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UMWA miners demonstrating in Washington in 1977. Photo from COAL PATROL.
HOLDING THE LINE
Miners’ Militancy and the Strike of 1978
Jim Green

The significance of the recent miners’ strike — one of the longest in recent history — seemed to fade when the United Mine Workers accepted an unpopular contract on March 24, 1978 and began to return to work, complaining bitterly about how little they had won as a result of their long strike. How important was the miners’ strike of 1977-78? Should it be viewed as a total defeat for the miners? Or was it a strike in which the rank and file minimized its losses through a long and militant industrial action? What does the strike mean for the tarnished “reform” administration of Arnold Miller, for the rank and file movements within the UMW? Finally, what are the implications of the strike for the left?

Some of the most important questions raised by the strike have to do with the particular militancy and tenacity coal miners display in strike situations. What are the sources of combativity among this group of workers? Are coal miners a uniquely rebellious group within the working class because of their work situation and their “cultural isolation”? Or does the miners’ militancy — which has been expressed in a remarkable wave of wildcat strikes leading up to this national walkout — come from sources common to other groups of workers? It is too soon to answer these questions with certainty, but they can be approached by examining the recent history of miners’ militancy and by exploring its deeper roots in the past.

Most miners apparently voted for the contract offer on March 24 under protest. They had been out over 100 days — an extraordinarily long period in modern times. They had received little if any of the $4 million other labor unions had contributed for relief. The
International was trying to force the rank-and-file to give in and ratify the contract. Given what the miners lost in this contract, especially in the health and pension funds, it is clear that the miners were forced to take a backward step. However, if we review the development of this strike, and put it in a larger context, what emerges is a picture of a national walkout in which the rank and file battled to minimize the losses which the union leadership had conceded to the owners.

The 1977-78 coal miners strike must be viewed in the context of an overall offensive by the capitalist class. The first target was the social wage (education, health and welfare benefits, etc.) paid to non-unionized workers, consumers, and welfare recipients, especially in the cities. During the urban fiscal crises unionized public-sector workers also suffered serious setbacks. But now the capitalists have shifted to the more difficult terrain of a strongly-unionized basic industry. According to a lead article in *The New York Times*, following the March 24 contract ratification: “For thirty years bargaining has focused on union demands: seniority rights, pay, pensions, layoff protection, time off, and medical care. But in recent months the spark points in contract talks have been management demands for givebacks or "takeaways"—the cancellation of some of labor’s old gains.”

Finding it difficult to wring more productivity out of workers (this is especially true in coal), capital is attacking the wage increases demanded by workers to keep up with inflation. But more important, employers are attacking the social wage workers have won, particularly in the form of health and pension benefits. These two issues were main points of attack in the recent contract strike between the UMW and the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA).

The coal companies have made enormous profits in the 1970’s. Between 1970 and 1974, profits doubled. Nonetheless they still forced concessions from the miners in the 1974 contract — which caused widespread rank-and-file dissatisfaction with the Miller administration. With coal stockpiles high and the demand for steel down in 1977, the corporations who control the mines (mainly larger steel and oil companies) decided to take back even more from the miners in this contract. Plagued with wildcat strikes that limited productivity under the last contract, the BCOA wanted to bring the miners under control this year. If they could enforce “labor stability” by disciplining wildcat strikers and instituting incentive schemes, the coal operators could take even greater advantage of the increasing demand for coal that will develop under Carter’s energy policy. As Tom Bethel wrote in *Coal Patrol*: “With the UMW leadership in obvious disarray, the coal operators went to the bargaining table last October armed with a long shopping list of humiliating demands. In the wake of three years of chaotic labor relations, they wanted nothing less than total control of the UMW work force.”

To get it they were willing to take a long strike, confident that the miners would be on their knees by the end of January.

THE 1978 CONTRACT

The BCOA did not confine its attack to limiting hourly wage increases or to eliminating the right to strike. They also wanted to take away some of the gains the UMW had achieved through its Health and Retirement Funds. Won in the great strike after World War II, these funds provide health care and pension benefits to over 820,000 active and retired miners and their families. Although the funds are jointly administered by industry and union, the UMW has traditionally controlled them. Conceived and implemented by some of America’s most radical medical people, the miners’ health fund developed a consumer-controlled system of free
clinics designed to deliver preventive medical care. Although the funds were in constant jeopardy because they were tied to the tonnage of coal produced, they nonetheless represented the most advanced form of "socialized" medicine available to working people in the U.S.

This May the fund's trustees cut the "retainers" to the free clinics because wildcat strikes had reduced production in the coal fields. As a result 80,000 miners struck to save their "medical card." Ater a ten-week walkout trustees promised to make no more cuts, but the previous reductions were not rescinded. The stage was set for the BCOA to include the destruction of the Fund in their contract demands for 1977-78.

The initial BCOA demands amounted to nothing less than a dismantling of the UMWA Health and Retirement Funds. Free health benefits were abolished, and miners would be forced to pay deductibles ranging up to $700 per year. From a pooled health fund administered largely by the UMWA, the benefits would revert to a company-by-company system, which would provide coverage through private insurance companies. This would allow individual coal companies to use health benefits as a weapon against troublesome workers. The new system also meant death to the miners' free clinics and their concept of preventive medicine. So just at the time when public support was beginning to crystalize for some kind of socialized medicine, the capitalists have moved to destroy the most progressive health care plan serving working people.

After the rank-and-file miners rejected a contract offer with these provisions on March 5, largely around the health benefits issue, the public began to see that this was no ordinary strike, that the miners were holding the line for the whole working class in struggle to save the collective gains they had achieved in the social sector. This was especially true in a mining state like West Virginia, where the whole standard of living for the working class has been affected by the UMWA's gains, and alternatives to private health care are almost non-existent.

The pension issue was tied closely to the health benefits issue. Initially the BCOA retained the distinction between the pensioners who retired before 1976 and those who retired after that date and receive much higher benefits. But neither group, including victims of Black Lung, would have had increases sufficient to keep up with the cost of living. Many working miners have fathers and uncles, as well as widowed mothers and aunts on pensions, and they were outraged by the BCOA offer to increase monthly pension benefits to only $275 per month and to add the burden of paying some health care costs under the deductible system. The operators added insult to injury by agreeing to guarantee some health benefits to pensioners only if the UMWA agreed to fine wildcat strikers $20 a day, with the fines going to the retired miners' health fund. Another kind of social wage — the UMWA pension fund — was under attack.

Finally, in its notorious "labor stability" clause, the BCOA demanded a contract provision to punish wildcat strikers and ensure industrial discipline generally. The first proposed contract gave the operators the right to fire any miner who "picketed, threatened, coerced or fomented or otherwise" became involved "in the cause of an unauthorized work stoppage." This is dangerously broad language—very similar to the kind used in court injunctions. Furthermore, the employers demanded the right to fire "some but not all" of the miners engaged in an unofficial strike, giving management new powers to victimize certain militants.

While the BCOA demanded broad rights to discipline wildcat strikers, it also bargained for an incentive scheme to increase production—a form of scientific management miners have always opposed, fearing that this would be an
"incentive" to disregard safety procedures, endangering all miners.

Finally, the operators took aim specifically at the wildcat strikes waged over health and safety issues at the point of production by demanding that members of the mine safety committees be subject to discipline "for closing down an area of a mine or attempting such a closing." This demand made it blatantly obvious that the BCOA drive for "labor stability" and increased productivity would come at the expense of safety.

Shaken by the cuts in the Health and Retirement Funds and the fear that more wildcats would bust the funds completely, Arnold Miller prepared to make major concessions to the BCOA. Labor stability was also necessary for the solvency of the union benefits program. With coal stockpiles high and the BCOA obviously taking a hard line in negotiations, Miller apparently believed the rank and file would settle for wage increases after a short strike. However, rank-and-file opposition quickly surfaced against the plan to use fines against wildcat strikers to compensate for lost revenues to the health and pension funds. When Miller heard from local and district officials that this provision would lead to certain rejection of the contract, he dropped the "payback" scheme. Nonetheless, on February 6 — after the strike had lasted for 60 days which many believed was all the miners could take — Miller presented a contract to the 39-member bargaining council with most of the BCOA's "takeaway" provisions still intact. The bargaining council — now elected rather than appointed — responded to discontent in the ranks and rejected the offer by a wide margin. Having already revealed his weakness to the operators, Miller was unable to win back any of the sacrifices he had made to the BCOA. On March 5, he presented, and the Bargaining Council approved for rank-and-file ratification, a contract that differed little from the one already rejected. After more than three months on strike and with the threat of a Taft-Hartley injunction facing them, the miners were expected to bite the bullet and accept the contract. Miller, claiming that this contract was the best that could be obtained, hired a public relations firm and spent $40,000 from the union's busted treasury to sell the deal to the members. Rank and file were angered by this propaganda, especially because they were receiving little if any strike benefits from the union. They were also suspicious of the summary of the contract circulated by the International, having been burned by a rushed ratification vote in 1974 when they had no time to study the contract. This time around rank-and-file militants in a number of key districts obtained full copies of the contract and publicized its sell-out provisions. Though many pundits predicted a close vote, the UMW membership rejected the offer by a resounding 2 to 1 margin.

Up to this point, the operators had imposed their will on the miners, making dictatorial demands which they backed up with big stockpiles and the assumption that the weakly-led, highly-divided UMW could not take a long strike. They accurately assessed the weakness of the leadership but they underestimated the strength and determination of the rank and file. Though militants did close down some non-union mines and disrupt the flow of scab coal, they found it difficult to spread the strike. They were aided, however, by an unusually severe winter which depleted stockpiles quickly and literally froze the movement of non-union coal along many waterways. The BCOA did not understand that the miners' solidarity and tenacity had actually increased as a result of the long strike, that their cumulative sacrifices made them more determined than ever to hold out. The federal government also ignored the miners' grim determination to "take no backward step" and to refuse to work without a
contract. Presidents had invoked the hated Taft-Hartley Act before only to have the miners defy it, but the defiance of the anti-strike law this March was particularly widespread. Violence between union and scab miners was largely absent from the strike (to the disappointment of the media). But there was clearly a climate of fear created during this strike, especially in heavily-armed areas like West Virginia where all miners know it is very dangerous to cross a picket line. Still the total defiance of Taft-Hartley by union miners indicated that much more than fear was involved in the rank-and-file’s defiance of the federal courts. Though the strike had now become a rank-and-file struggle, it was still holding solid. It was also beginning to receive much more support from other unions around the country, even though most of the big contributions, like the UAW’s $2 million grant, went directly into the International’s coffers. Furthermore, after the 2 to 1 contract rejection and the refusal to obey the court’s back-to-work injunctions, the miners seized the offensive. It was no longer a company lockout. It was a strike that was starting to hurt the corporations.

After the contract rejection on March 5, intense rank-and-file opposition emerged to the new BCOA contract. The offer made some concessions to the workers, but it retained the clauses dismantling the health care system and preserving the inadequate pension system. Travelling in West Virginia during this period we observed the anxiety of the UMWA officials assigned to sell this new contract with its takeaway provisions, the activity of the left, especially the Miners Right to Strike Committee (MRTSC) and the Miners Support Committee in opposing the contract, and the hostility of rank-and-file miners who felt cheated and betrayed. At a March 18 rally sponsored by the two Committees in Beckley, West Virginia, we heard Mike Branch of the MRTSC cheered by a crowd of about 200, including many miners, when he said “I’m tired of being pushed around, shoved around and sold out.” Commenting on the shifting tide of the strike, an eloquent young miner named Doug Riston likened the struggle to the Ali-Spinks heavyweight title fight. The operators won the early rounds of the strike, but the miners came back in the late rounds and landed some serious blows on the owners. On March 24, the bell would ring for the final round. If the UMWA lacked the stamina to carry on the fight the BCOA would win the decision, by a technical knockout. And that’s what happened.

Discouraged by a sell-out leadership and strained by over 100 days without pay, the miners gave in and voted to accept the contract
by a margin of 56 percent with much closer margins in West Virginia, the center of a strong movement to recall Arnold Miller from the presidency. This campaign is probably the work of some of Miller's opportunistic opponents (including the conservatives who backed Leroy Patterson who ran for president in the last election, narrowly losing to Miller), but it taps the strong wave of rank-and-file resentment against the UMWS's leadership that has been building since the ratification of the last contract. A current hit Country & Western record by a Drakesboro, Kentucky, miner says it all: "When Miller signed their contract, he might as well 'been on their side.'" It goes on: *Now all this contract offered us was a raise and a little bit more.*

*With a hospital plan that wouldn't be free like the one we had before.*
*There's a bonus just to end the strike and get back in that mine.*
*And the company's right to fire a man if they catch him on the picket line.*

A *New York Times* columnist remarked on the contempt expressed for the UMWS president in the coal country, which "is all the more poignant because he has, quite literally, set his people free." It is wrong to suggest that Miller did this single-handedly, but he did lead the Miners for Democracy movement which restored the rank-and-file right to vote on the contract and to elect district officials, two reforms that were sources of Miller's difficulties in getting this contract ratified. Although Miller's weak leadership and increasing paranoia (which led him to dismiss most of his reform-oriented staff for "insubordination") are clearly related to the intensity of the rank-and-file agitation in recent years, the press is propagandizing for union oligarchy when it blames Miller for the so-called "anarchy" in the UMWS.*

In selling this contract to the membership, Miller has sold his union down the river and assured an even more determined opposition movement to his leadership. What then is the balance sheet for this strike? Was the contract accepted on March 24 an unmitigated defeat for the miners?

The answer is no, because the resounding rejection of the earlier contract on March 5, and the miners' clear determination to carry the strike on longer, forced some concessions from the BCOA. The result was certainly not a victory for the miners, but through their militancy and tenacity the union's rank and file minimized defeat in a strike which started out with the deck totally stacked against them.

In the contract ratified on March 24 the BCOA granted an increase in wages of roughly 25 cents an hour more per worker. This will amount to a 37 percent increase in labor costs during the life of the contract, during which time profits are expected to increase at many times that rate. Naturally, the operators were willing to give most on the wage front; they admitted this even before the strike started. The idea was to take away the social wage in the benefit area, to make everything dependent upon hourly wages, especially medical care. The BCOA made some concessions on pensions (the pension increase, such as it is, will go into effect now rather than in 1980), but the inadequate monthly pension of $275 remains as does the great inequity in pensions between miners who retired before and after January 11 1976. Health coverage for miners' widows, which would have been available for only one month after death in the rejected contract, will be extended to five years after death in the new contract. This is an important gain, but it is small consolation to the miners and their families for the dismantling of the health fund (and the free clinics) and the establishment of private health insurance plans with deductibles. The latter is clearly the biggest corporate "takeaway" in the contract.

The most important result of the March 5
contract rejection came when the BCOA dropped its threatening "labor stability" clause. The "right to strike" forces succeeded in removing the contract provision disciplining wildcat strikers. However, the operators still have the power to do this under an arbitration ruling handed down on October 10, 1977 by the Abitation Review Board, a body created under the 1974 contract to act as an appeals board in grievance cases. "ARB 108" became a subject of great controversy in the coal fields after the March 5 contract rejection and the withdrawal of the "labor stability" clause. This memorandum, in which the Board upheld a coal company's right to fire miners for setting up an unauthorized picket, does contain some very frightening language:

The case at hand involved picketing. In terms of what is understood in other industries, it is seen as a willful and defiant act on the very fabric woven by both parties for their mutual benefit, and it is thus created as a capital offense.

Inseparably involved, once again, is the Miners' traditional willingness to shut down mines in supposed aid of fellow Miners. Until this begins to be turned around, the passing out of information relating to a dispute even in public places near an affected mine [meaning beyond mine-site entrances] cannot realistically be viewed as the exercise of constitutionally-protected freedom of speech and must be viewed instead as a contractually-improper act of work stoppage inducement.

The BCOA is now forced to rely on this ARB memorandum 108 (which was, amazingly enough, signed by the UMW member of the Board), instead of a contractual provision. So the miners gained an important point. Still, the very existence of ARB 108 is threatening, as is the union leadership's apparent willingness to sacrifice the right to strike and the right to free speech in order to gain labor stability.

In short, the BCOA, though it was forced to drop its labor stability clause, got most of what it wanted in this contract. This included the dismantling of the Health Funds, the right to remove members of the mine safety committees for leading wildcats, and a somewhat different form of the incentive pay system. However, the incentive scheme's likelihood of success is limited by the fact that a majority of miners in each local have to vote to accept the plan. Given the coal diggers' widespread fear that incentive schemes will cause more violations of safety standards, it is doubtful that the BCOA can use this scheme to gain the productivity it wants. It is also unlikely that the employers' power to fire mine safety committeeemen will stop wildcats over unsafe conditions. It is one thing to put something into a contract; it is quite another to enforce it, especially in the coal industry. Both the incentive scheme and the attack on the mine safety committees' autonomy conflict with the coal workers' growing concern over safety and with their traditional ability to defend their "work rules" at the point of production, a tradition discussed in more detail later.

THE RECENT SOURCES OF COAL MINERS' MILITANCY

The militancy and solidarity displayed by the rank-and-file in this long strike comes primarily from the life-and-death nature of the issues and secondarily from the union bureaucracy's apparent willingness to accept big "takeaways" by the companies.

In order to fully understand the rank-and-file militancy in the recent strike, we have to go back to 1969. In January of that year regular miners formed the Black Lung Association in West Virginia to push for a state law compensating victims of the disease which struck most veteran miners. In February and March of the same year rank-and-file miners in West Virginia conducted one of the most important "political"
strikes in modern labor history to protest the need for a black lung law. The awakening within the ranks prompted Joseph “Jock” Yablonski, a Pennsylvania miner, to run against John L. Lewis’s corrupt successor, W.A. “Tony” Boyle. Yablonski ran a strong race against Boyle, charging that Boyle was “in bed with the coal operators.” But the insurgent campaign lost out to the bureaucracy amid charges that the Boyle machine had stolen votes in the December elections. On New Year’s Eve 1969 ‘Jock’ Yablonski, his wife and daughter were murdered by gunmen directed by Tony Boyle. At the Yablonski funeral the Miners for Democracy (MFD) was formed to carry out the fight against Boyle’s obnoxious regime.

The MFD was not at the outset an organization of rank-and-file miners; it was led primarily by attorneys, notably Jock’s sons, who launched a legal attack on the Boyle machine, and by a group of reformers in Charlestown, West Virginia, around the Miner’s Voice, edited by Don Stillman. However, later in 1970 another political wildcat strike in southern West Virginia brought forth another rank-and-file organization, the Disabled Miners and Widows of Southern West Virginia. At the end of the year an MFD slate in Pennsylvania District 5, led by Lou Antal, defeated the Boyle machine. Then a strike at the end of the BCOA-UMWA contract in 1971 led to a confrontation between the rank and file and the leadership for more
strike benefits and a stronger set of contract demands; this scenario would be repeated again over the next two contracts.

Meanwhile the MFD legal strategy, which involved considerable fund raising among eastern liberal donors, began to pay off. A number of court cases were brought forth attempting, among other things, to throw out the results of the 1969 election and to prosecute the Boyle leadership for corruption in using funds. In May of 1972 the courts not only brought down two major decisions awarding district autonomy, but on May Day 1972 Judge Bryant overturned the 1969 election. Later in May, the MFD convention in Wheeling, West Virginia, united the MFD, the Black Lung Association (headed by a retired Cabin Creek miner named Arnold Miller), and the Disabled Miners and Widows Association.

The campaign leading up to the December 1972 election was hard-fought and extremely dangerous, but despite intense red-baiting and threats by the Boyle machine (who used their control over pensions to gain votes from retired miners) the MFD slate headed by Arnold Miller won an inspiring victory with 56% of the vote. Shortly after his election, which Miller claimed as a victory for the rank and file, the MFD was disbanded. More importantly, the Black Lung Association lost some of its independence and was brought under the control of the union leadership. This seemed reasonable at the time since the same man was president of the union and the Black Lung Association. As a result, the rank-and-file militancy in the coal fields dissipated for several years, until the Miller administration negotiated the 1974 contract. Rank-and-file miners in West Virginia actually struck to obtain copies of the contract which they believed to contain “sell-out” provisions. The coal companies were making unprecedented profits and the miners wanted to dig in for a strong fight; they felt betrayed by Miller, as we saw in the last part of Barbara Kopple’s film, “Harlan County, U.S.A.” In the winter of 1975 thousands of miners wildcatted against the contract the Miller administration had negotiated. A massive rank-and-file opposition movement against the UMW leadership had surfaced.

In the summer of 1976 came the most important explosion of militancy within the ranks. Protesting the use of federal court injunctions, arrests and fines against wildcat strikers from the Cedar Coal Company in Kanwaha County, West Virginia, 150,000 miners went out on strike — almost every union member east of the Mississippi. This remarkable nationwide political strike, which elicited cries of “industrial anarchy” from the BCOA, forced the federal judges in Charleston (who did not like to be totally defied) to withdraw their fines and injunctions. It was a great victory for the rank and file.

Arnold Miller, of course, came out against the strike, and blamed its prolongation on a “handful of radicals”, presumably the members of the Revolutionary Communist Party who led the Miners Right to Strike Committee. But when Miller came to West Virginia to speak against the strike, he was jeered in Charlestown and forced to withdraw from his speaking date at

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**UMWA STRIKE AGAINST INJUNCTIONS**

U.M.W.A., LOCAL UNION 1759, CEDAR COAL COMPANY, HAS A FEDERAL INJUNCTION AGAINST THEM. THEY ARE BEING FINED $50,000 AND $25,000 A DAY FOR STRIKING.

WE ARE SICK AND TIRED OF THE FEDERAL COURTS TAKING THE SIDE OF THE COAL OPERATORS. HUNDREDS OF LOCALS ALL THROUGHOUT THE COAL FIELDS KNOW HOW UNJUST THE USE OF FEDERAL INJUNCTIONS ARE.

ALL U.M.W.A. MINERS ARE ASKED TO STRIKE TO STOP THE INJUNCTIONS AND TO END ALL FINES AND SENTENCES.

UMWA paid ad, Charleston Gazette, July 22, 1976.
UMW Local 1759 where this amazing walkout began. In fact, when on August 10, 1976 Miller told a tumultuous meeting at a Charlestown hotel that he could not allow the miners to defy the courts and that they would face certain defeat, he played into the hands of the militants. The strikers not only defied the courts, they forced the federal judges to lift the injunctions and withdraw the fines. According to a Morgantown newspaper the big 1976 wildcat strike ended “only after Miller pledged to seek right to strike provisions” in the 1977-78 contract negotiations.10

THE MINERS RIGHT TO STRIKE COMMITTEE AND THE ROLE OF THE LEFT

As the right to strike sentiment grew stronger in the coal fields the left has played a greater role in politicizing the issue. The main left formation has been the Miners Right to Strike Committee (MRTSC). In the recent strike however, other leftists have been active in miners’ support work, especially in the two West Virginia strike support committees at Beckley and Morgantown.

The Miners Right to Strike Committee emerged from a wildcat in West Virginia during the winter of 1974 when Gov. Arch Moore imposed a gas limit during the fuel crisis, a limit that prevented miners from getting back and forth between home and work. During this strike a young miner from the Beckley area named Mike Branch joined with some disgruntled local officials in southern West Virginia (a hotbed of wildcat strike activity since 1969) and formed the MRTSC. Branch, along with several other young miners who moved into the coal fields from other areas, belonged to the Revolutionary Union (RU), which became the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in October of 1975. Though RU and later RCP members formed the leadership of the Right to Strike Committee, they had support from other militants in the West Virginia coal fields. In November of 1975 members of the Committee joined the march to support the Brookside strikers in Harlan County, where they circulated “right to strike” petitions while organizing some support in eastern Kentucky. (This march is documented, along with an interview with Right to Strike activists toward the end of the film “Harlan County, U.S.A.”)

By this time the MRTSC had already begun to draw fire from the International. In the summer of 1975, when Miller was faced with yet another massive West Virginia wildcat (this one to protect injunctions forcing Logan County miners back to work), the UMW president attacked the Right to Strike Committee after a newspaper story “exposed” RCP leadership of the Committee. Although the Committee did apparently suffer from red-baiting in Kentucky, it remained active in West Virginia. RCP members admitted that they were Communists and insisted that there were non-Communist members in the Committee as well, hoping to undercut the conspiracy theories put forth by the press and the bureaucracy. The MRTSC reportedly made some enemies in the rank and file by insisting that the 1975 wildcat continue until the right to strike was granted, but according to one Committee member, the group maintained enough importance in West Virginia to play an important role in a March 1976 wildcat strike protesting White House delay in signing an amended Black Lung law. By the summer of 1976, when the massive national wildcat strike occurred against the Cedar Creek injunctions, Miller was even less effective in red-baiting the Committee and blaming the strike on a “handful of radicals.” The point is that by this time the MRTSC had been articulating for four years a demand for the right to strike that masses of rank and file miners had already asserted in many places, and
particularly in West Virginia where the Committee was active.

During the recent strike the MRTSC aimed its attack squarely on the labor stability clause in the first two contract offers. When that clause was dropped, it zeroed in on the effects of the ARB 108 decision. The two Miners’ Support Committees, which contain some representation from the MRTSC, placed some very effective advertisements in the West Virginia newspapers emphasizing the “takeaways” by comparing the proposed contract provisions with the “rank and file demands” expressed by delegates at the 1976 UMW district and national conventions. The activities of the two West Virginia support committees, which include the establishment of a remarkable “free clinic” in Beckley, deserve a separate discussion because the organizational activities in question could serve as models for future left strike support work. The relationship of the MRTSC to the Support Committees was problematic throughout the strike, because the red-baiting of the former spread to the latter.

The Southern Support Committee in Beckley, impressed by the principled role played by the MRTSC representatives, decided to sponsor a joint rally against the contract on March 18. There was some concern that the rally would flop because avowed revolutionaries like Mike Branch of the RCP were scheduled to speak. The gathering drew about 200 people to a Beckley school, about half of whom were miners. The rally was a spirited affair with a rousing speech by Branch, appeals from various members of the Support Committee, and a talk by a Georgia farmer named Buddy Jones of the striking American Agricultural Movement who won a standing ovation after urging the miners to hold out. This joint rally was the outcome of a difficult, but fairly successful, effort by the Support Committee to battle red-baiting.

The Revolutionary Communist Party members in the MRTSC have been the object of most of this red-baiting. Their trade-union work in West Virginia has been unusually successful because of the key issue they have chosen to develop — the right to strike — and because they have learned from their mistakes (e.g. they are trying to correct an earlier impression they created that the main problem was Arnold Miller and the other “hacks” in the bureaucracy.) The RCP people in the Committee have tried to raise broader demands, but they have resolutely stuck to trade-union issues, refusing to dilute their appeal for the right to strike by calls for party-building. In many ways RCP politics in West Virginia resemble the early syndicalist phase of the CPUSA during the 1920’s when the Party attempted to build a rank-and-file movement within the AFL through the Trade Union Educational League.

An RCP article entitled Miners Struggle at the Crossroads (based on an article in the December 1977 issue of Revolution) argues that the rank-and-file movement of miners has grown up "spontaneously" and states the classic Leninist criticism of the limitations therein. It then calls, not for building a party, but for "rank-and-file organization." The RCP’s analysis of the massive wildcats is that they are not "clean-cut" affairs, the implication being that they need to be organized. In any case, they are
certainly not “spontaneous” actions. The pamphlet merely mentions the fact that these strikes move from mine to mine with the “stronger locals” becoming “storm centers” that draw “neighboring mines into the struggle.” This leaves the development of wildcat strikes at a very abstract level, and suggests a vacancy of local leadership that communists must fill. Until we know more about the history of militant locals in states like West Virginia—the locals that have initiated wildcats, spread them to other states in 1976, and acted as vanguards in the recent strike—our knowledge of the rank-and-file movement will remain somewhat abstract. We know that strikers in the mine fields take advantage of the traditional antipathy to crossing picket lines, that they can use “stranger” picketing more effectively than other workers, and that the use of CB radios and phone chains has been effective in spreading wildcats, but there is much more to know before any “lessons” can be drawn for rank-and-file movements in other industries. The RCP’s Leninist analysis of the miners’ movement exaggerates its spontaneous origins and dwells on the politicization of that movement in the period since the MRTSC has been involved. It is important to note that the movement began with a remarkable political strike for a black lung law in West Virginia almost ten years ago. However, the RCP does not grossly exaggerate its role or even the role of the Right to Strike Committee (which probably includes about 30-40 members with a few hundred supporters mainly in West Virginia). The influence of the Committee is in fact directly dependent upon the massive, nationwide concern among miners to retain the right to strike.

MINERS AND THE WILDCAT STRIKE

The Miners Right to Strike Committee’s attempt to politicize wildcat strikes and to use them as a flashpoint for organizing a rank-and-file movement is based on the rising level of unauthorized strike activity since the ratification of the 1974 contract. Of course, the pattern of unofficial strike activity goes back much further in the history of the industry. Ever since the UMWA started engaging in nationwide collective bargaining, its officers have pledged to discipline wildcat strikers, but local strikes still occurred frequently over issues not covered in the contract. Before 1943, many of these strikes went unrecorded, but in that year, when the miners defied the federal government in four national strikes (each time violating the wartime “no strike” pledge), the number of newly-recorded unauthorized work stoppages increased to 400, including many over local grievances. In 1944 there were 792 stoppages mostly of a local nature, and for the next decade between 400 and 600 such stoppages occurred each year. During this time there were also seven “official” industry-wide strikes, including the 59-day walkout in 1946 that established the Health and Pension Funds, and the 1949 strike in defiance of the Taft-Hartley injunction. 11

Between 1952 and 1964, when hundreds of thousands of miners lost their jobs as a result of mechanization and competition from other fuels, Lewis, who accepted the need for mechanization, authorized only two national work stoppages. Unauthorized work stoppages averaged less than 200 per year during this period, though the coal miners still struck at three times the national average despite heavy layoffs in the industry. This differential grew even wider in the 1960’s as the number of work stoppages in soft coal shot up from 160 in 1966 to 266 in 1968 and then to 457 in 1969, the same year that West Virginia coal miners launched their famous “political” strike to force the state legislature to pass a black lung law. 12 With the rank-and-file agitation around black lung, the assassination of reform candidate Jock Yablonski and the organization of the Miners for Democracy,
work stoppages increased even more dramatically. Five hundred work stoppages took place in 1970, when the mines were shut down following the Yablonski murders in January and through the efforts of the independent Disabled Miners and Widows organization protesting inadequate compensation from the UMW's welfare and retirement fund. "Both of these strikes might be classified as political strikes," according to a report of the Labor Studies Institute of the University of West Virginia, "although they were directed more at the internal affairs of the union than toward broader political goals." Of course these strikes against the union were of great importance, as was the 1969 black lung strike, because they signalled the politicization of the rank-and-file miners struggle.

An unusually high number of the mine work stoppages since World War II have been local wildcat strikes. Between 1966 and 1970 most strikes in U.S. industry took place during renegotiation of the contract with a third or less occurring during the term of the agreement, but Appalachian miners struck 93 percent of the time during the term of the contract. In addition to the health and benefit strike protests, miners struck increasingly over safety issues, alarmed no doubt by the 1968 explosion at the CONSOL mine in Farmington, West Virginia that killed 78 miners.

In addition to the growing concern over safety in the mines (which still have the highest fatality rates in U.S. industry), a number of other issues have contributed to the rising level of wildcatting.

A new generation of workers has entered the mines. The average age of the mine worker has decreased from 49 in 1968 to around 31 today. In fact, there is a gap between the generations with many middle-aged miners in one group and many miners in their early 20's in another. There is no hard evidence to support this but it does seem that the younger miners who have entered the pits in the 1970's (instead of leaving for the city as their older brothers did in the 1950's and 1960's) are more heavily involved in wildcat strike activity, especially in the larger mines where young miners compose most of the midnight to 8 a.m. "hoot owl shift." Along with this very young group are miners in their early 30's who are Viet Nam vets (West Virginia had the highest per capita fatality rate during the Indo-China war). Like the well-publicized long-haired workers who revolted against GM at Lordstown in 1972, these workers are willing and able to buck the authority of mine foremen and managers whose corporations are pushing for more and more productivity in time of high profitability. Coal company profits increased 100% between 1970 and 1974 while miners wages gained by only 7%. The operators' reckless drive for productivity and profitability has all but sabotaged grievance procedure.

After nearly 30 years of working through the same grievance procedure, the 1971 contract introduced some reforms. Serious problems result because miners a) could not have representation at the first stage of the procedure, b) only had three grievers on the mine committee, an inadequate number to ensure work-place representation in today's large-scale, multiple shift mines, c) were prohibited from discussing grievances on company time, and d) experienced long delays in the grievance procedure, which forced miners to substitute the wildcat strike for the grievance procedure. There has been a tendency, according to the West Virginia University study of work stoppages, to "view the grievance procedure, not as a flexible tool through which bargaining over issues which arise on a day-to-day basis takes place, but as a formal, almost judicial procedure for settling conflicts.... It may well be that that emphasis on procedure rather than on problem solving is so entrenched in the labor relations of this industry that no changes are possible. If this
is so, the grievance procedure will continue to fail as substitute for the wildcat strike.” Since 1971 that failure has been manifested in an increasing level of wildcat strike activity that cost the industry 2.5 million “man-days” of labor in 1977. A union official who defends members in grievance procedures at the arbitration level told us: “The companies are still using the grievance procedure the wrong way; they use it to delay issues. These corporation lawyers just don’t look into the human factors in a grievance.”

Work relations in the coal industry have never been good. This sector has been a nightmare to industrial relations experts since the turn of the century. Various craft traditions and work rules established a form of job control at the pit face which protected the miners’ rights until the 1930’s when mechanization radically altered work relations in the mines. Miners now work under factory-like supervision with a higher ratio of foremen to workers than in most manufacturing industries. Under these circumstances miners have preserved few of their traditional “freedoms” — like the right to stop working when a foreman entered the “room” and the right to establish their own quitting times — but some of the old work rules have been preserved in union contracts. The three-man mine committee is now inadequate for handling grievances (for the reasons mentioned above), but it, along with the safety committees established more recently, retained more power at the work place than most shop stewards in other industries who have stopped working full-time to become paid trouble shooters. The BCOA contract demand to make mine committeemen subject to discharge for “bad conduct” is the most recent, and most blatant corporation attempt to gain full control over miners at the point of production.

The entry of younger, less “disciplined” miners has not only exacerbated the troubles caused by the deterioration of work relations and the destruction of the grievance machinery, but it has also contributed to a continued weakening of the work discipline that forced miners to work even when they were exhausted, injured, undernourished and fearful for their safety. The abolition of the piece-rate system and the introduction of mechanized day work undercut the miners’ traditional freedom to control the pace and length of the working day free from company supervision. But the system of measured day work — combined with the hourly wage increases the UMW has won from a booming coal industry — now gives the miners more choice about whether or not to work for a full week’s time. Rising absenteeism and wildcat striking have hurt the U.S. coal industry productivity (though it is still five times higher in the U.S. than in other countries where the safer “long wall” mining method is used.) As a result the BCOA’s initial contract demands this year included severe measures designed to reduce work irregularity and increase productivity: a) the right to discharge any miner who takes two consecutive work days off without permission; b) establish a joint UMW-Industry Development Committee with an annual budget of up to $100,000 to study labor relations and productivity problems; c) institute productivity-incentive programs with rewards for exceeding productivity quotas; d) allow for operating mines on Sundays and holidays; 3) allow the company to set shift starting times, previously governed by past practice and custom; and f) prevent any new holidays with pay.

MINERS’ CULTURE

Here cultural traditions come into play. Relatively isolated in rural sections of Appalachia and other poor states, the coal miners have not been immersed as completely in the consumer culture as have other workers. They are still closer to their rural roots than the Appalachians who have migrated to Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago. Living in the hollows is
cheaper and simpler than it is in the cities and suburbs. This may be related to the difficulty the corporations have experienced in forcing miners to accept the "wage trick" (i.e. individualized wage increases instead of collectivized benefits). The isolation of miners' communities may also be connected with their seeming imperviousness to public opinion, press coverage and government pressure during strike situations. While the isolation of the coal miners in one-industry towns may in fact be connected to their ability to hold out in long strikes, it is wrong to accept the academic sociological theory that cultural isolation in itself is the reason for the miners' "high propensity to strike." This theory conveniently assigns miners, along with lumber workers, sailors and other groups of isolated workers, to a marginal status, so that their class-conscious behavior appears as a "deviant" form of behavior." Ben A. Franklin, who covered the strike for the New York Times, bought this theory. In an article headlined: "Coal Strikers: Mountain Men are Clannish, Combative," he emphasizes the miners' backwardness and the "Celtic ethnicity" of the Appalachian miners. "In the Anglo-Saxon — not to say Druid — heritage of the southern mountain coal towns, there is still xenophobic uneasiness about 'furriners' who work in other fields." Franklin de-emphasizes the class consciousness in the miners militancy by reducing that militancy to
an expression of clannish, mountaineer hostility to outsiders. 20

The theory of strike propensity based upon isolation, ethnicity and backwardness is an inadequate explanation of miners' militancy today. First of all the coal towns are not nearly as isolated now as they were even two decades ago. More to the point, many miners have worked in other parts of the country, notably Midwestern industrial cities, and have returned to the mines since production increased in the 1970's. They are not clannish backwoodsman. Secondly, the emphasis on the miners' combative Celtic ethnicity is misplaced. As coal industry historian Keith Dix pointed out to us, the tradition of the local strike, and the combative that went with it, came more from the ethnically mixed Pennsylvania and Illinois fields than from the southern mountain mining areas. Furthermore, even in Appalachia many blacks and eastern Europeans joined the Anglo-Saxon natives in the mines. Finally, these native-born white miners showed an unusual willingness to cooperate with black and foreign-born miners in order to fight the companies and to form industrial unions. Indeed, the isolated, clannish miners of rural Alabama and Appalachia showed much more willingness to work in common with Afro-Americans than did the white workers in modernized, cosmopolitan areas. 21

This is not to say that the miners' culture is irrelevant to their strong traditions of resistance. There is a proud mountaineer culture which even outsiders absorb after a few generations: West Virginia and Kentucky have a particularly vital mountain musical tradition to which the many fighting miners' songs are deeply indebted. This is also a gun culture where hunting is a favorite pastime. Of course the fact that miners are able and if necessary willing to use firearms means that West Virginians and Kentuckians have been more likely to resort to armed struggle against gun thugs, police and strikebreakers than other workers.

Political traditions are also important. West Virginia, for example, was unionized much later than some of the other coal fields. Because the UMWA came so late to West Virginia, it presented itself much more as an institutionalized collective-bargaining organization which would bring the benefits of a national contract to the hollows, but would allow for little self-organization or local autonomy. Since the International was so unresponsive to the serious local grievances of West Virginia miners, these workers held on to the right to strike during the term of a national contract. The bitterness of the conflict in this state, which actually involved large-scale armed struggle after World War I, made miners more outraged than most when UMWA leaders, like President John P. White (1912-17), took jobs with the coal companies. Led by the militant Frank Feeney, West Virginia UMWA districts also opposed the growing dictatorship of John L. Lewis in the 1920's. In short, to explain the militancy of miners in West Virginia or elsewhere, we must look beyond "variables" like cultural isolation put forth by sociologists who hope that "modernization" will finally bring "labor stability" to the coal fields.

TRADITIONS OF SOLIDARITY

Unlike other craftsmen who used the job control they exercised to form exclusionary craft unions, the skilled miners allied with unskilled helpers and surface workers to form their industrial union in 1890. And from that point the United Mine Workers of America was one of the country's most militant unions when it came to organizing the unorganized. The rising level of miners' strike activity in the 1880's resulted from violations of accepted rules and practices, and payment systems during a period of vast productive expansion. Strikes were not motivated simply by economic wage demands nor
were they regulated according to the business cycle, as most academics believed. Miners engaged in an increasing number of "control strikes" — issues of union recognition, work rules and conditions. In order to defend their traditional freedoms against mechanization and rationalization, skilled miners allied with other workers, like helpers and drivers. In other words, by the time the UMWA was founded miners had already seen the necessity of solidarity among all grades of workers around "general and inclusive demands" as distinct from the narrow, exclusive craft union demands. 22

As the mining industry was further consolidated under the aegis of the rail and steel corporations, miners saw the need for strike unity among workers who labored in different mines and in different regions. The formation of a national industrial coal miners union in 1890 was a necessity for workers pitted against the country's biggest corporations. For example, in 1902 all of the anthracite miners in the country walked out in one of the most important national strikes of the era, forcing President Theodore Roosevelt to threaten seizure of the mines if the corporations did not make some concessions to the union. The unusual nationwide unity displayed by miners from Alabama to Pennsylvania in this current strike testifies to the survival of industrial union traditions of solidarity.

Industrial unionism also opened the miners' organization to black and immigrant miners. It also helped to make UMW members receptive to the appeals of the Socialist Party in the 1910's. The Debsian Socialists, who successfully introduced a resolution at the 1911 UMW convention favoring the "collective ownership and democratic management of the means of production," believed that the miners' brand of industrial unionism was "socialism with its working clothes on." 23 John L. Lewis's iron-handed control over the union in the 1920's and his purging of socialists, did a lot to subvert this vision of industrial unionism; but the UMW's vision was restored in the 1930's, as Lewis did an about face, and helped make the Miners' Union the champion of the unorganized and the foundation of the new CIO unions. Since World War II and the drop in UMW membership from 600,000 in 1946 to about one-third that number today, the pioneer industrial union has lost much of its power and prestige.

Furthermore, with the emergence of collective bargaining for national contracts, locals and even district bodies lost their voice in deciding union policies. "Within a very narrow context," writes one historian, "the centralization of decision-making within the union can be justified — most industries are themselves concentrated and corporate labor policies are rarely determined by local plant management. It takes large centralized power on the part of unions to deal with large aggregates of industrial capital. . . ." 24 Further, industrial unions have often been led by "strong men" who justified their power as a necessity in dealing more effectively with big business: they were the Hillmans, Dubinskys, Reuthers, and John L. Lewises. Indeed, there is no better example of how the contradiction between national collective bargaining and union democracy was played out than Lewis's nearly 40 years as UMW president. During the 1920's Lewis shrewdly and ruthlessly purged his enemies in the various districts, including socialists like Alex Howatt, and his main rival, John Brophy of Pennsylvania. During a reorganization drive in 1933, Lewis brought two-thirds of all UMWA district offices under control of the International: Lewis argued that administrative efficiency and collective bargaining power conflicted with district autonomy. In 1936, when discussing the direct election of district officials, Lewis stated: "It is a question of whether you desire your organization
to be the most effective instrumentality within the realm of possibility... or whether you prefer to sacrifice the efficiency of your organization... for a little more academic freedom in the selection of some local representatives in a number of districts."

Many UMW members today believe that Lewis was right — that he had to assume nearly dictatorial powers in order to reorganize the union and help launch the CIO against some of the most brutal corporations in the country. In any case, Lewis's legacy to industrial unionism remains a contradictory one. Today President Arnold Miller attempts to maintain the contradictory position of pursuing the nationwide pattern of collective bargaining as well as continuing to push himself as the reformer who ousted Tony Boyle and helped the rank and file regain the right to ratify the contract, to enjoy district autonomy, and to elect their district officials. Of course Miller is a much weaker leader than John L. Lewis. Who isn't? But many of Miller's troubles flow from the fact that he is trying to pursue the traditional pattern of nationwide collective bargaining while allowing for a level of union democracy and district autonomy Lewis would have found inconceivable.

So the miners' current militancy can hardly be tied directly to the legacy of Lewis, though the UMW "godfather" is still remembered for his "no backward step" policy and his defiance of federal government power. Therefore the legacy of the national industrial union — so thoroughly shaped by Lewis's 40-year reign — is also of dubious significance, even though traditions of industrial union solidarity remain alive.

In the hand-loading piecework era which lasted up to the 1930's the isolated, irregular work of the skilled miner allowed for an amazing degree of control at the point of production where "company men" were few and far between. When it signed its first national contract, the UMW was required to penalize members for lack of discipline and irregularity, but the union refused to enforce contractual rules and allowed the customary work rules to prevail. In 1921 the journal *Industrial Management* advised factory owners not to hire miners because of their lack of discipline. In the mines, "the possibility of constant supervision or of surprise tests does not exist. The coal miner is accordingly trained to do as he pleases.... Transplant such a man into a factory where production is speeded and no imagination is required to picture what will happen."

"There are many other things also in the daily life of miners that make for their solidarity,'
Goodrich wrote, referring to the amount of time miners had to socialize while not working or when traveling to and from work on the “man trip.” By the late 1920’s mechanized production was extending into the union fields and undermining the sources of miners’ job control by making mine work more factory-like and more subject to close supervision. However, scientific management has never been very successful in the mines. Mining is still such a varied, difficult task that it has been impossible for management to take all of the decision-making power away from miners on the job.

Though mechanized production has taken away some of the skilled miners’ traditional freedoms, social solidarity has remained as part of the job. It still takes miners a long time to get to and from the pitface; work is still somewhat less regular than assembly-line production, and still somewhat difficult to supervise. And of course mining is still extremely dangerous. The hazardous nature of the work continues to unite workers on the same shift and in the same mine. In many smaller union locals, like the famous Brookside local in Harlan County, this unity is reflected in strike solidarity.

It would be romantic to suggest however that unity in coal strikes comes easily and naturally because of the collective danger miners face. Miners are also a very individualistic bunch whose unity has to be obtained through organization. In the 19th century coal mining was one of the trades in which workers were especially proud of their “manliness”, often engaging in bloody fights against the operators’ gunmen. “The craftsmen’s ethical code demanded a ‘manly’ bearing toward the boss,” writes one historian. “Few words enjoyed any more popularity in the nineteenth century than this honorific, with all its connotations of dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy.” Displaying “manliness” in dealing with one’s fellow workers was as important as it was in confronting the bosses. “Undermining or conniving” at another man’s job was considered “hoggish behavior.” For example in the early work rules of the UMWA was imbedded the “principle of the square turn, or equal distribution of mine cars” expressing the traditional miners’ feeling that each man “ought to get a fair share of the work that is going.” Stealing another man’s car or his coal, or endangering other brothers with dangerous work habits was not only considered “unmanly” behavior; it constituted grounds for expulsion from the union. In this sense the quality of “manliness” was associated not only with male supremacy but with the rights and freedoms a “freeborn” American workingman ought to defend. Of course, the traits of bravado and
macho were also involved, and indeed they still are, because many miners still feel the need to prove themselves as “men” before the bosses, their fellow workers, and their families.

Needless to say, there are many negative results of this especially in personal lives. When these “manly” qualities are combined with the strong individualism of many miners, there can be disastrous results ranging from ignorance of safety rules to performance of lone acts of terrorism. Only a few women are now working in the mines, but maybe they will bring some changes, because mining is one of the job’s most clearly stereotyped as “man’s work.” The male culture of the miner helps explain a sense of solidarity and combativity at the work place level and the local union level, but the wider support culture created by mining families and communities is far more important in this regard.

The role played by women in this strike and in mining strikes down through the years
deserves special treatment in and of itself. Suffice it to say in this context that the unusual militancy of women in mining communities has made a critical difference in many struggles. The historical record shows these women playing far more than a supportive role; they have been a vanguard in violent confrontations with scabs, police, and gun thugs. This was certainly the case in the Brookside strike, as depicted in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* The music of Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Hazel Dickens expresses a cumulative sense of class hatred that has built up in union families for generations, but the music also shows that the women are fighting for themselves as well as their men and their children.

The particularly important role played by female militants during the strike shown in *Salt of the Earth* led to confrontations over women's role in the mining community. In the Brookside strike, where some women emerged out of the family context to take roles as community
leaders, conflicts developed again over the women’s roles in a strike situation in which many of the miners believed their “manhood” was “on the line.” These confrontations of course develop out of a sort of family solidarity that has traditionally been unique to mining communities.

Finally, the kind of community support the miners often achieve not only helps them hold out in long strikes but also increases their militancy. There was strong community solidarity within late 19th-century mining towns against the actions of the alien, absentee-owned corporations, often controlled by railroads. Farmers and merchants, as well as doctors, lawyers, preachers, and even law officers, took the side of the miners against the bosses, because they too were threatened by the company-controlled town in which independent proprietors would be restricted or eliminated. The petty bourgeoisie in the mining camps was also closely connected to the mining families through commercial ties (the miners were their only clients or customers) and through kinship ties (many saloon keepers, etc. were retired miners). So these people often extended the miners credit, and even joined them in battle against the company’s forces. This tradition seems to have held up as well. As the New York Times reported, the “miners’ ability to weather a long strike is aided by merchants’ support and credit.” A grocer on Cabin Creek in West Virginia said the miners there “were good, honest people, but they’ve had to fight for everything they’ve got. They’re our people and we have to help them anyway we can. Nobody’s going hungry in this valley if I can help it.”

During the great mining strikes of this century and the last the middle class in mining communities has frequently faced a polarized situation, a violent situation of class conflict in which they chose to stand with the miners when asked: “Which Side Are You On?”

CONCLUSION
To return then to the questions raised at the outset: it seems that the long strike of 1977-78 was not an unmitigated defeat, but rather a bitter rank and file struggle in which the miners minimized the defeats the operators tried to inflict upon them.

What will the future bring? Many UMWA members fear that the union itself is in danger, not because of internal “anarchy” as the press would have it, but because the “takeaways” in this context will make it even more difficult to organize non-union mines. At the moment only about one-half the coal mined in the U.S. is union coal. Only a severe winter, freezing several inland waterways, prevented the movement of sufficient non-union coal to break the strike. By 1980, when the UMWA begins to negotiate its next contract, an even higher percentage of the coal mined will be non-union coal.

The miners’ defiance of Taft-Hartley has again been shown in their refusal to give up the right to strike in the face of government repression; this might serve as an important lesson to other workers. Furthermore, the strike prevented the BCOA from establishing a routine contractual process for firing wildcat strikers. However, under the protective umbrella of the ARB 108 decision, operators will be able to move against the “instigators” of unofficial work stoppages. The wildcat strike trend will probably ebb as the miners recover from their long strike. But the guerilla warfare at the point of production may actually increase as companies try to enforce industrial discipline to gain the productivity increase they were denied under the last contract.

Arnold Miller’s leadership, badly shaken as a result of the last contract ratification, is now the subject of scorn and hostility throughout the coal fields. While the rank and file displayed remarkable unity during the 1977-78 strike, the leaders fell out with each other. The movement
to recall Miller will probably fail, and it remains to be seen if leaders will emerge on a district level who are more responsive to the demands of the rank and file, especially the demand for the right to strike. If Miller himself is to retain any credibility, he will have to move radically in the next few years, perhaps in the direction of organizing the unorganized.

In any case, whatever happens to the UMW leadership and whatever happens to company policy vis-a-vis wildcats, the rank-and-file coal miners are in an unusually strong position to make their own history. Though great losses were sustained in this strike, one does not get the sense that the miners returned to work as defeated men. Frustrated and angry, yes, but not defeated.

The author thanks all of the people in West Virginia who took the time and effort to discuss the current strike and the political work connected with it. Thanks also to Margery Davies and Priscilla Long for good advice, and to Frank Brodhead for his vital help with interviewing, researching, and editing.

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4. Linda and Paul Nyden, “Showdown in Coal: A Miner’s Report Pamphlet,” *Pittsburg*, 1978, p. 17. It seems likely that the big steel companies who own the captive mines and are so dependent upon coal as a fuel source are behind this new effort to bring totalitarian control to the workplace. After the defeat of Sadowski’s right-to-strike forces in the recent United Steel Workers election, the companies now enjoy a non-strike contract with the union under the Experimental Negotiating Agreement. The steel corporations, who ran their captive mining towns like concentration camps until the early 30’s, would clearly like to impose this pattern on the coal mining industry. What’s more, they are especially dependent upon the high-quality bituminous coal mined only in Appalachia and Southern Illinois, the most militant wildcat-prone of all the coal fields.


12. The Institute for Labor Studies report concludes the following after studying the statistics from 1953 to 1970: “The percentage of all workers involved in work stoppage in the coal industry was fifteen times greater than the percentage of workers involved in all U.S. (non-coal) strikes.”

   During this same period 3.3 percent of workers in industries other than coal were involved in work stoppages on an average, increased from a low point of 1.6% in 1963 to 4.4% in 1970. In bituminous coal an average of 49.5 percent of all workers engaged in strikes over the same period, increasing from a low point of 15.2 in 1961 to an amazing 170.9 percent in 1969. The reason that the percentage could exceed 100 is that some miners engaged in more than one work stoppage in a given year. Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, the most unionized states, had the biggest percentage of miners involved in work stoppages, while Tennessee, still an open shop state, had the lowest.

13. Ibid., pp. 5, 10, 13.

14. Ibid., p. 9. It is difficult to measure the incidence of strikes over safety questions, because they are often listed under other causes. In fact, what the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports as the “issue in a work stoppage may not, in fact, be the basic cause of that stoppage. For example, a local strike may occur and the reported issue might be the company’s discharging of a mine worker. The facts behind the situation might show that the employee was discharged because he refused to obey working orders from his foreman. The facts might show further that the reason the particular worker refused to follow orders was that he believed that if he did so he would jeopardize his own safety.” A safety strike might therefore be listed as a work stoppage caused by a discipline problem. Ibid., p. 27.

15. Ibid., p. 71. Also see Keith Dix on miners’ wildcats in *People’s Appalachia* (Winter, 1972-73), pp. 22-24.


23. On the Socialist Party influence in the UMW during the 1910's see John H.M. Laslett, Labor and the Left, (New York, 1970), chapter VI. In the Southwest where the Socialists controlled two UMW districts in this period the Socialist Party established its earliest and strongest locals in the mine union locals where UMW struggles had already established some solidarity across lines of race, nationality and skill. See James R. Green, Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943 (Baton Rouge, La., 1978), chapter V.


25. Ibid.


27. David Montgomery, "Workers' Control and Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century," Labor History XVIII (Fall, 1976), p. 491. For an excellent first-hand account of the miners' pit face control and their informal work rules, see John Brophy, A Miner's Life, (Madison, Wis., 1964), chapter IV.


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THE TEN-MILLIONTH FORD

MARKING IT WITH NUMBER 10,000,000

COMING DOWN THE MOTOR ASSEMBLY LINE

THE FINAL ASSEMBLY

AND HERE IT IS. READY TO RUN
THE COMING OF THE LINE
The Ford Highland Park Plant, 1910-1914

Jack Russell

Ford, we are twelve: oh make us one
   Like drops within the social river.
O make us now together run
   As swiftly as thy shining flivver
—Song of the Alphas and Betas
   In Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World

The enquiries conducted by the industrialists into the workers’ private lives and the inspection services created by some firms to control the ‘morality’ of their workers are necessities of the new methods of work. People who laugh at these initiatives (failures though they were) and see in them only a hypocritical manifestation of ‘puritanism’ thereby deny themselves any possibility of understanding the importance, significance and objective import of the American phenomenon, which is also the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man.

—Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks

Please, Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line.
Please, Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line.
You know I don’t mind workin’, but I do mind dyin’
—a blues by Joe L. Carter,
   popular in Detroit in the 1960s
As Detroit entered the 20th century the city already possessed much of the industrial capacity and skilled workforce which the early auto makers would require. But the 46,000 wage earners of the turn of the century Detroit were not easily controlled servants at the beck and call of employers. Although one-third of the city’s people were foreign born, the majority of these were from Germany and Great Britain, where strong labor movements had no doubt influenced many of the skilled workers who settled in Detroit. They and their Yankee brethren had formed several craft unions in the preceding twenty years. The Council of Trades and Labor Unions included representatives from the carpenters, metal polishers, iron moulders, core makers, and machinists. These craftsmen were usually able to control the conditions under which they worked, including the pace of production.

In the early 1900s perhaps 12,000 Detroit wage earners—about ¼ of the total—were skilled workers organized in craft unions. Their strength was a serious problem for the leading businessmen of the city whose plans for Detroit’s future greatness and their own future profits depended on a subordinate workforce and steady production. Knowing they must break the power of the skilled workers, manufacturers in particular industries had tried to organize associations. In 1902, spurred on by an unprecedented national strike wave and the recent successes of local unions, they formed a unified Employers’ Association of Detroit (E.A.D.).

In the spirit of their official motto, “Prevention is Greater than Cure,” the E.A.D. began a campaign to crush the unions and make Detroit the most open shop city in America. The new unity of the bosses allowed them to establish firm control of the labor market. In clash after clash they refused to meet with union representatives, and discharged and blacklisted union men. Where necessary, they locked the workers out and hired new hands. Their paid spies reported regularly from the shop floor. Their press tried to mould public opinion. Their banks could foreclose a worker’s mortgage.

The best weapon of the E.A.D. was its Labor Bureau, established in 1903. The Bureau kept vital information on as many Detroit workingmen as it could. Where was he employed? What was his trade and ability? Did he “get along” with his fellow workers? Was he a “trouble maker,” that is, pro-union? Would a given employer rehire him? Within a few years the E.A.D. had records on 40,000 workers and could act as an employment agency for members who needed scab labor.

The employers were aided in their battle by a severe national recession in the mid-1900s and by technological developments which eroded the power of the skilled workers. The Panic of 1907 brought two years of harsh times. Though Detroit was less hard hit than elsewhere, local workers knew there were few jobs in other cities and were reluctant to risk their steady wages resisting the E.A.D. offensive. Still worse were the effects of rationalization. As new machinery was developed to do particular tasks previously performed by a multi-talented craftsman, his “property” in his skill was reduced. Each year there were fewer all-around machinists and more specialized operators who could handle only one specific machine. The union-run apprentice systems which had produced the craftsmen and controlled the supply of skilled labor were dying out, and the craft unions themselves were being divided into smaller and weaker parts.

From 1907 on the employers of Detroit consolidated their victory. In August of that year the Board of Commerce informed the immigration authorities at Ellis Island that Detroit factories were eager to employ the eastern and southern Europeans now pouring into America in record numbers. The E.A.D. made sure the
state legislature passed laws favorable to management, kept a watchful eye on any radical agitation in the city, and concentrated on recruiting both workers and entire corporations to Detroit. Eager to enjoy the benefits of the open shop guaranteed by the E.A.D., many major manufacturers relocated in Detroit during the 1900s. The Burroughs Adding Machine Corporation, the Timken Company, and Packard Motors packed up their best workers and their families and moved *en masse* to Detroit. These new arrivals, the older Detroit industries, and the expanding auto companies all needed hands. The E.A.D. advertised in the newspapers of nearly 200 North American cities advising both skilled workers and immigrant laborers to seek jobs in booming Detroit.

They came. The city swelled to 500,000 by 1911, to 600,000 by 1914, to nearly a million by the end of the decade. Buckwheats, unneeded sons of midwestern and Ontario farm families, came because the land held no future for them. Bright kids who had learned part of a trade in some Ohio, Indiana or Illinois town came looking for a ladder up in auto. Men who had worked in the great forests of northern Michigan and in the sawmill towns of Saginaw, Bay City and Muskegon retreated to Detroit as the white pine bonanza died with the timberlands. After 1917, war mobilization brought southern blacks in large numbers for the first time. Immigrant workers who had already endured a few years in Pennsylvania coal fields, as gandy dancers on the rail lines, or as day laborers in urban construction moved to Detroit hoping for more dollars and less drudgery.

They were joined by countrymen who had just reached America. The great majority were refugees uprooted by the collapse of peasant societies in southern and eastern Europe. Rapid increases in population, excessive subdivision of the land, the invasion of a money economy, and the beginning of world trade in agricultural staples had doomed their once self-sufficient villages. Men came to the United States to work hard, save all, and return with enough to begin again. Some made the voyage home, but more remained in the industrial towns of America. The older immigrant groups expanded as well, as thousands of British, Scandinavian, Belgian and Austrian nationals found their way to Detroit. Detroit became a jumble of factories and warehouses, old neighborhoods that housed different peoples every few years and new city blocks which only month before had been dirt roads and empty fields.

Life could be cruel in the crowded districts. Of every 1,000 children born, 186 died in their first year. There were some forces of stability. The Poles, the first, largest, and best established of the "new" immigrant groups, had their Church and an extensive school system. Other arrivals founded benevolent societies and cultural associations. But churches and national halls were always outnumbered by saloons (legal until 1917, more profitable thereafter) and brothels in a city where men would exceed women by over 85,000 in 1920.

From this mass of uprooted, unorganized immigrants and migrants divided by experience, custom, faith and language, the Ford Motor Company recruited the workers who manned the Highland Park Plant during its first historic decade.

During the last decade of the 19th century the managers of American industry intensified their quest for increased production and efficiency as they battled for bigger shares of new national and international markets. The managers' offensive took many different forms but always had one basic objective: to establish their complete control over the planning, processes, and pace of work. Bosses began to regard management as a science which could transform the ways in which their employees labored. They undertook a full "rationalization of produc-
tion,” a necessarily general, imprecise phrase which describes the cumulative effect of many changes. Rationalization meant breaking the power of highly skilled workers where they monopolized knowledge of technique and used this advantage to enforce their own pace of work. Rationalization eliminated much work done by skilled craftsmen by simplifying individual tasks. Machines were developed which combined many different functions while the actions which the workers performed were divided and divided again until each did a minutely specialized rote job. Rationalization required breaking down the laborers’ resistance to new forms of work. Experts in scientific management emerged whose function was to habituate reluctant workers to the new mode of production. As rationalization proceeded a deep division was produced. The planning aspects of labor were separated from the actual performance of the work, conception was divorced from execution, thought from action. The disjunction established two distinct levels of worker: the highly skilled engineers and machine builders whose labor was creative, and those who did the endlessly repetitive rote jobs whose labor and lives were degraded.

Rationalization did not come to American industry all at once. It was a long campaign with many battles. For every open, bloody conflict such as the Homestead Steel strike of 1892 there were a thousand shopfloor skirmishes. No one episode was decisive. None was more significant, however, than the institution of mass production at Highland Park. The event has become a commonplace of our official national history. Nearly every textbook devotes a page and a picture to the birth of the mass-produced Model T Ford. Yet for all this attention, few have explored what should be considered the most important question one can ask about the advent of rationalized auto production: how did the workers react? 1

The Ford employees at the Highland Park Plant during the 1910-1920 era were the first workers subjected to the assembly line. Who were they? What did they do? What can we learn from their experience? These are not easy questions to answer. They left few personal records during those years. But we try, because their lives were important. 2 Millions now labor as they did. They were the first, the shock troops, witnesses, victims and combatants at the coming of the line.

DETROIT: 1910

Why was Detroit, rather than any of the other early auto centers, the city which became preeminent? Two factors were crucial: the industrial foundation which already existed in the area, and the victorious war the major employers waged to make the city an “open shop” town.

In the years after the Civil War Detroit had become a city based on light industry. Here people made men’s clothing and shoes, slaughtered and shipped beef and pork, and turned Michigan’s hardwood forests into furniture. The surrounding farm lands yielded seeds which were marketed throughout the world. Several drug firms made Detroit a pharmaceutical center. Numerous tobacco-processing factories located in the “Tampa of the North.”

From the 1880s on heavier industry became more important. Late 19th century Detroit was stove maker to the nation. The Michigan, Detroit and Peninsular Stove Companies employed thousands, many of them skilled pattern makers, electroplaters, iron moulders, metal polishers and sheet metal workers. Detroit also built most of the rolling stock for the great western rail lines which stretched to the Pacific. The railroad car works were the city’s largest employers until the auto boom. After a series of mergers typical of the centralization of enterprise in the 1890s, the Detroit shops became
part of the national American Car and Foundry Company, which employed 6,000 locally at the
turn of the century. Most of these men were
unskilled laborers. The Polish immigrants who
began arriving in large numbers in the 1890s
sought jobs in the car works as an escape from
lower-paying street paving and sewer digging.
Building the rolling stock required skilled hands
in the machine shop and foundry, however.
These men were available to the fledgling auto
makers.

As the cities and towns along the Great Lakes
grew rapidly in the 1890s, so did traffic on the
Lakes. Detroit became the leading supplier of
commercial and pleasure vessels for the great
inland waterway. Several firms were consoli-
dated as the Detroit Shipbuilding Company in
1899. Their yards at the Orleans Street wharf
and in Wyandotte employed 1,500 men, most of
them highly skilled craftsmen. The marine
industry was particularly important in laying the
foundation for the early auto production since
many of the craft were powered by gasoline-
burning internal combustion engines.

RATIONALIZATION THROUGH 1914

More than a decade passed between the first
commercial production of automobiles in Amer-
ica and the opening of Ford’s Highland Park
Plant. These early years of the auto era were
lively times. Every new auto show focused
attention on important innovations and featured
new models and builders. Each season seemed
to bring the birth of new companies and the
death of others. The survivors reaped a bonanza.
The increases in investment, workforce, output
and profits were very large. Because rapid
change was the only constant, good records were
not always kept. Now, three quarters of a
century later, we know more about the antique
products of these years than we do about the
workers and the processes which produced
them.

Certainly the earliest methods were primitive.
As Henry Ford himself wrote, “In our first
assembling we simply started to put a car
together at a spot on the floor and workmen
brought to it the parts as they were needed in
exactly the same way that one builds a house.”
Such informality was general during the small
shop period of auto production in the very first
years of the century. Since no more than a few
score workers were assembling perhaps four or
five cars at any one time, “there was no set
procedure because, after all, there wasn’t any
system.”

After the Ford Company moved to the newly
constructed factory at Piquette and Beaubien in
the winter of 1904-05, assembly became some-
what more efficient. There was much more room
and management was spurred on by increasing
orders for Ford cars. Major components such as
the motor were now completed in pace with the
demand for them at final assembly. But no great
advances were made in the way the car was
actually put together. This is clear from the most
detailed description of pre-Highland Park meth-
ods which survives, the testimony of James
O’Connor, who was hired as an assembler at the
Piquette Plant in 1907 and worked there for two
years until transferred to the new factory in
Highland Park.

The cars were all lined up in a row to be
assembled. You went up one side and down the
other. We had about forty-five cars lined up in
this circle. Of course, they weren’t moving. They
were stationary right on the floor.

They had wooden horses and they set the front
axle on them and they did the same with the
rear, but that was that man’s job, just going
along and setting those axles on those horses. As
soon as the car left that place, the horses were
set down and then another line started.

After the axles were on, then the man would
come along with a truckload of frames. They
were four-wheeled trucks. They were pretty big
trucks. He would push them by hand. There was a team going with that truck and that was all they had to do, take that frame out of there and set them on those horses. Then the assemblers came along and put the clamps on. They would move along from car to car down the line assembling each frame to the axles. That would be their job.

They got up to where the motors were, and there would be a truckload of motors come along, and they would get hold of a motor and set it in. They just put a chain around it and picked it up. Sometimes they had three men. One would be on the front and one would be on each side. That was all they had to do, drop that in the frame.

Then the assemblers would come along and connect the axle up to the motor. They would stick an iron bar through this chain and pick it up and drop it in. Somebody else on another team would come along and attach it.

They would come to the dash assembly then and set the dash on. There was nothing on the dash. Another fellow would come along, and it was his job to bring the dashes and set them down and bolt them down. Another man would come along with the steering post and stick it through the door. Then another group would come along with the coil box. They put the coil box on, assembled it, and then they started hooking the connecting rod down at the bottom.

Then a man came along with a load of fenders and running boards. He would sit them right down on top of the frame. They were assembled. These assemblers would move from car to car. By the time the man got to the last car the first car would be all done.

Then they came along with bodies. Of course, that was a big job. Bodies took up a lot of room being trucked back and forth. Four men would pick that up and drop it on the chassis. That was all they had to do. These trucks were coming in all the time and these men were just lifting them on. Then they assembled the body, etc. They put the floor boards in and drove it off the line. The wheels would be put on right after the axles were put on.

When everything was finished, they would knock the horses down. After the wheels were on, they pulled those horses out and stood the car right on the floor. When the man came to take the car away, he had little dollies that he shot in under the wheels. One would be at the front and the other one at the back. They sent that to the garage then and that was it. From the garage, it was gassed up, tested, and the car was done.

We learn several things from this passage. The new Piquette factory, Flanders' efficiency measures, and the introduction of the simply designed Model T had increased the number of simultaneous final assemblies tenfold over the Mack Avenue days. The delivery of components and parts to the final assembly area was still relatively elementary. Large units were wheeled in on bulky pushcarts, smaller ones were apparently stockpiled in barrels or on shelves. O'Connor's account also indicates how specific each individual assembler's task was becoming. While building up a motor or transmission certainly still required skilled hands, final assembly was already by 1908 a sequence of many particular and quite simple jobs each performed by a different worker. No "master assemblers" built Model T's. These workers moved from car to stationary car, doing a job and then walking to the next car while another group came along to the unit they had left. Obviously there was still much slack in such a process. The men could move at their own pace, slowing for a rest or a word. All supervision could do was bark or prod if they saw the men lag. They could not be everywhere at once.

More substantial gains had been made in the rationalization of parts fabrication. As the auto industry matured it spurred the production of
increasingly specialized machine tools. Ford and other manufacturers demanded and got new lathes, grinders, screw machines, millers and drills.

Just as important as the constantly-improving equipment were the ways the machines were arranged and their operators supervised. Traditionally, machines had been grouped together by type. In one area of the shop a bank of identical machines would perform the same operation on a run of parts which would then be collected and carried off to another area where the next step in fashioning the part would be executed by different equipment. But toward the end of the Piquette Plant era Ford managers began to apply, within the limitations imposed by the now crowded factory, the concept of sequential arrangement of machinery. Here and there, in place of banks of lathes, drills, or presses appeared lines made up of a wide variety of machines ordered so that a particular part could pass along through the operations which made it ready for assembly.

The workers who operated the redesigned and rearranged machinery were also being tested by the Ford efficiency men. Production Superintendent Max Wollering had begun elementary time studies in the Ford shop by 1907.

_We would get a man whom we had confidence in and who knew what he was doing as to whether it was a lathe or a screw machine or a grinder. He knew the fundamentals of it and he would take a stop watch and operate this machine to get a fair idea of what could be done, and then he would put a man on there to test it out._

These crude studies were not intended, of course, to establish a happy medium pace to which each operative could adjust. Records were kept, standards set, and foremen ordered to enforce them. "If the first man can't come up to that standard," Max Wollering said, "try another. That was Henry's scheme of the thing."

Thus, by the close of its first decade, the American auto industry had already passed through the early stages of rationalization. But the increase was inadequate. The leading manufacturers were still unable to fully exploit the huge potential market for automobiles because they could not make them fast enough and cheap enough.

For the Ford Motor Company the lag between present capacity and potential market was especially acute. Ford's pride, the light, simple and relatively inexpensive Model T was designed to conquer the mass market. But soon after the Model T was introduced, the factory brass had to instruct dealers to suspend taking orders for several months because they were already so far behind.

It would be only a temporary embarrassment, however. A solution to the bottleneck was already taking shape on the outskirts of Detroit. With boundless faith in the future of his flivver, Ford had ordered the Company to invest over six million dollars in constructing and equipping the largest automobile factory in the world. In their citadel of glass and steel at Highland Park, the Ford men would have room to experiment on a grand scale as they pursued the ever more efficient exploitation of men and machinery which would create the brave new world of mass production.

For thirty months or so, as the building complex was completed and the workforce steadily increased, the Ford managers extended the efficiency improvements begun at the Piquette Plant. Sequential arrangement of machinery became the rule in every department as the supervision looked for ways to minimize the distance any part or subassembly traveled as it took shape. As Model T orders mounted, the productive use of every square foot of factory floor space became essential and the progressively grouped machines were squeezed closer and closer together. To speed and simplify the
routing of parts-in-progress through the growing thicket of tools, ovens, belts, and stockpiles, the closely-grouped machines were linked together by a network of gravity slides, rollways, and chutes. Parts were no longer handed along or carried between stations or floors.

The managers were amazed at the labor-cost reductions achieved by these installations. As they soon realized,

*Where a workman can perform absolutely similar successions of movement, he very soon gains great skill combined with great rapidity of muscular action; but if the routine of the workman's movement is broken, he must inevitably call his brain into action to find the best means of bridging his troubles, and must lose some time in devising and executing his unusual line of procedure.*

As they approached the breakthrough of the moving assembly line, the Ford efficiency men began to conceive their ideal worker as a pair of trained hands severed from the brain by the routine of work.

Toward the end of 1912 the Ford Company's efforts to rationalize auto making entered a new stage as they began to implement the methods which would, in the next two years, achieve mass production on the basis of moving assembly. Several examples can suggest the character of the general transformation.

The first steps were taken in the foundry. Until the fall of 1912 the Highland Park foundry was a typical wheelbarrow-and-shovel operation. Then a mechanic who had once worked in a brewery where grain was moved in hoppers suggested a device which would carry mixed sand over a line of mould packers and deliver it to each station through a chute as needed. When the conveyor was also run under the moulders' benches to recover unused sand and sand from used moulds was recycled to the hoppers, the first Ford endless-chain materials handler was born. Early in 1913 the concept was applied to baking the cores and pouring the molten metal into the moulds. Two loops of conveyors pushed the cores through ovens at the precise speed required to prepare them. Moulds were carried along on low chain-driven lines to be filled by stationary overhead spouts. Cooled moulds were taken to the shakeout area on a chain conveyor.

Labor costs went down rapidly. Mechanizing the movement of the work specialized and simplified the tasks performed by many foundrymen. The foundry superintendent could assert "that if an immigrant, who has never even seen the inside of a foundry before, cannot be made a first-class moulder of one piece only in three days, he can never be any use on the floor; and two days is held to be ample time to make a first-class core maker of a man who has never before seen a core-making bench in his life."

In April or May of 1913 came the first attempt at moving subassembly. The fly-wheel magneto was a relatively compact but complex unit. Before the spring of 1913, magnetos were assembled by individual men working at benches. The most experienced hands could average no better than one assembly each 20 minutes. When the Ford engineers decided to break the operation down into 29 separate tasks performed by 29 men as the unit passed before them on a moving belt, the results were startling. Average assembly time dropped to 13 minutes and 10 seconds. Experiments with the speed of the belt determined the best pace, 44 inches per minute, and revealed an important advantage of moving assembly. "The chain drive proved to be a very great improvement, hurrying the slow men, holding the fast men back from pushing work on to those in advance, and acting as an all-round adjuster and equalizer." And cost cutter. By early 1914, further experience and the installation of a higher line had reduced the magneto assembly crew to 18 men per line and the average time per unit to seven minutes. Soon thereafter a line of 14 men was turning out
magnetos at five minutes per unit. In less than a year, the production time had been halved, and then halved again.

Such success emboldened Ford’s production engineers. In the late summer of 1913 they attacked the intricacies of assembling the entire chassis. By then stationary assembly of the chassis had probably reached the limits of efficiency. Two lines 600 feet long each provided 50 stations for building up the chassis on saw horses. These lines were manned by a total of 600 hands, 500 assemblers and 100 carriers. Their best record for the labor time invested in a single assembly was 12 hours and 28 minutes; their average was about 14 hours. In August a special team experimented with a crude version of moving final assembly and buried all records. A rope and windlass pulled a chassis-in-formation down a 250-foot line as six assemblers, walking with the work, attached components already laid out at the right spots. They averaged 5 hours and 50 minutes of labor time per chassis, better than halving the previous record.... But with further changes, in less than a year, by May Day 1914, the average labor time was only 93 minutes.

One more example, that of motor assembly, will illustrate the pace at which rationalization proceeded in the 1913-1914 period and underscore how dramatically moving assembly and the subdivision of the manual tasks changed the work which each individual performed. W.E. Grimshaw worked in the motor department until shortly before the installation of moving assembly. He describes his job: “I was working at one bench and doing all this work in one place. We put in the crankshaft, then placed in the pistons and tightened them up, then placed the valves. We built the whole engine right at that bench.... I did most of the work on building up an engine myself.”

But by May, 1914, the motor-in-formation was driven along rails by an endless chain conveyor and the task of building up the unit was broken into 84 separate operations requiring 105 men on each line. The jobs mentioned in
Grimshaw’s brief account of his work had, in the language of the classic Ford shop manual, become:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of men</th>
<th>Time, sec.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35. Run in crankshaft</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations 36 to 43, inclusive, serve to place the crankshaft and gear assembly and are worked on a bench level with the assembling lines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 36. Ream bearing | 1 | 7 |
| 37. Ream bearing | 1 | 7 |
| 38. File bearing | 1 | 14 |
| 39. File off burrs on cam-shaft flange | 1 | 9 |
| 40. Assemble front bearing to cam-shaft | 1 | 10 |
| 41. Assemble spring to bearing and assemble center bearing | 1 | 14 |
| 42. Assemble gear | 1 | 44 |
| 43. Test out size of cam-shaft gear | 1 | 10 |
| 44. Drive brass bushing in case and line-ream same | 1 | 70 |
| 45. Assemble push rods in push-rod guides | 1 | 52 |
| 46. Drive cam-shaft in cylinder and blow out motor | 1 | 53 |
| 47. Put in cam-shaft bearing and inspect and take push rods from below valves (Piston and rods assembling is a separate job, on piston-and-rod-assembling bench) | 2 | 60 |
| 48. Gauge pin bearing on crankshaft and scrape off burrs on cylinder bores | 1 | 57 |
| 49. Fit pistons | 3 | 70 |
| 50. Fit rings to pistons | 1 | 24 |

Twenty hands for the work which only months before had been but part of one man’s job. Twenty men endlessly repeating a simple task every few seconds. Now motors were assembled with 238 minutes of labor time, less than half the investment of a few months before.

The achievement of the Ford engineers and supervisors was monumental. In the muted language of Ford Methods and the Ford Shops they had “applied team work to the fullest extent, and by this feature in conjunction with the arrangement of successive operations in the closest proximity, so as to minimize transportation and to maximize the pressure of flow of work, it succeeds in maintaining speed without obtrusive foremanship.” In fact they had established a new relationship between management and worker, capital and labor. Control of the line was a potent weapon in the inevitable battle for what the managers called “a fair day’s work.” The coming of the line destroyed the remaining islands of craft control over production work and subjected foundryman, operative and assembler to a common mechanized tyranny.

Although he confessed the prospect of repetitive labor terrified him, Ford asserted that it did not trouble the workers at the Plant.
To some types of mind thought is absolutely appalling. To them the ideal job is one where the creative instincts need not be expressed. . . . The average worker, I am sorry to say, wants a job in which he does not have to put forth much physical exertion—above all, he wants a job in which he does not have to think.

But Ford knew better. At the very moment of most intense rationalization at Highland Park, the workers were demonstrating what they thought of the new order.

"THE HOUSE OF CORRECTIONS":
THE LABOR CRISIS OF 1913

Ford and the other Detroit auto makers had coped with a restless workforce from the beginning. As the industry boomed, new jobs were created every month and dependable factory hands, in short supply despite the best efforts of the E.A.D., became the object of competition. Local newspapers were full of advertisements designed to lure workers from one employer to another. The practice was disruptive, expensive and widespread. Short-handed shifts could not fill production quotas. Processing and breaking in new workers cost dollars. One extensive survey of the period showed that 36% of the auto workers had been with their current employer less than six months. In the spring of 1912 the Employers' Association brought the auto manufacturers together and convinced them to abandon overt competition for labor in favor of intensified recruitment outside Detroit. But they could hardly wish away the tight labor market their boom created. Workers looking for better conditions or merely fed up with the regime at their factory could and did move about.

Even before 1913 the Ford Motor Company had special problems recruiting a stable workforce. The Plant was located on what was then the outskirts of Detroit, far removed from most of the working class neighborhoods. The extra pennies it cost to take the street railway to Ford surely discouraged some laborers from seeking jobs at Highland Park, especially since wages and hours there were no better than at factories closer to home.

As the new methods increased the pace of work and placed unfamiliar pressures on the men, their hatred of the work became obvious. "It was a terrible shock . . . some of the boys did not want to work on this kind of conveyor," said head motor-assembly foreman William Klann. Equally detested was the close spacing of machines and the system of gravity slides and rollways. "The men didn't like it," Klann says, "because they had to work harder. The pieces were there and they didn't have time to walk back and take a rest in between."

It was hard to get the proper men for assembly work. We took any kind of a man the Employment Department gave us, and one word every foreman had to learn in English, German, Polish, and Italian was 'hurry up.' It was putch-putch prento in Polish, mach schnell in German, and presto presto in Italian.

James O'Connor, who had now become a foreman on the chassis assembly line, also observed a widespread rejection of the new work. "We all would get new men every day. They kept coming and going. . . . There were a lot of people who wouldn't even try. They thought they couldn't do it." The weight of the line bore down on the men, taxing the nervous system in ways which heavy field work or day labor on the streets and railways of America never had. As many nationalities were mixed together by the flow of moving assembly, frictions increased. "We used to have quite a bit of trouble," admitted a set-up man in the screw machine department. "I've seen as many as six fist fights here in our shop walking from one department to another." "Because we had a long stone wall around the foundry," recalled factory manager P.E. Martin, "they used to call
the Ford Plant the “House of Corrections.”

No modern prison ever recorded a turnover of its inmates to equal the Highland Park Plant in 1913. In December of 1912 the turnover rate was 48% for the month alone. During the prolonged labor crisis of 1913, the annual rate was 38%. To maintain a workforce approaching 14,000, Ford hired over 52,000 men. Most of the tens of thousands who left the factory were not fired. They simply walked out. Quits outnumbered discharges six to one. The majority who walked just pulled their pay and disappeared without telling the Employment Office. After five days their names were taken off the rolls.

The managers kept the factory running by taking almost all comers and putting them to work on the increasingly simplified jobs created by rationalization. Some lasted, some did not. The instability was both expensive and disturbing. “It cost us as I remember about $38.00 per man to break them in on the job,” wrote A.G. Bondie, head of the Employment Office. At this rate turnover alone cost Ford two million dollars in 1913, or fully one third of the original investment in plant and machinery at Highland Park! More troubling still was the prospect of continuing on the course of increased rationalization, investment, and expansion with a labor force which had to be completely renewed every few months and whose discontent with the new work could be expressed in ways more dangerous than quitting. Reading the newspapers, hearing reports from the field, and talking with their peers at the Employers’ Association, the Ford men had every reason to fear a militant workers movement which might totally disrupt their planning.

Like other American industrialists, the auto manufacturers of Detroit had watched the growth of working class militancy and labor radicalism in the past few years. In some of the most widely publicized of the battles, leadership was given by the Industrial Workers of the World. Known popularly as the Wobblies, the IWW stood for all that was loathsome to American men of property. They believed the contest between bosses and workers was not merely a quarrel over wages and hours, but an inevitable war which would result in the defeat of capitalism and the creation of an industrial commonwealth run by the producers.

The IWW never became a serious revolutionary threat to American capitalism, but their bold pursuit of industrial unionism (at a time when the AF of L turned its back on unorganized factory labor), and its role in several moments of insurgency in the years before World War I did alarm the exploiters of unskilled hands in industries where rationalization was intense.

During the year 1912 a small IWW group in Detroit had begun to reach industrial workers. Membership increases required a move to a larger hall and weekly rather than semi-monthly meetings. The IWW locals were still a small band operating almost unnoticed, but they were
vigorouos soapboxers carrying on regular agitation for the 8-hour day and industrial unionism.

In late April of 1913 they focused their attention on Ford's Highland Park Plant. On the 28th, reported one local paper, IWWers were seen "haranguing employees of the Ford Motor Co." Harrasment by officials quickly followed, but the Wobblies returned the next day and drew a very large crowd estimated at 3,000. Curious Ford workers lined the factory windows and milled about in front of the lunch stands on Manchester Street. The main IWW attraction was Matilda Rabinowitz, veteran of Lawrence and Akron, sent by the national office to assist the Detroit group. In succession, she and four other Wobs, two of whom were Ford employees, mounted a small platform to address the workers. The police moved with dispatch, arresting each of them in turn.

The judge lectured the five about disturbing the peace and locked them up overnight. By noon the next day they were back at the Highland Park Plant, but this time drew a smaller crowd because Ford had apparently suspended outdoor lunch "privileges."

Undaunted by the arrests at Highland Park, the Wobblies turned their attention to Studebaker, the second largest auto maker in the city. While Rabinowitz was called to the Pittsburgh region by the national office, several local militants hired in at Studebaker, joining men already in the IWW circle. They thought the large crowds they had gathered at Ford might mark a new stage of opportunity for agitation. Seven weeks after the Highland Park episode, the auto bosses were confronted with the first major strike in the auto industry.

On the morning of June 17, 1913, a majority of the 3,500 hands on the day shift at Studebaker's No. 3 Plant at West Jefferson and Clark downed tools and walked out of the factory. For some time the men had been asking for weekly rather than bi-monthly pay days. The Company had said nothing and anger had grown. Then Dale Schlosser, one of the men who had acted as an informal representative of the workers, was fired. He had taken a day off to leaflet another factory, had lied about his absence, been discovered, and canned. When word of his dismissal spread through the shop, the men struck.

At one Detroit Studebaker plant on June 17, 1913, a mass walkout occurred to protest the firing of an informal workers' leader. On that morning apparently the majority of the 3,500 hands left, shutting down that plant, and tried to spread the revolt to other Studebaker plants. The IWW conducted mass meetings of auto workers, and the strikers voted to conduct their struggle under IWW auspices. But mounted cops chased and clubbed picketers, and in the end the strike was contained to the one Studebaker plant. On the sixth day of the strike, even though the workers began going back to save their jobs. The walkout had come at the depth of the summer slack season, tactically the worst possible time.

Still, in the aftermath of the Studebaker strike the capitalists of Detroit overestimated the threat which the IWW posed. The E.A.D. thought there might be 2,000 Wobs in the auto shops in the late summer of 1913, but a more likely figure is less than 600. Matilda Rabino-
witz, herself, leaves a more sober account of her organization’s capacity. In the heat of the battle she valued “the most splendid demonstration of solidarity for a common cause,” and claimed it was one of the few short strikes of the period “where the most revolutionary theories were put into practice and the most militant tactics used.” Later, looking back, she confessed that “the IWW local did not have the ability, nor even the comprehension of the magnitude of the job. The speakers were not organizers with plans and the discipline to tackle the job.”

The auto bosses she and the other Wobblies had fought could not assume, however, that their antagonists were as weak as they proved to be. They had seen thousands of workers in the streets and at meetings where revolution was applauded. They had contained a strike, but they had reason to be nervous, none more so than Henry Ford.

The explosion of discontent had come at Studebaker, not the Ford Motor Company, but who could say what the fall would bring? During the slack season of July and August as the Ford men cut back production, rethought their shop methods, and prepared for more experiments in the fall, they must have wondered if they could recruit and maintain a labor force which would accept the new order.

Recognizing that wages paid at the going rate would not hold new hires at Highland Park, Ford increased the average pay to thirty cents an hour, established a minimum at twenty-six, and reduced a cumbersome and confusing system of over sixty wage rates to eight clearly-defined categories. Ford also established a plan which passed workers through various “skill levels” and up pay scales as their stay on the job lengthened. These stages reduced the power of first line supervision over the workers and placed it more firmly in the hands of higher management since, until October, 1913, foremen had usually determined a worker’s pay rate.

Foremen, whose arbitrary rule was viewed as one cause of the turnover problem, also lost the power to fire, although they could still transfer men out of their department. Finally, a Savings and Loan Association was established for employees, the first appearance of the Ford paternalism which was to become world-wide news in the following year.

While fall quits and discharges remained well below the levels of early 1913, Ford obviously thought more was necessary. In the very weeks when moving assembly of the full chassis was being developed and the possibilities and dangers of the line revealed, the Ford leadership was brooding over their labor problem and evolving a revolutionary new policy.

THE FIVE DOLLAR DAY

On January 5, 1914, Henry Ford and James Couzens summoned the press of Detroit to their Highland Park offices and announced that the Ford Motor Company would soon “inaugurate the greatest revolution in the matter of rewards for its workers ever known to the industrial world.” Ford was about to embark on an unprecedented profit-sharing plan. Beginning on January 12, 1914, every worker twenty-two or older would have an increment of “profits” added to his normal wage which would bring his daily remuneration to at least $5.00. Those under twenty-two could qualify if they had dependents. This was twice the common factory wage of the period. The industrial world was, indeed, astounded. Ford immediately became an international hero. Newspapers were filled with speculations about his motives and predictions of his fate.

The Ford leadership had at least three related but distinct objectives when they launched the $5 day: to prevent any outbreak of IWW-inspired militancy among their workers, to ensure labor-force stability by ending high turnover,
and to provide the basis for the soon-to-be-introduced "welfare" programs.

The Wobblies and the events of the past year still concerned Ford in January, 1914. Joe Galamb, long a key figure in the experimental toolroom and a Ford favorite, remembers that "Mr. Ford said he would lick the IWW by paying the men the $5.00 day."

From the inception of profit sharing, the Ford executives believed that it would prove a sound business policy by ending expensive turnover before the full implementation of moving assembly aggravated the problem. Charles Sorensen recalls the discussion at the decisive meeting with Ford in early January 1914, "With the whole plant geared to final moving assembly lines, our 1914 costs seemed destined to go lower yet . . . I began to see how the increases would give greater incentive to our workers and that savings from lower costs and resulting higher production might be sufficient to take care of the major part of the increase." As long as Ford was paying twice the going rate men would grab a chance to work at Highland Park no matter how killing the job. "It kept the average men on the line," foreman James O'Connor said of the $5.00 day.

The high pay was intended to do more than keep the men in line and on the line. Profit sharing would also lay the foundation for the Ford Company's paternal regime during the 1914-1920 period. In these years the Sociology Department and other Ford programs experimented with the lives of Ford workers in an attempt to carry rationalization beyond the factory to the home and the reproduction of labor power. These most basic reasons for granting the $5 day were, however, obscured at first by the excitement surrounding its inauguration. As news of the $5 day spread across the nation in hours, a motley army of unemployed began trooping toward Detroit. The national recession had thrown tens of thousands into the street in every big city. Throughout the midwest and southern Canada, men decided to risk the trip to Highland Park in search of the big wage. During the first week 14,000 letters of application were received.

Those who could apply in person began to congregate at the Plant gates during the first night following the announcement. Ten thousand gathered the first day before "No Hiring" signs were posted. The following morning the throng was back and the Company announced that "men who formed crowds" would not be considered. For a day this drove the applicants into the side streets around the factory where they milled about in smaller groups from which Ford employment agents picked a few men without being noticed. They were hiring this day because the Company had begun to enforce the "tough shop" regime which would accompany
profit sharing. Wednesday had marked Christmas on the Eastern Orthodox calendar and 1,000 Greeks, Serbs and other southeastern Europeans had taken the day off. "When they returned for work on Thursday," reported the Detroit Times, "they were escorted in one door of the plant, their numbers taken away and they were then escorted out another door into the street." News of the open jobs brought new men on Friday, when 15,000 massed before the Plant.

Bitterly cold weather and the posting of "No Hiring" signs in several languages kept the crowd down over the weekend, but Monday the 12th was to be the first $5 day. By sunrise 10,000 cold and hungry men were huddled on Woodward and Manchester. Resentment began to grow as the day shift arrived and jobless men watched the fortunate file into the Plant. Rumors passed through the crowd that men were being hired on the sly and a cry went up to storm the factory and take it apart brick by brick. Some men did break into the enclosure as the crowd pressed Ford guards and Highland Park police against the gates. With their factory now threatened, the Ford brass ordered the firehoses turned on the men outside. The icy jets of water beat back the front ranks and then the nozzles were tipped to spray those behind them. The temperature was nine degrees above zero. Ragged overcoats were soon caked with ice. When the Highland Park Fire Department was summoned to aid in the drenching, the men took their axes and cut the hoses, but they could not get at the Ford equipment. Driven across the street, furious men pitched bricks through the glass walls of the factory and wrecked and looted the lunch stands along Manchester. By noon the battle was over.

The new era of industrial relations had not begun auspiciously. Henry Ford had returned from a triumphant week at the New York Auto Show to find his factory a besieged fortress. As minor troubles outside the Plant continued throughout the week, Ford announced he would employ only men who had lived in Detroit for six months and that henceforth the Company would draw its men from the E.A.D. Labor Bureau. During the first six months of profit sharing, only 1,336 were hired.

With the "mob" outside tamed, property Detroit now wondered what effect the $5 day would have on those who already held jobs at Ford. While some anticipated a total debauch of the workers or the exodus of millions in Ford wages to European relatives, and others awaited the advent of utopia at Highland Park, few seemed to have actually talked to the men in the factory. One reporter who did found "no room in any heart for aught but happiness." Woljeck Manijklisjiski, a helper in the steel receiving yard, told him, "My boy don't sell no more papers. My girl don't work in the home of
another and see her mother but once in the week no more. Again we are a family.” Tub McMannigal, a subforeman in the machinery room, thought “The Big worry that leads a lot of fellows to the suicide route, and a lot more to the booze route is just a lot of little worries added together, mostly, and that’s exactly what the big boost in pay is going to do away with in the Ford plant.”

The most telling bit of testimony which survives from the first weeks of 1914 comes from the wife of a worker on the final assembly line. She wrote directly to Henry Ford complaining that her husband’s wages were docked for lost tools and his lunches stolen. Then she asked, 

*Are you aware a man cannot ‘buck nature.’ He has got to go to the toilet and yet he is not allowed to go at his work. He has to go before he gets there or after work. The chain system you have is a slave driver! . . . You are working—working—working and have to keep at it and yet don’t feel well—have the grip as my husband has, and stand for a foreman ‘Goddamning’ you to hurry—slave driving you. God’s name should be used in reverence instead of cursing these poor men. That $5.00 a day is a blessing—but oh they earn it.*

This anonymous woman, grasping the connection between the $5.00 day and rationalized production, had seen deeper into the Ford policy than all the critics and admirers in the press. How the link could have escaped them is difficult to understand. On January 14th, the third day of profit sharing, less than 48 hours after firehouses had chased unneeded men from the portals of the great Plant, Ford added two complete new final assembly lines to the one with an electrically driven endless chain conveyor system. The age of Ford had begun.

1. Only four books which discuss the workers of the Highland Park Plant are worth mentioning. Allan Nevins, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company* assembles much but by no means all of the relevant information entombed in the Henry Ford Archives. However, Nevins cannot comprehend his evidence because he sees the workers only as the objects of Ford humanitarianism. Keith Sward’s *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York, 1948) presents a groundbreaking description of the development of Ford mass production and is without illusions concerning Ford charity. But Sward sees the workers more as victims than actors. He wrote before the Ford Archives were available, his documentation is very inadequate, and he makes several factual errors. Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York, 1974) contains an excellent brief discussion of the interaction between boss and worker at Ford during the crucial decade. Unfortunately, Braverman relied uncritically on Sward for his facts and reproduces some of his errors. Antonio Gramsci’s “Americanism and Fordism” in the *Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1971) is a brilliant meditation on the Ford revolution as a new stage in the mode and relations of production in capitalist society. Incarcerated by Italian fascism, Gramsci could hardly be expected to reconstruct a close history of the coming of the line, but his speculations about the rationalization of work and the “mechanization” of the worker, Ford paternalism, the functions of Prohibition and sexuality in the society of mass production, and many other themes are invaluable.

2. The major source for this essay was the Henry Ford Archives at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. My study would have been more substantial if the detailed records of the early Sociology Department had not been lost by fire. But the Ford Archives are still rich in primary sources on the early years of the Company, its workers, and the automobile industry, generally. For my purposes, the most useful were company publications: *Ford Times*, 1911-1916; *Ford Guide*, 1916; *Ford Man*, 1917; *Ford Factory Facts*, several years; and *Helpful Hints for Ford Men*; and oral histories or reminiscences by William Baxter, Frank Bennett, A.G. Bondie, George Brown, Chester Culver, Joseph Galamb, W.E. Grimshaw, W.E. Grimshaw, William Klann, Leslie McDonnell, James O’Connor, Al Renner, Robert Shaw, John Wagner, and Max Wollerling; and various company papers.

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FROM THE MOVEMENT

SAN FRANCISCO’S INTERNATIONAL HOTEL
Case Study of a Turf Struggle

Chester Hartman*

Few local land-use controversies in recent times have had the duration or notoriety that have characterized the battle over San Francisco’s International Hotel. It has lasted ten years and is far from over; it saw the City’s sheriff at first go to jail for contempt of court rather than carry out a court-ordered eviction; and it then saw 2,000 people facing 400 cops and sheriff’s deputies when the eviction action finally came down. This article attempts to analyze what has been won and lost so far, the reasons the fight for the Hotel took on the dimensions it did, and what lessons there are in it for future struggles of this type.

“Turf”, or land-use, struggles are a prototype of class warfare in urban areas. Economically and politically powerful forces seek to displace occupants of land not being put to its “highest and best use.” The rules of the capitalist economic system and its various enforcers in the political and legal arenas act to carry out that transformation, usually in a relatively swift and quiet way. The financial and social costs of that change generally are borne by those least able to bear them. These costs take the form of higher rents, other living/moving costs, and disrupted lives and social patterns. When change in land-use occurs under government auspices (as in the urban renewal and highway programs), there are now a set of protections and financial aids, still far from adequate and won after hard fights and much suffering. But where no direct government action or

*I should make clear my own relation to the struggle described here. I was involved in many ways: as frequent demonstrator; as a regular reporter of the story for Common Sense, a Bay Area radical newspaper; as a housing consultant who helped draw up and negotiate around the tenants’ substitute plan described in the text for City ownership and subsidization of the Hotel; and as a member of the Northern California Alliance, one of the left political organizations involved in the latter stages of the fight for the Hotel.

Photo by Rochelle Resnick
funding is involved—your classical "free mar-
tet" real estate deal—those unfortunate enough
to be in the path of "progress" have no rights or
benefits whatsoever. They are entitled to no
more than a timely eviction notice (usually from 3
to 30 days, depending on the state and
circumstances).

On occasion, such attempts at displacement-
replacement meet resistance. People don't al-
ways go quietly. Outside support then develops.
Creative and effective oppositional strategies
and tactics may be employed. The political and
legal system can be forced to act in a more
humanely responsive fashion. The results of
such struggles are delay, widespread exposure of
the way in which the system operates, sometimes
some victories.

In San Francisco, as in many other cities, the
housing crisis is becoming the central issue, and
likely the main organizing issue, not only for
low-income people but for moderate- and
middle-income people as well. Speculation is
driving prices and rents out of sight; there is no
rent control; housing and neighborhoods are
being lost to developers; rehabilitation efforts
turn out to be a subtle form of bulldozing people
out of their neighborhoods, the new, elegantly
named "gentrification process." The I-Hotel
struggle embodied these concerns. It was seen as
a way of saving needed low-rent housing, driving
back the developers, protecting a Third World
community. The issue was framed by residents
and supporters as property-profit rights vs.
housing-human rights. The struggle succeeded
in communicating this to the people of San
Francisco. The eviction drama itself—graph-
ically and extensively publicized, not only in the
Bay Area but nationally (Walter Cronkite, the
Washington Post, NY Times, Baltimore Sun,
LA Times, etc.—in many cases on the front
page)—was portrayed not merely as a "human
interest story" but in terms of the basic political
conflict that produced it.

THE HISTORY

To run through the bare bones of the story:
The International Hotel is a three-story,
155-room residential hotel, located in downtown
San Francisco, at the seam between the
expanding financial district and Chinatown. It is
one of the few remnants of a once-flourishing
Manilatown, now the site of banks, corporate
headquarters, office buildings, trendy shops,
and all the other edifice undergirding of an
expanding capitalist economy. Manilatown
hardly has any separate reality now and its
residents really form a corner of the adjacent
Chinatown community. The Hotel has the poor
luck to be located on the wrong side of Kearny
St., the financial district side rather than the
Chinatown side. As the city grew into Wall
Street West with World War II and the rampant
Asian military and trade activity of the next
three decades, the market for downtown real
estate boomed.

In the Fall of 1968, a local real estate magnate
and politico, Walter Shorenstein, told the
tenants to be gone by Jan. 1, 1969. At the time
196 people were living there, mostly middle-aged
or elderly, with a few younger residents. Over
half were Filipino, and many of the rest were
Chinese. Almost all were male and poor, living
on pensions and social security or part-time
wages. Those who worked were for the most part
cooks, busboys and waiters in local restaurants
or maintenance workers in hospitals. Some were
supporting families who remained in the Philip-
pines. The population structure of the Hotel
reflected the country's racist immigration laws,
which limited entry of women and children,
while encouraging the male laborers who
worked the fields, mines and ships. Those who
had worked and still worked as seamen used the
Hotel as their permanent homes, often paying
the rent on their rooms while they were away or
storing their possessions at the Hotel. Like many
such "hotels" in downtown areas of San
Francisco and other cities, the International Hotel functioned as a micro-community, providing an important social nexus and support system for those who lived there. While the number of residents steadily dwindled over the next decade, due to knowledge that the building was under threat of demolition, the basic character of the resident population remained the same.

Aided by the United Filipino Association and others, the tenants decided to resist and after a few months forced Shorenstein to give them a three-year lease. Their counter-offensive weapon was publicly to embarrass Shorenstein, a Parks & Recreation Commissioner appointed by Mayor Joseph Alioto and head of the local Humphrey for President Committee (picketing a dinner Shorenstein was hosting for Hubert was probably the most effective single tactic.) The lease was a pretty repulsive one—tenants had to pay property taxes and repair costs, plus a hefty net rental to Shorenstein—but it bought three years, made the I-Hotel into a major public issue, and established the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA) as the controlling body for the Hotel and the continuing struggle. Following expiration of the lease Shorenstein decided to bow out and sold the Hotel to the Four Seas Investment Corp., a Hong Kong- and Thai-based company eager to expatriate its capital out of an “unstable” Thailand after overthrow of the Thai military dictatorship. It reportedly bought the property sight unseen and perhaps illegally; Four Seas is now being investigated by the US Customs Service and the Thai government to see if this capital import violated those countries’ laws. (The large-scale role of foreign investment in US cities is just being recognized. In a recent New Yorker article on the Hotel, Calvin Trillin pointed out the relationship between prices for luxury buildings in Manhattan and such factors as economic instability in Italy, terrorism in W. Germany and the growth of Eurocommunism. He facetiously suggested that in pursuit of self-interest the New Yorkers who control this real estate might consider switching their charitable contributions from the NY Times’ Neediest Cases to the Italian Communist Party).

Four Seas then spent some three years trying to empty the building (at the same time picking up several other adjacent properties to make a more attractive development parcel). Tenant resistance took the form of lengthy legal proceedings and simple refusal to move: as squatting actions the world over have shown, property laws assume everyone will cooperate in the system. All the while the issue was becoming bigger and bigger within the city.

Regular demonstrations were held, with hundreds, at times thousands, of people. No local issue in decades had drawn crowds as large and as repeatedly. In July, 1976, a court finally ordered the eviction—a directed verdict in the face of a hung jury. Various stays were then obtained, the most dramatic being on Jan. 17, 1977, just 12 hours before a combined Police-Sheriffs Dept. strike force was to descend on the Hotel. A week before a crowd of several hundred people, hastily assembled via the supporters’ efficient telephone tree, had successfully prevented Sheriff’s deputies from posting eviction notices. January 12 and 16 had seen mass demonstrations of 3,000 and 5,000 people, respectively, in front of the Hotel. The court gave as its reason for the Jan. 17 stay an affidavit by Police Chief Charles Gain that he had “reliable reports” of automatic weapons on the Hotel roof and gasoline stored for firebombings. But everyone knew the “reports” were sheer lies, a face-saving device for the legal system, concocted by a City government that did not want to risk an unpopular and possibly bloody police action as in the 1934 General Strike. It was a heady, although temporary victory for people power. Another important factor was
liberal Sheriff Richard Hongisto's publicly-stated reluctance to carry out the eviction, which eventually landed him five days in jail for contempt of court. (Judge Ira Brown, who had directed the eviction, termed Hongisto's refusal "the greatest threat to every court in the country.")

The next few months were spent in battle with the courts. Under great pressure, the City in late 1976 had agreed to a "solution" to the problem: the Housing Authority would purchase the Hotel through its eminent domain powers, then re-sell it to the IHTA for permanent low-rent housing. The governing Board of Supervisors agreed to lend the Housing Authority $1.3 million to cover the purchase; the Housing Authority in December held the necessary public hearings, and in January filed its taking action. But in May the courts threw the tenants another curve ball: a judge ruled the Housing Authority could not take property from a private owner in order to transfer it to another private owner. While astute observers of the urban scene will recognize that that's what redevelopment agencies do all the time, it seems the courts will give this taking power the widest latitude when land is taken from the poor to be given to the rich (i.e., urban renewal), but such use of eminent domain powers becomes illegal when a housing authority tries to reverse that direction. The matter has been appealed (with a decision still months off), but the courts insisted that the eviction order be carried out, the appeals process notwithstanding.

The tenants made one last-minute try to force the City to intervene effectively: a plan they submitted to Mayor George Moscone in early July for permanent Housing Authority ownership of the Hotel, with tenant management. That would have bypassed the legal problems, plus some severe financial problems the tenants realized were inherent in the original "buyback plan", which they themselves had put forth. The economics of buying and renovating the Hotel were such that resultant rents would have been way beyond the reach of low-income tenants. In part, this was because the "fair market value" the Housing Authority (and later the tenants) would have had to pay to Four Seas had risen in three years from $850,000 (the price Four Seas paid Shorenstein) to $1.3 million. With possibly several hundred thousand dollars worth of renovation needed, there was no way room rents could remain in the $50-55 range. The tenants' new plan would have required an annual City subsidy along the order of $50,000—which seemed a small sum to preserve 155 well-located units—and put forth an important political principle of City responsibility for meeting housing needs of its low-income people. Unfortunately, however, Moscone was having no part of this concept of government responsibility, particularly in light of the city's financial difficulties, and rejected the plan outright.

As a result, the eviction went ahead on the morning of August 4, 1977, beginning at 3 a.m. Two thousand supporters came down to form a human barricade around the Hotel. Four hundred police and sheriff's deputies, backed by firetrucks, horses and all the paraphernalia of the state's brute force, clubbed their way through the crowd, seized the rooftop with aid of aerial ladders, battered down doors and windows, and over the next four hours removed about 50 remaining residents plus 100 or so supporters inside the building. It was brief, brutal and effective.

The issue did not die with removal of the tenants. A fight still is underway to save and restore the building, or perhaps salvage only the site and build new public housing on it, maybe even retake the entire block for the Chinatown-Manilatown community. Although Four Seas is in possession of the I-Hotel, a City "stop work" order has prevented them from demolishing it, pending the outcome of a court action on the
status of their apparently expired demolition permit. (Establishing that the permit has expired would lead to long delays, in obtaining a new permit, preparing an environmental impact report, etc.). Incredibly, Four Seas twice tried to demolish the building illegally, simply by showing up with bulldozers early in the morning. Quick action by supporters and police stopped the bulldozers, but not before a big chunk was chewed out of a back wall on the second attempt, adding to the extensive damage done by police and sheriffs during the eviction action. In March both Four Seas and its bulldozer driver pleaded nolo contendere to five misdemeanor counts arising from the illegal bulldozing and received a $500 fine, two years' probation, and, for the bulldozer operator, 15 days in jail. The district attorney's vigorous prosecution action can be traced to steady pressure by tenants and supporters. The original "buyback" plan still is alive in the form of the court appeal on the Housing Authority's eminent domain action. A voter opinion statement on the tenants' alternative plan for City ownership was placed on the Nov. 8 ballot (by a Supervisor opposed to it) and lost 2-1, voters being scared by the exaggerated price tag assigned by the Controller.

Perhaps the most promising new hope is the two grants the IHTA and two more mainstream Chinatown housing groups have just received to study possibilities of using the entire block the Hotel sits on for the community's housing and service needs. The original grant came from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and supplementary funding came from the City's
Commission on the Aging, putting the im-
primatur of important federal and local bodies 
on the study. Endorsement letters from Mayor 
Moscone, the Supervisor who represents the 
district in which the Hotel is located, and Sen. 
Frank Church of the Special Committee on 
Aging, all represented important political sup-
port for the study, which will be undertaken by 
two of the area's leading architecture and 
planning firms, chosen by the tenants. The hope 
is to use the feasibility study as a political 
organizing process as well, with a view to seeing 
how the entire block can be restored to the 
community rather than incorporated into the 
expanding financial district. Both renovation 
and new construction will be explored, and it is 
possible that the most reasonable solution at this 
point will be to replace the Hotel with a larger 
low-rent housing development. It will be some 
time before the final chapter of the I-Hotel story 
is written, and whether the "bottom line" is 
victory or defeat remains to be seen.

THE POLITICAL FORCES INVOLVED

The Hotel tenants and their organization, the 
IHTA, were at all times the center of the 
struggle. But in fact their leadership and the 
level of the group's activism shifted considerably 
over the course of the decade. The age, infirmity 
and English language problems of many of the 
tenants limited their participation and ability to 
lead the struggle. But enormous deference was 
paid to their expressed desires and views, as 
these emerged in individual conversations and 
group meetings. Until the mid-1970s leadership 
of the IHTA was with one or two residents who 
managed the Hotel and in practice were quite 
despotic, suppressing any real participation or 
dissent by other tenants. The move toward 
broader participation and democratization of 
the Tenants Association came largely as a result 
of the re-involvement of several younger Filipino 
activists who had originally been around during 
the 1968-72 period and now were members of 
KDP (the Union of Democratic Filipinos). The 
selected chairperson of the IHTA since 1976 was 
in fact a KDP activist living at the Hotel.

The question of leadership and a political 
center to the struggle was complicated enor-
mously by the fact that the IHTA was only one 
of three major tenants groups within the hotel 
building. The street level spaces (residential 
rooms were on the second and third floors) were 
occupied by several stores, community services 
and organizations. Two of the downstairs 
organizations occupying extensive spaces were 
the Asian Community Center (ACC) and the 
Chinese Progressive Association (CPA). The 
former, a.k.a. the Workers Committee to Fight 
for the International Hotel and Victory Building 
an adjacent parcel also owned by Four Seas is 
linked to the Revolutionary Communist Party 
(RCP). The latter is linked to the Maoist I Wor 
Kuen (IWK) group and is the key element in 
what was known as the I-Hotel Support 
Committee, which included other progressive 
groups and individuals in the Bay Area. (Many 
other supporters identified themselves more 
directly with the IHTA). All three tenant groups 
obviously had material bases in the Hotel 
struggle, although the upstairs residential ten-
ants were the most widely identified and 
supported tenant group. Tensions among all 
three groups were usually quite high, particu-
larly as two other Bay Area left organizations— 
KDP and the Northern California Alliance 
(NCA)—were closely associated with the IHTA. 
Each group had a specific view of the struggle, 
how it ought to be carried out, and its relation to 
a broader revolutionary analysis. Needless to 
say, each group also felt an enormous stake in its 
particular role in the outcome of the struggle, in 
terms of credit for a victory and hoped for 
hegemony with the Bay Area left.

Running through the composition, positions, 
tensions among the various tenants and support
groups over the last three years would require a separate article several times the length of this one. In practice, the existence of this large and confusing cast of characters, each of whom had some legitimacy, meant that often there were several voices speaking on behalf of, and different tactics used in the name of, the “tenants”. The general public and many of the less “inside”, non-affiliated supporters—who were by far the majority to show up at large demonstrations—had little knowledge of the internal politics of the situation. Confrontational tactics against the Mayor and other public officials used by one or another of the downstairs groups (who had major political differences with one another, the Workers Committee-RCP-ACC faction putting out the line that the struggle was essentially a class struggle, the Support Committee-IWK-CPA faction’s line being that it was basically a Third World Issue, representing national oppression) often worked at cross-purposes with the IHTA’s tactics. One striking example was the placement of the I-Hotel issue on last November’s ballot. The IHTA and its supporters initially regarded the proposition as a trap, a “no-win” situation, and upon hearing rumors that some supervisors were thinking of placing it on the ballot phoned one of the more friendly Supervisors to register their protest, only to be told by the befuddled man that he thought they wanted it on the ballot; it turned out that the Workers Committee on its own had concluded that such a ballot proposition would be a good idea and was lobbying strongly for it (in the name of “the tenants”).

There have also been points at which some of the left organizations subordinated the I-Hotel fight to what they regarded as more pressing, organizationally-determined needs, such as KDP’s shift of personpower toward other struggles involving Filipinos (the defense of Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, the two Filipina nurses convicted of killing patients in an Ann Arbor hospital, and the anti-Marcos campaign in the Philippines) and NCA’s sudden withdrawal from the Hotel following defeat of the Nov. 8 ballot proposition when it went into an “internal period” to deal with political differences within the organization.

The presence of the Hotel’s downstairs Marxist-Leninist organizations served to limit the support the struggle received from the Chinatown area itself, as the political stances and past tactics of some of these Asian youth groups have alienated large parts of the surrounding community, where they are well known. A further effect was to limit the City administration’s support for the struggle, which in some quarters was regarded as essentially a leftists’ cause, rather than a true community issue.

By contrast, however, the wider group of supporters from San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland and other nearby communities seemed for the most part unaware of and uninvolved in these more sectarian concerns. The intense ideological and tactical fights that underlay such questions as when, where and for what purpose demonstrations were called, what chants were used at demonstrations, what line was put forth in literature, etc., all were questions that seemed to have little bearing on those who actually showed up and otherwise acted to support the Hotel tenants. It is likely that a very high proportion of supporters were unaware of the distinctions and differences among the various tenant groups.

The outpouring of support for the I-Hotel is probably explained in large part by factors that already have been alluded to, but are worth summarizing. The Third World working class tenancy of the Hotel clearly was a major factor, in a highly politicized city with a large and varied Third World population and a long history of issues involving Third World struggles, domestically and internationally. The fact
that the tenants were elderly and clearly in need of outside assistance, yet at the same time determined and militant, also was important. And the cumulative long-term nature of the struggle, with its periodic victories and delays, in itself provided an incentive to support the Hotel; there was a feeling that victory was possible, especially given the accession of a new liberal city government in November of 1975. “When I arrived in San Francisco in 1974,” remarked one activist, “the I-Hotel already had a legendary quality.”

The limits of a liberal city government also were well revealed in the I-Hotel fight. George Moscone is a typical liberal mayor. Richard Hongisto was extraordinary, as sheriffs go. Both did some good things. Moscone twisted the arms of a reluctant Board of Supervisors to eke out the $1.3 million loan to the Housing Authority, Hongisto initially refused to evict and publicly mouthed some brave words, such as “laws in our society are written to protect people with property and money.” But in the end both chose to serve that system, to protect people with property and money. Moscone would not accept the tenants’ new plan and institute a new eminent domain action for permanent City ownership of the Hotel, the only act that would have definitively called off the eviction threat, even though the required subsidy was small and readily available from a no longer needed allocation of the hotel tax. Hongisto not only led the eviction, but participated in such a vicious way (sledgehammering down doors, threatening to order press and medical people out of the building when they remonstrated against his techniques) that one wondered whether his previous acts and words had any real meaning.

EVICTION NIGHT TACTICS
The mass demonstrations mounted around the Hotel played an important role in raising public consciousness about the issue, pressuring the City government (and courts), and politiciz-
ing both the demonstrators and tenants. Important questions can be raised about eviction night tactics, however. The entire sequence of events, starting around 10 p.m. when the call went out (triggered by informants in the Sheriff’s office) that “this was the night”; through the hours of waiting, chanting, dry-run arm linking, amplified reports on the progress of the approaching army (“they’ve left the Civic Center”, “they’re moving down Broadway”); watching the slow parade-like arrival of motorcycles, police-bearing buses, ambulances, firetrucks, paddy wagons, blue-and-whites; being clubbed, jabbed and pushed around for a few minutes before retreating; watching the axes and sledgehammers batter down the doors as we shouted and chanted from across the street; seeing people led and carried out of the building over the next four hours—it all had a surreal quality, like a prearranged script working itself out. Partly because of the age of the tenants and the expressed desires of at least some of them, the plan was to not resist beyond a certain point and not to resist in ways that would incur extreme police violence. But it seems no real consideration had been given to using those 2,000 people in a way that might result in really stopping the eviction. The 400 sheriffs, deputies and police were extremely well-supervised and controlled, all in all (there were a few instances of “exuberance” and loss of control, but considering the situation, history and potential, it was a pretty unbloody affair). Police Chief Gain oversaw and commanded the outside operation from an 8th floor command post in the adjacent Holiday Inn, the Sheriff and Undersheriff themselves were in full control of the inside operation. The political risks of the situation, not only for these men but for the City administration, were immense. The whole world, or at least the whole country, was in fact watching, via its reporters and t.v. cameras. It was most likely not a situation in which those in charge would have chosen to carry out the eviction no matter what kind or degree of force had to be used; rather, the force was finely tuned and in control.

And yet the crowd of demonstrators, their leaders and organizers seemed not at all to consider any kind of scenario that might have led the Police Chief, Sheriff and Mayor to decide to retreat, in order to avoid the unacceptable political consequences of unrestrained brute force. The crowd of 2,000 was in no way accoutered or otherwise prepared by instructions or training to hold out for longer than a few symbolic minutes; leaders with bullhorns in fact exhorted everyone to retreat within a short time after the police clubs and horses started in in earnest. Whether this is the “normal” reaction of a predominantly middle-class background, largely white crowd, or there simply was
no concept that things could be different, everyone did their expected thing, and despite this huge turnout the outcome was never in doubt. A friend told me of a film he saw of Japanese resistance to an airport expansion scheme, in which demonstrators wore protective equipment corresponding to that worn by the police, were highly disciplined, used creative, well thought out, well rehearsed tactics, fought back, and made it a real battle. Their intention and plan was to resist effectively, to stop something.

There's no question that the police have the armaments to win such a battle, where there is one of them for only five of us; but there is every likelihood that the politics and control in such a situation put a strict clamp on how far they will be allowed to go, how many and whom they will be allowed to injure. What would have been the political consequences of forcing this pitched battle and the pathetic scene of burly sheriffs escorting elderly Filipinos out onto the street to continue into the morning rush hour, as tens of thousands of commuters came into a totally tied up downtown battlefield? Our eviction night showing was profoundly depressing, not so much because we lost, but because it was set up so that there was no way we could do anything but lose. And the “lessons” to the public, to the police, to ourselves, are clear: we are a paper tiger.

Much of this criticism of eviction night tactics can be traced to the lack of a unified leadership in the I-Hotel struggle, which in turn stemmed from the central involvement of several distinct political groupings who disagreed with each other violently on many levels. A set of bitter accusatory papers was circulated within and to the various left formations analyzing eviction night, but relating perceived errors to the long-standing, broader history of disagreements. The Support Committee accused the Workers Committee of disrupting security plans during the eviction action, of abandoning the human barricades and attempting to persuade demonstrators to disperse. The Workers Committee in response said it regarded the eviction night demonstration as a futile gesture, doomed to fail, and that in contradistinction to the Support Committee it had sought to prevent the eviction attempt from coming about at all. Regardless of the comparative merits of the two attacks, it is clear that there was no unified strategy and set of tactics regarding how to handle the eviction attempt, and that most of the 2,000 persons there to protect the building and tenants were very confused by the conflicting directives they were given. That rare opportunity offered by the presence of thousands of persons prepared militantly to defend something they believe in was poorly utilized. And although it is difficult to make the case concretely in the space of this report, it seems at least plausible that a clearer overall sense of strategy, more unified leadership and better-planned tactics over the year and a half before eviction night might have prevented the August 4 eviction from ever being attempted and might have given tenants and supporters a clear victory.

SOME INNOVATIVE TACTICS
Some of the political tactics used in trying to save the Hotel may have wider applicability. Several months before the eviction supporters succeeded in having the Hotel listed on the National Register of Historic Places (a secondary level landmark status). Interestingly, the designation derived not from architectural considerations but from the Hotel's role in Filipino immigration history. Rebuilt after the 1906 Earthquake, the International Hotel had for decades housed, in communal fashion, low-paid Filipino and Chinese workers. While this designation did not prevent the eviction, it nonetheless has potential importance, because the designation means an environmental impact
report will have to be filed, should Four Seas have to get a new demolition permit, and that process can provide important delays and political leverage. Additionally, the new feasibility study grant—which eventually may provide the best hope for taking back the building and site—is available only because of the National Register status.

The eminent domain action is perhaps the most important innovative step in the struggle to make the city government more responsive. The power to take private land is truly a potent, potentially radical tool. To date cities have used it primarily in a regressive way, often cloaked in "public interest" or "public welfare" rhetoric—replacing "slums" with a convention center or new office buildings is good for the city's economy, creates jobs and tax revenues, and that benefits everyone. I know of no other instance in the United States in modern times when a city government has attempted to use its eminent domain powers to take land away from a wealthy developer for retention as low-rent housing. (The fact that the developer is foreign,
with no ties to the city’s power structure, may have made this easier). While there has been considerable after-the-fact criticism of the original IHTA “buyback plan” by some in the organized left for its financial unworkability and incorrect political perspective—that it placed responsibility for providing housing on low-income people themselves, rather than on the government—in retrospect there was no way that eminent domain action would have been embraced by the City had it not been regarded simply as a temporary means of getting the property away from Four Seas and into the tenants’ hands. The Board of Supervisors put up the $1.3 million only on the condition that it was short-term loan to the Housing Authority, the actual taking agency. The Housing Authority went through with all the complex taking procedures only because it regarded its involvement as temporary; it never was willing to own or manage the Hotel. The movement from the old “buyback plan” to the newer concept of using City eminent domain powers and City subsidies, thereby placing with the City ultimate financial responsibility for ownership and maintenance, was an important progression in people’s consciousness, albeit not a step the City seems willing to take. But any ultimate outcome of the I-Hotel struggle that is based on taking the Hotel away from Four Seas by eminent domain—no matter how jerryrigged the financing scheme is for making sure the units would remain as low-income housing—would be a truly progressive gain and one that might be repeated in San Francisco and other cities. Even if a plan led to the I-Hotel being demolished and new federally-financed public housing erected in its place, the solution would be a model to follow elsewhere. (While in some ways not as attractive a solution, it would provide more, larger, newer, and better units).

In more recent months, following the August eviction and the November defeat of the ballot proposition on the I-Hotel, cooperation among the various groups central to the struggle has markedly increased. One supporter attributes this, correctly I believe, to the weakened position of the struggle; if any victory is still to be salvaged, unity will be essential. While the struggle appeared strong, prior to the eviction, with chance of a clear-cut, dramatic victory, the various groups regarded leadership and “the correct line” as extremely important. The recent involvement of the two more mainstream Chinatown housing groups, as co-sponsors with the IHTA of the feasibility study for the Hotel block, is a significant development, both in representing support from the Chinatown community and eventually involving the City administration more closely in finding a solution to the neighborhood’s housing problems. At the same time, the IHTA itself has declined considerably. Half of the former tenants have relocated in a hotel seven blocks away (the rest are scattered about), and while the Association continues to meet attendance is poor and leadership uncertain. The new feasibility study can represent going on the offensive by developing community support for an imaginative plan to recapture an area several times as large as the Hotel site, through a combination of public and private programs. Where the leadership will come from for this effort is at the moment unclear. And whether such a development will again lead to sectarian warfare, lack of a unified strategy, and inability to reach out to the immediate surrounding community remains to be seen.

CHESTER HARTMAN is an urban planner and author living in San Francisco. He coordinates a national communications/action network for radical planners, community organizers and related types. People interested in this network should write him at 360 Elizabeth St., San Francisco 94114.
One of the political goals of Radical America is to help recover and spread the history of the democratic and libertarian socialist traditions. The suppression of that history is a part, we think, of the continued weakness of the Left today. Unfortunately most of the scholars writing that history direct their work towards academic audiences and the more dogmatic versions of socialist history still dominate in popular publications.

Because the exceptions are so rare, and so important, we want to call attention to some recent publications of British presses, relating to the history of socialist feminism. Though they may be harder to get than US books, they're worth the effort, and besides it would be useful to ask your favorite bookstore to carry them.

A new British feminist press, Virago, has put out an impressive number of good (and handsomely produced) books in the single year since it began. One of the most moving is the autobiography of Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree*. Russell was a British socialist feminist active, in the 1920s and 1930s, in the birth-control, sexual-reform, and progressive-education movements. She was the second wife of Bertrand Russell and clearly influenced his political development as much as he influenced hers. Her memoir is extraordinary, both politically and as a piece of writing. It is beautifully written; it unites personal and political emotions and commitments so successfully that it provides an effective portrait of a deeply political woman, one that can be inspiring to other women because it does not pretend to flawlessness or lack of ambivalence. The book teaches some important things about marriage, love, the British Left, the unity of class and sexual dominance among the upper class. It also offers a subtle and generous counter-view to Bertrand Russell's own rather self-serving autobiography...

Virago has other important books available in paperback as well: Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement*, reprinted from its original 1931 edition, a survey of the British struggle for woman suffrage by one of its few socialist leaders. Alexandra Kollontai's novel *Love of Worker Bees*, published in the Soviet Union in 1923. A new history book to be published in April 1978 seems very promising—*One Hand Tied Behind Us*, by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, an account of the working-class woman suffrage movement in the textile towns of Lancashire. The work is in part based on some wonderful interviews with older women textile workers, veterans of the movement. Virago books can be ordered from them in London (send for a catalog of prices) at 5 Wardour St., London WIV 3HE, England. Virago books are carried in the US by Women in Distribution, PO Box 8858, Washington, DC 20003.

The Pluto Press, also of London, has recently published two short books by our associate Sheila Rowbotham on British socialist feminists. *A New World for Women* is an
account of F.W. Stella Browne, an early-twentieth-century activist mainly in the birth control movement. Browne's political practice came from a revolutionary vision that connected economic and social domination with sex as well as class. Her feminism, shared by women in many socialist movements in many countries at that time, connected sexual liberation with women’s liberation, and considered both essential socialist goals. But Brown was unusual even among that company. Irrepressibly outspoken, brave, and possibly tactless and fanatical, she was one of few who dared defend abortion and lesbianism. Her experience was also unique because in England the birth-control campaign retained a class-conscious orientation and remained within the socialist movement much longer than it did in the U.S. For all these reasons socialists concerned with reproductive and sexual freedom today would do well to acquaint themselves with Stella Browne's work and experience.

Sheila Rowbotham has also co-authored with Jeffrey Weeks a small book on Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, *Socialism and the New Life*. Carpenter and Ellis were British socialists primarily known for their radical views on sex in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Weeks wrote the section on Ellis who was primarily a psychologist of sex, seeking a more positive acceptance of sexual pleasure and a more tolerant view of sexual deviance. While his work seems outdated to most today, he was historically important as a leader of the assault on Victorian prudery. Carpenter is much more important for us; in reading this essay it is easy to understand how he has been an important influence on a feminist historian like Rowbotham. Born in 1844, he became a socialist in the 1880s, when there was not yet a clear distinction between the British Marxists (led by Hyndman, they were already rather economistic) who emphasized economic change and the romantic socialists who emphasized inner spiritual change. Carpenter and his comrades created a rural socialist community where they attempted to shed some of their upper-class privileges — they lived without servants,* did manual labor, rode bicycles, sang together, devoted themselves to crafts — and actually succeeded in creating a community in which some working-class people became active members. Carpenter was a homosexual and this fact undoubtedly spurred him towards building a protective community. More importantly for us, he was also the first public spokesman for equal rights for homosexuals.** Carpenter was a strong supporter of feminism as well. His influence was great in the World-War-I era, and his most famous book — *Love's Coming of Age* — in defense of sexual freedom — was deservedly one of the socialist classics of that period. The triumph of Bolshevism rightly made people reject much of Carpenter’s romanticism but wrongly suppressed many of his hindsights and visions about the cultural and personal implications that socialism ought to have. Pluto Press books can be ordered from Pluto Press, 10 Spencer Court, 7 Chalcot Rd., London, NW1, UK, or in the United States from Urizen Books, Inc., 66 West Broadway, New York, NY 10007.

Linda Gordon

*It is important to remember how deep and unquestioned was the expectation that all but manual laborers would keep at least one servant. For example, Karl Marx at his poorest always had a resident housekeeper.

**The dominant sexual ideology at this time so completely denied the existence of lesbianism that it is likely that most people conceived of homosexuality as an exclusively male phenomenon.
ADDITIONAL BOOK NOTES

I’Enfant, Pierre, *Centuries of Toddling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). This reviewer predicted, when Philippe Aries’s *Centuries of Childhood* got such wide acclaim some years ago, that the floodgates had been opened for a new wave of revisionist history. This book would appear to bear out that prophecy. The author claims that up until the ninth and tenth centuries, babies were considered simply to be “clumsy people” and were not thought of as a separate category as they are today. He cites eighth-century photographs (not reprinted in the book, unfortunately) showing babies changing each others’ diapers and carrying on other “adult” responsibilities. This reviewer cannot express too strongly his indignation at the publishers for putting the footnotes at the back of the book, rather than at the bottom of the pages where they belong.

Van Humphreys, Frothington, III, *Syphilitic Morons with Shit for Brains: An Assessment of New Left Historians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). The historical profession has long awaited a calm stock-taking of the contributions and failings of “New Left” history, and we can be grateful that Professor Van Humphreys’ widely acclaimed 1976 Chippendale lectures on that subject are now available in book form. This reviewer cannot hope to do justice to the subtleties of Prof. Van Humphrey’s analysis. Suffice it to say that his conclusions, highlighting the need to “outfit a big ship, see, and send them back to Russia,” will stir many a spirited discussion at faculty cocktail parties over coming semesters.

Sanders, Col. Harlan, *Jobs for Historians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). The good humor and distinctly positive approach of this volume should be a useful corrective to any tendency toward self-pity on the part of some younger historians. Denial of tenure, as the author persistently reminds us, is not the end of the world.

Lemisch, Samuel Flag, *Little People in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). The author, a distant cousin of a well known radical historian, brings a laudably different approach to the same subject matter. This treatment of the role of little people in history is, to put it mildly, a masterpiece. In this reviewer’s opinion the chapters on Napoleon, Haile Selassie, and former Speaker of the House Carl Albert were the most interesting, but there is not really a single weak spot in the whole book. If there is a criticism to be made, it is that the author tends toward over-use of the phrase “diminutive dynamo.”

Social Science Institute, *Numbers: A Handbook for Historians* (Washington: Social Science Institute, 1977). This valuable reference work contains all the numbers from one to 4½ billion, listed in order. It is hoped that further generous support from the federal government will allow supplementary volumes, but this one contains all the numbers that the ordinary historian is likely to have use for.

Frumminger, Mrs. Bertram, *New Parameters in Women’s History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977). This reviewer could hardly believe the historical profession’s good fortune when he perused this volume and found that it combined the latest social-science concepts with a healthy traditionalism in regard to women’s rights and responsibilities. In this
book the activities of Mrs. Harry Stanton and Mrs. Edward Anthony and other prominent figures are put into a solid perspective. In a persuasive postscript the author states that in her more than twenty years as assistant lecturer at Columbia University she has had an opportunity to observe the historical profession at close hand and has witnessed none of the sexual discrimination so often discussed in recent years.

One of our editors wrote these book notes in the December 1977 Radical Historians Newsletter. They got a good response, and we’re reprinting them here.

LETTERS

To the Editor:

Jim O’Brien’s article, “American Leninism in the 1970’s” (Radical America, Winter, 1977-78) is a narrative summary of the recent history of various left organizations, some of which have appeared in the last decade while others have a longer history. The article contains several factual errors, but those are not the concern of my response; rather, I want to take issue with the basic premise of the article.

O’Brien opens his article by stating its intent: “to sort out a mass of information on American Leninism in the 1970’s and tell what is going on.” He proceeds to “sort out” this information without ever stating what Leninism is beyond a few off-handed remarks about the “disciplined political party” and “Leninist organizational forms.” While he includes a good deal of information that is valuable for anyone wanting a chronology of New Left activities, his approach relies on empiricist assumptions and thus cannot find real causes for current problems. By contrast, I would contend that Leninism is not an organizational form which may “at times help or hinder” the revolutionary process, nor is it a political party, nor a set of activities. Rather, Leninism is precisely Marxist theory in the present period, or Marxism-Leninism.

The problems, therefore, that O’Brien notes with the various sects and with the CPUSA are not principally organizational, nor principally tactical, nor even principally programmatic. The problem lies with their failure to see Marxism-Leninism as a living, developing science; their failure to see it as a method and a guide to action, not a set of dogma; and finally, their failure to grasp the essence of Marxist theory: dialectical and historical materialism. It is only the essence and the method of scientific socialism that we learn in studying the works of classical theorists, not the specific tactics, the program, the organizational forms, or even exact explanations of the way in which to wage the revolutionary struggle in a country so very different from Russia in 1917 and China in 1949. O’Brien’s dismissal of Leninism because of some logic about its (unspecified) vanguard form unfortunately does not serve as a contribution to the ongoing debate around revolutionary strategy; rather he insists on identifying “Leninism” with its dogmatist deviations. Worse, he presents us with a chronological picture of what so-called Leninist groups have done, which is simply a body of conclusions about the practice of various dogmatist and revisionist sects.

Certainly a “radical” assessment, in the sense of going to the very root of the problem, could bring forth a whole body of literature by the leading revolutionary theorists of history that would disprove every single assumption that O’Brien puts forth as synonymous with Leninism. A document such as Lenin’s Reorganization of the Party, for example, contradicts nearly every aspect of party organization that O’Brien attributes to “Leninism”. While one could quote endlessly from Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire or Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks, not to mention the debates during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, to disprove O’Brien’s simplistic and uninformed remarks about how traditional “Leninism” (thus Marxism-Leninism) has refused to deal with the crucial questions of culture and ideology, quoting battles (the forte of the existing groups O’Brien is describing) do not serve to advance our understanding of Marxist scientific theory. Our purpose should be to use the method of Marxism-Leninism, dialectical and historical materialism, as a guide, subject to scrutiny and reformulation at all points based on current conditions, a task the quotation-mongering dogmatist groups reject and, apparently, O’Brien as well.

The most serious problem, however, with Jim O’Brien’s article rests with his omission of the “anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist trend” as a political force in the party-building movement. Granted, his focus was on the parties and groups who have proclaimed themselves to be “Leninist” organizations; however, O’Brien has built his criticism in such a way as to discredit all Marxist-Leninist groups on the Left today. The “Maoist camp”, including those of us who have been influenced by the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s
contribution to the Marxist-Leninist tradition, did not all enter the CP-ML, RCP, etc. Many political activists who took up Marxism-Leninism in the late 60's and early 70's have continued political work in independent collectives, in organizations such as women's groups and trade unions, on campuses, in communities, and in workplaces. Publications, newspapers and articles have appeared over the past few years from the loosely-aligned anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist "trend" groups. Debate has been carried on principally around the need for a new communist party, around the best course for initiating the party-building process in this country, and around the manner in which the new party can be built so as not to reproduce the dogmatist and revisionist errors of the existing organizations.

Jim O'Brien's omission of this "trend" in his discussion of the state of the "Leninist" Left is a serious oversight for one who apparently follows the doings of the U.S. Left so carefully. He doesn't mention the long debate between the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) and Irwin Silber in the Guardian which squarely addressed, in a Marxist-Leninist dialogue, the problems facing the socialist movement and party-building forces in the U.S. today. The problems taken up in the Guardian exchange (sectarianism, parroting of one line or another, elevating political position to dogma, reformism, and the relative isolation of Marxist-Leninists from the working class) are among those which O'Brien sees as endemic to the Leninist form of organization itself.

In addition to the PWOC, and its monthly newspaper The Organizer, documents from the Ann Arbor Collective, El Comite, Detroit Marxist-Leninist Organization, Socialist Organizing Committee, Tucson Marxist-Leninist Collective, Potomac Socialist Organization, and the pages of the weekly Guardian, among others, have all discussed the party-building movement and the need to break definitively with the dogmatist, sectarian, and reformist revisionist practices of the existing Left groups. (The Guardian, by the way, has established a network of clubs for the announced purpose of nationwide coordination of political and ideological struggle as a step toward an opening in the party-building process. It did not proclaim its intention to form a party as O'Brien states.)

While there is no clearly delineated agreement among the groups mentioned, and even considerable controversy over the steps toward party-building in the present period, there is unity on the need to build an anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist movement. The initiation of this debate, as an ongoing theoretical and practical task, sorely credits O'Brien's pat conclusion that there is a "built in logic" in the Leninist organizational form which leads groups which are fairly close politically to form new organizations instead of seeking unity. The root of the sectarianism O'Brien describes rests with the ever-present danger of dogmatically appropriating certain set of principles as immutable for all places and all times, a danger that the "trend" is committed to struggling against.

The difference between the approach of the "trend" and that of O'Brien is clearly enormous. The "trend" is attempting to look within the full body of Marxist-Leninist theory and political practice in order to build a revolutionary socialist movement in this country. O'Brien, on the other hand, not only fails to note the contribution of the anti-dogmatist/anti-revisionist communist movement, but he fails to see anything in the "Leninist" (or supposed "Left Leninist") movement that shows promise of displacing the CPUSA's influence in the working class. The goal, a "will-of-the-wisp", is discounted because it hasn't happened, the comfortable logic of empiricism and the hallmark of U.S. bourgeois social science.

Terry Meade
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