

Unions and Reformism

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Unionism corresponded to a particular historical period of workers' struggles. Its form was determined by its reformist content. Unions regrouped only a minority of the working class, just enough to be able to put pressure on the capitalist class. Unions organized workers in the image of the capitalist system itself: according to trade, job skills, industrial sector. Unions became increasingly bureaucratized as capitalism itself became more complex. Hierarchical relations became the norm as unions entered the field of bourgeois legality. Economic demands were the unions' exclusive preoccupation and a political view of the system was relegated to a separate compartment: the political parties. But as long as reformism was a valid perspective, unions continued to play a role in improving the lot of the working class.

But with reformism an illusion in a period of permanent crisis, the unions' role became that of mobilizing the working class behind the bourgeoisie in peace and wartime. They guaranteed the subordination of workers' demands to the capitalist criteria of increased productivity and competitiveness. In a system in danger, unions insured the swift channeling of any dangerous discontent which might threaten to overthrow the system. Unions became an essential pillar of support for capitalism's continued existence. Those who speak of 'the good old days' of the CIO, for example, are replaying 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 whom the unions helped to mobilize for the second imperialist war.

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