
Mouvement Communiste Letter

Number eleven

October 2003

UNIONS AND POLITICAL STRUGGLE

This text does not intend to be a history of trade unionism, nor of the various unionist tendencies. It simply constitutes a restatement of communist positions on the subject.

TWO OPPOSED CONCEPTIONS, ONE PERMANENT FIGHT

Communists no longer expect anything from unions, and this has been the case for a long time. But confining oneself to saying that they are an active brake on struggles is not always correct or sufficient. Two radically different conceptions oppose each other when it comes to the so-called union question.

The first one, ours, holds that the unions, under certain circumstances, are capable of taking the initiative and organising the defence of certain material interests of the exploited (Cf. in November/December 1995 in France, during the mobilisation against the first reform of pensions), because, in their relations with other components of the state, they need to demonstrate their utility in containing the working class. But, including in these cases, the unions do not propagate any less the false idea which sees the emancipation of the oppressed as being possible within the framework of capitalist democracy. The unions thus work for the extension to the so-called social domain of classic bourgeois political democracy. The possibility of this extension of the domain of application of capitalist democracy into work places depends in its turn on the historic growth of the social productivity of labour, and therefore on the total value generated by the collective labourer.

The second conception of the union question, very widespread in proletarian political circles, is the idea that if the union tool as it exists is only slightly, or not at all, capable of expressing workers' demands, it remains, in itself, an organ useful for the exploited class and for the communist transformation of society. This conception, when it is fully developed, traditionally borders on the approaches of revolutionary syndicalism and Bolshevism.

In the course of the movement of October 1993 at Air France, a handful of employees of this airline company wrote very forcefully in one of their leaflets:

"To put pressure on the unions is still to recognise in them a utility which they don't have, even for negotiations. We can never repeat often enough: that they [negotiations] should take place openly and publicly, that discussions should be broadcast directly, without manipulation. We have also left to the unions the monopoly of calling together general assemblies (AG) for some initiatives. We don't need them to call AGs and to think about the direction of the struggle and consequently we don't need them to give us the means."

By these few phrases written in the heat of battle, they showed that they were aware of everything that is at stake in the union question as it is posed in the epoch of the domination of capital over the world market. In effect, since the integration of the unions into the state, their relation to the revolutionary class can only be antagonistic. The radical enmity between revolution and capital from then on involves the destruction of the integrated union organs by going beyond the class experiences of trade unionism. The constitution of the proletariat as an independent subject, and therefore the appearance of its adequate political expression, is from now on at that price.

THE COMMODITY LABOUR POWER AT THE HEART OF THE UNION QUESTION

The reproduction of the exploited class, of the commodity of which it is the exclusive bearer – the ability to do the work which creates new value – is at the origin of the union question. A century and a half ago, Karl Marx wrote:

“The value of labourpower constitutes the conscious and explicit foundation of the trade unions, whose importance for the English working class can scarcely be overestimated. The trade unions aim at nothing less than to prevent the reduction of wages below the level that is traditionally maintained in the various branches of industry. That is to say, they wish to prevent the price of labour power from falling below its value. They are aware, of course, that if there is a change in the relations of supply and demand, this results in a change in the market price. But on the one hand this change is a very different thing from the onesided claim of the buyer, in this case the capitalists, that such a change has taken place. And on the other hand, there is ‘a great distinction between the level of wages as determined by supply and demand, i.e. by the level produced by the fair operation of exchange that exists when buyer and seller negotiate on equal terms, and the level of wages which the seller, the labourer, must put up with when the capitalist negotiates with each man singly, and dictates a reduction by exploiting the chance need of individual workers (which exists independently of the general relations of supply and demand).”

The workers combine in order to achieve equality of a sort with the capitalist in their contract concerning the sale of their labour. This is the rationale (and logical basis) of the trade unions. What they purpose is that ‘the accidental immediate neediness of a labourer should not compel him to make do with a smaller wage than supply and demand has already established in a particular branch of labour’ and thus depress the value of labourpower in a particular area below its customary level. The value of labourpower is ‘regarded by the workers themselves as the minimum wage and by the capitalist as the uniform rate of wages for all workers in the same trade’. For this reason the unions never allow their members to work for less than this minimum.

They are insurance societies formed by the workers themselves. An example may explain the purpose of these combinations formed by the workers for the protection of the value of their labourpower. In all branches of trade in London there are so-called ‘sweaters’. A sweater is someone who undertakes to deliver a certain quantity of work at normal prices to an entrepreneur, but who then has it carried out for a lower price by others. The difference, which goes to make up his profit, is sweated out of the workers who actually perform the labour and represents nothing but the difference between the value of the labourpower that is paid by the first entrepreneur and the price which is equivalent to less than the value of that labourpower and which is paid by the sweater to the actual workers.”
(Karl Marx, An unpublished chapter of *Capital*)

The commodity labour power therefore possesses two specific properties:

1. On the one hand, it is the only commodity having the faculty, in certain objective conditions of production, of expanding wealth in the form of capital. This is a fact generally known and accepted.
2. On the other hand, it is the only commodity which is systematically sold below its value. The value added does not serve to remunerate labour power as such but only to buy the things necessary for its reproduction. It is considered by the capitalists as an objective resource of production, an innate use value, in the same way as the earth is.

Even on this level, that of the mercantile exchange of equivalents, labour power is not situated at all on the same plane as other commodities. This is no mere detail.

It is, on the contrary, the profound reason for the workers having an interest in organisations which, despite their political compromises with the dominant classes and their

integration into the state, try to make this selling relation more equitable, more balanced. Trade unionism, like any other cartel of commodity sellers, would have no reason for being if the permanent reality of unequal exchange between capital and labour didn't exist. This fact also points to the limits of the trade union enterprise as such. In effect, as the collective seller of the commodity labour power, if the proletariat organised in association pursues the aim of revaluing the market price of its commodity, it establishes by the same means that the value which is obtained through this intervention represents its impassable limit. It is thus forced to reassess its economic demands by the only means of struggle which remain accessible to it, that of political independence, that of incompatibility with the valorisation of capital. In a word, it must go beyond the commodity form of its labour power and thus overturn the dictatorship of value. Its struggle then becomes political, without necessarily losing its economic anchorage, dimension and demands. Besides, in certain circumstances (like that of crisis), the latter can only succeed by the political overthrow of the capitalist relations of production.

This social dynamic of the Economic, which, sooner or later, is destined to express itself by the Political, has been well understood by the class enemy. Historically, the latter has itself opened the way to the integration of the workers' movement into the state. Once nationalised, worker's selfhelp was developed by the state as *social protection* and extended to the whole of civil society. This was possible because it rested on the extraordinary accumulation of capital in the epoch of large scale mechanised industry. The formidable development of the productivity of labour had the result that, during the long periods of economic growth, the real wages (direct and indirect) of the workers grew while the relative wage (i.e. relative to the surplus value produced) diminished.

With this new historic phase, workers' political reformism, from now on deprived of its independent material base (the countersociety of cooperatives, workers' clubs, unions, recreational and sporting organisations) found itself torn between capital and revolution. The majority accepted submission to the state in exchange for the comanagement of parts of the wage (for example, the indirect wage). A minority hitched themselves for a brief moment to the wagon of proletarian revolution before returning to the fold of triumphant social democracy.

A QUESTION WHOSE PARAMETERS HAVE CHANGED PROFOUNDLY

The unions are not a Machiavellian creation of the bosses. They were formed straightaway in the first battles of the class and aimed at the establishment of less severe conditions of exploitation by uniting the greatest possible numbers (workers, artisans and poor peasants in the great majority of cases). Despite their primordial characteristic of being eminently defensive organs, from their beginnings the socialist selfhelp coalitions broke with confessional unionism (essentially Christian in Europe) on the terrain of the **POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DEFENSIVE STRUGGLES OF THE CLASS**. This is today, as always (and, maybe, more than ever) at the centre of the preoccupations of revolutionaries.

Friedrich Engels, in a letter to August Bebel in March 1875, recalled that the union is "*an organisation of the proletariat as a class within which it conducts its day to day struggle against capital and serves its apprenticeship for the supreme struggle*". The political struggle is seen as the natural outcome of the defensive everyday struggle. In a letter to F. Bolte on 23 November 1871, Karl Marx precisely defined the characteristics of an autonomous political struggle of the working class in the conditions of his time.

"To become political, a movement must oppose to the dominant classes the workers acting as a class to make them concede by means of external pressure. Thus, the agitation is purely economic while the workers try, by means of strikes etc., in a single factory or even in a single branch of industry, to obtain from the private capitalists a reduction of working time; on the other hand, it is political when they forcefully obtain a law fixing the working day at

eight hours etc. It is in this way that, from all the isolated economic movements, there develops everywhere a political movement, in other words a class movement with the aim of realising its interests under a general form which has the force of constraint for the whole of society”

In 1912, Lenin in his turn stated that, in the particular circumstances of the independent political struggle, “*the proletariat not only plays the role of one of the classes of bourgeois society, but even that of the dominant force, that is to say of the leader, the guide and the avantgarde*”. Prefiguration, if ever it was, of the period of transition, the proletarian political struggle lays the foundations of the dictatorship of the oppressed classes over the previously dominant classes. No mention is made here of the form of the process of supersession of capitalism, it could just as well be fulfilled by reforms able to dismantle the edifice of production relations and the state piece by piece as by a revolutionary rupture of the insurrectionary type. And this is not by chance. Up until the outbreak of the first world imperialist conflict socialism kept two irons in the fire. The socialist movement, although then divided into reformist and revolutionary currents, had not yet been confronted with the complete and lasting integration of one of its parties into the state. This is why the first fracture to cross the organised body of the proletariat from end to end was not focussed on reforms or revolution but rather on the political development of defensive battles. In a book devoted to the origins of the Italian workers’ movement, the historian Gastone Manacorda set out the contours of the problem in 1963.

“The history of workers’ organisation is a political history, the history of the political struggle which occurred around the appearance of a new class in the life of the country. On one side this struggle presented itself as a battle between preexisting political currents with the aim of asserting their predominance over the workers: whether by excluding workers’ associations from politics (the moderates) or by trying to make them the base of a democratic party (the Mazzinians, then the Radicals). On the other, there appeared the difficult affirmation of the political autonomy of the workers’ movement, which tears itself away from submission to the bourgeois parties.” (Gastone Manacorda, *Il movimento operaio italiano*)

Consequently, there were two kinds of action on the part of the class. To acquire right away the capacity to act in the political sphere, fighting against the fractions within it which devote it to a simple trade union action, and to become, simultaneously, an autonomous political subject for itself. The First International was a unitary organ of the political currents convinced of the necessity for the workers to exist as a political force. There you could find, side by side, anarchists, radical democrats and socialists of all persuasions. You could also find a large part of the organisations of workers’ defence and selfhelp enrolling into this line. But the First International was also the first site of combat for the affirmation of workers’ autonomy, a struggle which very rapidly ended in the schism between socialists and radical democrats, then between socialists et anarchists.

The process of political autonomy of the working class was thus born within the unions in order to leave the deadend street of purely economic struggle. The socialists, reformists and revolutionaries together defended at the same time the necessity for defensive struggles and the requirement for their subordination to the independent political struggle which attempts to go beyond societies divided into classes.

*“Trade Unions: their past, present and future
(a) Their past.*

Capital is concentrated social force, while the workman has only to dispose of his working force. The contract between capital and labour can therefore never be struck on equitable terms, equitable even in the sense of a society which places the ownership of the material means of life and labour on one side and the vital productive energies on the opposite side. The only social power of the workmen is their number. The force of numbers, however is

broken by disunion. The disunion of the workmen is created and perpetuated by their unavoidable competition among themselves.

Trades' Unions originally sprang up from the spontaneous attempts of workmen at removing or at least checking that competition, in order to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. The immediate object of Trades' Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expedients for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalised by the formation and the combination of Trades' Unions throughout all countries. On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades' Unions were forming centres of organisation of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades' Unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as organised agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule.

(b) Their present.

Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements. Of late, however, they seem to awaken to some sense of their great historical mission, as appears, for instance, from their participation, in England, in the recent political movement, from the enlarged views taken of their function in the United States, and from the following resolution passed at the recent great conference of Trades' delegates at Sheffield:

"That this Conference, fully appreciating the efforts made by the International Association to unite in one common bond of brotherhood the working men of all countries, most earnestly recommend to the various societies here represented, the advisability of becoming affiliated to that body, believing that it is essential to the progress and prosperity of the entire working community."

(c) Their future.

Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the nonsociety men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, incapable of organised resistance by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the broad masses of workers that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions."

(Karl Marx, Instructions for the delegates to the central provisional council of the IWA on the various questions to be debated at the Geneva Congress of 38 September 1866)

As always, for communists, a judgement on the opportunity for an organised presence within union formations depends above all on their capacity to inscribe in them the perspective of the autonomous political struggle of the working class. The question of the degree of efficacy in their specific domain of action (the economic struggle) is the wrong approach to take, an apolitical approach, of the syndicalist type, that we categorically refute. Workers' autonomy is not represented by class trade unionism.

"The working classes remain poor amid the increase of wealth, wretched amid the increase of luxury. Their material privation dwarfs their moral as well as their physical stature. They cannot rely on others for a remedy. It has become then with them an imperative necessity to take their own case in hand. They must revive the relations between themselves and the capitalists and landlords, and that means they must transform society. This is the general end of every known workmen's organization; land and labor leagues, trade and

friendly societies, cooperative production are but means toward it.” (Interview with Karl Marx by Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly)

The separation, and then opposition, between defensive struggles and the political movement of the class is the counterrevolutionary idea which the first socialists fought against. This false idea continues under the conditions of mature capitalism. It must be combated with the same vigour as in the past. In '68 and '69, the CUB (Unitary Base Committee) of the Pirelli factory in Milan, Italy, fought the same battle.

“Any demand can be reabsorbed by capital. However, if the perspective of workers' struggle is political, it is possible to refuse subversion without a future and to create moments and places of revolutionary struggle. In the existing situation, we are confronted with a division between the economic moment of the struggle, led by the unions, and the political moment, led by the workers' parties. But it is precisely the union between economic and political struggle which can throw capitalist society into crisis. In effect, the economic struggle is only fertile if it fights against the general plan of the bosses' policy, in the factory and in society (political struggle). More than this, the economic struggle is only fertile when it emerges from the political struggle. Conversely, the political battle cannot be separated, without fading away, from economic struggles. In addition, it is through workers becoming conscious of their own interests and rights in places of work that one can succeed in the general struggle in society, and viceversa. When, as now, the political struggle is confined to the party leaders and the economic struggle to their trade union equivalents, there is a risk that the working class will become a stranger to both processes. Without even mentioning that the leaders will transform themselves into a party and union bureaucracy. The CUB represents an attempt to restore to the working class its role as the subject of the economic struggle just as much as the political one.”

Commenting on the confrontations of 3 July 1969 in Turin (known under the name of Corso Traiano), the assembly of workers and students of that town in the north of Italy, the first autonomous organisation in the country surging from the struggles in the Fiat factories of the previous year, noted that:

“The political richness of the struggle at Fiat, its massive strength, today allows the whole of the Italian working class to enter a phase of general social struggle with objectives, forms, and times of struggle which are no longer fixed on the basis of the demands of the development of capital, of the unions and of the parties but entirely determined by the autonomous organisation of the workers.”

These were considerations and judgements of the utmost importance because they arose from the highest point attained by the last proletarian political cycle in the developed capitalist West.

THE INTEGRATION OF THE UNIONS INTO THE STATE APPARATUS

From the open affirmation of the proletariat as a class in the nineteenth century, a double tendency manifested itself. On one side, the battle for amelioration of its conditions within the framework of capitalism; on the other, the strong aspiration for a society without classes, or more precisely, one where human creative activity would finally be recognised as the motor and centre of society.

To ameliorate its condition, the working class organised itself into unions. That, in the historic context of the nineteenth century, was an expression of the workers. Nevertheless, very rapidly, the capitalists understood their interest in buying social peace by ameliorations to the workers' conditions. But, to put social peace in place, they had to have specialists in negotiation facing them, sharing in the aim of conserving the system. The movement of bureaucratisation and integration into the capitalist state of the old class unions was thus begun. It aimed at the constitution of a legal union apparatus. If, at the beginning of the twentieth century, one could still imagine bringing back to life some of the old unions, despite

the already numerous betrayals of strikes, it was no longer possible after 2 August 1914, the date marking their political passage into the camp of the warmongering bourgeoisie. In France, in Germany and in Great Britain, the trade unionists participated in the industrial planification of the war effort. During the world revolutionary wave of 1917-1927 (from the October Revolution to the Shanghai Commune), in all countries of all political nuances, the social democratic and Stalinist union bureaucracies acted as auxiliaries in the crushing of the revolution.

In the present period marked by the recognition and integration of the unions into the state, since at least the end of the Second World War (and well before in France), it has not been possible to have permanent organs for the defence of workers' interests. If numerous autonomous struggles have aimed at the formation of independent organs, these no longer have any chance of survival in this state. They are presented with a simple alternative. Either to be an autonomous organisation which goes beyond its original limits, at the price of becoming in a minority, that is to place itself essentially on the political plain, or to devote itself to enriching the social democratic institutions of capital by confining itself to the defence of the immediate interests of the workers. In reality there is also a third outcome which, in fact, is the one most often produced: the pure and simple disappearance of the autonomous organisation at the end of a proletarian political cycle, accelerated or not by repression. This is the Italian case of 1968/1978.

We can understand very well then that the question of workers' autonomy cannot in any way be reduced to a banal matter of techniques and forms of organisation. It is not enough to proffer magic slogans of committees, coordinations, Cobas or some other revolutionary union to change the game. Throughout the history of the workers' movement, there have been all kinds of combinations: workers' parties with or without unions, unions more or less politicised with or without a party, councils or militias with or without a party and/or a union. No organisational alchemy has been shown to be a sufficient guarantee of victory. During struggle the class engenders such organs *ad hoc*. The dynamic of the movement, if it is not interrupted, always tends to their unification, to their fusion in the service of the maximal concentration of available forces.

The relationship between defensive struggles and political combat is anything but linear. If it is true that the everyday struggle represents the school of communism, it can become the opposite when capital manages to freeze the price of utilisation of labour power within its limits of haggling. A potential brake on possible revolutionary developments as well as a base for political struggles of the working class, so-called economic struggles remain a subject of reflection of the first order within the communist movement.

Once we have understood the character at once organic and contradictory of the two concrete forms of expression of the proletariat as a class (defensive struggle, preserving it as a class of the society of capital ; political struggle, affirming it as the subject of the radical transformation of the mode and relations of production), we can finally approach the profound nature of the unions. A necessary historic product of the workers' condition, the union defined its *raison d'être* by the negotiation of terms of exchange of the commodity labour power. Its quality was progressively transformed into its fundamental limit when its social and political status was redefined by the dominant classes. They thus became articulations of the state aiming at a certain redivision of part of the global added value. The latter, the wage, serves at the same time the reproduction of the capacity for work of the workers and the monetarisation of the independent pressure of the workers. But the state unions only defend the wage as variable capital, that is to say capital capable of generating value all over again. To put it another way, they only fight for the wage on condition that the wage relation is not called into question and, on the contrary, is reinforced.

It is not unusual for the unions to not defend the wage, even as a subjective condition of production. On the other hand, the unions see themselves as authorised to demand

improvements in the situation of the workers when it is clear that the command of the enterprise and the state isn't going to be called into question. "*Contestation (and even hard struggle) maybe, revolution never*" is their single motto. The state unions defend the worker as a *dependent variable* of the capitalist mode of production, so that he will always remain that. The communists, though concerned about improving the material condition of the working class and its wage, know that the best way to defend it is to attack the foundations of capitalism, the relations of exploitation themselves. The economic struggle only makes sense in the framework of the perspective of proletarian revolution.

For communists material demands are not therefore an end in themselves. They are understood only as an expression of a balance of forces between struggling labour and capital. Outside of struggles communists essentially confine themselves to propaganda for communist ideas. And this is because, in low points in the conflict between classes, the workers do not express themselves as a social class acting for the defence of its own exclusive interests.

When, on the contrary, the workers rise up, revolutionary intervention tends towards the establishment of close and continuous relations with the workers in struggle. If it is not necessary to act as teachers of lessons, as a selfproclaimed vanguard, in the same way and inversely, the use of populist flattery should be avoided at any price. It is once again our task to contribute to the advancement of the movement by proposing to it certain means which we judge indispensable but which it doesn't immediately have, so as to obtain its political independence as quickly as possible.

What we are after is the end of wage labour, while today the best one can obtain is *less work for more money*. The passage from defensive struggle to the beginning of a revolutionary process depends in no way on the satisfaction of a particular demand, but, as Karl Marx would say, on "the everexpanding union of the workers". The satisfaction of workers' demands is always ephemeral, because the concessions made by capital can at any instant be taken back again, exclusively according to its imperatives of valorisation. If the defensive everyday struggles remain the school of communism, on a historical scale, they have to go beyond the narrow horizon of category, of enterprise, of nation, of prices and value.

WORK WITHIN THE UNIONS ?

Can the unions today serve the revolution? In view of their already very long history of integration into states, the response is, flatly, No. They are not appropriate to any use as class organs. For a very long time there has not been any struggle with radical potentialities which has not been led astray, impeded, sabotaged by them, from the lowliest local strike to movements on the scale of May 1968. What's more, periodically and according to the economic necessities of their masters, the unions don't even defend all their prerogatives. You can see them go as far as accepting the withdrawal of the right of staff representation, and the establishment of a consensual regulation of the right to strike.

In a period of social peace, the existence of the unions feeds off the passivity of the workers, with which they contract clientelist electoral relations founded on the proliferation of juridical councils and legal remedies, stimulating passivity and delegation amongst the workers. In France, the unions are better financed by state and company grants than by the subscriptions of their members. To justify these subsidies the union apparatus must demonstrate its capacity for controlling the employees.

Revolutionaries therefore have nothing to do within the state unions, nothing to hope for from them, and above all do not propagate the illusion of their revival.

In the period of developed social democracy and full trade union integration, it is inconceivable that that we can hope for the survival of autonomous organs coming out of struggles. But, after the struggle, not all of the workers will necessarily fall back into individualism and isolation from one day to the next. Minoritarian instruments of the class can still be constituted, but exclusively on the political terrain. The formalisation of a network of

these workers' committees is one of the conditions favouring the formation of a massive and centralised political organisation of the revolutionary proletariat. In this framework, what the communists can and must do is to contribute to the appearance of an independent political consciousness which increases the confidence of the workers themselves. It is a question of showing that proletarians have no need of officials to act, including when countering the minor facts of exploitation.

An alternative to the line of political committees is represented by the constitution of new unions. These attempts are doomed to failure because, in the epoch of social democracy, workers' reformism can no longer constitute itself into a permanent independent structure. The sincere illusion of being able to durably improve the condition of the exploited has no chance of leading to the creation and then the maintenance of class unions. The only outcome left from participation in the democratic game of capital is workers' reformism.

The other articulation of the unionist line is that of entryism into the existing unions. But, can one seriously believe that a handful of worker militants can join a union structure so as to benefit from certain legal advantages still in force today (delegation, facility time ...) without paying, in the end, the heavy price of submission, passive or active, to the bosses and the state? Of course, all the militants who engage in trade union activity – however they understand their reasons for it – are ready to swear with their hands on their hearts that they will be on the right side when working class struggle once again makes the necessary break from the unions the order of the day. But all the same these people must ask themselves the question: What became of the postMay '68 leftists, of all tendencies, who set off on that road? When we speak of the union apparatuses in 2003, it must be understood that they were in large part constituted precisely from elements coming out of May '68 which were later swallowed up by so-called fighting unionism. And yet, some of the currents of the extreme left coming out of May '68 were otherwise far more scathing of the union bureaucracies at the time than the alternative unions are today, the same ones who claim that they will never allow themselves to be turned around.

The necessity for a profound critique of trade unionism must not however end up in an obsessional repetition of endless exhortations to revolution or, even worse, by the denial of any particular demand. The target of critique must not be the search for improvement in the conditions of the exploited, but trade unionism, which separates defensive struggles from the communist political perspective with the aim of incorporating them into the many operations of capital's social democracy.

Trade unionism makes the economic struggle into a choice, a horizon wished for and conceived as impassable, sufficient in itself. It is that which must be attacked. Trade unionism is one of the most pernicious ideologies for the revolutionary perspective.

WHICH CRITIQUE OF THE UNIONS?

Let's return to the terms of the union question as it was posed at the start of the twentieth century. Lenin, in his work *What is to be done?* (1902), took up an erroneous thesis largely inspired by the social democracy of the Second International. On the one hand Lenin denies that revolutionary consciousness can emerge from the daytoday struggle against exploitation. "*Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers*", he wrote. On the other hand, he stated that any defensive struggle can only generate a political consciousness of the reformist, trade unionist type. While recognising that "*the 'spontaneous element', in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form*", Lenin inscribed an abrupt break between spontaneity and revolution when he stated that proletarian movements which are not led by communists – the exclusive bearers of revolutionary consciousness – will only produce workers' reformism. "*The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by*

its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.”

If you pursue this line of thinking you arrive, more or less, at the following result: only a reformist and not revolutionary political expression can come out of the strict collective defence of the material interests of proletarians. The revolution will thus arise from Politics in its most abstract sense, that is to say from outside the relations of production. *Consciousness* can therefore only emerge from the study of Marxism, sheltered from the relations of production. Where is the “*communism which surges spontaneously from the subsoil of society*”, according to the expression of Karl Marx? What about the defensive struggle as a *school of communism*, whose most important result is *the everexpanding union of the workers*?

With Lenin and Bordiga, workers’ reformism is credited with an objective superiority over the revolution because the former is continually reproduced within the very relations of capitalist production themselves. In some ways, reformism has no need of involvement in institutional Politics. It can remain on the trade union terrain without being in any way diminished. Politics, like in the *belle époque* of the British unions, can be reduced to a simple parliamentary appendage, certainly useful but with the exclusive function of obtaining a legal framework for contractual relations between labour and capital.

With Marx, the question of the connection between the bases of workers’ reformism and the revolution is posed in a far more complex fashion and appears in his writings in various facets. The critique of political economy (and of the British unions, we might add) aims amongst other things to “*destroy the separation, to show how an apparently pure economic form and power, that is to say politics, are connected*”.

Marx provided the categories which allow us to understand the link between economic and political struggle. In the first place, according to him, the reproduction of capitalist society resides in the act of productive consumption of labour power, that is to say within the factory, while the capitalist sets in motion and uses the creative power of the collective worker in the labour process (process of immediate production). If this is the case, it is erroneous to look for the foundation of consciousness elsewhere than in the workshops of social production, i.e. elsewhere than in the daily struggles against the machine, the factory authorities, the organisation of concrete work. Secondly, he insisted, in the domain of circulation, of the struggle in the labour market to assure a better treatment, the mystification of the commodity and the law of exchange of equivalents acts openly.

It’s the objective place for a fight limited to the terrain of getting a higher wage. It’s also where we find the material conditions for workers’ reformism. The defensive struggle can in effect be limited to that and remain on the surface of the capitalist relations of production, contesting only the terms of exchange between commodities. In this case, the practical critique by the workers of their own condition is only concerned with labour power as exchange value and only touches very marginally on its nature as a particular use value capable of creating new value. In this context, its most adequate expression is reformist trade unionism. This is the scenario described by Lenin. Inversely, when the collective worker reacts massively, not only against the particular conditions of the hiring of its labour power by the boss, but also against the use of its productive power in the labour process, there, by radicalising its combat, by always pointing more towards the specific characteristics of its exploitation, it can finally develop its revolutionary consciousness.

Certainly, in itself, this is in no way just a quantitative question (how many hours on strike, how far the conflict spread...), but a question of the concrete degree of independence *visàvis* commodity production. Nor is it essentially a question of objectives: you can struggle for the defence of pay and conditions in various ways. Finally, nor is it a question of forms of organisation because these are the product of struggles rather than their instigators. The

independent political organisation of the proletariat is nothing other than the accomplished form of class combat, the mature political product of radical struggle. Organisation and political struggle pure of economic influences therefore does not exist. In the same way that Politics as a separate airtight sphere does not exist. Of course, this vision has nothing in common with any surpassing of the unionist reformist limits of workers' struggle by "*the external initiative of a political organisation independent of the proletariat*". (Lenin, *What is to be done? – this is not from WITBD!!!*)

Every defensive struggle is at the same time economic and political or rather every economic battle is finally political. Also, if the radicality of class combat can vary, all worker's defensive struggles carry a dominant political sign, reformist or revolutionary, which in fact does not exclude their coexistence. Up to a certain point and during a given time, we can see in all workers' conflicts both political expressions more or less formalised. Naturally, this cohabitation is not – and cannot be – anything less than conflictual. The development of struggles can just as much aim at the surpassing or not of reformist positions. How else can we interpret, for example, the *Hot Autumn* in Italy in 1969? Here there are, very succinctly, strikes initially sparked off by the state unions for objectives judged to be reasonable which rapidly transform themselves into a formidable crucible for workers' autonomy and whose epilogue engendered a *trade unionist* result summed up in the adoption of a *Workers' Statute*.

Can we then, in the Leninist way, found an analysis of the movement purely on its outcome, decreeing that it was only trade unionist? Can we, in the way of some pseudoworkerists, describe it as a movement of offensive political combat which was only stopped by repression and betrayal by the left of capital? Clearly the answer is negative in both cases. These judgements excessively simplify a reality which proves to be more complex. Workers' reformism, always put forward by the dynamic proper to defensive struggles (Cf. the formation of *Solidarność*, *NUMCOSATU*, the Korean *KCTU* or even the clandestine embryonic unions in China), in the period of the flowering of social democracy, can only succeed exceptionally and during short periods in providing itself with a structure and a programme opposed to the dominant classes. With the extraordinary accumulation of capital which followed the two world wars and the massive introduction of machines into the labour process, workers' reformist institutions were progressively transformed into organs of the state. Thus associated for the management of portions of the wage and exploitation, these organs generally contributed to the modernisation and enlargement of the field of application of bourgeois democracy.

The development of social democracy in the enterprise with its dense network of institutions proper to the twentieth century introduced mechanisms of political standardisation of wage earners. From then on, according to the dominant ideology, the worker acquired even within the factory some of the characteristics of a citizen. Strengthened by his new prerogatives established by law and protected by the state, the employee is even a bearer of some elements of political equality in his place of exploitation, which are capable of pushing back the dictatorship of the boss. Thus, according to this idea, the new decisive civic battle is being waged in the workshops, aiming to politically emancipate the employee through the extension of a dense web of *new rights*. By this process the classic dichotomy between democracy in society and dictatorship in the factory becomes blurred. The reality is somewhat different.

From now on the worker is confronted, including in their place of exploitation, by the democratic mystification which is added to the traditional despotism of the machine and the supervisor of production. The dictatorship of capital in the factory becomes more complex by enriching itself through the application of the democratic principle even in the workplace. At first sight, naturally, this new order makes it more difficult for autonomous workers' struggle to get going, but, when it breaks out, it expresses a greater maturity, more capable of taking on the whole set of social relations based on valorisation.

The fight against democracy in the enterprise thus becomes a crucial front in the class war. Led coherently, it marks a line of demarcation clearly and impassably between the workers' side and the side of capital. The extension of the democratic mystification to places of exploitation reinforces the idea which wants the worker to directly have at his disposal in his place of work all the necessary elements to arrive at a critique of the totality of the society of capital. It is sufficient that he observes without the blinkers of the dominant ideology what is happening there, even where he is exploited.

What's more, reformism as an expression of something independent of capital becomes a more and more improbable perspective. The attempt by Trotskyists to pass off the unions and the left parties rallied around the state as the legitimate inheritors of past workers' reformism is then only a miserable falsification. Far from reproducing the frontist schemas of the past (which have, as elsewhere, systematically failed), revolutionaries consider the various organs of social democracy, as front line institutions of the class enemy for the capitalist integration of proletarians, which have to be treated accordingly. This is the principal lesson of the worldwide wave of autonomous workers' struggles in the years 1960-1970.

ANARCHOSYNDICALISM ON THE TIGHTROPE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

On the margins of the state integration of the big union centres and confederations there still exists today a small current which claims to be the inheritor of anarchosyndicalism and of the revolutionary unionism of the past which conceives of itself as the elementary cell of the association of producers to come. More than a century ago this revolutionary tendency appeared in reaction to the reformist degeneration and politicking of a social democracy which committed itself ever more openly to the progressive wing of the bourgeoisie. Some internationalist militants from the First World War such as Pierre Monatte, Alfred Rosmer and the French group *La Révolution prolétarienne* were associated with it. But the counterrevolution of the twenties also brought an end to this current. It disappeared around the time of the Second World War in the same way as almost the whole of the left oppositions.

Anarchosyndicalism, after the big movements in Argentina, Italy and Japan, laid claim to a final glorious page for itself during the war in Spain. After having courageously led the proletarian insurrection, the anarchists of the CNTFAI ended up comanaging the factories and the republican state in its battle against the Francoists. In Catalonia, having in fact taken power thanks to the insurrection which it led, the CNT knew only how to put itself in the hands of the progressive bourgeoisie. Anarchist ministers sat in the government of the bourgeois republic. This grave compromise was illustrated particularly clearly by the disarmament of insurgents by the 'anarchist' bosses during the events of May 1937 in Barcelona, thus opening the way for the phase of Stalinist repression.

After the tragic outcome of this battle, anarchosyndicalism came close to completely disappearing and only survived through a nebula of microscopic organisations brooding over the old days. Today, their descendants act like their big brothers in the established headquarters of the state unions. Some are recognised and elected onto various committees and base structures of state comanagement (representatives on enterprise committees, members of security and hygiene commissions and, to a markedly smaller degree, workers' representatives). When they act on the terrain of workers' struggles as pressure groups on other unions and groups for libertarian propaganda, these anarchosyndicalist formations align themselves above all with the basic positions and practises of their institutionalised elders (Cf. the defence of public services in France).

THE IWW, GOING BEYOND THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN THE ECONOMIC AND THE POLITICAL

It was historically a completely different matter for a current officially created in Chicago in 1905, and known under the initials of IWW (*Industrial Workers of the World*). This internationalist formation organised on the basis of industrial sectors constituted, for revolutionaries of the whole world, a wonderful counterexample to state unionism. The IWW constituted themselves in radical opposition to the AFL union (*American Federation of Labor*, which became the AFLCIO). The IWW concretely unified in everyday struggle revolutionary political demands (abolition of wage labour) and supposedly economic demands, pursued by means of direct action. During movements such as revolutionary opposition to the entry of the USA into the First World War, the IWW showed their specificity as an organisation not reducible to a union or a party. The IWW incarnated the autonomous political organisation of skilled workers (the Chicago railway workers, the dockers of the west coast, the Boeing workers), unskilled workers (of the big textile industries on the west coast, parts of Boston and New York) and the copper, silver and zinc miners (fighting with dynamite against the bosses' militias in Colorado and the Rockies). They were ferociously opposed to discrimination on the basis of trade, qualification, sex, nationality and race. The AFL, by contrast, refused to organise women, Blacks, Chinese and unskilled workers, conforming to the corporatist substance of trade unionism. Numerous revolutionary militants of the anarchist and Marxist persuasion joined the IWW. The *Industrial Workers of the World* also prefigured the appearance of a so-called unionist tendency present in Germany at the beginning of the 1920s in the form of the AAUD and AAUE. The IWW thus represented the most accomplished attempt to go beyond the social democratic dichotomy between Politics and Economics, between the defensive and offensive combat of the exploited class. All revolutionary perspective having finally disappeared after the many attempts to attack the capitalist edifice in the 1920s, the IWW then ceased to exist – but not without fighting and enduring a ferocious repression (the Everett massacre in 1917, the repression of the general strike in Seattle in 1919) – as a political expression of the proletariat. Their disappearance prevented them being swallowed up by the capitalist state. But their experience was not useless. The Italian Hot Autumn of 1969, with its rich and dense network of autonomous proletarian political organisations, made the lessons of the IWW its own ... going as far as reproducing some of their limits.

THE REVOLUTION AS A PROCESS OF RUPTURE

Workers' struggles which break out today seem to be confined rigorously within the firm, the sector or the region, without expressing – even in an embryonic form – the need for communism and revolutionary political organisation.

It is as if defensive struggles no longer function as a *school of communism*, and no longer forge from themselves their political supersession. Because of this, amongst other things, there is a certain resurgence in interest amongst the most combative fractions of the exploited class in so-called fighting unionism, considered as the only road to practical action.

However reasonable in appearance, this attempt is false and leads the most conscious proletarian elements towards the trap of social democracy. Nothing is more harmful than to assume that we are the prisoners of the economic stage of the struggle and that we can only begin the political stage of struggle in the factory once the former is completely developed. That would amount to defending the idea that the revolutionary political struggle is independent of the relations of production and the tensions which run through them. A political struggle which is abstracted from the cauldron of incessant everyday confrontation, between worker and machine, between proletarians and capital, cannot have any other outcome than Red Brigades style terrorism or *Lutte ouvrière* style electoralism. The

proliferation of a more or less *alternative* trade unionism does not constitute in any way whatsoever a stage in this process. The latter represents, on the contrary, a major obstacle on the way ahead.

Independent proletarian structures, when they exist, must avoid the trap of delegation of defensive struggle to organs assigned or predisposed to that function by their enemies. Workers' committees must take on the revolutionary political struggle by linking it to its material base: the daily battle for the defence of the immediate interests of proletarians. It is only when a sufficiently solid network, extended and representative of organs of this nature, makes its appearance that we can have the keys to the solution of the question of independent political organisation of the proletariat. Then, returning to better times, where class conflicts will be bearers of communism once again, the beginning of the process of the political selfconstitution of the proletariat, will mean quite simply abandoning this kind of delegation forever.

Today, such an understanding of things is unfortunately shared only too rarely. In these times there are many who prefer to limit their action to so-called *alternative* trade unionism, finding themselves a space in the trade union cage and throwing all their energy into the multiplication of extremely minoritarian struggles and propaganda, with the aim of drawing others into the struggle. To the trade unionist shortcut, they add the fragile safety valve of an anger which is expressed in an inoffensive and ephemeral way by stunt actions carried out by a few people in the name of those that they claim to represent. ... Hoping that the media will provide them with a sounding board. The political passivity of withdrawal into trade unionism is married here with weakwilled protest and vanguardism. Worse, it reduces itself to a grotesque imitation, to a caricature of class struggle, accompanied by a flagrant disregard for the real terrain of struggle and the balance of forces.

BrusselsParis, October 2003.