

# ON THE REVIVAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AS A SOCIAL FORCE

Sam Gindin

The following talk served as an introduction to a presentation by Steve Williams, the Co-Director of the San Francisco Bay Area group POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights). We invited Steve to Toronto because the kind of organizing POWER is doing contributes to a broader sense of who the working class is, and a deeper conception of building class capacities. Organizations like POWER, Migrante, and Worker Action Centres such as those in Toronto, Montreal and Windsor, don't replace traditional unions but they supplement them in ways crucial to any revival of the labour movement. And such a revival is fundamental to sustaining any larger social movement because of the potential contributions of the labour movement's resources, organizational skills and ability to not just protest but also stop the economy in its tracks. [William's dynamic presentation can be viewed at: [www.socialistproject.ca/leftstreamed/ls24.php](http://www.socialistproject.ca/leftstreamed/ls24.php)]

## PRIVILEGING 'CLASS'?

Before Steve speaks to the experience and lessons in organizing marginalized workers, I'd like to speak briefly to this intimately related issue of the revival of the working class as a social force. A good many social activists are hesitant to identify with the 'working class,' conflating that with bureaucratized unions that emerged to represent male and primarily white breadwinners in the blue-collar industries. There's also a suspicion of the broader term 'class,' seeing it as taking away from, or subordinating, other oppressions and identities.

There is clearly something to the point that unions, in the public as well as private sector, have been too slow to move beyond a leadership style and organizing culture that wasn't sufficiently sensitive to changes in the workforce. This had added barriers to progressive internal practices and to outreach potentials.

Yet it is also true that the majority of union members are now women, and that unions have represented a central site for struggles – and victories – by socialists, women and workers of colour. Moreover, when American autoworkers are laid off in such massive numbers, this includes black UAW members whose share of auto jobs is significantly higher than their share of the workforce. When the Toronto Steelworkers recently brought some 75 shop stewards together to discuss green jobs as well as factory occupations in Argentina, two points quickly struck home. They too were hardly privileged having all been victims of plant closures in the GTA. And, reflecting the changing makeup of both union and non-union industrial workers in the city, 80% were people of colour. The implicit notion of 'privilege' in describing unionized workers is rather inapt in light of what is happening to workers across the board today.

As for the term 'class,' here too there has been some justification in activists being wary of crude attempts to reduce all oppressions to that of class. The point however of emphasizing 'class' is to get at a shared social relationship within capitalism that cuts across and potentially bridges other oppressions. It includes all those who do not have the capital to generate a living: not only those who are (at least for the present) employed, but also those already out of work or denied a chance to work, those who work part-time and those who can't work at all because they have young children or because a disability makes their skills 'uncompetitive' in a profit-driven world.

The working class encompasses all these people and their families, and it does so without ever being able to end differences along race and gender lines. The idea of a homogenous working class was, in any case, always an abstraction. What we call the working class is inherently diverse and it is constantly in flux in terms of how it sees itself and how it relates to others within the class. The challenge hasn't been to erase that diversity (which includes histories and experiences that can be translated into strengths), or to patiently wait for its components to merge into a cohesive class, but how to *actively* build the fragments, divisions and uncertainties into an effective social force – how to *make* a self-conscious working class.

## BRINGING CLASS BACK IN

The problem in the unionized labour movement has in fact not been its over-emphasis on class, but the *absence* of a broad and committed class perspective. The fair criticism of unions isn't that they have achieved a degree of security and material comfort for their members (that is something they can justly be proud of) nor even that they haven't paid a lot of attention to diversity issues in recent decades (they have), but their inability to organize more and more workers and to do so in a way that goes beyond a narrow representation of the particular interests of each group of workers in relation to their specific employers. What they have not been able to do in other words is represent the class as a whole in the broad sense raised above. This has contributed to the isolation of unions and therefore their vulnerability to losing past gains.

Just how much a broad understanding of class matters can be seen in the nitty-gritty activity of bringing workers into unions. Unionization has, because of a combination of changes in the economy and corporate aggressiveness, become very difficult. It is when that organizing comes to be seen as being about more than adding new dues and defending existing unionized members and is understood to be part of building the working class and building working class power, that unions are more likely to

generate the energy, resources, commitment, and creativity to be successful – and to bring workers into unions that really matter.

A commonly cited example of the parochialism of the union movement has been its demand to protect local jobs against competition from abroad, with its tendency to nationalism and xenophobia. But an important distinction must be made. When workers were in struggle and articulated these claims as attempts to force corporations to maintain commitments to the community, as a fight over corporate freedoms undermining worker and community freedoms – that is, in class terms – the struggle was much less likely to end up attacking Mexican or Asian workers. It is when there is no class perspective, when unions are identifying with ‘their’ corporation and mobilizing to win subsidies *for* corporations, when the enemy isn’t capital but other workers, that racist tendencies are more likely to be reinforced.

While it is absolutely imperative that unions commit to fighting for the greatest equality amongst all workers if solidarity is to be meaningful, the fact is that equality even just within the working class can’t be achieved in a society based on markets, profits and competition. That is why extending that commitment to fight for overcoming class inequality in general is necessary. Equality within the class is best advanced through being serious about building the unity to bring down the whole class system that orders society.

Along similar lines, it is crucial to expand the emphasis on class into all aspects of our lives and not just the work relationship. Once we see class penetrating everyday life, we can start seeing social movements not as ‘others’ but as reflecting various dimensions of workers’ lives and various sites of struggle given the wide range of problems that confront the whole working class: issues of migrants being brought here to work while being denied the status of full citizens; issues of mistreatment by the state and capital along class lines that so often take shape in racial or gendered form; issues of health care, education and child care; of unemployment insurance, welfare and pensions; issues of housing and the environment.

Let me elaborate on the environmental issue because it is so often presented as a universal human problem that seems to trump social divisions. Absent a perspective that is conscious of relations of power and class divisions, the response to the environmental crisis tends to the application of market-based solutions (inspired by, of all things, innovations in financial markets) that will increase inequality while not in fact representing any possibility of solving the problem. No less important, it opens the door to an ‘environmental-industrial complex’ – private-public partnerships that see the environment as a new cite of both profits and legitimacy.

The point is that the environmental crisis is inseparable from the structures and power relations of capitalism, and also inseparable from the most basic questions of social justice here and abroad. Unless we pose it in the class terms of democratic planning, who pays and who benefits, and what kind of society we want, we’re not engaged in addressing the real problem.

## FROM CLASS TO ORGANIZATION

As we think about class and overcoming class oppression in these broader terms, it becomes clear that we can’t avoid posing the issue of an independent vision – independent that is, from the logic of capitalism. Without such a vision, ‘class’ itself can’t provide much coherence. Yet even a class perspective and vision are not enough. They must have an organizational expression. This is true in the sense of both reviving the role of unions, and in going moving beyond them.

The revival of unions will have to draw on the many examples of how working class people have engaged in effective movement building and struggles outside the unions. Bringing this experience into unions will largely be a matter of a movement from below within the unions. But we should have no illusions about rank-and-file members transforming their workplaces and locals one-by-one. Isolated as they are even from fellow union members doing similar work elsewhere and with limited resources to challenge the power structures within their unions, this – as many activists are frustratingly rediscovering today – makes such a local-by-local strategy seem overwhelming. This points to the need for organizational innovations to link and support networks of workers across their workplaces and across the groups that also struggle to define and represent broad working class interests and needs in their communities.

But there is also an inherent limitation to unions as working class organizations. Even at their best, there is only so far unions can go beyond representing a particular group of workers. Though they can be pushed, both internally and by examples from the outside, to think and act in broader class terms, their organizational form – negotiating contracts for specific workers – limits how far they can go. They are structured, as a South African trade unionist put it, to represent *workers*, not the working *class* (cited in Bill Fletcher Jr, *Solidarity Divided*). This was always a problem, but its been reinforced by neoliberalism and the further fragmentation of work and community – a fragmentation, it is important to note, that is also a problem for social movements because of their concentration on single issues or a particular constituency.

The issue, therefore, of both reviving unions and going beyond them requires developing other kinds of organizations that have their feet in the workplace and in the community, that cross individual unions and social movements, that create new spaces of struggle, develop new individual and collective capacities and spread new hope and possibilities.

## BEYOND ALLIANCES

It also means that we need to think beyond our task being the formation of new alliances between the movements and trade unions. This too is of course a step forward, but it does not get at the transformations that need to occur within both the social movements and organized labour – changes that can only come through some larger, more encompassing vehicles of class organization which are engaged in broader class formation.

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# San Francisco's Black Exodus

Jamilah King

It's been 33 years, but Ed Donaldson can still see the anxious look on his mother's face when she was told she had to move. It was 1976, and Donaldson was only 10 – the youngest of three children – when the family received word from the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency that they were being kicked out of their Hunter's Point apartment. Donaldson's mother decided to use the opportunity to purchase a home – no easy feat for a single Black woman in the 1970s. After months of racist- and sexist-tinged questioning by loan officials (was she having more children? where was her husband?), she secured a loan for a house she still lives in today.

"We landed on our feet, but so many other families didn't," remembered Donaldson, now 43 and the Housing Counseling Director at the San Francisco Housing Development Corporation (HDC), an organization focused on finding affordable homes in San Francisco for people of color, particularly Blacks.

As in other cities across the country, San Francisco's Black communities became the focus of massive urban renewal programs spanning from the late 1940s through the 1970s. In the city's predominantly Black Fillmore district, a total of 4,729 businesses, 2,500 households and 883 Victorian homes were demolished to make room for government-owned housing and commercial businesses. Some displaced residents moved to other parts of San Francisco, while others relocated to more affordable cities like Oakland and East Palo Alto. In total, more than 5,000 families were displaced.

Ironically, since the end of the urban renewal programs in the '70s, San Francisco city officials have commissioned several studies investigating why Black residents are leaving and how to get them back. Recommendations in the past have included training young Black entrepreneurs and establishing a Black tourist district like Chinatown. Yet the hemorrhaging has continued.

Since the last report in 1990, San Francisco's Black population has dropped by 40 percent, faster than any other major city in the country. According to the latest Census data, Black residents make up only 6.9 percent of the city's current population and are projected to make up as little as 4.6 percent in 2050.

The latest government effort to reverse this loss is the African American Out-Migration Task Force started by Mayor Gavin Newsom and Supervisor Sophie Maxwell in 2007. The task force has 18 members – mostly clergy, researchers and city officials – and was supposed to investigate what was driving Black residents out of the city. They were also to come up with a set of comprehensive policy recommendations to bring them back. Yet after nearly two years of work, the recommendations remain unpublished. But some task force members are concerned that the mayor will want final recommendations closely aligned with his already controversial housing agenda.

Last year both Mayor Newsom and Supervisor Maxwell endorsed Proposition G, a controversial housing measure that allows Florida-based developer Lennar Corporation to develop 10,000 new homes in Bayview. The measure, which ultimately passed was hotly debated because Bayview is a historically Black San Francisco neighborhood. It grew from fewer than 20,000 residents in 1940 to almost 150,000 by 1950 – the vast majority of whom were Black migrants from the South who came to work in the nearby U.S. Navy shipyard, along with many Black veterans returning from war. At the time, Black residents were prevented from living in other parts of the city by both legal and illegal policies and practices.

Still, some task force members are optimistic. Regina Davis, President/CEO of the San Francisco Housing Development Coalition, pointed to research collected by San Francisco State University professor Shawn Ginwright showing that 50 percent of Black residents who have left San Francisco since 1990 have moved to Oakland.

Davis thinks those residents are more likely to return if more is done to publicize what the city is doing, such as the \$100,000 in down payment assistance offered for first-time homebuyers through the Mayor's Office of Housing. This measure was highlighted in a draft version of the report as a potential way to bring middle class Black residents back. But in a city where it takes an estimated \$77,000 for a family of four to survive, housing is just one issue driving and keeping Black residents out of the city.

Tinisch Hollins, a member of the task force, said that the real intent should be to transition the city's current population to homeownership instead of emphasizing sub-standard public housing, and argues that assistance with down payments isn't enough in a city where an average home costs close to \$1-million. Moreover, she said the issue is much larger than housing.

## COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS SHARE THAT SKEPTICISM

"'Out-migration' is this broad, neutral term that assumes that Black people are leaving of their own free will and have found greener pastures," said Alicia Garza, co-director of People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), a multiracial non-profit that works on housing and wage rights in San Francisco. "Some of that is true, but what it doesn't do is take a critical look at... what San Francisco is doing that's causing that hemorrhaging."

Preliminary research by the task force showed that one key reason Black residents have continued leaving is "cultural safety," meaning the level of racial hostility targeted toward Black communities. That same research showed that some former residents said they felt alienated by what they see as the city's erasure of

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Black history. The city's Fillmore district, for instance, is now promoted as a jazz district, but with no direct mention that it was a historically Black neighborhood. Many younger Black residents feel that any institutional change must be community-led.

And that change in leadership may be in the Osiris Coalition, a collective of mostly young, Black leaders and five community-based organizations. The first piece of legislation the coalition tackled was the city's long-dormant Certificate of Preference program. Established in 1967, the program was supposed to benefit residents like Donaldson's family – people who were displaced by urban renewal. But for years, the program was plagued by inefficiency and mismanagement. It required that families provide paperwork to prove they had lived in areas that were demolished.

In its first two years, the coalition has been successful in pushing several reforms to the program, including getting the city to hire two staff members who work directly with residents applying for certificates and to institute an online database and registration form. About 6,500 certificates have been issued since the program's inception, and a little over 1,000 have been exercised.

In 1999, the program was extended to include the children of those displaced families and now the group is working to include the grandchildren of displaced residents in the program. Numbers on exactly how many residents have benefited from the changes were not immediately available, but Donaldson hopes a more efficient process will entice greater numbers of people to apply. An estimated 96,000 people are projected to be eligible for certificates.

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The cost of not having such organizations – of avoiding the building of such organizations – was never more evident than during the recent crisis. Capitalism was in disarray, in the midst of its greatest crisis since the 1930s, and a major section of the elite was discredited. Yet in spite of sporadic and localized battles here and there, we never even gave them a real scare. We were frustratingly unable to take advantage of that historic moment. Our capacities didn't match what we are up against.

Because unions and the social movements were not capable of forming, representing, and expressing the broadest class interests, we now face an even more dangerous situation. Capitalism seems to have not only survived the chaos it created, but – at least if the German election and the fate of U.S. universal health care initiatives are indicative – seems to be emerging more powerful. Some banks have disappeared but others have absorbed them and banking is more concentrated. And the American imperial state remains at the centre of the making and managing of global capitalism. In this context, it's not hard to guess who will face the pressures to pay for fixing this crisis, and with our weakness so exposed there is good reason to worry about how far the right will now go in trying to exploit the opportunity we missed. The crisis that should have been on the right has turned into one on the left.

Finally, there is one aspect of capitalist crises that we espe-

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In many ways, the Osiris Coalition stands as a challenge to an older generation of Black leadership that was either complicit in or ineffective to Black residents being pushed out of the city, according to Donaldson. And while he took issue with the fact that the program places the burden to return on displaced families, he also said that the work itself has given the Osiris Coalition the credibility it needs to be taken seriously. "What we're saying is that those old folks who are there, who are comfortable with doing things how they've done in the past, we're not standing for it," he said. **R**

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cially need to come to grips with. If we are going to build a movement that challenges capitalism, we are going to have to convince people that capitalism has become a barrier to human development *even when it seems to be working 'well.'* Otherwise crises tend to romanticize the pre-crisis period and that leaves many people vulnerable to the limited goal of fixing the crisis so we can get back to how things were. How tragic it would be for our movements if this crisis led only to a further lowering of expectations and narrowing of possibilities rather than bringing new openings for radically more ambitious goals.

What is so exciting about the work of POWER is that it has come to ask the big questions through its very concrete work on the ground. It has linked its vision of an alternative society to a practice of organizing from below and democratizing knowledge so the formerly marginalized can themselves become organizers and leaders. Take a look at the remarkable book on Land, Class and Power this organization has produced alongside its nitty-gritty grass roots working class community struggles. There is a common notion on the left everywhere that Canada is further along the road to progressive change than the U.S. is, but I think POWER shows us we have a lot to learn from what is happening on the left in the United States. **R**

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