

International Communist Current

The ICC traces its origins in the successive contributions of the Communist League, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Internationals, and the left fractions which detached themselves from the latter, in particular the German, Dutch, and Italian Left.

Today the ICC defends the following basic positions, fundamental lessons of the historical struggle of the working class:

- Since World War I, capitalism has been a decadent social system which has nothing to offer the working class and humanity as a whole except cycles of crises, wars, and reconstructions. Its irreversible historical decay poses the single alternative for humanity: socialism or barbarism.
- The working class is the only class capable of carrying out the communist revolution against capitalism.
- The revolutionary struggle of the proletariat must inevitably lead the working class to a confrontation with the capitalist state. In destroying the capitalist state, the working class will have to set up the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale.
- The form of this dictatorship is the international power of the workers' councils.
- Socialism, the mode of social reproduction initiated by the workers' councils, is not 'workers' self-management' nor 'the nationalization of the economy'. Socialism requires the conscious abolition by the working class of capitalist social relations such as wage labour, commodity production, national frontiers; it means the construction of a world human community.
- The so-called 'socialist' countries (Russia, the Eastern bloc, China, Cuba, etc) are a particular expression of the universal tendency towards state capitalism, itself an expression of the decline of capitalism. There are no 'socialist countries' on this planet and the above countries are just so many capitalist bastions which the world proletariat will have to destroy along with all other capitalist states.

WORLD REVOLUTION (Great Britain)

Write as follows without any other mention:

BM Box 869
London WC1V 6XX
Great Britain

- In this epoch the trade unions everywhere are organs of capitalist discipline within the proletariat.
- All the so-called 'workers' parties' (the 'Communist' and 'Socialist' parties, as well as their leftist appendages) are the left of capitalism's political apparatus.
- In decadent capitalism, parliament and elections are nothing but sources of capitalist mystification; any participation in the parliamentary straits can only reinforce this mystification in the eyes of the proletariat.
- Today all factions of the bourgeoisie are equally reactionary. Any tactics which call for 'popular fronts', 'anti-fascist fronts' or 'united fronts' between the proletariat and any faction of the bourgeoisie can only serve to derail the struggle of the proletariat and disarm it in the face of its class enemy.
- So-called 'national liberation struggles' are moments in the deadly struggle between imperialist powers large and small to gain control over the world market. The slogan of 'support for people in struggle' amounts, in fact, to defending one imperialist power against another under nationalist or 'socialist' verbiage.
- The role of the revolutionary organization is not to 'organize the working class' nor to take power 'on behalf of the workers' but to participate actively in the generalization of proletarian struggles and revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat.

THE ACTIVITY OF THE ICC:

The vital theoretical elaboration demanded by the re-awakening of the proletarian struggle after fifty years of counter-revolution.

Organized intervention, on an international scale, in the struggles of the proletariat in order to contribute to the process which leads to the self-organization and revolutionary action of the working class.

INTERNATIONALISM (USA)

PO Box 961
Manhattanville Station
365 West 125th Street
New York, NY 10027
USA

International Communist Current

Unions against the working class



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This is a reprint of an ICC pamphlet first published in November 1976. It contains the introduction to the first edition written during the reflux which followed the first wave of the working class' response to the opening-up of the present economic crisis in the late 60's. At that time the tendency was for the unions and the major parties on the left of the bourgeoisie to move towards governmental power. Today the tendency is in the opposite direction, for the left and the unions to take up the role of 'official opposition' to the parties of the right which are either taking over, or else consolidating their hold on, the reins of power. This change has come about directly as a result of the present resurgence of class struggle which began to develop in 1978 and continued throughout 1979. Even this initial development in the new wave of combativity has undermined the capacity of the left and the unions to impose austerity on the workers; the very chains which bind the workers to their wage slavery are straining under the renewed challenge!

Perhaps the most important weapons in the bourgeoisie's arsenal are the trade unions which stand directly against the workers at the point of production, trying to suppress the proletariat's resistance, divert its consciousness away from its class interests and derail its struggles when they break out. Whether openly in partnership with governments, or more covertly as 'radical defenders of the working class', their goal is the same: to force austerity down the throats of the workers and to open up the path towards another world war.

Because of the strength and combativity of the proletariat, the historic course today is towards revolution, not imperialist war. But for this historic opportunity to be grasped, workers will in their struggles be persistently confronted by the questions of the unions and their pernicious role. This pamphlet explains why, in this epoch of capitalism's decay, the unions can be nothing other than counter-revolutionary.

In addition to the original contents we have included a bibliography of texts and articles relating to the union question published in English by the ICC. These show how we apply our general framework described in this pamphlet to the specific situations the working class confronts.

Winter 1980

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

What is the role of trade unions in modern capitalist society? Two facts stand out clearly: that governments all over the world, faced with a deepening economic crisis which brings with it the growing threat of social chaos, are calling on the trade unions to help preserve the fragile equilibrium of capitalist society; and, that wherever the working class attempts to resist the effects of the crisis, the trade unions are amongst its most determined and ruthless opponents.

In Britain, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) at its annual conference last autumn gave its overwhelming support to the second phase of the 'Social Contract'. In effect this means that the TUC undertook to continue to use all its power to help the government enforce its programme of austerity measures. These measures, a combination of lower real wages, cuts in social services and higher unemployment, are simply a determined attack on the working class, to force workers to make sacrifices for the sake of crisis-ridden British capitalism.

British workers who struggle against these measures have to take on the combined might of the government and the whole trade union apparatus. The sequence of events provoked by even the smallest strike is well known. First comes a hysterical chorus of abuse from government and union leaders, who warn of the 'catastrophic' effects of the strike on the economy and international confidence in sterling. Meanwhile, the local trade union officials, even when they claim to be 'sympathetic' to the aims of the strike, soon make it clear that their one aim is to end it as quickly as possible. These officials try to 'persuade' the strikers to return to work: they are told that the strike is 'against their own interests'; moreover their irresponsible action is giving the company (and British capitalism) a bad name: they should be 'reasonable', and submit their case to strike arbitration. And at the same time, to make the strikers more 'amenable' to this persuasion, the union does everything it can to isolate them. Either they are presented as a 'special case' whose struggle is of no concern to other workers, or else they are branded a 'tiny minority' of 'wreckers' out to gain what they can for themselves at the expense of their fellow workers. In either case the aim is to deprive the strike of its most effective weapon, class unity.

In America, while workers' real wages have declined steadily since 1965 (apart from a brief period in 1972-73), the unions have negotiated contracts which have ensured that this decline in real wages is matched by constantly rising productivity (speed-ups etc). More recently construction workers' unions have agreed to actual wage cuts of up to 25 per cent. And so concerned are the unions for the smooth running of American industry that their contracts usually include a clause banning all strikes for the duration of the agreement. This means that all disputes have to go through official procedures, which may take months or even years ; and since the contract is 'binding', pay disputes are forbidden altogether. American unions thus act as 'policemen' for industry: enforcing labour discipline, preventing wildcats, and ensuring that strike action is confined to 'official' disputes - which are usually crippled by lack of union solidarity and company stockpiling (since companies often know about these official disputes months in advance). No wonder that the New York Times wrote smugly recently of the "community of interests between labour and management" and no wonder that American workers often express more hostility towards the union than towards the company itself.

How are workers to understand this conflict between themselves and their so-called 'representatives', the trade unions? Certainly there is no lack of explanations from the various organizations of the 'left'. According to some, such as the Trotskyists, it is the result of treachery on the part of reactionary leaders; while others, more 'libertarian' in outlook, blame the bureaucratic nature of union organization. But all such explanations share one common characteristic: whatever the qualifications, all defend the unions as basically working class organizations. No matter how often the unions side with the employers or the government against the working class, no matter how great the defeat suffered by workers at the hands of the unions, still, according to the 'left' the unions represent the "power of the organized working class". Thus militant workers who are struggling against the unions are told that they should divert their energies to working within them. It is only necessary to reform these organizations, they are told, to put pressure on the leadership from the 'rank and file', and the unions will once again assume their true role as defenders of the working class.

Against all such 'critical defence' of the unions, this pamphlet shows that the trade unions consistently weaken and derail proletarian struggle because this is their function in modern capitalist society. Consequently the reactionary nature of the unions is something which no amount of pressure from

the rank and file can possibly change; on the contrary, as the crisis deepens, as it must, conflict between the working class and the unions can only become increasingly bitter and widespread. And before the proletariat can impose its own solution to the crisis - the revolutionary overthrow of world capitalism - it will have to decisively confront and, ultimately, destroy the trade unions, along with the rest of the bourgeois state apparatus.

LEFTIST MYTHS AND WORKING CLASS EXPERIENCE

The experience of the working class (and this introduction will concentrate on the experience of the working class in Britain and America) utterly destroys all the lies put out by leftist organizations to support their claim that it is possible for the working class to struggle within the unions. Among these lies is the myth that the unions have a 'dual role', that somehow they are "for the working class some of the time and against it at other times". Although it is true that throughout a whole historical period the unions were genuine working class organizations which expressed and fought for the interests of the class, this period came to an end with the outbreak of World War I in 1914: since then the unions have represented the interests of the bourgeoisie and the state against the working class.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The terrible barbarism of World War I marked the end of capitalism as a historically progressive system. The working class of all nations had absolutely nothing to gain from the war, whatever its outcome, except the deaths of millions of proletarians. Its only interest was to struggle against the war, and this could only take the form of revolutionary defeatism: for the proletariat of each country to turn its guns against 'its' own bourgeoisie, as part of the world revolution against capitalism.

But the trade unions of every belligerent nation unhesitatingly chose the side of the bourgeoisie: not only did they call for the working class to support the war, for workers to sacrifice their lives to defend their national capital, but they also collaborated with the bourgeoisie in the enforcement of repressive measures to ensure that workers 'at home' did nothing to disrupt the ceaseless slaughter of their class brothers at the front.

In Britain it was collaboration between unions and the Labour Party which enabled the bourgeoisie to temporarily call a halt

to a rapidly rising wave of class struggle. In August 1914 these two organizations called for a cessation of class struggle for the duration of the war, and after consultations between unions and government this became law in 1915, when strikes were declared illegal. In addition the war meant that workers lost many more of the hard fought gains of previous decades: workers were tied to their place of employment; compulsory overtime, night-work and Sunday work were reintroduced; and factory health and safety regulations were suspended. These and many other repressive measures were fully supported by the unions.

In America, where union organization was still weak before World War I, the government realized that it needed to create a strong union organization if it was to keep growing working class militancy under control during the war. The solution was provided by a pact between the government, employers and the American Federation of Labour (AFL), a particularly spineless collection of craft and skilled trade unions which had always failed to organize more than a small minority of the class. The AFL agreed to oppose all strikes in return for the freedom to organize, which had previously been denied it by the American bourgeoisie. As a result, union membership increased by about two million during the war as a direct response to the needs of American capitalism.

This was no 'tactical error' or temporary aberration on the part of the trade unions. On the contrary it was a conscious decision to collaborate with the bourgeoisie which made the unions accomplices in the mass murder of millions of workers on the battlefield. Of course this betrayal by the unions of the belligerent nations in 1914 did not come out of the blue: it was the logical consequence of their increasing remoteness from the working class, and their growing cooperation with the bourgeoisie for a long period beforehand. Nevertheless 1914 marks a watershed, from which time it is fundamentally true to say that the unions have functioned as simple appendages of the capitalist state, whose only role is to help preserve capitalist 'order' against the proletarian threat.

At first sight this might seem to contradict the fact that trade unions have supported and called many strikes (and other working class actions) since 1914. But the contradiction soon disappears when one considers that the ability of the trade unions to contain militancy and derail struggles depends on the mystification that they are in fact working class organizations and the power of this mystification is precisely their long tradition as genuine working class organizations before 1914. If the unions openly opposed every strike this lie would soon be exposed, and they would lose all

credibility within the working class. This is indeed the case with unions in countries in the Russian bloc and Third World, which openly act as agents of the state to enforce labour discipline and higher productivity levels. But in Britain and America, and other countries in the US bloc, government, business and union leaders alike are aware that a union which has a tradition of 'militancy' among the workers is much more likely to be able to use its influence to keep workers' militancy within safe bounds. They are aware that 'disillusionment amongst workers with their unions brings with it the threat of class struggle outside the 'responsible' control of the unions. And this raises the spectre of the 'collapse of social order', which above all is what terrifies all these bourgeois leaders.

Although some less 'enlightened' sections of the bourgeoisie may remain hostile to the unions, this only serves to reinforce their radical image. And anyway, in times of deepening crisis it becomes increasingly obvious to all sections of the bourgeoisie that only the unions can keep the working class under control. The deeper the crisis, the louder the calls from bourgeois spokesmen (from government ministers to newspaper editors) to strengthen the unions, and to reinforce their authority within the working class. A carefully stage-managed strike is often the best way to achieve this objective.

THE CIO - CHILD OF U.S. CAPITAL

Thus in decadent capitalism the development of trade unions is always a response to the needs of the bourgeoisie and never to those of the proletariat. The enormous growth of American unions during the thirties provides a clear illustration of this. Their growth coincided with a wave of militant class struggle from workers reacting to the terrible conditions brought about by the Depression. But the impetus did not come from the workers, who were already attempting to organize themselves in a more autonomous and radical way, but from President Roosevelt, whose 'New Deal' in 1934 promised workers the 'right to organize' as part of the plan for economic recovery. In effect Roosevelt had recognized that only a strong union organization, working in close cooperation with government and business leaders could diffuse the growing class struggle (no doubt recalling the success of this tactic during the war). At this point workers had largely deserted the AFL unions, which had done nothing to combat the effect of the slump, but undoubtedly many were taken in by the colossal deception of the 'New Deal'. Hundreds of thousands of workers flooded into the unions believing that, with government backing, they would at least find a solution to their problems.

However workers soon found that the AFL was as hostile to all forms of industrial action as it had been throughout its ignominious history. In the massive textile workers strike of 1934, to take just one example, the union at first called a strike, in response to a threat to reduce hours and wages in the industry by 25 per cent; cancelled it in exchange for a government 'study' of the industry and union participation in management; called it again when it became clear that the workers were going to strike anyway; and finally ordered the strikers back to work after 17 days claiming an 'overwhelming victory': a government study of the industry. None of the workers' original demands had been satisfied. This use of the unions to confuse and demoralize the strikers went hand in hand with a continuation of the policy of bloody repression which American governments had pursued throughout the depression. During the textile strike, one of many violent disputes during 1934, at least nine strikers were killed and dozens wounded in clashes with the police and National Guard. The union leaders resolutely condemned any militant class response to this repression - especially the mobile pickets ('flying squadrons') which workers used to strengthen the solidarity of the strike and widen its effects. They also fought to ensure that the strike didn't spread to other industries: AFL representatives instructed workers in other industries to "give support without joining the strike." (New York Times, September 10, 1934, quoted by J. Brecher in Strike, Straight Arrow Books, 1972)

In this way, by attacking the class on an ideological level through the unions the bourgeoisie was able to prevent workers from forging the only weapon with which they could have resisted the physical repression: revolutionary class consciousness. The unions thus share full responsibility for the deaths of all the workers killed during this period. However it soon became clear that the crude strike-breaking tactics of the AFL, though successful in the textile strike and some other cases, were in general simply increasing the bitterness and the militancy of the workers. This threat of intensifying class struggle led to the establishment of the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organization), on the initiative of AFL leaders and under pressure from Congress. The aim was to channel militancy into building a new union organization, which could seem to offer workers a radical alternative to the AFL. But right from the start the CIO sought to destroy class combativity and reinforce union 'discipline' in American industry. The main tactic of the CIO unions was to support unofficial strikes in order to increase their membership and gain the confidence of the workers. At the same time they could prevent strikes from spreading and ensure that they caused minimum damage to the

company and the economy. For instance the famous sit-down at General Motors in Flint in 1936, began as a struggle against increased track speeds, organized by the workers themselves independently of the unions. By giving the strike its 'support' the CIO was able to transform it into a simple demand for union recognition, which meant that the company 'recognized' the union in return for a promise from the union that it would try to prevent all unofficial stoppages. Needless to say, union recognition was presented as another great 'victory' for the workers.

Thus through the CIO the American bourgeoisie was able to divert autonomous class struggle into union activity which far from threatening capitalism actually strengthened it. The true function of the CIO was succinctly expressed by John L Lewis, leader of the CIO in the thirties: "A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs or any other kind of strike." (Brecher, op cit, p.205)

By World War II, the American bourgeoisie had a weakened working class and a strong union organization, to make sure that workers did not disrupt war production, and American capitals' pursuit of higher profits. The CIO and AFL joined forces to ban all strikes and "plan for ever-increasing production". The world war was in fact the culmination of the general defeat suffered by the world working class following the failure of the Russian and German revolutions to extend in the twenties. And all over the world, the trade unions had been among the most important agents of this defeat. In Britain, in the 1926 general strike, the union leaders at first postponed the strike for a year, thus giving the government ample time to prepare for its defeat; and then abruptly called off the strike after nine days, leaving workers to drift back to work, confused and demoralized.

The lesson of these experiences is clear: that unions, like leopards, never change their spots. Even when a union calls a strike, or seems to be on the side of the workers, this is because it judges that, in the long run, this is the best way to reinforce union authority and weaken autonomous class struggle. In fact, the union which is on the side of the working class one day and the bourgeoisie the next, is just a mythical creation of the leftists. Whether unions take up a 'militant' or a 'reactionary' stance is determined simply by tactical considerations: their sole and constant aim is the preservation of 'social order', which in crisis-ridden capitalist society can only mean trying to prevent the working class from struggling against the relentless decline in its living standards.

THE MYTH OF THE RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT

But perhaps it is still possible to change this lamentable state of affairs? Maybe as the leftists claim, a strong 'Rank and File' movement could oust reactionary leaders and 'reclaim' the unions for the working class?

Again the leftists are answered categorically by working class experience. Sixty years of rank and file pressure has failed to prevent the unions from fusing more and more closely with the state apparatus. On the contrary, rank and file movements are themselves constantly being absorbed into the unions, where they function as an integral part of the whole union organization. The British shop stewards, for example, portrayed by the press as the ultimate in shop floor militancy, and idolized by the leftists, are often the most energetic opponents of strikes.

But the constant integration of rank and file movements into the union apparatus is hardly surprising, since, in decadent capitalism, the whole purpose of trade union organization is the infiltration of bourgeois ideology into the working class. The intimate contact between the lower ranks of the union hierarchy and the 'shop floor', far from making the unions more responsive to the needs of the working class, is exactly what makes them so valuable to the bourgeoisie.

Firstly, it is this contact which makes the unions the section of the bourgeoisie which is most sensitive to the mood of the working class, and thus ensures that they are absolutely indispensable to any government which wants to impose austerity measures on the working class without provoking a militant response. (The failure of the recent Tory government in Britain shows what happens to any government which attempts this without the support of the unions.) Nowhere can this function of the unions as 'barometers' of class struggle be seen more clearly than at recent TUC Congresses in Britain. Local delegates at these Congresses often warn of 'growing rank and file militancy', and needless to say they don't see this as a welcome sign of an emerging wave of class struggle which will take the proletariat a step closer towards its emancipation from wage slavery. On the contrary these warnings allow the unions and the whole bourgeoisie to take steps in advance to prevent an outbreak of class struggle. For example, the expected move by the British government from rigid wage controls this year to some form of 'free collective bargaining' next year is largely in response to the unions, which told the government that they would not be able to enforce another year of such rigid controls. Of course this does not mean that the unions are pressing for an end to austerity measures, simply

that they realize the need for these measures to take a different form.

Secondly, this close contact between workers and local union officials gives the bourgeoisie a mouthpiece within the proletariat. By appearing to side with the workers against management on minor issues (and of course their role as 'workers representatives' is constantly being stressed by politicians of all parties, the press, television, etc.), these officials are well placed to explain to workers why 'economic realities' force the union to support speed-ups, lay-offs, wage restraint, etc.

The shop stewards are simply a further refinement of the system, which extends the ideological penetration of the bourgeoisie into the heart of the proletariat. During the fifties and sixties when British capitalism appeared comparatively healthy, shop stewards were able to appear very militant. In particular they seemed to offer workers an alternative to the regular unions which were becoming increasingly distant, and seemingly less concerned with protecting their interests. But while workers found that the shop stewards were able to bring about a swift settlement of grievances, this was largely the result of developing links between stewards and management, the whole aim of these being to ensure that industry ran more smoothly. Many managers actually preferred to deal with stewards, whom they saw as more flexible than official union representatives and more influential among the workers. The unions, for their part, soon saw the advantages of strengthening and regularizing the informal links between unions, stewards and management, and bringing the whole process under their own control. In this way the stewards have become "the crucial point of contact between members, full time officials and the unions". ('Shop Stewards and Workshop Relations', Research Paper 10 by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, p.5.)

The militancy of shop stewards was in any case always greatly exaggerated (most managers and stewards themselves seeing the function of stewards as a "moderating influence" - Ibid, p. 7.), but the deepening economic crisis has brought the partnership between stewards and management into the open, and clearly revealed the stewards as opponents of class struggle and enemies of the proletariat. In other words the bourgeoisie is becoming more and more dependent on the shop stewards to contain class struggle. This was underlined at British Leyland's Longbridge plant recently when in response to an urgent call from unions and management, who were faced with a series of strikes which threatened to get out of control, seven hundred stewards voted almost unanimously to ban all unofficial strikes at the plant.

Moreover it would be a profound error to portray show stewards as just innocent victims, caught in the web of trade union bureaucracy. On the contrary the integration of the shop stewards (and all similar rank and file organizations) into the unions is a natural consequence of the acceptance of a trade unionist conception of working class struggle, which is the basis of all such organizations. The idea that workers can take on capitalism plant by plant, and sector by sector, not to overthrow capitalism but to claim their 'rightful' share; not as a permanent struggle against exploitation but as a temporary disruption of a system of otherwise peaceful coexistence: this sort of reformist struggle is no longer possible in decadent capitalism. When capitalism is in a state of profound and insoluble crisis, any serious struggle by the proletariat, even to defend its own living standards, threatens capitalism itself. At such a time, to advocate this form of 'responsible' struggle, within the limits of capitalist society, as the trade unions do, can in reality only mean to oppose all class struggle. Indeed the myth that it is possible for the working class to win permanent reforms in decadent capitalism is one of the main weapons of mystification used by the bourgeoisie to prevent the proletariat from taking its defensive struggles to their only possible conclusion: revolutionary struggle against capitalism itself. The failure of rank and file organizations to challenge this reformist, trade unionist conception of class struggle has three main results:

1. They are naturally integrated into the existing unions, or else become some sort of alternative union, with a more radical appearance, but fulfilling the same reactionary role as all other unions.
2. They concretely help to defeat class struggle by isolating it along sectional trade lines. The Scottish strike wave in the autumn of 1974 when a rash of spontaneous strikes led to a near general strike situation in central Scotland, provides the most vivid description of this. It was thanks to the shop stewards who, while taking a 'militant' stance, insisted that each group of workers was only in dispute with its own management, and for its own economic demands, that all these strikes remained isolated and were largely defeated. The next year, when a prolonged strike by a small group of dustcart drivers in Glasgow was met by concerted opposition from the whole state apparatus, (local council, government, trade union, press and television, and finally from troops sent in to break the strike) the workers' stewards refused to call for the extension of the strike, saying that it was just a dispute between the dustcart drivers and the local council!

3. More important than the actual physical defeat of such disputes, rank and file organizations form a barrier to the development of revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat, by reinforcing the credibility of the trade unions, and by strengthening the illusion that the proletariat can still struggle in a trade unionist, reformist way.

LESSONS OF RECENT STRUGGLES - THE NEED FOR CONSCIOUS STRUGGLE AGAINST THE UNIONS

Against all the leftist myths which seek to portray the working class as powerless and exposed as soon as it leaves the shelter of the trade unions, we have seen that the more involved trade unions become in workers' struggles, the more these struggles are weakened and finally, defeated. On the otherhand, the more the class struggles autonomously of and against the unions, the stronger it becomes.

But in decadent capitalism even the most 'successful' struggles can only offer the proletariat temporary relief from a constant deterioration in its conditions of life. All struggles can only be a preparation for the only possible proletarian solution to the crisis, the revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Class struggle against the unions is thus in no way a 'recipe' for instant success. Rather, the ability of the class to struggle against the unions is one of the essential preconditions for this revolutionary struggle.

Since the re-emergence of class struggle in the late sixties, the world proletariat has shown a clear tendency to struggle outside the unions, to create its own autonomous fighting organizations such as general assemblies, revocable strike committees, etc. In America in 1970, there were huge national wildcats by postal workers and Teamsters (truck drivers), as well as a rash of wildcats in other industries throughout the late sixties and early seventies. In Britain the number of strikes increased dramatically between 1967 and 1972, and an increasing proportion of these were 'unofficial' (amounting in 1969 to 95 per cent of all strikes).

These struggles formed part of a wave of class militancy which swept the world at this time, and which was felt most strongly in France in 1968, Argentina and Italy in 1969 and Poland in 1970, but which also affected very many countries all over the world to a greater or lesser extent. In all countries the trade unions were at first caught off balance by this sudden wave of class struggle, and were left helpless as the struggles inten-

sified in spite of their opposition. But since then, after their initial confusion the trade unions have shown a remarkable ability to re-establish their influence with the proletariat. In Britain after widespread wildcats in the mines in 1969 and 1970 (when the miners expressed great hostility towards their union) the union was able to regain much of its lost influence by supporting the 1972 strike, which it recognized as inevitable anyway. This undoubtedly helped to repair the image of the whole British trade union movement. During 1974 and 1975 the unions were further able to strengthen their position by supporting huge wage claims of up to 30 per cent by various groups of workers. Nevertheless because of inflation, real wages actually fell during this period. And the influence regained by the unions during this period was one of the factors which enabled the government to enforce the 'Social Contract'.

In America, unions and management have shown that they, like their British counterparts, have learnt from experience that a well-timed strike is often the best way to ensure industrial peace in the future. The most notable example of this was the General Motors strike in 1970, when cooperation between union and management reached a new level: the company went so far as to lend the UAW \$30 million to help finance the strike. One bourgeois commentator explained why the strike had been called: "A strike, by putting the workers on the streets, rolls the steam out of them - it reduces their demands and thus brings agreement and ratification; it also solidifies the authority of the union hierarchy." (Quoted by J. Zerzan in 'Organized Labour vs The Revolt Against Work', London Solidarity, Black & Red, etc.)

The strengthening of the unions has enabled the bourgeoisie to bring the working class more or less back into line for the present. The struggles of the late sixties and early seventies took the form of a spontaneous eruption which above all demonstrated the power and combativity of the proletariat. But the seriousness of the situation is now very much more apparent; the strength of the bourgeoisie and the implications of a direct confrontation with the unions and the rest of the state apparatus, make workers unwilling to embark on a new series of struggles. However, the lull in the class struggle has in no way involved the defeat of the proletariat, and for this reason it can only be temporary. The inevitable worsening of the crisis creates a growing build-up of class tension which can only lead to a new eruption, more extensive than before.

Meanwhile the bourgeoisie is using the temporary lull in class struggle to prepare its defences against the proletariat. Both its repressive forces (such as the police and the army) and its forces of mystification are being strengthened. In partic-

ular the unions' success in containing class struggle has further emphasized their growing importance to the bourgeoisie. In almost every country this has resulted in closer cooperation between unions and government. In Britain, Len Murray, President of the TUC said recently that "all in all (British) trade unionists have gained more from the government in the last two-and-a-half years than from any other government" (The Times, September 9, 1976). For workers this period has meant rapidly declining real wages and growing unemployment. Nothing could illustrate more clearly the absolute opposition between the interests of the unions, and those of the working class.

For the proletariat, the lesson of class struggle is clear: spontaneous struggle outside the unions is not enough - it can only form a particular, temporary phase in the development of the class struggle. In the future workers will be forced to struggle directly against the unions; and the development of this struggle will have to go hand in hand with a growing understanding within the working class of the true nature of trade unions. It is as a contribution towards this understanding that we are publishing this pamphlet.

International Communist Current
November, 1976

International Review

The International Review, the theoretical journal of the ICC, expresses the unity of action existing between the magazines of the various sections of the ICC. The Review has set itself the following tasks: to publish the positions and analyses of the ICC on the most important problems posed by the international situation; to republish little-known and little-circulated texts of the workers' movement, written during the course of the counter-revolution when revolutionaries suffered extreme isolation; to publish correspondence and polemics with groups and tendencies close to the Current or with those whose positions have a particular interest to the needs of the international class struggle. The Review appears in French, English, and Spanish every three months. Regular selections of texts from the International Review also appear in Dutch, German and Italian. The English version is available from World Revolution and Internationalism.

UNIONS AGAINST THE WORKING CLASS

One of the fundamental objectives of the class struggle in the last century was to win the right to organize in combinations and unions.

After the 1789 Revolution, the bourgeoisie in France having just conquered political power, deprived the working class of the right to form associations, a right the class had scarcely won for itself. As a result of a constitutional law passed on 14 June 1791, any grouping-together on the part of the workers in defence of their common interests was branded as an "Attack against Liberty and the Declaration of the Rights of Man", punishable by a fine of 500 livres (pounds) and the loss of citizen rights for a year. It was only after more than a half century of workers' struggles that improvements were brought about that 'tolerated' the right of combination while punishing any 'interference with the free play of industry and the liberty of labour'. In England the laws against combinations were only gradually lifted as a consequence of proletarian pressure. Not until June 1871, after the reforms of 1825 and 1859, did the law recognize the legal existence of trade unions - while simultaneously limiting the extent of such recognition by passing new laws. Legally recognised or not, the workers' unions would never have arisen nor survived if the workers had not constantly struggled and sacrificed themselves in their opposition to the bourgeois state.

Today relations between the working class, the unions, and the state have become totally different. Confrontation between the workers and unions has become a principal characteristic of any significant proletarian struggle. Since 1919, when the unions in Germany participated in the bloody suppression of the workers' insurrection in Berlin, the history of important workers' struggles has been marked by violent clashes between the proletariat and union organizations. This phenomenon, recurring through all the vicissitudes of the struggles, has simply been exacerbated in every country with the reawakening of the class struggle since 1968: the massive strike wave of May 1968 in France was launched despite the unions. In Italy during the course of the strikes which took place during the 'hot autumn' of 1969 the workers chased the union officials from the strike assemblies. In England where strikes have

multiplied since the beginning of the sixties and particularly from 1968 to 1972, strikes were for the most part 'wildcats' that is, against the unions. Anti-union strikes developed in Belgium in 1970, and in 1973 the Antwerp dockers attacked the union headquarters while on strike. In Venezuela, workers in the main industrial centres of the country took the union officials hostage and confronted the army coming to free them. In 1970 naval shipyard workers in Poland confronted the 'workers' party' and unions. The violence of the ensuing insurrectional struggles left several hundred dead.

Conversely, the relationship between the 'workers' unions' and the bourgeois state has become particularly close. In the state capitalist countries, cynically termed 'communist' societies, the unions are officially integrated into the state apparatus in just the same way as the army and police are. As state organs their task is clearly defined - the responsibility of containing the working class within the factories, providing police surveillance, labour discipline, and being the driving force behind the fulfilment of the needs of capitalist production through their efforts to increase productivity and lower wage costs. Thus, for example, the Executive Committee of the Chinese CGT (Confederation of Labour) at their meeting of 10 July 1953, ordered, "all union cadres to regard the strengthening of labour discipline as their fundamental and permanent task" and recommended "punishing in appropriate manner the recalcitrant elements who constantly commit serious infringements against labour discipline." (G. Lefranc, 'Le Syndicalisme dans le Monde', in *Qué Sais-Je?*) Similarly, the Tenth Russian Trade Union Congress (1949) defined the goals of unions in their exhortation to "organize 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."

In countries where the state makes use of so-called 'democratic' mechanisms, the collaboration between the state and the unions is less apparent, less official, but just as real. It is often clearer in countries where the central bodies of the trade unions are linked to political parties that quite often come to power. This happens in the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, etc. In Belgium, for example, the unions have since 1919 participated in 'round-table talks' organized by the state in order to facilitate good relations between the employers and the unions. The unions are represented in state labour tribunals which settle conflicts arising between employers and workers. They sit on the Central Council of the Economy, as well as councils running the National Bank of Belgium. They are responsible for managing the allocation of unemployment amongst the unionized workers, for which task

they receive a subsidy from the state. In short, they are closely associated with the state in the management of the national economy, that is in the management of wage slavery. In countries where the unions are connected to opposition parties, their link to the state can appear less obvious. They are then forced to play the same opposition game as the parties themselves. This has been the case with the main unions in France and Italy for some time. That does not, however, prevent their integration into the rungs of the state apparatus, even in institutionalized forms: thus for example, in France the unions are partly subsidized by the state, participate in the Planning Council, in the Social and Economic Council, in business committees, etc., and are respectfully consulted by the government on any decision of an important social nature.

In all countries, in any case, the bigger unions have become the very respectable and very official 'representatives of the working class', working alongside the bourgeois state, and becoming an integral part of it. It is not, therefore, difficult to understand why the leader of the French employers' union should today make a sincere and decided plea for strong workers' trade unionism, the very thing the revolutionary bourgeoisie fought against with equal energy in 1791: "As a counterpart to the freedom enjoyed by the captains of industry, it is desirable that workers' trade unionism should vigorously assert itself in order to establish an equilibrium. Personally, the more I advocate free enterprise, the more I hope for strong trade unionism. This is how things happen in a cohesive society." (F. Ceyrac, President of the CNPF, (the most representative organization of the French bosses), in L'Express.)

Today, the proletariat must draw the lessons of all the consequences of fifty years of triumphant counter-revolution and working class defeat. As the crisis of world capitalism deepens and engenders the reawakening of proletarian struggle which has extended itself over the whole planet on an unprecedented scale, the proletariat must engrave on its consciousness a clear response to the questions that history has violently posed it in practice. Are these 'wildcat' strikes, these anti-union struggles which have sporadically exploded during the last sixty years and which are multiplying today in all four corners of the world, marginal, exceptional phenomena, or are they class indications of the only way the proletariat can struggle in the present historic period? Is the integration of the unions into the bourgeois state a real phenomenon, complete and irreversible, or does it simply appear to be so? Do the unions still retain some working class character? Can they be recuperated by the working class in toto or should new forms of union organization be created? And more generally, can the proletarian struggle use the same forms today under decadent

capitalism (senile since World War I), as it used in the historically ascendant capitalism of the nineteenth century?

The proletariat can only draw the lessons for its struggles from its own historic experience. The possibility for revolutionary action depends on the capacity of the class to assimilate its own experience. In order to answer these burning questions, we must look at the essential aspects governing the evolution of the unions, and in a more overall sense, the forms workers' struggles have taken since the nineteenth century.

THE WORKERS' STRUGGLE IN ASCENDANT CAPITALISM

COMBINATIONS AND UNIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The following quotation illustrates how Marx summarized the main features of the process leading to the formation of the first workers' organizations:

"The first attempts of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations. Large scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance - combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers' sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations, which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favour of wages. In England they have not stopped at

partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, trades unions which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with their employers." (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, pp. 149-50)

Trade unions appeared therefore as permanent organizations of the class whose purpose was to facilitate the organized resistance of the workers against capital. Products of economic conditions and instruments of a basically economic conflict, they were not, however, nor could they be (contrary to the assertions of the anarcho-syndicalists and the reformists) 'a-political' organizations.

Everything that has to do with the government of the state is political. Because the bourgeois state is the guarantor and defender of the relations which link capital to labour, any resistance to such relations is inevitably to the state, and therefore, a political struggle. Thus immediately following the last passage we quoted, Marx adds:

"In this struggle - a veritable civil war - all the elements necessary for the coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character.... Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself.... But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.... Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social." (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, pp. 150 and 152)

But if it is quite obvious that the class struggle of the proletariat cannot help but bear a relationship to the government of the state, and hence is inevitably political in nature, we still have to find out what type of political struggle it is.

Indeed in the nineteenth century the historic reality of capitalism in its full tide of expansion meant that the political struggle of the proletariat could take place on two different levels: on the one hand the struggle fought on the terrain of the bourgeois state itself for economic and political reforms; and on the other hand the preparation for revolutionary struggle, the destruction of the bourgeois state and of the society engendering it.

THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORMS

The nineteenth century was the apogee of capitalism's historically ascendant phase. The major economic powers extended capital's domination, transforming the entire world in its own image. The English, French, American, and German capitalists invaded the world with their commodities, a world which offered ever-growing, and seemingly, inexhaustible markets for their production. It was the great era of imperialist expansion and industrial revolutions.

Within this historic framework, the amelioration of working class living conditions constituted objectively, not only a real possibility, but also in certain cases, a stimulant to capitalist development. Thus, for example, the victory won by the English working class in reducing working hours to ten hours per day in 1848, was a real gain for the working class (it was not immediately cancelled out by compulsory overtime), and it also provided a stimulus to the British economy. This is how Marx commented on this event in Wages, Price and Profit, illustrating the necessity and the possibility for economic reforms:

"The official economists announced that 'it would sound the death-knell of English industry' (when the Ten Hour Bill was obtained by the workers). They threatened a decrease of accumulation, rise of prices, loss of markets, stinting of production, consequent reaction upon wages, ultimate ruin. Well, what was the result? A rise in the money wages of the factory operatives, despite the curtailing of the working day, a great increase in the number of factory hands employed, a continuous fall in the prices of their products, a marvellous development in the productive powers of their labour, an unheard-of progressive expansion of the markets for their commodities." (Marx, Wages, Price and Profit, Peking edition, pp. 13 and 14)

However the bourgeoisie never granted such reforms out of its own inclination. Any concession to the proletariat was made in the first place to the detriment of capitalist profit. Generally speaking it was only after the capitalists were goaded into realizing the beneficial results such reforms produced (in terms of acting as a spur to capitalist growth) that they began to understand that it was in their interest to grant the proletariat reforms. It was, therefore, only as a result of implacable struggle that the working class could wrest reforms from the ruling class. This was the nature of the defensive struggles of the proletariat in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, in this period of free-trade, the bourgeoisie governed through Parliament. Here the different factions of the

ruling class really confronted each other and decided on government policies. For the working class, the right of universal suffrage constituted a real means of influencing the policies of the bourgeois state through its representatives in Parliament. Not that bourgeois Parliamentarians would make great cause with the specific demands coming from the representatives of the workers' organizations. Within the terrain of the bourgeois state, the antagonism existing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie could only ever be favourable to the ruling class. But the bourgeoisie in this epoch was still divided into more progressive and more reactionary factions. The modern bourgeoisie was still fighting against the representatives of the ruling class inherited from the old regime whose economic power remained, and against the most backward factions of its own class. In the words of The Communist Manifesto: "The organization of the proletarians compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions among the bourgeoisie itself." (Marx, The Communist Manifesto.)

In this historic period then, the struggle for democratic political rights was a necessity for the proletariat. The winning of universal suffrage, the right to form combinations and the parliamentary struggle itself, were political manifestations of the class struggle and formed an inseparable corollary to the struggle and organization of the unions. Unionism and parliamentarism were specific forms in which the necessity and possibility of reformist struggles in ascendant capitalism were expressed.

THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE

The struggle for reforms was only one aspect of the proletarian struggle in the nineteenth century. The working class is an exploited class and consequently no reform whatsoever can bring about its emancipation. The deepest expression of proletarian struggle lives and flourishes in its struggle for the destruction of exploitation and not in its struggles to ameliorate its exploitation. "An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonisms of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society." (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy.)

Also proletarian revolutionaries did not see in the struggle for reforms the authentic perspective for the working class, nor even the form of struggle which could act as the essential focus for its activity. Imprisoned within its own limitations, the struggle for reforms could only result in the defence of exploitation itself. It was no longer a step towards the definitive emancipation of the working class but a new noose hanging round

its neck. As much as Marx defended the necessity for reformist struggles, he just as energetically denounced the reformist tendencies that were trying to imprison the working class within that struggle, who "saw in the struggle for wages, only the struggle for wages" and did not see it as a school of struggle where the class was forging the weapons for its ultimate emancipation.

He coined the term "parliamentary cretinism" to describe the tendency in the workers' movement which tried to create illusions in the possibilities of parliamentary struggle and put all their energies in parliamentary activity.

On the subject of reformist struggles, the Manifesto stated: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers." (Marx, The Communist Manifesto)

And in Wages, Price and Profit, he noted: "At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these every-day struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes in the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!" (Marx, Wages, Price and Profit, Peking edition, pp. 77-8)

Similarly, the Resolution passed by the 1st International regarding the unions, stated: "The immediate objective of the workers' unions was always limited to the necessities of every-day struggles, to expedients against the incessant encroachments of capital, in a word, to questions about wages and hours of work. This activity is not only legitimate but also necessary." (Marx, Resolution of the 1st International)

But: "...the unions are far too exclusively occupied with local and immediate struggles against capital. They have not sufficiently understood their power to act against the system of

wage-slavery itself. They have too often stood aside from the more generalized movements and political struggles.

"Apart from their immediate task of reacting against the aggravating manoeuvrings of capital, they must now act as organizational spearheads of the working class for the great goal of its radical emancipation. They must assist any social or political movement tending in this direction." (Resolution on the Unions, their past, present and future, 1st Congress of the International Working Men's Association, Geneva, 1866)

For revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, the systematic struggle of the class to win reforms and limit capitalist exploitation, and the understanding that this struggle was not an end in itself but a moment in the global revolutionary struggle, were complementary. The marxist workers' parties which (parallel to the growing influence of the unions) developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and later formed the IInd International, tended from the beginning not only to provide the working class with representatives for the parliamentary struggle, but also constituted the political driving force of the unions. It was these parties which, in the face of all the sectional and local struggles of the class, put forward the common interests of the whole proletariat as a global, historical, revolutionary class.

The ephemeral associations of the early times became under the union form permanent organizations which in close collaboration with the mass parliamentary parties, and organized around the systematic and progressive struggle for reforms, constituted the place where the proletariat was unified and developed its class consciousness.

THE UNIONS DESTROYED BY REFORMISM

But the fact that capitalism was at the height of its ascendant phase meant that its destruction by the communist revolution was not yet on the historical agenda. With the expansion of the productive forces under the aegis of capitalist relations of production and the success of the parliamentary and trade unions struggles in obtaining real reforms favouring the working class, the very idea of the communist revolution began to appear as a long term, even unattainable goal.

The dangers inherent in unionism and parliamentarism which Marx had denounced continued to develop and with the famous slogan "the end is nothing, the movement is everything", the workers' movement was over run by reformism. The workers' leaders, at one time the representatives of the working class pitted against capitalist society, gradually became the representatives

of capitalism working against the class. The trade union and parliamentary bureaucracy tended more and more to dominate proletarian organizations.

One of the clearest signs of this evolution was expressed in the tendency for political struggles to be isolated from economic struggles. While the party was coming to be thought of only as a parliamentary machine, so attempts were being made to make the unions purely economic organizations. Through the separation of the political from the economic element in proletarian struggles, these organizations were being shaped for their integration into the rungs of the capitalist state.

The revolutionary left within the IInd International led a daily battle against this general degeneration. Rosa Luxemburg, for example, stated:

"There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only one class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself." (Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions)

But the left could not manage to stem the tide. With the entry of capitalism into decadence the unions and parliamentary parties were flung without difficulty into the camp of the bourgeoisie.

UNIONS IN DECADENT CAPITALISM

THE DECADENCE OF CAPITALISM

With the onset of the twentieth century the conditions which had allowed for capitalism's extraordinary expansion began to disappear. The creation of the world market was achieved and with this antagonisms already existing between the various capitalist powers for the domination of markets increased, as their need for outlets for their products outstripped the

capacity of the world market to absorb them. The very development of capital piled up barriers to its continued expansion. There were 'too many capitalists' for the existing markets. The last powerful nation states to enter into competition on the world market (in particular Germany, Italy and Russia) could only open up outlets for their own development at the expense of the old ruling powers. From the beginning of the century, squabbles between the imperialist powers multiplied.

The economic and social life of each nation was more and more thrown into disorder. To cope with rivalries developing over the competition of commodities on the world market as well as military competition, the whole economy had to be stretched to its maximum limits in order to lower the costs of production and release the necessary resources to develop armies and a military apparatus of the most modern type. The margin of manoeuvre which had once been available to the national capitals and which had allowed the proletariat room to lead a struggle for reforms within bourgeois society shrank rapidly. The pitiless war which the capitalist nations embarked upon led naturally enough to an internal war waged by capital against any amelioration in the living conditions of the producing class. The economic and military efficiency of each national capital vis-à-vis other national capitals depended as never before on the capacity of each to extract the maximum surplus value from its exploited class. No national capital could grant concessions to its proletariat without falling behind on the international arena.

The objective economic foundations which had led the proletariat to focus its class activity around a struggle for the systematic conquest of reforms had irreversibly fallen apart laying bare the fundamental class antagonisms between the proletariat and bourgeoisie and exacerbating them to their very limits. On the political level the most powerful sectors of the bourgeoisie in each national capital asserted themselves against the rest of their class and progressively concentrated all power in the hands of the state executive. In the process Parliament became merely a chamber to rubber stamp executive decisions. It was kept in existence solely for the purpose of political mystification.

The era of capitalism's apogee was over and the era of its historic decline opened up.

This fundamental change totally transformed the conditions within which the proletariat had been struggling. Gone was the time when the proletariat could negotiate within the confines of Parliament for an amelioration in its living conditions; gone was the time when it could take advantage of the divergen-

ces existing between different bourgeois factions in order to pursue its own interests; gone was the time when an improvement in its lot could constitute a stimulant to capitalist development; gone was the epoch when the proletariat could cling to the hope of winning its 'minimum programme'. From now on the class would be confronted with an ever-more centralized, omnipresent and powerful state which could only offer the proletariat ever-increasing exploitation and enlistment as cannon fodder in inter-imperialist conflicts. From now on, indirect methods of political struggle, the attempt to put pressure on the capitalist state and modify its policies through unions and parliamentary parties, could only collapse in the face of the survival-needs of each national capital. Any programme of reform became an unattainable utopia and all the methods of struggle which had evolved to suit the conditions of ascendant capitalism became fetters on the expression of proletarian interests.

World War I, by definitively marking the entry of capitalism into its decadent phase, violently confronted the proletariat and its organizations with this alternative: "War or Revolution"; "Socialism or Barbarism". Either the proletariat had to engage in the direct, revolutionary, mass struggle thereby abandoning its old, inappropriate forms of struggle and organization, or it would submit to capitalist barbarism.

The old union and parliamentary structure of the IInd International, riddled to the core with reformism, scarcely hesitated. It passed lock, stock and barrel into the camp of the bourgeoisie, and immediately became capital's recruiting agent for the imperialist butchery.

During the revolutionary explosion which shook Europe at the end of the war the workers provided themselves with new forms of struggle and organization: mass struggles organized in councils made their first appearance in the beginning of the century with the struggle of the young Russian proletariat. And there ranged before them, flanking the bourgeoisie and the parliamentary parties, stood the unions.

THE UNIONS INTEGRATED INTO THE CAPITALIST STATE

Since World War I, capitalist decadence has plunged humanity into the barbarity of a recurring cycle of crisis, war, and reconstruction. This cycle reinforces the existing historic conditions which simultaneously render impossible any defence of proletarian interests through reformist struggles and force any organization basing itself on this terrain to become a bourgeois instrument integrated into the state apparatus. These conditions principally boil down to the impossibility of reforms

and the development of state totalitarianism.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REFORMS

In order to deal with both international competition exacerbated to unbearable limits, and to cope with the unproductive expenses which keep growing in proportion to the deepening contradictions of the system, the bourgeoisie must use the following mechanisms:

1. the maintenance of the more and more monstrous administrative and policing apparatus of the state;
2. gigantic expenditure on military production (up to 50 per cent of the state budget in countries like Russia or the USA);
3. state subsidies to a greater and greater number of sectors suffering chronic deficits;
4. increase marketing, publicity, and in general the so-called 'tertiary' sector costs in an attempt to wring from the system compensation for all the expenses of an economic administration which has become as costly as it is contradictory and absurd;
5. and finally, capital is permanently forced to increase the exploitation of the proletariat beyond the point of endurance so as to meet all these unproductive expenses which are characteristics of capitalism in decline.

Given this situation, the bourgeoisie even when it is pressurized by the most militant workers' struggles, cannot afford to grant any real reforms.

It is obvious that during the last fifty years all the struggles for wage increases have ended up with nothing. On the economic terrain, increases in wages have been merely gobbled up by constantly rising prices. The wage increases won in June 1936 at Matignon in France (averaging 12 per cent) evaporated in six months (from September 1936 to January 1937 prices rose an average of 11 per cent). Similarly we all know that one year later nothing was left of the increases granted in June 1968 at Grenella (after the May-June 1968 events in France).

The same phenomenon can be seen with regard to working conditions. While during the ascendant period of capitalism the length of the working week effectively fell due to the pressure of workers struggles (from 1850 to 1900 the length of the working week in industry diminished from 72 to 64.5 hours in France, and from 63 to 55.3 hours in the USA), 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 of 1936 had become 44.3 in 1949 and 45.7 in 1962!).

The period of reconstruction, which began in 1945 after the miseries of the crisis and the war, led many to believe that an improvement in living and working conditions was still possible. The relative prosperity enjoyed by capital during the reconstruction period allowed it partially to reabsorb the unemployed and offer a certain amount of security of employment. Everywhere the defenders of the system held out the bright prospect of a spectacular improvement in living standards in the industrialized countries. But what was the reality behind this great 'improvement' which led some people to assert that the proletariat had disappeared - diluted supposedly into the so-called 'consumer society'?

INCREASED EXPLOITATION

What determines the living conditions of the workers is primarily the length of time the workers must work and the degree of intensification of their exploitation. Within these two areas there has been no meaningful improvement in the living conditions of the workers under decadent capitalism. The length of working time has officially been shortened but any decrease has been compensated for by compulsory overtime and extended commuting time.

"In the strictly economic domain the situation of the working class was never worse than it is today In many countries the refusal to work overtime is an immediate cause for dismissal and everywhere the introduction of so-called 'base rates of pay' which are deliberately kept low, and rewards and bonuses based on productivity, etc.... force the workers to accept 'of his own accord' working days of ten to twelve hours...

"With respect to the most profound aspect of exploitation - productivity per person per hour - the proletariat finds itself forced into a terrible situation. The production that is extracted from him each day increases at an enormous rate. First, technical innovations take away from the worker any creative intervention in his labour, measure his movements to the second, and transform him into a living robot subjected to the same rhythm as the machines. Then, time and motion studies, that atrocious and repugnant snare, force people to work over and over with the same tools and during uniform periods of time. Finally, the discipline of each enterprise reduces to a minimum the slightest suspension of

work even the lighting of a cigarette or taking a shit! The output that is extracted from each person by these means is enormous and so, in the same proportion, is the worker's physical and psychic exhaustion." (G. Munis, 'Unions against the Revolution', in Internationalism no. 3)

THE INCREASE IN PURCHASING POWER

Such an increase, which the idolators of capitalism have made so much of, is quite simply a fraud. Generally speaking, increased purchasing power means being able to acquire a television, a car, and the 'convenience' of electrical gadgets. But this increase is still only the minimum capital is forced to grant to maintain exploitation under the conditions of modern life. The best example of this is the television set. Apart from being one of the saddest ways of making the worker forget his exhaustion during the three or four hours left to him at the end of a day's work, television is also an effective ideological weapon and has long been recognized as such. If the workers didn't want television sets because they cost too much, capital would hand them out free. Cars and other labour-saving devices are ways of getting the most out of the 'free' time of the worker in order to allow him to reproduce his labour power under a rhythm of life made more and more exhausting for him by capital. Such devices are just as indispensable for today's proletariat as paid holidays are necessary to recuperate from a year of inhuman labour. All these things portrayed as sheer luxuries are merely the strict minimum required in this modern epoch.

The hollow-sounding assertions made by the defenders of capital cannot hide the reality workers have felt now every day for decades, namely that capitalism must deteriorate their living conditions irreversibly. Faced with this state of affairs and faced with the systematic failure of struggles for real reforms, what role remains for the unions to play? For unions to acknowledge the true state of affairs would mean the recognition of their own ineffectiveness and their self-destruction.

In order to survive, therefore, they have had to become the 'consolers' of the working class in the same way as the church was centuries back for the serfs. Today, while they don't promise heaven, they do invent 'victories' where there are only defeats. They speak of workers' conquests when there is nothing but a reinforcement of exploitation, and they transform any workers struggle into a peaceful demonstration. Just like the church in the Middle Ages, the unions act today as the spearhead of the ruling class within the exploited class.

In this era we have seen conflicts develop between capitalists

within each nation and between different factions of world capital. Conflicts have also arisen between antagonistic classes. And in a general sense we have seen a worsening in the overall conflict between the development of the productive forces and the social framework they have outgrown. Its own mechanisms lead decadent capitalism to disintegrate in every domain. And, as was the case in decadent periods of slave society and feudalism, the totalitarian power of the state intervening at every level in society - controlling everything - consequently becomes an essential factor in the maintenance of the old decaying social edifice.

If, during the prosperous years of the nineteenth century, 'free-exchange' and economic 'non-interventionism' were possible, in its decadent phase capital has developed a much strengthened state to co-ordinate and directly control every aspect of social life and above all control social relations between the classes.

Paralleling the increasing role of the state in the economy since World War I, has been the multiplication of laws regulating relations between capital and labour, to create a narrowly defined area of 'legality' within which the proletarian struggle is circumscribed and reduced to impotency. These laws can assume either the vicious dictatorial forms associated with Stalinist or fascist regimes, of the more subtle - though no less effective - forms associated with the so-called 'democratic' regimes. But under whatever guise they appear, these laws form an ideal apparatus for containing the struggles of the working class.

Given the present day historical conditions, any union organization is forced by the very nature of its function to seek legality. It is permanently subject to pressure. Such pressure tends to transform the union into a conveyor belt for the state playing the only game it can play. The game is making capitalist laws acceptable to the workers. The power of integration possessed by the state apparatus under the totalitarianism of decadent capitalism will only be defeated by direct revolutionary action against the state itself. The unions, which by definition cannot base their activity on this terrain, have no resources to pit against the state.

The integration of the unions into the state frequently manifests itself in an overt and direct way. They officially become an integral part of the state apparatus and in many cases the unionization of the workers is made obligatory by law. This is what happens in most of the countries born out of 'national liberation struggles', countries which display the most senile forms of decadent capitalism. This also happens in fascist

or so-called 'socialist' regimes.

In 'democratic regimes' - in particular those where the unions are linked to political opposition parties (or where they must submit to being clandestine) - integration into the state apparatus manifests itself in a less overt fashion. But the very fact that the unions accept the framework of state legality (or attempt to get themselves accepted by it as is the case for the clandestine unions in Spain) means that in reality they are integrated into the rungs of the state apparatus. Opposition between different factions of the bourgeois political apparatus serves only to give these union organizations a veneer of combativity, at least verbally, which allows them to better appear as 'workers' organizations'.

Whether this integration is done crudely, or whether it is done through participation by the unions in the bourgeois political comedy, the unions are inevitably absorbed by the state under decadent capitalism. At the point when the unions could no longer exist as workers' organizations because of the impossibility of fulfilling their original task, decadent capitalism created the need within the state for a number of functions which suited the unions perfectly: containment of the working class, management of the sale of labour power, regularization and defusing of the conflicts between capital and labour, etc. This is why we saw in the first part of the text that the state often creates unions, defends them and subsidizes them, for it is only as rungs in this apparatus, associated with the daily management of capitalist exploitation, that the unions can survive in a world where their original function has become impossible.

UNIONS: STATE POLICE IN THE FACTORIES

It is in the factories and in the face of explosions of class struggle that the unions are so indispensable to the capitalist state. Immersed within the revolutionary class they are the best placed to defuse, demoralize, and divide any revolutionary tendency in the class. In countries where an old trade unionist tradition exists, they have become experts in these matters.

The major weakness of any exploited class is lack of confidence in itself. Everything in a class society is structured so as to inculcate into the minds of the exploited class the idea of the inevitability of their situation and of their impotence to overthrow the status quo. Trade unionism - by offering no other perspective to the class than that of illusory improvements in its exploited condition, by permanently presenting the class struggle as a 'terrible sacrifice for the workers', by making negotiation the sole end of the struggle, by singing the praises

of the ideal 'good worker' who is the father of his family and responsible and serious in his work - is one of the best peddlars of bourgeois ideology within the working class. Unions spread a spirit of demoralization and self-abnegation, the very opposite of the combative spirit of the revolutionary class.

The unions excel in the task of dividing any working class struggle by imprisoning it within completely ineffective forms of struggle (strikes just for a few hours, 'days of action', go-slows, etc) and by compartmentalizing any proletarian struggle by shop-floor, by factory and by sector. To prevent at all costs the unification and generalization of the struggles of the class is the stock in trade of the unions.

Finally, when revolutionary elements in a factory break away from all this by putting the unions and their activities into question, the union bureaucracy is able to play a good policing role, meeting out physical repression when possible and resorting on other occasions to slander by calling the workers agent provocateurs of the government, CIA agents, etc. Each time acting as the faithful watchdogs of the system.

Books and books could be written recounting the many varied methods used by unions to sabotage struggles. Just to relate incidences from the last decades would be enough, but that is not our purpose here. The important point is to understand why the unions act in this way, how to fight against the union prison, and above all what not to do.

REVOLUTIONARY SYNDICALISM

If we accept that it was the unions' incapacity to break away from the framework of reformist struggles that led to their integration into the bourgeois state, then how are we to understand the idea that there might be a form of trade unionism which by having revolutionary goals could escape being integrated into the state? This is precisely what the anarcho-syndicalists tried to do from the beginning of this century with their revolutionary syndicalism.

Revolutionary syndicalism constituted a reaction against parliamentary degeneration and the reformism of the unions. To begin with it also expressed, at least in a partial way, an authentic current within the workers' movement. But in order to oppose parliamentarism, revolutionary syndicalism took up again the old anarchist idea, vehemently fought against by Marx, of advocating the rejection of political struggle, seeing in it the source of all reformist degeneration. Through its concern to be 'apolitical' it once more joined up with its reformist enemies, who as we have seen defended the

apoliticism of the unions, but from a different standpoint. Syndicalism and parliamentarism are part and parcel of a form of struggle which corresponded to a particular historical period. To reject one without the other is to inevitably fall into incoherence which can only lead to a dead-end.

Under decadent capitalism revolutionary struggle cannot take on a trade union form. The revolutionary struggle is a mass, generalized, and direct struggle which cannot revert back into the shell of an organization built for the purpose of a permanent, and systematic struggle for reforms, still less when reforms themselves are impossible. Revolutionary syndicalism had to adopt either politics in keeping with the union form (and that under decadent capitalism would have condemned it to pass to the camp of capital) or it would have had to dissolve itself as a syndicalist organization in order to integrate itself into the revolutionary struggle, or else dissolve into general society. In the USA, the IWW disappeared. In France and Spain, in spite of often great resistance, revolutionary syndicalist organizations fell prey in the first instance into participation in the imperialist war and in the second instance into participation in the government of the bourgeois Republic during the Spanish Civil War. (I)

In all cases, the experience of revolutionary syndicalism only demonstrated one thing: the impossibility of building revolutionary trade unions in decadent capitalism. That is to say, the impossibility of building real workers' unions.

LEFTISTS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

Within the union world there exists a 'critical' wing: the leftists. Crediting themselves with the principal errors of the IIIrd International, they today defend tactical participation and support of the trade union - while perpetually criticizing the unions' 'mistakes'. But the leftists consider the unions to

be workers' organizations, which they have the task of 'de-bureaucratizing' by reconquering the leadership.

DO THE UNIONS HAVE A DUAL ROLE?

In order to justify their 'critical' support of the trade unions, leftist tendencies express the idea that the unions have a dual role: 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. The unions are 'against the revolution' but not 'against the working class'. This reasoning is actually nothing but an oblique way of reaffirming faith in the unions while giving the impression of being against them. Trusting the unions but at the same time rejecting them. For example, this was the position of the group Pouvoir Ouvrier in May 1968 in France, who asserted in their political platform that:

"In the present epoch, in most capitalist countries, the unions objectively play a dual role: - they defend the immediate interests of the wage-earner against the bosses; they defend capitalist society which they accept in principle, against any class movement which might create difficulties for it." (Pouvoir Ouvrier, no. 90 May 1968)

This idea is no more profound than the one according to which the police force defends the interests of the workers when saving them from drowning at the beach, and no longer defends them when clubbing them over the head during a strike (thereby serving the interests of the boss).

The class nature of an organization is not determined by its attitudes in moments of social calm, when the proletariat remains passive, subordinated economically and ideologically to the power of the bourgeoisie. It is when the classes openly confront each other that you must judge the class nature of an organization.

The role of the unions becomes clear when during any generalized workers' struggle, they are seen preventing contacts between workers in different factories, falsifying the demands of the workers, using lies and slander to get the workers back to work, telling them that in the other factories in struggle 'the workers have gone back' and that they 'can't carry on alone'. Quite simply the unions' role becomes clear when they act as strike-breakers. That is when their class nature appears in broad daylight. The defensive comedy that they daily play in periods of social calm, putting themselves forward as

defenders of the class in masquerades of collective bargaining, scrupulous applications for the right to work, and the whole set of rules which govern the exploitation of labour, does not make them representatives of the class against capital, but makes them functionaries of capital responsible for facilitating the normal and daily functioning of exploitation within the working class. The crocodile tears the unions shed over the most flagrant abuses of capital ('hour long protest strikes', preoccupation with problems of individual workers in the factory, all the 'petty tasks') is the base on which the official myth indentifying the unions with the interests of the working class rests. This myth the leftists take up in their 'critical' way, but it is actually a necessary pre-condition for union containment of any real outbreak of class struggle.

Just as the police must save drowning people and direct traffic on the roads so as to justify their existence when the time comes to repress workers' struggles in the name of 'the public interest', so the unions must fulfil 'social welfare' functions for the workers and act as a safety valve within the class so that at a time of real struggle they will be that much better placed to play their role of containment and repression in the name of the workers' interests.

Sabotage of workers' struggle and official representation of workers within the framework of capitalist exploitation are not two differing - still less contradictory - functions of the trade unions under decadent capitalism. Both are but two aspects of one and the same anti-proletarian function.

THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF THE UNIONS AND ILLUSIONS ABOUT RECONQUERING THEM

Another argument taken up time and again by the leftists in order to justify their 'critical' support of and participation in the unions, is to present the unions as organizations which left to themselves would be valuable forms of organizations for the workers' struggle, but which have been led astray from their true path as a result of bureaucratization and 'bad leadership'. Thus for the leftists the question is to 'reconquer the unions' by making them more democratic (demands for faction rights) and by changing the 'corrupt leadership' by replacing it with real workers' leaders at the top.

Instead of seeing that bureaucracy and 'bad' leaders are inevitable products of the capitalist nature of the unions, people who hold such illusions present both as the cause of the 'errors' and 'betrayals' of the unions.

The bureaucratization of an organization does not stem from the

decision-making power of its central organs. Contrary to what the anarchists think, centralization is not synonymous with bureaucratization. On the contrary, in an organization inspired by the conscious, passionate activity of each of its members, centralization is the most efficient way of stimulating the participation of each member in the life of the organization. What characterizes bureaucracy is the fact that the life of the organization is no longer rooted in the activity of its members but is artificially and formalistically carried on in its 'bureaus', in its central organs, and nowhere else.

If such a phenomenon is common to all unions under decadent capitalism it is not because of the 'malevolence' of the union leaders; nor is bureaucratization an inexplicable mystery. If bureaucracy has taken hold of the unions it is because the workers no longer support with any life or passion organizations which simply do not belong to them. The indifference the workers show towards trade union life is not, as the leftists think, a proof of the workers' lack of consciousness. On the contrary it expresses a resigned consciousness within the working class of the unions' inability to defend its class interests and even a consciousness that the unions belong to the class enemy.

The relationship between the workers and the unions is not that of a class to its own class instrument. It most often takes the form of a relationship between an individual with individual problems and a welfare service ('which knows how to deal with the bosses'). The unions are bureaucratic because there is not and cannot be any proletarian spirit in them.

The leftists who militate within the unions have assigned themselves the task (among others) of revitalizing union life. All they succeed in doing is getting hold of the young trade union militant who begins by believing in the unions, only to become disillusioned and leave, (unless he too becomes a 'believer'). The only thing the leftists achieve is retarding the awareness of the class of the capitalist nature of these organizations. The leit-motif spouted by the leftists: "it's a bad workers' organization, but a workers' organization all the same" is ultimately the best defence the unions could have in the face of the growing suspicion the workers have about them. The union bureaucrats actually find the 'fanatics' committed to 'constructive criticism' of the unions their very best allies and touts among those workers who 'are led astray by anti-unionism'.

As for the tactic of 'reconquering' the leadership of the unions in order to turn them into real class organizations, that simply highlights the same myopic point of view, when it is not merely a smoke-screen for crude bureaucratic machinations. The

anti-working class actions of the unions are not a matter of good or bad leaders. It's no accident that for more than fifty years the unions have always had bad leaders.

It is not because of bad leadership that the unions do not take part in the real struggles of the working class; on the contrary, it is because the unions are **as organizations, incapable of serving the needs of the class struggle** that their leaders always turn out to be bad. As Pannekoek observed:

"What Marx and Lenin said over and over again about the state, that despite the existence of formal democracy it cannot be used as an instrument of proletarian revolution, applies also to the unions. Their counter-revolutionary force can neither be negated nor brought under control by a change of leadership, by replacing reactionary leaders with men of the 'left' or with 'revolutionaries'. It is the very form of the organization itself which reduces the masses to powerlessness and prevents them from using it as an instrument of their own will." (Pannekoek)

THE CONTENT AND FORMS OF WORKERS' STRUGGLES UNDER DECADENT CAPITALISM

CONTENT

Given the overtly anti-working class role of the unions, **wildcat strikes**, strikes against the unions, have multiplied everywhere. They express in practice the proletariat's antagonism to unions and reveal a clearer and clearer consciousness within the class of the capitalist nature of these organizations. But what is the content of such strikes? The fact that capitalism is no longer in a position to concede any real improvement in the conditions of exploitation has reduced proletarian struggles to a defensive battle against capital's

permanent attack on the workers' living standards. The examples of 1936 and 1968 in France show how capital is forced to take back immediately any concession torn from it by generalized struggles of the class. But 1936 and 1968 were situations in which wage increases were followed by price rises; in both cases these were exceptions arising out of particularly large scale struggles. The normal rule in capitalism today is not that price rises follow wage increases but the exact opposite. It isn't a question of capital constantly trying to recoup what the workers have torn from it, but of the workers constantly trying to resist any intensification of exploitation.

What characterizes the content of workers' struggles under decadent capitalism is not in itself the fact that they are defensive struggles (this has been a common feature of all proletarian struggle ever since the workers first confronted their exploiters), but firstly the fact that struggles can only be defensive, without any hope of real victories such as were won in the nineteenth century and secondly the fact that real workers' struggles immediately tend to put into question the very existence of the exploitative system (ie their tendency to become revolutionary).

The workers' resistance under decadent capitalism can no longer escape the following two alternatives. Given the system's drive for self-preservation, either the working class must accept the containment of its struggles within a purely economic terrain thereby condemning its struggles to a total impasse since capitalism can no longer grant any meaningful economic reforms, or the working class must assert itself resolutely as a power in its own right. If the workers accept the first alternative, such an impasse produces within their midst the best conditions in which the bourgeoisie can unleash its chief weaponry against working class resistance. These weapons include economism, narrow localism, illusions in self-management, etc. These mystifications always lead to defeat and demoralization. But if the proletariat takes up the second alternative, it is immediately forced to go beyond the purely economic framework of its struggle and display its political nature by developing class solidarity and confronting the very basis of bourgeois legality, starting with the state's representatives within the factory: the unions.

There is no longer any possibility of conciliation between capital and labour. Their fundamental antagonism is, under decadent capitalism, pushed to its final limits. That is why any real working class struggle must inevitably and immediately pose itself as a political and revolutionary struggle. The revolutionary content of the struggle bursts out to a greater or lesser degree depending on whether the struggle is a resp-

onset to a situation of deepening crisis and whether the political apparatus which the workers are confronting is made up of all the 'shock-absorbers' in society (unions, 'workers' parties, political liberalism, etc). In countries where these shock-absorbers are absent or too inflexible to successfully perform this role, workers' struggles, while less frequent, take on an openly revolutionary aspect much more rapidly. This happens in countries like Francoist Spain or in the Eastern bloc countries where workers' strikes so often become insurrectional struggles embracing whole towns and are soon transformed into generalized confrontations with the forces of the state - as for example in Vigo, Pamplona, and Vitoria in Spain, and Gdansk and Szczecin in Poland in 1970.

But whatever the exact circumstances, and however intense the struggle may or may not be, working class resistance in this epoch can no longer assert itself without immediately taking a revolutionary direction. It is this new characteristic in the workers' struggles which has led revolutionaries since the outbreak of World War I to proclaim that the old distinction made by the Social Democracy between the 'minimum programme' (reforms to be obtained within capitalism) and the 'maximum programme' (communist revolution), is no longer valid. From 1914 on, only the 'maximum programme' could express the interests of the working class. Since the possibility of obtaining reforms under capitalism became utopian, only that which is revolutionary is part of the working class. Only that which tends towards the revolution can have a truly proletarian character.

Does this mean that the working class must abandon its economic struggles, as those 'total revolutionists' from Proudhon onwards have advised the class to do, considering economic struggles paltry activities integrated into the life and defence of capital? No, that point of view is not revolutionary. The proletariat is a class, a group of people who are defined according to economic criteria (ie the position they occupy in the process of production). Therefore to extol the virtues of abandoning its economic struggle means concretely to ask the working class to either abandon any struggle and remain passive in the face of its exploitation, or to immerse itself in all kinds of 'non-class-based' struggles (co-operatives, feminism, ecology, regionalism, anti-racism, etc) and thus dissolve itself into an eclectic, heterogeneous, spineless mass of 'well-intentioned' people and others voraciously seeking after 'human justice'. In either case it all comes down to the same old bourgeois cry to the proletariat to "Abandon the class struggle!"

Only people who have never understood why the working class

is a revolutionary force can arrive at such a conclusion. It is not because the working class is endowed with a marked taste for ideas and 'generous causes' that it alone is capable of conceiving and realizing the communist society. Like all revolutionary classes in history, the proletariat is led to destroy the ruling system only because its defense of its immediate interests objectively forces it to do so. And like any class, the proletariat's interests are fundamentally economic. It is because the destruction of the capitalist system is the only way the working class has of avoiding ever-increasing degradations in its living conditions that its struggle for an improvement in its economic situation becomes a struggle for the destruction of the system itself.

The revolutionary struggle of the proletariat is not, then, the negation of the economic nature of its struggle but the result of its total understanding of the reality of that struggle. In consciously embracing the political nature of its daily economic struggle, in deepening it to the point of finally destroying the bourgeois state and establishing communist society, the proletariat never abandons its defence of its economic interests. Rather the proletariat takes upon itself all the meaning and all the consequences of that struggle. As long as the proletariat exists, that is to say for as long as classes exist, up to and even after the assumption of revolutionary power, the class struggle will retain its economic character. The economic basis of man's historic activity will only disappear when communist society flourishes, in other words when all classes - and hence the proletariat too - disappear. In the meantime, inevitably, unavoidably, the working class forges the weapons of its revolutionary struggle through its daily resistance to capitalist exploitation. It is this which both allows the class and forces it to unify as a class and thus it is in the heat of this struggle that the proletariat arrives at a consciousness of the necessity for, and the possibility of, communist revolution.

What the proletariat must abandon is not the economic nature of its struggle (an impossibility in any case if it is to fight as a class), but all its illusions in the future possibilities of successfully defending its interests, even its most immediate ones, without leaving the strictly economic framework of struggles and without consciously adopting a political, global and revolutionary understanding of its struggle. Faced with the inevitable short-term failure of its defensive struggles under decadent capitalism, the class must conclude that it isn't that these struggles are useless, but that the only way of making them useful to the proletarian cause is to understand them and consciously transform them

into moments of learning and preparation for struggles which are more generalized, more organized, and more conscious of the inevitability of the proletariat's final confrontation with the system of exploitation. In the era of capitalism's decline, when the communist revolution is on the historical agenda, the effectiveness of the every day struggles of the working class can no longer be measured, or understood, in immediate terms. Their effectiveness can only be understood within the world historic perspective of the communist revolution.

FORMS OF ORGANIZATION.

With the trade unions lost to it forever, the working class has been confronted with the problem of discovering a new form of organization. But this is by no means easy under decadent capitalism. The great strength of the unions derives from their ability to gain recognition as the only possible means of organization for the workers' struggle. Thus the bosses and the government accept no other 'spokesman' for the working class than the trade unions. Every day, ceaselessly, in leaflets, the press, radio and television, capital systematically drums the message into the heads of the workers:

"The trade unions are your organizations". Nothing is spared in its efforts to strengthen the ability of the trade unions to mystify the working class. Even so, this operation is not always an unqualified success: in a country like France where the sledgehammer of the unions 'representative' role is applied with particular violence, only one worker in five feels the need to join the union. Today the 'leftist' organizations are called upon to play a bigger and bigger role in reinforcing the credibility of these capitalist organs in the eyes of the more combative workers. Constantly subjected to this barrage of mystification, the workers in countries which boast 'trade union freedoms' have the greatest difficulty in envisaging the possibility of organizing their struggles outside the traditional apparatus. A particularly unbearable situation must develop in order for them to find the strength to openly oppose the immense state machine and its parties and trade unions. This is what characterizes and renders the struggle of the proletariat so difficult under decadent capitalism. In opposing the unions, the working class does not simply confront a handful of trade union bureaucrats. The capitalist state itself stands before it. But this very difficulty makes every upsurge of the class outside the trade unions all the more significant. It is this which makes the question of forms of organization outside the trade unions so important. The problem of the forms of organization of the working class struggle is not independent nor separate from

the problem of its content. There is a close inter-relation between the revolutionary content workers' struggles immediately tend to take on in the epoch of capitalist decadence, and the forms of organization the class arrives at.

DURING THE STRUGGLE

In its greatest revolutionary struggles in this century, the proletariat has taken up a new form of organization suited to its revolutionary mission: the soviets or workers' councils - assemblies of delegates mandated by the general assemblies of workers. These organs of centralization and unification created by the class are the means through which it can forge, in the heat of the struggle, the material and theoretical forces necessary for its attack against the state. But the very form of the soviets or councils gives them one particular characteristic. Because they are assemblies of delegates elected by quasi-permanent general assemblies, their existence is entirely dependent on the existence of generalized class struggle. If the class is not struggling in all the factories, if there are no general assemblies of workers in all the places they are fighting, the councils cannot exist. The workers' councils can only become permanent when the generalized open struggle of the class becomes permanent; in other words during the revolutionary process itself. The workers' councils are the specific organs of proletarian power.

How then does the working class organize itself when it is struggling against the state and its union appendages, but the struggles have not yet reached the stage of generalized insurrection? The experience of thousands of wildcat strikes during the course of more than fifty years has provided a clear answer to this question. In all four corners of the planet and under the most different geographical and historical conditions, anti-union strikes have spontaneously taken on a particularly simple form of organization: general assemblies of strikes co-ordinated by committees of elected delegates which are permanently responsible to the assemblies. The same organizational basis is found in these strikes as that of the councils. Forms and content are connected. In the same way that the most important strikes in decadent capitalism contain within themselves the seeds of massive revolutionary struggle, likewise their forms or organization reveal in an embryonic fashion the organizational forms of the organs of the revolution - the councils.

OUTSIDE OF STRUGGLES

Confronted with the death of the union form of struggle the working class through its own experience has resolved in

practice the question of the form of organization it must use in order to take its open struggle on to victory. But the unions functioned not only as forms of organization used by the class when it was engaged in struggle. As permanent organizations they were also used by the workers in periods of calm. Together with the mass party, they constituted a real permanent means of regrouping the class. After the unions ceased to be proletarian organizations, the class was then faced with the problem of knowing if and how it could organize itself on a class basis, given a let-up in the struggle. What generally happens when the struggle dies down is that the strike committees disappear along with the general assemblies. The workers tend to go back to being a mass of individuals, atomized and defeated, more or less accepting the claims of the unions to represent them. Such a return to passivity may take a long time or it may happen very quickly, but in either case if there is no new outbreak of open struggle it is inevitable. In an attempt to prevent such a relapse, it often happens that in the downturn of the struggle the most combative workers try to remain organized in order to create a permanent organization which will allow the class to regroup after the struggle has finished. The absence of struggle systematically condemns such attempts.

Either the factory organization dissolves itself after a time, demoralized by its inability to regroup all the workers (this happened to the German AAU, for example, after the struggles of 1919-1923 and also to all the Action Committees which tried to stay alive in the French factories after the events of May-June, 1968 (2)), or it remains and is transformed into a new union. This return to unionism can in some cases be very obvious. The initiators of these factory groups simply acknowledge the formation of a new more 'radical', less 'bureaucratic', 'more democratic' union. (This, for example, was the fate of the strike committee that the Trotskyists tried to keep going in 1947 after the Renault strike in France. And similarly the 'Workers' Commissions' in Spain became by the end of the 1960's a real national union structure, and an instrument in the hands of the bourgeois parties of the 'democratic' opposition.)

With the gradual undermining of the union mystification, the return to unionist practices tends to take place more and more undercover of ambiguous, more confusionist forms of organization - masked overall in anti-union language. In the course of open struggles, especially when they come up against the union apparatus, it becomes clearly impossible to separate the immediate economic struggle from the historic revolutionary struggle. Often, in the wake of these strikes, the idea takes root among some workers to try to 'invent' a new form

of permanent organization which would be just like the assembly of strikers, being neither a simply 'economic' nor a simply 'political' organization.

But it is not sufficient just to 'want' something to be possible for it to be so. In wishing to retain the two main characteristics of the trade unions (that of a unitary organization capable of regrouping all the workers and a permanent organization existing outside periods of open struggle) these attempts always end up, after a shorter or longer period of time, in failure. The failure is rounded off by an inevitable return to trade unionist cretinism. Then, as enthusiasm wanes, such organizations - powerless in the face of the demobilization of the workers - gradually become concerned once more with discovering 'concrete' and 'realistic' demands with which to 'reactivate the masses'. They quickly come to the point of outbidding the demands of the main unions (a 36-hour week instead of a 40, an increase of 200 francs instead of 100, 'qualitative demands' instead of quantitative ones, etc) in and effort to make the myth of 'immediate victories' sink better into the consciousness of the workers. In the process, general revolutionary ideas are made to seem far 'too abstract to be understood by workers'.

Politically, such organizations seek ways of distinguishing themselves from traditional union organizations. They adopt a more radical 'left' sounding language and political slogans putting forward either 'impossible demands' or the sinister joke of self-management. Thus, after a little time, a type of organization that had wanted to be 'neither a union nor a political organization' only gives rise to a more political trade union: a leftist union, usually very small and even more confused, whose only real distinction is its inability to recognize itself for what it has become - namely a trade union. Certain leftists are now specialists in generating this kind of activity. Autonomia Operaia in Italy and Plataformas anti-capitalistas in Spain are probably the most typical example of this most shameful form of unionism.

WHY ALL THESE FAILURES?

Whether we are dealing with the German 'Unionen' (AAU) between 1919 and 1923, the Action Committees in France in 1968-1969, the Unitary Base Committees and Autonomous Assemblies in Italy, or the Workers' Commissions in Spain, all have their origins in workers' circles formed by the most combative workers.

All such circles express the general movement of the class towards organization. But contrary to what those leftist stu-

dents may think who try to invent new forms of organization for the class (from such experiments as the Cahiers du Mai in France to the 'Autonomous Assemblies' in Italy today.), there is not an unlimited number of possible organizational forms open to the proletarian struggle. A form of organization must inevitably be appropriate to the goal it pursues. In other words, for each goal there corresponds a form of organization which is most effective and most adapted to it. Now the class does not pursue an unlimited number of goals. It has but one: the struggle against exploitation, both its effects and its cause. In this struggle, the proletariat has only two weapons: its consciousness and its unity. Thus when workers regroup outside times of open struggle in order to assist in the general struggle of their class, they can only do so by giving themselves two basic tasks to carry out, that of contributing to the deepening and generalization of revolutionary consciousness within the class and contributing to the unification of the class.

The proletariat's forms of organization are necessarily moulded by the need to carry out these two tasks. But here problems arise: these two tasks are two aspects of the same general task, two contributions to the same fight. But they nevertheless have contradictory characteristics. In order for the class to be united there must be an organization to which every worker can belong irrespective of his political ideas, simply because he is a worker. But in order that the consciousness of the class as a whole may develop, the most advanced workers cannot simply stand around waiting for this to happen of its own accord. It is their duty to spread their convictions, to make propaganda, and intervene with their political positions within the rest of their class. As long as the working class exists as an exploited class (and when it is no longer exploited it will no longer be a class), there will be within it immense differences in the consciousness and revolutionary will of its members. In the course of struggle, all workers owing to their place in production, tend to take on a revolutionary consciousness. But all workers do not develop consciousness at the same pace. There are always individuals and fractions of the class who are more decided and more conscious of the necessity for and the means of revolutionary action, while others are more fearful, more hesitant, and more susceptible to the ideology of the ruling class. It is only in the long process of class struggle that revolutionary consciousness can be generalized. The intervention of the most advanced elements of the class is an active factor in this process. But this activity demands an essential political agreement on the part of those engaged in it. Moreover, it must be carried out in an organized manner. Thus the organization charged with this task must be formed on the basis of

a political platform. If such an organization were to admit into its midst all the political currents that exist in the class; in other words if it refused to elaborate for itself a political platform summing up all the lessons arising from the experience of two centuries of class struggle, it would become incapable of carrying out its tasks. In the absence of strict political criteria governing membership, the organization is condemned to become a source of confusion.

Unifying itself and raising its level of consciousness are the two tasks which the class must perform in an organized manner. But it cannot do this with only one type of organization. That is why it has always thrown up two basic forms of organization:

1. class-wide (unitary) organizations whose task is to regroup all workers without regard to their political ideas (trade unions in the ascendant epoch of capitalism, councils and general assemblies in the period of decadence).
2. political organizations based on a political platform and without social criteria for membership (political parties and groups).

Most attempts to create class-wide organizations outside times of open struggle are characterized by the more or less explicit desire of the participants to create an organization which is both unitary and political at the same time - an organization at once open to all workers while simultaneously pursuing the task of defending political positions within the class, particularly those regarding the unions.

And that is the primary reason for the systematic failure of such attempts. We have already seen why a political organization cannot be 'open' - like a unitary organization - without becoming a source of confusion within the class. But the basic reason for their systematic failure lies in the general impossibility within decadent capitalism for the class to organize itself in a class-wide manner outside periods of open struggle; a fact that the class repeatedly discovers for itself.

In the nineteenth century, the workers' unions could be permanent and class-wide organs because of the function they had to fulfil: the systematic struggle for reforms could and had to be permanently undertaken. Workers could effectively regroup around this struggle and create a living centre for the development of class consciousness, reinforced as it was by concrete results. But when this struggle became impossible and ineffective, when working class resistance could only express itself in and through open struggle, there no longer remained a focus capable of allowing a general regroupment of the class outside of open struggle. The masses could not organize them-

selves for long around an activity that had no immediate results.

The only activity which can engender a stable organization on the terrain of the class outside periods of struggle, is an activity placing itself within the framework of the historical and global struggle of the class and that activity belongs to the proletarian political organization. Its task is to draw the lessons from the historical experience of the working class, to reappropriate the communist programme and carry out systematic political intervention in the class struggle. But this task belongs to a minority of the class which is never able to constitute the real basis for the general, class-wide regroupment of the class.

Attempts to form organizations functioning as both unitary and permanent organs of the class are immediately caught in a vice. On one side such organizations are incapable of being real class-wide organs; on the other they are doomed to fail as political organizations unless they abandon any pretensions to being class-wide. They are either condemned to dissolve or are kept going by undertaking the only activity able to provide them with the illusion of continued life - that of becoming unions.

The workers' groups which have been formed outside of open struggle can be no more than temporary centres of discussion where workers can start to deepen their class consciousness. Any attempt to freeze them by trying to transform them into something they cannot be, that is stable organizations, must end up in one of the dead-ends we have already discussed.

THE INTERVENTION OF REVOLUTIONARIES

In the years to come the trade unions will be called upon to play a leading role on the political stage of the class struggle. They are the main barricade behind which capital attempts to protect itself from the attacks of the proletariat. For the working class, they represent the first enemy to be vanquished, the first barrier to be thrown down. That is why the denunciation of the trade unions is one of the main tasks of the intervention of revolutionaries. Communists must explain again and again to their class that those who are today at the head of the trade union processions and who are so concerned with the maintenance of order will be the same ones tomorrow, who will take up arms against the workers. Revolutionaries must also tirelessly denounce the ideologists of self-management, and all the other vultures of decadent capitalism who, under cover of slogans like 'the dual nature of the trade unions', the 'workers' united front', and other forms of 'critical support'

seek to present these organs of capital as workers' organizations.

Communists do not defend particular demands, unlike the people who invent and put forward 'more radical', 'more unattainable' or 'more transitional' demands as carrots to encourage the proletariat to 'go beyond economic struggles and on to political struggles'. Communists support all demands of the class when they express the proletariat's resistance to increasing exploitation. Their task is to show that within decadent capitalism, capital can no longer grant any lasting satisfaction to the workers' demands which would represent real improvements in the conditions of the workers' lives; that there can no longer be a struggle against the effects of exploitation which does not also become a struggle against its cause; that there can be no real victory in defensive struggle, except the acquisition of the means to definitively destroy the system itself.

The denunciation of the trade unions goes hand in hand with the defence of forms of organization suited to the proletarian struggle under decadent capitalism: general assemblies, factory committees, and workers' councils.

But by themselves the forms of class organization can never be a sufficient condition to guarantee real class autonomy in the class struggle. The bourgeoisie knows only too well how to recuperate forms of organization that the class throws up in its struggle, and how to use them for its own purposes. What's more by posing the question as a problem of organization, by polarizing the preoccupations of the workers on this question, organization becomes a way of conjuring away the problem of the content of the struggle by fixating and blocking the revolutionary process at a particularly vulnerable stage. The forms of organization are a necessary condition for the development of this process, but their appearance is very much a spontaneous product of the action of the masses rather than a result of the intervention of revolutionaries. But once these forms have appeared, the continuation of the revolutionary process can no longer be on that spontaneous level but must be based on the content of the struggle. It is on this terrain that the intervention of revolutionaries is absolutely vital.

Revolutionaries must denounce all those who, with every step taken by the proletariat in its struggle, present these advances as definitive victories, and attempt to constrict the development of the revolutionary process.

At every stage of the struggle revolutionaries put forward the historic perspective and global character of the prole-

tarian struggle.

The destruction of the unions is only one aspect of the global destruction of the capitalist state. The workers can only develop their struggle by globally assuming its true content, that of the historic struggle for the world communist revolution.

This article first appeared in November/December 1974 as 'Les Syndicats Contre La Class Ouvrière' in no.12 of Révolution Internationale, the publication in France of the International Communist Current. This, in turn, was a rewritten and improved version of 'Grèves Sauvages et Syndicats' in Révolution Internationale, no.3 (Old Series), December 1969. A version of that article appeared in English under the title 'Unions and Wildcats' in Internationalism, no.1 (the publication in America of the ICC), and was reproduced under the same name as a pamphlet by Workers' Voice in 1974. This pamphlet is a translation of a further revised and developed text produced by the International Communist Current in French in pamphlet form, entitled 'Les Syndicats Contre la Classes Ouvrière'.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The Spanish CNT, the only example of a trade union organization to have tried several times to realize its maximum programme, the "social revolution" (in 1933 and 1934), only did so after the anarchists of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) had conducted a bitter struggle inside it. Throughout the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the CNT, despite its professed 'revolutionary a-politicism', was in contact with all kinds of conspirators, like Macia, the Republican Alliance, and various other oppositional elements.

In July 1927 the FAI was founded. Its members, rejecting any kind of tactical compromise, attempted to win over the CNT in order to realize the social revolution. The FAI became the rallying point for all those who disapproved of the reformist orientation of anarcho-syndicalism.

At the National Congress of 1930 the two tendencies clashed. On the one hand, there were the leaders of the CNT, who stressed above everything else the trade unionism of the CNT, and proposed an alliance with other groups and fractions to faci-

litate the setting up of the Republic; on the other hand stood the 'purists' of the FAI who insisted on the anarchism of the Confederation, rejecting all compromise. The latter carried the day: the old leaders were displaced from their positions, then took their faction out of the CNT. (The 'trentistes' organized their own trade unions). It was for this reason that the CNT did not participate in the embryonic Popular Front of 1930.

The CNT, under the influence of the FAI which was also committed to an 'a-political' line, tried until 1936 to use the general strike as a preparation for insurrection. Weakened considerably by repression and discouraged by successive failures, the CNT paid the price for believing in the possibility of revolutionary unionism. At the 1935 Congress the 'trentistes' came back, having meanwhile entered into all kinds of alliances with the bourgeoisie. The attempted right-wing insurrection of 18 July 1936 and the proletarian uprising of the 19th shattered the façade surrounding the organization. The 'workers' forces came to power led by the CNT and the FAI. In Catalonia, its stronghold, the CNT made up part of the Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias - itself on the borders of the 'Gobierno de la Generalidad'; then it entered the latter, thus giving it the working class prop it needed so badly. Syndicalist a-politicism had triumphed! The 'purists' of the FAI did not take long either to accept ministerial posts in the Republic they had fought against for so long.

These 'anti-authoritarian' partisans of an 'a-political social revolution', who acted in the name of sacrosanct moral principles, never understood the need for the destruction of the state apparatus as a moment in the political struggle of the proletariat against its class enemy, the bourgeoisie.

All the while defending certain revolutionary principles (anti-frontism, anti-parliamentarism) in the name of ideological purity, they attached little importance to the transgression of these principles under the pressure of events, as long as the ideology remained 'pure'. Thus the CNT allied itself with bourgeois parties, participated in the government of the bourgeois Republic, and allowed the proletariat to be massacred in Barcelona in 1937 in order not to disturb the 'unity' of the anti-fascist front. In short they proved what must now seem obvious: that a-politicism, the rejection of class frontiers clearly set down as political principles, can only benefit the bourgeoisie.

After 1936, the CNT's policy of anti-fascist unity made it play the role of all other reformist unions: containing the

working class in the service of capital. Despite the honesty of its militants, the 'a-political' organization thus joined the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

To have struggled so much and sacrificed so many revolutionary militants, only to end up with a seat in the ministries of the Republic was a sad destiny for 'revolutionary a-political syndicalism'.

By allying itself with the very forces which showed no hesitation in firing upon revolutionary workers (most of whom were its own militants) the CNT buried anarcho-syndicalism in the dustbin of history, alongside the parliamentary parties, the reformist unions, the Trotskyists, and the Stalinists.

2. Frequently this dissolution takes place in the most distressing forms of decomposition. As the original nucleus sees its membership declining, eventually leaving only a handful of isolated individuals, despair overtakes them and flings them into a frenzied activism which often results in the theorization of individualistic types of activity: sabotage, terrorism, or even into experiences of localized, 'immediate transformations of everyday life'. In Italy, for example, where in 1969 the most generalized anti-union struggles of Western Europe took place, many such prototypes of decomposition were produced.

Note: Readers may be interested in the following ICC texts which show in more detail how the unions - both 'official' and 'alternative' are used to defeat workers' struggles:

WORLD REVOLUTION

- N.4, The First Shop Stewards Movement
- N.6, The General Strike: Fifty Years On
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- N.16, The Firemen's Strike
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- N.18, Layoffs at Speke
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- N.19, Naval Dockyard Strike—Spanner in the War Machine
Who Needs Foremen When You've Got Shop Stewards?

N.20, Strike Against 5%, Austerity or Class Struggle

BL Unions: Tools of the Bourgeoisie

N.21, Union Victory = Workers Defeat

N.22, Resolution on the British Situation

The Lorry Drivers' Strike

Times Lock-Out: Unions Divide and Rule

N.23, Ambulancemen's Strike: No Excuses Needed

Singers': The Struggle Continues

N.24, Perkins Strike: Workers versus Shop Stewards

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N.25, Corby: Yes to an all-out Strike! No to Union Control!

Class Struggle in Eire and Ulster

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N.13, Telephone '71: How the Unions Broke the Strike

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Struggle in the Coalfields—Militance is not Enough

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N.15, Coal—Class Struggle in a Union Straightjacket

N.16, Down on the Farm—the Strike that Fizzled

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