

now & after

FEBRUARY, 1977

A LIBERTARIAN SOCIALIST NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO. 1



on the unions

One of the most difficult questions facing radicals is what attitude to take toward the trade unions. Generally speaking, the left has regarded trade unionism as progressive activity which, given proper objective conditions, leads to revolutionary activity.

What traditional leftists have been unable to understand is that unions, far from challenging the wage system, are, and always have been, defensive organs seeking to obtain the best return for the labor power of the workers in the framework of the capitalist market. As one observer put it: "The labor leader organizes and sells wage workers to the highest bidder on the best terms available. He is a jobber of labor power. He accepts the general conditions of labor under capitalism and then, as a contracting agent operating within the system, he haggles and bargains over wages, hours, and working conditions for the members of his union."¹ In this sense, as suppliers of labor power, the unions are an integral component of the system, or, as "labor statesman" David Dubinsky phrased it: "Trade unionism needs capitalism like a fish needs water."²

The organizational form itself is ill-suited to militant struggle. Partly out of economic insecurity, partly out of adaptation to the dominant values of capitalist society, the working class traditionally tended to organize itself as a pressure group, complete with a corps of professional leaders to whom it delegated power. Both unions and left-wing parties have followed this hierarchical pattern of organization. Although they have sometimes brought the workers modest improvements, this has been at the cost of depriving the rank and file of direct control over their own struggles.

Part of the confusion about the role of unionism undoubtedly results from a failure to

recognize that ruling class attitudes have changed. Until comparatively recent times the capitalists firmly opposed unionization. In a competitive capitalist system, a union contract might place an individual firm at a competitive disadvantage and was opposed accordingly. As the economy tended to become monopolized, the capitalists were able to control the market more effectively through price fixing and other such measures. In this situation, trade unionism didn't seem as subversive to the bosses, since they would be able to nullify its costs by raising prices and increasing productivity.

In addition, the advantages of unions as stabilizers of the system gradually became apparent, namely: (1) Trade unions were a means of diverting the workers' discontent into harmless channels or, in other words, for converting the class struggle into interest group activity; (2) Unions were a means of regulating the purchasing power of the workers, which would help to lessen the inherent tendency of capitalism toward overproduction; and (3) They provided a special stratum, the labor bureaucracy, for enforcing contractual periods of labor peace.

The attitude toward unions upheld by most of the American left today was formed well before 1935, when the passage of the Wagner Act signaled a shift in approach by a decisive section of the ruling class (spurred on by the massive working class revolt of the early '30s). "Revolutionary industrial unionism" was a slogan raised not only by the IWW and other syndicalists, who regarded the union as the revolutionary organization per se, but by the revolutionary socialists as well. The latter attempted to capture existing unions or establish new "revolutionary" ones in unorganized industries. When confronted with the conservatism and class collaboration of the American Federation of Labor,

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ABOUT OURSELVES . . .

About a year ago a call was issued for the formation of a "libertarian socialist federation" in the Bay Area. This appeal elicited great interest; almost 100 people attended one of the conferences held. Nevertheless, after the initial euphoria, it became clear that since the discussions were not progressing interest was waning. Last spring the public meetings were discontinued because the few remaining participants found it impossible to reach an agreement. In retrospect, it may appear that the attempt to unify people of very different backgrounds (anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, situationists, ultra-left Marxists) was a noble but premature ambition. However, if the meetings failed to attain their initial objective, the balance-sheet was far from negative: ideas were exchanged, contacts were strengthened between people of similar trends of thought. In addition, our group emerged from the discussion.

Our pamphlet, "A World to Win," was printed and distributed in May, 1976. Its sales in local bookstores have been satisfactory. Many copies were sent to individuals and friendly groups in this country and abroad. There is a modest but constant demand for the pamphlet, which will soon be out of print.

Our text was well distributed, but response from our readers, while encouraging, was only moderate. Comrades from our general perspective in Europe sent greetings and encouragements with friendly criticism (or promise of it). We received many letters containing questions or expressing disagreements. We are carrying on dialogues with these correspondents. Also, in this newsletter we are publishing excerpts from some of these letters.

We would like to thank those who helped on that project: the typesetter, the artist, the friends who bought bundles of copies, the publishers of *Synthesis* and *Echanges* who reviewed the pamphlet, and the comrade from Spark Books who reprinted and distributed it.

Our subsequent discussions have aimed at correcting the inadequacies of "A World to Win." We are aware of the vagueness of some statements and of the scant treatment of some questions. This reflects in part the situation of the revolutionary movement now, in particular the doubts, scruples and questions which confront people like us, who don't claim to be infallible prophets. The shortcomings may also be attributed to the origin and composition of the group and to our desire to quickly publish a document upon which we could work together and move forward.

Among comrades in general sympathy with our orientation the absence of a clear-cut perspective on political economy was regretted. Others wanted a more definite position on the trade union question.*

With regard to economics, we don't feel capable, for the time being at least, of producing an original and serious work on the subject. It would have been easy to concoct one of those pretentious and empty texts which encumber so many radical papers: two or three quotations, a few statistics, a ritual invocation of the perennially falling rate of profit and the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism, culminating in a few predictions sufficiently vague in time and space as to defy verification. We will spare the reader the tedium of this type of article. Of course, we do not live in limbo and are very much interested in the economic aspects of the society in which we live. But as it follows from our pamphlet and from the writings of fraternal comrades, our opposition to private and state capitalist societies is not based on their inability, real or alleged, to overcome various economic problems. Although unemployment affects us very much as wage-earners, we have not—contrary to some radical groups—heralded a revolutionary upsurge because of the increase in unemployment or fluctuations in the rate of inflation. This being said, it goes without saying that we have no contempt for economics, and will publish studies or information on the subject when possible.

We spent many hours discussing the union question, dealing with historical examples as well as with personal experiences. Although there was little disagreement on the text we are publishing here, some comrades tend more than others to stress what they consider the limited but positive aspect of trade unionism. The text adopted expands on the general ideas contained in "A World to Win" and is not an attempt to be the last word on the subject.

We have been asked our opinion about holding a national libertarian conference as a preliminary step toward the foundation of a national organization. We can all deplore the pre-

*A very minor point: some people, either through ignorance or through a sentimental clinging to the concept of the "anti-imperialist united front," were offended at our calling Ho-Chi-minh a butcher. The facts (if not the details) of Ho's thuggery have been well known for years, even if the left in general has not been eager to disseminate this information. Even the Trotskyists, who bore the brunt of Ho's repression, have, in their abject fawning on Stalinism, soft-pedaled this episode. Those wishing to read more on this subject are referred to *Vietnam: Whose Victory?* by Bob Potter, published by SOLIDARITY.

sent situation in which many small, isolated groups spend much time and energy for meager results; however, a sober look at the problem reveals that this situation cannot be corrected artificially, through administrative measures. With perhaps a few exceptions, the isolation of these groups reflects not only geographical dispersal but also real divergences. Most of these differences are not insurmountable if people are willing to shed their traditional jargon and prejudices to deal with real issues. But as long as we are only engaging in discussions and are not involved in common practice, this process of unification is slow and thankless work, as we learned in the Bay Area. Although it must be done, we are not ready at present to participate in a hasty regroupment that could at best represent a paper unification. We are in general agreement with the ideas put forth by Paul Mattick, Jr. in *Synthesis No. 3*.

The frequency of publication of this newsletter will be determined by several factors, the most important of which is the response from our readers. Although we can always use contributions, we need your comments and suggestions more. Exchange of ideas and information is vital for those who want a radical transformation of society. We hope that *Now & After* will be a means to that end. □

—Feb., 1977

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they countered with proposals for structural changes (industrial unionism substituted for craft unionism) and for the replacement of incumbent bureaucrats with new leaders espousing a more radical line. The Communist Party continued this tradition of reliance on trade union work, now “boring from within,” now forming “dual unions,” according to the dictates of Soviet foreign policy. So successful were they in their union work that they eventually gained control of a sizable segment of the newly formed CIO in the late '30s. As labor bureaucrats these “revolutionaries” acted in so similar a fashion to the common garden variety piecard that when the CIO decided to expel the Communist-controlled unions, they were forced to base their case upon an examination of union convention resolutions on foreign policy matters.

The point is that the essence of unionism—periodic bargaining which contains the class struggle within a narrow institutional framework—imposes itself on the best-intentioned radicals. Either they go the way of all flesh or

they remain isolated cranks uttering ritual denunciations of the “sell-out” bureaucrats. The reality is that the union bureaucracy has developed into a kind of mediating force between workers and management, pursuing interests of its own. Its power rests mainly on its ability to convince both classes that it alone can protect each one from the other. In recent years this “balancing act” has in fact meant a growing alliance with employers and government against the workers.³ In view of the foregoing, the persistent attempts by various Leninists to “conquer” the unions can perhaps be explained by the bureaucratic nature of their own organizations, which expect to run society “on behalf of” the workers.⁴

Central to any fundamental social change, as we see it, is the self-activity of people—the struggles they wage on their *own* behalf. For this reason, it is important in evaluating the unions to pay attention to current attitudes of workers toward them.

Over the past two decades American workers have demonstrated an increasing hostility to unions.⁵ This tendency has been manifested by wildcat strikes and rank and file rejections of proposed contracts. Workers have also become less enthusiastic about the kind of union reform movements that they previously supported, probably because the reformers elected have not differed significantly from the people they replaced.

While they seldom see the unions as the product or expression of their own struggle, workers still tend to support them for providing a kind of elementary protection against the employers. This point has a particular significance for workers in backward industries, people with experience in non-union shops, and those old enough to remember the pre-union days.

What, then, is the alternative? We have already suggested that because of their top-down structure, their spirit of negotiated compromise, their developing collaboration with bosses and government, and their unavoidable role as brokers of labor power, the unions cannot be converted into effective instruments of struggle, much less of social revolution. We have rejected the traditional left's strategy of reforming or capturing the unions as being both unrealistic and bureaucratic. We also believe that when the self-activity of the workers reaches a high point (i.e. a revolution), the unions will be swept aside along with all other institutions tied to the old order.

But both the history of anarcho-syndicalism and the experience of recent wildcat struggles make it seem unlikely that workers could estab-

lish within capitalism alternative rank and file organizations *on a permanent basis*. Due to the nature of unionism, the anarcho-syndicalists⁶ found it impossible to be revolutionary and "trade unionist" at the same time. As for the rank and file assemblies and struggle committees

be waged more and more through temporary *ad hoc* organizations.

It is in this light that we should criticize the view stated, or at least hinted at, by certain "ultra-left" groups that revolutionaries should call on workers to quit (or destroy) the unions.⁷



The People, 1900

that have sprung up recently (notably in Italy), they usually either dissolve when the particular fight ends, or else they are progressively incorporated into the union structure. This implies that in "normal" capitalist times, struggles will

(Let's leave aside the question whether it is the business of revolutionaries to issue such "directives.") This proposal suggests one of two things:

(1) Workers can and should form alternative

bodies that would defend their day-to-day interests better than the unions do.⁸ The examples cited above, as well as the experience of the German councilists after World War I, make us doubt that these bodies can survive as much more than propaganda groups, except in the context of an ascending movement.⁹

(2) Workers should "start the revolution" immediately.¹⁰ To this we respond that the workers will "start the revolution" and go beyond unionism when they are willing and able. While recognizing the connection between day-to-day struggles and revolution, we suspect that abandoning the unions becomes a practical issue only in periods of intense and widespread confrontation.

Whether we like it or not, as long as people see little chance of a major upsurge, as long as they doubt their ability to take matters into their own hands, they will continue to rely in a limited way on the unions. In acknowledging this we don't mean to make a virtue out of it. Our basic conviction is that only the autonomous activity of people can bring about a radical transformation of society—not merely because the capitalists and "leftist" politicians can't do it for them, but also because it is through this activity that they will be transformed into new people capable of building a new society. We believe that the unions, far from aiding this development, are increasingly an obstacle to it. This is why we would not hesitate to encourage people to struggle outside or even against them. In fact such struggles are already occurring; we intend to take part in them. □

NOTES

1. Mills, C. Wright. *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948. p. 6.
2. Quoted in *ILGWU: Fighting for Lower Wages*. Boston: New England Free Press, n.d.
3. Well documented by John Zerzan in *Organized Labor versus "The Revolt Against Work."* Available in *Unions Against Revolution* from Black & Red, P.O. Box 9546, Detroit, Mich. 48202.
4. This mentality is displayed in every issue of *Workers Vanguard* and *Workers Power*.
5. See Brecher, Jeremy & Costell, Tim. *Common Sense for Hard Times*. New York: Two Continents Publishing Group, Institute for Policy Studies, 1976.
6. The example of the Spanish CNT may seem to contradict this assertion. Its relative radicalism, however, can, at least in part, be attributed to the near impossibility of reformism in the Spain of the '20s and '30s. Even so, reformist currents emerged in the CNT from time to time. And when push came to shove in 1936-37, its "influential militants" supported and finally joined a capitalist government.

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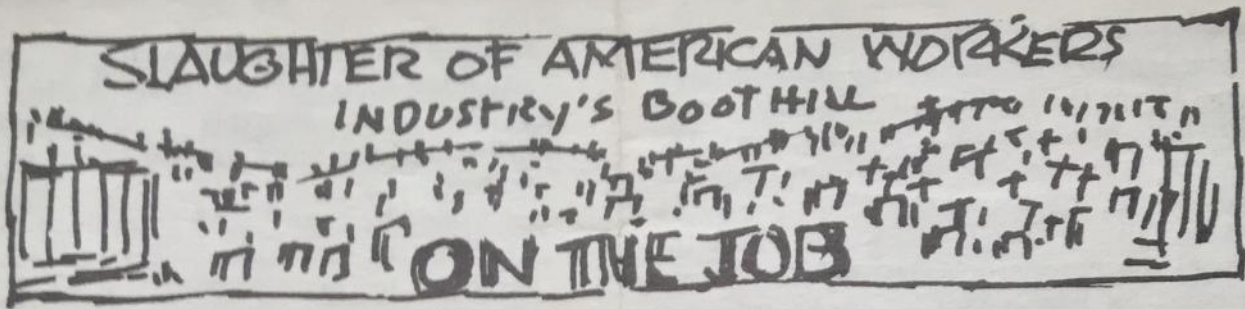
A WORLD TO WIN

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7. See Zerzan's comments near the end of *Trade Unionism or Socialism*, published by Solidarity (London), c/o 123 Lathom Road, London E.6, England.
8. This seems to be the position of G. Munis in *Unions Against Revolution*, the Black & Red pamphlet cited above.
9. The AAUD, a network of workplace committees, was formed in Germany in 1920. Influenced by the IWW and the British shop stewards movement, it rejected parliamentarism and trade unionism, regarding itself as the embryo of the council system that would run communist society. As the post-war revolutionary wave subsided, the AAUD dwindled in size and influence to a small radical sect. It finally abandoned any claims to unite all the workers, joining with an earlier split-off to form an explicit propaganda group, the KAUD.
10. This idea comes across in issue no. 1 of *Forward*, P.O. Box 60161, 1723 W. Devon, Chicago, Ill. 60660. This paper rejects all struggles that are not for "communism."



EXPERIENCES IN A SMALL FACTORY

I recently spent a few months working in a small light manufacturing plant as a mechanical assembler. When I was hired I greeted my new occupation with an ambiguous anxiety. In a way I was eager to start the job, both because I was desperate for money and, having never worked in a factory before, I was curious. At the same time I dreaded the prospect of spending 40 hours of every week as a subordinate doing a repetitive, boring and ultimately deadening job.

As it turned out, all of my fears were realized. Naturally I hated being a worker. On the other hand, all my hopes for collective confrontations with the bosses were necessarily changed into a more practical assessment of my workplace. It became more realistic for me to try to understand why there wasn't a more collective feeling among us and why our attempts to confront our situation were isolated and stunted. This article is an attempt to develop such an understanding.

The company was engaged in making artificial respirators and related machinery. This field is relatively new and the company (a subsidiary of Searle Pharmaceuticals, a multi-national corporation) had been operating for only two years. What was disturbing to the higher-ups was the failure of the company to make a profit during the first year of operation. This resulted in a restructuring of management and production techniques. The process had been set in motion about six months before I was hired and included the merger of the company with another subsidiary (with ensuing rumors that the plant would move to Texas); the purge of most of lower management personnel and their replacement with people trained in the methods of scientific management; and the further Taylorization of the work process.

These various machinations in the halls of management meant a deterioration of working conditions, through harassment, speed-up, increase in the work load, and further division of

labor. A general atmosphere of worry, tension, and demoralization was created as a result.

I was introduced to my co-workers in this setting. My first impression was that the people I worked with had a healthy attitude toward work. There were the usual complaints about working, the supervisors, wages, and unsafe conditions. In addition to the desire to be away from the drudgery of work completely, there was a general feeling that it was pointless and self-defeating to work hard. No matter how hard or fast one worked, management would always want a little (or a lot) more. At the same time we were concerned with the quality of our work, especially since we were making life-saving machines. This desire was frustrated by almost every aspect of the work process: production quotas, division of labor, the boring nature of the work.

But we couldn't always find a way to translate these commonly held attitudes and feelings into collective action against the assaults on our working conditions. There were several reasons for this, one being the demoralized and tense atmosphere in the plant. It was both a cause and an effect of our inability to defend ourselves collectively. Since there was no real feeling of unity we all tried to handle our problems with management individually. The resultant frustration was reflected in our relationships with each other. There was more than the usual number of sarcastic attacks on each others' personalities, physical characteristics and abilities. And we would often spend our breaks in awkward silence, looking at the clock, a kind of testimonial that leisure time is the mere shadow of our un-free labor.

There was also a problem concerning unions. It has been my experience, and that of others I've talked to, that when workers begin to think of collective ways of defending themselves it usually points toward unionization. While I was there we never reached the point of seriously considering it. Had we, though, serious divisions among us would have undoubtedly arisen.

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Several of the people working in production (about one-third) had previously worked at Ruckers, another electronics plant. As I pieced together later, there had been a militant union drive there. Elections were held and the union was voted in. The company contested the vote to the NLRB, claiming that the union (IBEW) had used coercion and other disreputable means to gain votes. At that point a considerable majority of the workers went on strike. All of the people who were subsequently hired at Searle had been strikebreakers.*

There were other reasons, which were also elements in our general lack of collective feeling, why a union drive never cropped up. In the first place no one wanted to take the risks involved, since it was apparent that there would not be 100% solidarity. People were afraid that the company would close down completely if threatened in any way. And lastly, we all seemed to operate within a very passive framework. For example, even those people who favored unionization spoke of it as something that someone else would establish for us.

Since lack of union protection made full scale resistance too risky, we had to rely on other, more sporadic means of coping with our worsening situation, from absenteeism to taking cigarette breaks in the bathroom. The old plant (we moved to a new building about four months after I was hired) lent itself to goofing off. The supervisor was isolated in his own cubby hole, there were high shelves to hide behind and a few rooms that were separate from the main assembly line. At opportune moments two or three of us would be able to stop working almost completely and talk or just relax.

There were also instances of spontaneous attempts at collective activity. In fact, one of the most surprising and far-reaching of these attempts was facilitated by the semi-freedom we had in communicating during work time.

About two months prior to the company's move to a new building 20 miles away we began to realize the disadvantages it would mean for us. For some of us it would add up to two hours to the work day in commuting time, not to mention the increased traveling expenses. Suddenly this topic was being heatedly discussed among all of us. We asked for pay raises, a plea summarily dismissed by management. This heightened our anger. What resulted was a short, non-organized, unconscious work stoppage. Most of us spent the better part of one morning standing around complaining to each other and talking about possible actions we could take. I heard one of the few men that worked in pro-

duction blow up at one of the leads, saying that something had better be done to improve working conditions. The little discussion group I was involved in talked over the possibility of a strike (without a union). Someone mentioned that it was one way we could exert pressure on management but that there was always the possibility that scabs would be hired. Another woman (in fact a previous strike-breaker and someone who usually spoke in favor of management) countered with the assertion that we alone were the people who had the knowledge to make the machines. "Shit, all we have to do to stop scabs is burn the blueprints!" she said.

As soon as management got wind of how widespread the discontent was, they announced that there would be an "air-all-complaints" meeting during the afternoon break. At the very mention of the meeting the momentum of our budding collective activity was broken. The emphasis was shifted from group action to individual responsibility, summed up in the statement, "If you don't air your complaints at the meeting then you have no right to gripe." A couple of us put forward a suggestion to hold off meeting with the supervisors until we could meet together and get our own ideas and plans together. There was no real response to this and the proposal wasn't widely circulated.

The meeting, as was expected, worked to the advantage of management. We backed off on all our complaints, and the meeting ended on the note, "we-can-work-out-our-problems-if-we-try."

Our discontent remained, though, directed as much at each other as at the company. Again it was expressed in individual terms. A lot of people felt that they, personally, had been let down by the rest of us, and concluded that it wasn't worth it to stick their necks out for a bunch of slobs who would ultimately chicken out.

What seemed to be a more likely explanation to me was that we were all afraid of the possible consequences. What if they fired us? What if the plant closed down? And we weren't sure of each other. There were real differences between us (e.g. on the unions). We would have to find a way to overcome our fears and mistrust before we could begin to see our common interests and effectively act on them.

Our momentary proto-uprising was positive in that it was a step in that direction. It signalled a break (although it lasted for only an instant) from the atomized way in which we usually handled problems and pointed toward

*The strike eventually failed and months later the company moved its operations to another state.

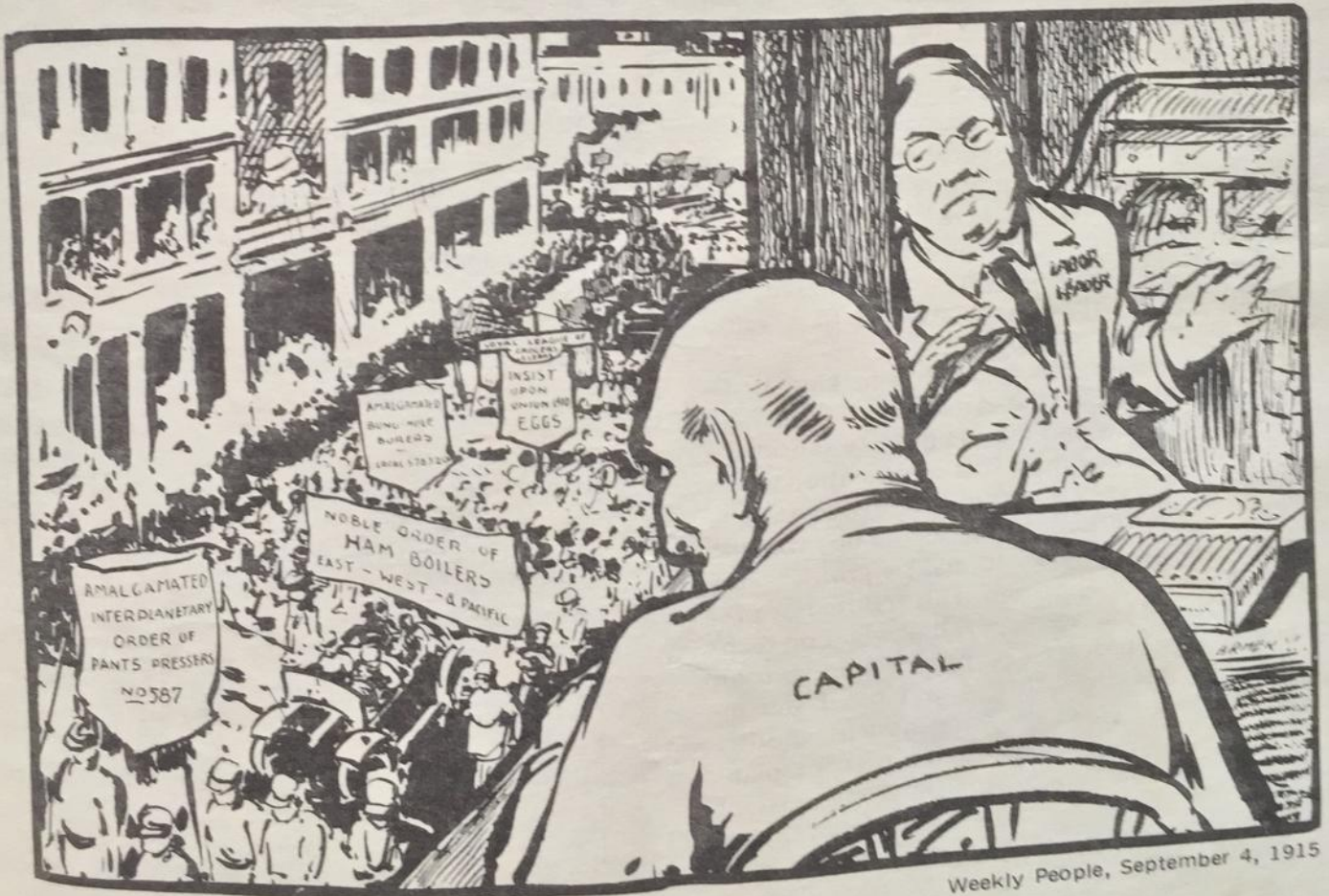
better relationships between us.

A few weeks later we moved into the new building. It was the fulfillment of management's desire to have total control over our actions. The production area was one huge room with row after row of workbenches. There were no shelves or tall structures that would block the view from the supervisor's glass cubicle. Now I knew what he had meant when he told me, "Things will be different in the new building." It became even clearer two weeks later when I was laid off along with five other workers.

There are many aspects of my experiences at Searle that are not touched upon in this article. It has not been my intention to paint a one-sidedly pessimistic picture, but for me, the most

salient feature of work is that it is a conflictual situation for everyone involved. How a group of workers handles this conflict in many ways influences the more general fabric of life in a factory.

At Searle, a small workshop, there were many obstacles to our self-activity: e.g. fear of victimization by management; fear of a runaway shop. These obstacles and frustrations crept into our personal relationships, creating further obstacles. But it is only through collective activity (and we got a glimpse of it at Searle) that a worsening work situation can be dealt with. Hopefully, as working conditions continue on their downhill trend at Searle, the workers there will again begin to act along these lines. —S.K. □



Weekly People, September 4, 1915

HOW MUCH ON THE HOOF?