

Red & Black Notes

No. 3 Fall 1997

Class, Culture and Workers' Struggle

The 15 day strike by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters against UPS this summer produced a flurry of commentary in the left press. Although tightly controlled by the Teamster hierarchy it was a stirring moment for many who watched the militant picket lines and wondered, sometimes aloud, "could it be this way again?" After suffering years of humiliating defeats, workers could again say "it is possible." It is a striking indictment of the times in which we live that an old fashioned militant trade union strike can cause such controversy.

While the leadership of the trade unions has moved to the right and away from "traditional" trade unionism the revolutionary left has also undergone a transformation. Splits, shrinkage and outright disappearance has been the rule. This summer the British Class War Federation dissolved stating "we have gone as far as we can: the time has come to try something new." The final issue of the paper was devoted to "An Open Letter to the Revolutionary Movement" which attempted a critical summation not only of the left, but also of their own organization. Whether or not one agrees with the substance of Class War's criticisms it must be admitted that the step they have taken is a remarkable one.

The question "what is to be done?" haunts the far left in the late twentieth century. To paraphrase Marx, past revolutionary practice and in

particular the Bolshevik example, weighs like a "nightmare on the brain of the living." Much of the revolutionary left still nourish the fantasy that although they are not quite on the verge of storming of the Winter Palace, then at least THEY alone have the revolutionary philosopher's stone. While the anarchists have avoided some of the delusions of the Marxist-Leninists the equally unreal flame of Barcelona '36 still burns brightly for many of them.

We believe that the conditions that produced these revolts against the capitalist world order have largely been superceded by the process of capitalist development. This process of development has not made class struggle and revolution impossible or impractical, but it has changed the conditions under which they will take place. For our part we believe that many of the conceptions outlined by the council communist movement remain superior to those as practiced by would be Leninist vanguards. Not because we prefer one eighty year old theory over another, but rather the emphasis on working class self determination and self actualization seem to us more important that the theories of the self proclaimed vanguard. Their theory too, has been overtaken by history but their goal of trying to describe their society and trying to understand the processes by which it could change is still valid.

We hope that readers of the current issue of **Red & Black Notes** will take the time to criticize this article and the others contained below. We have a new PO Box and look forward to this discussion.

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A Different Sort of Democracy

The following article was written as an introduction to C.L.R. James' *Every Cook can Govern*. It has been slightly edited for publication here. The full introduction and James' article are available for \$3 from Bewick Press (see below)

Celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary of the creation of a democratic society in ancient Greece took place in 1991. Dignitaries from the various Western democracies attended ceremonies in Greece. The hypocrisy of these celebrations seems obvious in light of the fact that the modern parliamentary and congressional democracy is, in many ways, a violation of the principles of direct democracy that were established in ancient Athens.

What passes for democracy in the modern world is generally held in contempt by the citizens of those very countries which call themselves democracies. In this century, the leading democracies, first and foremost the United States, have been involved in two devastating world wars, the pillage of the peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia, the support of brutal dictatorship whenever it suited their imperial interests, and so on. At the same time, they have been unable to provide all their citizens with the minimum levels of comfort and culture that a modern technological society is clearly able to produce.

The human race, and the world in which we live, is in a desperate situation. Poverty and unemployment, racism, sexism, bigotry are endemic in the modern world. Two centuries of industrialization have wreaked havoc on the environment. People starve, not because there is no food, but because food is distributed only when it can make a profit. Even the wealthiest nations are ridden with debt. Corruption is common in politics and business. Disease, random violence and homelessness are eating the heart out of every major city on Earth. Work, for most people, continues to be drudgery, with fewer and fewer opportunities for creative initiative.

In October 1956, in the totalitarian Communist dictatorship of Hungary, the people rose up and demonstrated the possibility of a revolutionary direct democracy in the modern world. A large and growing demonstration of students and intellectuals was under way in a major square in Budapest when it was joined by thousands of Hungarian workers. They proceeded to create workers' councils and, within 48 hours, took over control and direction of all the means of production, service and communication in Hungary. The old Communist government was overthrown. The Hungarian people were working their way toward a new kind of society which was neither Communist (as that was understood in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union) nor capitalist. There was nothing in Hungarian society that could withstand their attempt to create a new society.

The revolution was overthrown by the invasion of Soviet tanks. The West, led by the United States, took whatever propaganda advantage that it could from the Soviet oppression, but also took care that the Hungarian Revolution would not spread to other countries. Before 1956, Radio Free Europe and Voice of America had called for East Europeans to revolt. After 1956, that call was never heard again. (While the Soviet Union was crushing the Hungarian Revolution, England, France and Israel invaded Egypt in an attempt to steal the Suez Canal.)

The Hungarian Revolution was direct democracy in action in the modern, industrial world. Workers and others did not act through elected representatives, professional politicians. In the workers councils they acted directly and in concert to assume control of their own lives and their own society. All employees of an establishment met at their workplace as often as everyday to make decisions. Delegates were chosen to carry out decisions or to represent the council at city-wide or regional bodies. All delegates were subject to immediate recall.

In 1968, something very similar happened in France. The entire working class of the country occupied all of the factories in France and came

within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the DeGaulle government. In the same year, the people of Czechoslovakia attempted to do the same and were crushed by another Soviet invasion. In 1980, after many years of struggle, direct democracy appeared in Poland in the form of Solidarity. (By the Solidarity of 1980 we do not mean Lech Walesa in 1990 trying to sell Polish factories to American capitalists.)

The world has recently seen the destruction of totalitarian dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. We need to understand that the first blows to weaken the Soviet empire were struck by the workers of Eastern Europe and, to some extent, Western Europe. Decades of working class resistance, punctuated by revolutionary attempts to assert direct democracy, made Eastern Europe, and then the Soviet Union, ungovernable. The revolutions in these countries - the attempts to create new societies - have only just begun. China's Tiananmen square, the overthrow of military dictatorships in Africa and the crowds at the Russian legislature during the Moscow coup are well-known examples. Less well-known was the 1989 strike of Soviet coal miners. The strike committees became centres of activity for whole communities. Under the slogan "perestroika from below" these committees began to assume political functions.

Western politicians and journalists would have us believe that these battles and sacrifices were somehow intended to replace totalitarian dictatorship and state capitalism with "free enterprise" and what passes for democracy in our own countries. They have tried to convince us that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and that the greed, corruption, poverty and violence of our society are minor aberrations.

In the West, the differences between politicians are minor and cosmetic. Policies, platforms and promises are marketing tools to entice the electorate. The campaign speech has been reduced to the eight second sound bite. To be successful, politicians must lower their horizons to the next election. The goal of political parties is not

to exercise power wisely but only to achieve power and maintain it.

[The] flaws in representative democracies are still well known to their peoples. The popular attitude towards politicians is anger and contempt. In Canada clumsy and secretive attempts by the federal and provincial governments to amend the constitution have led to demands for a constituent assembly composed of non-politicians as well as referenda to ratify any changes. In the United States, where half the eligible propaganda refuse to even take part in the charade of the electoral system, disgust with incumbent has sparked proposals to limit the number of terms that federal and state legislators can serve.

While not the direct democracy of the Hungarian Revolution or ancient Greece, these developments show a growing desire to get away from government by professional politicians, which is what representative democracy is.

We do not want to suggest that the democracy of ancient Greece was perfect or that it can be easily copied in the modern world. Greece was burdened by the dual crimes of slavery and the inferior status of women, as were all ancient societies in the Mediterranean basin and in Asia. What distinguished ancient Athens was that, in that society, human beings began to break out to produce new forms of self-government. That they could not solve all the evils of that time should not be surprising.

How useful is this example for the huge, industrial societies of today? One of the things which Greece had, to a significant extent, was a sense of community. In our world, that is substantially absent. How do we envision the possibility of a new, free, cooperative society while we are enmeshed in one that is driven by greed and bigotry? The answer does not lie in electing a new set of legislators, or a different political party to replace the discredited old ones. The answer lies in seeing in the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the French Revolt of 1968, the Polish Solidarity of 1980, the modern forms of the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

The answer lies in ending the separation of economics and politics. It involves people taking control of their workplaces, their neighborhoods, their communities - directly and without mediators. Without bureaucrats, capitalists and managers standing in the way, it should be possible to build a sense of community, of unity, of cooperation. This will obviously provide tremendous opposition. Hungarian, French and Polish workers confronted the economic, political and military might of their societies. Either we will find the strength and will to do the same or we will sink further into the decay that is now destroying us

Martin Glaberman



On Workers' Culture's

The following article is an extract from an unsigned editorial in the newspaper *Correspondence*, December 12 1953. It may have been written by C.L.R. James, who had written an extensive essay on a related theme several weeks earlier. It should be noted that despite the use of the masculine pronoun throughout the article, the *Correspondence* group were quite sensitive to questions of gender. Thanks to Scott McLemee for providing this material.

Picket lines, wages and hours, union bureaucrats and even the union meetings do not command the lively interest of the workers that they held in the past. Yet from the stories that we get every day from the shops, we can see a new form of struggle emerging. It never seems to be carried to its complete end, yet its existence is continuous. The

real essence of this struggle and its ultimate goal is: a better life, a new society, the emergence of the individual as a human being. Each scrap with the boss, each manifestation of discontent with things as they are, all tend to smash down the old and help the new to emerge. This struggle is not the old one. This is the struggle to establish here and now a new culture, a workers culture.

Culture for the American workers does not necessarily mean attending lectures, visiting museums, reading or writing books. For him it is a way of life, his relations with his fellow humans on the job, his relations with his neighbors, the kind of house he lives in, what he does in his spare time, the movies he sees, the things he likes or dislikes, this is his culture.

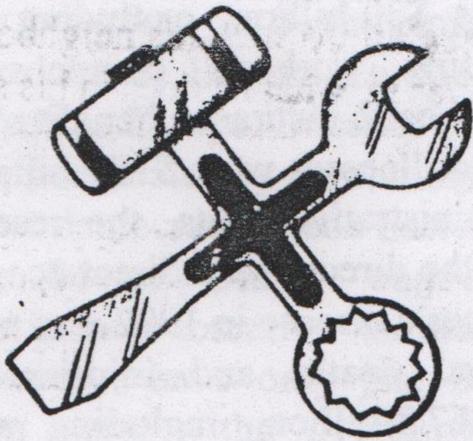
It is this that we must be extremely sensitive to. We must watch with an eagle eye every change or indication of the things that these changes reflect. It is these things that must fill our consciousness and the pages of the paper.

From earliest time man has chosen various forms to express his feelings, the ideas that motivate his life and express his desires. The cave man scratched these things on his cave wall with stone implements; later, others expressed themselves in their architecture. The middle ages found feudal lords gathering around themselves artisans, craftsmen, and artists to give expression to their idea of culture. Today things are different. If we fail to recognize that difference then it will be impossible to give expression to it.

We know the vital force of our society to be the working class. We must observe the forms that this class uses in expressing itself. In the shop it may be marked by an aggressive attitude toward the boss, by the attitude of the worker toward his machine, the men around him. His activities outside the shop are a vital part of the same. This is the expression of the things he feels, his own attempt to build for himself and his family the kind of life he wants to lead. It is those things that constitute his culture. The things he does to his home in the way of decoration and conveniences, his car, TV, his

friends, amusements, sports, the places he goes, and the things he does are all expression of what he wants out of life.

No one compels him to do any of these things as a boss in the shop compels him to bend over his machine. These things are his free expression of his ideas and desires as much as if he were to sit down and write about them, a thing he rarely does. We must see it, put it in the paper. It is his culture.



Work is A Danger to your Health

The following three articles deal with work in capitalist society. The first is from **Chirevnet (Chicago Revolutionary Network)**. The second is an **AP** story confirming the extent to which capitalism murders vast numbers of workers. The third is an excerpt from a pamphlet published by the **British Solidarity** organization and written by Paul Cardan.

Accidental Deaths and Serious Injuries at Work & Capitalism by R.U. Angry

Nearly every week there is a major, local news story about the "accidental" deaths or injuries of workers on the job. The news commentators lament the losses, the bosses lament the losses, while the workers, family and friends grieve. **Then the whole cycle of violence against workers on the job by capitalism is repeated.**

If there is some obvious unsafe condition at fault, the bosses are quick to "correct" the problem so that "it won't happen again." When the situation between the workers and the bosses is "too hot to handle," the Occupational Safety & Health Administration [OSHA] steps in and issues "fines" - slaps the capitalists on the wrists - and "shows" the workers that the Government "cares." **Then the whole cycle of violence against workers on the job by capitalists is repeated.**

Safety costs money. Money spent on safety reduces the bottom line - profits. That's why safety is a low priority for capitalism. Profits first, safety last. That's capitalism for you. And the result is that unsafe **CORRECTABLE** conditions on the job murders and seriously injures workers constantly.

Recently, in March, there was a big explosion by Beta Steel in Northwest Indiana. Three workers were murdered by capitalism. Scores more were injured. One of the murdered workers had complained three days earlier about a major hazard where he worked! The whole incident was then whitewashed. In April, there was a fire at U.S. Steel, again in Northwest Indiana. Three workers were badly burned, with one dying - again murdered by capitalism.

Last year, close to a thousand workers were killed on the job, while tens of thousands of workers were seriously injured. Probably, 95% of the deaths and injuries could have been prevented. But, it's cheaper for capitalism to pay small fines and insurance policies than it is to have a safe and healthy work environment.

Ask workers if their work environment is safe and healthy, especially in industry, and they will usually say "No." Unsafe and unhealthy working conditions are so widespread as to be considered "normal." Why do workers continue to take it?

Because we workers are conditioned as "good" wage-slaves to accept our "lot in life." If we get angry and on the move, the Federal Government steps in - with-pie-in-the-sky promises - to calm the situation down, sometimes "correcting" matters.

Yet, the work environment is becoming **INCREASINGLY UNSAFE AND HAZARDOUS, UNHEALTHY**. This is because capitalism is in a developing, severe economic, political and social crisis. In the short term, matters can only get worse, with more murders by capitalism on the job, and more serious injuries.

There **CANNOT** be a safe and healthy work environment under capitalism. Remember, it's a Profit First, People Last system.

The **ONLY SOLUTION** is working class revolution where we workers, own, control and manage the workplaces and the economy, creating safe and healthy working conditions for the first time in history. **JOIN US AND FIGHT TO MAKE ALL THIS A REALITY!**

Workplace Injuries Costly: Study

Associated Press 28 July 1997

Job-related injuries and illnesses are more common than most people believe, costing the United States far more than AIDS or Alzheimer's disease and at least as much as cancer or heart disease, a new report says. "Occupational injuries and illnesses are an insufficiently appreciated contributor to the total burden of health costs in the United States," researchers say in today's issue of the *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

The researchers combined many sources of government and other data for what they believe are the first U.S. estimates of job-related injuries and illness in a single year. In 1992, about 6,500 Americans died from 13.2 million were hurt from work-related causes, said the researchers, led by J. Paul Leigh of the economics department at San Jose State University in California. That toll averages to 18 deaths and 36,000 injuries a day, compared with government estimates of 17 workers fatally hurt each day and 9,000 non-fatally injured.

Occupational illness - such as lung diseases and lead poisoning - caused 60,300 deaths and 862,200 illnesses in 1992, the researchers said. That averages to 165 deaths and more than 2,300 ailments

daily, compared with government figures of 137 and 1,095 daily in those categories, respectively. And the new reports probably underestimates the totals because injuries and illnesses are undercounted, the researchers said.

In all, the direct costs of injuries and illnesses totalled \$65-billion (U.S.) In 1992 (\$178-million a day), the researchers said. Indirect costs - including lost wages - were \$106-billion (\$290-million a day), they said. That made the total \$171-billion that year (\$468-million a day)

That is far more than the 1992 cost of AIDS, which was \$30-billion, excluding the costs of administering worker's compensation, Social Security or health insurance benefits. Occupational injuries and illnesses were \$155-billion, excluding those administrative costs, the researchers said. Similarly, the direct and indirect economic burden of Alzheimer's disease in 1992 was much less than work-related deaths and injuries. Alzheimer's totalled \$67.3-billion, including administrative costs, the researchers said. And for heart and all other blood vessel diseases, the total was \$164.3-billion. For cancer, it was \$170.7-billion. For musculoskeletal diseases, such as arthritis and osteoporosis, it was \$149-billion, researchers said.

"The authors make a very good case that the magnitude of the occupational health burden really rivals other major problems," said Dr. Linda Rosenstock, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

The Emptiness of Work

Consumption as such has no meaning for man. *Leisure as such* is empty. Few are more miserable in today's society than unoccupied old people, even when they have no material problems. Workers all over the world wait longingly for Sunday to come. They feel the overwhelming need to escape from the physical and mental slavery of the working week. They look forward to being masters of their own

time. Yet they find that capitalist society, even then, imposes its dictates upon them. They are as alienated in their leisure as they are at work. Objectively, Sundays reflect all the misery of the working week which has just finished and all the emptiness of the week which is about to start.

From *The Meaning of Socialism* by Paul Cardan



Out of the Past

The following article is reprinted from the February-April 1942 issue of *Solidarity*, the paper of the British Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF). In 1986 it was reprinted, along with other material from *Solidarity* by the Wildcat group. Thanks to the comrades from *Subversion* for providing a copy of the pamphlet.

Where We Stand by the APCF/WRL

We repudiate party politics and the popular conceptions of parties. We claim that party politics and sectarians have betrayed the fundamental principles of socialism, and have brought about a state of confusion and political bankruptcy in the ranks of the working class movement.

To the professional politician and party theoreticians the proletariat exists mainly as

objective phenomena, to be used merely as pawns in a game to prove their particular sociological theories, and to be manipulated manually in the making of history. We denounce this attitude as opportunism and adventurism of the worst possible kind, and declare that we, the workers, have a much higher conception of the destiny we shall fulfill.

We assert in the light of the materialist conception of history that it is the historic mission of the proletariat to emancipate society and the forces of production from the thralldom of class domination and exploitation by the act of social revolution and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We claim that this is not the work of any one party or parties, who consider themselves distinct and apart from the masses of the workers.

However, we realize that political clarity and understanding do not develop simultaneously with awakening class-consciousness; that spontaneity of action and revolutionary fervour do not always embody the necessary knowledge of proletarian strategy and tactics.

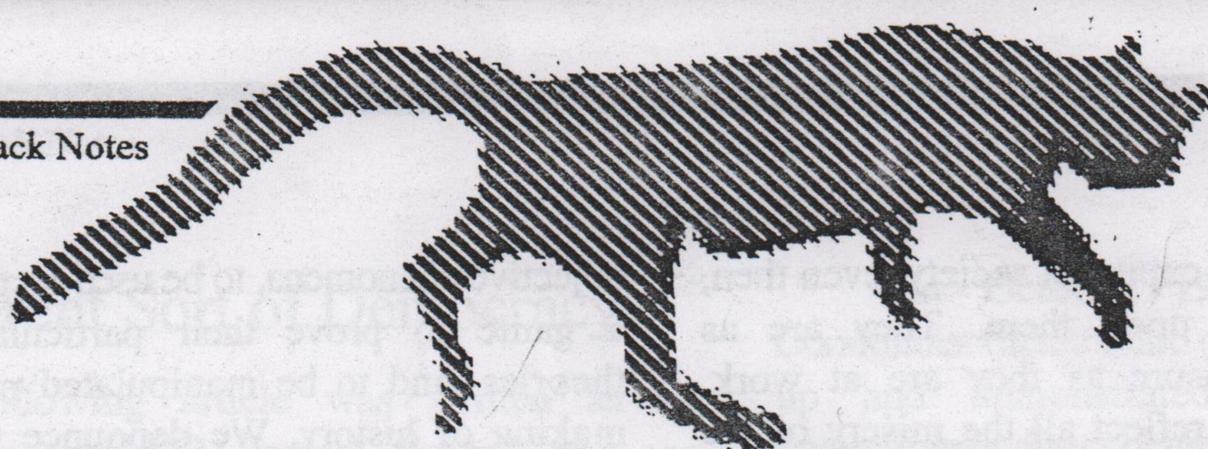
We claim therefore, that it is the duty of those already class-conscious and politically advanced to come together in common unity; not as another political party, but as the vanguard of the workers themselves, for the purpose of organizing propaganda to offset the reactionary tendencies of the professional and party politics.

Utilizing their knowledge of the past history of the movement and trained in the correct method of organization to give a clear cut and directive lead to the social aspirations of their less politically advanced fellow workers.

Towards this end the Workers Revolutionary League has come into being to express the need for workers unity in the face of the present political debacle.



la lucha continua



Some Worthwhile Projects

The following are some of the best things that have dropped through our mailbox recently. Unless otherwise noted send a couple of dollars to cover costs, mailing etc.

AK Press is still the biggest and best distributor of anarchist and libertarian socialist literature in North America. Write to PO Box 40682, San Francisco, CA 94140-0682, USA for their marvelous catalogue. e-mail: akpress@org.org

Bruce Allen has a new pamphlet out entitled *Reengineering and the Harris Agenda*. It's a insightful analysis and criticism of the Ontario labour leadership. 36 Sunnylea Drive, St. Catharines, ON L2M 5Z8 Canada. e-mail: praxis1871@aol.com

Anytime Time resumes publication after a delay of five years. Published by Red Lion Press the new issue has several articles on the subject of anarchism. P.O. Box 174, Montreal, PQ, H3K 3B9, Canada

Bewick Press has some very worthwhile books and pamphlets by C.L.R. James, Martin Glabeman and others. PO Box 14140, Detroit, MI, 48214, USA

Class War is dead, long live Class War. The federation disbanded with an "Open letter to the Revolutionary movement." Worth a look. Order from **AK Press**.

Collective Action Notes has just published its latest issue. An essential magazine with features on the Liverpool dockers, France, India, Canada and much more. \$7 for four issues.. PO Box 22962, Baltimore, MD, 21203, USA. e-mail: cansv@igc.apc.org

Internationalist Notes is published by North American supporters of the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party. The new issue contains an excellent article on strikes in WWII. PO Box 2044,

Madison, WI 53701-2044, USA. Other North American supporters of the IBRP are the Los Angeles Workers Voice. Write them at Box 57483, LA, CA, 90057, USA e-mail 74742.1651@compuserve.com

Monthly Review (July-August 1997) is a special issue on "Labor in the Age of Global Capitalism." Articles on France, Korea, Mexico and the state of working class struggle in North America. \$7. Available at newsstands.

Eugene Plawiuk, the "voice of the Rebel Worker" has a terrific web site well worth spending some time exploring. From labour reports to classic anarchist and ultra left texts, this site has something for everyone.

<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/5202>

Rev News is the publication of CHIREVNET (Chicago Revolutionary Network), and has good articles on revolutionary organizing. Subscriptions are \$10 for 4 issues. Order from Boxholder, PO Box 578042, Chicago, IL, 60657-8042, USA.

Subversion has just published its 22nd issue with the usual great collection of articles. Free, but be nice and send some money to Dept. 1, 1 Newton Street, Manchester, M1 1HW, UK. e-mail: knightrose@geocities.com

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