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The working class today – Maral Jefroudi

- 1. Karl Marx – Capital, extracts**
- 2. FI 1991 world congress “Bourgeois plans and workers’ perspectives” (extract)**
- 3. Charlie Post (interview) – We're all precarious now
additional reading:**
- 4. FI 1979 world congress “Class Unity, the Working-Class United Front and Allies of the Proletariat.” (extract)**



Chapter 10: The Working Day

I. THE LIMITS OF THE WORKING DAY

We began with the assumption that labour-power is bought and sold at its value. Its value, like that of all other commodities, is determined by the labour-time necessary to produce it. If it takes 6 hours to produce the average daily means of subsistence of the worker, he must work an average of 6 hours a day to produce his daily labour-power, or to reproduce the value received as a result of its sale. The necessary part of his working day amounts to 6 hours, and is therefore, other things being equal, a given quantity. But with this the extent of the working day itself is not yet given.

Let us assume that a line A-----B represents the length of the necessary labour-time, say 6 hours. If the labour is prolonged beyond AB by 1, 3 or 6 hours, we get three other lines:

Working day I: A-----B-C

Working day II: A-----B---C

Working day III: A-----B-----C

which represent three different working days of 7, 9 and 12 hours. The extension BC of the line AB represents the length of the surplus labour. As the working day is $AB + BC$, or AC, it varies with the variable magnitude BC. Since AB is constant, the ratio of BC to AB can always be calculated. In working day I, it is one-sixth, in working day II, three-sixths, in working day III, six-sixths of AB. Since, further, the ratio of surplus labour-time to necessary labour-time determines the rate of surplus-value, the latter is given by the ratio of BC to AB. It amounts in the three different working days respectively to 16½, 50 and 100 per cent. On the other hand, the rate of surplus-value alone would not give us the extent of the working day. If this rate were 100 per cent, the working day might be of 8, 10, 12 or more hours. It would indicate that

the two constituent parts of the working day, necessary labour-time and surplus labour-time, were equal in extent, but not how long each of these two constituent parts was.

The working day is thus not a constant, but a variable quantity. One of its parts, certainly, is determined by the labour-time required for the reproduction of the labour-power of the worker himself. But its total amount varies with the duration of the surplus labour. The working day is therefore capable of being determined, but in and for itself indeterminate.¹

Although the working day is not a fixed but a fluid quantity, it can, on the other hand, vary only within certain limits. The minimum limit, however, cannot be determined. Of course, if we make the extension line BC, or the surplus labour, equal to zero, we have a minimum limit, i.e. the part of the day in which the worker must necessarily work for his own maintenance. Under the capitalist mode of production, however, this necessary labour can form only a part of the working day; the working day can never be reduced to this minimum. On the other hand, the working day does have a maximum limit. It cannot be prolonged beyond a certain point. This maximum limit is conditioned by two things. First by the physical limits to labour-power. Within the 24 hours of the natural day a man can only expend a certain quantity of his vital force. Similarly, a horse can work regularly for only 8 hours a day. During part of the day the vital force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs, to feed, wash and clothe himself. Besides these purely physical limitations, the extension of the working day encounters moral obstacles. The worker needs time in which to satisfy his intellectual and social requirements, and the extent and the number of these requirements is conditioned by the general level of civilization. The length of the working day therefore fluctuates within boundaries both physical and social. But these limiting conditions are of a very elastic nature, and allow a tremendous amount of latitude. So we find working days of many different lengths, of 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 hours.

The capitalist has bought the labour-power at its daily value. The use-value of the labour-power belongs to him throughout one working day. He has thus acquired the right to make the

1. 'A day's labour is vague, it may be long or short' (*An Essay on Trade and Commerce, Containing Observations on Taxes, etc.*, London, 1770, p. 73).

worker work for him during one day. But what is a working day?² At all events, it is less than a natural day. How much less? The capitalist has his own views of this point of no return, the necessary limit of the working day. As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour.³ Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him.⁴ If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.⁵

The capitalist therefore takes his stand on the law of commodity-exchange. Like all other buyers, he seeks to extract the maximum possible benefit from the use-value of his commodity. Suddenly, however, there arises the voice of the worker, which had previously been stifled in the sound and fury of the production process:

'The commodity I have sold you differs from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use creates value, a greater value than it costs. That is why you bought it. What appears on your side as the valorization of capital is on my side an excess expenditure of labour-power. You and I know on the market only one

2. This question is far more important than the celebrated question of Sir Robert Peel to the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce: What is a pound? Peel was able to pose this question only because he was as much in the dark about the nature of money as the 'little shilling men' * of Birmingham.

3. 'It is the aim of the capitalist to obtain with his expended capital the greatest possible quantity of labour (*d'obtenir du capital dépensé la plus forte somme de travail possible*)' (J. G. Courcelle-Seneuil, *Traité théorique et pratique des entreprises industrielles*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1857, p. 63).

4. 'An hour's labour lost in a day is a prodigious injury to a commercial State . . . There is a very great consumption of luxuries among the labouring poor of this kingdom: particularly among the manufacturing populace, by which they also consume their time, the most fatal of consumptions' (*An Essay on Trade and Commerce*, etc., pp. 47, 153).

5. 'If the free worker rests for an instant, the base and petty management which watches over him with wary eyes claims he is stealing from it' (N. Linguet, *Théorie des lois civiles*, etc., London, 1767, Vol. 2, p. 466).

* The followers of the banker and Radical M.P. Thomas Attwood (1783-1836) of Birmingham, so called because they advocated the repayment of creditors in shillings of a reduced gold content, as a way of solving the currency problems incurred at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. See *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, English edition, pp. 81-3.

law, that of the exchange of commodities. And the consumption of the commodity belongs not to the seller who parts with it, but to the buyer who acquires it. The use of my daily labour-power therefore belongs to you. But by means of the price you pay for it every day, I must be able to reproduce it every day, thus allowing myself to sell it again. Apart from natural deterioration through age etc., I must be able to work tomorrow with the same normal amount of strength, health and freshness as today. You are constantly preaching to me the gospel of "saving" and "abstinence". Very well! Like a sensible, thrifty owner of property I will husband my sole wealth, my labour-power, and abstain from wasting it foolishly. Every day I will spend, set in motion, transfer into labour only as much of it as is compatible with its normal duration and healthy development. By an unlimited extension of the working day, you may in one day use up a quantity of labour-power greater than I can restore in three. What you gain in labour, I lose in the substance of labour. Using my labour and despoiling it are quite different things. If the average length of time an average worker can live (while doing a reasonable amount of work) is 30 years, the value of my labour-power, which you pay me from day to day, is $\frac{1}{365 \times 30}$ or $\frac{1}{10,950}$ of its total value. But if you consume it in 10

years, you pay me daily $\frac{1}{10,950}$ instead of $\frac{1}{3,650}$ of its total value, i.e. only one-third of its daily value, and you therefore rob me every day of two-thirds of the value of my commodity. You pay me for one day's labour-power, while you use three days of it. That is against our contract and the law of commodity exchange. I therefore demand a working day of normal length, and I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place. You may be a model citizen, perhaps a member of the R.S.P.C.A., and you may be in the odour of sanctity as well; but the thing you represent when you come face to face with me has no heart in its breast. What seems to throb there is my own heartbeat. I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity.⁶

6. During the great strike of the London building workers [1859-60] for the reduction of the working day to 9 hours, their committee published a manifesto that contained, to some extent, the plea of our worker. The manifesto alludes, not without irony, to the fact that the greatest profit-

We see then that, leaving aside certain extremely elastic restrictions, the nature of commodity exchange itself imposes no limit to the working day, no limit to surplus labour. The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and, where possible, to make two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the worker maintains his right as a seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length. There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides. Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class.

2. THE VORACIOUS APPETITE FOR SURPLUS LABOUR. MANUFACTURER AND BOYAR

Capital did not invent surplus labour. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of labour-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production,⁷ whether this proprietor be an Athenian *καλὸς ἄγαθός*,* an Etruscan theocrat, a *civis romanus*, a Norman baron, an American slave-owner, a Wallachian boyar, a modern landlord or a capital-

monger among the building masters, a certain Sir M. Peto, was in the 'odour of sanctity'.* (The same Peto, after 1867, came to an end *à la* Strousberg.)†

7. 'Those who labour ... in reality feed both the pensioners, called the rich, and themselves' (Edmund Burke, op. cit., pp. 2-3).

*Peto was a Baptist, a benefactor to various chapels, and the author in 1847 of a pamphlet entitled *Divine Support in Death*.

†The bankruptcy of Peto's firm was in fact in 1866; the allusion here is to the bankruptcy of the German financier and speculator B. H. Strousberg in St Petersburg in 1875 and his subsequent expulsion from Russia after being charged with fraud.

* 'Handsome and good': ancient Greek expression for an aristocrat.

ist.⁸ It is however clear that in any economic formation of society where the use-value rather than the exchange-value of the product predominates, surplus labour will be restricted by a more or less confined set of needs, and that no boundless thirst for surplus labour will arise from the character of production itself. Hence in antiquity over-work becomes frightful only when the aim is to obtain exchange-value in its independent monetary shape, i.e. in the production of gold and silver. The recognized form of over-work here is forced labour until death. One only needs to read Diodorus Siculus.⁹ Nevertheless, these are exceptions in antiquity. But as soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, the *corvée*, etc. are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, whereby the sale of their products for export develops into their principal interest, the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom etc. Hence the Negro labour in the southern states of the American Union preserved a moderately patriarchal character as long as production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements. But in proportion as the export of cotton became of vital interest to those states, the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products, but rather of the production of surplus-value itself. The same is true of the *corvée*, in the Danubian Principalities for instance.

The comparison of the appetite for surplus labour in the Danubian Principalities with the same appetite as found in English factories has a special interest, because the *corvée* presents surplus labour in an independent and immediately perceptible form.

Suppose the working day consists of 6 hours of necessary

8. Niebuhr remarks very naively in his *Roman History*: 'It is evident that monuments like those of the Etruscans, which astound us even in their ruins, presuppose lords and vassals in small (!) states.' Sismondi, with deeper insight, says that 'Brussels lace' presupposes wage-lords and wage-slaves.

9. 'One cannot see these unfortunates' (in the gold mines between Egypt, Ethiopia and Arabia) 'who are unable even to keep their bodies clean or to clothe their nakedness, without pitying their miserable lot. There is no indulgence, no forbearance for the sick, the feeble, the aged, or for feminine weaknesses. All, forced by blows, must work on until death puts an end to their sufferings and their distress' (Diodorus Siculus, *Historische Bibliothek*, Bk III, Ch. 13).

5. THE STRUGGLE FOR A NORMAL WORKING DAY. LAWS
FOR THE COMPULSORY EXTENSION OF THE WORKING
DAY, FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE FOURTEENTH TO THE
END OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

'What is a working day? What is the length of time during which capital may consume the labour-power whose daily value it has paid for? How far may the working day be extended beyond the amount of labour-time necessary for the reproduction of labour-power itself? We have seen that capital's reply to these questions is this: the working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services. Hence it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the free play of the vital forces of his body and his mind, even the rest time of Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarians!)⁷² – what foolishness! But in its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals

if it is night, or by the noise, if it is day.' Mr White gives cases where a boy worked for 36 consecutive hours, and others where boys of 12 drudged on until 2 in the morning, and then slept in the works till 5 a.m. (3 hours!) only to resume their work. 'The amount of work,' say Tremetheere and Tufnell, who drafted the general report, 'done by boys, youths, girls, and women, in the course of their daily or nightly spell of labour, is certainly extraordinary' (ibid., pp. xliii and xliv). Meanwhile, late at night perhaps, Mr Glass-Capital, stuffed full with abstinence, and primed with port wine, reels home from his club, droning out idiotically 'Britons never, never shall be slaves!'

72. In England even now in rural districts a labourer is occasionally condemned to imprisonment for desecrating the Sabbath by working in his front garden. The same man would be punished for breach of contract if he remained away from his metal, paper or glass works on Sunday, even on account of some religious foible. The orthodox Parliament will entertain no complaint of Sabbath-breaking if it occurs in the 'process of valorization' of capital. A petition of August 1863 in which the London day-labourers in fish and poultry shops asked for the abolition of Sunday labour states that their work lasts on an average of 16 hours a day for the first 6 days of the week, 8 to 10 hours on Sunday. We also learn from this petition that the delicate gourmards among

the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It haggles over the meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, and grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, renewal and refreshment of the vital forces to the exact amount of torpor essential to the revival of an absolutely exhausted organism. It is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers' period of rest. Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.

By extending the working day, therefore, capitalist production, which is essentially the production of surplus-value, the absorption of surplus labour, not only produces a deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal moral and physical conditions of development and activity, but also produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself.⁷³ It

the aristocratic hypocrites of Exeter Hall* particularly encourage this 'Sunday labour'. These 'saints', so zealous in *culte curanda*,[†] show they are Christians by the humility with which they bear the over-work, the deprivation and the hunger of others. *Obsequium ventris istis (the workers') perniciosis est.*[‡]

73. 'We have given in our previous reports the statements of several experienced manufacturers to the effect that over-hours ... certainly tend prematurely to exhaust the working power of the men' (op. cit., 64, p. xiii).

* A large hall on the north side of the Strand, built in 1831, and pulled down in 1907. It was used throughout its existence for meetings by religious bodies of various kinds, but especially by the Church Missionary Society. 'Exeter Hall' was in Marx's time a shorthand expression for that tendency among the English ruling classes which stood for the extension of English power in Africa with the aim of converting the 'natives' to Christianity, and at the same time stamping out the slave trade. It is associated with the name of Wilberforce.

† In attending to their bodily pleasures' (Horace, *Epistles*, 1, 2, 29).

‡ Horace's actual words were: '*obsequium ventris mihi perniciosis est cur?*' ('why is gluttony more ruinous to my stomach?'). Hence, here, 'gluttony is more ruinous to their (the workers') stomachs'. (Horace, *Satires*, Bk II, Satire 7, line 104.)

extends the worker's production-time within a given period by shortening his life.

But the value of labour-power includes the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of the worker, for continuing the existence of the working class. If then the unnatural extension of the working day, which capital necessarily strives for in its unmeasured drive for self-valorization, shortens the life of the individual worker, and therefore the duration of his labour-power, the forces used up have to be replaced more rapidly, and it will be more expensive to reproduce labour-power, just as in the case of a machine, where the part of its value that has to be reproduced daily grows greater the more rapidly the machine is worn out. It would seem therefore that the interest of capital itself points in the direction of a normal working day.

The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses a piece of capital, which he must replace by fresh expenditure on the slave-market. But take note of this: 'The rice-grounds of Georgia, or the swamps of the Mississippi, may be fatally injurious to the human constitution; but the waste of human life which the cultivation of these districts necessitates, is not so great that it cannot be repaired from the teeming preserves of Virginia and Kentucky. Considerations of economy, moreover, which, under a natural system, afford some security for humane treatment by identifying the master's interest with the slave's preservation, when once trading in slaves is practised, become reasons for racking to the uttermost the toil of the slave; for, when his place can at once be supplied from foreign preserves, the duration of his life becomes a matter of less moment than its productiveness while it lasts. It is accordingly a maxim of slave management, in slave-importing countries, that the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth. It is in tropical culture, where annual profits often equal the whole capital of plantations, that negro life is most recklessly sacrificed. It is the agriculture of the West Indies, which has been for centuries prolific of fabulous wealth, that has engulfed millions of the African race. It is in Cuba, at this day, whose revenues are reckoned by millions, and whose planters are princes, that we see in the servile class, the coarsest fare, the most exhausting and unremitting toil, and even the absolute destruction of a portion of its numbers every year.'⁷⁴

74. Cairnes, op. cit., pp. 110-11.

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* Like all other laws, it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here.

We can now understand the foolishness of the economic wisdom which preaches to the workers that they should adapt their numbers to the valorization requirements of capital. The mechanism of capitalist production and accumulation itself constantly effects this adjustment. The first word of this adaptation is the creation of a relative surplus population, or industrial reserve army. Its last word is the misery of constantly expanding strata of the active army of labour, and the dead weight of pauperism.

On the basis of capitalism, a system in which the worker does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the worker, the law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production may be set in motion by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power, thanks to the advance in the productivity of social labour, undergoes a complete inversion, and is expressed thus: the higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital. The fact that the means of production and the productivity of labour increase more rapidly than the productive population expresses itself, therefore, under capitalism, in the inverse form that the working population always increases more rapidly than the valorization requirements of capital.

We saw in Part IV, when analysing the production of relative

surplus-value, that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a machine, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [*entfremden*] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.

This antagonistic character of capitalist accumulation²³ is enunciated in various forms by political economists, although they lump it together with other phenomena which are admitted

23. 'From day to day it thus becomes clearer that the relations of production in which the bourgeoisie moves do not have a simple, uniform character, but rather a dual one; that in the same relations in which wealth is produced, poverty is produced also; that in the same relations in which there is a development of the forces of production, there is also the development of a repressive force; that these relations produce bourgeois wealth, i.e. the wealth of the bourgeois class, only by continually annihilating the wealth of the individual members of this class and by producing an ever-growing proletariat' (Karl Marx, *Misère de la philosophie*, p. 116) [English edition, p. 107].

It is not enough that the conditions of labour are concentrated at one pole of society in the shape of capital, while at the other pole are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. Nor is it enough that they are compelled to sell themselves voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus population keeps the law of the supply and demand of labour, and therefore wages, within narrow limits which correspond to capital's valorization requirements. The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. It is otherwise during the historical genesis of capitalist production. The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to 'regulate' wages, i.e. to force them into the limits

suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence. This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation.

The class of wage-labourers, which arose in the latter half of the fourteenth century, formed then and in the following century only a very small part of the population, well protected in its position by the independent peasant proprietors in the countryside and by the organization of guilds in the towns. Masters and artisans were not separated by any great social distance either on the land or in the towns. The subordination of labour to capital was only formal, i.e. the mode of production itself had as yet no specifically capitalist character. The variable element in capital preponderated greatly over the constant element. The demand for wage-labour therefore grew rapidly with every accumulation of capital, while the supply only followed slowly behind. A large part of the national product which was later transformed into a fund for the accumulation of capital still entered at that time into the consumption-fund of the workers.

1991 World Congress

Europe 1992: Bourgeois plans and workers' perspectives

Europe

Monday 1 January 1996

C. Crisis in the workers' movement and new struggles

8. The establishment of the Single Act is a challenge thrown down to the European workers' movement and to all the social movements. The European workers' movement is, moreover, facing this new international conjuncture in a difficult situation.

- The economic crisis and austerity policies have gradually modified the socio-political conditions in which workers are struggling. In a majority of European countries, the following factors have created a new restricting and difficult context that has helped to divide or isolate struggles: the appearance of a very high level of structural unemployment (above all, youth and long-term unemployment); the development of insecure employment (above all for women and young people), short-term contracts and intermittent work; the decline of collective sectoral negotiations in some countries; the growth of flexibility; the development of external subcontracting; the reduction of numbers employed in the big companies; the crisis, and even disappearance, of certain working-class communities around traditional industries; and, finally, the modification of the industrial fabric. The old strong industrial sectors, whose workers' won many social victories (sliding scale, union rights, collective agreements, social security and so on) that were rapidly extended to the whole of the working class, have gone into crisis and have not yet been replaced or are

not yet in a situation to play this role once again.

- These changes have taken place in a particular political context: after the checking of the Portuguese revolution; the controlled transition in the Spanish state; the impasse of the historic compromise in Italy; the failure of the Union of the Left in France; the disastrous austerity policies of the British Labour Party from 1976 to 1979, which helped Thatcher to defeat them; and the disastrous experience of governments led by social democracy in the 1980s (France, Sweden, Greece, Spanish state).

- All this has not happened without leaving its mark on struggles, on their intensity and, above all, their political consequences. The effects have been felt in all the European countries, at different times, through a marked decline in strike activity.

- There have been some important defeats, sometimes with cumulative effects on the whole workers' movement in a country. There has been a visible exhaustion of the generation of the workers' vanguard of the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. Among the layer of advanced workers - that is, the workers' vanguard in the struggles - the idea of socialism has lost support, even more so given that in the preceding period there was not a sufficient accumulation of revolutionary forces giving a credible reply to scepticism and a rejection of the Stalinist model.

- Poverty, job insecurity and social marginalization have hit broad sectors of the population, particularly immigrants and "second generation" young people. The educational system rejects them, the workers' movement is not interested and finds itself incapable of responding to their expectations. Their social revolt takes specific, often violent, forms, and constitutes a new, complex problem of organization and politicization. As the social and economic crisis gets worse this will be a lasting problem and a big question for anyone who

really wants unity and mobilization of all the oppressed.

- For several years in a certain number of countries we have seen the growth of extreme-right fascist currents without the workers' movement knowing how to prevent it. Racism has been on the rise, with a marked increase in working-class electors voting for extreme-right parties. These fascist forces, who are beginning to address workers specifically and try to use all aspects of the social crisis and the rottenness of bourgeois parliamentarism, will be a stable feature of the new political situation.

Class consciousness has been weakened by all this. And this situation has led to a weakening of both trade-union and political rank-and-file structures, reducing the arenas where class solidarities are crystallized and reproduced.

- Such is the heritage of the recent past. But the particularities of the economic crisis (which have however left the bourgeoisie some economic room for manoeuvre), as well as the scope of the gains and positions won by the workers' movement during the previous 30 years, have for the moment prevented this being translated into a lasting political and social defeat of the working class.

- The bourgeoisie has remained on the offensive, exploiting a favourable relationship of forces. But men and women workers have resisted: they have prevented the bosses' projects being completely implemented or have defeated them. The same goes for women who have also seen their abortion rights threatened, or for young people confronted by austerity policies in education.

- We have also seen over recent years (unequally according to the country and above all in an unsynchronized fashion) rather significant outbreaks of sporadic struggle. This has not only taken the form of the most intransigent fightbacks but also wage demands in line with the enormous profits made in the

recent past, or the demand for reduced working hours. On the basis of these struggles and the relative phase of expansion recently, in some countries or sectors there has been a resurgence of unionization.

Some new types of struggle have appeared, notably in the public services (healthworkers, teachers...) or the most feminized professions, indicating that a renewal of the strong sectors of the working class was underway.

However these struggles take place in a very unequal fashion throughout Europe. We have also seen new forms of self-organization developed to counter the bureaucratism and crisis of the union movement. However, in the absence of a political outcome and overall perspectives these movements sometimes lead to sectoral isolation.

Although they have been massive and very determined, the big struggles of the 1980s have still not led to the cumulative development of a new vanguard generation which would make possible a qualitative leap in building our organizations.

- There have also been a whole series of struggles among young people, beginning with important university and school strikes against austerity policies in education. They show that around concrete demands there is an immense potential for social protest although once again these mobilizations have not represented a political radicalization among young people equivalent in subversive consciousness to that of the end of the 1960s.

- Strong mass movements have been able to develop on trade-union, feminist, anti-militarist or other terrains, mobilizing tens or hundreds of thousands of people. Such movements will continue to develop. But in their development they will also continue to suffer from the absence of credible political possibilities for the satisfaction of their demands.

Conditions are therefore difficult. Structural factors linked to socio-economic changes combine with the attitude of the trade-union and reformist party leaderships. It is certainly not the case that the working class and a section of young people have no capacity left to engage in overall struggles against the bosses' policies. But the traditional leaderships oppose this perspective; they block any possibility of convergence of partial struggles, which is the only way of inverting the political and social processes set in motion by the crisis.

Big social confrontations and new mass experiences will be necessary to overcome all these handicaps. And the role of revolutionaries in encouraging these processes will be determinant.

9. Under the effects of the crisis, of partial defeats and reformist politics, the organized workers' movement - trade-union and political - has suffered a series of setbacks and is going through important internal transformations today. The crisis of management and dialogue based on Keynesian politics worsens this turmoil.

- In general, the reformist leaderships have been incapable of consolidating the initial struggles against austerity measures. Aside from demagogic measures and propaganda, they have been unable to reply positively to the changes taking place in the proletariat by organizing the unemployed, women, young people or immigrants, as the situation demands. The increasingly pressing demands for democracy and control have been ignored in favour of increasing cynicism, manipulation and corruption inside the ruling bureaucracies.

10. The trade-union movement has not escaped from this crisis.

- Until now, its scope has been very varied depending on the country, since the rate of unionization of wage-workers in Western Europe varies between 5% and 85%. These

qualitative differences are explained by specific trade-union and political histories, or by the various degrees of institutional integration. Not all unions have suffered equally from a loss of efficacy and credibility in confronting new social and economic challenges.

- However, everywhere we are seeing a loss of militant resources and an increasing gap developing between the bureaucracy and the base. In every country, to various degrees, the economic and political crisis of the union leaderships has opened up a new situation in terms of relations between workers and unions and the way in which unions organize the rank-and-file. There has been a total impasse of union strategies and an absence of left alternatives sufficiently credible to change the situation.

- The union bureaucracies are looking for a way out of the crisis by increasingly accepting the choices of European capitalists, and by emphasizing their service functions to the detriment of a class-struggle, democratic and unified trade unionism. "Realism" is spreading and has bit by bit acted as a line of compromise with capitalist projects.

- The European TUC - a bureaucratic apparatus par excellence above the national trade-union movements - reflects this crisis and this inability to adapt to the new challenges via its functioning, projects and policies. It is more preoccupied with finding ways to discuss with the European Commission than engaging in a real fight around demands against the whole of the Single Act. It is busier going along with social democracy's European policies.

All these accumulated delays can only end in big setbacks and retreats for the unions in the face of the growing internationalization of production and the bosses' strategies.

- Even when the level of unionization is very low in the workplace or in general, trade-union organizations continue to be a framework for

the long-term debates about strategic orientation running through the workers' movement. This in recent years there have been several examples of a rise of workers' struggles and progress recorded by oppositional forces in the trade unions. In periods of deeper crisis, the weakening of the trade union constitutes a mortal threat to the workers' ability to fight back. Strengthening the oppositional currents in the trade unions is therefore a concrete and immediate condition for their survival. Revolutionary socialists have to step up their fight to organize such opposition currents around immediate demands for the democratization of the union and around a platform of demands which is in practice opposed to the rightwing policies of the union bureaucrats.

11. The social-democratic parties have confirmed themselves as perfect managers for the bosses' policies. They propose themselves as the main political force with the will and capacity to establish the Europe of the Single Act.

- This is not just a conjunctural policy. It corresponds to a new adaptation by the social-democratic leaderships to the new conditions created by the capitalist crisis. It also highlights a certain number of structural changes at the heart of these leaderships, with a symbiosis between the traditional workers' bureaucracies, technocratic factions (petty bourgeois and bourgeois) of the state and public services and managers of the private sector. Theories about the need to build a "New Left" and the new social bloc (including the most modern and enlightened bosses), correspond to these transformations. Unable and unwilling to develop a real policy to defend social gains, social democracy has substituted an ideology of the "new citizen" and of "democracy", and has abandoned the last vestiges of a class analysis. It has accepted, or has itself orchestrated, policies of privatization, limitation of trade-union rights, increased military spending and so on.

- The working class composition and activist layers of the social-democratic parties have dramatically diminished. But their political and electoral influence has tended to increase in most countries, accompanying the retreats in class consciousness and growing scepticism towards socialism, and partially capitalizing on the crisis of the Communist and far-left parties. Their electors do not have confidence in their projects of big reforms, but even so they sometimes appear as a minimum guarantee in relation to the projects of the right-wing parties, or as the lesser evil. When in power they practice austerity policies and do what the ruling class expects of them. Today's social democracy is reformism without reforms, weighted down with new contradictions, the bearers of internal conflicts - including into the trade-union movements that they control.

12. The Communist parties, for their part, have experienced a massive crisis.

- During the last few years, in most countries - notably those where the CPs have been in a minority in relation to social democracy for a long time - these parties have either collapsed or exploded, sometimes to the point of nearly disappearing.

- In those countries where the CPs have remained mass parties, sometimes majority ones, the crisis has taken various forms combining massive membership losses, total political disorientation, a complete inability to reply coherently to capitalist projects and an incapacity to propose an alternative and credible line on the economic and social crisis, in particular for the trade unions.

- Above all, they have suffered dramatically from all the effects of the Eastern European regimes' crisis and from the disgust they have increasingly inspired among workers. These parties, which grew again after the World War II in reference to the divisions in Europe, have been definitively destabilized by the new world

situation, while Gorbachev has no more need for these “fraternal parties” as a transmission belt.

- Centrifugal forces were reinforced as soon as a section of the apparatuses integrated themselves permanently into bourgeois state institutions and when links with the Soviet apparatus lost all their substance.

- The crisis of the CPs partially removes an obstacle that revolutionary Marxists have had to confront for the last 60 years. But, for a time, it could provoke new confusion and demoralization, notably in the trade-union sectors influenced by them. In a number of CPs, the idea of renouncing any ideas of radically transforming society or renouncing the “Communist” tradition has been common in the majority currents of the leaderships who are seeking to keep their electoral support and present a more “realistic” profile. But this has also been the case for the minority oppositional currents who have been dragged towards social democracy under the pressure of the crisis and the lack of perspectives.

- The development of discussions and splits in the CPs is also determined today by what’s happening in Eastern Europe. There, the extreme weakness of those currents claiming to support socialist democracy does not help to give a correct interpretation of Stalinism for those critical sections inside the CPs.

- No substantial and stable left current has yet come out of the crisis of the CPs in Europe, apart from the Greek CP for the moment. A collection of currents inside the CPs are trying to transform themselves into radical forces, centred around “new values” of the “Red-Green” type, aiming at sections of the Greens, the social movements and even the far left. This situation, combined with the weakness of revolutionary Marxists, has negative ideological consequences among certain layers of advanced workers and youth.

13. The Green parties have appeared in the last period as movements winning important electoral victories thanks, in most countries, to the votes of workers and young people. They are often the consequence of a new change taking place inside the left. For example, a section of their activists come from the traditional workers’ parties and the far-left.

Up to now, these parties, particularly electorally, have partially captured the discontent and frustrations born out of the political practice of the social-democratic and Communist parties. Faced with the scale of ecological dangers, threats of nuclear war, racism, poverty in the third world and so on, they have appeared as searching for an alternative society on the base of a radical reformism. These parties as such, or a section of their base, are sometimes prepared to get involved in other struggles.

Although the formation of the Green parties could represent a hope for the regroupment of the non-reformist left, in many cases their electoral gains and their integration into institutions brought about new contradictions. In certain cases this has already led to a rapid adaptation to parliamentary politicians’ games or to an ideology of “neither left nor right”. This could lead to big divisions within them, leaving disoriented a section of their base which demands satisfactory answers both on ecological struggles and a more overall understanding of the misdeeds of capitalism.

14. Among the new forms of political and social activity that have appeared in the last period figure social movements which, around questions of feminism, anti-racism, anti-militarism, pacifism or ecology have been able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in Europe. Some very important political and social struggles have taken place on these questions, playing a leading role in the activity of sections of the youth, and sometimes posing serious problems to governments. However,

these movements have also suffered from the lack of central political perspectives:

- The autonomous women's movement is experiencing an unequal and difficult development, and socialist-feminist currents have declined. There has been a crisis in the peace movement and it now needs to find new themes following the changes taking place in Europe and particularly after the Gulf war. The ecology movement is very dispersed, extremely heterogeneous. The anti-racist movements maintain a real audience among a section of young people, but they will have to respond to new challenges with the rise of the far right.

- For revolutionary Marxists, these social movements are not simply timely opportunities. They represent a phenomenon of new social solidarities in the context of the current capitalist crisis. As for the feminist movement, it represents the permanent historic need for women's self-organization to fight all the specific forms of their oppression.

It is therefore necessary to build these movements and lead them under the form of permanent, democratic and unitary structures, at the same time carrying out anti-capitalist educational activity within them. In general, we have a lot of catching up to do in our elaboration and propaganda on questions of defending the environment. Solidarity with the third world will continue to mobilize important forces. Themes against poverty in the third world, the question of human rights and the struggle for peace will continue to mobilize a series of people.

- Some of these movements that were born at the end of the 1970s or the beginning of the 1980s have been tests in terms of the crisis of the traditional organizations of the workers' movement. In different ways, according to the country, they have often been a means of getting involved in social actions which were barely or not at all under the control of the traditional bureaucratic leaderships.

- However, the question of the links between these movements and the workers' parties or unions has come up. The latter should have taken their place, as such, in these movements, while conserving their independence, unity and democracy. But, generally, the reformist leaderships have balked at taking on their responsibilities. They became involved in these mobilizations belatedly, or joined in with the goal of manipulating them and draining them of all subversive content. The more the workers' movement has dragged its feet in contributing to these movements and intervening on these questions, the more it has suffered the consequences in terms of losing credibility, particularly among young people.

We're All Precarious Now

The economy is changing and work is getting more precarious. How can radicals organize in the new conditions?

by Charlie Post

Neoliberalism isn't a new concept any more. Using it, along with "deindustrialization," to describe changes in the core economies since the 1970s has become a kind of truism. But more recently, activists have started to consider what the implications of this regime of capital have been on class structure: is something fundamentally new and different happening? Does the condition of insecurity and fragmentation of labor change radical perspectives on the labor movement, invalidating strategies for trade unionism and reform?

What some have started to call "the precariat" is a concept that bundles together these feelings and theories, and is a term that has gained currency with many on the Left.

Charlie Post, author of the book *American Road to Capitalism*, argues that "the precariat" is a misleading category for understanding the changes working people face today. This interview, conducted by Tessa Echeverria and Andrew Sernatinger for Black Sheep Radio, discusses how radicals should relate to the existing labor movement and how our tactics should change in response to new economic conditions.

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Let's start with some background. Can you tell us why socialists, communists, anarchists, and other radicals have traditionally been interested in organized labor?

I want to break that down into a couple of pieces. Historically, the socialist/communist left has been interested in the workplace and in the industrial working class: workers in manufacturing, transport, etc. That flows from an analysis that these workers have social power. Their work and the withholding of their labor is socially more disruptive to the operation of capitalist society than workers who work in stores, smaller workplaces, and the like.

Industrial workers also, because of their position in production, can develop a collective interest in a democratic collectivist socialist society. That's the foundational reason that Marxian socialists of various stripes, anarcho-syndicalists, and others have been focused on the workplace. Thus, the issue becomes the importance of organization at the workplace.

So are you distinguishing here between the "proletariat" and the working class in general?

Hal Draper used that distinction. I generally want to talk about the distinction between industrial workers, those in manufacturing, transport, construction, telecommunication and the like, and workers in other areas of social life. Historically, the Marxian and anarcho-syndicalist left have always had a strategic focus among workers in industry, even though they've also been involved with teachers, hospital workers, and others.

There's also the understanding that without organization, even workers in large workplaces who have potential social power are not going to act in a class manner or become class conscious. Workers under

capitalism have a dual existence: both as collective producers struggling against capital for control of the workplace, for hours and wages, but also workers compete with each other as sellers of labor power.

This gives rise to what the early twentieth century Marxists used to call “sectional interests”: divisions along the lines of race, citizenship, nationality, gender, sexuality, etc. So the question of the organization of the workplace first and foremost through the formation of militant, democratic unions has also been a historic focus.

Then there’s the third element that really comes into debate in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for radicals and revolutionaries who are interested in organizing at the workplace and building consciousness: “How do we relate to the existing unions?” Because since the early twentieth century, the labor movement has been really dominated by top-down-run bureaucracies that are more interested in cutting deals with the bosses, often at the expense of their own members, than with actually struggling against the boss.

Before the First World War, the revolutionary left was all over the place. Some people said what we need to do is build revolutionary red unions; that was the response of anarcho-syndicalists with the IWW in the US. Other people said you have to work within the existing unions and build opposition to the bureaucratic leaderships. Still others said that you could somehow convince bureaucrats, trade union officials, to be more progressive.

Since probably the 1920s, the revolutionary left has mostly been aligned with that second position (opposition within existing unions). The reality is that workers in unorganized workplaces, when they begin to organize themselves and struggle against the bosses, they’re going to first look to the existing unions to organize them and carry on the struggle. Thus revolutionaries and radicals need to relate to those existing unions, otherwise when workers start to move they’ll be isolated from the activity.

Continuing with that we wanted to get into, how have radicals used tactics in organized labor to radicalize the workforce or to bring their socialism into the organizing? How do you see that changing as the structures of labor have been changing in the last few years? There’s a different relationship to work and a different character of the workforce since the 1920s . . .

Right. The 1920s bear some superficial resemblance to today as only a small portion of the workforce, mostly skilled, was unionized but in sharp decline, and the bureaucracies were cutting deals left and right.

By the 1930s revolutionaries had shifted towards the internal opposition strategy mostly, arguing that where these unions existed they had to relate to them, be members of them, argue for industrial unionism, etc. For workplaces that aren’t organized, they should try to create non-majority unions — groups of workers who organize workplace actions over immediate grievances, recognizing the activists and organizers of these unions would for the most part be the radicals in that workplace.

In the late 1930s and early ’40s, the Communist Party started to argue that as bankrupt and bureaucratic as the unions are, they needed to not only relate to the existing unions, but to find leaders who are progressives and support them. This would frame the position of most of the socialist left in the US toward the labor movement ever since.

So you get socialists who were incredibly enthusiastic about the election of John Sweeney [to president of the AFL-CIO] in the early 1990s, believing that his rhetoric about organizing new groups of workers and immigrants was going to lead to the revitalization of the labor movement. Later, a lot of radicals were interested in the model put forward by the Service Employees International Union under Andy Stern, because they were talking about organizing new groups of workers. Today we see the same thing with people trying to relate to local, progressive union officials through citywide central labor councils.

Unfortunately, many of these people who they want to relate to, while they're good on the war in Iraq or may say good things about health care, in the workplace these people carry out the same kind of policies of cooperating with the employers that the more conservative unions do.

Only a relatively small current on the US left in the last thirty or forty years has been committed to rebuilding militancy from below. What that looks like is building reform caucuses, the most successful being Teamsters for a Democratic Union. Or in non-unionized workplaces, which are the vast majority of workplaces in the US, building non-majority unions — small groups acting like a union but without going through the National Labor Relations Board election process.

At this point, the percentage of the organized workforce is actually lower than it was before the right to bargain was won through the National Labor Relations Act. I think there's a lot of young people who see labor as important to the socialist project or at least to building a fighting element in the United States, but their argument is that there have been some substantial changes to the economy, and the concentrated industrial strategy doesn't apply anymore. They reference this thing called "the precariat," and I was wondering if you could introduce the concept and explain why it's something people find attractive.

The notion that there's the emergence of a new social class or a new layer in the working class is something that goes back to the beginning of the neoliberal offensive in the late 1970s or early '80s. The idea is that there's a category of people whose conditions of life are marked by short-term, temporary, part-time work, at lower-wages without social protections or benefits.

By the late 1980s, there were a number of French sociologists who were talking about "precarious" work. In the English-speaking world, the book that's attempted to make this argument most systematically is *The Precariat*, by Guy Standing. What he's arguing is that the precariat is a distinct social class, separate from the working class. He defines the working class as the 1950s and '60s unionized working class in the industrialized world: people who had full-time employment, job security, who stayed with their employer for twenty or thirty years, who could not be hired or fired at will and the like.

The precariat, according to him, is the growing number of people, particularly among youth and people of color, who are increasingly employed in non-union workplaces, and are part-time and most importantly to him precarious, short-term; people are constantly turning over jobs, moving from one job to another. Standing's argument, then, is that it is this layer, the precariat, who have a more radical potential.

The problem I have with this is that I'm not sure empirically the description of the precariat as a distinct, precariously employed sector of the working class, or even distinct class, is in fact accurate. There's a very good book by Kevin Doogan called *New Capitalism?* For the most part, it focuses on this issue of precarity.

On the one hand, there's been a clear growth in part-time work: in health care, retail and big box-type stores. But what he points out is that while all of these employers are using more part-time work so that they don't pay medical benefits or pensions, the work is very steady. People aren't working for only a few months, but rather are working sometimes ten or fifteen years for the same employer, and they just can't get full-time.

Doogan argues that the reason that the notion of the precariat has gained so much resonance is not because there's this growing number of people whose attachment to employment has become more precarious, or that there's a distinct group with distinct interests, but instead the defeats of the last thirty years, the rise of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state, have made the consequences of unemployment much more severe for workers today than they were in the postwar period.

When I was much younger, in my late teens and twenties, I was first radicalizing in the 1970s, and I had a lot of friends who'd get jobs at the post office or the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They knew that if they got laid off or fired for political activity, they could collect unemployment, get food stamps, probably get on Medicaid, or they could pick up another job quickly. Since the successful neoliberal offensive, we have seen that it is much harder to get full-time employment that have social benefits, and in general the welfare benefits have degraded or disappeared.

The consequences of getting laid off or fired today are much more severe today than they were just a few decades ago. This is what contributes to a growing sense of precariousness among all workers. That starts with workers who are so-called "privileged" with full-time jobs, down to those who are working part-time for Walmart with no prospect of a full-time job.

This has contributed, along with the series of defeats and declining organization of the workplace, to a growing sense that the objective social power that workers once had in this society has dissipated. This goes along with a tendency that many on the Left have had to believe that the relative decline in the percentage of the industrial working class is something new. They argue that there's a historic change in the history of capitalism.

The reality is that the percentage of workers employed industrially has been shrinking since the 1880s and 1890s! This is a result not of geographic mobility of capital leaving the core, but the result of mechanization.

We have seen a very sharp increase in mechanization and in speed-up, or "lean production" — a hyper-scientific management where you break up jobs into very simple and repetitive operations, you eliminate or combine jobs, get people working even harder and faster. You get a situation where today more cars are produced in the United States than in any time over the last one hundred years, but with many fewer workers, and the percentage of those workers organized in unions is very small because of the employers' offensive.

So this notion of precarity goes along with the notion of deindustrialization. Unfortunately, it's also the argument of the trade union officials! What they say is that the reason the trade union movement is in such bad shape is that employers have broken the post-World War II social contract: they're no longer hiring us full-time, they're no longer giving us benefits, and they're moving to China. They say that

instead of confronting the dead end of bureaucratic business unionism—reliance on the NLRB to maintain union density.

Do you have any thoughts on how people could use this common sense to guide them in action? How to organize some of these part-time or service jobs that lend themselves to the idea of the precariat?

The most useful way to use this concept is to do what Richard Seymour, who runs the blog Lenin's Tomb, has done and say, "We're all precarious now." Deunionization, the neoliberal offensive means that all working people face precarious conditions of one sort or another. It's only through organization that we can begin to overcome this, with the recognition that a lot of the struggles of precarious workers are to become regularized and get full-time hours, job security, and benefits.

This means that those of us who are radicals need to bring in a strategic vision. There's been lots of discussion of how do you organize Walmart, which is the biggest retailer in the United States. Many of the unions who have been trying to do it have been going store by store. To be honest, my sense is while it's important and should not be given up, this will not be strategically central because no group of workers in these stores, even those employed regularly, has the social power to disrupt their operations and force Walmart to give in to something.

What's been interesting to me is that the United Electrical Workers, which has been one of the unions who have most done non-majority organizing, in their organizing they have focused on not the stores but the distribution centers: the places where all the crap comes in and goes out to maintain the just-in-time inventory systems.

Those who are trying to figure out how to organize retail, industries where most people are today working, and we also want to reorganize the traditional industries: auto, rubber, transport, and the like. In order to do this, we need to do this strategically, and if young radicals are thinking about how to organize Walmart, you need to think is the key getting a job at a store or a distribution center? At the latter, a small, concerted group of radicals can make an impact to disrupt and bring the company to its knees for a short period of time and exercise more social power.

On the one hand, deskilling, fragmentation, speedup and greater precariousness for all workers has weakened workers. But other aspects, particularly in lean production and just-in-time inventories, have given more power to strategically placed groups of workers.

If people are serious about organizing Walmart, they should follow the UE's example of focusing on these distribution points, because if you can shut those down you shut down dozens of stores, not just a single one. For auto, think about key suppliers of certain parts. In transport, look at the elements of the transport network.

So what you're saying is that the natural resting place in capitalism for its workforce is a state of semi-precarity? Precariousness is not a distinct category or phase, and it's the conscious organizing of ordinary working people that combats precarity and puts stability in people's lives.

Exactly. If you look at the condition of workers before the First World War, say in the 1890s, the vast majority of working people lived an incredibly precarious existence. I was doing some research on skilled workers in Victorian England, the so-called labor aristocracy. Most of these people were working half the year, subject to long bouts of unemployment, and if they were out of work they could lose housing.

You had some minor sections of the working class with what we think of as regular full-time work, but not many.

The sense of what most people alive today thought was “the norm,” was actually the historical exception. The 1940s through the early 1970s was an exceptional period for working-class people in the industrialized countries. In the 1930s and 1940s, workers had posed a major political threat and forced capital to concede major reforms. Once the pressure of competition and profitability forces pushed capital in a different direction and they’re not meeting resistance, then we go back to where we were in the 1880s and 1890s.

Could you talk about the approach that unions have been taking of putting pressure on city governments or state agencies in order to win labor reforms? The idea is that the workplace is too small or they don’t have enough power, so they’ll do it through the government. I wonder if you could get into this distinction of pressuring capital versus state agencies?

I should preface by saying I think that putting pressure on local governments for better labor standards is part of a repertoire of tools for organizing. It is a way for workers who are organizing to reach other to others in their communities.

However, the problem is that the American union officials, particularly United Food and Commercial Workers and the Service Employees International Union have been using this as a substitute for organizing at the workplace. It goes along with this idea that we’re too weak at the workplace, so we’re going to get the government to step in and regulate. This is part and parcel of the worldview of the trade union officials. They say, “We don’t have to sit down, or occupy factories. We can rely on the labor board.”

The reality is that unless workers are exercising some real social power there’s no reason government officials should buck the people who finance their campaigns or “provide jobs in the community.” Unless workers have this workplace social power, their ability to win these local campaigns for government regulation is very limited.

If you look at many of the living-wage campaigns, where they have not been accompanied by concerted workplace action they’ve either been unsuccessful or the laws have been highly restricted or just unenforced.

There’s a critique farther on the Left that the problem is the reliance on cooperation with the state. They identify Taft-Hartley and the NLRB as never making it possible to succeed in any real way. Their model tends to focus on the IWW and concerted illegality. Your position has tended to be somewhere in between there, and I was wondering if you could draw that all out? It’s very understandable for people to say, “Look at how this has been stacked against us, so fuck the whole thing.”

For the most part, that’s a healthy reaction. But it’s not a substitute for a real strategy. The problem is that it harkens back to the idea that in each isolated workplace, we have enough power to take on capital. It leaves open, how do you coordinate actions between workplaces?

Some of the Wobblies back in the 1980s were pointing to some Spanish dockworkers that had very strong organization, but because of their syndicalist influences didn’t engage in nationwide bargaining. The problem was, as the employers became more aggressive, they pitted one group of militant

dockworkers against another — threatening to move one port to another — and got them to agree to lower wages and gutted work rules.

The question is, how do you negotiate the interface between strong workplace organization and coordination in a democratic, bottom-up way? How do you use whatever rights workers have won historically, in terms of legality, to advance that?

There's a really good book that everyone interested in a better labor movement should be reading called *Reviving the Strike*, by Joe Burns. He's written a very good and balanced framework for the National Relations framework and how it appeared to work in the boom years of the 1950s and 60s. But since that boom ended, employers have become more aggressive, and it has become more of a restriction to workers in unions to fight back.

He does not say that you should now ignore the NLRB, but he argues that unions have to be ready to break the law in a more systematic way: extend strikes, spread strikes, take illegal actions, go beyond jurisdictional boundaries, etc.

He talks there about people who have done non-majority actions: we build groups that act as though they're a union, organize around grievances, link up with other groups of workers in similar industries. But how to press for employer recognition? There the question becomes balancing maintaining real power and pressure from below, and then participating in NLRB elections. That's something the labor left needs to go back to, because the labor left has been polarized between those who say, "We'll just figure out a strategy to win NLRB elections" and those who say, "Fuck all this. We'll just organize individually."

How do you respond to people who find the notion of the precariat still very attractive? You've presented some very compelling arguments for why as a category the precariat maybe conceals more than it reveals, and the working class as a whole is experiencing more insecurity that leads to a general feeling of unease and precarity. But for those who aren't interested or able to leave behind a service or retail position, how would you think they should proceed?

On a broad level, I think it comes back to the argument that we're all precarious now. But I think you should go through the experience of organizing where you are. No one should be saying, "I told you so" about limitations, but rather you should go through and consider, "What power do we have in the workplace where we are? Can we leverage that through our potentials and limits?"

It's part of an ongoing discussion of how to organize Walmart, or the big-box stores, home health care aids, nonunion hospitals and the like. Go through the experience and carry on the conversation about what it will take and what we can do in our organizing attempts.

If there's any group of people thinking about organizing their workplace, I'm the last person to say it's a waste of time. That's the kind of conservatism that's gotten the far left a bad name, and deservedly.

Class Unity, the Working-Class United Front and the Allies of the Proletariat. *Fourth International*

Unity of the proletariat, forged in action, must be at the heart of any strategy for a socialist revolution in the imperialist countries of Europe.*

The unification of the key sectors of the proletariat—essentially, those in industry, transport, and communications—is the cornerstone of building such unity and of rallying the oppressed and exploited layers, those who have no objective interest in preserving private ownership of the major means of production, behind the cause of the working class.

An orientation calling for an alliance with the so-called middle classes on the basis of respecting private ownership of the means of production and the market economy, as is involved in a class collaborationist policy, creates division in the ranks of the wage earners. A section of these are impelled, even to defend their elementary demands, such as halting layoffs, to want to do away with capitalist ownership here and now.

Such workers tend immediately to refuse to subordinate their interests to the needs of an alliance with “antimonopoly sectors” of the bourgeoisie, or even with the monopolist bourgeoisie itself, as is the case in the Italian “historic compromise.” The orientation of the reformists thus dampens their spirits, may discourage them, and keep them from winning more backward layers to their cause.

Other sections of the working class, which are not confronted with the same difficulties, do not have the same experience in struggle, and have not yet been won over to independent working-class action, may wait and see what the results of such a class-collaborationist policy are. But their expectations will be disappointed, with the resulting risks of an erosion of their forces.

Thus, any strategy of alliances on a conservative basis with “middle layers,” any class-collaborationist policy, introduces a dividing line

* This is an extract from the resolution on Europe of the 1979 world congress of the Fourth International.

into the working class itself. The unity of the workers is thus inextricably tied up with class independence.

Such strategies make the unity of the workers organizations and their leaderships a prior condition for any mobilization of the exploited and oppressed layers themselves for their demands. To the contrary, any real mass movement may serve as a catalyst in unifying the proletariat.

For example, if the unemployed are organized and led in struggle, this can inspire sections of the proletariat that are tending to be reduced to a precarious existence by the crisis with a confidence in their power. Along with this, such action can raise in the mass workers organizations the question of uniting the proletariat.

Moreover, if immigrant workers go into action in defense of their specific demands, this also provides a basis for raising the need for uniting the class, that is, for bringing the immigrants into a united battle line of the working class as a whole. In such mobilizations, we support demands and forms of action that facilitate a linkup with the workers movement.

Achieving an alliance with sections of the petty bourgeoisie—small shop keepers, small farmers, and artisans—remains an important problem for the workers. An alliance with the small peasants is a strategic, question first of all because of the social weight they wield in a series of countries (Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Spain, southern Italy, and certain regions of France). But it is a vital question also as a result of the role they play in supplying food to the urban complexes in most European countries.

It is necessary to convince the small peasants, artisans, and shopkeepers, many of whom are being expropriated by big capital, that the expropriation of the expropriators is not aimed at confiscating small property. What needs to be done is to show that a working-class plan for solutions to the crisis offers the means for meeting their own special needs.

In Portugal, among sections of the peasantry in the north, of the small shopkeepers, and artisans, the hope of getting long-term credit at very low interest rates as a result of the nationalization of the banks created a favorable attitude toward the nascent revolution of a period. The same reaction could be seen when the Portuguese petrochemical trust (SACOR) was nationalized under workers control, and the possibility appeared of its supplying fertilizer on unprecedentedly favorable credit terms.

Every means possible has to be used to demonstrate to these petty-bourgeois layers that there is no antagonism between workers control over the banks and industry, a monopoly of foreign trade, and setting up a unified banking system, on the one hand, and what is favorable to their interests. They look for distribution of the land, getting what is necessary to cultivate it (fertilizer, machinery), and easy credit terms. It is necessary also to demonstrate to the peasants, artisans, and small merchants that there is no contradiction between these first steps in setting up a planned economy and their enjoying favorable conditions for buying raw materials and distributing their products. This can encourage them to organize in cooperatives on a voluntary basis.

A series of working-class demands may also answer the most pressing needs of such petty-bourgeois layers—improving or establishing a genuine social welfare system, developing social and collective infrastructures (hospitals, housing, nurseries, etc.), education and vocational training in all fields (crafts, industry, agriculture).

Decisiveness on the part of the workers movement in providing positive answers to crucial socio-economic problems, such as the destruction of the environment, capitalist squandering of energy potential, the anarchy in scientific research and its subordination to the narrow needs of monopolies such as the military-industrial complex, and the threadbare system of public health can attract to the side of the workers sections of the “new middle layers of wage earners” (engineers, scientists, university teachers, and house physicians in hospitals, etc.)

In order to forge the unity of the working class in action and advance the proletariat along the road of class independence, the united front tactic assumes an important role.

The strategy of uniting the proletariat for the conquest of power must not be reduced to this tactic alone. This strategy requires a complex combination of actions and methods and slogans to go along with them. Nonetheless, the tactic of the workers united front assumes a special place today among the tasks to be pursued by the sections for the following reasons:

- The economic offensive of the bourgeoisie.
- The objective division that this offensive is creating in the working class, helped along by the bureaucratic apparatuses.
- Growing violations of democratic rights.
- The divisiveness engendered directly by the reformist leaderships on the trade-union and political levels.

- The need for large-scale mobilizations to block the austerity policies of the governments and the bosses during which large sectors of the masses can test the validity of the alternative policy we put forward.
- The urgent need to offer a rallying point for the struggles of the various social movements.

The united front tactic cannot be focused exclusively on agreements between the major organizations in the working class. Nonetheless, such accords are often decisive in mobilizing the class, since the new layers of the working class that are going into action insist on unity, an attitude they take in response to the attacks of the capitalists. This aspect of the united front takes on its greatest importance in those countries where the workers movement is split from top to bottom along party lines (SP, CP).

The united front at the top must not be counterposed to unity in action in various forms at the rank-and-file level or in specific sectors. What is important is to start from the objective needs of the working masses and to combine this activity with an orientation to the workers organizations, both at the top and at the bottom.

The Trotskyists do not take a wait-and-see attitude, making their initiatives dependent on a prior agreement or under standing among the big workers organizations. By themselves, or together with other organizations, they can and must promote mobilizations. But in formulating slogans and selecting forms of action, they have to combine two objectives. One is to broaden the mobilization as much as possible by including, if feasible, activists and sections of the traditional organizations. The other is to maintain a united-front approach to these organizations, even when the chances of achieving any unity with them are slight.

Differentiations within the reformist parties, as well as changes in the relationship of forces between the apparatuses and the working-class vanguard may offer greater opportunities for the sections to formulate their proposals for unity in concrete terms on all the levels on which they raise them.

Depending on the relationship of forces and the concrete political situation, propaganda as well as agitation for a working class united front may be focused primarily on a united front between the big organizations of the working class on the national level—for example, united actions of the SP and the CP and the trade-union organizations led by them against an austerity plan.

We campaign constantly to explain our entire program to as broad an audience as possible, posing it as an alternative to the program of the reformist leaderships.

But this is not enough to win broad layers of workers away from the influence of the reformists or even of the centrists. Only experience in action can raise the consciousness of major sections of the working class. This enables them to see in practice what an obstacle the reformist policy represents to the advancement of the movement in which they are involved.

Of course, we do not make acceptance of our program a condition for establishing a united front. We base our united-front initiatives on the tasks flowing from the needs of the masses, which are dictated by the objective situation. To this end, we put forward immediate, democratic, or transitional demands that offer a basis for the unity in action of the masses and the organizations of the workers movement both in the plants and outside. At the same time, we campaign to get the workers organizations to break with the bourgeoisie. This can take different forms, depending on the country and the situation. We may focus on the need to break with a bourgeois party, oppose restrictions on the right to strike, oppose participation (by the unions or workers parties) in labor management boards, etc. Although such a break from the bourgeoisie cannot be complete except on the basis of the revolutionary program and although the Trotskyists explain this publicly, they do not make adopting the revolutionary program a precondition for movements going in this direction.

In the framework of this battle for unifying the working class and achieving its political independence, we maintain the need for building a revolutionary party to facilitate united action by the masses and to make it easier for them to take the initiative on the political level. The united-front tactic is not an end in itself, but a means for mobilizing the masses, for winning influence over them, and wresting them away from the domination of the reformist leaderships. Our objective remains the advancement of united, broad, and militant mass mobilizations, democratically organized and led.

The highest form of such class unity is embodied in the setting up, extension, and coordination of councils and committees. When this is achieved, the power of the ruling class on the governmental and state level will in fact be put in question.