

“No More Tradition’s Chains”

The Crisis of the U.S. Trade Union Movement and the Fight for a Workers’ Party

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The goal of this paper is to take part in the broad dialogue already underway on the role of trade unions in this period of tremendous social, economic, and political instability. To assess the future of the U.S. trade union movement, we have to look at how the movement began to understand why it is in such profound crisis. That crisis constitutes a crisis of its very existence. After centuries of vicious slavery and a bloody Civil War, the transformation of the United States from what was even then still a largely agrarian society into an industrial powerhouse was accomplished with breathtaking speed and extraordinary brutality. It was a metamorphosis soaked in the blood of generations of industrial workers whose flesh and bone were ground up in the gigantic production machine which America became. The U.S. trade union movement emerged out of this 19th century crucible.

Karl Marx once warned that if workers did not fight the day-to-day struggle for better wages and working conditions, they would simply be reduced to being “one level mass of broken wretches, past salvation.” That certainly describes what would have happened had the workers of the United States not fought – almost from the opening of the first workshops and factories – to improve their situation. The long, uphill battle which workers waged against the industrial capitalists in an earlier era has left a legacy of pride in resistance which has rightly been passed down from generation to generation in many working-class families. In such families, especially those in the industrial heartland which was the scene of so many bitter strikes, there is an instinctive understanding that the capitalist class will commit any crime and reduce human beings to any level of misery if it is not confronted. This gut feeling is expressed well in a comment still heard during arguments in some workplace lunch rooms and at some family gatherings -- “Don’t you dare talk against the union; without the union, we’d have nothing!”

The militant class hatred underlying that sentiment merits the most profound respect. It is recognition of the fact that the struggle to legalize trade unions in the United States was the most violent of the fights to legalize trade unions in the Western industrialized world. Indeed, it was precisely because of the extraordinary scope and intensity of the “labor wars” of the 19th century and early 20th century that the ruling class was compelled to develop a system of control over the unions that is so intricate.

The modern grievance and arbitration procedure was deliberately designed to be cumbersome and time-consuming precisely in order to channel the rage of millions of workers off the shop floor. At the time it was created – with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 – this system was a finely woven net whose purpose was to

ensnare and bind an angry giant. The working class waged a relentless fight for real democracy and a place in the emerging industrial economy. We not only honor those who gave their lives in those battles, we look to their fighting spirit as a reminder of the need for a vision and the revolutionary zeal necessary to win genuine democracy in the age of electronics.

But we would pay no homage to the martyrs of our class if we were to pretend that the world today is basically the same as it was in the 19th century. Instead, our response to every outmoded tactic, false hope, and once-valuable practice now holding us back should be to proclaim: "No more tradition's chains shall bind us!" Those defiant words were written in 1871 by the French transport worker Eugene Pottier in his tribute to the world working class, "The Internationale." They have been sung every since by workers all over the globe, including by 25,000 textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts during the historic "bread and roses" strike of 1912. Their uncompromising stance should form the very foundation of our perspective.

At a moment of change, the ideas, habits, and practices which once pushed the struggle forward can hold it back if they are held on to beyond their usefulness. At one point, the ideology of militant trade unionism helped inspire millions to fight for "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work." Are those ideas sufficient to point the way out of this crisis? No, they are not. We have to face facts. The material foundation for whatever strength the trade union movement possessed several decades ago was the existence of gigantic industry. With the development of electronic production, the very ground on which the trade union movement was built is splitting open as society experiences an economic earthquake.

It's important to distinguish between "the labor movement" and "the unions." These terms are not synonymous. The labor movement is the totality of all the struggles waged by the working class – the class which can only survive by selling its ability to labor --- for economic, cultural, social, and political emancipation. As such, the labor movement encompasses the struggle of all workers, whether employed or unemployed, young or old, and regardless of ethnicity, gender, or immigration status. A trade union is one form of organization of one part of the labor movement. It is the basic organization of a group of employed workers (and usually workers with fairly stable employment) in a specific workplace or trade. There is still a sector of the working class whose members have full-time jobs and unions to represent them, but this sector is shrinking rapidly.

While the present-day union movement is a shell of the union movement of the past, there are forces fighting valiantly inside the unions that still exist. These forces are making valuable contributions to the overall struggle of the working class. What is occurring is that the historical moment in which the trade union was the main form of struggle of the most decisive section of workers is coming to an end.

THE QUESTION TODAY: Andy Stern, who recently stepped down as president of SEIU (Service Employees International Union), had this to say about the tremendous technological changes impacting workers and the economy: “[Stern] now knows that how the labor movement is structured is not as important as it is for unions to respond to the fundamental shift in how work is done.” He regrets that he “probably didn’t understand how profound the changes were [that were] happening as a result of the current economic revolution we are now part of.” (BNA Daily Labor Report, April 22, 2010).

In some ways, Andy Stern does a good job of describing the dilemma facing trade unions in a globalized economy. In a lengthy profile on Stern published in The New York Times Magazine in early 2005, reporter Matt Bai wrote that: “Stern talks about giving ‘added value’ to employers, some of whom have come to view him, warily, as a partner.” (“The New Boss,” The New York Times Magazine, January 30, 2005.) Providing “added value” is exactly what this era of new technology demands. While the turmoil inside the trade union movement today is the culmination of years of opportunism, narrow policies, and intrigue, none of that is new to the trade union movement. What is new is an environment in which unions cannot help workers hold on to good-paying jobs

Historically, the role of the trade unions has been to deliver a high standard of living to a section of the employed workers. The good wages and working conditions obtained by unions for that section of employed workers tied those workers to the ruling class. At one stage, the trade unions played an important role in economically stabilizing a section of the working class and -- through that section --controlling other sections of the working class as well. But today, good-paying jobs are disappearing. There really is no “middle class life” to speak of, and therefore, no way for the trade union movement to help employed workers achieve that dream.

The question confronting unions is not whether workers are in a union that is “corrupt” or in one that is “militant.” The real question is: How do workers achieve political power in order to rebuild a society that is currently being remade for the global rich?

Most trade union leadership faces the technological transformation of production without the political and philosophical understanding necessary to deal with its consequences. A large section of the newly unemployed and underemployed workers were once union members and will look to the trade union for answers. Workers are looking for guidance in this new era when there is so much at stake for humanity.

We finally have the productive capability that could ensure a life of abundance for all. The question before society is whether we seize the future or allow a tiny handful of exploiters to maintain control of society.

As digitalized technology is applied to every aspect of the production and distribution of goods and services, workers across the globe are facing falling wages and increasing

prices for the very necessities of life. In the early days of the foreclosure crisis, the U.S. government put billions of dollars at the disposal of the corporations with little or no control. The corporations have no more of an obligation to consider the needs of the working class after their bailout than they did before the bailout. The present administration, like those that have come before it, is scrambling to stabilize capitalism as the unemployment rate remains high in a "recovery" that will permanently lose even more jobs. While the extending of unemployment benefits for millions and the passage of job-creation bills has postponed the day of political reckoning, that day is coming.

It will have profound effects for all institutions in this society, including the trade unions.

There are a limited number of possibilities of how the trade unions can react to a qualitatively different environment.

One result could be that the trade union movement as it has been known historically will simply no longer deliver as it once did. Another is that the trade unions will somehow, in some form, transform themselves into something different. There are signs that part of the trade union movement – while still tied to the Democratic Party – is moving both to bolster the Democratic Party (in preparation for the 2010 and 2012 elections) – and also making the first steps toward creating a populist third party.

To assess the context for these possibilities, it is necessary to step back and review some history.

FROM CRAFT UNIONS TO ASSEMBLY LINES

The development of trade unions in the United States cannot be separated from the general history of the country. What is happening in society at large always sets the parameters for what is possible in the trade union movement itself.

While the first known trade union in the United States emerged in 1827, and there were a few citywide and even national trade union groupings before the Civil War, the overall situation was summed up well by Karl Marx when he wrote: "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." (Capital, Volume I, page 329.)

But the end of the Civil War led to a massive increase in industrial production and the rise of the first really national trade unions. The National Labor Union was the first national labor federation in the United States. Founded in 1866 and dissolved in 1873, it paved the way for other organizations, such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor.

At that time, most unions were craft unions. In the first decades after it was formed in 1886, the American Federation of Labor tolerated industrial unions – organizations

which encompassed all the crafts in one workplace – only in industries where the practice had a long history, or where exceptional conditions prevailed (such as in mining).

Craft unions admitted workers according to skill, not according to industry or employer. Each craft was concerned first and foremost with protecting its own trade. This arrangement worked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries because the skilled workers of that time possessed abilities which their employers simply could not function without. This gave those workers considerable bargaining power.

For instance, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers (“the AA”) was formed in 1876. It was a union of skilled iron and steel workers which was deeply committed to craft unionism. As late as 1919, there were 24 different unions which claimed jurisdiction over portions of the steel industry.

STRIKE WAVE

In 1913, Henry Ford added a motorized assembly line in his plant producing the Model T Ford. Technological change began to reduce the number of skilled jobs in the modern factory and increase the number of unskilled positions. By 1933, unskilled and semi-skilled workers in steel, auto, rubber, and other mass-production industries began pushing to join unions. Despite this, the AFL clung to its conservative ways. For instance, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) refused to waive jurisdiction over tool-and-die makers, general machinists, and maintenance workers in auto plants.

Despite the conservatism of the AFL craft unions, the upsurge of workers in the mass-production industries could not be stopped. On Sept. 1, 1934, the Great Textile Strike began.

This strike was the largest work stoppage in U.S. history and involved 400,000 workers from New England to the Carolinas. The year 1934 also saw strikes by truckers, rubber workers, and dock workers.

This huge strike wave allowed the international-financier wing of the capitalist class to move decisively to reshape the legal relations between capital and labor in a way that served its strategic interests. After the Civil War, most of the wing of U.S. finance capital which had its roots in industry had been absolutely, vehemently opposed to granting legal recognition to trade unions. This section of capital had been willing to crush the union movement by any means necessary, including the violence which led to the martyrdom of several of the Molly Maguires, the Haymarket defendants, the Homestead Steel strikers and the striking copper miners killed during the Ludlow Massacre.

Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the wing of finance capital which had its roots in industry dominated national politics, and its anti-union agenda prevailed. But the turmoil of the early 1930s allowed the international-financier wing of capital in the

United States to seize the initiative and actively encourage some unionization. At first, this unionization was limited to the largest and most strategic industries. This decision flowed from a very calculated assessment of the domestic and international situation made by the international-financier wing of capital.

Franklin Roosevelt became the leading political spokesman for this wing of capital during this period.

At the time of Roosevelt's inauguration, the ruling class was split about how to respond to the deep economic crisis. Roosevelt's international-financier wing of capital was embroiled in a bitter fight with the national-industrial wing of capital -- represented by organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers and newspapers like the Chicago Tribune and its publisher, Colonel Robert McCormick.

WAR CLOUDS

When Roosevelt took the oath of office on March 4, 1933, the Nazi Party had been in power in Germany for less than two months. The Soviet Union had just completed its first five-year plan ahead of schedule and building was going on everywhere. The world's first socialist state was not a part of the capitalist financial system and was growing by leaps and bounds, while the capitalist world was mired in the Great Depression. The contrast with the Soviet economy inspired millions of people to join the world's communist parties. (This included tens of thousands of people who joined the Communist Party in the United States.)

By the early 1930s, the most far-sighted representatives of the international-financier wing of capital could see the war clouds beginning to darken the world's sky.

These leaders could sense where the seizure of power by fascists in Italy, Japan, and Germany was going to lead. They saw the rise of a world movement against fascism which was in danger -- from their point of view -- of being led by communists. They knew that the United States would never be able to manufacture the steel and planes and tanks necessary to win a world war if the factory floors of the United States continued to be battle zones. They understood that if the capitalist state's violent actions against the U.S. strike wave continued indefinitely, that suppression could escalate into a terrible bloodbath -- and perhaps to a situation close to civil war.

Crushing the strike wave completely with an iron hand would destroy any possibility of gaining the willing cooperation of the U.S. worker in the world war which was coming. Given all this, the international-financier wing of capital shrewdly moved to bring about labor peace.

THE NLRA AND THE BATTLE FOR UNIONS

One of the most significant steps in the process of bringing about labor peace took place when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act into

law on July 5, 1935. The NLRA – or Wagner Act – was designed not just to tolerate unions, but to encourage them. It promoted the idea of “industrial democracy.” The Wagner Act protected workers’ rights to bargain collectively. It established a three-member National Labor Relations Board and prohibited employers from engaging in unfair labor practices.

Before the Wagner Act, a right to join a union in the workplace without reprisal did not exist in the United States. By making unions legal, the Wagner Act gave a gigantic impetus to the union movement.

Four months after FDR signed the Wagner Act, the CIO was formed. In the six years between the CIO’s formation in 1935 and the U.S. entry into World War II in 1941, unions signed up hundreds of thousands of members. The NLRA made it possible for workers to win union recognition after bitter strikes and hard struggle, but it did not replace the need for such struggle. It did not automatically put unions inside factories.

From the “Battle of the Overpass” at the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan to the Memorial Day Massacre outside the Republic Steel Works in South Chicago, the most anti-union of the industrial capitalists responded to the CIO organizing drive with bloody violence and even outright murder. The workers’ fight for unionization during the New Deal era took courage and sacrifice even after the passage of the NLRA.

That unionization drive also took ingenuity and a willingness to use new tactics. Seven months after the NLRA became law, the first sit-down strike took place – at Firestone Plant One in Akron.

Between 1936 and 1939, American workers engaged in 583 sit-down strikes of at least one day’s duration. The most notable was the 1936-37 sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan which resulted in the recognition of the United Auto Workers as the auto workers’ sole bargaining agent and led to a wave of other such recognitions across the country.

However, while the Wagner Act paved the way for unionization, it also corralled the very unions whose existence it guaranteed. This piece of legislation, anchored in the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution, relegated labor unrest to the legal arena without granting workers fundamental constitutional rights. The Roosevelt administration exacted an agreement from the unions to cease all wildcat strikes and go to the National Labor Relations Board to resolve disputes. In this period, some workers continued to wildcat. Increasingly, their workplace power was undermined by the very trade union leaders who had previously fought side by side with them. Once militant against the brutality of the corporations and the state, they had accepted this compromise, one that reflected the orientation to fight for a section of the working class, but not for it as a whole.

The move of the Roosevelt administration to support unionization corresponded perfectly with the goals of the overall direction of the trade union movement set by the "Center" forces in the CIO. Their vision was to have some kind of tripartite rule in the United States, a sharing of power between the government, the corporations, and labor unions. The political opportunity benefited both the financiers and the union leaders. The union leaders believed that if they agreed to cease labor strife on the factory floors and fight the threat of fascism, the capitalists would make accommodation with them and offer them a place at the table. (See *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* by Nelson Lichtenstein.)

The leaders of the capitalist class began to work with the most "responsible" union leaders to ensure a system of labor peace in this country – one in which sit-down strikes would "not be necessary." This agreement between the unions, the corporations, and the government brought workers in the large auto, steel, and rubber factories into the unions. Workers in the smaller auto-parts supplier plants, the small iron foundries, and in the canneries and fields were left out. The result was a labor peace that fenced out more workers than it fenced in. This became the foundation for the New Deal and the basis for the U.S. version of a social contract.

Despite the fact that some members of the ruling class denounced Roosevelt as a "traitor to his class," Roosevelt's own assessment of his role is more accurate. "I'm the best friend the capitalists in this country ever had," he famously declared.

The relative labor peace brought about by legalizing the unions in basic industry helped to unite the country for the fight against Hitler. For the wing of capital that was preparing to fight the Axis powers, the labor peace at home ensured by the NLRA came just in time:

- Four months before Roosevelt signed the NLRA into law – in March 1935 – fascist Germany had flagrantly violated the Treaty of Versailles by introducing compulsory military conscription and rebuilding its armed forces.
- Less than one month after the NLRA became law – in August 1935 – the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International opened in Moscow. There, Georgi Dimitrov, the hero of the Reichstag fire trial, made his ringing call for a "united front against fascism."
- Three months later, fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia (October 1935).
- Ten months after that, the fascist generals in Spain launched their revolt, sparking the Spanish Civil War (July 1936).
- Three years later, World War II began in Europe (September 1939). We should never forget the international context for the passage of the NLRA or lose sight of the fact that this law was in part designed to thwart a wing of the U.S. ruling class that supported fascism at home and abroad.

By the time that World War II ended in 1945, the National Labor Relations Act in its original form had served its purpose. It had helped unite the country against the Axis powers and begun the process of corralling the workers' struggles. For example, once having advocated for social health care, the unions dropped this fight. In the face of government-mandated wage freezes, they accepted employer-paid health care in lieu of wage increases.

When the steel workers, auto workers, electrical workers, packinghouse workers, and workers in many other industries went on strike shortly after World War II, some of the same capitalists who had been willing to tolerate unions during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency moved to impose restrictions on labor. These forces began supporting political candidates committed to restricting (and even undoing) important parts of the New Deal.

In the 1946 mid-term election, the Republican Party won control of both houses of Congress. Many of these Republicans were representatives of the fascist wing of the ruling class, the national industrial wing of capital. These Republicans' first target was the Wagner Act. In this effort, they had the support of a big section of the Democratic caucus in Congress – particularly the Southern "Dixiecrats." These forces moved a bill through Congress designed to gut the NLRA – the Taft-Hartley bill.

After President Truman vetoed the Taft-Hartley bill, almost two-thirds (106 out of 178) of House Democrats and almost half (20 of 42) of Democratic Senators voted to override the veto. The Taft-Hartley Act became law on June 23, 1947, and the Democrats were instrumental in its passage.

Thus began the post-World War II, Cold War era. The United States would take its place as the leading capitalist "democracy." It would export its brand of bourgeois democracy, unleash the greatest expansion in productive capacity ever, and apply the burgeoning technological advances developed during World War II in domestic production.

After fierce infighting and jockeying for power, most trade union leaders abandoned the demands for universal health care, education, and a livable minimum wage. They focused instead on improving the conditions of union members in the hope that these improvements would filter down to the rest of society. All this was based on a virulent anti-communist campaign supported by the government and acquiesced in by the trade union leaders.

The trade union movement quickly remade itself into business unionism. Most trade union officials agreed to sign the Taft-Hartley anti-communist affidavit. Members were betrayed and locked into a restrictive, legalized framework of how to fight the corporations and the government.

Following the tremendous political unrest of the 1930s and 1940s -- a period of turmoil in which a majority of workers became embroiled -- the decades of the 1950s and 1960s were times of relative economic peace inside the union movement, with the battles waged by most unions limited to contract fights with individual employers. These "good times" and this relative peace and quiet prevailed on the economic front for a majority of workers even as society as a whole was experiencing the very opposite of quiet. The country was convulsed by the civil rights movement, a historic struggle in which many African-American union members played an important role.

This period was marked by unprecedented productive growth and the amassing of huge profits by the wealthy – although nothing like what has been witnessed in the last 30 years, with the application of technology to production and distribution.

During this period, having a union job meant receiving good wages, having access to health care, and having the possibility of owning a home and eventually drawing a pension – regardless of one's education. While the working class of the United States as a whole had the world's highest standard of living during this period, there was a special "middle class dream" which came true for many unionized workers (and especially for the white male union worker in the North).

THE SOUTH

In the South, the situation was different. One year before the Taft-Hartley Act became law, the CIO had begun a massive effort to unionize Southern workers.

– "Operation Dixie." The CIO spent \$2 million on Operation Dixie and over 200 organizers participated in 12 states. When Operation Dixie was finally called to a halt in 1953, it had organized less than 15 percent of the South's textile workers. This section of the work force held the key to Southern industry. Although it had not been the only objective in the drive, it was obvious the drive had failed -- one year before the Supreme Court's Brown decision (1954), and two years before the start of the Montgomery bus boycott (1955).

The defeat of Operation Dixie profoundly affected the shape of the civil rights and trade union struggles of the next half century in the South. It meant that the civil rights struggles which broke out in the mid-1950s after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on school integration in 1954 had to be fought out without a strong Southern union movement to support them. One can only speculate how different the history of the 1950s and 1960s might have been if Operation Dixie had succeeded – and if there had been a large, militant trade union movement in the South to ally itself with the Southern civil rights movement during that critical moment in U.S. history.

There would not be another major attempt to unionize Southern textile workers until 1963, and that effort – at J.P. Stevens – would take 17 years until it finally succeeded in 1980. The South remains the least unionized part of the United States and control of

the South remains the key to control of the country and therefore control of the working class.

TODAY'S GLOBAL ECONOMY

The history cited above forms the background for the present-day reality of a global economy which finds trade unions positioned in a defensive crouch.

As the economic situation in the United States worsens, as the unemployment rate remains high and foreclosures continue, anger is growing. All across the United States – and especially in the Rust Belt – a huge section of the population which once had good-paying jobs are unemployed. State governments are slashing funds for education, health care, and other essential programs. The result has been large protests, especially by public sector workers and young people affected by massive cuts in education.

The government will move to quell unrest, but discontent will only grow. Traditionally, trade unions helped bolster the state by delivering the votes of their members for political candidates who supported the status quo. Union leaders can no longer guarantee candidates the votes of their members. With the alienation of many union members from both parties and the disappointment which many workers feel about the current administration, disaffected activists are already discussing third party strategies.

As the legacy benefits that were the hallmark of the most successful collective bargaining agreements come under massive attack, unions face the dilemma of trying to defend what they had gained during better times. This challenge is compounded by the fact that employers must introduce new technological innovations to remain competitive. Unions will no more massively rebuild membership in the domestic industrial/manufacturing sector than laundries or drycleaners will go back to pounding clothes on rocks to get them clean!

For many individuals and families, being a “good union member” still expresses the essence of their commitment to their fellow workers and to a better life. There was a time when being a good union member simply meant never crossing a picket line; supporting your union’s worthwhile programs; attending union meetings and other events regularly; staying informed; and looking out for other workers by not letting the company get away with its inevitable attempts to violate the contract. For many decades after World War II, that level of activity was all that was required for workers to win steady improvements in their standard of living.

Every aspect of social and economic reality today drives home the point that the situation is very different for working people. The intensification of the economic crisis and the bursting of the housing bubble have left many people homeless and wondering just what went wrong.

STRAINED ANALOGIES

Pointing out what is new today is especially important.

From the first moment of the Democrats' 2008 election victory, representatives of the political middle --including the top trade union leaders --loudly proclaimed that a "new New Deal" was upon us.

Trade union leaders and their supporters declared that the election of Barack Obama during the "Great Recession" paralleled the election of Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression. They described the worker occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago in 2008 as a second edition of the Flint sit-down strike of 1936-1937. They compared Obama's appointment of Hilda Solis as Secretary of Labor to Franklin Roosevelt's appointment of Frances Perkins to the same Cabinet post. Then in the first, optimistic days of the new administration, they argued that passage of the (now-abandoned) Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) would have the same galvanizing effect on union organizing that the passage of the NLRA had during the 1930s. Some activists were so enthusiastic that they made it seem that EFCA would usher in a new golden age of union organizing. (Some activists said the passage of EFCA might lead to the organizing of 60 million new union members – one-fifth of the 300 million people in the United States!)

These strained analogies ignore the fact that the real world of 2010 is fundamentally different from the world of the 1930s, the New Deal era. The Wagner Act was passed because of the strike wave which preceded its enactment, because of the existence of a planned economy in the Soviet Union which forced the U.S. ruling class to respond with seemingly pro-labor measures, because of the worldwide struggle against fascism which had already begun in the summer of 1935 when Roosevelt signed the NLRA into law. The Employee Free Choice Act cannot possibly be a second Wagner Act because the world is a completely different place than it was in 1935.

At the time of the passage of the NLRA, millions of U.S. workers labored in factories with tens of thousands often toiling together under one roof. There was a split in the ruling class of the United States, with one wing bitterly opposed to unions and supporting fascism at home and abroad. The other wing of capital strongly encouraged unionization at home because its interests lay in fighting the fascist states abroad.

Our situation is virtually the opposite of the 1930s. There is no split in the ruling class, and therefore no reason for any section of the ruling class to strongly encourage massive unionization. The percentage of the working class employed in factories is not rising; it is falling dramatically. (For instance, during World War II, the River Rouge complex of the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan employed 80,000 workers in the complex; in late August 2009, only 6,000 workers were still working there.)

Trade unions served to maintain an ideological link between the working class and the Democratic Party. Their influence grew when they were able to deliver union contracts that improved working conditions and the pay of union members. This is no longer possible. Many workers see no need to pay dues to belong to a union that cannot deliver the goods or to support political candidates of a party that has turned its back on workers' interests.

A law that guarantees trade unions remain viable is not in line with the needs of the ruling class, and consequently EFCA never even received a hearing in Congress.

THE UNIONS AND THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION

Like all the presidential administrations which came before it, the current administration is on a course of protecting and consolidating the ruling class and protecting the rights of corporations. Even when the administration was carrying out what amounted to nationalizing part of the banking, financial, and auto sectors (but not health care, education or housing), the working class articulated part of its demands —“Bail out Main Street, not Wall Street.” Its demands were ignored, as the bailouts benefited the corporations and the wealthy.

The struggle for health-care reform legislation showed the need for new organizational forms. Because of the unions' ties to the Democratic Party and their inability to break from old organizational forms, the union strategy in the fight for health-care reform legislation became one of having each union negotiate for a piece of the reform bill to address the needs of their specific members. (Those members will still face rising premiums and out-of-pocket expenses.) Those unions demanding a single-payer reform of health care are also tied in a thousand different ways to the Democratic Party. While they militantly fought and attempted to unite with the left wing of the Democratic Party, the centers of the Democratic and Republican parties were moving in unison. Both were moving to shed their left and right wings in order to ensure that the corporations received a reform they could profit from.

With continued high unemployment, workers without health care will be forced to either buy -- with some subsidies -- a defective insurance product, or face an 8 percent fine on their income taxes. This was a mandate to keep the insurance companies profitable without providing health care, regardless of whether workers have a job. So, the passage of the health-care reform legislation ended up tying workers even more to their employers for health insurance, at a time when employers are shedding any obligation to pay for or subsidize health care for workers.

TO FREE THE PRESENT FROM THE PAST

With the 2010 election campaign underway, the trade union leadership will try to convince workers that they must support the Democrats, arguing that all the work can't be done in one legislative session. This argument will be increasingly difficult to sell.

The intoxication with all things Obama experienced by some workers is wearing off as their economic situation deteriorates.

One big problem will continue to face all trade unions: The constant and always rapidly advancing application of electronic technology to every aspect of production, service, delivery, distribution, and the transferring of monies will proceed. No industry is being left untouched, from the delivery of government services to the delivery of babies. Where will workers go as the technologies are perfected? Workers without any means of financial support will eventually take matters into their own hands.

We must consider the implications of the fact that the very centerpiece of the modern trade union movement – collective bargaining – is coming to an end.

When the U.S. economy shifted from small manufacturing plants comprised mainly of skilled craft workers to gigantic factories employing tens of thousands of workers, that change threw the union movement and society into turmoil. If that degree of change could upset things so much, how much more profound can we expect the consequences to be of society moving from industrial production to production carried out with almost no human labor at all? And how could this change not shake the trade union movement to its very foundation?

NO RE-STABILIZATION

Since there will be no new social contract and no re-stabilization of the capitalist system, this country is in for a prolonged period of extreme instability. There is a danger that some unions could end up playing the bad role of acting as enforcers of the attacks on the standard of living of those workers who once had stable employment but are now losing everything. These attacks are coming not just from the employers; in the case of nationalized industries like auto, they are coming from the government itself.

If we are to move forward, while honoring the past, we must distinguish carefully between the content of what the working class was attempting to do in a past period and the organizational forms it used.

From the time that the first union was formed in the United States in 1827, the underlying impulse, the content of that brave act was an attempt by workers to defy the capitalist class to secure a better life. For more than a century, the form of the struggle (the fight for trade unions) served to express the content (the fight for survival). Because the fight to legitimize trade unions and the struggle of workers to survive overlapped, the two appeared to be the same.

This misimpression may have been understandable at a time when the entire economy was organized around factory production. However, the reality of the de-industrialization of America demands that we make a distinction between what were always two separate things (even if they often seemed to overlap).

The introduction of electronics has devastated the ranks of the union movement. The current economic crisis has created tens of millions of permanently unemployed workers in the heart of the Rust Belt, many of whom were once union members. In this environment, it would simply not be true to argue that the trade-union struggle and the struggle of the workers for survival are one and the same. The trade-union struggle was the principal form of the struggle of the workers at a specific point in history – the era of the domination of giant industry. It was never the content of that struggle – and that era is now over.

The change in the economic environment has led to a situation where the old form of the working class struggle -- the limited, trade-union struggle as the main form -- is giving way right before our eyes. It is being transcended, and a new content is emerging. This content is expressed through the struggle of those workers without permanent employment, people whose fight for a better life cannot be directed against an individual employer because many of the participants in that fight do not have any regular employment.

In the previous era, the steadily employed industrial workers constituted the leading sector of the working class. Until recently, millions of people had such jobs. They felt that they had a stake in the system. They never thought they would see poverty. Now, millions of such workers are being thrown out of employment. They are in danger of losing everything. After being productive their entire lives, these workers' current status could be summed up with one line from the well-known union song "Solidarity Forever" -- the verse which declares: "Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have made." It is this new grouping of workers that we refer to when we use the term "the dispossessed." These dispossessed workers are now the decisive section of the working class, the section capable of leading the whole working class in the fight for fundamental change. The political center of gravity has shifted.

During the height of industrial production, the unions were one of the main instruments through which the capitalist class distributed the "good life" to the employed workers. (The union movement was not the only vehicle for this, but it was often the main vehicle.) Today, the end of industrialization has destroyed the material foundation for "the American way of life" and the "insider politics" that went with it. But this very destruction also creates something. It opens the possibility for something new to emerge -- class politics and an organizational expression of class politics.

The working class --if it is to realize its demands for the basics of life --must become independent from the political parties of the ruling class. Only through the formation of a workers' party independent from the ruling class will workers have a chance to win their immediate demands. The fight for such a party will draw in some workers still inside the unions, other workers who have recently been cast out of the unions, and many workers who have never been in a union. The unions will continue to have an influence in society which far exceeds their size.

The fight to develop a workers' party will be a rallying point for the dispossessed in its fight for ways to expose and temporarily alleviate the suffering and privation it is experiencing. The creation of such a party would mark a significant step in the development of the consciousness of the dispossessed. As such, it would be a step toward the permanent, long-term solution to the problem of economic misery -- the creation of a society where the economy is organized along the lines of "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs."

It's impossible to say how long it will take to create a workers' party. What's certain is that nothing can stop the objective polarization of society. The profound changes wrought by the electronic revolution have made our era unique. The visionary parts of the song "Solidarity Forever," once ahead of their time, now ring true. In 1915, when a member of the Industrial Workers of the World wrote "Solidarity Forever," the capitalist system still had room to expand. That is no longer the case. Despite the terrible destruction we see all around us, we finally can "break the haughty power" of the tiny class of exploiters who "have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn." It will require an outlook profoundly different from that of militant trade unionism, but we can succeed. We can defeat the system which has embroiled our country in two brutal wars and is devastating the environment. Finally, at long last, we really can "bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old."

Notes: This paper was written by Sheilah Garland-Olaniran and Chris Mahin. It was the product of discussions with revolutionaries both inside and outside of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America. It is meant to open a dialogue, not to end one. For that reason, we welcome comments. (Donations welcomed to help cover the cost of publishing and distribution of the paper in pamphlet form.) For more information about the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, contact www.Irna.org. To comment on the paper, write to chris_mahin@yahoo.com or sgolaniran@hotmail.com.