

Martin Glaberman

1911-1970s: Unions

and workers:

limitations and

possibilities

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We are dealing with a complex and controversial question. The question of labour, of the working class, of the union movement, has always been controversial. The first problem is to try to understand the reasons for what everyone clearly sees, and that is the decline of the organised labour movement in the United States. Membership in the unions has gone down, the power of the unions has gone down, and the influence of the unions in politics has gone down, and on and on... The tendency of many people, from the left, from the centre, from the right, is to lay the blame on individual union leaders. Better leaders mean better unions. More militant leaders mean more militant unions.

I believe that sociologists need a little bit of history. In 1911 a book called *Political Parties* by Robert Michels appeared, describing the bureaucratisation of the working class movements in Europe. It was based on a study of the German Social Democratic Party. But

bureaucratisation has been a characteristic of labour organisations, political parties, trade unions, etc., ever since. It has been true of the socialist parties of Europe, it has been true of the trade unions, and it has been true of the trade unions in the United States. If it can be traced back that far, it seems to me it is somewhat superficial to blame it on union leaders or the quality of union leadership. Why do such organisations always choose bureaucratic leaders? There has to be something objective, something fundamental, something that is continuing in the world that leads to the bureaucratisation of working class organisations.

I want to deal with three aspects of the decline of the union movement in the United States; not simply bureaucratisation, but decline. One element is the role of the government. It is clear that in the United States the government has been on the whole less sympathetic to labour, labour movements, labour organisations, than countries in Western Europe. That, of course, is not an absolute. All one has to do is look at the Thatcher government in Great Britain to see equivalent records of anti-labour activity in Europe. But what people fail to realise is something that is distinctive about American history and American development. In Number 10 of the Federalist Papers, James Madison made a very

interesting point in his argument that people ought to vote in favour of the new constitution. Essentially, what he said was that we, in the United States, are a country of small property holders, primarily farmers. But we can look across the sea and see the rise of a populous working class in the major cities of Europe. What we need to do is protect ourselves from the inevitable change to a majority of propertyless workers. His argument for the constitution was that the constitution would make sure that a popular majority could not easily win control of the government. This was accomplished by the division of powers, the separation of federal and state, the separation of legislative, judicial, executive, and so forth.

Legacy of the Founding Fathers

It strikes me that one of the reasons the United States tends to be at least twenty years behind the rest of the industrial world in things like social welfare, labour legislation, etc., is that legacy. The founding fathers were brilliant and they built very well. They did what they intended to do, namely, prevent a popular majority from easily and quickly winning control of the government.

The tendency always, even among sociologists, is to blame the victim. The reason the American labour movement is in trouble, it is claimed, and the reason the

United States is backward is because of the backwardness of the American working class. We do not have the political parties, we do not have the kind of union movement, and we do not have the same history as the working classes of Europe. Not quite. American workers built labour parties, called workingmen's parties, in the 1820's and 1830's, before the British working class had even won the right to vote. They were quickly absorbed into the existing bourgeois parties, the Whigs, the Democratic- Republicans, etc... They were co-opted, as we would say today. Perhaps that was because the American working class in that period was still young, still not fully formed. But, in any case, it seems to me that it is impossible to describe that working class as backward. American workers are a product of American history, as we all are. But backwardness is not one of the characteristics of the American working class.

The point also needs to be made that the European labour and socialist parties are not particularly superior to the American Democratic Party. They invariably support their own national imperialisms, they supported NATO and the cold war, and, if one looks at Great Britain, they are not especially adept at fighting off right wing strike-breaking and anti-labour legislation.

Will the election of Bill Clinton, the governor of a right-to-work state, make a difference and begin to turn things around? Perhaps, but not by much. There will be some differences resulting from new appointments to boards and agencies that unions have to deal with. There may eventually be further differences resulting from new appointments to the federal courts. But the attempts of the union movement to modify some of the existing anti-labour legislation, such as Taft Hartley and Landrum-Griffith, could not even get through Democratic controlled Congresses before the Reagan-Bush administrations. Are the chances for pro-union legislation improved? Perhaps, but not by much.

In the United States there is another factor which has been amply documented, particularly in labour history. One of the characteristics of the American labour movement is something which labour historians have called the social compact. It goes back at least to the garment unions in New York in the early years of this century. Essentially it is an arrangement, sometimes formal, sometimes informal, by which the unions receive for their members wages, fringe benefits and so on, and in return give to the employer workers who work. At the height of the militant 1930's John L. Lewis, the head of the CIO, announced publicly, with great pride, that a CIO

contract was a guarantee against strikes. It was not true then, and it probably won't be true now or in the future. Nevertheless, it gives a sense of what was involved. You give us wage increases, you give us fringe benefits (although that came somewhat later) - in other words, you give us things outside the process of work and we will see that our members behave in a disciplined way and work and don't wildcat and don't sabotage and don't take days off and so on.

Social Unionism

One of the things that you hear in discussions of the American labour movement is that we ought to go back to the days of "social unionism." What is forgotten is that social unionism is essentially a form of the social compact and it is associated most strongly with Walter Reuther. What Walter Reuther did was propose all kinds of plans; plans for the restructuring of the automobile industry for war production; plans for the restructuring of the automobile industry for conversion to peace-time production. He marched in civil liberties parades in the South and in Washington. (He did not fight for upgrading blacks inside the plants, inside the unions which he controlled.) And what he created in the UAW, and what exists, more or less, in most large industries is what has been called by labour relations people a one party state.

That is, there is a certain formal democracy, but one party rules.

If you permit me a little leeway, I would like to give you an experience out of my own past. Years ago I got a job at a General Motors plant in Detroit. The day before I was to get seniority and be protected by all the elements of the union contract, the foreman called me over and told me I was fired. Which was a mistake, because all he had to do, since I had no rights at all as a probationary employee, was to tell me I was no longer needed and lay me off. But he said I was fired, so I asked him to call the committeeman. The committeeman came over - it was a hot Saturday, and I remember I had the pleasure of sitting in the foreman's air-conditioned office while he and the committeeman wandered around the plant discussing my fate. They returned about an hour or two later and the committeeman told me that Joe here will not fire you if you agree not to do all these terrible things you were supposed to have done. Well, since I didn't admit that I had done them in the first place, although some were done and some were not, I agreed. I agreed to stop beating my wife, so to speak. I kept my job and I came in to work on Monday and I had seniority and a totally different relation to the company. I could not be fired easily; I could only be disciplined in a long process.

This is the union at its best. But what never left me is the argument that the committeeman used to win me my job back. He said, look, management and labour had a meeting several months ago and we agreed that we could not run the plant without each other. Why do you come to me after this guy is fired? What you should have done was come to me before he was fired and tells me the problem. Then I go over to him and put my arm around him, and I say, hey, buddy, we don't work like that here. So I straighten him out, you don't have a problem, I don't have a problem, and we don't have to write a grievance.

In other words, he won his case, he won my case, because the foreman did not permit him to participate in the management of the employees. I have been a committeeman and I have been a steward, and that is part of the reality. You see a guy fast asleep in the toilet. You can let him sleep, or you can wake him up and say, hey, buddy, if you get caught there is no way I can save your job. What is the difference? What I am doing is enforcing the contract, enforcing the company rules. That, it seems to me, while not exactly what Michels said years ago, is fundamentally the objective basis for the bureaucratisation of the union movement. It is based on

contracts in which the company and the union work out ways of living together.

Decline of the Social Compact

Why then the decline, why isn't the social compact working? There is one specific element that has to be seen in the social compact. That is the militancy and the resistance of ordinary workers on their jobs. If the workers weren't militant and the workers didn't resist, there would be no basis for the compact. Why should a company agree with the union to grant concessions if they did not need the union to help discipline workers and keep workers at work? So the underlying reality is a working class that is consistently resisting its life at work and the union which gets concessions outside of the work process and provides discipline inside the work process.

What has changed in recent years? First, obviously, a much more conservative, a much more reactionary, anti-labour administration. Secondly, a long period of substantial unemployment. Thirdly, the growing possibility to move production, originally to other parts of the United States where labour is cheaper, but also to move production abroad. As a consequence, it was possible for companies to smash unions and to break strikes in ways which were not possible in the 30's or 40's

or 50's or 60's. The labour movement has been weakened because the fundamental basis of the compact, that each side brings something substantial to the table, was no longer as true as it was in the past.

Another sign of that reality is the continual change in the way corporations try to deal with working class unrest. In 1991 there was a strike at the Lordstown plant of General Motors which, in a matter of days, began to shut down more and more plants of GM. Lordstown has a very interesting history. When it was a new plant in the 60's and 70's, there was a lot of unrest there. It was new, many of the workers were young, there was a lot of absenteeism, there was sabotage, there was dope in the plant, etc.. At one point, in the discussion of general unrest, of which Lordstown was typical, Time made a significant observation: that everyone knows that what Marx said was wrong, but what is forgotten is that one thing he talked about was true and is still relevant "" and that is alienation. That is what workers at Lordstown and elsewhere are experiencing, the kind of alienation in work that Marx talked about. What emerges is different stages of how to deal with that. There was Taylorism. In the 60's and 70's there was job enrichment. That was the Scandinavian model. The idea at Volvo was that if you get a team of six people together, each one, not with a

specific job, but sharing the work of putting an engine together, you would get workers who were much more satisfied than otherwise.

That it didn't quite work the way it was supposed to was reflected in the fact that Swedish auto plants could not find enough Swedish citizens to take these supposedly enriched jobs and they had to depend heavily on imported labour. The reasons are not hard to find. One of the American plants that was written up frequently as an example of job enrichment was a Gaines dog food plant in Topeka, Kansas. An examination of that experience would illustrate the limitations of such a program. To begin with, the plant had 90 workers, which is not exactly the Ford assembly line. The workers were given the right to organise the work in ways that suited them best. They even had the right to interview and pass on new hires "" to make sure that new workers were compatible with the regular work force. But the basic problem was the nature of the work itself. Dry dog food pellets were poured into sacks automatically, the sacks were sealed and then placed on a loading dock. A simple question would be: how enriched could that job ever become? I had visions of a young worker, passing muster with his fellows and hired to be part of the work team. After a couple of weeks I could picture this worker

grumbling that this was a lousy job, dull and meaningless. His fellow workers would try to correct him and tell him that this used to be a lousy job, but now it was much better. And this young worker would say that he didn't know how the job used to be, but he did know that it was a lousy job. The end of the story is that after a number of years, job enrichment was abandoned by the company.

The Japanese Model

Now job enrichment has run its course and you have the Japanese model, Quality Circles. One of the things they have in common is something which Taylor saw and which most people do not relate to Taylorism. Taylor understood that workers know how the job is done and managers don't. The key to Taylorism was that you first had to find out what the worker knew, and then management appropriated that and reorganised the work. That is the point of job enrichment that is the point of Quality Circles that is the point of the Japanese system. In fact, in Japan there is an enforced program in most major companies of employee suggestions. Your pay increases, your merit increases, literally depends on your regularly bringing suggestions to management. Again, this assumes that workers know about work and managers don't. That is the reality.

An aside: I have learned over the years that if I want to find out how militant the American workers are, I don't read the radical press, I read the Wall Street Journal, I read Fortune, etc.. They don't fool around with that stuff and are not burdened by a party line that insists on the backwardness of the workers. They are supposed to know and they talk to each other. They assume that they don't have a popular audience, which is true enough. They will describe worker unrest and workers' movements the way Time talked about alienation in relation to Lordstown and similar situations.

What about the future? The problem with the future is that sociology is not really equipped to deal with it. We can count pretty well, but we can't predict the future. Back in 1963, in his presidential address, Everett C. Hughes, the president of the American Sociological Association had as his theme (remember, this is 1963) why sociologists did not predict and did not expect the emergence of black militancy, the civil rights movement, etc.. He said:

"Why did social scientists "" and sociologists in particular "" not foresee the explosion of collective action of Negro Americans toward immediate full integration into American society? It is but a special instance of the more general question concerning sociological foresight of and

involvement in drastic and massive social change and extreme forms of social action...

"Some have asked why we did not foresee the great mass movement of Negroes; it may be that our conception of social science is so empirical, so limited to little bundles of fact applied to little hypotheses, that we are incapable of entertaining a broad range of possibilities, of following out the madly unlikely combinations of social circumstances.

"It is sometimes said that sociology deals only with those processes of social behaviour which are repeated again and again...

"Perhaps we failed to foresee present racial movements because our whole inward frame is adapted to study of the middle range of behaviour, with occasional conducted tours toward, but not dangerously near, the extreme."?

I don't think that has changed particularly. Sociology has a very particular character, a particular role. I was looking at a table of the ASA and there was a little folder on jobs available in sociology, and it includes industrial relations, human resources management (which always sends a chill up and down my spine.) In other words, among the

functions of sociology are to manage people, to keep order in the society, to improve productivity, and so on.

Alienation

Let me give you instead two other categories, units of time. A long time ago Robert Blauner wrote a book on alienation in which he dealt with several industries, chapter by chapter. In the chapter on the automobile industry he noted, this was in the early sixties that the average job in the industry took a little less than 60 seconds to do. By the time that the Lordstown plant was built, the average job on the assembly line at Lordstown took about 36 seconds to do. While obviously, jobs vary even within a particular factory, depending upon whether you work on a machine or on an assembly line, the basic drive is for greater productivity. The point is to reduce the time it takes to do any job.

Consider these two units of time: 36 seconds, the rest of your life. The job that takes 36 seconds to do that you're going to do for the rest of your life. I don't know a better definition of alienation than that. The job can be quiet, which they rarely are; it can be clean, which they are usually not; it can be light and easy, but 36 seconds to do a job for the rest of your life" nobody will ever convince me that higher wages, fringe benefits, a vacation cottage, a motor boat, a second car, and sending your kids to

college will reduce the oppression of that reality. It is that alienation, which Time saw years ago, which is at the root of working class resistance and working class struggle. It is the kind of thing which is virtually impossible to measure. There are certain things you can't count. You can't operate on the principle that if you can't count it, it ain't true; or, if you can't count it, it doesn't exist.

Let me give you, again, a couple of examples from the modern world. In 1956 the working class of Hungary in 48 hours (there were things leading up to it in the preceding day or so) created workers' councils and took over control of all industry, offices, shops, etc.. In effect, the Communist Party was overthrown and had to be reorganised under another name. The workers councils were destroyed, not by anything in Hungarian society, but by an invasion of Soviet tanks.

In 1968, just to keep the balance even, in western Europe, after two weeks of street fighting between students and police in Paris, there was a wildcat strike in a little aircraft factory in Nantes, where young men and women workers imprisoned the management in their offices and, again, within 48 hours, 10 million French workers occupied all the factories of France and came within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the de Gaulle

government. I think that the basic difference between Hungary and France was that in Hungary the army clearly fell apart and much of it went over to the side of the revolution, whereas in France de Gaulle kept the army intact and there weren't the signs of cracks in the military structure. So, while the workers weren't defeated, they only went so far and then the movement receded and it ended with traditional trade union kinds of gains.

Let me submit that if a sociologist did a survey in the working class suburbs of Budapest in September of 1956, he or she would never have found out that one month later the Hungarian working class was going to take over the means of production. The same thing would have been true in the working class suburbs of Paris in April of 1968. Why? Because the workers didn't know. That is not the way fundamental revolutions or uprisings or massive changes in society take place. But it seems to me that that is the direction we have to look to see what the future holds in store.

In the United States the working class has been defeated many times and it has been revived many times. There was the Knights of Labour, which declined after a massive strike wave in 1877. There was the beginning of the AFL and its decline in the 1920s and its later revival. Related to these developments is something that Marx

indicated in his view that capitalism was revolutionary. He attributed that to constant revolutions in technology and the means of production which led to continual changes in all the social relations. In the famous strike at Homestead in the 1890s, in which the growing steel workers' union was crushed, the basic cause was the invention of a new process of making steel, the Bessemer furnace, which downgraded the power of the skilled steel maker. Akron today is no longer a major tire making centre because of the development of the bias tire. Printing unions are falling apart because of the replacement of traditional printing with the new technology of word processing.

Militancy Will Emerge

That these things happen should not be a surprise. That labour unions do not seriously resist them, given the bureaucratisation of the labour unions, should not be a surprise. But it also shouldn't be a surprise that there will once again emerge a militant American working class which will create organisations that it feels it needs, not necessarily consciously, not particularly consciously, to take back what it has been losing and, hopefully, to go further. Something Marx wrote can help put this in a fundamental theoretical framework. In *The German Ideology*, one of his early writings, he wrote:

"Both for the production on a mass scale of the communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew." [2]

I suggest that this is the opposite of what most people think Marx said. Marx didn't say we have to create new people in order to make a revolution. He said we have to make a revolution in order to create new people. Where does the revolution come from? Do you mean that the American working class, the sexist, racist, American working class can make fundamental changes in this society? It has over history. But if you think that you are going to reinvent the American working class first, and then make fundamental changes, you might as well retire and leave the struggle. It just doesn't work that way. Revolutions are made; the CIO upsurge was made, by ordinary people with all the limitations of the society "" driven by 36 seconds for the rest of your life. If you can

live with that daily reality, there will not be any fundamental change.

One of the problems sociologists have is that we tend to look at ordinary workers as inferior beings. We wouldn't stand for all that crap, right? That is why we are in the academy. Why should we think workers would stand for that? They never have, they never will, and that, it seems to me, is the future of the American working class and the American labour movement. And when that upsurge takes place, all these moribund bureaucratic unions are going to rush to get to the head of the parade and say, Yes, we are going to lead you, and also we are going to control you, and we can get new, better contracts, and so forth. A lot of the things which unions can't do now, they may be able to do then. Whether that will be possible, I don't know. I don't think history is simply a continual repetition of the past. But in the reality of work is the motive power for change. If someone can change the nature of work in capitalist society, then the impetus for change might decline and disappear. But I have not seen anything to indicate such a possibility. The latest attempt at "reforming" work is Quality Circles, the so-called Japanese model. But the latest statistics show that when Quality of Work Life, or Employee Involvement, as at Ford, are introduced, industrial accidents go up, which

is another indication that it is a very refined way of saying speed-up.

That remains, and the struggle remains, and change remains.