

From the archive of the *World Socialist Web Site*

Why are trade unions hostile to socialism?

David North

28 September 2019

The strike by 46,000 US General Motors workers has pit workers in a battle not only against a powerful transnational corporation but against the United Auto Workers. The widening corruption scandal has confirmed what workers have already learned from decades of betrayals: the UAW has transformed into a criminal syndicate hostile to the interests of workers.

The transformation of the UAW is part of a universal process. All over the world the trade unions, including those which, like the UAW, were founded through bitter struggles led by socialist-minded workers, now play the leading role in enforcing the dictates of management.

Such a profound transformation can only be explained through an historical examination of the trade unions themselves.

To assist workers today we are republishing articles dealing with the history of the United Autoworkers and the evolution of the trade unions.

Today we are posting the text of a lecture by David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, made to the International Summer School on Marxism and the Fundamental Problems of the 20th Century in January 1998. It has since been republished as the sixth chapter of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, which can be purchased here from Mehring Books.

* * *

Two vexed questions

In the history of the Marxist movement, there are two political issues, or “questions,” that have been the source of exceptionally persistent controversy, spanning more than a century. One is the “national question” and the other is the “trade union” question.

What is the reason for the persistence of these questions and what is the relation, if any, between the two? I suggest that the answer is to be found in a study of the historical conditions within which the modern workers movement emerged. The bourgeois nation state, as it arose out of the revolutionary-democratic struggles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provided the economic impulse and political framework for the development of the European and American working class. The process of national consolidation was, though in many different forms and in different degrees, linked to general democratic issues of great importance to the working class.

The attitude of the working class to the nation could not but be of a highly complex, contradictory and ambivalent character. On the one hand, the growth of the working class in numbers and power, and the improvement of its standard of living, were generally linked to the consolidation of the national state and the expansion of its economic-industrial might. At the same time, the development of the economic and social struggles of the working class placed it in a position of hostility to the national state, which, in the final analysis, served the class interests of the bourgeoisie.

The vexed character of the national question within the Marxist movement arose precisely from the complexity of the relation of the

workers to the bourgeois nation-state. Nowhere in the world have we seen a painless and organic transcendence by the masses from national to international socialist consciousness. In the life of a human being, the experiences of his or her youth remain powerful influences throughout the rest of their years. An analogous phenomenon is to be observed in the historical evolution of the social consciousness of classes. The historical allegiance of the working class to nationalism is to be explained by the conditions of its origins and the struggles of its formative stages. Social consciousness lags behind—or, to put it more precisely, does not directly and immediately reflect in scientific form a highly complex and contradictory—social being. In the same way, the influence of nationalism over the workers movement does not decline in direct proportion to, and with a speed commensurate with, the growth of the preponderance of world economy over the national state and the increasingly international character of the class struggle.

The persistence of national oppression in the twentieth century—even though its essential cause is of a socioeconomic character—has fortified forms of national consciousness. But despite the power of national influences, it is the responsibility of Marxists to base their program not upon the appeal of old prejudices and obsolete conceptions, but upon a scientific analysis of social reality. The adaptation of its political program to prevailing prejudices, for the sake of short-term tactical advantages, is one of the most common features of opportunism. It proceeds from practical and conjunctural estimates, rather than from considerations of a principled, historical and scientific character.

Denying the political and economic consequences of the globalization of production upon the national state, the opportunists generally attribute to this historically outmoded political form a progressive potential that it altogether lacks. Thus, they persist in glorifying the demand for national self-determination, notwithstanding the fact that this has become the watchword of every reactionary chauvinist movement in the world.

Marxists do not consider the nation-state irrelevant. Though the nation-state form constitutes, from the standpoint of the global development and integration of the productive forces, a barrier to human progress, it remains a mighty factor in world politics. The socialist movement does not ignore this political reality in the elaboration of its tactics. To the extent that the nation-state persists as a basic unit of political and economic organization of bourgeois society, the national question—which, at this point in history, would be more aptly called the “national problem”—persists. But Marxist tactics flow from a scientific understanding of the historical obsolescence of the national state. Through its tactics, the Trotskyist movement strives to implement the guiding strategy of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. It is this insistence upon the supremacy of international strategy that distinguishes the International Committee of the Fourth International from every national-reformist and opportunist group.

These principled considerations are posed no less urgently in relation to the trade union question, which concerns the role of this very old form of

proletarian organization in the development of the revolutionary struggles of the working class for socialism. The emergence of the modern proletariat occurred within the context of the historical development of the nation-state. Its organizations, and their activities, took shape within the framework of the national state. This was especially the case in relation to the trade unions, whose advances and prosperity were, to a great extent, dependent upon the industrial and commercial successes of “their” national state. Just as there exist historical reasons for the ambivalent attitude of the working class toward the national state, there are also deeply rooted objective reasons for the ambivalence, even hostility, of the trade unions toward socialism. This is a problem over which the socialist movement has shed a great many tears for well over a century.

Of course, the seriousness of the problems that were to haunt the relations between revolutionary Marxist parties and the trade unions could not have been fully anticipated in the earliest years of their existence. The attitude adopted by Marxists to the trade unions has, inevitably, reflected the conditions and circumstances of the time. The trade union question is not posed in 1998 as it was in 1847. There has been a fair amount of history over the last 151 years, and the socialist movement has had ample opportunity to acquaint itself with trade unionism. It has learned a great deal about the nature of trade unions, though not a trace of this accumulated knowledge is to be found in the pages of the “left” radical press.

Through much of its history, the socialist movement has ardently pursued the trade unions. Yet, despite much courting and wooing, this romance has been largely unsuccessful. Despite innumerable professions of affection and concern, the socialist suitors have been repeatedly kicked in the teeth and even stabbed in the back by the objects of their desire. Even when the socialists have sought to create trade unions of their own and provide them with an impeccable Marxist education, their offspring have repaid them with the blackest ingratitude. As soon as the opportunity has presented itself, they have tended to spurn the lofty ideals of their socialist elders and find pleasure in the fleshpots of capitalism.

Must socialists submit to the authority of the trade unions?

One would think that there is something to be learned from so many ill-fated experiences. But like the old fools found in the tales of Boccaccio, the aging and toothless radicals today are only too eager to play the cuckold again and again. Thus, the present-day “left” organizations still insist that the socialist movement is duty-bound to minister loyally to the needs and whims of the trade unions. Socialists, they insist, must acknowledge the trade unions as the workers organization par excellence, the form most representative of the social interests of the working class. The trade unions, they argue, constitute the authentic and unchallengeable leadership of the working class—the principal and ultimate arbiters of its historical destiny. To challenge the authority of the trade unions over the working class, to question in any way the supposedly “natural” right of the trade unions to speak in the name of the working class, is tantamount to political sacrilege. It is impossible, the radicals claim, to conceive of any genuine workers movement which is not dominated, if not formally led, by the trade unions. Only on the basis of the trade unions can the class struggle be effectively waged. And, finally, whatever hope there exists for the development of a mass socialist movement depends upon “winning” the trade unions, or at least a significant section of them, to a socialist perspective.

To put the matter bluntly, the International Committee rejects every one of these assertions, which are refuted both by theoretical analysis and historical experience. In the eyes of our political opponents, our refusal to bow before the authority of the trade unions is the equivalent of *lèse-majesté*. This does not trouble us greatly, for not only have we become accustomed, over the decades, to being in opposition to “left-wing”—or to be more accurate—petty-bourgeois public opinion; we consider its embittered antipathy the surest sign that the International Committee is,

politically speaking, on the correct path.

The radicals’ position rests on one crucial premise: by virtue of their mass memberships, the trade unions are “workers organizations.” Thus, he who challenges the authority of the trade unions is, by definition, setting himself in opposition to the working class. The problem with this premise is that it reduces the trade unions to empty, ahistorical abstractions. That the trade unions have a large working class membership is undoubtedly true. But so do many other organizations, such as, in the United States, the Elks, the Masons, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Catholic Church.

Moreover, a reference to the large working class membership of the trade unions is not an adequate substitute for a more careful analysis of the social composition of these organizations, especially their leading strata—that is, their ruling bureaucracies. It does not automatically flow from the mass working class membership of the trade unions that these organizations act in its interests. Indeed, one is compelled to examine whether there exists, within the trade unions, an objective conflict between the interests of the mass membership and those of the governing bureaucracy, and the extent to which the policies of the unions reflect, not the interests of the former, but the latter.

Even if one were to concede that the trade unions are “workers organizations,” very little is added to the sum total of political knowledge by the use of this definition. After all, we could then continue to play the definition game by simply asking, “And precisely what is meant by workers organization?” It would hardly do to reply, “An organization of workers!” In seeking to understand the nature of the trade unions, the real question is, “What is the relation of these organizations to the class struggle in general, and to the liberation of the workers from capitalist exploitation in particular?”

At this point, we must move beyond empty terminology and toward the construction of a more profound definition, based upon a careful historical analysis of the role played by the trade unions in the struggles of the working class and the socialist movement. The purpose of such an analysis is not merely to produce examples of crimes or achievements, depending upon what one is looking for. Rather, it is to uncover the essence of this social phenomenon, that is, the underlying laws of which the actions and policies of the trade unions are the operative and practical expression.

Why do trade unions betray the working class?

Our radical opponents never even attempt such an analysis, and therefore cannot even begin to offer a serious answer to the most elementary and obvious question: “Why have the trade unions failed so miserably to defend the living standards of the working class, let alone raise them?” Not only in the United States, but all over the world, the last quarter-century has witnessed a precipitous decline in the social position of the working class. The trade unions have been incapable of defending the working class against the onslaught of capital. Inasmuch as this failure has been demonstrated over several decades on an international scale, one is led inescapably to search for its underlying causes—both in the socioeconomic environment within which the trade unions now exist and, even more fundamentally, in the nature of the trade unions themselves. In other words, assuming that the environment turned suddenly hostile after 1973, what was it about the trade unions that rendered them so vulnerable to this change and so incapable of adapting to the new conditions?

Let us consider the response of the Spartacist League to this problem. In the course of a furious denunciation of the Socialist Equality Party—spanning four issues of their newspaper and thousands of words, of which an extraordinarily large percentage are abusive adjectives and adverbs—the Spartacists strenuously deny that there are any reasons of an objective character for the failure of the trade unions. Rather, everything is to be explained by “the defeatist and treacherous policies of the AFL-CIO misleaders.” A more banal explanation could hardly be imagined. A

paleontologist might just as well declare that the dinosaurs became extinct because they no longer wished to live! The Spartacists fail to explain why the dinosaurs in the leadership of the AFL-CIO decided to pursue “defeatist and treacherous policies.” Was it simply because they were bad people? And if they were bad people, why were so many of them to be found in the leadership of the trade unions, not only in America, but throughout the world? Is there anything in the nature of the trade unions that leads them to attract so many bad people, who then pursue “defeatist and treacherous policies?” We might also ask yet another question, “What is it about the Spartacist League that induces it to support, so enthusiastically, organizations that attract great numbers of bad people who devote themselves to betraying and defeating the workers they supposedly represent?”

The problem with a subjective approach is not only that it avoids grappling with all the really difficult problems; it permits the Spartacist League, and the other radical groups, notwithstanding their verbal assault upon the “misleaders,” to hold open the possibility of their eventual redemption and, on that basis, endorse the continuing subordination of the working class to the trade unions and, ultimately, the very same misleaders.

This perspective is spelled out in an article written by Peter Taaffe, the main leader of the British Socialist Party, formerly known as the Militant Tendency.[2] Mr. Taaffe’s attempts to dress up his subservience to the labor bureaucracy with radical phraseology produces an effect that is more comical than convincing. He begins by offering a short list of countries in which the trade union officials have been involved in particularly egregious betrayals of the working class. Like the police chief Louis in *Casablanca*, Taaffe is deeply, deeply shocked by the corruption that he observes all about him, even as the political payoffs from the bureaucracy are slipped into his pocket. The role of the Swedish union officials, Taaffe tells us, has been “scandalous.” The behavior of Belgian bureaucrats is “brazen and open.” Irish leaders are also engaged in a “scandalous spectacle” of betrayal. In Britain, Taaffe states that workers “have paid a heavy price for the impotence of the right-wing leaders.” He also notes sorrowfully the capitulation of the union leaders in Brazil, Greece and the United States.

But as far as Taaffe is concerned, the problem of the trade unions is merely one of inadequate leaders who suffer from a false ideology: acceptance of the capitalist market. The organizations themselves are basically healthy. On the basis of this subjective evaluation, Taaffe criticizes “small left groups”—by which he means the sections of the International Committee—who, basing themselves on Trotsky, insist that the betrayals of the unions are the expression of a fundamental tendency of development. This “one-sided” approach, according to Taaffe, fails to recognize the possibility that right wing trade union leaders, “under the pressure of the base, an aroused and embattled working class,” can “be forced to separate themselves from the state and head up an opposition movement of the working class.”[3]

Therefore, writes Taaffe, the “main tendency in the next period,” in Britain and elsewhere, will be that of workers “compelling the unions to fight on their behalf.” The fate of the working class depends upon “the regeneration of the unions.”[4]

A similar argument is advanced by a faction of the now defunct Workers Revolutionary Party. What must be avoided at all costs, it insists, is any struggle to develop new forms of working class organization opposed to the domination of the trade unions. “Any simplistic rank and fileism which starts from the abstract proposition that the union leaders are in bed with the state and that alternative organizations must be built and linked up will be completely inadequate to grasp the new situation.”[5]

I have no special information relating to the nocturnal trysts of union officials in Britain or anywhere else, but their opportunism is anything but a merely “abstract proposition.” Rather, the treacherous services of the

union officials are propositioned on a daily basis by the employers and the state, and these propositioners are very rarely disappointed.

The prospects for an eventual redemption of the trade unions appear far less likely when one grasps that the characteristics and qualities of the ruling bureaucracies are the subjective manifestations of objective social properties and processes. Denunciations of trade union leaders are permissible and even necessary, but only to the extent that they do not serve as a substitute for an analysis of the nature of trade unionism.

Therefore, our aim is to initiate an analysis of trade unionism, based upon a historical review of critical stages in the development of this specific form of the workers movement. The socialist movement has accumulated, over a period of not less than 150 years, immense historical experience. This experience justifies its claim to be the world’s greatest and saddest expert on the subject of trade unionism.

We do not claim that trade unionism represents some sort of historical mistake that should never have occurred. It would be ridiculous to deny that a phenomenon as universal as trade unionism lacked deep roots in the socioeconomic structure of capitalist society. There is, to be sure, a definite link between trade unionism and the class struggle; but only in the sense that the organization of workers within trade unions derives its impulse from the existence of a definite conflict between the material interests of employers and workers. It by no means follows from this objective fact that trade unions, as a specific socially-determined organizational form, identify themselves with, or seek to prosecute, the class struggle (to which, in a historical sense, they owe their existence). Rather, history provides overwhelming evidence that they are far more devoted to its suppression.

The trade unions’ tendency to suppress the class struggle has found its most intense and developed expression in their attitude toward the socialist movement. There has been no illusion more tragic, especially for socialists, than that which imagined the unions as dependable, let alone inevitable, allies in the struggle against capitalism. The organic development of trade unionism proceeds, not in the direction of socialism, but in opposition to it. Notwithstanding the circumstances of their origins—that is, even when the trade unions in one or another country owed their existence directly to the impulse and leadership provided by the revolutionary socialists—the development and consolidation of the trade unions has invariably led to a resentment of socialist tutelage and determined efforts to break free from it. Only through an explanation of this tendency is it possible to arrive at a scientific understanding of trade unionism.

The trade unions as social form

It must be kept in mind that when we set out to study trade unionism, we are dealing with a definite social form. By this, we mean not some sort of casual, accidental and amorphous collection of individuals, but rather a historically-evolved connection between people organized in classes and rooted in certain specific relations of production. It is also important to reflect upon the nature of form itself. We all know that a relation exists between form and content, but this relationship is generally conceived as if the form were merely the expression of content. From this standpoint, the social form might be conceptualized as merely an outward, plastic and infinitely malleable expression of the relations upon which it is based. But social forms are more profoundly understood as dynamic elements in the historical process. To say that “content is formed” means that form imparts to the content of which it is the expression definite qualities and characteristics. It is through form that content exists and develops.

Perhaps it will be possible to clarify the purpose of this detour into the realm of philosophical categories and abstractions, by referring to the famous section in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, in which Marx asks: “Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labor, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself.”[6] That is, when a product of labor assumes the form of a

commodity—a transformation that occurs only at a certain stage of society—it acquires a peculiar, fetishistic quality that it did not previously possess. Once products are exchanged on the market, real social relations between people, of which commodities are themselves the outcome, necessarily assume the appearance of a relation between things. A product of labor is a product of labor; and yet, once it assumes, within the framework of new productive relations, the form of a commodity, it acquires new social properties.

Similarly, a group of workers is a group of workers. And yet, when that group assumes the form of a trade union, it acquires, through that form, new and quite distinct social properties to which the workers are inevitably subordinated. What, precisely, is meant by this? The trade unions represent the working class in a very distinct socioeconomic role: as the seller of a commodity, labor-power. Arising on the basis of the productive relations and property forms of capitalism, the trade unions seek to secure for this commodity the best price that can be obtained under prevailing market conditions.

Of course, there is a world of difference between what I have described in theoretical terms as the “essential purpose” of trade unions and their real-life activities. The practical reality—the everyday sell-out of the most immediate interests of the working class—corresponds very little to the theoretically conceived “norm.” This divergence does not contradict the theoretical conception, but is itself the outcome of the socioeconomic function of the trade union. Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, “The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.”

The defense of legality means the suppression of the class struggle. That is why the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated. Herein lies the contradiction upon which trade unionism flounders. The conflict between the trade unions and the revolutionary movement arises not, in any fundamental sense, from the faults and failings of the trade union leaders—though both are to be found in abundant supply—but from the nature of the trade unions themselves. At the heart of this conflict lies the organic opposition of the trade unions to the development and extension of the class struggle. That opposition becomes all the more determined, bitter and deadly at the point where the class struggle appears to threaten the production relations of capitalism, that is, the socioeconomic foundations of trade unionism itself.

That opposition, moreover, is focused on the socialist movement, which represents the working class, not in its limited role as a seller of labor-power, but in its historic capacity as the revolutionary antithesis of the production relations of capitalism.

These two critical aspects of trade unionism—its tendency to seek the suppression of the class struggle and its hostility to the socialist movement—are decisively substantiated by the historical record. In this regard, the history of the trade union movement in two countries, England and Germany, yields important lessons and insights.

Trade unionism in England

England is commonly regarded as the great home of modern trade unionism, where, through this form of organization, the working class realized remarkable achievements. Indeed, this was the impression the trade unions made upon Eduard Bernstein, during his extended sojourn in England during the late 1880s and 1890s. The supposed successes of British trade unionism convinced Bernstein that it was the economic struggles of these organizations, not the political efforts of the

revolutionary movement, that would be the decisive factor in the advance of the working class and the gradual transformation of society along socialist lines.

Everything said today by the petty-bourgeois radicals was anticipated a century ago, by the founder of modern revisionism. The fact that their arguments are 100 years old does not, in itself, render them invalid. After all, I freely admit that some of the arguments I am using are also 100 years old—for example, the arguments employed by Rosa Luxemburg against Bernstein. These, however, have the advantage of having been substantiated in the course of the last century, while those of the neo-Bernsteinites have been refuted. As a matter of fact, contemporary critics of Bernstein noted that his estimate of the economic achievements of British trade unionism was grossly exaggerated. Indeed, the ascendancy of trade unionism, whose rise to a dominant role in the workers movement had begun in the 1850s, was an expression of the political degeneration and intellectual stagnation that followed in the wake of the defeat of the great revolutionary political movement of the British working class, Chartism. The Chartist movement represented the culmination of a political, cultural and intellectual ferment that affected broad sections of the working class in the decades that followed the French Revolution. Years after the final defeat of Chartism in 1848–49, Thomas Cooper, one of its most respected leaders, contrasted the revolutionary spirit of the old movement to the dull, petty-bourgeois outlook cultivated by the trade unions. He wrote in his autobiography:

In our old Chartist time, it is true, Lancashire workmen were in rags by thousands; and many of them often lacked food. But their intelligence was demonstrated wherever you went. You would see them in groups, discussing the great doctrine of political justice—that every grown up, sane man ought to have a vote in the election of the men who were to make the laws by which he was to be governed; or they were in earnest dispute respecting the teachings of Socialism. Now, you will see no groups in Lancashire. But you will hear well-dressed working men talk, with their hands in their pockets, of co-ops, and their shares in them, or in building societies.[7]

A new type of labor leader emerged with the trade unions: timid gentlemen who craved middle-class respectability and preached the new gospel of class compromise took the place of the old revolutionary Chartists. As Theodore Rothstein, a socialist historian of Chartism, wrote:

Men of great talent, great temperament, of great and profound erudition, who but a few years previously had shaken the very foundations of capitalist society and had been followed by hundreds of thousands of factory workers, were now lonely figures moving in obscurity, misunderstood by the majority, understood only by small groups of the selected few, while their place was taken by new men who did not possess a fraction of their intellect, talent and character, and who attracted similar hundreds of thousands of workers by the shallow gospel of “look after the pennies” and the need of coming to an agreement with the employers on this subject, even at the price of class independence.[8]

As for trade unionism, Rothstein offered the following assessment:

The distinguishing feature of this mental outlook was acceptance of capitalist society, which acceptance found its expression in the rejection of political action, and in the recognition of the teachings of vulgar political economy of the harmony of interests as between the employing and the working class.[9]

The apologists of trade unionism have argued that the British workers' retreat from political action was necessary in order to allow the class to concentrate its energy on the more promising opportunities provided by the economic struggle. This theory is disproved by the fact that the rise of trade unionism was not associated with the intensification of economic struggles, but, rather, with their general repudiation by the new leaders of the working class. Between the early 1870s and mid-1890s, the hey-day of trade unionism in England, the wages of workers stagnated. That trade unionism was not discredited during this period is to be explained by the fact that there was a massive drop in the prices of staple goods such as flour, potatoes, bread, meat, tea, sugar and butter took place.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when revolutionary sentiments were widespread among the workers, the English bourgeoisie had bitterly resisted all tendencies toward combination. But, by the end of the century, the bourgeoisie had come to appreciate the service rendered by the trade unions to the stability of capitalism—especially by serving as a barrier to the re-emergence of socialist tendencies within the working class. As the German bourgeois economist, Lujo Brentano, wrote: If the trade unions were to fail in England, it would

by no means mean the triumph of the employers. It would mean the strengthening of the revolutionary tendencies all over the world. England, which hitherto boasted of the absence of a revolutionary labor party of any serious importance, would henceforth rival in this with the Continent.[10]

Marx and Engels lived as revolutionary exiles in England during the period of the rise of trade unionism. Even before they had arrived in England, they had recognized the significance of trade unionism as the response of the working class to the efforts of the employers to lower their wages. In opposition to the petty-bourgeois theoretician Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who denied the utility of both trade unions and strikes—on the grounds that increases in wages achieved through their efforts led only to increases in prices—Marx insisted that both formed necessary components of the struggle of the working class to defend its standard of living.

Marx was certainly correct in his criticism of the views of Proudhon, but it is necessary to bear in mind that these early writings were produced at a time when the trade unions themselves were still in their swaddling clothes. The experience of the working class with this new organizational form was extremely limited. The possibility could not be foreclosed, at that time, that the trade unions could yet evolve into potent instruments of revolutionary struggle, or at least as the direct forerunners of such instruments. This hope was expressed in Marx's observation in 1866 that as "centers of organization" the trade unions were playing for the working class the same role "as the medieval municipalities and communes did for the middle class." [11]

Even by then, however, Marx was concerned that "the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself." But it was in this direction that they had to evolve:

Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad

interest of its *complete emancipation*. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural laborers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.[12]

Marx sought to impart to the trade unions a socialist orientation. He warned the workers "not to exaggerate to themselves" the significance of the struggles engaged in by the trade unions. At most, the unions were "fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady." It was necessary for the unions to undertake a struggle against the system that was the cause of the workers' miseries; and, therefore, Marx proposed to the trade unions that they abandon their conservative slogan, "*A fair day's wage for a fair day's work*," and replace it with the revolutionary demand, "*Abolition of the wages system*." [13]

But Marx's advice made little impression, and by the late 1870s, the observations of Marx and Engels on the subject of trade unionism had assumed a far more critical character. Now that bourgeois economists were expressing greater sympathy toward the trade unions, Marx and Engels took pains to qualify their earlier endorsement. They distinguished their views from those of bourgeois thinkers like Brentano, whose enthusiasm for the trade unions was dictated, according to Marx and Engels, by his desire "to make the wage-slaves into *contented* wage-slaves." [14]

By 1879, it was possible to detect in Engels' writings on the subject of trade unionism an unmistakable tone of disgust. He noted that the trade unions had introduced organizational statutes that prohibited political action, thus barring "any participation in any general activity on the part of the working class as a class." In a letter to Bernstein, dated June 17, 1879, Engels complained that the trade unions had led the working class into a dead end:

No attempt should be made to conceal the fact that at this moment a genuine workers movement in the continental sense is non-existent here, and hence I don't believe you will miss much if, for the time being, you don't get any reports on the doings of the TRADES UNIONS here.[15]

In an article written six years later, in which he contrasted the England of 1885 to that of 1845, Engels made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the conservative role played by the trade unions. Forming an aristocracy within the working class, they cultivated the friendliest relations with the employers, in order to secure for themselves a comfortable position. The trade unionists, Engels wrote with scathing sarcasm, "are very nice people indeed nowadays to deal with, for any sensible capitalist in particular and for the whole capitalist class in general." [16]

The trade unions had all but ignored the great mass of the working class, for whom

the state of misery and insecurity in which they live now is as low as ever, if not lower. The East-end of London is an ever-

spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work.[17]

Engels' hopes were aroused, toward the end of the 1880s, by the development of a new and militant trade union movement among more exploited sections of the working class. Socialists, including Eleanor Marx, were active in this new movement. Engels responded to these developments with enthusiasm, and noted with great satisfaction:

These new Trades Unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organizations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways. ... And they are organized under quite different circumstances—all the leading men and women are Socialists, and socialist agitators too. In them I see the *real* beginning of the movement here.[18]

But it was not too long before these “new” unions began to exhibit the same conservative tendencies as the old ones. This was an early verification of the theoretical conception we consider critical to the analysis of the trade unions—i.e., that the character of these organizations is not determined by the social position and status of the particular sections of workers organized within them. These are factors which, at most, only influence certain secondary aspects of trade union policy—perhaps making some unions more or less militant than the average. Yet, in the final analysis, the trade union form, whose structure is drawn from, and embedded in, the social and production relations of capitalism, and, we must add, the nation-state framework, exercises the decisive influence that determines the orientation of its “content”—the working class membership.

German social democracy and the trade unions

On the continent, especially in Germany, theoretical lessons were being drawn from these early experiences with trade unionism. The German socialists viewed the English trade unions, not as the forerunners of socialism, but as the organizational expression of the political and ideological domination of the working class by the bourgeoisie. This critical attitude arose, not only on the basis of theoretical insights, but also reflected a very different relation of forces within the workers movement, between the Marxist political party and the trade unions. In Germany, the impulse for the development of a mass workers movement had been provided not by the trade unions, but by the Social Democratic Party, which had succeeded, between 1878 and 1890—the period of Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws—in establishing its political authority as the leadership of the working class. It was at the initiative of the SPD that the so-called “Free” trade unions were established, mainly to serve as recruiting agencies for the socialist movement.

The influence of the trade unions—assisted by the SPD, from which they drew their leading cadre and political insights—began to expand in the 1890s. But the lingering effects of the protracted industrial depression held down their membership, and as late as 1893, the ratio of Social Democratic voters to trade union members was eight to one. Still, concern was expressed within the SPD that the trade unions might seek to compete with the party for influence in the working class. This was strenuously denied by the trade unions, whose leader, Carl Legien, defined them, at the Köln party congress of 1893, as “recruiting schools of the party.”

However, with the end of the industrial depression in 1895, the German trade unions began to grow rapidly; and the changing relation of forces increased tensions between the party and the trade unions. By 1900, the membership of the trade unions had grown to 600,000. Four years later,

the figure had risen to one million. As the ratio of SPD voters to trade union members declined, the dependence of the SPD upon the votes of trade unionists increased significantly.

Though the trade union leaders themselves refrained from offering any political support to Bernstein when he first unfurled the banner of revisionism, it was widely understood in party circles that his theories could only lead to a reorientation of the German socialist movement along English lines, in which reformist trade unions would replace the revolutionary political party as the axis of the workers movement.

In opposing Bernstein, the principal theoreticians of the Social Democracy paid particular attention to his effort to portray the trade unions as the indispensable bastion of the socialist movement. It was, of course, Rosa Luxemburg who took the lead in this struggle. Her most important work, in this regard, was *Reform or Revolution*, where she made mincemeat of Bernstein's claim that the efforts of the trade unions effectively counteracted the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism and led, however gradually, to the socialization of society. Luxemburg insisted that this was utterly untrue: that trade unionism did not lead to the abolition of class exploitation. Rather, it sought to ensure that the proletariat, within the framework of the exploitative structure of capitalism, received, in the form of wages, the best price that the market would allow.

What could be achieved by the efforts of the trade unions, in terms of raising workers' wages, was limited by the fluctuations of the market and the general dynamic of capitalist expansion. Capitalist society, she warned, was not moving “toward an epoch marked by a victorious development of trade unions, but rather toward a time when the hardships of labor unions will increase.”[19] Thus, whatever the temporary gains achieved by the unions, they were engaged, to the extent that their work remained rooted within the boundaries set by the capitalist system, in “the labor of Sisyphus.” The trade union leaders never forgave Luxemburg for making use of this winged metaphor, which provided such a devastatingly apt and prescient assessment of the activities of the trade unions.

This summary hardly does justice to Luxemburg's analysis of the reasons for the inability of the trade unions to do more than mitigate, and then only temporarily, the exploitation of the working class under capitalism. Another aspect of her criticism of Bernsteinism that is especially relevant: her denial that there is anything inherently or implicitly socialistic in the activities of the trade unions, or that their work contributes necessarily to the victory of the socialist cause. Luxemburg did not deny that the trade unions, to the extent that they were led by socialists, could render important service to the revolutionary movement. Indeed, she hoped, through her criticism, to work for such a development. (It is another matter, which we will consider later, whether that aim was achievable.) But she warned against any illusion in the existence of organic socialistic tendencies in trade unionism as such.

“It is precisely the English trade unions,” Luxemburg wrote:

as the classic representatives of complacent, correct, narrow-mindedness, that bear witness to the fact that the trade union movement, in and for itself, is utterly non-socialist; indeed, it can be, under certain circumstances, a direct obstacle for the expansion of socialist consciousness; just as, in the opposite case, socialist consciousness can be an obstacle for the achievement of purely trade union successes.[20]

This passage remains a stunning rebuke to all those who slavishly adapt themselves to the trade unions and their bureaucracies, and who cannot conceive of a workers movement in anything other than a trade unionist form. As it makes so very clear, there exist no organic and unbreakable

links between trade unionism and socialism. They are not, of necessity, moving along parallel trajectories toward the same general destination. Rather, trade unionism, which by its nature is, as Luxemburg stated, “utterly non-socialist,” undermines the development of socialist consciousness. And, furthermore, the political principles of the socialists, which require that they base their activities upon the historical interests of the working class, run counter to the practical aims of the trade unions.

In England, the trade unions developed upon the ruins of Chartism and independently of the socialist movement. In Germany, on the other hand, the trade unions emerged under the direct tutelage of the socialist movement. Its leaders were diligently schooled in the teachings of Marx and Engels. And yet, in essence, the German trade unions were no more devoted to socialism than those in England. By the turn of the century, having become more self-confident by the influx of hundreds of thousands of new members, the trade unions were indicating their discomfort with the political influence of the party and their subordination to its political aims. This discomfort found expression in a new platform: that of political neutrality. A growing section of trade union leaders began to argue that there was no reason why their organizations owed any special loyalty to the campaigns of the SPD. In fact, the domination of the SPD, they argued, cost the trade unions the possibility of winning members among workers who were disinterested in, or opposed to, socialist politics. Among the foremost representatives of this trend was Otto Hué, who insisted that the trade unions could only serve the “professional (not class) interests” of its members if they adopted a position of political neutrality. “Where workers,” Hué wrote, “wind up politically under conditions of trade union neutrality is and must be a matter of indifference to the trade union leaders.”

Trade unions and the “mass strike”

Between 1900 and 1905 tension mounted between the party and the trade unions. The union leaders, in their capacity as delegates to the congresses of the SPD, continued to cast their votes in favor of socialist orthodoxy. Their innate hostility to socialism as a revolutionary movement had not yet reached the point where they were ready to directly challenge the SPD’s political commitment to the struggle for state power. This was changed by the events of 1905, both within Germany and beyond its borders.

The explosion of revolution throughout Russia affected the German working class. Workers followed with intense interest the detailed coverage of the revolutionary struggles in the socialist press. Russian events, moreover, coincided with, and apparently inspired, the eruption of a wave of bitter strikes throughout Germany, but especially in the Ruhr among miners. Despite the militancy of the workers, the strikes encountered stiff resistance from the mine owners. The trade unions were taken aback by the owners’ intransigence, to which they had no effective response. The strikes were called off, thus shaking the confidence of the workers in the efficacy of traditional union tactics.

In this new situation, Luxemburg, supported by Kautsky, argued that the events in Russia were of all-European significance and had revealed to the German workers the potential of a new form of mass struggle: the political strike. The idea of a political mass strike found widespread support in the working class. But the trade union leaders were horrified by the implications of Luxemburg’s arguments. Were the workers to act on Luxemburg’s theories, the unions would find themselves caught up in “revolutionary adventures” that the officials thought were none of their concern. Mass strikes would cost the unions enormous amounts of money and could empty their bank accounts of the cash reserves of which the leaders were so very proud.

To prevent such a catastrophe, the union leaders decided to launch a pre-emptive strike against Luxemburg and other SPD radicals. At the trade union congress held in Köln in May 1905, a special commission was established to prepare a resolution that would define the attitude of the

trade unions to the question of the mass strike. The spokesman of the commission, Theodore Bömelburg, declared:

To develop our organizations further, we need peace in the labor movement. We must see to it that the discussion of the mass strike disappears, and that the solutions of [the problems of] the future are left open until the appropriate time arrives.[21]

In what amounted to a declaration of war upon the SPD left wing, the trade union congress adopted a resolution that declared discussion on the question of a political mass strike was impermissible within the trade unions. It warned workers “not to let themselves be distracted by the reception and propagation of such ideas from the small day-to-day tasks of building up the organization of labor.”[22]

The SPD was shaken by the rebellion of the trade union leaders against the party. Kautsky declared that the congress had revealed the depth of the alienation of the trade unions from the party, and noted, with a sense of irony, that it struck him as absurd that the “desire of the trade unions for peace and quiet” had been proclaimed in a year “that has been the most revolutionary in all human history.” It was evident to Kautsky that the trade union leaders were more concerned with the fate of the organization’s bank accounts than with the “moral quality of the masses.”

For the union leaders, hatred of the SPD left wing assumed pathological dimensions. Rosa Luxemburg, in particular, was the perennial target of vitriolic denunciations. Otto Hué, who edited the miners’ journal, urged those who had such a surfeit of revolutionary energy to go to Russia “instead of propagating general strike discussion from their summer resorts.”[23] The attacks on Luxemburg intensified, even as she languished in a Polish jail after being arrested for her revolutionary activities. Sickened by the vicious personal attacks on Luxemburg, who was still his friend and ally, Kautsky denounced the persecution of “a leader of the proletarian class struggle.” It was not Luxemburg, he wrote, who endangered the relations between party and trade unions, but rather the trade union officials, who felt a “narrow-minded hatred of these elements against any form of the labour movement that sets itself a higher goal than five pennies more per hour...”[24]

For a time, the SPD leadership fought back against the trade union officials, but did so as cautiously as possible. At the Jena party congress of September 1905, Bebel introduced a skillfully worded resolution that partially acknowledged the validity of the political mass strike—but only as a defensive weapon. In return, the trade unions acquiesced to Bebel’s formulation, but only briefly. At the party congress in Mannheim in September 1906, the trade union leaders demanded, and obtained from the SPD, passage of a resolution that established the principle of “equality” between the trade unions and the party. This meant that on all issues touching on matters that were of direct concern to the trade unions, the party had to work out a position that was acceptable to them. Over strenuous objections, party leaders collaborated with trade union officials to bureaucratically shut down discussion and ram through the resolution.

From this point on, the SPD was effectively ruled by the general commission of the trade unions. The relation of the trade unions to the party was, as Luxemburg noted, like that of the shrew peasant wife, who told her husband, “Whenever questions arise between us, we shall use the following procedure: When we agree, you will decide. When we disagree, I will decide.”

In their disputes with Luxemburg and the revolutionary forces within the SPD, the trade union officials claimed that they had a far better idea of what the average worker really wanted than the revolutionary theorists. Preoccupied with their abstractions and utopian visions, Luxemburg, and revolutionists of her ilk, did not really have practical answers for the

problems workers faced in the mines or on the factory floor. It was well and good for the theorists to dream about a future revolutionary cataclysm, and the socialist utopia that would emerge from it, but in the here and now the workers were much more concerned with a few extra marks in their weekly paychecks.

It was probably true that the arguments of the union officials reflected the outlook of substantial sections of workers during the years when the debate on the mass strike first erupted. It is even possible that, had the issue been put to a vote in 1905 or 1906, more workers would have cast their votes for the position of Legien than for that of Luxemburg. However, in considering the attitude of the workers to the dispute between the Marxists and the reformist union leaders, it is important to keep the following in mind: The officials were, so to speak, institutionally and constitutionally “committed” to policies that proceeded from their unions’ organic dependence upon capitalist production relations and the national-state setup. The working class, as a revolutionary social force, was not similarly committed to the gradualist program of reformist adaptation.

The development of the underlying contradictions of the capitalist system frayed the fabric of social compromise in Germany. As class tensions increased, the workers adopted a more aggressive and hostile attitude toward the employers and the state. By 1910–11, there were clear signs that Luxemburg’s arguments had begun to resonate among broader sections of the working class. Especially in the aftermath of the strikes of 1912–13, which failed in the face of the employers’ bitter resistance, the dissatisfaction of the workers with the official unions increased noticeably.

The outbreak of the World War in August 1914 temporarily halted the process of radicalization. But by 1915–16, the social discontent of the working class, exacerbated by the war, surged over the barriers erected by the official unions. The old bureaucratic arguments against the political mass strike finally received their decisive answer in October–November 1918 with the outbreak of the German Revolution. The revolutionary character of the mass movement expressed itself, as had been anticipated theoretically by Luxemburg and foreshadowed practically in the Russian Revolution, in new forms of organization—rank-and-file committees and especially workers councils—that had emerged in opposition to the official unions.

The experiences of the German and English working class represented the greatest historical test of trade unionism. We could, if we had sufficient time, supplement and substantiate our analysis of the conflict between socialism and trade unionism with innumerable examples, drawn from many more countries and spanning all the decades of this century, right up until our own time.

The necessity of socialist consciousness

The purpose of this lecture has not been to provide as many examples as possible of the treachery of the trade unions. Rather, it is to substantiate the necessity of socialist consciousness and the fight for its development in the working class. Herein lies the significance of the revolutionary Marxist party. Even if a renaissance of spontaneous militancy of a syndicalist character were to occur—and such a development would be unthinkable without explosive rank-and-file rebellions against the old bureaucratic organizations—the development of such a promising movement along revolutionary lines would depend upon the independent work of the Marxist party, fighting to bring socialist consciousness into the working class.

All those who insist upon the incontestable authority of the trade unions, oppose the struggle for Marxism in the working class. Cliff Slaughter[25], for example, denounces those Marxists [of the International Committee] “who persist in thinking that they have the mission of ‘consciousness-raising,’ ‘politically-intervening,’ and ‘politicizing,’ in the spontaneously arising struggles of the working class...”[26]

This statement substantiates Slaughter’s repudiation of Marxism and embrace of middle-class anarchism. We are now approaching the conclusion of a century that has witnessed the most terrible of historical tragedies. The price paid in blood for the failures and betrayals of the many revolutionary struggles of this century is incalculable. The victims claimed by the political consequences of revolutions betrayed number in the hundreds of millions. In this decade we have seen the results of the disorientation of the working class in the former Soviet Union. And yet, in the midst of this universal political disorientation, Slaughter denounces those who seek to overcome that disorientation on the basis of socialist science.

The interests of the working class are not served by glorifying its spontaneity—that is, the prevailing level of consciousness and the given forms of organization. In the case of Slaughter and similar ex-Marxists, such testimonials to spontaneity serve merely as a cover for their own collaboration with the labor and trade union bureaucracies. We make no apologies for our insistence that the future of the working class depends on the strength of our political interventions and the success of our efforts to raise its consciousness.

We stand on the foundations laid down by the great founders and representatives of scientific socialism. We reject Slaughter’s statement as a repudiation of the essential principles that have constituted the historic *raison d’être* of the Marxist movement from its earliest days. The proletariat is the active historical subject of the socialist project. But socialism did not, and could not, arise directly out of the working class. It has its own intellectual history. Marx never claimed that his conception of the historical tasks of the proletariat conformed to whatever might be the general “public opinion” of the vast majority of workers at any given moment in their development. It is absurd even to suggest that Marx devoted his entire life to formulating ideas that merely reproduced what the average worker was likely to think on his own.

If socialist consciousness were generated by the spontaneous development of the class struggle, there would have been no reason to organize this international school. What need would there be for lectures on history, philosophy, political economy, revolutionary strategy and culture if the working class, with its existing mass organizations and prevailing level of political and historical consciousness, could automatically rise to the level of the tasks that are being posed to it by the development of the world crisis of capitalism?

Let us consider the political backdrop against which this school is being held. Even as we meet, the economies of Southeast Asia are in turmoil. Almost overnight, the existence of hundreds of millions of people is being placed in peril. In Indonesia, the value of the currency fell by 22 percent the day before yesterday. In the course of six months, the Indonesian rupee has lost nearly 80 percent of its value. The IMF is demanding a regime of brutal austerity, and under these conditions the eruption of massive social struggles is inevitable.

However, does not the outcome of these struggles depend on the assimilation by the Indonesian working class of the tragic lessons of its own history, which constitute yet another nightmarish chapter in the history of the twentieth century? Is it not necessary to review with Indonesian workers, students and intellectuals the events of 1965–66—that is, how the largest Communist Party in the world outside the USSR and China, with a membership of more than a million people, proved powerless in the face of Suharto’s coup? More than a half-million people were slaughtered in that counterrevolution. The rivers of Sumatra and Bali were clogged with the corpses of the murdered. The executions of prisoners arrested in the aftermath of Suharto’s coup continued into the 1990s. But how many questions and problems remain unanswered and unclarified! The strategic lessons of that period constitute the basis for the historic revenge that the Indonesian workers must exact for the crimes committed by the Indonesian bourgeoisie, abetted by American and I

might add, Australian imperialism.

At issue here is not an Indonesian problem, but a world-historical task. Thus, we end this school as we began it, by stressing that the future of humanity in the twenty-first century depends on its assimilation of the lessons of the strategic historical experiences of the twentieth. And if I were compelled to state, in just a few words, the principal conclusion at which we have arrived at the end of our examination of this troubled century, it is that the destiny of mankind is inescapably intertwined with the struggle for the development of socialist consciousness and culture within the international working class, a struggle which finds its political expression in the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

Notes

[1] Lecture delivered on January 10, 1998, at the International School on Marxism and the Fundamental Problems of the Twentieth Century, held in Sydney Australia.

[2] Peter Taaffe, “*Trade Unions in the Epoch of Neo-Liberalism*,” *Socialism Today*.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Workers International Press, Number 1, February 1997, p. 21.

[6] Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 76.

[7] Quoted in Theodore Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), pp. 183–184.

[8] Ibid., p. 195.

[9] Ibid., p. 197.

[10] Ibid., p. 273.

[11] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 20 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), p. 191.

[12] Ibid., p. 192.

[13] Ibid., p. 149.

[14] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 27 (New York: International Publishers, 1992), p. 98.

[15] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 45 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1991), p. 361.

[16] Ibid., Volume 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990), p. 299.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Volume 2: “*The Politics of Social Classes*” (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 111.

[19] Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), p. 36.

[20] “Die englische Brille,” in Rosa Luxemburg *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 1/1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990), p. 481, (translation by D. North).

[21] Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy: 1905–1917; the Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 39–40.

[22] Ibid., p. 40.

[23] Ibid., p. 41.

[24] Quoted in Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, ed. and trans., *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2009), p. 45.

[25] Cliff Slaughter is a former leader of the British Workers Revolutionary Party who broke politically with the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1986.

[26] Cliff Slaughter, “*Review of Istvan Mezsaros' 'Beyond Capital'*,” *Workers International Press*, Number 3, (London, June 1997).





To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact