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LETTERS

TO OUR READERS

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Organizing Office Workers

Jean Tepperman

Socialists in the past have usually not seen office workers as a very important group to organize. Most leftists have felt that office workers were not as strategically located in the economy as factory workers: they don’t have as much power to shut the economy down or to build a new one after the revolution. In addition, people have argued that clerical work is done less collectively than factory production, so workers don’t learn as deeply that collective activity could be the basis of a new society. And office workers have been seen, in general, as more conservative politically, because of their white-collar image and their identification with management.

All these observations about office workers are true to some extent, although they are all becoming less true, as I will try to show. But besides these real problems, socialists’ lack of interest in clerical workers has been partly based on false consciousness within the left. We have tended to buy the “white-collar myth”, feeling that clerical workers were somehow in a different position in the economy from blue-collar workers. This has not been true for a long time—office workers, like factory workers, are exploited and powerless on the job. They aren’t really part of man-
agement, even if some may think they are.

The other major reason for ignoring office workers has been sexism within the left, responding to stereotypes of "secretaries" as trivial, stupid, and flighty. It has been hard for socialists, as well as everyone else, to learn to see women office workers as serious people.

I think that ignoring office workers was always a mistake. But some current economic and social trends are making it more important all the time to pay attention to office workers. First, clerical work is by far the largest area of employment for women — now one out of every three employed women is a clerical worker. (1) This means that if we are serious about building a working-class-based women's movement, it's necessary to involve clerical workers.

Second, clerical work is an increasingly important part of the economy. Now 18% of the work force is clerical (2), and the work done in offices is crucial to the economy's ability to operate. Clerical workers do the vital work of communicating and processing information, without which the capitalist economy would go haywire.

And the gap between clerical and blue-collar workers is narrowing — many office workers face routine work, speedup, layoffs, etc. The average pay for clerical work is now less than the average for factory work. (3)

In this article I will try to describe a new impulse toward organizing among office workers. Although very little of this new activism is based on socialist consciousness, it is an important and positive development, with potential for making both the workers' and the women's movements stronger and more progressive. Because the left, to be effective, must be based largely on these movements, it's important for socialists to understand and encourage the growth of the office workers' movement.

In the first section I will try to give an idea of the kind of organizing that is going on. Next I will discuss some of the reasons why new organizing efforts are happening now; the grievances that lead office workers to organize; the aspects of their consciousness that hold them back from organizing; and the effect on organizing of divisions among office workers. Finally I will give my impressions of the effects of this new movement on the consciousness of office workers.

BEGINNINGS OF A NEW MOVEMENT

In the summer of 1974 I began research for a book on the "office workers' movement" in connection with Nine to Five, the Boston Women Office Workers Organization. I wanted to do the book because I believed an office workers' movement was necessary and important. I was not convinced that it was real. Since that time I have interviewed office workers in various parts of the country,
done quite a bit of reading and statistical study, and worked at two clerical jobs myself. (Quotes from office workers that appear throughout this article are taken from interviews I did for the book or from conversations with co-workers at my jobs.) By now I have become convinced that the office workers' movement is real.

I remember particular experiences that gave me a push toward believing this: One was receiving a clipping my mother sent me about a university clerical group organizing in my home town. Another was receiving a letter from a middle-aged woman who had written in response to an MS article on Nine to Five. She wrote that she and other clerical employees of the city of Pasadena had recently decided to form their own union. They weren't impressed with the performance of the AFSCME local—besides, its leadership was all male.

By attending meetings and interviewing organizers and members I saw that clerical organizing projects, like Nine to Five in Boston and a similar group, Women Employed, in Chicago, were meeting a real response from rank-and-file office workers. Several hundred people are actually members of each group, some of them active in committees and projects. My impression is that the vast majority of active participants have never been involved in any other militant activity. Their backgrounds seem to be mainly working-class, except for particular groups which are based in a more semi-professional constituency, such as Nine to Five's Women in Publishing group.

Besides the active members and the hundreds who show up at public events, both groups get a steady stream of phone calls from office workers with grievances or interest in organizing. Members describe the attitude of co-workers toward Nine to Five activities as support and approval, even if passive.

Nine to Five and Women Employed organize office workers around specific demands on employers or government officials, using demonstrations and publicity to win victories. Their organizers feel that many offices are not yet ready for unionization. They view their present activities as preparing for future, more solid workplace organizing, by promoting the idea of clerical activism and organizing about job issues, and by developing groups of people with organizing skills and experience. Both groups have generated some union activity: Women Employed is assisting an independent union organizing at a Chicago insurance company; Nine to Five is in the process of starting its own local (Number 925) of the Service Employees International Union.

Some clerical workers are already unionizing, especially on university campuses and in the public sector, and especially on the West Coast. Women office workers were a leading force in a nine-day strike of San Francisco city employees in 1974. Across the bay, clerical workers have organized their own caucus within the Alameda County employees union.
There has even been some union organizing in banks and insurance companies. Many groups of Blue Cross and Blue Shield workers, among others, have held union drives — some successful, some not. Bank executives are busy writing articles and holding conferences on how to counter what they see as a growing threat of unionization. (4) When I was in San Francisco last February, there were active union campaigns going on in two major financial institutions: the San Francisco office of Mastercharge, and the Bank of America. (The Mastercharge campaign later lost; the Bank of America campaign is still going on. But even losing campaigns like the one at Mastercharge are evidence of serious efforts by significant groups of employees, chipping away at the non-union traditions of financial institutions. An unsuccessful union campaign often paves the way for a successful one next time around.)

In general there seem to be many small efforts to organize going on among clerical workers all over the country. It's hard to estimate exactly how large this movement is, but I will try to give a few indications of its scope.

Organizations similar to Nine to Five and Women Employed have recently been formed in San Francisco, New York, and Cleveland. Women's groups within companies are widespread, especially in big outfits like AT&T. Although these tend to be dominated by higher-level employees, many clerical workers are involved. There are clerical groups on many campuses across the country, from New York to Indiana to Mississippi to California, and many of these have gone on to unionization.

Unionization among clerical workers has been increasing slowly and steadily through the sixties and seventies. I don't know whether these new clerical organizing efforts have yet added significantly to the numbers of office workers joining unions. But in the places I visited (Boston, New York, New Haven, Chicago, and San Francisco) I saw union organizing among clerical workers that was qualitatively different from traditional campaigns by bureaucratic unions. Women who identify with the women's movement, or who are in contact with the general office-worker organizing movement, are organizing for unions in a way that stresses rank-and-file participation, militance, and struggles against sexism.

The office workers' movement is still not a truly mass movement, involving a large percentage of office workers in organizing. But I think there is reason to look forward to much more mass involvement: because of the increase in activism that has already taken place, because of the interest and support that other office workers have expressed, and because of general changes in the consciousness of office workers.

WHY AN OFFICE WORKERS' MOVEMENT NOW?

The trend toward activism was stimulated first of all by the women's movement. Clericals have been part of the massive
groundswell of women’s consciousness, sharing in new feelings: I am important, I deserve something better, I am worth fighting for. Although they don’t identify with “women’s libbers” or “bra burning”, many women clericals have begun to see more clearly their importance and value to the companies they work for, and to resent more sharply their lack of pay, respect, and promotional opportunities. Women are taking a new pride in themselves as clerical workers, in two ways. One is a kind of craft pride, talking about how difficult and skilled many clerical jobs are. The other is a more collective sense that clerical work is crucial to the whole company: “If we stopped working, nothing really would happen.” Many women see the low pay and lack of respect for clerical workers as a direct reflection of sexism. And the women’s movement has encouraged them to feel that protest is legitimate. Another office worker said: “It’s now possible to be an uppity woman on the job and feel you’re not alone.”

The change in women’s consciousness has itself been produced partly by a basic change in women’s economic lives: their increasing dependence on their own earnings. Divorce, single parenthood, disillusion with marriage, and the simple fact that one income is not enough to support a family — all these things have put new financial burdens on the shoulders of women. More women now work outside the home for more years of their lives. This new relationship of women to their jobs has made them more interested in fighting for higher pay and better job conditions.

But as women become more dependent on their own earnings, the prolonged economic crisis of the seventies is whittling away those earnings. Inflation was mentioned by many of the office workers I interviewed as a major reason why more organizing was taking place. The 1974 San Francisco city strike was a response to a 2% wage-increase offer, in a year of double-digit inflation. The economic crisis has also contributed to worsening job conditions. When a person quits she is often not replaced, and her workload is distributed among the people who are left. Many people mentioned managements “tightening up”, increasing rules, beginning systems for counting people’s productivity, etc.

Layoffs, which used to be less common in offices, are becoming more frequent — and without union contracts, they often occur in arbitrary and cruel ways. An employee of CNA insurance in Chicago described the layoff procedure there: “They’ll walk in and tell you, like at 10 o’clock, ok, you can get your stuff and go home. They don’t give you notice. The only way you find out that there’s going to be firings on your floor is by rumor. And whoever’s the head of that department, they can get rid of whoever they want to.”

These factors — changes in women’s consciousness, changes in women’s economic responsibilities, and the economic crisis — are the major reasons for the current growth in office-worker organizing. Underlying these is a more long-range process of
"proletarianization" in office work, as described by Harry Braverman in LABOR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL. (5)

What clerical workers do is process and communicate information. Braverman shows that this function is especially important to advanced capitalism because the economy is so complicated and chaotic that it needs a lot of coordination. As a result, the percentage of clericals in the work force has increased from 3% in 1900 to over 18% today. (6)

As clerical payrolls became a major expense, companies started serious efforts to economize. The pay of clerical workers relative to the rest of the work force has declined dramatically over this century. This process went hand-in-hand with the recruitment of women into clerical work, since it was easier to get away with paying women low salaries. (7)

Employers also increased efforts to get more output from every clerical worker. The secretary’s role of all-round office assistant is declining. Division of labor is increasing, as more and more clerical workers are assigned to "specialize" in just one part of the office operation. Work is passed from one person to another in a way that functions like an assembly line, even though companies may be careful to make the office look more pleasant. Receiving information, coding information, setting rates, typing policies, punching information into computers, typing correspondence for men bosses, and filing, are all separate jobs in a typical insurance company. Fewer bosses have private secretaries. One person may work for several bosses, while more and more of the big typing jobs are sent to the typing pool.

New office machinery tends to increase the division of labor and the routinization of clerical jobs. As computers take over skilled clerical functions, these jobs are eliminated and the demand for keypunchers increases. Automatic typewriters can now store form letters on magnetic tape and type them out at 150 to 350 words per minute. This machine must be used constantly, since it is so expensive, so it often requires a new division of labor in which one former secretary is assigned to the "word-processing machine" full-time. The high cost of computers and computer time also increases pressures for speed and accuracy in many clerical jobs, since correcting mistakes becomes a major expense, and deadlines must be met to keep the computer constantly in operation.

The increased division of labor and mechanization in offices also makes easier the use of "scientific management" methods of speedup. Production counts are kept on many typists and keypunchers. Even some higher-level employees, like insurance underwriters, have quotas for how many policies they must process in a day. Aetna Insurance Company gives people time standards for phone calls, and has most of its office workers on a piecework system.

(In spite of the importance of these trends, I think some radicals have recently made the mistake of taking this too far, and viewing
all office work as "mindless", mechanical repetition of the same tiny task all day. In fact, there are still many clerical jobs that involve varied tasks, requiring interpersonal, problem-solving, and verbal skills and the ability to organize details as well as skill and experience in typing, shorthand, and the operation of office machinery. Many clerical workers are justifiably proud of their own abilities and accomplishments in their jobs. For non-working-class radicals to characterize all clerical work as "mindless" or "shit-work" shows ignorance and class arrogance.

The other danger in this caricature is that it misses an important level of office-worker consciousness. Many women are vividly aware of the assembly line as an alternative to the office. I have heard women in my own offices say things like, "If I had to sit and do the same thing over and over all day, I'd go crazy." Of course, many office workers do sit and do the same thing all day. Even the ones who don't are victims of the general trends toward factory-like office organization in other ways. But it's important to appreciate a little of the variety and complexity of clerical jobs in order to have a real feeling for the lives of office workers.)

The trend toward the office-as-factory contributes to the likelihood of clerical organizing. Partly it just makes clerical work more unpleasant—boring, repetitive, pressured. The extreme division of labor puts many (but by no means all) clerical workers in the position of following procedures without an opportunity to understand the whole work process. A machine operator in a bank said: "Most of the people agree with me that they don't give you enough training on what happens to the check. Some of the words they use—you're running the D,D,A, today. Fine. I know that D,D,A, means you're running the main type of work with the orange separator card, but I don't know what D,D,A, means. It means debit something. Or D,V., or S.D.A., or G,L,E.—you know, all those words. It would be nice if you knew what they were or where the checks come from or where they're going. It's just a feeling of not knowing. It's like the machine running you. You're like a computer. 'We'll run D,D,A, today.'"

Increased division of labor also tends to make relationships with other workers more collective. Although many clerical workers are still isolated, each in an office with her boss, the trend is toward larger offices where many women work together, each doing a job that is a phase of the whole operation. Supervision is more formal and rigid, because the group is large enough to have one official supervisor.

Being stuck in a large group of people doing a mechanical job also makes it clear that chances of "working your way up" inside the company are slight. As clerical workers sit in rows of desks crowded together, they are very much aware of the men (bosses) in closed offices around the edge of the room. Many office workers resent the symbols of hierarchy, one describing her office this way: "It's very class structured. The very biggest honchos, like
the president and vice president, work in a section called mahogany row because they put all this mahogany paneling and this orange grass paper up on the walls, and they have central air conditioning in there, and doors on their offices, and different color chairs and sofas, and even their secretaries have nicer desks than everybody else’s secretaries. You can look at someone’s chair and know what their position is.” The lines are even sharper because they coincide almost completely with sex lines. Another person from another company told me “You can look at a person and just because he’s a man you know he’s a grade 36 or over.”

GRIEVANCES

All of these general patterns are reflected in the reasons clerical workers give for organizing. Bosses’ and companies’ attitude of contempt for office workers is the thing most people mention first, as in these two comments:

“I don’t think Travelers cares anything at all about their employees. They just don’t have any respect for the work we do; they think that any idiot could do it. A lot of it is very technical and time-consuming, and it has to be very very exact. I think that’s the thing I hate most. They just don’t think we’re important at all, that we’re just clericals.”

“Management doesn’t care. They quite blatantly don’t care. I’ve seen the manager or the assistant manager go over and kick somebody’s desk because she had her head down, resting or something. It just lets you know that the attitude is, ‘Hey, we’re paying you, you keep working.’”

The women’s movement has made many people very sensitive to the symbolism of having to get the boss’s coffee — that and the right to wear pants have sparked hundreds of spontaneous acts of protest and rebellion. Several people mentioned the fact that clericals were left out when decisions were made, even decisions that involved only them, like picking new desks when an office was remodeled. Many people resent petty restrictions that are applied only to women clericals, while higher-up men can ignore them. Some companies make people sign “late slips” or ask permission to leave their desks. The single most often mentioned example is being hassled for taking sick days. People are interrogated by supervisors, some required to bring doctors’ notes. Many office workers are put on some kind of probation which means that if they are out one more time they are fired. Office workers are indignant about all these things mainly because, as one person said, “they completely undermine anybody’s dignity”.

How much people get hassled depends a lot on what their supervisor is like. Because there is usually no union contract, there is often no standardized procedure for disciplining people. In many companies, supervisors have tremendous power to determine peo-
ple's raises (on the "merit" system), to put them on probation, and even to choose who gets laid off during a cutback.

In a way, this power of supervisors makes it harder for people to see the need to organize against the company as a whole, because it makes the personality of the supervisor seem like the main cause of job problems. But many people are beginning to see that the very fact that the supervisor has so much power over them is itself the problem.

The other near-universal complaint is low pay. Partly because low pay for clerical work is such an accepted pattern, and partly because of rebellion against the sexist assignment of jobs, many people's desires for more money take the form of desires for promotion. Promotion is also seen as a way to get more respect, and to be able to do more interesting work. Many organized office groups raise demands like the creation of a "career ladder", which are traditional in clerical workers' unions. But I also talked to many people who said that their fellow workers were not much interested in promotion and mostly wanted more pay and respect for the work they were doing.

OBSTACLES TO ORGANIZING

For clericals, as for any other group of workers, two opposing forces exist — some pushing them to organize, and some keeping them from organizing. I have tried to describe some of the forces pushing clerical workers to organize. But the obstacles, obviously, are still stronger — less than 20% of clerical workers are unionized. (8) That's why I think it's important to describe some of these obstacles. By doing so, I don't want in any way to contribute to feelings that office workers can't be organized. The spirit and insight and anger I've seen in so many office workers have shown me that the obstacles are growing weaker, and clerical militance is growing stronger.

For office workers, as for most workers, the main obstacle to organizing is fear. When I mentioned unions to a John Hancock file clerk, she said, "Here? They'd just fire everybody! I can hear it now, coming over the loudspeaker!" The fears are well founded. Both Nine to Five and Women Employed have already had members who were fired for organizing, and this is still probably the most common employer response to protest. In most workers, this fear is combined with cynicism about the possibility of change.

Almost everybody in an office has some plan, real or fantasy, about how she's going to escape, only work here for a little while more. Women probably feel these hopes more, because they may have the possibility of being supported by a man. But for most women this is not a realistic possibility. And fantasies about escape are common. A more particular problem women face is the conflict between their home responsibilities and an activist role. Several organizers told me they thought this was the most impor-
tant thing keeping women from organizing. ("There are no good
times for meetings," one organizer complained. Women usually
have to rush home to get children from babysitters, cook dinner,
and do the housework.)

In addition, it's probably still true that more office workers than
factory workers have feelings of identifying with management, or
at least don't feel clearly that management is their enemy. It does
seem that the aesthetics of getting dressed up, having your own
desk and telephone, etc., tend to blur class feelings. Some secre-
taries also really enjoy reflected prestige from bosses who are
"important men".

There are also still things about the work itself that influence
people toward identifying with management. Many clerical workers
have a lot of responsibility for keeping track of the company's
business, seeing that information, payments, bills, etc., flow
smoothly. "It's really management work," one secretary said to
me—she was right in a way, even though clerical workers have
no power over what they are doing. But just being involved in all
that tends to seduce people into identifying with management's
goals.

Maybe this is especially true in "accounts receivable" depart-
ments, which is where I happen to have worked. It's almost inevi-
table to start referring to the company as "we", talking about how
much people owe "us", etc. Credit department people are delighted
when an overdue check comes in to the company. Once I asked
someone why, since it wasn't her money, and she said, "But it's
my job." When I worked in a hospital this was especially upsetting
because billers were arguing with patients about bills. Like many
other clerical workers (bank tellers, etc.) they were in the position
of being yelled at by customers about the company's policies. It's
very difficult in that situation to avoid getting defensive and identi-
ifying with the company and its logic: like feeling that people should
pay their hospital bills.

Besides the content of the work, some things about the process
undermine people's sense of solidarity with each other, and orient
them toward management's goals. Many offices divide work in such
a way that each person has responsibility for a particular part of
the alphabet, set of clients, or whatever. One of the hospital billers
said she liked this arrangement because "it's like you have your
own little business." In that office there was also a lot of competi-
tiveness about who was better at the work. This was stimulated by
management, which kept records of how many dollars were out-
standing in each biller's part of the alphabet—the boss showed
them to me the second week I was there.

Many office workers are also influenced away from organizing
by nice gestures, like being taken out to lunch or given a Christmas
bonus—or by fear of losing little arrangements worked out with
an individual boss, like being able to leave early to go to the den-
tist once a month. Many people say they don't have to organize be-
cause they have a nice boss, or are taken in by employee manipulation techniques, like a powerless “employee advisory committee”.

There is probably still some feeling that, as “white collar” workers, clericals are above organizing, but I have encountered very little of it. In my experience, the opposite problem is more significant. In the words of an Illinois AFSCME organizer, “I don’t think the clericals feel so much superior to a blue-collar worker as they feel just a nothing themselves.” Many office workers are slow to protest low pay or degrading rules because they are just so used to thinking of management’s power as legitimate. It’s common to hear things like, “Well, after all, the company has to keep people from abusing the privilege of sick leave.”

Many office workers are reluctant to organize because of negative feelings toward unions, as much as positive feelings toward the boss. Some of the negative attitudes reflect reality: unions are seen as corrupt, bureaucratic, un-democratic organizations that don’t do anything for the workers, but support the luxurious life styles of officials with members’ dues. Many women also see them specifically as sexist. Women who have tried to organize have faced union staff members’ condescending attitudes, cynicism about women’s abilities, or sexual come-ons. On the other hand, I think many negative feelings about unions come from a basic individualist distrust of collective action. People say things like, “I think it should be up to the individual whether to join the union, or go out on strike.” That feeling undercuts the whole basis of unionism: the only power workers have comes from united action.

Finally, office workers are weakened by the same kinds of divisions that cause problems for all other American workers. There is a tendency for people to take things out on each other rather than the boss. Company favoritism often produces backbiting and resentments among workers. And workers are often divided soci ally by barriers of age and race. People tend to form friendships and talk about their feelings mainly with others of the same age and race. Blacks and whites often sit separately at lunch. Discrimination by companies adds to racial segregation among workers: most minority workers are concentrated in a few low-level jobs in a small number of departments: keypunching, typing pool, etc. These social divisions and lack of communication can lead to misunderstanding and hostility. They can make it harder to build a real unity that would be a basis for everyday struggles in the office.

But as many of the obstacles get weaker (women’s hope for escape into being a happy housewife, for example), and the forces for militance get stronger, organizing activity is increasing.

DIFFERENCES AND DIVISIONS

Within the whole group of office workers, different sub-groups organize in different ways, and with different degrees of ease. Age, class background, type of job, education, race, and industry all af-
fect participation. The people who are the first to become involved are not necessarily the ones who will be the strongest activists over the long run.

Most people who initiate and lead organizing efforts are in their twenties. They tend to have fewer family responsibilities, to be less loyal to the company, more confident about finding jobs (therefore less scared of being fired) and more open to feminist ideas. However, several activists told me they were surprised by the militant feelings of many older women. “They’ve just taken shit for so many more years,” one person said. Besides, workers with more seniority are likely to be more exploited, in non-union places. Starting salaries rise with the market, but with no standard raise policy, a worker with ten years’ seniority may be making the same amount as the young woman hired last week. Also many older women are divorced or widowed and more dependent on their earnings than younger people, who may have parents or husbands still in the picture. All these things make older women slower to become active, but often very strong when they finally do.

Most of the activists I met had had some college education, even the ones from blue-collar backgrounds, working at relatively low-status jobs. College gives people more self-confidence and more hope of avoiding low-paid drudgery, as well as exposure to progressive or radical ideas, which make them more open to organizing. In the words of one secretary, who has since joined the Nine to Five staff, “I’m a product of the sixties — fighting for independence and knowing it’s a battle all the way. Knowing that those who have power are not going to give it up willingly.”

Besides differences in amount of education, I think there are really class differences among office workers. Clerical work itself is definitely a working-class job, and most clericals are clearly working-class. But a person’s class position doesn’t come automatically from the job she has at the moment — it also includes her parents’ class, her husband’s job, and her future class position. Partly because of sex discrimination, many women who are petty bourgeois by these other standards hold clerical jobs. Although they are a minority among office workers, they are often among the first people to get involved in an organizing effort. In general, women from professional or managerial family backgrounds often have the self-confidence and skills that make it easier to get involved. Many of them are indignant about being clerical workers at all. They see this as a form of sexism, since their class background leads them to compare themselves with men in managerial or professional jobs. Promotion for women, affirmative action, etc. are naturally the main concerns of this group.

However, not all the groups were initiated by people with such class backgrounds. And as organizations like Nine to Five and Women Employed develop, they are attracting more people from working-class families, who always expected to be office workers, or who at least take that role more for granted. Some of these peo-
ple, too, are concerned about sexism in promotion (as well they might be—nearly everyone has a story to tell about a woman who trained a man to become her boss). But I think it's true that as more working-class women get involved, the concerns shift more toward collective demands for pay, benefits, and better conditions, and unions begin to seem more relevant. One clerical worker, who was involved in a protest group that included both clericals and women from somewhat higher-level positions, said: "I think the higher-ups come when they think they can only benefit by it, for themselves. I think the clericals come as part of the clerical group, as representation, you know, what can be done about this as a whole, not what you can do for me, but what you can do for everybody."

Class dynamics are related to the fact that organizing seems faster and easier in universities and publishing houses: more of their clerical employees are college graduates. But it would be a mistake to assume that these women are the only ones organizing. Many working-class women who have never been to college are active in starting organizing efforts. An equally important reason for the relative ease of organizing in these industries is their "liberal" atmosphere. Universities and publishing houses do fire people for organizing. But compared to the repressive and regimented atmosphere of banks and insurance companies, universities and publishing houses are easier to maneuver in, and their managers tend to rely more on liberalism and cooptation to deal with unrest. The first places to organize may well not be the most militant in the long run. When the John Hancock typists and file clerks rebel, their militance is liable to match the strength of the repression against them.

Finally, race is a factor in organizing. In union drives I heard about in San Francisco and Chicago, black and Spanish leadership was important. Minority people were leaders both because of their anger about racism and because of their generally greater political sophistication. On the other hand, a Boston union organizer told me that blacks are less likely to participate in leadership, although they support the union, because they tend to have more home responsibilities and community involvements.

This explanation seems somewhat believable, since a higher percentage of black women are heads of families. But it also seems to me that most organizers of office workers have de-emphasized discussion of racism, and that their efforts to involve black women have not been as energetic as they could be.

Nine to Five and Women Employed are both predominantly white. I think their "women's group" image and emphasis on fighting sex discrimination have been less attractive to black women than a union campaign would be. Although some black women have been involved in fighting sex discrimination, there seems to be a tendency for them to see their oppression more in class and racial terms. However, I think it is perfectly possible for groups like these to
involve minority women. Both groups already have some black members and activists, and show some signs of making greater efforts to involve minority people.

WHAT CLERICAL ACTIVISTS ARE LEARNING

Changing clerical consciousness has produced organized groups, and the existence of organizing groups in turn affects people's consciousness, and helps move them toward action. The groups raise issues and help change the way people think about problems. If a group's existence suggests the possibility of change, a problem or hassle or misery can crystallize into a grievance.

Several union organizers described this process to me: Workers became more militant because organizers educated them about rights they had on paper, or could have, with a better contract. Union activity also brought clerks into confrontations with management which made it clear that management's job was to oppose their interests.

Even when groups inside a particular workplace are weak or non-existent, organized group activity from outside changes consciousness. An insurance employee told me that since Nine to Five began an active campaign to leaflet insurance companies, the tone on her floor has changed — people make a lot more "liberation comments". A group organizing at MIT said that the very existence of Nine to Five helped give their efforts "legitimacy". And a clerical committee at Syracuse University got its start by seeing a notice in MS, about a New York City office workers' conference. A few went to the conference, came back, and organized their own group on campus.

Many little incidents like these showed me the crucial role organizing projects can have in crystallizing grievances and moving people to action, in a time when there is widespread, unfocused discontent. My experiences doing research and working in offices have made me feel strongly that right now is a time like that for office workers.

In general, I was very impressed with the work of the organizers I met in doing the book, and of Nine to Five, with which I am more familiar. These organizers are working carefully and I think successfully to build a movement that the mass of office workers can identify with. From this basis, all these groups — unions, Nine to Five, Women Employed — also move and change the people involved and, to a lesser extent, other office workers who are aware of their activities. These organizations teach people a few important lessons: Change is possible. Workers only win by organization, unity, and struggle. Management is the enemy. Clerical work is dignified and valuable. You can feel proud and strong as a woman and a worker.

Active participants in these groups described personal changes — they have learned skills, gained self-confidence, and been turned
on by the possibility of change. "It's really exciting," one person said, "to realize that the efforts I am making now will make a difference."

The international unions office workers are joining in, among others, the Office & Professional Employees' Union (OPEIU); the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU); the Distributive Workers of America ("District 65"); and the Teamsters. Except for District 65, they are standard bureaucratic American unions, or worse. But clerical groups organizing new offices, or building caucuses within their unions, are making real gains in educating people to a rank-and-file-oriented, militant concept of unionism. The most developed example I encountered was "Clerks' County", a caucus within the Alameda County employees' union. This caucus has been going for several years, putting out a newsletter, arranging meetings of rank-and-file groups, and pushing more militant approaches within the union.

But many of the clerical organizing groups I met were conscious of the goal of building a different kind of union. One organizer said: "If you want people to take responsibility for negotiations and for running their own union, you really have to start before you have the union. We're trying to transfer the responsibility for the campaign from the organizing committee to the membership. The membership now meets every three weeks, and all major policy decisions now are made by the membership."

A bank employee described conflicts between her organizing committee and the union's staff organizers: "They felt that they were professionals and they knew more about organizing.....I'm not doubting that they might be able to pull a fast one, faster than we could. But we weren't out to pull a fast one. What we wanted to do was organize the workers, consciously organize the workers so we can actually struggle together — you know, everyone struggling together to get what we want."

All of these developments in people's consciousness and self-confidence are exciting. But there are limitations and problems, too. Any union campaign faces strong pressures to become like most other American unions. Union organizers I spoke to were quite anxious to concentrate on unionism and avoid being "sidetracked" by other radical or women's issues. An organizer who had been involved in an unsuccessful union drive at Yale in 1971 recalled: "When women's liberation was in the forefront we demanded child care. Then we went on to the next issue. We talked about wanting an efficient, low-cost mass transit system, we objected to Yale’s contributing to air pollution, we objected to their unchecked expansion in the city. All very fine things, but clearly off the wall for a group that's trying to organize a bunch of employees. It's taking on so much...you had to get people to care about something, to get them started somewhere, And we were asking them to start everywhere at one time." I felt her concern was
valid, but because of this real problem, radicals involved in union efforts face a constant danger of forgetting their larger goals.

Direct action organizations like Nine to Five and Women Employed face similar pressures to stick to the lowest common denominator. In addition, their activities sometimes reinforce misconceptions the members have. Their programs to demand better legislation and state regulations are valuable because they provide a way to take militant action for people whose co-workers are not ready to unionize. But these struggles tend to lead people into an attitude of relying on liberal government officials, and a view of the government as neutral or even friendly. This problem could be reduced by making an effort to point out to people constantly that it is their own militance and organization that forces liberal officials to be cooperative. But these groups’ long-range strategy for dealing with this difficulty is to develop groups within each workplace, strong enough to struggle directly against their employers.

Struggles against sex discrimination often encourage women’s desires to move up into management, without leading them to question management itself. One activist told me she had become disillusioned with banking as a career, but her reason was only that it was so sexist she didn’t have a chance of getting anywhere. Nine to Five is beginning to deal with this problem, partly by offering a course on the insurance industry for active insurance employees. The course will give activists a chance to examine insurance companies as whole capitalist institutions, not just in relation to specific grievances.

Organizing that is mainly focused on sexism does not necessarily teach people to see things in class terms. This was made startlingly clear to me when I had the following exchange with a veteran Nine to Five activist:

Me: If there were no sex discrimination, would that solve the problem? Would that be all you’d want?

She: If there were no sex discrimination, then as a result we’d get all that we are after, promotions, benefits, pay.

Me: But what if the insurance companies were set up as they are now, except that there were an equal number of men and women in every position?

She: That would be fine.

Me: But the typists and file clerks are still getting underpaid, aren’t they?

She: I see what you mean, but we really haven’t gotten into that yet. This particular action is focused on sex dis-
crimination. I just never even thought of it that way. It's true.

The problems raised by this conversation are not easy to solve. An emphasis on fighting sexism is necessary and important, especially in offices, where it is so extreme that people actually use "women" and "workers" as interchangeable terms, and do the same with "men" and "bosses". Partly because of this pattern, and partly because of the women's movement, most women office workers seem already more conscious of sexism than of class exploitation. I don't know how much effort is made by organizers who are socialists, who work in groups like Nine to Five, to deepen the class analysis of activists. I feel they could probably do more of this without damaging the work they are already doing. But it's easy for people outside the situation to underestimate the problems of combining mass organizing with socialist education.

CONCLUSION

In spite of its obstacles and limitations, the office workers' movement is a very exciting development. It is solidly based in a group that is clearly moving toward greater militance and protest. The group itself is crucial: the work clerical workers do is very important in the economy, and they are 18% of the work force.

By organizing in a relatively non-unionized sector, the office workers' movement may have more freedom to create militant, democratic, and non-sexist unions, at least on the local level. Organized clericals can also have an important effect on the women's movement, broadening its class base and re-orienting its tone and programs more toward working-class women. The office workers' movement fuses women's and workers' consciousness in a way that taps tremendous sources of strength and militance within people — and also brings out and develops powerful feelings of solidarity and sisterhood.

FOOTNOTES

5. Braverman, op. cit.
6. Ibid., p. 295.
7. See Margery Davies, "A Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter", in RADICAL AMERICA, July-August 1974.
8. MONTHLY LABOR REVIEW, August 1975.

JEAN TEPPERMAN is the author of NOT SERVANTS, NOT MACHINES: OFFICE WORKERS SPEAK UP, to be published by Beacon Press in February 1976.

WOMAN'S PLACE IS AT THE TYPEWRITER:

The Feminization of the Clerical Labor Force

Margery Davies

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The Working Class

Martin Glaberman

The question of the working class is an old and honored one in the left generally, although it has fallen on lean days. There are various points of view about the working class which are considered Marxist. I have a particular point of view which I consider Marxist, but I will not get into any of the sectarian business of "I am a better Marxist than you are." A point of view has to be valid in the ways in which it reflects reality, in the way in which it provides useful ideas with which people can view reality or deal with reality. It is only in that sense, and in the sense that discussion is limited, that I indicate my theoretical viewpoints. We are not talking about any view of the working class; we are talking about variant possibilities within a broadly left or Marxist framework.

The question has certain built-in problems. The first problem is not the easiest one: Who or what is the working class? It is clearly not a cohesive entity. There are many contradictions and differences. There is the problem of where to draw the line, who is in and who is out of the working class. Apart from that, there are clearly differences in skill, in sex, in age, in nationality, in
race, in income. My basic emphasis is not on the differences, but, because in any discussion there is an inevitable tendency to oversimplify, I think it is necessary for people to be aware of the fact that we are not talking of a homogeneous entity. We are talking about a very complex, contradictory, constantly changing entity, but yet one which can justifiably be viewed as an entity. It is not simply a sum of various kinds of people. There is such a thing as the working class, no matter how you define it. Although the differences and contradictions within the class have to be recognized and dealt with, the overriding characteristic is not homogeneity (that is too strong a word), but a consistent, even if complex, totality.

We are not discussing the working class because we want to find out what the noble worker is all about. We are concerned with social change. The fundamental problem of how you define and how you view the working class is the problem of whether the working class is a viable instrument for social change. There is a classic Marxist point of view that defines the socialist revolution as the proletarian revolution. That is, society can only be transformed fundamentally by the working class, no matter who else participates. If there is no working-class revolution, there is no socialist revolution, although there may be a political revolution or changes of various kinds. In classical Marxist terms socialist and proletarian are interchangeable, they are identical.

Before World War II that classic definition, although very often abstract and meaningless, was almost universally accepted. After World War II, however, this view of the working class began to disintegrate and various points of view began to appear. There appears within the left in the United States the whole business of the "hard hats," the Wallace movement, the so-called reactionary, racist working class. There is the idea of the affluent working class, the working class transformed into middle class, and so on.

A certain amount of care has to be exercised in working out a definition. A definition is not a fact, it is not true or false. It is useful or not useful. Which means that the working class can be defined with some legitimacy in different ways. It can be defined usefully, or it can be defined in ways that conceal elements of reality. Marx did not have an all-inclusive definition of the working class. The definition of a productive laborer in Marx, for example, is not the same as his definition of the working class. There were people who were clearly members of the working class who were not productive laborers, that is, who did not produce surplus value. Pretty clearly, Marx's definition of class is based on relation to the means of production. And yet it is also used by Marx, by Engels, and by Marxists generally, in a much broader sense to include the families of workers, that is, the working-class housewife, working-class children, and so forth. And that is also a legitimate use.
In brief, one cannot talk, and one should not think, in terms of some fixed, absolute definition that can take care of everybody in the world. (You either are or are not a member of the working class, and that's it. Tough, you didn't make it, kid.) It is much more complex and much more flexible than that. And, if you are going to view it dialectically, that is, in a Marxist way, it is a definition, or a series of definitions, which has to change if, as seems true, the working class itself changes. The definition of a worker in 1850 is not the same as that of a worker in 1950. The composition, the size, the character of the class changes and, therefore, the definition of the class changes.

In particular, it is not the sociological view that has to account for everybody. The classical sociological definition is one of income: from 0 to $5,000 a year is lower working class, $5,000 to $10,000 is upper working class, $10,000 to $15,000 is lower middle class, $15,000 to $20,000 is upper middle class, and so on. That is, of course, very neat—it takes care of everybody. Nobody is left out; everybody belongs to some class. But in real life there are a lot of marginal people. In which class is the guy who runs a gas station, puts in 80 hours a week pumps gas, gets his hands dirty, but also employs half a dozen people and makes a profit?

If you really have to define everybody, then you are not in the business of making revolutions, you are in the business of defining people. And what I want to get away from is the idea that unless every living soul is taken care of, there is something wrong with the theory. We are dealing with social categories, which are abstractions, and which are only approximations of reality. They can never include every human being in any kind of definition.

In recent years there have been essentially two views that tend to counter the traditional Marxist view of the working class. They are two different versions of the disappearance of the working class. One is the view that the working class is literally disappearing. It arose, especially in the late fifties and early sixties, with the development of automation and the apparent disappearance of blue-collar jobs. It is not entirely a view of the disappearance of the working class, but, rather, a view that the blue-collar working class is disappearing.

The other tends to do the same thing in the opposite way. It tends to see all of society becoming working-class. We are all workers together: students, teachers, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers and salaried people of various kinds. So the working class is eliminated not by disappearing, but by having everybody join it except for a handful of capitalists at the top. It is a definition that tends to be limited in usefulness because it blurs significant distinctions that still remain in this society.

The first view has to be dealt with in terms of specific facts. Everybody knows that the service sectors, the government sectors, of the modern economy have expanded tremendously at the expense
of traditional production and transportation sectors. There is an interesting article by Andrew Levison, in the December 13, 1971 issue of THE NATION (2), that indicates how these things get distorted in government statistics. His evidence is based on American government statistics, but I’m sure that these categories are pretty much the same in Canada, Western Europe, and so on. There is the following switch in categories: To begin with there are the major sectors in the society, manufacturing, agriculture, service and government. There is a relative decline in manufacturing and an increase in service and white-collar employment. Even in terms of these categories, however, there is not an absolute decline in manufacturing employment, although the substantial increases are in categories such as hotels, insurance companies, government employment, etc. Levison takes the major categories one step further. When government employment is broken down into sub-categories, some startling information emerges, specifically, that the blue-collar working class is not disappearing.

With the decline of urban transportation in the United States in the 1930s, for example, city transportation systems were municipalized, so that bus drivers became civil servants. Did they thereby lose their character as blue-collar workers? Are mail workers, or people who handle the sacks or drive the mail trucks, blue-collar or white-collar? Are garbage collectors blue-collar or white-collar? Are janitors in public schools blue-collar or white-collar? In short, there is a range of categories which is blue-collar, but which is contained in the expanding category of government employment.

The same thing is true of the service trades. There has been a tremendous expansion of hotels and motels. Except behind the desk, where you have a clerk or two, hotel employees are chambermaids, bellhops, busboys, waiters, and other occupations which cannot reasonably be called white-collar.

There is another aspect to this change in the nature of the working class and the concealment of that change. There has been a substantial increase in certain kinds of white-collar occupations, particularly in banks, insurance companies, offices, and the expansion of central offices of manufacturing concerns. But there is also an element of change in the nature of the work which contradicts the expansion in the category. That is, there are many more people who are concerned with bookkeeping today than there were 10 or 20 years ago, but instead of being bookkeepers who enter figures in a ledger, they tend to be IBM machine operators, computer operators, and punch-card operators. The increase in the number of secretaries replaces individuals who have a one-to-one relation to the boss with rows of women behind desks who are essentially machine operators. They sit at their typewriter with a dictaphone machine strapped to their head, never seeing the source of the material they are typing, and are supervised by a forelady.
who makes sure their breaks are not too long. Except for the fact that it tends to be cleaner, lighter, and a little bit quieter, this new kind of white-collar work is less and less distinguishable from factory work.

It is only a matter of time before many of these so-called new categories which are destroying the old reality of the working class will lead to the kind of ideology that corresponds to the new reality. That is, a machine operator is a machine operator is a machine operator. And, while there is a difference between a punch press and an IBM machine, the difference is not as great as the difference between a punch-press operator and someone taking shorthand or entering figures in a book. It is dangerous to be glib about the nature of the concrete changes that are taking place. There is not, and there is no evidence for, any decline in the level of blue-collar employment. By blue-collar employment I mean manual work, as opposed to clerical or retail trades. The latter are also working-class, but have always been viewed as less potentially revolutionary because they are less related to central matters of production and transportation.

The second view of the nature of the working class is that, because of the all-pervasive nature of alienation in modern society, everybody can be defined as a worker. More and more sections of society are suffering from the same or similar ills that workers have traditionally suffered from—exploitation, alienation, etc. My own view of this question is not universally accepted, but I present it because I think it is a necessary antidote to some of the very glib formulations of what is revolutionary in this society. To begin with, I do not think it is necessary, in order to justify the validity of a movement, to define it as working-class. An anti-war movement, such as the anti-war movement in the United States during the Vietnam war, was a perfectly legitimate movement even though it was overwhelmingly non-working-class. Student movements have an independent validity, working-class or not. Women's movements, national movements, and so forth, have a validity in combatting this society which does not require them to be defined as working-class for them to be justified. But what is involved is, that if you begin to define all of these movements and all of these individuals, because they suffer some ill under capitalist society, as working-class, you begin to lose sight of very important distinctions. In another article by Andrew Levison (3), he reports what a young worker said in regard to defining everybody who is alienated in some way as working-class. In this case the popular notion among intellectuals that a college professor who is forced to prepare mundane and insignificant papers is a victim, like the factory workers, of alienation, epitomizes the complete lack of understanding that exists. The "young worker studying under the GI Bill who encountered this argument suggested that the professor would begin to understand how a factory worker feels if he had
to type a single paragraph, not papers, from nine to five, every day of the week. Instead of setting the pace himself, his typewriter carriage would begin to move at nine and continue at a steady rate until five. The professor's job would be at stake if he could not keep up the pace. For permission to go to the bathroom or to use the telephone, the professor would have to ask a supervisor. His salary of sixteen thousand dollars for a full professor would be cut by nine thousand dollars, and his vacations reduced to two weeks a year. He could also be ordered to work overtime at the discretion of the company or lose his job. If unlucky, he might have to work the night shift. Finally, if he faced the grim conclusion that his job was a dead end, his situation would then approximate that of an unskilled young worker in a contemporary auto factory." That is one level of difference. The reality of blue-collar work, factory work, or even white-collar work is somewhat different from the various other forms of alienation which exist in this society. But there is another element involved.

There has clearly been a change in the classic middle class in modern society. The middle class used to be a self-employed middle class—the independent farmer, the small businessman, the independent professional, and so on. The bulk of that has disappeared. Instead there is now a salaried middle class, which performs similar, and sometimes not so similar, functions, but essentially functions of social control.

An important distinction between teachers or social workers and manual workers is that manual workers manipulate things and teachers and social workers manipulate people. And although they are exploited and underpaid, and should unionize and strike, they perform certain functions of control in this society which cannot be ignored by simply defining them as working-class. If that distinction is lost, then a very important distinction that relates to various tactical and strategic questions is lost. If you define everybody that is getting low pay (and many teachers get less than many workers; there are tool and die workers that make much more than grade-school teachers), then, unless you go back to a definition in terms of income, that does not change the reality of one being essentially middle-class and the other being essentially working-class. Both have reason to resist and revolt against this society. There is no social revolution in the modern world that I know of that can take place with simply the working class. Other sections of society are bound to participate. The French events of 1968, for example, were touched off by student demonstrations, students battling police in Paris and elsewhere for several weeks. Society is an integrated whole. But that is another type of question. The difference is that street demonstrations become transformed into a social revolution if the industrial working class intervenes and moves to take over the means of production. Unless we keep in mind that there are different types of work with different rela-
tionships to the process of production, important distinctions are lost.

But definitions and distinctions are only the beginning. There is still the question which derives from the classical Marxist view of whether the worker is the key to the revolutionary overthrow of this society. Are workers so exploited that they will revolt?

What is there that will make a worker revolt? People have heard about the affluent society — the well-paid workers who have become middle-class, own a car (maybe two cars), can send their kids to college, have a summer home, a boat, and any number of things. Some of that is exaggerated, Most workers do not have all these things. Many workers work all year long and get paid under official poverty levels. But in the fundamental areas of basic industry which are crucial to Marx's theory — the auto industry, steel, mining, and so forth — there are, in fact, in Canada and in the United States, the best-paid industrial workers in the world. There is still insecurity — it is pretty obvious today with the levels of unemployment. But when working, particularly with forced overtime, the pay is fairly good. Is that kind of supposed affluence enough to transform the traditional revolutionary working class to defenders of capitalist society, defenders of the status quo?

A brief look at the reality of life in production will indicate that that is not likely and has, in fact, not taken place. In most sectors of production, and in service and clerical work, working conditions are oppressive and are, in fact, deteriorating. Resistance has been most visible in heavy industry, still overwhelmingly male (although the number of women workers in this area is growing). For example, the General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio is the most automated automobile factory in the world. It is made up overwhelmingly of young workers with an average age in the twenties. They have been having certain difficulties there, strikes from time to time, and terrible things like that. One of the things that they bragged about was that over a hundred cars an hour came off that Vega line; that a job on that assembly line took 36 seconds to do. That means that on a hot summer day when the temperature is in the 90s and the drinking fountain is about 10 yards away, you can't get a drink; because if you got there and back, a car would have gone by. But to that category of time must be added another category. A blue-collar worker at the Lordstown plant knows that that is where he or she is going to be for the rest of his or her life. Workers who have accumulated a couple of years' seniority know that they will have their job, or one like it, for the rest of their lives. There is nothing in terms of payment or fringe benefits or pensions that compensates for the kind of alienation and exploitation which is universally characteristic of blue-collar work. This does not mean that all jobs are on the Vega assembly line. But the 36 seconds is not too startling. In ALIENATION AND FREEDOM, published in 1960, Robert Blauner noted that the average job in
auto was under one minute. So that what is involved is the change from about 58 seconds to 36 seconds in 15 years. 58 seconds is not much of an improvement over 36 seconds. The auto industry is much more rationalized than many other industries, but the fundamental character and drive of all industry is the same. Rationalize production to get rid of workers to reduce the amount of time it takes to do any job. In that context, the only thing that would be surprising would be that workers did not strike or resist or revolt. The belief that $5.50 or $6.00 an hour compensates for that kind of alienation, is the belief that workers are an inferior breed, not like ordinary people. We, obviously, wouldn't stand for that kind of nonsense; but workers — they don't know any better. And it should come as no surprise that, in fact, they do resist.

There are some interesting letters from executives of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada in Windsor to Leonard Woodcock, President of the UAW; Douglas Fraser, a Vice-President; and C. Brooks, President of Local 444 of the UAW in Windsor, Ontario. The letters complain to the union about the miserable behavior of these damned Chrysler workers. The letter to Woodcock and Fraser is dated September 8, 1973. "Dear Sirs: You are fully aware, without my detailing them, of the extremely unsatisfactory record of illegal, unauthorized and unwarranted strikes that we have had in our Windsor plants in recent years, the most recent of which consisted of massive walkouts on August 27, 28, 29, 30 and September 4." (September 1, 2, and 3 must have been holidays.) "This unsatisfactory record was the subject of a lengthy conference with you today.... You urged us nevertheless to rescind the disciplinary action which we took yesterday against 1447 employees who took part in the most recent series of strikes. And so, in view of your strong assurances and our firm belief that you will carry them out, we will comply with your request and rescind the disciplinary action we took with respect to Windsor employees yesterday."

A letter of May 6, 1974, to Mr. C, Brooks, President, Local 444, states: "On April 26, 1974, the Corporation, as a result of representations made by officers of the Local Union, agreed to the reinstatement of six individuals who had been discharged for their participation in an illegal work stoppage...." The unrest continues. And again, the corporation fires a lot of people; the union says no, you can't do that and give us all a bad name; so they rescind some of the firings. In this letter they announce reduction of some of the discharges to 60 days off.

Several letters are addressed to Mr. D. McDermott, Vice-President and Director for Canada of the International Union, UAW, from Mr. J. H. McGivney, a Chrysler official. They are dated April 18, May 22, November 26, and November 27, 1973, and March 28 and April 2, 1974. Each letter begins with the sentence: "This letter is written to inform you that on (here each letter lists
no less than three dates and as many as eleven dates in the weeks preceding the date of the letter) the following incidents occurred:"

There follows, in each of the letters, a detailed listing of acts of resistance and sabotage. They make fascinating reading:

From the letter of April 18, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant

April 2

At 11:16 p.m., a 16-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9303, Body-in-White Division. A body bolt was found jammed in the No. 3 drive. Eighteen units were lost. Attempted sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of May 22, 1973:

Windsor Assembly Plant

May 7

All Shifts — Dept. 9075, Millwrights. Beginning with the midnight shift (normal starting time 11:30 p.m.), 28 employees punched in prior to 11:00 p.m. and punched out one-half hour early at 7:30 p.m. On the day shift, 25 employees punched in prior to 6:45 a.m. and punched out at 3:15 p.m. Normal hours are 7:45 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. On the afternoon shift, 18 employees punched in prior to 3:00 p.m. and out at 11:30 p.m. Normal hours are 3:54 p.m. to 12:24 p.m. In most cases, supervision did not put employees to work until normal starting times....

May 8

Day and Midnight Shifts — In Dept. 9075, Millwrights, the employees were again arriving for work an hour early and leaving an hour early. Early arrival and quitting times were experienced in this department on the midnight shift on May 9, 10, 11, and 12.

The millwrights (joined by the carpenters on May 10), perhaps after attempting to negotiate the matter with the company, were simply organizing a change in shift hours. There is no indication in the letters whether the attempt was ultimately successful.

From the letter of November 26, 1973:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant
November 7

Day Shift — A 19-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9131, Motor Line. A bolt was found jammed in the line. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of March 28, 1974:

Windsor Assembly Plant

March 20

Afternoon Shift — At 8:42 p.m., a nine-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9308, Metal Line, Body-in-White Division. A dunnage pin had been jammed in the line. Production lost — nine units. Sabotage is extremely likely.

From the letter of April 2, 1974:

Windsor Truck Assembly Plant

March 25

Day Shift — At 8:45 a.m., a two-minute breakdown occurred in Dept. 9121, Frame Line. A spring clip had been threaded through the links of the drive chain. Production lost — 1/2 job. Sabotage is extremely likely.

One thing that is distinctive about these itemized lists at one complex (three plants) of the Chrysler Corporation of Canada is that they are recorded. Another thing about this situation is that they do not really want to make it public because it can get out of hand. There were also charges of sabotage in the Lordstown situation. The workers said that the speed of the line forced them to make defective cars, because they couldn’t do a proper job of assembling them. The company said that the workers were sabotaging the cars. That is the kind of dispute that corporations never want to escalate because they can’t win. So instead, there are long, detailed, confidential letters to union bureaucrats asking, in effect, What are you going to do about these damned people? There is sabotage throughout industry. That tends to be a lot closer to the reality of what the modern working class is like than anything that would be learned by looking at workers’ paychecks or by finding out about their fringe benefits. There is, literally, a continual civil war going on in modern industry. This relates to a range of problems and possibilities which speak directly to the question of whether the modern industrial working class, the post-World War II working class, is a viable force for social change.
One of the elements that goes into this kind of struggle is the various levels and kinds of consciousness that move a modern industrial worker. Consciousness is a very tricky word. One of the problems in dealing with the working class, as opposed to "labor movement," "labor leaders," and so forth, is that you are dealing with people who do not have vocal or written expression of their ideas and beliefs. Labor leaders make speeches, workers do not. It is very natural to assume that when George Meany, AFL-CIO President, or Leonard Woodcock or any other labor leader makes a speech or makes a pronouncement, he somehow speaks for the workers he is supposed to represent. The fact of the matter is that they do not.

There is another element. Working-class reality is a totality that goes far beyond the ordinary intellectual view of consciousness. The usual way to view consciousness is in terms of formal statement of belief. Unfortunately, or fortunately, in terms of the working class and its living reality, that simply does not work. The following is an example of how it does not work.

In the 1940s, during World War II, most of the labor movement gave a no-strike pledge. Labor leaders agreed to put patriotism before class interest and said that during the course of World War II workers would not strike. There was much resistance and opposition to this. If corporations did not agree to give up profits, why should workers agree to give up the right to strike? In one union, the UAW, this struggle over the no-strike pledge had a very open and formal character. In the 1943 convention of the UAW the dispute came to a head in a very strange way. There were various resolutions presented, against and for the no-strike pledge. All of them were defeated, leaving the union without a no-strike pledge. The bureaucrats on the platform were thus humiliated in the presence of government dignitaries because they could not deliver their membership anymore. They did what has become traditional in the UAW, the cure for democracy being more democracy. If workers vote the wrong way, they are made to vote again, and to keep on voting until they learn to vote the right way. The bureaucrats said that the convention was not really representative enough (which it would have been, obviously, if it had reaffirmed the no-strike pledge). And since this is a very important question, what is needed is a membership referendum.

They had a membership referendum, which was the perfect sociological survey. Every member got a secret ballot which was filled out in the privacy of a kitchen or living room and which was mailed back in. The secrecy was protected because both sides were represented on the committee that ran the referendum. It was a pretty fair count as these things go. When the ballots were counted, the membership of the UAW had voted two-to-one to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. It was rather reasonable to draw the conclusion that the consciousness of auto workers was that they
placed patriotism before class interest; that in a major war workers should not strike; no matter what the provocation, war production had to continue.

There was, however, a slight problem. Before the vote, during the vote, and after the vote, the majority of auto workers wildcatted. What, then, was the consciousness of the auto workers? Were they for or against the no-strike pledge? There is a further problem. As in most votes, most people did not vote. The majority which voted for the pledge was not a majority of the members of the UAW. But the strikers did include a majority of the UAW. Experience in a factory can give you insight into how these things work. Some guy listening to the casualties and the war reports, votes to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. The next day, going in to work, the foreman cusses him out, and he says, "To hell with you," and out he goes. And you say, "I thought you were for the no-strike pledge." And he says, "Yeah, sure, but look at that son of a bitch." To workers, workers do not cause strikes. Capitalists cause strikes. So if strikes are to be prevented, the thing to do is to get rid of all these grievances. It's these lousy foremen who do not want to get rid of all these grievances who cause all these strikes.

The whole idea of consciousness is more complex and is a much larger totality than simply formal statements of belief, which would be sufficiently dealt with simply by having a survey, or that postcard ballot, or whatever. There is a reality in which often, when not given any other choice, workers appear to be saying things which are conservative or reactionary. It is also true that many workers have very reactionary views on a whole range of subjects, like race, sex, age, skills, and so on. Workers are not the noble savage, all pure and honest and forthright and revolutionary. But reality, which is a 36-second job for the rest of your life, the reality, which is sabotage recorded every single day in the Chrysler plants in Windsor, Ontario, is a reality which forces workers to behave in contradiction to their own stated beliefs. Unless that behavior is included in the understanding of their consciousness, there is no sense of what the working class is capable of doing, or the ways in which it explodes, or the ways in which strike waves or wildcat strikes appear. And it is that reality which sustains the belief that the working class is a viable force for social change.

However, there are also other elements. People tend to view workers as victims. They are exploited, they are alienated, they have 36-second jobs, etc. I talked to workers on a wildcat strike at a Chrysler stamping plant about 15 miles outside of Detroit a few years ago. It was the first day of the strike and there were a few guys on the picket line — you don't really need a great effort to shut a plant down in the Detroit area. This was a stamping plant making parts for various Chrysler cars. What the workers were saying was, if we're out one day, Chrysler Jefferson, Dodge Main,
and the Plymouth plant in Detroit shut down. If we're down two
days, Windsor, Ontario shuts down. If we're down three days, St.
Louis, Missouri shuts down. And so on. One of the realities of
working-class existence is not simply victimization, but power,
and an awareness of that power when it seems to be appropriate,
or when the possibility opens up. Not all workers have that power.
In a plant making trim with 16 other plants making the same kind
of trim, workers can go out for six months without being noticed.
But in a crucial kind of plant, or on a railroad, or if the auto in-
dustry is shut down, or the steel industry, or some other industry,
workers become aware of a social reality which is different from
what is available to middle-class radicals or anyone else.

If teachers or students shut down a school, the school is shut
down. But when five thousand people in some small town in Ohio
shut down a stamping plant, within two weeks two-thirds of General
Motors is shut down and steel plants begin to lay off and railroads
begin to lay off and so on. Those workers who have access to that
kind of power are aware of that reality. That is one of the elements
that make up the totality that has to go into the kind of social crisis
that makes a revolutionary change in society possible. It is the
element that distinguishes, in very classical Marxist terms, the
industrial or blue-collar working class, although not all blue-collar
workers, from the reality available to other sections of society,
no matter how hostile they might be to their own immediate con-
ditions of life. There are limitations to what they can do about it
until this perspective of fundamental change and fundamental power
is opened up.

There has been a growing recognition of this reality, that is, the
resistance of workers to their conditions of life. It has taken vari-
ous forms over the years. The current form is "job enrichment." 
Everyone knows now that workers do not want to work. They are
absent half the time, they sabotage, they go on wildcat strikes, they
vote against contracts — and the term alienation has suddenly be-
come reputable. There have been programs on television, articles
in newspapers, articles in academic journals and other places,
about job enrichment and blue-collar blues and how to overcome it
and how to make workers satisfied with their jobs. Perhaps the
best-known American example was a General Foods plant in To-
peka, Kansas. It was a Gaines Dog Food plant and it got a lot of
publicity because those jobs were really enriched. The workers
even interviewed prospects to fill vacancies. But there are some
other details about these fantastically enriched jobs. First, there
are only 72 workers in that plant. It is not exactly the Ford as-
sembly line. Second, all that this plant produces is dry dog food.
This is as easy to picture as a 36-second job. All that happens in
the plant is that pellets of dog food are poured into sacks, and the
sacks are sealed mechanically and piled on the loading dock. How
rich can these damned jobs get? Working there now may be better
than previously, because you choose your fellow workers and you
can take a break when you want to, etc. But it isn’t hard to picture
someone who gets hired after being interviewed by the other work-
ers two or three years from now. The new one looks around and
says: Boy, this is a pretty shitty job. And the other workers say
You’re crazy. It used to be bad, but now it’s a great job. And he
says: Well, I don’t know about how it used to be, but it’s a lousy
job.

This may be an extreme case, but there are limits to enrich-
ment. The basic limit is that it cannot be allowed to interfere with
productivity. On a reduced scale, either on a smaller scale of
production or on sub-assembly units, it is possible to allow a cer-
tain amount of workers’ control of the job without interfering with
productivity. However, it cannot be done on highly rationalized
production lines. All that has been done is to set the clock back
a number of years. Cars used to be made with everyone standing
around and working as a team, in an enriched way. Did anyone
praise work before Ford invented the assembly line? If that is the
model, then work will tend to become as bad as it was in 1910 or,
depending on the industry, in 1950 or 1940 or 1930.

What job enrichment amounts to is two things. One is a recog-
nition of the continual resistance of workers to the nature of work
in capitalist society. But, two, it is at the most a stopgap, a change
that might satisfy people or at least have them quit struggling for
a few years, until the reality once again catches up with them.

All of this seems to be in a very limited economic sphere. One
of the things frequently heard from Marxists is that these are
merely economic struggles. What about politics? What about a
successful revolution? What about parties and soviets? The proc-
ess involved is the following. Ordinary workers are in no position
to think about the socialist society. If they thought about it too
much they could not get to work the next day, not if their jobs took
36 seconds to do. If they thought how great socialism was, they
would never make it through the day. So they blur their minds, and
think about sex, about sports, about Saturday night, about getting
drunk on the weekend, about the family, about anything at all, but
not about the job and surely not about socialism.

However, the reality forces workers to fight. If the resistance
reaches a certain point, workers walk out. If attacked by the po-
lice, they fight back. Suddenly they see that they have shut down
half an industry. They see that people in other plants are coming
out. The reality of struggle frees them to think about other possi-
bilities. That is when workers begin to think about a new society —
in the process of struggle for it. It is not an abstraction that when
51% of the workers have finally decided that they are for socialism
and against capitalism, the time for the revolution can be set. No
revolution has ever taken place in that way. Unless someone can
demonstrate that workers are no longer willing to struggle against

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their conditions of life, then the fundamental prerequisite for working-class socialist revolution is constantly present. The way it appears is in massive social upheavals.

There are two relevant examples from the post-World War II world. There is no conceivable sociological survey that could have given advance indication of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. With all the advantages of hindsight to formulate the questions, if someone had gone into the working-class suburbs of Budapest in October of 1956 and asked the workers what they thought, there would have been no inkling that one month later a socialist revolution and workers' councils would have covered Hungary and the Hungarian Revolution would have taken place. No survey in the working-class suburbs of Paris in March or April of 1968 would have revealed that one month later ten million workers would have occupied all the factories of France and brought the De Gaulle government virtually to its knees. How can a strike that begins in an aircraft plant one day, in 48 hours, in opposition to all the organizations of the working class, the unions, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, lead to that massive kind of social upheaval?

In a society which was totalitarian for ten years, where the only education, the only press, the only organizations were the official organizations of the Communist Party and the Communist government, how could the workers, following a student demonstration, create workers' councils all across Hungary, take control of the means of production and destroy the Communist Party? How could that take place unless that living reality of struggle is an inherent characteristic of the modern industrial working class?

The ability of the working class to transform society relates both to the reality of that struggle and where it is located. That is, all of the resources which everyone associates with wealth, with capital, and with the government — means of transportation, means of communication, newspapers, railroads, factories — belong to the ruling class only as long as people permit it. What happens when the workers do not want to run the trains, or send their own messages on the telegraph, or print their own newspapers? All of a sudden this vast power and wealth disintegrates. That is the reality of social revolution, and that is the reality of the modern industrial working class.

Marxism has been around for 100 years. Che Guevara said that Marxism is now part of the general heritage of mankind. There are all sorts of ideas which were the property of Marxists, say in 1917, which are now the property of humanity generally. The idea of government regulation, the idea that government owes something to the population — that was not the general conception in the 1920s, for example.

And society has changed. We have been, since Marx and since Lenin, through a major depression in the thirties, a major world war in the forties, the colonial revolution, the atom and hydrogen
bombs, and so forth. People no longer think the way they did before.

That doesn't mean that the source of revolution is ideas brought to the working class from outside. Because certain ideas can't come from the outside. Some of the ideas most fundamental to Marxism come from the working class and not from the Marxists. For example, the French working class of today—or 1968—has the experience of 1934, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Paris Commune of 1871. What did the Parisian workers of 1871 have? What made them create the Commune? Not a Marxist organization. The reality of social revolution is that the form of the worker's state is the spontaneous creation of the working class. There was no such thing as a Commune in Marxist ideology until Parisian workers created it. Lenin never heard of soviets until Russian workers created them in 1905. And then again in 1917. That does not mean that the political party didn't play a certain role in 1917. But what it does mean is that one of the fundamental aspects of Marxist theory is to see where the working class has reached and to see what that means for theory. People asked Marx: What is this dictatorship of the proletariat you're talking about? What is this socialist society? He refused to answer the question. He made comments about not making recipes for the cookshops of the future, or the like. When the workers of Paris created the Commune, Marx wrote about the Commune, and that became the classic Marxist work on the workers' state. And then in STATE AND REVOLUTION we have Lenin on Marx on the Commune and Lenin on soviets.

It is in the best classical Marxist tradition to base theory on the peak that the working class has reached in any stage of society. And the reality of the post-World War II world is typified by what happened to France in '68 and Hungary in '56. That is the basis for our theory. If a theory that was valid in 1871 is still valid today, or a form or a political party that was valid in 1917 is still valid today, then there is some fundamental weakness in dialectics. Dialectics, as Marx understood it, implies that capitalist society is continually changing and being revolutionized. The social relations are changed; the capitalist class is changed; the working class is changed. It would be a miracle of dialectics if everything else changed, while something Lenin wrote in 1902 in WHAT IS TO BE DONE? remains eternal. It doesn't make any sense, Lenin was not afraid to say that Marx's description of capitalism in the middle of the nineteenth century was no longer valid. Things had changed in 50 years. But he defined the new stage as imperialism. Well, we're 50 years beyond that. Do we have to forever stay in 1917? It seems to me not. And concepts of organization have to change in correspondence with changing concepts of the working class and changing concepts of capitalist society. So where do we look? We look at the highest peak that the working class has reached. That, in the
post-World War II world, is France in '68 and Hungary in '56. I don't know any place where they have gone further than that.

Another aspect of methodology is involved. Marx thought that the Paris Commune made a lot of mistakes. They don't appear in his classic work on the Commune. He said the contribution of the Commune is its own living existence. In private correspondence he wrote that they should have nationalized the bank, or should have done this or that. It is always easy to find out why the workers did not make a revolution. It is all around you. But the business of a revolutionist is to find out why they will. One of the characteristics of the dialectic view of the world — in fact, any view of the world — is that people tend to find what they look for. Those who are interested in finding out why the French revolt of '68 was a failure will have no trouble finding reasons. But I am interested in finding out why it was a success, why it happened. What everybody in the world around me tells me is that it can't happen. And I say it can — and there's the proof: It did happen. Was the Paris Commune a failure? Lenin celebrated when the Russian Revolution outlived the Commune by one day. That is a revolutionary attitude. The weaknesses of the working class are all around. The press, radio, television, the schools, everyone is insisting how backward people are, how incapable people are of transforming society. And when people attempt it, that is what a Marxist bases his revolutionary theory on. That is what we are living for, so to speak. We are living for the peak, and not the valley. I do not mean that we ignore it in our day-to-day work, but in our fundamental theory we say that what the working class in the modern world is capable of is demonstrated by France and Hungary in '68 and '56. It is not demonstrated by a lot of other things which are happening all the time but which are characteristics of bourgeois society and which the working class is not immune to because it lives in and suffers from all of the distortions and contradictions of bourgeois society. But because it has to resist that society, these peaks appear. And if it were not for the peaks, there would not be any revolution. I believe that the revolt is inevitable, but victory is not inevitable. The nature of society forces workers to revolt and resist; but the man can push the button and drop the bomb, and that ends modern civilization as we know it, and there is no socialist revolution. There are no guarantees of victory.

What forms are available to the working class? The union movement is not a force for revolutionary change. I do not think it can be transformed. Workers tend to use what is at hand. Mostly they boycott and ignore unions — they do not go to meetings, they do not vote in union elections, and so forth. Occasionally they will use the union. They might vote on the contract and occasionally will vote a contract down. They will occasionally, but rarely, participate in opposition caucuses. Whether the workers become revolutionary or not does not depend on what the union leadership
does. There is no other instrument available except the creation of new organizational forms, and those are the equivalent of workers' councils which take over production on a national scale. I have no idea when that will happen. I have no idea how that will happen. I have no idea of the particular forms it will take in Canada, the United States, France or England or anywhere else. But in general the outline is indicated by what has happened in Hungary and in France.

So long as workers resist alienation and oppression they will revolt. And these revolts will emerge, as they always have, with remarkable power and suddenness. It would be a pleasant change from past experience if, for once, it was not the revolutionaries who were most taken by surprise, most caught unprepared, by the revolt of workers.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Diane Markrow assisted in editing the original lecture for publication.

MARTIN GLABERMAN, an associate editor of RADICAL AMERICA, has worked in the Detroit auto plants and participated in the Facing Reality group. He is now working on a book about the UAW.

WOMEN: a special issue of Dimension

To mark International Women's Year Canadian Dimension has published a special issue of the magazine. It features articles on the development of class and the oppression of women; the Women's Liberation Movement; the role of women in the liberation of Viet Nam; women and imperialism; working-class women; Cuban women; suffragettes; divorce and abortion. Featuring these writers: Margaret Benston, Pat Davitt, Marlene Dixon, Kay MacPherson, Claire Culhane, Joan Kuyek, Z. Farid, Anita Shilton Martin, Margaret Randall, Gwen Matheson, Sandra Henneman, Deborah Gorman, Roberta Buchanan, Margi Gordon and Shelley Gavigan. Send $1.50 to Canadian Dimension, Box 1413, Winnipeg, Man., Canada.
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New Orleans Wharf Scene, sometime between 1880 and 1910. Photo by George Francon Mugnier.
A Short History of New Orleans Dockworkers

Dave Wells and Jim Stodder

This is a short history of the interrelationship of race and class consciousness in the second largest port in the U.S. (1) It is an effort to show how racial solidarity developed in the remarkable history of the New Orleans working class, and how that solidarity frequently dissolved into hostility. The history brings us up to the very recent past and the important wildcat strike of 1,800 black and white longshoremen in 1973 which once again closed the port of New Orleans. This short history also shows that racial divisions on the waterfront were not entirely the result of manipulation by employers. The unions are still an important bulwark of segregation in the Crescent City.

RACISM IN NEW ORLEANS

Despite the softening touch of Latin culture, New Orleans is one of the most racist cities in the U.S. Major riots by white racists in 1866 and 1874 marked in blood the beginning and end of Radical Reconstruction. A 40-foot column still stands downtown to commemorate the latter event which, as the inscription reads, saved "White Supremacy". (2)
The local ruling class, throughout its transition from the trade of cotton and slaves to that of oil and tourists, has preserved a genteel and entirely open racism within this black-majority city. Other big Southern cities may try on a new liberal image; New Orleans still boasts an ultra-reactionary newspaper monopoly and one (appointed) black on its city council.

But New Orleans is also a city in which black and white workers, notably longshoremen, have created another tradition of unity across racial lines in the class struggle. This tradition has not grown out of an ideology of integration. In fact, it has developed in spite of the strictest segregation in both social life and union organization. To this day, the New Orleans International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA — an old AFL union) has two (different) sets of locals for the General Longshore Workers (1418 and 1419), for the Sack Sewers, Sweepers, Waterboys, and Coopers (1802 and 1683), and for the Banana Handlers (1515 and 1800). All the Clerks and Checkers (1497) are white; all the Dock Loaders and Unloaders of Freight Cars and Barges (854) are black.

Although black and white dockworkers have managed to achieve surprising levels of racial solidarity at various points in history, despite segregation (in fact, workers sometimes made cunning use of segregation), interracial cooperation has not been a consistent force on the docks. Instead, the development of black-white unity has followed a cycle in which there seem to be recurring lapses of historical memory.

The cycle that recurs has looked something like this: Initial hostility — often based on lack of work experience (after the Civil War most dockers were Irish immigrants, ex-slaves, or rural “poor whites”) or on employers’ calculated manipulation, combined with union segregation — gives way to tactical alliances, mainly during strikes. This is followed by increased racial tension as each side jockeys for advantages, with the white unionists generally asserting their “white supremacy”. Racial conflict between black and white workers, sometimes violent, then reinforces old suspicions and segregated traditions. Racial solidarity then declines and has to be rebuilt, usually in the midst of a strike.

This recurring cycle has of course been played out under changing conditions. The last century has seen a growing black presence in unskilled and semi-skilled work on the docks. Because of violence and discrimination, which removed ex-slaves and free blacks from the artisan strata, Afro-Americans held down only 23% of the skilled jobs in the city in 1880. Blacks held 44% of the unskilled jobs, and faced stiff competition from Irish immigrants and native-born whites. By 1910 the demand for black labor had increased in New Orleans, as it had throughout the industrial South, and blacks held 60% of the longshore jobs in the state. (3) This proportion has increased steadily in the last 60 years.

Unlike other Southern industries, such as railroads and textiles, the longshore industry has contained so many black workers that
white unionists have been forced to engage in interracial cooperation in order to have any chance for strike victories. The cycle has also been played out against increasing mechanization which eliminated many skilled jobs in the 1920's and, more recently, containerization which has reduced the work force drastically and reduced the working hours of those who remained on the job.

We want to describe the cycle of struggles that has occurred on the New Orleans docks. It would be impossible to provide comprehensive coverage of 120 years of turbulent history in this short space. We do believe, however, that it is instructive to see when and why black and white longshoremen joined together in struggle, and what then tore them apart. We will also touch on the continuing struggle against corruption in the unions and mechanization in the industry which runs alongside our larger story.

THE BIRTH OF SEPARATE UNIONS

Before the invention of the cotton press and the use of large steamships, profits in cotton depended on stuffing small sailing ships with all the cotton bales they could hold. "Sometimes," an old dockworker named Tom Gannon recalled, "we thought she'd bust before she reached Europe." Gannon was part of an elite fraternity of screwmen, who literally screwed the bales down tight into the hold with huge hooks and jackscrews. The work was highly skilled and very exhausting. The screwmen organized early to see that they were paid accordingly. One of the earliest unions in New Orleans history, the Screwmen's Benevolent Association, was chartered with 121 white members in 1851. (4)

The Screwmen's bargaining power soon gave them the strongest union with the highest wage rate in the city; they were, in the words of the hostile DAILY PICAYUNE, the "aristocrats of the waterfront". (6) In 1854 and again in 1858 they won large wage increases by simply threatening to strike. Like the skilled iron workers who, according to Kathy Stone, could almost dictate wages to employers in the mid-19th Century, the screwmen could paralyze the port of New Orleans simply by withholding their labor. (7)

When New Orleans fell to Federal troops, unionism received a boost as unemployment declined. Workingmen's societies sprang up to demand an end to slavery, which lowered the wages of "free labor". (8) However, the first real strike of dockworkers, which also involved non-union blacks, did not take place until just after the Civil War. The Screwmen, who had not obtained any wage increases during the war, demanded that employers double their daily pay from $3 to $6. At first the mayor was sympathetic. "I thought it was an indication of progress," he said,

when the white laborers and the negroes on the levees the other day made a strike for higher wages. They marched
up the levee in a long procession, white and black together. I gave orders that they should not be interfered with as long as they interfered with nobody else; but when they undertook by force to prevent other laborers from working, the police promptly put a stop to their proceedings. (9)

Only black “rioters” were arrested, however, and the Screwmen did not win their $6-per-day demand until later. This rate then remained the standard rate for two generations. (10)

In 1867 black longshoremen took matters into their own hands when contractors refused to pay them the wages they promised. About 500 longshoremen struck and threatened to lynch one of the offending contractors. After chasing all of the other contractors off the docks, the strikers marched on the Freedmen’s Bureau office, where they were met with threats. The deployment of a company of troops on the docks did not prevent the strikers from driving away highly paid scabs and winning their demands. (11)

In 1872 the white screwmen helped organize a black Longshoremen’s Protective Union Beneficial Association to cooperate with the white longshoremen and screwmen. Today’s black General Longshore Workers’ ILA 1419 can be traced back to that organization, making it the oldest black union in the country. (12) As an Irish dockworker put it, since the black outside the union was “a perpetual menace as a scab”, it would “be better to admit him as an ally”.

Just one year later this shaky alliance was nearly destroyed in the financial panic of 1873. The shippers cut wages in half and began to hire, in the words of the white dockworkers, “low ignorant negroes who slept under tarpulings and in barrel houses...and who could afford to work at lower than regular rates”. When rioting erupted on the docks, Federal troops were called in, and several workers were wounded.

The shippers welcomed this bloody competition for jobs. The situation became so severe in the lean years after 1873 that even the privileged white screwmen feared for their jobs. At this time there were no black screwmen, but black longshoremen had been learning the mysteries of the craft as skilled white workers gradually turned part of their work over to unskilled laborers. When it became clear that employers could find blacks to do the screwmen’s work, the Screwmen’s Benevolent Association prudently organized a special Colored Association in 1875 and limited the number of black screwmen who could work at any time to 100. (13) So the dual unionism of New Orleans developed a step further, and blacks accepted the limited gains they could achieve through segregated unions.
A DECADE OF SOLIDARITY, 1880-1892

With both blacks and whites represented in the city's most powerful union, a remarkably successful organizing drive followed on the New Orleans waterfront as the economy began to pull out of the deep depression of the 1870's. There was an epidemic of strikes in New Orleans among both white and black workers in 1880, involving first the cotton yardmen and then the teamsters, who had formed integrated unions. At this time, there were also four black longshore unions whose members became involved in the other strikes of 1880. (14) The first strike in this epidemic—the one called by the Cotton Yardmen's Association—was important because it set the pattern. After the bosses flatly rejected the yardmen's opening demands, they found themselves threatened with a general strike. The newspapers puzzled over "how it was that in a strike affecting only the cotton rollers, all men should join". But the threat was effective and the yardmen's union was soon recognized. The organization of this association was advanced by the backing of the powerful unions of black and white screwmen. (15)

The organizing drive of 1880 did not stop at the waterfront. The screwmen were also the driving force behind the organization of a Central Trades and Labor Assembly in 1881, the same year in which over 10,000 black and white unionists marched in the funeral parade of a slain black striker. Another parade sponsored by the Assembly in 1883 drew an equally impressive turnout. (16) George McNell, a leading labor intellectual of the time, declared that the formation of the Assembly had done more to break down the color line than anything since Emancipation. (17) Racial solidarity continued to increase. When employers refused to negotiate with a black draymen's union in 1885, almost every craft in the city went out in a short but effective city-wide sympathy strike that paved the way for the great general strike of 1892. (18)

The great demand for black labor that had existed in New Orleans since the ante-bellum days—when slaves or free blacks accounted for most of the skilled as well as the unskilled jobs—actually increased in the late 19th Century after the city had absorbed a large native white immigration. (19) As a result, some sort of recognition of black labor was necessary. This recognition did not, of course, take place on an equal basis. Union locals were strictly segregated and nearly always subordinate to the white locals. But the fact that blacks had unions at all, especially in skilled trades, was notice of recognition. The white union's strategy was clearly aimed at buying off a small section of the black working class in order to protect their own relatively privileged jobs from the great mass of impoverished black workers. The "100 men" agreement made between the white and "Colored" Screwmen clearly represented that kind of compromise. The agreement later collapsed as black migration to the city increased the size of the
black work force, but, while it lasted, the compromise created a sort of working relationship between blacks and whites which made New Orleans one of the best organized cities in the country. (20)

If it seems curious that this kind of recognition for black labor should have taken place in the “racist South”, it should be pointed out that the Southern states had a tradition of parallel, segregated institutions which allowed for some cooperative relations between blacks and whites that did not directly challenge white supremacy. Northern white workers, who generally opposed the abolition of slavery, believed that they would have to accept blacks or other new immigrants into their unions on an equal basis. This is what Frederick Douglass and William Sylvis fought for in the ill-fated National Labor Union right after the Civil War. (21) In most Northern cities blacks were systematically excluded from skilled trades and from trade unions, while in Southern cities like New Orleans a peculiar kind of segregated solidarity functioned.

The rapid growth of unionism in New Orleans in the 1880’s culminated in the great general strike of 1892, the “first strike in American history to enlist skilled and unskilled labor, black and white, and to paralyze the life of a great city”. (22) After the streetcar workers won a reduction of their work day from 16 to 12 hours, “workers flooded into the A.F.L. unions of the city” and formed a Workingmen’s Amalgamated Council of 49 unions representing more than 20,000 workers. Even more important was the formation of the “Triple Alliance” of recently organized Teamsters, Scalesmen, and Packers (which included blacks and whites), who promptly called a strike for a ten-hour day, overtime pay, and a closed shop. When the New Orleans Board of Trade stubbornly refused to recognize the Alliance, the Labor Committee directing the strike was “moved to action by the indignation of the rank and file”. It called a general strike involving over 20,000 workers, from musicians and shoeshine boys to cigar makers and lamp trimmers. (23)

When the Labor Committee responded to the Governor’s orders and twice ordered the strikers to return to work, the workers defied their own leadership. But after the Governor virtually declared martial law, the unions, not wanting to risk a collision with the militia, agreed to end the strike after the wages and hours demanded by the Triple Alliance were granted. “The New Orleans general strike revealed an extraordinary solidarity,” writes Jeremy Brecher. “The close cooperation and loyal mutual support of skilled and unskilled, black and white workers suggest that racism was not always insurmountable....” (24)

THE RACE RIOTS OF 1894

Just as the Panic of 1873 helped to cripple working-class organization in the city, the terrible depression of 1893 damaged labor unity and racial solidarity. Employers did not have to look far to
discover a critical weakness among the workers. The "100 men" agreement between black and white screwmen had never been equitable, and it became less acceptable as more and more black dockworkers took work on the levee and demanded better jobs.

1894 was a bad year for the cotton trade in New Orleans. Much of the cotton was rerouted by the railroads to the newer and better equipped ports which were being built along the Gulf. British ships began hiring blacks at half the usual wage; other ships began forcing black and white gangs to work alongside each other where formerly they had always worked opposite sides of the ship. (25)

The white longshoremen and screwmen struck. On the night of October 26, 1894, 100 armed men wearing masks boarded ships and threw the tools of the colored screwmen overboard. Seventy-five pairs of screws were lost, valued at as much as $100 a set. The next day the scene was repeated, with several black screwmen being thrown overboard along with their tools. Three blacks were shot and seven drowned; two whites were shot in return. A reporter on the scene wrote that the police stood "like so many statues of Patience watching the scene as though it had been a Sunday school picnic. The chief of police observed from his buggy." Much of the violence was instigated by the "double headers" in the white unions, men who worked as longshoremen during the heavy fall season and were police the rest of the year. (26)

An official of the black screwmen gave eloquent answer to those whites who charged the blacks with breaking their agreement to limit their numbers on the waterfront. This compact was never made freely, but by black workers

bowing in humble submission to the dictates of the white screwmen, and acting under the advice of some colored men....This uprising is not of mushroom growth, but it has steadily grown from the acorn of opposition until it has reached the giant oak of hate and persecution....To the charge made against us, that of "wage cutters", we simply say that the prostitution of rights, the denial of work, and the assassination of our brothers will force us to seek the arms of protection in the nearest, and under the most available terms.

To this a white longshoreman answered: "We do not want people to understand that we are trying to drive the negro to the wall. We don't want to see the negro starve, nor will we. We don't want to have the negro placed in the position where he can drive us to the wall.' (27)

Despite conciliatory statements like this by white workers, it appeared that the employers would be able to divide and conquer the working class without much difficulty during the drawn-out depression of the 1890's. But the employers overplayed their hand when they declared that they would hire non-union workers. This
move hastened the reconciliation of black and white unionists who had been fighting over jobs on the waterfront. The employers' open-shop drive effectively refocused the resentment of both races. The day after employers announced their decision to hire non-union labor, a big wharf agent was burned out. In the following days more fires erupted on the waterfront. Eventually employers succeeded in getting a federal court injunction forcing the white strikers back to work. The blacks grudgingly submitted again to the "100 man" rule, and accepted the new order of things. After the defeat of the white strikers, employers ordered black and white crews to work side by side. (28)

The 1894 riots represented a two-pronged threat to the basis for labor solidarity on the docks. First, the employers threatened to break the unions and force white labor off the docks with cheaper, more tractable non-union labor performed by blacks. Second, the white unions wanted to force the blacks off the docks altogether in order to save their members' jobs. Neither threat could be fully carried out. The blacks had not improved their position, to be sure, but they had defended their position on the docks. They had maintained a foothold which they would use to win advancement in the 20th Century.

Between 1897 and 1901, as the economy revived, the total membership of U.S. trade unions doubled. From 1901 to 1904 (a period of great urban growth), union membership doubled again to two million (80% of it in AFL affiliates). (29) In Southern cities some of this growth came in segregated Federal Labor Unions organized among unskilled workers. (30) New Orleans labor was part of this upsurge around the turn of the century.

1901 was a banner year for New Orleans labor. A succession of major strikes were launched by screwmen, longshoremen, riverboat roustabouts, streetcarmen, teamsters, painters, paper hangers, slaughterhouse workers, brewers, cooperers, gas workers, electricians, blacksmiths, carpenters, plumbers, and tailors. A new United Labor Council was formed in late August, as an alternative to the old Central Trades and Labor Assembly, with a more militant and class-conscious platform. This deserves to be quoted at length, as a refreshing antidote to the conservatism of most central labor bodies today:

Individual unions must unite in one large league, which shall proclaim the unity of the interests of all and give mutual support. Soon thereafter will come the recognition of the fact that our whole society rests exclusively on the shoulders of the working class, and that this latter can, by simply choosing to do so, introduce another and more just society. The class conscious power of capital, with all its camp followers, is confronted with the class conscious power of labor. There is no power on earth strong enough to thwart the will of such a majority conscious of
itself. It will irresistibly tend toward its goal.... The earth and its wealth belong to all. (31)

The Council also provided that none of its members could enter contracts prohibiting them from sympathetic strikes.

In the same year the dockworkers introduced a re-organization plan which did more to protect the separate skills and races than most unions today. On October 5, 1901, the new Dock and Cotton Council united all dock unions—36 in all—into a true industrial union, predating the I.W.W. Any section of the Council—screwmen, longshoremen, teamsters, coal wheelers, roustabouts, cotton yardmen, etc.—could go it alone if they wanted to strike. But if they received the support of the majority, all would go out together. (32)

The Dock and Cotton Council made a very conscious effort to break down the crippling effects of racism by allotting everything, work and leadership, on a 50-50 basis. Each of the thirty-six sections sent two delegates, one white and one black. Every year the officers of the Council would be racially rotated, e.g. one year the President would be white, the Vice-President black, the Financial Secretary white, and the Corresponding Secretary black; the next year the order would be reversed. In 1902 a further provision was made to share all work equally between blacks and whites. Also, the composition of each gang of four was to be made of two whites and two blacks, now that they were all working in the hold together in the aftermath of the '94 riots. (33) This would at least prevent anyone from being ganged up on.

At the same time, this working agreement made it possible to determine the nature of a "fair day's work". When it had been the custom to keep black and white gangs in separate holds, the overseers had been able to keep them competing by shouting to the whites that the blacks were doing all the work and shouting the opposite to the blacks. (34)

After 1902 labor unity started to bring more worker control on the job. Cotton bales had always been loaded by a dangerous "shoot the chutes" system which was well known as a killer. The white and black screwmen now united to demand that the number of bales stowed in a day be drastically reduced—from 500 to 160 bales a day! They won this demand in spite of the fact that the black union's contract still had two years to run. It is not too much to say that this was the most radical improvement ever won on the levee. The employers were greatly displeased with it, and they soon tried to reverse this victory. (35)

In the contract negotiations of 1907 the bosses demanded an increase from 160 to 200 bales a day for the screwmen. At the same time the blacks made a further demand for equality by insisting that half of the foremen be black. Since this would mean that whites would have to work under black foremen, the white workers vigorously resisted this demand, and a wild meeting on August 29 made
a split seem inevitable. For this did raise the question of white supremacy, no matter how much the black delegates insisted that it was "simply a labor problem". Finally, the blacks agreed to drop their demand, and so solidarity was maintained in the face of the employers' offensive. But it should be remembered that this "unity" was fundamentally based on white supremacy.

In October of 1907 black and white unionists "joined in a general levee strike" when employers refused to renew the 1906 contract. The strike, which lasted for 20 days, involved black and white screwmen, longshoremen, and yardmen, as well as all-black groups of coal wheelers, teamsters, and leaders, and every other work group on the waterfront. (36) The dockworkers were also striking in support of the socialist-led Brewery Workers Union, an industrial union involved in a bitter jurisdictional strike with AFL Teamsters. David Montgomery calls the 1907 strike "the most massive struggle of the period" because it was a "general strike based on the power of the 'unskilled'" which also explicitly asserted black and white unity and aroused "bitter work hostility to the AFL", which opposed the industrial unionism of the Brewers and the Dock and Cotton Council. The struggle bore all the attributes of an "I.W.W. struggle" even though there were no Wobblies directly involved. (37)

The bosses spared no expense to break the unions and more specifically the screwmen, whose skills were becoming less needed with the larger ships. The Thiel Detective Agency, already notorious for its armed strikebreakers in the 1902 New Orleans Streetcar Strike, was again hired to import its thugs. Thirteen hundred scabs were imported in all, their average wage being $5 a day plus travel expenses from St. Louis or Chicago. (38) A force of 75 sharpshooters was also engaged to guard the warehouses. Three ships were rented as "floating scab hotels".

These new recruits had little taste for longshore work, "most of them looking as though they had been on the ragged edge for some time....They tear the sacks,...puff and labor like so many grampuses." (39) On the 8th of October the scabs pleaded to Mayor Behrman that they had been brought to the city under false pretenses, and were receiving miserable food and wages and becoming seasick in the bargain. The next days saw two hundred more men come to the Mayor's office with the same complaint. Behrman wrote to the Illinois Central Railroad, protesting their policy of "dumping in our midst a lot of tramps and hoboes". This "strike of the strikebreakers", as one participant calls it, led many workers to suspect them of being "union men in disguise". (40)

On October 11, the Central Trades and Labor Council joined with the United Labor Council in threatening to extend the general strike if it became certain that a move was afoot to destroy the screwmen. On the 17th the Mayor had convinced the Screwmen to go back to work at a compromise rate of 180 bales a day until such
time as a special committee could investigate conditions in Gal-
veston and other Southern ports. But the British shippers still held
out for 200 bales, and now the local stevedoring companies threat-
ened to break with them, one admitting that it thought the shipping
agents meant to destroy all organized labor on the waterfront. (41)

On the 24th the agents finally agreed to the committee, but now
refused to meet with the four Dock and Cotton Council representa-
tives, as long as two of them were black. The Picayune denounced
this "characteristic of the Senegambian or Hottentot in not being
able to get over his ambitions to force himself on the white man
when he sees he is not wanted". Making further reference to these
"Sons of Ham" and "Black Micawbers", that fine journal observed
the "simple fact that a number of negroes have been anarchists
and fanatical denouncers of authority". (42) Mayor Behrman tried
milder tactics in an elegant speech to the unionists pleading for
removal of the black delegates so that the welfare of the city not
be further injured.

This meeting, as described by Oscar Ameringer, is the best ex-
ample we can find of the kind of role playing which was forced
upon the blacks in order to maintain solidarity in a situation where
white supremacy could not be effectively attacked. The first
speaker to answer the Mayor's plea, after a polite applause had
been registered, was a black. He, and a number of black speakers
who followed, moved in favor of the Mayor's suggestion to take the
blacks off the committee. Every white speaker went against the
motion, and when a vote came, the whites were unanimous in op-
posing it. Still a number of blacks voted to withdraw their own
representatives, "merely as a matter of confidence in the sincerity
of the white brothers". (43) The President of the black longshore-
men, who had earlier said "in all my 30 years of experience on the
levee, I never saw such solidarity", assured everyone that "We
recognize the white man's superiority, but think the occasion de-
mands that colored men should be on the committee." (44) With
such protestations of humility, and with the demand for black fore-
men withdrawn, the white unionists allowed themselves to stand
with the blacks—as long as it was clear they also stood above
them.

On November 9 the agents finally and reluctantly agreed to the
compromise and sat down with the black and white representa-
tives. Principals in the discussions were: Alonzo Ellis, a black
ex-jockey and ex-seaman who had helped found the German Sea-
man's Union and could read Marx in the original; Dan Scully, "a
redheaded Irishman in every sense of the word"; and the stately
Senator Cordell, "the composite portrait of the Kentucky Colonel
seen in whiskey advertisements". Ameringer's recollection of the
fireworks is worth retelling:

Senator Cordell: (violently rising from his chair...vio-
ently tearing his hair, and violently striding around the
conference room) "The ideah! The ve'y ideah! White men conspirin' with niggas against the honoah and prosper'ty of the gre-at po't of N'yo'l'ns, against the honoah and prosper'ty of the gre-at State O Louisianah itself!.... compelled to heckle like penny-pinchin' tradas ovah a few pennies mo'h less with a pacel o' watah rats and niggas. Ah shall not continya this disgra-ceful, shameless bick-erin' fo anotha second, I am leaving...."

Ellis: "Please sit down, Senator. We're not here to save the honor and prosper'ty of the great State of Louisiana. We is here to settle the strike.... Your job is to see to it that we work the longest possible hours at the least possible pay. Our job is to make your crowd pay us the high'est possible wages for the lowest possible amount of work. Now let's get down to business. What's more, we've won the strike already, else you gentlemen wouldn't be here to talk compromise, honor, and prosperity."

Dan Scully: "Oh, we're water rats, are we? And white trash, are we? But you can't run your goddamn port without us. Can you? I guess before long you'll call us nigger lovers, too. Maybe you want to know next how I would like it if my sister married a nigger? Well, go ahead, ask me. But take it from me, I wasn't always a nigger lover. I fought in every strike to keep the niggers off the dock. I fought until in the white-supremacy strike (of 1894) your white-supremacy governor sent his white-supremacy militia down here and shot us white-supremacy strikers full of holes.... But let me tell you and your gang, there was a time I wouldn't even work beside a nigger. You got 'em on the loose. You made me work with niggers, eat with niggers, sleep with niggers, drink out of the same water bucket with niggers, and finally got me to the place where if one of them comes to me and blubbers something about more pay, I say, 'Come on, nigger, let's go after the white bastards.'" (45)

The commission dragged its investigation on for many months, visiting various other ports, charging the railroads and shippers with conspiracy against New Orleans, and hearing a sensational testimony from Ellis about how dockers were forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates from foremen who were agents of the shippers. A settlement was finally made in May 1908, nine months after the strike had begun and eight months since the men had gone back to work. The contract required 187 bales to be loaded a day. The worst part of the contract was that it expired in the slack summer season. (An old New Orleans saying has it that "Long-shoremen eat turkey in the fall and winter, his bones in the spring,
and the feathers in the summer."
(46) Rank-and-file sentiment was against ratification until the leadership threatened to quit. The settlement was really a standoff between workers and management. The agents had not been able to destroy the unions, and the screwmen had managed only to partially defend their work standards in the face of a changing technology. That defense was to last only 15 more years. (47)

THE POST-WAR REACTION

During World War I the screwmen were able to raise their wages to $5.20 a day. The old five-dollar wage had been in effect since just after the Civil War, and this was their first raise. For almost two generations screwmen had waged a bitter struggle, not to improve their position, but just to stay at the same level. But their days were numbered. By 1921 the screwmen were loading 200 bales a day, and the companies asked for 11 bales more. Fifteen hundred screwmen walked out. When the companies again brought in scabs, the Dock and Cotton Council responded with a general strike on November 24, bringing out between 12,000 and 15,000 workers. On November 28 there was mass rioting at the foot of Canal Street where the crews shaped up. Many strikebreakers were injured and 250 cops with riot guns were called in to protect them. The next day the screwmen agreed to stow 225 bales a day at a slightly higher rate per bale, the "Galveston formula". (48)

After the 1921 strike was broken, the screwmen began to lose their privileged status on the docks. The invention of a high-speed cotton press during the war made the screwmen's skills archaic, and the general open-shop, anti-labor offensive of the 1920's weakened the Screwmen's Benevolent Association along with other unions. Nevertheless, the screwmen still held the exclusive right to load cotton at a much higher rate than regular longshoremen, even after the 1921 strike. (49)

The screwmen's relatively privileged position was imperiled even more by the large influx of black workers to New Orleans during the war years. By 1923 the black screwmen's union had 3,000 members and the white one only 1,400. The old 50-50 agreement of 1902 was no longer fair, and there was much bitterness over this. (50)

These two factors, technological change and a change in the racial balance of the work force, combined to destroy the screwmen in 1923. The white screwmen were determined to make up the losses of the 1921 strike. They used their influence to force a strike, even though a majority in the black unions opposed it. (51) Blacks resigned from the longshore union in droves and went to work during the strike, but most of the strikebreakers were white "casuals". Newspapers of the day are full of accounts of violence
on the docks, even stating that "gangsters" had been posing as strikers for the purpose of beating and robbing anyone on the waterfront. The employers again resorted to a "floating scab hotel", and claimed to have over a thousand men at work. The ILA stepped in to save its New Orleans stronghold; and Gulfport and Mobile struck in sympathy on September 29. The I.W.W. Marine Transport Workers Union ordered all its sailors in New Orleans out, and an international boycott on ships from New Orleans. This helped to scotch an employer's plan to use sailors for scabs. (52)

But this inter-union solidarity could not cover up the growing breach between black and white workers themselves, or the general weakness of trade unionism in the 1920's. Injunctions against picketing (uncommon in earlier days) finally broke the 1923 strike, but it had been fatally weakened by the strikebreaking of black unionists (who could not find jobs through the unions) and by white "rabbits" — as the casualties of New Orleans were called. The defeat of the strike finally ended the power of the Screwmen on the docks, and led to the demise of the Dock and Cotton Council. After 1923 the unions were restricted to three lines represented by the U.S. Shipping Board, while 70% of the port's cargo was handled by non-union labor. (53)

THE OPEN-SHOP ERA

The years 1923-1935 were bad ones for longshoremen and the rest of New Orleans labor. 1929 saw the bloody defeat of the powerful streetcarmen's union by the newly consolidated utility monopoly, in a gigantic strike that lasted five months, leaving hundreds injured, three dead, and many streetcars burned and dynamited.

On the docks the bitterness between the races destroyed any chance for strong unions. The New Orleans Steamship Association had taken to hiring blacks only, and initiated a badge system under the leadership of A. E. Harris, a black longshoreman. The black local (ILA Local 231) held on to jobs on the three government lines but had only 700 members. The white local (1226) led a shadowy existence and was not recognized in any contracts.

In 1927 the hiring of blacks on the waterfront became an issue in the mayorality race, with one candidate charging that the companies had "Africanized the waterfront". In fact, the percentage of blacks in Louisiana longshore jobs increased from 65% in 1920 to 74% in 1930. (54) That same year Irishman Terence Darcy was elected president of the white ILA local. Darcy must have been a masterful politician, for in the next nine years he was able to manipulate the black longshoremen's union into nearly destroying itself.

Darcy organized about 2,500 casuals, black and white, into an informal "get-together club". He then accepted all the white club
members into his union, a rather painless operation since he had no work to distribute. He also demanded that (black) Local 231 do the same thing with the black members of his club. Local 231 refused, whereupon Darcy influenced International president Joe Ryan to threaten revocation of 231’s charter. Once the new blacks were admitted, they immediately called a strike, under Darcy’s orders. Darcy then sent his white members to scab in their places and protested to the agents that the black local was full of troublemakers. This tactic did not succeed in breaking 231, but it remained fully under Darcy’s control through his black flunky, J. D. Spencer. (55)

In 1933 the government lines leased their wharves to private operators who promptly kicked out the last remnants of union labor. This same year the Steamship Association began to sponsor its own brand of unionism in order to protect the shippers against further disruption. They did this under the provisions of the famous Section 7(a) of the N.R.A., which opened the door to company unions as well as “real” unions. In October of that year the Independent White Longshoremen’s Association and the Independent Colored Longshoremen’s Association, the so-called “independents”, signed contracts for 75¢ an hour (a 10¢ raise) and arbitration by equal representation of labor and management. All but a few companies signed. (56)

The company unions won substantial improvements, as the two old ILA-AFL unions soon lost much of their membership to the “independents”. In 1934 the International decided to revoke the charters of the two defunct ILA locals—and hand them over to the company unions! But the wily Darcy was able to thwart his old ally Joe Ryan when the state courts ruled that the ILA President had acted illegally in revoking the charters of 231 and 1226 without authority in the ILA constitution.

In 1935 the “independents” signed another two-year contract. This contract was inferior to ILA pacts in Texas but somewhat better than those in Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. The ILA, still anxious to regain its former Gulf stronghold, called out all its locals from Florida to Texas, demanding raises and recognition for New Orleans. But so strong was company unionism in this city that more men worked than ever before to take up the slack from the striking Gulf ports. Eventually, the refusal of the other Gulf ports to handle trade from New Orleans moved two inter-coastal shippers to sign with the old ILA locals 231 and 1226—the first contracts they had seen in 12 years.

By themselves the New Orleans dockers could never have achieved this victory, since the black longshoremen, who now made up a large majority of the work force, resisted “every move on the part of the New Orleans representatives of the ILA”, controlled by Darcy, because it seemed dedicated to driving “the black man from the waterfront”. In fact, the black proportion of jobs did decline after 1933. (57)
In 1936 the courts reversed themselves and granted ILA charters to the two independents, transferring the memberships and agreements of the old locals to the new ILA locals 1418 (white) and 1419 (black), thus ending the intrigues of Darcy. The two segregated unions still dominate the New Orleans waterfront, though a suit by black longshoremen to merge them is now underway. What is really significant, in view of the subsequent history of corruption and bribery in these two unions, is that the present ILA is lineally descended from the company union set up under the NRA. In other words, for almost 40 years the New Orleans Steamship Association’s bargaining “opponent” has been a union initially of its own creation.

COMPETITION FROM THE CIO

The next round of contract negotiations for the ILA bore out the widespread suspicion that the union was still company-dominated. The union decided to keep working even after the old contract had expired and a strike was going on all over the Atlantic coast. The New Orleans locals finally settled, without a strike, for a wage that was 5¢ an hour lower than the Atlantic agreements. (58)

In the fall of 1936, Harry Bridges’ West Coast International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) made its appearance on the New Orleans docks. Affiliated with the CIO, the ILWU had a militant reputation, but had little success in this Southern city. The CIO union managed to sign up enough workers to petition the NLRB for an election contest with the ILA. The latter proved to be a formidable opponent, with friends in government and business. The state legislature adopted a resolution against the CIO which declared “the organization of negroes a threat to white supremacy”, and urged all local authorities to “take steps necessary to suppress, stamp out, and eradicate communism and its attendant evils”. The New Orleans police complied by raiding the CIO-ILWU headquarters, arresting union leaders, and destroying membership cards. The shipping companies did their part by granting a raise to the ILA in the middle of the campaign. Furthermore, eligibility for voting was determined in such a way as to prevent all but the most regular workers from casting a ballot. The ILWU had concentrated on attracting younger, casual workers with promises of more work, but as it turned out, most of these men never got a chance to vote. (59)

The ILA won the election handily, but it cost the AFL union $80,000 in what the union called “direct and indirect education” to defeat the CIO union.

THE REIGN OF CORRUPTION IN THE ILA

Both the black and the white leadership in the New Orleans ILA have been corrupt from the very beginning, though the black cor-
ruption has been more spectacular and open. Members of black Local 1419 had to pay 5% of their earnings to the union through a dues check-off (i.e., for the privilege of working). The elaborate patronage system set up through the AFL unions, contractors, shipping companies, and political bosses had helped the ILA defeat the more progressive CIO union which called for an end to the corrupt "shape up" system, but failed to sever a significant number of workers, especially blacks, from the old patronage system. As a result the "shape up" remained in New Orleans as a permanent barrier to progressive unionism. (60)

However, the CIO challenge to the AFL patronage machine did have some after effects, because it exposed the incredible corruption and favoritism that function in New Orleans, as it did in other ILA ports like Boston and New York. In 1940 the rank-and-file learned that there was only $3,000 in the treasury. An NLRB investigation showed that over $400,000 had been paid into the fund, but that over $200,000 of this was missing. President Hortman of 1419 had maintained himself in office from 1935 to 1941 by rigging elections and changing the constitutional term of office from one to five years, paying off his opponents not to press charges. After the NLRB placed Local 1419 in a receivership, the old corrupt leadership resigned, and in April of 1941 a reform candidate named Harvey Netter (who had supported the CIO) swept into office. He reduced the size of the check-off and promised to reduce the long term of local officers, but it was soon clear that he was no improvement over the old leadership. In fact, Netter himself had rigged his victorious election, which was boycotted by most members (only about one-fourth of those eligible voted). Furthermore, the Civil District Court discovered that Netter's two opponents were actually "dummies" on the union payroll. (61)

The year 1941 also saw a turnover in the leadership of the white longshore local (1418) as Al Chittenden was elected to the presidency. Known as "the man in the white hat" because of his large collection of stetsons, Chittenden has managed to remain in office until the present day, staying aloof from the bad publicity associated with the corruption in black Local 1419 up until the 1973 royalty-fund scandal.

Netter stayed in control of 1419 until 1947, when another "reformer" named Dave Dennis took over. By 1953 the membership was howling for the repeal of the 5% check-off. On July 8, a mass meeting of dockers demanded the abolition of the 5% and the impeachment of Dennis, who had gone back on his repeated promises to end the check-off. The new "executive vice-president", Clarence "Chink" Henry, handed out a leaflet saying the meeting was illegal and "anyone attending such meeting will be dealt with according to law". Then in August of that year the Senate Waterfront Racketeering Investigation made disclosures that sealed Dennis's political fate. Dennis had stolen $3,800 of the money sent from the International to combat ILWU recruiting. (62)
The next regular meeting of 1419 was presided over by Dennis. He reluctantly agreed to a motion to end the 5% check-off, but adjourned the meeting before an impeachment vote could be taken. Five days later he requested a leave of absence and put the administration of the local into trusteeship under Chink Henry, who was elected president when Dennis's regular term ran out the next year.

With dreary repetition the cycle of reform and corruption played itself out once again. About one term of "clean" administration seems to be all that can be expected of any candidate within the current structure. After getting his machine in smooth working order by that time, he then proceeds to steal all he can get in the time that is left for him. Henry's chief reform was to be a regular and "honest" financial report, but when a financial scandal occurred just two years after his election, the practice was stopped.

Under Henry's regime black dockworkers became more powerful on the waterfront, especially during the World War II years. Due to the tight wartime labor market, blacks gained more jobs on the waterfront and achieved a limited degree of occupational advancement in New Orleans, although these gains were not as dramatic as those achieved by black longshoremen in the West Coast ILWU, a CIO union. (63) The proportion of blacks working on Louisiana docks increased to 77% of the work force in 1950, but it then declined to 69% in 1970. Meanwhile, as a result of mechanization and containerization, the number of hours worked decreased drastically; by 1963 only about 40% of the Louisiana longshore work force put in enough hours to make a decent living at dock work. And despite the numerical strength of blacks on the docks and in the ILA (where blacks outnumbered whites by more than 4 to 1), blacks were kept out of preferred jobs until the late 1960's. Furthermore, the corrupt patronage system of job procurement grew even stronger as the number of jobs decreased, because groups still get work through an employer-operated hiring hall, "the only such type in a major American port". (64)

Under these conditions, Chink Henry became the most powerful of the black longshore leaders in his 20-year reign over Local 1419. As president of one of the largest black organizations in a major Southern city, Chink often postured as a "civil-rights leader". In fact, the ILA leadership in all of the East Coast ports has been forced to be more sensitive to black issues than most union bureaucracies, because the black membership amounts to 40% of the whole. It is, moreover, a black membership that has become increasingly militant during the past decade, not just around wages and working conditions, but around social issues as well.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968 black and white dockers across the country struck. This one-day walkout was given official sanction by the ILA, but undoubtedly there would
have been a strike in any case in this largely black union. (65) In New Orleans there were memorial strikes by the Sewage and Water Board Workers as well as the longshoremen, and a group of several hundred black workers and students marched to City Hall and forced the flag which had been left flying high to be lowered to half-mast. (66)

The Rhodesian chrome issue offers another example in which rank-and-file pressure forced the leadership to take a public stand. ILA President Gleason had promised that his union would not unload chrome from the dictatorial white-minority government, in keeping with a United Nations resolution which the U.S. had signed, but he later decided to ignore this promise. Chrome from Rhodesia continued to come into U.S. ports. In March of 1972, in the midst of contract bargaining and rumors of a joint East and West Coast dock strike against the wage controls of Nixon’s pay board, black students from Southern University in New Orleans and Baton Rouge demonstrated against chrome being unloaded in Burnside (about halfway between the two cities). Burnside dockers refused to unload the chrome, and ILA officials followed with a belated statement approving the boycott. (They had never done anything about the shipments before the students had made an issue of it.) The chrome was eventually unloaded by non-union labor farther upriver. In the winter of 1973-74 the chrome issue was successfully taken up by dissident longshoremen in Philadelphia and Baltimore, with a similar two-faced response from the union bureaucrats. (67)

THE 1973 WILDCAT

New Orleans became the first city where ILA rank-and-file anger over bureaucratic corruption erupted into a major wildcat strike. (68) Ever since the 1968 contract on containerized freight, members had been wondering what had become of the royalty funds due them for work lost to automation. The employers had agreed to pay $1 to the union for every ton of freight shipped through the New Orleans port in containers. This money was to be divided between a pension fund and a system of direct payments to the union membership. But rank-and-file members never saw a penny of it in the five years that the fund had been in existence. ILA members had grown accustomed to ripoffs, but nothing in the long and shady history of their union had prepared them for this. When some dissident longshoremen circulated the information that roughly 49 million tons of containerized cargo had come through the port since 1968, amounting to $49 million in royalty payments, the usual cynicism gave way to militant action.

This was an issue which affected the whites just as much as the blacks. When a wildcat was called on Monday, July 23, almost everyone working on the docks stayed out, 1800 white and black longshoremen. Informal mass rallies were held outside the shape-up
hall, with speeches by militants and jamming by neighborhood musicians. The strikers demanded an accounting from their presidents, Al Chittenden and Chink Henry. The question of who was a bigger crook was a moot point. "Look," said an older white long-shoreman flanked by a group of young blacks, "those guys (Al and Chink) are shaking hands, sleeping with the same women, and stealing money from all of us." Everyone laughed and nodded agreement.

By using their strike power to deal with their bureaucrats instead of parliamentary or legal tactics, the membership showed that it had learned something from the previous defeats. The tactic worked to get action fast. International President Thomas Gleason flew down from New York immediately to quell the uprising. He met with Henry, Chittenden, and the shippers, but joined with the two local presidents in refusing to come down to the shape-up and talk with the men. Instead, the bureaucrats requested a committee of the wildcatters to meet with them. "Let Gleason come down here," was the response of Irvin Joseph, one of the wildcat leaders. "If he wants to talk, this is my committee," he said, gesturing to the crowd of strikers milling around him.

The union leadership suddenly discovered $892,000 in the royalty fund. They offered to put out 90% of it for direct distribution, although the '68 contract called for 75% to go into a pension fund. The direct-distribution plan advocated by the leadership would work out to about $200 per man. The more militant workers rejected this effort to buy off their anger for a pittance. They still wanted to know where the many millions more were being hidden. A second wildcat was threatened in February 1974, but a court order for a new audit was made at the last minute. Today the membership still does not know where the money is, or whether it has been paid into the fund at all. It appears likely that the money simply has not been paid, that the companies have not bothered to keep complicated records of how many containers come into the port, many of which are unloaded by non-union labor outside New Orleans.

In May 1974 Chink Henry died during a routine operation. A special election was held to find a successor. Wilfred Dalliet, one of Chink's right-hand men, was elected by a large majority. The result is of doubtful veracity, since the majority of working long-shoremen — if the number of bumper stickers on cars around the shape-up is any indication — favored Irvin Joseph, the leader of the 1973 wildcat. Joseph has protested to the International ILA leadership that votes were bought and that Dalliet made all kinds of promises to the pensioners that he had no authority to make.

Chittenden has fared better than Henry for the time being. He somehow managed to beat a suit on 67 separate counts of extortion and embezzlement which was filed shortly after the wildcat. But it is doubtful that he can survive a suit to merge the separate black and white locals.
THE FUTURE

The suit to merge the two union locals was filed some five years ago by a group of black longshoremen, some of whom were leaders of the 1973 wildcat. All legal experts say that separate union locals are clearly discriminatory and illegal. And yet the suit has dragged on and on, without a final order to merge. The likely reason for this is that the Steamship Association does not yet have a trustworthy group of flunkies lined up who would be capable of managing an integrated local for them.

So far both the black and white leadership have made farcical attempts to save their little empires. Al Chittenden boldly denied that his union was segregated, and submitted to the court a list of almost 200 “non-white” members. Upon closer examination, all but a few of these turned out to be Hondurans and Cubans, who make up a large part of New Orleans’ population. He did have one or two new black members, however—all recruited within the last few months. Chittenden’s defense got to be something of a joke among the Latin members of his union, and did little to further his sagging political fortunes. “Big Al” is so well known as a racist that it is inconceivable that he will be able to play any major part in a new, integrated local.

The black leadership, for their part, have been agitating their members against the merger. In a somewhat humorous reversal of stereotypes, they have branded the white minority “undesirables” and “freeloaders”. Dulliet has been reminding the blacks how many millions (much of it in graft) were spent on their plush union hall which was only recently paid for. Now, he says, the whites, who have much more ramshackle buildings and are actually in debt, will be able to use the blacks’ mansion without having paid one cent for it. The blacks also receive a lot of free medical care under their union, while the whites receive none. So why should they let these deadbeats get a free ride?

Ridiculous as some of these arguments are, they have struck a responsive chord with white and black workers who are distrustful of changes from above and from each other. According to Irvin Joseph, one of the wildcat leaders who filed the original merger suit, most of the longshoremen are dubious about the merger. He still supports it, he says, “because we will have better representation. The way it is now the black officials are getting their members to fight against the whites, and the whites are getting their members to fight against the blacks. So that in itself will be eliminated.” (69)

Although the memory of black and white unity during the wildcat strike is still fresh, there is a stench of corruption on the waterfront that soon befoils anything, and leaves most people cynical about change. This cynicism in turn makes people more likely to look to their own hustling for any improvement in life, and so breeds future generations of sellouts.
Every single leader since 1936, when the old company unions were given ILA charters, has been totally corrupt. Given the hiring hall operated by the Steamship Association, where company dispatchers can make or break union foremen every day by their distribution of work, this is inevitable. Joseph himself, who will surely make another try for president, admits that the union is a company union. "If we were to go into office exactly the way it is now, we would either have to bow to corruption or be annihilated." (70)

Both the company hiring hall and the shape-up system must be abolished. But even this will not end the fierce competition for jobs and the inevitable bribery that follows. That will continue as long as capitalism, and it will get much worse in the very near future as containerization decimates the work force. It is the issue of containerization, more than any other, that shows how badly a socialist workers' movement is needed, and how far from satisfactory the reforms of even honest militants like Joseph can ever be.

Five years ago there were 10,000 working longshoremen registered in New Orleans. Today there are 5,000. In another five years there may be only a thousand left, and these will be able "to come to work with suits on" if automation continues at its expected pace. (71)

Joseph and the other leaders of the '73 wildcat have never been able to find records on how much containerized freight is coming into the port. Even if such records exist, and even if every single container entering the port could be worked or charged a royalty fee, this would not touch the problem of LASH ships. The new LASH (Lighter Aboard Ship) super-freighters were especially designed to displace longshoremen. Each LASH vessel carries as many as 20 large river barges, any one of which can be floated upstream without a New Orleans longshoreman so much as seeing it. Since the Mississippi, its tributaries, and connected waterways reach 80% of the U.S. population, and since inland water transportation is the cheapest form of bulk transport, the LASH freighters are threatening to leave longshoremen high and dry. The West Coast ILWU dockworkers have made a feeble attempt to deal with LASH and the complexities of container-counting by charging a $5 million per year flat rate for the whole coast. This is peanuts when you figure that New Orleans alone should be pulling in $10 million a year in royalty fees.

The projected construction of an offshore superport at the river's mouth, and the huge centralized container docking facilities slated for New Orleans, are ominous monuments for the longshoremen's future. Only by linking up with the many other New Orleans area workers who are directly and indirectly employed in transportation and demanding protection from layoffs and a real compensation from these super-profits can the majority of dockworkers hope to survive.
Longshoremen have traditionally been not only the largest and most powerful, but also the most representative work force of the New Orleans working class. Trading the jobs of many for the royalties and privileges of a few will at best eventually transform New Orleans longshoremen into an elite far removed from the teeming slums of the marginally employed, miserably paid service workers of New Orleans. At worst, it simply will not work: the history of U.S. labor is filled with short-lived "feather-bed" arrangements such as the now-extinct screwmen.

Automation is a social issue involving the relative value of labor in different industries. There is basically no solution to the problem within a capitalist economy, where every labor-saving invention is also laborer-discarding. In a worker-controlled economy, of course, every such improvement would be an unmixed blessing, since it would free us from drudgery. The only thing which can confront the issue head-on is a revolutionary workers' movement calling for socialism, a movement that is not yet visible on the New Orleans docks.

CONCLUSION

The history of the New Orleans dockworkers is rich in great moments of militant solidarity, black and white workers united to fight in crisis. But they are only moments, and the unity is always teased apart later on.

One reason for this is that the "solidarity" up to now has always contained that "acorn of opposition"—white supremacy—which inevitably bloomed into the "giant oak of hatred and persecution". Blacks gained little by little in each new tactical unity, but still had to accept a second-best place beside the whites. Privileges in job assignments, sometimes small but always gratifying, are still given to the whites through the dual union structure. For fifty years blacks have been a majority without majority power in the New Orleans dockworkers' unions. That will soon be ended in the merger of the two locals—but the racism and the struggle over privileges will not.

"White supremacy" can no longer be shoved down black workers' throats: the whites are in a more defensive position of trying to maintain the few remaining privileges they have on the docks. Most white workers today, even in the South, will at least grant the theoretical desirability of giving anybody from whatever race an even break. But they naturally don't want to see this adjustment of claims made in a way that will injure them—which is the only way it can be carried out under capitalism. Once white supremacy is broken the immediate result may be less solidarity rather than more, in the free-for-all scramble to see which race gets what. To that extent the South is "catching up" to the racism of the North.

With the diminishing number of jobs due to containerization, LASH, and the superport, somebody is going to have to take a beat-
ing. It is unlikely that whites will be able to gain a larger portion of a shrinking pie in a black-controlled union, although they may be able to keep up the old rationing. But it is also possible that whites will become very scarce at the shape-up. Then we can expect that the anti-labor propaganda against the workers’ attempts to control this central New Orleans industry will become more openly anti-black. The cry of “Nigger Government” will again be heard, as it was in Radical Reconstruction. The present period is very critical because it marks the beginning of black majority power, at the same time as a seemingly permanent and irreversible destruction of jobs is getting underway.

When one reads the case after case of defeat through division and victory through unity, only to be followed by new forms of division, one is tempted to form a cynical view of history—that the only thing you can learn from it is that nobody learns anything from it. After all those strikes where black and white stood shoulder to shoulder in elated and victorious brotherhood, why didn’t somebody get the idea that this was the right way to run a union? Even the inspiring solidarity of the recent ’73 wildcat seems almost forgotten today, and all you hear is the same old easy cynicism. The reason is that this unity is never more than tactical, only a temporary sanity that breaks through the day-to-day insane reality of cut-throat competition just to find enough work to make a living.

Radicals have often said that no revolution is possible until white workers give up their racial privileges. This is true, but what makes it rough is that no worker has any reason to voluntarily give up scraps of privilege, unless a socialist movement exists which could conceivably win so much more for everybody that those scraps look too miserable to bother with. Although there have been outside socialist agitators like Hall and Ameringer, and socialist rank-and-filers like Alonzo Ellis, there has never been anything like a socialist movement that could challenge the competitive logic of racism. Such a movement is needed today more than ever, because the disappearance of jobs will make competition more desperate. At the same time a socialist movement is the only possible way to make headway with workers in other industries over layoffs due to automation.

The New Orleans tradition of racial solidarity shows that there is a great potential for black and white workers finding the strength of unity, even in the most racially polarized society. But we still need a socialist movement in which that potential can become a power.
FOOTNOTES

1. Special thanks is due to Jim Green for such valuable information and extensive help in editing the manuscript. We would also like to thank Martha Neber of the New Orleans Public Library for actively helping us search out materials.

2. For a good history of this period see John W. Blasingame, BLACK NEW ORLEANS, 1860-1880 (Chicago, 1973).

3. Ibid., pp. 59-63.


13. Ibid., p. 185.


18. Pearce, op. cit., p. 27.


24. Ibid., p. 66. Although the Populists moved their state headquarters to New Orleans after the general strike in a bid to build a farmer-labor party, workers registered very little support for the agrarian radicalism of the upland parishes. Those workers who did continue to vote in the 1890's, when most black voters were finally disfranchised, supported the corrupt Choctaw machine which literally bought votes or won them through patronage arrangements. These arrangements would also frustrate the socialists who became active in New Orleans after the turn of the century. W. I. Hair, BOURBONISMS AND AGRARIAN PROTEST: LOUISIANA POLITICS, 1877-1900 (Baton Rouge, 1969), pp. 216-217, 227, 258-259.

25. Spero and Harris, op. cit., p. 191.


27. Quoted in ibid., pp. 33-34.


32. Covington Hall, "Labor Struggles in the Deep South" (unpublished, undated manuscript in Tulane University Library), pp. 76-77. Hall was a leading New Orleans revolutionary and labor journalist who became an I.W.W. organizer.
33. Foner, op. cit., p. 250.
34. In fact, the black gangs were usually pushed harder, or pushed themselves, working the equivalent of two or three days' more cargo in the course of the year, according to a timekeeper of the Leland Lines. See Spero and Harris, op. cit., pp. 191-192.
38. Pearce, op. cit., p. 66.
40. Hall, op. cit., pp. 81, 87.
41. Pearce, op. cit., pp. 67-68.
42. Ibid., p. 69; and Foner, op. cit., p. 251.
44. DAILY PICAYUNE, Oct. 18-19, 30, 1907, quoted in Pearce, op. cit., pp. 68-69.
46. Ameringer, op. cit., pp. 42-43, 89. Hall says the platform was written by Oscar Ameringer, who worked for the Brewery Workers as a publicist.
47. In 1913 the I.W.W. became active on the New Orleans docks through its affiliate, the Marine Transport Workers Union. The Wobblies were organized by Covington Hall, a Mississippi-born revolutionary. Hall had participated in the 1907 general strike and helped to organize the Brotherhood of Timber Workers, another I.W.W. affiliate which united over 20,000 black and white lumber workers in a protracted struggle with the timber companies of the piney-woods parishes. However, the Wobblies were not nearly as effective in New Orleans as they were on the Philadelphia docks, which they dominated and effectively desegregated between 1913 and 1920. The I.W.W. advocated a more egalitarian kind of unionism than the A.F.L., but in New Orleans the Wobblies' militant industrial unionism was co-opted to some extent by the powerful Dock and Cotton Council. See James R. Green, "The Brotherhood of Timber Workers, 1910-1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U.S.A.", PAST AND PRESENT, no. 60 (1973), pp. 161-200; and Philip S. Foner, ORGANIZED LABOR AND THE BLACK WORKER, 1619-1973 (New York, 1974), pp. 112-113.
48. TIMES PICAYUNE, Nov. 22-Dec. 4, 1921, cited in Pearce, op. cit., p. 75.
49. Miller, op. cit., p. 23.
50. Ibid., p. 24.
51. Ibid., p. 25.
52. Pearce, op. cit., p. 81.
53. Miller, op. cit., p. 25.
56. Ibid., p. 30.
58. Miller, op. cit., p. 34.
62. Miller, op. cit., p. 44.
63. See Rubin and Swift, op. cit., pp. 142-144.
64. Ibid., pp. 102-107.
65. NEW YORK TIMES, April 6, 1968.
68. This section is based largely on Dave Wells, "Rebellion on the Docks", LOUISIANA WORKER, Vol. 1, no. 2 (1973).
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.

DAVE WELLS is a teacher and JIM STODDER an offshore oil worker in the New Orleans area. They have both been involved in union organizing and strike support work, and have written for the LOUISIANA WORKER.
The Politics of Power in
‘On the Waterfront’

Peter Biskind

It is our hope that the thread of the democratic story runs through (our films) without calculated emphasis, but with the more powerful emphasis of suggestion.... It is the absence of propaganda that foreigners like.... That is why an American film is jammed in Prague or Helsinki while a Soviet film across the street unwinds to a corporal’s guard. Forced fed on propaganda, people turn from it with loathing, and eagerly welcome entertainment devoid of ideological lecturing and sermonizing.... A shot of an American drug-store can carry a more powerful message for democracy than thousands of words devoted to its why's and wherefores. (1)

These words were written in 1950 by Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, in defense of Hollywood “entertainment” films against charges that Hollywood was not pulling its weight in the cold-war “battle of ideas” with the Soviet Union. Right-wingers within and without the industry wanted films that were overtly ideological, overtly anti-Communist. The spate of anti-Communist films that were produced in the early fifties
were notably unsuccessful at the box-office, and liberals were quick to underline the message. Some, like Dorothy Jones in her essay "Communism and the Movies" (2), criticized the vulgar anti-Communism of films like MY SON JOHN and IRON CURTAIN as doing more harm than good. She wanted her propaganda covert and sophisticated.

Elia Kazan's ON THE WATERFRONT (1954) was a case in point. It was the last of his anti-Communist trilogy, made shortly after the openly ideological MAN ON A TIGHTROPE, a financial flop. Kazan went to Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, with a script for a film on corruption in the waterfront unions. Cohn agreed to produce the film only if the mobsters were turned into Reds. Kazan refused, and went on to produce independently a film that has become almost legendary. For all that, it remains highly ideological, more effective because its ideology is concealed.

ON THE WATERFRONT harnesses the methods of the thirties to the ideology of the fifties. It is political allegory cast in the form of a morality play. This requires skillful aesthetic footwork, since its success requires that the political allegory be simultaneously admitted and refused. To deny the allegorical level runs the risk that the message of the film will go unrecorded. To acknowledge the allegorical level runs the risk that the ideological project of the film will be unmasked. Films like ON THE WATERFRONT walk a tightrope between revelation and concealment, between clarity and mystification.

In many ways, ON THE WATERFRONT was a child of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations, a blow struck in the ideological and artistic battle between those who talked and those who didn't. Many of its personnel, including Kazan; Budd Schulberg, who wrote the script; Lee J. Cobb, who played John Friendly; and Liel Erickson, who played one of the Waterfront Crime Commission investigators, had gone before the Committee (HUAC), confessed their past sins, and implicated close friends and associates. One of Kazan's closest friends (whom he did not name) was Arthur Miller, with whom he had worked on ALL MY SONS and DEATH OF A SALESMAN. In 1953, Miller's play THE CRUCIBLE, a thinly veiled attack on the witch-hunt, opened on Broadway. In it, Miller has his central character, John Proctor, go to his death rather than inform against his friends. When Deputy Governor Danforth, his antagonist, demands names, Proctor replies: "I speak my own sins; I cannot judge another, I have no tongue for it...I have three children — how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends."

ON THE WATERFRONT is Kazan's answer. It presents a situation in which informing on criminal associates is the only honorable course of action for a just man. The obligation to inform comes out of an absolute moral order of good and evil rooted in the authority of the self. The refusal to inform is degraded to a rela-
activistic and, in terms of the film, morally limited sense of loyalty to friends. Father Barry (Karl Malden) expresses this nicely: "What's ratting on them, is telling the truth for you." On the other hand, Charlie-the-Gent ("a butcher in a camel's-hair coat") becomes the spokesman for the discredited principle of loyalty: "Stooling is when you rat on your friends."

By ratting on John Friendly and his boys, Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) helps the Crime Commission destroy a corrupt union, wins the lady, Edie Doyle (Eva Marie Saint), and redeems himself in his own eyes and in those of the honest rank and file. The informer as hero, American society may not be perfect, says ON THE WATERFRONT, its institutions may be fallible, but they contain the mechanisms for their own regeneration. Although corrupt unions run the docks, the regulatory and investigatory (HUAC included?) agencies of government — the open hearings covered by the free press, the benign investigators — are more than a match for the forces of darkness. Justice prevails. As the opening title says:

It has always been in the American tradition not to hide our shortcomings, but on the contrary, to spotlight them and to correct them. The incidents portrayed in this picture were true of a particular area of the waterfront. They exemplify the way self-appointed tyrants can be fought and defeated by right-thinking men in a vital democracy.

By deciding to inform, and then justifying this decision in his film, Kazan turned his back on the thirties. On the other hand, it may be said that his actions constituted not so much a betrayal of the thirties as a fulfillment of certain attitudes toward the state implicit in thirties radicalism. Both the New Deal with its stress on activist big government, and the Communist Party with its admiration for the Soviet Union, contributed to a generally positive attitude toward state power on the part of the left. If the state was indeed seen as benevolent, it is perhaps not so surprising that the state could later, under different circumstances, command the loyalty of its citizens against its enemies. The ex-Communist friendly witnesses of the fifties were still Stalinists at heart, only Truman and Eisenhower had become their Stalin. The USA had replaced the USSR.

The submerged analogy between the criminally corrupt waterfront unions and the "crime" of membership in the Communist Party reflected a belief dear to the hearts of cold-war liberals — that the CPUSA was a criminal conspiracy falling outside the traditional guarantees of civil liberties. Suffice it to say, the equation between overt acts of violence and "crimes" of belief that is used to justify informing against Communists and fellow travelers, doesn't hold up.

Nor is the film's portrayal of union corruption very convincing.
Although it is quite faithful to the texture of local detail, it falsi-
fies the overall picture. (3) Kazan is careful to circumscribe the
tumor of corruption so that it may be neatly excised without undue
injury (or embarrassment) to the body politic. Despite one rhetori-
cal gesture toward generality (a single shot shows "Mr. Upstairs"
watching the Crime Commission hearings on television), Kazan
emphasizes the limited and exceptional nature of his subject. Lest
this be misunderstood, he underlines it by having one of his dock-
ers exclaim: "The waterfront... ain't part of America."

The notion that racketeering might be endemic rather than inci-
dental, that it was a natural expression of a capitalist system that
concentrated power and money in the hands of a few and employed
graft to lubricate and stabilize the system, was unthinkable. Cor-
rup­tion is regarded exclusively as a moral evil, a sin perpetrated
by bad men (the theological frame of reference is enforced by the
prominent place occupied by the priest, Father Barry), rather than
a form of mutually beneficial and politically expedient collusion
between unions, management, and the Tammany Hall machine. (4)
Joseph P. Ryan, the International Longshoreman's Association
(ILA) boss who could have served as a model for John Friendly,
held notorious annual dinners, attendance at which was obligatory
for every politician in the city, the mayor and police commissioner
included. (5) Management purchased "protection" from the crooked
union, freedom from strikes and disruptions over pay and work-
place grievances: "Industrial racketeering...performs the func-
tion...of stabilizing a chaotic market and establishing an order
and structure in the industry." (6) Yet ON THE WATERFRONT
portrays the shipper, a major beneficiary of this arrangement, as
neutral, as a bystander above the factional fight within the union.
He doesn't care who runs the docks, so long as he gets his ships
loaded and unloaded. (7)

With these general observations out of the way, we can turn to
the critical question of the film's conception of power. What im-
nediately becomes clear is that the film doesn't seem to deal with
power at all. The arena of conflict in ON THE WATERFRONT,
which is, after all, a film about labor and unions, is not class but
self. It is Terry Malloy's interior struggle, his struggle to come
to moral awareness and to act on his new perception of right and
wrong.

The agent of Terry's awakening is the waterfront priest, Father
Barry. Father Barry intervenes decisively at crucial moments to
change the course of events:1. He precipitates the struggle against
the mob, ("There's one thing we've got in this country, and that's
ways of fighting back. Now getting the facts to the public and testi-
ying for what you know is right against what you know is
wrong....") 2. He persuades Terry Malloy to confess to Edie
Doyle that he helped set up her brother Joey to be pushed off a
roof. 3. He prevents Terry from using his gun to avenge the death
of his brother Charlie-the-Gent (Rod Steiger) at the hands of John Friendly. 4. He urges Terry to testify before the Crime Commission. ("You wanna hurt John Friendly for what he did to Charlie and a dozen other men who are better than Charlie?... You'll fight him in the courtroom tomorrow with the truth as you know the truth.") 5. He prevents the dockers from aiding the badly injured Malloy so that he can make his heroic walk leading the men back to work in defiance of the mob. ("Finish what you started... take your hands off him... leave him alone.") All these interventions turn out for the best, since Kazan apparently approves of this kind of moral agency; but they could have easily been catastrophic. What emerges is an alarming picture of a ruthless crusader who manipulates others like chess pieces in the name of a higher good for which no price is too high, no sacrifice too great.

That manipulation is not too strong a word for Father Barry’s behavior is clear from the authority with which he employs his carrot-and-stick strategy to guide Terry through the intricate moral maze that Kazan has constructed for him. Although his interventions in the course of the action are frequently direct and forceful (at one point he knocks Terry down in order to prevent him from going gunning for John Friendly), just as frequently this coercion is coyly denied or disguised. On the several occasions when Terry asks Father Barry or Edie (an ancillary manipulator) what he should do, what course of action he should adopt, they insist that it is up to him, to his conscience, that they cannot tell him what to do. Invariably, this disavowal is contradicted by a moral imperative which immediately follows: do this or do that, as in this exchange in which Father Barry forcefully but obliquely urges Terry to reveal his part in Joey’s death to Edie:

Father Barry: "What are you gonna do about it?... about telling her, the Commission, the subpoena?..."

Terry: "I don't know..."

Father Barry: "Listen, if I were you I would walk right — Never mind, I'm not asking you to do anything.... It's your own conscience that's gotta do the askin' — Edie's... coming here.... Come on, why don't you tell her."

Father Barry’s method of persuasion is successful, Terry indeed perceives his choices as issuing from his own “conscience,” his own deepest desires, when in fact they are elicited by a powerful, albeit disguised, form of psychological and moral pressure. It appears, in fact, that Charlie-the-Gent is correct when he tells John Friendly later that "This girl and the Father — they got the hooks in the kid so deep he don't know which end is up anymore."

In choosing to use persuasion rather than coercion, Barry is do-
ing no more than acting in accord with the democratic ethos as defined, for example, by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, in 1949: "The thrust of the democratic faith is away from fanaticism; it is toward compromise, persuasion, and consent in politics...." (8) Force was not used because it was not needed, as Schlesinger pointed out in the course of arguing against some of the harsher measures of the witch-hunt: "If we can defeat Communism as a political force within the framework of civil liberties, why abandon that framework?" (9) Using the Church as a disguised instrument of social control, as Kazan does, was characteristic of the disingenuous approach of one strain of fifties liberalism toward problems of power.

What is the significance of a ruthless and powerful, but apparently moral figure like Father Barry, when Kazan has shown us in VIVA ZAPATA! that power corrupts? Although the power-to-the-people moral of VIVA ZAPATA! would lead us to expect that in a democracy, where power is shared among the demos (In America, "the people have a voice"), such a figure should be either evil or unnecessary. But it is clear from ON THE WATERFRONT that the people are incapable of exercising power. They are a passive herd who invariably fail to act when put to the test. At best, they can follow the leader, shuffling along behind Terry, exercising their power in a negative refusal to act: "How 'bout Terry? he don't work, we don't work." The conclusion which inescapably emerges, from the contradiction between the two films, is that when Kazan wishes to show the self-regenerative capacities of liberal capitalist society, through mass political action, effective yet circumscribed, leaders are OK. But when he is faced with a real social upheaval, as he is in VIVA ZAPATA!, which threatens to exceed the bounds of decorous reform, he enforces a self-serving moral that leadership will always become corrupt.

Rather than the egalitarian society we might have expected from VIVA ZAPATA!, ON THE WATERFRONT, like many other films of the fifties, offers an elitist model of society in which power is the prerogative of experts in the law and its enforcement (police, judges, lawyers) in alliance with social engineers (priests, psychiatrists, social workers) and family (usually the hero's wife or girlfriend) to perform an essential task of social control. Acting in concert, the official and unofficial agents of society curb the hero's cynical, self-interested asocial behavior. They awaken in him, at the very most, a higher moral awareness (as in ON THE WATERFRONT) or, at the very least, a recognition that his own apparent-ly narrow self-interest in fact promotes the larger purposes of the state. Unlike the Soviet Union, the magic of democracy is that the interests of the people and the state are harmonious. It is not necessary to sacrifice the one to the other (as in the films of Samuel Fuller). The type of control exercised by these figures is indirect rather than direct, manipulative rather than coercive. The hero
perceives his commitment to family and a steady job, and his consequent acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the established order, as a voluntary choice dictated by his own free will. Social directives are internalized. But Terry is in no sense free; he has merely exchanged one type of bondage for another.

Even though Terry rises bravely on his own two feet at the end, having successfully inspired the men to defy the mob, his stance is an uncertain one; we have the feeling that Terry is still at the mercy of forces he cannot understand, forces much more subtle and dangerous than the ones he has overcome—a alliance of Wilsonian moral ferocity, Progressive institutions, the family, and management. As the film closes, and the great iron door of the shed crashes shut, we feel that Malloy is not so much liberated as trapped by the shadowy figure of the shipping boss who is the ultimate beneficiary of the action, and who has, in effect, the last word: “All right, let’s get to work.” Once power abused has been eliminated, the ships can be loaded, and the happy collaboration between capital and labor that cemented the fifties consensus can prevail.

Kazan’s view of reform is as elitist as his conception of democracy. Both social reform and individual salvation are top-down affairs, conducted by experts, the Crime Commission in the one case, and the priest in the other. The initiative in both instances comes from the experts, from above.

Even though the main thrust of ON THE WATERFRONT is toward the socialization of Terry, it is necessary to pay close attention to the way this operation is carried out. It occurs through an apparent contradictory process of individuation, Terry is divested of old-world ethnic ties to immediate family (“they’re asking me to put the finger on my own brother”), to the extended family of the union local (“Uncle” Johnny Friendly “used to take me to the ball games when I was a kid”), and to neighborhood. He is systematically detached from the social tissue that forms his natural habitat, and gathered into a larger notion of community-as-nation, associated with abstract absolutes like “democracy,” “truth,” “right and wrong,” and anchored in the upwardly mobile nuclear family which provides its institutional base. For his blood-brother Charlie he substitutes the claims of the Christian brotherhood of Father Barry (“you’ve got some other brothers”) and the democratic brotherhood of America (“the people have a right to know”).

This transition is facilitated in several ways. First, it is rendered as a process of growth. Terry’s testimony before the Crime Commission is an indication of self-knowledge (“I was ratting on myself all them years, and I didn’t even know it”) and the assumption of adulthood. The measure of his maturity is his decision to inform, to transcend local loyalties for larger, and presumably higher ones. Loyalty to friends is regarded as an adolescent virtue, the province of his protege Tommy of the Golden Warriors.
who spurns him after he testifies. Although Tommy’s reaction is experienced as a painful repudiation, it is somewhat undermined by being given a Freudian dimension. The sullen and hostile attitude he displays toward Edie earlier in the film suggests adolescent jealousy of the as yet latent adult relationship between Edie and Terry. Second, the mob, although in one sense Terry’s family, is in another sense a false family. After all, it is an all-male group like the Golden Warriors, and it frequently acts to destroy family ties. It is responsible for Joey Doyle’s death (Joey is defined in the film principally as Edie’s brother): the core of Terry’s accusation against his brother, Charlie-the-Gent, is that Charlie let his loyalty to Friendly take priority over his natural blood ties to his own brother. Charlie later redeems himself by reasserting familial bonds in defiance of the mob. Since the mob is exposed as a false family, it is not too difficult to convince Terry that they do not deserve his allegiance. Third, Terry is invested with the notion of the legitimacy of his own private goals and ambitions which the mob had thwarted by frustrating his boxing career. And, finally, all these strands are gathered up in the nuclear family represented by Edie. It offers maturity and responsibility, adult sexuality, upward mobility (Edie has been educated in a suburb, Tarrytown, and her father has labored so that she will enjoy the advantages of which he was deprived), and satisfaction of “private” goals. If his boxing career is over, he can at least experience the pleasures of romantic love, which was regarded as the peculiar province and strength of the nuclear family, as it became clear that emotional gratification could not be found outside the home. In terms of social control, society has successfully identified the “responsible” leadership (the family) within the community, and forged an alliance with it in order to destroy autonomous (and thus subversive) neighborhood groups outside its control.

Submerged in the valorization of romantic love, family, and “feminine” virtues was a new definition of what it meant to be a man in fifties America. The film suggests that the old-style immigrant morality of John Friendly, and the character structure that accompanied it, were obsolete. Ethnic ghettos were being dispersed by assimilation and upward mobility; the protective reflexes based on fierce individual and ethnic loyalties were no longer necessary. Immigrant groups were encouraged to emerge from the shadows of city streets and tenements into the suburban sunshine of democratic institutions. The government would afford first-generation Americans the protection formerly provided by ethnic protective associations, ethnic enclaves within unions, and tight, close knit neighborhoods. Changed social circumstances required a new, softer, more pliable and trusting version of the male role. And if Terry had to move toward Edie, Edie had to move toward him, away from old-fashioned European notions of woman’s role pressed upon her by her father, toward a superficially more
equal and activist stance. It is a comment on the distance between
the fifties and the seventies that the immigrant ethos which is dis-
carded in ON THE WATERFRONT as un-American is sentiment-
ized by a more radical film like GODFATHER I, with Brando now
playing what could easily be the aging John Friendly.

In the fifties, the process by which Terry is detached from his
old loyalties and incorporated into an abstract community was
called "massification" by social critics when it occurred in total-
itarian societies. It signified the emergence of "mass" man. Groups
which mediated between the individual and the state, which might
have competed with the state for the loyalty of the individual, were
destroyed. The state directly impinged upon the individual. The
only institution which remained intact was the nuclear family. The
family was expected to generate goals of personal gratification
through consumerism and emotional relationships which in turn
were to create and guarantee the illusion of an autonomous world
of private life insulated from the demands of the state. ON THE
WATERFRONT revealed that massification was as much a feature
of America in the fifties, as it was her enemies'.

It is hard to resist the impulse to round out Kazan's portrait
with some guesses about the future. After the spasm of reform had
subsided, Terry, if he were still alive, would become unemployable
on the docks; he and Edie would follow the working-class migra-
tion to the suburbs to bring up their children in clean air far away
from the foul smell of the docks. Edie would teach at Forest Hills
High, and in her spare time would tidy up Terry's diction so that
he could become a professional commentator on working-class and
urban problems. Like Eric Hoffer, Terry would appear on late-
night talk shows and sing the praises of labor-management cooper-
ation in READER'S DIGEST.

It is worth noting that in the course of Terry's pilgrimage, he
and Edie, who is initially a spokes-woman for the right-at-any-cost
position of Father Barry, change places. As soon as she falls in
love with Terry, she urges him to flee, to avoid the confrontation
with Friendly that Father Barry demands, and for which he is
ready to sacrifice Terry, Edie, and everyone else. It's just not
worth it, she feels. Although the film fails to give credence to her
point of view, she comes to represent a perspective from which to
challenge Barry's manipulative morality. Within the limited terms
that the film presents, it is not worth it. In the absence of a more
profound insight into the politics of corruption, Malloy is being
asked to sacrifice himself for nothing. As Pauline Kael pointed out
at the time, John Dwyer, one of the real-life prototypes of Terry
Malloy, defied the ILA but lost the support of AFI officials who
abandoned him in the crunch. His attempts to challenge the ILA
ended in failure, "For a happy ending," she wryly quoted TIME
MAGAZINE, "dockers could go to the movies." (10)

Although, as we have seen, Kazan falsifies the larger picture in
the interests of his own political position, it is important to come
to terms with the reasons the film works as well as it does. Part
of the answer to this question lies in the kind of world Kazan
presents, a world full of conflict and violence. The state of nature is
not innocent, but a Hobbesian jungle. As Terry tells Edie: “You
know this city’s full of hawks. They hang around on top of the big
hotels and they spot a pigeon in the park — right down on him.”
This predatory morality informs the ethics of the mob, and makes
strong claims on Terry as well. “Down here, it’s every man for
himself. Do you wanna hear my philosophy of life? Do it to him
before he does it to you,” Terry tells Edie. Opposed to this philos-
ophy in which the strong (hawks) consume the weak (pigeons) is
Edie’s morality (“Isn’t everyone part of everybody else?”) and
Father Barry’s Christianity which promises that the meek shall
inherit the earth.

Kazan’s vision includes genuine conflict, Terry’s cynicism about
the promises of democracy expresses a real contradiction within
post-war America, one that eventually generated the opposite of
fifties consensus: the radicalism of the sixties. Despite Kazan’s
efforts to the contrary, the line from Brando’s Terry Malloy to the
sixties is a direct one, as indicated by the sympathy with which
young New Leftists viewed Kazan’s anti-Communism in films like
VIVA ZAPATA! That ON THE WATERFRONT finally produced its
mirror image in GODFATHER I suggests that American popular
culture is indeed dialectical.

Not only does Kazan’s vision include a world of darkness, but he
gives this negation free reign. Despite the final reconciliation of
conflicting interests, the dissident voices are not hushed, Edie’s
anguished cries of protest are heard above Father Barry’s efforts
to propel Terry on his final walk. It is in fact by allowing the film
to project a vigorous negation of its ideological thrust, and then
including that negation in a final harmonious synthesis, that Kazan
can guide ON THE WATERFRONT to a conclusion that is emotion-
ally satisfying.

The seriousness of the contradiction Terry embodies is sug-
gested by the fact that his socialization and redemption require
real effort: the most sophisticated resources of church and state
must be brought to bear upon him. It is one of the peculiarities of
the film that church and state are ultimately the same. When Terry
decides to become a stool pigeon, he fuses the spiritual and the
secular realms, Terry’s protege Tommy calls attention to this
when he throws a dead pigeon at Terry’s feet: “A pigeon for a pi-
geon.” In Christian terms, Terry voluntarily assumes the role of
the meek (the dove); in secular terms, he assumes the role of the
informant (pigeon), and the one transforms the other. The informer
as Christian saint.

In a democracy, then, power is not confronted with power, but
with Christian virtue, Liberal institutions (the Crime Commission)
hand in hand with the Christian soldier (Terry) will ensure the reign of the meek. Like other anti-Communist directors of the period, Kazan made the implicit claim not only that those who named names before HUAC were Christian martyrs, but also that fifties America was the secular City of God on earth. A booming consumer economy offered ample proof that the God who had abandoned 20th Century Europe to physical and spiritual destruction had come to roost in America. Father Barry’s assertion that “Christ is down here, on the waterfront” is not a metaphorical or rhetorical device, but the literal truth, expressing a confidence peculiar to the fifties. I know nothing about Kazan’s religious convictions, but it is clear from ON THE WATERFRONT that he shared with most Americans a belief in a Providence that had saved America from the ravages of war, had given her the atomic bomb, and had delivered into her reluctant hands the responsibility for world leadership. This belief in the special destiny of America was responsible in part for the ultimate suppression of transcendence in films of the fifties, either the ridiculing of utopianism as childish and unrealistic, or the attempt to show that utopian aspirations could be realized within American institutions. Thus the incarnation of the Christian (and transcendent) dove in the secular role of the stool pigeon.

Finally, something must be said about Marlon Brando. Brando was the ideal vehicle for the theme of power in the fifties. As the quintessential expression of the brooding, inarticulate, violent lumpen or laborer, his menacing strength with its class overtones had to be transformed into negative power, the capacity to endure the aggressions inflicted upon him by others. Thus the beating or humiliation became an essential part of the Brando role, occurring not only in VIVA ZAPATA! and ON THE WATERFRONT, but in such diverse films as THE WILD ONE, ONE-EYED JACKS, THE CHASE, and THE APPALOOSA. The significance of Terry’s final walk down the pier to the shed is that his power has been chastened, transfigured, and spiritualized. Brando’s performance in ON THE WATERFRONT is perhaps the finest of his career. The film succeeds because of the immensely powerful grip on the American mind exercised by the myth of individual action and redemption which lies at its heart. Especially as embodied by Brando, this myth allows us to express the fantasy of anti-social rebellion at the same time that it allows us to submerge it in an even more compelling vision of social inclusion, wholeness, and renewal.

Finally, some conclusions. Kazan twists and turns to avoid confronting the implications of American power and power in America. He presents a picture of an ideal democratic society in which power, as such, does not exist. It is only the enemy which exercises power, the John Friendlies of the world in whose hands power is inevitably abused. Nevertheless, since power is in fact exercised
by agents with whom Kazan is sympathetic, it must be disguised in order to maintain the fiction of its absence. Power struggles in the public sphere are displaced into moral struggles in the private sphere. Manipulation replaces coercion, and power, to the extent that it cannot be denied, is transformed into the negative power of the martyr.

This is the portrait of America that the film intends to present. But the picture of America that actually emerges from the film is quite different. Power, rather than being dispersed throughout the whole society, is concentrated in the hands of an elite of experts, both official and unofficial, who wield it with a ruthless singleness of purpose for their own ends. These ends include the socialization, if possible, of dissident individuals and groups or, if necessary, their destruction. Socialization is achieved by redefining individual allegiances and goals so that they conform to those sanctioned by society.

The two antagonistic portraits of America (egalitarian and elitist) offered by ON THE WATERFRONT are not entirely contradictory. A view of society as run by technical elites is one way of achieving the masking of power required by the egalitarian fiction. If power is exercised by experts or dispersed throughout a bureaucracy, it is not power but expertise, technical skill, cost accounting, or systems analysis. The state is viewed as a politically neutral organization of administrators standing above the petty quarrels of competing interest groups, a servant of the people.

The evident reluctance to acknowledge or specify centers of power at a time of vast American military and economic strength may also be taken as an indication of guilt or bad conscience, a refusal to accept responsibility for the uses to which American power had already been put, not only at home in the witch-hunt, but in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many American films of the fifties expressed the wish to relinquish power, or the feeling that power was a liability. Nevertheless, it would be another decade or so before these contradictions would surface, before the reality of American power would be unmasked and repudiated.

FOOTNOTES

2. REPORT ON BLACKLISTING, FUND FOR THE REPUBLIC, 1956.
3. The composition of the local in the film was a fairly exact reflection of the ethnic mix on the waterfront. The leadership of the union was drawn from the older, entrenched Irish, while Italians made up a large proportion of the rank and file, and struggled to wrest control of the newer locals from the Irish. By the time the film was shot in Hoboken, most of the locals on the New Jersey waterfront were Italian. The film accurately portrays the consequences for the rank and file of the stranglehold on the locals exercised by a small clique of racketeers: cushy jobs and other privileges for the few and intermittent, but heavy labor for the many. The film is true to other details of waterfront life as
well, like the scramble for tags or "brass checks" which were given out each working day and turned in at the end of the week for cash.

4. As Kazan had said of his attitude at the time ON THE WATERFRONT was made: "I think when we lost faith in the Soviet Union at the end of the thirties, a lot of us said: 'Our basic institutions are good but are corrupted by individual people.' but later we realised that the corruption is general, throughout." (KA-
ZAN ON KAZAN, edited by Michel Ciment, New York, 1974, p. 56)

5. The intimate relationship between the mob, big labor, city officials, and business can be glimpsed from the following facts. "Since the port is a munici-
pal enterprise, a businessman had to negotiate pier leases from the city, get various licenses, and learn his way around the Office of Marine and Aviation... in 1947, during the (Mayor) O'Dwyer regime, an ex-bootlegger who sought to rent a pier was told to see Clarence Neal, a power in Tammany Hall, and to en-
gage his services for $100,000. As a result of these disclosures, Mr. O'Dwyer's Commissioner of Marine and Aviation and his two chief deputies retired....
From 1928 to 1938, Joe Ryan was chairman of the AFL Central Trades and La-
bor Council, and in that post spoke for 'labor' in the political campaigns....
Another hidden source of ILA influence was the...friendship between Joe Ryan
and a prominent New York businessman...William J. McCormack. He was...
executive vice-president of the powerful U.S. Trucking Corporation, whose board
chairman was Alfred E. Smith....His Morania Oil Company supplies fuel oil
to the city. His largest enterprise, Penn Stevedore Company, unloads all the
freight brought into the city by the Pennsylvania Railroad....Jarka, a steve-
doring concern, had paid $89,582 in 'petty cash' to steamship-company officials
over a five-year period to earn 'good-will'; $20,000 had gone to Walter Wells,
the president of Isthmian Lines (owned by U.S. Steel)...." (Daniel Bell, THE
END OF IDEOLOGY, New York, 1961, p. 176)


7. "From 1919...until 1945...a pattern of economic accommodation existed
which worked to the benefit of the shipowners and the union barons and against
the interests of the men. Collective-bargaining agreements were reached regu-
larly without strikes, but these agreements brought few benefits other than
miniscule hourly wage increases for the men....In the years from 1946 to 1951
...every major collective-bargaining agreement between the shipping compa-
nies and the longshore union was repudiated by the men." (Bell, op. cit., pp.
196-197, 175) The unions performed vital services for the shippers. By means
of the "open shape-up" they helped maintain an over-supply of labor willing to
work "long and continuous hours a few feverish days in the week, and (to) wait
patiently over the idle stretches until the next ship" came in. (Bell, op. cit.,
p. 179) "Although the I.L.A rate for longshore work in 1951 was $2.10 an hour,
the men working on McCormack's piers...received only $1.54 an hour." (Bell,
op. cit., p. 195)


10. "After all the strenuous efforts at clean-up, the old crowd was still in
control....Tough Tony Anastasia had extended his power over the Brooklyn
docks. Ed Florio, after fourteen months in Atlanta prison, was again the power
in Hoboken. The Bowers group that had organized the loading on the West Side
were still entrenched. And the I.L.A itself had won a union shop which gave it
even greater power over jobs on the waterfront." (Bell, op. cit., p. 206)

PETER BISKIND is a New York film maker and critic who frequently
writes for radical film journals. He is making a series of films and
writing a book about the impact of the Cold War on Hollywood. The
article published here is a shortened version of one first published in
FILM QUARTERLY, Fall 1975.
Letters

(Editors’ note: We would like to encourage our readers to send us brief responses to our articles and comments on important political issues for publication in this section. We will print as many as we can of those which seem of general interest to our readers.)

To the editors:

Staughton Lynd used to argue that moral imperatives do exist, that there are social realities — slavery, for example — which simply cannot be justified. However strained his arguments, he succeeded in rallying most leftwing intellectuals to his side when Eugene Genovese tried to insist, against Lynd’s “moralizing,” that Marxist morality is soul-less and relative.

Staughton did not demolish Genovese’s arguments; he never developed the political tools to accomplish that. But he and others did generally succeed in discrediting Genovese’s approach, which previously had held much greater sway in left circles.

Why did this happen? I think it is because most of the young people who grew up in the civil rights, anti-war, and New Left movements learned from experience that to a large extent people can and do intervene in the world of politics and bring about dramatic changes. They do not need to sit around and wait for some elusive “objective conditions.” Instead, they can act in a way which creates a more favorable political environment for struggle. (It is not an accident that these lessons — for Staughton and almost everyone else — were most dramatically illustrated by the black liberation struggle.)

Because most activists of the sixties were relatively unfamiliar with left theory, and often were hostile to it, Genovese was unable to cow them by invoking Marx’s ghost. Since then, many have read Marx, and have discovered that his writings don’t support the position advanced by Genovese.

Peculiar indeed, then, as well as very sad, is the situation now, where Staughton appears to be advancing the very ideas which he once found so distasteful. Where we were once challenged to bring people into the freedom movement because it was just, now we are told to organize workers on the basis of nickel-dime programs, because more visionary ones are impractical.

When Staughton writes that “radicals should propose solutions (to racism) which benefit white working people as well as black” he is admitting that he doesn’t think the struggle against racism itself benefits whites — and therefore he finds it necessary to offer whites some additional payment, privilege, or guarantee in order to win them over.

I would like to ask Staughton: What should Marx have offered white British and U.S. workers to enlist them in the struggle against slavery in the United States? Wage rate retention? guarantees against layoffs? After all, Marx’s “guilt tripping” only offered them unemployment and suffering — and their own freedom!

Noel isn’t saying that white workers like having their children physically beaten, degraded and humiliated, short-changed, etc. But he is saying that they were not sufficiently concerned about these marks of oppression to initiate a massive and visible struggle against them. (Moreover, Staughton should ponder the implications of raising this. White groups who organize for “quality education” against black demands for equality in education don’t seem to think that this is an issue among their potential constituents, unless and until their children are sent to desegregated schools.)

On the other hand, masses of black people did launch a struggle for equality in the schools, and thereby made the schools into the present battleground. Any radical program which fails to acknowledge this fact, and to call for full support for that demand without qualifiers, is counterfeit — isn’t a “solution” to racism at all. (Does
Staughton really think that black people are fighting to have their children beaten, degraded, humiliated, and short-changed equally with whites? that they need someone to tell them that they haven't demanded enough? that if they demand more, white workers, who have hitherto, quite sensibly, withheld their support, would suddenly flock to their banner?

It is Staughton, not Noel, who appears to believe that white workers are so backward that they cannot be won to the struggle for equality and justice (i.e. to their class interest) unless we sweeten the pot with a petty bribe.

Contrary to Staughton's accusation, Noel never held white workers "primarily responsible" for the oppression of black workers. But Noel probably believes, with Lenin, that white workers are "partners of their own bourgeoisie" relative to black workers. The task is to dissolve the partnership.

Ken Lawrence
Tougaloo, Mississippi
October 11, 1975

To the Editors of RADICAL AMERICA:

Before responding to the substance of Ken Lawrence's letter, I want to say something about its tone.

It was the way of the Old Left to excommunicate longtime co-workers because of differences. Thus a difference which could not be immediately overcome led to a split in the movement. In the New Left we asked people to demonstrate in practice the superiority of that which they advocated. Thus, had the difference between Ken and myself arisen in a New Left context, each of us would have been asked to go to work locally and produce a living model of that which we believed to be right. If I read him correctly to say that a black-and-white movement can be built around the grievances of black people alone, then in the New Left his task would have been to go forth and show the rest of us that it could be done. Instead he postures, and pronounces, in a manner I believe destructive even if he were correct. Ken's tone of voice is the sectarian tone which has made the movement so burdensome in recent years.

Now as to the merits:

Begin with rate retention, which Ken thinks Karl Marx would have scorned to advocate. I have just returned from a visit to a steel mill community where I talked with white and black steelworkers about the recently-adopted Consent Decree in the steel industry. The white steelworkers have advocated the opening up of jobs to black steelworkers for thirty years. The black steelworkers are militants. Both agreed that in the absence of rate retention for the white worker displaced by the black as the result of the Consent Decree, the effect of the Consent Decree was to drive an unnecessary and artificial wedge between white and black steelworkers, and to make the task of building an inter-racial movement more difficult. For persons in that situation rate retention is not a contemptible issue.

Since the beginning of this correspondence, what I have urged is that radicals in Boston and in similar situations elsewhere seek the equivalent of rate retention for white parents and their children.

If what busing means in the experience of white parents and children at the host school is that the quality of education goes down, they will oppose busing. If what busing meant in the experience of white parents and children at the host school is that the quality of education went up, there would be a fighting chance of winning their support to busing despite their racial prejudices and fears.

Therefore I say that the Left black and white has the responsibility to add to a demand for busing demands which would result in the improvement of the quality of education for all children affected.

It should not be forgotten in the heat of controversy that busing is a preeminently liberal demand. I understood the original RADICAL AMERICA article to argue that, despite this, busing should be supported because the black community, at least in Boston, is solidly behind it. I agree. But I do not think this requires mechanically and passively supporting the demand in the form in which it has been put forward.

When SNCC demanded the vote, I felt that the Left black and white had a responsibility to add to that demand an economic perspective. Otherwise, I feared,
black people would win the vote but use it to support the traditional parties. It is my impression that this is what has happened in the South.

So in the present situation, I think it is the responsibility of the Left black and white to support busing in a critical manner directed to the building of the unity of black and white working people. Instead I find much of the mobilization in support of busing in Boston indifferent as to the effect of the agitation on white workers.

Ken seems to think that I used to believe the movement could be built on moral affirmations, and have deserted that position for an opportunistic catering to short-run material needs. What I hope I advocated then, and what I certainly advocate now, is a unifying of moral and material appeals so that a Left program day by day confirms itself in people's lives. I think our own experience in the anti-war movement underlines the correctness of this approach. So long as students felt themselves to be threatened by the draft, it was possible to build a movement on the twin foundations of idealism (the attempt to empathize with the experience of those suffering in Vietnam) and self-interest (the fear that one might oneself be drafted). When Nixon ceased to draft people for the war, the anti-war movement ceased to be a mass movement and became a movement of that much smaller number of persons willing to be active on the basis of idealism alone.

This experience is also the experience of the working-class movement historically, in my opinion. What does it mean to build around the idea that An Injury To One Is An Injury to All? It means an appeal to the idea that what is happening to my brother today, may happen to me tomorrow, that neither of us is strong enough alone to win, and that only by uniting today around his need can I be sure of protection myself when my turn comes.

Thus, in the building of the CIO, many white workers were won over to joint black and white struggle by the experience that only in this manner would they win. And that experience, proving that black-and-white-together could protect self-interest, spilled over into social relationships. In Gary, Indiana, for instance, black and white steelworkers took their families to the park together on weekends. But they would not have done so had they not first discovered that by coming together on the shop floor each could move forward.

Where is the equivalent of this in the Boston busing struggle? Where is the attempt to say to whites in South Boston: Look, don't you see that only by supporting this struggle can your own children have a better time in school and a better chance in what lies ahead of them?

I suggest we don't say it because, in the form in which the busing demand has thus far been made, it isn't true.

Historically, I think Noel and Ken would both agree, racism has developed among working-class whites, not because whites are hostile to "blackness" and somehow innately prejudiced (as scholars such as Degler and Jordan appear to suggest), but rather, because the enslavement of blacks became profitable to the governing class, and racial distinctions between white and black workers were a method useful in reinforcing that program of preserving slavery. In other words, Step 1 was the drop in the price of tobacco from 3 d. to 1/4 d. a pound in the Chesapeake area in the 1660s, which made planters frantic to cheapen their labor costs. Step 2 was the wholesale importation of blacks and the passage of laws forbidding intermarriage, punishing blacks more severely than whites for the same offenses, and otherwise creating the legal status of slavery. Step 3 was the development of racist sentiments.

Now we must, I believe, run that film backward. That is, to transform the racist sentiments of white workers one must, first, undo racism as a legal institution. This has been the liberal program since Brown v. Board of Education. Busing is one part of it. It deserves support as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. In addition there is needed an element which will play the part in motivating white workers to end racism, that the fall in the price of tobacco played for white planters in creating it.

I have now, in three letters, expressed this position as best I could. It is time for me to heed my own advice, to fall silent and go do what I am talking about. I hope Noel, Ken, and for that matter the editors of RADICAL AMERICA, will do likewise. It would be a shame if RADICAL AMERICA, too became a place where comrades could talk to each other only by screaming.

Staughton Lynd
November 9, 1975

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Radical America's special pamphlet subscription is designed to make new pamphlets from the left presses in the US and Europe available to our readers.

In the past year our pamphlet mailings have included the following titles:

Winter, 1974

Mark Naison, Rent Strikes in New York, from New England Free Press; H. Hanegbi, et. al., The Class Nature of Israel, from the Middle East Research and Information Project; Fredy Perlman, Essay on Commodity Fetishism, from NEFP; and A Guide to Working Class History, a selected, annotated list of readings, recordings and films on workers' history in the US and Canada, also from NEFP.

Spring, 1975


Summer, 1975

Portugal: A Blaze of Freedom, from Big Flame (Britain); Unions and Hospitals: A Working Paper, by Transfusion (Boston); Taxi at the Crossroads: Which Way to Turn?, from the Taxi Rank and File Coalition (New York); and the first issue of Cultural Correspondence, edited by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner.
To Our Readers:

This issue marks the beginning of our tenth year of publication. For most of our magazine's existence, Fredy and Lorraine Perlman of the Printing Co-op in Detroit printed RADICAL AMERICA with extraordinary skill, hard work and a lot of patience. The quality of their work is literally unique; they made fine printing available to us which we could never have afforded elsewhere, and frankly we do not expect to be able to match it now. For reasons having to do with their own development as publishers and printers, Fredy and Lorraine no longer want to print RADICAL AMERICA. It is a big job and represents a large portion of all their work, leaving them little time for the publications that they and others put out under the name of Black and Red. With tremendous gratitude to them and much sadness, we have shifted to another printer.

The great boon of having the Perlman's as printers all these years leaves us now, ironically, in a difficult financial bind. They produced the magazine so cheaply that we were able to keep our prices down to levels far below standard "market" prices. We have not raised our prices for five years. Now we are forced to raise them quite a bit, in one jump, and we hope you will stick with us. This price increase represents the exact minimum that will enable us to meet our costs.

We thought that you might be interested in how your money gets spent. Printing is our main cost, nearly half of our total budget, and it has increased by 85%. Postage is another big expense and it continues to increase. We spend very little on rent; almost all the work is done on a volunteer basis by the editors.

While the magazine contains the same amount of material as before, we have changed the format slightly in order to hold down our printing costs.

Our magazine is changing in several other ways. One is that we have inaugurated a modified letters column. Specifically we hope to encourage many of you who don't feel up for writing whole articles to write short letters commenting on our articles or contemporary political issues. We can't promise to print all we receive, but we'll try to print those that seem most generally useful to our readers. Another change is that we're trying to enforce a length limitation on our articles whenever possible. We're also attempting to solicit articles of contemporary analysis, and about organizing, more zealously than before.

Finally, RADICAL AMERICA seems more and more important to us, as one of the few stable voices of an anti-Stalinist Left which is primarily focussed on building a working-class socialist movement in the U.S. We hope that people actively engaged in organizing and research will feel a responsibility to share their analyses with others through our journal.

The Editors