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Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The union question](#) ^[1]

Unions Against the Working Class - Preface (2005)

3621 reads

In the 19th century workers fought in the streets in order to defend their union organisations and to impose their right to exist on the ruling class. Today, the governments of the ruling class fight to prevent workers in struggle from going beyond the unions and to stop them leaving these organisations.

Are the unions today organisations which defend the interests of the working class?

Can the unions in our epoch prevent or even limit the permanent attack on the living conditions of the workers?

What is the future of the workers' struggle?

How can we struggle?

It is these questions that our pamphlet addressed when it first appeared in 1974. It elaborated the position of the ICC set out in our Platform:

"In the nineteenth century, the period of capitalism's greatest prosperity, the working class, often through bitter and bloody struggles, built up permanent trade organisations whose role was to defend its economic interests: the trade unions.

*"These organs played an **essential** role in the struggle for reforms and for the substantial improvements in the workers' living conditions, which the system could then afford. They also constituted a focus for the regroupment of the class, for the development of its solidarity and consciousness so that revolutionaries could intervene within them and help make them serve as 'schools for communism'. Although the existence of these organs was linked in an indissoluble way to the existence of wage labour, and although even in this period they were often substantially*

bureaucratised, the unions nevertheless were authentic organs of the class to the extent that the abolition of wage labour was not yet on the historical agenda.

*"As capitalism entered its decadent phase, it was no longer able to accord reforms and improvements to the working class. Having lost all possibility of fulfilling their initial function of defending working class interests, and confronted with an historic situation in which only the abolition of wage labour and with it the disappearance of trade unions was on the agenda, the trade unions became the true **defenders of capitalism**, agencies of the bourgeois state within the working class. This is the only way they could survive in the new period. This evolution was aided by the bureaucratisation of the unions prior to decadence and by the relentless tendency within decadence for the state to absorb all the structures of social life.*

The anti-working class role of the unions was decisively demonstrated for the first time during World War I when alongside the social democratic parties they helped to mobilise the workers for the imperialist slaughter. In the revolutionary wave which followed the war, the unions did everything in their power to smother the proletariat's attempts to destroy capitalism. Since then they have been kept alive not by the working class, but the capitalist state for which they fulfil a number of important functions:

- *actively participating in the efforts of the capitalist state to rationalise the economy, regularise the sale of labour power and intensify exploitation;*
- *sabotaging the class struggle from within either by derailing strikes and revolts into sectional dead-ends, or by confronting autonomous movements with open repression."*

(Platform and Manifesto of the ICC. 1980. Point 7).

This is the essential content of this pamphlet. But has its analysis been confirmed in the decades since 1974? The last 30 years have been tumultuous with a multitude of wars, famines, economic crises, strikes and revolts. The period has been especially marked by the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, bringing the Cold War to an end and unleashing a new phase of greater international instability and imperialist confrontation. But beneath all of these developments, and ultimately determining them, has been the gradual, but inexorable, deterioration of the global capitalist economy. The profound contradictions at the heart of capitalism that plunged it into its period of decadence some 90 years ago continue to work away. One of the fundamental consequences of this is the deepening of the antagonism between the principal classes of society: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Despite all of the efforts of the ruling class, the absolutely irreconcilable opposition between the logic of the capitalist economy and the needs both of the working class, and of humanity as a whole, tends to become more exposed.

All the elements of reality, all the essential tendencies of decadent capitalism and the class struggle upon which the analyses of this pamphlet are based, have been confirmed despite all the ebbs and flows of the class struggle at the day to day level:

- the impossibility of reforming capitalism to the advantage of the working class;
- the necessity of a massive, radical and political response from the workers;
- the impossibility of a good trade unionism;
- the historic responsibility of the working class faced with the future of humanity.

Our pamphlet retains all of its validity. The examples that were given in 1974 to illustrate our position are those that were available at that time, but we could find many others in the intervening period

that are just as convincing.¹ Even if the examples from this period are not quite so memorable today, they do help us to show that the role played by the unions as enemies of the proletariat and the methods they use to defend the bourgeois order have not changed throughout this time. Furthermore, the pamphlet was also part of the effort of the new generation of militants that emerged from the struggles of 1968 to rediscover the political heritage of the communist left and to apply it to the times they were living in. It therefore also has some historical significance in itself.

Nonetheless, we think it important to briefly show how our analyses have been confirmed over the last thirty years by considering each of the points above in the light of the practical experience of the class struggle these last decades.

1. The impossibility of reforming capitalism to the advantage of the working class

The last thirty years have seen a continual deepening of the economic crisis of capitalism and the exhaustion of all of the 'solutions' proffered by the ruling class, whether the Keynesianism of the 70s, the Reaganomics of the 80s or the 'dot.com revolution' of the 90s.² *"The capitalist system has entered its sixth phase of recession since the resurgence of the crisis at the end of the Sixties: 1967, 1970-71, 1974-75, 1980-82, 1991-93 and 2001-?, without counting the collapse of the South East Asian countries, of Brazil, etc in the years 1997-98. Since the Sixties, each decade has shown a mean growth rate lower than the preceding one:*

1962-69 = 5.2%

1970-79 = 3.5%

1980-89 = 2.8%

1990-99 = 2.6%

2000-02 = 2.2%"

(*International Review* no. 114, "The reality of 'economic prosperity' laid bare by the crisis")

For decades now capitalism has only been able to survive through assorted monetary and financial manipulations that ultimately only undermine its very foundations. In particular, the continued accumulation of debt, while allowing a certain economic health today, only worsens the chronic problems that endanger the very life of capitalism and threaten ever more serious acute crises tomorrow.

Absolute pauperisation

For the working class it is no longer just a matter of not being able to extract any lasting improvements from capitalism, but of being subjected to a sustained assault on all aspects of its standard of living world-wide. It is no longer only an increase of exploitation which the working class must combat, but the loss of the little that it thought was 'acquired'. The capitalist machine is jammed up. It is increasingly unable to absorb more workers and spits out those from whom it can no longer extract surplus value into the street to live and die in poverty and misery. This has been true for the under-developed countries for many decades and is now becoming increasingly true for the industrial heartlands as well.

"The main indicator of the advance of the crisis is the degradation of the living conditions of the working class...In order to sustain the levels of debt, to jettison ballast and eliminate all unprofitable activity, and to let loose a furious competitive battle, all capitalist countries have pushed the worst of the crisis onto the working class. Since the 80's the lives of the 'privileged' workers of the central countries - here we are not talking about the frightening conditions of their brothers in the Third World! - have been branded by the red-hot iron of mass unemployment, the turning of permanent working into temporary, the proliferation of wretchedly paid part-time jobs, the lengthening of the working day through a multitude of subterfuges including the '35 hour week', the cutting of subsidies and social spending, the steep rise in accidents at work.

"Unemployment is the main and the surest indicator of capitalism's historic crisis. The ruling class in the main industrialised countries understands the gravity of the problem and has developed a policy of politically covering up unemployment, so as to hide it from the workers' and the population's eyes. This policy has condemned a mass of workers to a tragic merry-go-round (a temporary job, several months of unemployment, a part time job, a training scheme, another period of unemployment...and so on and so on) together with a scandalous adulteration of the statistics, which has allowed them to broadcast its 'permanent success' in eradicating unemployment.

"A study of the percentage of unemployed between 25 and 55 years old gives more precise figures than the general unemployment figures which dilute the percentages by mixing them up with youngsters (18-25 years) many of whom are in full time education and workers who have taken early retirement (56-65 years):

Unemployment levels between the ages of 25 and 55 (1988-95)

France	11.2%
Great Britain	13.1%
USA	14.1%
Germany	15.0%

"In Great Britain the percentage of families where all the members are unemployed has continued to rise:

1975	6.5%
1976	16.4%
1977	19.15%"

(International Review no. 106, "Report on the economic crisis")

For those in work the reality is increasing hours and workloads and decreasing real wages: "Wages have fallen continuously for more than 10 years... 'The average weekly wage - adjusted for inflation - of 80% of workers in the United States fell by 18% between 1973 and 1995 from \$315 to \$285 a week... These figures have been confirmed during the last five years: unit labour costs in the US fell by 0.8% between July 1999 and June 2000. In 1973 the average hourly wage was \$11.50 whilst in

1999 it was \$10. The level of exploitation in the US has risen relentlessly: in order to receive the same level of income (discounting inflation) workers had to work 20% more hours in 1999 than 1980" (ibid).

The result of this is an increase in poverty: "The UNO has produced an index called the Index of Human Poverty (IHP). The 1998 figures for the percentage of the population that live below the IHP minimum are:

USA	16.5%
Great Britain	15.1%
France	11.9%
Italy	11.6%
Germany	10.4%" (ibid).

A recent study in Britain, using various measures of poverty, found that in 1999/2000 25% of the population were living in poverty (*Poverty: the facts*. Child Poverty Action Group 2001).

A major focus of the attack on the working class' living conditions has been the social wage. In the US millions are unable to afford any medical cover: "in 2001, according to the New York Times, 1.4 million people, 800,000 of whom earned more than \$75,000 lost their health insurance" (*Le Monde Diplomatique* December 2003 - English language edition). "In Britain the rationing of health care through lack of resources and lengthy waiting lists effectively denies care to millions. In France plans are being drawn up to significantly change the funding of healthcare, pushing the cost onto the patient" (ibid).

At the time of writing, the most recent attack is on workers' pensions. Across the developed world the bourgeoisie are concluding that workers are living too long and being given too much money. "The British case is a particularly edifying example of what the working class can expect: since the 'Thatcher years', 20 years ago, pensions have been based on private pension funds. But the situation has become much worse since then. By transforming pensions into private funds, the idea was that shares in these funds would bring in a lot of money as the stock exchange rose. The opposite has happened. With a collapse in share prices, hundreds of thousands of workers are reduced to poverty (the basic state pension is about €120 a week). Some 20% of pensioners live below the poverty line, condemning many of them to continue working beyond the age of 70, generally in poorly paid and precarious jobs" (*International Review* no. 114 "The massive attacks of capital demand a mass response from the working class"). Workers face the prospect of working to 70 or beyond, of paying more in pension contributions, or of enduring even greater poverty in old age. That living longer should become something to fear is truly a condemnation of the inhuman world that capitalism has created.

Socialism or barbarism: the choice facing the working class

It is possible to sum up the real acceleration of the historic decadence of capitalism in two figures: in the middle of the 80s more than 30 million people per year were dying of hunger in the world (more than during the four years of the First World War!) while at the same time the world's military expenses were greater than a million dollars a minute! During this time, the production of the means of subsistence in every country was reduced because of... overproduction.

Capitalism's tendency towards barbarism has accelerated over the last two decades as it entered its phase of decomposition. Arising from the inability of the ruling class to impose its solution to the economic crisis in the form of war, on the one hand, and from the inability of the working class to impose its solution of revolution on the other, all of the contradictions of capitalism pile up. Devoid of any perspective for the future all of the worst features of capitalism are magnified in a war of each against all: *"...as its name suggests, decomposition leads to social dislocation and putrefaction, to the void. Left to its own devices, it will lead humanity to the same fate as world war. In the end, it is all the same whether we are wiped out in a rain of thermonuclear bombs, or by pollution, radioactivity from nuclear power stations, famine, epidemics, and the massacres of innumerable small wars (where nuclear weapons might also be used). The only difference between these two forms of annihilation lies in that one is quick, while the other would be slower, and would consequently provoke still more suffering"* (International Review no. 62, "Decomposition, final phase in the decadence of capitalism").

No, the last decades have not invalidated the basic idea of the pamphlet, according to which it is not possible to reform capitalism or draw from it lasting reforms for the benefit of the exploited. While in the 19th century, during capitalism's period of ascendancy, such reforms were possible, this is no longer the case in its period of decadence. Today the total opposition between the logic of capitalist economic laws and the most elementary interests of the working class deepens more and more.

Increasingly, the survival of capitalism involves the absolute pauperisation of the proletariat; increasingly, the very survival of the proletariat demands that it take the class struggle to more global, more unified and more radical levels. Ultimately, the choice facing the working class and the whole of humanity is socialism or barbarism.

2. The necessity for a massive, radical and political response by the working class

Has the experience of the class struggle these last decades confirmed not only the *necessity*, but also the *possibility* of such a response by the working class?

In the final analysis, the sole response which would allow the proletariat to definitively stop the machine which crushes and oppresses it every day, would be a total, social revolution: the destruction of the machine of exploitation itself, the installation of new social relations based on production for human needs instead of the accumulation of capital. At the end of the day, there is no other alternative.

The loud proclamations that "another world is possible", which flow from the mouths of today's anti-globalisation movement, fall on the rocky ground of their illusions in the ability of the state to offer protection against the infamous multi-national and trans-national corporations and the ideology of 'neo-liberalism'. All they can summon up is an alternative capitalist world, a nostalgic vision of Keynesianism and the welfare state, oblivious to the fact that these were the precursors of today's more open exploitation. Such a vision is a trap for the working class, because it seeks to keep its struggle within capitalism, choosing between the 'social' and the 'neo-liberal' models, which are just two faces of the same coin.

It is essential to recognise, as all great revolutionaries have, from Marx, to Lenin and Luxemburg, that the immediate struggles of the proletariat today are the vital link to its revolutionary struggle tomorrow. To separate the two, whether ignoring the daily struggle as do many supposedly 'pure' revolutionaries, or seeing only the daily struggle as reformists, including the anti-globalisation movement, do, is to condemn the working class to sterility.

Revolution doesn't 'replace' the daily resistance of the exploited class: it is the logical outcome of it. The daily struggle reinforces the unity of the working class; it deepens its understanding of its struggle and of the enemy that it faces, and so prepares it for the revolutionary struggle to come.

Today, the working class has been under a sustained and intense assault from the ruling class for many years. The form of the attack varies - in some countries a gradual, piecemeal, approach has been successfully used, in others a more overt, confrontational approach has been employed - but the outcome is always a worsening of the living conditions of the working class.

What can the working class do in order to limit and push back, at least momentarily, the offensive of the bourgeoisie?

The dominant class will not respond to appeals, which it only sees as a sign of weakness. It will only retreat when it is confronted with such a force that it can do nothing else without risking a dangerous destabilisation of its political power.

This balance of class forces works at both a historical level and a more immediate level, but it is the former that is most important. At the historical level, this balance of forces determines the direction in which history is moving, either towards world war or towards a confrontation between bourgeoisie and proletariat: this is what the ICC has termed the course of history. The bourgeoisie was able to launch the first and second world wars because the proletariat had been defeated. In the one through the internal disintegration of much of the Second International due to the weight of reformism and opportunism, in the other because of the defeat of the revolutionary wave that began in 1917 and the subsequent physical and ideological crushing of the revolutionary proletariat. It took the emergence of a new generation of workers after the massacres of 1939-45, and the return of the open crisis after the years of post-war reconstruction, for the historic course to turn again towards decisive confrontation between the classes, reopening the perspective of communism. The strikes of 1968 and the years that followed were the expression of this change. The course of history has not been reversed since, despite in particular the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the resulting retreat in working class struggle.

Within this framework there have certainly been shifts in the balance of class forces but without any decisive change. Indeed, this relative stalemate between the classes is at the root of the present, and final, phase in the life of capitalism, its decomposition. However, this stalemate is not marked by a lessening of social tensions but by their increase and multiplication. The years since 1989, when the working class has seemed to be in retreat, show every bit as much as those before it, when the working class was launching international waves of struggle, that the only language possible between the two antagonistic classes of society, is that of *force*, of class violence. The possibility that the historic course offers to the working class and the whole of humanity has to find expression in the daily struggle of the working class through the determined effort to establish a favourable balance of class forces. This can only be achieved if the proletariat:

- refuses any attitude of resigned passivity;
- gives itself the means to unify its forces beyond professional, racial and national categories;
- takes its combat directly to the centre of power of the dominant class: its state and its government;
- conceives its struggle as one of class against class, and assumes the defence of its own interests against the economic logic of the system.

The experience of workers' struggles since 1968 confirms this reality. There is a setback or a hold on the struggles when they do not spread, or radicalise; there is success when, on the contrary, the struggle spreads, providing itself with a framework of unitary, autonomous organisation, co-ordinated

and centralised, when the struggle remains firmly on its own class terrain by clearly affirming its working class character, and when it puts forward common unifying demands.

Thirty years of struggle

In the first fifteen years after the appearance of this pamphlet, the struggle of the working class went through periods of greater and lesser intensity within a historical and international dynamic of developing struggle. In the next fifteen years, following the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, the class struggle went into a serious retreat and the working class experienced an immense disorientation and loss of confidence, from which it is still recovering. But even at the worst moment, it has never lost its potential and has never ceased to pose a threat to the ruling class at the historical level. Throughout all of these developments the ICC has sought to understand the balance of class forces and the perspective for the class struggle at the international and historical level. In 1988, on the 20th anniversary of May 1968, we reviewed the evolution of the class struggle over the two preceding decades:

"During these years the class struggle hasn't developed in a linear way. On the contrary it has gone through a complex, uneven development, full of advances and retreats, passing through successive waves interspersed with periods of calm and counter-offensive by the bourgeoisie. If you look at these 20 years of struggle on a global scale - the only way which allows you to grasp the dynamic of the proletarian struggle - you can distinguish three major waves of workers' struggles.

"The first wave, opened up by May '68, lasted until 1974. For around 5 years, in nearly all countries, both the industrialised and the less developed, in the east as well as the west, workers' struggles went through a new development. Already in 1969 in Italy (the 'hot autumn'), a powerful wave of strikes in which clashes between workers and unions multiplied, confirmed that May '68 had indeed started a new international dynamic in the class struggle. In the same year in Argentina (Cordoba, Rosario) the working class launched massive struggles. In 1970 in Poland, the workers' struggle reached new heights: in generalised street confrontations with the militia, the working class forcing the government to back down. For the workers in the Eastern bloc countries it confirmed that it was possible to fight against state totalitarianism; for the workers of the whole world, the myth of the working class nature of the eastern bloc countries suffered a blow. Then, in this international context of class combativity, particularly significant struggles developed in Spain (Barcelona 1971), in Belgium and in Britain (1972).

"However, after 1973 the mobilisation of the workers was to start slowing down. Despite the important struggles waged by the working classes in Portugal and Spain when the regimes in these countries were being democratised (1974-77), despite a new wave of strikes in Poland in 1976, on the global level - and in particular in western Europe - there was a clear reduction in the level of workers' mobilisations.

"But in 1978 a new wave of workers' struggles exploded on an international scale. Shorter in time than the previous one, we saw, between 1978 and 1980, a new deployment of proletarian forces, striking in its international simultaneity. The massive strikes of the oil workers in Iran in '78, those of the German and Brazilian metal workers in '78 and '80; the miners' struggle in the USA in 79 then the New York transport strike of '80; the violent struggles of the French steel workers of '79 and the Rotterdam dockers' strike in the same year; the 'winter of discontent' in Britain in 78/79 which led to the fall of the Labour government, and the big steel strike at the beginning of 1980; the strikes in Togliattigrad in the USSR in '80 and the struggle in South Korea at the same time... all these struggles confirmed that the social calm of the mid-70s had merely been temporary. Then in August

'80, the most important workers' struggle since the 1920s broke out in Poland. Drawing the lessons of the experiences of '70 and '76, the working class displayed an extraordinary level of combativity, of organisation, of control over its own forces. But the dynamic was to falter in front of two deadly obstacles: first, the illusions the workers in the east have in 'western democracy' and particularly in trade unionism; and secondly, the national framework. Solidarnosc, the new 'democratic' union, formed under the attentive eyes of the 'democratic' forces of the western bloc, zealously propagating the most ingrained nationalist ideology, was in the forefront of distilling and cultivating this poison. The failure of the mass strike in Poland, resulting in the military coup by Jaruzelski in December 1981, clearly posed the question of the responsibility of the proletariat of the more central countries, those sections of the class with the greatest historical experience: not only at the level of their capacity to advance the internationalisation of the workers' struggle, but also because of the contribution they can make to overcoming illusions in 'western democracy' which still weigh heavily in many countries.

"The fall of the Labour government in Britain in the face of a wave of strikes illustrated what was to be the response of the bourgeoisie to this second wave: the 'left' in government had been discredited. It was essential to put the left in opposition where it could carry out its sabotage from within the struggles, allowing the government, usually in the hands of the right, to speak the language of 'truth'. This strategy had, and still has, an effect.

"After the period of reflux in the international class struggle following the defeat in Poland, a new wave of struggles began at the end of '83 with the public sector strike in Belgium. In Hamburg in West Germany there was the occupation of the shipyards. In 1984 Italy saw a powerful wave of strikes against the elimination of the sliding scale, culminating in a demonstration of nearly a million workers in Rome.

"In Britain there was the great miners' strike which lasted a year and which, despite its exemplary courage and combativity, showed more than any struggle the ineffectiveness in our epoch of long isolated strikes. In the same year there were important struggles in India, USA, Tunisia and Morocco.

"In 1985 there was the massive strike in Denmark, and several waves of wildcat strikes shook that other 'socialist paradise': Sweden; the first big strikes in Japan (railways); strikes in Sao Paulo when Brazil was in full transition towards 'democracy'; there were also important struggles in Argentina, Bolivia, South Africa, and Yugoslavia. 1986 was marked by the massive strike in Belgium in the spring, paralysing the country and extending by itself in spite of the unions. At the end of '86 and the beginning of '87 the railway workers in France developed a struggle which was remarkable for the workers' attempts to organise independently of the unions. In spring '87 there was a whole series of strikes in Spain directly opposing the plans of the 'socialist' government. Then there were the struggles of the miners in South Africa, the electricity workers in Mexico and a big wave of strikes in South Korea.

"Through a good part of the year there were also the struggles of the school workers in Italy who managed to organise outside of and against the unions. Finally, the recent mobilisation of the workers of the Ruhr in Germany and the resurgence of strikes in Britain in 1988...confirmed that this third international wave of workers struggles, which has now lasted for more than four years, is far from over". (International Review 53, "20 years since May 68 - Class struggle: the maturation of the conditions for revolution").

The article goes on to identify the lessons learnt by the proletariat during this period: "a loss of illusions in the political forces of the left of capital and first and foremost the unions towards which

illusions have given way to distrust and, increasingly, an open hostility...the growing tendency to abandon ineffective forms of mobilisation, the dead-ends which the unions have used so many times to bury the combativity of the workers, such as days of action, token demonstrations, long and isolated strikes... the attempt to extend the struggle...the attempt by workers to take the struggle into their own hands..." (ibid). The article concludes by noting that, while "it is less easy to talk of revolution in 1988 than in 1968", not only had the revolutionary objective been affirmed but that "the conditions for its realisation haven't stopped maturing" (ibid).

Just a year later, faced with the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the ICC recognised that the situation was greatly changed:

*"The historic crisis of Stalinism and the collapse of the bloc it dominated, constitute the most important historic facts since the second world war. An event on such a scale cannot fail to have its repercussions, and indeed is already doing so, on the consciousness of the working class, all the more so since it involves an ideology and political system that was presented for more than a half a century by all sectors of the bourgeoisie as 'socialist' or 'working class'. The disappearance of Stalinism is the disappearance of the symbol and spearhead of the most terrible counter-revolution in history. But this does not mean that the development of the consciousness of the world proletariat will be facilitated by it. On the contrary. Even in its death throes, Stalinism is rendering a last service to the domination of capital; in decomposing, its cadaver continues to pollute the atmosphere that the proletariat breathes. For the dominant sectors of the bourgeoisie, the final collapse of Stalinist ideology, the 'democratic', liberal and nationalist movements that are sweeping the eastern countries, provide a golden opportunity to unleash and intensify their campaigns of mystification. The identification that is systematically established between Stalinism and communism, the lie repeated a thousand times, and today being wielded more than ever, according to which the proletarian revolution can only end in disaster, will for a whole period gain an added impact within the ranks of the working class. We thus have to expect a temporary retreat in the consciousness of the proletariat. (...) In particular, reformist ideology will weigh very heavily on the struggle in the period ahead, greatly facilitating the action of the unions. (...) Given the historic importance of the events that are determining it, the present retreat of the proletariat - although it doesn't call into question the historic course or the general perspective of class confrontations - is going to be much deeper than the one which accompanied the defeat of 1981 in Poland." ("Theses on the economic and political crisis in the eastern countries", *International Review* no. 60).*

Underneath, and driving this development, was the passage of capitalism into a new historical phase: that of its internal decay, of its decomposition. The ICC had identified the existence of this phenomenon before 1989, but the collapse of the Eastern bloc led it to deepen its analysis: *"This phase of decomposition is fundamentally determined by unprecedented and unexpected historical conditions: a situation of temporary 'social stalemate' due to the mutual 'neutralisation' of the two fundamental classes, each preventing the other from providing a definitive response to the capitalist crisis"* (*International Review* no. 62, "Decomposition, final phase in the decadence of capitalism"). This presents a serious danger to the working class:

"In fact we must be especially clear on the danger of decomposition for the proletariat's ability to raise itself to the level of its historic task. Just as the unleashing of the imperialist war at the heart of the 'civilised' world was 'a bloodletting which [may have] mortally weakened the European workers' movement', which 'threatened to bury the perspectives for socialism under the ruins piled up by imperialist barbarism' by 'cutting down on the battlefield (...) the best forces (...) of international socialism, the vanguard troops of the whole world proletariat' (Rosa Luxemburg, The Crisis in the Social-Democracy), so the decomposition of society, which can only get worse, may in the years to

come cut down the best forces of the proletariat and definitively compromise the perspective of communism. This is because, as capitalism rots, the resulting poison infects all the elements of society, including the proletariat.

"In particular, although the weakening grip of bourgeois ideology as a result of capitalism's entry into decadence was one of the conditions for revolution, the decomposition of the same ideology as it is developing appears essentially as an obstacle to the development of proletarian consciousness.

" (...) The different elements which constitute the strength of the working class directly confront the various facets of this ideological decomposition:

- **solidarity and collective action** are faced with the atomisation of 'look out for number one';
- the **need for organisation** confronts social decomposition, the disintegration of the relationships which form the basis for all social life;
- the proletariat's **confidence in the future and in its own strength** is constantly sapped by the all-pervasive despair and nihilism within society;
- **consciousness, lucidity, coherent and unified thought, the taste for theory**, have a hard time making headway in the midst of the flight into illusions, drugs, sects, mysticism, the rejection or destruction of thought which are characteristic of our epoch" (ibid).

This analysis has been fully confirmed by developments over the last decade and a half. For the first three years there was a profound retreat in the class struggle as the full force of the campaigns about the 'death of communism' and the 'victory of capitalism' hit home. But by 1992 there were signs that the working class had not lost its ability or its will to struggle. Beginning with a large mobilisation in Italy in the autumn of 1992, with a million workers taking part in one strike, the resurgence spread to a number of other countries. In October there was a struggle in Britain against pit closures. At the end of 1993 there were movements in Germany, Belgium, Spain, and in Italy again. However, while these struggles showed a returning militancy that broke the calm of the period since 1989, they were marked by serious confusions: "...what mainly characterises this resurgence is the hold the unions have over the current struggles, the almost total absence of autonomous initiatives on the part of the workers, the fact that the rejection of unionism is very weak. If the consciousness, however vague, of the possibility of overthrowing capitalism is lacking, combativity is caught in a trap. Restricted to formulating demands within the capitalist framework, it finds itself on the home ground of unionism." (International Review no. 76, "The difficult resurgence of the class struggle").

Faced with this challenge from the working class the bourgeoisie stepped up its campaign. Ever since the collapse of the Eastern bloc it had sought to discredit the very idea of communism, the fact that there is an alternative to capitalism, with the lie that Stalinism equals communism and that the revolutionary struggle of the working class can only lead to bloody dictatorship. Now it sought to prevent the anger and militancy that it recognised in the working class from pushing it into struggles where it would begin to overcome its confusion and disorientation. The bourgeoisie sought to use the combativeness stirring in the working class against the development of its consciousness by keeping it trapped within the capitalist framework. Above all, this meant reinforcing the grip of the trade unions. To this end a whole series of manoeuvres were launched that aimed to present the unions as the only real defenders of the working class. At the forefront of these were the strikes in France at the end of 1995 where, through a series of provocations, the ruling class was able to draw substantial parts of the working class into action behind the unions and to create the illusion that a victory of some sort had been gained. The unions were cast in a radical light, leading a movement in

which there were mass assemblies and delegations and in which 'radical' rank and file unionists played a leading role. This was followed by movements in other countries. Some, such as those in Germany and Belgium, followed the French example, while others, such as the dockers' strike in Britain and the UPS strike in America were more adapted to the circumstances in the particular country.

This set the pattern for a campaign of the type of deliberate provocations that has always been one of the most important weapons in the bourgeoisie's arsenal. However, even at its most successful, this did not mean that the ruling class had mastered the working class: *"The scale of these manoeuvres did not call into question the underlying reality of the revival of class struggle. In fact, it could be said that these manoeuvres, for all that the bourgeoisie was usually one step ahead of the workers, provoking movements in unfavourable conditions and often around false issues, were a measure of the danger posed by the working class..."* (International Review no. 96 "Report on the class struggle"). This has been shown by the necessity for the ruling class to constantly adapt its weapon, to keep up with the evolution of the class struggle. In 1998 500,000 workers participated in strikes in Denmark (out of a working population of just 2 million): *"Despite the failure of the strike and the manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie, the significance of this movement is not the same as that of December 1995 in France. In particular, whereas in France the return to work went along with a certain euphoria, a feeling of victory which left no room for putting unionism in doubt, the end of the Danish strike brought with it a feeling of defeat, and few illusions in the unions. This time, the bourgeoisie's objective was not to launch a huge operation to restore credibility to the unions internationally, as in 1995, but to 'wet the powder', to anticipate the discontent and growing combativity which is asserting itself little by little in Denmark, as it is in other European countries and elsewhere"* (International Review no. 94 "Against the poverty and barbarity of capital. One answer: international proletarian struggle").

It is at this level that the class struggle has taken place in recent years. The process has not been one of waves of struggle as between 1968 and 1989, but a more diffuse and contradictory struggle in which the real potential of the working class is seen more in the continual manoeuvres of the ruling class than in the moments of unofficial action by the working class, significant as these are. If the ruling class shows again and again that it is able to get ahead of individual struggles, or even of particular parts of the working class, it has never been able to strike a definitive or even long-lasting blow against the militancy of the working class as a whole. However, it is at the level of its consciousness, of its understanding of the relationship between the classes, of the methods of struggle and of the ultimate purpose of struggle that the proletariat faces the greatest difficulties. The disorientation and loss of confidence that the working class experienced after 1989 still weigh on it, as do the illusions in democracy and the possibility of winning gains from capitalism that it had challenged but not shaken off between 1968 and 1989. However, the deepening of the economic crisis, the ever more direct attacks on the working class as well as the revelation of capitalism's dead-end expressed in the current proliferation of wars, creates again the conditions through which the working class can understand the truth about capitalism.

"The Communist Manifesto describes the class struggle as a 'more or less veiled civil war'. The bourgeoisie, in trying to create the illusion of a social order in which class conflict is a thing of the past, is nevertheless forced to accelerate the very conditions that polarise society into two camps, divided by irreconcilable antagonisms. The more bourgeois society sinks into its death agony, the more the veils hiding this 'civil war' will be cast aside. Faced with ever-increasing economic, social and military contradictions, the bourgeoisie is obliged to increase its totalitarian grip over society, to outlaw any challenge to its order, to demand more and more sacrifices for less and less reward." (International Review no. 99 "Report on the class struggle")

The last thirty years as a whole confirm not only the necessity for a massive, radical and political response from the working class but also that it is a realistic possibility. The workers' combativeness remains intact. While the period between 1968 and 1989 was marked by tendencies within the proletariat to challenge the unions, and to take control of its struggle, the class still lacked the essential political understanding of its enemy, and of the wider context and goals of its struggle. Today, the deepening of the crisis and the sharper polarisation between the classes that actually exists beneath the surface, creates the conditions in which a real politicisation of consciousness is possible; but at this point it is a situation that has only just begun to evolve. *"The large-scale mobilisation of the spring of 2003 in France and Austria represent a turning point in the class struggles since 1989. They are a first significant step in the recovery of workers' militancy after the longest period of reflux since 1968...the simultaneity of the movements in France and Austria, and the fact that in their aftermath the German trade unions organised the defeat of the metal workers in the east as a pre-emptive deterrent to proletarian resistance, show the evolution of the situation since the beginning of the new millennium. In reality, these events bring to light the growing impossibility for the class - despite its continuing lack of self-confidence - to avoid the necessity of struggle faced with the dramatic worsening of the crisis and the increasingly massive and generalised character of the attacks"* (International Review no. 117, "The evolution of the class struggle...") It is essential to grasp the significance of this development: *"The importance of struggles today is that they can be the scene for the development of class consciousness. The basic issue at stake - the recovery of class identity - is an extremely modest one. But behind class identity, there is the question of class solidarity - the only alternative to the mad competitive bourgeois logic of each for himself. Behind class identity there is the possibility of reappropriating the lessons of past struggles, and reactivating the collective memory of the proletariat"* (ibid).

Today, the working class has the capacity not just to resume the class struggle, but to do so at a higher level, with the political understanding essential if it is to go from defence to offence, from the struggle to survive to the revolutionary transformation of society.

3. The impossibility of a good trade unionism

The integration of the unions into the capitalist state

The unions were created as organs of the workers' struggle against capitalism. Today they exist as organs of the state within and against the working class. This change in their nature was expressed most clearly during World War One when the unions declared a cease-fire in the class war in order to enrol the working class in the imperialist war. Since then, in all countries, in peace and war, the unions have been central to the bourgeoisie's plans for containing the working class and managing the crisis. While the extent of the unions' direct integration into the state varies between countries, in every country they serve the ruling class most effectively by sabotaging the workers' struggles from within.

Participation in the management of the capitalist crisis

When the bourgeoisie imposes sacrifices on the workers, in order to preserve its profit margins, the unions generally begin by declaring 'No sacrifices', only to add immediately afterwards: 'unless they are shared out among the whole population'. Concretely, that ends up in some spectacular negotiations between government and union³, even if this is with official mediators rather than the government directly. The question is never 'sacrifice or not', but always, evidently: 'how to organise the imposition of sacrifices'. And the last act of this script, played out a hundred times, is always the same: new sacrifices by the workers for the profit of the national capital. And the unions cry victory because... 'It would have been worse if we hadn't been there'.

Official spokesmen of the government, *official* representatives of the workers, the unions *officially* negotiate anti-working class laws and sign the *official* documents which forcibly impose the demands of the state to maintain the profitability of the national capital at the expense of the conditions of life of the workers.

The unions reason in terms of the national capitalist economy. They situate their actions in the logic of the dominant economic system. When the logic of the capitalist machine demands more sacrifices, the unions have the job of presenting them to the workers in the name of a so-called **realism** which in fact only consists of considering the economic crisis as a sort of 'natural cataclysm' - such as an earthquake or a sudden freeze - and capitalism as an eternal given of nature.

In the 1980s it was in the name of such 'realism' that the French unions signed, first with a government of the right, then with a government of the left, the deal to systematically reduce unemployment pay and a number of other benefits. It's always in defence of this 'realism' that the unions are directly or indirectly associated with the elaboration of all the political and economic measures taken against the working class. It was in co-operation with the German unions that the government reduced family allowances; it was alongside the Spanish unions that the 'Socialist' government introduced the reduction of pensions; it was with the 'experts' of the British trade unions that the Conservative government prepared half a million job cuts in the public sector, and it was with the Italian unions that the 'centre-left' government organised the destruction of the sliding scale of wages. It was with the FGTB (Belgian Socialist union) that the government imposed a 10% cut in unemployment pay.

The unions continue this work today. In May 2005 staff at the British Broadcasting Company were faced with large job cuts. The unions staged a campaign against them that consisted of workers standing outside their workplace wearing badges during one lunch hour and then staging a one-day strike while asking the managers to be 'realistic'. As one of the unions involved put it: "*The unions will resist all **compulsory** redundancies. Through the coming months we will stand together in workplaces to oppose the **scale and extent** of cuts, and work in the public arena with Licence Fee payers, politicians, and opinion formers, to make the case that the BBC offers the best value for money in British broadcasting.*" (emphasis added). The result? Job losses as planned.

The sabotage of the struggles

It is impossible to enumerate the thousand and one manoeuvres which the unions in Europe have used to sabotage strikes and arouse nationalist intoxication over the last decades, in order to contain any expression of proletarian revolt in a dead-end:

- diverting the content of struggles towards nationalist dead-ends;
- isolating the struggle by country or locality;
- disorganising any possibility of unification;
- channelling militancy towards useless and demoralising actions;
- undermining the practice of class solidarity.

Concrete examples of these are not lacking:

- In 1979 the union apparatus diverted the militancy of the French steelworkers into *nationalist* actions against train-loads of German iron ore to the cries of 'Let's produce French'.

- They *isolated* the British miners' strike by presenting it as a struggle of one sector opposed to the others. This was summed up in the slogan "coal not dole". The miners' union, the NUM, only showed itself radical in language in order to give credibility to the 'working class nature of the unions'... and thus the 'working class nature' of the refusal of all the other official unions to actively support the miners' strike.
- They *isolated* the steelworkers of the Lorraine in 1984 by getting them to set up barricades on the roads into the region, which not only cut them off from workers of other regions, but moreover, isolated them from each other.
- In Western Germany, they 'organised' a gigantic campaign of struggle for the 35-hour week in order in practice to *disorganise* the combative push in the working class; a strike carefully controlled and directed by the unions, 'revolving', town by town, region by region, hour by hour, in order to avoid any excessive accumulation of forces.
- In Italy they channelled the anger of the working class towards spectacular and hopeless actions, which went from the blocking of trains up to the organisation of the 'March on Rome' (March 84) which pulled together nearly a million workers for a depressing stroll through the streets of the city.
- During the miners' strike in Britain they perverted the movements of solidarity that developed within the working class by presenting financial collections and 'sales for...' as a substitution for active solidarity through participation in the struggle.

The single most powerful example of how unions sabotage the workers struggle was the mass strike in Poland in 1980. In its first days the strike reaffirmed the revolutionary nature of the proletariat. Starting with a single strike at a single factory the strikes developed sporadically during July 1980 and then exploded into a mass movement in August. Strike committees were formed and then linked up through an inter-factory committee: *"The strike committee then had 400 members, two representatives per factory; at the height of the movement there were between 800 and 1,000 members. Delegations went back and forth from their factories to the central strike committee, sometimes using cassettes to record discussions. Strike committees in each factory took care of any specific demands, the whole was co-ordinated by the central strike committee"* (International Review no. 23, "Mass strikes in Poland 1980: the proletariat opens a new breach"). On the back of the mass strike the advocates of 'free' trade unions came to the fore. Drawing on the illusions of the workers in democracy and supposedly independent unions they were able to take control of the movement, leading it first into the dead-end of creating the union Solidarity and then into the arms of the state. *"Never was the proletariat stronger than when there were no unions, when it was the assemblies of workers in struggle which had the responsibility for running the struggle, for electing, controlling, and, when necessary, revoking the delegates elected onto the movement's centralising organs."*

"Since that time, the creation and development of Solidarity has permitted the following situation: a deterioration of living standards far worse than that which provoked the strikes of summer 1980 has been met by the workers with a much weaker and more dispersed response. It's Solidarity that has been able to achieve what the old unions were unable to do: make the workers accept a prolongation of the working week (the giving up of 'free Saturdays'), a tripling of the price of bread and massive increases in the price of other basic necessities, and increasingly severe shortages. It's Solidarity which has managed to drive the Polish workers into the impasse of self-management, which they showed little interest in last year, and which gave them the 'right' to decide - as long as this is compatible with the views of the ruling party - who should be in charge of their exploitation. It's Solidarity which, by demobilising so many struggles, has prepared the ground for the authorities' present offensive on the issues of censorship and repression" (International Review no. 27, "One

Year of Workers' Struggles in Poland"). In December 1981 the Polish state led by General Jaruzelski staged a coup, reasserting its authority and throwing leaders of Solidarity, such as Lech Walesa, into prison. The Polish workers were isolated from their class comrades in other countries, in particular from those in the west because their struggle was presented as being against 'communism', for the 'true' Poland, including the Catholic church and, above all for western freedoms of democracy and independent trade unions. The 25th anniversary of the strike occurred while this introduction was being completed and was used by the bourgeoisie to repeat all of these lies. With the benefit of hindsight the bourgeoisie now argue that Solidarity, inspired by the late pope and led by his altar-boy Walesa, began the process that resulted in the end of 'communism'.

While not on the same scale, similar practices continue today:

- In 1995-6 the Liverpool dockers were further isolated by the 'international solidarity' run by the unions. This solidarity was limited to calls for dockers in other parts of the world to 'black' British registered ships, leaving the Liverpool dockers to continue the strike alone, with all power having been surrendered to the unions.
- In Britain in 2002 the Fire Brigades Union isolated the militancy of the fire fighters by presenting them as a 'special case', deserving of a pay increase completely at odds with those of other workers.

The radicalisation of the unions and the trap of rank and file unionism

The political and union forces of the bourgeoisie, in particular those in the industrialised countries have a great deal of experience. They recognise that their repeated participation in attacks on the working class and their sabotage of workers' struggles will tend to lead to mistrust amongst workers, especially those who have the most understanding of the historic goal of the proletariat's struggle. They try to divert this mistrust towards the leadership of the unions which is 'too remote' from the workers, 'too reformist' or 'too bureaucratic'. They thus encourage the illusion that you can have 'a good trade union'.

This may take the form of a 'radicalisation' of the unions, with the election of a more 'left wing' leadership and the promotion of radical demands, such as very large pay increases or changes in government policy and so on. In the strikes in France in 1995 the unions took up a very critical, even hostile attitude towards the government. In Britain, as New Labour settled into power there was a deliberate distancing between the unions and government and more recently still a number of unions have reduced their financial contributions to the party or even threatened to break from it altogether.

It may also take the form of a 'critical', 'anti-leadership' or even 'anti-union' tendency. These have taken a variety of forms and names - 'base unionism', 'rank and file', 'co-ordinations' - but what unites them is the defence of the basic trade union form. They are the most pernicious form of union self-defence.

During the 70s, the general tendency of the different political masquerades which the bourgeoisie used to govern the proletariat consisted of putting into office 'governments of the left' (Labour in Britain, Democrats in the USA, Social-Democracy in Western Germany), or at least orienting the policies of its 'left' forces into a perspective of participation in government ('Historic Compromise' of the Communist Party in Italy, 'Common Programme' of the Communist and Socialist parties in France). The 'official' representatives of the workers participated in government with the view of demanding 'momentary sacrifices' from the workers in exchange for better tomorrows. The presence of these 'workers' organisations' in government would serve as a guarantee that the fruits of these sacrifices would be of great profit to the working class.

But the tomorrows never came and the economic crisis and the attacks against the workers, far from attenuating, only worsened. The wave of struggles in '78-'80 showed, for the bourgeoisie, that carrying on with the participation (or the association) of its forces of the left in government - with the support of the unions - would not only no longer hold back the workers' struggle, but would also reduce their ability to play the role of policemen in the workers' ranks, since they openly appeared as responsible for the situation faced by the workers.

The 80s began with a reversal of the bourgeoisie's orientation in the main industrialised countries. The 'workers' parties (Socialist, Social-Democratic or Democratic in countries such as Britain, Germany or the United States; Communist Parties in 'Latin' countries) returned to opposition, again taking up a 'radical', 'intransigent', even 'revolutionary' language in order to try to regain the indispensable credibility for their function as saboteurs of the workers' struggle.

In France, the proletariat had experience of the 'left in government' later on. But, in a short time, the same reality was imposed: after 3 years of the participation of the PCF (Communist Party of France) in government and the accelerated loss of credibility of the CGT (General Workers Union - historically close to the Communist Party): the latter quit the government in order to return to opposition under threat of losing all control of the struggles.

We should note that this 'radicalisation of language' wasn't general to all the unions, nor even to a single union. In reality, in every country, the union structures know how to share out the roles: there were the unions which 'radicalised' and those who were more 'realist', then within each union there were 'combative' tendencies and those that were more 'prudent'. These are the two complementary points of the union pincers. Thus,

- the miners' strike in Britain was divided between the 'radicality' of the miners unions and of its leader Scargill on one hand, and the 'realism' of the whole of the Trade Union apparatus on the other;
- the struggles of the German workers in '84, between the 'radicalism' of IG Metal and the 'moderation' of the apparatus of the DGB;
- the strike of the workers of Talbot in France at the beginning of '84, between the 'radicalism' of the CFDT and the 'prudence' of the CGT;
- the reactions of the workers in Belgium at the beginning of '84, between the 'bold' tone of the FGTB and that of the 'conciliatory' (Christian) CSC.

This distribution of roles between the unions was accompanied by another division of labour, between the official unions and the various 'critical' union tendencies, either within the unions or outside them. It is these tendencies that the proletariat systematically came up against in the years before 1989 when it tended to break out of the framework of the union leadership. The more a struggle succeeded in loosening the direct grip of the official unions, the more it came up against this 'shamefaced unionism', this unionism of spectacular and verbose actions which has no other function than to try to polish up the image of the unions, of an impotent form of organisation that belongs to the past. Rank-and-file unionism only criticised the 'leaderships' in order to better defend the possibility of 'transforming' and 'regenerating' the unions - and thus fighting in them; it only criticised the official unions to better defend the idea of 'pure' unions.

The 'leftist' organisations of the Trotskyist, 'autonomous' or anarchist and Maoist types specialised in this sort of work. Their militants often constituted the main animators of these last vestiges of union life in factories in times of social calm and were the most adroit and sophisticated saboteurs of the combat in times of conflict.

The union 'shop-stewards' (factory delegates) in Britain, the 'union councils' in Italy, the 'assemblyists' in Spain, or the movement in 'Longwy 79-84' in France, the 'combative' tendencies within Solidarity, in reality all constituted an indispensable complement to the union leadership and the 'official' unions.

The 'co-ordinations', a new variety of base unionism

The phenomenon of the co-ordinations first appeared in France and Italy. This is explained by the fact that traditional unionism had suffered the most discredit in these countries. In Italy, the unions' discredit began in an important way in the big strikes of 1969 (known as 'the hot autumn'). Thereafter, insofar as the struggles of the Italian proletariat were amongst the most important struggles of the world proletariat, the continual use of the unions by the Italian bourgeoisie to sabotage the struggles led workers to distrust them more and more.

During the powerful movement in the Italian education sector in 1987, the clear discredit suffered by the official unions led to the creation of the "Cobas" (rank and file committees) which appeared as authentic organs of combat aimed at unifying the struggle under the control of the workers themselves, not the unions. But while the Cobas began as organs of the working class, their attempt to maintain a permanent existence after the struggle had died away led them inevitably onto the terrain of traditional unionism: corporatism, and in general a readiness to compromise with the demands of the bosses. As genuine working class life drained out of them the Cobas became dominated by the leftists and were transformed into a weapon for sabotaging the struggle.

In France, workers' distrust towards the unions developed as a consequence of the left being in government, supported by the unions, between 1981 and 1986. This government was responsible for unprecedented attacks against the working class (notably, the massive redundancies in the steel, car and shipping industries). The lesson of the way in which the Cobas could be used to prevent the struggle from generalising outside a particular trade or industry, while at the same time maintaining a façade of "workers' control", was not lost on the trades unions in other countries. It was in France that the co-ordinations achieved their hour of glory, first in the big railway strike of December 1986 and then in the hospitals' strike of the autumn of 1988.

One of the aspects of the co-ordinations' anti-working class activity (usually animated by leftist groups or by dyed-in-the-wool unionists who opposed the main unions in order to keep a grip on the situation) was to give the impression to the workers that the existing unions did not defend their interests because they were organised across whole branches of industry. By creating organs based in a particular job sector (for example the train conductors, the train drivers, or the nurses, etc.) the struggling workers were supposed to be much more able to control them and to defend their own specific interests without having their demands submerged amongst those coming from all the other sectors. Furthermore, the hostility that the leaderships of the big unions showed towards them enabled the co-ordinations to present themselves as a 'different' type of organisation because they actually represented workers' interests. In reality, the essential role of the co-ordinations was to keep workers in different trades apart, and to reinforce all the workers' illusions about the 'specificity' of their particular job (the extra 'qualification' of nurses in the hospital movement, or the long-standing separation between drivers and other trades on the railways, for example). In this sense, they were nothing other than a variety of rank and file unionism, created to take the place of traditional unionism in sabotaging struggles when workers' militancy threatened to overflow the latter.

Since that time in the second half of the 1980s, the co-ordinations have disappeared from circulation mainly because of the reflux suffered by the class struggle. However, it is not unlikely that they will reappear in the course of future struggles. If the proletariat is to avoid falling into the same traps as those laid by the bourgeoisie previously, it will have to assimilate the lessons from the second half of

the 1980s. The lessons from the experience with the co-ordinations were summed up in an article in the *International Review* from the end of 1988:

"The need to unify the struggle, felt more and more pressingly by the workers themselves, is bound to come up against a multitude of manoeuvres aimed at dividing the working class and fragmenting its struggles, which will involve a division of labour among all the bourgeoisie's political forces, and especially the left, the trade unions, and the leftist organisations. What is confirmed by the events in France, is that one of the ruling class' most dangerous weapons will be the 'co-ordinations', which will be increasingly used as the unions are discredited and workers become more ready to take control of the struggle themselves.

"Against the bourgeoisie's manoeuvres aimed at keeping the struggles under the control of the 'co-ordinations', the working class must be aware that its real strength lies not in these so-called 'centralising' organisms, but first and foremost in its own general assemblies or mass meetings. The centralisation of the class' combat is an important element in its strength, but over-hasty centralisation, without all the workers being involved in controlling the struggle, can only end up with handing over control to the forces of the ruling class (especially the leftist organisations) and to isolation, i.e. the two elements of defeat. Historical experience has shown that the higher the level in the pyramid of organs created by the class to centralise its combat, the greater the remove from the level where all the workers are directly involved, the easier it is for the left-wing forces of the bourgeoisie to take control and put their manoeuvres into practice. This has been true even in revolutionary periods. It was true in Russia, where for most of 1917 the Executive Committee of the Soviets was controlled by the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries, which for a time led the Bolsheviks to argue that the local soviets should not feel themselves tied to the policy conducted by this centralising organ. Similarly in Germany in November 1918, the Congress of Workers' Councils could find nothing better to do than to hand over power to the Social Democrats, who had gone over to the enemy camp, thus signing the death warrant of the Councils themselves.

"The bourgeoisie understands this perfectly. This is why it will systematically encourage the appearance of 'centralising' organisms, which it will easily be able to control as long as the working class remains insufficiently mature and experienced. And to better protect itself, it will whenever possible create such organs in advance, especially with the help of its leftists, giving them their 'legitimacy' afterwards through sham mass meetings, so as to make sure that these meetings do not create their own centralising organs: elected and revocable strike committees in the factories, central strike committees at the town or regional level, etc."

(*International Review* no. 56, "France: The Co-ordinations in the vanguard of sabotaging the struggles").

Good trade unions are impossible in our epoch. It is not because the union leaderships are rotten and have 'sold out' that the unions no longer have a place in the workers' combat today. On the contrary, it is because trade unionism - that's to say the struggle for reforms in respect of the dominant economic laws - has become ineffective and anachronistic in capitalism in decline, that unions - great or small, official or unofficial - are inevitably absorbed by the state. All of the tendencies that defend the possibility of a 'good class trade unionism' - whatever the original motivations of their protagonists - only bar the route of the workers' struggles towards the sole opening possible: *the mass strike, radical, political and self-organised*. They are the last rampart that the workers' struggle will have to breach in order to free itself from the union fortifications.

4. The working class' historic responsibility for the future of humanity

After the collapse of the Eastern bloc the bourgeoisie promised a 'new world order' of peace, prosperity and democracy. Today that promise lies in ruins. Instead of peace there has been sixteen years of uninterrupted war in which acts of barbarism have become commonplace, whether it be the 'ethnic cleansing' in ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the forcing of parents to mutilate their own children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the former Zaire) or the high-tech massacre of retreating Iraqi conscripts in the first Gulf War. Instead of prosperity millions are condemned to starve amid plenty and die of curable illnesses in the 'under-developed' world, while millions more sink into poverty and despair in the rotting heartland of capitalism. As for democracy, it has indeed spread further around the world, via the moneybags of the ex-Stalinist Mafia in Russia, on American tanks in Afghanistan and Iraq and in the multi-coloured 'people's' revolutions in parts of the former Eastern bloc. Permanent war, growing poverty and a descent into barbarism - this is the future capitalism holds for humanity.

But the capitalist mode of production is no more of an eternal reality of nature than, in their time, ancient slavery or feudalism were. Like all systems of exploitation, capitalism is a human creation, a collection of social relationships imposed by the degree of development of the productive forces and by the economic and political power of one class over the others. Its survival directly depends on the outcome of the constant reality that is the struggle between the principal classes of society.

Through more than two centuries of struggle, the world working class has shown that its combats are not mere dispersed skirmishes without continuity. The workers' struggles of today are in continuity with those of the silk weavers of Lyon in 1834, those of the workers of the Paris Commune in 1871, those of the Russian Revolution in 1905 and 1917 and those of the German workers during their insurrection of 1919. It is a struggle which has a historic continuity and logic of its own, the end of which can only be a total, social revolution, bearing a new society which will finally master its productive forces and its historic becoming: communism.

"Behind each strike, lurks the hydra of revolution" Lenin said. He knew, as Marx said, *"not only to see misery in misery"*. The actual development of workers' struggles throughout the world over recent decades, and despite the setback after 1989, confirms that the revolutionary potential of the working class remains intact. It shows that another world *is* possible. It is the hope of humanity.

Despite union sabotage, despite gigantic campaigns of ideological intoxication, despite police repression, despite the threat of unemployment that permanently weighs on each worker, despite the co-operation of the whole international bourgeoisie faced with the proletarian danger, the struggles of the last decades demonstrate an unbroken militancy. Between 1968 and 1989 the struggle often developed spectacularly. The struggles of the workers in Poland in 1980 were the most important proletarian manifestation since the international revolutionary wave at the end of the First World War; the strikes of the public sector in Belgium and Holland were the most important in this sector in these countries in the whole of their history; the attack by the French steelworkers on the Socialist Party HQ in Longwy 1984 was an unprecedented event in this country; the occupation of the naval dockyards by the German workers in 1984 was the first since the 20s and the mobilisation for the 35 hour week, the most important since the same period; the British miners' strike of 1984-85 was the biggest strike in this country since the General Strike of 1926.

After 1989 the class struggle seemed at times to have disappeared, but it has merely returned to its roots, to appear again, equal to the tasks ahead of it and ready to engage its enemy once more. *"Proletarian revolutions, however, such as those of the nineteenth century, constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently already been accomplished in order to begin the task again; with merciless thoroughness they mock the inadequate, weak and wretched aspects of their first attempts: they seem to throw their opponent*

to the ground only to see him draw new strength from the earth and rise again before them, more colossal than ever; they shrink back again and again before the indeterminate immensity of their own goals, until the situation is created in which any retreat is impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: Hic Rhodus, hic salta" (Marx, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte)

It is in the further development of the present struggles that the sole force capable of breaking the apocalyptic logic of decadent capitalism and offering a future to humanity can be found.

It is through these combats of resistance that the world proletariat is preparing to assume its historic responsibilities.

But the proletariat cannot emancipate itself, nor even defend its most immediate interests, without the greatest unity and without the most penetrating and ruthless lucidity. The unions and trade unionism in our epoch disarm the working class by dividing and blinding it. The working class cannot develop its strength and its consciousness without fighting outside and against the unions. This idea, which is the basis of this pamphlet, remains the order of the day.

September 2005

Footnotes

1. For more recent examples readers should refer to articles in the *International Review* and particularly in the ICC's territorial press.
2. See "Thirty years of the open crisis of capitalism" in *International Review* nos. 96, 97 and 98
3. It is a classical and generalised tactic of the unions to make negotiation *in itself* the main objective of a struggle which is going on, leaving to one side and avoiding the real demands that are at the origin of the mobilisation.

History of the workers' movement:

- [1980 - Mass strike in Poland](#) ^[2]

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The union question](#) ^[1]

Unions Against the Working Class - Preface (1976)

4545 reads

What is the role of trade unions in modern capitalist society? Two facts stand out clearly: that governments all over the world, faced with a deepening economic crisis which brings with it the growing threat of **social** chaos, are calling on the trade unions to help preserve the fragile

equilibrium of capitalist society; and, that wherever the working class attempts to resist the effects of the crisis, the trade unions are amongst its most determined and ruthless opponents.

In Britain, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) at its annual conference last autumn gave its overwhelming support to the second phase of the 'Social Contract'. In effect this means that the TUC undertook to continue to use all its power to help the government enforce its programme of austerity measures. These measures, a combination of lower real wages, cuts in social services and higher unemployment, are simply a determined attack on the working class, to force workers to make sacrifices for the sake of crisis-ridden British capitalism.

British workers who struggle against these measures have to take on the combined might of the government and the whole trade union apparatus. The sequence of events provoked by even the smallest strike is well known. First comes a hysterical chorus of abuse from government and union leaders, who warn of the 'catastrophic' effects of the strike on the economy and international confidence in sterling. Meanwhile, the local trade union officials, even when they claim to be 'sympathetic' to the aims of the strike, soon make it clear that their one aim is to end it as quickly as possible. These officials try to 'persuade' the strikers to return to work: they are told that the strike is 'against their own interests'; moreover their irresponsible action is giving the company (and British capitalism) a bad name: they should be 'reasonable', and submit their case to strike arbitration. And at the same time, to make the strikers more 'amenable' to this persuasion, the union does everything it can to isolate them. Either they are presented as a 'special case' whose struggle is of no concern to other workers, or else they are branded a 'tiny minority' of 'wreckers' out to gain what they can for themselves at the expense of their fellow workers. In either case the aim is to deprive the strike of its most effective weapon, class unity.

In America, while workers' real wages have declined steadily since 1965 (apart from a brief period in 1972-73), the unions have negotiated contracts which have ensured that this decline in real wages is matched by constantly **rising** productivity (speed-ups etc). More recently construction workers' unions have agreed to actual **wage cuts** of up to 25 per cent. And so concerned are the unions for the smooth running of American industry that their contracts usually include a clause banning all strikes for the duration of the agreement. This means that all disputes have to go through official procedures, which may take months or even years; and since the contract is 'binding', pay disputes are forbidden altogether. American unions thus act as 'policemen' for industry: enforcing labour discipline, preventing wildcats, and ensuring that strike action is confined to 'official' disputes - which are usually crippled by lack of union solidarity and company stockpiling (since companies often know about these official disputes months in advance). No wonder that the *New York Times* wrote smugly recently of the "*community of interests between labour and management*" and no wonder that American workers often express more hostility towards the union than towards the company itself.

How are workers to understand this conflict between themselves and their so-called 'representatives', the trade unions? Certainly there is no lack of explanations from the various organisations of the 'left'. According to some, such as the Trotskyists, it is the result of treachery on

the part of reactionary leaders; while others, more 'libertarian' in outlook, blame the bureaucratic nature of union organisation. But all such explanations share one common characteristic: whatever the qualifications, all **defend** the unions as basically working class organisations. No matter how often the unions side with the employers or the government against the working class, no matter how great the defeat suffered by workers at the hands of the unions, still, according to the 'left' the unions represent the "*power of the organised working class*". Thus militant workers who are struggling **against** the unions are told that they should divert their energies to working **within** them. It is only necessary to reform these organisations, they are told, to put pressure on the leadership from the 'rank and file', and the unions will once again assume their true role as defenders of the working class.

Against all such 'critical defence' of the unions, this pamphlet shows that the **trade unions consistently weaken and derail proletarian struggle because this is their function in modern capitalist society**. Consequently the reactionary nature of the unions is something that no amount of pressure from the rank and file can possibly change. On the contrary, as the crisis deepens, as it must, conflict between the working class and the unions can only become increasingly bitter and widespread. And before the proletariat can impose its own solution to the crisis - the revolutionary overthrow of world capitalism - it will have to decisively confront and, ultimately, destroy the trade unions, along with the rest of the bourgeois state apparatus.

LEFTIST MYTHS AND WORKING CLASS EXPERIENCE

The experience of the working class (and this introduction will concentrate on the experience of the working class in Britain and America) utterly destroys all the lies put out by leftist organisations to support their claim that it is possible for the working class to struggle **within** the unions. Among these lies is the myth that the unions have a 'dual role', that somehow they are "*for the working class some of the time and against it at other times*". Although it is true that throughout a whole historical period the unions were genuine working class organisations which expressed and fought for the interests of the class, this period came to an end with the outbreak of World War I in 1914: since then the unions have represented the interests of the bourgeoisie and the state **against** the working class.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The terrible barbarism of World War I marked the end of capitalism as a historically progressive system. The working class of all nations had absolutely nothing to gain from the war, whatever its outcome, except the deaths of millions of proletarians. Its only interest was to struggle against the war, and this could only take the form of revolutionary defeatism: for the proletariat of each country to turn its guns against 'its' own bourgeoisie, as part of the world revolution against capitalism.

But the trade unions of every belligerent nation unhesitatingly chose the side of the bourgeoisie: not only did they call for the working class to support the war, for workers to sacrifice their lives to defend their national capital, but they also collaborated with the bourgeoisie in the enforcement of repressive measures to ensure that workers 'at home' did nothing to disrupt the ceaseless slaughter of their class brothers at the front.

In Britain it was collaboration between unions and the Labour Party that enabled the bourgeoisie to temporarily call a halt to a rapidly rising wave of class struggle. In August 1914 these two organisations called for a cessation of class struggle for the duration of the war, and after consultations between unions and government this became law in 1915, when strikes were declared illegal. In addition the war meant that workers lost many more of the hard fought gains of previous decades: workers were tied to their place of employment; compulsory overtime, night-work and Sunday work were reintroduced; and factory health and safety regulations were suspended. These and many other repressive measures were fully supported by the unions.

In America, where union organisation was still weak before World War I, the government realised that it needed to **create** a strong union organisation if it was to keep growing working class militancy under control during the war. The solution was provided by a pact between the government, employers and the American Federation of Labour (AFL), a particularly spineless collection of craft and skilled trade unions, which had always failed to organise more than a small minority of the class. The AFL agreed to oppose all strikes in return for the freedom to organise, which had previously been denied it by the American bourgeoisie. As a result, union membership increased by about two million during the war...as a direct response to the needs of American capitalism.

This was no 'tactical error' or temporary aberration on the part of the trade unions. On the contrary it was a conscious decision to collaborate with the bourgeoisie, which made the unions accomplices in the mass murder of millions of workers on the battlefield. Of course this betrayal by the unions of the belligerent nations in 1914 did not come out of the blue: it was the logical consequence of their increasing remoteness from the working class, and their growing co-operation with the bourgeoisie for a long period beforehand. Nevertheless 1914 marks a watershed, from which time it is fundamentally true to say that the unions have functioned as simple appendages of the capitalist state, whose only role is to help preserve capitalist 'order' against the proletarian threat.

At first sight this might seem to contradict the fact that trade unions have supported and called many strikes (and other working class actions) since 1914. But the contradiction soon disappears when one considers that the ability of the trade unions to contain militancy and derail struggles depends on the mystification that they are in fact working class organisations and the power of this mystification is precisely their long tradition as **genuine** working class organisations before 1914. If the unions openly opposed every strike this lie would soon be exposed, and they would lose all credibility within the working class. This is indeed the case with unions in countries in the Russian bloc and Third World, which openly act as agents of the state to enforce labour discipline and higher productivity levels. But in Britain and America, and other countries in the US bloc, government, business and union leaders alike are aware that a union which has a tradition of 'militancy' among the workers is much more likely to be able to use its influence to keep workers' militancy within safe

bounds. They are aware that 'disillusionment' amongst workers with their unions brings with it the threat of class struggle outside the 'responsible' control of the unions. And this raises the spectre of the 'collapse of social order', which above all is what terrifies all these bourgeois leaders.

Although some less 'enlightened' sections of the bourgeoisie may remain hostile to the unions, this only serves to reinforce their radical image. And anyway, in times of deepening crisis it becomes increasingly obvious to all sections of the bourgeoisie that only the unions can keep the working class under control. The deeper the crisis, the louder the calls from bourgeois spokesmen (from government ministers to newspaper editors) to strengthen the unions, and to reinforce their authority within the working class. A carefully stage-managed strike is often the best way to achieve this objective.

THE CIO - CHILD OF U.S. CAPITAL

Thus in decadent capitalism the development of trade unions is **always** a response to the needs of the bourgeoisie and never to those of the proletariat. The enormous growth of American unions during the thirties provides a clear illustration of this. Their growth coincided with a wave of militant class struggle from workers reacting to the terrible conditions brought about by the Depression. But the impetus did not come from the workers, who were already attempting to organise themselves in a more autonomous and radical way, but from **President Roosevelt** whose 'New Deal' in 1934 promised workers the 'right to organise' as part of the plan for economic recovery. In effect, Roosevelt had recognised that only a strong union organisation, working in close co-operation with government and business leaders, could diffuse the growing class struggle (no doubt recalling the success of this tactic during the war). At this point workers had largely deserted the AFL unions, which had done nothing to combat the effect of the slump, but undoubtedly many were taken in by the colossal deception of the 'New Deal'. Hundreds of thousands of workers flooded into the unions believing that, with government backing, they would at least find a solution to their problems.

However, workers soon found that the AFL was as hostile to all forms of industrial action as it had been throughout its ignominious history. In the massive textile workers strike of 1934, to take just one example, the union at first called a strike, in response to a threat to reduce hours and wages in the industry by 25 per cent; cancelled it in exchange for a government 'study' of the industry and union participation in management; called it again when it became clear that the workers were going to strike anyway; and finally ordered the strikers back to work after 17 days claiming an 'overwhelming victory': a government study of the industry. None of the workers' original demands had been satisfied. This use of the unions to confuse and demoralise the strikers went hand in hand with a continuation of the policy of bloody repression which American governments had pursued throughout the depression. During the textile strike, one of many violent disputes during 1934, at least nine strikers were killed and dozens wounded in clashes with the police and National Guard. The union leaders resolutely condemned any militant class response to this repression - especially the mobile pickets ('flying squadrons') which workers used to strengthen the solidarity of the strike and widen its effects. They also fought to ensure that the strike didn't spread to other industries: AFL

representatives instructed workers in other industries to “give support **without joining the strike**” (*New York Times*, September 10, 1934, quoted by J. Brecher in **Strike**, Straight Arrow Books, 1972).

In this way, by attacking the class on an ideological level through the unions, the bourgeoisie was able to prevent workers from forging the only weapon with which they could have resisted the physical repression: revolutionary class consciousness. The unions thus share full responsibility for the deaths of all the workers killed during this period. However, it soon became clear that the crude strikebreaking tactics of the AFL, though successful in the textile strike and some other cases, were in general simply increasing the bitterness and the militancy of the workers. This threat of intensifying class struggle led to the establishment of the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organisation), **on the initiative of AFL leaders and under pressure from Congress**. The aim was to channel militancy into building a new union organisation, which could seem to offer workers a radical alternative to the AFL. But right from the start the CIO sought to destroy class combativity and reinforce union ‘discipline’ in American industry. The main tactic of the CIO unions was to support unofficial strikes in order to increase their membership and gain the confidence of the workers. At the same time they could prevent strikes from spreading and ensure that they caused minimum damage to the company and the economy. For instance, the famous sit-down at General Motors in Flint in 1936 began as a struggle against increased track speeds, organised by the workers themselves independently of the unions. By giving the strike its ‘support’ the CIO was able to transform it into a simple demand for union recognition, which meant that the company ‘recognised’ the union in return for a promise from the union that it would try to prevent all unofficial stoppages. Needless to say, union recognition was presented as another great ‘victory’ for the workers.

Thus through the CIO the American bourgeoisie was able to divert autonomous class struggle into union activity which far from threatening capitalism actually strengthened it. John L Lewis, leader of the CIO, succinctly expressed the true function of the CIO in the thirties: “*A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs or any other kind of strike*” (Brecher, **op. cit.**, p.205).

By World War II, the American bourgeoisie had a weakened working class and a strong union organisation, to make sure that workers did not disrupt war production and American capitals’ pursuit of higher profits. The CIO and AFL joined forces to ban all strikes and “*plan for ever-increasing production*”. The world war was in fact the culmination of the general defeat suffered by the world working class following the failure of the Russian and German revolutions to extend in the twenties. And all over the world, the trade unions had been among the most important agents of this defeat. In **Britain**, in the 1926 general strike, the union leaders at first postponed the strike for a year, thus giving the government ample time to prepare for its defeat; and then abruptly called off the strike after nine days, leaving workers to drift back to work, confused and demoralised.

The lesson of these experiences is clear: that unions, like leopards, never change their spots. Even when a union calls a strike, or seems to be on the side of the workers, this is because it judges that, in the long run, this is the best way to reinforce union authority and weaken autonomous class struggle. The idea that the union is on the side of the working class one day and the bourgeoisie the next, is just a mythical creation of the leftists. Whether unions take up a ‘militant’ or a ‘reactionary’ stance is determined simply by tactical considerations: their sole and constant aim is the

preservation of 'social order', which in crisis-ridden capitalist society can only mean trying to prevent the working class from struggling against the relentless decline in its living standards.

THE MYTH OF THE RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT

But perhaps it is still possible to change this lamentable state of affairs? Maybe, as the leftists claim, a strong 'Rank and File' movement could oust reactionary leaders and 'reclaim' the unions for the working class?

Again the leftists are answered categorically by working class experience. Sixty years of rank and file pressure has failed to prevent the unions from fusing more and more closely with the state apparatus. On the contrary, rank and file movements are themselves constantly being absorbed into the unions, where they function **as an integral** part of the whole union organisation. The British shop stewards, for example, portrayed by the press as the ultimate in shop floor militancy, and idolised by the leftists, are often the most energetic opponents of strikes.

But the constant integration of rank and file movements into the union apparatus is hardly surprising, since, in decadent capitalism, the whole purpose of trade union organisation is the infiltration of bourgeois ideology into the working class. The intimate contact between the lower ranks of the union hierarchy and the 'shop', far from making the unions more responsive to the needs of the working class, is exactly what makes them so valuable to the bourgeoisie.

Firstly, it is this contact which makes the unions the section of the bourgeoisie which is **most sensitive** to the mood of the working class, and thus ensures that they are absolutely indispensable to any government which wants to impose austerity measures on the working class without provoking a militant response. (The failure of the recent Tory government in Britain shows what happens to any government that attempts this **without** the support of the unions). Nowhere can this function of the unions as 'barometers' of class struggle be seen more clearly than at recent TUC Congresses in Britain. Local delegates at these Congresses often warn of 'growing rank and file militancy', and needless to say they don't see this as a welcome sign of an emerging wave of class struggle which will take the proletariat a step closer towards its emancipation from wage slavery. On the contrary, these warnings allow the unions and the whole bourgeoisie to take steps in **advance** to prevent an outbreak of class struggle. For example, the expected move by the British government from rigid wage controls this year to some form of 'free collective bargaining' next year is largely in response to the unions, which told the government that they would not be able to enforce another year of such rigid controls. Of course this does not mean that the unions are pressing for an end to austerity measures, simply that they realise the need for these measures to take a **different form**.

Secondly, this close contact between workers and local union officials gives the bourgeoisie a mouthpiece within the proletariat. By appearing to side with the workers against management on

minor issues (and of course their role as 'workers representatives' is constantly being stressed by politicians of all parties, the press, television, etc.), these officials are well placed to explain to workers why 'economic realities' force the union to support speed-ups, lay-offs, wage restraint, etc.

The shop stewards are simply a further refinement of the system, which extends the ideological penetration of the bourgeoisie into the heart of the proletariat. During the fifties and sixties when British capitalism appeared comparatively healthy, shop stewards were able to appear very militant. In particular they seemed to offer workers an alternative to the regular unions, which were becoming increasingly distant, and seemingly less concerned with protecting their interests. But while workers found that the shop stewards were able to bring about a swift settlement of grievances, this was largely the result of developing links between stewards and management, the whole aim of these being to ensure that industry ran more smoothly. Many managers actually preferred to deal with stewards, whom they saw as more flexible than official union representatives and more influential among the workers. The unions, for their part, soon saw the advantages of strengthening and regularising the informal links between unions, stewards and management, and bringing the whole process under their own control. In this way the stewards have become "*the crucial point of contact between members, full time officials and the unions*". ('Shop Stewards and Workshop Relations', **Research Paper 10** by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, p.5).

The militancy of shop stewards was in any case always greatly exaggerated (most managers and stewards themselves seeing the function of stewards as a "*moderating influence*" – *ibid.*, p.7), but the deepening economic crisis has brought the partnership between stewards and management into the open, and clearly revealed the stewards as opponents of class struggle and enemies of the proletariat. In other words the bourgeoisie is becoming more and more dependent on the shop stewards to contain class struggle. This was underlined at British Leyland's Longbridge plant recently when in response to an urgent call from unions and management, who were faced with a series of strikes which threatened to get out of control, seven hundred stewards voted almost unanimously to **ban all unofficial strikes** at the plant.

Moreover it would be a profound error to portray shop stewards as just innocent victims, caught in the web of trade union bureaucracy. On the contrary, the integration of the shops stewards (and all similar rank and file organisations) into the unions is a natural consequence of the acceptance of a trade unionist conception of working class struggle, which is the basis of all such organisations. The idea that workers can take on capitalism plant by plant, and sector by sector, not to overthrow capitalism but to claim their 'rightful' share; not as a permanent struggle against exploitation but as a temporary disruption of a system of otherwise peaceful coexistence: this sort of reformist struggle is no longer possible in decadent capitalism. When capitalism is in a state of profound and insoluble crisis, any serious struggle by the proletariat, even to defend its own living standards, threatens capitalism itself. At such a time, to advocate this form of 'responsible' struggle, within the limits of capitalist society, as the trade unions do, can in reality only mean to **oppose all class struggle**. Indeed the myth that it is possible for the working class to win permanent reforms in decadent capitalism is one of the main weapons of mystification used by the bourgeoisie to prevent the proletariat from taking its defensive struggles to their only possible conclusion: revolutionary struggle against capitalism itself. The failure of rank and file organisations to challenge this reformist, trade unionist conception of class struggle has three main results:

1. They are naturally integrated into the existing unions, or else become some sort of alternative union, with a more radical appearance, but fulfilling the same reactionary role as all other unions.
2. They concretely help to defeat class struggle by isolating it along sectional trade lines. The Scottish strike wave in the autumn of 1974, when a rash of spontaneous strikes led to a near general strike situation in central Scotland, provides the most vivid description of this. It was thanks to the shop stewards who, while taking a 'militant' stance, insisted that each group of workers was only in dispute with its own management, and for its own economic demands, that all these strikes remained isolated and were largely defeated. The next year, when a prolonged strike by a small group of dust-cart drivers in Glasgow was met by concerted opposition from the whole state apparatus, (local council, government, trade union, press and television, and finally from troops sent in to break the strike) the workers' stewards refused to call for the extension of the strike, saying that it was just a dispute between the dust-cart drivers and the local council!
3. More important than the actual physical defeat of such disputes, rank and file organisations form a barrier to the development of revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat, by reinforcing the credibility of the trade unions, and by strengthening the illusion that the proletariat can still struggle in a trade unionist, reformist way.

LESSONS OF RECENT STRUGGLES - THE NEED FOR CONSCIOUS STRUGGLE AGAINST THE UNIONS

Against all the leftist myths which seek to portray the working class as powerless and exposed as soon as it leaves the shelter of the trade unions, we have seen that the more involved trade unions become in workers' struggles, the more these struggles are weakened and finally, defeated. On the other hand, the more the class struggles autonomously of and against the unions, the stronger it becomes.

But in decadent capitalism even the most 'successful' struggles can only offer the proletariat temporary relief from a constant deterioration in its conditions of life. All struggles can only be a preparation for the only possible proletarian solution to the crisis, the revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Class struggle against the unions is thus in no way a 'recipe' for instant success. Rather, the ability of the class to struggle against the unions is one of the **essential preconditions** for this revolutionary struggle.

Since the re-emergence of class struggle in the late sixties, the world proletariat has shown a clear tendency to struggle **outside** the unions, to create its own autonomous fighting organisations such as general assemblies, revocable strike committees, etc. In America in 1970, there were huge national wildcats by postal workers and Teamsters (truck drivers), as well as a rash of wildcats in other industries throughout the late sixties and early seventies. In Britain the number of strikes increased dramatically between 1967 and 1972, and an increasing proportion of these were 'unofficial' (amounting in 1969 to 95 per cent of all strikes).

These struggles formed part of a wave of class militancy which swept the world at this time, and which was felt most strongly in France in 1968, Argentina and Italy in 1969 and Poland in 1970, but which also affected very many countries all over the world to a greater or lesser extent. In all countries the trade unions were at first caught off balance by this sudden wave of class struggle, and were left helpless as the struggles intensified in spite of their opposition. But since then, after their initial confusion, the trade unions have shown a remarkable ability to re-establish their influence with the proletariat. In Britain after widespread wildcats in the mines in 1969 and 1970 (when the miners expressed great hostility towards their union) the union was able to regain much of its lost influence by supporting the 1972 strike, which it recognised as inevitable anyway. This undoubtedly helped to repair the image of the whole British trade union movement. During 1974 and 1975 the unions were further able to strengthen their position by supporting huge wage claims of up to 30 per cent by various groups of workers. Nevertheless because of inflation real wages actually fell during this period. And the influence regained by the unions during this period was one of the factors that enabled the government to enforce the 'Social Contract'.

In America, unions and management have shown that they, like their British counterparts, have learnt from experience that a well-timed strike is often the best way to ensure industrial peace in the future. The most notable example of this was the General Motors strike in 1970, when co-operation between union and management reached a new level: the company went so far as to lend the UAW \$30 million to help finance the strike. One bourgeois commentator explained why the strike had been called: *"A strike, by putting the workers on the streets, rolls the steam out of them - it reduces their demands and thus brings agreement and ratification; it also solidifies the authority of the union hierarchy"* (Quoted by Zerzan in 'Organised Labour vs. The Revolt Against Work', London Solidarity, Black & Red, etc.).

The strengthening of the unions has enabled the bourgeoisie to bring the working class more or less back into line for the present. The struggles of the late sixties and early seventies took the form of a spontaneous eruption, which above all demonstrated the power and combativity of the proletariat. But the seriousness of the situation is now very much more apparent: the strength of the bourgeoisie and the implications of a direct confrontation with the unions and the rest of the state apparatus make workers unwilling to embark on a new series of struggles. However, the lull in the class struggle has in no way involved the defeat of the proletariat, and for this reason it can only be temporary. The inevitable worsening of the crisis creates a growing build-up of class tension that can only lead to a new eruption, more extensive than before.

Meanwhile the bourgeoisie is using the temporary lull in class struggle to prepare its defences against the proletariat. Both its repressive forces (such as the police and the army) and its forces of mystification are being strengthened. In particular the unions' success in containing class struggle has further emphasised their growing importance to the bourgeoisie. In almost every country this has resulted in closer co-operation between unions and government. In Britain, Len Murray, President of the TUC said recently that "...all in all (British) trade unionists have gained more from the government in the last two-and-a-half years than from any other government" (*The Times*, September 9, 1976). **For workers** this period has meant rapidly declining real wages and growing unemployment. Nothing could illustrate more clearly the absolute opposition between the interests of the unions, and those of the working class.

For the proletariat, the lesson of class struggle is clear: spontaneous struggle **outside** the unions is not enough - it can only form a particular, temporary phase in the development of the class struggle. In the future workers will be forced to struggle directly **against** the unions; and the development of this struggle will have to go hand in hand with a growing understanding within the working class of the true nature of trade unions. It is as a contribution towards this understanding that we are publishing this pamphlet.

International Communist Current,

November 1976.

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The union question](#) ^[1]

Unions Against the Working Class - Introduction

4754 reads

One of the fundamental objectives of the class struggle in the last century was to win the right to organise in combinations and unions.

After the 1789 Revolution, the bourgeoisie in France having just conquered political power, deprived the working class of the right to form associations, a right the class had scarcely won for itself. As a result of a constitutional law passed on 14 June 1791, any grouping together on the part of the workers in defence of their common interests was branded as an "*Attack against Liberty and the Declaration of the Rights of Man*", punishable by a fine of 500 livres (pounds) and the loss of citizen rights for a year. It was only after more than a half century of workers' struggles that improvements were brought about that 'tolerated' the right of combination while punishing any 'interference with the free play of industry and the liberty of labour'. In England the laws against combinations were only gradually lifted as a consequence of proletarian pressure. Not until June 1871, after the reforms of

1825 and 1859, did the law recognise the legal existence of trade unions – while simultaneously limiting the extent of such recognition by passing new laws. Legally recognised or not, the workers' unions would never have arisen or survived if the workers had not constantly struggled and sacrificed themselves in their opposition to the bourgeois state.

Today relations between the working class, the unions, and the state have become totally different. Confrontation between the workers and the unions has become a principal characteristic of any significant proletarian struggle. Since 1919, when the unions in Germany participated in the bloody suppression of the workers' insurrection in Berlin, the history of important workers' struggles has been marked by violent clashes between the proletariat and union organisations. This phenomenon, recurring through all the vicissitudes of the struggles, has simply been exacerbated in every country with the reawakening of the class struggle since 1968: the massive strike wave of May 1968 in France was launched despite the unions. In Italy during the course of the strikes that took place during the 'hot autumn' of 1969 the workers chased the union officials from the strike assemblies. In England, where strikes have multiplied since the beginning of the sixties and particularly from 1968 to 1972, strikes were for the most part 'wildcats', that is, against the unions. Anti-union strikes developed in Belgium in 1970, and in 1973 the Antwerp dockers attacked the union headquarters while on strike. In Venezuela, workers in the main industrial centres of the country took the union officials hostage and confronted the army coming to free them. In 1970 naval shipyard workers in Poland confronted the 'workers' party' and unions. The violence of the ensuing insurrectional struggles left several hundred dead.

Conversely, the relationship between the 'workers' unions' and the bourgeois state has become particularly close. In the state capitalist countries, cynically termed 'communist' societies, the unions are officially integrated into the state apparatus in just the same way as the army and police are. As state organs their task is clearly defined - the responsibility of containing the working class within the factories, providing police surveillance, labour discipline, and being the driving force behind the fulfilment of the needs of capitalist production through their efforts to increase productivity and lower wage costs. Thus, for example, the Executive Committee of the Chinese CGT (Confederation of Labour) at their meeting of 10 July 1953, ordered, "*all union cadres to regard the strengthening of labour discipline as their fundamental and permanent task*" and recommended "*punishing in appropriate manner the recalcitrant elements who constantly commit serious infringements against labour discipline*", (G. Lefranc, 'Le Syndicalisme darts le Monde', in **Que Sais-Je?**). Similarly, the Tenth Russian Trade Union Congress (1949) defined the goals of unions in their exhortation to "*organise socialist competition in order to assure that the quotas set forth in the economic plan will be fulfilled and surpassed in order to increase productivity and lower the costs of production*".

In countries where the state makes use of so-called 'democratic' mechanisms, the collaboration between the state and the unions is less apparent, less official, but just as real. It is often clearer in countries where the central bodies of the trade unions are linked to political parties that quite often come to power. This happens in the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, etc. In Belgium, for example, the unions have since 1919 participated in 'round-table talks' organised by the state in order to facilitate good relations between the employers and the unions. The unions are represented in state labour tribunals, which settle conflicts arising between employers and workers. They sit on the Central Council of the Economy, as well as councils running the National Bank of Belgium. They are responsible for managing the allocation of unemployment amongst the unionised

workers, for which task they receive a subsidy from the state. In short, they are closely associated with the state in the management of the national economy, that is, in the management of wage slavery. In countries where the unions are connected to opposition parties, their link to the state can appear less obvious. They are then forced to play the same opposition game as the parties themselves. This has been the case with the main unions in France and Italy for some time. That does not, however, prevent their integration into the rungs of the state apparatus, even in institutionalised forms: thus for example, in France the unions are fatly subsidised by the state, participate in the Planning Council, in the Social and Economic Council, in business committees, etc., and are respectfully consulted by the government on any decision of an important social nature.

In all countries, in any case, the bigger unions have become the very respectable and very official 'representatives of the working class', working alongside the bourgeois state, and becoming an integral part of it. It is not, therefore, difficult to understand why the leader of the French employers' union should today make a sincere and decided plea for strong workers' trade unionism, the very thing the revolutionary bourgeoisie fought against with equal energy in 1791: *"As a counterpart to the freedom enjoyed by the captains of industry, it is desirable that workers' trade unionism should vigorously assert itself in order to establish an equilibrium. Personally, the more I advocate free enterprise, the more I hope for strong trade unionism. This is how things happen in a cohesive society"*, (F. Ceyrac, President of the CNPF, (the most representative organisation of the French bosses), in *L'Express*).

Today, the proletariat must draw the lessons of all the consequences of fifty years of triumphant counter-revolution and working class defeat. As the crisis of world capitalism deepens and engenders the reawakening of proletarian struggle, which has extended itself over the whole planet on an unprecedented scale, the proletariat must engrave on its consciousness a clear response to the questions that history has violently posed it in practice. Are these 'wildcat' strikes, these anti-union struggles which have sporadically exploded during the last sixty years and which are multiplying today in all four corners of the world, marginal, exceptional phenomena, or are they class indications of the only way the proletariat can struggle in the present historic period? Is the integration of the unions into the bourgeois state a real phenomenon, complete and irreversible, or does it simply appear to be so? Do the unions still retain some working class character? Can the working class recuperate them *in toto* or should new forms of union organisation be created? And more generally, can the proletarian struggle use the same forms today under decadent capitalism (senile since World War I) as it used in the historically ascendant capitalism of the nineteenth century? The proletariat can only draw the lessons for its struggles from its own historic experience. The possibility for revolutionary action depends on the capacity of the class to assimilate its own experience. In order to answer these burning questions, we must look at the essential aspects governing the evolution of the unions, and in a more overall sense, the forms workers' struggles have taken since the nineteenth century.

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- The union question ^[1]

The workers' struggle in ascendant capitalism

4469 reads

COMBINATIONS AND UNIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The following quotation illustrates how Marx summarised the main features of the process leading to the formation of the first workers' organisations: *"The first attempts of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations. Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest that they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance – **combination**. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition between workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combination at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers' sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations, which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favour of wages. In England they have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, **trades unions** which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with their employers"*, (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 149-50).

Trade unions appeared therefore as **permanent** organisations of the class whose purpose was to facilitate the organised resistance of the workers against capital. Products of economic conditions and instruments of a basically economic conflict, they were not, however, nor could they be (contrary to the assertions of the anarcho-syndicalists and the reformists) 'a-political' organisations.

Everything that has to do with the government of the state is political. Because the bourgeois state is the guarantor and defender of the relations that link capital to labour, any resistance to such relations is inevitably to the state, and therefore, a **political** struggle. Thus immediately following the last passage we quoted, Marx adds: *"In this struggle - a veritable civil war - all the elements necessary for the coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character...Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself...But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle...Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social"*, (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 150 and 152).

But if it is quite obvious that the class struggle of the proletariat cannot help but bear a relationship to the government of the state, and hence is inevitably **political** in nature, we still have to find out what type of political struggle it is.

Indeed in the nineteenth century the historic reality of capitalism in its full tide of expansion meant that the political struggle of the proletariat could take place on two different levels: on the one hand the struggle fought on the terrain of the bourgeois state itself for economic and political **reforms**, and on the other hand the preparation for revolutionary struggle, the destruction of the bourgeois state and of the society engendering it.

THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORMS

The nineteenth century was the apogee of capitalism's historically ascendant phase. The major economic powers extended capital's domination, transforming the entire world in its own image. The English, French, American, and German capitalists invaded the world with their commodities, a world which offered ever-growing, and seemingly, inexhaustible markets for their production. It was the great era of imperialist expansion and industrial revolutions.

Within this historic framework, the amelioration of working class living conditions constituted objectively, not only a real possibility, but also in certain cases, a stimulant to capitalist development. Thus, for example, the victory won by the English working class in reducing working hours to ten hours per day in 1848, was a real gain for the working class (it was not immediately cancelled out by compulsory overtime), and it also provided a stimulus to the British economy. This is how Marx commented on this event in *Wages, Price and Profit*, illustrating the necessity and the possibility for economic reforms: *"The official economists announced that 'it would sound the death-knell of English industry' (when the Ten-Hour Bill was obtained by the workers). They threatened a decrease of accumulation, rise of prices, loss of markets, stinting of production, consequent reaction upon wages, ultimate ruin. Well, what was the result? A rise in the money wages of the factory operatives, despite the curtailing of the working day, a great increase in the number of factory hands employed, a continuous fall in the prices of their products, a marvellous development in the productive powers of their labour, an unheard-of progressive expansion of the markets for their commodities"*, (Marx, *Wages, Price and Profit*, Peking edition, pp. 13 and 14).

However the bourgeoisie never granted such reforms out of its own inclination. Any concession to the proletariat was made in the first place to the detriment of capitalist profit. Generally speaking it was only after the capitalists were goaded into realising the beneficial results such reforms produced (in terms of acting as a spur to capitalist growth) that they began to understand that it was in their interest to grant the proletariat reforms. It was, therefore, only as a result of implacable struggle that the working class could wrest reforms from the ruling class. This was the nature of the defensive struggles of the proletariat in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, in this period of free-trade, the bourgeoisie governed through Parliament. Here the different factions of the ruling class **really** confronted each other and decided on government policies. For the working class, the right of universal suffrage constituted a real means of influencing the policies of the bourgeois state through its representatives in Parliament. Not that bourgeois Parliamentarians would make great cause with the specific demands coming from the representatives of the workers' organisations. Within the terrain of the bourgeois state, the antagonism existing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie could only ever be favourable to the ruling class. But the bourgeoisie in this epoch was still divided into more progressive and more reactionary factions. The modern bourgeoisie was still fighting against the representatives of the ruling class inherited from the old regime whose economic power remained, and against the most backward factions of its own class. In the words of *The Communist Manifesto*: *"The organisation of*

the proletarians.... compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions among the bourgeoisie itself", (Marx, The Communist Manifesto).

In this historic period then, the struggle for democratic political rights was a necessity for the proletariat. The winning of universal suffrage, the right to form combinations and the parliamentary struggle itself, were political manifestations of the class struggle and formed an inseparable corollary to the struggle and organisation of the unions. Unionism and parliamentarism were specific forms in which the necessity and possibility of reformist struggles in ascendant capitalism were expressed.

THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE

The struggle for reforms was only one aspect of the proletarian struggle in the nineteenth century. The working class is an exploited class and consequently no reform whatsoever can bring about its emancipation. The deepest expression of proletarian struggle lives and flourishes in its struggle for the **destruction** of exploitation and not in its struggles to ameliorate its exploitation. *"An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonisms of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society", (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy).*

Also proletarian revolutionaries did not see in the struggle for reforms the authentic perspective for the working class, nor even the form of struggle which could act as the essential focus for its activity. **Imprisoned within its own limitations**, the struggle for reforms could only result in the defence of exploitation itself. It was no longer a step towards the definitive emancipation of the working class but a new noose hanging round its neck. As much as Marx defended the necessity for reformist struggles, he just as energetically denounced the **reformist** tendencies that were trying to imprison the working class within that struggle, who *"saw in the struggle for wages, only the struggle for wages"* and did not see it as a school of struggle where the class was forging the weapons for its ultimate emancipation. He coined the term 'parliamentary cretinism' to describe the tendency in the workers' movement which tried to create illusions in the possibilities of parliamentary struggle and put all their energies in parliamentary activity.

On the subject of reformist struggles, the *Manifesto* stated: *"Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers"* (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*). And in *Wages, Price and Profit*, he noted: *"At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these every-day struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes in the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the **revolutionary** watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'"* (Marx, *Wages, Price and Profit*, Peking edition, pp. 77-8).

Similarly, the Resolution passed by the 1st International regarding the unions, stated: *“The immediate objective of the workers’ unions was always limited to the necessities of every-day struggles, to expedients against the incessant encroachments of capital, in a word, to questions about wages and hours of work. This activity is not only legitimate but also necessary”,* but: *“...the unions are far too exclusively occupied with local and immediate struggles against capital. They have not sufficiently understood their power to act against the system of wage-slavery itself. They have too often stood aside from the more generalised movements and political struggles...Apart from their immediate task of reacting against the aggravating manoeuvrings of capital, they must now act as organisational spearheads of the working class for the great goal of its radical emancipation. They must assist any social or political movement tending in this direction”,* (Resolution on the Unions, their past, present and future, 1st Congress of the International Working Men’s Association, Geneva, 1866).

For revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, the systematic struggle of the class to win reforms and limit capitalist exploitation, and the understanding that this struggle was not an end in itself but a moment in the global revolutionary struggle, were complementary. The marxist workers’ parties which (parallel to the growing influence of the unions) developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and later formed the 2nd International, tended from the beginning not only to provide the working class with representatives for the parliamentary struggle, but also constituted the political driving force of the unions. It was these parties which, in the face of all the sectional and local struggles of the class, put forward the common interests of the whole proletariat as a global, historical, revolutionary class.

The ephemeral associations of the early times became under the union form permanent organisations, which in close collaboration with the mass parliamentary parties and organised around the systematic and progressive struggle for reforms, constituted the place where the proletariat was unified and developed its class consciousness.

THE UNIONS DESTROYED BY REFORMISM

But the fact that capitalism was at the height of its ascendant phase meant that its destruction by the communist revolution was not yet on the historical agenda. With the expansion of the productive forces under the aegis of capitalist relations of production and the success of the parliamentary and trade unions struggles in obtaining real reforms favouring the working class, the very idea of the communist revolution began to appear as a long term, even unattainable goal.

The dangers inherent in unionism and parliamentarism that Marx had denounced continued to develop and with the famous slogan *“the end is nothing, the movement is everything”*, the workers’ movement was over run by reformism. The workers’ leaders, at one time the representatives of the working class pitted against capitalist society, gradually became the representatives of capitalism working **against** the class. The trade union and parliamentary bureaucracy tended more and more to dominate proletarian organisations.

One of the clearest signs of this evolution was expressed in the tendency for political struggles to be isolated from economic struggles. While the party was coming to be thought of only as a

parliamentary machine, so attempts were being made to make the unions purely economic organisations. Through the separation of the political from the economic element in proletarian struggles, these organisations were being shaped for their integration into the rungs of the capitalist state.

The revolutionary left within the 2nd International led a daily battle against this general degeneration. Rosa Luxemburg, for example, stated: "*There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only one class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself*" (Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*).

But the left could not manage to stem the tide. With the entry of capitalism into decadence the unions and parliamentary parties were flung without difficulty into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The union question](#) ^[1]

The unions in decadent capitalism

4234 reads

THE DECADENCE OF CAPITALISM

With the onset of the twentieth century the conditions which had allowed for capitalism's extraordinary expansion began to disappear. The creation of the world market was achieved and with this antagonisms already existing between the various capitalist powers for the domination of markets increased, as their need for outlets for their products outstripped the capacity of the world market to absorb them. The very development of capital piled up barriers to its continued expansion. There were 'too many capitalists' for the existing markets. The last powerful nation states to enter into competition on the world market (in particular Germany, Italy and Russia) could only open up outlets for their own development at the expense of the old ruling powers. From the beginning of the century, squabbles between the imperialist powers multiplied.

The economic and social life of each nation was more and more thrown into disorder. To cope with rivalries developing over the competition of commodities on the world market, as well as military competition, the whole economy had to be stretched to its maximum limits in order to lower the costs of production and release the necessary resources to develop armies and a military apparatus of the most modern type. The margin of manoeuvre which had once been available to the national capitals and which had allowed the proletariat room to lead a struggle for reforms within bourgeois society shrank rapidly. The pitiless war which the capitalist nations embarked upon led naturally enough to an internal war waged by capital against any amelioration in the living conditions of the producing class. The economic and military efficiency of each national capital vis-à-vis other national capitals depended as never before on the capacity of each to extract the maximum surplus value from its exploited class. No national capital could grant concessions to its proletariat without falling behind on the international arena.

The objective economic foundations which had led the proletariat to focus its class activity around a struggle for the systematic conquest of reforms had irreversibly fallen apart, laying bare the fundamental class antagonisms between the proletariat and bourgeoisie and exacerbating them to their very limits. On the political level, the most powerful sectors of the bourgeoisie in each national capital asserted themselves against the rest of their class and progressively concentrated all power in the hands of the state executive. In the process Parliament became merely a chamber to rubber stamp executive decisions. It was kept in existence solely for the purpose of political mystification.

The era of capitalism's apogee was over and the era of its historic decline opened up.

This fundamental change totally transformed the conditions within which the proletariat had been struggling. Gone was the time when the proletariat could negotiate within the confines of Parliament for an amelioration in its living conditions; gone was the time when it could take advantage of the divergences existing between different bourgeois factions in 'order to pursue its own interests; gone was the time when an improvement in its lot could constitute a stimulant to capitalist development; gone was the epoch when the proletariat could cling to the hope of winning its 'minimum programme'. From now on the class would be confronted with an ever-more centralised, omnipresent and powerful state which could only offer the proletariat ever-increasing exploitation and enlistment as cannon fodder in inter-imperialist conflicts. From now on, indirect methods of political struggle, the attempt to put pressure on the capitalist state and modify its policies through unions and parliamentary parties, could only collapse in the face of the survival-needs of each national capital. Any programme of reform became an unattainable utopia, and all the methods of struggle that had evolved to suit the conditions of ascendant capitalism became fetters on the expression of proletarian interests.

World War I, by definitively marking the entry of capitalism into its decadent phase, violently confronted the proletariat and its organisations with this alternative: 'War or Revolution'; 'Socialism or Barbarism. Either the proletariat had to engage in the direct, revolutionary, mass struggle thereby abandoning its old, inappropriate forms of struggle and organisation, or it would submit to capitalist barbarism.

The old union and parliamentary structure of the 2nd International, riddled to the core with reformism, scarcely hesitated. It passed lock, stock and barrel into the camp of the bourgeoisie, and immediately became capital's recruiting agent for the imperialist butchery.

During the revolutionary explosion which shook Europe at the end of the war the workers provided themselves with new forms of struggle and organisation: mass struggles organised in councils made their first appearance in the beginning of the century with the struggle of the young Russian proletariat. And there ranged before them, flanking the bourgeoisie and the parliamentary parties, stood the unions.

THE UNIONS INTEGRATED INTO THE CAPITALIST STATE

Since World War I, capitalist decadence has plunged humanity into the barbarity of a recurring cycle of crisis, war, and reconstruction. This cycle reinforces the existing historic conditions, which simultaneously render impossible any defence of proletarian interests through reformist struggles, and force any organisation basing itself on this terrain to become a bourgeois instrument integrated into the state apparatus. These conditions principally boil down to the impossibility of reforms and the development of state totalitarianism.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REFORMS

In order to deal with both international competition exacerbated to unbearable limits, and to cope with the unproductive expenses which keep growing in proportion to the deepening contradictions of the system, the bourgeoisie must use the following mechanisms:

1. The maintenance of the more and more monstrous administrative and policing apparatus of the state.
2. Gigantic expenditure on military production (up to 50 per cent of the state budget in countries like Russia or the USA).
3. State subsidies to a greater and greater number of sectors suffering chronic deficits.
4. Increase marketing, publicity, and in general the so-called 'tertiary' sector costs in an attempt to wring from the system compensation for all the expenses of an economic administration which has become as costly as it is contradictory and absurd.
5. And finally, capital is permanently forced to increase the exploitation of the proletariat beyond the point of endurance so as to meet all these unproductive expenses which are characteristics of capitalism in decline.

Given this situation, the bourgeoisie even when it is pressurised by the most militant workers' struggles, cannot afford to grant any real reforms.

It is obvious that during the last fifty years all the struggles for wage increases have ended up with nothing. On the economic terrain, increases in wages have been merely gobbled up by constantly rising prices. The wage increases won in June 1936 at Matignon in France (averaging 12 per cent) evaporated in six months (from September 1936 to January 1937 prices rose an average of 11 per cent). Similarly we all know that one year later nothing was left of the increases granted in June 1968 at Grenella (after the May-June 1968 events in France).

The same phenomenon can be seen with regard to working conditions. While during the ascendant period of capitalism the length of the working week effectively fell due to the pressure of workers struggles (from 1850 to 1900 the length of the working week in industry diminished from 72 to 64.5 hours in France, and from 63 to 55.3 hours in the USA), under decadent capitalism the number of hours has remained the same when it has not actually risen (not to mention the increasing amount of time spent commuting to work). In May-June 1968 the French working class was obliged to win again the 'victory' it won in 1936 (the forty-hour week of 1936 had become 44.3 in 1949 and 45.7 in 1962!).

The period of reconstruction, which began in 1945 after the miseries of the crisis and the war, led many to believe that an improvement in living and working conditions was still possible. The relative prosperity enjoyed by capital during the reconstruction period allowed it partially to reabsorb the unemployed and offer a certain amount of security of employment. Everywhere the defenders of the system held out the bright prospect of a spectacular improvement in living standards in the industrialised countries. But what was the reality behind this great 'improvement' which led some people to assert that the proletariat had disappeared - diluted supposedly into the so-called 'consumer society'?

INCREASED EXPLOITATION

What determines the living conditions of the workers is primarily the length of time the workers must work and the degree of intensification of their exploitation. Within these two areas there has been no meaningful improvement in the living conditions of the workers under decadent capitalism. The length of working time has officially been shortened but any decrease has been compensated for by compulsory overtime and extended commuting time: *"In the strictly economic domain the situation of*

*the working class was never worse than it is today...In many countries the refusal to work overtime is an immediate cause for dismissal and everywhere the introduction of so-called 'base rates of pay' which are deliberately kept low, and rewards and bonuses based on productivity, etc...force the workers to accept 'of his own accord' working days of ten to twelve hours...With respect to the most profound aspect of exploitation -productivity per person per hour - the proletariat finds itself forced into a terrible situation. The production that is extracted from him each day increases at an enormous rate. First, technical innovations take away from the worker any creative intervention in his labour, measure his movements to the second, and transform him into a living robot subjected to the same rhythm as the machines. Then, time and motion studies, that atrocious and repugnant snare, force people to work over and over with the same tools and during uniform periods of time. Finally, the discipline of each enterprise reduces to a minimum the slightest suspension of work even the lighting of a cigarette or taking a shit The output that is extracted from each person by these means is enormous and so, in the same proportion, is the worker's physical and psychic exhaustion", (G. Munis, 'Unions against the Revolution', in *Internationalism* no. 3).*

THE INCREASE IN PURCHASING POWER

Such an increase, which the idolaters of capitalism have made so much of, is quite simply a fraud. Generally speaking, increased purchasing power means being able to acquire a television, a car, and the 'convenience' of electrical gadgets. But this increase is still only the minimum capital is forced to grant to maintain exploitation under the conditions of modern life. The best example of this is the television set. Apart from being one of the saddest ways of making the worker forget his exhaustion during the three or four hours left to him at the end of a day's work, television is also an effective ideological weapon and has long been recognised as such. If the workers didn't want television sets because they cost too much, capital would hand them out free. Cars and other labour-saving devices are ways of getting the most out of the 'free' time of the worker in order to allow him to reproduce his labour power under a rhythm of life made more and more exhausting for him by capital. Such devices are just as indispensable for today's proletariat as paid holidays are necessary to recuperate from a year of inhuman labour. All these things portrayed as sheer luxuries are merely the **strict minimum required in this modern epoch**.

The hollow-sounding assertions made by the defenders of capital cannot hide the reality workers have felt now every day for decades, namely that capitalism must deteriorate their living conditions irreversibly. Faced with this state of affairs and faced with the systematic failure of struggles for real reforms, what role remains for the unions to play? For unions to acknowledge the true state of affairs would mean the recognition of their own ineffectiveness and their self-destruction.

In order to survive, therefore, they have had to become the 'consolers' of the working class in the same way as the church was centuries back for the serfs. Today, while they don't promise heaven, they do invent 'victories' where there are only defeats. They speak of workers' conquests when there is nothing but a reinforcement of exploitation, and they transform any workers struggle into a peaceful demonstration. Just like the church in the Middle Ages, the unions act today as the spearhead of the ruling class within the exploited class.

In this era we have seen conflicts develop between capitalists within each nation and between different factions of world capital. Conflicts have also arisen between antagonistic classes. And in a general sense we have seen a worsening in the overall conflict between the development of the productive forces and the social framework they have outgrown. Its own mechanisms lead decadent capitalism to disintegrate in every domain. And, as was the case in decadent periods of slave society and feudalism, the totalitarian power of the state intervening at every level in society -

controlling everything - consequently becomes an essential factor in the maintenance of the old decaying social edifice.

If, during the prosperous years of the nineteenth century, 'free-exchange' and economic 'non-interventionism' were possible, in its decadent phase capital has developed a much strengthened state to co-ordinate and directly control every aspect of social life and above all control social relations between the classes.

Paralleling the increasing role of the state in the economy since World War I, has been the multiplication of laws regulating relations between capital and labour, to create a narrowly defined area of 'legality' within which the proletarian struggle is circumscribed and reduced to impotency. These laws can assume either the vicious dictatorial forms associated with Stalinist or fascist regimes, of the more subtle - though no less effective - forms associated with the so-called 'democratic' regimes. But under whatever guise they appear these laws form an ideal apparatus for containing the struggles of the working class.

Given the present day historical conditions, any union organisation is forced by the very nature of its function to seek legality. It is permanently subject to pressure. Such pressure tends to transform the union into a conveyor belt for the state playing the only game it can play. The game is making capitalist laws acceptable to the workers. The power of integration possessed by the state apparatus under the totalitarianism of decadent capitalism will only be defeated by direct revolutionary action against the state itself. The unions, which by definition cannot base their activity on this terrain, have no resources to pit against the state.

The integration of the unions into the state frequently manifests itself in an overt and direct way. They officially become an integral part of the state apparatus and in many cases the unionisation of the workers is made obligatory by law. This is what happens in most of the countries born out of 'national liberation struggles', countries which display the most senile forms of decadent capitalism. This also happens in fascist or so-called 'socialist' regimes.

In 'democratic' regimes - in particular those where the unions are linked to political opposition parties (or where they must submit to being clandestine) - integration into the state apparatus manifests itself in a less overt fashion. But the very fact that the unions accept the framework of state legality (or attempt to get themselves accepted by it, as is the case for the clandestine unions in Spain) means that in reality they are integrated into the rungs of the state apparatus. Opposition between different factions of the bourgeois political apparatus serves only to give these union organisations a veneer of combativity, at least verbally, which allows them to better appear as 'workers' organisations'.

Whether this integration is done crudely, or whether it is done through participation by the unions in the bourgeois political comedy, the unions are inevitably absorbed by the state under decadent capitalism. At the point when the unions could no longer exist as workers' organisations because of the impossibility of fulfilling their original task, decadent capitalism created the need within the state for a number of functions which suited the unions perfectly: containment of the working class, management of the sale of labour power, regularisation and defusing of the conflicts between capital and labour, etc. This is why we saw in the first part of the text that the state often creates unions, defends them and subsidises them, for it is only as rungs in this apparatus, associated with the daily management of capitalist exploitation, that the unions can survive in a world where their original function has become impossible.

UNIONS: STATE POLICE IN THE FACTORIES

It is in the factories and in the face of explosions of class struggle that the unions are so indispensable to the capitalist state. Immersed within the revolutionary class they are the best placed to defuse, demoralise, and divide any revolutionary tendency in the class. In countries where an old trade unionist tradition exists, they have become experts in these matters.

The major weakness of any exploited class is lack of confidence in itself. Everything in a class society is structured so as to inculcate into the minds of the exploited class the idea of the inevitability of their situation and of their impotence to overthrow the status quo. Trade unionism - by offering no other perspective to the class than that of illusory improvements in its exploited condition, by permanently presenting the class struggle as a 'terrible sacrifice for the workers', by making negotiation the sole end of the struggle, by singing the praises of the ideal 'good worker' who is the father of his family and responsible and serious in his work - is one of the best peddlers of bourgeois ideology within the working class. Unions spread a spirit of demoralisation and self-abnegation, the very opposite of the combative spirit of the revolutionary class.

The unions excel in the task of dividing any working class struggle by imprisoning it within completely ineffective forms of struggle (strikes just for a few hours, 'days of action', go-slows, etc.) and by compartmentalising any proletarian struggle by shop-floor, by factory and by sector. To prevent at all costs the unification and generalisation of the struggles of the class is the stock in trade of the unions.

Finally, when revolutionary elements in a factory break away from all this by putting the unions and their activities into question, the union bureaucracy is able to play a good policing role, meeting out physical repression when possible and resorting on other occasions to slander by calling the workers agent provocateurs of the government, CIA agents, etc. each time acting as the faithful watchdogs of the system.

Books and books could be written recounting the many varied methods used by unions to sabotage struggles. Just to relate incidences from the last decades would be enough, but that is not our purpose here. The important point is to understand why the unions act in this way, how to fight against the union prison, and above all what not to do.

REVOLUTIONARY SYNDICALISM

If we accept that it was the unions' incapacity to break away from the framework of reformist struggles that led to their integration into the bourgeois state, then how are we to understand the idea that there might be a form of trade unionism which by having revolutionary goals could escape being integrated into the state? This is precisely what the anarcho- syndicalists tried to do from the beginning of this century with their revolutionary syndicalism.

Revolutionary syndicalism constituted a reaction against parliamentary degeneration and the reformism of the unions. To begin with it also expressed, at least in a partial way, an authentic current within the workers' movement. But in order to oppose parliamentarism, revolutionary syndicalism took up again the old anarchist idea, vehemently fought against by Marx, of advocating the rejection of political struggle, seeing in it the source of all reformist degeneration. Through its concern to be 'apolitical' it once more joined up with its reformist enemies, who as we have seen defended the apoliticism of the unions, but from a different standpoint. Syndicalism and parliamentarism are part and parcel of a form of struggle that corresponded to a particular historical period. To reject one without the other is to inevitably fall into incoherence which can only lead to a dead-end.

Under decadent capitalism revolutionary struggle cannot take on a trade union form. The revolutionary struggle is a mass, generalised, and direct struggle which cannot revert back into the

shell of an organisation built for the purpose of a permanent, and systematic struggle for reforms, still less when reforms themselves are impossible. Revolutionary syndicalism had to adopt either politics in keeping with the union form (and that under decadent capitalism would have condemned it to pass to the camp of capital) or it would have had to dissolve itself as a syndicalist organisation in order to integrate itself into the revolutionary struggle, or else dissolve into general society. In the USA, the IWW disappeared. In France and Spain, in spite of often great resistance, revolutionary syndicalist organisations fell prey in the first instance into participation in the imperialist war and in the second instance into participation in the government of the bourgeois Republic during the Spanish Civil War (see note 1).

In all cases, the experience of revolutionary syndicalism only demonstrated one thing: the impossibility of building revolutionary trade unions in decadent capitalism. That is to say the impossibility of building real workers' unions.

Note

1. The Spanish CNT, the only example of a trade union organisation to have tried several times to realise its maximum programme, the "social revolution" (in 1933 and 1934), only did so after the anarchists of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) had conducted a bitter struggle inside it. Throughout the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the CNT, despite its professed 'revolutionary apoliticism', was in contact with all kinds of conspirators, like Macia, the Republican Alliance, and various other oppositional elements.

In July 1927 the FAI was founded. Its members, rejecting any kind of tactical compromise, attempted to win over the CNT in order to realise the social revolution. The FAI became the rallying point for all those who disapproved of the reformist orientation of anarcho-syndicalism.

At the National Congress of 1930 the two tendencies clashed. On the one hand, there were the leaders of the CNT, who stressed above everything else the trade unionism of the CNT, and proposed an alliance with other groups and fractions to facilitate the setting up of the Republic; on the other hand stood the 'purists' of the FAI who insisted on the anarchism of the Confederation, rejecting all compromise. The latter carried the day: the old leaders were displaced from their positions, then took their faction out of the CNT. (The 'trentistes' organised their own trade unions). It was for this reason that the CNT did not participate in the embryonic Popular Front of 1930.

The CNT, under the influence of the FAI which was also committed to an 'a-political' line, tried until 1936 to use the general strike as a preparation for insurrection. Weakened considerably by repression and discouraged by successive failures, the CNT paid the price for believing in the possibility of revolutionary unionism. At the 1935 Congress the 'trentistes' came back, having meanwhile entered into all kinds of alliances with the bourgeoisie. The attempted right-wing insurrection of 18 July 1936 and the proletarian uprising of the 19th shattered the facade surrounding the organisation. The 'workers' forces came to power led by the CNT and the FAI. In Catalonia, its stronghold, the CNT made up part of the Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias - itself on the borders of the 'Gobierno de la Generalidad'; then it entered the latter, thus giving it the working class prop it needed so badly. Syndicalist apoliticism had triumphed! The 'purists' of the FAI did not take long either to accept ministerial posts in the Republic they had fought against for so long.

These 'anti-authoritarian' partisans of an 'a-political social revolution', who acted in the name of sacrosanct moral principles, never understood the need for the destruction of the state apparatus as a moment in the political struggle of the proletariat against its class enemy, the bourgeoisie.

All the while defending certain revolutionary principles (anti-frontism, anti-parliamentarism) in the name of ideological purity, they attached little importance to the transgression of these principles under the pressure of events, as long as the ideology remained 'pure'. Thus the CNT allied itself with bourgeois parties, participated in the government of the bourgeois Republic, and allowed the proletariat to be massacred in Barcelona in 1937 in order not to disturb the 'unity' of the anti-fascist front. In short they proved what must now seem obvious: that apoliticism, the rejection of class frontiers clearly set down as political principles, can only benefit the bourgeoisie.

After 1936, the CNT's policy of anti-fascist unity made it play the role of all other reformist unions: containing the working class in the service of capital. Despite the honesty of its militants, the 'a-political' organisation thus joined the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

To have struggled so much and sacrificed so many revolutionary militants, only to end up with a seat in the ministries of the Republic was a sad destiny for 'revolutionary a-political syndicalism'.

By allying itself with the very forces which showed no hesitation in firing upon revolutionary workers (most of whom were its own militants) the CNT buried anarcho-syndicalism in the dustbin of history, alongside the parliamentary parties, the reformist unions, the Trotskyists, and the Stalinists.

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The union question](#) ^[1]

Leftists and the trade unions

3993 reads

Within the union world there exists a 'critical' wing: the leftists. Crediting themselves with the principal errors of the 3rd International, they today defend tactical participation and support of the trade union - while perpetually criticising the unions' 'mistakes'. But the leftists consider the unions to be workers' organisations, which they have the task of 'de-bureaucratising' by reconquering the leadership.

DO THE UNIONS HAVE A DUAL ROLE?

In order to justify their 'critical' support of the trade unions, leftist tendencies express the idea that the unions have a dual role: in periods of 'social calm' when there are no important struggles, the unions defend the working class against the bosses; in periods of social unrest, they defend the bosses against the working class. The unions are 'against the revolution' but not 'against the working class'. This reasoning is actually nothing but an oblique way of reaffirming faith in the unions while giving the impression of being against them. Trusting the unions but at the same time rejecting them. For example, this was the position of the group Pouvoir Ouvrier in May 1968 in France, who asserted in their political platform that: *"In the present epoch, in most capitalist countries, the unions objectively play a dual role: - they defend the immediate interests of the wage-earner against the bosses; they defend capitalist society that they accept in principle, against any class movement which might create difficulties for it"*, (Pouvoir Ouvrier, no. 90, May 1968).

This idea is no more profound than the one according to which the police force defends the interests of the workers when saving them from drowning at the beach, and no longer defends them when clubbing them over the head during a strike (thereby serving the interests of the boss).

The class nature of an organisation is not determined by its attitudes in moments of social calm, when the proletariat remains passive, subordinated economically and ideologically to the power of the bourgeoisie. It is when the classes openly confront each other that you must judge the class nature of an organisation.

The role of the unions becomes clear when during any generalised workers' struggle, they are seen preventing contacts between workers in different factories, falsifying the demands of the workers, using lies and slander to get the workers back to work, telling them that in the other factories in struggle 'the workers have gone back' and that they 'can't carry on alone'. Quite simply the unions' role becomes clear when they act as strike-breakers. That is when their class nature appears in broad daylight. The defensive comedy that they daily play in periods of social calm, putting themselves forward as defenders of the class in masquerades of collective bargaining, scrupulous applications for the right to work, and the whole set of rules which govern the exploitation of labour, does not make them representatives of the class against capital, but makes them functionaries of capital responsible for facilitating the normal and daily functioning of exploitation within the working class. The crocodile tears the unions shed over the most flagrant abuses of capital ('hour long protest strikes', preoccupation with problems of individual workers in the factory, all the 'petty tasks') is the base on which the official myth identifying the unions with the interests of the working class rests. This myth the leftists take up in their 'critical' way, but it is actually a necessary pre-condition for union containment of any real outbreak of class struggle.

Just as the police must save drowning people and direct traffic on the roads so as to justify their existence when the time comes to repress workers' struggles in the name of 'the public interest', so the unions must fulfil 'social welfare' functions for the workers and act as a safety valve within the class so that at a time of real struggle they will be that much better placed to play their role of containment and repression in the name of the workers' interests.

Sabotage of workers' struggle and official representation of workers within the framework of capitalist exploitation are not two differing - still less contradictory - functions of the trade unions under decadent capitalism. Both are but two aspects of one and the same anti-proletarian function.

THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF THE UNIONS AND ILLUSIONS ABOUT RECONQUERING THEM

Another argument taken up time and again by the leftists in order to justify their 'critical' support of, and participation in, the unions, is to present the unions as organisations which left to themselves would be valuable forms of organisations for the workers' struggle, but which have been led astray from their true path as a result of bureaucratisation and 'bad leadership'. Thus for the leftists the question is to 'reconquer' the unions by making them more democratic (demands for faction rights) and by changing the 'corrupt leadership' by replacing it with real workers' leaders at the top.

Instead of seeing that bureaucracy and 'bad' leaders are inevitable products of the capitalist nature of the unions, people who hold such illusions present both as the cause of the 'errors' and 'betrayals' of the unions.

The bureaucratisation of an organisation does not stem from the decision-making power of its central organs. Contrary to what the anarchists think, centralisation is not synonymous with bureaucratisation. On the contrary, in an organisation inspired by the conscious, passionate activity

of each of its members, centralisation is the most efficient way of stimulating the participation of each member in the life of the organisation. What characterises bureaucracy is the fact that the life of the organisation is no longer rooted in the activity of its members but is artificially and formalistically carried on in its 'bureaux', in its central organs, and nowhere else.

If such a phenomenon is common to all unions under decadent capitalism it is not because of the 'malevolence' of the union leaders; nor is bureaucratisation an inexplicable mystery. **If bureaucracy has taken hold of the unions it is because the workers no longer support with any life or passion organisations which simply do not belong to them.** The indifference the workers show towards trade union life is not, as the leftists think, a proof of the workers' lack of consciousness. On the contrary it expresses a resigned consciousness within the working class of the unions' inability to defend its class interests and even a consciousness that the unions belong to the class enemy.

The relationship between the workers and the unions is not that of a class to its own class instrument. It most often takes the form of a relationship between an individual with individual problems and a welfare service ('which knows how to deal with the bosses'). The unions are bureaucratic because there is not and cannot be any proletarian spirit in them.

The leftists who militate within the unions have assigned themselves the task (among others) of revitalising union life. All they succeed in doing is getting hold of the young trade union militant who begins by believing in the unions, only to become disillusioned and leave, (unless he too becomes a 'believer'). The only thing the leftists achieve is retarding the awareness of the class of the capitalist nature of these organisations. The *Leif-motif* spouted by the leftists: "*it's a bad workers' organisation, but a workers' organisation all the same*" is ultimately the best defence the unions could have in the face of the growing suspicion the workers have about them. The union bureaucrats actually find the 'fanatics' committed to 'constructive criticism' of the unions their very best allies and touts among those workers who 'are led astray by anti-unionism'.

As for the tactic of 'reconquering' the leadership of the unions in order to turn them into real class organisations, that simply highlights the same myopic point of view, when it is not merely a smoke-screen for crude bureaucratic machinations. The anti-working class actions of the unions are not a matter of good or bad leaders. It's no accident that for more than fifty years the unions have always had bad leaders.

It is not because of bad leadership that the unions do not take part in the real struggles of the working class; on the contrary, it is because the unions are as organisations, incapable of serving the needs of the class struggle that their leaders always turn out to be bad. As Pannekoek observed: "*What Marx and Lenin said over and over again about the state, that despite the existence of formal democracy it cannot be used as an instrument of proletarian revolution, applies also to the unions. Their counter-revolutionary force can neither be negated nor brought under control by a change of leadership, by replacing reactionary leaders with men of the 'left' or with 'revolutionaries'. It is the very form of the organisation itself which reduces the masses to powerlessness and prevents them from using it as an instrument of their own will*", (Pannekoek).

Heritage of the Communist Left:

- The union question ^[1]

The content and form of workers' struggles under decadent capitalism

4123 reads

CONTENT

Given the overtly anti-working class role of the unions, **wildcat strikes**, strikes against the unions, have multiplied everywhere. They express in practice the proletariat's antagonism to unions and reveal a clearer and clearer consciousness within the class of the capitalist nature of these organisations. But what is the content of such strikes? The fact that capitalism is no longer in a position to concede any real improvement in the conditions of exploitation has reduced proletarian struggles to a **defensive** battle against capital's permanent attack on the workers' living standards. The examples of 1936 and 1968 in France show how capital is forced to take back immediately any concession torn from it by generalised struggles of the class. But 1936 and 1968 were situations in which wage increases were **followed** by price rises; in both cases these were exceptions arising out of particularly large-scale struggles. The normal rule in capitalism today is not that price rises follow wage increases but the exact opposite. It isn't a question of capital constantly trying to recoup what the workers have torn from it, but of the workers constantly trying to **resist** any intensification of exploitation.

What characterises the content of workers' struggles under decadent capitalism is not in itself the fact that they are defensive struggles (this has been a common feature of all proletarian struggle ever since the workers first confronted their exploiters), but firstly the fact that struggles can be defensive, without any hope of real victories such as were won in the nineteenth century and secondly the fact that real workers' struggles immediately tend to put into question the very existence of the exploitative system (i.e. their tendency to become revolutionary).

The workers' resistance under decadent capitalism can no longer escape the following two alternatives. Given the system's drive for self-preservation, **either** the working class must accept the containment of its struggles within a **purely economic terrain**, thereby condemning its struggles to a total impasse since capitalism can no longer grant any meaningful economic reforms, or the working class must assert itself resolutely as a power in its own right. If the workers accept the first alternative, such an impasse produces within their midst the best conditions in which the bourgeoisie can unleash its chief weaponry against working class resistance. These weapons include economism, narrow localism, illusions in self-management, etc. These mystifications always lead to defeat and demoralisation. But if the proletariat takes up the second alternative, it is immediately forced to go beyond the purely economic framework of its struggle and display its political nature by developing class solidarity and confronting the very basis of bourgeois legality, starting with the state's representatives within the factory: the unions.

There is no longer any possibility of conciliation between capital and labour. Their fundamental antagonism is, under decadent capitalism, pushed to its final limits. That is why any real working class struggle must inevitably and immediately pose itself as a political and revolutionary struggle. The revolutionary content of the struggle bursts out **to a greater or lesser degree** depending on whether the struggle is a response to a situation of deepening crisis and whether the political apparatus which the workers are confronting is made up of all the 'shock-absorbers' in society (unions, 'workers' parties, political liberalism, etc). In countries where these shock-absorbers are absent or too inflexible to successfully perform this role, workers' struggles, while less frequent, take

on an openly revolutionary aspect much more rapidly. This happens in countries like Francoist Spain or in the Eastern bloc countries where workers' strikes so often become insurrectional struggles embracing whole towns and are soon transformed into generalised confrontations with the forces of the state - as for example in Vigo, Pamplona, and Vitoria in Spain, and Gdansk and Szczecin in Poland in 1970.

But whatever the exact circumstances, and however intense the struggle may or may not be, **working class resistance** in this epoch can no longer assert itself **without immediately taking a revolutionary direction**. It is this new characteristic in the workers' struggles which has led revolutionaries since the outbreak of World War I to proclaim that the old distinction made by the Social Democracy between the 'minimum programme' (reforms to be obtained within capitalism) and the 'maximum programme' (communist revolution), is no longer valid. From 1914 on, only the 'maximum programme' could express the interests of the working class. Since the possibility of obtaining reforms under capitalism became utopian, **only that which is revolutionary is part of the working class, only that which tends towards the revolution can have a truly proletarian character**.

Does this mean that the working class must abandon its economic struggles, as those 'total revolutionists' from Proudhon onwards have advised the class to do, considering economic struggles paltry activities integrated into the life and defence of capital? No, that point of view is not revolutionary. The proletariat is a class, a group of people who are defined according to economic criteria (i.e. the position they occupy in the process of production). Therefore to extol the virtues of abandoning its economic struggle means concretely to ask the working class to either **abandon any struggle** and remain passive in the face of its exploitation, or to immerse itself in all kinds of 'non-class-based' struggles (co-operatives, feminism, ecology, regionalism, anti-racism, etc.) and thus dissolve itself into an eclectic, heterogeneous, spineless mass of 'well-intentioned' people and others voraciously seeking after 'human justice'. In either case it all comes down to the same old bourgeois cry to the proletariat to "*Abandon the class struggle!*".

Only people who have never understood why the working class is a revolutionary force can arrive at such a conclusion. It is not because the working class is endowed with a marked taste for ideas and 'generous causes' that it alone is capable of conceiving and realising the communist society. Like all revolutionary classes in history, the proletariat is led to destroy the ruling system only because its defence of its immediate interests objectively forces it to do so. And like **any class**, the proletariat's interests are fundamentally economic. It is because the destruction of the capitalist system is the **only way** the working class has of avoiding ever - increasing degradations in its living conditions that its struggle for an improvement in its economic situation becomes a struggle for the destruction of the system itself.

The revolutionary struggle of the proletariat is not, then, the negation of the economic nature of its struggle but the result of its total understanding of the reality of that struggle. In consciously embracing the political nature of its daily economic struggle, in deepening it to the point of finally destroying the bourgeois state and establishing communist society, the proletariat never abandons its defence of its economic interests. Rather the proletariat takes upon itself all the meaning and all the consequences of that struggle. As long as the proletariat exists, that is to say for as long as classes exist, up to and even after the assumption of revolutionary power, the class struggle will retain its economic character. The economic basis of man's historic activity will only disappear when communist society flourishes, in other words when all classes - and hence the proletariat too - disappear. In the meantime, inevitably, unavoidably, the working class forges the weapons of its revolutionary struggle through its daily resistance to capitalist exploitation. It is this which both allows

the class and forces it to unify as a class and thus it is in the heat of this struggle that the proletariat arrives at a consciousness of the **necessity** for, and the **possibility** of, communist revolution.

What the proletariat must abandon is not the economic nature of its struggle (an impossibility in any case if it is to fight as a class), but all its illusions in the future possibilities of successfully defending its interests, even its most immediate ones, without leaving the strictly economic framework of struggles and without consciously adopting a political, global and revolutionary understanding of its struggle. Faced with the inevitable short-term failure of its defensive struggles under decadent capitalism, the class must conclude that it isn't that these struggles are useless, but that the only way of making them useful to the proletarian cause is to understand them and consciously transform them into moments of learning and preparation for struggles which are more generalised, more organised, and more conscious of the inevitability of the proletariat's final confrontation with the system of exploitation. In the era of capitalism's decline, when the communist revolution is on the historical agenda, the **effectiveness** of the every day struggles of the working class can no longer be measured, or understood, in immediate terms. Their effectiveness can only be understood within the world historic perspective of the communist revolution.

FORMS OF ORGANIZATION.

With the trade unions lost to it forever, the working class has been confronted with the problem of discovering a new form of organisation. But this is by no means easy under decadent capitalism. The great strength of the unions derives from their ability to gain recognition as the only possible means of organisation for the workers' struggle. Thus the bosses and the government accept no other 'spokesman' for the working class than the trade unions. Every day, ceaselessly, in leaflets, the press, radio and television, capital systematically drums the message into the heads of the workers: "*the trade unions are your organisations*". Nothing is spared in its efforts to strengthen the ability of the trade unions to mystify the working class. Even so, this operation is not always an unqualified success: in a country like France where the sledgehammer of the unions representative role is applied with particular violence, only one worker in five feels the need to join the union. Today the 'leftist' organisations are called upon to play a bigger and bigger role in reinforcing the credibility of these capitalist organs in the eyes of the more combative workers. Constantly subjected to this barrage of mystification, the workers in countries that boast 'trade union freedoms' have the greatest difficulty in envisaging the possibility of organising their struggles outside the traditional apparatus. A particularly unbearable situation must develop in order for them to find the strength to openly oppose the immense state machine and its parties and trade unions. This is what characterises and renders the struggle of the proletariat so difficult under decadent capitalism. In opposing the unions, the working class does not simply confront a handful of trade union bureaucrats. The capitalist state itself stands before it. But this very difficulty makes every upsurge of the class outside the trade unions all the more significant. It is this that makes the question of forms of organisation outside the trade unions so important. The problem of the **forms** of organisation of working class struggle is neither independent nor separate from the problem of its **content**. There is a close inter-relation between the revolutionary content workers' struggles immediately tend to take on in the epoch of capitalist decadence, and the forms of organisation the class arrives at.

DURING THE STRUGGLE

In its greatest revolutionary struggles in this century, the proletariat has taken up a new form of organisation suited to its revolutionary mission: the soviets or workers' councils - assemblies of delegates mandated by the general assemblies of workers. These organs of centralisation and unification created by the class are the means through which it can forge, in the heat of the struggle, the material and theoretical forces necessary for its attack against the state. But the very form of the soviets or councils gives them one particular characteristic. Because they are assemblies of

delegates elected by quasi-permanent general assemblies, their existence is entirely dependent on the existence of generalised class struggle. If the class is not struggling in all the factories, if there are no general assemblies of workers in all the places they are fighting, the councils cannot exist. The workers' councils can only become permanent when the generalised open struggle of the class becomes permanent; in other words during the revolutionary process itself. The workers' councils are the **specific** organs of proletarian power.

How then does the working class organise itself when it is struggling against the state and its union appendages, but the struggles have not yet reached the stage of generalised insurrection? The experience of thousands of wildcat strikes during the course of more than fifty years has provided a clear answer to this question. In all four corners of the planet and under the most different geographical and historical conditions, anti-union strikes have spontaneously taken on a particularly simple form of organisation: general assemblies of strikes co-ordinated by committees of elected delegates which are permanently responsible to the assemblies. The same organisational basis is found in these strikes as that of the councils. Forms and content are connected. In the same way that the most important strikes in decadent capitalism contain within themselves the seeds of massive revolutionary struggle, likewise their forms or organisation reveal in an embryonic fashion the organisational forms of the organs of the revolution - the councils.

OUTSIDE OF STRUGGLES

Confronted with the death of the union form of struggle the working class through its own experience has resolved in practice the question of the form of organisation it must use in order to take its open struggle on to victory. But the unions functioned not only as forms of organisation used by the class when it was engaged in struggle. As permanent organisations the workers also used them in periods of calm. Together with the mass party, they constituted a real permanent means of regrouping the class. After the unions ceased to be proletarian organisations, the class was then faced with the problem of knowing if and how it could organise itself on a class basis, given a let-up in the struggle. What generally happens when the struggle dies down is that the strike committees disappear along with the general assemblies. The workers tend to go back to being a mass of individuals, atomised and defeated, more or less accepting the claims of the unions to represent them. Such a return to passivity may take a long time or it may happen very quickly, but in either case if there is no new outbreak of open struggle it is inevitable. In an attempt to prevent such a relapse, it often happens that in the downturn of the struggle the most combative workers try to remain organised in order to create a **permanent** organisation that will allow the class to regroup after the struggle has finished. The absence of struggle systematically condemns such attempts.

Either the factory organisation dissolves itself after a time, demoralised by its inability to regroup all the workers (this happened to the German AATJ, for example, after the struggles of 1919-1923 and also to all the Action Committees which tried to stay alive in the French factories after the events of May-June, 1968 (see note 2 below)), **or it remains and is transformed into a new union**. This return to unionism can in some cases be very obvious. The initiators of these factory groups simply acknowledge the formation of a new more 'radical', less 'bureaucratic', 'more democratic' union. This, for example, was the fate of the strike committee that the Trotskyists tried to keep going in 1947 after the Renault strike in France. And similarly the 'Workers' Commissions' in Spain became by the end of the 1960's a real national union structure, and an instrument in the hands of the bourgeois parties of the 'democratic' opposition.

With the gradual undermining of the union mystification, the return to unionist practices tends to take place more and more undercover of ambiguous, more confusionist forms of organisation - masked overall in anti-union language. In the course of open struggles, especially when they come up against the union apparatus, it becomes clearly impossible to separate the immediate economic

struggle from the historic revolutionary struggle. Often, in the wake of these strikes, the idea takes root among some workers to try to 'invent' a new form of permanent organisation, which would be just like the assembly of strikers, being neither a simply 'economic' nor 'political' organisation.

But it is not sufficient just to 'want' something to be possible for it to be so. In wishing to retain the two main characteristics of the trade unions (that of a **unitary** organisation capable of regrouping all the workers and a **permanent** organisation existing outside periods of open struggle) these attempts always end up, after a shorter or longer period of time, in failure. The failure is rounded off by an inevitable return to trade unionist cretinism. Then, as enthusiasm wanes, such organisations - powerless in the face of the demobilisation of the workers - gradually become concerned once more with discovering 'concrete' and 'realistic' demands with which to 'reactivate the masses'. They quickly come to the point of outbidding the demands of the main unions (a 36-hour week instead of a 40, an increase of 200 francs instead of 100, 'qualitative demands' instead of quantitative ones, etc.) in an effort to make the myth of 'immediate victories' sink better into the consciousness of the workers. In the process, general revolutionary ideas are made to seem far 'too abstract to be understood by workers'.

Politically, such organisations seek ways of distinguishing themselves from traditional union organisations. They adopt a more radical 'left' sounding language and political slogans putting forward either 'impossible demands' or the sinister joke of self-management. Thus, after a little time, a type of organisation that had wanted to be 'neither a union nor a political organisation' only gives rise to a **more political trade union**: a leftist union, usually very small and even more confused, whose only real distinction is its inability to recognise itself for what it has become - namely a trade union. Certain leftists are now specialists in generating this kind of activity. Autonomia Operaia in Italy and Plataformas anti- capitalistas in Spain are probably the most typical example of this most shameful form of unionism.

WHY ALL THESE FAILURES?

Whether we are dealing with the German 'Unionen' (AAU) between 1919 and 1923, the Action Committees in France in 1968-1969, the Unitary Base Committees and Autonomous Assemblies in Italy, or the Workers' Commissions in Spain, all have their origins in workers' circles formed by the most combative workers.

All such circles express the general movement of the class towards organisation. But contrary to what those leftist students may think who try to **invent** new forms of organisation for the class (from such experiments as the Cahiers du Mai in France to the 'Autonomous Assemblies' in Italy today), there is not an unlimited number of possible organisational forms open to the proletarian struggle. A form of organisation must inevitably be appropriate to the goal it pursues. In other words, for each goal there corresponds a form of organisation that is most effective and most adapted to it. Now the class does not pursue an unlimited number of goals. It has but one: **the struggle against exploitation**, both its effects and its cause. In this struggle, the proletariat has only two weapons: its **consciousness** and its **unity**. Thus when workers regroup outside times of open struggle in order to assist in the general struggle of their class, they can only do so by giving themselves two basic tasks to carry out, that of **contributing to the deepening and generalisation of revolutionary consciousness within the class** and contributing to the **unification** of the class.

The proletariat's forms of organisation are necessarily moulded by the need to carry out these two tasks. But here problems arise: these two tasks are two aspects of the same general task, two contributions to the same fight. But they nevertheless have contradictory characteristics. In order for the class to be united there must be an organisation to which every worker can belong irrespective of his political ideas, simply because he is a worker. But in order that the consciousness of the class as

a whole may develop, the most advanced workers cannot simply stand around waiting for this to happen of its own accord. It is their duty to spread their convictions, to make propaganda, and intervene with their political positions within the rest of their class. As long as the working class exists as an exploited class (and when it is no longer exploited it will no longer be a class), there will be within it immense differences in the consciousness and revolutionary will of its members. In the course of struggle, all workers owing to their place in production tend to take on a revolutionary consciousness. But all workers do not develop consciousness at the same pace. There are always individuals and fractions of the class who are more decided and more conscious of the necessity for and the means of revolutionary action, while others are more fearful, more hesitant, and more susceptible to the ideology of the ruling class. It is only in the long process of class struggle that revolutionary consciousness can be generalised. **The intervention of the most advanced elements of the class is an active factor in this process.** But this activity demands an essential political agreement on the part of those engaged in it. Moreover, it must be carried out in an organised manner. Thus the organisation charged with this task must be formed on the basis of a **political platform**. If such an organisation were to admit into its midst all the political currents that exist in the class; in other words if it refused to elaborate for itself a political platform summing up all the lessons arising from the experience of two centuries of class struggle, it would become incapable of carrying out its tasks. In the absence of strict **political** criteria governing membership, the organisation is condemned to become a source of confusion.

Unifying itself and raising its level of consciousness are the two tasks that the class must perform in an organised manner. But it cannot do this with only one type of organisation. That is why it has always thrown up two basic forms of organisation:

1. class-wide (unitary) organisations whose task is to regroup all workers without regard to their political ideas (trade unions in the ascendant epoch of capitalism, councils and general assemblies in the period of decadence).
2. political organisations based on a political platform and without social criteria for membership (political parties and groups).

Most attempts to create class-wide organisations outside times of open struggle are characterised by the more or less explicit desire of the participants to create an organisation which is both **unitary** and **political** at the same time - an organisation at once open to all workers while simultaneously pursuing the task of defending political positions within the class, particularly those regarding the unions.

And that is the primary reason for the systematic failure of such attempts. We have already seen why a political organisation cannot be 'open' - like a unitary organisation - without becoming a source of confusion within the class. But the basic reason for their systematic failure lies in the general impossibility within decadent capitalism for the class to organise itself in a class-wide manner outside periods of open struggle; a fact that the class repeatedly discovers for itself.

In the nineteenth century, the workers' unions could be **permanent** and class-wide organs because of the function they had to fulfil: the systematic struggle for reforms could and had to be permanently undertaken. Workers could effectively regroup around this struggle and create a living centre for the development of class consciousness, reinforced as it was by concrete results. But when this struggle became impossible and ineffective, **when working class resistance could only express itself in and through open struggle, there no longer remained a focus capable of allowing a general regroupment of the class outside of open struggle.** The masses could not organise themselves for long around an activity that had no immediate results.

The only activity that can engender a stable organisation on the terrain of the class outside periods of struggle is an activity placing itself within the framework of the historical and global struggle of the class and that activity belongs to the proletarian political organisation. Its task is to draw the lessons from the historical experience of the working class, to reappropriate the communist programme and carry out systematic political intervention in the class struggle. But this task belongs to a minority of the class, which is never able to constitute the real basis for the **general**, class-wide regroupment of the class.

Attempts to form organisations functioning as both unitary and permanent organs of the class are immediately caught in a vice. On one side such organisations are incapable of being real class-wide organs; on the other they are doomed to fail as political organisations unless they abandon any pretensions to being class-wide. They are either condemned to dissolve or are kept going by undertaking the only activity able to provide them with the illusion of continued life - that of becoming unions.

The workers' groups, which have been formed outside of open struggle, can be no more than temporary centres of discussion where workers can start to deepen their class consciousness. Any attempt to freeze them by trying to transform them into something they cannot be, that is stable organisations, must end up in one of the dead-ends we have already discussed.

THE INTERVENTION OF REVOLUTIONARIES

In the years to come the trade unions will be called upon to play a leading role on the political stage of the class struggle. They are the main barricade behind which capital attempts to protect itself from the attacks of the proletariat. For the working class, they represent the first enemy to be vanquished, the first barrier to be thrown down. That is why the denunciation of the trade unions is one of the main tasks of the intervention of revolutionaries. Communists must explain again and again to their class that those who are today at the head of the trade union processions and who are so concerned with the maintenance of order will be the same ones tomorrow, who will take up arms against the workers. Revolutionaries must also tirelessly denounce the ideologists of self-management, and all the other vultures of decadent capitalism who, under cover of slogans like 'the dual nature of the trade unions', the 'workers' united front', and other forms of critical support' seek to present these organs of capital as workers' organisations.

Communists do not defend particular demands, unlike the people who invent and put forward 'more radical', 'more unattainable' or 'more transitional' demands as carrots to encourage the proletariat to 'go beyond economic struggles and on to political struggles'. Communists support all demands of the class when they express the proletariat's resistance to increasing exploitation. Their task is to show that within decadent capitalism, capital can no longer grant any lasting satisfaction to the workers' demands which would represent real improvements in the conditions of the workers' lives; that there can no longer be a struggle against the effects of exploitation which does not also become a struggle against its cause; that there can be no real victory in defensive struggle, except the acquisition of the means to definitively destroy the system itself.

The denunciation of the trade unions goes hand in hand with the defence of forms of organisation suited to the proletarian struggle under decadent capitalism: general assemblies, factory committees, and workers' councils.

But by themselves the forms of class organisation can never be a **sufficient** condition to guarantee real class autonomy in the class struggle. The bourgeoisie knows only too well how to recuperate forms of organisation that the class throws up in its struggle, and how to use them for its own purposes. What's more, by posing the question as a problem of organisation, by polarising the

preoccupations of the workers on this question, organisation becomes a way of conjuring away the problem of the content of the struggle by fixating and blocking the revolutionary process at a particularly vulnerable stage. The forms of organisation are a **necessary** condition for the development of this process, but their appearance is very much a spontaneous product of the action of the masses rather than a result of the intervention of revolutionaries. But once these forms have appeared, the continuation of the revolutionary process can no longer be on that spontaneous level but must be based on the **content** of the struggle. It is on this terrain that the intervention of revolutionaries is absolutely vital.

Revolutionaries must denounce all those who, with every step taken by the proletariat in its struggle, present these advances as definitive victories, and attempt to constrict the development of the revolutionary process.

At every stage of the struggle revolutionaries put forward the historic perspective and global character of the proletarian struggle.

The destruction of the unions is only one aspect of the global destruction of the capitalist state. The workers can only develop their struggle by globally assuming its true content, that of the historic struggle for the world communist revolution.

Note

2. Frequently this dissolution takes place in the most distressing forms of decomposition. As the original nucleus sees its membership declining, eventually leaving only a handful of isolated individuals, despair overtakes them and flings them into a frenzied activism which often results in the theorisation of individualistic types of activity: sabotage, terrorism, or even into experiences of localised, 'immediate transformations of everyday life'. In Italy, for example, where in 1969 the most generalised anti-union struggles of Western Europe took place, many such prototypes of decomposition were produced.

This article first appeared in November/December 1974 as 'Les Syndicats Contre La Class Ouvrier' in no.12 of **Revolution Internationale**, the publication in France of the International Communist Current. This, in turn, was a rewritten and improved version of 'Greves Sauvages et Syndicats' in **Revolution Internationale**, no.3 (Old Series), December 1969. A version of that article appeared in English under the title 'Unions and Wildcats' in **Internationalism**, no.1 (the publication in America of the ICC), and was reproduced under the same name as a pamphlet by **Workers' Voice** in 1974. This pamphlet is a translation of a further revised and developed text produced by the International Communist Current in French in pamphlet form, entitled 'Les Syndicats Contre la Classes Ouvriere'.

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