

Working Class Self-Activity

George Rawick

The history of the American working class is a subject obscure to the Old and New Left alike. For the most part, academic labor scholarship has been institutional history focusing on the trade union, and like all institutional orientations has been quite conservative. "Radical" labor history has similarly been little concerned with the working class because of its concentration on another institution, the radical political party. Marxists have occasionally talked about working-class self-activity, as well they might, given that it was Marx's main political focus; but as E. P. Thompson points out in the preface to his monumental *Making of the English Working Class*, they have almost always engaged in substituting the party, the sect, and the radical intellectual for class self-activity in their studies. (1) As a result of this institutional focus, labor history from whatever source generally ignores also social structure, technological innovation, and the relation between the structure and innovation. In the present article I shall attempt some notes toward a study of the American working class since 1919 which strives to avoid the main errors of the old historiography. It must be clear from the outset that this article can be no more than suggestive, that it will be sparse and at times abstract. Hopefully, however, it will engender serious consideration and further probing into its basic themes.

The great steel strike of 1919 marks one beginning of the struggle for industrial unionism. Building upon the tradition of the IWW, a gigantic strike of almost all American steel workers broke out that year, the workers divided into dozens of small craft unions, but under the leadership of two former IWW leaders, William Z. Foster and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (both soon to become leaders of the Communist Party), attempting to overcome the organizational limits of the craft structure. During World War I the introduction in the steel industry of significant technological rationalization was followed by the appearance of the entire apparatus of Taylorism, which included a whole range of procedures including time-and-motion studies and the development of new equipment to significantly increase the rate of exploitation. Despite the militancy of the workers, the craft-union form of organization was not powerful enough to withstand the implications of highly-rationalized industry, and the strike was broken. Taylorism had meant that workers could not gain anything significant by organization on a shop-by-shop basis. Monopoly capitalism, then at its most sophisticated in US Steel, demanded industry-wide organization if the workers' struggles were to succeed.

Before World War I, many skilled workers had significant control over their own time. They had the right to fairly-long breaks from work at their own discretion; they organized their work to suit their own needs and whims. Workers could regularly take off an extra day or two each month to handle personal affairs, which often included a small garden farm or other additional

sources of income. Workers controlled much of the hiring process, directly handled the relationship with their workmates in such matters as sickness and death benefits, and successfully bargained informally with plant managers and foremen.

Taylorism and its greatest innovation, the assembly line, was introduced to try to expropriate from workers their previous freedoms. Factory life of the 1920s was characterized by significant rationalization in steel, automobiles, electrical equipment, and petroleum and chemical products. Although wages increased to \$5 per day in the automobile industry, the amount of surplus value extracted from workers increased at a more rapid rate. Thus, while American workers received a wage level certainly higher than that known by workers in other industrially-advanced countries, they also worked harder and faster than any similar group of workers in other countries. Detroit and the assembly line became synonymous on a world-wide basis in the 1920s with high wages—and a degree of alienation hitherto even unanticipated. It would take a full-length study to substantiate this; here it must be simply asserted with the hope of encouraging documentation.

The relative increase in the standard of living in the 1920s was most significant for American workers, most of whom were foreign-born or in contact with relatives in Europe, or were from poor American rural backgrounds. Under such conditions most workers who experienced an increase in the standard of living were unwilling, under conditions in which they could not see their way clear to the creation of new forms of organization, to engage in militant action. Thus in heavily capitalized and rationalized industry, the decade was one of relative peace. There should be nothing surprising about this calm, however. The problems posed by mass production and the assembly line required some time and pressure before workers could fight back again.

The changes in American capitalism during the 1920s did not alter the low-capitalized industries, most of which were in the South. There were serious workers' struggles in sectors such as textiles, clothing, and low-priced consumer goods, where only limited technological rationalizations were economically feasible, and the labor of low-paid male and female workers was substituted for new technology. Under such conditions, the margin of profit came from attempting to make workers labor harder and accept wage cuts and deteriorating conditions. Most unions ignored these industries and made the workers look to their own resources and to whatever aid they could receive from radical organizations. In strike areas like Loray, Tennessee; Danville and Gastonia, North Carolina; and Passaic, New Jersey, the Communist Party was able to play an important role precisely because the American Federation of Labor was unwilling to attempt to organize the unskilled workers. Historians often present these strikes in such a way as to suggest their impossibility without Communist Party leadership; in my opinion this is a false impression. Indeed, long conversations I had many years ago with Fred Beal, a leading organizer of strike activity in Gastonia, suggest to me that these strikes might have been more successful if the Communist Party had been willing to follow the lead of workers.

In the soft-coal mines of Southern Illinois and in the bituminous coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia in the late 1920s and early 1930s, there were constant struggles of a similar nature. Preliminary investigations of these suggest that the self-activity of the workers was often sabotaged by the conflict among radical organizations over the mythic question: "Who should lead the

workers?" This kind of strike activity continued into the early 1930s in bloody pitched battle in the bituminous coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia. Here too we have a decaying industry unable to modernize; here too the official Left was able to play a meaningful role; and here too it subordinated the struggles of the workers to its own needs. In any case, the importance of strikes in low-capitalized industries during this period should not be exaggerated.

In 1958 an article in *The New International* (an American Marxist periodical, now defunct) on the New Deal had the following conclusion about why workers supported Roosevelt:

The problem is really simple if one is willing to lay aside romantic notions based upon the experience of other countries and their working-class movements. The American working class had not yet reached a level of consciousness that enabled it to do anything but accept the concessions it was able to force out of the pro-capitalist parties. The task in the New Deal period for the labor movement was the mass organization of the industrial workers.... One could not reasonably expect the American working class to leap so far ahead as to reject a New Deal, with its undeniable benefits, in the interests of a more class-conscious and politically-mature radical objective.

I was the author of this article. In writing it I demonstrated the backwardness not of the working class, but of the intellectuals who fail to understand the working class. Nor was I the only one convinced of the backwardness of the American workers. Some ten years ago I spent some time with Francis Perkins, then a professor of labor economics at Cornell, but previously Secretary of Labor under FDR and the person most responsible for the New Deal labor policy. Madame Perkins spoke to me along the following lines: Why didn't the working class in America ever attempt to change American society? We all expected that it would in 1933. At the first meeting of the Cabinet after the President took office in 1933, the financier and adviser to Roosevelt, Bernard Baruch, and Baruch's friend General Hugh Johnson, who was to become the head of the National Recovery Administration, came in with a copy of a book by Gentile, the Italian Fascist theoretician, for each member of the Cabinet, and we all read it with great care.

Madame Perkins was quite wrong. The American working class did change American society, despite the fact that American capitalism was very powerful and had often indicated clearly in the 1930s that it would resort to any means, if allowed to do so, to prevent a radical transformation of society.

We can estimate most sharply the power of the American working class if we look at its accomplishments comparatively. In Italy the crisis of capitalism of the decade of the Bolshevik Revolution and the World War produced Fascism as an answer to the bid of the Italian working class for power. In Germany, the crisis of capitalism produced first the Weimar Republic, which did nothing to alter the situation, and then Nazism; the consequence was the worst defeat any working class has ever known. The German working class was pulverized—unlike the Italian working class, which was never smashed to bits under fascism and in fact survived to destroy fascism itself. In France essentially the same

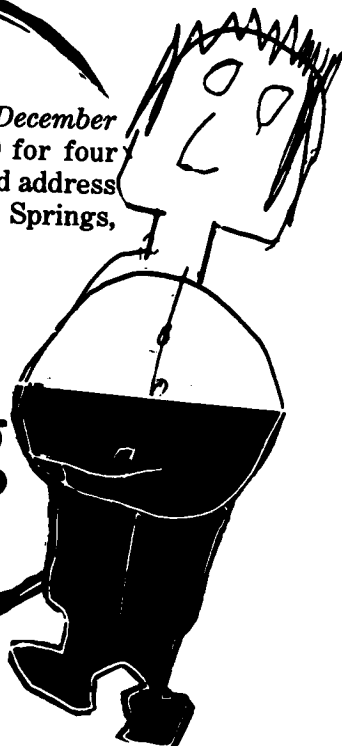
december

"...strikes me as ranking with the best dozen or so little magazines published in the U.S."—*News and Ideas*, *College English*, Dec. 1966.
"...stimulating, varied, enjoyable, enlightening, and absorbing."—*The Booklover's Answer* No. 11.
"...one of the fattest fullest mags on the scene."—*Writer's Forum*, Vol. II, No. 3.
"...a splendid magazine..."—*Bulletin of African History*, 1964.

If you wish to subscribe to *December Magazine*, the rate is \$5.00 for four issues. Send check, name, and address to: Box 274, Western Springs, Illinois 60558

A sample issue is \$1.00.

you
reading
us?



"...the excellent but little-known magazine, *December*."—*Esquire*, 1963.
"...avoids the imbalance of most literary mags..."—*Mt. Adams Review*, 1965.
"One of the better literary magazines."—*The Smith*, 1965

a magazine of the
arts and opinion

pattern as in Italy was repeated, with the difference that full-fledged Fascism came only as a result of the German military advance, since the French working class had managed to defend democracy throughout the 1930s, often over the heads of the radical parties.

In the United States the situation was different. Throughout the 1920s the working class found its organizations weakened; but in the 1930s the working class struggled and created powerful mass industrial unions of a kind never known anywhere in the world, unions that organized all the workers in most major industries throughout the nation. The working class of America won victories of a scale and quality monumental in the history of the international working class. Only the capture of state power by a relatively-small working class of Russia—a state power it did not retain—has surpassed the magnitude of its victory in the Thirties.

The full organization of the major American industries, however, was a mark of the victories, not the cause of the victories, of the American working class. The unions did not organize the strikes; the working class in the strikes and through the strikes organized the unions. The growth of successful organizations always followed strike activity when some workers engaged in militant activities and others joined them. The formal organization—how many workers organized into unions and parties, how many subscriptions to the newspapers, how many political candidates nominated and elected, how much money collected for dues and so forth—is not the heart of the question of the organization of the working class. The statistics we need to understand the labor history of the time are not these. Rather, we need the figures on how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through the slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class's own initiative.

In virtually every year since 1919, American workers have either led, or were second or third, in both the absolute and relative numbers of hours lost through strikes. In 1932 there were only 840 strikes; in 1933 there were 1700; by 1936, 2200; by 1937, 4740; in 1938, only 2500; in 1941, 4000; in both 1944 and 1945, 5000. In 1946, the year of the greatest militancy up to that point, there were just under 5000 strikes involving nearly five million workers, fourteen and a half per cent of the work force. And as the strike wave developed the unions grew. All of this occurred in the midst of a great depression and after more than a decade of inactivity in the area of industrial union organization. But most important, it all occurred not because the older unions attempted to organize industrial workers, but in spite of these unions and even against their opposition. When the crisis came, the response of the AF of L unions was to protect their own members' jobs and wages from the onslaught of millions of unorganized workers placed in the pool of the proletarians.

Only John L. Lewis and the oldest industrial union, the United Mine Workers, along with a few other older semi-industrial unions such as those in clothing and printing, responded at all. For the most part, what occurred was simple and direct. The workers in a given plant organized themselves into a strike committee, went out on strike, won some limited demands or lost, but maintained their organization. Eventually they joined with workers in other parts of the industry to form a national union.

There were three obstacles to the efforts of workers to organize unions. First there was the resistance from the employers who hired spies, blacklisted workers, fired activists, and finally created company unions. Second was the set of obstacles created by the top-ranking union leaders. Fearing that a strong industrial union would threaten the entrenched interests of craft-union leaders, the American Federation of Labor decreed that auto workers were to be organized in local federal unions, and that later these federal unions were to be broken up and their members divided among the craft unions. In the early years of the 1930s these tactics of the unions confused, demoralized, and slowed down the organization of workers. Only after a few years did the workers gain renewed confidence to organize, if need be against the unions. Third was the set of obstacles created by the Government under the National Recovery Administration. With the co-operation of the established unions, the NRA saw to it that demands for more money or a check on the growth of speed-up were ignored.

One recent case study of the organization of a particular union is illustrative of this process of the self-activity of the working class and the obstacles it encountered. (2)

When workers in the Budd Manufacturing Company, in September 1933, voted to apply for an AF of L federal charter, Budd management hastily installed a company union. When a committee of the new federal union asked management for recognition, they were flatly told that the company had already recognized an association for bargaining purposes. Hearing this, the membership voted to strike the plant. The company responded by hiring strike-breakers and continuing to operate the plant, although production was crippled. The Regional Labor Board stepped in and ordered the strike ended and an election conducted to determine whether the workers wanted the federal union or the company union to represent them.

But the company had other ideas: It had no intention of laying off non-strikers. The National Labor Board answered this by referring the case to the National Compliance Board of the NRA; the Board handed down recommendations calling for an election under rules favorable to the company union, and discriminating against the strikers. Finally, in March 1934, the Budd case was included in the general settlement forced through by the Government to head off widespread strikes in the auto industry scheduled for March. The company agreed to re-employ one striker for every two men hired.

The role of the AF of L was characteristic. A full month elapsed after the strike began before AF of L president William Green gave it official recognition (but no financial help). By the time the strike had ended, the union affiliated with the AF of L in the plant was dead. The workers at Budd turned to new organization and were among the first to create the United Automobile Workers.

Such were the experiences of auto workers throughout the industry. And after two and a half years of such defeats, inflicted by a combination of employers and government and union officials, a new movement began which would wage the sit-down strikes and from which would grow the UAW. A look at the history of the sit-downs will indicate that in this most-advanced example of working-class struggle, the genuine advances of the working class were made by the struggle from below, by the natural organization of the working class, rather than by the bureaucratic elaboration of the administration of the working class from above. Symbolically, the first sit-downs came spontaneously in Atlanta, Georgia, not in Detroit under the direction of the Left.

During the early years of the Depression (before 1937), the struggles remained fairly small while workers sought a new form. In 1934 the organization of industrial unions began in earnest. With the further downswing of wages and employment in 1937, the workers in autos, then in rubber, and then in other industries occupied the plants, slept there, ate there, refused to leave or produce, protected themselves inside the plants, and organized massive demonstrations outside. Thousands of troops surrounded the factories with tanks and artillery, not firing because of the certainty that it would further radicalize the situation. Out of the strikes came the right of workers to join unions, with virtual closed-shop conditions won in many industries.

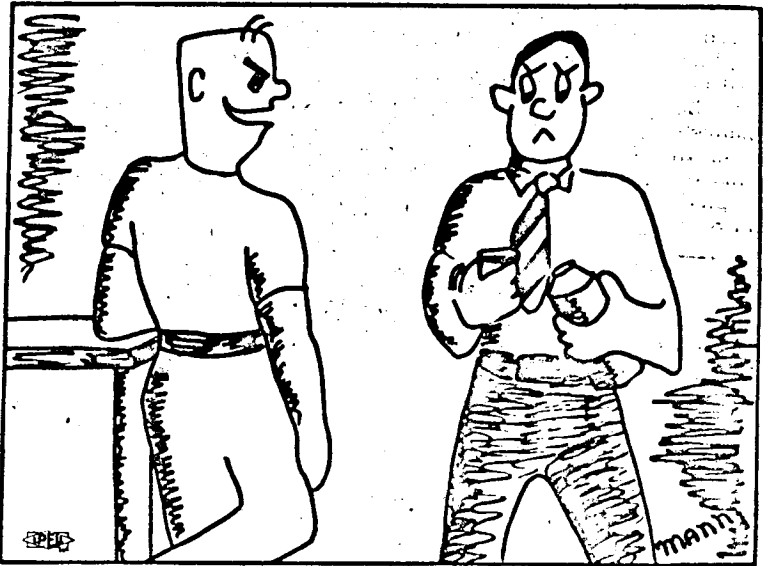
Throughout the War, workers were faced with a general wage freeze and a commodity-scarce economy. Workers made good money by working overtime and continually demonstrating that they would never accept lower wages again. However, the most basic struggles the workers engaged in were attempts to improve working conditions, slow down the speed of work, and resist the attempts of management to turn the factories into smaller military camps by disciplining the workers. Workers in coal production engaged in very militant strikes to increase wages directly, because during the 1930s coal miners had not even been able to raise their pay.

At the end of the War, there was an attempt to roll back wage increases made during the war, to force the working class to accept a smaller share of the product. Only after the greatest outpouring of strikes and militancy since 1919 did American capitalism agree to a new wage policy.

The price of the new wage policy was the further linking of the union leadership with government and management decision-making processes. Since the end of

The Needle

by Mann



"Now, Boss, why should I want to put cutting oil in your thermos?"
from - Correspondence

World War II the unions have been able to gain monetary wage increases, generally speaking, to keep up with increases of productivity: Unions can guarantee that the size of the unionized worker's slice of the national product does not diminish, although inflation continues to wipe out many gains. In return unions have had to insure industrial peace by disciplining the workers and curtailing their demands on all issues save money and fringe benefits. In particular unions resist demands of workers for greater shares of production and lessened exploitation.

Unions have generally given up the demand for a shorter work week. Indeed, in many industries the de facto situation now is that workers work fifty hours or more per week. Workers' pay does keep up with productivity, but only if overtime pay is included. The grievance procedure which has been the main protection of the worker in the past has all but totally broken down. With thousands of unresolved grievances common in every major plant, the speed-up has increased very rapidly without much union opposition, automation proceeds without limitation by the union, and attempts of workers to gain control over working conditions and procedures are systematically fought by the unions.

All of this must be understood as part of the necessary device whereby the State has directly transformed capitalism since the 1930s. The State regulates the flow of capital, owns outright or indirectly large bodies of capital, (for example, the aerospace program in both its public and private sectors), and through the contract—enforced by the shop committeemen and union stewards, who in effect become agents of the State—disciplines the workers. On the one hand, the New Deal acts—from the NRA (declared unconstitutional) to the Federal Reserve Act, Securities and Exchange Act, Agricultural Adjustment Act et cetera—provided the legal context in which workers raised their wages through massive strikes at the end of World War II. On the other hand, the CIO unions became through the process the political weapons of the State against the working class. Carefully-legalized mass industrial unions were a necessary part of this development; industry-wide bargaining agents able to impose wage rates high enough to drive out all marginal producers who cut prices by super-exploitation of workers were in effect incorporated into the State apparatus.

The full incorporation of the unions within the structure of American State capitalism has led to very widespread disaffection of the workers from the unions. Workers are faced squarely with the problem of finding means of struggle autonomous of the unions, a problem which, while always present under capitalism than anywhere else. As a consequence workers struggle in the factories through wildcat strikes and sporadic independent organizations. Outside the factory only young workers and black workers find any consistent radical social-political expression, and even the struggles of blacks and youths are at best weakly linked to the struggles in the factory.

There is often a very-sectarian and remarkably-undialectical reaction to these developments. Some historians and New Leftists argue that it demonstrates that the CIO was a failure which resulted only in the workers' disciplining. This argument ignores the gains of the CIO in terms of higher living standards, more security for workers, and increased education and enlightenment. Clearly, the victories are embedded in capitalism and the agency of victory, the union, has become an agency of capitalism as well. This is a concrete example of what contradiction means in a dialectical sense; and it is part of a process which

leads to the next stage of the workers' struggle, the wildcat strike.

There are two characteristics of the wildcat strike which represent a new stage of development: first, through this device workers struggle simultaneously against the bosses, the State, and the union; second, they achieve a much more direct form of class activity, by refusing to delegate aspects of their activity to an agency external to themselves. (3)

When the wave of wildcat strikes first began to appear as the new form of working-class self-activity and organization, it was hard to see (except very abstractly) where they would lead. But after glimpses of the future afforded by the workers' councils during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the French uprising of May and June 1968, the new society which can only be fully realized and protected by revolutionary struggle is clearly revealed: workers' councils in every department of national activity, and a government of workers' councils.

FOOTNOTES

(1) The last work approaching a full-scale Marxist history of the US working class was in the early additions to Anthony Bimba's History of the American Working Class, which while theoretically above average was factually far below. A mark of the backwardness of American Marxism, its failure to concern itself with its own working class, is the fact that History of the American Working Class by Frederich Sorge, who lived in the US in the latter Nineteenth Century while remaining one of Marx's closest co-workers, has never been translated into English from its initial publication in Neue Zeit.

(2) See Frank Marquart's study of the creation of a union at the Budd Manufacturing Company in Philadelphia which appeared in Speak Out (Number 9). Unquestionably, hundreds of similar stories can be collected; doubters should listen to the sit-down stories of auto workers from Flint, Michigan, and compare them to the official UAW history which emphasized the strikes' leadership (none other than the present national officers and executive board of the UAW). Radical scholars should begin to collect materials while there is still time.

(3) Marxists who are familiar with the basis of the Hegelian dialect, in the master-slave discussion in which Hegel indicates that the slaves must struggle against elements of their own class as well as against the masters, will not be surprised by this historical analysis. In Facing Reality (Facing Reality Publishing Committee, Detroit, 1956), CLR James offers the following useful summary of dialectics:

(a) All development takes place as a result of self-movement, not organization or direction by external forces.

(b) Self-movement springs from and is the overcoming of antagonisms within an organism, not the struggle against external foes.

(c) It is not the world of nature that confronts man as an alien power to be overcome. It is the alien power that he has himself created.

(d) The end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is not the enjoyment, ownership, or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, not utility.