ISO offers sophistry in the service of the trade union bureaucracy

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29 January 2013

The passage in December of right-to-work legislation in Michigan, the birthplace of the United Auto Workers union, was a devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of the UAW and the official trade unions in general. After decades of collaboration with the auto companies in imposing layoffs, wage cuts and speedup, the UAW proved incapable of rallying any significant support among auto workers to oppose the right-wing attack by Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Republican-controlled Michigan legislature.

The UAW opposed the law, which bars labor contracts requiring employees to pay union dues, entirely from the selfish standpoint of the UAW officials. The bureaucrats at UAW headquarters in Detroit and in regional and local offices around the country see the right-to-work law as a threat to their privileged financial status and institutional influence. They had sought in advance of the vote on the bill to convince Governor Snyder that the auto companies could more effectively suppress rank-and-file opposition and intensify the exploitation of UAW members with the services of the union apparatus than without it.

Passage of the right-to-work law followed the unsuccessful attempt last November of the UAW, backed by the Democratic Party, to obtain passage of a Michigan ballot proposal that would have barred right-to-work legislation and guaranteed the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks. The UAW-sponsored measure explicitly affirmed the right of the state and localities to ban public-sector strikes, underscoring the role of the UAW as an instrument of the employers for policing the workers. Voters defeated the measure by a wide margin.

These events have demonstrated the extent to which the UAW and the rest of the official unions rely on support from the state and the employers for their existence. Once that support is withdrawn, these organizations are exposed as utterly impotent.

The passage of right-to-work legislation in Michigan was a debacle not just for the unions, but also for the host of liberal and pseudo-left organizations that promote these corporatist organizations and demand that workers remain within their grip. In the aftermath of the vote, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) posted a series of articles on its *Socialist Worker* web site attempting to restore the credibility of the unions and prevent the opposition of workers to the attacks of the employers and the state from escaping their control.

On December 19, the ISO web site posted an article by Lee Sustar entitled "What went wrong in Michigan?" In the article, Sustar parroted the line of the UAW bureaucracy, complaining that the unions would now have to "continue to provide services for workers who 'opt out' of paying their fair share of dues."

The ISO also published two longer articles by Megan Behrent entitled "The Return of Class Struggle Unionism" and "The Source of Union Power."

The basic argument of these articles is that the unions remain organizations of the working class and the only viable means workers have to carry out a struggle. They are, Behrent admits, led for the most part by wrong-headed officials who have carried out disastrous policies. But if pressured from below, she claims, the union leaders can be forced to adopt what the ISO calls "social justice unionism" and defend the rank-and-file members.

Behrent's article includes the following damning admission:

"As a result of concession after concession, UAW-organized plants are now essentially no different than nonunion ones. While each concession has been justified on the basis of maintaining union jobs or 'living to fight another day,' the UAW—which had 1.5 million members in 1979—is now a shadow of its former self. Even after modest growth in the past year, its total membership today is about 380,000. At GM alone, after 30 years of concessions, the job loss is almost 90 percent."

Referring to her own union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), she adds, "In the name of practicality, the union builds alliances with politicians and bosses that inevitably lead it to sell out its membership and the communities it serves. Strikes are avoided at all cost since they declare in practice workers' refusal to collaborate in their exploitation. When the threat of a strike is used, it's all too often not to scare the bosses, but the membership—which has no confidence in the collaborationist leadership to lead a successful struggle."

These words constitute an indictment of the very organizations Behrent and the ISO are setting out to defend—and the ISO's own role in promoting them. From their own pens, the ISO apologists of the union bureaucracy paint a picture of reactionary organizations that are viscerally hostile to the workers.

Citing AFT President Randi Weingarten's 2011 net salary of almost half a million dollars, Behrent goes on to write: "Union leaders are often completely disconnected from the membership." Acknowledging the widespread hatred among union members for the union apparatus, she notes that "it can often seem like the union leadership is, in fact, the enemy and that its interests are more aligned with the bosses than with the members. Many people argue that the union leadership, in fact, benefits from selling out its membership."

Well, Ms. Behrent, do they or don't they? The fact that Weingarten makes nearly $500,000 a year while the jobs and conditions of AFT members are being decimated is one convincing piece of evidence that the union leadership profits handsomely from the betrayals they inflict on rank-and-file workers.

The description of the unions given here could, with a few alterations, serve as descriptions of the US company unions in the open-shop 1930s or the fascist labor syndicates under Mussolini.

Nevertheless, Behrent concludes—without advancing any supporting arguments—that "unions are workers' front line of defense against their employers under capitalism," and are "crucial to the future self-emancipation of the working class."

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The “contradictory role of the unions”

In order to try to square this claim with the reality workers confront every day, Behrent lectures that workers must understand the “contradictory nature of the unions under capitalism.” The “essential function of the unions is to negotiate the terms of exploitation on behalf of their members,” she writes, adding that the preservation of the unions “depends on the continuation of capitalist class relations.”

“And yet,” she insists, “as institutions formed through struggle to defend workers, unions have radical and even revolutionary potential—which is why the bosses hate them so much.”

Aside from the abundant evidence that contradicts the supposed “hatred” of major corporations for the unions—including the vast structure of joint union-company bodies at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler—Behrent’s invocation of the “contradictory” nature of the unions under capitalism is utterly abstract and ahistorical. Forty years ago, one might have spoken of the “contradictory” nature of the unions, which, despite having a leadership that betrayed the long-term interests of the working class, still to some degree defended the daily needs of workers. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, the American unions had ceased to function as defensive organizations of the working class.

They had rejected any connection to the class struggle, embraced corporatism and economic nationalism, and adopted a policy of collaborating with the corporations and the government in cutting the wages and benefits of union members. The same process has since unfolded among trade unions in every part of the world.

The basic cause of this transformation was not the subjective characteristics of union leaders, but profound changes in world economy—above all, the globalization of capitalist production. This process completely undermined all of the old labor organizations, which were rooted in the national economy and the national labor market.

Under conditions where transnational corporations could shift production to virtually any country in search of cheaper labor, the unions, already thoroughly bureaucratized, sought to defend their financial and institutional interests by pressuring their members to work harder for less, in an attempt to convince the employers to maintain production within the national borders.

Over the last three decades, major strikes—which had previously been a common feature of American life—all but disappeared, with work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers falling to a record low of five in 2009 and only 19 in 2011. This compares to 470 in 1952, 424 in 1974 and 145 as late as 1981, the year Reagan fired the striking air traffic controllers.

In defending the unions, Behrent feels obliged to put in a good word for the pro-company stooges who control them. “Just as socialists need to understand the contradictory nature of unions under capitalism,” she writes, “we need to understand the role that the union leadership plays. No matter how bad they are, they vacillate, depending on the strength and organization of the rank and file.”

In other words, blame for the betrayals of the unions is ultimately to be placed not on the union officials, but on the rank-and-file workers, who fail to place sufficient pressure on the leaders.

The falseness of the claim that pressure from below will shift the union leadership to the left is being demonstrated in bitter struggles of workers in every part of the world. Whether in Greece, Spain, Egypt or Wisconsin, the common experience is that the union tops respond to the pressure from below by moving even further to the right and employing everything from deceit and trickery to murderous violence to quash any movement of workers that threatens to escape their control.

The most concentrated expression of the class conflict between the workers and the union apparatus has occurred to date in South Africa, where the National Union of Mineworkers and the Congress of South African Trade Unions last year openly supported the police murder of scores of striking platinum miners at Marikana and other locations.

“Social justice unionism”

In line with its effort to restore the credibility of the unions, the ISO claims to have detected signs of a new, more militant and progressive form of trade unionism, which is supposedly being sponsored by the upper echelons of the UAW as well as the AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations.

Behrent calls this hopeful development “social justice unionism” and cites as prime examples the strike by Chicago teachers last summer and the recent “inspiring walkouts” at Wal-Mart stores and fast food restaurants in New York City.

The strike by 28,000 Chicago teachers was, in fact, betrayed and defeated at the hands of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), led by President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the ISO. Unable initially to ram through a sellout agreement—and facing growing support for the Socialist Equality Party’s call for teachers to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the CTU and establish rank-and-file committees to fight for a broader industrial and political mobilization of the working class—the CTU shut down the strike, accepting all of the major demands of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. As a result, teachers now confront the expanded use of standardized tests to victimize and fire them, longer school days, the shutdown of more than 100 public schools, and the opening of more for-profit charters.

What the Chicago teachers’ strike demonstrated was the impossibility of waging a successful struggle in defense of public education and the jobs and conditions of teachers while remaining politically tied to the Democratic Party. The CTU and the ISO, acting directly in the person of Vice President Sharkey, systematically covered up the role of the Obama administration in pushing the very agenda that Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff, was implementing in Chicago.

The ISO would have workers believe that the “social justice unionism” façade being adopted by a number of unions, including the UAW—largely through the embrace of racial and identity politics—can provide a new way forward, even as it remains firmly wedded to the Democratic Party and capitalism.

As for the trade union-organized protest stunts at Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, their glorification as “strikes”—even though they involved a small number of workers and made no attempt to shut down facilities—reveals the further movement of the ISO and the rest of the anti-Marxist pseudo-left to the right. The ISO actually promotes these protests as being more “progressive” than the old-fashioned mass strikes that, from the 1930s through the 1970s, stopped production at the Big Three auto giants, at steel, rubber, electrical, telephone, longshore and mining companies, and in mass transit, education and other public services, at times for weeks and even months on end.

While these struggles were politically limited by the reactionary, pro-capitalist and pro-Democratic Party policies of the union leadership, they did give expression to the immense industrial power and potential social power of the working class. Today, the ISO and similar organizations, which speak for privileged sections of the middle class, are thoroughly hostile to any, even limited, form of genuine working class struggle.

Their “social justice unionism” is, in fact, an attempt to palm off as working class struggle various forms of middle-class protest politics, in which the role of the working class is submerged beneath the different

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strands of identity and lifestyle politics.

Towards the conclusion of her articles, Behrent warns about the "devastating consequences when a union fails to understand the necessity of taking up social justice issues like the struggle against racism, sexism and all forms of oppression."

As an example, she points to the 1968 teachers' strike in New York City, "in which the United Federation of Teachers was pitted against advocates for community control in the African-American neighborhood of Ocean Hill Brownsville." She continues: "This had a devastating impact and led to long-term rifts between the union and the communities our schools serve."

This is, in fact, an ex post facto attack on a completely legitimate struggle waged at the time by the New York teachers' union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), against reactionary demands by black nationalist advocates of "community control," who sought to turn African American youth and workers against the teachers on racial grounds, demanding the gutting of seniority rights and the firing of Jewish and white teachers and their replacement with blacks.

Just as the politicians of "community control" in Ocean Hill Brownsville did the bidding of corporate and political interests seeking to smash the nascent teachers' union and divide the working class along racial lines, so today the ISO and its "social justice unionism" serve the interests of the ruling class, including through the promotion of racial politics. The difference, however, is that today the ISO is lined up in a united front with the trade union bureaucracy, which long ago abandoned any defense of the interests of workers.

This is a measure of how far to the right both the unions and their pseudo-left acolytes have moved in the intervening period.

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