

The Working Class

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The question of the working class is an old and honored one in the left generally, although it has fallen on lean days. There are various points of view about the working class which are considered Marxist. I have a particular point of view which I consider Marxist, but I will not get into any of the sectarian business of "I am a better Marxist than you are." A point of view has to be valid in the ways in which it reflects reality, in the way in which it provides useful ideas with which people can view reality or deal with reality. It is only in that sense, and in the sense that discussion is limited, that I indicate my theoretical viewpoints. We are not talking about any view of the working class; we are talking about variant possibilities within a broadly left or Marxist framework.

The question has certain built-in problems. The first problem is not the easiest one: Who or what is the working class? It is clearly not a cohesive entity. There are many contradictions and differences. There is the problem of where to draw the line, who is in and who is out of the working class. Apart from that, there are clearly differences in skill, in sex, in age, in nationality, in

race, in income. My basic emphasis is not on the differences, but, because in any discussion there is an inevitable tendency to oversimplify, I think it is necessary for people to be aware of the fact that we are not talking of a homogeneous entity. We are talking about a very complex, contradictory, constantly changing entity, but yet one which can justifiably be viewed as an entity. It is not simply a sum of various kinds of people. There is such a thing as the working class, no matter how you define it. Although the differences and contradictions within the class have to be recognized and dealt with, the overriding characteristic is not homogeneity (that is too strong a word), but a consistent, even if complex, totality.

We are not discussing the working class because we want to find out what the noble worker is all about. We are concerned with social change. The fundamental problem of how you define and how you view the working class is the problem of whether the working class is a viable instrument for social change. There is a classic Marxist point of view that defines the socialist revolution as the proletarian revolution. That is, society can only be transformed fundamentally by the working class, no matter who else participates. If there is no working-class revolution, there is no socialist revolution, although there may be a political revolution or changes of various kinds. In classical Marxist terms socialist and proletarian are interchangeable, they are identical.

Before World War II that classic definition, although very often abstract and meaningless, was almost universally accepted. After World War II, however, this view of the working class began to disintegrate and various points of view began to appear. There appears within the left in the United States the whole business of the "hard hats," the Wallace movement, the so-called reactionary, racist working class. There is the idea of the affluent working class, the working class transformed into middle class, and so on.

A certain amount of care has to be exercised in working out a definition. A definition is not a fact. It is not true or false. It is useful or not useful. Which means that the working class can be defined with some legitimacy in different ways. It can be defined usefully, or it can be defined in ways that conceal elements of reality. Marx did not have an all-inclusive definition of the working class. The definition of a productive laborer in Marx, for example, is not the same as his definition of the working class. There were people who were clearly members of the working class who were not productive laborers, that is, who did not produce surplus value. Pretty clearly, Marx's definition of class is based on relation to the means of production. And yet it is also used by Marx, by Engels, and by Marxists generally, in a much broader sense to include the families of workers, that is, the working-class housewife, working-class children, and so forth. And that is also a legitimate use.

In brief, one cannot talk, and one should not think, in terms of some fixed, absolute definition that can take care of everybody in the world. (You either are or are not a member of the working class, and that's it. Tough, you didn't make it, kid.) It is much more complex and much more flexible than that. And, if you are going to view it dialectically, that is, in a Marxist way, it is a definition, or a series of definitions, which has to change if, as seems true, the working class itself changes. The definition of a worker in 1850 is not the same as that of a worker in 1950. The composition, the size, the character of the class changes and, therefore, the definition of the class changes.

In particular, it is not the sociological view that has to account for everybody. The classical sociological definition is one of income: from 0 to \$5,000 a year is lower working class, \$5,000 to \$10,000 is upper working class, \$10,000 to \$15,000 is lower middle class, \$15,000 to \$20,000 is upper middle class, and so on. That is, of course, very neat — it takes care of everybody. Nobody is left out; everybody belongs to some class. But in real life there are a lot of marginal people. In which class is the guy who runs a gas station, puts in 80 hours a week pumps gas, gets his hands dirty, but also employs half a dozen people and makes a profit?

If you really have to define everybody, then you are not in the business of making revolutions, you are in the business of defining people. And what I want to get away from is the idea that unless every living soul is taken care of, there is something wrong with the theory. We are dealing with social categories, which are abstractions, and which are only approximations of reality. They can never include every human being in any kind of definition.

In recent years there have been essentially two views that tend to counter the traditional Marxist view of the working class. They are two different versions of the disappearance of the working class. One is the view that the working class is literally disappearing. It arose, especially in the late fifties and early sixties, with the development of automation and the apparent disappearance of blue-collar jobs. It is not entirely a view of the disappearance of the working class, but, rather, a view that the blue-collar working class is disappearing.

The other tends to do the same thing in the opposite way. It tends to see all of society becoming working-class. We are all workers together: students, teachers, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and salaried people of various kinds. So the working class is eliminated not by disappearing, but by having everybody join it except for a handful of capitalists at the top. It is a definition that tends to be limited in usefulness because it blurs significant distinctions that still remain in this society.

The first view has to be dealt with in terms of specific facts. Everybody knows that the service sectors, the government sectors, of the modern economy have expanded tremendously at the expense

of traditional production and transportation sectors. There is an interesting article by Andrew Levison, in the December 13, 1971 issue of THE NATION (2), that indicates how these things get distorted in government statistics. His evidence is based on American government statistics, but I'm sure that these categories are pretty much the same in Canada, Western Europe, and so on. There is the following switch in categories: To begin with there are the major sectors in the society, manufacturing, agriculture, service and government. There is a relative decline in manufacturing and an increase in service and white-collar employment. Even in terms of these categories, however, there is not an absolute decline in manufacturing employment, although the substantial increases are in categories such as hotels, insurance companies, government employment, etc. Levison takes the major categories one step further. When government employment is broken down into sub-categories, some startling information emerges, specifically, that the blue-collar working class is not disappearing.

With the decline of urban transportation in the United States in the 1930s, for example, city transportation systems were municipalized, so that bus drivers became civil servants. Did they thereby lose their character as blue-collar workers? Are mail workers, or people who handle the sacks or drive the mail trucks, blue-collar or white-collar? Are garbage collectors blue-collar or white-collar? Are janitors in public schools blue-collar or white-collar? In short, there is a range of categories which is blue-collar, but which is contained in the expanding category of government employment.

The same thing is true of the service trades. There has been a tremendous expansion of hotels and motels. Except behind the desk, where you have a clerk or two, hotel employees are chambermaids, bellhops, busboys, waiters, and other occupations which cannot reasonably be called white-collar.

There is another aspect to this change in the nature of the working class and the concealment of that change. There has been a substantial increase in certain kinds of white-collar occupations, particularly in banks, insurance companies, offices, and the expansion of central offices of manufacturing concerns. But there is also an element of change in the nature of the work which contradicts the expansion in the category. That is, there are many more people who are concerned with bookkeeping today than there were 10 or 20 years ago, but instead of being bookkeepers who enter figures in a ledger, they tend to be IBM machine operators, computer operators, and punch-card operators. The increase in the number of secretaries replaces individuals who have a one-to-one relation to the boss with rows of women behind desks who are essentially machine operators. They sit at their typewriter with a dictaphone machine strapped to their head, never seeing the source of the material they are typing, and are supervised by a forelady

who makes sure their breaks are not too long. Except for the fact that it tends to be cleaner, lighter, and a little bit quieter, this new kind of white-collar work is less and less distinguishable from factory work.

It is only a matter of time before many of these so-called new categories which are destroying the old reality of the working class will lead to the kind of ideology that corresponds to the new reality. That is, a machine operator is a machine operator is a machine operator. And, while there is a difference between a punch press and an IBM machine, the difference is not as great as the difference between a punch-press operator and someone taking shorthand or entering figures in a book. It is dangerous to be glib about the nature of the concrete changes that are taking place. There is not, and there is no evidence for, any decline in the level of blue-collar employment. By blue-collar employment I mean manual work, as opposed to clerical or retail trades. The latter are also working-class, but have always been viewed as less potentially revolutionary because they are less related to central matters of production and transportation.

The second view of the nature of the working class is that, because of the all-pervasive nature of alienation in modern society, everybody can be defined as a worker. More and more sections of society are suffering from the same or similar ills that workers have traditionally suffered from — exploitation, alienation, etc. My own view of this question is not universally accepted, but I present it because I think it is a necessary antidote to some of the very glib formulations of what is revolutionary in this society. To begin with, I do not think it is necessary, in order to justify the validity of a movement, to define it as working-class. An anti-war movement, such as the anti-war movement in the United States during the Vietnam war, was a perfectly legitimate movement even though it was overwhelmingly non-working-class. Student movements have an independent validity, working-class or not. Women's movements, national movements, and so forth, have a validity in combatting this society which does not require them to be defined as working-class for them to be justified. But what is involved is, that if you begin to define all of these movements and all of these individuals, because they suffer some ill under capitalist society, as working-class, you begin to lose sight of very important distinctions. In another article by Andrew Levison (3), he reports what a young worker said in regard to defining everybody who is alienated in some way as working-class. In this case the popular notion among intellectuals that a college professor who is forced to prepare mundane and insignificant papers is a victim, like the factory workers, of alienation, epitomizes the complete lack of understanding that exists. The "young worker studying under the GI Bill who encountered this argument suggested that the professor would begin to understand how a factory worker feels if he had

to type a single paragraph, not papers, from nine to five, every day of the week. Instead of setting the pace himself, his typewriter carriage would begin to move at nine and continue at a steady rate until five. The professor's job would be at stake if he could not keep up the pace. For permission to go to the bathroom or to use the telephone, the professor would have to ask a supervisor. His salary of sixteen thousand dollars for a full professor would be cut by nine thousand dollars, and his vacations reduced to two weeks a year. He could also be ordered to work overtime at the discretion of the company or lose his job. If unlucky, he might have to work the night shift. Finally, if he faced the grim conclusion that his job was a dead end, his situation would then approximate that of an unskilled young worker in a contemporary auto factory." That is one level of difference. The reality of blue-collar work, factory work, or even white-collar work is somewhat different from the various other forms of alienation which exist in this society. But there is another element involved.

There has clearly been a change in the classic middle class in modern society. The middle class used to be a self-employed middle class—the independent farmer, the small businessman, the independent professional, and so on. The bulk of that has disappeared. Instead there is now a salaried middle class, which performs similar, and sometimes not so similar, functions, but essentially functions of social control.

An important distinction between teachers or social workers and manual workers is that manual workers manipulate things and teachers and social workers manipulate people. And although they are exploited and underpaid, and should unionize and strike, they perform certain functions of control in this society which cannot be ignored by simply defining them as working-class. If that distinction is lost, then a very important distinction that relates to various tactical and strategic questions is lost. If you define everybody that is getting low pay (and many teachers get less than many workers; there are tool and die workers that make much more than grade-school teachers), then, unless you go back to a definition in terms of income, that does not change the reality of one being essentially middle-class and the other being essentially working-class. Both have reason to resist and revolt against this society. There is no social revolution in the modern world that I know of that can take place with simply the working class. Other sections of society are bound to participate. The French events of 1968, for example, were touched off by student demonstrations, students battling police in Paris and elsewhere for several weeks. Society is an integrated whole. But that is another type of question. The difference is that street demonstrations become transformed into a social revolution if the industrial working class intervenes and moves to take over the means of production. Unless we keep in mind that there are different types of work with different rela-

tionships to the process of production, important distinctions are lost.

But definitions and distinctions are only the beginning. There is still the question which derives from the classical Marxist view of whether the worker is the key to the revolutionary overthrow of this society. Are workers so exploited that they will revolt?

What is there that will make a worker revolt? People have heard about the affluent society — the well-paid workers who have become middle-class, own a car (maybe two cars), can send their kids to college, have a summer home, a boat, and any number of things. Some of that is exaggerated. Most workers do not have all these things. Many workers work all year long and get paid under official poverty levels. But in the fundamental areas of basic industry which are crucial to Marx's theory — the auto industry, steel, mining, and so forth — there are, in fact, in Canada and in the United States, the best-paid industrial workers in the world. There is still insecurity — it is pretty obvious today with the levels of unemployment. But when working, particularly with forced overtime, the pay is fairly good. Is that kind of supposed affluence enough to transform the traditional revolutionary working class to defenders of capitalist society, defenders of the status quo?

A brief look at the reality of life in production will indicate that that is not likely and has, in fact, not taken place. In most sectors of production, and in service and clerical work, working conditions are oppressive and are, in fact, deteriorating. Resistance has been most visible in heavy industry, still overwhelmingly male (although the number of women workers in this area is growing). For example, the General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio is the most automated automobile factory in the world. It is made up overwhelmingly of young workers with an average age in the twenties. They have been having certain difficulties there, strikes from time to time, and terrible things like that. One of the things that they bragged about was that over a hundred cars an hour came off that Vega line; that a job on that assembly line took 36 seconds to do. That means that on a hot summer day when the temperature is in the 90s and the drinking fountain is about 10 yards away, you can't get a drink; because if you got there and back, a car would have gone by. But to that category of time must be added another category. A blue-collar worker at the Lordstown plant knows that that is where he or she is going to be for the rest of his or her life. Workers who have accumulated a couple of years' seniority know that they will have their job, or one like it, for the rest of their lives. There is nothing in terms of payment or fringe benefits or pensions that compensates for the kind of alienation and exploitation which is universally characteristic of blue-collar work. This does not mean that all jobs are on the Vega assembly line. But the 36 seconds is not too startling. In *ALIENATION AND FREEDOM*, published in 1960, Robert Blauner noted that the average job in

auto was under one minute. So that what is involved is the change from about 58 seconds to 36 seconds in 15 years. 58 seconds is not much of an improvement over 36 seconds. The auto industry is much more rationalized than many other industries, but the fundamental character and drive of all industry is the same. Rationalize production to get rid of workers to reduce the amount of time it takes to do any job. In that context, the only thing that would be surprising would be that workers did not strike or resist or revolt. The belief that \$5.50 or \$6.00 an hour compensates for that kind of alienation, is the belief that workers are an inferior breed, not like ordinary people. We, obviously, wouldn't stand for that kind of nonsense; but workers — they don't know any better. And it should come as no surprise that, in fact, they do resist.

There are some interesting letters from executives of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada in Windsor to Leonard Woodcock, President of the UAW; Douglas Fraser, a Vice-President; and C. Brooks, President of Local 444 of the UAW in Windsor, Ontario. The letters complain to the union about the miserable behavior of these damned Chrysler workers. The letter to Woodcock and Fraser is dated September 8, 1973. "Dear Sirs: You are fully aware, without my detailing them, of the extremely unsatisfactory record of illegal, unauthorized and unwarranted strikes that we have had in our Windsor plants in recent years, the most recent of which consisted of massive walkouts on August 27, 28, 29, 30 and September 4." (September 1, 2, and 3 must have been holidays.) "This unsatisfactory record was the subject of a lengthy conference with you today.... You urged us nevertheless to rescind the disciplinary action which we took yesterday against 1447 employees who took part in the most recent series of strikes. And so, in view of your strong assurances and our firm belief that you will carry them out, we will comply with your request and rescind the disciplinary action we took with respect to Windsor employees yesterday."

A letter of May 6, 1974, to Mr. C. Brooks, President, Local 444, states: "On April 26, 1974, the Corporation, as a result of representations made by officers of the Local Union, agreed to the reinstatement of six individuals who had been discharged for their participation in an illegal work stoppage...." The unrest continues. And again, the corporation fires a lot of people; the union says no, you can't do that and give us all a bad name; so they rescind some of the firings. In this letter they announce reduction of some of the discharges to 60 days off.

Several letters are addressed to Mr. D. McDermott, Vice-President and Director for Canada of the International Union, UAW, from Mr. J. H. McGivney, a Chrysler official. They are dated April 18, May 22, November 26, and November 27, 1973, and March 28 and April 2, 1974. Each letter begins with the sentence: "This letter is written to inform you that on (here each letter lists

no less than three dates and as many as eleven dates in the weeks preceding the date of the letter) the following incidents occurred: " There follows, in each of the letters, a detailed listing of acts of resistance and sabotage. They make fascinating reading:

From the letter of April 18, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant

April 2

At 11:16 p.m., a 16-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9303, Body-in-White Division. A body bolt was found jammed in the No. 3 drive. Eighteen units were lost. Attempted sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of May 22, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant

May 7

All Shifts — Dept. 9075, Millwrights. Beginning with the midnight shift (normal starting time 11:30 p.m.), 28 employees punched in prior to 11:00 p.m. and punched out one-half hour early at 7:30 p.m. On the day shift, 25 employees punched in prior to 6:45 a.m. and punched out at 3:15 p.m. Normal hours are 7:45 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. On the afternoon shift, 18 employees punched in prior to 3:00 p.m. and out at 11:30 p.m. Normal hours are 3:54 p.m. to 12:24 p.m. In most cases, supervision did not put employees to work until normal starting times....

May 8

Day and Midnight Shifts — In Dept. 9075, Millwrights, the employees were again arriving for work an hour early and leaving an hour early. Early arrival and quitting times were experienced in this department on the midnight shift on May 9, 10, 11, and 12.

The millwrights (joined by the carpenters on May 10), perhaps after attempting to negotiate the matter with the company, were simply organizing a change in shift hours. There is no indication in the letters whether the attempt was ultimately successful.

From the letter of November 26, 1973:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant

November 7

Day Shift — A 19-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9131, Motor Line. A bolt was found jammed in the line. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of March 28, 1974:

Windsor Assembly Plant

March 20

Afternoon Shift — At 8:42 p.m., a nine-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9308, Metal Line, Body-in-White Division. A dunnage pin had been jammed in the line. Production lost — nine units. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of April 2, 1974:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant

March 25

Day Shift — At 8:45 a.m., a two-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9121, Frame Line. A spring clip had been threaded through the links of the drive chain. Production lost — 1/2 job. Sabotage is extremely likely.

One thing that is distinctive about these itemized lists at one complex (three plants) of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada is that they are recorded. Another thing about this situation is that they do not really want to make it public because it can get out of hand. There were also charges of sabotage in the Lordstown situation. The workers said that the speed of the line forced them to make defective cars, because they couldn't do a proper job of assembling them. The company said that the workers were sabotaging the cars. That is the kind of dispute that corporations never want to escalate because they can't win. So instead, there are long, detailed, confidential letters to union bureaucrats asking, in effect, What are you going to do about these damned people? There is sabotage throughout industry. That tends to be a lot closer to the reality of what the modern working class is like than anything that would be learned by looking at workers' paychecks or by finding out about their fringe benefits. There is, literally, a continual civil war going on in modern industry. This relates to a range of problems and possibilities which speak directly to the question of whether the modern industrial working class, the post - World War II working class, is a viable force for social change.

One of the elements that goes into this kind of struggle is the various levels and kinds of consciousness that move a modern industrial worker. Consciousness is a very tricky word. One of the problems in dealing with the working class, as opposed to "labor movement," "labor leaders," and so forth, is that you are dealing with people who do not have vocal or written expression of their ideas and beliefs. Labor leaders make speeches, workers do not. It is very natural to assume that when George Meany, AFL-CIO President, or Leonard Woodcock or any other labor leader makes a speech or makes a pronouncement, he somehow speaks for the workers he is supposed to represent. The fact of the matter is that they do not.

There is another element. Working-class reality is a totality that goes far beyond the ordinary intellectual view of consciousness. The usual way to view consciousness is in terms of formal statement of belief. Unfortunately, or fortunately, in terms of the working class and its living reality, that simply does not work. The following is an example of how it does not work.

In the 1940s, during World War II, most of the labor movement gave a no-strike pledge. Labor leaders agreed to put patriotism before class interest and said that during the course of World War II workers would not strike. There was much resistance and opposition to this. If corporations did not agree to give up profits, why should workers agree to give up the right to strike? In one union, the UAW, this struggle over the no-strike pledge had a very open and formal character. In the 1943 convention of the UAW the dispute came to a head in a very strange way. There were various resolutions presented, against and for the no-strike pledge. All of them were defeated, leaving the union without a no-strike pledge. The bureaucrats on the platform were thus humiliated in the presence of government dignitaries because they could not deliver their membership anymore. They did what has become traditional in the UAW, the cure for democracy being more democracy. If workers vote the wrong way, they are made to vote again, and to keep on voting until they learn to vote the right way. The bureaucrats said that the convention was not really representative enough (which it would have been, obviously, if it had reaffirmed the no-strike pledge). And since this is a very important question, what is needed is a membership referendum.

They had a membership referendum, which was the perfect sociological survey. Every member got a secret ballot which was filled out in the privacy of a kitchen or living room and which was mailed back in. The secrecy was protected because both sides were represented on the committee that ran the referendum. It was a pretty fair count as these things go. When the ballots were counted, the membership of the UAW had voted two-to-one to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. It was rather reasonable to draw the conclusion that the consciousness of auto workers was that they

placed patriotism before class interest; that in a major war workers should not strike; no matter what the provocation, war production had to continue.

There was, however, a slight problem. Before the vote, during the vote, and after the vote, the majority of auto workers wildcatted. What, then, was the consciousness of the auto workers? Were they for or against the no-strike pledge? There is a further problem. As in most votes, most people did not vote. The majority which voted for the pledge was not a majority of the members of the UAW. But the strikers did include a majority of the UAW. Experience in a factory can give you insight into how these things work. Some guy listening to the casualties and the war reports, votes to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. The next day, going in to work, the foreman cusses him out, and he says, "To hell with you," and out he goes. And you say, "I thought you were for the no-strike pledge." And he says, "Yeah, sure, but look at that son of a bitch." To workers, workers do not cause strikes. Capitalists cause strikes. So if strikes are to be prevented, the thing to do is to get rid of all these grievances. It's these lousy foremen who do not want to get rid of all these grievances who cause all these strikes.

The whole idea of consciousness is more complex and is a much larger totality than simply formal statements of belief, which would be sufficiently dealt with simply by having a survey, or that postcard ballot, or whatever. There is a reality in which often, when not given any other choice, workers appear to be saying things which are conservative or reactionary. It is also true that many workers have very reactionary views on a whole range of subjects, like race, sex, age, skills, and so on. Workers are not the noble savage, all pure and honest and forthright and revolutionary. But reality, which is a 36-second job for the rest of your life, the reality, which is sabotage recorded every single day in the Chrysler plants in Windsor, Ontario, is a reality which forces workers to behave in contradiction to their own stated beliefs. Unless that behavior is included in the understanding of their consciousness, there is no sense of what the working class is capable of doing, or the ways in which it explodes, or the ways in which strike waves or wildcat strikes appear. And it is that reality which sustains the belief that the working class is a viable force for social change.

However, there are also other elements. People tend to view workers as victims. They are exploited, they are alienated, they have 36-second jobs, etc. I talked to workers on a wildcat strike at a Chrysler stamping plant about 15 miles outside of Detroit a few years ago. It was the first day of the strike and there were a few guys on the picket line — you don't really need a great effort to shut a plant down in the Detroit area. This was a stamping plant making parts for various Chrysler cars. What the workers were saying was, if we're out one day, Chrysler Jefferson, Dodge Main,

and the Plymouth plant in Detroit shut down. If we're down two days, Windsor, Ontario shuts down. If we're down three days, St. Louis, Missouri shuts down. And so on. One of the realities of working-class existence is not simply victimization, but power, and an awareness of that power when it seems to be appropriate, or when the possibility opens up. Not all workers have that power. In a plant making trim with 16 other plants making the same kind of trim, workers can go out for six months without being noticed. But in a crucial kind of plant, or on a railroad, or if the auto industry is shut down, or the steel industry, or some other industry, workers become aware of a social reality which is different from what is available to middle-class radicals or anyone else.

If teachers or students shut down a school, the school is shut down. But when five thousand people in some small town in Ohio shut down a stamping plant, within two weeks two-thirds of General Motors is shut down and steel plants begin to lay off and railroads begin to lay off and so on. Those workers who have access to that kind of power are aware of that reality. That is one of the elements that make up the totality that has to go into the kind of social crisis that makes a revolutionary change in society possible. It is the element that distinguishes, in very classical Marxist terms, the industrial or blue-collar working class, although not all blue-collar workers, from the reality available to other sections of society, no matter how hostile they might be to their own immediate conditions of life. There are limitations to what they can do about it until this perspective of fundamental change and fundamental power is opened up.

There has been a growing recognition of this reality, that is, the resistance of workers to their conditions of life. It has taken various forms over the years. The current form is "job enrichment." Everyone knows now that workers do not want to work. They are absent half the time, they sabotage, they go on wildcat strikes, they vote against contracts — and the term alienation has suddenly become reputable. There have been programs on television, articles in newspapers, articles in academic journals and other places, about job enrichment and blue-collar blues and how to overcome it and how to make workers satisfied with their jobs. Perhaps the best-known American example was a General Foods plant in Topeka, Kansas. It was a Gaines Dog Food plant and it got a lot of publicity because those jobs were really enriched. The workers even interviewed prospects to fill vacancies. But there are some other details about these fantastically enriched jobs. First, there are only 72 workers in that plant. It is not exactly the Ford assembly line. Second, all that this plant produces is dry dog food. This is as easy to picture as a 36-second job. All that happens in the plant is that pellets of dog food are poured into sacks, and the sacks are sealed mechanically and piled on the loading dock. How rich can these damned jobs get? Working there now may be better

than previously, because you choose your fellow workers and you can take a break when you want to, etc. But it isn't hard to picture someone who gets hired after being interviewed by the other workers two or three years from now. The new one looks around and says: Boy, this is a pretty shitty job. And the other workers say: You're crazy. It used to be bad, but now it's a great job. And he says: Well, I don't know about how it used to be, but it's a lousy job.

This may be an extreme case, but there are limits to enrichment. The basic limit is that it cannot be allowed to interfere with productivity. On a reduced scale, either on a smaller scale of production or on sub-assembly units, it is possible to allow a certain amount of workers' control of the job without interfering with productivity. However, it cannot be done on highly rationalized production lines. All that has been done is to set the clock back a number of years. Cars used to be made with everyone standing around and working as a team, in an enriched way. Did anyone praise work before Ford invented the assembly line? If that is the model, then work will tend to become as bad as it was in 1910 or, depending on the industry, in 1950 or 1940 or 1930.

What job enrichment amounts to is two things. One is a recognition of the continual resistance of workers to the nature of work in capitalist society. But, two, it is at the most a stopgap, a change that might satisfy people or at least have them quit struggling for a few years, until the reality once again catches up with them.

All of this seems to be in a very limited economic sphere. One of the things frequently heard from Marxists is that these are merely economic struggles. What about politics? What about a successful revolution? What about parties and soviets? The process involved is the following. Ordinary workers are in no position to think about the socialist society. If they thought about it too much they could not get to work the next day, not if their jobs took 36 seconds to do. If they thought how great socialism was, they would never make it through the day. So they blur their minds, and think about sex, about sports, about Saturday night, about getting drunk on the weekend, about the family, about anything at all, but not about the job and surely not about socialism.

However, the reality forces workers to fight. If the resistance reaches a certain point, workers walk out. If attacked by the police, they fight back. Suddenly they see that they have shut down half an industry. They see that people in other plants are coming out. The reality of struggle frees them to think about other possibilities. That is when workers begin to think about a new society — in the process of struggle for it. It is not an abstraction that when 51% of the workers have finally decided that they are for socialism and against capitalism, the time for the revolution can be set. No revolution has ever taken place in that way. Unless someone can demonstrate that workers are no longer willing to struggle against

their conditions of life, then the fundamental prerequisite for working-class socialist revolution is constantly present. The way it appears is in massive social upheavals.

There are two relevant examples from the post-World War II world. There is no conceivable sociological survey that could have given advance indication of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. With all the advantages of hindsight to formulate the questions, if someone had gone into the working-class suburbs of Budapest in October of 1956 and asked the workers what they thought, there would have been no inkling that one month later a socialist revolution and workers' councils would have covered Hungary and the Hungarian Revolution would have taken place. No survey in the working-class suburbs of Paris in March or April of 1968 would have revealed that one month later ten million workers would have occupied all the factories of France and brought the DeGaulle government virtually to its knees. How can a strike that begins in an aircraft plant one day, in 48 hours, in opposition to all the organizations of the working class, the unions, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, lead to that massive kind of social upheaval?

In a society which was totalitarian for ten years, where the only education, the only press, the only organizations were the official organizations of the Communist Party and the Communist government, how could the workers, following a student demonstration, create workers' councils all across Hungary, take control of the means of production and destroy the Communist Party? How could that take place unless that living reality of struggle is an inherent characteristic of the modern industrial working class?

The ability of the working class to transform society relates both to the reality of that struggle and where it is located. That is, all of the resources which everyone associates with wealth, with capital, and with the government — means of transportation, means of communication, newspapers, railroads, factories — belong to the ruling class only as long as people permit it. What happens when the workers do not want to run the trains, or send their own messages on the telegraph, or print their own newspapers? All of a sudden this vast power and wealth disintegrates. That is the reality of social revolution, and that is the reality of the modern industrial working class.

Marxism has been around for 100 years. Che Guevara said that Marxism is now part of the general heritage of mankind. There are all sorts of ideas which were the property of Marxists, say in 1917, which are now the property of humanity generally. The idea of government regulation, the idea that government owes something to the population — that was not the general conception in the 1920s, for example.

And society has changed. We have been, since Marx and since Lenin, through a major depression in the thirties, a major world war in the forties, the colonial revolution, the atom and hydrogen

bombs, and so forth. People no longer think the way they did before.

That doesn't mean that the source of revolution is ideas brought to the working class from outside. Because certain ideas can't come from the outside. Some of the ideas most fundamental to Marxism come from the working class and not from the Marxists. For example, the French working class of today — or 1968 — has the experience of 1934, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Paris Commune of 1871. What did the Parisian workers of 1871 have? What made them create the Commune? Not a Marxist organization. The reality of social revolution is that the form of the worker's state is the spontaneous creation of the working class. There was no such thing as a Commune in Marxist ideology until Parisian workers created it. Lenin never heard of soviets until Russian workers created them in 1905. And then again in 1917. That does not mean that the political party didn't play a certain role in 1917. But what it does mean is that one of the fundamental aspects of Marxist theory is to see where the working class has reached and to see what that means for theory. People asked Marx: What is this dictatorship of the proletariat you're talking about? What is this socialist society? He refused to answer the question. He made comments about not making recipes for the cookshops of the future, or the like. When the workers of Paris created the Commune, Marx wrote about the Commune, and that became the classic Marxist work on the workers' state. And then in STATE AND REVOLUTION we have Lenin on Marx on the Commune and Lenin on soviets.

It is in the best classical Marxist tradition to base theory on the peak that the working class has reached in any stage of society. And the reality of the post - World War II world is typified by what happened to France in '68 and Hungary in '56. That is the basis for our theory. If a theory that was valid in 1871 is still valid today, or a form or a political party that was valid in 1917 is still valid today, then there is some fundamental weakness in dialectics. Dialectics, as Marx understood it, implies that capitalist society is continually changing and being revolutionized. The social relations are changed; the capitalist class is changed; the working class is changed. It would be a miracle of dialectics if everything else changed, while something Lenin wrote in 1902 in WHAT IS TO BE DONE? remains eternal. It doesn't make any sense. Lenin was not afraid to say that Marx's description of capitalism in the middle of the nineteenth century was no longer valid. Things had changed in 50 years. But he defined the new stage as imperialism. Well, we're 50 years beyond that. Do we have to forever stay in 1917? It seems to me not. And concepts of organization have to change in correspondence with changing concepts of the working class and changing concepts of capitalist society. So where do we look? We look at the highest peak that the working class has reached. That, in the

post-World War II world, is France in '68 and Hungary in '56. I don't know any place where they have gone further than that.

Another aspect of methodology is involved. Marx thought that the Paris Commune made a lot of mistakes. They don't appear in his classic work on the Commune. He said the contribution of the Commune is its own living existence. In private correspondence he wrote that they should have nationalized the bank, or should have done this or that. It is always easy to find out why the workers did not make a revolution. It is all around you. But the business of a revolutionist is to find out why they will. One of the characteristics of the dialectic view of the world — in fact, any view of the world — is that people tend to find what they look for. Those who are interested in finding out why the French revolt of '68 was a failure will have no trouble finding reasons. But I am interested in finding out why it was a success, why it happened. What everybody in the world around me tells me is that it can't happen. And I say it can — and there's the proof: It did happen. Was the Paris Commune a failure? Lenin celebrated when the Russian Revolution outlived the Commune by one day. That is a revolutionary attitude. The weaknesses of the working class are all around. The press, radio, television, the schools, everyone is insisting how backward people are, how incapable people are of transforming society. And when people attempt it, that is what a Marxist bases his revolutionary theory on. That is what we are living for, so to speak. We are living for the peak, and not the valley. I do not mean that we ignore it in our day-to-day work, but in our fundamental theory we say that what the working class in the modern world is capable of is demonstrated by France and Hungary in '68 and '56. It is not demonstrated by a lot of other things which are happening all the time but which are characteristics of bourgeois society and which the working class is not immune to because it lives in and suffers from all of the distortions and contradictions of bourgeois society. But because it has to resist that society, these peaks appear. And if it were not for the peaks, there would not be any revolution. I believe that the revolt is inevitable, but victory is not inevitable. The nature of society forces workers to revolt and resist; but the man can push the button and drop the bomb, and that ends modern civilization as we know it, and there is no socialist revolution. There are no guarantees of victory.

What forms are available to the working class? The union movement is not a force for revolutionary change. I do not think it can be transformed. Workers tend to use what is at hand. Mostly they boycott and ignore unions — they do not go to meetings, they do not vote in union elections, and so forth. Occasionally they will use the union. They might vote on the contract and occasionally will vote a contract down. They will occasionally, but rarely, participate in opposition caucuses. Whether the workers become revolutionary or not does not depend on what the union leadership

does. There is no other instrument available except the creation of new organizational forms, and those are the equivalent of workers' councils which take over production on a national scale. I have no idea when that will happen. I have no idea how that will happen. I have no idea of the particular forms it will take in Canada, the United States, France or England or anywhere else. But in general the outline is indicated by what has happened in Hungary and in France.

So long as workers resist alienation and oppression they will revolt. And these revolts will emerge, as they always have, with remarkable power and suddenness. It would be a pleasant change from past experience if, for once, it was not the revolutionaries who were most taken by surprise, most caught unprepared, by the revolt of workers.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Diane Markrow assisted in editing the original lecture for publication.
- (2) See also Andrew Levison, "The Working-Class Majority," *THE NEW YORKER*, Sept. 3, 1974.
- (3) "The Rebellion of Blue-Collar Youth," *THE PROGRESSIVE*, Oct. 1972.

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Volume 7, No. 2

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