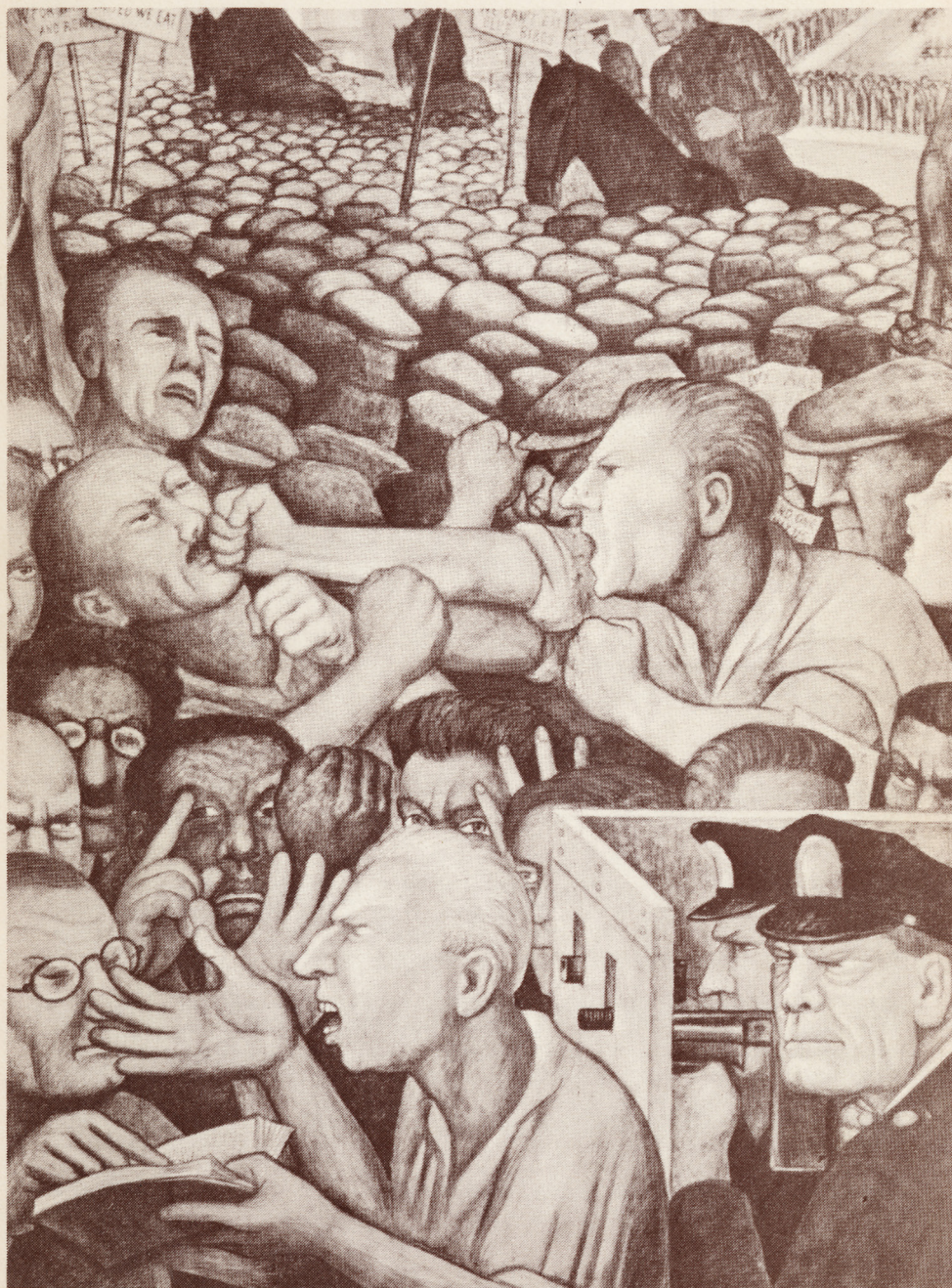


U.S. WORKING CLASS*UNEMPLOYED ORGANIZING

RADICAL AMERICA

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Cover: Demonstration of the unemployed, 1930's. This is a portion of the mural painted by Diego Rivera for Rockefeller Center in New York but destroyed on the orders of Nelson Rockefeller.

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Introduction

This issue of *Radical America* contains both historical and contemporary analyses of the working class and of the attempts of socialists to organize within it. Jeremy Brecher's article on the current state of wage labor in the United States is a useful survey of the composition of the working class, its housing patterns, and the changed working conditions which have resulted from the interaction between capitalist offensives and the countermeasures, both defensive and offensive, which workers have taken against them. In particular, Brecher stresses the informal, extra-union resistance by workers. He also analyzes the changing nature of community/workplace ties, noting the erosion of ethnic divisions among white workers and signs of frequent on-the-job solidarity between blacks and whites.

It is also important to remember that large segments of the working class are not in the wage labor force, particularly large proportions of young and old people and women of all ages. Class-conscious militance among the non-employed has usually lagged behind workplace activity, but it is vital to attacking the capitalist system as a whole. It is especially crucial in inflationary periods in which monopolies try to take back in the marketplace what they may lose in wage struggles. It is with this perspective that we are reprinting here Bruno Ramirez's brief descrip-

tion of the "self-reduction" movement in Italy — a campaign of direct action in reducing prices. Although this article describes struggles that took place two years ago, the struggles are continuing. They marked an important departure from both the traditional workplace battles in general and the non-socialist consumer organizing found in the United States. The Italian consumers' movement is powerful and potentially socialist because, unlike most consumers' campaigns in the United States, it is a solidly working-class movement. The success of "self-reduction" in Italy seems to be based on a unity between these struggles and workplace militance. This unity has many historical precedents in both Europe and the United States. In mining and mill towns, for example, where the domination of a single employer helped overcome other divisions among the working class, community support for strikes was often decisive. The mobilization of women through community struggles that spoke to their needs as well as to those of (male) workers added great strength to the working class. In addition, in its tactics — people setting their own prices and paying the prices they themselves determined to be just — the Italian consumers' movement has substituted a proletarian, popular legality for bourgeois legality, an essentially revolutionary conception.

In an historical article Roy Rosenzweig gives us a look at another important example of non-workplace organizing: work with the unemployed during the Depression. He has reconstructed this history from material that has not been readily available previously, and in addition has unearthed hard-to-find accounts of people's actual activity in the unemployed movements of the 1930's. This history is particularly important precisely because more recent attempts at organizing the unemployed have been short-lived and/or unsuccessful. Ironically, the successes of the earlier movements of the unemployed help to account for the lack of contemporary successes. Part of the purpose of the expansion of relief programs in the 1930's was to undercut the effective challenge of radical organizing among the unemployed, and the greater availability of different forms of welfare and unemployment compensation have somewhat moderated the harshness of unemployment. In fact, in many ways the present-day counterpart of the 1930's struggles Rosenzweig describes should be sought in community struggles over housing, welfare, and other such issues rather than over unemployment as such. The contemporary tenants' movement, for instance, is in some ways a more fitting descendant of the 1930's unemployed movement than are the recent, generally unsuccessful efforts at organizing the unemployed. Nevertheless, given the ills of the U.S. economy at this time, unemployment will continue to be an important problem for the working class, and Rosenzweig provides some important insights into the obstacles hindering successful organization of the unemployed.

While Rosenzweig's article focuses on one episode in the history of the U.S. Left and its attempts to organize working-class people, James Weinstein's recent widely-read book, *Ambiguous Legacy*, attempts to make sense of that history for the entire 20th century. The task Wein-

stein sets for himself is an extremely important one, as Jim O'Brien points out in his review, for the U.S. Left has in general been plagued by ignorance of its own history. Weinstein has also made an important contribution in pointing out the problems involved in mechanically transposing the lessons of a revolution in one historical situation (for instance, Russia) to attempts to organize a revolution in another (for instance, the United States). Furthermore, he rightly criticizes the belief that reform struggles will automatically lead to self-conscious socialist ones and stresses the important lessons embodied in the New Left. But O'Brien also finds several serious weaknesses with the book. He criticizes Weinstein's failure to get inside the movements he describes, to understand the difference between the motivations of the rank and file and the directives of a party line, and takes issue with Weinstein's class analysis of contemporary society. Weinstein embarks on the important task of getting the U.S. Left to learn from its history, but O'Brien differs with him about what the lessons are to be learned.

As many of our readers are aware, during the past few months we have been conducting a fund-raising drive. Due to the generosity of many people, this drive has so far been quite successful and will serve as the basis for a new-subscriber drive we are undertaking this summer and fall. Since an increase in subscriptions is the only way to put *Radical America* on a stable financial footing again, we urge our subscribers to encourage other people to subscribe to the magazine. In addition, it would be a great to help us if those readers who normally buy the magazine in bookstores and newsstands would subscribe instead.

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BULLETIN

OF CONCERNED ASIAN SCHOLARS



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Wage Labor in the U.S. Today

Jeremy Brecher
Tim Costello

In the summer of 1973, we took a trip around the country, excepting the South, talking with working people about their lives and what they observed about the social world around them. Since that time we have continued to conduct interviews in the New England area, and to combine what we have learned from our discussions with historical material and current data. While we had by no means a statistically random sample, those we talked with represented a wide range of industries, occupations, and backgrounds, with males and whites particularly heavily represented. Our main focus was on work, but we tried to learn something about community life and the impact of economic conditions as well.

Our research was no doubt affected by who we were — a labor historian and a teamster, both men, white, around thirty years old, with little affection for the present organization of society. We present the following description, not as any kind of definitive portrait, but rather as one contribution to a process of collective self-discovery in which all of us who are the victims of the existing structure of social relations have a part to play.

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I. The Workforce

Over the past century, capitalism has moved from being the dominant form of labor organization to being virtually the universal form in the United States. Small farmers are now only a few per cent of the population, and the self-employed middle class is of comparable size. Housekeeping and childcare remain primarily the work of women in the home, but little other labor remains outside the sphere of exchange and money.

About 75% of the employed population are blue-collar and low-level white-collar workers; for the purposes of this article we will consider them and their families the working class. A widespread myth maintains that the "blue-collar" industrial workforce is rapidly diminishing. Actually, there are more blue-collar workers today than ever before. Blue-collar workers form a larger part of the male workforce today than in 1930. Blacks and the newer immigrant groups, such as Puerto Ricans and Chicanos, are concentrated in blue-collar occupations. The average educational level of blue-collar workers has increased sharply since World War II, closing most of the gap between blue-collar and white-collar workers.

The entire 20th century has seen a tremendous expansion of white-collar employment, largely drawing on the labor pool of women. Within the white-collar sphere there has been a separation of upper- and lower-level white-collar workers, parallel in many ways to the separation of masters and journeymen of an earlier industrial era. Lower-level white-collar workers, such as clerical and sales workers and office-machine operators, have had their incomes move below blue-collar workers; lost their advantage in health, pension, vacation, and other benefits; lost their traditional job security; had their jobs mechanized, and subject to time study and other forms of "rationalization." Their conditions are now far closer to blue-collar workers than to higher-level professionals and managers. This is in sharp contrast to the situation described, for example, in the Lynds' Middletown in the 1920's, where the great division was between the "working class" and a "business class" which included virtually all white-collar workers. The lower white-collar categories are dominated by white women, though blacks, especially black women, have begun to enter them in increasing numbers.

Despite the degradation of much white-collar labor, substantial cultural differences remain between white- and blue-collar workers. "Respectability" remains a more important value in the office than in the shop. Interest in business advancement and orientation toward a career is a potent force for male and some female white-collar workers, and is cultivated by management's advancement hierarchies. Preoccupation with status remains a major theme among white-collar workers. As actual conditions deteriorate, and

as white-collar workers are increasingly recruited from blue-collar families, this orientation has declined somewhat, but more slowly than one might have expected.

The workforce is very distinctly divided along racial lines. Black workers remain overwhelmingly in a separate labor market, working for different firms, in different localities (generally central cities), and within firms in special "Negro jobs." Two decades of civil-rights agitation have done far less to change the minority job situation than brief periods of labor shortage during World Wars I and II. Blacks and other racial minorities are disproportionately employed in small firms in highly competitive sectors of the economy, marked by relatively low rates of profit, insecure employment, and low wages. They are also generally confined to jobs in stagnating central cities. In the post-World War II move to the suburbs of the more prosperous sections of the working class, blacks were largely excluded. The heavy migration of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos to urban areas over the past two decades has mainly been to the very inner cities which whites were leaving. Yet four-fifths of all new jobs in metropolitan areas from 1950 to 1970 were in the suburbs (where a large majority of white union members now live). The official unemployment rate for blacks remains double that of whites.

A basic change in the workforce has been the influx of married women into the labor force. In 1940, 15% of married women were in the labor force. Today, about 50% of married women are employed at some point during the course of the year, and until the recession the figure was rising rapidly. Women are still concentrated in "women's jobs." More than 70% are clerical, nonhousehold service, or low-paying operative and sales workers. This results primarily from discrimination against hiring women in other occupations. The "income gap" — the percentage of male earnings made by full-time women workers — deteriorated from 64% in the mid-1950's to 60% in 1970. These figures understate the real difference, since 60% of women do not hold jobs full-time or full-year.

II. The Structure of Work

Let us now turn to the work itself. The way work is organized is a reflection, not so much of technology or "economic laws" as of a continuing struggle between workers and employers over the production process and its product. The employer, by employing, brings workers into groups and gives them a common interest against the employer. His problem under these conditions is to motivate workers to work and to prevent workers from organizing against him. Toward that end, employers develop strategies — at times deliberately, at times simply by retaining what seems to succeed and discarding what doesn't — to make workers work.

At their origins, most industries experienced production con-

trolled by skilled workers. Management strategies since the late 19th century have aimed to break this power, often in the name of "rationalization" or "scientific management." Management strategy in the 1970's is based largely on the same elements that employers introduced following the destruction of the early industrial pattern of control by skilled workers. The general management goal is still to condition workers to pursue individual rather than collective self-interest, while making the individual workers' self-interest appear identical with the employer's.

A. Fear of loss of job remains at the core of labor discipline. Despite unionism, most workers feel little reliable protection against job loss. In actuality, firings are relatively rare, although lesser disciplinary actions are common. The limit on the employer's exercise of this power seems to be the resistance and demoralization it creates among the remaining workers.

B. The basic pattern of centralized power and authority established by early 20th century "rationalization" remains virtually universal today. So does the deliberate fostering by management of workers' ignorance about the work — workers are forbidden to explore their plants, to learn about production techniques, scheduling, long-range employer plans, and in many cases even what shifts they will be working a few days or weeks hence.

In industries which matured before World War II, the traditional pattern of non-working foremen responsible for direct supervision of a small number of workers remains dominant, although foremen are increasingly being recruited from college rather than from the shop floor. Foremen are generally regarded by workers with a mixture of pity, hatred, contempt, and sympathy — they are hated as "the boss," the immediate giver of orders, but also felt sorry for as "the man in the middle" who gets it from both company and workers.

Newer industries have somewhat different patterns of supervision. In high-technology industries such as oil, the immediate "boss" is most often a scientist, technician, or professional. In hospitals, the doctors and nurses often form lines of authority over workers distinct from those of the hospital administration, giving workers the kind of room for maneuver that drives scientific managers bats. In offices, it is common to give some workers management titles and responsibility to supervise other workers as well as doing their own work, presumably to create an advancement hierarchy and close supervision to counter the office worker's ability to look busy while not doing much. In small businesses, owner-supervision of course continues, with all its traditional opportunities for paternalism and/or arbitrary meanness.

C. The advance of technology continues to improve the capacity of machines to regulate human labor. This is particularly the case in continuous-flow industries, where workers have no direct control over the pace of work short of downright sabotage. But it is

increasingly true wherever new plants are built so that total production can be planned to increase "productivity." A good example was the Lordstown plant, designed to squeeze out the last few remaining seconds in which an auto worker was not actually producing. The expanding use of machines to pace work is seen in the increasing favor of managers toward "measured day work." This is a system in which work is paid at a flat hourly rate, and workers have production norms set to the pace of machines and enforced by close supervision. (However, it is important to keep in mind that American industry has had great difficulty modernizing its production plant. Fully automated equipment is very expensive. The slowed rate of accumulation in a stagnating economy has led to a general shortage of capital for modernization, and the slow rate of growth and general instability of markets has made employers reluctant to make expensive investments. The advanced, high-productivity factory is the exception, the classical pre-automation model more the norm.)

Regulation of work by machine pacing has become far more important than previously in the office. The publications of the American Management Association are filled with advice on how to "Taylorize" paperwork. Clocks and counters are on every new business machine, and "word processing centers" maintain output quotas indistinguishable from those in physical production.

The elimination of skilled industrial craftsmen by the building of their skills into the machinery is now nearly complete. The last hold-outs, such as the tool-and-die makers, are now finding their jobs broken down by semi-automated machinery, though as usual the general breakdown of skill tends to create a small elite of extremely-high skilled workers who do what the machines can't do. Most "skilled" jobs today can be learned fairly quickly. Indeed, the classification is generally somewhat arbitrary — as many workers who have been skipped over a number of grades to jobs supposedly requiring years of experience can report. Of course any job can require a lot of skill — especially to do it without killing yourself, and knowing what to do when things go wrong — but this can apply to supposedly "unskilled" jobs as well. Jobs which are "skilled" in the old sense, and which provide their workers with the traditional power of craftsmen, remain primarily in the construction trades, and a few other isolated groups.

D. In most production work, the subdivision of jobs has now been pushed to its practical limits. Attempts at further subdivision only provoke worker resistance, in the forms of poor-quality work, high turnover, uncooperativeness, sabotage, and strikes. On the whole, it is an effective management technique not only for making workers work during every available second, but also for convincing them of their powerlessness — many workers feel that if they tried to fight conditions, they could easily be replaced, making resistance appear fruitless. The subdivision of jobs is of course the

main cause of the "job boredom" which was widely and mistakenly publicized as the basic cause of worker dissatisfaction in the early 1970's. Equally overpublicized have been modest attempts by employers to deTaylorize to some extent through "job enlargement." Such plans are not profitable to introduce except in cases where they substantially increase productivity; they are not widespread and are not likely to become so. They can be used as a rhetorical cover for speed-up, as they were at Lordstown, although they can also alleviate some of the more brutal effects of scientific management. Mostly, however, they exemplify the ability of American managerial publicists to recycle old ballyhoo.

E. Job and promotion hierarchies, one of the classic strategies for dividing and "motivating" workers, remain widespread, with some variations — hierarchies are marked in steel and utilities, less so in auto, for example. Some of the touted "job enrichment" plans are really based on establishing such hierarchies. These hierarchies, which usually have little basis in technology or skill requirements, are central means of motivating and dividing workers on the job. Not only do individuals compete for the better jobs, but many of the conflicts between racial, sexual, and other groups revolve around the "advancement" ladder. These usually take the form of a struggle over seniority or job bidding. The job hierarchy is of course also central in shaping the inequality of income and status within society at large. While unions in many industries have established the principle of promotion by seniority, our interviews indicate that favoritism is more the rule than the exception — "there's advancement by seniority if all other things are equal, but the company decides whether they're equal. Favoritism was one of the main grievances which led to worker support for the CIO; its significance as a grievance at present should not be underestimated.

F. Form of payment has changed more than most other management strategies since the days of Taylor. The distinction between hourly and salaried workers remains strong, and backed by many forms of apartheid, even as the actual gap between most white-collar and blue-collar workers grows less and less. The use of piece rates continues to decline, remaining primarily in backward industries such as garment and packing. Management has never been able to counter the workers' ability to control the rates by setting their own informal ceilings on output. Piece rates are now seen by management as a last resort to be applied only in the absence of "good supervision." Incentive plans and bonus systems are still widespread, but are frequently "demoralized" — bonus rates are set very low, so that everyone gets the bonus. Sometimes they work so much to the workers' benefit that workers demand their extension — as happened in the steel industry a few years back. The general management trend, as we have noted, is toward measured day work, with fat hourly wages and control by output

norms, close supervision, and setting of machine speed.

III. Workers' Strategies

These employer strategies generate the basic conditions of work, the institutions within which workers spend their days. Whatever the nature of the productive activity, most workers face one or another combination of these structures. In the end, most of these tactics boil down to the carrot and the stick, but in a form that makes them appear the inevitable product of technical and economic necessity. Work is generally viewed in the fatalistic light of death and taxes — something which cannot be fundamentally changed. Consequently, thought and discussion about how work might be performed differently is not widespread. Within the established framework, however, workers have developed a number of strategies for dealing with the power of employers over them.

One obvious possible tactic is to try to please or curry favor with the employer — indeed, the adoption of this strategy by workers is the objective of management's pattern of rewards and punishments. We found this attitude to be normal among managers and other groups with a genuine hope of "getting ahead," but very rare among workers, even relatively favored ones. In fact, the only place we ran into it was among a minority of women in or from rural areas. Far more common, especially among older workers, was the approach of doing only what was necessary but avoiding sore spots, keeping out of trouble, and learning to live around points of irritation with management.

The most common resistance strategy might be described as the use of guerrilla tactics — secret cooperation among workers while avoiding overt confrontation with management. Such tactics are used for a wide range of objectives: controlling the pace of work, winning free time, making the job more interesting or pleasurable, altering unsafe and uncomfortable conditions, undermining the authority of the employer, improving pay and benefits, and sometimes affecting the social results of the work itself. Tactics themselves include: production-output ceilings set by workers' consensus; flexible deciding of how much to produce day by day; organized slowdowns; sabotaging machinery; work evasion; job rotation and division of work by the workers; government work (making things for yourself on company time); inventory shrinkage, high-grading, riding with the flag up, and other forms of quasi-theft; and an almost unlimited number of irregular ways of making life on the job more interesting and satisfying. While such guerrilla tactics are seen by sociologists, many radicals, and many workers as almost insignificant acts of individual frustration, they require at the least a supportive milieu of social acceptance. They require genuine group self-discipline in most cases, and sometimes a very considerable amount of secret organization.

The other strategy used by workers is outright confrontation, usually based on the power to stop production. Short work stoppages, which were normal in the 1930's and '40's, are generally frowned on by unions and are most common around safety issues and in a few shops where they remain a continuing tradition. One-day or one-shift walkouts are common in the auto industry, especially over extremes of temperature and similar grievances. Wildcat strikes over immediate work issues — firings, speed-up, safety, harassment, or almost anything else — occur sporadically in most industries, although they are most common in the coal mines. Our impression is that wildcats were chronic during World War II, occurred in large bursts in many industries during the immediate post-War years, and declined thereafter until the mid-1960's. They then became more common, though never returning to earlier levels, until the mid-1970's, when (except in coal) they began to decline. On the other hand, plant occupations — extremely rare since the 1930's — have begun to reemerge here and there as a tactic — notably in the Chrysler plants in 1973 and in a number of plants, such as the Rheingold breweries in New York, threatened with closing.

Several different kinds of factors seem to affect the strategies workers choose. To some extent the choice reflects individual experiences, values, and temperament — what managers perceive as the “bell curve” of cooperative and resistant individual workers. Behind these lie class strategies embodied in social values: the strategy of individual advancement embodied in competitive striving vs. the strategy of solidarity embodied, for example, in the still widespread repugnance at scabbing, crossing picket lines, etc., and a general support for the struggles of other workers.

Even more important, however, seem to be the past experiences of a particular work group. A new group — such as a newly-hired shift at a plant — may be little more than a collection of unconnected individuals, with no cooperative strategy. Where there is high turnover or extreme isolation, this situation can be chronic. More often, however, interaction, shared experiences, and realization of common interests develop over time, creating a milieu in which cooperative strategies can be attempted. The success or failure of these then becomes part of the shared experience of the group, both limiting and supporting future action. Social pressure applied both to group members and particularly to new workers turns the group itself into the key determinant of strategies.

Several factors outside the workplace also appear to affect workers' strategies on the job. There certainly seems to be a decrease in respect for authority and a decline in willing acceptance of work and of the “work ethic,” especially among young people. The onset of recession has had contradictory effects: on the one hand, it generates greater caution about keeping one's job; on the other, it generates general discontent and rejection of the status

quo, while promoting speed-up and general tightening-up by management which itself encourages resistance.

White-collar workers frequently have been regarded as less militant on the job than blue-collar workers. Growing discontent among white-collar workers was apparent in the late 1960's, however. Lack of defenses against inflation further embittered white-collar workers in the first half of the 1970's. In some urban centers, the woman's movement has brought the subordination of women into question, especially among younger women. Where white-collar movements have broken through in the past several years, such as the Harper and Row strike in the New York publishing industry, it seems to have been in good part the result of the convergence of these two factors. On the other hand, divisions between workers of different status, and preoccupation with one's own status, are still powerful impediments to white-collar organization in most companies.

One of the surprising results of our interviews was the discovery that racism does not appear to be a major factor impeding workers' resistance on the job. Both black and white workers in numerous industries told us that, while social contact tends to go along racial lines, resistance to management cuts completely across race lines, and cooperation in fighting the employer is very strong. Even in cities as notoriously racist as Detroit and Cleveland, sabotage, wildcat strikes, and the like normally involve black and white workers side by side. White workers are also often outspoken in their admiration for the solidarity of blacks in resistance to management at work. If there is a potential growing edge for racial cooperation in the U.S., this may well be it.

Traditionally, women have been viewed as less militant and effective in organizing on the job, either because they consider their work temporary and secondary to their main role or because they are used to accepting a subordinate position. But it has to be kept in mind that most women workers are concentrated in occupations with labor surpluses and no tradition of resistance on the job. Where this is not the case, women appear to organize effectively to control production rates, resist supervision, and organize the job to meet their needs.

How widespread is worker resistance on the job today? The great diversity makes it hard to generalize, but it is fair to say on the basis of our interviews: 1) places where people are so unorganized that they will, for example, bust their asses on piece rates without limit are exceptional, and limited to competitive, small-firm, low-capital industries such as the garment industry, where most workers are easily replaced and stay with the company a short time, and where any substantial improvement in wages or conditions would be likely to put the employer out of business; 2) most blue-collar workplaces have, at the least, general cooperation in regulating the pace of work; and 3) greater initiatives for

more control of time and labor are very widespread, but normally sporadic rather than continuous.

*

Usually quite distinct from this informal worker organization is the formal bargaining agent for the workers, the union. Union agreements cover about 20% of all jobs, including the great majority of those in large industrial enterprises and a growing percentage of public employees. Public employees in the past few years, like industrial workers in the past, are winning union representation through a combination of their own struggles and the aid of politicians seeking their support.

The separation of informal worker organization from unionism has been a historical evolution. In the background of most unions lies a period of militant struggle against employers, in which workers identified the unions with themselves — although they may have identified more with their own locals and felt some distrust for the international. With recognition, the union leaderships reached accommodation with the employers. This stage, which occurred in the late 1930's and early 1940's for most contemporary unions, often saw chronic conflict between the shop-steward level and the local and international leadership. As unions normalized relations with the companies, undertook "joint administration" of "labor problems," and established discipline over their own lower levels, on-the-job worker organization and action grew increasingly separate from all levels of the union.

Among workers today, loyalty and commitment to the union is concentrated among older workers who have received very substantial benefits from unionism and who remember the "bad old days" before unionization. Unions are also supported because they give some degree of protection from the company, and because conditions are generally superior in unionized workplaces, since there is at least some recourse from the arbitrary authority of the boss. Many lower-level union officials are personally liked and respected, and many workers have received favors and services from union officials. But the union is generally seen, at best, as a source of such help, not as an embodiment of workers' own activity or will. There are partial exceptions to this picture, particularly in craft unions where the union plays a large role in hiring or for other reasons remains a live force.

Negative attitudes toward the union, particularly among younger workers, are more widespread than even those as critical of unionism as ourselves would have supposed. It would be hard for us to recount the number of times during our trip that we were told, "I hate to say it, but I guess I hate the union worse than I do the company." In many cases, such as many steel mills, the union is hardly even a presence on the job — many workers never see a grievor or know a union official. Grievance procedures are generally slow and ineffective, in some cases backed up for years. Else-

where, the union plays a central role in enforcing labor discipline, preventing wildcats and other forms of direct action, even occasionally timing jobs and forcing workers to meet production standards. Union support for the companies is notorious in many industries, including some with supposedly "progressive" unions; it is a common statement in Detroit that "they couldn't run the auto industry without the U.A.W." The union is often experienced as a buffer which prevents workers from taking action against the company. While corruption seems to be relatively uncommon or taken in stride, charges of favoritism against union officials are common and bitter.

While unions are met by a devastating critique, the idea of solidarity among workers is still bound up with the idea of "the union." While forms of informal organization exist separate from the union as an institution, they are considered an expression of "unionism" in a vaguely defined sense. This leads to the fascinating paradox of militants who attack the union up and down in every statement being referred to as "strong union men."

One highly-publicized development in unionism has been the tendency toward giving up the right to strike, notably in the recent steel-industry contracts. While the press hailed a new era of labor peace, few unions can be expected to go this route; they would have virtually no function could they not oppose management from time to time. Less noticed but perhaps more significant is the development of the official union strike as a way of managing discontent and "rolling the steam out of workers' discontent." This was seen most vividly — and admitted most frankly — in the 1970 U.A.W. strike, but is generally understood by union officials.

While unions have functioned within a rigid legal structure at least since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which carefully specified the actions they could legally take, two recent legal developments have turned them further into means for controlling labor for capital. The first, now in abeyance but bound to be reinstalled if inflation continues, is government wage control. The controls installed in the early 1970's were accepted and cooperated with by the unions, despite the fact that workers' real incomes were falling as a result of inflation. These conditions also led to widespread contract rejections and nationwide wildcat strikes in response to union policy. The second legal development is the recent court ruling that employers can be granted injunctions against unions whose members engage in unauthorized strikes. Many United Mine Workers locals now have fines totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars against them for their members' participation in wildcats. This is forcing the U.M.W. to become even more direct an agent of labor discipline than it was before. A similar evolution may be expected if and when substantial unauthorized strike activity breaks out in other industries. This appears to imply a return to the age before the Norris-LaGuardia Act outlawed the use of injunctions

against strikes and unions; today it can again be a crime not to work.

Unions continue to play a role in dividing workers into competing groups. This is most clear in the traditional craft unions, which have excluded women, blacks, and minorities from many of the more favored occupations. But it is also true for the industrial unions, which have accepted or encouraged discriminatory hiring patterns and supported principles of seniority and advancement that favor males, whites, and other established groups.

Within most unions there exist reform and rank-and-file caucuses of one kind or another. They appeal both to workers who feel the existing leadership is rotten and to aspiring union politicians who would like to be in that leadership's place. While from time to time they may achieve enough support to overcome entrenched union machines, in general workers regard them with considerable cynicism. This is usually based on past experience — a good proportion of today's union bureaucrats were yesterday's militant reformers. Reform movements in office face the same constraints as the officials they replaced. For example, the Miners for Democracy leadership, which came to power largely in reaction to the cooperation of the U.M.W. with the coal operators, has become the major tool for opposing miners' strikes over immediate grievances. It contributed greatly to the defeat of last autumn's massive walkout in West Virginia. Union administrations may turn over somewhat more rapidly in the present period of economic discontent than they have in the past, but this is unlikely to be the way in which major changes in working-class organization develop. We believe a more promising strategy lies in trying to develop the informal organization of workers on the job beyond the limits of unionism.

IV. The Impact of Hard Times

Real working-class incomes rose very substantially from the end of the Great Depression to about 1965, as a result of relatively full employment, unionization, and the increasing proportion of working wives. Estimates of the increase range from 30% to 100%, with the more realistic ones at the lower end of that scale. With the general stagnation of accumulation in the world capitalist economy, real wages fell from 1965 to 1970, and, after a brief rebound, decreased 9.5% in 1974 and early 1975 — a loss which has yet to be made up. The results have been the loss of luxuries, such as boats, vacation homes, and second cars, for the upper working class; loss of comfort and a return to penny-pinching for the mainstream working class; and general impoverishment, nutritional deficiency, and family disruption for the lower working class.

1974 saw the rise of mass unemployment, with furloughs, layoffs, and plant closings leading to the unemployment of roughly

a quarter of the workforce at one time or another in the course of 1975. A large proportion of the rest have experienced short hours and reduced incomes. At first this was seen as simply another cyclical recession. Now, despite the current modest revival of business activity, it is widely believed that we are at the beginning of a long-continuing period of "hard times."

A number of "cushions" have been widely touted as making unemployment less devastating than in the 1930's. They indeed have replaced destitution with impoverishment. Unemployment insurance averages \$65 a week, one-half to one-third of the average wage. Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB's) financed by employers exist in only a few industries, and are inadequately funded for conditions of mass unemployment — some SUB funds in the auto industry simply ran out. Millions of "new entrants," "re-entrants," "discouraged workers," workers not covered, and long-term unemployed receive no protection from either of these sources. While there was a substantial expansion of welfare in the 1960's, the fiscal crisis of the state has led to substantial "welfare reform" — cutting of the rolls — at the very time that need has increased.

There are also several "cushions" that existed in the 1930's but are lost today. In the Great Depression, consumer prices fell by about one-third; food in particular was plentiful and very cheap. Many workers still had relatives on the farm, to which they could return during spells of unemployment. And it was far more possible than today to substitute more primitive technologies — wood for oil, ice for refrigeration, local farmers for food chains — and thereby survive at a lower cash level. How an urban area would survive a full-scale depression today is not at all clear.

Workers' action has been quite closely correlated with the economic developments we have described. The years from 1948 to the mid-1960's saw a relative ebb of class struggle at work; much of what occurred was focused on questions of job security in the face of "automation," and controversy over work rules. The new wave of discontent that surfaced in the mid-1960's was largely focused on the workplace, with conflicts over safety, bosses' authority, and the like. By 1969-70, however, the cumulative effect of inflation was substantial, and there was a big strike wave, marked by the official electrical and auto workers' strikes and the wildcat teamsters' and postal walkouts. Strike activity declined in 1971-72, a period of low inflation when real wages tended to rise. By early 1973, however, prices were rising sharply. The mass response was the national meat boycott, unquestionably the largest mass protest in American history, in which an estimated 25% of consumers participated, centered in families with incomes around \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year.

With the continuing rapid inflation, compounded by the seemingly trumped-up fuel shortage in the winter of 1973-74, there seemed

to be a general shift in attitude toward serious worry and anger. This expressed itself first in the extraordinary nationwide highway blockade conducted by independent owner-operators, a group with some working-class and some small-business characteristics, and, that summer, in the largest strike wave since 1946. This strike wave was centered in small and medium-size workplaces, with the emphasis on catching up to inflation through wage increases and, particularly, cost-of-living escalators. Many of the strikes resulted from rank-and-file contract rejections. Union officials also reported a surge of interest in unionization among the unorganized.

This strike wave came up against the sharp increase in unemployment that began in late 1974 and within half a year raised the official unemployment rate to the highest level since the Great Depression. This long unfamiliar situation requires a complete reorientation of working-class strategies to be dealt with effectively; such a reorientation has not yet occurred. (Exceptions include the development of solidarity, including sympathy strikes, among municipal and state workers in response to layoffs, speed-ups, and wage cuts, and the increasing frequency of workplace occupations.) While there is a much more general appreciation of the social nature of unemployment today than in the early days of the Great Depression, there appears at present to be much the same sense of waiting "to see if something turns up."

V. Workplace and Community

A fairly standard urban pattern structured working-class community life from the late 19th century through World War II. It consisted of concentric circles with a central business district surrounded by a circle of old, decaying buildings for immigrants and other poor at the core. This was surrounded by another circle of working-class housing: row houses, apartments, two- and three-family dwellings, and small detached houses on postage stamps of land. Beyond this was the middle-class housing of the suburbs, itself segregated by income. The poor and mainstream working class were largely clustered by nationality. Car ownership was the exception, and public transportation was available and financially accessible.

The post-World War II boom decades superimposed on top of this the pattern of urban organization with which we are all familiar. The key change was the building of a wheel or grid of high-speed highways. This was followed by the migration of industries, jobs, and stores to the urban rim four-fifths of all new jobs in metropolitan areas from 1950-1970 were in the suburbs, and more than half of all retail business is now done in shopping centers, mostly suburban. Only older, less dynamic, low-pay industries remained in the central cities, while black migrants from the South poured in to replace former impoverished groups.

In the post-War years, the more prosperous sections of the

working class, overwhelmingly white, moved to the suburbs — 60% of all AFL-CIO members, for example, live in the suburbs. This move involved the loss of valued community roots, but for many families it represented the most dramatic symbol of the general improvement in living standards experienced in these years. The new highways opened a vast job market to workers with cars — as well as the experience of commuting 50 miles or more each way. The decline of public transportation, which started in 1946 and continues today, simultaneously excluded carless inner-city workers from the good labor market on the periphery.

Even before the current recession, a number of factors were bringing the era of residential and environmental improvement for the working class to an end. Housing construction turned down in the 1960's until it fell behind the rate at which older housing stock deteriorated.

This was at the very time that the "baby boom" children born after World War II reached the age of family formation. Housing and mortgage costs put home ownership out of reach to most young working-class families. What residential construction continued shifted to apartments, especially garden apartments, although even they have now declined drastically. All this reversed the general post-War trend toward single-family suburban home ownership.

At the same time, the once superior conditions of suburban life began to deteriorate substantially. Poverty and even slum-ghettos became widespread in inner suburbs, while suburban crime rates increased several times faster than those in cities. A large proportion of working-class suburbs have become in effect "outer cities," indistinguishable except by a somewhat larger lot size from the regions of working-class housing of the pre - World War II cities. The long-term increase in environmental pollution now strikes the suburbs as well as the central cities. And the fiscal crisis of the state is leading to a deterioration of community services in urban and suburban areas alike. The general though unmeasurable sense that environmental conditions are deteriorating contributes an unmeasurable amount to a general decline of commitment to the status quo.

The restructuring of urban areas that followed World War II had a major impact on working-class communities. One major effect was to widen the gap between work and neighborhood. Neighborhoods no longer have a concentration of people who work for the same company or industry, while those who work side-by-side are likely to come from dozens of communities scores of miles apart. This definitely makes mutual support between community and workplace struggles harder and less frequent.

Suburbanization — and the sheer passage of generations — has led to a partial dissolution of ethnic clustering. There is both less ethnic-based community solidarity and — more often overlooked — a tremendous decrease in inter-ethnic conflict and hostility. Along

with this appears to be the gradual creation of communities whose main characteristic is that they are working-class communities, and a gradual replacement of ethnic identification with a somewhat vague working-class identification. The erosion of traditional forms of ethnic-group self-protection and self-advancement (which often meant in practice advancement for the middle-class leadership) may be increasing the potential for class-based community movements. Certainly most urban-community movements in recent years — such as those against urban renewal and highway construction — have generally cut across ethnic ties.

The most striking limitation on the residential homogenization of the working class remains segregation along racial lines, which has become more pronounced over recent decades as a result of the influx of blacks to central cities and the migration of whites to the suburbs.

The dispersion of the older urban population undoubtedly disrupted the older networks which tied together working-class communities. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that workers are now "atomized." The fact is that older communities are always breaking down, if only through death and migration; less visible is the fact that new ties of neighbors, friends, co-workers, members of organizations, and the like are always being born. What has changed is that friendship networks, while not as densely packed in any one neighborhood, are now far more extended, reaching through whole metropolitan regions. (Again, the main limitation appears to be that they do not generally cross racial lines.) The extent to which these networks can be used for self-organization when the desire for self-organization is there was seen in the 1973 meat boycott, which was organized without any national leadership by tens of thousands of housewives getting on the phone and holding kaffee-klatches with their friends and neighbors.

VI. The Shared Experience

The American working class was recruited largely from groups of impoverished peasants and squeezed-out artisans whose past experiences were marked by extreme poverty and insecurity. For most of them, migration to urban America meant a great improvement in conditions of life. Even if they faced a life of hard toil, the opportunity to have a job and make a living was itself a big step forward compared to their conditions before; the opportunity for their kids to get an education and move up the social ladder was likewise seen as a substantial upgrading. A steady job was defined as a basic requirement for a good life.

The Great Depression left a heavy scar on the generation that lived through it in large part because it shattered these expectations. It left many with a tradition of working-class militance, but one oriented toward the effort to maintain economic security and

a reasonable level of domestic comfort.

The two decades that followed World War II led, as we have seen, to a very great improvement in incomes and living conditions for most workers — often far beyond what those reared in the Depression expected for themselves. The quite natural result was what Harvey Swados called “the conservative temper” of the American working class in those years, a sense of support for the status quo and its benefits.

The post-World War II generation that has flooded into the workforce in the past decade took employment, education, and the absence of deprivation more or less for granted. They were more aware of the cost than the gains of their parents' generation's sacrifices. They were told by the official media of the society that they would be able to escape from the working class through education, and most expected to do so. As a result, they developed a higher range of aspirations than earlier generations; they wanted time for personal pleasure and satisfaction, freedom from arbitrary authority, a clean, safe, esthetic environment, and work that was interesting, creative, expressive, and self-directed. This generation, when they went to work, were widely and accurately reported to be less tolerant of authority than older workers, and more willing to risk their jobs through various forms of resistance. Compared to older generations of militants, they tended to use more individualistic forms of resistance, such as sabotage and absenteeism, while being less well schooled in some of the basic experiences of collective class struggle.

In the late 1960's, as the “baby boom” generation flooded the workplace and generational conflict was rife throughout the entire society, the “generation gap” was a significant force in the workplace. Indeed, the conflict between older and younger workers, combining conflict of interests and conflict of cultural styles, was the main polarization in many workplaces. In the years 1972-76, however, this “gap” has greatly narrowed and there has been a virtual reconciliation of the generations. This has resulted in part simply from habituation, in part from the “greening” of the older generation, in part from the lessening of generation-based conflict in the society at large.

The current economic crisis began hitting younger workers first, since they lacked the protection of seniority and had little power within the unions. Their weak economic position was aggravated by the demographic fact of their large numbers. The result appears to have been the spread of a value system and life style based on an unwillingness to plan or sacrifice for the future; no resurgence of the “work ethic” has yet appeared widespread among working-class youth. There has also developed a large pool of young people who have never worked regular jobs.

A second major shift for this generation has been the decline of the “education fetish.” The student movement of the 1960's already

debunked somewhat the glamor attached to "college jobs" by exposing the fact that many of them, too, reduce their holders to "cogs in the machine." This was compounded in the early 1970's by the inability of college graduates to get jobs using their education. By 1973 large numbers of college graduates were driving taxis, working in factories, and generally facing working-class conditions. Meanwhile, steeply rising education costs reversed the trend toward ever-increasing rates of college attendance and priced higher education out of reach of many working-class families. Taken together, these factors mean that for a substantial proportion of kids, education is no longer seen as an available road of escape from the working class.

The Vietnam experience is another factor affecting the current American working class. This is seen most directly among Vietnam veterans, who form a particularly alienated, oppressed, and militant group, and who are known in particular for their resistance to authority on the job. Within the working class as a whole, published surveys and our own impressions indicate that reflex support for the state, for the military, and for foreign intervention is greatly weakened.

Finally, there is unquestionably a great loss of commitment to political parties, a rapidly deepening distrust and resentment of all politicians, and a general alienation from the state and the entire establishment, extending even to the most respected groups, such as doctors. Organizers from left-wing groups appear to be little less subject to this skepticism than others, although they have had somewhat more success in involving themselves in workplace struggles in the past two or three years than before. Discontent doesn't seem to be moving toward support for one or another political movement, but rather, at present, seems to be moving toward a deepening awareness of the conditions facing working people themselves.

While there are exceptions to any generalizations that can be made about the working class, there is one we would suggest in conclusion. Most current members of the working class have shared expanding aspirations that make a steady job and income inadequate definitions of a good life, and now face sharp deterioration of real incomes and general social conditions.

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Workers occupy a condemned building in Rome to prevent its destruction.

The Working-Class Struggle Against the Crisis:

Self-Reduction Of Prices in Italy

Bruno Ramirez

With an inflation rate of over 25%, widespread unemployment, and increasing repression, Italy's current economic crisis shows how far capital is willing to push its attack against the living conditions of the working class.

One of the distinct marks of this crisis — in Italy as well as in other capitalist countries — is the extent to which class conflict has widened, involving directly the area of social consumption. The dramatic increase in the cost of living is in fact setting off a wave of struggles dictated by the working class' need to protect their wage gains, and to ensure adequate access to essential goods and services such as food, housing, utilities, and transportation. It is no coincidence that — particularly in Italy — capital's massive move onto this terrain comes after a long cycle of factory struggles which have yielded considerable gains in wages and working conditions. It shows the coherence of capitalist strategy — a coherence which has been forced to become explicit by the organized resistance of wide sectors of the working class.

The practice of "self-reduction" — i.e., the refusal to comply with price increases of essential services — is an answer that has emerged from this terrain of struggle. The character of this strug-

gle raises important political questions for both capital and the working class. How can this struggle be mediated and brought under control? To what extent does the brunt of this struggle fall primarily on one sector of the working class — i.e., housewives, as the central protagonists in the area of social consumption?

Self-reduction

Self-reduction is not an entirely new phenomenon in Italy. For instance, at Magliana — one of Rome's largest working-class districts — some two thousand families have been practicing self-reduction for the past two years, cutting their monthly rent payments by 50%. And this is by no means an isolated case. What is new is the way in which this practice has spread to other sectors of essential social consumption, such as public transportation, electricity, and home heating.

When viewed in the context of parallel practices — such as squatting and organized mass appropriation of groceries from supermarkets — this struggle becomes more than merely a defensive one. It becomes — as some militants have called it — a struggle for the re-appropriation of social wealth produced by the working class but unpaid by capital.

When on a Monday in August 1974 hundreds of commuting workers found out that their bus fare from Pinerolo to Turin had been increased by almost 30%, few people would have predicted that such a relatively insignificant event could provide the spark for a new wave of struggles. To those commuters, the fare increase — decided by the bus line during the two-week summer shutdowns — sounded like an act of cowardly provocation. It took only a few days to organize some action and mobilize the commuters travelling on that line. The following Monday the plan of action was ready. Workers set up tables near the Pinerolo bus terminal with signs all around saying "Refuse the fare increases!" But more importantly, they issued substitute weekly bus tickets, selling them at the old price (tickets are normally bought by commuting workers on Mondays and entitle them to a week's travel). The bus company responded by shutting down its operations, so hundreds of Pinerolo workers that morning did not go to work, and continued their mobilization. In the afternoon they sent a delegation to the Regional Bureau of Transportation to demand that the old fares be reinstated, and that in the meantime the substitute bus tickets be accepted. After a few days of pressure, the Bureau ordered a suspension of the new fares.

The spark had caught fire. Within a few days, similar events were occurring throughout the heavily industrialized region around Turin. On September 17, the Regional Authorities issued new guidelines for interurban transportation fares applicable to the 106 private bus lines operating in the region — guidelines which sub-

stantially reduced the increases already enacted or proposed by the bus lines.

The first round of self-reduction struggles had yielded its fruits. The practice, however, was quickly spreading to other regions of Italy, disseminating chaos in municipal and regional governments and in the trade-union bureaucracies. By the end of September the media networks were hysterically condemning this outbreak of "civil disobedience," and the Italian Communist Party was solemnly reminding workers that the only valid method of struggle is the strike.

The Electricity Bill

The next logical step for the workers was to apply this form of struggle to other areas of social consumption. The electricity bill figures high in the budget of most working-class households, and it is to this item that the struggle suddenly turned. One could hardly think of a more politically explosive choice. For one thing, in Italy the electricity industry is nationalized and adopts rates which are applied throughout the whole country. The State would therefore become the direct target in a struggle whose potential for generalization among the working class would be enormous. Moreover, popular sentiment against the state-controlled electricity corporation (ENEL) was at a high point because of recent increases in electricity bills at a time when the corporation had been caught in a scandal involving the financing of political parties. ENEL's policy of granting reduced rates to industry as a form of subsidy (roughly 25% compared to domestic-use rates) also added much fuel to the fire, as it is viewed by many as a blatant act of discrimination.

The initiative came again from the heavily industrialized areas of Turin and Milan. The initial support given by local trade-union officials, or local union bodies (such as for instance the Turin Labour Council) was very instrumental in facilitating mobilization of workers in factories. It made it possible to utilize the organizational apparatus of the workers' councils for this purpose, especially once the councils' executives had expressed their support of the struggle. In most cases, the mobilization involved setting up "self-reduction committees" whose task was to collect workers' electricity bills and issue substitute bills, often bearing the stamp of the unions. Workers would then enter the new amount, usually cut by 50%, and pay the bill.

Self-reduction Committees

This mobilization, however, was not confined to factories. As this practice spread throughout Italy, self-reduction committees sprang up in urban neighborhoods as well as in small rural towns.

In some of the large urban districts the setting up of these committees was facilitated by the prior existence of neighborhood committees with a long history of community struggles. Most of these committees are made up of delegates, a few from each block or apartment building, whose task is to mobilize their neighbors, coordinate the activities of various buildings, and make links with nearby neighborhoods and factories. The support given by ENEL workers who often refused to enforce the company's orders to disconnect electricity was also an important factor contributing to the success of the struggle. Through this combination of factory and neighborhood mobilizations, by the end of December tens of thousands of electricity bills had been collected in each major Italian city. Turin was at the head, with about 140,000 bills collected.

To a large extent the political significance of this wave of struggles lies in the territorial link-up it is providing between factories and neighborhoods. As a worker from Naples explained: "In Naples in the past we have had experiences of self-reduction of water bills, gas bills, and electricity bills; but they have always been restricted to some building or some neighborhood, and have never caught on in the factories or in the unions. But today the situation looks quite different, and offers a great political potential." (L'UNITA CONTINUA, October 4, 1974, p. 2)

Speed-up in Housework

It is, however, in the neighborhoods that this mobilization is having its most dramatic effect, because it is often interwoven with other struggles such as squatting and self-reduction of rents. Moreover, despite the fact that often factory workers have been the spearhead of the mobilization, it is ultimately at the level of the neighborhood that the brunt of the struggle has been borne. This is where people have to face ENEL officers who come to either collect the bills or disconnect the electricity. And this is where they often have to confront the police and the fascist groups who are sent to disrupt the mobilization. It is this dimension of the struggle which has shown the crucial role of housewives as central protagonists. Their role stems also from other considerations. If there is one item of productive consumption which falls squarely within the work of housewives, this is electricity. The increase in the electricity bill amounts in effect either to a speed-up imposed by the State on housewives, as it would force them to perform the same amount of domestic services (cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, etc.) in a shorter time, or to an extension of their working day, as it would force them to do more work by hand.

It is obvious that capital's attack at the level of productive consumption stems from its difficulties in halting the wage increases that workers have won in the factories. Although this attack is directed against the working class as a whole, it tries to exploit the

division of labor (factory labor versus domestic unwaged labor) on which capitalism rests, by hitting a weaker sector of the class — i.e., by squeezing more unpaid labor from housewives. To see the central role of housewives in this wave of self-reduction struggles as merely a show of solidarity toward factory struggles would be clouding a very important class process with empty leftist rhetoric.

Their role as central protagonist can only be understood by the fact that their material conditions of work are the immediate target of capital's attack, and hence that this struggle is in a very important sense their struggle against their increased exploitation. Only after this point has been made clear can one talk about solidarity.

In this light, the struggle to reduce substantially the monetary cost of a family's productive consumption has become very crucial for the survival of many working-class households. This is particularly true in many large urban neighborhoods, such as in Rome and Naples, where many people make their living through marginal occupations (petty trade, black marketing, prostitution, etc.). The fact that in most of these cases the wage relation between capital and the male breadwinner is either non-existent or highly unstable has produced a dynamic which escapes the trade unions' mediating mechanisms. This explains why in these cases the self-reduction practice has exhibited a higher degree of autonomy both in its direction and in its content, allowing housewives to exercise the leadership which the terrain of these struggles confers on them. It is important to note, for instance, that in many of these cases the slogan was not "50% reduction" (the directive given by union officials in factory mobilizations), but rather "let's pay the rates that bosses are charged" — which means a reduction of over 75%.

Factory/Neighborhood

The contrast between factory mobilizations and neighborhood mobilizations can be better grasped when one looks at the strategy pursued by the unions in order to control and channel the self-reduction struggles — a strategy which is reminiscent of the 1969 wave of factory strikes.

The initial outbreak of self-reduction struggles and the workers' use of the workers' councils (most of which are union-controlled) forced union officials to take a position. Similarly, in many large working-class neighborhoods, the Communist Party was confronted with the situation of many party militants joining the self-reduction struggles and often even using the local Party sections to help the mobilization. But while the CP leadership did not take long to condemn this practice, calling it "divisive" and a "provocation" by a few extraparlimentary groups, the situation was much more complex for the trade-union leadership.

There is no question that the role played by local union officials — many of whom are members of other Marxist organizations — was very instrumental in gaining the support of the various labor bodies, especially in the Turin and Milan areas. But for many other union officials, the outbreak of self-reduction struggles was viewed in the context of the increasing dissatisfaction among workers with the unions' obstructionism in the development of a broad mobilization against the rising cost of living. This was clearly expressed by the Secretary of the Turin Labor Council: "...what is at stake here is our relationship with the people; what is being questioned is our ability to build an alternative. In these last months the credibility of the unions has hit a low ebb. (...in order to regain it) it is not enough to demand 50,000 or 100,000 liras for the workers; we must instead come up with alternative political solutions." (L'ESPRESSO, September 29, 1974, p. 8)

When this "alternative solution" started rolling, it was again the old-time Italian union politics. While the lower-level union leadership in the main supported this new wave of militancy — being directly confronted by this new upsurge of struggles — the national leadership was buying time, avoiding a clear-cut position. This posture was largely dictated by the necessity to maintain the shaky balance of alliances among the three national union federations, which has repeatedly been threatened by the "ungovernability" of the working class, and consequently by the state of crisis in which all political parties are enmeshed.

The Government Falls

This wait-and-see strategy began to pay off when the Rumor Government resigned in early October, setting off a long governmental crisis which lasted throughout the rest of the month. The absence of a cabinet at a time when the self-reduction movement was quickly spreading throughout the country undoubtedly had the effect of dramatizing the impact of this wave of struggles. It also contributed to giving the unions — the only institution which could conceivably control and manage the upsurge — the leverage necessary to influence the formation of the new government. The political formula which enabled the new Moro Government to take power at the end of October is too complex to be discussed here. One essential ingredient of the formula, however, was the support given by the unions, on the condition that the Moro Government would commit itself to a national re-negotiation of cost-of-living allowances. A further condition was a revised schedule of electricity rates. From now on, the autonomous and rank-and-file-controlled development of the self-reduction struggles had to be stopped. The logic of class mediation and the unions' credibility vis-a-vis the government demanded it.

During the long period of negotiations between the government

and the three national union federations — culminating in the agreement by the end of December — the impact of the unions' new policy vis-a-vis the self-reduction movement became evident in the factories. The overwhelming majority of workers'-councils executives ordered a stop to the mobilization. This meant that workers who wanted to continue the struggle had to do so in opposition to these union bodies. The confrontation was often fierce, showing the extent to which the unions cared more about their credibility with the government than about their credibility with the workers. At the ALFA SUD auto plant near Naples, for instance, the target of 2,500 reduced electricity bills was reached by bypassing the workers' council. At the ITALSIDER steel plant, in Bagnoli, several workers'-council executive members were forced to resign from office because of their opposition to the mobilization.

Back to the Neighborhoods

Despite these and other successes scored by autonomous rank-and-file forces in several factories throughout Italy, it was clear that the self-reduction mobilization at the factory level had been severely affected by the imperatives of trade-union politics. To a large extent, therefore, the continuation of the struggle lay with the neighborhood mobilizations, where the mediation of the unions was proving unworkable, and with their ability to resist and counter the direct repressive attacks by the State.

The new agreement over a national COLA package, which includes revised rates for domestic electricity, has marked a significant step forward in the process of the unions' integration into the capitalist state apparatus. The extension of their bargaining functions into the politically explosive area of essential consumption makes the unions a crucial partner in capitalist planning. Not only do they co-manage the determination of wages and their distribution, they also co-manage the way wages are used in the area of social consumption.

In retrospect, the unions' course of action had other significant implications in terms of the dynamics of the struggle. Their involvement had the function of separating the initial autonomous links between factory and neighborhood mobilizations and then attempting to impose a new link "from above" by co-managing along with the State the new electricity rates and their acceptance. This illustrates clearly the crucial political importance of the unions in the context of Italy's economic and political crisis; they are the only institution that can mediate between the worker as wage-earner, and the worker as consumer of essential goods and services, and thereby continue to conceal the exploitation of unwaged workers — above all, housewives.

A Chapter Closes

The agreement, however, has merely closed another chapter of this struggle. It has not put an end to the self-reduction practice, which, particularly in the neighborhoods, has continued practically unaffected by the trade-union/government politics. Nor has the mobilization in the factories been brought to a complete halt. The last few months or so, in fact, have witnessed a revival of the struggle in an increasing number of factories. A motion to support the struggle for the self-reduction of electricity approved at a special meeting of 1,000 workers' delegates from the Milan area indicates the degree of resistance the unions may still encounter among workers. In part this new upsurge stems from the workers' reaction to the new electricity rates, which became effective in January. The new rates are based on a graduated system, depending on the level of consumption of each household. In effect, for a typical working-class family consuming an average of 450 kilowatt hours per quarter, the new rates mean an increase of 33%.

Many feel this increase is certainly worth a struggle; particularly the millions of housewives for whom a forced reduction in the consumption of electricity means that all those domestic services which normally are done through electrical appliances, will now have to be done by hand.

If the present policy of Italian capitalism is to reduce levels of consumption in order to patch up the current economic crisis, it has become clear to what extent the burden of this political operation falls on the shoulders of housewives. It makes it possible to squeeze from them huge new amounts of unpaid labor without serious inflationary consequences.

The present Italian crisis has shown with unusual sharpness the importance of the home as a unit of production, and housewives as protagonists of the struggle against capitalist planning in this sphere.

BRUNO RAMIREZ, a militant and student of labor history, is an editor of ZEROWORK, in which this article, written in February 1975, first appeared.

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Fight for Work or Wages
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Mass Demonstration Against Unemployment

**March 6th, 1930, 5:30 P. M.
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Comrades, Workers!

The increasing unemployment and part time work are getting so bad that even the capitalists are beginning to TALK about relief for the distressed jobless workers. Millions of workers' families cannot afford the bare necessities of life. Millions of workers are working part time and lead a hand to mouth existence.

The State of the capitalists is expending hundreds of millions of dollars for armaments but it won't provide relief for the unemployed. The capitalist corporations made billions of dollars last year by exploiting and spending up the workers. The workers must force these corporations to provide unemployment insurance from the super-profits.

The Department of Justice and the police are attacking most viciously the

leadership of the unemployed workers as represented by the Trade Union Unity League and the Communist Party. Hundreds of working class fighters are arrested, beaten up, and sentenced on simulating to riots and disturbing the peace charges. But in spite of everything the Communist Party and the TUUL will lead the working class in the International Demonstration Against Unemployment.

The oppression in the shops is being intensified. Every worker stands the chance of getting kicked out the next day because of the deepening crisis in the U. S. This should bring to the attention of the employed workers that the struggle against unemployment is of concern to the whole working class.

**STRIKE ON MARCH 6th!
FIGHT FOR WORK OR WAGES!
DEMAND FULL WAGES FOR ALL PART TIME WORKERS!
FIGHT FOR THE 7-HOUR DAY!
LONG LIVE THE UNITY OF THE BLACK AND WHITE WORKERS!
DOWN WITH IMPERIALIST WAR!
DEPEND THE SOVIET UNION!**

Trade Union Unity League



Auspices

**Communist Party
Young Communist League**

Organizing the Unemployed:

The Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929-1933

Roy Rosenzweig

The re-emergence of economic hard times in the 1970s raises forcefully the issue of how the left can best respond to attacks on working-class living standards. The best historical model we have for such a response is the organizing that radicals did among the unemployed in the early years of the Great Depression. Although the two historical situations are obviously not exactly the same, there is a great deal that we can learn from the experience of the activists of the early '30s. The fact that almost nothing has been written about the unemployed groups of that period makes it worthwhile to piece together a general sketch of their activity and how it evolved.

On March 7, 1930 President Herbert Hoover made his most detailed economic statement of the four months following the Wall Street Crash. "All the evidences," Hoover declared, "indicate that the worst effects of the crash upon unemployment will have passed during the next sixty days." (2) Although Hoover's veneer of optimism remained untarnished during his next three years in office, unemployment mounted steadily. At the time of this very speech, even according to moderately conservative government estimates,

joblessness had already increased almost tenfold from 492,000 to 4,644,000. By the following March it had almost doubled again, and before peaking in March 1933 it had practically doubled once more to 15,071,000. (3)

Although virtually no industry or community escaped the scourge of unemployment, the impact was not uniform. Autos, textiles, and other durable-goods industries were particularly hard hit in the early years of the Depression. Between March 1929 and August 1931 the payroll of the Ford Motor Company dropped from 128,142 to 37,000 persons. Even within industries and communities, unemployment was selective. The poor, the unskilled, the young, and the foreign born suffered disproportionately. Managerial employees suffered least, and whites did much better than blacks. The unemployment rate for Harlem blacks, for example, was between one and a half and three times that of the whites in New York City. Yet, for all these variations, what was truly remarkable about '30s joblessness was its pervasiveness — one third of a nation was out of work. (4)

How did these unprecedented millions of unemployed respond to their plight in the early years of the Great Depression? Although many observers on both the right and the left expected them to turn to radicalism, the jobless, of course, never composed the shock troops of revolution. Still, it is a serious mistake to conclude on this basis, as did one historian, that "most of the unemployed meekly accepted their lot." (5) The jobless employed a number of spontaneous survival strategies such as informal and formal cooperative movements, family and neighborhood networks of assistance, individual and group looting of supermarkets, coal bootlegging, determined searches for work, and innovative stretching of income. (6) At the same time, radical organizers helped stimulate more formal and political jobless actions such as sit-ins at relief stations, national and state hunger marches, demonstrations at City Halls, and direct resistance to evictions. Organized into a variety of groups under the leadership of several left-wing organizations, the unemployed compiled an impressive record in the early '30s. Not only did these radical organizations of the unemployed stop evictions and raise relief payments, they also helped to intensify the class consciousness of many of their members.

But we must be wary of exaggerating or romanticizing the past. While no one would deny the heroism, energy, and imagination of the radical leaders and rank-and-file militants active in the unemployed movement, we must realize that their organizations constituted neither a revolutionary force nor even a truly mass movement. The core, active membership of the unemployed movement — perhaps 100,000 in 1933 — never included even one per cent of that third of a nation that was out of work at the height of the Depression. While the radical unemployed movement often succeeded in winning immediate concrete gains for the jobless on the local lev-

el, it was much less successful in its efforts to create a revolutionary movement based on the unemployed.

What were the barriers to the development of such a mass-based, revolutionary unemployed movement? Were the radicals themselves responsible, as many commentators of both the right and the left have argued? Or was the problem in external social, economic, and political conditions that made a jobless-based revolutionary movement an impossibility in the early '30s?

Passing judgment on the record of 1930s radicals is a difficult and painful process for the present-day left. (7) The dismal record of the American left in the last few years should make us distressingly aware of our own failures and limitations as radical organizers and strategists. Consequently, while judgments are inevitable, they must be made with a consciousness of both the difficult conditions faced by '30s organizers and the limited range of options open to them. This article, then, explores the experience of Communists, Socialists, and Musteltes in organizing the unemployed within the context of the external barriers that limited their successes. It focuses primarily, however, on the Communist Party's efforts, since in the Hoover years of the Depression it was both the first to act and the strongest radical group. Moreover, the problems faced by the Communists were typical of those faced by other groups trying to do the same kind of organizing.

COMMUNISTS AND THE UNEMPLOYED: THE UNEMPLOYED COUNCILS

Organizationally, the Communist Party (CP) faced the Depression in a weakened state. The post-World War I Red Scare, the political lethargy of the '20s, and the expulsions of the Cannon and Lovestone factions had reduced the Party to a mere 7500 members at the start of the '30s. Moreover, the CP of 1930 did not represent a cross-section of the American working class; rather, it was dominated by foreign-born and urban workers. (8) Ideologically and strategically, on the other hand, the Communists were uniquely well prepared for the Depression. The Tenth Plenum of the Comintern Executive Committee, meeting in Moscow in the summer of 1929, had proclaimed the "Third Period" of capitalist crisis and revolutionary offensive. (9) In August 1929, while most Americans were still celebrating Republican prosperity, the Communists were in Cleveland organizing a new labor federation, the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which included as one of its objectives "To set up Councils of Unemployed Workers." (10)

The Communists' new Third Period line directed them to take an aggressive approach to decaying American capitalism. As a result, even before the Wall Street Crash, energetic young Communist activists sought out the jobless on breadlines, at flop houses, outside factory gates, in relief offices, and, most often, in

their neighborhoods. With the coming of mass unemployment in 1930, organizational activity accelerated and organization of the unemployed became a top priority for Communist activists. In March 1930 the Party's theoretical journal declared that "The tactical key to the present state of class struggle is the fight against unemployment." (11) Organizational activities took very concrete and visible forms. In Chicago, for example, Communists led, organized, or participated in 2,088 mass demonstrations in the first five years of the Depression. (12) Not just mass demonstrations, but also leafleting, personal contacts, and eviction protests were used to build a core of local activists around whom to organize a local unemployed council. Any issue of immediate concern to the jobless was seen as a potential organizing tool. "The Councils," writes one historian, "did not consider any issue too small or unimportant to fight for: brooms for housewives in Seattle, milk for a baby in Detroit, breaking down barriers against Negro relief in St. Louis, coffee instead of cocoa for welfare recipients in New York, ...an anti-spaghetti crusade at a Minneapolis relief commissary." (13)

The early successes of the Communist unemployed movement grew directly out of the spontaneous discontent that was sweeping through the urban unemployed. "So desperate were the unemployed," wrote two Chicago observers, "that protest was seething through the disadvantaged neighborhoods of the city." The Chicago CP was unable to fulfill all the requests for organizational assistance from protesting groups. (14) The Communist unemployed associations, usually known as Unemployed Councils, built on a cooperative neighborhood solidarity that emerged in response to the disorganization and inadequacy of local relief. Consequently, the Communist Unemployed Councils were most effective when they seized upon potent neighborhood issues. (15) Because of the unemployed movement's initial connection to the Trade Union Unity League, Communist organizers were told to form unemployed groups on a shop or factory basis. But, as unemployed leader Herbert Benjamin has recalled, "down below people weren't concerned with" these directives. They were "just concerned with finding any means they could of acting." (16) Most often this meant local, ad-hoc neighborhood councils mobilized around specific grievances.

Out of this combination of aggressive organizing and spontaneous discontent emerged a vital Communist-led unemployed movement beginning in January and February 1930. These months saw demonstrations of the unemployed in such places as New Britain, Connecticut; Passaic, New Jersey; Buffalo, New York; Pontiac, Michigan; Detroit; Boston; Philadelphia; and New York City. (17) These early stirrings climaxed dramatically on March 6, 1930. The Party mobilized all its resources behind nationally coordinated demonstrations on March 6, which it called International Unemployment Day. Within the first month of the campaign the Party distributed

over one million leaflets. Chicago Communists distributed 200,000 leaflets, 50,000 stickers, and 50,000 shop papers in the last few days before the demonstration. (18) These energetic efforts paid off. Throughout the United States huge numbers of unemployed workers, many of whom had never before taken part in radical demonstrations, took to the streets. Although precise figures are impossible to arrive at now, the Communist Party at the time claimed a nationwide mobilization of one and one-quarter million people. (19)

The March 6 demonstrations awakened many to the existence of mass unemployment and large-scale unrest in America. In Detroit, where over 35,000 jobless workers had been mobilized by the Unemployed Council, business leaders "were shocked by the emergence of truly radical agitation, and by the support it received." Even local Communists were surprised by the size of the crowd. (20) In many cases, government repression — a problem that was to bedevil the unemployed movement throughout its history — came immediately. The scene of carnage at the bloody Union Square Demonstration in New York prompted even the NEW YORK TIMES to strong description:

Hundreds of policemen and detectives, swinging night-sticks, blackjacks and bare fists, rushed into the crowd, hitting...all with whom they came in contact, chasing many across the street and adjacent thoroughfares.... A score of men with bloody heads and faces sprawled over the square with policemen pummeling them.

The blood spilled on March 6 was only the beginning. In the next five months over 4,000 people were arrested at radical demonstrations. The battle lines were drawn. (21)

Despite these repressive measures, the Unemployed Councils blossomed in the period immediately following the March 6 demonstrations. Unemployed workers around the country began constituting themselves as loosely-organized, neighborhood-oriented councils of the unemployed. By mid-Summer Chicago had twelve locals and Philadelphia seven. Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis also had strong groups. (22)

Of particular significance was the emergence at this time of interracial unemployed councils. As early as December 1929 Party leader Earl Browder had stressed that the organization of black workers had to be a top priority of the unemployed councils. The March 6 demonstrations provided an opportunity to implement this call, and throughout the country they attracted large numbers of black participants. Black Communist leader Cyril Briggs felt that March 6 revealed "the successful breaking down of the wall of prejudice between white and Negro workers fostered by the employers and the substitution of working-class solidarity and frat-

ernization." Not all unemployed groups cut across racial lines, but many, especially those in Southern cities like Chattanooga and Atlanta, were the first interracial organizations in their areas. Even in the North black and white solidarity threatened public officials. "Here was something new," black sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton have commented about the frightened reaction in Chicago: "Negroes and whites together rioting against the forces of law and order." "The beginnings of a breaking down of barriers between whites and Negroes," unemployed leader Aurelia Johnson has recalled, were among the central achievements of the unemployed movement. (23)

In the spring of 1930 the CP made its first efforts at national coordination of the unemployed movement. Out of a Preliminary National Conference on Unemployment in New York at the end of March and a Chicago Convention in early July emerged a new national organization — The Unemployed Councils of the U.S.A. Although officially under Trade Union Unity League control, the Unemployed Councils, in practice, remained a largely autonomous neighborhood movement based on the anger and confusion of the jobless. (24)

This local, ad-hoc quality was a strength, but also an important weakness of the unemployed movement. Particularly in the early years of the movement, large numbers of unemployed mobilized around specific grievances or demonstrations, but rarely maintained a regular organizational connection. One Party official complained in the fall of 1930 that "despite millions of leaflets and hundreds of meetings, not to speak of the half-dozen demonstrations in every city, organized unemployed councils are almost nonexistent." Where there was a regular membership it was usually dominated by CP members. (25) The problem of impermanence



Breadline, New York City

plagued the unemployed movement throughout its history. Many people drifted in and out of jobs in the '30s; they were not continuously available for membership in an unemployed group, and this led to a continual churning of membership. This churning had a particularly severe effect on rank-and-file leadership, since it was often the most talented and aggressive among the unemployed who first secured re-employment. (26) (The Party itself also suffered from this problem of membership instability. In 1930 six thousand new members joined the CP, but actual membership rose only about one thousand.) (27)

The Communist Party's Third Period line, although it had helped the Party anticipate the economic crisis, created additional problems for the unemployed movement. Its revolutionary anticipations were too sanguine for the period, and thus inspired slogans and demonstrations which either frightened or confused the rank-and-file unemployed worker. Few unemployed saw the connection between their immediate need for relief and demonstrations against the "Imperialist war danger," slogans about Defense of the Chinese Soviets, or even electoral campaigns for CP candidates. Nor was it clear why Norman Thomas was being denounced as an "under-cover" agent at the same time that he was speaking out against repression of the unemployed movement, or why Socialists and Muskettes were regularly labeled "social fascists" and "tools of the bosses." (28) Such revolutionary posturing inevitably alienated unemployed workers, especially outside of the big cities. Moreover, it seriously handicapped efforts to recruit the jobless into the radical movement. The use of terms like "rightist deviation", "agitprop", and "theoretical levels" "invariably frightened...off" the average worker, observed Mauritz Hallgren, a NATION editor sympathetic to the left. "These Communists," a worker complained to Louis Adamic, "thought Shamokin, Mount Carmel, and Shenandoah were just like Union Square." (29)

The Communist Party itself soon reached a similar conclusion. In September 1930 CP leader Clarence Hathaway complained of the Party's tendency to raise issues of no immediate concern to the jobless: "Crises, war, contradictions, colonial revolts, defense of the Soviet Union, etc. too often become merely a string of phrases having no connection with the class struggle in a given locality." And two months later the Party's Central Committee called for a reorientation of the Unemployed Councils toward more direct work among the unemployed and away from revolutionary sloganeering. It also directed that the Councils should operate on two levels: nationally, they would work for direct federal aid for relief and unemployment insurance; locally, they would represent the unemployed in their relations with relief authorities. (30)

This new "bread and butter" focus dominated the Councils on the local level through 1933, and with some modifications for the rest of the '30s. Although they never again reached the level of nation-

wide visibility achieved on March 6, 1930, the Councils successfully won limited concrete gains for the local unemployed. Particularly in the period 1931-33, when local relief efforts were disorganized and woefully inadequate, the Councils were able to force important concessions from the relief authorities through demonstrations at relief offices, city halls, and state capitals. In Chicago, for example, the Unemployed Councils on several occasions blocked citywide relief cuts. (31)

Yet the real effectiveness of the Councils rested not on their ability to occasionally force increased relief appropriations, but on their capacity to resolve individual relief grievances. By 1932 the Chicago Unemployed Councils had already handled several thousand individual cases, and in the process had helped establish important precedents on adequacy and quality of relief. Moreover, in many localities the Unemployed Councils successfully fought relief discrimination and liberalized administrative thinking regarding the right of clients to complain. It was this function of the Unemployed Councils as grievance representatives for the jobless that constituted their greatest attraction to the rank-and-file unemployed worker. A study of Cleveland Unemployed Council members confirmed that individual relief grievances were most often the "precipitating factor" in creating Unemployed Council members. (32)

The prevention of evictions was another concrete service that the Unemployed Councils performed for the jobless in the early '30s. A variety of techniques came into play: blocking the sheriff's entrance; returning the furniture; packing the courts to pressure judges to stop evictions. As the Depression deepened in 1931 and 1932, eviction struggles occurred with increasing frequency. In March 1931 Edmund Wilson reported that the Unemployed Councils had "practically stopped evictions" in Detroit, and that one landlady had actually called the Unemployed Council to ask whether she could evict her tenant yet. (33)

This new "bread and butter" focus implemented in the fall of 1930 proved particularly effective in black communities. Mark Naison, in his recent study of Communists in Harlem, notes a shift at that time from agitational work into practical organizational activity. According to Naison, this policy, combined with the aggressive leadership of a committed, interracial group of organizers, helped the Harlem Unemployed Council "develop into a mass movement with solid roots in the community, one of the major sources of Communist influence among the least privileged sectors of Harlem's population." The two major tactics employed by the Harlem Council were the relief-bureau sit-in and eviction resistance. Unemployed Council sit-ins, demonstrations, and disruptions at the home-relief bureaus sought — and sometimes won — immediate relief for hard-hit Harlem residents. These eviction struggles brought concrete results, not only in Harlem, but in other

urban black communities as well. When Chicago blacks received eviction notices, "it was not unusual," according to Cayton and Drake, "for a mother to shout to the children, 'Run quick and find the Reds!'" These struggles persisted despite vicious police attacks which led, for example, to the killing of three black eviction protesters in August 1931. (34)

The Unemployed Councils aimed for direct approaches to the immediate needs of the jobless. But, how direct? Soliciting food donations for the hungry or, alternatively, seizing food from the grocery store? The Councils briefly flirted with both of these tactics, but ultimately rejected them. In early 1931 directives from both the Comintern and the Trade Union Unity League urged that the Councils set up relief kitchens and undertake direct food collections. By July, however, the Party had reconsidered, and Browder had denounced communal charity schemes as an "open right-wing opportunist deviation." But this new policy sometimes caused problems on the local level. In Harlem, according to Naison's study, Council leaders concluded that the rejection of "spontaneous efforts of rank-and-file Council members to collect food, money, and clothing for starving neighbors, or to cook communal meals for the unemployed.... had isolated the Harlem Council from many sincere workers who saw no contradiction between taking a collection for their neighbors and resisting an eviction or marching on City Hall." Consequently, by the fall of 1931 the Harlem Council began to take up food collections, although such collections never became a central focus of the Council's work. (35)

Unemployed Council participation in food seizures similarly reflected both an ambivalence at the top and a tendency of some local unemployed groups to set their own course in accordance with local conditions. In the early '30s individual and group looting of supermarkets was not an isolated phenomenon. "Grown men, usually in two's and three's, enter chain stores, order all the food they can possibly carry, and then walk out without paying," the NATION reported from Detroit in the summer of 1932. Although most such incidents took place outside of the organized unemployed movement, Unemployed Councils in Toledo and Oklahoma City joined in the food looting in early 1931. Such actions, however, frightened not only authorities, but also some top Communist leaders. In the summer of 1931 Browder condemned food seizures as "an effort to substitute an idealistic, 'heroic' action to 'inspire' the masses, in the place of the necessary Bolshevik organization and leadership." Unemployed Council leader Herbert Benjamin recalls that "those of us who were politically more responsible" continually advised against food riots, and he believes that more such rioting would have occurred without the Unemployed Councils. "It seems probable," conclude two academic writers unsympathetic to the left, "that the Communist Party exercised an important influence in restricting the amount of violence against persons and property during the depression." (36)

While the CP helped to restrain the violence of the out-of-work, it could do little to restrain police violence directed against the jobless. As an examination of the dispatches of the FEDERATED PRESS or even the NEW YORK TIMES shows, police violence against unemployed demonstrators was almost a daily occurrence. One of the most dramatic incidents came on March 7, 1932, when the Detroit Unemployed Councils led 3,000 in a march on Henry Ford's River Rouge Plant in Dearborn to demand jobs, fuel, and food. The Dearborn police responded with bullets. By the end of the day four marchers lay dead and over fifty had been seriously wounded. (37) Such incidents were all too common in the '30s.

The successes of the Unemployed Councils as a local pressure organization between 1930 and 1933 were not equaled on the national level. The Unemployed Councils did not receive effective national leadership until the fall of 1931, when Herbert Benjamin was assigned by the CP to direct this work. Even then the national office remained a "nominal sort of thing," as Benjamin has recalled. In fact Benjamin himself was the national organization — he initially had no supporting staff. (38)

In the early '30s national Unemployed Council activity revolved around petition drives for the CP's unemployment-insurance bill and two national hunger marches in December 1931 and December 1932. The marches did much to publicize the unemployed cause, although neither was a dramatic success. The Communists limited participation in the marches to elected representatives of local Unemployed Councils, and as a result only 1600 marched in the first and 3200 in the second. More importantly, the marches failed to mobilize many jobless outside of those already in the Communist Party; over 70% of the 1932 hunger marchers, for example, belonged to the Communist Party or the Young Communist League. (39)

The national organization of the Unemployed Councils strengthened and solidified in the years after 1933. Yet these same years saw the loss of much of the vitality and spontaneity of the unemployed movement, particularly on the local level. The local Councils settled down as a more orderly movement that sought to represent the unemployed in their dealings with relief authorities; they became in many areas the bargaining agent for both relief recipients and WPA workers. Large demonstrations of eviction resistance occasionally flared up, but more often the unemployed organizations quietly carried out their trade-union functions. In 1940 Irene Oppenheimer, a sociologist, noted that each year the unemployed organizations tended to have fewer sit-ins, strikes, and picket lines; she concluded that unemployed activity "has been characterized by a gradual evolution from the position of a purely conflict group to an organized and responsible relationship with the authorities." (40)

Along with this decreasing activism on the local level came the nationalization and unification of the unemployed movement. By 1936 the Workers' Alliance of America, originally a federation of Socialist unemployed groups, encompassed most of the Communist, Musteite, and independent jobless leagues as well. Increasingly, the Workers' Alliance focused its attention on Washington (where it had its headquarters), and it developed into a relatively effective lobbying organization for national-relief and unemployment-insurance measures. Basically, the Workers' Alliance accepted the terms of the New Deal; it adopted the politics of the popular front — a left-wing New Deal liberalism — and developed a close symbiotic relationship with New Deal relief officials. In 1938, for example, Workers' Alliance locals campaigned actively for New Deal candidates. Both nationally and locally the unemployed movement after 1933 moved from insurgency to respectability. "The unorganized unemployed," wrote a SATURDAY EVENING POST reporter in 1938, "are no longer merely an undecorative and troublesome fringe on the body politic." (41)

It was not just the Communists with their popular-front politics who shifted their unemployed organizing into more "respectable" channels in the late '30s. Other unemployed groups led by Socialists and Musteites also made that transition. An examination of the organizing efforts of these groups before the New Deal shows how their tactics evolved in a way similar to those of the CP.

SOCIALISTS AND THE UNEMPLOYED

That the Socialists formulated their basic approach to the problem of unemployment six months before the Wall Street Crash, and retained that approach unaltered for three more years, testifies to the unimaginative way many Socialists initially confronted the gravest crisis of 20th Century capitalism. In May 1929 the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party (SP) urged local Party branches to form "Emergency Conferences on Unemployment," not as mass pressure organizations of the unemployed, but rather as lobbying agencies for three traditional Socialist demands: unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and abolition of child labor. Throughout the early '30s most Socialist activity on behalf of the jobless continued to emphasize traditional Socialist propagandizing and disdained direct organization of the unemployed. (42)

Why this inertia on the part of the party of Debs? Whereas the Third Period line of the CP predisposed it to respond aggressively to the Great Depression, the political conditions within the SP led it initially to offer traditional Socialist panaceas rather than aggressive organizing. The American Socialist Party had declined precipitously in the 1920s, with membership plummeting from 105,000 in 1919 to less than 8,000 in 1928. Those who had stuck it out during the lean years of the '20s no longer had any immediate

expectations of a Socialist victory. These so-called Old Guard Socialists — often over 60, foreign born, and closely tied to the trade unions — believed that Socialist propaganda and educational activities would lead inevitably and gradually to Socialism — but only in the long run. (43) In the meantime, campaigns to organize the unemployed were perceived as unnecessary diversions which would “take time away from Socialist propaganda.” Anyway, the Old Guard felt that the unemployed were too unstable and heterogeneous to make good Party members. They condemned, as one critic observed, “any ‘backdoor’ entrance into Party membership by way of ‘mass struggle’ rather than rigorous intellectual education.” (44)

Only with the entrance into the Socialist Party of a newer generation of young, college-educated, and native-born members did the SP begin to abandon its passive approach to the unemployed question. Starting with the 1928 Norman Thomas Presidential campaign, and accelerating after the onset of the Depression, the SP benefited from a rapid influx of young, activist Socialists, who clamored impatiently for “Socialism in Our Time.” Many also belonged to the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), a Socialist Party offshoot which appealed largely to college students, professionals, and white-collar workers. Prior to the Depression the LID had devoted most of its energies to educational activities, but from 1931 on its members often took a leading role in helping to organize the jobless. (45) By far the LID’s most impressive achievement was the Chicago Workers’ Committee on Unemployment, which by mid-1932 had organized 25,000 jobless into over 60 locals. (46) Inspired by the Chicago success, LID members in Baltimore initiated the People’s Unemployment League, which had about 20 locals and 7,000 to 12,000 members. (47)

While many LID members were out aggressively organizing the unemployed, the Socialist Party was just beginning to stir out of the bog of lethargy. A combination of factors — the growing power of the younger activists with the Party, the fear of Communist domination of the unemployed, and the increasingly grave economic situation — pushed the SP’s National Executive Committee, in February 1932, to finally endorse the idea of direct organization of the jobless. (48) Yet, while the National Office of the SP provided some programmatic and organizational guidance to local Party branches interested in organizing the jobless, the success or failure of most efforts rested largely on the local initiative of both Socialists and the unemployed. The real growth of Socialist influence among the unemployed did not come until the beginning of the New Deal, and in some ways was tied to that development. In the mid-1930’s the Socialist unemployed groups provided the impetus for the nationalization and centralization of the unemployed movement under the Workers’ Alliance. (49)

Both the LID and Socialist unemployed groups tended to employ the same techniques as the Communist Unemployed Councils —

acting as grievance representatives at relief stations, fighting evictions, and holding demonstrations and parades to urge higher relief appropriations. On the whole, however, Socialists tended to use confrontations and disruptions less than the Communists. They often tried to intercede with relief authorities to get money for a family threatened with eviction rather than trying to block it bodily. This moderation often gave the Socialist organizations a certain respectability the Communists lacked. "We were not a pariah organization," one leader of the Baltimore People's Unemployment League (PUL) recently recalled. To a much greater degree than the Communists, the Socialist unemployed groups subordinated Socialist ideology to the quest for fulfillment of the immediate economic needs of the jobless. "We were so busy with local problems," remembers another organizer of the PUL, that "indoctrination" of members in "Socialist principles" was often neglected. (50)

MUSTEITES AND THE UNEMPLOYED THE UNEMPLOYED LEAGUES

When Socialist organizing of the unemployed finally got underway in the early years of the New Deal, it tended to mirror both the organizing approach and constituency of the Communist Unemployed Councils. But the third major radical movement of unemployed workers, that led by the followers of A.J. Muste, the Dutch Reformed Minister turned labor educator and organizer, differed in organizing methods and support. (51)

Beginning around 1932, the Musteites sought to transform their propaganda and educational organization — the Conference on Progressive Labor Action — into an independent working-class center competitive with the AFL, CP, and SP. The unemployed offered a possible power base for this transformation, and in 1932 the Musteites began organizing Unemployed Leagues. The Musteites, like the Communists and Socialists, met with their greatest success when they pitched their efforts toward the bread-and-butter needs of the unemployed. But to this immediate-needs focus they added their own, unique "American Approach" — an effort to identify their Unemployed Leagues with popular patriotic symbols such as the Rattlesnake Flag and the slogan "Don't Tread on Me." This approach made the Musteites somewhat more tolerant and flexible in dealing with existing non-political unemployed groups than the Communists or Socialists. They worked closely and successfully with jobless self-help groups — organizations devised by the unemployed to meet their needs through barter and exchange of labor for produce and fuel. While other unemployed groups stigmatized self help as "collective picking in garbage cans," the Musteites initially condoned this approach, calling it "a cement ... to keep the organization together ... that would push the members into further action." (52)

This flexibility and Americanism paid off: the Musteitees were able to attract more native-born and less-politicized members, and to build a following in areas that the Communists and Socialists were unable to penetrate. From the small industrial and mining towns of Ohio, the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the coal fields of Eastern Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and the textile mills of North Carolina, thousands of unemployed enlisted under their banners. While the CP Unemployed Councils in Ohio were confined to the cities and towns with large immigrant populations, like Youngstown, the Musteite Leagues found support in much smaller and more rural towns. (53)

The attractiveness of patriotic rhetoric for many Depression unemployed is further evidenced by the success of the Washington marches of Father James Cox and the Bonus Expeditionary Force. In January 1932 Father Cox, a round-faced, spectacled Pittsburgh radio priest active in the labor movement, led 15,000 unemployed from the Pittsburgh area to Washington to present their demands for immediate relief. (54) The following summer the famous Bonus March gathered over 20,000 jobless World War I veterans in the capital. (55)

Why were these marches able to attract many who were immune to the appeals of radical unemployed groups? One important reason was that the radicals had to recruit the jobless in the face of well-ingrained cultural assumptions that identified radical activity with anti-Americanism, alienism, and deviance. E. Wight Bakke, a Yale economist who made an extremely careful and sensitive study of the New Haven unemployed, found that "the identification of all radical ideas with Russia is all but universal." In New Haven, at least, these patriotic and anti-communist cultural assumptions militated against the success of radical groups. (56) Father Cox and the Bonus Marchers, like the Musteitees to a lesser degree, played effectively on this patriotism and anti-Communism. Cox's March was, in part, a reaction against the Communist Hunger March of 1931. In explaining his march, Cox said:

Some weeks ago I read of the invasion of Washington by a Communistic group of marchers waving the red flag, singing the Internationale and demanding all sorts of fantastic things. This is repugnant to me, and I so stated casually over the radio. I remarked that, while I condemned these demonstrations, I believed a body of real American citizens should go to Washington and protest against unemployment conditions which exist in the United States today.

This Americanist rhetoric carried through Cox's entire march. His followers arrived in Washington singing the Star Spangled Banner and waving American flags; they concluded their visit at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. (57) The Bonus Marchers also manipulated patriotic symbols to cultivate an image of respectability. (58)



Chicago stockyards workers on hunger march. This is a still from the film "Union Maids."

This patriotic posturing apparently enabled Cox and the Bonus Army to attract followers who disdained the radical unemployed movements. Most workers were used to frequent periods of joblessness, but small entrepreneurs and white-collar workers were not. In the '30s, for the first time, unemployment was an experience shared by both the middle and working classes; but, it was the middle-class unemployed who experienced the greatest shock and attitude changes as a result of the Depression. (59) Hence, although these middle-class jobless were important potential supporters for '30s protests, they were unlikely to join avowedly radical groups like the Unemployed Councils, The Bonus Army and Father Cox, with their patriotic rhetoric, could and did mobilize the middle-class unemployed. According to one recent historian, the "vast majority" of the Bonus Marchers were "middle-aged and middle-class — small businessmen, skilled tradesmen, white-collar workers, with a sprinkling of professionals, such as teachers, lawyers, and dentists." (60) Although little is known about Father Cox's marchers, his financial backing came from the small store owners of the Allegheny County Retail Merchants Association. (61)

Although to a lesser degree, the Musteltes shared with Cox and the Bonus Army the ability to attract more middle-class, native-born, and "Middle American" unemployed. Yet, the Musteltes' Americanist rhetoric also brought its problems. At the Unemployed League's first national convention, held in Columbus, Ohio on July 4, 1933, the Musteltes had to quell a revolt led by a "Stars and Stripes" faction over the Musteltes' failure to open the Convention with a prayer and the National Anthem. In the long run, much of this native American and small-town support evaporated as the Musteltes became more and more revolutionary in their gradual movement toward Trotskyism, and as the New Deal liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt competed for the allegiance of the out-of-work. (62)

CONCLUSIONS

We see, then, that between 1929 and 1933 the three main radical unemployed movements varied in ideological assumptions, organizing personnel, geographic bases, and organizing strategies. Yet they shared some common achievements. First, they resolved the immediate individual grievances of their members with particular success: they won relief adjustments, blocked evictions, and re-connected the gas and electric for thousands of unemployed. Second, on a collective level, the unemployed organizations helped create pressure not only for higher levels of relief and larger relief appropriations, but also for more equitable and less degrading administrative procedures at relief stations. And, third, they were the first groups in the '30s to propagandize and agitate openly and actively for unemployment insurance. Although there were a number of elements involved, such as the pressure on FDR from Huey

Long, their agitation did help to pave the way for the Social Security Act of 1935, which included provisions for unemployment insurance. The battle for unemployment insurance had a long history going back to the early 20th Century, but the radical unemployed movement can be credited with helping to revive it as a serious issue in the Great Depression. (63) The psychological impact of the unemployed movement should, similarly, not be minimized. Jobless workers became convinced that their condition was not their own fault, that larger economic forces had thrown them out of work.

Perhaps most importantly, the unemployed movement helped raise the political and social consciousness of the thousands of workers who passed through its ranks. For many the unemployed movement was their first experience in any sort of mass pressure organization, and through this affiliation many learned the power of organization as a weapon. Sam Brugos, a leader of a Cleveland Unemployed Council, had no contact with radicalism or trade unionism prior to the Depression. Yet, he told an interviewer of his determination to "join a union and organize a strike" as soon as he found a job. (64) Obviously many jobless workers did just that in the late '30s. Many leaders of the CIO came directly out of the unemployed movement, and it appears that many in the rank and file had similar training. "It was a period of great schooling," black Communist leader William Patterson recalled. (65) Schooling not only in organizational techniques, but also in interracial cooperation. The greatest educational achievement of the Baltimore People's Unemployment League, according to one of its founders, was "getting white men and women to work with and under Negro men and women." (66)

These were substantial and significant achievements, particularly from the perspective of the rank-and-file jobless worker. To the extent that the unemployed movement fostered trade-union consciousness and helped break down barriers between black and white workers, it contributed importantly to the strength of the American working class. Yet, to state the obvious, neither this gain nor the more tangible improvements in living conditions won by the unemployed movement were accompanied by the creation of a mass revolutionary movement of the unemployed. To return, then, to the question raised at the outset: Was this limitation the product of mistakes internal to the radical movement, or was it determined by broader external forces?

The comparative experience of Communists, Socialists, and Mustelites in organizing the unemployed suggests that the basic limitations on the '30s unemployed movement lay outside the left. The Socialists and Mustelites, in their efforts among the jobless, offered variations on the basic Communist theme, but neither achieved markedly better results. Being less prone to the use of confrontation politics, the Socialists could sometimes attract less

politicized workers or win a more respectful hearing from authorities. But, there was a political price to this approach. As one top leader of the People's Unemployment League wrote to Norman Thomas: the "loyalty of the members...is to the league and its leaders and not in any sense to the SP." (67) The aggressive grassroots organizing and the "American Approach" of the Musteites offers a contrasting strategy to that of both Communists and Socialists. Yet, there were problems here as well. The Musteites' Americanist rhetoric attracted many workers who were indifferent to the Communists and Socialists, but some of these workers soon lost interest in the Musteites when they realized that the radicals' patriotism did not run very deep. Moreover, as a relatively small left-wing sect built around one man, the Musteites were never able to expand their movement beyond Ohio and Pennsylvania.

All of the radical unemployed groups suffered at one time or another from opportunism, sectarianism, factionalism, dogmatism, and mechanical party control of a mass movement. In particular, one could easily criticize some of the programs and practices of the Stalinized Communist Party of the '30s. Yet, Stalinism did not permeate the unemployed movement. And, rank-and-file organizers often ignored Party directives that were irrelevant to their concrete and practical organizing efforts. Indeed, in general, the organizers of the radical unemployed movement evidenced creative and aggressive leadership on both the local and national levels. While others merely talked about the "forgotten man," these organizers actually did something.

In the end, the similar levels of success achieved by the varying organizing approaches of the Communists, Socialists, and Musteites suggest that no slight shift in the party line would have made any fundamental difference. Hence, although an awareness of the errors of the left organizers in the '30s may help to prevent their repetition, to understand fully the limitations of the unemployed movement it is necessary to examine the basic external factors that shaped its history: the repressive response of the government and the upper classes; the dominant ideological and cultural currents in 1930s America; and the composition and condition of the jobless themselves.

The American upper classes were not about to passively accept a jobless-led revolution. Virtually any signs of incipient rebellion were met by swift and often violent repression. An American Civil Liberties Union pamphlet, "What Rights for the Unemployed?", summarized the grim situation: "Bans against assembly, refusal of permits to speak, the stationing of squads of police at relief stations, attacks by the police on peaceful meetings, clubbings, arrests, abuse of prisoners, infliction of maximum sentences, prosecution for criminal syndicalism or conspiracy — these have become in relation to the activities of the unemployed monotonously familiar." Yet it was fear of repression, not repression itself,

that deterred many jobless from supporting the radical unemployed groups in the first place. Yale economist E. Wight Bakke learned in talking to New Haven jobless that they had discovered in their working days that radicalism was a "sure-fire demoter," and they "cannot forget it now." (68)

But, the organizers of the radical unemployed movement confronted more than just police batons and tear gas. They sought to win the allegiance of the unemployed in the face of powerful ideological and cultural assumptions that militated against their success. Although the Depression did much to erode working-class faith in American capitalism, this breakdown had not led to a new consciousness, at least by the early '30s. As the Lynds found in Muncie, Indiana during the Depression, "fear, resentment, insecurity, and disillusionment were largely an individual experience for each worker, and not a thing generalized by him into a 'class' experience." (69) Workers had a culture of their own, of course, which rejected many of the values of middle-class American society. But many of the values of that very working-class culture — patriotism, distrust of politics, and a frequent anti-radicalism — also discouraged membership in radical unemployed groups. "In the face of Communism," Bakke found in talking to the New Haven jobless, "the most insecure American workman becomes a hero by defending American conditions." (70)

Moreover, unemployed organizers had to try to mobilize an American working class that was divided within itself along ethnic, racial, religious, and geographic lines. Although occasionally the shock of unemployment did break down racial and ethnic barriers, the basic divisions remained. Homer Morris, an American Friends Service Committee worker, described the persistence of racial, national, religious, and family feuds in the impoverished coal-mining camps of West Virginia and Kentucky. Similarly, one New Haven worker blamed his unemployment on the "Jews in control who had no use for Italians." (71) Among the Depression unemployed the problems in developing class consciousness were exacerbated by the presence of large numbers of jobless men and women from middle-class backgrounds. Given this context, most unemployed people in the early '30s did not come to see themselves as part of a common group united by their lack of work.

Finally, the jobless, as a group, were particularly difficult to organize for a number of reasons. As one '30s radical leader has commented: "I don't know of any task in the revolutionary movement more discouraging and disheartening than the task of trying to keep an unemployed organization...together." (72) One problem was the continual churning of leadership and membership caused by the impermanence of unemployment. Another was the debilitating effects of unemployment: joblessness, for some, often led to despair, apathy, and listlessness, rather than rebellion. (73) Because of the persistence of the work ethic throughout the De-

pression, (74) many of those without work began to see themselves as worthless. Such men and women were more likely to withdraw from society than to actively protest against it; the last thing they wanted was to publicly identify themselves as "relievers" by participating in jobless associations. Finally, there was the battle for survival itself: unemployed workers often were too absorbed in their own personal struggles for food and housing to concern themselves with political action. Not only individualist efforts, but also collective sharing and cooperation among kinship networks, neighbors, and ethnic groups absorbed the full energies of many unemployed workers.

Given these formidable barriers — persistent and often violent repression by government and business, the strength of cultural values which inhibited jobless political activity especially of the radical variety, and the inherent problems involved in basing a revolutionary movement on the unemployed — it becomes clear that the accomplishments of the '30s unemployed movement are more notable than its failures. It remains a significant example of a locally-based, grass-roots organization under radical leadership that worked creatively and militantly to meet the concrete, immediate needs of the unemployed.

FOOTNOTES

1. I would like to sincerely thank the following people for their helpful comments and suggestions on this article: Herbert Benjamin, Elizabeth Blackmar, Ellen Malino James, Jim O'Brien, Frances Fox Piven, Marion Shapiro, and Ann Withorn. None of these people is responsible for my interpretations, and Mr. Benjamin, in particular, is critical of some of my formulations.

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3. Robert R. Nathan, "Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1929-1935," INTERNATIONAL LABOUR REVIEW, 33 (January 1936), pp. 49-73.

4. Irving Bernstein, THE LEAN YEARS (Baltimore, Maryland, 1966), pp. 255-257; John A. Garraty, "Unemployment During the Great Depression," LABOR HISTORY, 17 (Spring 1976), p. 134; Mark Naison, "The Communist Party in Harlem: 1928-1936" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1975), p. 49.

5. William Leuchtenberg, FDR AND THE NEW DEAL (New York, 1963), p. 26.

6. The definitive work on cooperative self-help is Clark Kerr, "Productive Self-Help Enterprises of the Unemployed" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, 1939). See also "Cooperative Self-Help Activities Among the Unemployed," MONTHLY LABOR REVIEW, XXXVI (March, April, May, and June 1933); Daniel J. Leab, "Barter and Self-Help Groups, 1932-33," MIDCONTINENT AMERICAN STUDIES JOURNAL, III (Spring 1966), pp. 15-24. On stealing and coal bootlegging see FEDERATED PRESS, December 10, 1933 and October 4, 1932; Louis Adamic, MY AMERICA (New York, 1938), pp. 316-324; Bernstein, LEAN YEARS, pp. 422-425. E. Wight Bakke discusses the unemployed worker's struggle to maintain his self-reliance in THE UNEMPLOYED WORKER (New Haven, 1940), pp. 363-385.

7. For a discussion of some of the issues involved in radical historiography of radicalism see Aileen Kraditor, "American Radical Historians on Their Heritage," PAST AND PRESENT, No. 56 (August 1972), pp. 136-153, and James R. Green, "American Radical Historians on Their Heritage," PAST AND PRESENT, No. 69 (November 1975), pp. 123-130.
8. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTY (Boston, 1957), p. 225; Nathan Glazer, THE SOCIAL BASIS OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM (New York, 1961), pp. 38-89.
9. Howe, COMMUNIST PARTY, p. 178.
10. LABOR UNITY, September 14, 1929.
11. "Notes of the Month," THE COMMUNIST, IX (March 1930), p. 198.
12. Harold D. Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock, WORLD REVOLUTIONARY PROPAGANDA — A CHICAGO STUDY (New York, 1939), p. 44. .
13. Daniel J. Leab, "United We Eat: The Out-of-Work, the Unemployed Councils, and the Communists, 1930-1933" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1961), p. 72.
14. Lasswell, PROPAGANDA, pp. 43-44.
15. LABOR UNITY, July 16, 1930.
16. Interview with Herbert Benjamin, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1973.
17. THE DAILY WORKER, January 16, 21, 22, 27, 31 and February 4, 5, 6, 1930; THE NEW YORK TIMES, February 12, 15, 22, 28, 1930.
18. "Notes of the Month," THE COMMUNIST, IX (March 1930), p. 198; Lasswell, PROPAGANDA, pp. 191-193. See also LABOR UNITY, February 1, 22, 1930.
19. While THE DAILY WORKER claimed that 110,000 gathered in New York's Union Square, THE NEW YORK TIMES reported that only 35,000 demonstrated. THE DAILY WORKER, March 7, 1930; THE NEW YORK TIMES, March 7, 1930. See also LABOR UNITY, March 15, 1930; M. J. Olgin, "From March Sixth to May First," THE COMMUNIST, IX (May 1930), pp. 417-422; S. Mingulin, "The Crisis in the U.S. and the Problems of the CP," THE COMMUNIST, IX (June 1930), pp. 500-518.
20. Martin E. Sullivan, "On the Dole: The Relief Issue in Detroit, 1929-1939" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Notre Dame University, 1974), p. 45.
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22. Daniel J. Leab, "'United We Eat': The Creation and Organization of the Unemployed Councils in 1930," LABOR HISTORY, 8 (Fall 1967), p. 313. See also for example LABOR UNITY, March 29, May 10, June 18, and September 10, 1930.
23. Naison, "Harlem," pp. 54, 57; THE DAILY WORKER, January 31, 1930; St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, BLACK METROPOLIS (New York, 1945), p. 87; Johnson quoted in Leab, "United" (M.A. thesis), p. 71.
24. LABOR UNITY, April 5 and July 16, 1930. The Program of Action adopted at the July Convention declared: "The local TUUL Council shall lead and direct the activity of the unemployed movement."
25. Clarence A. Hathaway, "An Examination of Our Failure to Organize the Unemployed," THE COMMUNIST, IX (September 1930), p. 789; A. Allen, "Unemployed Work — Our Weak Point," THE COMMUNIST, XI (August 1932), p. 684. Both THE PARTY ORGANIZER and THE COMMUNIST are filled with complaints about the "organizational weakness" of the Unemployed Councils. See for example Earl Browder, "Report of the Political Committee to the 12th Central Committee," THE COMMUNIST, X (January 1931), pp. 7-31; Jack Johnstone, "Overcome Looseness in Our Mass Work," THE COMMUNIST, X (March 1931), pp. 324-329; Clarence A. Hathaway, "On the Use of 'Transmission Belts' in Our Struggle for the Masses," THE COMMUNIST, X (May 1931), pp. 409-423.
26. Robert E. Asher, "The Influence of the Chicago Workers' Committee on Unemployment Upon the Administration of Relief, 1931-1934" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1934), p. 72.

27. Glazer, *SOCIAL BASIS*, p. 101.
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30. Hathaway, "Failure to Organize," p. 791; *THE DAILY WORKER*, November 8, 1930; Leab, "United," *LABOR HISTORY*, pp. 314-315.
31. Lasswell, *PROPAGANDA*, p. 343. Probably the most dramatic and effective of the Chicago demonstrations was that of October 31, 1932, which mobilized 25,000 jobless. Asher, "Chicago," pp. 21-22; *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*, November 1, 1932; *CHICAGO DEFENDER*, November 15, 1932.
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33. Edmund Wilson, "Detroit Motors," *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, 66 (March 25, 1931), p. 145. Ellen James, who is studying relief in New York City in the Depression, argues that pressure from City Hall was the major force in stopping evictions in New York, at least. Ellen Malino James, "Reform in NYC Welfare Before the New Deal" (paper read at American Historical Association Convention, Atlanta, 1975).
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37. Alex Baskin, "The Ford Hunger March," *LABOR HISTORY*, 13 (Summer 1972), pp. 331-360.
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74. See for example Warren Susman, ed., CULTURE AND COMMITMENT, 1929-1945 (New York, 1973), p. 68.

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ERRATUM

We regret that we forgot to mention in the last issue that Anne Bobroff's article, "The Bolsheviks and Working Women, 1905-20," was a condensation and revision of an article previously published in SOVIET STUDIES.

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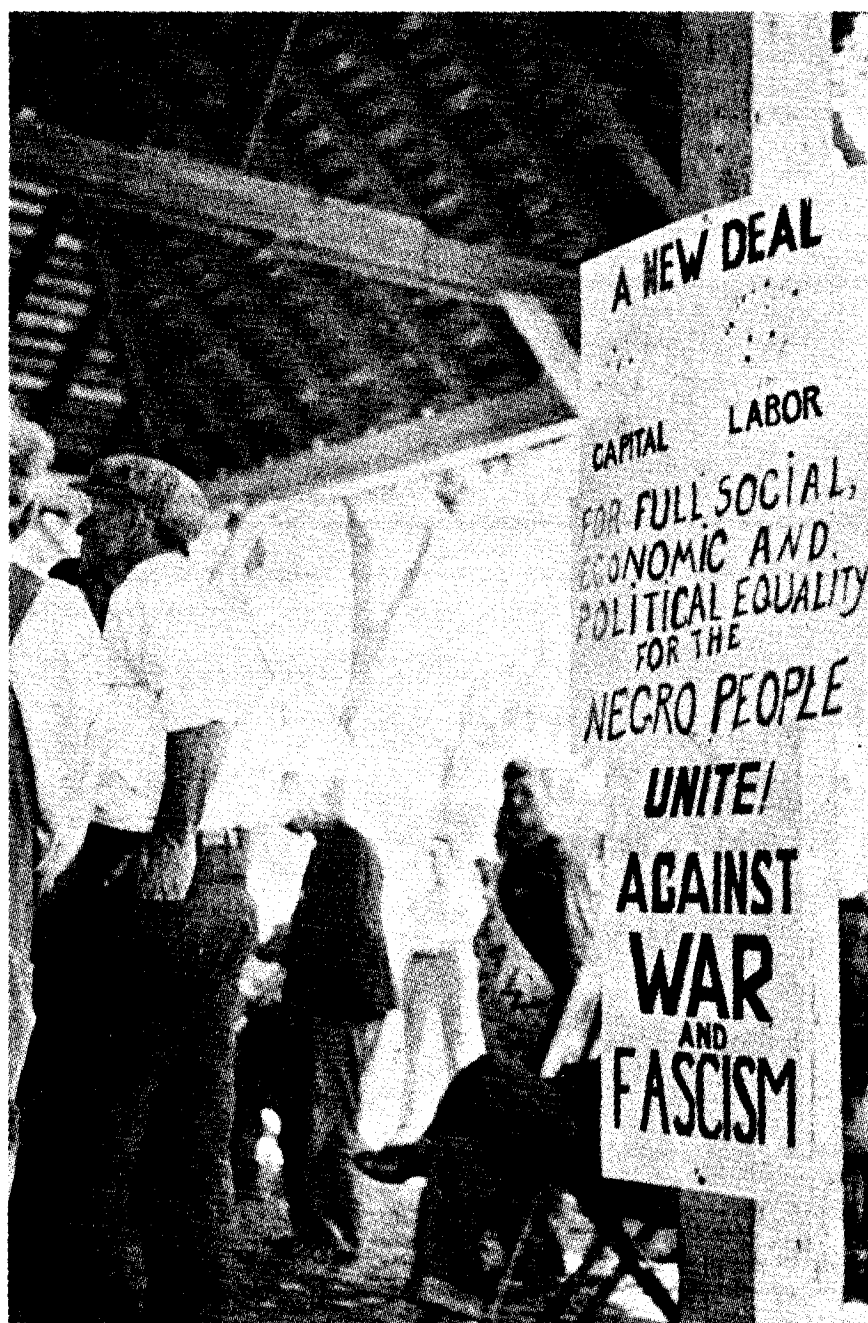
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The Ambiguous Legacy

Jim O'Brien

The present-day American Left has not been able to come to grips with its own historical traditions. Left-wing memoirs and the fragmented writings of academic authors give us scattered insights, but little systematic discussion of our history and its meaning. In this analytical vacuum, James Weinstein's new book, *AMBIGUOUS LEGACY: THE LEFT IN AMERICAN POLITICS*, should be gratefully welcomed. There are serious problems with the book, but to dismiss it out of hand would be to sabotage a badly-needed debate. The book's chief failings arise from Weinstein's somewhat mechanical notion of making socialism a "public issue" and his much-too-broad definition of the working class. Even with its weaknesses, the book is the most sweeping and creative attempt that anyone has yet made at interpreting our past in the light of the events of the 1960s and '70s.

Weinstein's argument is worth summarizing at some length before getting into an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. *AMBIGUOUS LEGACY* is an interpretive essay on the pre-World War I Socialist Party, the Communist Party through the 1950s, and

*James Weinstein, *AMBIGUOUS LEGACY: THE LEFT IN AMERICAN POLITICS*, New York: New Viewpoints, 1975; xi 179 pages, \$4.95 paper.

the New Left. The Communist Party gets the most space. The book's central theme is that since the splintering of the Socialist Party around 1919 the Left has failed to make socialism a public issue in the U.S. Blindness to the ways in which capitalism has been changing (and especially to the role of liberal reforms in that process) has caused the Left to assume that socialist consciousness would more or less automatically arise in the course of struggles over concrete limited goals. He says this approach has constituted a form of "syndicalism," or "militant interest-group activity," in which the ultimate goal of a socialist society is obscured to the point of effectively disappearing.

As in earlier writings, Weinstein's fairly brief treatment of the old Socialist Party in this book depicts the SP in the days of Eugene V. Debs as having been in robust health. The party "opposed the capitalists where they functioned together as a class — that is, in government bodies on municipal, state, and federal levels" and elected over a thousand candidates to office on socialist platforms. The SP had 120,000 dues-paying members at its peak, had a flourishing press, and enjoyed a wide influence in trade unions. The party made socialism a public issue, within the unions and in electoral politics, and recruited successfully on that issue. Although Weinstein says the Socialists were slow to recognize the emergence of corporate liberalism as a strategy for stabilizing the capitalist system, he basically holds their political strategy out as a model that could usefully have been applied in later decades. He argues that the chief reasons for the SP's demise after World War I were external rather than internal: government repression during the war, the war's shattering of many people's belief in humanity's steady march toward socialism, and the new Third International's call for insurrection in the advanced capitalist West following the Russian Revolution. Formation of the Communist and Communist Labor parties (later merged into the Communist Party) in 1919 was a misguided attempt to heed the Comintern's appeal rather than a response to shortcomings in the Socialist Party.

Nevertheless, over the course of the 1920s, Weinstein says that the Communist Party's association with the Soviet Union gave it a hegemony on the Left that made it all but impossible for other groups to compete successfully with it. By the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s the CP was the dominant force on the American Left, and it remained so until the 1960s.

By the time of the Depression, in response to the increasing centralization of power in the Soviet CP and the Comintern, the American party had reached a highly elaborated "vanguard" form of centralized organization. Weinstein argues that this was to prove a serious barrier to the party's serving as a revolutionary force in the U.S. The specific form of Lenin's party, he claims, was shaped by the peculiar conditions (semi-feudalism, autocracy, a tiny and largely illiterate working class) existing in the Czarist

Empire. In the 1920s the elements of democracy in the Soviet party steadily diminished. But even the vanguard party as Lenin conceived it, Weinstein argues, would have been wrong for the U.S. "The form of a revolutionary party should follow from its historical function. The function of a revolutionary party in the United States is to unite an increasingly diversified and stratified working class — one that is a large majority of the population — around the need for socialism." By copying the Soviet model, he says, "the American party guaranteed that socialist consciousness would remain the property of a small, and isolated, elite."

The CP's vision of socialism, which it proclaimed publicly during the early 1930s and kept in the background after that, was also copied from the USSR. Weinstein summarizes William Z. Foster's TOWARD SOVIET AMERICA (1932) to illustrate the CP's hope that American workers would somehow be attracted to the "example" of working and living conditions in the USSR, then in the early stages of its industrialization. Weinstein points out that Soviet workers not only were far poorer than American workers even in the Depression, but lacked even the limited democratic rights of the U.S. A real "dictatorship of the proletariat" in an industrialized country, Weinstein says, would have to be the exercise of power by the great majority of the population which belongs to the working class. "Small wonder," he argues, "that the Communists did not succeed in making their vision of socialism widely popular, that they could not make the question of socialism versus capitalism a genuine public issue during the years that they did openly espouse a socialist politics."

Whatever the CP's vision of socialism, Weinstein argues that the party had only the most threadbare strategic notions of how to achieve it. Foster's scenario in 1932 was that American workers "will carry out a militant policy now in defense of their daily interests and, finally, following the example of the Russian workers, they will abolish capitalism and establish Socialism." (1) Or as the party's 1936 convention put it, "a strong and consistent fight for democratic rights under conditions of decaying capitalism must ultimately lead the American people to the choice of a socialist path." (2) Both during the CP's ultra-militant "Third Period" of the early '30s and the Popular Front period that followed, the party acted as though the struggle for concrete limited goals would more or less automatically radicalize the people who took part in the struggle. Thus, in the early '30s the party tried to nourish revolutionary dual unions through the Trade Union Unity League. After an interlude of returning to the mainstream American Federation of Labor, the party and its militants played a vital role in building many of the new CIO unions in the late '30s. Both in their dual unions and in the CIO, Weinstein says, the party acted as though there were something inherently revolutionary about militant industrial unions. Thus, in the process of helping to build the new industrial

unions of the CIO, Weinstein argues that the Communists submerged their politics to the point of facilitating the channeling of the unions' political energies into the Democratic Party.

Weinstein argues that the Comintern's policy of trying to build anti-fascist "popular fronts" heightened the party's tendency to avoid an attack on capitalism as such. In the U.S., unlike Europe, the most important ruling-class response to the capitalist crisis was reform rather than a move toward fascism. Thus the "popular front" against fascism in the U.S. meant support for the New Deal and therefore subordination to a strong segment of the capitalist class. This subordination was most marked, of course, during the years of the American-Soviet alliance in World War II. But even with the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, Weinstein sees a basic continuity in CP policy. "The Popular Front had been an alliance of Communists with liberals in power. The postwar policy was an alliance with anti-cold-war liberals out of power. The second was better than the first, but in both cases the ideology of the alliance was liberal."

In Weinstein's analysis, the CP's tendency to submerge its politics was increased rather than reduced by the party's stress on industrial workers as the "key sector" to be organized. This stress made it easier to support liberal politicians as long as they were pro-union. More broadly, "To think about socialism and a socialist movement as if it were simply concerned with workers' control over immediate goods production encouraged a lack of concern about other aspects of society, about the need for a socialist politics in other spheres of social life." The party's policy "led to an emphasis on the industrial workers as a vanguard class that was strategically placed to shut society down, and to an underemphasis of the proletariat as a universal class that has within it the ability to run society." The result, once again, was an avoidance of the need to win the working class to the idea that it could run society.

In his account of the student movement of the 1960s, which focuses primarily on Students for a Democratic Society, Weinstein finds that the New Left—for all its eagerness to repudiate the Communist and Socialist past—repeated several of the Communist Party's failings in a new form. The New Left's radicalization, he says, tended to take the form of an intensified militancy in behalf of objectives that were not inherently radical. Just as Communist activity in the 1930s had often been turned to the benefit of New Deal Democrats, so SDS's militancy against the war helped to create a student base for the McCarthy and Kennedy anti-war campaigns of 1968. There was the same avoidance of explicitly socialist politics in SDS's approach as in the CP's. Similarly, the CP's old emphasis on a "key sector" that would be crucial for revolution was repeated in inconsistent ways by the New Left. Various its leaders looked to students, the poor, blacks, or young people as the force that would lead the way. Almost entirely missing was a

sense that college students were being prepared for proletarianized white-collar jobs, and that the student movement was potentially part of a movement of the whole working class for socialism. (Weinstein praises the "new working class" theory of the late-middle '60s as a start in that direction, though he notes that defenders of the theory sometimes fell into thinking of college-educated workers as the revolutionary force.) In the absence of such an understanding, the New Left lacked the self-confidence to hold onto its own values, notably its radical notion of democracy and its sense of the non-economic aspects of life under capitalism.

These are roughly the lines of Weinstein's argument. How useful a book it is depends on the kind of discussion it provokes. Here I will try to indicate some of the ways in which I feel the book contributes to an understanding of Left politics in the 20th Century U.S., and some of the ways in which its history and conclusions seem inadequate.

Among the strong points of the book, Weinstein's depicting of the problems involved in transposing the Soviet model of revolution to an advanced industrial country is especially welcome. Time and again he shows how the Communist Party's close identification with the USSR, which helped give the party hegemony on the Left, simultaneously reduced the CP's ability to carry out a program suited to the assertion of working-class power in the U.S. Today, when old texts and heroes are being uncritically exhumed, Weinstein's warning that a country with a working-class majority is different from one that was perhaps five per cent working-class is very timely. He rightly refuses to make the leap of faith required of those who say that rule by an elite with a "proletarian outlook" is the same as the actual exercise of power by the working class.

Likewise, there is much to be learned from his insistence that reforms have to be understood against the background of the evolution of corporate capitalism. There has been a recurrent tendency on the Left to regard certain types of reforms — particularly the recognition of trade unions — as inherently anti-capitalist. Yet as history has shown, capitalism is a flexible system which can often profit from the regularization brought by government "intervention" and by collective bargaining. The reality of trade unionism is expressed by Weinstein this way:

Precisely because a union's function is to defend the interests of workers as workers it must operate within capitalist social relations. It must accept the wage system, work within it, and get the best possible deal for the workers at any given moment. Thus the union itself cannot be the basis of revolutionary consciousness. To the degree that it functions as a union — that is, settles for wage increases, improves conditions, signs contracts and as-

sumes responsibility for their enforcement — the union cannot by itself be revolutionary. And, as the IWW discovered, to the degree that a union does not function this way, it does not become a stable or powerful organization — it is not recognized and is bitterly opposed by corporations and the state.

It is not the struggle for limited gains that Weinstein criticizes, but the belief that this struggle in and of itself will lead to a self-conscious socialist movement. Whatever the limitations of his own program for bringing about such a movement, his analysis of the difficulties that Left groups have had in dealing with reforms is helpful.

A third strong point of the book is its insistence that the New Left and the women's movement raised issues which were never fully comprehended in the old Communist notions of revolution. Weinstein takes very seriously the idea that socialism to be attractive as a goal must involve a much greater degree of real democracy than presently exists, and that it has to promise a greater degree of individual self-fulfillment. The extent to which campus-derived groups are now taking up authoritarian forms of organization and morality (including a rejection of feminism as petit-bourgeois and a belief that homosexuals "can't be communists") is astonishing. It is as though the erosion of the Catholic Church's hold on major portions of the working class had created a vacuum which "revolutionary" groups are rushing to fill. Against this background, Weinstein's recognition of the positive aspects of the ferment of the 1960s is refreshing.

In probing for weaknesses in this book, the easiest starting point is its historical flatness. Weinstein does not get inside the movements he is writing about, does not give a sense of their variety and complexity, does not try to gauge how their rank-and-file participants viewed the work they were doing. The result is a retrospective judgment on the Communist Party and the New Left, minus a concrete sense of why they took the courses they did. For all his rejection of a vanguard-party model for the U.S., Weinstein's historical approach seems to assume that the "line" taken by a leadership can have an extraordinary effect on the course of events. Yet the experience of SDS within the student movement was just the opposite. SDS grew on campuses to the extent that radicalized students could use it as a vehicle for collective expression and activity. Whenever SDS as a national organization tried to act as anything like a central committee of the student movement, it failed; when it tried too hard, it disintegrated. Obviously the experience of the CP in the 1930s was not exactly parallel. But the party's high turnover in membership, and the way in which its activists often modified their organizing tactics to fit local situations, suggest to me that the CP leadership's ability to control

events was fairly limited. I suspect that the tens of thousands of working-class militants who were part of the CP for part or all of the '30s were there because they found the party (at least for a while) a vehicle for advancing working-class power. Had the CP been more visible, its vulnerability to red-baiting may well have made it a much less suitable instrument for that purpose. At least that is the way these militants may have felt; there is no way of telling from this book, because Weinstein doesn't go into that sort of question.

A second criticism, which relates to the present as well as the past, is that an alternative strategy for making socialism a public issue is never fleshed out. The one element of such a strategy that is clear from the book is the fielding of socialist slates in elections. But the problems encountered in these campaigns are not dealt with. It is unclear, for example, how much a party (Weinstein assumes that a party is desirable without arguing for it) operating along the lines he suggests would differ from the Socialist Workers Party. During each of its campaigns the SWP whips out Eugene Debs's plea, "It is better to vote for what you want and not get it than to vote for what you don't want and get it," and gets nowhere. While the SWP tends to feature far-reaching "transitional demands" which cannot be granted under capitalism, rather than calling directly for socialism, it is still an unmistakable anti-capitalist presence on the ballot; and its vote totals do not inspire enthusiasm for the electoral tactic. That is entirely aside from such questions as the remoteness of governmental decision-making from elections in the U.S., and the historical tendency of the Socialist and Communist electoral parties of western Europe to accommodate more and more to the workings of capitalism.

Another weakness of the book is that Weinstein is too quick to lump reform struggles together and to give them the label "interest-group activity" if they do not involve explicitly socialist rhetoric. There are all kinds of reforms and all kinds of ways of working for them. In general, the nature of a particular reform struggle — whether it aims at increasing working-class power, whether it tends to break down racial or sexual stratification in the working class, whether it tends to increase working-class self-confidence — is more important than the enunciation of explicitly socialist politics. This is all the more true in that the term "socialism" can often be used to blur class lines rather than sharpening them. Throughout the book Weinstein seems to place too much stress on persuading people of the virtues of socialism, and not nearly enough on the need to create in action a working-class solidarity which would make socialism seem plausible. As will be noted below, Weinstein's own use of class categories is fuzzy in a way that lends itself to an ambiguous notion of what socialism would actually be.

In analyzing the student revolt of the 1960s, Weinstein implies that it was centered among students who were headed for jobs that

would make them part of the working class. He talks of the "approaching proletarianization" faced by students at Berkeley and other prestigious schools, and he talks about the "massive social transformation that had converted college-educated labor from a narrow elite — as in pre - World War II days — into a substantial, technically and administratively skilled sector of the corporate work force." This is part and parcel of Weinstein's apparent readiness to make "the working class" a catch-all social description for everyone whose income is derived from wages or salaries rather than profit. Such a broad definition blurs class distinctions which it is crucial to make. In the first place, people who occupy supervisory positions in business or government, even if they are employees rather than owners, share a common bond. Their interests may not be inextricably bound up with the continued rule of the corporate capitalists, but the kinds of privileged positions they hold are certainly linked to the continuation of some form of bureaucratic and hierarchical rule. In a different way, highly educated professionals (doctors, lawyers, college-level teachers, architects, psychologists, scientists) have to be considered as another separate social stratum. Their prestige and advanced education, together with the autonomy and the chance for creativity that their jobs typically provide, set them apart from the working class. The differences between salaried and self-employed professionals are far less important than the traits that mark professionals as a distinctive social group.

Most college graduates, to be sure, are headed for jobs that can be considered working-class: high-school and elementary-school teachers, social workers, nurses, technicians, and some kinds of salespeople, not to speak of those who end up as "overqualified" clerical or blue-collar workers. But the student movement of the '60s was strongest at the minority of schools whose graduates were headed for professional and managerial jobs. It started among students who were very disproportionately from professional class backgrounds or who planned professional careers, and such people were always the organizational backbone of the movement. With very few exceptions (San Francisco State, Kent State, and a number of Southern black schools), those colleges which primarily trained people for teaching and other white-collar working-class jobs were relatively untouched by the movement. When Weinstein says that the New Left should have seen itself as potentially part of a broad working-class movement, he puts an impossible burden on the New Left. For all its strengths, it was not based on the working class or any segment of it.

This may seem like historical quibbling, but it also gets us back to a central question about Weinstein's alternative to the "syndicalist" tradition of the Left. Even if the sort of party that he calls for could become more than a small utopian sect, the probable content of its politics is not very appealing. With his broad defi-

nition of the working class, and his insistence that the Left not seek out "key sectors", it seems likely that such a party would fall under the natural leadership of its most articulate and organizationally skilled members, who would almost certainly be from professional or even managerial backgrounds. Even if it were to develop a mass following, there is no reason to believe that it would behave differently from the European parties which have the word Socialist in their titles.

In the end, the indirect criticisms made by Weinstein's book are more enduring than the direct ones. He has made a number of implicit but telling points against two different tendencies that have had revivals in recent years. The first is a kind of neo-populism in which the left-wing politics of the organizers are carefully hidden on the assumption that a struggle for reforms has its own built-in dynamic of radicalization. The other is a primitive Leninism based on a wholly romanticized and unhistorical picture of Soviet history and the Communist International. Weinstein has not, however, given us a reliable alternative history of the 20th Century American Left. He fails to do this because his history is written too much from the outside and leaves us wondering why the activists who belonged to the Communist Party and the New Left made the choices they did. By making the somewhat nebulous notion of "socialist consciousness" such a central standard in judging their activity, he gives a distorted picture of what they actually accomplished. Most importantly, the way in which he uses that standard to evaluate the past shows that there are serious inadequacies in his implied course of action for the present. The difficult problems of helping to build working-class self-assertion and unity could not have been solved in the past — and cannot be solved now — by an approach which says that nearly everyone is in the working class and that the main task is to convince them that socialism would be a good thing.

For all its faults, the book should be widely read. As a critical analysis of the American Left's historical experience, free from the blinders of sectarian self-justification and of liberal or right-wing anti-communism, it can serve as a good starting point for discussion. It should not be ignored, any more than it should be accepted wholly at face value.

1. Quoted from TOWARD SOVIET AMERICA, p. 212.

2. Quoted from Earl Browder, THE PEOPLE'S FRONT (New York, 1938), p. 113.

JIM O'BRIEN, an editor of RADICAL AMERICA, is a printer and general staff member at the New England Free Press.

Letters

(Editors' Note: Although we are publishing a longer letter in this issue, we would like to encourage our readers to send us brief (maximum: 1000 words) responses to our articles and comments on important political issues for publication in this section. We will print as many as we can of those which seem of general interest to our readers.)

To the editors of *Radical America*:

We strongly commend Alband, Rees, and Woodmansee for undertaking a task generally shunned by the American left — concrete analysis of conditions within the U.S. military and a description of the nature and breadth of the soldiers movement as it exists today. We can't recall when we last read an article which so thoroughly and artfully discusses the American military from a left perspective.

The crux of our difference with the authors is contained in a question which they pose in the article: "Might not that (reform) fight simply speed up the military's own modernizing efforts? ... (and) make the military run more efficiently(?)."

First of all, the authors' suggestion that the existing GI movement can be neatly divided into two wings is a dubious thesis. That the vanguard element exists cannot be questioned but we don't think that the other tendency can properly be considered a "reform" element. It would be more accurate to describe these "non-agitators" as a pacifist tendency which, although it offers case-help and tailor-made solutions, actually shares the vanguardists' concern with the military's *mission*. More important, they enjoy virtually no mass appeal.

To be sure, the potential for a mass-organized reform movement does exist within the armed forces today, as is amply documented by the authors. But the extent to which it can be influenced by a group or tendency with an "independent political perspective" at this juncture is certainly an open question. In effect we are saying that while social, economic, and cultural struggles within the military cannot be artificially separated, there comes a point in a new soldier's career when he or she must make an accommodation to the specific nature of their job. How this choice is made produces career soldiers who are concerned with job-related issues, on one hand, and those who chafe under the authoritarian and backward "social" relations which persist in the "new" military, on the other. This latter group tends to return to civilian life convinced that military life — regardless of its economic inducements — is not for them.

The transformation of military institutions under VOLAR is still not complete. Certain structural change at the base has been made, accompanied by a clever campaign to change the military's "image." But, as Rees, et al, point out in convincing detail, there is a significant lag in the military's ability to reform its repressive legal system to accommodate many of the changed cultural values in the larger society. So soldiering is a job and then again, it is more than that. In this we all agree.

It is in the context of this analysis that we argue there are essentially two constituencies within the "new" military. The dissident element can still be appealed to on the basis of *political* propaganda from activists outside the military who want to challenge the military mission and "gum up the works." But the tentative probes of the AFGE, whether they ultimately proceed or not, constitute a recognition that objective conditions for military service have undergone major change. When one contrasts the potential power of a mass organization of soldier-workers with the combined impact of even ten *thousand* dissident acts, there is no question *which* contains the possibility of seriously challenging the military hierarchy on *all* fronts; from job conditions to mission. The fact that GIs are not currently aware of in whose interests the military mission is presently defined is not an argument against organizing GIs around issues with which they *are* aroused, namely conditions of employment. We will go further and assert that *only* a mass organization of soldiers, fully conscious of its identity and duty as a class, possesses the social power to directly counter the deployment of America's military might. A union is a necessary first step in the evolution of such an organization.

If the AFGE goes ahead with its drive, we say work (in a principled fashion) with it. If they stall, we say work to get it going again. The existence of a bona fide trade union within the context of an autocratic and hierarchical organization like the U.S. military is inherently *progressive*. Every aspect of daily union activity — free speech, assembly, petitioning, printing, picketing, bargaining as equals with the boss, etc., would constitute direct blows against the arbitrary discipline and isolation upon which the American military thrives. If commanders are compelled to bargain and negotiate with their troops on a basis of *parity* (as equals) then an important shift in traditional relationships within the military will have taken place. It is not just for nostalgia that the command clings tenaciously to every prerogative of the "chain of command" and to a system of military justice which it openly regards as a tool of "good order and discipline".

It is not likely that such a union would be democratic or led by the rank and file, despite our best efforts. But, rank and file caucuses working through a non-cooptible trade union program could begin to concretely work toward the day when the U.S. military could be neutralized or dismantled under conditions of socialist revolution.

Michael Uhl
Tod Ensign
ATOM, Inc. (Alternatives
to Militarism)
May 21, 1976

Radical America

To Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign:

Yes, we believe you're right to bring our attention to bear on the American Federation of Government Employees' pending soldiers union drive. The Vietnam-era GI movement and the post-ceasefire restructuring of the form and function of the armed forces have created the preconditions for such a union. Not only is this the trend in the armed forces of several European countries. But even the most respected establishment military sociologist, Morris Janowitz, believes it to be the wave of the future here as well. In a statement to the Defense Manpower Commission in July 1975, he remarked, "In my opinion, the present emphasis on 'economic man' and rigid costs accounting will, of course, in a very short number of years lead to unionization of the armed forces, both officers and enlisted men." Janowitz's opinion is confirmed by the military's more far-sighted, yet conservative members and supporters.

If the AFGE agrees at its September conference to go ahead with the drive, we agree, work with it. If the drive stalls, yes, work to get it going. Yet we come to the same conclusions for different reasons. We do not share your view that "the existence

of a bona fide trade union in the context of an autocratic and hierarchical organization like the U.S. military is inherently progressive." Because we believe that a soldiers union will be established sometime in the next five years, our intent is to encourage the birth of the union precisely when the AFGE faces the most opposition from the Department of Defense and the Congress. It is under these conditions that lower-ranking enlisted men and women would be more inclined to view the union as an instrument in their fights with the command. If the Pentagon makes an enemy of the AFGE, incorporating grievance procedures into the chain of command, and thereby turning the union into their own instrument for integrating dissent into proper channels. Unfortunately, too many bona fide trade unions today serve just this purpose.

The dynamism and creativity of the movement of soldiers and their wives since the ceasefire has stemmed in part from their direct confrontation with the chain of command. In the most lively of these confrontations, soldiers and their wives have produced organizations of their own which stood apart from and opposed to the command. It is precisely this form of autonomous soldiers organization which the union drive might help create.

Conversely, the movement in the ranks is likely to be the only force capable of compelling the union to defend soldiers' economic, legal and civil rights within the limits of trade unionism as we know it. If left to its own devices, the AFGE, according to its own candid announcements, will not infringe on the command's power to determine the conditions of work. It intends to act solely as a lobby for soldiers to win favorable pay and benefits packages from their employer, Congress. The career soldiers you speak of are the least likely layer to push the union beyond issues of compensation, although they are most likely to be at the core of any union drive. In addition, no society-wide movement exists now which could affect the outcome. The trade union movement, particularly the AFL-CIO of which the AFGE is a member union, is not known for its willingness to challenge the military. And the left has exercised almost no mass influence among GIs since the ceasefire over three years ago.

A soldiers union will prove to be combative and democratic only if the lower ranking troops are strong in numbers and organization. And that strength, in turn, depends on the breadth of horizontal organization of GIs in the lower ranks — a type of organization a union drive might stimulate. In the absence of either a vertically integrated union of soldiers of all enlisted ranks, or of a horizontal organization of soldiers in the lower ranks, the development of both will be substantially weakened.

You're probably right that just about any soldiers union will compel the military to formally grant more legal, political and civil rights to soldiers. Of course, we'd champion such a move. Our concern — which explains our hardnosed orientation toward the lower ranks — is that a soldiers movement exists which is both *willing* and *able* to exercise those rights. Our intent is to make sure that the movement in the ranks has the *right*, the *power*, and the *desire* to continue the struggle against the command. If the union drive establishes the right to struggle while stripping soldiers of the power or desire to do so, the GI movement will be the real loser.

Linda Alband

Steve Rees

Dennni Woodmansee

May 25, 1976

To *Radical America*:

We were pleased to see Jean Tepperman's article "Organizing Office Workers", and agree that socialists have often overlooked this important unorganized sector. Her article provided a general overview of the nature of clerical work today: she describes both its importance to the functioning of the capitalist economy and the organization of the work process itself.

Our response is two-fold: first a brief criticism of Tepperman's treatment of racism which we see as the major weakness of the article; and second, a longer section, which is our attempt to illustrate how the obstacles to union organizing Tepperman talks about in her article manifest themselves in an actual union drive, and some impli-

cations we draw from it. We are not spending more time on our major criticism of Tepperman since we feel that it is important to share experiences and lessons drawn from our work in the Bay Area. Racism was not the major reason for the failure of the drive in which we were most closely involved (Western States Banking Association — Mastercharge, where some of us were on the support committee). The most decisive factor in this failure was the relationship of the Organizing Committee to the union and management; and the relationship of the union to management. Thus this is our focus.

RACISM

We believe racism to be the primary division within the working class today. By not focusing on this division specifically (all the divisions among workers are equated in her article: backbiting, company favoritism, age and race barriers), what emerges from the article overall is a sense of reality that fits more the experiences of white office workers than those who are Third World. Tepperman says: "Discrimination by companies *adds* (our emphasis) to racial segregation among workers". But it is precisely this systematic discrimination against Third World people in the relations of production (i.e. the labor process and the labor market) and the easier access of whites to jobs and promotions which is at the root of "racial segregation among workers." It is primarily this systematic discrimination that produces hostility and misunderstanding among office workers, rather than the "social conditions" or "lack of communication" as Tepperman suggests. These actual differences, and the fear that without these differences they would be worse off, often keeps white workers from seeing their common interests with Third World people.

Our reading of U.S. history has convinced us that the working class as a whole (including the white working class) has been the most successful in its struggles when it has not allowed itself to be weakened by ethnic and racial division. Nevertheless, the white working class has often objectively allied with the white ruling class instead of their Third World brethren. In doing so they have undermined their own struggles and condemned Third World people to the most extreme forms of exploitation and oppression. By not directly confronting racism, the basis for building trust and a unity based on *common* interest is impossible.

The implication this has for organizing office workers is the necessity to attack this division between workers head on by raising demands that challenge racism, demands that incorporate the needs of the most oppressed sector of the working class. (An example of which would be across-the-board wage increases which decrease the differences in wages among workers rather than percentage increases which only serve to widen the gap). We do not want to imply that there is an easy and simple formula for struggling against racism. What we are trying to say, and what Tepperman's article does not, is that in all our work the attack on this division must be seen as central.

WESTERN STATES BANKING ASSOCIATION - MASTERCHARGE - AN ORGANIZING ATTEMPT

Conditions

Western States Banking Association (WSBA/Mastercharge) does all the processing for the Mastercharge credit system. Merchants are signed up by individual banks to use the system; any bank that subscribes to WSBA can issue credit cards to its depositors. The work done at WSBA is primarily data processing, billing and verification of credit. Much of the work is organized in assembly line fashion; there are 3 shifts running around the clock and an individual worker completes only 1 stage of the work process. The bargaining unit was composed of 556 workers, whose monthly pay ranged from a low of \$400 to a high of \$750 — the average pay being \$500. Eighty-five percent of the bargaining unit was Third World, with a majority of Filipinos. Fifty-one percent were women. A lot of students were employed by WSBA and the turnover was high.

Pay increases and promotions come less frequently to racial and national minorities. There are daily instances of racist harassment and discrimination. One example was a case where a supervisory position was open and a black woman applied for the

job. She was subject to an interrogation by the department manager and two supervisors, a procedure none of the white applicants were required to endure. In the end, she did not even get the job.

The Drive Itself

Against this background, a WSBA organizing drive began in the fall of 1974. (To our knowledge, this was the second attempt to unionize at WSBA; a couple of years earlier there had been an unsuccessful drive). The initiators of this drive were all Third World and were representative of the racial and national minorities at WSBA. Throughout the drive the Organizing Committee was composed of a majority of Third World people. They chose Local 250 of the Service Employees International Union (S.E.I.U.) to represent them.

Previously they had hooked up with Local 3 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (O.P.E.I.U.). But the bureaucrats of OPEIU thought they were too militant and pulled out. The WSBA folks then attempted an independent drive but after 3 weeks they realized that they lacked sufficient funds to carry it out. Through contacts with Union Wage (Women's Alliance to Gain Equality), they were put in touch with a woman organizer from SEIU Local 400 (public sector workers). The organizer, Maxine Jenkins, was interested in seeing an independent office workers local of SEIU form. She, however, was tied up with issues involving public workers and sent the Organizing Committee to Local 250 of SEIU which was interested in organizing at WSBA. The Organizing Committee then began to meet with an organizer from that local.

After only one month of passing out cards, the Organizing Committee was able to collect the number they required. They filed with 250 signed cards out of a bargaining unit of 556. Four hundred and fifty people voted in the final election — the union lost by about 3 to 1. (Three hundred and twenty-six voted no; to one hundred and twenty-five yes.) Obviously some of the previous support for the union had been eroded.

The Organizing Committee summed up its major error as insufficient contact with the workers. They did not have enough people or contacts in the many departments and on the shifts; and it was extremely difficult to find time when people could come to meetings. One result of this effort was the Committee's lack of knowledge of their fellow workers' feelings about unions or the extent of their support for the drive itself. Another result was their inability to be responsive to people's questions, fears and sentiments.

Throughout the drive, management used a variety of tactics to try and defeat the union. Four meetings were held in which workers were told about the many benefits they received from the company. Management consistently attacked unions in general and Local 250 in particular. They told their employees that unions were not interested in the workers, they just wanted their dues, and that the company understood employees' needs better than a union, and certainly better than a hospital workers union. Management also utilized scare tactics by claiming that a successful union drive would increase production costs, causing the banks giving WSBA business to pull out, and the company to fold. It is impossible to know the exact effects of these tactics. They all contributed to the lack of support for the union; and underlined the necessity for close and constant contact between the Organizing Committee and the workers, and the need to prepare people before hand for management's tactics.

The Organizing Committee misassessed workers' attitudes towards unions. A large number of people did not trust unions. They were skeptical about the advantages of unions and saw them as another authoritarian, bureaucratic structure which would not significantly improve their working conditions. After a meeting with the union representative, a woman commented that she felt the same as after a meeting with management! Management's anti-union propaganda fed into these fears and Local 250's practice during the drive confirmed them. In the first place, the union offered only economic benefits. Propaganda they put out dealt primarily with material benefits which the company was largely able to counteract by alluding to a 10% cost of living increase they all would get in the summer. They did little regarding grievance

procedure and on-the-job problems. Nothing was raised around the racism rampant in the hiring and promotion policies. They were often careless and unreliable in their work. Leaflets were always late and meetings often cancelled. The union representative's method of fighting management was to engage in a great deal of back and forth name calling and slandering — tactics which did nothing to educate the workers about WSBA and only served to alienate them. The union also published an inaccurate wage scale undermining their credibility with workers and confirming the idea that the union did not know a lot about their situation.

From the beginning of the drive, Local 250 fought the Organizing Committee tooth and nail for control of the drive. The union tried as much as possible to keep the Organizing Committee, and thus all the workers, ignorant about the day-to-day activities. Decisions were made without the Organizing Committee and they were often not told when a leaflet was coming out and what the content would be. Leaflets written by the Organizing Committee were edited by the union and whole sections were deleted. The union representative avoided the Organizing Committee; often he was not in when members of the Committee called and phone calls were rarely returned. The main way he was reached was by letter.

On two occasions the union negotiated with management behind the backs of the Organizing Committee with disastrous results for the drive. The first time, the union agreed to postpone the election in exchange for a list of all the workers in the company. The outcome was that the election was not held at a time when enthusiasm was at a high point but at a later date when support and activity had subsided. Adding insult to injury, the union then never made this list available to the Organizing Committee or used it themselves.

The second incident dealt with part-time workers. Part-time workers at WSBA had previously lost their benefits. The issue of getting them back was key in the drive and had mobilized a lot of support for the union. One and a half months before the election the union signed an agreement which waived its right to file suit against the company if the company reinstated part-time benefits. Therefore WSBA immediately reinstated part-time benefits and undercut one of the Organizing Committee's major issues.

In retrospect, the Organizing Committee believes that the day-to-day energy that went into fighting the union prevented them from doing much of the contact, education and propaganda that was needed. One result of this was that they failed to raise issues and demands that particularly addressed the specific oppression and harassment of racial and national minorities. Contact with Third World people who initially participated in the drive was not followed up on when they no longer showed up. Therefore the Organizing Committee did not know what the key issues were of the workers at WSBA and thus did not directly speak to them in the drive. Also, the Organizing Committee thought that in order to win the drive, it was necessary to talk primarily about the advantages of a union. But they now understand this as an error and see the importance of speaking openly from the get-go about the contradictions and problems of unions — that even though unions are defensive organizations of the class to protect basic workers' rights, and to bargain for a better sale of our labor power, they at the same time serve to control and curb the militancy of the labor force and protect the status quo. Therefore they are only a beginning in the struggle.

Summary

Our indirect experience with WSBA took our previously conceived ideas about unions out of the realm of theory and grounded them in reality. As they exist today unions at best provide economic benefits and job security; at worst they serve to regulate and discipline the working class, preventing militant struggle which threatens to effect any change, reinforcing the apathy and powerlessness people feel.

At this point it is unclear whether or not unions can be transformed into mass organizations which fight in the interests of the entire working class (which includes fighting against the special oppression of Third World people and women) and to what extent new forms of mass workers' organizations will have to be built. But we believe union organizing among office workers to be a pre-condition for the development of

further forms of struggle. Unions can provide some economic gains and protection for on-the-job struggles in a sector where wages and working conditions are extremely poor. Hopefully, union organizing will begin to break down the myth of office work as a "professional white collar" job; helping clericals to develop an identification with other kinds of workers. Also union organizing as compared to legalistic activities (i.e. affirmative action) makes more clearly the distinction between workers as a class and management; union organizing is the collective action of workers against management as opposed to individual struggle.

Seeing union organizing as only the first step in the development of a workers' movement has certain implications for socialists. First of all, participation by the most number of people has to be a conscious goal from the start of any organizing campaign. To develop this, we must choose unions that are the most democratic where rank and file control will be most possible. In some cases this might mean forming independent unions. Secondly, WSBA was a confirmation of the importance for us as organizers and revolutionaries to have trust in the people we work with, to address ourselves to people's concerns and questions honestly. We have the tendency to develop our own analysis of situations and not to change when reality tells us something different. Thirdly, since the task of union organizing is long and arduous, there is the danger for socialists to lose sight of our larger goals and fall into the trap of narrow trade unionism. We need to learn how to raise issues, demands and analysis in a way that begins to challenge capitalism within the context of our work in mass organizations.

Presently workers at WSBA are again actively organizing and have already begun to correct their previous mistakes. They have carefully investigated the practice of various unions as a basis for making their decision. They are making individual contacts with workers, seeking out people's feedback and concerns and are open about addressing the realities of unions. The Organizing Committee is not limiting itself to bread and butter issues. They have been fighting two firings due to race and sex discrimination using leaflets and a petition. Due to the large response on the petition, management was forced to rehire the one woman. The WSBA Organizing Committee felt that this was, therefore, only a partial victory and is not giving up this struggle "until the policy is changed to the workers' satisfaction and the other person is back on the job".

Hopefully this third attempt to unionize will be successful and serve as inspiration and guidance for further unionizing among office workers.

In struggle,
Office Workers Base Committee of the
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Spring, 1975

Critique (#4): *A Journal of Soviet Studies and Socialist Theory*, from Glasgow; the first issue of *Network: Voice of the UAW Militants*, from Detroit; a special labor issue of *Philippines Information Bulletin*; and the suppressed monograph by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda*, from Warner Modular Publications.

Summer, 1975

Portugal: A Blaze of Freedom, from Big Flame (Britain); *Unions and Hospitals: A Working Paper*, by Transfusion (Boston); *Taxi at the Crossroads: Which Way to Turn?*, from the Taxi Rank and File Coalition (New York); and the first issue of *Cultural Correspondence*, edited by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner.

Autumn, 1975

Southern Populism and Black Labor, by Vince Copeland; *Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution*, by Black and Red; *The IWW in Canada*, by George Jewell; and an issue of *Theaters*, with *Marxism and Popular Culture*, by Paul Buhle.

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