



THE RIGHT WING OFFENSIVE AND THE WORKING CLASS

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Introduction

In the last few years the organized right wing has become a real political threat. The left has generally understood this development as a backlash against the gains of the 60's made by specially oppressed sections of the working class--women, people of color, gay people. It is in this sense that we speak about the "new" right. The right wing movement does have some new organizational features: it has increased its financial base through computerized direct mail fund-raising techniques and has developed a single-issue electoral approach. But what is really new about the right is that it has begun to enter the mainstream of American politics. Around certain issues--tax cuts, the ERA, abortion, gay rights, affirmative action--the Right has found a significant base of passive support in the working class. It is this support that poses the real threat of the right wing today. And it is this question: why is there a rise in right-wing consciousness in some sections of the working class, that we must answer in order to develop a strategy that can meet the Right's challenge.

The analysis that begins and ends with the idea of a "backlash" is not enough. First, it implies that reaction to the gains of the 60's is inevitable, without saying why that is so. Second, it treats working class consciousness at a purely ideological level. That is, it treats workers' ideas as fundamentally emotional and irrational, "prejudice." "Backlash" implies an unthinking, reactive response. Third, the "backlash" approach has led many leftists to see the right wing offensive as a capitalist conspiracy in which the working class is fooled by the onslaught of capitalist propaganda into scapegoating sections of the class for their own problems. This analysis implies that racism and sexism (for that is what scapegoating is all about) are only a matter of bad ideas. It forgets that racist and sexist ideas are rooted in real material oppression. Oppression benefits the capitalist class first and mainly, but oppression also confers relative advantages on one section of the working class (white male workers) at the expense of another section (people of color, women).

In what follows we will try to go beyond the "backlash" idea to understand why some working people are open to right wing ideas. We will try to show how workers' support for the Right is rooted in and conditioned by two material aspects of their everyday experience: 1) the capitalist crisis and the employers' offensive against their wages and working conditions; 2) the disorganization of workers' basic weapons of defense--especially the trade unions--their inability so far to lead a fight against the capitalist class. The everyday experience of American workers, not simply the lies put out by the capitalists, has determined their receptiveness to the right wing movement.

The 70's have witnessed the development of a severe crisis in the world capitalist economy. In order to maintain their profits the capitalists have launched an all-out offensive to drive down the wages and increase the pace of work of the workers. The American working class has been caught in this attack without strong weapons of self-defense.

Thirty years of post-war prosperity, combined with the McCarthyite attacks on the Left, created the conditions for the bureaucratization of the labor unions, the elimination of radicals from the trade union movement, and an almost total break with traditions of militant struggle and rank and file organization. This combination of factors: capitalist crisis on the one hand, the weakness of the instruments of working class organization on the other hand, has meant that a collective response to the employers' offensive appears to many workers impossible. Nonetheless, the necessity to find some way to maintain their standard of living becomes ever more pressing as the capitalists' offensive is ever more successful. The total pie shrinks. The capitalists' share of it seems impregnable. Yet workers must defend themselves. To do so, the working class has begun to turn upon itself--each section looking to improve its conditions not by taking on the employers but by taking something away from another section of the class. In this situation the existing divisions within the class, divisions by industry, by race, by sex, by sector, become the basis for individual workers' strategies for survival. People use already existing solidarities--white vs. black, men vs. women, "American vs. "foreign"--to create organization and power (against each other, not the capitalists). As working people act on the basis of these solidarities the ideas appropriate to their action--that fit it, that justify it--become more and more powerful. These are the ideas of the Right.

For example, if we look at the tax revolt vs. "big government," etc., we can see how the intensification of the employers' offensive has led to broad support for cutbacks in social services that are especially necessary to people of color and, part and parcel of this, has led to an intensification of racism within the working class. As workers attempt to maintain the value of their wage they can either take on the employer or find some other way. In the tax revolt, working people who in fact do pay with their taxes for social services, have tried to increase their take-home pay by lowering their taxes, since it has been so difficult to fight successfully against the employers for a better contract. However, again in the absence of an organized, powerful working class movement that could lower taxes by shifting the tax burden from working people onto the corporations, lower taxes have had to mean lower state spending. Lower state spending means increased hardship for the specially oppressed sections of the class. As part of defending and rationalizing the fact that workers benefitting from tax reductions are benefitting at the expense of those who are most needy, it is not surprising that all the old racist ideas (welfare cheaters, etc.) come to the fore. The point to remember is that in the absence of a fight vs. the capitalists, this sort of response has an apparent "rationality" for working people. In the longer run, of course, it is suicidal, for it makes it impossible for the class to unify itself against the employers, and opens the way for the capitalist stampede.

In the absence of an organized class response to the employers' attack, workers are in fact pitted one against the other in a bitter struggle for survival. Those few institutions within capitalism that are not based on competitive market relationships of individual competition and conflict become increasingly important to people's lives. In particular the family appears to be the last refuge from a world turned into a jungle

We can therefore begin to understand why the apparently irrational ideologies of the right wing--especially the ideas that the social crisis can be solved by reconsolidation of the family finds such a deep and emotional response today. In fact, the irony is that the capitalist crisis itself is constantly undermining the nuclear family, forcing women into the labor market, increasing emotional tensions that the family cannot cope with, etc. As the family appears less and less stable in the context of a chaotic world, the threat to the family presented by women's liberation and the acceptance of gay life styles becomes much greater. This is the link between the appearance of anti-women, anti-gay politics and the capitalist crisis.

The left has to face the fact that the rise of the right wing is not only a product of better organization, more money, religious fundamentalism, or corporate capitalist propaganda. The problem of the rise of the right wing is a problem of workers' activity and consciousness. Workers' ideas in this period are overwhelmingly determined by the fact of the economic crisis, the employers' offensive and their own relative powerlessness in the face of it. The only way to change workers' ideas toward the left is to show that there is an alternative approach--to organize a successful strategy of collective action and collective power to deal with the capitalist crisis.

In the 60's, while the majority of the working class stood passively by, the specially oppressed sections of the class--blacks, latinos, women--organized. Important gains were made. But those sections could only go so far without the support of the rest of the class, and their struggles were eventually defeated. Now, in the crisis, the specially oppressed communities are suffering first and most severely. Their gains are being wiped out. In the face of this attack, they have been the first to organize politically--against the cuts, for affirmative action, against Bakke, for ERA. Our first task is to support these movements and to try to unite them. But more than this is necessary. Unless and until the working class, especially its unionized sectors, in their majority white and male, can be organized, the movements of the specially oppressed will remain without sufficient strength to adequately defend their interests. The economic crisis and the employers' offensive have created the conditions that open the possibility for the first time in years for the return of militant, class struggle organization in the working class. The miners strike, the post-office wildcats this year are signs of the beginning of worker's organization. But as these strikes and others showed, between the workers and the employers stand the union bureaucracy whose role in this period has been to disorganize any spontaneous militancy and to derail any rank and file organization. Our task is to create the rank and file organization of workers in the unions to develop their ability to take on the capitalists, in spite of the obstacles posed by their current leadership. The struggle for rank and file organization to make the unions instruments of workers defense will make it possible to change workers' ideas. In order to take on the employers, the rank and file will need new forms of struggle, militant tactics which require taking on the police and the courts as well as the employers. To win this kind of battle requires allies. And the search for allies will lead in turn to linking workers up, not only across craft and industrial lines, but to the movements of the specially oppressed in the communities.

To bring these different aspects of the struggle into relation with each other the left needs to build organizational forms that can create a bridge between the movements. We believe the left should begin now discussing the possibility of working together to form city-wide united front organizations whose expressed goals will be to organize, independent of the union bureaucrats and the Democratic party politicians, a working class response to the economic crisis.

The "New" Right

We put the "new" in quotes because in important ways the organized right wing of today is not new at all. The core of the right wing movement is a network of activists, organizers and wealthy individuals involved in interconnected extreme right wing organizations that have operated since the 1960's. For example, Phyllis Schlafly, leader of Stop ERA is a member of the John Birch Society, the American Conservative Union, and Young Americans for Freedom, all well-established extreme right organizations. The YAF was founded in 1960 by Howard Phillips who now runs two new right wing organizations, the Conservative Caucus which does grass-roots organizing for causes such as opposition to OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and Stop ERA, and works with the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, which raises money for right-wing candidates. Joseph Coors, one of the big money donors to new-right campaigns, such as Phyllis Schlafly's anti-ERA drive, is in the John Birch Society and the National Right to Work Committee, one of the oldest anti-union organizations. These older established extreme right organizations have been given new strength by Richard Viguerie, who sits like a spider at the center of this right-wing web. Viguerie is part of the new face of the right. His importance lies in his ability to tap a new source of financial support. Viguerie runs a direct mail fund-raising operation. Through use of computerized mailing lists carefully built up over a period of years, Viguerie helps the right tailor its propaganda and fund-raising calls to the specific concerns of thousands of different individuals. Through the mail operations Viguerie has been able to bring thousands of dollars in small contributions pouring in to right-wing campaigns.

Besides its greater financial strength, the right of the 70's differs from the right of the 60's in terms of its tactics. In particular, it has begun to launch single-issue campaigns that make it possible to draw support from groups that would not support its whole program. In this way, on certain issues, the right can have an effect far beyond its real base. An example is the Right to Life movement. Many right wing organizations contribute personnel and money to Right to Life organizations. But in building the Right to Life movement, the right wing has been able to make an alliance with the Catholic Church, vastly increasing its political strength. It is estimated that at least one-third of the funds for the Right to Life organization are contributed by the Catholic Church.

The single-issue approach and their sophisticated fund raising operation have no doubt helped the extreme right. But in and of them-

selves, they can't explain the right's success. For the right hasn't won all across the board. The campaign against the Panama Canal treaty, for example, fizzled dismally--despite the fact that Viguerie's direct mail operation was used to organize funds and letters to the White House, and despite the fact that one of the right's most glamorous figures, Ronald Reagan, headed it up. It is only when the right focuses on certain issues--taxation and government spending, abortion, gay rights, women's rights--that they have had important victories. For example, in Dade County and Eugene, Oregon over gay rights; in Congress with the Hyde Amendment denying federal funds for abortions; in California with the passage of Prop. 13. They have won on these issues because they have found broad support among the American population, including significant numbers of the working class people. It is this widespread support that makes the right such formidable enemies. Why is it there? Why is it getting stronger?

Capitalism and Consciousness

In order to understand the connection between the economic crisis and working class openness for right wing ideas, we need to understand the double-edged character of workers' experience under capitalism. Capitalism as a system shapes workers' consciousness--but it does this in two diametrically opposed ways. Begin with the fact that working people have to guarantee their own survival. But the question always faces them, how? They can adopt either competitive, individual strategies or collective, class strategies. Capitalism creates the basis for the development of class strategies. But at the same time, capitalism also creates a dynamic towards individualistic strategies.

Marxists and socialists have tended to emphasize the first dynamic, toward collective action by workers. The capitalist economy is organized around competition on the market between capitalist producers. In order to compete successfully, capitalists must accumulate, must make a profit, or otherwise be driven out of business. In order to maintain their profits, capitalists will push to cut costs. This means, inevitably, they will try to cut the cost of labor. So, at the point of production the effect of competition between capitalists is to make very clear the direct conflict of interests between capitalists and workers. The question of the length of the working day, the speed and pace of work, payment for labor, etc.--questions which determine the very survival of the workers--are a matter of conflict between workers and capitalists. Thus, capitalism creates the necessity for workers to struggle against their employers to survive.

At the same time, the capitalist economy creates the conditions for workers' organization. A society of proletarians and capitalists is also a society in which production is social, not individual. Production is accomplished by a capitalist who brings laborers together collectively to cooperatively produce (of course with means of production owned and supplied by the capitalist). But this collective character of the labor process creates the conditions for workers to communicate, get

together. Interdependency in practice, this cooperation in production, can be turned into political cooperation--collective organization over and against the boss at the point of production, around the wage, conditions of work, etc. Cooperation on the shop floor can be extended--again on the basis of the real interdependency of workers in production throughout the economy. From cooperation in struggle on the shop floor, workers can expand their organization to other factories in the same industry, creating trade unions; from the industry the collective struggle can expand to the class as a whole; from the struggle of the class of workers vs. the class of employers, to the struggle against the state of the employers. It is this side of capitalism, this aspect of workers' experience under capitalism, that leads to the development of class struggle class consciousness, and ultimately the revolutionary movement.

But there is another side of workers' experience: workers must provide for their own reproduction^{and} survival. But they do not have the means to do this. They do not own the means of production which would allow them to produce what they need (like say peasants who owned their land and tools). So workers must sell their labor power in order to survive. They must find a capitalist willing to buy their labor power for a wage in order to survive. But in the labor market workers are forced directly into competition each one with the other, to sell their labor power to the capitalists. If the worker's world of production is a world defined by interdependency and cooperation, the worker's world of the labor market is a world defined by individuals and competition. From this point of view, society is not one of two conflicting classes each attempting to guarantee their survival at the expense of the other. Instead, society is made of millions of individuals, each one relying only on themselves, each one alienated and separated from the other, each one attempting to guarantee their survival at the expense of the other. The consequences of this fact of life--that workers are sellers of labor power competing with each other in the labor market--a fact of life every bit as factual and real as their cooperation in production, can lead workers to be cynical about their ability to organize collectively, and make individualistic strategies for survival seem the only possible ones. So to get and keep a good job you sell yourself to the boss, might stab other workers in the back. How many times do people say, "It's a dog eat dog work, you have to look out for number one."

Competition between workers as sellers of labor power has broader consequences for workers' strategies. When workers see themselves primarily as sellers of labor power, then they are open to acting similarly to the capitalists. Each has a similar view of the world--and each has similar interests. The profitability of the firm can seem to have as much importance to the worker as to the capitalist. So we get, for example, auto workers supporting the auto companies when they demand relaxation of pollution standards. Or steel workers supporting tariffs on foreign steel to support the monopoly prices of U.S. steel firms. In the competitive war of all against all, it can appear to be very rational for workers and their employers to "join up."

The point is that capitalism as a system, in the way it works and in the kind of experiences people undergo just by living and working in

it, presents a contradictory reality--or two different realities. It cuts two ways, all the time. It pushes workers toward collective ideas and toward individualistic ideas.

Marxists, of course, have emphasized the ways in which capitalism pushes workers to develop class consciousness. Moreover, we have argued that there is an aspect of capitalism that makes it necessary, in the last analysis, for workers to develop collective rather than individualistic strategies if they are to survive. Capitalism is a system of economic crises. Economic crisis leads in the direction of class consciousness because economic crisis intensifies the conflicts of interest between workers and employers. In times of prosperity, when profits are up and investment is up, employment expands, so there is less downward pressure on wages. In an economic crisis, however, profit margins dwindle and so investment funds dry up. Employment shrinks. Now the capitalists facing declining profits, turn to squeezing more work for less pay out of the work force, much more intensely. Workers' standard of living goes down while their working conditions come under vicious attack. Falling profits leads to intensified competitive pressure among the employers, and this leads to an employers' offensive against the workers. In the face of the employers' offensive, the idea that capitalists and workers have common interests is revealed to be false. Just to survive, workers are forced to organize against the employers.

In the long run, capitalist crisis will face working people with the choice to either fight or be crushed. But only in the long run. Yet, socialists have often assumed that capitalist crisis will almost automatically force workers to organize. This assumption has especially misled many of us in understanding the recent period. For since the early 70's there has been a real and progressively worsening crisis in U.S. capitalism. In 1965 the average rate of profit (after taxes) was 10.1%; by 1972 the average rate of profit in the U.S. economy had fallen to 5.1%. In response to the falling rate of profit, employers have been on the attack. By 1976 spendable income for the average family had fallen back to the level of 1965 (having risen somewhat through the early 70's). Speed-up became a way of life for people at work. On this basis, the left waited expectantly for a workers' upsurge. There were important instances of workers' revolt in the late-60's through the early 70's: wildcat strikes in post-office and trucking, big strikes in the mines, in longshore, in the auto plants, and elsewhere. But by and large these uprisings did not produce any lasting organization. And since that time there has been a sense of demoralization among many sections of the class.

The left has been disoriented by this turn of events. Prepared to intervene in the working class around spontaneous militant upsurges, expecting a shift to the left in the political spectrum, socialists were unprepared for what in fact happened: a decline since the early 70's in industrial militancy and a political shift to the right. The problem is this: that while it is true that crisis creates the conditions for the emergence of workers' self-organization, crisis cannot itself produce organization. Needs and interests do shape consciousness. But needs and interests lead nowhere unless they are tied up with actual activity

directed to meeting those needs. People's social experience does determine their consciousness. What this means is that all ideas are practical: ideas are instruments that help us to understand our experience and to act in the world. But the link between our experience and our ideas is action, practice. So, it is practical to hold the idea that the boss is your main enemy, practical to see that capitalists are responsible for economic crisis... but only on one condition--that you can act in terms of that understanding, act consistently and successfully. People can hold an idea only if it can be a useful guide to action. But, if it seems that there's no chance to fight the boss, no chance to fight the capitalist system, if the means to take on such powerful enemies appear unavailable, you have to look elsewhere. It is difficult to see the world in terms of bosses ~~and~~ workers, if there seems little chance for acting with other workers against the bosses. If you need to fight, but no one is fighting, if you need to stand up to the boss, but the union is weak, if you need to fight capitalism but there is no revolutionary movement, it becomes difficult for these needs to form the basis for anti-capitalist ideas. No matter how much it may be in your interest to fight, if a fight appears impossible, then the need to survive forces you to come up with other strategies.

Employers' Offensive + Workers' Disorganization

This is the key, in the current situation, to the openness to right-wing ideas of working people. It appears to numbers of workers there is no apparent adequate practical means to struggle to survive... outside of individualistic (and ultimately self-defeating) ones. Why is this the case? Why doesn't an anti-capitalist alternative exist? We can't go into a whole history of the U.S. working class here. But the essence is this: over the past thirty years working class organization, especially the self-organization of the rank and file workers, has been very much weakened. At the same time, and as part of this process, the trade unions have come under the control of enormous parasitic bureaucracies, alienated from the members and standing now as a barrier to workers' militancy. Unions are the natural, necessary instrument of workers' defense against the employers. But the unions, to the extent they remain controlled by the bureaucracy, cannot be used to take on the employers. Just the opposite. Workers find themselves, therefore, without any means of defense. Having come to rely on the trade union officials, instead of themselves, they find that the union officials will not fight. And they have no organization themselves with which to force the unions to fight.

Things were not always this way. In the 1930's, working people organized to get industrial unions. Just to win this demand they were forced to wage a bitter and broad struggle. This led them to form organizations that went across craft lines, breaking with the conservative A.F. of L, across industry lines--as workers from one industry struck in solidarity with those in others--connected up to the movements of the unemployed--in order to win the unemployed to their cause and prevent the unemployed being used as scabs, and against the state--over and over again intervening on the side of the bosses.

The objective conditions that workers faced in trying to defend themselves just over against their own employers demanded that they move far beyond organization on the shop floor. The conditions for victory were the development of a broad, class-wide organization that could bring the combined force of workers to bear not just in the economic, but in political arenas as well. The working class responded to this necessity and created such a movement. Its success was based on the self-organization of the rank and file workers which brought hundreds of thousands of workers together in militant, class struggle, built the CIO and industrial unionism, pushed the spectrum of political debate in the country to the Left, and brought significant numbers of the working class into the revolutionary movement.

However, from the beginning of World War II, through the 40's, 50's and 60's, workers' own organization, their own self-activity, declined. In its place rose the trade union bureaucracy. The reasons for this are complex but we can briefly point to several: 1) war prosperity and world capitalist expansion and prosperity for twenty-five years following the war; 2) the rise of McCarthyism led to the vicious rooting out of the left wing from the trade union movement in the late 1940's and early 1950's; 3) the achievement of relative labor peace in a trade off between union officials and the corporations. Union officials took more and more control over bargaining from the workers and built a trade union apparatus to keep worker militants isolated and to break organization among the rank and file. In return the employers allowed the officials to "deliver the goods" to the workers in contract bargaining. The trade union officials were able to give a rising standard of living to unionized American workers out of the enormous corporate profits of the war and post-war period. With the standard of living increasing, and especially where they were able to maintain some shop-floor organization as an immediate protection against the employer (especially to enforce the terms of the contract), workers' saw little need to take on the task of organization. This was left to the union officials, who centralized control, kept local levels of the union leadership in line, and organized along the most narrow, business-unionism lines.

So, over the last 30 years workers lost their connections between one another developed out of the militant organizing activity of the 30's. Except at the level of the shop floor, where workers' solidarity still forms part of day to day experience, workers are not connected to each other directly through common organizing activities which build links beyond the shop floor. Instead they are connected only through the trade union officials who they have so long allowed to act for them.

But the unions are only as strong as the organized militancy of the rank and file. Up through the 60's, the fundamental weakness of a trade-union movement organized by the union bureaucracy was masked by the expanding economy. With the return of economic crisis the unions' weakness was revealed. No longer a powerful movement, but in many ways an ossified bureaucratic shell, the unions have fallen like nine pins under the employers' attack. In contract after contract, the supposedly powerful unions like the United Autoworkers and the Teamsters have failed to protect workers' standards of living and working condition .

While workers continued to rely on shop floor organization, letting the officials take care of the rest, the capitalist class did not sit still. The employers' efforts to get around the one remaining arena where the workers had strong organization--the shop floor. Essentially, what we have seen in the last two decades is a tremendous re-organization of capitalist production methods specifically designed to weaken the effectiveness of shop floor organization and a tremendous tightening up of capitalist political organization to isolate shop floor militancy.

First, employers have used technology to change the labor process to eliminate or lessen their dependence on labor. Two examples are agriculture, where mechanization (based on research and development often supported by the state government in state universities) has followed hard on the heels of the organization of the United Farmworkers; and Longshore, where the employers made enormous investments in completely new mechanized ports which can unload whole ships with only a few people in order to break the hold over the labor process won through years of struggle by the Longshoremen's union.

Second is the re-organization of production. A major example here is General Motors. In the late 60's GM introduced General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) in which assembly plants located all over the country are flexible enough to be able to shift model production easily. This means that when a militant assembly plant goes out on strike, its production can be shifted to other plants in other parts of the country. This happened, for example, with the Norwood, Ohio Local, which struck for eleven months in 1972, while other plants worked overtime producing the cars for GM that Norwood was not. In this way GM can sustain a long strike at one plant without any real losses.

Third, employers have developed their own organizations to collaborate and support each other in strikes. The old tactic of whip-sawing, in which one company was struck and others allowed to run in order to take on the companies one at a time, no longer works when the capitalists develop solidarity.

Fourth, the companies have used the law, the courts and the legislature to whittle away at shop-floor power. There have been the big anti-labor Taft Hartley and Landrum Griffin Acts. There are also no-strike agreements in the contracts; grievance procedures that reduce every shop floor conflict to a safe and long judicial debate; injunctions against mass picketing; etc. all circumscribe the kinds of action workers can take without immediately coming up against the courts, the police, fines and jail.

In summary, since the 1930's the historical trend has been that the workers have become more and more disorganized, while the employers have become more and more organized.

If we look back again to the 30's, we can see that this impasse is not permanent. In that period also, working class organization in response to the employers' offensive of the Great Depression was by no means immediate. Between 1929 and 1933, for 3½ bitter years, under conditions far worse than what the current crisis has yet produced,

American workers were relatively quiet under the blows of the capitalists: starvation wages, inhuman working conditions, long and toilsome hours of work, and especially high unemployment. Then, too, working people found themselves disorganized and separated from each other, and struggles were few and far between. However, beginning in 1933, a sudden change took place. There was a qualitative breakthrough to workers' organization. Militant, rank and file upsurges in a few places sparked a massive upheaval. Almost all at once, the possibility for collective action was made real. Working people leapt from a situation of no organization anywhere to a massive rank and file movement. By 1934, several American cities had been rocked by General Strikes. The situation of the working class can change qualitatively very quickly. A few real breakthroughs in rank and file organization can shift the balance from cynicism and defeat to militancy and class consciousness. But until that time, until some breakthroughs are made, the apparently insurmountable barriers to collective action will continue to lead some working people to look to right wing solutions.

The Material Basis for Right Wing Ideas: The Tax Revolt

For the moment, class action seems impossible, but some kind of action is imperative. So there is the attraction of building organization around existing solidarities, solidarities which unite one section of the class against another--company vs. company, craft vs. craft, race vs. race, sex vs. sex. The right-wing consequences of this type of strategy, of organizing around sectional interests, is most clear in the so-called "taxpayers revolt." Here, both the short-run rationality of capitalist strategies for workers and the connection between action around capitalist strategies and right-wing ideas is most clear.

What Proposition 13 and the "tax revolt" really represents is workers in the private sector attempting to improve their situation at the expense of workers in the public sector and those who are dependent on public services. The huge development of public services--health care, welfare, higher education, increased unemployment benefits, etc. --was based on the tremendous economic prosperity of the post-war period. On the whole, the costs of these services came out of workers' wages. With the onset of crisis, two things have happened. First, real wages are declining, so workers can no longer afford to support expanded public services; second, in order to restore declining profits, there has been a shift of the total tax burden onto the working class. Between 1966 and 1976, the corporate share of total taxes paid declined from 23% to 13%. Workers find themselves on the one hand with a greater burden for public services and on the other hand with that burden taking an increasing share of a declining real wage.

The fact is that the rate of taxation for workers has almost doubled, while that on capitalist profit has declined. In 1953, taxes took 9.2% of workers' income; by 1974 taxes took 16%. In 1953, taxes took 43% of corporate profit, by 1974, 31%. (The corporate tax rate is

in fact inflated by the government figures; most economists estimate that the effective rate in any year is much lower than government figures. However, the figures given here illustrate that the trend has been steeply downward.)

The increasing share of public services that workers have been forced to bear is the result of two things. First, there has been a conscious policy of cutting corporate taxation. As part of their policy of keeping up the rate of profit, the government has lowered business taxes through laws such as investment tax credits and accelerated depreciation allowances. Second, inflation automatically increases the tax rate on wage incomes. For example, inflation amounted to 50% in the years 1968 to 1975. That means that a family with \$15,000 in 1975 and \$10,000 in 1968 had the same real income, the same real purchasing power in both years. But the rate of taxation on \$15,000 is double that of the rate of the rate of taxation on \$10,000: 9% vs. 4.5%. So that a family has actually suffered a 5% cut in their standard of living due to taxation even if their money wages kept up with inflation

The effect of inflation on increasing the tax burden is especially evident in the Prop. 13 campaign. It used to be that only businesses owned property and the property tax was an instrument for making capitalists pay for state services. But since World War II, higher working class incomes and the drive by workers for security from landlords have created a home owning boom. In 1940, only 41% of all houses were owner occupied; by 1960, 61% of houses were owner occupied. The number of owner-occupied units doubled while the number of rental units stayed the same. In areas of population growth such as California, the general inflationary pressure in the economy has created a tremendous inflation in housing prices. As the market goes up, so do assessments. Assessments represent potential, not actual income. Yet as assessments go up so do property taxes. Workers' income of course has not kept pace. Property taxes have become a very visible and very serious source of workers' declining standard of living.

The point is that taxation really hurts working people. They really cannot afford to pay. The liberal opponents to Prop. 13 who chided people for their lack of generosity in supporting it, and those radicals who insisted that "no cuts" was in itself sufficient to fight 13 were unable to get support because they failed to address this problem.

Working people are being badly squeezed and looking for an answer. Prop. 13 was one. The alternative would have been a campaign to make the corporations pay, to shift the tax burden back where it belongs. But this kind of reform takes a political offensive, a real organizing effort. Yet who would take this on? The Democratic politicians scurrying to reduce corporate taxation to prop up profits and stave off economic disaster? The trade union officials whose whole strategy toward the crisis has been to go along with the corporations' demand that we protect their profit first to get the economy going? None of the existing institutions which supposedly represent workers' interests were able or willing to fight for this alternative. This left the workers with the other alternative: joining with the capitalists to cut back on government services. So in the Prop 13 campaign we have the spectacle of Howard Jarvis, lobbyist for the California Real Estate

industry, leading a "popular revolt." Business will reap the major part of the benefits of Prop. 13--an estimated 4.6 billion dollars out of the total 7 billion cut in state revenues. But, even though it meant a 4.6 billion giveaway to the corporations, workers were overwhelmingly in support of 13--because they too will benefit.

The program of tax cuts and spending cuts also finds support because government spending for social services is based on a redistribution of income within the working class. Welfare, health care, unemployment benefits, are used by the unemployed, or the underemployed, and paid for by employed workers. There has been a tremendous expansion of these services in the post-war period. Added to these basic services are the (completely inadequate of course) poverty-program services--special training programs, free child care, scholarships for higher education, etc. Oppressed people, and especially people of color, are the unemployed and the underemployed in this society. The unemployment rate for black men is 13.7%, for white men 7%; for white women 9%, for black women 14%. The expansion of basic services, and especially the poverty program, were won through their struggle. They were part of the gains of the movements of the 60's. The right wing fought against these from the very beginning. But as long as prosperity held, they could not find a hearing. On the one hand even the existing rate of taxation produced greater state funds on the basis of rising incomes. On the other hand, increasing tax rates, which did occur, were not so burdensome on working people. So it was difficult to mobilize working people around this issue.

From the late 60's this began to change. As the squeeze got worse it was much easier to organize white workers against government spending for programs that do benefit and are absolutely necessary to the survival of people of color. Now, as white workers move to save themselves at the expense of people of color, they have to adopt ideas that make sense of this. These ideas are ready to hand: most of the people on welfare are "welfare cheaters," "lazy Mexicans"; "blacks don't want to work," etc., all the false, racist stereotypes that are deeply part of American culture. These ideas have always been there. What has changed is the material situation. It is not just racist ideas that have led sections of the white working class to racist action; it is their action, which is racist in its effect, that has strengthened their acceptance of racist ideas.

There have been similar developments vis a vis jobs. With the onset of economic crisis, the job market has shrunk. Not only has unemployment climbed, but there are fewer and fewer good jobs to go around. White workers have responded by trying to re-establish their monopoly of the best jobs. The Bakke case came to represent affirmative action and preferential hiring--the instruments through which this monopoly had been broken. "Reverse discrimination"--a slogan that would have seemed off the wall ten years ago--has become their rallying cry. Anti-ERA sentiment similarly flows from the fact that the ERA has come to symbolize the threat that women will now compete with men for jobs. Working class support for kicking out undocumented workers is part of the same thing. A "capitalist" strategy for survival leads directly to racism and sexism.

The Crisis of Liberalism

From this point of view we can understand why liberalism has failed so dismally in the 70's, why the Democratic Party has moved to the right, why the supposedly liberal "veto-proof" Democratic Congress and a Democratic President elected in 1976 have passed bill after bill benefitting business. The liberalism of the 60's aimed to cushion the worst abuses of capitalism--unemployment, poverty, inequalities between classes in education, medical care, etc.--through state services. This was accomplished primarily through taxation on the working class--not on capitalist profits. In conditions of prosperity, liberals were able to carry this off. But if liberal programs depend on prosperity, they also depend on capitalist profits. In a capitalist system high profits are necessary to get investment, investment is necessary for economic expansion and prosperity. So, it is entirely logical that in a period of economic crisis the Democratic "friends of labor and the little man" are doing everything they can to restore profits. This includes of course, further reducing taxes on corporations. However, also because of the economic crisis, the working class cannot afford to pay and is resisting paying taxes. In order to maintain or expand social services there is only one other place to get government income--corporate profits. But the liberals are unwilling to attack profits. Therefore, the liberals have no political alternative to offer workers.

So to keep workers' votes the "liberals" have moved to coopt the programs of the right wing. From Jerry Brown in California to Carter in Washington, the "new liberals" of the Democratic Party are not liberals at all but conservatives, trying to beat the Republicans at their own game. They proclaim "fiscal responsibility" (that is, slashing social services) and they attack "big government" (that is, firing public workers).

The fight against the firings and the cuts will require a fight to make the corporations pay. Just as the working class will have to refuse to pay for the crisis by cutting back their standard of living, they will have to refuse to allow the least well-off in the class to suffer so that capitalist profit can be protected. The liberals and the Democratic Party will not lead this fight. They will continue to capitulate to the right wing. In this way, they will open the way to the strengthening of the right wing.

Sexual Politics and the Crisis

There is one area of right-wing politics that appears at first to be completely unconnected to material interests, to strategies for economic survival. This is the attack on women's reproductive rights and the attack on gay rights. Anti-abortion and anti-gay politics do not flow directly from any material conflict, any defense of economic privilege. But they nevertheless are bound up with the economic crisis. The link is through the defense of the nuclear family. Gay rights and especially the affirmation of gay life-styles and women's right to

choose to have children or not, both challenge the nuclear family. Both gay life-styles and women's right to choose deny that either men or women must accept as natural or inevitable the adult sex roles defined by the nuclear family: "men are breadwinners who support a woman and their children;" "women are dependent on men for their support in return for which they raise children and take care of men." While neither the gay movement nor the pro-abortion movement defines itself as attacking the family, the struggle for the right to choose (on abortion) and for gay rights seems to bring the nuclear family into question.

Now again if we look back at the 60's we can remember that the right wing was organizing against the women's and gay movements. But in fact many people, including working people, responded positively to these movements, or at least tolerated them. The women's movement was able to win out, over against the right. Why is it now that people are rising to the defense of the family, why does it now appear so important to "preserve the family?"

The family as we know it is organized so as to assure male dominance. Women are oppressed by traditional sex roles, and in fact, male sex roles often put tremendous strains on men themselves. The family, as people experience it, is hardly enjoying great success; many families are breaching up, and this trend is increasing.

On the other hand, the family, with all its weaknesses, is one of the few institutions in capitalist society in which people can have non-competitive, inter-dependent, supportive relations. They are not competing with each other on the market, but trying to make a go of it together. As the crisis deepens, and when working class collective action does not develop, there is an intensification of competition between workers which tends to break up the solidarity between them. The world outside the family becomes more and more a "war of all against all." In this situation, the family becomes much more important to people. Here they can find some support; here they can find some solidarity and trust; here they know that everyone has to work together because they are dependent on each other.

Yet the crisis itself is undermining this last refuge. One worker's wage is no longer enough to support a family; women are entering the labor force in record numbers, as their earnings become not a luxury but a necessity. The sexual division of labor which makes women dependent homemakers disappears. On the other hand, women who work can't fulfill all the demands the family puts on them. Financial insecurity, lack of time put tremendous pressure on both men and women and make the family less and less able to provide the kinds of support that men and women expect from it. Just when people need the family most it is most fragile. It is this desperation about the loss of the family as a shelter from the world of competition that has made the symbolic threat to the family represented by the women's movement and the gay movement suddenly something that must be fought.

The Way Forward

The capitalist crisis and the employers' offensive have formed the basis for the right-wing drift in the working class. But at the same time they are creating the conditions for its opposite: the re-emergence of class action and class politics for the first time since the 1930's. For what is common to all these individual methods of defense is that in this period of economic crisis they cannot work. Tax cuts and spending cuts are not eliminating "bureaucratic waste" or hurting only the poor. The spending cuts are further depressing all workers' standard of living. The schools and public libraries, parks, beaches and museums, trash collection, sewers, street lighting, road maintenance are all falling along with welfare. Suppression of gay people, the denial of abortion to the poor, defeat of the ERA will not keep women out of the labor market or prevent the disintegration of the family. Forcing people of color to bear the brunt of unemployment and eliminating affirmative action programs, will not stave off unemployment for whites. Job opportunities for whites will continue to shrink because the capitalist economy is stagnating.

But even more important, these strategies are, and will increasingly be revealed to be self-defeating, for they have terrible consequences for workers when they do try to organize against their employers. The exclusion of people of color from the unionized and better paid jobs only creates a scab labor pool for the employers. In the 1970 teamster wildcat, the L.A. beer drivers strike last year and in the recent West Coast teamster grocery strikes, employers recruited from among the unemployed to break the strikes. Ads in the newspapers and on radio directed especially to people of color promised immediate high paying jobs with "equal opportunity employers." Striking teamsters learned a bitter lesson here about the consequences of their failure to organize against job discrimination against blacks. Similarly, immigration controls are used not to keep undocumented workers out and open up jobs but to create a cheap unorganized labor force for the employers. When, as recently in L.A., the retail clerks union tried to organize a plant and won a union election, the employer called in the immigration service which arrested the undocumented workers who worked there and broke the union.

As workers are pushed into conflict with their employers, the disaster of strategies based on the oppression of one section of the class by another will be made clear. Moreover, the crisis is leading workers, for the first time in decades, to experience the limitations of the bureaucratic collaboration in the unions. While the first reaction to the failure of the bureaucrats to lead a fight has often been cynicism, there are places and moments when workers have moved to struggle against their employers. The working class is not yet in mass motion. As we saw from the history of the early depression years, this situation could continue for a time; it is likely to be broken through fairly sudden upsurges, explosive movements after a period of only small and sporadic struggles. On the other hand, where struggle has occurred, workers have moved and will in the future move very quickly to new forms of activity and new ideas. For under present conditions, even the most routine contract negotiations run up against vicious

resistance from the employers, determined not just to prevent gains but to take away advances made in the past. The union officials either capitulate or, when forced by the rank and file, call a strike. Then they do everything they can to control the strike and keep it within safe, and losing bounds. On the street, workers quickly learn two things: 1) the union officials cannot be trusted, the rank and file will have to organize themselves; 2) they cannot win without taking militant tactics--refusing to accept injunctions limiting their pickets, which means defying the courts; pushing to spread the strike to other workplaces in their industry; organizing support from workers in other industries, building their picket lines with supporters from the community, from other unions. These were the lessons so quickly learned in the recent heroic struggle of the mine workers.

This dynamic has led to the beginnings of rank and file organization within the unions, and it is these beginnings that present an opportunity to break through the feelings of powerlessness and cynicism that dominate workers' approach to the world, and to begin to bridge and overcome divisions within the class. Once in struggle, acting on class solidarities, workers become open to anti-racist and anti-sexist ideas. In fact, the search for allies against their bosses makes links with other groups in struggle natural avenues for organization. As the crisis deepens, the opportunity for leftists to intervene in the working class with class politics as opposed to right wing politics increases. On the basis of relating to and helping to strengthen rank and file organization we can build a left current in the working class, based on the organization of rank and file militants.

The development of this current is also key to the successful re-development of the movements of the 60's, the movements of the specially oppressed. Although these groups are suffering first and most from the employers' offensive--and from the right-wing political attack--they also remember that during the 60's their movements were isolated from the rest of the working class. This is a weakness that, whether clearly understood or only vaguely felt, has produced a pervasive sense of powerlessness in these communities. However, here too we can see the beginnings of motion--fights against Bakke, for ERA, anti-immigration restrictions. Building bridges between these groups and the rank and file movement will develop each of them. In fact, it is only by building links in action that we can create the basis in action for a movement against the right.

It is for this reason--the necessity to link organizing activity of workers against their employers to the organizing of oppressed people--that left unity is so pressing. The key to a successful fight against the right is the development of workers' struggle against the bosses. But the development of workers' struggle against the bosses depends in part on the ability of workers to unite the class. If class struggle politics and class struggle ideas are to become a current in the class, the working class has to be able to act in terms of these ideas. By concentrating our forces and by working together, the left can help make workers' self-organization as producers more practical. We can involve ourselves in and lend our support to rank and file organization.

And we can use our connection to other arenas of struggle to bring support to rank and file organization from oppressed communities. In turn, we can use this practice to break down the racist and sexist politics within the working class, to unify the class not just through ideas but through their own activity

Local United Fronts: "Fight Back Organizations"

We have no illusions that we can move now to build a united mass movement against the right. But we must seek ways to build the crucial bridges among our different movements that will make the emergence of a mass movement more possible. One way we can do this is through building local, e.g. city-wide, united front organization out of different arenas--rank and file movements and struggles of oppressed groups. The point would be to bring together the relatively small number of already committed activists--usually leftists--for the purpose of political development, propaganda, and coordinating mass action on the few issues that will provide opportunities for such interventions. Through solidarity work we can develop our political practice and mutual understanding. At the same time, by combining forces we can begin to create a public left presence in our cities. We can put forward the analysis of the economic crisis--what's really going on--and strategic ideas about the politics of united action between the oppressed and other working people against the capitalists' "solution" of the economic crisis.

To develop this activity and politics we need a common organization--a coalition of activists. This organization would have three main tasks:

- 1) Coordinating the activity of members in different arenas to concentrate forces as necessary;
- 2) political education and propaganda to build a left presence, to bring pro-working class, anti-capitalist point of view to all arenas of struggle. The main vehicle for this would be a city-wide newspaper which would report and publicize different struggles of rank and file workers and oppressed people and provide ideas and education about the economic crisis, the employers' offensive and the need for self-organization to combat them;
- 3) provide a forum for discussion among anti-capitalist forces of different points of view. To build left unity through comradely debate and mutual respect based on common activity.

In light of these tasks, we would propose the following political points of unity for these local united front organizations:

- 1) There is a crisis of the capitalist system which has led to a vicious employers' offensive against working people and specially oppressed groups.
- 2) The key to a successful fight back is developing unity among workers, women, gay people, people of color, through struggle.

- 3) The need for rank and file workers' organization, independent of the trade union bureaucracy.
- 4) Support for the self-organization and special demands of oppressed groups.
- 5) No subordination of the struggle of the rank and file workers and oppressed groups to the Democratic party or to the trade union bureaucracy. For the development of a multi-national, independent working class party.

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