose to do so, wouldn't be forced to try to use the liberal wing of the Democrats and young radicals as a substitute for involving his membership. Tragically, the change for Fraser and many incumbents like him would not be an easy one to make. Far too many auto workers know Fraser as a breaker of strikes. Such an identity is hard to overcome and is better remembered in the auto plants than outside.

The atmosphere during the Cobo Hall coalition meeting was without the excitement of new ideas because of the isolation of union officials, liberals and socialists from the ranks of labor. One of the big problems, of course, is the length of the period during which the fights made by workers have not broken out of the workplace with sufficient force to become national public events. The coal miners' strike against both the operators and union leaders earlier this year



was an exception. The widespread localized rank and file rebellions of the 1964-1969 period were frustrated by the combined efforts of the employers and union officials. Those rebellions and revolts would have become official struggles aired before the public had the union officials been free to lead them. No-strike contract unionism has eliminated the union leadership's ability to act as a communication link between the working class and the middle class public, its more radical sections in particular. The period of isolation of workers from radical intellectuals and what has often appeared to be an era of apathy for both, exactly parallels the period of the "soft" industrial relations approach of the large corporations.

Doug Fraser's coalition is a response to the passing of the "soft" period. The breadth and scope of the organizations in attendance at the first meeting is impressive and important. Not one of those organizations, however, has any real touch with any mass grouping in America or makes claim to such. Only Fraser can in any way be looked to to change that condition for the other organizations in the coalition at this point. It is in the nature of the long drought that many will pin high hopes on Fraser without knowing the limitations that bind him. There hasn't been a serious public discussion and examination of the condition of collective bargaining for more than a generation. Woefully, too, between now and the 1980 elections that Fraser is so focused on, those who want to stay in the coalition will have to make concessions to the con artist politics necessary to the Democratic Party.

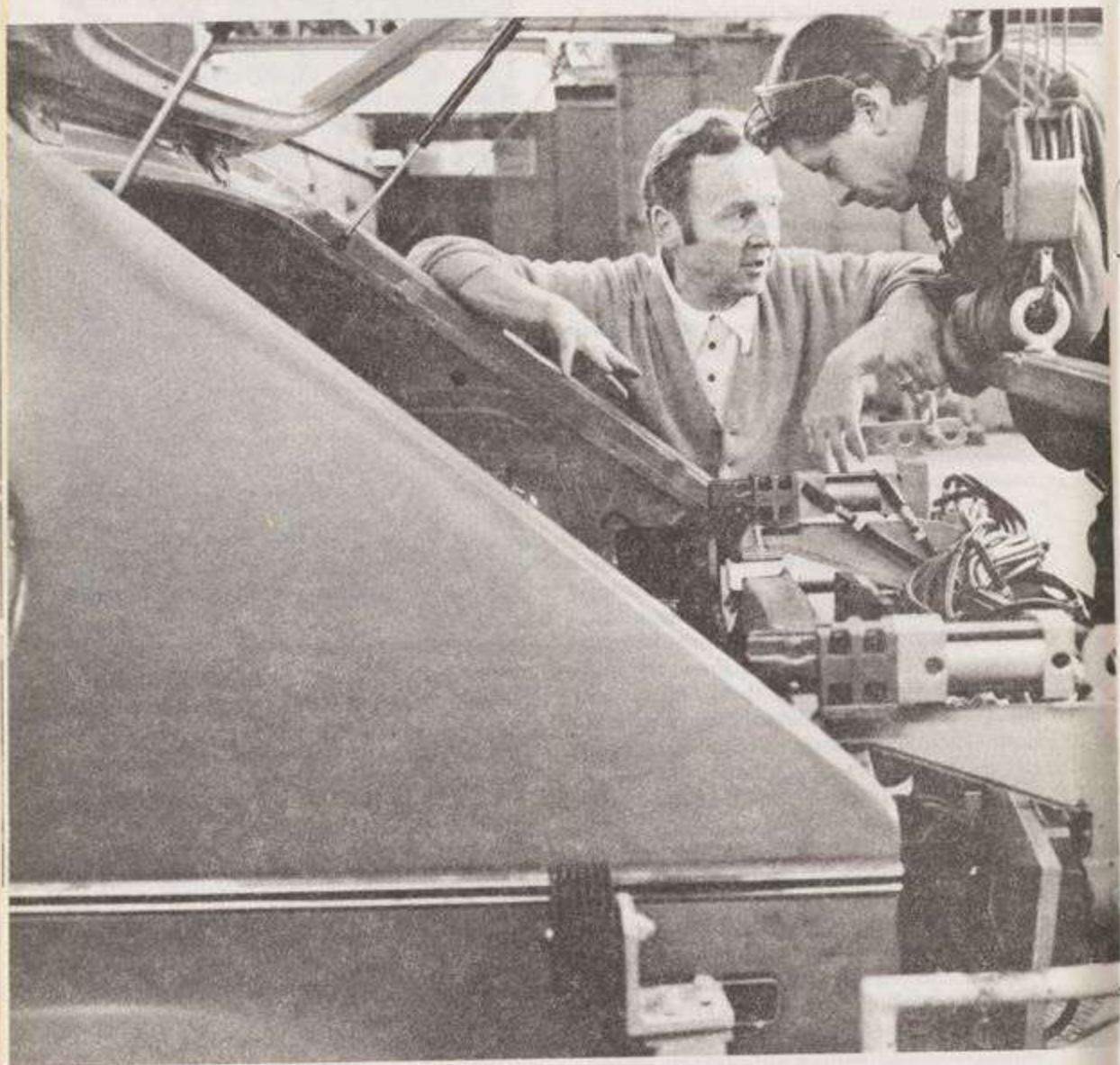
All institutional forces involved in collective bargaining and the role that the two-party system has played in its degeneration, conspire to keep rank and file auto workers out of Fraser's coalition. More, I don't believe that an invitation to join will be attractive to them. There is not only a resentment against the international union, but an attitude of ridicule

toward the sort of things even the most liberal of two-party politicians must do in their dealings with people.

The question has and will again be raised as to whether or not it is correct for socialists to participate in the Fraser Coalition. It appears an easy matter for those who have decided that socialism can develop "from above," through progressive though bureaucratically taken steps. But those who are committed to the concept that socialism is only possible through initiative from the ranks of the working class may have a harder time. The Fraser Coalition is the first fissure, crack or cranny that many have seen in the establishment's politics for some time. Though distorted, it will be seen as some sort of opportunity to break out of isolation. This is an illusion, in my view. In the longer run it guarantees isolation. How can any who believe that social progress is dependent upon the free and independent involvement of the working class make entry to any area where, in effect, working class entry is denied?

---

*STAN WEIR is a former merchant seaman, longshoreman, teamster, and auto worker. He teaches shop stewards' classes in collective bargaining. He is co-founder of Singlejack Press.*





# AUTO IN THE EIGHTIES

## Uncars and Unworkers

Al Fabar

What will the U.S. auto industry look like in the decade ahead? How will its development shape and be shaped by the level and forms of autoworker struggle? I will argue that three events external to U.S. auto itself — the 1973-74 oil embargo and price rise, government-imposed fuel economy standards, and the re-emergence of intense international auto market competition — are changing the face of the U.S. auto industry. Cars must be redesigned and made lighter, and the government's regulatory timetable enforces a rapid redesign schedule. As a result, the industry will have to increase its profit margin on small cars; this will intensify competition with the imports and will require a risky overhaul of pricing structures and qualitative improvements in production efficiency. These improvements will necessitate new systems and techniques of productive organization, which will fundamentally alter the status of auto workers. In the new social relations of production, openings for — and threats to — greater working class consciousness are likely. Part I treats the deep changes in the auto industry, and examines their causes. Part II explores the possible ramifications of those changes for working class politics in the industrial sector.

### CHANGES IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY

The year 1973 was something special for the auto industry. More U.S. cars were sold than in any model year before or since. The industry made record pre-tax profits of \$6.7 billion, or approximately \$7,400 per autoworker. Riding that performance, the entire U.S. economy soared to new heights: record incomes, record profits, and record employment.

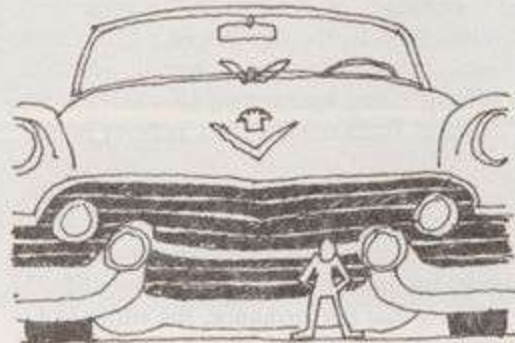
But 1973 went out quite differently than it came in. When OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) hiked crude oil prices late in the year, the industry went into a tailspin. Not since 1929 had such a sudden and precipitous downturn hit auto. Not only that; the problems were much more complicated this time around. First, there was the exhaustion of the normal three-year cycle in auto sales: good years in 1971, 1972, and 1973 probably would have meant a bad year in 1974 and perhaps 1975 as well. Second, the OPEC price hike — quickly translated into sharply higher gasoline prices and, during the embargo, into reduced availability as well — affected the industry's model mix. Big cars weren't selling and the industry made very little profit on each small car it sold. For example, in 1978 General Motors earned an operating profit of \$1,362 on each full-sized car it sold, compared to just \$449 on each compact and a mere \$147 on each subcompact. Third, sales of small, fuel-efficient imported cars were beginning to look serious: their share of the U.S. market grew from 0.8% in 1955 to 15.4% in 1973.

1974 was bad, and 1975 even worse. New car production tumbled 2 million units from 1973 to 1974, then by a million more in 1975. By early 1975, over 230,000 U.S. and Canadian

autoworkers — about one-third of the total — were on layoff. Every company but General Motors was losing money. In addition to the cyclical industrial crisis, the seeds of a riskier future were being sown: specifically, Congress passed EPCA, the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975. EPCA, strongly opposed by the auto companies but endorsed by the UAW in the belief that nothing else would make Detroit compete with small car imports, mandates a doubling of new car fuel economy from 1973 to 1985. Not only was Detroit losing money in 1974 and 1975 on its heretofore popular "gas guzzlers" but now it was going to have to come up with an extra \$3 billion per year to retool for the production of smaller cars on which lower unit profits had always been the rule. This \$3 billion amounts to an increase of about 40% over the industry's "business as usual" capital spending program. Thus the companies must not only match, but far surpass, their historical per vehicle profit targets.

The financial risks associated with the transition to a greater production of smaller cars has been masked, largely because the 1976-1978 period has seen steady improvements in sales, productivity, and employment (though the 1973 employment record still stands). The risks of this transition will be clearer as auto sales drop in the next recession. Auto production rose 2 million units from 1975 to 1976, another million in 1977, and 300,000 more in 1978. In addition, light trucks are selling like wildfire, so that while 1978 new car sales did not quite match the 1973 record, total sales (cars, trucks and buses) broke the record with room to spare.

Everywhere but Detroit, reports of three years, each better than the one before, would be good news indeed. But as William Priebe of a major parts supplier, Dana Corporation, had put it in August, 1977, "I really hope 1978 will be a bummer. If not, we'll probably have a

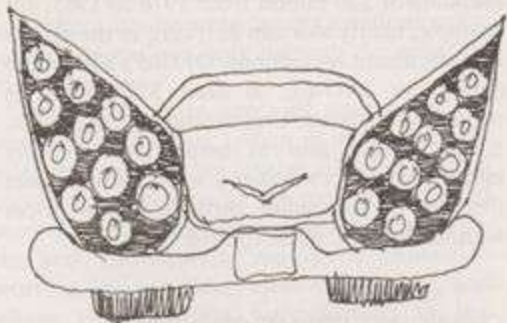




severe fallout in 1979." Following the sales cycle, with "good years" in 1976, 1977, and 1978, expectations are for a "bad year" in 1979 and a worse one in 1980. Bad years mean sagging profits, and sagging profits are just what the industry doesn't need at precisely the time that it needs *more* money — much more — in order to avoid fines for failure to comply with federal emissions and fuel economy laws and in order to weather unexpected events without substantial dividend reductions.

Whether or not auto sales adhere to their usual cycle, the basic contours of the industry's evolution in the 1980's are clear enough. Cars will become smaller, lighter and more expensive, partly because of a campaign to sell cars with lots of optional equipment. Smaller and lighter cars will satisfy the dual needs of compliance with EPCA and more resolute competition with the imports. More expensive cars will allow increased production of smaller models without disastrous implications for profitability. With rising costs of imports (because Japanese and German currencies are rising relative to the dollar) Detroit hopes to put Americans into the plush leather driver's seat of an AM/FM/digital... \$6,000 Pinto. And while the latest data on optional equipment sales suggests that the strategy may work, its failure could cost billions.

The rising price of new cars, relative to other goods and services, will somewhat dampen the demand for new automobiles, though the level of dependence on autos for travel in the U.S. and Canada will probably keep demand from falling so far as to actually reduce industry revenues. Furthermore, a slower growth rate in new car sales will help to stave off the ultimate saturation of the North American market. A recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)' estimates saturation — defined as the point at and beyond which all new car demand becomes



mere replacement demand — at a level of 600 cars per 1,000 population. The U.S. is at 520 today; using U.S. Census forecasts of population growth, and assuming a slightly decreased rate of growth in sales, one can infer that the "car density ceiling" of 600 will be reached in the mid-1990's at a vehicle (cars plus trucks plus buses) level of about 17 million units, or 15% above 1977 output. This amounts to *annual* output increases of about 0.8%. If auto industry productivity continues to rise at its 1957-77 trend rate of 3.5% per year, and if the annual hours of direct labor do not change, employment will decline 2.7% a year. In that event, instead of today's 700,000 hourly workers in the industry there will be fewer than 450,000. However, it is probable that UAW gains toward a shorter work year and work career will keep industry employment from falling as far as these figures suggest.

#### THE COSTS OF TRANSITION

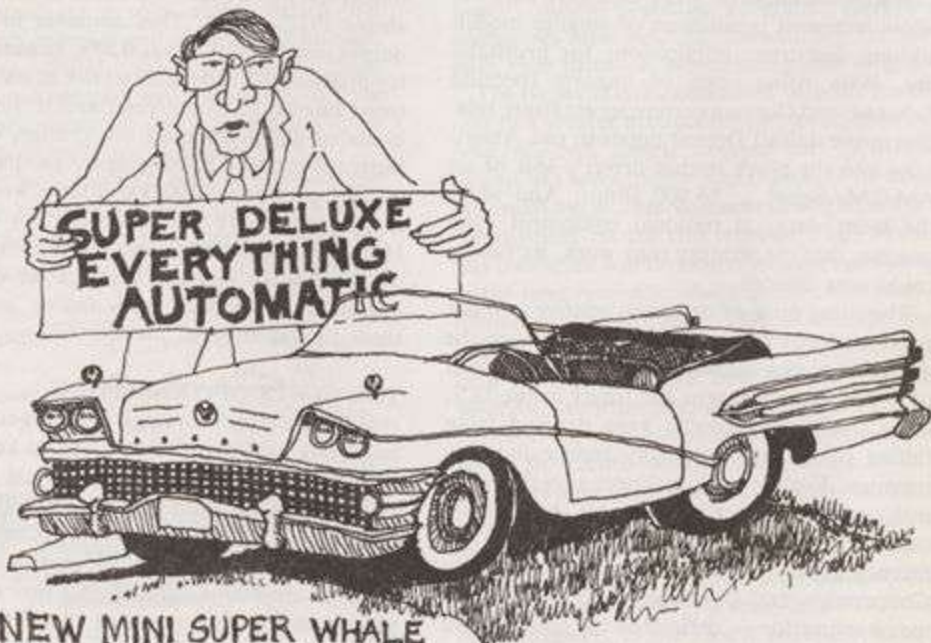
If the industry's strategy of down-sizing and up-styling works sufficiently well to keep average profit per car from falling, total earnings will stay in the neighborhood of \$7 billion. But \$7 billion in annual profits will not mean what it once did, because federal mandates in the areas of emissions control and fuel economy will require capital spending that will devour much of that sum. Of Ford's planned capital

spending of \$20 billion from 1978 to 1985, for example, nearly half can be traced to the effects of government regulations. Of GM's \$30 billion outlay for 1977-85, at least \$12 billion is regulation-inspired. Understandably, the industry sees regulations as taxes, and like any industry wonders whether it will be able to pass them on to the public through higher prices without hurting sales volume.

#### CHANGING FORMS OF WORK AND STRUGGLE IN AUTO

From the standpoint of autoworkers, the transition means major changes in the mix and content of jobs. Down-sizing means new tooling, reversing a trend of decreased demand for skilled labor. If lower sales result from higher relative new car prices, the number of production jobs will decline faster than it otherwise

would. But most important, down-sizing and other aspects of car redesign give the companies an opportunity to revamp much of the production process. New plants, new machines, and new routines are being introduced at record rates. GM boss Pete Estes estimates that computers will control 90% of all new auto plant machines by 1988.<sup>2</sup> Greater use of robots, such as the Unimate welders at Lordstown, is inevitable, and with it will come faster line speeds — meaning even greater discipline built into the technology itself. Because the overhaul of industry technique has of necessity begun at the tooling level and filtered down to final assembly, the phenomenon of machines appearing to control the activity of people will spread out of assembly plants to become the rule elsewhere. Skilled autoworkers will, one would expect, come to see the production process more as unskilled and semiskilled workers do now.





At one level, this is nothing more than the coming to fruition of the standard Marxian prediction of increasing proletarianization; but it is more than that as well. The new auto production technologies, based on advances in the semiconductor/microprocessor sector, allow increasingly precise monitoring of materials handling and production technique by management, uncovering long-established worker "short-cuts" and discovering previously undiscovered waste. The depth of drill holes, for example, can now be measured electronically (from the temperature of the bit), as can the rate of flow of paint in sprayers. As a result, drill bits will last longer, and less labor time will be allotted to drill press and paint spray jobs. These and similar changes certainly reduce auto workers' range for discretion and task-specific craftsmanship.

The most important result of this new technology is to make obsolete the *arbitrary* appearance of shop floor discipline. The pace of work will increasingly be controlled by machinery, not supervisors. Foremen, already a waning force in auto assembly plants where the line itself is the real enforcer, will likewise grow less relevant to work in non-assembly operations. Without human supervisory personnel to blame for the factory experience, the only viable target for anger will be the organization of work itself. The perpetrators of discipline will be largely invisible, locked away in corporate offices monitoring production on video screens and with computers. The problems of the shop floor, and the way it feels to many autoworkers, will tend to collapse into a *single sentiment of outrage at being in the position of worker*. For if it is true, as Marx argued, that the germ of higher social relations resides today in the most extreme nuances of the existing alienated relations, it is altogether possible that autoworkers are engaged not primarily in a struggle between the companies and themselves

as workers, but between factory relations and a collectivity realized only through the *negation* of worker-ness.<sup>1</sup>

This is far from sure, of course. In the changing production system in auto, there resides the potential for several different, indeed conflicting, reactions on the part of politicized workers. First, growing opposition to automation and "robotization" may occur. Those auto workers who are older, more experienced, and whose self-definitions were formed in less mechanized times can be expected to tend toward this response, justifying their stance by appeals to job security.

Second "cybernation" may provide greater opportunities for the left. If the UAW continues to lose control of the production process, monitoring of work pace and production standards, and if workers perceive the need for alternative forms of *organized* activity, then the best-organized left groups with plant contacts stand to assume crucial positions of leadership. On the other hand, the auto companies' ability to "source" (farm out) work to small supplier firms — and "double-source" (to two identical suppliers as a hedge against strikes at either one) — will tend to undermine the left's capacity to organize around single workplace issues.

Third, one can imagine an uneasy alliance between the anti-automation forces mentioned above and the "rational unionism" majority.<sup>2</sup> The former are too weak by themselves to have much effect, but the latter has no real job security program. But together the two could convince the industry that a slower, more consultative — if no less inexorable — introduction of new technologies is the only way to move ahead without inviting an unpleasant surge in autoworker militancy. The GM-UAW "quality of worklife" committees could well be the mechanism for such consultation.

From the standpoint of left strategy much depends on which of these three reactions —



anti-technology, consultation, or an alliance of the two — predominates. Those socialist groups that emphasize "shop floor struggle" will probably find some success among the anti-technology workers, and the fact that the UAW has not fought automation will help such groups distinguish themselves from the union. In the end this may hurt, however: in the UAW even the dissidents claim loyalty to the union. Perhaps, therefore, groups that seek merely to reform the union as a whole, rather than appealing only to the anti-technology forces, stand the best chance.

But many workers will not find much that is attractive about either 1930's style "class struggle unionism," or jointly managed monotony. They will not want their "old jobs" or their "old struggles" or even their new jobs. Among all these alternatives, they will want

none of them, or more to the point, none of *it*. They will, in a word, not want to be "workers."

It would not be wrong to characterize this last statement as a prediction of disgust with all models of struggle or collaboration currently offered by the union *and* the left. Certainly, it should not be read to be an endorsement of cynicism or resignation. Rather, it should stir a sense that new realities demand a qualitatively amended approach to political activity. Such disgust, after all, is one way that the "space" is created in which new commitments can arise. The autoworker who comes to reject both what exists *and* what is held out as the future is not necessarily rejecting all possible futures.

This is not the place to present another "future" and oppose it to other, more time-tested — and time-worn — proposals. But it can and should be said that what past and present offerings lack, and a key source of their failure to catch on, is an obstinate refusal to place workers as people, as intellectuals, as citizens at their center. The problem, after all, is not in how cars are made, but in the appropriation of the right to decide how (and how many, and whether) to make cars and every other product and service.

This alternative future starts with the question of what needs people develop in their experience, including their experience of struggling to realize individual, sectoral, and even class interests. The conclusion is that the pursuit of interests by auto workers (slowing down automation, winning job security pledges, etc.) will produce fewer and fewer successes as it comes up against the inexorable restructuring of the industry. But because the socialization of production and the introduction of technology are intensifying, the needs that may surface should be easier to recognize than in the past. The need for non-private control over *industrial* decisions surfaces when *task* decisions become



buried in the production "system" itself. The need for explicit planning makes itself felt as auto workers balance the social goal of fuel conservation against the private means of "efficiency drives." Finally, the increasing impoverishment of auto work shows the need for institutions which affirm that the collaboration among people who work does not end when the whistle signals the end of the shift.

#### NOTES

I am grateful for the editorial assistance of Allen Hunter.

1. OECD, "Long-Term Perspectives of the World Car Industries," Paris, Feb. 1978.
2. Elliott M. Estes, President of General Motors, address to the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, Detroit, October 31, 1977, reported in Bureau of National Affairs, *Daily Executive Report*, November 1, 1977, p. M-2.
3. The distinction between struggle as workers and struggle against worker-ness parallels the distinction between *interests* and *needs*. See Jean Cohen's review of Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London, 1976) in *Telos* 33 (Fall 1977), pp. 170-84.
4. This alliance might, for example, serve as a partial resolution of the post-war tension between skilled craftsworkers in the U.A.W. and the International. The former have tended to take a craft/protectionist stance in response to their dwindling numbers in the industry, while the International Union has insisted on a contractual policy of non-resistance to new labor-saving technologies — in return for a 3% annual "productivity factor" added onto wage rates.
5. John Lippert ("Shopfloor Politics at Fleetwood," *RA* Vol. 12 no. 4) has argued that hostility to "worker identity" is concentrated in a particular age group. At least one insider agrees; discussing a stratum of workers, "largely young... that is responsible for a disproportionate share of absenteeism, challenges to shop floor discipline, and wildcat activity," a Ford Motor Company vice-president goes on to note that "This is not just a shop phenomenon; rather, it is a manifestation in our shops of a trend we see all about us." — B.J. Widick, *Auto Work and Its Discontents* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 10-11.

## CAPITAL & LABOR: *partners?*

*two classes — two views*

VICTOR LEVANT

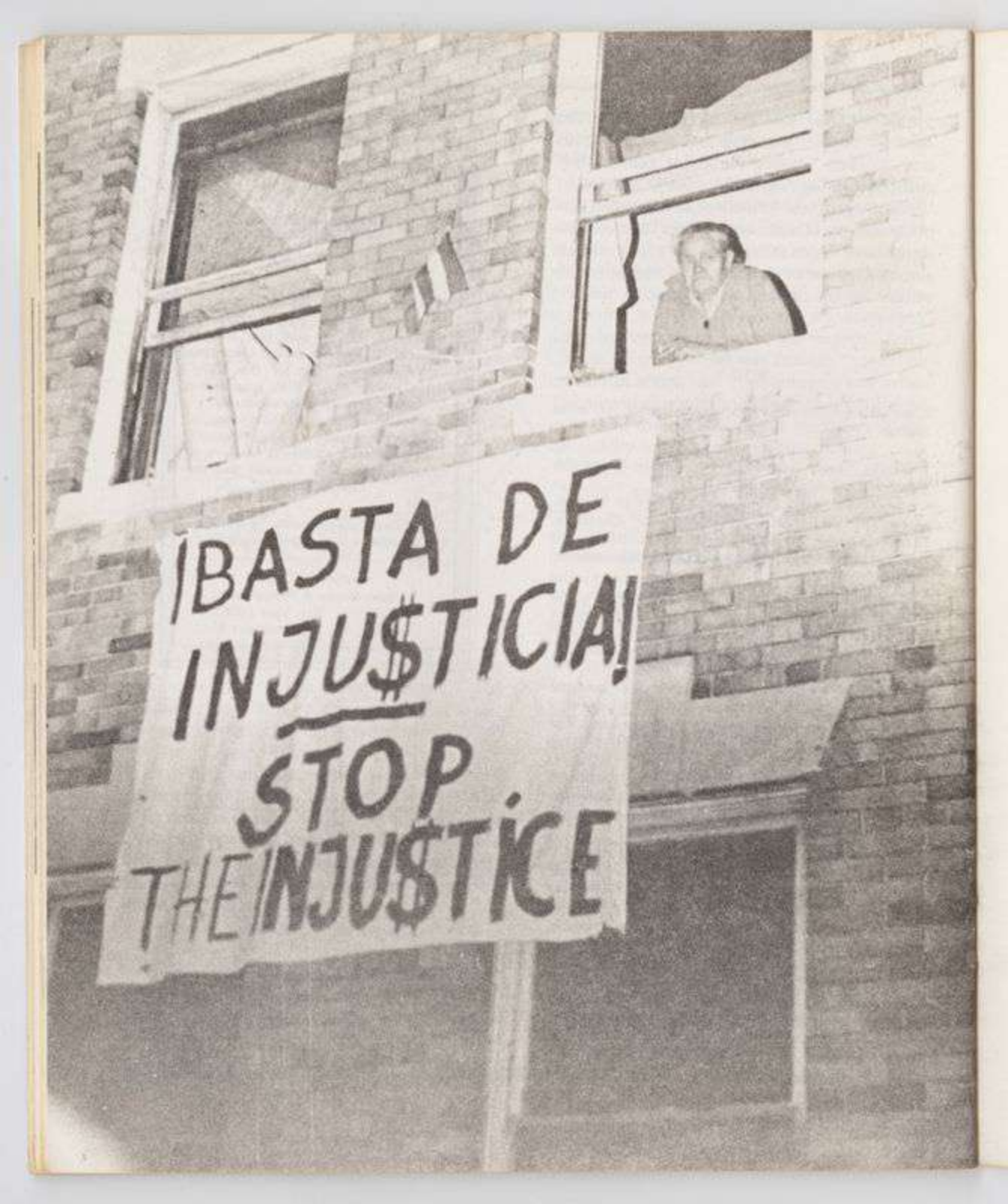
From John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the Employee Representation Plan to Samuel Gompers and the modern Business Union, the author traces the company-unionization of the trade-union movement and its progressive integration into the state apparatus.

A systematic study of the ideology of class collaboration. An original contribution towards a Marxist analysis of labor legislation in Canada and the United States.

276 p. Illustrated \$ 6.95  
Includes a working bibliography

Available through  
China Books & Periodicals,  
125 5th Ave. New York 10003,  
or 2929 24th St., San Francisco 94110.

The photograph on page 2 of the November-December issue of *Radical America* should have been credited to George Ballis.



¡BASTA DE  
INJUSTICIA!  
STOP  
THE INJUSTICE



# FROM THE MOVEMENT

## CITY LIFE Lessons of the First Five Years

Kathy McAfee

The 1970s have been rough for the working class movement in the U.S. and rough, of course, for the left. But for the members of City Life, a community-based socialist organization in Boston, that movement is still very much alive. It helps to shape our lives and gives us plenty of hard work to do. It provides us with a sense of history and community, a network of personal support, and the vision of a future worth fighting for.

Until December, 1978, when we changed our name, City Life was known as the Tenants Action Group (TAG). TAG was formed in 1973 in Jamaica Plain, a racially mixed, mostly working-class section of the city, and most of our work is still centered here. This work is carried out primarily through the three City Life organizing committees: Tenants, Workplace and Education. The organization also puts out a newspaper in English and Spanish called *CommUnity News/Noticias de la Comunidad*. We have a variety of other activities, including social and cultural events and study groups that we offer to potential new members.

The Tenants Action Group began as a group of five and has grown into an organization of about 35 people. This includes a "core" membership (13 at the present time) who are committed to a fairly high level of group discipline and to taking responsibility for the over-all direction of the organization. Outside of the core is a larger group of people who belong to one of the organizing committees and regularly attend meetings but who have not (yet) joined the core group.

---

*Opposite: TAG and other community groups help to block the eviction of an elderly Puerto Rican woman.*

Our goal is to build an organization with solid roots in our workplaces and neighborhoods. We want it to be a group in which working class people can grow and develop as socialists and as leaders in the struggle. And with City Life as a base, we want to help build a class-conscious working class movement that can resist the deterioration of living conditions in the city, and begin to pose socialism as the only plausible alternative to the "urban crisis."

Often people who hear about us question whether two of our goals — building a working class movement and promoting socialism — are compatible, at least at this time in the U.S. Apparently many people are convinced that they are not, judging by the numbers of leftists who have put their politics in the closet in order to help lead populist economic reform campaigns. No doubt there *are* ways to build a larger organization faster, such as by bringing together leftists regardless of class or community roots, or by organizing particular sectors of the working class around their short-range economic self-interest. But to us, combining "working class" and "socialist" is the whole point; the alternatives don't seem worth the effort.

Our approach has also been criticized by adherents of the "party-building" left, who cannot conceive of any means of developing revolutionary leadership except through a Bolshevik-style party structure, and who see mass organizing more in terms of struggles for "democratic rights" than in terms of building a mass base for socialism. But we in City Life believe that the task of making a revolution in a society such as ours — at least at this stage — calls for different organizational structures and a different strategy, which we are trying to formulate as best we can as a small, local organization.

Since it has been our practical experience, and not just our theory that has brought us to

this position, a short history and description of our group may help to explain it.

## OUR HISTORY

The five original members of TAG settled in Jamaica Plain in 1972 with the intention of organizing in a working class community. All of us had come to some form of Marxism, or at least a class perspective, as a result of our experiences in the 60s. We were searching for a way to go beyond leftist speculations about how the working class "should" or "could" be reached. We wanted to find ways for ourselves and our neighbors to develop consciousness and power as working class people.

Since the Vietnam war was at its height, our first project was the production of an anti-war newsletter, the *J.P. Weekly War Bulletin*, which we handed out every Saturday at supermarkets and laundromats. The response was generally sympathetic, and as we met more local people through the *Bulletin*, we looked for ways to organize more directly around the material conditions of people's lives.

Housing seemed the obvious answer. Even a glance at the situation — acute shortage of apartments, worsening conditions, higher rents, replacement of homeowners by speculators, urban renewal and "gentrification" at the expense of working class residents — made it clear that the system of housing for profit was a disaster for all but the profiteers. We were also influenced by the half dozen or so tenants organizations in the Boston area, some founded by ex-student leftists, which were mobilizing to defend rent control legislation, block evictions, and promote rent strikes.

When we formed the Tenants Action Group, we saw our goal as building tenant unions that would be capable of fighting for better housing conditions, mainly through direct action (rent strikes, etc.) and that would be willing to support each other's struggles. We assumed that



as the tenant unions grew, they would somehow come together to form a larger mass organization. We also thought that in the process of helping people to stop evictions and rent increases, we would be able to persuade many of them that housing was only one example of the failure of capitalism to meet our needs, and that only socialism could provide the basis for better housing and a better way of life. We also expected that some of the more highly conscious tenants would become members of TAG.

At that time we put more emphasis on direct tenant action and on forming tenant unions than on building TAG as an organization. We thought that without the direct experience of successful struggle, few people would become so convinced of the possibility of working class power, and that, conversely, working class power had to be built through action and organization at the base. We felt certain — and we still believe — that no revolutionary movement can succeed *in the name of* the working class, and that any genuinely working class movement has to be based in some type of grass-roots "struggle organizations." We saw tenant unions as one possible form of such organizations. (Worker's councils or worker-controlled unions might be other forms.)

Beyond this, our politics were vaguely defined. TAG had no written goals or principles, even for our own members, and no formal program for study. Every issue of the *Comm-Unity News* carried articles criticizing "the profit system" with specific examples from housing, health, sports, etc., and we tried to raise the question of socialism with the tenants we worked with. But action, and not education, remained our first priority.

Between 1973 and 1976 our efforts yielded some respectable results: several tenant unions formed, many rent increases defeated, repairs won, and evictions stopped. There were three cases in which our group, along with other local

activists, helped to organize human blockades to prevent the eviction of an old woman, the demolition of a house, and the violent harassment of several Puerto Rican families by white neighbors. Less dramatic but just as important was the increased awareness in the community of tenants' rights, and of the anti-working class policies of the city and federal government and the local banks.

## RE-EVALUATION

However, most of the tenant unions failed to survive during periods between crises, much less come together spontaneously in a militant working class movement. This, along with the failure of TAG to grow beyond a group of 10 "cadre", led us to review our strategy in part. We began to realize that in our attempt to avoid a top-down, overly-centralized organization, we were neglecting to provide the kind of structure and leadership that were absolutely crucial to enabling local working-class people — and ourselves, for that matter — to develop as militants and as socialists.

While many people from the community were interested in TAG, few had become full members. Looking back, it is easy to see why. TAG's structure was amorphous, with the criteria for joining and the responsibilities of membership only vaguely defined. Since we had no system for teaching people what we knew about organizing, only a highly confident and motivated person could really participate. And, such people had to make a near-total commitment, since there was no way for someone to get involved a little at a time.

We had no program for political education or group study, and we were putting little effort into collective, critical analysis of the work we were doing. As a result, our goals in organizing were often undefined. We had a hard time recognizing when we had succeeded or failed, much less learning from our mistakes and

passing that knowledge on to new members.

We were also failing to provide potential new members with enough of the things that inspired and sustained us as revolutionaries: i.e., a sense of socialism as a historical and international movement; personal support, comradeship and honest criticism; in other words, an alternative culture and community.

From the beginning we had been open about being socialists, and this was a decision we did not regret. Far from being "scared off," many of the people we met were impressed or at least intrigued by our commitment and political ideas. But we realized that we could not expect new people to join our group and make a commitment to socialism unless we could offer a clearer picture of (1) what socialism is and what it could mean in the U.S., (2) how we can get there from here, and (3) the specific ways that a new person can get involved, learn, and contribute.

#### BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

It was the recognition of these needs that led us, in early 1976, to restructure the group, giving more attention to building TAG as an organization. The structure we set up then is the one we still have today. The first step in restructuring was to set up a system of separate core group meetings for internal organizational business, and committee meetings for planning our external organizing. There were several reasons. For one thing, there was more internal business to be dealt with: finances, relations with other groups, child care, cultural events, recruitment of new members, personal tensions, etc. Also, we had begun to branch into other areas of organizing besides housing and we needed separate committees for each area.

A third reason for setting up this kind of structure was to make a distinction between core group members, who belong to a com-

mittee and also attend internal meetings, and committee members who work on a committee without taking on responsibility for the organization as a whole. One advantage of making this distinction is that organizational policy is set by those who have the most experience with and commitment to the group. Another advantage is that when we meet someone who is interested in the group or in a particular issue, but who is not yet a socialist, or who is not used to working collectively, who is uncomfortable with big meetings and political lingo, that person can be asked to join a committee. That way the new person has a chance to get involved gradually, developing skills and confidence, while the rest of the organization gets to know the new person.

The organizing committees are semi-autonomous in that they recruit their own committee members and plan their own week-to-week work. But major decisions that affect the whole organization, such as holding a demonstration or joining a coalition, must be worked out with the rest of the group. The work of each committee is also reviewed and evaluated yearly by the whole organization.

At the same time that we set up the committee structure we also adopted specific requirements for core group membership, including a commitment from each core member to take some degree of leadership responsibility in their committee and a share of the organization's bureaucratic work. Potential new core members are required to go through an orientation process that involves a six-month study series and at least three months of work on one of the committees. We also established criteria for who we want to bring into the core membership, giving priority to people who are working class both in background and in current occupation.

Another part of the new structure set up in 1976 was an elected leadership body of 4 people





*First annual picnic, 1977.*

which coordinates the work and growth of the organization. The most important way that it does this is by planning and chairing the monthly core meetings at which we make all major policy decisions. (We expect that as City Life grows, such frequent core meetings may become unworkable, but we want to keep the principle of strong leadership plus democratic decision-making intact.) Another aspect of our new structure is a yearly autumn retreat at which we sum up the past year's work and plan for the new year.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

At the 1977 retreat we made a decision to give a more central place to collective study. We adopted a study plan which we have been

following for the past year and are scheduled to complete in the spring of 1979. The plan included 10 topics, all problems that we felt we needed to work on in order to clarify our direction as an organization. We set aside two to eight sessions for each topic and established sub-committees to prepare each one, so that every member would have the experience of planning, leading, and summarizing the discussions. The topics were:

- What do we mean by "socialism"?
- Leninism and forms of revolutionary organization
- Review of basic Marxist economics
- Racism and nationalism in the U.S.
- Methods of constructive criticism

The urban fiscal crisis and the tax revolt  
Classes in the U.S. today  
Sexism and the family  
The dialectical method in study and practice  
The role of reforms in a revolutionary movement.

There were several reasons why we decided to make collective study a priority. In the first place, it was clear from the way that differences were starting to crop up that we needed to clarify our organizing strategy. We needed a better sense of what we could hope to accomplish in this period, a clearer basis for deciding which projects to get involved in and how to evaluate the results. We needed a more definite idea of the type of organization we were trying to build and its relation to our broader revolutionary goals, including written summaries of our principles that could be made available to prospective new members. We needed a method for incorporating the results of experience into our theory, for revising our goals, and for working out political differences. Otherwise we were likely to grow in different directions and splits would be inevitable.

A second motivation for group study was to fill in the gaps between members with different kinds of intellectual and political backgrounds. At first some of us doubted that such an ambitious study plan would work in a group that, by this time, included both former grad students and working class people who had never been to college. Would it be irrelevant or too hard for some, and boring for others? But the study turned out to be challenging for every one of us, tapping the diverse insights and experiences of different members and sharpening our collective powers of analysis.

The study has had an equalizing effect within the group, not because our heads are now stuffed with equal amounts of information, but because it has increased the ability of each of us

to analyse readings, apply them to our experience, and make political judgements based on what we *do* know. We feel the purpose of study is to learn to think for ourselves, not just absorb a line.

A third reason for the study was to articulate our group's position vis-a-vis the rest of the left. Having been called everything from anarchists through Trotskyists to revisionists, we felt a need to re-examine our relationship to the Leninist traditions, our attitude toward the current party-building groups, and our own views of the organizational stages that the revolutionary movement in the U.S. will have to go through. This is the aspect of our politics that other leftists have seemed most interested in, so we took the time to write a summary of our conclusions from the section of our study on Leninism. It is printed here as an appendix to this article.

Without a doubt our collective study — both the process of studying together and the context of what we've learned — has been the most important factor in consolidating our group and developing our organizing program in the past year. However, when the current study plan has been completed and as new people join, we plan to adopt a more decentralized and less intense program of collective study.

#### LIFE IN "CITY LIFE"

City Life's current structure, with its requirements for organizing and study, puts a lot of demands on individual members. As a minimum, each core member is expected to attend committee meetings (usually once a week) and participate in the committee's organizing work, to attend monthly core meetings and bi-weekly study sessions, to help prepare and lead one or more sections of the study, work on two issues of the *CommUnity News* each year, and pitch in with miscellaneous work, such as painting the office, attending a coalition meeting, or



setting up a film showing. Right now we don't see any way to avoid this heavy a work load, but we try to be supportive by pairing up for tasks, helping each other with study and child care, and other means of sharing our emotional and material resources. We try to be flexible about work requirements at times of personal crises and transition.

There are times for each of us when we do feel overburdened. We also recognize that many working class people have responsibilities to work and parenting that makes it almost impossible for them to function as core members of a group this demanding. Our hope is that as we grow larger we will be able to have a broader division of labor and reduce our work

requirements somewhat. Meanwhile we encourage people in this situation to work with us as committee members and to participate in other activities as much as they are able to.

In spite of these problems it is clear to all of us that the tighter structure set up in '76 has resulted in more growth and development in the group than the previous un-structure. It has made it possible for working class people who had no previous experience with the left to function as full members of the group, including as core members. While it has not eliminated all the problems and tensions that arise from the differences in our class backgrounds, it has given us a context for dealing with them. Also, several of our working class members, on their



*Members of a welfare-mothers' support group present a play to neighborhood children.*

own initiative, have been meeting occasionally during the past year as a "new people's caucus" to discuss these and other problems. One of the suggestions that came out of the caucus was a "buddy system." Each new member can choose a "buddy" from among the old members, whose responsibility it is to give the newer person support in raising issues and to fill them in on political debates, the group's history, etc.

Of the five original members of our group, four were women, and women still make up the majority of our membership. A sizeable minority of our members are gay. Although it hasn't been our policy to give priority to recruiting female and gay members, we are glad it worked out this way. The influence of feminism and gay liberation has helped us in defining our goals, understanding what motivates people to change, and becoming more sensitive to each other and the people we work with as whole people. To us, questions of how people raise kids, share housework, give and accept criticism, and lend emotional support are as important as their understanding of imperialism or the state. We can't expect to build class consciousness without confronting racism, sexism, and individualism. We include discussion of these issues in the meetings at which we evaluate our individual and collective work, and a lot of personal struggle about them goes on outside of meetings.

A great deal of our day-to-day work is with black people: tenants, parents, and workers. Although the core of our membership is all white at this stage, our goal is to become, or to become part of, a multi-racial organization. Becoming a bi-lingual organization presents an additional challenge. We now publish 7 of the 16 pages of our newspaper in Spanish. A group of Latin Americans (most of whom are from Puerto Rico) takes a large part of the responsibility for the Spanish section, including planning, layout, and writing some original articles

in Spanish every issue. But, although we sometimes have meetings with tenants in Spanish, all of our internal organizational meetings are still in English. We hope to reach the point where we can have Spanish-speaking organizing committees or sub-committees and offer study groups in Spanish.

#### OUR PROGRAM FOR ORGANIZING: THE CONTEXT

Our experience as well as our study has shown us that both the material conditions and the quality of working class life are under attack now in Boston. Of course this is true throughout the country, but we've focused our analysis on Boston because we think the forms of resistance must be geared to the particular nature of the attacks. In this city a number of factors, including the impact of world-wide recession, the decline of the industrial north-east, the fiscal crisis of state and local governments, and the nature of Boston as a center of finance, administration and research/education have combined to trap Boston's working class in a double squeeze.

Economic growth (both real and paper) in the real estate, finance, insurance, and health industries have required the transformation of the central city, inflation of rents and property value, the destruction of working class housing, and the displacement of poor and minority residents. At the same time, the replacement of moderate-wage manufacturing jobs with low-wage service and clerical jobs, combined with stiffened employer resistance to unionization, have kept average real wages from rising. In short, there's less housing, what there is costs more, and we have less money to pay for it.

Meanwhile the fiscal crisis (precipitated by recession, rising taxes, and blackmail by the banks) has resulted in government service cut-backs, speed-up of city and state workers, and a policy of urban "triage." What this means for working class communities is that hardly a



dollar of public funds is spent unless it helps someone to make a profit (usually through urban "renewal" and gentrification), while areas that are not currently profitable are left to rot. Anything that gets in the way of this process, such as the Rent Control program won through tenant struggles in the late 60s, is being eliminated. Neighborhoods are further disrupted as ethnic and racial groups are played off against each other, while traditional community institutions like neighborhood schools, churches, and political machines have grown steadily weaker. (These institutions, although racist and hardly progressive, at one time gave some working class communities the means for bargaining for concessions from the city's ruling class.)

The desegregation of Boston public schools needs to be understood in this light. Although the process was begun in response to demands for equality by black people, members of the State's corporate bourgeoisie have used the school restructuring program linked to busing as a means of regaining partial control of the school system from the more openly racist locally-based politicians. Although the desegregation plan has weakened local patronage machines, it has also aided the streamlining of the school system in the interests of the corporations and the further removal of education from the control of working class parents. And the closing of many older schools in black and mixed working class neighborhoods as part of the plan has further weakened the ability of

these communities to resist deterioration and displacement.

#### TOWARD CLASS-CONSCIOUS STRUGGLE

It is in this context that City Life has begun to formulate our plan for fighting back. The thrust of our current organizing program can be summed up by the slogan **SAVE BOSTON FOR BOSTON'S WORKING CLASS**. This theme developed from two directions simultaneously: from our analysis of what's happening economically and politically to Boston, and our own needs as working class people — tenants, parents, and workers — struggling to survive here. For us the battle has three main fronts, corresponding to our three organizing committees:

- (1) The fight to save working class housing and stop the destruction of minority and working class neighborhoods.
- (2) The fight against racism and for working class Parent Power in the public schools.
- (3) The fight for a decent standard of living for people who live and work here, through organization of lower-wage workers, and linking workers and the community in struggles for better services.

We are convinced that as conditions worsen, growing numbers of people will become involved in these struggles. We see our role as helping to build the struggles, while trying to convey to people that it is not just a particular neighborhood, or school, or ethnic group, or category of workers that is getting screwed, but the working class of the city. At the same time we need to convince people that if the city is to be saved, it is only us working class people who can do the saving. In other words, our job is to help turn existing, fragmented struggles into a united, class-conscious movement.

\* By "triage" we mean the decision by business and government planners to apply scarce resources only to areas where it will do some good (for capitalists, of course). Thus housing subsidies, public facilities and services, and investments are channelled to neighborhoods that "could go either way," under the assumption that more prosperous neighborhoods will save themselves, while poor communities are a lost cause anyway.

The following description of our three organizing committees may give a better picture of how we are trying to begin.

*Tenants Committee:* Although we sometimes go door-knocking in buildings owned by targeted slumlords, most of the tenants we work with are people who get in touch with us for help. We get as many as 100 calls a month from people who hear about us from friends, the *CommUnity News*, or radio ads. We give advice to everyone, but we put the most energy into helping people who are working class and who are willing to work collectively with neighbors. As we work with people, we try to persuade them that each major rent increase, eviction, or demolition of a sound house is a blow to the whole working class community, and that homeowners as well as tenants have an interest in defending working-class housing. We try to get white people to recognize the

effects of racist housing policies and to understand their own interests, as working class people, in supporting black and Latin struggles.

When we give aid to a tenant, we usually ask the person to reciprocate by doing something for the group (like answer phones) or for another tenant (like help someone contact a housing inspector). This helps to counteract the idea that we are some kind of social service agency. If the new person shows some initiative and interest in the group we encourage her to come to a tenants committee meeting. The next step would be to talk to the person about City Life and invite them to actually join the committee.

We haven't given up on tenant unions; in fact, a few of the groups we helped organize still exist. But we found that functioning tenant unions are hard to sustain, especially when there is a high turnover of residents in the building or development. We have also found



*Tenants Committee meeting.*



that often the hardest thing to ask a new person to do as a first step is to organize her own neighbors. But by joining the committee, new people can get support in their own situations, experience in working collectively, exposure to socialism and the idea of building a working class movement, and the skills and confidence they need to go back and organize in their own buildings or neighborhoods.

Most of the other Boston area tenants groups from the early 70s have fallen apart (as TAG probably would have had we remained a single-issue organization), and thus the tenants movement has ceased to exist. But we think there is the potential to rebuild city-wide resistance on a class basis to gentrification and neighborhood deterioration, and so we are trying to strengthen our ties with working class people and groups in other parts of the city. We also spend some time discussing ruling class plans for housing and the city and trying to formulate a socialist alternative.

**Education Committee:** This committee is made up of parents of kids in Boston public schools. The impulse for starting it arose from the need to deal with our children's problems at school as well as from a desire to organize other parents. So far the committee's work has centered around the Racial-Ethnic Parents Councils, parents advisory groups set up in each school as part of the desegregation plan. By giving parents a foot in school doors, the REPCs have aided the growth of a city-wide parents movement, responding to worsening conditions and struggling over a variety of issues ranging from transportation and classroom size to racist administrators. Often immediate problems, such as the lack of basic supplies, are so pressing that it is hard to get to the more fundamental issues.

The City Life Education Committee members play an active role in these immediate

struggles and in doing so, try to relate them to the broader issues of race and class. They also try to increase the participation, class consciousness and power of working class parents within the movement, such as by forming support groups of working class parent activists, and by challenging the notion that the education "experts" know what is best for our kids. Another way the committee tries to reach new parents and get its view across is by writing a regular column in the *CommUnity News*. We use the column to expose the racist, sexist, and anti-working class bias in school structures and curricula, and to give a sense of what education *could* be like if working class people were in control of it.

**The Workplace Committee:** The membership of this committee reflects the economic base of Boston. Some members work in manufacturing, transportation, or printing, but as many have clerical or service jobs in industries such as health and education. This is City Life's newest committee, and we are still too small to concentrate people in any one industry or to carry out a city-wide strategy. Most of the committee members, however, are rooted in organizing at their own workplaces, and the committee functions as a support group for them. The committee has also mobilized support for a variety of local workers' struggles, and is beginning to set up events and study groups to which members can invite the people they get to know at work.

But primarily, at this stage, the job of this committee is to formulate a City Life strategy for our workplace organizing in Boston. Among the questions the committee has been discussing are: What is the role of socialists in union organizing drives and union shops? What are the peculiarities of organizing in service industries? What are the boundaries of, and divisions within the U.S. and the local working class? How can we promote struggles that build

the *positive* side of class consciousness, i.e., workers' desires to take pride in and have control over our own work?

### WHY TALK ABOUT SOCIALISM?

Our organizing work has deepened our conviction that a class-conscious movement has to have socialism as its explicit goal. The question of socialism can not be put off until some later stage because we have reached the stage at which only a socialist program can point the way out of the trap the cities are in. Short of eliminating profit as the basis of the housing industry, there is no way to break the cycles of disinvestment and decay, and of inflated housing costs, gentrification, and displacement. Likewise, only the socialization of investment will be able to reverse the loss of jobs and end the fiscal crisis. And nothing less can provide the material basis for the elimination of racism.

Changed political and economic conditions make this more clear today than it was in the 1960s. Then, it was possible to struggle in the name of justice for civil rights, "participation," and gains in housing and welfare for the poorest sectors of the working class. The economy was still expanding at a rate that allowed the poor to be given a piece of the pie without much being taken off the plate of anyone else. What most of these poor people's struggles, no matter how militant, boiled down to was a demand for the state to "give us more." But at that time, to an extent, they could succeed. Today this is no longer the case. The idea promoted by Piven and others that if we could only revive the mass disruptions and other tactics of the '60s, we could stop the erosion of the gains made back then ignores economic reality. U.S. capitalism can no longer afford buttered guns.

In the '60s — previous to global recession, the energy squeeze, and the balance of pay-

ments crisis — the growing rate of inflation, egged on by staggering public debt, could still be tolerated. But today inflation is becoming a threat to capitalist growth and, among other things, public spending has to be held down. An increasing proportion of the public funds that *are* spent must be spent to subsidize profit-making, directly or indirectly. The alternative (within the limits of capitalism, of course) would mean reduced incentives to invest and economic contraction.

In other words, today there is much less flexibility in the system. Even when those in power might prefer, for political reasons, to grant concessions such as urban reconstruction, welfare programs, or environmental controls, they find it hard to do so without cutting into someone's profit and undermining the economy in one way or another. Thus when something is given with one hand, it is taken away with the other (wage gains are eaten away by inflation, tax cuts to homeowners are compensated for by other, equally regressive forms of tax exploitation or by service cutbacks, and so on). Now that the American empire has passed its peak, there will be few ways that working class people in this country will be able to win *more*, in material terms, except at the expense of other sectors of the working class. Under these circumstances, there is little chance of reform movements that remain within a capitalist frame of reference winning any substantial improvements in working class living standards.

This is one reason why our strategy differs from that of the current populist reform groups. It is our view that these groups will be able to win few, if any, economic gains, and that such gains as may be won will either be illusory or, at worst, will actually increase the gap between the more advantaged sectors of the working class (whites, longer-term residents, homeowners) and the lower-income, less estab-



lished sectors.

In every area of our organizing we are confronted with the ways in which working class people are in conflict with each other. The deepest divisions are along lines of race, but there are other ways that groups are pitted against each other: Tenants vs. homeowners; one neighborhood vs. another; the steadily employed vs. the marginally employed and welfare recipients; citizens vs. undocumented residents; public school parents vs. taxpayers with no kids in the school system; city vs. suburban residents; and of course women vs. men and homosexuals vs. heterosexuals. If a movement broad enough to have real power is to be built, many more of these people will have to be persuaded of the common class interests that transcend these particular divisions. The context for building this class consciousness is struggles that unite people around interests that they do have in common.

However, a movement that is limited to struggling for individual economic gains, and whose goals are defined solely in terms of "economic justice" will not be able to develop this class consciousness and class unity. For while there may be some reforms that if won, could benefit most working class people, there are many ways in which the short-range material needs of different sectors of the working class are objectively in conflict. There can be no economic reform program — within the framework of capitalism — that addresses the needs of all of us. A movement based primarily on the promise of direct material benefits without a change in the system will either set its followers up for cynicism when the demands can not be won, or will be dashed on the rocks of racism and interest-group politics when it becomes clear that some people's needs must be sacrificed for the benefit of others.

Does this mean we should stop fighting for economic reforms? Definitely not. But it

does mean that our goal in waging these struggles must be to challenge the basic assumptions of capitalism, the constraints that stand in the way of *all* of us having fulfilling and materially secure lives. One side of this challenge involves exposing the fundamental irrationality and exploitativeness — not just the "corruption" and "injustice" — of the present system. The other aspect of it involves the development of an alternative, a socialist program that must be conveyed to people in convincingly concrete terms.

A socialist program for the U.S. isn't something we can develop simply by sitting down and writing it. Although we could sketch some of the broad outlines now, to a great extent such a program will only begin to appear plausible, winnable, or even desirable to people as the struggle develops and as people are changed in the process. For one thing, a workable socialism will require the redefinition of many of our needs away from individualized consumption and in the direction of more collective forms. Under socialism, less alienating and individualized forms of housing, transportation, and recreation could provide the basis for some of the non-material benefits — like security, increased social contact, a feeling of community — that even now people perceive as missing from their lives. But no speech or pamphlet alone will convince people that the missing dimension, a sense of community and collective purpose, can be regained and is worth fighting for. But the actual experience of collective struggle *can* convince and transform people, just as it did many of us in the '60s.

Another essential ingredient for socialism that can only be developed through mass struggles is working class leadership and the confidence among working people that we can take over and run things better. To us in City Life, socialism means that the working class is in power at all levels of society. But the power

to govern is not something we can just "take"; it has to be created through struggle, mass participation and over a long period of time. This is why we say the means of struggle are as important as the ends. In any particular battle, the extent to which people are mobilized, take collective risks, break through old patterns of individualism, sexism, and racism, gain a sense of their potential power, and strengthen the skills and accountability of leadership is as important as whether the particular demand is won or lost.

This is a point on which we disagree with both the populists and with the traditionalist "ML" groups, and where we think the two approaches have a lot in common. Both the populist and the current party-building groups, from what we have seen, tend to rely on hierarchical forms of organization and on methods of struggle which do little to increase the confidence, decision-making ability, and leadership potential of rank and file members.

City Life does not claim to have all the answers. While we have a lot of confidence in the politics that have been laid out here, there is clearly a lot more that we need to learn. With the support of the rest of the group, I decided to stick my neck out and publish this article in the hope that other people and organizations will respond with descriptions of their own organizing experience and their conclusions from that experience, whether they tend to support or call into question the lessons we have drawn.

---

*KATHY McAFEE, who lives in Jamaica Plain, was one of the founding members of the Tenants Action Group. City Life can be reached at 670 Centre St., Jamaica Plain, Mass. 02130.*

---

## LENINISM AND FORMS OF ORGANIZATION

*All the members of City Life take part in a bi-weekly study group. Its purpose is to help us analyze our experience in light of the experience of other revolutionary movements and of current conditions in the U.S., so we can develop a theory to guide our practice. During one period of study (March through May, 1978) we focused on the question of what kinds of leadership and organizational forms are necessary to build a working class revolutionary movement. After discussing the writings of a number of theorists and groups, including Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, Andre Gorz, historians of the Russian revolution, and several American "Marxist-Leninist" groups, we came up with a consensus which we have tried to summarize in the following pages. The summary is in three parts:*

*I The Russian Revolution and the Leninist tradition*

*II Past attempts to build working class power through working mass organizations*

*III The relation of means to ends: the kind of socialism we want, and the way of organizing that will make it possible to build that kind of socialism*

### I THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE LENINIST TRADITION

For over 50 years, "Marxism-Leninism" has been the dominant ideology among revolutionaries. Lenin was a creative and successful revolutionary leader who brought an additional dimension to Marx's theory. Lenin's party, the Bolsheviks, was the first organization to seize state power in the name of the working class. Thus, the Russian revolution became a reference point for revolutionaries world wide. It started a chain of organizational and ideological development that, in the U.S., carries from



the founding of the Communist Party through the other present-day "Marxist-Leninist" groups.

Our reason for looking at the Leninist tradition was to determine which elements of that tradition are applicable to our task of making a revolution and building socialism in a highly industrialized society. At the same time we hoped to clarify our relationship to the "party-building" left in the U.S. today.

Evaluating the relevance of Leninism is hard because it's not obvious what a Leninist approach to revolution in the developed capitalist societies really is. Certain Bolshevik concepts and tactics have become institutionalized by left organizations, and are often applied in a literal and dogmatic way. It would be un-Marxist to assume that Lenin himself, were he faced with the task we are faced with, would adopt the same tactics he used in Russia.

However, there is a lot in Lenin's method of thinking and organizing that we believe does apply for us today. For instance, Lenin's critique of Economism (a tendency among Russian revolutionaries) has lessons for us. The Russian Economists thought revolution would grow out of workers' struggles over "bread and butter" issues: wages, working conditions, etc. Lenin showed that revolution was neither the inevitable result of such struggles nor a spontaneous outburst by the working class. Rather, he said, revolution had to be the conscious goal of revolutionary organizations, and the structure and tactics of such organizations had to be directed toward making revolution the conscious goal of the working class.

In line with what we have learned from Lenin, we see the need for revolutionaries in the U.S. today to:

(1) Base our practice on theory, developed through an analysis of concrete conditions, and constantly redefined through a process of summing up our experience.

(2) Form disciplined organizations for carrying out our practice and work toward strengthening those organizations and building unity among them.

(3) Root our work and organization among working class people.

(4) Struggle for better working class working and living conditions, but not in an economist way. In other words, instead of acting as if economic gains and other reforms were ends in themselves, we should promote class consciousness and the awareness that only socialism can provide the basis for any real improvement in working class life.

(5) Recognize that socialism can't be built without the conquest of the bourgeois state by the working class and the elimination of the bourgeoisie as a class, and that this will involve armed struggle.

We could probably think of other things we've learned from Lenin, but it's also important to recognize the limitations of Leninism. Given the great differences between the society of pre-revolutionary Russia and the U.S. in the 70s, we shouldn't expect to find the solution to all our problems in the history of Bolshevism or the Marxist-Leninist classics.

To start, we have to face the fact that while the Bolsheviks did succeed in gaining state power, in making tremendous improvements in the lives of the Russian workers, and in shaking the entire capitalist world, they did *not* succeed in laying the foundation of a classless or even a socialist society. The more we study the history of the Russian revolution, the easier it is to understand why this is so.

Up to 1917, Bolshevik theory and practice was directed toward the overthrow of the Czarist autocracy. No bourgeois revolution had taken place in Russia, and industrialization was just beginning. The working class was very small and mostly illiterate, and almost all types of organizing were illegal. The Bolsheviks saw

their immediate task as bringing down the Czar, and socialism as a task for the future, after a period of democracy and industrialization during which the proletariat would grow strong and equal to the task of building socialism. Even in 1917, when the Bolsheviks were, in effect, forced to take power to prevent the restoration of reactionary rule, Lenin and the other party leaders believed that socialism could not be achieved in Russia without revolution by the industrial proletariat of Europe.

Without a developed working class, isolated in a capitalist-dominated world, the leaders of the young Soviet state were forced to undertake a task which even they had not considered possible. We can't condemn them for failing to accomplish it. Instead, we have to look closely at Bolshevik experiences to understand the ways in which it failed and *what problems it left unsolved*.

Most important among these, we think, is the problem of working class power and revolutionary democracy. The Russian revolution would not have been possible but for the actions of workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors organized in Soviets and Factory Committees. These institutions might have evolved into organs of real proletarian power. They might have served as a counter-balance to what became an authoritarian party/state. The reasons why they did not have mainly to do with the historical circumstances described above. But it is also true that the Bolsheviks did little to build up these or any other form of mass, working-class controlled institutions. One can argue about whether the Bolsheviks had any choice, what their intentions were, and when the crucial turning point was passed. But it can't be denied that the Party did end up suppressing working class democracy, and in doing so, laid the foundation for a depoliticized, stratified, and repressive society.

(Ironically, the claim that classes had been abolished and socialism established began to be put forth by party leaders, particularly Stalin, as early as the early 1930s. We believe these claims deserve outright condemnation. This great myth became the basis for thousands of lies, crimes, and distortions which have burdened and confused revolutionaries for half a century and will haunt us for generations to come.)

The impact and romantic attraction of the Russian revolution has led many groups to try to duplicate the Bolshevik success by using essentially the same tactics. All the American "Marxist-Leninist" groups we looked at in our study seem to be making the same error in failing to understand the significance of the differences between Russia in the early 1900s and the U.S. today. Most M-L groups try to apply the Bolshevik model to the U.S. as if the task we face here (making a socialist revolution) were the same as that faced by Lenin (overthrowing a dictatorship in a mostly pre-capitalist society where the masses had no political rights whatsoever). We think the Bolshevik model may be more applicable to semi-feudal or colonized countries, but we don't think it can succeed in an advanced industrial society such as ours, where bourgeois democracy has long been in power and where the working class is literate, with a relatively high material standard of living, and makes up the vast majority of the population.

In their effort to apply Bolshevik theory and tactics to the U.S., most M-L groups end up with a concept of the revolutionary process that separates the struggle for reforms from the struggle to build a base for socialism. According to this model, the seizure of state power by a "vanguard" party (including some "advanced workers") will come as the culmination of the struggle for "democratic rights" and material gains by the working class. The pro-



blems of how the majority of the working class (outside of the "vanguard") will be won over to socialism, how socialism will be built, and what form it might take in the U.S. are left to be dealt with at a later stage. Among the specific ideas and tactics which, we think, arise out of this model, and which we reject as inapplicable to the U.S., are:

(1) The notion that a highly-centralized, Bolshevik-style party is the only important and only possible form of revolutionary organization.

(2) An emphasis on secrecy and hierarchy beyond what is justified by current conditions and planning for future, more repressive conditions, and the use of "security considerations" to justify the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite at the expense of the working class as a whole.

(3) A rigid and outdated view of the working class that reserves a "vanguard" role exclusively for industrial workers.\*

(4) An emphasis on economic demands and "democratic rights" that limits the goal of struggle to gains within a bourgeois framework, and leaves out any attempt to build working class power through self-organization, or struggle for control of the production process, and redefinition of the relation of producers to each other and to their product (a socialist vision).

---

\* Marx's and Lenin's views of classes were shaped by the period of industrial revolution in which they lived. At that time industrial workers, because of their position, organization, and consciousness, were able to lift society to a new level. This is still true in developing countries such as China. But the U.S. is not a developing country enjoying the first fruits of industrial revolution. Within the U.S. other workers (such as those in service industries and the public sector) outnumber industrial workers, and do work that is increasingly necessary for the maintenance of the empire and the accumulation of capital. We suspect they will have an equally important role to play in gaining control over and re-shaping the U.S. economy.

(5) A tendency to see problems of personal relationships and work style, family life, and sexuality as unimportant and unrelated to class consciousness and the ability to lead.

(6) The view that the party must be built before the movement for socialism can begin among the working class.

We believe that socialist revolution in industrialized countries can't be separated into two stages. We don't think a struggle aimed primarily at the goals of "democratic rights" and material gains, led by a Bolshevik-style party, will be able to reach the point of seizing state power. Here, we are at the stage of needing to make a socialist, not an anti-autocratic revolution. Until a large proportion of the American working class — not necessarily a majority, but more than a narrow vanguard of "advanced workers" — is imbued with a sense of socialism as a concrete, plausible alternative, the conquest of state power (except by a new dictatorship) will not be possible.

In line with Leninist principles, organizational form must follow revolutionary function. At this stage, class consciousness and the base for socialism must be built among the working class, and working class leadership must be developed. The structure of our organizations must be geared to these goals. The exact form of organization that will be capable of leading armed struggle and taking over state power can't be determined until the working class has begun to feel its own power and has such confidence in its ability to re-make society that it is willing to take the risks involved in overthrowing the bourgeoisie.

## II WORKING CLASS POWER AND MASS ORGANIZATIONS

As we have stated, a lesson to be learned from the Russian revolution is that the seizure of state power by a vanguard party — even with mass support — combined with the expropria-

tion of private property does not necessarily lay the basis for a socialist society. We think the base for the transition to socialism needs to be built in the pre-revolutionary period, before the seizure of state power. A strong, working class-based party will be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the seizure of state power. In addition, the following conditions will have to exist:

(1) Large numbers of working class people will have had some experience of struggling for actual control of their workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and other institutions.

(2) There will have to be strong, local working class-controlled organizations that will struggle against, and become an alternative to, bourgeois power in the pre-revolutionary period, and will help to form and to exert democratic control over the new state once power is ours.

(3) The goals of the movement will be seen not just as the overthrow of existing economic relationships, but also transformation of the culture from one dominated by bourgeois individualism to a proletarian culture stressing collectivity, and the reconstruction of all institutions (media, schools, family, sex roles, etc.) that are now shaped by bourgeois values.

(4) The mass movement will have a vision of what we are fighting *for*, not just a hatred of what we're against.

If these conditions haven't been developed before the seizure of state power, it is likely that a bureaucratic elite will develop out of the party that seizes state power, and that this elite will end up ruling in the *name* of the working class. This is what we feel happened in Russia.\*\*

Since the Russian revolution, there have been movements in many countries that have tried to develop such a pre-revolutionary base for socialism. Examples of such movements can be found in the Soviets and Factory Committees in Russia in 1905 and 1917, and the Factory

Committees in Germany and Italy in 1917-20, and possibly elsewhere.\*\*\*

Although these movements had many differences, they also had important common elements, such as:

(1) The desire not to reproduce, in the name of revolution, the same kinds of hierarchical authority relations they sought to overthrow.

(2) A reaction against the overly-centralized forms of some "Leninist" and Social Democratic parties, which often reproduced old power relations in a way that undermined revolutionary struggle.

(3) A commitment to democratization through local, collective decision-making structures which embody, or at least prefigure, the kinds of social relations that are the ultimate goal.

Antonio Gramsci, the leading spokesman of the Italian workers' council movement, believed that through councils in their factories and neighborhoods, workers could begin to take over control of the production process and of their lives, and develop their own leadership

---

\*\* In China and other revolutions led by socialists, these conditions haven't always existed. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the "left" tried to build up mass participation and democracy and fought against the developing elite. The success of such movements in China and other "Socialist" countries will determine whether these countries develop in the direction of socialism and the elimination of classes, or toward a system more familiar to the Soviet Union.

\*\*\* In an article in *Radical America* (Vol. 11, No. 6 / Vol. 12, No. 1), Carl Boggs characterizes movements of this kind as "prefigurative communism." In addition to the movements mentioned above, there are other, more recent movements that we think may provide examples of the kind of socialist base-building we are talking about, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Hungarian rebellion in 1956, France in 1968, Poland in 1970, and Chile, Portugal, and Italy in the early 1970s. (Some of these are discussed by Boggs.)



and self-governing abilities. He thought that the councils would thus be the "embryos" of the new, socialist state. Such councils did function in Northern Italy during the period of 1918-20, but like the other examples cited above, they failed to survive for more than a few years.

In general, council movements have not gotten very far because they have been too crisis-oriented and locally-centered. These movements failed to establish the kind of national coordination and planning that would have been necessary for them to gain strength and sustain themselves. They did not develop a plan for dealing with state power. They lacked a central organization to coordinate and help give direction to the local movements.

Gramsci, who considered himself a Leninist, believed that a strong revolutionary party was necessary. He believed (and we agree) that its role is to lead and coordinate the revolutionary movement, to release and build upon the creativity of the workers, but not to control and manipulate them.

The position of our organization is that the question of exactly how and when such a party should be formed, and the nature of its relation to mass organizations can't be answered right now, but will have to be worked out as the working class movement develops and grows. We don't discount the possibility that more than one party or party-type organization may play a leading role in the revolutionary movement.

### III THE RELATION OF MEANS TO ENDS

What can we do in the present period to build the base for the kind of party we believe is necessary, and to establish the preconditions for a genuinely socialist revolution? Neither history nor the other movements can give us a blueprint. We shouldn't expect them to, since a

strategy for revolution here must be based mainly on conditions in the U.S. Nevertheless, our study so far has made it possible for us to formulate some general principles about the kind of organization we want to build and the kind of work we want to do in this period.

The socialism we want is one in which the working class itself, and not a bureaucratic elite, is in power. For this to happen working class people must be highly conscious, organized, and in control of our own institutions. *Self-organization of the working class is the heart of the revolutionary process.*

This self-organization, for the most part, won't happen spontaneously. It will require leadership and coordination through strong organizations based in the working class, including (at some point) a revolutionary party. But we agree with the statement of Andre Gorz that "The party must be viewed not as the future holder of power, but as the agent whereby power will be transferred to the people."

Of course we aren't saying that if people just get themselves organized, the result will be a peaceful transition to socialism. Working class consciousness and power will have to be built through an escalating series of struggles and confrontations (including armed confrontations) that will eventually lead to the conquest of the bourgeois state.

The phase involving the takeover of state power will be the most important one of the revolution, but the takeover of state power is not *in itself* the revolution. The revolutionary process must begin long before that time and continue long after it. The fundamental task of revolutionaries — that of building the power and the ability to govern of the working class — will be the same before and after the state is ours.

The working class movement in the U.S. hasn't reached the stage where a genuinely working class, multi-racial party can be

formed, but this doesn't mean that the development of working class leadership and organization should be postponed. It is organizations such as ours that must help establish the basis for the formation of a party. Most of the same principles concerning how leadership is exercised and how decisions get made and carried out applies as much to our group today as they do to the future party. This includes both our internal process and our organizing work.

To be effective as we grow as an organization, we need to increase our level of internal unity and discipline, and this requires a form of democratic centralist structure and leadership. But it doesn't mean that as we expand we will have a growing number of disciplined cadre who simply carry out orders, while power is increasingly concentrated at the center. Rather, the function of leadership within the group is to formulate and present the alternatives that we, as an organization, must choose from, and to help the members develop the ability to make the best choices. As the organization grows, the leadership ability of all of us should increase, with different people taking leadership in different areas.

The formation of a revolutionary party won't be possible until the working class has increased its organized strength, developed a higher level of racial unity, and made socialism an issue for a much greater number of working class Americans. In the meantime, what kind of work can groups like ours do to help build the movement and lead it in that direction?

Since one can't organize for socialism directly, we have to build the movement by struggling for reforms. But which reforms, and how to struggle? Among the questions we must ask in deciding whether or not to engage in any particular reform battle are:

(1) Do we have the resources to try it at this time?

(2) Will the goal, if won, help build class unity by breaking down divisions, including reducing material divisions within the working class? (For instance, the winning of a strong affirmative action plan could help unite the class by reducing the material basis of racism and sexism. On the other hand, a reform such as a tax rebate for homeowners that is not shared by tenants might increase material divisions and reinforce individualism within the class).

(3) Will the process of fighting for the reform (whether we win or lose) help to increase the organization, consciousness, and power of the working class people who are involved in the struggle or affected by the reform? (No reform, no matter how "good" it is for working class people, or how well it fits our preconceived ideals, is a revolutionary gain if it is simply imposed from above, or if it is won through the hard work of a handful of leaders while most people don't know what's going on.)

Just as important as which reforms we struggle for is the question of how the struggle is carried out. There is no such thing as a reform with "socialist content." It's how the reform is fought for and what we do with it that counts. The way people grow stronger, become receptive to new ideas, and learn to act collectively is through the experience of struggle. Thus, one of our goals should be to maximize mass participation in the struggles we engage in. We should be looking for new organizational forms through which working class people can exert their collective strength and develop their self-governing and leadership abilities.

An equally important task for us (and for all revolutionary socialists) is to present a socialist alternative. We've learned from experience that what often holds people back from struggle is not so much a love for capitalism as despair and the belief that no system can work any better. This attitude isn't entirely irrational. Most people don't know anything about socialism other



than the anti-communist caricatures they are exposed to in school and the media. As long as one's vision is limited by the framework of capitalism, nothing really is worth fighting for. Even working class victories seem to be at our own expense (higher wages bring higher prices; rent control leads to disinvestment and loss of housing, or so we're told). People won't risk the little they have unless we can show them both why capitalism can't solve their problems and *how socialism can*. It is by situating our battles in the context of the historical and international struggle for socialism that we can give people respect for themselves as members of the working class, a sense of the historic mission of our class, and cause for hope.

*This article was written by a committee of three City Life members [Doug Stickell, Susan Moir, and Kathy McAfee] with input from the rest of the organization.*

## LETTER

Dear Editors,

Compliments on Joann Barkan's useful and interesting contribution to the current debate on the Italian Communist Party (RA 12, no. 5). However, there is one small point which bears correcting.

Reference to the Truffa Law (p. 31), with a capital T, creates the impression that this unpopular law bore the name of the Christian Democratic politician who presented the bill to Parliament in 1952.

Actually *truffa* means "fraud," and the proposed law quickly came to be known by the title the mass left conferred on it, the "legislative fraud."

The Italian Christian Democratic Party undoubtedly contains some of the slickest con men in western Europe; some of them even admit this openly. It is unlikely, however, that any of their cabinet ministers would go so far as to assume this characteristic as a proper name.

Suzanne Cowan  
Santa Cruz, Calif.

## A New Book From South End Press

### They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee

7 Radicals Remember the 60s

edited by Dick Cluster

Remembering "the Sixties" is suddenly becoming chic, but most of the memories are more surface than substance. The big deal about this period was neither the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, Neil Armstrong's acrobatics on the moon, nor even Richard Nixon's arrival at the Oval Office. What truly determined the character of that decade was the emergence of mass-based popular movements of protest on a scale not seen in the U.S. since the 1940s.

*They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*—the title refers to the first lunch counter incident which began the Civil Rights Movement—is a collection of essays and interviews by activists in the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Anti-War, Student, GI, and Women's Liberation Movements.

*"There was a sense of power, in a place where you didn't feel you had any power. There was a sense of confronting things that terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the streets. A whole lot of Black folks couldn't even walk in the street in those places in the South. You were saying in some basic way, 'I will never again stay inside of these boundaries... The Civil Rights Movement gave me the power to challenge any line that limits me.'"* —Bernice Reagon

contributors are: Bernice Reagon, Jean Smith, John Lewis, Reggie Schell, Ernie Allen, Dick Cluster, Steve Rees, Ann Popkin, and Leslie Cagan.

288 pages

\$5.00

This book will be available January 1978 and can be ordered from South End Press at a 20% discount (prepaid plus 50¢ for postage). Or you can become a South End Press member for \$12.00 a year and receive 2 free books and 50% off on all other books.

South End Press, Box 68, Astor Sta., Boston, MA 02123.

## RICHARD WRIGHT & THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Mark Naison

The publication of Richard Wright's *American Hunger*, the last third of his autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, is an important literary and political event. Completed in 1944, it deals with Wright's experiences in Chicago during the Great Depression and contains an eloquent and evocative, if somewhat inaccurate, account of his experiences with the Communist Party. Wright's publishers severed this section from the larger narrative for fear that it would detract from Wright's story of his childhood and youth in the South, and arouse a bitter debate over Communism at a time when the Party and the Soviet Union possessed considerable goodwill in liberal circles. An abridged version of chapters dealing with the Party was published in *Atlantic Monthly* and Richard Crossman's *The God that Failed*, but this is the first time that the entire section of the novel appears as a whole.

The contribution is welcome, particularly at a time when socialists throughout the world are reevaluating the political and intellectual legacy of the Communist movement in the era of Stalin's dominance. No American of Wright's generation has presented a better analysis of how the Stalinist features of Party life prevented the movement from adapting to the complexities of the American political and

fully tapping the creative energies of American workers and intellectuals. Well before E.P. Thompson and other new left intellectuals raised those questions theoretically, Wright analyzed the Party's unwillingness to deal with the psychological dimensions of oppression, its fear of imaginative activity, and the impoverishment of its official vocabulary in dealing with interpersonal relationships and personal goals.

*American Hunger* details Wright's effort to function as a creative intellectual within the Party during his Chicago years. When he first joined the organization, Wright was struck by the distance between Party organizers and the people they sought to lead and became convinced that Communists "conceived of people in too abstract a manner." Putting his literary talents at the Party's disposal, he made it his personal mission to bridge this gap by telling Communists "how the common people felt" and telling common people "of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them." But these efforts made him an object of ridicule in the Chicago Party and the target of an extensive campaign to make him confine his intellectual work to pedestrian tasks assigned by Party leaders. Branded a "bastard intellectual," "incipient Trotskyite" and exponent of "anti-leadership tendencies," he was given tasks that took him away from his writing, and was ostracized and harassed on his Federal Theatre and Writers project jobs.

Throughout all of this, Wright maintained his belief that the Party was the ultimate repository of the hopes and aspirations of the oppressed, and his description of the Party's



power to unify and inspire people gives the account of his personal nightmare a peculiarly tragic quality. As few other writers have been able to do, Wright describes how the Party's "internationalism" was both a strength and a weakness, imparting it with the power to make individuals feel part of a vast force creating a better world, but saddling it with tactics, values and organizational forms more suited to an underground movement in Czarist Russia than a legal party in a liberal democracy. "There existed in the Western World," Wright wrote:

*an element that baffled and frightened the Communist Party, the prevalence of self-achieved literacy. Even a Negro entrapped by ignorance and exploitation...could, if he had the will and love for it, learn to read and understand the world in which he lived...The heritage of free thought...that self-generating energy that made a man feel, whether he realized it or not, that he had to work and redeem himself through his own acts, all this was forbidden, taboo. And yet this was the essence of that cultural heritage which the Communist Party had to carry forward, whole and intact into the future. But the Communist Party did not recognize the values that it had sworn to save when it saw them; the slightest sign of independent thought and feeling, even if it aided the Party in its own work, was enough to make one suspect, to brand one as a dangerous traitor.*

The validity of the main points of Wright's critique cannot be overemphasized: in virtually every sector of the society where its practical work won support, including the black community, the Party's authoritarian inner life and unwillingness to tolerate dissension on major issues made it difficult to retain recruits and opened it up to accusations that its goals were inimical to democratic values.

But if Wright pinpoints many of the fundamental weaknesses that prevented the CPUSA from establishing deep roots in American soil, he also exaggerates the extent of personal and political uniformity within the Party and the degree to which Stalinist practices shaped the behavior of the rank and file on a day to day basis. During the Depression years, there was considerable room within the Party in which dynamic political organizing and imaginative artistic activity could take place, although it sometimes occurred in spite of the actions of Party leaders. Much of Wright's most creative literary work took place while he was a member of the Party, though one would never know this from reading *American Hunger*. For the sake of polemical power, Wright dramatizes the period of his life when he clashed sharply with Party leaders, and leaves out completely an account of those years when he was left alone to write so long as he publicly defended the Party line.

Readers of *American Hunger* must be careful not to treat this book as an accurate, comprehensive account of his involvement with the Communist Party. The book gives the impression that Wright left the Party in 1936 in Chicago, and that his involvement with the movement ended there. The afterword, by Michel Fabre, says nothing to suggest otherwise. In fact, Wright rejoined the Party when he moved to New York in 1937, serving as the head of the *Daily Worker's* Harlem Bureau for six months, and functioning as a major public figure in the New York left-wing cultural movement until he finally severed ties with the Party in 1942.

Everything that Wright says in *American Hunger* about his trouble with the Chicago Party leadership is true, but his experience with the New York organization was very different. Consciously seeking a position of leadership in the nation's cultural center, the New York CP gave its intellectuals considerable freedom from

routine party duties so long as they were willing to endorse major Party policies. In Chicago Wright was assigned to an overwhelmingly working class Party unit on the South Side where his creative aspirations were ridiculed. In New York, he was in a "downtown" unit composed entirely of intellectuals and was encouraged to pursue his career as a novelist without interference. In return, Wright publicly defended the Party's major domestic and international policies at writers congresses, black community gatherings, and in statements to the press, changed his views with each shift in Party line through both the Nazi-Soviet Pact and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. He did not publicly resign from the Party until 1942, when its refusal to support the March on Washington and failure to dynamically confront Jim Crow during wartime, convinced him that it had lost its leading position in the struggle for racial equality.

The artistic freedom Wright experienced in his New York years is perhaps best revealed by the Party's response to the publication of *Native Son*. When the novel was first released in 1940, it provoked a terrific furor within the Party because of its unflattering portrait of white communists and its choice of a black criminal as the main character. Although the novel presented a chilling picture of the harshness of ghetto life, it failed to offer the customary "solution" (which appeared in much of Wright's prior work) of united action by black and white workers, offering instead a more ambiguous image of personal emancipation through violence. Many black and white communists wanted to publicly attack the book, but were prevented from doing so by Party cultural leaders because Wright had won national acclaim for the novel and brought the Party considerable prestige. The only critical review of the book allowed to appear on the *Daily Worker's* cultural page (controlled by V.J. Jerome) was by Wright's patron and protector in

the Party, Ben Davis, Jr., who was careful to preface his negative comments on the novel with extensive praise for Wright's portrait of the effects of "capitalist oppression" on Negroes. Nevertheless, inside the Party itself, impassioned discussion took place over the contents and meaning of the book.

These details of Wright's experience in New York do not invalidate his critique of the Party's theoretical rigidity and hostility to public discussion of political issues, but they do suggest the need to modify the prevalent image (which *American Hunger* tends to reinforce) that the Party was a "totalitarian" organization immune to popular initiatives and unresponsive to its political environment.

In certain times and places, Party "influentials" (the term for Party members who were leading public figures as a result of non-party activity), and occasionally rank and filers, could function with relative freedom so long as they did not challenge keystones of Party policy—among them support for the Soviet Union, endorsement of the Moscow trials, and black and white unity. During the Popular Front period, intellectuals and trade union leaders, each important in Party efforts to enter the mainstream of American life, were gradually freed of the responsibility of attending regular meetings of Party branches and often lived in a manner indistinguishable from their non-communist colleagues. For those left-wing novelists, playwrights, journalists and performing artists who would rationalize or ignore the Party's blind faith in Soviet omnipotence, the situation offered considerable advantages. They could vicariously draw inspiration from the Party's achievements in the political and economic sphere, while pursuing their own artistic careers and lifestyles with considerable freedom. At a time when the Party was "popular" and in tune with liberal opinion, it served as a weathervane for black and white intellectuals and a focus of considerable artistic creativity.



This freedom rested on an extremely fragile theoretical basis. The Party leadership did not believe in even the limited autonomy of art and politics; they opportunistically allowed influential artists to cultivate individualized modes of expression in order to keep them in the Party and expand the Party's prestige and influence.

But the momentum of the policy could not be easily reversed. When the Party tried to crack down on its intellectuals for insufficient political or aesthetic orthodoxy, or when its policies placed it at odds with the rest of the nation, most of those intellectuals, like Wright, left the organization. The same was true of its trade union leaders, who defected in droves after the Cold War began. Certain freedoms, which the leadership regarded as tactical, were viewed by intellectuals, for both principled and careerist motives, as the *sine qua non* of the Party membership. Each time the Party leadership, following international cues, tried to shut down the space remaining for political and artistic innovation, it further narrowed its influence.

What makes the history of the CPUSA so tragic is *not* that it blindly pursued a "bol-shevik" strategy through thick and thin, but that, under the impact of the Popular Front policies of the 30's and 40's, it nearly evolved into an indigenously American socialist organization. Wright's novel, though it dramatizes how the Party's conspiratorial atmosphere, mechanistic approach to culture, and hostility to critical discussion of its policies hindered its effectiveness in the early Thirties, fails to explore how those features of Party life survived the period of its "Americanization" and mass growth. In neither history nor literature has that problem yet received the detailed treatment it deserves.

---

MARK NAISON, an associate editor of *Radical America*, has written extensively for left publications and teaches Afro-American history at Fordham University.

---

---

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION. 1. Title of Publication: *Radical America*. 2. Date of filing: December 15, 1978. 3. Frequency of issue: bi-monthly. 4. Location of known office of publication: 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143. 5. Location of headquarters or general business offices of publisher: 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143. 6. Names and addresses of publisher and editor: Alternative Education Project, 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143; Margery Davies, 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143; Frank Brodhead, 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143. 7. Owner: Alternative Education Project, Inc. 8. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1% or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None. 9. In accordance with the provisions of this statute, I hereby request permission to mail the publication named in Item 1 at the reduced postage rates presently authorized by U.S.C. 3626. Frank M. Brodhead, Business Manager. 10. Extent and nature of circulation (after each item the first number is the average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months, and the second number is the actual number of copies of the single issue published nearest to the filing date): A. Total number of copies printed: (4321, 4236). B. Paid circulation: 1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 960, 1005. 2. Mail subscriptions: 2099, 2186. C. Total paid circulation: 3059, 3191. D. Free distribution by mail, carrier, or other means: Samples, complimentary and other free copies: 150, 150. E. Total distribution: 3209, 3341. F. Copies not distributed: 1. Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 912, 695. 2. Returns from news agents: 200, 200. G. Total: 4321, 5236. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Frank Brodhead.

---

---

SUBSCRIBE NOW TO

## **RADICAL AMERICA**

**RADICAL AMERICA** is an independent Marxist journal, featuring the history and developments in the working class, the role of women and Third World people, with reports on shop-floor and community organizing, the history and politics of radicalism and feminism, and debates on current socialist theory and popular culture.

Cut out this box and mail it to: *Radical America*  
P.O. Box B., North Cambridge, MA 02140

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ \$30.00 sustaining subscriber
- ☐ \$10.00 (1 year — 6 issues)
- ☐ \$7.00 if unemployed
- ☐ \$18.00 (2 years)
- ☐ Add \$2.00 per year for all foreign subscriptions

Make all checks payable to *Radical America*

---



JAMAICA  
PLAIN  
TENANTS  
ACTION  
GROUP



