

# Theses on Mass Worker and Social Capital

By Guido Baldi

## INTRODUCTION

"Theses on Mass Worker and Social Capital" brings together, in the form of a historical outline, some of the political hypotheses and methodological guidelines that have circulated within the Italian working-class movement since 1967. It does so by summarizing some of the ideas contained in Operai e Stato (Workers and State), a collection of essays on "workers' struggles and the reform of the capitalist State between the October Revolution and the New Deal", which has recently been published in Italy. (1)

These Theses have been written not to contribute to an academic, historical re-interpretation of workers' struggles in the Twentieth Century, but rather to present a particular methodological and political perspective which, in a more developed form, has served as a basis for the political formation of revolutionary cadres in Italy. Thus, many of these ideas have represented theoretical anticipations of the development of a concrete revolutionary practice.

Methodologically, the intent of the Theses is to define and develop new concepts such as "class composition", "political re-composition", "technological path to repression", and so forth whose use in the analysis allows one to grasp the main trends of class struggle today: the capitalist use of technology as a means of controlling the political movements of the working class, the interpenetration of economics and politics, the centrality of "quantitative demands" to the development of working-class unity in the anti-capitalist struggle. The most important contribution of this Italian viewpoint to an understanding of these trends in class struggle is perhaps the dichotomy between "working class" and "labor power".

Politically, the Theses impute the impasse in which the Marxist Left has found itself, and the bankruptcy of its "revolutionary project" in the advanced capitalist countries, to two main circumstances: (1) the emergence of the "mass worker", the new political figure created by the "scientific organization of labor" in the American Twenties and generalized in the last forty years to the rest of the capitalist world; (2) the inability of the Marxist Left which emerged from the struggles of the first quarter of the century — both "orthodox Marxism" and its "Left-wing alternative" — to politically interpret and articulate the new program of struggles of this "mass worker", with its new and more advanced political contents.

The second essay presented here, "Struggle Against Labor", is an early attempt to make explicit the new political program of the mass worker. It is a selection from Mario Tronti's book Operai e Capitale (Workers and Capital) (2), published in 1965 as a reflection on his ongoing political practice (Tronti was the editor of the autonomous working-class journal Classe Operaia) and therefore as a prediction of Italian mass workers' revolutionary struggles to come.

The demands for more wages developing as an attack on the State; the struggle for more money and less work turning into a struggle against labor; the manifold struggle against labor materializing as a demand for "political wages", that is, an income disengaged from the labor expended (the concrete basis for a new unity of workers, unemployed, and housewives) — all this is the revolutionary process of the Italian Sixties. (3)

If we are correct, the test of the hypotheses presented in both essays lies in the American Seventies.

#### FOOTNOTES

(1) Milan, Feltrinelli, 1972. The contributors to this book are S. Bologna, George Rawick, M. Gobbini, A. Negri, L. Ferrari Bravo, and F. Gambino.

Tronti, "Workers + Capital"  
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(2) This selection is from the last chapter of Mario Tronti's book *Operai e Capitale* (1965), and has been translated by John Merrington. The full English edition, Workers and Capital, copyright by New Critics Press, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri, 1971, is scheduled to appear in late 1972. Not  
true

(3) Radical America readers are already familiar with "struggle against labor" as a concrete political slogan. They have seen it developed in "Italy: New Tactics and Organization" (Volume 5, Number 5) and in the Dalla Costa essay on "Women and the Subversion of the Community" (Volume 6, Number 1).

## THESES ON MASS WORKER AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

1

The years from the beginning of the century up to the English general strike of 1926 witness this crucial new feature in class struggle: Whereas deep contradictions between developed and backward areas characterize capitalism at this stage and confine it to national levels of organization, the political autonomy and independence of the working class reach an international level: For the first time, capital is bypassed by the workers at an international level. The first international cycle, roughly 1904 to 1906, is a cycle of mass strikes which at times develops into violent actions and insurrections. In Russia, it starts with the Putilov strike and develops into the 1905 revolution. 1904 is the date of the first Italian general strike. In Germany, the spontaneous Ruhr miners' strike of 1905 on the eight-hour issue and the Amburg general strike of 1906 lead a class wave that overflows into a large network of middle-sized firms. In the US, the miners' strikes of 1901 and 1904 and the foundation of the IWW in 1905 seem to be a premonition of the struggles to come.

The second cycle starts with 1911. We see the same class vanguards initiate the struggle: In the US the vanguards are the coal miners of West Virginia, the Harriman railroad workers, and the Lawrence textile workers; in Russia they are the Lena gold miners of 1912; in Germany they are the workers of the 1912 mass strike of the Ruhr. World War I represents the occasion for the widest development of class struggle in the US (1,204 strikes in 1914; 1,593 in 1915; 3,789 in 1916; and 4,450 in 1917 — and the National Labor Board sanctions a number of victories: collective bargaining, equal pay for women, guaranteed minimum wage) while laying the groundwork for a third international cycle. Since the War has produced a boom in precision manufacturing, electrical machinery, optics, and other fields, the class weight of the superskilled workers of these sectors is enormously increased in Germany and elsewhere. They are the workers who form the backbone of the councils in the German revolution, the Soviet Republic in Bavaria, and the Italian factory occupation of 1919. By 1919, the year of the Seattle General Strike, 4,160,000 workers in the US (20.2% of the entire labor force) are mobilized by the struggle. In the international circulation of struggles, Russia, the “weakest link”, breaks. The capitalist nightmare comes true: The initiative of the working class establishes a “workers’ state”. The class that first made its appearance in the political arena in 1848 and that learned the need for political organization from its defeat in the Paris Commune is now moving in an international way. The peculiar commodity, labor power, the passive, fragmented receptacle of factory exploitation, is now behaving as an international political actor, the political working class.

The specific political features of these three cycles of struggle lie in the dynamics of their circulation. The struggle starts with class vanguards, and only later does it

circulate throughout the class and develop into mass actions. That is, the circulation of struggles follows the structure of the class composition that predominates in these years. That composition consists of a large network of sectors with diverse degrees of development, varying weight in the economy, and different levels of skill and experience. The large cleavages that characterize such a class composition (the dichotomy between a skilled "labor aristocracy" and the mass of the unskilled is one prominent example) necessitates the role of class vanguards as political and organizational pivots. It is through an alliance between the vanguards and the proletarian masses that class cleavages are progressively overcome and mass levels of struggles are reached. That is, the "political re-composition of the working class" is based on its industrial structure, the "material articulation of the labor force (labor power)".

4

The organizational experiments of the working class in these years are by necessity geared to this specific class composition. Such is the case with the Bolshevik model, the Vanguard Party. Its politics of class consciousness "from the outside" must re-compose the entire working class around the demands of its advanced sectors; its "politics of alliances" must bridge the gap between advanced workers and the masses. But such is also the case with the Councils model, whose thrust toward the self-management of production is materially bound to the figure of the skilled worker (that is, the worker with a unique, fixed, subjective relationship to tools and machinery, and with a consequent self identification as "producer"). In Germany in particular, where the machine-tool industry developed exclusively on the basis of the exceptional skill of workers, the Councils express their "managerial" ideology most clearly. It is at such a relatively-high level of professionalization — with a worker/tools relationship characterized by precise skills, control over production techniques, direct involvement with the work plan, and co-operation between execution and



planning functions — that workers can identify with their “useful labor” in a program for self-management of the factory. In the heat of the struggle, this program gains the support of productive engineers.

5

With the Councils, “class consciousness” is expressed most clearly as the consciousness of “producers”. The Councils do not organize the working class on the basis of a political program of struggles. The Council structure reproduces — by team, shop, and plant — the capitalist organization of labor, and “organizes” workers along their productive role, as labor power, producers. Since the Councils assume the existing organization for the production of capital (a given combination of variable and constant capital, of workers and machines) as the basis for their socialist project, their hypothesis of a workers’ democratic self-management can only pre-figure the workers’ management of the production of capital, that is, the workers’ management of their very exploitation.

6

Yet, the revolutionary character of all workers’ struggles must always be measured in terms of their relationship to the capitalists’ project. From this viewpoint, it becomes clear that the organization of the Councils, by reproducing the material articulation of the labor force as it is, also freezes development at a certain level of the organic composition of capital (the level of fixed, subjective relationship between workers and machines). Therefore, it challenges capital’s power to bring about whatever technological leap and re-organization of the labor force it may need. In this sense the Councils remain a revolutionary experience. As for the ideological aspect of the self-management project, the hypothesis of a workers’ management of the production of capital, it also becomes clear that “the pre-figuration of a more advanced level of capitalist development was the specific way in which workers refused to yield to the capitalist needs of the time, by trying to provoke the failure of

capital's plan and expressing the autonomous working-class need for conquering power". (De Caro) It is in the workers' refusal to be pushed back into a malleable labor force under capitalist rule, and in their demand for power over the productive process (whether in the form of the Councils' "self-management" and freeze over development, or in the Bolsheviks' plan for development under "workers' control") that the fundamental political novelty of these cycles of struggle lies: on an international level, the workers' attempt to divert the direction of economic development, express autonomous goals, and assume political responsibility for managing the entire productive machine.

7

When the capitalists move to counter-attack, they are not prepared to grasp the two main givens of the cycles of struggle: the international dimension of class struggle, and the emergence of labor power as the political working class. Thus while the international unification of the working-class struggle raises the need for an international unification of capital's response, the system of reparations imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty merely seals the inter-capitalist split. While confronted by the international working class, the capitalists can only perceive their national labor powers. The outcome is a strategic separation between their international and domestic responses. Internationally, world revolution appears to the capitalists as coming "from the outside", from the exemplary leadership of the USSR: hence the politics of military isolation of the Revolution in Russia. Domestically, all the capitalists know is the traditional tools of their rule: (1) the violent annihilation of workers' political organizations (the Palmer raids and the destruction of the IWW; Fascism in Italy; bloody suppression of the "Red Army" in the Ruhr, and so forth), which breaks the ground for (2) technological manipulation of the labor force (Taylorism, the "scientific organization of labor") as a means of politically controlling class composition.



Taylorism, the "scientific organization of labor", the technological leap of the Twenties serves but one purpose: to destroy the specific articulation of the labor force which was the basis for the political re-composition of the working class during the first two decades of the century (Thesis 3). The introduction of the assembly line cuts through traditional cleavages in the labor force, thus producing a veritable revolution in the composition of the entire working class. The emergence of the mass worker, the human appendage to the assembly line, is the overcoming of the vanguard/mass dichotomy upon which the Bolshevik Party is modeled. The very "aristocracy of labor" that capital created after 1870 in its attempt to control the international circulation of the Paris Commune (the very workers supposedly "bribed" by the eight-hour work day, Saturdays off, and a high level of wages) became one of the pivots of the circulation of struggles in the Teens. Through the assembly line capital launches a direct political attack, in the form of technology, on the skills and the factory model of the Councils' professional workers. This attack brings about the material destruction of that level of organic composition which served as the basis of the self-management project. (The political unity between engineers and workers is also under attack. From Taylorism on, engineers will appear to the workers not as direct producers, but as mere functionaries of the scientific organization of exploitation; and the self-management project, devoid of its original class impact, will reappear as a caricature, the "managerial revolution" to come.)

Thus, capital's response to the struggles follows the Nineteenth Century's "technological path to repression": It entails breaking whatever political unification the working class has achieved during a given cycle of struggles, by means of a technological revolution in class composition. Constant manipulation of class composition through contin-

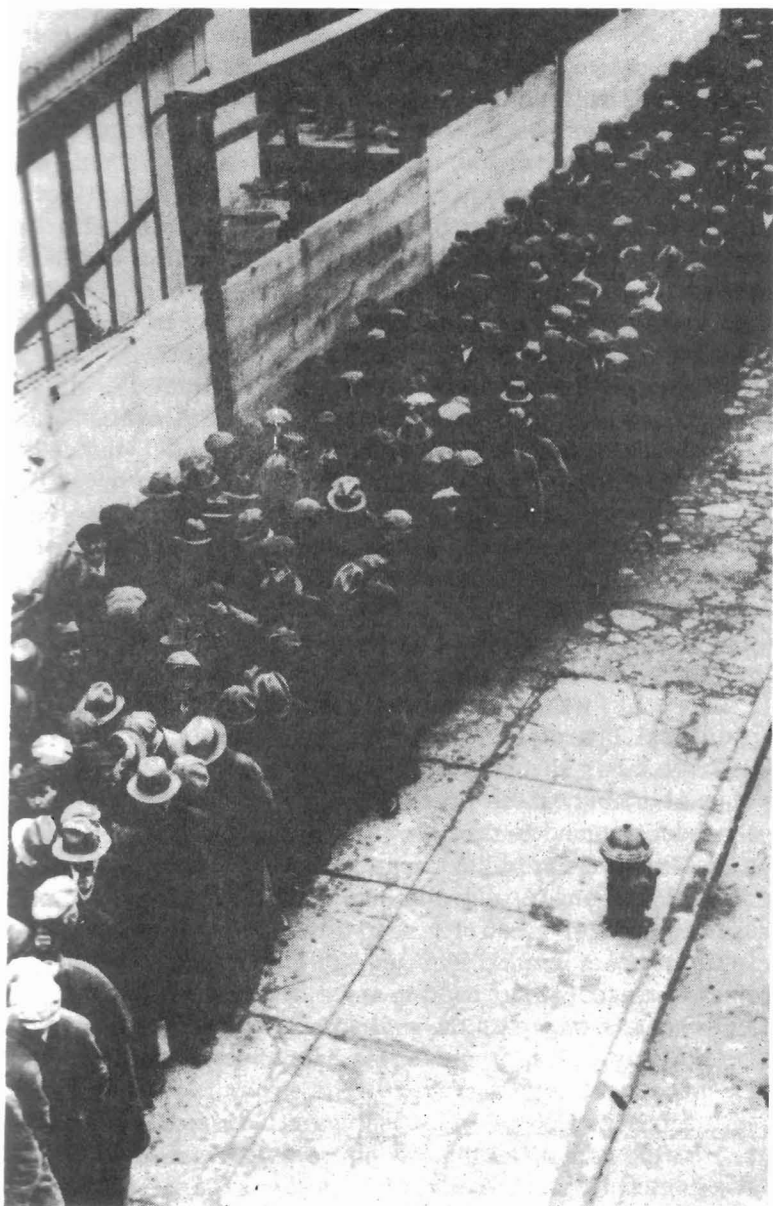
uous technological innovations provides a tool for controlling the class "from within" through its existence as mere "labor power". The re-organization of labor is a means to the end of the "political decomposition" of the working class. Since the working class has demanded leadership over the entire society, to push it back into the factory appears as an appropriate political move. Within this strategy, factory and society are to remain divided. The specific form of the labor process in the capitalist factory (that is, the plan) has yet to be imposed on the entire society. Social anarchy is counterposed to the factory plan. The social peace and the growing mass production of the Twenties seem to prove that traditional weapons have been successful again. It will take the Depression to dissipate this belief.

10

With 1929, all the tools of the technological attack on the working class turn against capital. The economic and technological measures for containing the working class in the Twenties (re-conversion of the war economy, continuous technological change, and high productivity of labor) have pushed supply tremendously upward, while demand lags hopelessly behind. Investments decline in a spiral toward the great crash. In a very real sense, 1929 is the workers' revenge. Mass production and the assembly line, far from securing stability, have raised the old contradictions to a higher level. Capital is now paying a price for its faith in Say's law ("supply creates its own demand"), with its separation of output and market, producers and consumers, factory and society, labor power and political class. As such it remains caught in a tragic impasse, between the inadequacy of the economic and technological tools of the past and the lack of new, political ones. It will take Roosevelt-Keynes to produce them.

11

While Hoover resumes the old search for external "international causes", Roosevelt's approach is entirely domestic: a re-distribution of income to sustain the internal



*The crash: Jobless men in New York, 1930*

UPI

demand. Keynesian strategy is already emerging — keeping up demand by allowing wages to rise and by reducing unemployment through public expenditure. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA) of 1933 raises wage rates, encourages unionization, and so forth at the same time that it authorizes both massive investment in public works through the PWA and large relief funds. The political break with the past is enormous. In the classical view, the flexibility of wages is the main assumption. Workers' struggles are seen as an outside interference with a self-regulating economy: Labor organizations belong with other "institutional factors" that maintain wages "artificially", while it is the State's role to preserve the economy against such artificial interference. In the Keynesian model, the downward rigidity of wages is the main assumption; wages are taken as independent variables. The State becomes the economic subject in charge of planning appropriate redistributions of income to support the "effective demand".

12

Keynes's assumption of the downward rigidity of wages is "the most important discovery of Western Marxism" (Tronti). As wages become an independent variable, the traditional law of the "value of labor" collapses. No "law" but only labor through its own struggles can determine the value of labor. Class antagonism is brought into the heart of production and is taken as the material given on which capital must rebuild its strategy. The NRA is precisely a political maneuver to transform class antagonism from an unpredictable element of risk and instability into a dynamic factor of development. Through its emphasis on the income effect of wages, as opposed to the mere cost effect, the New Deal chooses wages as the mainspring of growth, but within precise limits: Wages must rise harmoniously with profits. The necessary control over wage dynamics requires the institutionalization of class struggle. For workers' struggles inside capital's plan means working class inside capital's State. Hence the need for the emergence of two new political figures in the Thirties: capital as the new "State-as-Planner" and the working class as organized "Labor".

The turn toward State-as-Planner is a radical break with all previous policies of State intervention. The NRA regulates the whole of industrial production. The certainty of a capitalist future has been shaken to its roots by the crisis: The NRA "codes", involving the totality of the capitalist class (95% of all industrial employers), guarantee that a future exists. As the depth of the crisis makes the State's function of "correcting mistakes" obsolete, the State must assume the responsibility of direct investment, "net contribution" to purchasing power. The State must expose the myth of "sound finance" and impose budget deficits. It is no longer a juridical figure (the bourgeois government of law); it is an economic agent (the capitalist plan). (All this represents a historical watershed, the beginning of a long political process that will culminate in the "incomes policy", the wage-price guideposts of the New Frontier.) Most important, as the representative of the collective capitalist, the State's main function is the planning of the class struggle itself. Capital's plan for development must establish an institutional hold on the working class.

Hence, the need for Labor as the political representative of the working class in the capitalist State. But the technological leap of the Twenties has entirely undermined the trade unions, by making their professional structure obsolete: By 1929, the AFL controls only 7% of the industrial labor force. By cutting through the old class composition and producing a massification of the class, Taylorism has only provided the material basis for a political re-composition at a higher level. As long as the mass worker remains unorganized he/she is entirely unpredictable. Thus with "Section 7a" of the NRA and later with the Wagner Act the collective capitalist begins to accept the workers' right to organize and bargain collectively. It will be no smooth process, for while capitalists as a class support the NRA, the individual capitalist will resist its consequences at the

level of his own factory. The birth of the CIO will mark the victory of a thirty-year-long struggle for mass-production unionism. Capital and the mass worker will now face each other as the State-as-Planner and organized Labor.

15

Class struggle, once the mortal enemy of capitalism to be dealt with through bloodshed, now becomes the main-spring of planned economic development. The historical development of labor power as the political working class is acknowledged by capital's plan in this major theoretical breakthrough. What was conceived of as a passive, fragmented object of exploitation and technological manipulation is now accepted as an active, unified political subject. Its needs can no longer be violently repressed; they must be satisfied, to ensure continued economic development. Previously, the working class was perceived as capital's immediate negation and the only way to extract profits was to decrease wages and increase exploitation. Now, the closed interdependence of working class and capital is made clear by the strategy of increasing wages to turn out a profit. Whereas the reduction of the working class to mere labor power was reflected in a strategic split between factory (exploitation) and society (repression) (Thesis 9), capital's political acknowledgment of the working class requires the unifying of society and factory. Capital's plan is outgrowing the factory to include society through a centralized State. This involves the development of the historical processes leading to the stage of social capital: the subordination of the individual capitalist to the collective capitalist, the subordination of all social relations to production relations, and the reduction of all forms of work to wage labor.

16

The signing of the NRA by the President (June 1933) marks the beginning of a new cycle of struggle. The second half of 1933 witnesses as many strikes as the whole of 1932 with three and a half times as many workers. By June 1934, with sharply reduced unemployment and a 38% growth of the total industrial payroll, the strike wave gathers momentum:



7.2% of the entire labor force (a peak not to be matched until 1937) is mobilized by the struggle. The crucial sectors are being affected — among them steel and auto workers, the West Coast longshoremens, and almost all textile workers, united behind wage, hours, and union recognition demands. 1935 is the year of both the CIO and the Wagner Act. Between the summer of 1935 and the spring of 1937, employment surpasses the 1929 level, from an index of 89.2 to 112.3. In a context of relative price stability, industrial production moves from an index of 85 to 118, and wages move from 69.1 to 110.1. The massification of the working-class struggle and the economic development of capitalist recovery are two sides of one process. 1936: The struggle circulates to small factories and marginal industries while the sit-downs begin at Firestone, Goodyear, and Goodrich. 1937 is the year of 4,740 strikes, the peak year in the generalization of the mass worker's struggle. In February GM capitulates; in March US Steel recognizes the Steel Workers Organizing Committee and accepts its basic demands: 10% wage increase for a 40-hour week.

17

The crucial aspect of the struggles throughout the New Deal is the general emergence of wages (wages, hours, unionization), the workers' share of the value produced mutually acknowledged by both capitalists and workers as the battlefield for the new stage of class struggle. For capital, wages are a means of sustaining development, while for the workers they represent the weapon that re-launches class offensive. It is precisely this contradictory political nature of wages (the means of workers' "integration" on one hand, and the basis for the class's political re-composition and attack on profit on the other) that causes Roosevelt's failure to ensure steady growth while at the same time maintaining control of the working class. To the threatening massification of struggles, big business responds with an economic recession, a refusal to invest, a "political strike of capital". (B. Rauch: The History of the New Deal)



The economic recession of 1937-38 is the first example of capital's use of the crisis as a means of regaining initiative in the class struggle. Inflation, unemployment, and wage cuts are weapons that break the workers' offensive and are means for a new political de-composition of the working class. The political necessity of the economic crisis shows dramatically that the Keynesian model is not sufficient to guarantee stability; only through an act of open violence can capital re-establish its domination over workers. Yet, it is only with the introduction of crises as a means of controlling the class that the Keynesian model can show its true value. While in 1933 the use of class struggle as the propelling element of capitalist development was the only alternative to economic recession, five years later, with the "Roosevelt recession", "crisis" is revealed as the alternative face of "development". Development and crisis become the two poles of one cycle. The "State-as-Crisis" is thus simply a moment of the "State-as-Planner" — planner of crisis as a pre-condition for a new development. From now on, capital's crises will no longer be "natural", uncontrollable events, but the result of a political decision, essential moments of actual "political business cycles". (Kalecki)

The political figure which dominates class struggle from the 1930s on is the mass worker. The technological leap of the Twenties has produced both the economic recession of 1929 and the political subject of class struggle in the Thirties (Thesis 8). The "scientific organization" of mass production necessitates a malleable, highly interchangeable labor force, easily movable from one productive sector to another and easily adjustable to each new level of capital's organic composition. By 1926, 43% of the workers at Ford require only one day for their training, while 36% require less than a week. The fragmentation and simplification of the work process undermine the static relationship between worker and job, disconnecting wage labor from "useful

labor" entirely. With the mass worker, "abstract labor" reaches its fullest historical development: The intellectual abstraction of Capital is revealed as worker's sensuous activity.

20

From the plant to the university, society becomes an immense assembly line, where the seeming variety of jobs disguises the actual generalization of the same abstract labor. This is neither the emergence of a "new working class" nor the massification of a classless "middle class", but a new widening of the material articulation of the working class proper. (In this process, however, lies the basis for much ideology. Since all forms of work are subsumed under capital's production, industrial production seems to play less and less of a role, and the factory seems to disappear. Thus, what is in fact an increasing process of proletarianization — the main accumulation of capital being the accumulation of labor power itself — is misrepresented as a process of tertiarization, in which the class dissolves into the abstract "people". Hence the peculiar inversion whereby the notions of "class" and "proletariat" appear as "abstractions", while "the people" becomes concrete.)

21

From the worker's viewpoint, interchangeability, mobility, and massification turn into positive factors. They undermine all divisions by productive role and sector. They provide the material basis for the political re-composition of the entire working class. By destroying the individual worker's pride in his or her skills, they liberate workers as a class from an identification with their role as producers. With the political demand of "more money and less work", the increasing alienation of labor becomes a progressive disengagement of the political struggles of the working class from its economic existence as mere labor power. From the workers' viewpoint, wages cannot be a reward for productivity and work, but are instead the fruits of their struggles. They cannot be a function of capital's

need for development, they must be an expression of the autonomous needs of the class. In the heat of the struggle, the true separation between labor power and working class reaches its most threatening revolutionary peak. "It is quite precisely the separation of the working class from itself, from itself as wage labor, and hence from capital. It is the separation of its political strength from its existence as an economic category." (Tronti)



*"All they think about is money."*