

# Unions & the Nature of Work

New James Boggs pamphlet misses the point about work and workers today

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a review of

“But What About the Workers?,” a pamphlet by James Boggs and James Hocker, available from the Advocators, Box 07249, Gratiot Sta., Detroit MI 48207; \$0.75, 43 pp.

James Boggs and James Hocker, like so many other revolutionaries, desire a unified working class capable of a socialist revolution and set out in their pamphlet to examine the state of unions today and why so many workers employ “individualistic” solutions to their problems.

Given the complete political and theoretical bankruptcy of the so-called Left, the two authors correctly emphasize the critical nature of the growing crisis of life under capitalism and urge a wide discussion of their analysis—this is ours.

Unfortunately, despite the sincerity of effort on the part of Boggs and Hocker, “But What About the Workers?” fails dismally to understand the current stage of capitalism, the present state of the working class and the events that have produced the situation.

Taken to its bare bones, “...Workers?” is a nostalgia piece which bemoans the facts that neither unions nor workers are the way they were in the “good old days” of the '30's when the CIO was first organizing and worker solidarity was high.

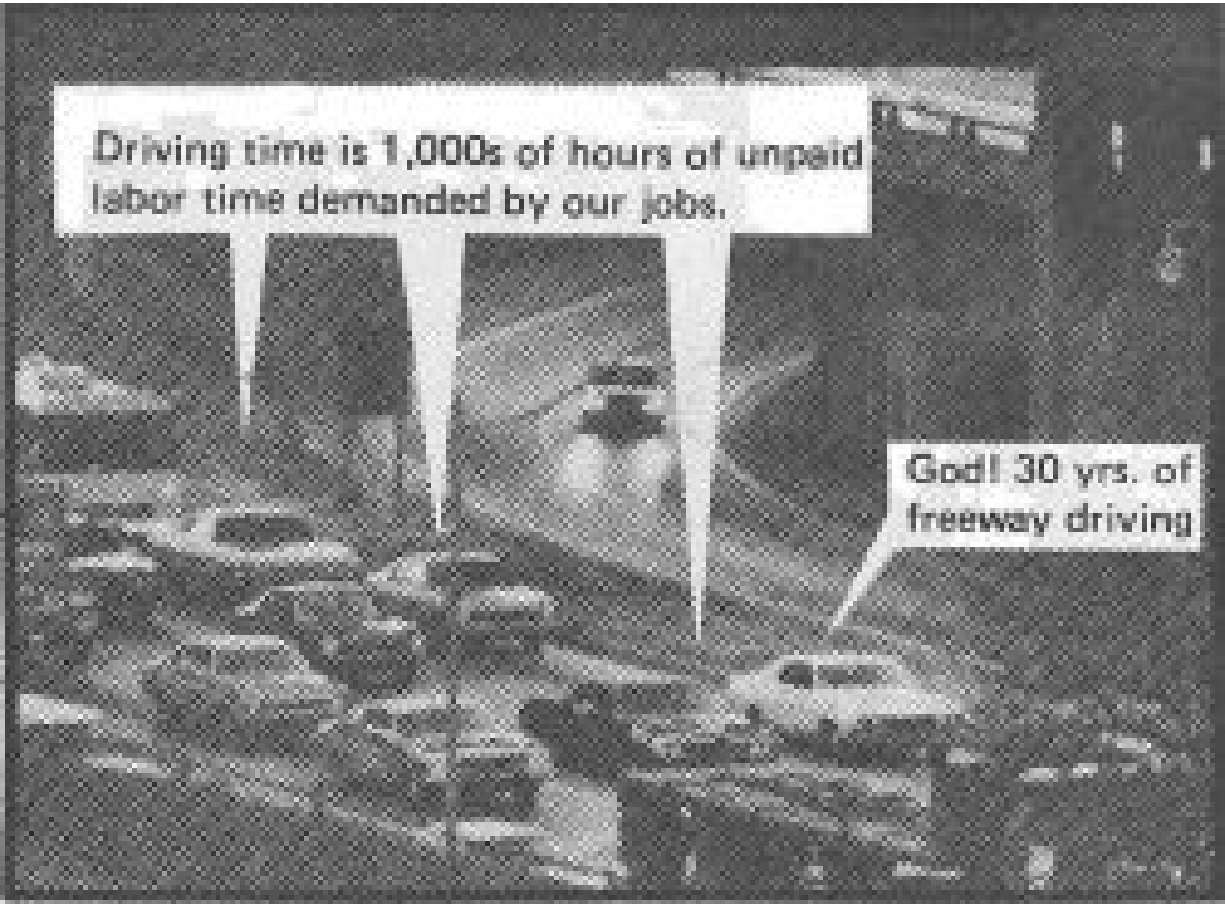
Boggs and Mocker begin by contrasting the work force, “then and now.” However their approach to the union movement of the 'thirties misunderstands the development of Capital in that period and their critique of today's workers reduces itself to mere moralism.

## The “Good Old Days”

They describe unions and the union movement completely uncritically, using such phrases as, “Like a tornado the new movement of unionism swept across the industrial centers of the country, magnetically drawing into its path other elements who were also looking for a way out based on a new-found hope and buttressed by a new kind of action.”

Many old timers and many radicals look back to that period as the golden age of worker militancy where “people felt that a new day had dawned for the ordinary working man and woman.” (Boggs and Hocker p.3) This, indeed, was a period of tremendous struggle and conflict, a decade when the national guard and police of the U.S. murdered over 300 workers and injured thousands more involved in battles for union recognition.

“... Workers?” describes the pride individual workers had in their union and the respect in the community that was enjoyed by both the rank-and-file and union leadership; a time of exuberance on the part of a working class struck by one of the worst economic calamities in industrial capitalism's history.



While not denying at all the way in which individual workers may have viewed the drive for unionization and their participation in the process, it is important to investigate what were the large and more pervasive trends in the political economy that shaped that period.

## The Statification of Capital

The 'thirties began as a period of revolutionary upsurge on the part of the American working class and ended with its integration into a restructured capitalism.

The process that Boggs and Hocker neglect is that of the statification of Capital that began at the outbreak of World War I with the realization on the part of private Capital that it was not viable as an enterprise without direct government intervention.

The State ceased being simply the political expression of the capitalist class and became an integral part of the functioning of Capital itself. Statification took different forms during the 1930's corresponding to the differing political and economic histories of particular countries.

In the Soviet Union the state capitalist brand of Stalinism was employed to stabilize the rule of Capital; in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan fascism was utilized to resolve the crisis in those countries; in the U.S. the capitalist class employed a more benign form of statification to solve its problems and called it the New Deal. Under Roosevelt the government intervened directly in the economic sphere, never to exit, as a needed component in the capitalist cycle of financial ruin, war, recovery, ruin.

Unions played an important part in this process. At the beginning of the decade, class struggle raged as desperate workers fought pitched battles against the armed forces of Capital; general strikes were called in several cities, but by 1941 a peaceful unionized work force marched off to war while agreeing to collaborate with management for increased production.

Judith Allen in *Internationalism* magazine sums up the 'thirties thusly:

Those who speak of 'the good old days' of the CIO, for example, are repeating a crushing defeat. The CIO was the perfect mechanism conceived and encouraged by Roosevelt and his 'worker' collaborators, to insure the channeling of workers' discontent during the depression, and despite the brave struggles of the rank and file workers their 'victory' was an illusion.

Among the tasks which the CIO undertook was to help the capitalists introduce speedups and other types of 'rationalization' into the process of production (increasing the rate of exploitation of the workers), to help introduce compulsory overtime (extension of the working day), and to facilitate the laying off of masses of workers. But the real nature of this so-called 'victory' is nowhere better seen than in the millions of dead and wounded workers who the unions helped to mobilize for the second imperialist war.

This is all to say that there must be a distinction made between the purely subjective feelings of workers toward the CIO described by the "...Workers?" pamphlet and the objective trends in the political economy. Without this ability Boggs and Hocker are left singing choruses of "Those Were the Days." The two authors postulate that the bureaucratization of the unions came during the period of the 1950's with the first five year contract and the installation of the automatic dues checkoff system.

Yet one page earlier the pamphlet asserts that in 1939 "the International union and the company finally outlawed the sit-in strike."

Apparently Boggs and Hocker fail to recognize that the mere signing of the first union contract, what every militant CIO struggle was about, was the signal for the end of class warfare. For it took away the power of the strike from the rank and file and put it into the hands of their "representatives," who were bound by the terms of a legal contract not to strike. The union from the first day of its recognition as the agents of the work force began to function as the police of labor.

C. Wright Mills in his *The New Men of Power* (1948) describes the union's role thusly:

The integration of union with plant means that the union takes over much of the company's personnel work, becoming the discipline agent of the rank and file.

Many other works describe this same process and the recognition of such by workers beginning even before the 'thirties were out.

## **What are Unions?**

Unions, originally formed to defend the average selling price of their members' labor, were never what Boggs and Hocker submit, but rather from their inception only regrouped a small section of the U.S. working class (in those industries most important to Capital) and have become auxiliary organs to the industries they "organized."

Unions are institutions of capitalism and counterrevolutionary by their function—the sale of wage labor to Capital. They are devoid of any revolutionary potential and their reform is impossible.

As G. Munis in *Unions Against Revolution* states:

[The union's] 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.

## **What is the Value of "Work?"**

Towards the end of the pamphlet Boggs and Hocker pose some very central questions about human activity—"Should people work? Why? What is the social value of work? What does it mean to be human?" Had meaningful answers to these questions been suggested throughout their text, the results would have been significantly different from what appears.

Rather than writing with these problems in mind it appears as though Boggs and Hocker take as givens the basic assumptions of capitalism—wage work, commodity production and exchange, the extraction of surplus value (profit) from what a worker produces, etc.

Boggs and Hocker make no attempt to analyse the nature of work under capitalism, but instead complain that there is "no longer the respect for a job and for work that work had in the thirties." For two persons who claim to be radicals this statement seems preposterous. If it is true that there was a genuine respect for "work" (read capitalist wage work) in that period, it is just a case of happy slaves.

The basis of capitalist exploitation and human misery is rooted in wage labor, yet throughout the pamphlet we find quotes such as, "Instead of seeing the plant as part of their lives, workers today look on it as a prison to which they have been sentenced for a few years..." Do our two authors actually dispute this view of factory life which they correctly attribute to workers?

They do, in fact, complain that workers don't even like to dress like workers and seem to be at the job only for "their" own interests. The authors complain that the only enthusiasm seen in a plant today is "exhibited at the end of the shift." They again quite correctly state that this "makes clear the workers' lack of feeling for their work."

Are they kidding? Do they really think that the daily activities of wage workers is "their" work and not work done for Capital? Apparently not, because in another nail-gnashing section they bemoan the fact that, "Gone is the pride in having a job in the plant and the knowledge that by working you are making a contribution to society."

At one juncture the authors tell us that "Even the worker's identification badge, issued by the employer, became a badge of distinction." And they bewail the fact that workers now hide their badges. Being forced to wear a plant ID badge and being proud of it would be similar to having pride in a concentration camp tattoo.

Have Boggs and Hocker left the arena of revolutionary theory and hired on with the local Chamber of Commerce? This is a description of work with all the elements of radical critique ripped out of it.

The authors not only fail to realize the most fundamental nature of capitalism and “work,” but also are unaware of the development of the work force itself during the last generation.

Although the two, on at least three occasions in their pamphlet, elect to toss out the writings of Karl Marx as irrelevant for this age since he wrote 100 years ago (although they have no qualms about quoting Lenin writing 70 years ago), Marx’s description of wage labor in Europe of the 1840’s is perhaps more true today than it was then.

## **Marx’s Description of Labor**

Marx describes wage labor as the process whereby workers are forced to sell their labor to a capitalist as a commodity, but also with the transaction goes control over all the circumstances of one’s life and one’s creative powers. The commodity created by wage labor returns as an alienated object which confronts the worker as something alien rather than as one’s creation.

Marx, in *Excerpt-Notes of 1844*, described work as

...only the semblance of an activity, only a forced activity, imposed upon me by external and accidental necessity and not by an internal and determined necessity...My labor, therefore, manifested as the objective, sensuous, perceptible, and indubitable expression of my self-loss and my powerlessness.

That was work under capitalism in 1844; that was wage work under capitalism in the 1930’s and that remains the nature of work today. Apparently workers can see this because they despise everything about their employment—the terrible hours, the long unpaid driving time, the stupid authority of foreman and supervisors, the miserable conditions—all in a period when everyone with imagination can visualize something better than the alarm clock, time clock and TV.

The question is why do Boggs and Hocker consider the hatred of wage work to be such an awful thing? Do they really want to peddle the bourgeois notion that working contributes to “society” and not just to Capital?

What the authors are really concerned about is the lack of union unity and class solidarity that they observed in a section of the working class a generation ago, but what comes out is country preacher moralizing about workers spending too much time concerned about their personal lives, excessive gossiping, drug and alcohol abuse and other signs of social disintegration that capitalism produces in the most exploited sectors of the working class.

To call for a return to the grand days of yesteryear suggests not only a misunderstanding of “yesteryear,” but also of the changes in the workers’ movement from the period the authors extol to what exists today.

## **Revolutionary Upsurges**

The revolutionary upsurges of the proletariat from 1848 through 1939 were based on a view of capitalism as an unjust system that penalized the real producers of value (the workers) in favor of a class of parasites (the capitalists) who did no real labor and only collected profits created by the labor of the workers.

The solution was too easy to imagine—simply take the means of production out of the hands of the owners, place them at the disposal of the workers and bingo—you have communism. This did make sense; workers were involved in producing the essentials of daily life and it was only the armed might of the State (capitalist or state capitalist) which prevented the revolutionary overthrow of the system.

What is so glaringly missing from the analysis of contemporary marxists is their failure to comprehend the structural changes that capitalism has gone through in the last forty years.

No longer can workers exclaim that it is they who are producing the needed stuff of human existence, instead millions of workers are engaged in producing nothing of real human value—plastic flowers, trashmashers, electric screwdrivers (“a contribution to society”?) and a host of other worthless articles needed for the needs of Capital, but not by people.

Millions more workers are involved in paper-shuffling administrative, governmental, technical, accounting, financial, legal, clerical and countless other bureaucratic aspects of Capital that have no translation into human terms—they are only meaningful if you accept the logic of capitalism itself.

As Jacques Camatte says in *The Wandering of Humanity*: “In the era of its real domination, Capital has run away; it has escaped. It is no longer controlled by human beings.”

Workers now confront Capital not as a class of producers against a class of bosses, but rather as component parts of a system gone out of control that has no relationship to human beings. Hence, the destruction of one part of the system by the workers, i.e., management, would leave intact a structure which continues its domination of human activity.

## **The Real Struggle for Communism**

So, ultimately the questions posed by Boggs and Hocker turn out to have even more impact than one imagines they anticipated—“Should people work? Why? What is the social value of work? What is the human value of work?”

People serious about a communist project (a liberated community based on decentralized, voluntary activity free from the mediation of political parties, the state or authority of any variety) must confront these questions in terms that take into account Capital as it currently presents itself; not as it did 50 or 100 years ago.

If no one can seriously think of a Revolutionary Plastic Flowers Workers Council or a Council of Revolutionary Secretaries, what becomes of the people involved in those activities, and isn't it senseless to demand that people consider themselves within the categories that Capital imposes upon us when those are exactly the ones we want to demolish?

In *The Wandering of Humanity* Camatte says: “We are all slaves of capital. Liberation begins with the refusal to perceive oneself in terms of the categories of capital... At this point the movement of recognition of human beings can begin.”

This last point brings us around to the last question posed by Boggs and Hocker—“what does it mean to be human?” They do not suggest an answer and perhaps one is not even available in an affirmative sense while Capital constrains our lives and even our imagination. Perhaps at best we hint at an answer by rejecting all the elements that make us what we are today (“slaves of capital” as Camatte put it), and that will suggest what shape a human community will have.

This is in no way meant to suggest that struggles should cease at any point within Capital, but rather that they should intensify. However, if the struggles are restricted to that of the consciousness of workers fighting for material gains as workers, we will continue to define ourselves as non-human things—elements of Capital.

Struggles must be fought to define ourselves as human beings and then, whether it is 1,000 persons at a plant or two at an office (or the reverse), the real struggle for communism will begin.

Books read and considered for this article:

*Unions Against Revolution* by G. Munis and J. Zerzan;

*Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution* by Negation;

*Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* by I. I. Rubin;

*The Wandering of Humanity* by Jacques Camatte;

*The Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement* by J. Barrot and F. Martin.

All books are published by Black & Red and are available through Ammunition Books at the *Fifth Estate* office or through B & R directly at: Box 9546, Detroit, MI 48202.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/267-november-1975/unions-nature-work>  
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