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Left Communist Pamphlet No.3



UNIONS
and
WILDCATS

**WORKERS
VOICE**

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INTRODUCTION

This text first appeared in "Revolution Internationale" No.3 (Old Series) of December 1969. A translation into English was published in "Internationalism" No. 1, from which we republish it. We feel it is important to publish this pamphlet in order to understand the class nature today of the unions and to combat the myths and illusions perpetrated by the "Left". The unions today confront the workers - the workers do not as yet fully understand why they confront the unions in wildcat strikes. The purpose of this pamphlet is to help workers understand the nature of the situation they find themselves in and why at some stage they will be obliged to confront and eventually destroy the unions.

When militant workers come into struggle they find themselves surrounded on all sides by advice on how to change, "democratise", "revolutionise" or in some other way make use of the existing trade unions; the whole point of this pamphlet is to demonstrate the futility of this activity. Indeed in the practice of the class struggle this is quite apparent - workers today make increasingly less use of trade union methods of struggle - this is the importance of the wildcat strike and other unofficial forms of action. This phenomenon can be observed all over the world as capitalism is in its crisis. As the pamphlet makes clear this crisis means two important things for the workers.

- 1). Impossibility of capitalism granting any permanent meaningful reforms for the working class.
- 2). Increasing state capitalist tendencies and with this, increasing incorporation of the unions into the system.

One of the necessities of this increasing state capitalist tendency is that workers must come to understand the class nature of trade unions. As revolutionaries, it is our job to spell out our understanding of trade unions that we have absorbed both in our practical experience and in our historical assessment of trade unionism. At every time that capitalism has faced difficulties it has been the unions that have come to the rescue - in times of war, imperialist or colonial: the unions have been on the side of their own nation state and have suppressed the class struggle at home, mobilising the workers for the slaughter. When the class struggle rages, as for instance in 1926, it is of no use the militants shouting sell-out or betrayal for in reality the unions had nothing to betray, and nothing to sell-out. Unions are only interested in haggling over the price of wage labour and can no longer be vehicles for prosecuting the class struggle. Indeed we can go further and understand that the unions will only give way in a revolutionary situation to the institutions that the workers have created. There is dual process at work - the traditional economic organisations of the workers continue to be absorbed by the status quo and become less and less able to protect the workers as a class within capitalism, - on the other hand the workers themselves in order to protect their position unconsciously use and develop methods and forms of organisation which go against the unions. This conflict is only resolved in a revolutionary crisis.

If we recognise the class nature of the unions we must also understand the institution of the shop steward. It was the unions which spawned and gave birth to the shop stewards movement and it can only be viewed in relation to the unions. The shop steward at the point of production reflects the contradictions of the conflict between Capital and Labour. However sincere and

genuine an individual shop steward is (and many are) this does not alter the fact that shop stewards are part and parcel of the trade union machine with all that this implies. (We intend to produce a separate pamphlet dealing with our views of the shop stewards movement)

OUR DISAGREEMENTS

Having said all this we could not publish this document without setting down our disagreements. In particular we strongly reject the notion of revolutionaries setting up 'workers commissions' 'rank and file committees' etc.; these are the product of the class struggle itself. (1) It is our view that workers councils are the product in a revolutionary situation of the destruction of the unions. It is not the task of revolutionaries to set up artificial and permanent forms of organisation outside the heat of the struggle (this only leads to a kind of workers parliament, which tries to 'spark off' the social struggle) It is the duty of revolutionaries to develop a communist perspective, which goes beyond the immediate economic, sectional interests of the workers. 'Base groups' 'ginger groups' 'reform groups' etc., only reinforce the divisions within the working class. The general interests of the working class demand that revolutionaries should conduct the sharpest struggle against all purveyors of illusions and mystification. For this reason we reject the proposal on page 14 that militants of every political tendency should come together in these 'base groups' The struggle for the autonomy of the workers also means the struggle for the political content of that autonomy - which is the communist programme;

(i) Abolition of the wages system

(ii) Destruction of the capitalist state

(iii) Socialisation of production

This necessarily means there can be no hierarchy or power elite based on the exploitation of one class by another.

'THE EMANCIPATION OF THE WORKING CLASS IS THE TASK OF THE
WORKING CLASS ITSELF'

(1) This is no longer the view of 'Revolution Internationale'

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UNIONS

and

WILDCATS

A hundred years ago, the working class fought against the state for unionization. Today, it is the state that fights for unionization.

" It is necessary to unionize the mass of French workers since unionization provides employers with a valuable intermediary that would reduce the gravity and frequency of social conflicts."

(R. Schuman, State Minister for Internal Affairs, 1968.)

Spontaneous, uncontrollable strikes - WILDCATS - erupt outside the unions or against them. They are becoming the nightmare of international capitalism.

:: In England, where the government admits that 95% of all strikes are unoffical, these strikes systematically paralyze entire sectors of the economy. (The unions prevented the passage of the last Labour government's notorious anti-strike law, " In place of Strife", by promising to fight wildcat strikes themselves.)

:: In the United States, during wildcat strikes black and white workers find themselves in common struggles that eliminate the racism characteristic of the unions and that transcend the nationalistic framework of black struggles.

:: In Germany, wildcats break out even while the bourgeoisie prepares for elections celebrating the triumph of the Mark.

:: In France, where there is no longer any advance warning of a strike, wildcats multiply, reaching into both the nationalized and private sectors; the CGT (the communist dominated confederation of unions) is forced to make itself appear "leftist" while the government is forced to repeat its appeals for unionization.

(R. Schuman, State Minister for Internal Affairs, 1968.)

International capitalism, the unions or against them. They are becoming the nightmare of the unions or against them. They are becoming the nightmare of the unions or against them.

But above all it is in Italy that wildcats have reached the highest point of their development; strikes initiated by, organized by, and discussed by rank and file assemblies multiply. These strikes are mainly inspired by the workers' distrust of unions.

Wildcat strikes no longer represent unconscious attempts to circumvent the unions; they are on the contrary, conscious acts undertaken by workers who, after months of struggle, have come to realize that the unions are on the side of the capitalists. Here are some examples.

The strikes, the demonstrations, the meetings inside the factories have broken down the barriers between workers and have brought to maturity the autonomous organization of the working class which now is fighting for the following objectives:

- always to have the initiative in the factory against the union;
- 100 liras increase over the base pay, equal for all,
- etc.....

(Tract, Turin Workers Assembly, 7th July, 1969.)

The first thing that we workers must decide without the union deciding for us is what the objectives of the struggle are During the course of the recent struggle we have had sufficient proof that the unions not only don't serve our interests, but that they are opposed to the struggle or are working to transform it into something harmless or something useful to the bosses.

(Leaflet, FIAT workers, 22nd July, 1969.)

WE ARE ALL SHOP REPRESENTATIVES

(FIAT workers, shop 69, opposing a move to establish permanent shop delegates.)

Thus today workers are turning against the organization that their comrades built by bitter struggles a hundred years ago. Were the workers of the last century wrong to form unions? Did Marx make a gross error when he viewed unions as a fundamental step in the historical struggle of the working class? Were all the struggles then ultimately futile, indeed harmful to the future of the working class? Or, on the other hand have the workers of our epoch lost the "historical thread"? Are wildcats only the expression of their inability to take up again the task of their predecessors of forming "good unions"?

Neither the one nor the other. It is, in fact, a question of two forms of struggle that correspond to two different historical periods. Many things have changed in the capitalist system since the end of the nineteenth century; during the nineteenth century capitalism was a progressive system -- today it is decadent.

The Ascendent Period of Capitalism

Capitalism destroyed feudal relations of production and constructed "a world in its own image!" During the nineteenth century it experienced extraordinary growth without important setbacks. The economic laws of capitalism corresponded to an objective historical need. The capitalists pocketed profits which they then freely administered. The state acted as a policeman to assure the submission of the working class. Free-exchange and bourgeois liberalism reigned.

For these reasons, the revolution was not yet objectively the order of the day, despite what some of the revolutionaries of the period thought. On the contrary, reformism was possible and therefore necessary. In effect, it was possible for the capitalist system to afford real increases in salary or to effectively reduce the length of the working day without being ruined by it. Profits increase without limit, outlets seemed inexhaustible and the cost of maintaining the system was small; the capitalists could accept modifications in the distribution of the social product if the workers' struggle imposed it on them.

When the proletariat had the satisfaction of winning a victory, it was durable and therefore real. All working class struggles were determined by this fact. Reformism and w went with it (mass political parties, unionization, etc.) made sense for the working class. This no longer is the case in the period of decadent capitalism.

The Period of Capitalism's Decline

The first world war marked the beginning of a new historical period for capitalism, the period of constant inflation, saturation of markets, increased imperialist rivalries, the need for arms economies and massive destruction by war. The system's own economic contradictions began to shake it violently as in the crisis of 1929. Capitalism's golden age had ended and the period of decadence had begun. So too began the era of proletarian revolution.

Our purpose here is not to explain the profound economic reasons which brought about this change. For the sake of our analysis of unions it will suffice to take up two characteristics of capitalism resulting from decadence. These are :

(1) The inability of the ruling class to grant new reformist concessions to the working class.

(2) The ever-increasing role of the state in society.

(I) THE INABILITY OF THE RULING CLASS TO GRANT NEW REFORMIST CONCESSIONS TO THE WORKING CLASS.

It is obvious that during the last fifty years all struggles for salary increases have been futile: salary increases are immediately gobbled up by corresponding if not greater, increases in prices. The salary increase won in June 1936, at Matignon (averaging 12%) evaporated in six months (from September 1936 to January 1937, prices rose an average of 11%). Similarly, nothing is left of the Grenelle increases of 1968. 2

The same phenomenon can be seen with respect to the length of the working week: while during the "ascendent" period of capitalism the length of the working week effectively fell due to the pressure of the workers' struggle (from 1850 to 1900, the length of the working week diminished from 72 to 64.5 hours in France, and from 63 to 55.3 hours in the U.S.), under decadent capitalism the number of hours has remained the same when it has not actually risen (not to mention the increasing amount of time spent commuting to work). In May -June 1968, the French working class was obliged to win again the victory it won in 1936 -- the forty hour week! The forty hour week of 1936 was 44.3 in 1949, 45.7 in 1962, 45.5 in 1967! After Grenelle, the goal "promised" by the government was "foreseen" as 44.5 hours in 1970. (3)

One could say that now there are paid vacations, automobiles, T.Vs, etc. It might even be concluded that the working class has disappeared. But these "improvements" are, in fact, only ways of adapting the daily life of the working class to the "progress" of capitalist exploitation. Television has become an "opiate", replacing the consolation of religion and the indoctrination of Sunday sermons. Considering the killing rhythms of modern life and work, paid vacations are as necessary as food or sleep. And in an age of gigantic cities and immense industrial suburbs, the automobile has become a working necessity. All that appears from a distance as a luxury turns out, upon closer examination to be nothing more than the absolute minimum necessary for life in the modern period. (4)

Moreover, compared to the increases in productivity that have taken place, these "gains" turn out to be only insignificant crumbs. Far from receiving a larger share of the value for each increase in productivity. Thus rather than obtaining new advantages, most of the workers struggles of the last decades have taken place to prevent new inroads into living standards. And, in the long run, these struggles have always failed. Thus Pierre Chaulieu has written:

" In the decadent period of capitalism, not only have all new "concessions" to the proletariat become impossible for the ruling class, but the ruling class has been forced by the organic crisis of its economy to take back from the working class all that was won during the preceding period. "

Under decadent capitalism, the bourgeoisie is forced to extract more and more production from the working class in order to participate in the deadly competition between the different blocs of worldwide capital, and in order to pay the increasing costs of maintaining and insuring the survival of a system that more and more is riddled with contradictions. The tremendous increase in productivity and the augmentation of surplus value which has paid for:

:: the maintenance of the bureaucratic and police apparatuses of the capitalist state which have become enormous;

:: the costs of a war economy (a palliative for the system's crises and which absorbs almost 50% of the national budgets of countries like the USSR and the U.S.);

:: the costs of subsidizing unprofitable companies or companies considered important for international competition;

:: the costs of subsidizing agriculture (in the U.S. this even includes payments to farmers for not producing);

:: finally, all the increasing costs of managing an economy that has become contradictory and absurd: marketing, publicity, etc. (the dizzying development during recent years of the unproductive, so-called "third sector").

All these new costs, characteristic of capitalism in its decline are not luxuries: on the contrary, they are the form in which the system survives. This is why the ruling class is obliged to take back what was won at a given moment in the heat of struggle as soon as the combativity of the exploited decreases. Experience has demonstrated clearly that under decadent capitalism, reformism has become utopian.

(2) THE EVER INCREASING ROLE OF THE STATE IN SOCIETY

At the same time that the system enters its decline, there develop in society the forces for the destruction of the state. Decadence thus involves a systematic strengthening of the state apparatus. As with slave and feudal states, capitalism in its period of decline, has taken on an increasingly totalitarian form. Since the first crises and the world wars demonstrated that the system had to overcome immense difficulties in order to survive, the state has systematically developed itself as an economic organ, as the coordinator and controller directing all the productive forces.

Since the first great working class revolutions put socialism on the historical agenda, the state has had to strengthen itself as the armed force of the ruling class. The inability of the ruling class to grant concessions to the working class is thus logically accompanied by the development of its apparatus of oppression.

Unions in the period of capitalism's decadence

The bourgeoisie systematically takes back what it is sometimes obliged to grant, i.e. no true reformist concessions are possible; thus the working class is reduced to taking and holding by force whatever victories it wins.

Contrary to what happened during the nineteenth century, there is today no longer any possibility of compromise between the needs of the proletariat and those of the capitalist economy. A struggle for real improvements cannot be integrated into the legalistic framework of the bourgeoisie. If the struggle is pursued to its logical conclusion, it cannot help but run up against the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state and take on the character of a revolutionary struggle.

The period in which the proletariat could impose permanent legal settlements in its struggles for reform came to an end during the first years of this century. Since then, either the proletariat has been willing to accept the usual raises while watching its living conditions become increasingly inhuman, or seeking some sort of real improvement, it has been necessary for it to attack the power of the ruling class and its armed might, the state. Thus the distinction between a minimal program (political and economic reformism) and a maximum program (revolution) which was valuable during the "ascendent" phase of capitalism, makes no sense during the decadent phase of capitalism.

The working class did not organize itself into unions in order to take up the question of capitalism, but in order to defend its immediate interests within the capitalist system. The goal of a union is to obtain the best possible price for labour power and improvements in working conditions; under "ascendant" capitalism, these tasks did not involve questioning the system itself. Moreover, the unions weren't revolutionary organizations. Their existence was linked to the existence of capitalism. This was entirely natural and corresponded to the proletariat's needs while reformism was possible within bourgeois society. But since shortly before the beginning of World War I, the struggle for reform has tended to end up immediately in a struggle with the system itself. This has led to new forms of struggle including direct mass action, illegal strikes, factory occupations, etc. And these struggles have run up against the opposition of the unions and their parliamentary parties.

Here, for example, is an excerpt from a resolution adopted by a conference held in 1906 by the largest workers party of the period, the German Social Democracy (a program that might be adopted today by the French Communist Party or the CGT):

Believing that socialism will develop more readily through legal rather than illegal means, this conference renounces the tactical principal of 'direct mass action' and proclaims its adherence to the principle of parliamentary reformist action, that is to say hopes that the party will in the future as previously struggle to realize its goals little by little by way of legislation and organic evolution.

For this reason, the conference recognizes as an inalienable right, the right of the working class to refuse to work when all other means have failed in order to repel attacks against its legal rights as well as to win new rights. but since mass political strikes cannot be won by the working class unless they are kept strictly within the bounds of legality and offer no excuse for armed intervention, the conference consider the growth of Social Democratic organizations -- the political party the unions, the co-operatives -- the only correct preparation for this type of struggle. (6)

The unions' return to legality and their opposition to radical movements in the working class could only develop to the extent that capitalism had become decadent.

Since the beginnings of unionism, one factor, directly linked to the form of union organization, has played an essential role in this process of integration: the inevitable growth of union bureaucracy. In order for an organization to be truly democratic -- that is to say for it to function with the free and equal collaboration of all its members -- it is above all necessary that the members be deeply involved in its activities. If most of the members become apathetic, true collaboration becomes impossible and there can be no democracy. Those members who continue to be active cannot help but assume the role of bureaucratic leaders leading an organization whose members have become apathetic and dulled by routine.

By definition, unions are permanent mass organizations, existing in periods of social calm as well as in periods of struggle. When a union is born in the heat of struggle, it is organized by freely associated workers as a means for defending their common interests. But when the struggle ends, the members inevitably become apathetic and thus create the basis for the growth of a union bureaucracy. When the struggle breaks out anew, the workers find themselves faced with a hierarchical organization that tends to make them into passive followers of leadership.

The inevitable growth of union bureaucracy leads to the appearance of a whole stratum of "specialists," whether or no they are "professionals," who soon find themselves isolated from the rank and file; they rapidly learn to deceive (consciously or unconsciously) the rank and file which finally they come to regard only as pawns and shock troops. Preoccupied with building up "their" organization and with

negotiating for reforms with management and government, these bureaucrats become more and more attached to bourgeois legality and the capitalist state itself since the rank and file of the union no longer has any power over them. Furthermore, when a workers' struggle becomes violent, it collides with the union leaders and the organization they control. If the struggle goes beyond the bounds of legality, if it takes on the character of a revolutionary struggle, the unions then become openly counter-revolutionary organizations. Thus, for example, in 1906, the opposition of the German social democratic unions to "direct mass action" (as seen above) logically led to the Social Democrats' open participation in the bloody suppression of the German proletarian revolution of 1919.

As we have seen, in the decadent phase of capitalism the struggle for reforms, if it is consistent, must lead inevitably to a questioning of the capitalist system itself.

The unions of our epoch, far from remaining weapons in the class struggle, have become permanent obstacles if not actually supplementary forces of repression. This explains why the working class in the principal industrial countries, in particular England, Germany and the United States, has, since the beginning of the century attempted to mount struggles outside the unions. Thus there have appeared wildcat strikes, organized and unleashed without any advice from the unions and very often against them. (Movements like "Rank and File" in England, or the KAPD and the "Workers Union" in Germany exemplify this current.) It might be objected that this wouldn't happen if the unions set revolutionary goals for themselves, or if they were led by good leaders.

Revolutionary Unionism

Since the 1890's, the idea of revolutionary unionism has developed in response to the political degeneration of unions and socialist parties. A union's principal task, however, is to organize the workers to defend their immediate interests. To be a member of a union, a worker has only to be ready to fight for the defence of his interests. To the extent that a union requires its members to subscribe to religious or political beliefs, it is prevented from carrying out its task of organizing workers. Instead, the union takes on the character of a political organization or party, and it is capable only of organizing minorities. Consequently it is unable to carry out its principal task.

Revolutionary unionism "presupposes that the worker has a revolutionary consciousness which, in fact, can only result from years of political practice. Thus revolutionary unions turn into small groups of workers with revolutionary sentiments; however, their enthusiasm cannot make up for the weakness of their organization. Attempting to carry out some function other than its own, the union ends up unable to carry out its own task of improving working conditions. It is unable to do what it is supposed to do -- organize the masses -- and what it attempts to do -- revolutionary education -- it does wrong."

(7)

Some revolutionary unions believe that the union is the organizational form necessary for the working class's seizure of power. Experience has shown, however, that only workers councils allow the working class an effective and democratic way to exercise

its power. Thus French revolutionary unions, which were especially strong before World War I, rapidly sunk to the level of pious hypocrisy; the principal revolutionary unions (the CGT of the period) degenerated like the others, and like the others they participated in the imperialist war on the side of the bourgeoisie while the tendencies within the unions that opposed the war remained insignificant minorities and soon were forgotten. As for the Spanish CNT: during the Spanish Civil War, it was led into playing the role of a mass political party. Because it believed in carrying out political activity on all levels, it joined in the "Popular Front" with the Stalinists and the bourgeois republicans, and even participated in the republican government.

To attempt to breathe revolutionary life into a form of organization that no longer corresponds to the needs of the struggle only can lead to a situation in which the organization will be obliged to carry out tasks for which it was not conceived; and act as a brake on their successful execution, and at the same time impede the creation of forms that correspond to the reality of the struggle.

Change the Leaders

It often is said that the unions have gone over to the side of the ruling class because they have bad leaders. Consequently, changing the character of the unions simply becomes a question of struggling to replace the bureaucrats with "good revolutionary leaders." This is an idea dear to the Trotskyists and Leninists who love to talk about "reconquering the unions." However, experience has repeatedly shown that it is impossible to take over the leadership of bureaucratic unions for the simple reason that they are bureaucratic: such organizations are preoccupied with perpetuating their power and staving off any attack on it.

The union question is not a question of good or bad leaders. More than fifty years of working class experience has shown that it is not simply by accident that unions always have had bad leadership. It is not because of bad leaders that unions do not take part in real struggles of the working class; it is, on the contrary, because the unions are incapable as organizations of serving the class struggle that leaders inevitably turn out to be bad. As Pannekoek observed: " what Marx and Lenin reiterated about the state -- t t

that despite the existence of formal democracy it does not allow itself to be used as an instrument of proletarian revolutions -- applies also to unions. Their counter-revolutionary tendencies can be neither negated nor tamed by a change of leaders, by replacing reactionary leaders with 'leftists' or 'revolutionaries.' It is the form of organization itself that reduces the masses to powerlessness and prevents them from using it as an instrument of their own will. "

In the present epoch, when the proletariat engages in struggles, it is neither a question of changing the union leadership, nor one of forming new unions: it is, on the contrary, a question of new forms of organization that correspond to new forms of struggle outside the unions.

The Unions' "Double Function"

It often was said, especially in May of 1968 when the unions "betrayed" the movement, that unions have a "double function" in the present epoch: in periods of social "calm," when there are no important struggles, the unions defend the working class against the bosses; in periods of social unrest, they defend the bosses against the working class. This is the position held by a group called "Pouvoir Ouvrier" (Workers' Power). (8)

In its political platform, "Pouvoir Ouvrier" maintains that "in the present period, in most capitalist countries, the unions play a double role:

- (1) They defend the immediate interests of the working class.
- (2) They defend the longterm interests of capitalist society, which they accept in principle, against any working class movement that might make trouble for capitalism." (9)

This idea is no more profound than the idea that the police defend a worker's interests when they rescue him from an auto wreck but no longer defend his interests when during a strike they club him, thereby serving the boss.

First of all, nothing is more absurd than to pretend that in a society composed of antagonistic classes whose interests are constantly in opposition, an organization as embroiled in the class struggle as the unions could alternate between serving one class and then another without the slightest change in structure or leadership.

Secondly, it is impossible to determine the class nature of an organization by its attitude during periods of social "calm," when the proletariat passively submits to the power of the bourgeoisie, economically and ideologically. If one wants to determine the class nature of an organization, it can be done only at the moment of open class warfare. Then the masks begin to fall and the class contradictions become clearly apparent.

If one wants to have a true idea of the social role of the police in the class struggle, one does not predicate judgment on their behavior during an auto accident, but on the way they act when the class struggle breaks out. Similarly, the unions' social function emerges clearly when one observes them at times like May-June 1968 when they attempted to prevent workers in different factories from contacting one another, or contacting students; when they falsified the workers' demands, used lies and slander to get the workers to go back to work -- in short, when they played the role of a repressive force directed against the workers' struggles.

However, everyone knows that the unions are officially the "representative organization of the working class," and that it is they who are charged with the task of defending the interests of the working class through the union branch and through the government's economic organizations. Everyone also knows that during periods of calm the unions organize "days of action," that when the rank and file grows reckless, they organize strikes (although the strikes last only 24 hours (in France and Italy)), and that they even formulate demands. Moreover, it is true that in certain countries, and in certain French factories, it is better to belong to the union to guarantee one's employment or to obtain certain advantages.

But is it necessary to conclude from all this that the unions are in the service of the working class? No. The second "function" is in fact only a part of the first.

If at times, such as May-June 1968, the unions acted as they did without immediately provoking a general workers revolt against them, it is because they have, during periods of "calm" carefully built up the myth of the Union as the only legitimate representative of the workers; and they have done this with government help. The little strikes, the demands for clean locker rooms and for bonuses, the "days of action," etc. are the ways in which the unions develop their "authority," so that they can order the workers back to work on the day when a real struggle breaks out.

Just as the police justify their existence by directing traffic and, during periods of social unrest, carry out repression in the "interest" of society as a whole, so the unions make "small claims" on behalf of the workers in order to guarantee that during periods of struggle they will be able to fulfill their function of containment and repression "in the name of the working class." Consequently the unions' activities cannot be divided into two separate functions: they are, in reality, two aspects of the same function.

Furthermore, the little tasks carried out by unions during periods of social "calm" actually correspond precisely to the needs of decadent capitalism. Let us consider, for example, the case of countries where unions are formally integrated into the state apparatus; this is the case in fascist countries (Spain and Portugal, for example) and the state capitalist countries (USSR, China, the Eastern European states, etc.) If in these countries -- where even strikes are forbidden -- unions exist they exist because they correspond to a real need of the state. In effect, they carry out a function that has become absolutely necessary for decadent capitalism: the containment of the working class.

It is necessary for the state to effectively contain the working class (1) in order to be able to dispose of labour according to the needs of the national capital (the plan, etc.); (2) in order to allow the free play of capitalist economic forces in the labour market and to avoid special abuses by private capitalists or by local directors whose actions might incite the working class or lead to harmful shifts in the national economy;

(3) and finally, to contain and to break up any serious attempt at rebellion by the working class. (10)

No one would say that the fascist unions in Spain are working class organizations, or that Russian unions defend the workers against their boss, the state; these unions are nothing but instruments of the state.

In the West, unions participate in the economic sections of the government (in France, the Planning Council, the Economic and Social Council, etc.); they take part in company management; they represent the workers in collective bargaining, playing the role of the "valuable intermediary" needed by the state; they protest extreme abuses committed by bosses or managers, and they systematically attempt to defuse strikes. In all these cases, the unions perform the same functions as those performed by unions in Russia and Spain. These functions don't serve the interests of the working class. On the contrary, they correspond to the needs of capital. For this reason, in totalitarian as well as in liberal states, the governments subsidize or create unions to "represent the working class."

The one thing that differentiates unions in liberal states from those in other countries is the fact that their integration into the state apparatus occurs through political parties. This fact leads to a certain number of consequences that often mask the unions' true role. For example, when the political party that dominates a union opposes the party in power in the government, then the workers' struggles that the union supports take on a "tough" character that serves the need of the political party. A union can even provoke large-scale movements for reasons of political expedience, as happened in 1947 when the CGT led strikes after the Communist Party was expelled from the government, and as happened in 1953 when the CGT and the CP organized demonstrations during General Ridgeway's visit to Paris.

Often the political tendencies that dominate the unions are partisans of bureaucratic, state-capitalist regimes, and advocate the nationalization of industry. This explains the fact that certain large private corporations fear unionization.

The unions' connections with opposition political parties give them an appearance of combativity; but it is enough to know what happens when the opposition party wins power (as was the case of the French Communist Party after World War II, or the Labour Party from 1964 to 1970), or to witness the political manipulations that go on in the factories during membership drives, in order to understand that the unions' party commitment is not a question of defending the interests of the workers but the interests of the political organization. The union delegate, however devoted he maybe, is quickly drawn into the whirlpool of party politics. Consciously or unconsciously, he becomes not the representative of the workers' interests but the representative of the interests of the political party. (11)

Consequently unions don't have a "double function," one capitalist, the other working class. Their "double function" is, in reality, two aspects of the same capitalist function: the containment of the working class for the interests of the capitalist system.

What should be done Today?

In the present period, the unions have been integrated, directly or indirectly, into the capitalist state. Thus the class struggle can only develop outside of and against the unions.

But what organizational form will the workers employ to carry out these struggles? How to overcome the inertia that keeps the workers in the union prison? What is the role of revolutionaries in this process?

The form of organization

The largest working class struggles that have taken place outside the unions have demonstrated that the form of organization best suited to the struggle is that of the Factory Committee or Strike Committee made up of elected, instantly recallable delegates:

- :: all decisions concerning the direction of the struggle are made by workers assemblies;
- :: the task of coordinating the struggle is carried out by a strike committee (or factory committee) made up of delegates elected by the workers assemblies and at all times responsible to the assemblies.

This especially simple form of organization is the only form that permits true participation by all the workers in the struggle. The struggle is thus the concern of the workers and no longer the concern of centralized unions. It allows for the sort of unity and coherence that the unions systematically hinder.

This form of organization doesn't just result from a preoccupation with democracy. It is already, in itself, a prefiguration of workers councils, the organizations that the working class will create in order to hold power permanently. As we have seen, in the period of capitalism's decadence, the struggle against further deterioration in living conditions immediately leads to the formation of working class organizations that call into question the power of the ruling class.

If the bourgeoisie, driven by economic contradictions, is incapable of making further concessions, the working class will use force in order to win its demands. The struggles over speed-up at Pirelli in Milan at the end of 1968 illustrate especially well the situation. Here is an excerpt from a leaflet published by the "Rank and File Committee" :

We will no longer work at the rate set by the company. We will decide for ourselves how long we will work, so that we will live to be sixty in good health. Since, when we break our backs working, management thanks us and kicks us out the door while lowering our salaries and reducing our pensions and other fringe benefits.

We should all be aware of the decision made by the

workers of workshop 866I who suddenly stopped work when a foreman attempted to force a worker to work at the old rate. For each important question or problem that comes up in the workshops, we too should immediately stop work and meet in assembly (there is no need to wait for a rule that allows us to do so, we have already won the right to it) to decide all together how to settle the question. Working conditions will improve when we make them improve ourselves. (I2)

Every important struggle leads to the posing of the problem of power within the factory. Thus it is to be expected that the type of organizational form that the struggle assumes contains within it the essential characteristics of the type of organization that will seize total power.

Breaking out of the union jail

However, the process that leads to struggles of this sort encounters a series of obstacles that tend to keep the movement under the control of the union. There is, first of all, the question of "habit". Over the years, the working class, lulled by the myth of the unions as "the organizations that represent the workers' interests," has left the control and organization of the struggle in the hands of the centralized unions and their officials. Moreover, the idea of self-organization without the unions often appears adventuristic and utopian. This "habit" can only be overcome to the extent that the struggle has reached the point where the workers have no other alternative than to take matters into their own hands.

It is essential that these new forms of struggle become known everywhere. Everyone should know about the wildcats staged by Italian, English and American workers. The idea that there are other forms of struggle and organization besides unions should be common knowledge; and it should be known that these new forms have been tested and continue to develop throughout the world.

To some workers, opposition to union too often appears to be a form of "isolation from the general workers movement." Thus it is absolutely necessary to show that on the contrary the unions more and more isolate themselves from the real struggle of the workers movement. In order to accomplish this it is necessary to work systematically in factories (1) denouncing the centralized unions and (2) popularizing wildcat struggles in order to foster working class autonomy.

To carry out this task, groups of workers inside the factories who are inclined to do this sort of work appear to be most natural and efficient means.

"Rank and File committees", "workers commissions", "action committees", whatever their name, these minority groupings are not the representatives of a political party or tendency. They regroup workers belonging to different political tendencies, or no clear political tendency or group, provided they agree on the necessity for developing autonomous forms of working class organization and struggle. These groups which have appeared in the majority of countries where there

have been wildcat strikes, thus can organize especially effective bodies for developing the self-organization of the workers.

There are, as well, certain factors that prevent some workers from breaking out of the framework of unionism at times of struggle; thus there is a need for coordination with other centers of struggle which also are in a similar position of having a management that will talk only to union delegates. Normally, the unions are the only existing link between workers in different companies; to break with the unions creates a fear of isolation. In fact, experience has shown that the unions employ their "power of coordination" to isolate and divide the struggle. The classic tactic they employ is to announce falsely in one factory that the workers on strike in the other factories have gone back to work. It is therefore essential to develop as many links as possible between rank and file committees and, above all, to guarantee direct liasons between representatives chosen by the workers when the struggle begins.

The problem posed by the fact that the company will talk only with union can only be resolved by the workers' determination and combativity. Only by a test of strength can the workers impose their own representatives and therefore their own will.

What role should revolutionaries play in the struggle?

Clearly, the fundamental task for revolutionaries is to publicize the experience of workers in struggle and the new form of struggle that emerge, thus accelerating the development of autonomy from political parties and centralized unions. Besides publications, slogans, etc. the fundamental means is the formation of groups (rank and file committees) inside the factories. Revolutionaries can contribute to their formation and their continued existence, and help them set up direct contacts with other rank and file committees.

It is not the task of revolutionary organizations to set goals for the struggle even those that cannot be achieved under capitalism. Today, every true goal of the struggle is necessarily unobtainable. The immediate goal of the struggle will be chosen by the workers themselves.

Moreover, revolutionaries should combat illusions of eventual legal reforms and show that only what can be seized and held by force can be held permanently. This is not a question of neglecting this or that demand because it is not revolutionary or because "the ruling class will not concede it"; on the contrary, it is a question of clearly showing that these forms are the only forms of effective struggle and now such struggles can only lead to a total revolution and the definitive conquest of workers power.

Should revolutionaries agitate inside the unions ?

The problem of the class nature of the unions often is confused with the problem of revolutionary action within reactionary unions. This is especially true for those who believe that unions are only "a form of organization" which only needs to be transformed by "good leaders" in order to go over to the side of the revolution. We have already seen why this position is completely false.

But it is often argued (1) the fact that workers belong to the unions means that it is necessary to agitate in the unions, where the workers are to be found:

If you want to help "the masses" and to win the sympathy, confidence and support of "the masses," you must not fear difficulties, you must not fear the pin-pricks, chicanery, insults and persecution of the "leaders" (who, being opportunists and social chauvinist, are in most cases directly or indirectly connected with the bourgeoisie and the police), but must imperatively work wherever the masses are to be found. -- Lenin. (13)

(2) It is not a question of calling upon the workers to create new forms of organization "invented" by revolutionaries.

With respect to the first argument as set forth by Lenin ("work wherever the masses are to be found") we maintain that (1) the working masses are not in the unions (more than 80% of the French working class is not unionized). Besides, contrary to what often is maintained, those who are unionized are not always the most militant: experience shows that during periods of struggle the non-unionized elements (or those who play no role in union affairs) are the most militant. Furthermore, in most cases, workers join the unions for reasons of convenience in the same manner that they accept social services. (2) unionized workers are not shut off from the world; there is no need to join the union in order to see them. It can be said that if one is a union delegate one has free time and the possibility of going around to different workshops, and thus one is in a position to contact workers more easily. But then one is faced with a choice: either one remains silent and doesn't go beyond the framework of union ideas (in order not to be expelled); and thus not only does this sort of work lead nowhere, but also it places the revolutionary in a position of collaborating with an organization he considers counter-revolutionary; or, refusing to keep silent he expresses his opinions openly and soon finds himself thrown out of the union. Thus the union no longer serves as a basis for agitation. In certain situations, this can be of some help as a means of denouncing the unions, but it is no longer a question of doing what Lenin advocated:

We must be able to withstand all this, to agree to any sacrifice, and even -- if need be -- to resort to all sorts of stratagems, artifices, illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges,

only so as to get into the trade unions, to remain in them, and to carry on Communist work within them at all costs. (14)

As for Lenin's second argument (it is not a question of calling upon workers to create new forms of organisation "invented" by revolutionaries) we need simply repeat the argument given by Gorter in his "Answer to Lenin": the new forms of organisation (elected factory committees) that have sprung up in Great Britain and in Germany, were not created "from above"; on the contrary, they resulted from the spontaneous activity of the rank and file because they corresponded to a concrete need of the struggle.

R. Victor

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- (1) From Informations Correspondence Ouvrières (ICO), Sept., 1969.
- (2) Matignon, Grenelle: agreements between the government, employers and trade unions on collective bargaining, wage scales, etc.
- (3) L'Expansion, Oct., 1969, p. 89.
- (4) And very often, in order to obtain this minimum, it is necessary to have two salaries instead of one. The wife must work to help support the family and moreover receiving a salary that is very much less than her husband's. The difference between salaries for men and women also tends to increase. Thus it went from 8.9% in January, 1959, to 9.8% in January, 1964. See Revue Française du Travail, 1964, pp. 50-1.
- (5) Pierre Chaulieu, "Les Rapports de Production en Russie," Socialisme ou Barbarie, II, p.33.
- (6) Cited by Rosa Luxemburg, "Grève de Masses, Partis et Syndicats," p.76 (Maspero ed.)
- (7) In Pannekoek et les Conseils Ouvriers, ed. Serge Bricainer, Paris, n.d., pp. 83f.
- (8) Pouvoir Ouvrier: a group with a "state capitalist" analysis; dissolved, 1970.
- (9) Pouvoir Ouvrier, No. 90, May, 1968.
- (10) The Twentieth Russian Trade Union Congress (1949) defined the goals of unions in the following order:
1. "To organise socialist competition in order to assure that the quotas set forth in the economic plan will be fulfilled and surpassed in order to increase productivity and lower the costs of production (!)...."
 5. "To see that the laws concerning work and security are maintained".

In China: "the executive committee of the General Confederation of Labor that met July 10, 1953, ordered "all union cadres to regard the strengthening of discipline as their fundamental permanent task". If the results of this campaign proved unsatisfactory, then it would be

necessary 'to punish in an appropriate manner the recalcitrant elements that constantly interfere with discipline.'" From George Lefranc, Le Syndicalisme dans le Monde, p. 102.

(11) At its 1946 congress, the communist majority of the CGT voted for the following statement: "The CGT calls upon the workers to support the drive to attain maximum production. A higher salary can be attained only by increasing output." In Lefranc, p. 100.

(12) Cited in ICO, Feb., 1969.

(13) "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder", New York, 1940, p. 37.

(14) *ibid.*, p.38.