

Unions

A revolutionary critique

Red and Black Notes

Autumn 2004

Unions probably prevent more strikes than they precipitate. Given our adversarial system, where it is often assumed, incorrectly, that every gain by the worker is a loss for management — it's surprising there are not more strikes. The fact is that unions are an essential vehicle for lessening the frustration many workers feel — three out of every four workers say they don't trust their employers. Good unions work to defuse that anger — and they do it effectively. Without unions, there would be anarchy in the workplace. Strikes would be commonplace, and confrontation and violence would increase. Poor-quality workmanship, low productivity, increased sick time, and absenteeism would be the preferred form of worker protest. By and large, unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of worker resistance. If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that union leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes. In my view, the wonder of the collective bargaining process in Canada is that we have so few strikes.

— Buzz Hargrove *Labour of Love*
Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, 1998.

The quote from the leader of the Canadian Auto Workers, considered by many, to be one of the most militant unions in Canada, and certainly one which prides itself on its 'social unionism' hardly needs explanation.

The image that many people have of unions is drawn from the historical battles working people fought for better pay and better working conditions. Today, the picture is very different. Union membership is often a condition of employment,¹ and dues are collected by the employer and forwarded to the union. Unions own real estate, employ vast numbers of workers, and occasionally come to resemble in structure, the corporations with whom they negotiate.

This was not always the case. Once upon a time, even in shops with union contracts, dues were collected on payday by a shop steward. If the union was not seen to be defending the workers, the workers refused to pay their dues. A similar situation exists in France, where in

¹ Readers should bear in mind that this article is primarily focused on Canada. However we believe that while some points do not apply elsewhere, the main points of the article are universal.

many workplaces, three or more unions compete for the same dues and workers can switch their memberships — this means that the union must be a little more responsive to the base). But in North America, after World War II, the pattern was for the establishment of a permanent union apparatus, which was detached from the shop floor, and functioned as a part of the machinery of capital. How did this happen?

The unions are a product of the struggle between workers and capital. These organizations developed, in many cases, in the 18th and 19th centuries out of skilled guilds in an effort to protect their wages and professions. And they were savagely resisted. Nova Scotia was the first province in Canada to pass laws forbidding unions, in 1812. Recently in Iraq, the provisional authority forbade workers in government owned industries (which is most of them) forming unions, because a law based by the Ba'ath Party had made them illegal. Finally, something Saddam Hussein did that the imperials like! The battles fought by the working class are too many to name. But even in this period, the unions showed their conservatism. They were defence organizations, not revolutionary organizations. Karl Marx, writing in his famous pamphlet *Value, Price and Profit* criticized the conservatism of the unions for seeking “a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work” instead of demanding the abolition of the wage system.

Trade unions, although they were defence organizations, were always about negotiation over the sale of labour power. But, at the same time, the unions reflected and maintained the existing divisions in class society: skilled workers vs. unskilled workers; manual vs. mental; men vs. women; “native” labour vs. immigrants, etc. etc. The Knights of Labor opposed strikes, the American Federation of Labor was opposed to organizing blacks or immigrants, and produced virulently racist anti-Chinese propaganda.

Of course this was not true of every workers organization. The Industrial Workers of the World, which was founded in 1905, sought the destruction of the capitalist system. It organized everyone it could, it refused to sign contracts, and everywhere agitated for revolution. Other anarchist and syndicalist unions followed this same course. In fact, the IWW was also to have a significant impact on the European council movement, in particular in Germany after World War I.

But for these were the exceptions. And the identification with capital reached its climax during the war in 1914, when the unions supported the slaughter. (While this for many is proof of the unions’ character, many leftists argue the opposite and point to the fact many unions opposed the recent war in Iraq — so did Jean Chretien!)

Why did the character of the unions change? Part of the answer lies in the changing form of capitalism. Early capitalist society was little different from feudal society. Instead of working on the land, new proletarianized workers went to the factory — and one of the hardest battles for the newly emerging capitalists was getting workers to actually go to work. But while this struggle went on there was a great deal of “social space.” Mass working class political parties came into existence in the 19th century, along with newspapers, co-operative societies, cultural organizations, mutual aid societies etc. But over time, as capital strengthened its grip, as the law of value extended its reach, as capital made its transition from being formally to really being dominant over society, those social spaces disappeared too. Except on a very small scale. Those existing organizations were either absorbed into the machinery of capital (like the unions and the political parties) or squeezed out of existence (like the IWW).

In a sense, the problem with unions today, is the problem with social democratic governments. Many activists and leftist militants realize that social democracy is not the answer, but honestly

believe it will be better than what is offered by the other parties. Once elected of course, the social democrats offer precisely the same as the other parties. But it is not a question of betrayal. They were never on our side. What is at issue is the role they play in the system of capital. The unions are little different.

When a contract is signed with an employer, the union, in effect, becomes the cop in the workplace, ensuring that the employer and most importantly the workers live up to the document. Anything outside of the contract is forbidden. Filing a grievance essentially means handing the problem over to lawyers and committees outside of the shopfloor. Any worker having trouble sleeping might well consider reading their contract, assuming the union has provided one, in order to ensure restful sleep. The first contract the UAW signed with General Motors was one page. Today a contract might run to hundreds of pages, all written in impenetrable legal jargon. And lest it be forgotten, it was John L. Lewis the first head of the more militant Congress of Industrial Organizations who said, “the best guarantee against a sit-down strike is a CIO contract.”

It should be understood that this is not a conspiracy theory. All unions are not uniformly bad. There are “good” unions and there are “bad” unions, but they are not qualitatively different. Once upon a time workers, often as a last resort, went on strike to fight for something they believed in, even though they often paid for their raises by saving the company wages; today, it seems that people go on strike in order to give up things.

The unions today are tied to a system of social development that has many names. The welfare state, Fordism, Keynesianism, the post-war compromise. It is also clearly a system, which is dissolving in the twenty-first century. Few people would deny that the welfare state has positive aspects. Being able to go to a doctor and have your child recover from a simple treatable disease, rather than dying for the sake of a few pennies is good. But it’s the same Welfare State that evicts tenants, that cuts off benefits, that closes hospitals etc. when it is necessary. It is a means of social control. Unions are a part of this social control, and very effective. In the old totalitarian countries, the unions were not effective because they were simply seen as part of the government and therefore distrusted. But in so-called democratic countries we have the illusion of participation and choice. In many ways a democracy is a lot easier and cheaper to run — brute force is messy and expensive. Thus, for decades capital and unions could get along easily.

But capital is changing. Outsourcing, temp work, lean production have all contributed to the changing nature of work and therefore undercut the need for the employers to use unions. Hence the rise of union busting. And although in the short run, they may be a wave of support for and organizing of unions to combat these trends, ultimately the unions will be unable to prevent changes in the system, just as they have been unable to prevent layoffs and plant closures.

Where does this leave us? Some militants argue it is possible to reclaim the unions, and with a better leadership the unions can become effective fighting organizations, but this leaves out what it is that unions do. Others argue for leaving the “business” unions in favour or “red” unions. Unfortunately, it might be very lonely, and even if there were a breakaway revolutionary grouping, in order for the union to be effective, the same patterns of negotiation would appear. There is a third alternative. Class struggle occurs without pause. Sometimes, the struggle is large and visible, as in the case of strikes, general strikes and even the emergence of workers councils; at other times, the struggle is “underground” and takes the form of absenteeism, sabotage, and informal go-slows. The place for the revolutionary is to be a part of these struggles, assisting and deepening where possible. For as Marx noted, the final goal is not a rise in the minimum wage, but the abolition of this corrupt, exploitative system in favour of a New World.

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