

Strata in the working class

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In the discussions we have held and in some of the articles that have appeared and will appear in this Bulletin we have begun to concretize one of our most basic political concepts which has appeared in generalized form in our political resolutions and documents. We have based our politics in large part on Trotsky's conception of the instinctive urge to socialism of the working class. This theoretical statement is, for us, not a holiday phrase for manifestoes and May Day speeches but, as all theory, a guide to action. Our theoretical analysis and concrete understanding of the proletariat must form the basis of the theory and practice of the revolutionists. How can it be otherwise with a movement which bases itself first and foremost on the conquest of power by the working class?

We began, therefore, by learning to seek out in the daily life of the workers in the factory the expression of their instinctive striving toward their liberation and the liberation of all humanity. We learned to analyze the thought, the speech, the actions of the workers--not at face value, superficially--but rather fundamentally, in its innermost essence, in a word, dialectically. In this study and preparation our worker comrades have contributed immeasurably from their store of personal and immediate knowledge of the life of the proletariat.

The concrete knowledge we are now acquiring is serving to confirm and deepen our theoretical understanding of the proletariat as a class and its relation to other classes. Full Marxist understanding, however, requires that we extend our analysis deeper. Understanding the nature of the working class as a whole, we can go on to an appreciation of the conflicts and contradictions within the class, the conflicting currents that play their part in the class struggle.

Fundamentally the proletariat is tied together by common conditions of life, by common aspirations. But to view the working class as one homogeneous whole is to view it statically and abstractly. In discussing the working class itself, Lenin rarely failed to describe the different strata of workers and their differing, often contradictory relation to class struggle. Probably the most outstanding dialectical analysis of the proletariat is contained in Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution and the book deserves a careful study from this point of view alone.

Basic to an understanding of the working class as a whole is its relation to production. And a further analysis must also proceed from this point, which is at the heart of the contradictions contained within the proletariat.

The relation of workers to production, their role in the process of production, is not uniform or identical. One of the most easily recognized differences is that of skill. The tool and die maker has a different relation to production than the worker on the assembly line. His work involves a substantial degree of special training and skill. He is one of the few workers that can get a certain amount of satisfaction from his work. He feels a greater freedom on his job since he exercises a degree of influence over

his machines unlike the assembler or production machine operator who is completely dominated by the machine or the assembly line. He even owns certain expensive tools himself. And he stands in a relation with other phases of production which give him an understanding of his strength.

Unskilled and semi-skilled work in the modern factory is impossible without the skilled worker-- the builder of machines, the maker of tools and dies, the maintenance and repair man. His special skills and training also command higher wages and make him a bit less susceptible to unemployment.

All this affects him socially and politically. It is the basis for the fact that skilled workers were the first to achieve powerful and stable union organization which in turn helped to raise them even further above their fellow workers, economically and socially. But the development was contradictory. At the same time that they were the first to struggle militantly for their unions, their higher social status and their special conditions of work introduced a strong counter- tendency of conservatism.

They are the backbone of reactionary craft unionism - defending their special position not only against the capitalists but also against the rest of the working class. Their higher income, home and car ownership, occasional entry into the ranks of the lower bourgeoisie, etc. make them especially susceptible to bourgeois ideology in general and bourgeois politics in particular. As Lenin pointed out long ago, these higher strata of workers are corrupted by capitalism (and colonialism) and provide the social base for reformism-in the United States, New Dealism and the alliance between local unions and municipal political machines. Their features can be summed up by the contradictory role the skilled workers play in the auto unions. In most locals of the UAW there is a solid core of union leaders from the skilled departments. They are the ones with ability and experience, untiring in their efforts to maintain the union and fully educated in the principles of unionism. But their understanding goes no further than formal unionism. When militant struggle is required which clashes with the peaceful running of the union, they are a conservative and backward force that acts as a break on the rank and file workers.

The size of the plant in which they work plays an important role in forming the thought and determining the actions which workers take. Compare, for example, the huge Ford Rouge plant in Detroit which employs over 60,000 workers (about 90,000 at the height of war production) with the plant of an independent auto parts manufacturer employing, let us say, 2000 workers. Marxists have always understood that workers are organized by the process of production itself. But in the Ford plant the effects of this on the workers' consciousness are much more direct and immediate.

Within the gates are assembly lines, production lines, machine shops, a tire plant, a steel mill, a glass factory and much more. The worker understands the complexity of modern production but sees directly its integration, its social character. He has a

direct relation with workers in very different occupations. He can see at a glance that he has tremendous power over the whole productive process. A strike at the Rouge plant has extensive and visible ramifications. In a matter of hours other companies in Detroit begin shutting down, producers of parts which can no longer be used. The huge international empire of Ford can be tied up.

Even outside the factory: In the huge anti-Taft-Hartley Bill demonstration in Detroit the presence of the Ford workers made a qualitative difference which they could see. Through force of numbers they could run the city of Dearborn. A demonstration of Ford workers has national repercussions. They are a power in the factory and outside it.

Compared to this the 2000 workers are as nothing. They don't see and can't see as readily and as concretely how any action they might take can have substantial significance other than on narrow shop and union questions. The tendency is always to wait for the lead from the bigger shops and locals for that is where the power lies. All this is reflected in the Ford worker. The Rouge plant contains within it among the most advanced and militant workers in Detroit and, therefore, in the nation. Directly political questions play a much greater part in the life of the union than in other locals. And the special history of the Ford Rouge local reflects this in part, particularly the influence the Stalinists have gained and retained since Ford was organized.

There are many more sources for the differences that exist within the working class, most important among them, the question of the Negro and national minorities. But one final one will be considered here. That is the relation of workers in different industries to the class struggle.

We accept as a commonplace the distinction between heavy and light industry, between production goods and consumer goods industry. But very often the effects of this distinction on the workers themselves are not appreciated. What are the differences between the two types of industry? (Actually, for a serious analysis, this should be broken down further for there are many gradations from the heaviest to the lightest.) By and large, heavy industry is characterized by larger factories, greater centralization and huge corporations and a greater proportion of constant capital to variable as against smaller shops, decentralization and a minimum of heavy machinery in light industry. In addition, heavy industry has a decisive influence over the economy as a whole which is not shared by light industry. All of this has different effects on miners and steel workers on the one hand and textile workers and agricultural laborers on the other.

The effects of large factories, great corporations and extreme centralization we have seen. Heavy industry workers tend to be organized in huge combinations, often centralized in one or two big cities. In light industry the workers are dispersed and are deprived of the feeling of strength which characterized the others. The mass of

favours which the job gives them. The lowest layers of the union leadership also develop a legitimate organizational loyalty to their union. They are the conscious union propagandists. But while this is a necessity in the building and maintenance of any organization, in times of crisis this loyalty can temporarily retard good union militants from striking out on a new road.

Between the lowest and the highest levels of union leadership there are many gradations. An understanding of the leadership as a whole and its different strata is required for an effective struggle against the labor bureaucracy and for the building of the revolutionary party in the factories.

the side of class peace and abandons entirely its original role of representative of the workers in their struggle against capitalism is thus the need of capitalism to limit the class struggle and the nature and role of the labor unions that makes of the labor bureaucrats agents of capital in the working class movement, labor lieutenants of capitalism - a position, it must be said, which they occupy very willingly, without any visible remorse and for what is really a pittance considering their importance to capitalist society.

The union leadership is not, of course, an unrelieved swamp. It extends from the summits where it is in regular contact with the government and the bourgeoisie to its lowest ranks - the stewards and the committeemen in the shops who represent the men directly against the foremen and plant managements. As one goes down the ladder the contact with the ranks is strengthened and the officials become more responsive to the moods and desires of the workers. Even in the lowest ranks of the union leadership the contradictory elements can be found but the greater weight is usually on the side of class struggle leadership.

The committeemen and stewards come directly from the rank and file. They share their income and their existence. The response to a failure to struggle militantly or to represent the men adequately is immediate and strong. In the lowest strata of the leadership can be found many of the most self-sacrificing workers, workers with ability who have already established themselves as leaders of other workers, workers with a high level of consciousness and understanding. Here are workers who, when they become revolutionists, can provide the most conscious leadership to the workers in the shops and can recruit and build the party with the greatest effect. They are an important field for party recruitment.

It is because of this, however, that comrades should understand the contradictions which are present even here. The committeeman and steward is called upon to enforce the contract and while a good steward fights for all he can get for the workers he represents he is tied to the contract and feels duty bound to support it. He accepts the contract as a normal way of life in the factory and is often in a position where he has to enforce it against the workers, or at the least, inform workers that they have no claim or grievance under the contract. The aim of the capitalists and the top labor leaders and the tendency in labor contracts is to separate the lowest officials from the rank and file. There has been a considerable development in the direction of having fewer shop representatives and putting committeemen on full time. Where a steward represented 50 or 100 men with whom he worked, now (as in the Ford contract) one committeeman will represent 500 workers and will not have to work on a machine at all. Company representatives are constantly attempting to bribe stewards with favors of all kinds - easier jobs, higher ratios of pay, passes from the plant, etc. - provided the steward will play ball with the company. The job of a steward is becoming increasingly technical (time study, etc.) and many militants are scared away from the post by its complexity. The result is that many of the lowest union officials have been separated from the ranks to some extent and try to keep their jobs to keep the protection and

constant capital which the workers in basic industry face, their direct domination by the machine, makes it easier for them to see the impersonal and generalized character of their exploitation and their anger and hatred is turned readily against the "system." In light industry the exploitation is more personal, the capitalist or his direct agents can more easily be held responsible rather than capital itself. There is a greater tendency to believe that in the next factory or the next town things are better. The knowledge that any miner or steelworker or railroad worker has that when he shuts his industry down the whole economy creaks to a halt is absent in non-basic industry.

These differences have had their influence on the history of the workers. The workers in light industry are only partly organized, have a much lower standard of living, are more backward politically. The workers in heavy industry are more "progressive."

But the matter does not end here. The situation does not remain static but develops dialectically. The advanced workers who have demonstrated their ability to set up permanent organizations, who have fought their way upward, are subject to a counter tendency which is the result of this very progressiveness. The very organizations which they have built in struggle act as a partial brake on their further movement. They treasure their unions and their traditions and are loathe to break from them when a higher stage in the class struggle is reached. They develop a certain organizational conservatism - a very understandable conservatism to preserve what they built at such cost--but a conservatism nevertheless. Certain strata of the workers achieve a petty bourgeois standard of living and enter the corrupting atmosphere of the aristocracy of labor. The permanent crisis of declining capitalism tends to lessen the importance of those differences--but they remain and must be understood.

The more backward workers, oppressed by their greater exploitation, by illiteracy, by subsistence or below subsistence standards of living, are not bound by the confining influence of fully developed class collaboration and their hatred for their lot, which has not the safety valve that traditional unionism can supply, explodes with the greatest fury in times of crisis. At such times strata which have been retarded for many years can leap far ahead of the more advanced sections of the working class and what they lack in stability and tenacity is made up in striking power and explosive force.

Indications of this are visible around us. Poor southern whites who flocked to the northern factories during the war demonstrated in themselves these contradictions. They had no union tradition, rarely attended union meetings and often spoke antagonistically of the union and its leaders. Yet they played an important part in the wild-cat strikes and resorted regularly to direct action against the boss with total disregard of the no-strike pledge and the discipline imposed by the union bureaucracy. Another indication is the greater violence, with which more backward strata enter into the class struggle, particularly the great post-war strike waves. The

great mass strikes of the CIO demonstrated perfect organization and an extremely high level of consciousness. So solid were the workers in these industries that practically no defense of their picket lines was required except in special local situations. Compare this to the militant struggle of the telephone workers for lesser demands, or even the foremen and the violence in their strike at Ford, and the potentialities of strata of the workers that arrived late on the scene of the class struggle can be clearly seen.

An understanding of the different strata within the working class and their movement is essential to guide the politics and daily activity of the revolutionary party. Comrades should develop within themselves a perceptivity to the slightest shift in current or change in mood in the working class. For it is with such understanding that the program of revolution can most effectively be brought to the workers.

The decisive field of work for revolutionists today in the United States is the organized labor movement. That is, therefore, the section of the working class we should study with the greatest care. One section of the organized working class has a special status. Born out of the working class, based on the working class yet standing apart from and above the working class is the labor bureaucracy.

The union bureaucracy has its origin in the struggles of the proletariat to improve its conditions of life and to assert its position in society. From the very beginning of working class organization for struggle leaders have been thrown up to guide, to direct, to organize the fight. Some of these leaders have come from outside the working class, others were motivated by the purest self-seeking opportunism, yet fundamentally all were put forward by the ranks because in one way or another they represented the strivings of the workers. They were able to formulate more clearly or do more effectively what the workers wanted formulated or what the workers wanted done. But they expressed not merely the progressive aspirations of the workers but also their backwardness, contained in the bourgeois ideology that dominated the formal thinking of the proletariat, and this, too, they expressed with greater clarity and consciousness.

In the newer unions in the CIO the roots in the ranks of even the top layers of the bureaucracy are still visible. Dodge workers still recall when Frankenstein worked by their side in the Dodge Main plant and held secret meetings in back rooms and basements to organize the union. R. J. Thomas is still remembered by Chrysler workers in the same way.

But the upper layers of the bureaucracy are completely divorced from their origins in the ranks of the working class and play a special role dictated to them by the positions which they occupy.

Their conditions of life are no longer that of the workers. Their huge salaries and expense accounts, their homes and vacations, the social environment of capitalists and government officials in which they feel very much at home remove them from the problems and pressures of the workers and remove from their thinking the worker and his point of view. The influences of the workers on these people is indirect and distorted and derives only from the fact that the social basis of their positions, salaries, etc. is the membership of their unions.

Much more decisive than their personal living conditions, however, is the role dictated to them by the nature of the trade union movement under capitalism. The trade unions arose as instruments of struggle of the working class under capitalism. Their function is to represent the workers in their day to day conflict with the capitalists in the factory. But the unions are limited by two considerations: First is the all-inclusive character of union membership. The most backward workers in a shop must be included in the union if it is to be effective. The result is to tie the union movement to an elementary minimum program on which all workers, or most workers, can agree at all times. Secondly, the unions are limited by the fact that "normal" functioning in a capitalist society requires relative labor peace and some sort of agreement or understanding with the capitalists, usually embodied in a contract.

Thus, although one essential element of unionism is its character as an organ of struggle, contradictory to this - even because of this - the unions are also organs of class peace. Just as the state exists to control and confine the class struggle in society as a whole, which otherwise would be torn apart, similarly the unions control and limit the class struggle in the factory and make possible longer or shorter periods of class peace.

The union contract itself embodies those contradictory elements. On the one hand it contains the gains won by the workers and obligates the company to carry them into effect. On the other hand it stabilizes the worker-capitalist relations for a year (or two years) and is enforced against militant workers who utilize opportunities to make greater gains.

This contradiction cannot be contained indefinitely in the labor movement. With increasing force as capitalism declines and makes more and more difficult the achievement of even the smallest gains, this contradiction tears the labor movement apart and can only result in the explosion of the revolution which overthrows completely the element of class peace and its human agents in the labor movement.

An increasing polarization in the labor movement is taking place today in which the forces of revolt, the hatred and resentment of the workers, are collecting at one pole and all the weight that bourgeois society can muster to enforce class peace is being assembled at the other pole. In this situation the labor bureaucracy, driven by the need to maintain the labor unions in their traditional form, goes over completely to