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The ABCs
of Capitalism

Capitalism and Class Struggle

Catalyst

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Understanding Capitalism

By Vivek Chibber

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Capitalism and Class Struggle

Since its origin in the nineteenth century, the modern Left has been associated with two things — a moral stance and a political strategy. The moral stance is that there is something fundamentally unjust about capitalism. It's an economic system that places the vast majority of people in permanent material insecurity; the only way for people to mitigate this insecurity is by offering themselves up to be exploited by capital. This offer also contains an agreement that while they are working for their bosses, they will give up their autonomy and do what they're told; this, in turn, gives property owners power over the working class majority, both within the workplace, and in society at large. The state can't be counted on as a counterbalance to the power of capital, since capitalists' economic power also gives them enormous leverage over government. So both economic *and* political power is concentrated in capitalists' hands, and they use

that power to maintain their exploitation of labor. When we put all this together, it means that capitalism systematically deprives people of the basic ingredients for a decent life, such as material security, personal autonomy, the resources for self-determination, and mutual respect — which is just another way of saying that capitalism is fundamentally unjust.

How, then, might we bring about a more humane society? A very common approach is to appeal to the better instincts of those in power. This usually means encouraging charitable donations and volunteer work, and, more recently, promoting Corporate Social Responsibility programs. But the response of the Left has always been to deny the feasibility of this strategy, because pleading with capitalists to behave better overlooks the structural pressure on them to abuse their power. No matter how much they are exhorted to be nicer, the pressure of market competition makes it impossible for them to respect their employees' well-being while also protecting the bottom line. What in fact happens is that, rather than bringing their actions in line with their morality, capitalists modify their morality to justify their actions. Hence, if workers are to have a better life — with more security, more freedom, and better work conditions — it will very likely have to be acquired over their employers' resistance.

So the first component of the Left's recipe for a more humane society is the conviction that it will have to be brought about by political struggle, not by appeals to decency. This naturally leads to the question, what *kind* of political struggle? What is the political strategy that might enable the poor and the exploited to acquire the basics needed for a decent life? The conventional response has been that it should center around organizing and mobilizing labor — what is classically described as class struggle. This is why, for more than a century, the Left physically located itself in the everyday lives and the employment venues of working people. The focus on labor as the fulcrum for social change is undoubtedly the defining element of the radical Left as a political current, and it has been so for more than 150 years.

In this pamphlet we examine the reasoning behind this strategy. As we will see, it is fundamentally a strategic choice, not a moral or ideological imperative. This is not to say that moral motivations are unimportant, or that ideology isn't relevant. They both matter a great deal. But they cannot on their own justify class politics. The reason labor struggles are central is that they are the *enabling* condition for everything else. They create the power and the political leverage that enables us to *act* on our morals and ideological beliefs — whereas the morals and values without the leverage remain little more than pipedreams. In what follows we develop the classic rationale for a class-based political strategy. We examine how it works and also why, even though it deserves to be at the heart of progressive politics, it is so hard to organize and sustain.

WHY THE WORKING CLASS?

Why develop a political strategy around the labor movement? There are three basic reasons. First, and this is often lost in intellectual debate — workers happen to be the majority of society. In the United States, the working class accounts for something like two-thirds of the population.¹ Any political movement that claims to fight for social justice had better represent the interests of more than just a small section of the population. It has to be fighting for things that most people want and need, not just some chosen few, no matter how badly off that particular small group is. One of the Left's most compelling attributes has always been that it can claim to be fighting for the needs of the *vast majority*. Second, these masses of working people have good reason to *want* change. And third, they have a unique capacity for bringing about progressive change.

¹ Estimates vary, of course, but most reliable studies put workers somewhere in the 60%–75% range. A good non-technical survey is Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 2nd edn (Cornell University Press, 2012), chapter 1, esp. 29–31.

The interest in fighting for progressive politics comes from the fact that working people are systematically denied many of the basic things that go toward a decent life. The reasons for this were described in detail in Pamphlet 1, but it is worth briefly rehearsing them again.

Insecurity

To be in the working class means that you lack direct access to the means of production. The only way to secure a livelihood is by finding a job working for somebody else. Both the ability to find a job and then to keep it, are only partly in the hands of the worker. They are primarily controlled by the employer, which leaves the worker's fate in someone else's hands. Now, in itself, this need not be problematic. A condition of dependence on somebody else isn't harmful if the dominant party has the same interests as the weaker one and assumes responsibility for the weaker one's welfare. The problem for workers is that their employers have no direct interest in the employee's welfare. Their direct interest is only in one thing — maximizing profits. They hire new workers only when it is profitable to do so, and they keep them on only as long as it is good for the bottom line. This means that workers are in a situation of permanent insecurity. They don't know if they will find a job, and if they do find one they are not sure if it will pay them enough to sustain themselves and their loved ones, if they have dependents.

In the Global South today, the basic situation of billions of workers is one of long-term migrancy and temporary employment, as they travel from city to city, region to region in search of employment. They live in temporary dwellings, lack basic amenities, and can't even begin to plan out their lives. Even in the advanced industrial world, the recent trend has been away from long-term employment, so that jobs that were once the emblem of security and decent wages are shifting to temporary contract labor and hence deepening the experience of insecurity for the labor force.

Needless to say, being in this situation undermines any chances for economic and psychological well-being. Temporary jobs are also typically lower waged; they also tend to come without health and pension benefits, which is one of the reasons employers are switching over to them. Lower wages and no benefits mean a decline in living standards for employees; they also mean compromised health and longevity. The incessant search for jobs and uncertainty about their economic condition means that working people can't plan effectively for the future, even the near future.

Wage suppression

It is not just the precariousness of employment that workers have to overcome. The job itself is fraught with conflict. Since employers have to maximize profits, they have no choice but to strive to minimize their operating costs. And this calls for a very specific strategy with regard to their employees. Most importantly, minimizing costs entails that they hold down wages to the lowest feasible level. Just what that level happens to be will depend on the bargaining position of the employees. But whatever this bargaining position happens to be, it is never one of equality. A defining fact of capitalist labor markets is that employers are always and everywhere in a position of strength relative to their employees. This comes from the simple fact that when it comes down to it, an employer can hold out longer than any employee in an economic stand-off. What can vary and change is the *degree* of the employer's advantage — in some situations it can be greater, in others it may be less; but the simple fact of *having* an advantage is built into the relationship.

Workers therefore can't count on the fact that if they just work harder, their wages will also increase. From the employer's standpoint, every extra dollar that her firm makes is an extra dollar of profit, which she can use as she sees fit — there is no reason for her to give a part of it back to her employees unless she absolutely has

to. And as long as she can get away with not giving part of it back, she won't. This has become abundantly clear in the past forty years, in which the productivity of American manufacturing enterprises has increased by more than 78 percent, but wages have only gone up by slightly over 5 percent. What this means is that employers had lots of new money in their hands that could have gone into higher wages, but went instead into the firms' coffers — and then into new investments or into the boss's pockets. There was no "trickle down," there was only a *vacuuming up*.

Hence, not only is there uncertainty about finding and keeping a job, but there is also no guarantee that workers will share in the gains that come from their labor. The boss's greater power enables her to scoop up the lion's share of new revenue; and the competitive pressure of the market compels her to use that power to the worker's detriment. This creates direct conflict of interest between the worker and employer.

Labor extraction

Wage suppression is just one side of the labor equation. The flip side is the drive to extract the maximal labor effort from the worker. This shows up in two seemingly contradictory ways. The first is in the well-known phenomenon of speed-up. When an employee is paid by a particular unit of time — like an hour or a day — the capitalist wants to be certain that every minute of that time period is put to good use. Every minute that the employee isn't working is, to the boss, a minute stolen. It is time for which she is paying the worker but getting nothing back in return. So at the very least, the capitalist will try to manage the workplace to minimize "slack." But that's just the baseline. The more desirable outcome is not just to minimize non-work, but to *ratchet up* the actual amount of labor effort per hour or minute. Working harder, faster, and better — that is the mantra of the rational capitalist.

A defining fact of capitalist labor markets is that employers are always and everywhere in a position of strength relative to their employees.

What does this mean for the employee? Two things. The most obvious is that no amount of effort is ever enough. Every time employees show they can work faster, that new rate becomes the standard, and that standard becomes the new minimum acceptable rate. If some employees find a way to go longer without a break, then that duration becomes the new expectation of all employees in the plant. If a few employees are willing to work longer without overtime, then that becomes the expectation going forward. The art of management is finding ways of getting more effort from workers without having to pay them for it.

So, one implication is overwork. The second, which seems contradictory, is *underwork*. In many sectors like retail and food service, workers face the problem of not getting *enough* hours and, on top of that, not having a fixed schedule at work. They are told that they might be called in at any point, often with only a few hours' notice, and typically don't know how long they will be asked to stay. Some days they work three hours, others they might work ten. They rarely accumulate a full forty hours over the week, and often have to juggle two or three jobs. But coordinating multiple jobs becomes hard, because of the unpredictable schedules that come with them.

For the employer, this strategy makes sense for the same reasons

that overwork does. Remember that her goal is to get the most work out of her employees for every dollar that she spends on them. In many service industries, the problem is that during any given day, the flow of customers isn't easy to predict. There might be some days when it's very thick, and others when it's thin. During periods when business is thin, she will discover that she is "overstaffed". What this means is that she is paying people to do nothing — it's wasted money. So from her standpoint, the ideal solution is to have complete flexibility as to when to call her workers in and when to send them home. An added benefit is that, if she has such power, she can also avoid having to pay overtime, since she can end their workweek at the 39-hour mark.

Autonomy

Spread across all three issues outlined above, and in many other aspects of workers' lives, is one constant — that the price they have to pay for getting a job is to place themselves under someone else's control. The condition on which the worker acquires a job is that she agrees to give up her autonomy to her boss. And all her activity while at work becomes directed toward ends which she hasn't chosen. She has little or no say in how she spends eight, ten, sometimes twelve hours at a time — which is a major component of her waking life. What's more, the activities that she is asked to perform are not only selected by someone else, but often cause her considerable harm. She has to perform them, because the alternative of being jobless is so dire.

Loss of autonomy in the workplace also generates a loss of control outside it. Having no say in how long or how hard they have to work has enormous consequences for workers when they are technically off the job, at home. In cases where they are overworked, the time at home is reduced to the point that they have very little chance to do anything but get ready to go back to work the next day. Time for

friends, family, entertainment now begins to look like a luxury. Conversely, in situations of underwork, there's technically lots of spare time, but in fact very little scope to use it, since a call might come at any time to go to work. What should technically be free time, in both instances, just becomes an offshoot of the workplace. The job ends up taking control of most all of the worker's life, not just the hours she is physically at work.

The resentment created by this sense of powerlessness shouldn't be underestimated. In some way or form, most every worker often feels like her life is not under her own direction. And throughout the history of the labor movement, demands for more say in the conditions of work has been a constant goal. Even while intellectuals have not always seen the link, workers have understood how their subordination at work also leads to their subordination to work. This is why they have held that acquiring more power at work is key to enriching their social and cultural life outside it.

Capacity for social change

Thus, in addition to the fact that workers are numerically preponderant in capitalism, they also have a direct interest in pursuing the goods that are essential for social justice — since they are systematically denied them. But by itself, this isn't sufficient. After all, one can easily come up with other groups of people who also lack basic amenities, or who are oppressed and marginalized — the homeless, the old and infirm, indigenous populations, etc. If having an interest in more resources and more stability were the only rationale for concentrating on the working class, then it would fall short — since all of these other groups would be equally important for political strategy. And it might legitimately be claimed that it is arbitrary to “privilege” the labor movement above other groups, whose condition is just as dire as that of workers — indeed, sometimes more so.

Actually, on purely moral grounds, the Left has always maintained

that *all* the oppressed and marginalized are equally deserving of political attention. As Lenin famously insisted, the labor movement can't hive itself off from other dominated groups as if it were a simple interest group. He insisted that it had to be a "tribune of the people ... [fighting] oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects."² The same sentiment motivates Gramsci's idea that the socialist movement had to rise above its "economic-corporate" political identity and seek to represent all subordinate groups. The socialist Left has long understood that workers have not cornered the market on oppression. So, then, why the focus on labor? The fuller justification for the centrality of labor has to do with its political *leverage* — its *capacity* to bring about change owing to its structural location. What is special about it is that it is the only social group that both *confronts* capital on a daily basis and is *positioned* to bring capital to heel.

As we have seen in Pamphlets 1 and 2, capital is the primary source of power in modern society, within the economy as well as in the state. It uses this power to advance its own interests, and it is these very interests that have to be confronted by a movement seeking significant changes in income, time, and social insurance. Any social movement committed to greater economic security for the poor, better working conditions, more free time, better access to social services, and so on soon finds itself opposed by the owners of capital, because employers' management strategy is geared towards denying these ends. This has been the lesson that all popular movements have learned over the past two centuries. And precisely because capital as a social group is hostile to such demands, the state, too, is either indifferent or resistant to them. Movements have learned that they cannot count on the state to take their side against capital, since the state is itself dependent on capital.

2 V.I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done, Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), vol. 5, 423.

Any movement to change the distribution of income, time, and freedoms will fail unless it can overcome resistance from capital, and its henchmen in the state. What makes the working class special is its ability to do just this. First of all, the modern workplace already organizes workers to some extent. The nature of work in modern economies is such that it brings workers together in pretty large numbers under the same roof. They see one another every day and coordinate their actions in producing whatever good they are selling. This places them in a kind of organized and disciplined relation to one another, which is already the essence of what they want to achieve if they band together in order to negotiate with their boss. They already cooperate and work together on a daily basis. What they now have to do is to build on this infrastructure and create an organization of their own, which fights for their own needs, not the needs of their employer.

But even more importantly, when workers do organize collectively, they have the unique ability to strike at the very foundation of capital's power — *profits*. In the normal course of things, employers wield power over their workers because they can throw them out of a job, and thereby deprive the worker of a livelihood. Now, this potentially also has a cost for the employer, because even though the worker lost something she needed — her job — so too the employer — a unit of labor power, someone who was carrying out a necessary task. Just as the fired employee needs to now find a new job, so too the employer needs to replace her labor power with a new one, another employee. In normal times, this isn't a problem for her. There are dozens of people eager to replace the person she fired, and this is why she can lord it over the employee — because the employee knows that it's far easier to find a replacement for her than it is for her to find a new job.

But in certain conditions, the worker can use this situation to her advantage. Because while it's fairly easy for her boss to find one or two, or even ten replacements, it generally gets harder as the

number of lost workers increases. In other words, the cost of finding replacements goes up in direct proportion to the numbers. If they can coordinate with one another, so that they can withdraw their labor power *collectively*, then the employees can turn the tables on the boss— because now she can't run her operations at all. They can stop the flow of profits. Even more, in a competitive market, the temporary stop in her operations can potentially have long term consequences, since competitor firms can now walk away with the employer's customers. So while one worker fears the prospect of withdrawing her labor power, the *collective* of workers can use it as a weapon.

In normal business conditions, when profits are flowing in, nothing is more devastating to a capitalist than the disruption of that flow. And nothing brings her to the table, and take seriously the concerns of her employees, like the threat of such a disruption. Whereas under normal conditions she can safely ignore most demands coming from her workers, job actions by her labor force make it *costly* for her to ignore those very demands. With every passing day, she loses the profits that would have been flowing into her office, and she sees customers either walking away to rival firms, or switching to other products. This ability to impose devastating costs on capital gives labor a special place in the power constellation of capitalism. An unorganized working class is largely at the mercy of capital. But once organized, it is also the *only* force that can bring capital to heel.

An organized and mobilized labor movement changes the social balance of political power. First and most obviously, workers get more control over the basic conditions of their lives. Achieving higher wages translates into better access to necessities; shorter and more regulated work schedules means more free time at home to pursue other ends; curbing managerial despotism at the workplace means a better and healthier work environment; and all these things add up to more *control* for workers over the details of their own lives— more autonomy. And if this happens at a large scale, across large sections

of the economy, it means, by definition, a massive improvement in the quality of life for the vast majority of the population, since this majority is comprised of workers.

But just as importantly, as labor achieves more power against capital, it also loosens capital's grip on the *state*. As we explained in Pamphlet B, if employers feel that they have to make real concessions to labor, if they truly fear the threat of economic disruption, then they also make concessions in the realm of *state policy*. A mobilized labor movement doesn't change the basic fact of the state's dependence on capital. But because it changes capital's preferences — in making capitalists more willing to concede to their demands — these changed preferences create more room for a progressive policy agenda. Policies that state managers knew would not have been tolerated by their patrons before, now become palatable to those same patrons. Even right-wing governments have to acknowledge labor's power in these situations, because these governments want to avoid economic disruption as much as their corporate funders do.

So an appropriately organized working class, with real power, and with the ability to significantly disrupt the flow of profits, changes the power balance in society more profoundly than any other social group. No other group has the combination of being in the numerical majority, having an *interest* in progressive change, and also having the *capacity* to bring it about.

FROM RESISTANCE TO TRANSFORMATION

The fact that workers have an interest in organizing themselves, and that they are also pretty well positioned to carry it out, led innumerable commentators over the past 150 years to predict that capitalism's days were numbered. The most famous such pronouncement came from Karl Marx, who declared in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 that, in bringing masses of workers together this way, capitalism creates “its own gravediggers”. Marx wasn't alone in this

prognosis. It's fair to say that in the first third of the 20th century, there was a wide sentiment among political observers that the system was under attack and could very well be in danger. They weren't so far from the truth. There was a workers' revolution in Russia in 1905, and then again in 1917, massive labor uprisings in Germany and Austria in 1918, in Italian factories in 1920, then again in Germany in 1923, Shanghai in 1927-28, and then, after the Great Depression, another massive wave of strikes and organizing all over the Western World, culminating in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. This quarter-century or so witnessed a steady wave of political explosions in the working class, concentrated in Europe and North America but spreading in a giant arc around the globe. The grave-diggers seemed to be working over-time!

Two things happened that tempered the optimism of these early decades— the first was that, in the most advanced countries, which were supposed to have been the sharp end of class struggle, workers were unable to tear down capitalism. In some cases, they weren't even inclined to try. So in Germany, England, and the United States unions made gains, and even rattled the walls a bit, but capitalism survived. This seemed to go against the predictions of Marx and other socialists after him. The second development was that, by the 1970's, it was starting to look like even the capacity or desire to be the gravediggers of capitalism was dissipating. In the United States and England, labor unions actually suffered a very quick and dramatic slide in strength, while in other advanced countries, they only managed to hold their ground and then to seek out a peaceful coexistence with employers. The decades of the 1980's onward witnessed a reversal of fortune for labor, compared to the first thirty years of the century. The result was that supporters of the labor movement began to wonder if maybe they had been overly optimistic about how simple or inevitable it might be for workers to take advantage of their position in capitalism and organize to advance their interests.

What kind of conclusions should we draw from the experience of the past century? Nobody doubts that the early socialists'

expectations regarding the working class were much too optimistic. But it would also be foolish to join the chorus of later intellectuals who have written off the labor movement. What the decades of historical experience point to is this — Marx was right in his judgment that the best way for workers to defend their well-being was by banding together in collective organizations; but he underestimated, or at least, failed to adequately describe, the hurdles that workers have to overcome when they set out to organize themselves. And these hurdles are steep. No account of labor's political interests can be complete unless we have a fuller understanding of them. And so, it is not enough to lay out all the reasons why workers might want to organize themselves and all the conditions that enable them to do so. We have to balance the story with an account of the conditions that pull in the opposite direction, and which undermine the possibility of collective organization. This will allow us to understand both of the relevant issues — why it makes sense for workers to organize themselves, and what the obstacles are that they have to overcome when they organize.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

It is important to recognize that workers don't automatically turn to workplace organizing to improve their situation. In fact, the most natural strategy is to find ways to improve their condition *individually*. This is so because, as we will see shortly, trying to do it collectively takes lots of hard work and has its own added risks. For workers who are on their own, without union protection, the instinct is to adopt individualistic strategies. This is their baseline situation, the one that they are naturally slotted into unless some special conditions enable them to bargain collectively. We should note that it is also the strategy that bosses want their employees to use, and which they work very hard to maintain as the only *possible* one available.

How can a worker defend herself, or better her condition,

individually? One way is by using what is called an “exit option” — by threatening to quit. The threat to quit is an ultimatum, to the effect that unless her demands are met, she will take her skills elsewhere, perhaps to one of her employer’s competitors. What makes it effective is that it could impose two costs on the employer: the direct cost of replacing this particular employee, which amounts to the revenue that goes into screening new applicants and then the time it takes to train them; and the indirect costs of all the advantages she will give her competitor if she starts working for her. It’s these costs that make her employer stand up and maybe listen to her demands.

Of course, the threat only works if the employee is hard to replace. And that will only be the case if she happens to be very skilled at her job or have some kind of highly technical knowledge about the product. This is what will make it costly to find a replacement. As it happens, in those cases where particular workers are in fact very highly skilled or really do have very specialized knowledge, they are usually able to command a pretty hefty premium for their services. The problem is that this is a bargaining strategy that is going to be open to only a small proportion of the labor force. Most workers don’t have scarce skills and therefore can’t really impose serious replacement costs on their employer. Even “skilled” workers can be replaced, if the knowledge that enables them to be counted as skilled is widely available — like having a college degree. The ones that are really at an advantage, that really do have scarce talents, are ones with product-specific training, not general training. Replacing one college graduate with another isn’t all that hard. But replacing someone who has been trained in a *particular* programming technique, or that *particular* software, usually is.

Since the vast majority of workers aren’t hard to replace, the boss can handle a difficult employee by just firing her. For the boss, this carries a very low cost since she can pick up another worker without much trouble. But for the worker, it means something very different. Precisely because she has the same profile as so many other job

seekers, there isn't anything that makes her particularly desirable. And that in turn makes the chances of finding a new job pretty dim, since she'll be competing with many others for the same position. This in turn means that, instead of imposing a cost on her *employer* by her decision to quit, it's the *employee* who will be bearing all the costs and all the risks. So it's no wonder that for the vast majority of workers in a capitalist economy, the exit option isn't very appealing. Instead of figuring out what the best time might be to walk into the boss's office and threaten to quit, they work as hard as they can to hang on to the job they have.

There are some situations when workers find their bargaining situation improved, even if they are with normal skills. This happens when unemployment is very low and jobs are easier to find in all sectors of the labor market. It's what economists call "full employment". In those situations, individual-level strategies can work to some extent, and they have. Workers find that, instead of their competing with other poor souls on the job market, it's employers who have to worry about finding applicants to fill the positions they advertise. This changes the power balance somewhat between the two. Workers are less worried about getting fired, since they can find a new job in a matter of days. They become bolder, less intimidated, and they are able to bid up their wages. But these situations are rare

Workers choose individual strategies because the collective one carries risks and costs that make it seem out of reach.

and tend to be short-lived. In fact, a noticeable rise in wages is often followed by an economic recession, which throws droves of workers out of work and brings wages back down, as a crowded labor market forces workers to accept employment at reduced wages. Hence, the typical situation is for there to be far more people looking for jobs than there are jobs.

The other way to resist is by staying on the job, but undermining the boss's demands as much as possible. This can be done in a variety of ways — one rather subtle method is by just working more slowly, or with less care, than managers demand. Maybe you work just hard enough to not get fired; you cut corners, take slightly longer breaks than allowed, show up a little late and leave a little early, etc. You don't get a higher wage this way, of course. But you do snatch back some of your *time*, and preserve your health slightly. But most of all, you get the pleasure of knowing that you are resisting the demands made on you. In more extreme cases, workers will actually sabotage the labor process — break a machine, remove a cog, etc. This isn't just an expression of frustration. It has also been a way of forcing a break in brutal work schedules.

But these methods of resisting are also very limited, just as individual negotiating is. They are only effective as long as the worker isn't caught, or as long as the manager is willing to tolerate her shirking. It's a way of blunting the sharp edge of workplace domination, but its effects are pretty meager. Neither of the ways of resisting we have discussed here are really viable in the long run, not if workers want real gains.

THE OBSTACLES TO COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

Most workers know that there is only so much they can do as individuals. This is why they are careful not to overstep their bounds. Of course this means that, for the most part, they remain trapped in pretty awful work situations. So then, why don't they all just come

together and create organizations for collective action? Many intellectuals have said that the reason is that workers don't fully understand their situation or their interests — that they suffer from a “false consciousness”. But this is hard to believe. If a journalist or a professor can understand, why can't a worker? After all, she is the one who goes to work every day, suffers the boss's power, and sees the real limits of her own power. Why not do the obvious and get together with other employees to form an organization? The reason isn't that they don't understand what is at stake. On the contrary, it is that there is *too much* at stake, and they understand this very well. Workers choose individual strategies because the collective one carries risks and costs that make it seem out of reach.

The most severe problem workers face is the enormous power that their employer has over them. If employees try to band together to bargain for a better deal at their job, they know that if their boss suspects what is going on, they are certain to lose the job altogether. As a result, organizers often have to try carrying out their activities in secret. This places enormous practical burdens on them. It's hard enough trying to bring a large number of people together into one unit. But now they have to do it under the constant threat of being found out by the boss. What makes it worse is that there are often some workers in the establishment who might not stand to gain very much from a union — very highly skilled workers who already command high wages, or workers who have special deals with the boss — and who therefore are not very sympathetic to the idea of a union.

Not only do organizers have to somehow convince these skeptics of the merits of collective representation, but they have to do it while hoping that one of the latter doesn't give them up to the employer. Not surprisingly, the result is that most workers in most every workplace choose to keep their heads down and not take the chance. Even when some brave souls decide to undertake this very risky campaign, they have to deal with the reality that many of their coworkers will prefer not to.

This generic problem of risk-aversion is made worse by the fact that, in much of the world, jobs tend to be very short term. This is particularly so in the Global South, where the vast majority of workers labor in the informal sector, or work under temporary contracts in the formal sector. But it is increasingly the case even in rich countries, where “precarious” work has increased massively in recent decades. When workers are at a job for only a short duration, when they shift from one venue to another, it makes the possibility of organizing them even more remote. The bonds that normally form between them, as they come to know one another over the course of months, now get no chance to develop. They don’t build the friendships and sense of camaraderie that are the bedrock of collective action. Even more, they don’t feel that they have a stake in the particular venue where they happen to be, since they will soon be gone, either to another workplace or to their village if they happen to be migrant workers. Temporary employment makes for a very short-term outlook.

So the first obstacle to collective organization is that all efforts to bring it about take place in a pre-existing field of power. Of all the constraints on workers, this is the most important one. Creating a union isn’t like starting up a club. You can’t just walk up to somebody and ask them if they would like to join. The simple act of talking to a coworker about it is likely to create trouble for you, and might even get you and the person you are talking to fired. The reaction on the part of workers is typically to just keep their heads down and stay out of trouble.

A second obstacle to creating a workers’ organization is that it makes demands on their resources, which are already stretched very tight. The main such demand isn’t money, though of course that is important. Any kind of organization will ask its members to pay dues of some kind, a request that is never easy for working people. But a monthly dues payment isn’t all that pinches. Also burdensome are the demands that organizing makes on workers’ *time*. Time is a precious and scarce resource for two reasons. First, it’s the most

important ingredient that goes into workers' recuperation from the physical and psychological damage of work. Simply put, whatever else they might do to recover from the fatigue that they suffer from the workplace, there is no substitute for sleep and rest, neither of which can be compressed without diluting its effects.

Time is also important for a second reason, in that it is what allows workers to care for all the other needs they have, apart from the need for physical survival — building their social relationships, taking care of family and loved ones, developing their creative abilities, developing new skills, entertaining themselves, etc. To put it somewhat crudely, while rest nourishes the body, these other activities nourish the soul. Putting these two reasons together, we can see why time matters. When workers are asked to participate in an organizing drive, or in activities of an established union, they are being asked to set aside all the other concerns that are crucial to their physical and emotional wellbeing. Not surprisingly, workers often decide that they would rather preserve what time they have and dedicate it to these other priorities; others will realize that they literally don't have the time to give — they have no choice but to dedicate it to recuperation, or to looking after their children, or to taking care of their home, etc.

The third obstacle arises in some measure from the two that we have examined. Owing to the enormous risks and burdens involved in an organizing drive, there is a tendency on the part of many workers to try to pass on the costs to others and to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. What makes this a live possibility is not only the desire to avoid the costs, but also the fact that, if the drive is successful, the benefits that come from it will accrue to all the employees in the workplace, regardless of whether or not they participated. Unions don't just negotiate for the people who join them or show up for meetings. They bargain for all the workers in the establishment, even those who don't show up. On the one hand, this makes the union more powerful, because it gives it a wider base of support and

more leverage against the employer. And it also makes it harder for the employer to use a divide-and-conquer strategy in which she can play off workers who aren't being represented by the union against those who are. So it's sensible for organizers to fight for everyone who works in the establishment. But it also creates a problem, in that it generates an incentive for some workers to reduce their own risk and their own contribution to the effort, by letting others shoulder more of the burden. This is called *free-riding*, and it means what it sounds like — it's when workers basically let other workers foot the bill, in terms of costs and risk, in the effort to bring the bosses to heel.

These are all very real constraints, and together they typically make it entirely reasonable for workers to opt for an individualist survival strategy — just show up for work, mind your business, defend yourself by working only as hard as you have to, compete fiercely when you think it will help, and on some occasions, when it's safe, even sabotage the whole work process.

FORGING SOLIDARITY

The key to social change is for workers to opt for a collective strategy of resistance over an individual one. As we have just seen, it doesn't happen automatically, since workers have good reason to choose going it alone over banding together. This is why a working class movement depends on conscious and directed *organizing*. The essence of labor organizing is to create the material and psychological conditions for workers to choose the path of collective struggle.

Solidarity

Since the costs and risks of organizing are so prohibitive for the typical worker, organizers understand that a successful strategy depends on minimizing both of them, so workers feel that what is being asked of them is reasonable, and that they have a decent chance of success in

the job action. This is the function of strike funds, for example. These are pools of money that unions save up so that if they call for a job action, workers will have some source of support. But the fact is that, no matter how much you reduce the risk involved in the campaign, no matter how much you promise to reduce the individual costs, there is always a material burden that the worker has to willingly take on. This is simply built into her class location. If she can be fired for her actions, she will have to accept a level of sacrifice and uncertainty. So collective action requires convincing workers to not make their decisions based on a pure cost-benefit analysis, because on those grounds, the rational move for most people is to opt for putting safety first, and just make the best with what they have.

How do you convince workers to willingly take on the sacrifices that come with job actions? The most important ingredient has been the creation of a *solidaristic culture*. What this means is a feeling of mutual obligation toward one another, so that if one or a group of workers is seen to be taking on some of the risk, the response is to feel a moral obligation to *join in*, rather than to *free-ride*. It means inculcating among workers a sense of mutual responsibility over an ethos of individualism. There are a number of ways in which this process has been described — the creation of a common identity, a sense of solidarity, a culture of resistance, and most famously, what Marx called it, the development of a class consciousness. It means that the worker rejects the attitude that other workers are her competitors, and comes to see them as peers. Her very sense of self, her personal identity, now partly includes her social bonds with those peers.

This ethos doesn't typically come about on its own. Of course, there are elements of sympathy and mutual support that are part of working class life. For billions of the laboring poor all over the world, economic survival would be impossible without innumerable acts of support, goodwill and humanity. And these come about from their being thrust into the most horrible circumstances, all of them together, all of them needing one another's cooperation to survive.

This is true within the workplace and outside it. But it is important to recognize as well the massive pressures that constantly pull them apart, which we described in the previous section. In the everyday operation of the labor market and the workplace, wage laborers do see that they are all in the same situation. But their situation includes having to scratch and claw to find a job *over* the attempts of others, and to *outwork* the others so they can keep the job once they have it. In other words, the normal condition of being a worker is to also see the others as competitors, not just as comrades. These are powerful pressures and most workers accept them because to not take them seriously is to risk their very survival.

So the creation of solidarity requires conscious intervention to build on the common experiences, and to create institutions that reinforce the feelings of mutuality and common identity. Some of these institutions are social and cultural, others more political. The most successful workers' organizations always had a rich internal life — of clubs, newspapers, self-help societies, drama groups, literary circles, sports teams, summer schools, child care centers, and many other facets. They created a world of their own, so that their members related to them not only for their political or economic interests, but for their social and familial lives. Children grew up going to socialist summer camp, young people met their future

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spouses at union picnics, workers improved their literacy through union-funded adult education classes, and so on. Politics and social life became very closely interwoven, so that when workers joined political campaigns, they felt they were participating with their friends and compatriots, not just their coworkers.

Social hierarchies

One of the most important components of solidarity is mutual respect. Each person has to feel that they are valued and their dignity recognized by the people with whom they are joined in struggle. But if this is to be so, racial, gender, caste, or ethnic hierarchies cannot be tolerated within labor organizations. Nobody will remain loyal or take up struggle if they are demeaned, excluded, or placed in subordinate positions within a movement. Hence, campaigns against social oppression of every kind have to be part of the labor movement, and not taken to be something external to it.

In recent years, especially in the US, many on the Left have become critical of “identity politics” as a political movement that distracts from deeper issues of class power. Now, it is of course true that what passes for struggles around race, caste, or gender oppression has become focused on very narrow and often symbolic issues. Identity politics, especially on college campuses, often revolves around “micro-aggressions”, symbolic affronts, individual choices, etc. But the fact that a centrally important issue is being reduced to matters of taste and symbolism doesn’t mean that’s all there is to the issue. Outside the university, in workplaces and labor organizations, domination on the basis of social identity — real domination, not just the language of it — is not only pervasive, but utterly crippling. In a labor force that is now almost fifty percent female, and more than one-third non-white, tackling the prevalence of racial and gender hierarchies is not a luxury or a distraction — it is one of the most important preconditions for effective labor organizing.

So denigrating these issues as “mere” identity politics is self-defeating for the labor movement. Of course, that doesn’t mean that any and all forms of these politics are to be embraced. There really are conservative versions of gender and race politics, and in the recent past, these narrower forms have managed to capture the stage. Where once the leaders of the women’s movement and the movement for racial justice saw economic demands as being the key to liberation, insisted on foregrounding the interests of the poor among these groups, and saw themselves as part of the broader anti-capitalist Left, this is no longer the case. But the answer is to show people that unless we return to that broader vision of liberation, in which working women and working class minorities set the agenda rather than elites — unless we return to that, the battle against oppression based on these identities cannot be won. And unless the labor movement takes these issues as central to its own vision, it won’t be able to organize the class it seeks to represent.

Member Control

Mutual respect and a vibrant cultural life go a long way toward creating an ethos of solidarity. A third and more formal mechanism has to do with the political structure of the organization. Workers are more likely to sacrifice, to join in and contribute, when they feel that they have actively participated in the decisions taken by their organization. This is only possible if the organization is run on a *democratic* basis. A culture of democracy requires that:

- Organizational decisions are taken only after a thorough debate among the members. This is critical because if members feel that decisions are being taken without their input, that they are just being given marching orders without any regard to their views, they will be less likely to expend the time and energy needed for the campaign or the mobilization to succeed. But if decisions

are undertaken after an open and honest debate, members feel much more committed to them, even if they might feel unhappy with the decision itself.

- Mechanisms are in place to hold the leadership accountable. Obviously, any organization in which leaders are immune to discipline will not only fail in eliciting members' enthusiasm, but will very likely degenerate over time. An organization of any size has to put some kind of bureaucratic structures in place — it needs to have officials and staff who work full-time, whose job it is to manage its affairs, and who therefore are to some extent separated from members on an everyday basis. These officers are empowered to negotiate with employers on the organization's behalf and to also enforce any contracts that the bosses agree to. This gives them a great deal of power, and if unchecked, they will tend to use that power to maintain their own privileges, rather than to represent their members. And as this happens, member commitment and enthusiasm will wane, their willingness to participate will dissipate, and the organization will lose its strength.
- Member participation has to extend to as many parts of the organization as possible. Offices have to be open and accessible; there should be constant communication both vertically — between leaders and members — and horizontally, between members themselves. The best organizations encourage constant debate and discussion, not just when important decisions are being taken, but on an everyday basis, on all facets of political life — where the organization is going, what its strategy ought to be, how it conducts itself, what its agenda might be, etc.

These are just some of the central ingredients of a democratic culture, and there are many more. The point is that a commitment to democracy isn't just a moral one. It is deeply practical, because a

rich, democratic culture is the lifeblood of a labor organization. Trade unions are only as strong as their ability to disrupt production. But this ability in turn depends entirely on members' willingness to contribute and sacrifice, to do the hard work of actually making job actions successful. They will not do so if they feel unconnected to their peers, or if they feel alienated from the organization itself. The response, in those situations, will be to hold back, to free-ride, and to thereby hope that someone else will undertake the efforts to make the campaign successful. But of course, this very orientation will ensure that campaigns cannot succeed, since members increasingly resort to shirking rather than participating.

A second reason that democracy is a practical matter is that it is the only way to keep a strong connection between campaigns and member *interests*. If members feel that campaigns are unconnected to their everyday concerns, if they feel that they are being asked to sacrifice for someone else's interests — like their officers, for example — or that the goals being pursued are wildly unrealistic, then they will again feel alienated from the organization and less willing to jump in. Democracy is important because it not only connects leaders to members, but it creates an organic link between member interests and organizational decisions. People feel connected to the decisions, not just because they took part in the final outcome, but because the final outcome reflects their real needs and their own assessments of what goals are or aren't realistic.

If we bring all this together, we can sum it up as follows. Working people can defend their interests only if they are organized, and their organizations will succeed only if they are open, member-controlled, built on mutual respect, and culturally vibrant. Above all, they have to be committed to building *real power*. There is nothing automatic about this process. Workers can rationally choose to stick to an individualistic defense of their interests, and trade unions can be formed, but be top-down and bureaucratic. It takes active and purposive intervention to get unions up and running, and just as much work

to maintain them as *fighting* organizations. Because of the relentless pressures that markets impose on them — both on individual members and also on the organization itself — there never comes a point when unions or their members can relax and assume that the hard work is done. There has to be a permanent campaign to keep members engaged, maintain checks on leadership, prevent the ossification of internal structures, renew interpersonal bonds, promote class identities, and most of all, *build power* at work and outside it.

CLASS POLITICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The past few decades have been one of the longest period of quiescence the labor movement has ever seen. No matter how you measure it, the power and influence of the working class has declined, not just in the United States, and not just in the advanced capitalist world, but across the world. This has understandably led to a loss of confidence among progressives, and with that, a tendency to look for political alternatives. In an era when labor politics are losing steam, it's understandable that in some quarters, the reaction is to look for a new political anchor, or to retreat into individualistic solutions like lifestyle politics, or various forms of self-help, etc.

Other political strategies can gain some traction in certain situations. They can work sometimes and for some individuals. But if the ambition is to succeed in achieving significant shifts in income, time and resources for people at any significant scale, political movements discover sooner or later that they have to take on the power of the capitalist class. In modern market societies, the center of economic and political power continues to be *capital*, and it is the holders of capital who also control the allocation of resources. Any move to significantly redistribute them has to find a way to gain leverage against this group. If you want better wages, they come from your employer; if you need more time at home, you have to negotiate less time at work; if you want a more stable work schedule so you can

plan your home life, you need to get your boss to agree; if you need better health care, you either negotiate it with your employer, or you pressure the state to provide it; if you need child care, you acquire it via higher wages, or state provision, both of which lead you to your employer's social power; if you want a pension, you either get it from your employer, or you pressure the state — and so on. At every turn, for the fundamental goods that go into a decent life, all roads lead to the economic and political power of capital. You either have to extract them from the employer class directly, or from its henchmen in the state, who take their cues from capital.

The lesson is clear — as long as capital remains the arbiter of people's fate, any social movement with a real ambition for justice will have to find a way of gaining leverage against it. And this is why, as long as we are within capitalism, working people have to remain at the core of political strategy. There is simply no other social force with the capacity to take on the employer class and the state.

This simple fact has enormous implications, not just for “class” demands, but for the pursuit of social justice more generally, which includes the fight against other social oppressions. In recent years, many intellectuals have accused socialists of being indifferent to race and gender domination. Their view is that since race and gender can't be reduced to class, arguing for the primacy of class amounts to ignoring the plight of women and racial minorities.

But this criticism is based on a fallacy. The fact that race and gender oppression can't be reduced to class oppression doesn't mean that they can be remedied independently of class mobilization. As we said earlier, any reform movement that aims at a significant redistribution of income or economic resources, any call for significantly changing the state's spending priorities, will have to confront the power of capital — which includes movements around gender and race.

Consider the situation of racial minorities. A program to seriously address the subordination of blacks and Latinos in the United States, or Arabs and Africans in Europe, cannot succeed unless it prioritizes

massive programs for jobs, health care, education and housing. But where will these come from? All of them will entail a significant *redirection* of state spending, away from corporate handouts, defense spending, and tax breaks for the rich. This being the case, any movement that foregrounds these demands will have to find a way to change the state's current priorities — which are set by the wealthy and by owners of capital. And capitalists are not going to stand idly by while the state enacts far-reaching policies for public housing, free health care, etc. So too, a feminist movement that proposes a nationwide program of state-provided child care, family leave, etc. will call for the same sorts of changes in policy that anti-racist movements demand. Without such demands, both of these movements become movements of *rich* minorities and women — those members of these groups who don't need free health care, can hire their own child care workers, or can send their kids to private schools.

If struggles for racial and gender justice are going to represent the interests of all women and minorities, not just the well-off ones, then they have to call for a massive redistribution of economic resources, whether directly through higher wages, or indirectly through state provision. And their ability to do so will depend entirely on their ability to build the kind of social power that only the labor movement has ever been able to provide.

Hence, the traditional Left commitment to class struggle as the center of its political strategy is not only sound, but necessary. There is no garden path to getting the labor movement going again. Maybe it will come out of the public sector; maybe strong electoral mobilizations will get it going; it might take inspiration from immigrant rights movements. There isn't a ten-step program to re-energizing labor organizing. But wherever it comes from, however it is built, it remains the central ingredient for success. Our power to achieve progress toward a more humane society still rides on the power of working people. ▲



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