

Unions Against Revolution

Grandizo Munis

1960

No contradiction can exist between the economic and the political aspects of a revolutionary conception, even supposing the clearest organic and functional demarcation between them. The same is true for any reactionary conception. Hence the present interpenetration, the agreement and collaboration between unions—economic organs —and political parties—ideological organs—gives us the key to understanding both, from whichever side one looks at the matter. This statement proceeds from an old and unalterable principle, more than proven by reason and verified by men in the course of a thousand years' experience: every idea or political action arises from an economic foundation which then plays both a controlling and determining role. In the course of this work we will examine, under different aspects, the interpenetration of politics and economics and evaluate unions by taking a look at how they presently function.

Unions first appeared as defensive organs of the working class, faced with sub-human conditions of work, presenting themselves, on the industrial plane, as extensions of the old brotherhoods and corporations. On the basis of their aspirations unions do not even reach the level of reformism. Reformism, utilizing ideological and economic analyses, claims to demonstrate that, by means of capitalist democracy, it would be possible to attain socialism through a legal evolution and without any need for revolutionary acts. For unions there was never a question of either evolution or revolution, still less of socialism. Unions go no further than attempting to obtain, for the exploited worker, conditions of labor which are less intolerable and less humiliating, but also, as time has demonstrated, more profitable for capital. In spite of this limitation the early unions were organs which, if not revolutionary, at least had a working class spirit and a sound composition compared to the corruption and false class character of today's unions.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century a so-called revolutionary unionism (syndicalism) appeared. This was an eclectic doctrine adapted to the situation then prevailing, drawn from the marxist conception, the so-called a-politicism of anarchism, and the strictly economic claims made by the old trade unions. There is no paradox in the fact that the period of the greatest influence and the strongest thrust of this type of unionism coincided with the apogee of reformism.

Sorel and Bernstein, besides being contemporaries, had more points in common than differences. While Sorel offered, in syndicalism, the panacea to the problems of historical development, Bernstein and his tendency saw in parliamentarism, and even in the necessities of capital accumulation, the happy mechanism of a certain and harmonious evolution towards socialist soci-

ety. In reality revolutionary syndicalism and reformism were united by the same bonds to the formidable economic drive of the bourgeoisie. This was the period in which the bourgeoisie attained the zenith of its civilizing possibilities, granting the greatest amount of liberty and illusions to those who, without completely escaping its ideo-economic complex, leaned to the left. For this reason the political bankruptcy of 1914 would carry with it the syndicalists and reformists. Even the Spanish C.N.T. was not an exception, although the military neutrality of Spain spared it the capitulatory phrases and attitudes of the French C.G.T.; its particular bankruptcy, as we will see later, took place at the moment of the proletarian revolution in 1936-1939.

The numerical strength and the social weight of the unions has grown continually since 1914 and if in some countries, like France, their numerical strength has considerably diminished in the course of the last few years their importance has continued to grow. It has been said that the disaster of 1914 was necessary for the unions to really come into their own. This is because until that time capitalism feared the unions as a destructive force and had not yet seen—except perhaps in England—the collaborative role that unions could play. But since the end of the first world war numerous experiences of “worker’s control” in the factories have surprised the capitalists by their satisfactory effects. “Worker’s control” has attenuated the struggle of workers against capital, facilitating the operation of the factories and above all increasing output. The unions stood out not only as defenders of the fatherland—that specifically capitalist entity—but as effective collaborators in the mechanism of exploitation itself. That made their fortune and opened as yet unsuspected horizons to them. However, it was during the years 1936-1937—years which for many reasons were a very important landmark in the history of the international workers’ movement—that the unions took on their definitive orientation. In this period they displayed the qualities thanks to which they have become one of the most solid pillars of capitalist society.

Twenty years separated the Russian and the Spanish revolutions, which were the first and the last explosions of the same offensive of the world proletariat against capitalism, an offensive marked by incessant attacks in many other countries. Meanwhile the Stalinist bureaucracy had completed the construction of state capitalism and just at the moment when the Spanish revolution was in full swing the Stalinists got rid of all those who were really communists with guns and slander. This was to modify in a decisive manner all the organic factors of the class struggle and corrupt all the ideological factors. For a long time Russian intervention in the international workers’ movement had been negative; in Spain the Russian-controlled Communist Party, dragged along by the requirements of its own preservation, turned out to be the principal counter-revolutionary police force. In July 1936 it attempted—happily in vain—to prevent the uprising of the proletariat which destroyed the army throughout most of the country. In May 1937 this same Communist Party would machine gun the proletariat, which was revolting against the C.P.’s reactionary policies, defeat it, disarm it and crush the revolution. What the military had failed to do in 1936, Stalinism accomplished 10 months later.

For the first time Moscow acted, outside its own territory, directly as a counter-revolutionary force. Up to now there has been no real appreciation of the immense reactionary consequences of this event. Yet this was the source of all the acts of world importance which followed: from the Hitler-Stalin pact and the second “great war” till the policy of “peaceful coexistence” and uprisings such as those in East Germany, Poland and Hungary. The latter must be situated, not on the level of the revolt of the Spanish proletariat of May 1937, but at the most on the same level as the July 1936 insurrection, this time with the Stalinist army and police in place of Franco’s

army. Imre Nagy and his friends were in Hungary what the popular front was in Spain in 1936: the by-product of a revolutionary upheaval but not the core of the revolution.

It is significant that it was around 1936 that the unions revealed all their latent characteristics, incontestably manifesting themselves as auxiliary organs of capital. That in such a development it was Stalinism which won for itself the greatest influence in the unions—with the exception of the English and American trade unions—is quite natural. The economic empiricism of capitalism found in Russian counter-revolutionary empiricism a higher political expression, one which inspired it and perfected it at the same time. Both of these elements were mixed and merged to create a more favorable milieu. Now this milieu exists under a more or less completed form: it is nothing other than capitalism at its present stage, taking each country, including the “backward” ones, not as an isolated case but as part of the world system.

We will look at the Western bloc which prides itself on its democracy and more concretely on its right to strike. In reality this right is given not to the workers but to the representatives which the law recognizes them as having: the unions. Every strike launched by the workers themselves has to face a coalition of state and unions which seeks to smash it—sometimes by the direct defeat of the workers, sometimes by making the workers accept arbitration. Since the French revolutionary strike of 1936 was smashed by the Communist party (Thorez: “One must know how to end a strike”) and the Socialist party together (the Blum government and police commanded by ‘socialists’) almost every country has known strikes led to defeat by the unions because they ran counter to their economic and political interests. Thus, the strike has been in fact and in law taken over by the unions. But that is not all. Beyond the always exceptional situation of a strike, in the day-to-day relations between capital and labor—which is where the class struggle is forged—the unions appear not only as buffers between the two camps, but as messengers from capital to labor and as agents who help to adapt labor to the requirements of capital. All the natural manifestations of the struggle of labor against capital, once monopolized by the unions, are turned against the worker for the benefit of capital.

We have only to recall certain facts to see that the above line of reasoning is undeniable. Factory committees¹ as well as delegates from departments, shops or occupational categories are not the expression of the free will of the workers, whatever may be the mode of their election, depending on the country. They represent the unions, within which workers are not free to elect anyone they want: even the famous British shop stewards need the assent of the trade unions. In most countries the law has decided that the unions which it recognizes represent the working class. The workers therefore no longer have the right to represent themselves as they see fit, still less to create organs other than unions in order to direct their struggles and to deal with the employers or the state. The rights of the working class and the rights of the unions are manifestly two distinct and contradictory things. Because of this the opposition between the workers and the factory committees or departmental delegates—an opposition which is always present in a latent form—sharpens whenever there is a conflict with the employer and becomes a direct encounter if the struggle broadens. In the course of the last twenty years every strike which deserves the name has had to be called against the will of the unions and by outflanking its representatives in the factories; the workers themselves have had to elect strike committees. However, every

¹ Here Munis is referring to organs which are part and parcel of the union apparatus and not autonomous factory committees.

time that these strike committees or factory assemblies, elected by the workers, have allowed themselves to be influenced by the union leaders, capital has gained the upper hand.

The goal of collective labor contracts was to limit the arbitrariness of the employers in various areas: working conditions and the length of the working day, intensity of exploitation (hourly productivity), wage range by category (hierarchical relations), hiring and layoffs, political rights, freedom of speech and assembly within the factories, factory regulations, etc. However, collective contracts have become, in the hands of the unions, who alone under the law have the right to negotiate and sign them, a formidable instrument for the subjugation of the proletariat to capital in general and to the unions in particular. Indeed, unions have become, *at present*, partially or totally, agents of exploitation. Layoffs and hiring are most often entrusted to the mercy of capital, except in the case of closed shops, which far from guaranteeing work for the laborers, simply grants the right of adjudication to the unions. This is reactionary economic coercion of the worst sort, as we will see below when we discuss unions in the Eastern zone.

Labor contracts sanction and encourage the division of the working class into hierarchical groups opposed to one another because of differences in wages and the prejudices attached to the category and technical function of the worker. The unions instinctively, by their very nature, contribute to the division of the proletariat on a hierarchical basis, except for which the proletariat would form a compact bloc against capital. The necessity of dividing the proletariat through hierarchical work relations, and of thus alienating it from its highest interest, is as important for the unions as it is for capital. For a century the workers' movement fought against hierarchical relations within its midst, and in large part it destroyed prejudices in favor of hierarchy while limiting its material bases. In the course of the last few decades the unions and their political inspirers have succeeded in largely re-establishing hierarchical prejudices and greatly increasing the number of work categories. Most workers today, even the worst off, think that hierarchical work relations are natural and "just."

Lastly, if the original idea of collective contracts was to put a curb on the arbitrariness of capital while awaiting its complete suppression, today they constitute an almost perfect way to regulate the capitalist system in accordance with its functional requirements. In negotiating and signing collective contracts the unions behave as if they were an integral part of the groups who monopolize the means of production. In the United States and in other countries, many unions are important shareholders in the companies which exploit their own members; which, far from prefiguring a socialist society, transforms the union into a beneficiary of exploitation in the fullest economic and ideological sense of the term. Where the unions do not actually participate in drawing up plans for the exploitation of the workers they seek this right.

The work place, the large factories in particular, which are the scene of the class struggle, afford the most revolutionary workers a permanent and far-reaching practical and ideological activity. But this activity is made impossible by the unions. Frequently collective contracts stipulate that political propaganda and activity within the factory are prohibited, not to speak of discussions and meetings which are indispensable to any working class activity. For many years the unions have conspired with the employers every time there was a question of dismissing revolutionary workers. Such dismissals are now legitimized by a written clause in collective contracts or surreptitiously acknowledged, since they are covered by the rules made by the employers in all the factories. The unions and their political inspirers have undertaken the task of acting as policemen against those who distribute revolutionary literature, when necessary beating them up. In Italy, the Stalinist union leaders have granted to the employers the right to fire, without

notice or compensation, workers guilty of distributing literature or any type of agitation.² In France, most of the factory rules permit as much and the restrictions on thought go so far that even the most rebellious workers are afraid to express themselves and so keep quiet. The situation is no better in Germany, England or the U.S., no more than in Russia or Spain. Thus, thanks to the convergent action of capital and the union organizations, the working class finds itself reduced to clandestinity even at the work place, which is where it is exploited and fucked over.

The proletariat must recover its political freedom, which is impossible without throwing the present employer-union legal framework overboard. The complete freedom of people with respect to the exercise of their labor contains, in embryo, the future revolutionary democracy and communism. We say communism because those who today call themselves communists are not communists at all and through legitimate revulsion towards them, those who really are communists often avoid claiming the name.

In the strictly economic domain the situation of the working class was never worse than it is today. Everything said to the contrary is so much bullshit. The eight-hour day, which should have been replaced long ago by a four or five hour day, now exists only on paper. In many countries the refusal to work overtime is an immediate cause for dismissal. Everywhere the introduction of so-called “basepay” (norm in Russia) which is deliberately kept low, and rewards and bonuses based on productivity, etc., not only forces the worker to accept, “of his own accord,” working days of ten to twelve hours but in fact abolishes daily or hourly wages by imposing anew the vilest of all types of labor—piece-work. Since its inception the workers’ movement has endeavored to put an end to this oldest of all forms of exploitation, which physically exhausts the worker and dulls him intellectually. It succeeded in eliminating piece-work in most of Europe. Even twenty years ago most workers considered it demeaning to accept piece-work of any kind. Today, however, piece-work is again the rule, less because capital has imposed it than through the deceit of the unions: in fact we have here a proof of the ultimate affinity of unions and capital.

With respect to the most profound aspect of exploitation, productivity per person and hour, the proletariat finds itself forced into a terrible situation. The production that is extracted from it each day increases at an enormous rate. First, technical innovations take away from the worker any creative intervention in his labor, measure his movements to the second and transform him into a living robot subjected to the same rhythm as the machines. Then, time 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.

To mention this problem is to put one’s finger on the evil of modern society and of the unions which are part of it. Moreover, there is no way to resolve these problems without overthrowing the present relation³ between production and distribution, in short, without making the revolution. But in order to treat this question properly it is necessary to first of all see what unions represent in Russia—which is the model that the whole Eastern bloc, and even many countries beyond it, must imitate.

² A worker reading *l’Unita*, the Stalinist newspaper, inside the factory is dismissed without a hearing, with the agreement of the Stalinist leaders, who have co-signed this clause.

³ between instruments of labor and wage labor

Everything that has been said about the reactionary work of unions and the deterioration of the proletarian condition in the West is even more true for the Russian world. Ever since, under Stalin's aegis, state capitalism was established in Russia, the whole of the old bourgeois world has been learning lessons in exploitation from it. These pertain to police repression too, but here we will limit ourselves to speaking about the specific relations between capital and labor and the role of the unions. Thus, if unions in general have, everywhere and for a long time, been a complementary force to capital within the working class, the Stalinist counter-revolution, by giving unions a very strong push in this direction and by providing them with a tempting example, has disclosed the intrinsic destiny of unions. Almost all the measures which, since 1936, have aggravated the exploitation of the proletariat in the West and heightened its objectification, have their model in Stalinist Russia.

The complete suppression of political rights and the right to hold meetings inside or outside the factory; overtime imposed by the employer or the inadequate base pay (norm) for the official working day; fines and disciplinary measures at the discretion of the employer, who also dictates the factory rules; time studies and innumerable controls, piece-work, hierarchical divisions within the proletariat based on wages and technical "qualifications"; collective contracts which only benefit capital, continuous increase of productivity to the detriment of the producers, prohibition of strikes in fact or by law; in short, everything which in the West transforms the union organizations into more and more negative institutions received a strong impetus from the Russia of the 1930's and was to inspire capital and unions throughout the world.

It is well known, at least by those who are familiar with the situation in Russia, that economic inequality between the privileged and the exploited is greater there than anywhere else, as are the inequalities between different categories of workers. Inequality between the privileged and the exploited, which is at the same time the cause and the effect of capitalism, only concerns us in this essay as it affects the evolution and the prospects of the unions. It is sufficient to note for the moment that this inequality raises in Russia, as in every other country, the necessity for the expropriation of capital by the workers, which is impossible without an insurrection which completely demolishes the present governmental apparatus including the official party and the whole body of law.

Better than any bourgeoisie, the Stalinist bureaucracy knows how to intensify exploitation by accelerating the rhythm of labor and by introducing into the proletariat the greatest possible number of job categories. The traditional means for capitalism to "stimulate" production is to substitute for the homogeneous historical interest of the proletariat a multiplicity of heterogeneous immediate interests, which are so many obstacles to a common revolutionary activity. Once again the Russian union and political "natchalniks"⁴ have outdone their Western counterparts.⁵ In Russia the worker foremen receive a direct profit from the exploitation of their comrades in labor: the Stakhanovists receive a bonus which is proportional to the surpassing of the "norm" and to the number of workers in their team. Thus they see their wages increase by the exploitation of the common workers and are therefore led to intensify this exploitation. The Stakhanovists are

⁴ A pejorative term applied by the people to the present rulers.

⁵ During the honeymoon of Russo-American relations, towards the end of World War II, the heads of the Yankee monopolies (including among others, Johnston, then President of the Chamber of Commerce) having been invited by Moscow to visit its industrial enterprises, lavishly praised the methods of "Soviet" exploitation that the American workers, or so they complained, prevented them from applying.

therefore, still more clearly than foremen in the West (with their fixed salaries), turned into the enemies of their comrades in labor.

There is nothing astonishing in all this, since everything in Russia has been turned into its opposite. Once the revolution gave way to the counter-revolution, a capitalist dictatorship, which demagogically calls itself a proletarian dictatorship, presents—in reality *imposes*—as socialist the most rotten features and principles of traditional capitalism. The *Labor Law*, approved in 1939, says:

The basic feature which characterizes wages in the capitalist countries is the levelling of wages between specialized and non-specialized workers. In the remuneration of labor, petit-bourgeois levelling is the worst enemy of socialism. For many years Marxism-Leninism has unceasingly fought against levelling.

For many years the Stalinists have tried to take people in by presenting industrial development through wage labor as the loyal expression of Marxist thought. Marxism, on the contrary, establishes as its objective the abolition of wage labor, and the economic levelling of society, the unlimited satisfaction of all individual needs and the greatest freedom and liberty, which is indispensable to any personal or collective fulfillment. If we do not aim at that, nothing revolutionary can be done in the present historical juncture.

In the old capitalist countries wage differences within the proletariat are a condition established by the direct market relation between capital and labor. In Russia these wage differences have, by constitutional law, acquired the status of a principle and consequently it is a crime to fight against them. The traditional relation between capital and labor, which the bourgeoisie never justified as a social relation of man to man but only through the subterfuge of the “sacred right of property”—which in reality is turned against it when we consider as property, not the means of production or instruments of labor, but everything which is necessary to the material consumption and the full psychic development of each person—is transformed in Russia into a natural and permanent relation between people having different abilities. Thus, instead of social classes or categories delimited *in fact* by wealth we have classes delimited *by law* on the basis of their talents and special functions. Nonetheless delimitation in fact on the basis of wealth takes on importance instead of losing it. Worse still the whole thing smacks of a biological justification for the exploitation of man by man.

Let us further point out that the principle object of the labor contracts imposed by the Russian unions is to put the working class at the mercy of capital, even juridically, “by guaranteeing the fulfillment and overfulfillment of the state production plan for the given establishment.”⁶ It is a question of extracting higher and higher rates of production from labor:

The main stipulation of the contracted obligation must be an increased demand from every worker. Without

strengthening labor discipline and without ruthless struggle against the violators of state and labor discipline —grabbers and loafers—there can be no real fulfillment of obligations laid down in the collective agreement.⁷

⁶ *Trud*, the official Russian trade union paper, Feb. 19, 1947, cited by Solomon M. Schwarz, *Labor in the Soviet Union*, London 1952, p. 230.

⁷ *Ibid.* The 1917 revolution called for the disappearance of wage labor and capital. That is why a reformist critic, Zagorsky, defined the economy of the revolutionary epoch as “an enormous charity program.” Beginning with the N.E.P. (New Economic Policy), there clearly began a movement in the opposite direction, which acquired the character of state capitalism with the Stalinist counter-revolution. Up to that point contracts were individual even if they were

The very word *contract* is a mark of servitude for the working class. Whether collective or individual, verbal or written, “free” or imposed, the labor contract is the legal symbol of its condition as a wage-slave class, to use Marx’s term. This fact in itself is sufficient to expose the lies of the Russian exploiters. In a truly socialist economy neither capital nor wage labor would exist, and consequently the labor contract (the agreement for the utilization of the labor force) would disappear with the disappearance of the contracting parties. In a socialist economy, the means of production would cease to be capital and human labor power would cease to be a commodity for sale. United in one economic and social entity, they would be as free from any contractual obligations as an individual is toward himself. By its very existence, the Russian labor contract places itself within the framework of the social bonds characteristic of capitalism. But it is the “innovations” of the Russian system, particularly the completely overt way the unions assume the role of slave-drivers towards the workers, that reveal the ominous contours of a society in decline whose despots seem to be more capable than anyone else of checking proletarian resistance.

In effect, these contracts, whose main point is to extract the highest productivity possible from each worker, are drawn up by the unions and, after the formality of government approval, it is the *unions’* duty to insure servility through promises of higher pay, by the use of threats or by turning over to legal prosecution those workers who do not go along with the demands of production. It is through union channels that the Russian government punishes, as if it were a crime, the struggle to work less and earn more (‘The Right to be Lazy’)⁸ which the world revolutionary movement has always considered to be a just claim of the working class and a progressive demand.

Thus in the eyes of the Russian workers the unions appear as the organization immediately responsible for their exploitation and for the cruelties characteristic of the counter-revolution. A great number of convincing documents (enough to fill several volumes) testify to this effect. It is impossible to list all of them here. One of the greatest weaknesses of the revolutionary movement, perhaps the cause of its limited support today, is the fact that it did not protest these ignominies. For the purposes of this article however it is enough to recall certain typically reactionary features of the Russian system: the laws forbidding workers to change jobs without the permission of the plant manager—laws which have long since been eliminated in older capitalist countries; laws establishing wages proportionate to the productivity of each individual worker (piece rates) not to mention bonuses for political servility; laws which punish absenteeism, lateness and other “disciplinary” infractions by fines, suspensions, firings and forced labor; laws which transform everything which revolutionary thought considers an outrage into something honorable and profitable; in short, all the laws which crush the proletariat as nowhere else are in Russia the direct work of the unions. This legislation is both proposed and carried out by the unions. Furthermore, the forced labor camps—“re-education” according to official jesuitry—the burial ground of workers and especially revolutionaries, the method deliberately chosen to lower wages and to be able to claim that unemployment is non-existent, are also “institutions” created on the initiative of the unions who share the advantages of this system with the state and with its essential instrument: the police.

not written down. The systemization of collective contracts runs parallel to the establishment of a state capitalism which seeks stability and permanence.

⁸“Le droit a la paresse,” Paul Lafargue, 1898.

One can argue that the Russian unions, as everyone knows, do not really act on their own initiative. But their repudiation by the workers is no less absolute. International experience indicates that unions in their structure and function vis-a-vis the working class, always contained propitious elements for their transformation into a cog in the most centralized and absolute capitalist system. Certainly the Russian unions blindly obey the orders of the government; they are only its vulgar instruments. But their own leaders are integrated into the highest levels of the Party and the state and thus become both “co-managers” (“co-owners”) of an impersonal capital and at the same time “worker” leaders. Never could a company union dream of a more complete subjugation of the workers.

In Russia today the unions’ function is part and parcel of the exploitative function of capital itself. The union is at the same time boss, foreman and policeman. In each factory it represents along with managers and technicians—all of whom are distinguished members of the union and of the “Communist” cell—the same thing as Hitler’s confidential councils (Vertrauenstrat). Furthermore, the complete intermixing of capital and Party-State has erased all trace of any union autonomy or protest activity. No one has to teach Russian workers this fact; they have cruelly suffered its consequences for many long years.

In the trajectory of Russian society, there is a definite break between the Soviet period and the period of the unions. Soviets were organizations which represented the workers, carried out their orders and those of the revolution. The unions on the other hand, are organizations of control over the workers executing the orders of the counter-revolution. The Soviets were paralyzed and finally disbanded while unions gained in importance and prerogatives as the bureaucracy increasingly revealed its counter-revolutionary nature. The proletariat was repressed to such an extent that today its subjection is nowhere as great as in Russia. Certainly it is not the unions alone which inspired the counter-revolution. They themselves are part of a whole series of bourgeois ideas and interests, vestiges from the tsarist period; its main basis was the high administrative bureaucracy, both technical and political, whose numbers and privileges have monstrously expanded. But in their turn the unions—or if one prefers, their high-level leaders—form an inseparable part of the whole category of state capitalists who rule the enormous corporation falsely called the “Soviet Union.”

The interpenetration of the unions and the Russian counterrevolutionary bureaucracy was neither artificially imposed by the latter nor was it an accident. It is the spontaneous result of the intrinsic nature of unions from which the government assassinated or “purged” certain union leaders along with former revolutionaries. The government eliminated them not for their union activities but for their communist attitude, either real or imagined. Because of their adaptive powers, the unions conformed perfectly to the specific aims and routine functioning of the counter-revolution. To understand this clearly, it suffices to examine the nature of unions.

Unions are totally inconceivable without the existence of wage-labor, which in turn presupposes the existence of capital. As long as capital is held by individual owners engaged in competition and represented by many individuals and parties in the government, unions are at least able to bargain for an improvement in the conditions of labor exploitation. Their function is to regularize the sale of labor power, a function which has become indispensable to the modern capitalist system. From this fact comes their importance as complementary structures of the state, if not part of the state itself, everywhere in the world today. But this very function, which in the past allowed unions to at least serve as instruments of the working class was also a narrowness indicating their limitations and

reactionary future. Their existence as an organization is entirely dependent on the continued existence of the labor/capital duality. They would be immediately eliminated by the destruction of this duality. However, they can side with capital as much as they choose without destroying this duality. On the contrary, they become increasingly indispensable to the maintenance of the capitalist system. As a result, the more gigantic and anonymous the concentration of capital, the more the unions take the side of capital and consider their role to be directly determined by the great “national” interest. Even Stalinist union leaders in the West, agents of Russian imperialism, are careful to present their union policies as an element of national welfare. They are not lying; their only future is to establish themselves as the firmest bastion of statified capital.

All unions without exception are in the process of changing from the stage of “free competition” between the supply and demand of labor power—between the working class and the bourgeoisie—to the stage of the control of the supply by the demand: that is, the control of workers by monopolistic or state capital. In most cases the unions already participate, directly or indirectly, in the profits of capitalism or else they sense the opportunity to do so.⁹ In Russia this evolution was completed with the counter-revolutionary transformation of the country in general. The law bestows on the unions all power over the working class without leaving the smallest possibility for workers, collectively or individually, to discuss, accept or reject the conditions of their exploitation. All working conditions—even what the workers should *think*—are directly dictated by the unions in the name of capital. As always, economics and politics intertwine and end up united in the most strict absolutism.

The historical examples of a truly working-class unionism were all the results of revolutionaries’ activities and belong to an age (which ended with the Spanish Revolution) which allowed a certain margin for the class struggle within capitalism. But today revolutionaries who stubbornly persist in regarding unions as any sort of advantage for the future of socialism are condemning themselves to ineffectiveness or worse: betrayal. The past struggles of French, Spanish, or Italian syndicalism were the result of the activity of revolutionary tendencies, either marxist or anarchist. The Spanish CNT would have been nothing without the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation) and it is the FAI itself which must be held responsible for the reactionary alliance with Stalinism during the Civil War. The year 1936 marks the bankruptcy of Spanish syndicalism comparable (in all ways) to the bankruptcy of the French CGT in 1914. Not only did the FAI-CNT voluntarily submit to Stalinism (a submission presented, as usual, in the interests of “national welfare”) but it established an alliance with the leaders of the reformist UGT, an alliance which would have meant, in explicit enough terms, state capitalism. The CNT will never pick itself up after such a fall. Any revolutionary group coming from these roots must seek other horizons.

The collectivist experiences in Spain were only syndicalist by default. This movement was set off by the impetus of revolutionary militants and by highly radicalized sections of the masses; the unions found themselves faced with a *fait accompli*. The same can be said of the uprising against the military on July 19, 1936 and of the magnificent insurrection of May, 1937. When, after revolutionary action, the unions intervene and take over, the entire process is reversed: the activity of the proletariat and the participation of revolutionaries recedes and retreats—the

⁹ The possible exceptions to this trend do not fundamentally weaken the above argument. It should be noted that the “exceptions” are not to be found in underdeveloped countries but more likely in the older countries of Europe. In underdeveloped countries, where unions are or seem to be new developments, they voluntarily accept being in the service of the bourgeoisie or the state. Often different unions in the same trade engage in cut-throat competition to offer *their* manpower to the bosses at the cheapest rate.

prelude to defeat. In the same vein, the experiences of the strike in Nantes¹⁰ in 1956 should be remembered. The strike, the work of several revolutionary militants in the local union, was betrayed by the national union. Hundreds of similar examples can be found in any country in the world.

Attempts to give unions a revolutionary content, through the use of internal oppositional caucuses or even by creating completely new unions, are doomed to failure. The only result of such ‘tactics’ is to demoralize the revolutionary experience of those who attempt it or to turn them into simple bureaucrats. Unions bring to bear all the powerful, deformative forces of capitalist society which constantly eat away at men, changing and destroying even the best of them. There is about as much possibility of ‘changing’ unions in a revolutionary direction as there is of ‘changing’ capitalist society in general; unions use men for their own particular ends but men will never be able to make unions serve a revolutionary goal; they must destroy them.

Attempts to “change” unions are futile even from a practical point of view. In most countries workers are *no longer* in unions. Even if they still carry a union card in their pocket, whether voluntarily or because the law forces them to do so, the suspicion and disgust they feel for unions is no less strong. In countries which have had the most extensive experience with unions, workers have recourse to unions only if they feel that their “rights” under capitalist law are being flagrantly violated.

This is a tedious formality but necessary, on the same level as going to the police when something is stolen. But everyone knows it is useless to go to unions to get something outside the limits of capitalist ‘law’ because unions are a part of that law. Consequently, we see, in many cases, a decline in the number of union members and a general desertion from union meetings by the majority of workers. Unions, having a bureaucratic and legal life of their own, merely use the working class as a docile mass to manipulate in order to increase their own power as a legal institution in our society. Unions and working people have completely different daily lives and motivations. Any “tactical” work within unions, even if guided by the purest intentions, will impede the self-activity of the exploited class, destroying their fighting spirit and barring the way to revolutionary activity.

Lenin and Trotsky’s position on revolutionary work within unions is entirely outside the realm of today’s realities. Their position explicitly supposes that the proletariat, otherwise inexperienced and unorganized and full of illusions, meets in the unions where freedom of speech would permit revolutionaries to expose the opportunist leadership and thereby spread revolutionary ideas.¹¹ In addition to the argument citing the prevalence of workers’ illusions about unions, the key premise of the Leninist tactic was the fact that unions were considered as ideologically *reformist* and therefore supposedly interested in wresting concessions from the declining society by playing left-wing to the “liberal democrats” of an earlier age. These conditions no longer exist and those who continue to gear their activity towards them are acting in vain. Fifty times the proletariat has tried the experience of unions and of the parties which dominate them and they have changed in an undeniably reactionary direction. To act towards them as though they were still reformist is a ridiculous expression of today’s opportunism.

The most solid basis for a revolutionary critique of unions concerns not tactical or contingent considerations but the question of principle and strategy. These questions had not been taken into

¹⁰ One of the most significant strikes in France during the 50’s.

¹¹ Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism* 1920.

account by Lenin and Trotsky probably because the changes in unions had not clearly developed until the last few decades. The fact is that unions and their political inspirers have been completely assimilated by the capitalist world, not as part of the “democratic wing” of the bourgeoisie but as henchmen for the exploitative society and for the new needs of the counter-revolution. The polemic between Lenin, Trotsky and Tomsky on the union question, which occurred before the sinister shadow of the Stalinist police had ravaged revolutionary thought, finds its synthesis after long periods of trial and error, in the political conclusions of this article.

There are still revolutionaries who refuse to see the problem and repeat like a credo: “since the conditions which gave rise to unions still exist, we do not see how today one can deny their utility.” At the same time they postpone the elimination of unions until the moment when the “specific characteristics of bourgeois society disappear,” that is, when the separation between workers and instruments of production has disappeared.¹² This is more sententious subterfuge than reasoned argument. In a sense this argument can be used against itself. If when we speak of conditions which have given rise to unions, we mean the purchase of human labor power by the monopolizers of the means of production, or in a more general way, the characteristic relations of capitalist society as a whole, then it is clear that unions are part of this whole network of relations and that unions continue to exist with it and *for it*. From this point of view, to attribute a useful function to unions in the revolutionary process is as unthinkable as seeing revolutionary potential in the stock market. Unions are as much a part of capitalist value production as the stock market, even if we examine only the aspects of the dealing and contracting of wage labor, aspects which are not unconnected to the values quoted on the stock market.

In addition to these conditions which gave rise to unions, conditions of a historically more limited nature must be dealt with. In the period of capitalist ascendancy, free competition, including free competition in the labor market, permitted workers to benefit from the greatest number of advantages compatible with the system. The regulation and administration of these advantages constituted the fundamental *raison d’être* of unions. However, with the system’s transformation into giant trusts and state capitalism, the unions, which it nourished, naturally began to play a reactionary role. They could not continue to maintain their function without adapting themselves to changing market conditions now no longer free but controlled and despotic, indeed malthusian since it prevents the realization of human and economic potential.

Thus in a strict sense the conditions which gave rise to unions no longer exist; they died at the same time as that which justified the existence of capitalism as a historically progressive social form. Unfortunately it is the revolutionaries who are way behind in recognizing the facts and drawing the logical conclusions.

The reasoning of *Programme Communista* which offers the best theoretical justification for all tendencies (including anarchism) still clinging to an oppositional or revolutionary unionism, is in fact completely mistaken. Their reasoning is very dangerous especially in the event of a victorious revolution. The subterfuge of putting off the disappearance of unions until the obliteration of all traces of capitalism—until the advent of full communism—would give unions a harmful monopoly over the proletariat in the transitional period. Far from bringing society closer to communism, this would raise still another obstacle, and not a minor one, promoting the growth of

¹² The Italian political tendency of Bordiga whose arguments we combat here (*Il Programma Communista*, May 26, 1960) defends the conservative union tactic from the most revolutionary point of view. But many Trotskyist and anarchist groups (if not all) fall into the same error with an opportunist flavor. Even those who claim to be against the unions, like “Socialisme ou Barbarie,” in fact fall into the same old routine practices.

state capitalism as it did in Russia. Bordiga's analysis links the disappearance of unions to the disappearance of violence within the society, meaning in fact the disappearance of the state. However, the withering away of the state and of all social violence can only be a consequence of a *proceeding* disappearance of the exploitation of labor, wage labor to be exact. Unions are in complete contradiction to such a transformation, both in terms of interest and principle.

A century ago Karl Marx reproached unions for restricting their demands to questions of money, hours of work, etc., while they ignored the issue of the abolition of wage labor, the key to the destruction of capitalism. Today, Marx would be treated as a petty-bourgeois egalitarian by the men of Moscow and as a crazy ultra-leftist by those who believe they can reform unions. Marx did not see the elimination of unions as part of the far-distant future, well after the revolution, but as concomitant with the revolution or even its cause. He believed that already in his lifetime the industrialized countries disposed of sufficient material means to tackle the problem of revolution. We, revolutionaries of today, are able to add that unions stand in the way of every aim of social revolution because they have become an indispensable cog in the machinery of the exploitation of man by man. Their role in the present economy is comparable to that of the guilds in the age of small-scale manufacture—with this difference however: guilds proved unable to adapt to large-scale industry whereas unions adapt perfectly to the most resolute type of capitalism, the statified form. Unions will be destroyed only by the victory of the revolution; more precisely their destruction is a pre-condition for this victory, without which the unions will continue to grow into a huge coercive apparatus complementary to the state capitalist machine. That is the greatest counter-revolutionary danger of our time. If humanity proves unable to face this problem in the West as well as in the Stalinist East, it will witness the most ominous era of our history.

After the revolution, all workers (without need of any union affiliation whatsoever) must decide on the economic questions posed by society's progress towards communism. No organization, whether a union or a party can be identified with the society as a whole or invested with its attributes. The existence of differing ideological currents (based on the foundations of the revolution) all competing for a majority will only further insure the possibility of direct participation of all in social decisions. But a union-style management of the economy will necessarily prove anti-democratic and stifling; it would exclude non-members and impose itself on everyone. Of course ideologies can degenerate or betray but only through the spread and growth of revolutionary ideas can man win his freedom.

Even today the proletariat's immediate demands elude union formulations. Faced with exploitation heightened by technology, forced overtime, piecework, speed-up, etc., it is essential to demand a reduction of the work day to a maximum of five to six hours without reduction of wages or bonuses. On such a basis, demands for constantly decreasing work schedules in inverse proportion to technological progress are urgently needed. This is the way to challenge today's crushing work day and to prefigure a reorganization of socially necessary work by eliminating the enormous amounts of waste production in industry as well as in the government and administrative bureaucracies.

The necessary complement to this demand is the refusal to go along with any increase in production, whether caused by improvements in machinery or by speed-up, unless the working class benefits; the working class represents the interests of society as a whole. This is an unlimited demand, not only against capitalism and its threats of constant war, but as an idea of the kind of considerations which would govern a future revolutionary society; underlying this demand is the necessity for the destruction of the present system.

Politically, workers must impose complete freedom at the point of production: the rejection of all rules which have not been decided upon by workers' delegates democratically elected and approved in general assembly. In the case of problems or conflicts, workers' committees, elected outside of all union structures, are revocable at any time. Any agreement with management must have the consent of the interested parties themselves and not the unions even if they claim to represent the majority. Finally, coordination among the different workers' committees would prepare the way for the demand, as an immediately realizable objective, for workers' control of production and distribution.

A careful study of the problems which face the working class today would only reinforce these conclusions. The three types of problems, which encompass all the others, amply demonstrate the reactionary conservatism of unions and the fact that it is impossible for the workers to make a move ahead without coming up against them. Without getting rid of them, the proletariat will never get out of its present difficulties and will never have a revolutionary perspective.

The future of unions is indisputably linked with that of capitalism and not the revolution. Their ability to adjust to the reactionary transformation of society was largely overlooked by even the most far-seeing revolutionaries. An exception must be made for an almost unknown theoretician, Daniel DeLeon, whose thoughts on this subject have proven visionary. From 1905 DeLeon saw that unions and the 'official' workers' parties harbored serious counterrevolutionary dangers. The work in which he succinctly expressed his ideas deserves the attention of all revolutionaries.¹³

DeLeon's judgments are excellent historical analyses which he expresses with revolutionary passion. On the basis of international experience, particularly with the British and American trade unions and their respective labor leaders, he predicts that the victory of these organizations would kill any social revolution.

The present labor leaders represent a disguised position, a strategic point and a force sustaining capitalism and their true nature cannot but produce a disastrous demoralization of the working class.

He compares the labor leaders and *their* organizations with the leaders of the plebs in Rome. Just as the pleb leaders used the plebeians to acquire the rights and privileges of the patrician class without giving anything more than crumbs to the dispossessed masses, modern labor leaders and *their* organizations use the proletariat to consolidate their economic and political position within the capitalist system of exploitation.

Like the leaders of the plebs, labor leaders are practical men as they boast; they do not live on visions or chase rainbows.

Like the pleb leaders, labor leaders do not see any alternative to the existing social system, and they aim to put out the flame that devours the working class.

Like the plebeian leaders of Rome, today's labor leaders, if we do not counteract them . . . will nullify all the possibilities which our age offers: they will divert the important and powerful actions of the masses until they lose the name of action.

The aptness of the comparison between the leaders of the Roman plebs and our union (and party) bureaucrats is even clearer if we examine the role of the so-called plebeian party in Roman history. This party, born in the time of the Tarquins, supposedly in irreconcilable opposition to

¹³ *Two Pages From Roman History*. I. Pleb Leaders and Labor Leaders, II. the Warning of the Gracchi (New York 1946).

the patrician ruling classes, enjoyed its greatest influence during the Republican period. Its power did not serve the true plebs, the poor masses, either slave or free, but worked to the benefit of a privileged minority which represented the plebs in name only and belonged to the plebeian class only by the accident of Roman legal definition. Caesar and Augustus, the founders of the Empire, constantly used the trick of referring to themselves as originally 4 'plebs' or 'on the pleb side.' Their victory, the high point of the party of the pleb leaders, destroyed forever all possibility of revolution in Rome. The plebeian usurpers replaced by and large the old patrician class. They did not open the way to a new or superior type of society but merely prolonged the decadence of the ancient world over which they presided in its final stage.

Despite the great structural and ideological differences between Greco-Roman civilization and capitalist civilization, the analogy between the role of the pleb leaders and today's labor leaders is close. Whether they call themselves apolitical, Communist or Socialist, they have substituted for the principle contradiction of capitalism— that which can only disappear with its destruction—another, unessential contradiction inscribed within the functional necessities of capitalism and for which the "solution" makes them indispensable, to the exclusion of any revolutionary intervention of the workers.

The bourgeoisie and the proletariat are the human profile, the anthropomorphic image of the social contradictions between capital and wage labor. This contradiction is unresolvable except with the abolition of capital—an act which must simultaneously abolish wage labor itself. Here ends capitalism and begins the social revolution: a new, unlimited horizon of a new civilization.

The spirit of the so-called labor leaders as well as their organizations are absolutely incompatible with the solution of this contradiction. They attempt to resolve only a secondary contradiction within the framework of exploitation: that is, the anarchy of private capitalism with its cyclical crises which calls for an ordered plan of production and a severe regimentation of manpower, the unemployed included. In this way, the interests of the labor leaders coincide with that of big capital which every day demands more economic regulation, more concentration. In other words, that which they perceive and want to change are the difficulties which the system encounters on the road to one huge monopoly, not at all the difficulties which the system as a whole poses for the forward march of humanity towards communism. With the concentration of all the means of production in a huge state monopoly, labor—upon which depends consumption, liberty, culture, the whole life of human beings—appears as an element which is as subordinate to the exigencies of the plan as iron ore, leather or any other raw material. The elimination of the bourgeoisie does not in any way mean the elimination of capital or the proletariat. Capital is an economic function, not a proprietary function; in becoming an anonymous function it completes its oppression of man and bars his march to communism with new counter-revolutionary force. The use of the purely anthropomorphic representation of the contradiction between capital and wage labor (bourgeoisie and proletariat) gives the union and party leaders the opportunity to present the elimination of private capital as the elimination of capital in general and their economic and political management as the solution of social contradictions. They know from the experiences of the Stalinist counter-revolution and from Yankee and British trade unions that the more complete the concentration of capital, the bigger the share of profits for them to pocket.

The most menacing aspect of this tendency of the labor leaders is that it coincides with the law of capitalist concentration and with the development of material and ideological coercion which is its consequence. But they are really dangerous only because of the passivity of the proletariat, whom the revolutionaries, attached to the old ideas and tactics, do not know how to

stir into action. Chained to the old formulae, they are cursed with sterility. But a careful look around suffices to realize that the human necessity of a total transformation challenges capitalism itself and the labor leaders, a challenge which will open an unlimited field to revolutionary action. Humanity does not need technocratic plans in order to produce—plans which are used for exploitation and war. The crisis which our civilization is living through will not find its solution until all of production is oriented towards consumption without regard to selling. All individuals by their very existence must be able to utilize the material and spiritual resources of the society. The marketing of one or the other leads to the dissatisfaction of the immense majority, the impossibility of individual fulfillment and the venality of culture. Only the elimination of individual proprietors and the giant trusts will lead to the elimination of the proletariat: the class which does not consume but lives only on its salary. Thus it is wage labor which must be eliminated. In this way capital will necessarily be abolished as an economic function along with the exploiters, be they bourgeois or bureaucrats. Any plan for production must be established with regard to the non-mercantile needs of human consumption, with all that these words imply of political and cultural liberty. The true anthropomorphic aspect of the problem is the abolition of wage labor which will give to man the possibility of determining his own destiny. By substituting for this the idea of simply eliminating the bourgeoisie (and by putting themselves in its place) union leaders offer us a series of fetishes—the economic plan in place of God, father and judge of man with the big union and party bureaucrats playing the role of the priesthood.

Revolutionaries must expel from the factories and professional organizations all the union representatives; and all the Thorez', the Nennis and the Reuthers of all countries, with the Vatican crouching behind the Christian unions, will be paralyzed. The working class will have regained its freedom of thought and action and will be able to transform society from top to bottom. It will have gained the strength to wrest humanity from the mire of degradation.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Grandizo Munis
Unions Against Revolution
1960

Retrieved on August 11, 2024 from Black and Red Press PDF
Unions Against Revolution is a translation of a work by G. Munis written in 1960 and
reprinted in France after the events of May 1968. The English version appearing here is from
Internationalism No. 3. Black and Red, Detroit

usa.anarchistlibraries.net