

# Unionism and Mass Action

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From "Revolutionary Socialism"

THE working class, as every revolutionary class, passes through a process of material and ideological development, in which its purposes and tactics, determined by the prevailing historical conditions, are transformed and adapted to new circumstances as they arise. This development, roughly, consists of three phases:

1. Isolated economic action, through craft unions and sporadic strikes, with a gradual development of the idea of independent political action as a revolutionary means of struggle.

2. Political action, in its parliamentary sense, dominant in the proletarian class movement, becomes conservative and incompatible with the development of the proletariat, does not adapt itself to this development; and revolutionary movements arise, industrial in character, that repudiate all politics.

3. The third phase, the phase into which we are now emerging, adjusts itself to new circumstances and the increasing development of the proletariat, recognizing industrial and political action as synthetic factors in the general mass action of the proletariat, as phases of the dynamic struggles of the new social-revolutionary era.

The proletariat steps upon the stage of history as a revolutionary class. It was the still immature class of workers that saved the French Revolution, that established a bourgeois revolution in spite of the cowardly hesitancy and compromise of the bourgeoisie. In all subsequent revolutions in France—and France is the classical exemplar of this period in the development of the proletariat—the workers were a dynamic factor; they made the revolution, but they could not retain control because of the immaturity of their class development. The great struggle of the Paris Commune was the final heroic act of this period, and at the same time a projection of what was to come. In the historical sense, these revolts were not revolution but insurrections, revival of the action of the bourgeois revolution and dominated largely by its ideology. With the downfall of the Commune and the collapse of the social-revolutionary First International, the workers enter upon a new period, the period of systematic, peaceful organization and struggle, along national and moderate lines, and not international and revolutionary. The value of these early revolts lay in impressing the workers with a sense of their own class immaturity and driving out of their consciousness the surviving ideology of the bourgeois revolution.

The workers, when they organize against Capitalism, organize into unions to carry on a struggle for more wages and better conditions of work generally. Largely because their skill is still an important factor (and these early movements are dominantly movements of skilled labor), the workers win certain concessions. But because they are skilled workers, and equally because Capitalism has not yet integrated industry and the proletariat, these movements do not assume revolutionary proportions, nor do they actually conquer material concessions. The economic action is isolated; there is no general contact of the working class with the capitalist class, and the conception of a more general class struggle arises, developing into politics and parliamentary activity. Through the action of politics, the workers oppose a general struggle to Capitalism, a struggle that

cannot develop out of isolated economic action. At this period the concept of the workers engaging in independent class politics is revolutionary, as it develops the consciousness of class and establishes class contact with the ruling class.

Socialism, with its program of class politics, offers the workers a class conception and class activity that are historically revolutionary. This development marks an epoch in the proletarian movement. It arouses, ideologically and potentially at least, the workers' consciousness of class; and without this consciousness of class the proletariat is doomed either to futile insurrection or being an instrument for the promotion of rival bourgeois interests.

Accordingly, Socialism develops along the lines of politics, in the parliamentary sense. But a means of action may be revolutionary or conservative according to historical conditions and requirements. At one period, a particular means may be revolutionary; at another, considering new conditions which require new or supplementary means of action, it may become conservative, even reactionary. This is precisely what happens to Socialism in its parliamentary phase, which is its dominant phase. Where previously Socialism developed the consciousness of class and potential revolution in the proletariat, within the limits of its maturity, it now becomes a force that hampers this development.

Socialism in its early activity as a general organized movement was compelled to emphasize the action of politics because of the immaturity of the proletariat. The workers are scattered, and their struggles are largely directed against the individual employer; large scale industry has not developed sufficiently to make large masses of workers engage in a general industrial class struggle against Capitalism and the state. The workers, subjectively and objectively, find it difficult to establish general class contact with each other industrially; it could be, and it was, done through political contact of isolated workers. Socialism, the dominant parliamentary Socialism, sees in the unions simply a transitory phase which may be necessary under given conditions, but which are unimportant in comparison with politics, as is mass action and extra-parliamentary action generally. The unions are conceived as conservative instruments, as organizations that in fact retard the revolutionary development of the workers,—which is true, in the period under consideration, but not as an ultimate proposition. Socialism makes a fetish of politics: parliamentarism is emphasized as the instrument with which the proletariat may emancipate itself. But that happens which differs from the earlier Socialist politics; under the impulse of the national bias, social-reformism and an opportunism that refuses to adapt itself to new requirements, the parliamentary, as well as the general, activity of Socialism becomes conservative, hesitant, compromising. The dominant Socialism becomes a fetter upon the emancipation of the proletariat.

This result does not arise out of any one fact, but of a series of facts, previously considered; the central fact is that Socialism did not adjust itself to the development of the proletariat, nor to the social-revolutionary era objectively introduced by Imperialism and the

war; and this failure to adjust purposes and tactics to the new proletarian and social conditions conservatizes Socialism, turns it into a reactionary force,—temporarily, to be sure, but still reactionary.

The concentration of industry and technological development generally have during the past twenty years revolutionized the material existence of the proletariat. On the one hand has been produced the typical proletarian of average unskilled labor; on the other, the integration of industry in mammoth proportions has developed the conditions for general class action of the workers through industrial means directed against the capitalist, not as an individual but as a class, and against the whole bourgeois regime and its state. The proletariat has been centralized into large industrial groupings, and its revolts and action constitute a general action against Capitalism, the tremors of which are felt throughout the whole industrial and social system. This development, coincident, it must be emphasized, with the rise of Imperialism, arouses discontent and revolts in the craft unions, which are unable to cope with the new developments, and in which the unskilled become a more and more influential factor. But even more significant are the great strikes involving large masses of unorganized unskilled workers, strikes that shake the very fabric of capitalist society, and the influence of which stimulate revolutionary currents within the Socialist organizations. Instead of recognizing the revolutionary vitality of these new developments, the dominant Socialism tries to compress and stultify them within the limits of the old tactics, tries to maintain the ascendancy of a Socialism expressing the non-revolutionary elements of skilled labor and the petty bourgeoisie. In its struggles against Capitalism and the dominant Socialism the unskilled industrial proletariat turns to mass action, a mass action that emphasizes the futility and reactionary character of pure and simple parliamentarism.

The reactionary character of the dominant Socialism is expressed not simply in the failure to accept the new developments, but in the fact that it has frequently condemned and opposed manifestations of the new proletarian action, occasionally even actively betrayed the unskilled proletariat while it was in the midst of gigantic struggles against Capitalism.

The dominant Socialism maintains its influence because of prestige, the conservatism of organization, and the insufficiently developed consciousness of the unskilled proletariat; but it is gradually undermined by industrial development and its new requirements. The industrial proletariat is "organized by the very mechanism of capitalist production itself;" industry becomes co-ordinated, integrated, and the strikes of the industrial workers assume revolutionary significance, antagonizing the dominant craft unions and parliamentary Socialism, and striking directly at Capitalism through the industrial source of capitalist supremacy. While antagonisms between the *bloc* of skilled labor and the *petite bourgeoisie* as against the capitalist class are softened, the antagonisms between the industrial proletariat and Capitalism are sharpened. Industrial struggles become more and more general, larger in scope and intensity; a new epoch of class war emerges, relentless in spirit and aggressive in purpose,—a class war having as its driving