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Striking Against The Work/War Machine

Jeff Shantz & P.J. Lilley

2003

The tools that are available to workers in times of war are the same as they are in capitalist “peace time” — strikes, mutiny and sabotage being a few of the most effective. Worker’s power still comes from our participation in production and the threat of withdrawing our participation by going on strike.

Strikes give workers confidence in their collective strength. It can be a readily available option, and it draws on the daily dissatisfaction with work, and our desire to do something other than work. A strike can mobilize entire neighborhoods or communities as people offer food and assistance.

It doesn’t even need to be a consciously “anti-war” strike. Just the disruption itself can be enough to threaten the state’s ability to go to war. A strike can bring out all sorts of claims and concerns that affect the population more broadly. In August of 1990, 4000 Turkish maintenance workers on US bases went on strike over pay, which seriously hampered US plans for air strikes against Iraq, and ended with the Turkish government ordering the strikers back to work “in the interests of national security.” The recent firefighters strike in Britain was

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massive enough to require the state to reserve troops at the ready to fight fires in London instead of sending them to Iraq. Even where such strikes are legislated back to work, the public support for the defense of such a critical public sector service is reinforced, and in this case has provided an underpinning to the more recent demonstrations of dissatisfaction with Blair's "Labour" Party.

Since the bosses of capital and the state clearly need us for their war machine to operate smoothly, some of the most successful work refusals recently have been on train tracks, at airports, and on the shipping docks. Last week, a 24-hour strike in Santos, Brazil called on all longshore workers to suspend loading and unloading of ships bearing the British or US flag, this in the largest port of Latin America. Last Tuesday, Italian port workers of the three major unions went on strike for the last hour of their shifts to protest against the US using their work places to ship war equipment out to the Gulf, and Greek dockers also refused to participate. Another 'hot cargo edict' was declared by the longshore union in New Brunswick, Canada. Even a couple of people can be critical as the British Ministry of Defense found out a few weeks ago, when two train drivers in Scotland refused to move a freight train carrying ammunition. The two were the only pair of drivers trained to take trains on the route from Glasgow to the Glen Douglas base, and were backed by their union, so both the army and the private railway were screwed by that one.

But it's not just the war machine, it is all of industry which needs our blood and sweat and toil. For instance, just to keep the oil flowing, they need miners, machinists, refinery workers, dockers at port, sailors, truck drivers, storage and distribution point workers, gas station attendants.

Here is where the general strike becomes a most powerful weapon in the class war. Mass protests that walk around in circles or sit in the civic square are part of a "citizenship politics", which assumes that leaders will respond to public grievances.

to fight back is to build a genuinely international movement of working people united against the ruling corporate class and its war strategy. We will need to draw together lessons learned from the similarities of our solidarity in order to face this new, open-ended "war on terrorism", which remains a class war.

In many of today's union leaderships, we have seen the same simpering support for war and "discipline in the ranks". As Joann Wypijewski put it in CounterPunch, "immediately after 9/11, the Machinists famously bellowed for "vengeance not justice," and John Sweeney said the unions stood "shoulder to shoulder" with George Bush in the war on terror. Since that time, working people in America have paid dearly for this in concessions and job losses.

Of great importance, in looking at war-time resistance among workers, is the impetus this resistance gave to working-class self-organization. War-time strikes and sabotage, partly because of their illegal and unsanctioned nature, bring rank-and-file workers together outside of union structures. Workers have to make crucial decisions about running the strike directly in face-to-face meetings or on the picket lines. Bureaucrats, who are left to their fundamental role of brokering with the bosses can be relegated to the sidelines in such situations. In Germany in 1917, illegal strikes helped to sweep the union structures right out of workplaces. Strikes increasingly took on an anti-union, as well as anti-boss character with wildcats occurring in growing numbers through the armistice and beyond. Workers replaced the unions by forming works committees which were precursors to the workers' councils that played such important parts in the near-revolutions of 1919. Similar developments occurred in Italy in 1943 when internal strike committees emerged and eventually moved their meetings from the factories to public markets. They were crucial in the general strikes that followed and drove the Nazis out of several cities. In fact, some of these uprisings were only put down by the advancing Allied armies which feared full-scale social revolutions.

This short survey cannot do justice to the inspiring histories of class struggle against war that exist around the world. When it comes right down to it, workers have no country. In this age of multi-front wars and mobile capital, the most effective way

Unfortunately, they're based upon a withdrawal of consent or 'public opinion' rather than a material withdrawal of productive capacity, so these mass exercises often suffer the double lack of not interfering in a material way with work/war mobilizations and simultaneously giving an appearance of "openness" and "democratic participation." In Cairo, despite the imposition of martial law, the Egyptian government has allowed demonstrations, saying they are necessary to "blow off some steam". Most states around the world feel pressured by massive street demonstrations, but still do not react as repressively to workers taking the streets as they do to workers taking up the more decisive general strike. When working people all unite against austerity measures, and begin to make specific demands, then capital really begins to get worried.

Wartime strikes, even sit-downs, slow-downs, or sick-ins, threaten capital and the state when/where they are most vulnerable, which bares the teeth which are usually hidden behind slick smiles. All niceties of equity and fairness, freedom and democracy fall away in the openness of struggle. At these crucial times, perceptions of "our nation's prosperity" or protecting "our way of life" are challenged by the realities of the class society in which we work and live.

History is rich with hidden stories of resistance to past wars and the strike has been one of working peoples' most elemental strategies. As one WWII resistance organizer stated: "We shall not, all of a sudden, persuade the 150,000 miners of the Nord department to take armed action, but they will strike heroically to obtain soap and a Sunday's rest."¹

During WWII, strikes took place throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, for diverse reasons, including: "supply difficulties, the arduous nature of the work expected, inadequacy of air raid shelters, solidarity with other strikers, protests against arrests, low wages, demonstrations against shooting of hostages, de-

¹ Quoted in *The Shadow War*, by Henri Michel, 1972: 221

mands for higher rations, distribution of clothing coupons, hostility to managers accused of collaboration, obsolescence of installations, increase in the cost of living, insistence on the observance of collective agreements, allocation of milk to children, observance of holidays.”²

In the United States, right after Pearl Harbor, patriotic fervor was running high. The big US unions in the AFL and CIO signed a “no strike pledge” with the corporate bosses of the day. The government called it the “Equality of Sacrifice” legislation, but the workers, even the patriotic ones, knew it was bullshit, that the sacrifices made by the bosses would not equal those made by the workers on the line.

It was not just a raise that was at stake, but a whole host of other grievances, around health and safety, the production process, and discipline within the plants. In the northeastern US, workers responded with an increase in wildcat strikes and sit-downs. The government, with the aid of the bosses, the media, and even the union bureaucrats, tried to paint any strikers as not only un-patriotic, but allies of Hirohito, and worse. Military officers, in uniform, were present in all the major war production plants, and regularly intervened in strikes and potential strikes. (The bureaucrats in the union had their role as broker threatened by the wildcats and autonomous action of the workers, so they got together with the bosses and hammered out some of the first anti-wildcat clauses to be instituted into contract language. Today, this clause allowing for the firing of any rebels in the plant is now a staple of UAW and CAW contracts in Canada.)

Rent Control was another thing that came out of wartime class struggle. In Britain during WWI, the government’s wartime financial policies discouraged construction projects for working class homes. This led to a housing crisis and an upward pressure on rents as the competition for available

² Michel, 1972: 222

housing stocks became increasingly intense. Attempts to evict tenants for nonpayment of increased rents, in October 1915, led to a situation that “threatened to disrupt the productive relations of the war economy”.³

A convergence of rent strikes, which were receiving tremendous support, and the resistance to the government labor policies posed a real possibility. “In fact, the government faced mounting pressure to resolve the rents question before it combined with industrial unrest, thus precipitating a major crisis that might threaten the prosecution of the war itself.”⁴ In December 1915, the government quickly passed into law the Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restriction) Act which froze all rents at prewar levels. Basically, the government was able to make a concession that defused a spark that might have spread and broadened into a much larger, potentially decisive social crisis.

We can’t rely on unions or parties to organize this resistance for us. While the role of the unions in restraining conflict has been discussed above, the socialist parties have played similar parts. Historically the mass Social Democratic parties of the Second International/Europe, despite paper policies supporting strike actions to stop war, completely gave themselves over to patriotic mobilization at the outbreak of WWI. The German Social Democratic Party and the Unified French Socialist Party both voted for war credits and sent workers off to kill their former comrades. While the unions played perhaps less dastardly roles in sending workers to their deaths, they played a part in restraining conflict on the home front as discussed above.

³ “The Political Economy of British Engineering Workers During the First World War” by Keith Burgess, in *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective*, 1989: 305

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