

# Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1976

## What About Gangs?

To the Fifth Estate:

The FE is usually a delight to read. Only a couple of small things have detracted from that: Using “man” to mean “people” (in the article on a Michigan landfill) is sexist and a turnoff to me.

In the cover article of your gang issue [#276, September 1976] I was never certain what you felt about the gang attacks. Seems when you sound more situationist—like you become less clear and less subjective. The other articles on gangs were fine—the open letter to the columnists, a delight.

Kent

Charlotte, NC

## Down With Straws

To the Fifth Estate:

I was surprised there was no staff response to the letter by David Thorp last issue [#277, October 1976] which you entitled “Anarchism Flops.”

The letter attempts to be a critique of anarchism, but instead provides us with a classical error of polemical argumentation. Thorp sets up his own conception of what “anarchism” is, then proceeds to defeat it. Thus, in the final analysis, he is merely defeating himself, his own ideas.

This is known as the “straw man” argument: One projects one’s own ideas of the opposition’s position and attacks that projection rather than the opposition itself.

“...you will need armed individuals ...you will call them workers’ patrols ... but they will be police.” Thorpe projects our future within the scope of his own bourgeois imagination, then proceeds to criticize it. In that, his inclinations are most correct.

Regardless of the validity of a critique of anarchism (or of “ism” anything), this kind of sophistry leads nowhere. The letter is not even an opinion as such, but merely a piece of faulty reasoning.

Jason P. Huxley

## Desanctify Councilism

Dear FE gang:

Worker’s councils as a point of dogma has long turned us off; we ended contact with the pro-situationist group Point-Blank about three years ago, for example, based in part on our anti-ideological critique of councilism, which

was similar to Ned Ludd's. [see "Self-management and the Spanish Revolution," #274, July 1976 and Letters, #275, August, 1976]

Despite the frequent brilliance of situationist analysis, neither Marxism nor ideology were really left behind. And it is from the various pro-situationists—the S.I. itself having been a little more subtle—that the workerist, collectivist, and bureaucratic elements come out most clearly. Ned Ludd's contribution to a de-sanctifying of Worker's Councils provoked expected reactions, and demonstrates that from the government financed psychosis of the NCLC to the "libertarian socialists" who define themselves by their lame efforts to salvage all the old shit by spicing it with "anti-authoritarian" phrases, to the faithful sycophants of situationist writ, leftism is indeed leftism, and is nothing if not a respecter of ideology.

Raoul Vaneigem, in his *Treatise on Living for the Use of the Young*, asked ingenuously, "Why has nobody seen that the principle of productivity simply replaced the principle of feudal authority?" The twist of course, is that the "nobody" includes the situationists. They, in common with the rest of the left, consider "Trade unions and political parties [as having been] created by the working class as tools of its emancipation" ("On the Poverty of Student Life").

Having swallowed this (see our article in the April FE [Who Killed Ned Ludd?] on the Luddites, on the origins of unionism and leftism), it follows that they got really no further than councilism in their search for revolutionary possibilities.

John & Paula Zerzan  
San Francisco

## No Writers ante

To the Fifth Estate:

Letters from "Louis" of Berkeley and "Ted Lopez" of Tampa defending worker's councils (FE Oct. '76) suggest more than what either of them is-actually willing to state.

Louis' criticisms are certainly easier to take than Lopez' arrogance, but both of them share the same perspective—that of a politician, a person who has plans and programs for others. Each of them has a preconceived view of the "revolution" and asserts very positively that we will do this and such to create the communist paradise. These are junior Kim Il Sung's in the making.

All their libertarianism aside, they are proposing some very specific things for us to do after the revolution: we will expand production, we will assist the Third World, we will radically transform the means of production, etc. This is a political program based around the administrative apparatus of councils which takes as a given all of the physical elements of capitalist production.

My intent is not to counterpose an alternative program to theirs; I simply stated what I thought would happen: workers would abandon the gigantic, anti-human productive forces that will stunt our lives no matter who "controls" them.

"Louis" and "Lopez" are crypto-leninists without being willing to face it. To administer the system they propose, especially one that operates world-wide (assisting the Third World, etc.), demands centralized bureaucratic and authoritarian political control. And I somehow think that my two critics will end up on the "planning" end of the "expanded" production rather than the practical end of factory work.

As to both their concern about my nihilism, it sounds almost like a compliment coming from their pens. Just like the charge of "spontaneity" is a code word within the leninist schema for people acting outside of the party or union structure, so "nihilism" carries the same purpose for the "libertarian" politician: to describe those who refuse the political domination of the councils.

Gentlemen, your grandiose plans for world transformation are that much more in the long tradition of political saviors who yearn for power over others. Forget it; your councils are yesterday's newspaper. No one is planning our revolution except those who participate in it and no writers need apply.

Yours for factories Ablaze  
Ned Ludd

## Ho's for Trio

Dear Fellow Shirkers:

Comrade Kim Il Dung's statue is 70 feet tall, not 15 feet as you reported.

"La Rotten Passion Fruit" is here visiting us. She has a statue too. The Scottish Section of the International Brigade recently erected an eight-foot statue to her comratperson.

She says she's having a good time and wishes you were here.

Brasoining,

Red Mongoose Collective

Honolulu, HI

P.S. Uncle Ho says it's a trio (see Oct. FE) or nothing. Remember, he's Third World.

## Class-conscious Unions

Dear Friends:

I find the article by John Zerzan, "Unionism and the Nazi Labor Front" [#277, October 1976], to reveal a crucial insight into the class collaboration efforts of trade unionism in general. The article ends on the note asking the question: Is our own labor movement (American as well as Canadian) the modern counterpart to the Arbeitsfront, that supported the rise of National Socialism? In certain ways, at least to my knowledge of the Canadian movement, it appears to be doing so, although there are a number of elements that oppose such development.

The Canadian Labour Congress, the major Canadian union movement at the present time, has come out with its own Labour Manifesto, in which it proclaims that the labour movement wants a direct share, along with business, in the workings of governmental economic power. They call such a gesture "social democracy".

What the leaders of the union movement really want is not for labour to share power, but for it to submit to the runnings of a corporate business elite. The only share of power would mean that union bureaucrats would become a labour elite that could stand amongst the members of a managerial caste. The sharing of power would in no way signify that members of the rank and file would be any better off. Rather, the invisible chain of the working class to capitalism and state capitalism would be increased.

The tragedy of the whole situation is that many have fallen for the trick that the Manifesto is a great step forward for the labour movement. Meanwhile the press builds up the ridiculous notion that the Manifesto is a "radical" document that must be heavily taken into consideration to "appease" labor.

However, there are some countering trends to this development. The only real remaining hope lies upon the workers themselves. A number say that the solution to this would be the development of a class-conscious form of unionism—the concept put forward by the I.W.W. being one example.

Upon this notion there must be taken into account the fact that indeed the labour movement will move to the right (whatever that is), unless the majority of workers become increasingly class-conscious (politically conscious, economically conscious).

This is the only hope if there is a shift to the right by labour leaders and their opportunist colleagues.

History has shown a number of times that the inherent class consciousness of the work force is a stumbling block to a total world-wide movement toward fascism. The problem that confronts us is how to bring that latent consciousness into the foreground.

Leonard Wallace

Windsor, Ont.

## Rachleff Rapped

To the Fifth Estate:

RE: Pete Rachleff's review of "The Emergence of a UAW Local", by Peter Friedlander (Aug. 1976 FE).

Rachleff's review suggests one of two things. Either he forgot to read the first 29 pages—or more unlikely and unfortunately, he is so compulsive in his ultra-leftism that he is blind to any way of looking at the world that might transcend it.

The introductory chapter clearly describes Friedlander's aim to study a union as a particular, concrete example of a larger, general concept—social praxis. Not a union as some thing-in-itself, nor as linearly tied to revolution. And thus, not something to be either exalted or derided in the manner of leftists and ultra-leftists.

The point of departure here is broad—the large framework of the bourgeois social process as a whole. Within it, Friedlander focuses on one element, the activity of a group of US workers in the 'thirties. He wants to describe their union as an institution they created, and one that cannot be either reduced or totaled to their praxis. In the process of creating themselves a working class, these UAW workers must engage in abandoning archaic conceptions of their relations both to various antique European ruling classes, and simultaneously, archaic self-conceptions.

Such activity will generate ideology particular to a more modern working class and yet be affected by the ideology of all capitalist classes. And simultaneously, this working class praxis will share in the development of bourgeois ideology-as-a-whole and the emergence of "advanced capitalism".

If unions, then, are the historically specific crystallizations of all the above factors, then it's senseless to define them and their leaders/rank and file as "revolutionary" or "anti-revolutionary".

Back to the introduction, Friedlander explains the absolute necessity of creating concreteness in describing praxis. He's not interested in these UAW workers' ethnicity, as Rachleff claims, to apologize for their not changing history or themselves. Just the opposite—it's the interacting of their different social or "ethno"-personalities that generates the tension underlying higher level praxis. Or as Rachleff calls for, Historical self-change.

But while Friedlander wants a method which creates concreteness, Rachleff can only imagine the workers involved as some abstract conglomeration of variable, passive capital. History for him isn't human activity, but Time, passing, passing, playing out the same tired scheme over and over.

A working class. Searching for (unconscious?) communism. Spontaneity vs. Leadership. Revolution vs. Not-Revolution. Defeat after defeat. A few enlightened prophets preaching against leadership, their mission ever whistling in the dark. The workers, the poor schlemeils, duped into "nightmares of alienation from their real desires."

Maybe modern ultra-leftists can get away with this lifeless moralizing, in the remote corners of European history. But with Friedlander's study of a UAW local, Rachleff can't pull a Makhno or a Kronstadt without looking even more compulsive than usual.

Admitting that "the experiences, backgrounds, present situations, attitudes which divide workers into various groups must be taken into account", Rachleff still can't consider any such elements of backgrounds or attitudes which would make some groups of workers "leaders" and others "passive". Because he still sees such stances towards a union as ahistorical, either-or rational behavior, he seems utterly driven to accuse Friedlander of immoral approval of the Leadership (though Friedlander states for those who don't get the point implicitly, that Kord's historical project is not his project). [Kord was the union president during the '36-'39 period.]

Friedlander, Rachleff says, "grumbles" about the gang members' lack of formal political organization, he's "enthusiastic" about the union's takeover of capitalist managerial functions in the plant, he finds "shortcomings" in the gang members' undisciplined behavior.

For Rachleff, to get emotionally involved with the leadership's point of view means to side with the evil side of History. And for someone compelled to see workers as eternally good and leaders as ever bad, it must be pretty terrifying to look into the future. If workers have always been duped by leaders in the past, then the future can only look grim.

Rachleff, then, shall cover up his intense pessimism by being cheerleader for the gang members, spokesman for their unconscious \* communist dreams.

Friedlander, on the other hand, can get as emotional as he wants, from his own point of view. After all, as a social product the activity of the UAW leadership was the order of the day in the 'thirties. People like Kord were, as opposed to the gang members, consistently ideological, self-conscious, and self-confident. Thus their praxis was admirable within its own historical bounds, as that of the French Revolutionists was admirable. And again, we can't reduce the praxis of any epoch to the institution which it creates.

We can, then, admire the UAW leadership precisely because their project wasn't ours. Unlike Rachleff (and ultra-leftists and leftists) we don't confuse our communist dreams with whatever the aspirations of young Polish autoworkers in Hamtramck in 1937 might have been, or with whatever those of the leadership might have been.

We can't bear capitalist life, but we're neither romantic enough nor pessimistic enough to suppose that every "worker" has felt the same way since time immemorial. To study working class history, and to participate in making revolutionary history involves not the acting out of moralistic fantasies, but trying to know whether a working class is creating itself from a more primitive social personality, to one which can perhaps NOW begin to undertake the project of realizing the dreams we are still creating.

\* (Can communism ever be unconscious?)

Deborah Nathan

El Paso, Texas

***Rachleff's response:***

I must admit I am somewhat puzzled by these criticisms, though I was also puzzled by the introduction to Friedlander's book. In large part, I felt strongly that Friedlander had failed to live up to his own project, as outlined in the introduction. Was in fact a union an institution "created" by the workers considered in the book? Certainly not by all of the workers. The central problem raised by the book—and skirted over by this letter—was that the project of organizing the union began and remained a distinctly minority project. Why were some interested in the project and others not? Here, Ms. Nathan, much as Friedlander, sheds no light. All the prattle in the world about "ethno-personalities" gets us not a step closer to the answer.

I must also admit that I take offense at being accused of seeing history as "Time passing", rather than human activity, and seeing workers as "poor schlemeils", being "duped" by anybody. Rather, they did not see the project of building a union as their project. Indeed, they refused to be duped into wasting their time building yet another institution which would return to haunt them.

What makes some "leaders" and others "passive"? Elements of background and attitudes cannot explain these phenomena. People play the roles of leaders and followers within definite social contexts, as engaged in concrete projects. The question must then become (here again missed by both Friedlander and Nathan) the nature of the project, and why certain people become interested in that project, as opposed to some other one. Friedlander and Nathan refuse to subject this project—the organization of a union—to critical scrutiny. The project itself is seen ahistorically (workers always build unions); blinding them to the possibility that historical development itself alters the significance of this project, thus changing the features which might attract working people into devoting their energies into this channel.

What does it mean to say that "the activity of the UAW leadership was the order of the day in the 'thirties"? Talk about history seen as other than human activity! Who decided that their activity was the order of the day? Was nothing else possible? How do we know that? Did Friedlander ask other workers what they wanted? What did they think was possible? What imposes limitations on activity? Some external standards? Perhaps the hindsight offered us by further historical developments. But then we will be compelled to forever look at history as only those projects which were "the order of the day". Rubbish!

I would again like to urge readers to tackle Friedlander's book ("The Emergence of a UAW Local") for themselves, make up their own minds and, if so inclined, contribute to the discussion which Ms. Nathan has spurred.

Peter Rachleff

# fifth Estate

Various Authors  
Letters to the Fifth Estate  
1976

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/278-november-1976/letters-to-the-fifth-estate>  
Fifth Estate #278, November, 1976

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**