

It's Anarchy Time!

Is it our turn now? Anarchism flourishes when work is precarious; & that's now!

Jim Feast

I begin with two insights. Global systems theorist, Immanuel Wallerstein, argues that throughout capitalist history the working class has been divided into a proletariat, which makes a living solely through waged labor, and a semi-proletariat which in its contemporary incarnation, juggles such pursuits as temp work, freelance projects, state subsidies (food stamps, artists in residence grants, or student loans), and maxing out on credit cards.

Note that in distinction from the ideas of recent thinkers on precarious (semi-proletarian) labor, who mark its emergence as a recent highlight of transnational capital, Wallerstein holds that the existence of the semi-proletarian (as against proletarians) has been part of capitalism from the beginning and integral to its development. The system rests economically on a global dual labor market and ideologically plays these worker groups off against each other.

The second insight comes from labor studies historian, Stanley Aronowitz, who in *How Class Works*, remarks that classes only fully exist when they are active, whether struggling for autonomy or changing their structure.

He argues, for example, the emerging European bourgeoisie only displayed its potential when it combated the aristocracy for class hegemony. An equally important moment appears when the working class reforms its internal structure. Indeed, this shift is so significant it yields a way to periodicize U.S. history into, 1) times in which large numbers of the semi-proletarian are becoming proletarians (1930s-1960s) and, 2) times when the proletarians are being semi-proletarianized (now).

To shift gears a moment, remember how in explaining a Bakuninist-inspired uprising in Italy in 1877, Engels makes a pertinent remark (one echoed by Marx in other places) to this effect: "The proletarian strata in these towns [where the outbreak occurred] are not very numerous, still less advanced, and in addition comprise a strong admixture of people who have no regular or steady jobs," i.e., they were semi-proletarians.

If we keep Engels' identification of semi-proletarians with anarchy but abandon his teleology—according to him, these workers are not yet "advanced" enough to be proletarians—then we can surmise that American history can be divided into Marxist (proletarianizing) and anarchist (semi-proletarianizing) ages, dependent on which philosophy's organizational and cultural practices offer the most viable means for taking down the system.

In the 1930s, a Marxist period, when workers in the auto, rubber and other industries were entering unions and more structured circumstances, what was most productive for them was to have a supplementary bureaucracy to represent them in negotiating for parity and to have Popular Front politics that could enroll the petit bourgeoisie and the workers in the same camp; a tenable strategy in that both shared a consumerist, anti-fascist outlook.

When it came to confrontational forms—and this was the most radical edge apparent in the shift—the tactic of choice was the sit-down strike, by which means factories were occupied until demands were met. Of course, this tactic is only viable when labor is organized in mammoth complexes, such as the Ford River Rouge plant near Detroit.

At the moment, none of this material about the '30s is as pressing as a look at what politics and culturally resistant activities are powerfully contestatory in an anarchist phase of history such as ours. In order to study such practices

in a fully fleshed-out form (before getting to the present), it would be useful to look at another period of massive semi-proletarianization, the pre-World War I 1900s when the most creative, dynamic union (the IWW—Industrial Workers of the World) was anarchist and when it, sometimes in association with Greenwich Village bohemians, forged astonishing forms of dissident culture.

Here is the core, two-pronged problem the IWW faced: Those they wanted to organize were hard-to-pin-down migratory laborers who shifted with the seasons to harvest, cut timber, build new towns and do other forms of pick-up work and because of the union's distrust of formal procedures and bureaucratic hierarchies, members wanted to conduct their organizing with an ad-hoc, shifting, rotating leadership that was recrafted in line with each emergent situation.

They set an impossible task, perhaps, but one that as much as and as long as it was accomplished would be devastatingly effective.

Take the free speech fights in the early part of the last century. A Wobbly soapboxer would be thrown in jail in a small town for rabble rousing. Suddenly, fellow IWW militants would pour in with their own portable soapboxes to be arrested in turn. They flooded courts and jails till the system was collapsing from the strain and, usually, the town's ban on incendiary speech was rescinded. Only because the Wobblies were so footloose and unshackled by a rigid organization could they mobilize so quickly and massively. And, such a capacity was also useful in more straightforward labor/management disputes.

Take the textile mills strikes on the East Coast during the same period, in which the unorganized workers walked out when they could no longer tolerate brutal conditions, and then reached out to the IWW because no "legitimate" union would help them. They were unskilled and made up of a welter of different, and usually warring, nationalities. The IWW, because it could turn on a dime and was unhobbled by bureaucracy, quickly assembled organizers from every nationality on strike.

In the Lawrence, Mass. strike, they accomplished the near-impossible, by assessing the strengths of each ethnic group and adroitly matching their capability to the demands of prosecuting the labor action successfully.

One might ask: Given the anarchist union was so lacking in stability, how did it manage to hold together for so long, an ever-shifting coalition of activists that would energize a rootless, adrift semi-proletariat?

First off, note that IWW militants were "walking delegates," as peripatetic as those they recruited, with whom they "rode the rods," supped in hobo jungles and bunked down in migrant labor camps. At the campfires they would preach, "One Big Union," while, on entering an occupied boxcar, they would flash their red union card, which identified them and usually meant they were heartily accepted by one and all.

These delegates promulgated and shared a Wobbly culture. Mark this. They did not rely on a separate ethnic culture, as previous immigrant leftists, such as the Chicago German anarchists, did, nor even, in the way of the Knights of Labor, did they create a homegrown alternative lifestyle.

Rather, they reacted to the then emergent mass culture of Tin Pan Alley and early cinema, by inventing a para-mass culture. Their *Little Red Song Book* was filled with pieces that borrowed the tunes and parodied the lyrics of religious and pop songs, doing double duty by both setting out the IWW message and lampooning the posturing of religious and capitalist ideologies.

These lyrics were constantly on their lips. Melvin Dubofsky, who chronicled IWW history, describes a campaign in the West, "These Westerners sang their way across Montana, eating in the 'jungles,' preaching revolution in the prairie towns they besieged, and singing constantly."

Along with this ongoing chorus, particular circumstances allowed for another cultural tactic. They would turn the most detested (by the capitalist class) weapon of the workers, the strike, into sentimental and populist images. Case in point one: In the 1912 Lawrence, textile workers' dispute, the IWW organized children of the strikers to be brought out of the city, in a photogenic way, to foster homes until the trouble was settled. According to Dubofsky, "Not only did the removal of the children ease the relief problem in Lawrence, it also gained the most remarkable [and favorable] national publicity."

Case two. To support the Paterson, N.J., strike, left journalist John Reed and Mabel Dodge, a liberal heiress, presented a vast pageant at Madison Square Garden in which the actual workers sang and acted out the story of their strike. While empowering the laborers to present their own narrative and informing the audience of all the par-

ticulars, the event, as Dubofsky mentions, had the side benefit of making “the IWW the link between New York’s radical ‘new’ intellectuals and the ‘new’ working-class revolutionaries.”

It stands to reason that because we are currently in the midst of another anarchist age, characterized by semi-proletarian labor, and because the IWW’s practices were so carefully oriented toward the development of a revolutionary thrust, we will find that analogous practices are (or should be) used by today’s activists.

For a first parallel, let’s look first at AIDS militants in the early 1980s. Recall that, as writer Cindy Patton has emphasized, Reagan’s deplorable refusal to recognize the original AIDS outbreak, provided an opening for the emergence of ASOs (AIDS support organizations) which mobilized activists (“walking delegates”) to talk up safe sex practices in bars and discos frequented by less politicized homosexuals. Moreover, they gave out health awareness information with a progressive slant.

Patton writes, “Safe sex was viewed by the early AIDS activists, not merely as a practice to be imposed on the reluctant, but as a form of political resistance and community building.” Comparable to methods seen in the IWW’s free speech actions was ACT-UP’s use of “zapping.” Wherever and whenever a backward politician or health official was speaking, dressed-to-blend-in militants would pop up, embarrassing the authority with questions that underscored the speaker’s ignorance or indifference to the health crisis.

It is no secret that the 1999 disruptions in Seattle, the squat fights in New York City, and anti-police brutality organizing, to name a few instances, are the products of multi-issue networks that have worked together while blending different progressive perspectives in a way not seen since the IWW-shaped textile strikes. This resembles the way the hip-hop culture of graffiti, rap and break-dancing first grew from integrated efforts of Black and Hispanic youth in the South Bronx.

Rap music, like the ASOs, was eventually co-opted and integrated into the corporate state system, but early on it exhibited (through scratching, sampling and talking over pop records) the same type of renegade para-mass cultural stance seen in the Little Red Book. The creators of rap contested, parodied and internally critiqued the pop music they both homaged and savaged.

Another instance of this targeted detournment of standard musical material is provided by Jean Leason in the last issue of this journal (FE #374, Winter, 2007), where she describes the way players in activist marching bands usually got their training in high school military bands, whose workings they now subvert, whereby “lockstep becomes dance.”

Perhaps the only feature of the previous anarchist age that the present U.S. movement has not displayed is the staging of a cultural spectacular, allowing workers or activists involved in a particular anti-authoritarian conflict to tell their own story in a luminous presentation. Perhaps because (with many notable exceptions) today’s artistic avant garde is more co-opted and divorced from street life than it was in the early 1900s, or because we are under-resourced, this theatricalization of class conflict has not occurred.

That certainly is on the agenda as is the resurrection of practices that have been forgotten or co-opted for, to all lookouts, the time is now to get these contestatory methods up and running to create a vibrant, democratic replacement for the sick politics and culture of capitalism.

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