

Local Unions, “Primitive Democracy,” and Workers’ Self-Activity

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Unions need to reassess conventional ways of reaching out to workers. In every American community activists, often in new workplaces, are sharing broad objectives for social change. Unfortunately, these voices are frequently ignored.

THESE remarks are addressed to local union officers or would-be local union officers who hope somehow to make use of their tenure in local union office to move toward a socialist society. Two such rank and filers, Ed Mann and John Barbero, inspired my wife and me to locate in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1976. After years of struggle, their slate had taken over Local 1462, United Steelworkers of America, in 1973. They had been reelected three years later. Ed and John, besides being socialists with a small “s,” had opposed not only the Vietnam War but the Korean War; had struggled against racism in both the mill and the community; and were ardent civil libertarians. Their ideology might be described as participatory democracy

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(after retiring from union office, Ed joined the Industrial Workers of the World). The context that life gave them to try to realize this view of things was a decision by the aerospace conglomerate that owned their place of work to close the mill.

Ed and John are dead now, but the question that challenged them remains. My hypothesis is that in times of social crisis, the working class can be expected to create new institutions separate from, but perhaps also at a local level built upon, existing trade unions. These institutions bring together all kinds of workers in a given community, horizontally, for mutual aid and common struggle. In Russia such bodies were created in 1905 and 1917 and were known as “soviets.” There and elsewhere, what they really are is ad hoc central labor bodies, created from below.

I know of no better way to elaborate this suggestion than to carefully retrace the steps of Marxist discussion of trade unions between the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and Rosa Luxemburg’s murder in 1919. Since then, in my opinion, there has been almost a total absence of anything that resembles an adequate theory of the labor movement. The result of this absence of theory has been that several generations of dedicated radicals—principally Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, and for the most part Trotskyists since 1970—have doggedly pursued the mirage of turning national, bureaucratic, hierarchical, and, at best, social democratic trade unions into instruments of revolutionary transformation.

I have previously described the evolution of what one might call Marxism-Luxemburgism in an essay titled “The Webbs, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg” (Lynd 1997). Here I shall offer some additional evidence and try to highlight the relevance of this story to the transition from capitalism to socialism.

Karl Marx had a particular interest in the late medieval commune and expressly compared it to the trade union. In an 1853 article on “The Value of Strikes,” Marx argued that, without strikes,

the working classes of Great Britain, and of all Europe, would be a heart-broken, a weak minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass, whose self-emancipation would prove as impossible as that of the slaves of Ancient Greece and Rome. We must not forget that strikes and combinations among the serfs were the hotbeds of the medieval commune, and that those communes have been in their turn, the sources of life of the now ruling bourgeoisie. (Marx 1975a, 169)

In an 1854 letter to Friedrich Engels, Marx remarked:

It is often funny how the word *communio* used to be heaped with abuse just as communism is today. The parson Guibert of Nogent writes for instance: "*Communio* is a new and extremely bad name."

There is frequently something quite pathetic [I suspect Marx meant "moving"] about the way in which the burghers in the twelfth century invite the peasants to flee to the cities to the sworn commune. Thus for instance the Charter of St. Quentin says:

"They (the citizens of St. Quentin) have sworn jointly each to give common aid to his confederate, to have common counsel, common responsibility and common defense. Jointly we have determined that whoever shall enter our commune and give us aid whether by reason of flight or for fear of his enemies or for other offense . . . shall be allowed to enter the commune, *for the gate is open to all.*" (Marx 1975a, 476)

Might the trade union become a commune within capitalism, inviting to its banner all those whom capitalism oppressed? The most important evidence of how Marx answered this question is a document titled "Trade Unions, Their Past, Present and Future," a part of instructions drafted by Marx for the British delegates to a meeting of the First International in 1866. "Trade unions," Marx wrote,

originally sprang up from spontaneous attempts of workmen . . . to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. . . . On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the trade unions were forming centers of organization of the working class, as the medieval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the trade unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labor, they are still more important as organized agencies for superseding the very system of wage labor and capital rule. (Marx 1975c, 191–192)

As he continued, Marx fell into a familiar hectoring tone of voice, chiding trade unions for their preoccupation with narrow economic goals.

Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, trade unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wage slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements

Apart from their original purposes (trade unions) must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist non-union men in their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades. (Marx 1975c, 191–192)

Similarly, in the fragment “Value, Price and Profit” written a little earlier, Marx called on trade unions not to limit themselves “to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it” (Marx 1975c, 149).

Both in England and on the continent, however, the trade unions of the 1870s and 1880s tended to be organizations of skilled craftsmen pursuing narrow, immediate economic interests. Marx had some surprisingly harsh things to say about these unions. In an 1868 letter to a German correspondent, Marx wrote:

I believe I have had as much experience in the trade union field as any of my contemporaries. . . . [C]entralist organization, although very useful for secret societies and sectarian movements, goes against the nature of trade unions. Even if it were possible—I state outright that it is impossible—it would not be desirable, and least of all in Germany. Here where the worker’s life is regulated from childhood on by bureaucracy and he himself believes in the authorities, in the bodies appointed over him, he must be taught before all else to walk by himself. (Marx 1975d, 143–144)

In 1871, in a speech to a London conference of the First International, Marx is reported to have said:

The trade unions are an aristocratic minority. The poorer workers can-

not join them: the great mass of workers, driven daily by economic developments from the villages into the cities, remain outside the trade unions for a long time, and the poorest of all never belong to them. The same goes for the workers born in London's East End, where one out of ten belongs to the trade unions. The farm workers, the day laborers, never belong to these trade unions.

The trade unions by standing alone are powerless—they will remain a minority. They do not have the mass of proletarians behind them. . . . [T]he International doesn't need the organization of trade unions in order to win the workers. . . . It [the International] is the only union that inspires full confidence among the workers. (Marx 1987, 82)

According to the minutes of the General Council of the International, "Citizen Marx said the trade unions were praised too much" (Marx 1987, 85).

There came a time in England, just as later in the United States, when the union's inspiration reached some of the very unskilled workers Marx had in mind—such as the dock workers in London's East End—in the form of industrial unionism. But in neither country did an increase in membership resolve the problem that at the turn of the century came to be called "economism." Like the Teamsters and Steelworkers at the World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations in Seattle, even in reaching out to unfamiliar recruits and engaging in unaccustomed tactics, industrial unions pursued narrow, self-interested goals: in our own recent experience, preventing Mexican truck drivers from crossing the Rio Grande or keeping foreign steel out of the United States, that is, protecting the immediate interests of one group of workers without thought for the consequences to workers elsewhere.

Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg inherited the inconclusive reflections of Marx and Engels on trade unionism, and struggled to synthesize them in practice. Whatever we may think about the later political career of Lenin, his views on trade unions and the ad hoc soviets are important. Briefly, Lenin's theories of the labor movement went through three distinct stages, each dramatically different from the one that preceded it.

1. In 1894–1895 Lenin was part of a Marxist group in St. Petersburg that believed in constant agitation among factory workers on the basis of their everyday needs and demands. A series of leaflets was distributed, exposing factory conditions and invariably concluding with a call to strike until the offending conditions were corrected. A general strike of more than 30,000 textile workers in the summer of 1896 appeared to set the seal of success on this approach to working-class organizing.

2. In December 1895, however, Lenin himself was arrested and, after some delay, transported to Siberian exile. In 1898 his bride, Krupskaya, joined him. They spent their mornings translating *Industrial Democracy* by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, which had just been published. Viewing the Webbs' description of developments in Great Britain as predictive for the future development of Russia, Lenin concluded (so he wrote in 1902) that "[t]he history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness." Hence the task of socialists was necessarily "to divert the labor movement" from its spontaneous pure and simple trade unionism, and to redirect it to political goals, beginning with opposition to the tsar (Lenin 1929, 136–138).

3. Life wasted no time in refuting this theory. In 1905 workers all over Russia organized a vast horizontal network of militant, highly political, local central labor bodies known as soviets. Not only that, but in 1917, in a process initiated by female textile workers in St. Petersburg, they once again threw up soviets of workers and soviets of soldiers and sailors as well.

Lenin, it seems, got the message. In 1902, in *What Is to Be Done?* he had approvingly paraphrased the Webbs' chapter on what the Webbs called "primitive democracy," concluding, as the Webbs had, that it was "absurd" to think that "all the workers must take part in managing the unions," or that "all questions [should be] decided by the votes of all the members," or that

official duties should be “fulfilled by all the members in turn” (Lenin 1929, 214). In the summer of 1917, in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin (without conceding that he was doing so) altogether reversed himself. He denounced Eduard Bernstein for his “vulgar bourgeois jeers at ‘primitive’ democracy,” adding:

In his renegade book, *The Premises of Socialism*, Bernstein wars against the ideas of “primitive” democracy . . . binding mandates, unpaid officials, impotent central representative bodies, etc. To prove that this “primitive” democracy is unsound, Bernstein refers to the experience of British trade unions, as interpreted by the Webbs. (Lenin 1976, 53)

The Webbs recommended trade union self-government as practiced by British trade unions: “parliamentarism combined with bureaucracy.” According to the new-age Leninism of *The State and Revolution*, the Webbs’ model involved “exclusion of the poor from the affairs of ‘higher’ administration.” Under socialism, Lenin concluded,

much of the “primitive” democracy will inevitably be revived since, for the first time in the history of civilized societies, the mass of the population will rise to take an independent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration. (Lenin 1976, 141)

To be sure, this is exactly what Marx had written in 1871 about the Paris Commune. In 1902, however, Lenin had denounced “primitive”—or, as we might say, “participatory”—working-class democracy. In 1917 he embraced it and affirmed that it would play a central role in the transition from capitalism to socialism.

In the meanwhile, Polish socialist Rosa Luxemburg, despite her celebrated differences with Lenin about the desirable structure of a revolutionary political party, came to a conclusion virtually identical to his about the self-organization and self-activity of the labor movement. Experience shows, Luxemburg wrote (very much as Edward Thompson was to write a half century

later) that “every time the labor movement wins new terrain, [the directing centralized organs] work it to the utmost. They transform it at the same time into a kind of bastion, which holds up advance on a wider scale” (Wolfe 1970, 91–92).

Already at the end of the 1890s, in parallel with Lenin, Luxemburg insisted that trade unions were necessary but defensive institutions. The indispensable struggle of trade unions merely to maintain the worker’s share of capitalist wealth, she declared, was “a sort of labor of Sisyphus”: a phrase for which the leaders of German trade unions were said never to have forgiven her. At the 1899 party congress, she said about the English trade unions what she already thought about German ones: “From a school of class solidarity and socialist ethics, the trade union movement [has become] a business” (Luxemburg 1950, 71; Nettl 1966, 223; Abraham 1989, 61).

For Luxemburg, just as for Lenin, the dilemma was this: On the one hand, the self-activity of workers is the indispensable force propelling a transition to socialism, and it is folly to look to any other social group for that purpose. On the other hand, the trade union form of organization that workers over and over again create will predictably become a business and a bastion against change.

Thus the clash of thesis and antithesis. And from the same tumultuous event, the Russian Revolution of 1905, Luxemburg and Lenin derived essentially the same synthesis. Just as Marx had said, the working class would emancipate itself. But at moments of social crisis, working-class self-activity would take on new organizational forms, outside the trade union movement. The *locus classicus* for this argument, and for me the most significant Marxist work of the twentieth century, is Rosa Luxemburg’s assessment of the 1905 Revolution, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*. I shan’t attempt to summarize it here. Read it.

What Lenin and Luxemburg saw and celebrated in the Russian Revolution of 1905 was not a phenomenon limited to that country, or that stage of economic development, or that period of history. Workers around the world have over and over again created soviet-like institutions at moments of intense class conflict (Arendt 1963, 259–285). To mention only a few examples, again in Russia in 1917; in Seattle, Washington, in 1919; in Italy in the early 1920s; in the Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco general strikes of 1934; in Hungary in 1956; in Poland in 1980–1981; and—lest we forget—in France in the fall of 1995, when a working class, the trade union density of which is as low as in the United States, mobilized itself through institutions outside the trade union movement, repeatedly took to the streets, and forced the government to abandon a plan for social retrenchment at the expense of the workers.

The left in several Latin American countries has seen the need to begin the building of a new society locally, from below. In Mexico, the Zapatistas have artfully promoted from below the goal of national democratization without themselves entering into the electoral process. The Brazilian Workers Party has recently elected mayors of São Paulo and more than 170 other communities. In San Salvador, Mayor Héctor Silva has been elected to a second term on a platform of participatory democracy. We must find ways to do likewise. Autonomous local labor parties would be a natural outgrowth of autonomous ad hoc central labor bodies, bringing together all kinds of workers in a given community.

The foregoing may seem quite abstract, very far away. But I will predict: You will over and over again find yourself choosing between two ways of reaching out to the larger labor movement. One way is to align yourself with national union headquarters or, at most, other locals of the same national union. This is the path of union electoral politics, of collective bargaining cam-

paigns for dollars-and-cents objectives. Without denying the need for those activities, I encourage you to think about something else as well. In your community there are other local union activists, in other kinds of workplaces, who share the same broad class objectives for social change to which you aspire. In other countries, perhaps in the same industry but not in the same union, are still other activists and dreamers. Reach out to them, horizontally, on a basis of equality. Together you can change the world.

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