

TRADE UNIONS, THE WORKING CLASS AND THE STATE

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An encouraging feature of the confrontation on "The State and Political Economy" was its emphasis upon a broader problematic for political economy than the usual discussions of the 'relationship between the economic and the political'. In particular, some discussants emphasized the role of both state and non-state institutions within capitalist society in ideological or cultural reproduction. It was also pointed out that, while the Canadian state has shown considerable capabilities for repression, it has also demonstrated itself able to intervene in the economy to legitimize the existing set of capitalist economic and social relations.

Several of these key theoretical points might have been brought to bear upon the discussion of the "working class" and the trade union movement. I was not particularly convinced by the responses of Leo Panitch and Wally Clement to a question posed by Harold Chorney: "Is there, in fact, a working class that actually articulates interests, or are there institutions which articulate supposed interests of the working class and are therefore defined as working class institutions?" Panitch, while admitting that unions "mediate the demands of the working class" nevertheless regards unions as "indigenous working class institutions". I think, however, that this formulation ignores Panitch's earlier dictum that the state "be understood in the context of class struggle". The state and the capitalists did not stand idly by while workers freely associated in unions of their choice. Had they done so, there is every possibility that the revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World, United Brotherhood of Railway Employees and the Western Federation of Miners, which flourished in pre-World War One British Columbia, would today be that province's dominant trade union philosophy. The popular One Big Union movement, which swept the Prairie provinces into the revolutionary camp after the war would predominate in that region. The OBU refused to accept that property ownership conferred upon people certain 'rights' to exploit their workers and relied upon the sympathetic general strike as the means of dealing with recalcitrant employers and ultimately as the means to overthrow the entire

system of capitalist production relations. And, had the state remained neutral, the communism of the Workers' Unity League of the 1930's would have added the workers of northern Ontario, garment workers in Montreal and Toronto and Cape Breton coal miners into the left-wing fold. In practice, all these movements were repressed out of existence — though the case of the WUL is more complicated — by the determined actions of the capitalist state. The trade unions that the state *did* allow to survive were those that would conform to a set of rules imposed by the state. These rules, as consolidated by order in council P.C. 1003, in 1944, involved the acceptance by union leaders of the responsibility of enforcing contracts, of recognizing a wide area of exclusive management rights and of curtailing the right to take industrial action. While the unions that conformed to such legislation, in the process purging themselves by generally undemocratic means of 'communists', cannot be labelled 'company unions', it is ahistorical to see them totally as "indigenous" working class institutions. They are the result of a long process of class struggle in which genuine workers' organizations, fighting for the total emancipation of working people, lost out and the bourgeois state, while unable to crush unionism altogether was able to impose a version acceptable to itself of the "working class movement".

It would be facile to say that repression alone was the only instrument employed by the bourgeoisie in the class struggle. The very fact that the state allowed any trade union movement to exist at all is evidence that the capitalist class sought to control the workers as much by co-option as by repression. But the essential victory so far of the bourgeois state with regard to class conflict lies in the creation of the necessarily bureaucratic trade union organizations required to conform to state standards of 'proper' working class organization. These organizations, while of a mass character in numbers, have a tiny percentage of active rank-and-filers, with most members cynically regarding their "indigenous" organizations as only slightly less parasitic than the corporations and the state. While the lot of the workers would be far worse with no unions at all, it is clear that the trade union movement as it has evolved in Canada and elsewhere was not solely an affair indigenous to the working class and without the interest or involvement of the bourgeoisie and their state.

One of the key roles the state performs in capitalist society, both in terms of its accumulation and legitimation functions, is the establishment of a stable environment for capital. If investors are edgy for whatever reason, the process of capital accumulation slows down, employment begins to fall and soon what begins as an accumulation crisis can become a legitimation crisis as well. The provision of a predictable trade union movement which accepts most of the rules of the game and plays accordingly is an important element of this process. William Serrin describes this process well with regard to the United Auto

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Workers, a union generally seen as more politically 'progressive' than its counterparts in other industries:

What the companies desire — and receive — from the union is predictability in labour relations. Forced to deal with unions, they want to deal with one union, one set of leaders, and thus they have great interest in stability within the UAW and in a continuation of union leadership. They also want to have the limits of the bargaining understood and clearly subscribed to. "G.M.'s position has always been, give the union the money, the least possible, but give them what it takes", says a former negotiator. "But don't let them take the business away from us." The union has come to accept this philosophy as the basis of its relationship with the companies: it will get money, some changes in work procedures, usually nothing more. "We make collective bargaining agreements", Reuther once declared, "not revolutions". Both the unions and the companies, a mediator says, have one major goal: "They want to make cars at a profit." (Serrin, *The Company and the Union*, New York, 1973, pp. 156-7).

What working-class institutions, untampered by the bourgeois state, are possible? In Canada, outside Quebec, one sees few examples of working-class institutions, economic or cultural, that stand outside of the integrative mechanisms of capitalism and which reconstruct as "class" experience what appears to most people as "private" problems of day-to-day life. It is this fragmentation of people's experiences that is a far more effective barrier to the emergence of a class conscious of itself as capable of transcending capitalist "political economy" than is the existence of the sectoral fragmentation that Clement emphasizes.

Yet, such fragmentation has at times been broken down. In France in May, 1968; in Italy, sporadically since the 'hot summer' of 1969; at times in various automobile plants in Michigan; in pre-junta Chile; workers' councils that invite mass participation and ignore state limitations on the right to protest management "prerogatives" have become active. Working-class newspapers, plays, radio stations and books have become more common in Western Europe and Quebec. The hegemony of the bourgeois state is still, in the final analysis, based on its tremendous ability to reproduce the false consciousness that

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obscure class loyalties and reduces people back to their previous fragmentation. Ethnic divisions and the all-embracing propaganda for the American Dream, along with liberal doses of repression, leave the Canadian state in the happy position of still being able to face a working class which, while it may exist 'objectively' as a class in the heads of Marxist intellectuals, persists in asserting itself, on most occasions, as a random collection of bourgeois individuals. The re-emergence in Canada of institutions in which workers — and, I admit that I have omitted discussion of the issue of defining the 'working class' — begin to challenge the notion that ordinary people are unable to take charge of their own lives has yet to begin. That such institutions have existed here historically and now exist in other capitalist countries should be cause for at least some optimism that in the next round the bourgeois state will not be able to crush or remold working-class organizations into a familiar pattern.

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