

I'm Sticking with the Union?

The battle of Detroit

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"Hey! What are you guys doing here? You hate unions!"

—A strike supporter

The labor militant who aimed this question at us was surprised, almost shocked, to see a group whom she considers anarchists critical of unions, shoulder-to-shoulder with striking Teamsters and newspaper reporters, squaring off against the cops at a suburban Detroit printing plant late one night last summer.

Actually, we don't "hate" unions at all, certainly not in the manner of the companies which operate the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*, corporate rags that have been trying to smash their labor organizations since the Great Detroit Newspaper Strike began last July 13. What our friend sees as "hate" has been our effort over the last twenty years to create a radical understanding, free of leftist mystique, of the role unions have historically played within the political economy of capital.

But the question she asked us is an important one, and in many ways expresses the contradictions and ambivalence we often feel when we transfer our theories to daily life experiences. If unions are nothing more than the institutional way capital purchases labor, why were we out there on Mound Road facing off 250 cops from 20 different suburban forces that balmy September night?

The cops were suiting up with shields, helmets, three-foot riot staves, and gas masks. Our main defenses were bandannas over our faces to ward off the pepper spray and some flimsy sticks from our picket signs. The cops were preparing to force approximately 750 strikers and supporters away from a blockade of the printing plant gate which company trucks had to pass through to distribute the Sunday paper produced with scab and replacement workers.

Initially, we had no reason to think this would be little other than a ritual strike, followed by negotiations and a return to work. Many of us were drawn to the side of the strikers by their refusal to knuckle under to the humiliation the company intended for them, and by our friendship with several members of the Newspaper Guild, the association of reporters.

The unions had made enormous concessions in previous contracts and the workers hadn't had a raise in six years. Although the papers made a handsome profit in 1994, they forced the strike at a point when the unions were neither anxious nor prepared for a strike. Besides the reporters, five other locals of Teamsters, Pressmen, and Lithographers walked out.

1,200-Man Corporate Militia

Unlike past work stoppages, the papers decided to print a joint issue during the strike and immediately hired several thousand replacement workers recruited from around the country. They also brought in a heavily armed 1,200-man corporate militia from the Vance Corporation, whose specialty is strike breaking and picket line violence.

It soon became abundantly clear the intent of the management was not the negotiation of a new contract, but the elimination of its unions.

The unions were determined to stop the circulation of the paper by calling for a subscription boycott, to which up to 300,000 people responded, and to stop the papers from leaving the main printing plant or local distribution centers. Confrontations at the *News*' Sterling Heights, Mich. printing plant and distribution centers were extremely intense in August through October, with often up to 1,000 workers battling the cops, sometimes resulting in victories for the strikers. Even in the face of numerous arrests and vicious police attacks, the picket lines often held until late hours of the night, forcing company trucks to leave the plant 12 hours behind schedule.

After years of being pushed around at demonstrations, to watch 40 cops in full riot gear charge a blockade of determined pickets and be repulsed after a brief, but furious battle, was extremely heartening. That night, the police knew they needed a 200-man reinforcement to do the job since the strikers were not prepared to give an inch.

As soon as the strike began, it quickly took on a quality no one had expected, least of all the major belligerents. The papers expected resistance but nothing like what they encountered. Numerous local and international unions offered support in what soon became a city-wide effort unseen since the heyday of Detroit unionism in the 1930s. By December, the strikers were publishing a 325,000 circulation Sunday paper of their own. Solidarity and aid was sent from locals across the country. The feeling in the labor movement is that if unions can be defeated in Detroit, they can be defeated anywhere.

Although the union bureaucrats have a tight lock on overall strategy, rank-and-file self-organization has been an exceptional feature of the strike, particularly in highly coordinated late night attacks against newspaper distribution centers where tens of thousands of dollars in damages were inflicted by trashing offices and dozens of cars belonging to scabs and the company.

Also, an incredible camaraderie has developed among middle-class reporters who remain on strike (50 percent have returned to work) and the more working class, industrial staff (very few who have crossed the picket line). Benefits, parties, fund-raisers and other gatherings have become the sites of not only friendship and solidarity, but also of an increasingly radicalized view of the world of corporations, workers and cops.

The down side of the strike has been the increasing toll, financial and psychological, exacted from the strikers and their families as the dispute rolls through its seventh month. Time is on the side of management. More and more reporters have left town for other jobs. and the industrial workers face the necessity of finding other work as well.

Capital's Affirmation

Radicals have always faced the question of whether it is possible to struggle within capital without actually affirming and extending by going no further than demanding piecemeal reforms? In the case of unions, John and Paula Zerzan pointed out in these pages two decades ago that rather than a triumph of some sort, the establishment of the first labor organizations marked a crushing defeat for humanity. Unions arose only after the early 19th century machine-breaking Luddite movement had been subdued by the English army and legal system.

When the representatives of early workers' organizations accepted the duality of labor and capital, and formally agreed to bargain over the selling price of the commodity of human labor, they acquiesced in enshrining capital as a permanent and dominant institution.

From the first, unions became junior partners in the racket of capital, accepting the new economic system's definitions and rules as their own. This was, and is, particularly true in the area of labor discipline where unions act as the first line of defense against independent or radical thrusts within the working class.

When radical labor formations, like the IWW, violated the standards for conduct, they were quickly snuffed out by a combination of government repression and vigilante action, usually without a word of protest from the official labor movement (or, as in the case of the McCarthy era, with direct participation from the union bosses). Radical historians note that any militant labor struggle which went beyond the capital/labor compact found itself not only being confronted by the state and management, but the union hierarchy as well. [1]

But even conservative unions had to provide something tangible for their members or they would have been immediately discarded. Their major function has been to raise the average selling price of labor artificially—meaning if the price of labor were left to fall to its “fair market value,” U.S. and European wage workers would be looking at pay scales similar to those of Mexico or Sri Lanka.

Capitalism is the only economic system humans have created in which a good crop is a curse. If you have an abundant harvest of potatoes, the price falls. The same is true with the sale of human labor. If there is a lot of it, and there is, the price plummets in a manner no different than if it were rutabagas for sale.

Within a strict, radical critique of capital, the struggle over hours, working conditions and wages is viewed as simply which sector of the system gains what portion of the wealth produced. But to those functioning within capitalism as wage workers (most of us), these questions often determine the misery quotient of our lives.

The current round of attacks on unions is part of a world-wide effort by capital to enforce austerity measures which began with workers and the poor, but has now extended to the middle-class as well. Seeing little resistance, corporations are emboldened to increase the rate of work and reduce the rate of pay, all of which means more profits for their stockholders.

Also, the tasks unions once fulfilled for capital have ceased to be as important in an era when revolutionary resistance to capital as a system has diminished to almost nothing. Now, work itself is the disciplinarian, and the globalization of capital has meant a similar process for labor, so increasingly the U.S. labor market is in direct competition with that of Sri Lanka or Mexico.

Struggles for better wages, hours and working conditions historically did extend and affirm capital to the point where most workers and their labor organizations became zealous defenders of the system which had offered them a handsome price for their labor. However, employers often resist even modest reforms until there has been a recognition on their part that their ability to rule in traditional ways is being threatened.

During the 1930s, police, the National Guard, private security forces and vigilantes killed 300 workers involved in union organizing and recognition battles. But capital works by the carrot as well as the stick.

By the Depression era, the progressive sector of the ruling class, led by President Franklin Roosevelt, was acknowledging the need to contain the increasing revolutionary tendencies among labor as seen in the Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Toledo general strikes. A 1935 National Recovery Administration report stated, “Unless something is done soon, they (the workers) intend to take things into their own hands.” The “something” was unions. Labor organizing was quickly sanctioned by law and unions were established throughout the country by the end of the decade.

Dutifully Off To War

Despite the best intentions of rank-and-file militants, this period, with its admirable sit-down strikes, romanticized by the left as a Golden Age of labor militancy, was, in fact, a period of recuperation. The decade began with general strikes, but ended with workers marching dutifully off to the second inter-imperialist world war. Although fascism was an authentic threat, workers’ interests in every country were submerged beneath those of the ruling class. While workers were sent off to die, world Capitalism emerged from the financial doldrums of the ‘30s significantly strengthened through the creation of enormous, permanent war economies. On the home front, this process was assisted by cooperative trade union discipline which enforced No Strike pledges on their workers during the war. [2]

Leftists term union activity as class struggle. They assert inter-class conflict is not only how the proletariat combats being looted by capitalists of the wealth workers create, but is also a central feature of revolutionary activity. Marxists view class struggle in a tight little schema as the motor force of humanity’s historical stage driving toward the emergence of communism.

However, Jean Baudrillard, in *The Mirror of Production*, stood the Marxist theorem on its head, postulating that rather than the process of revolution being advanced by class struggle, capitalism innovates its forms of domination and rationalizes newer modes of production through class conflict. Activity in which working class battles are fought on capital’s terrain for wages, etc., stays within the political economy of the system it opposes.

Jacques Camatte characterized class struggle as “gangs within capital” fighting over pieces of a fragmented world rather than leaving the one capital has created. [3]

To be sure, class struggle has led to a more equitable distribution of capitalist wealth than if the process had been left to the tender mercies of the ruling classes who intended to share almost nothing.

Radical Desire

The revolutionary project with which we identify does not strive to share the loot industrial capital produces. Rather, it seeks to eliminate swag, created by the destruction of humans and nature, as the basis of societies. Radical desire does not want a “fairer” share of capitalist wealth to go to labor: it wants to leave all of this system and establish a new world, not reform the current one.

The socialist project, on the other hand, has no intention of eliminating, what P.M. calls in his book, Bolo'bolo, the “Planetary Work Machine,” which necessitates labor as life’s central feature and the maintenance of an immense, centrally administered, world-wide production/distribution grid regardless of what “class is in power.”

But this all said, how do we respond to attacks from capitalism’s greedy, rapacious elite? A war in the Persian Gulf, an incinerator in our neighborhood, the cutting of an old growth forest, or assaults on our standard of living demand a response. Such struggles may be reformist, but is the only option to wait for the final revolutionary conflagration?

Beyond a critical analysis of what constitutes revolutionary activity or reform, there rises in the human consciousness a sense of anger and refusal that in normal times is suppressed beneath the exterior of the model citizen. Often an individual or a group reaches the point where they refuse to be pushed around any longer, or sit idly by while humans or the wild world are being exterminated.

For many of the Detroit newspaper strikers, their fight against the corporations fits most readily into this category. The reporters who realized they had nothing financially to gain from the strike have gone back to work. The remainder are participating in a self-created culture of resistance where many readily admit they like life on strike better than life at work.

You hear repeated comments about how the strike is the most important thing that’s ever happened to them, how it’s “transformed” them, how “life is now an adventure,” (almost echoing the situationist slogan), and how bad daily life at work was prior to the strike. This from middle-class professionals who, for the most part, had never been on a picket line before last July and who conceived of themselves as lone actors within a profession.

The industrial newspaper workers had long considered themselves middle-class, often politically conservative, patriotic, suburban Americans, but now many express the same sentiments one hears from the reporters.

Since the strike, men and women, young, middle-aged, and elderly, have fought battles with the cops, tracked down and harassed scabs, replacement workers and management, participated in endless all-night vigils and blockades to stop distribution of the papers, and developed a network of friends and comrades any social movement could envy.

The problem is that the strikers have nowhere to go except back to work. The union chiefs still echo the refrain, “All we want to do is go back to work and produce a quality paper,” but this is ringing more hollow as time progresses.

I wonder how many strikers would now agree that the papers they produced were a “quality product.” To us, they were always 60 percent ads and 40 percent lies. Like all corporate media, they usually are on the wrong side of every social question, support every war, lie about every protest movement, and apologize for every monstrous act this system commits.

“Disavow Any Physical Violence”

The union chiefs are depending on subscription and ad boycotts and their alternate paper to break the corporate will. The company owners have already taken a \$200 million loss, so it's an open question as to how much more money they are willing to lose in order to defeat the strikers

The AFL-CIO, Teamster, and Newspaper Union bureaucrats are horrified at agitation among some rank-and-file and middle-level union officials for a one-day general strike, a national labor mobilization in Detroit. breaking a court injunction by mass picketing at the newspaper's central printing plant, and roving pickets to block distribution.

The union chiefs cut the ground out from under these proposals in mid-January by issuing a statement that they “emphatically disavow any and all physical violence, property destruction, criminal activity and physical blocking of ingress and egress.” This declaration, which sounds as if it was issued from the company newspaper front office, makes the type of activity that galvanized initial widespread support more difficult.

Nevertheless, I think this is an important strike to win and that some resources of the radical community should be mobilized in its support. I say “some” since it is equally, and perhaps more important, that our small, tenuous, anti-authoritarian, projects be maintained and extended.

As I write in early February amidst bone-chilling winter cold, the resolve of the strikers seems unshakable. Their goal appears to be less and less concerned with the formal demands of the strike and more with not being defeated by the corporations.

Maybe we should, as *Extraphile* magazine suggests, cheer the collapse of unions as a way of clearing the decks for more radical forms to emerge. To me, that only sounds good on paper. Is fighting battles “on capital's terrain” always a retreat, an acquiescence to the call of asking the rulers to “not kill everything so fast?” Here's where the ambivalence lies. Given the current meagerness of radical alternatives to capital and the deepening levels of misery, almost any resistance to the ruling order these days is encouraging. If we don't start here, where is the place?

That September night in Sterling Heights, Mich. ended differently than one would have anticipated. The 250 cops were just about to charge when, like in the old labor song which goes, “Hold the fort for we are coming,” an additional 2,000 unionists and supporters came marching down Mound Road to make our blockade impenetrable. The cops were ordered to take off their riot gear and surrender the field to the strikers.

At that point, a tremendous cheer of joy and celebration rose from the crowd. I'm glad I was there.

For Further Reading

See: G. Munis, *Unions Against Revolution*, \$1.50;
Jacques Camatte, *The Wandering of Humanity*, \$2;
Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, \$12;
P.M., *Bolo 'bolo*, \$8;
Eat the Rich Gang, *Wildcat*, \$2.
Ordering information on page 26.

Endnotes

1. It should be noted that in numerous countries, union activity refused the rules of capitalist activity and entered into a contestation based on the revolutionary dispossession of the bourgeoisie. The repression of the IWW in this country or the civil war fought by the anarcho-sindicalist CNT in Spain are examples of ruling class reaction to such effrontery.

2. Judith Allen, writing in *Internationalism*, #3 in 1975, said, “Among the tasks the CIO [the national union federation] 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 world war."

However, workers at home often resisted the sacrifices demanded of them on the job. See *Wartime Strikes* by Marty Glaberman.

3. Camatte's most serious indictment of the reactionary nature of the concept of class struggle comes in his observation that its main function in the 20th century has been to install the capitalist mode of production in areas of the world where Marx and Engels never dreamed it would exist, i.e., China, North Korea, etc.

"The feudal system, which preceded capitalism, had imbedded in its class structure a series of mutual obligations for ruled and rulers. By the time that system of lords and peasants became moribund, those requirements for the wealthy had all but become ignored. When a radical merchant class emerged during the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the gulf between rich and poor, rulers and ruled was enormous. In their triumphal form at the dawn of an era, the new capitalists planned to keep it that way.

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