

Chapter 5: Abandoning the Struggle for Socialist Consciousness in the Working Class

In *Objectivism or Marxism* we raised the WSWS record on the NYC transit strike of December 2005 as a prime example of the party's abstentionism with regard to the working class.

The proletariat as the revolutionary subject of history is always the blind spot of objectivism. Of course the working class is routinely invoked on the WSWS in the same ritualistic way most articles call for building the party. But the struggle *to build a bridge to socialist consciousness* – the crux of *What is to be done?* and the *Transitional Program* – plays virtually no role in the life of the movement.

Nowhere has the IC's retreat into journalism been more evident than in its abandonment of interventions in the everyday struggles of the working class. It was in this context that we brought up the issue of the transit strike. We pointed out:

It has been well over a decade since the party made the assessment that there was no longer any potential left for the trade unions to play a progressive role, and yet in all that time nothing has been done to propose any alternatives to the working class. Nor has anything been done to work through the implications of the degeneration of the unions with the millions of workers still left within these organizations, since apart from journalism any work inside the unions seems to have long since been abandoned. For years it was impossible even to find a program of demands on the WSWS, and to this day there is still no concise statement of 'Where We Stand' for a worker to read.

North cites this passage but addresses none of the concerns we raised. Instead, he sets up a straw man, making us out to be syndicalists. He claims that "one can reasonably infer" from the passage just cited that our position is that the unions still can play a progressive role and he then characterizes our criticism of the IC's abstentionism as being "a veiled attack on the party's assessment of the reactionary role of the trade unions." (38) In fact there is nothing reasonable about such an inference, and for the record we made it explicitly clear in Steiner's document that we were in agreement with the party's analysis of the qualitative degeneration of the unions.¹ But Steiner also made the point that what should have followed from such an analysis "was a practice aimed at founding new organizations of working class struggle," and while there had been some initiatives in that direction in the early 90s (e.g. the campaign around the Mack Avenue fire in Detroit), by the end of that decade all such interventions in the working class had ceased. Steiner concluded that "the upshot of the discussion on the trade unions was that any form of active intervention in working class organizations was abandoned."

¹ Here is the relevant quote from Steiner's document: "About a decade ago, the International Committee concluded after long discussions and reflections on the experiences of the working class, that the trade unions were no longer capable of playing a progressive role, even to the very limited degree that was achieved in the 1930's. I think this judgment was essentially correct."

This is the real issue: the IC has abandoned its revolutionary responsibilities to the working class – *responsibilities that were clearly evident from its own analysis.*² The degeneration of the unions requires new defense organizations of the working class. At the same time, there are millions of workers remaining within the unions who need guidance and leadership in their everyday struggles – leadership that can link those struggles with the broader fight for the political independence of the working class. Obviously it isn't a matter of the party simply willing new defense organizations into existence, but even a small party can have a significant impact on class consciousness through creative initiatives that concretely demonstrate to workers how they can defend their rights, while contrasting such initiatives with the abject prostration of the unions. Within the unions, such work can take the form of ad hoc committees operating outside official union channels, bringing together rank-and-file workers who are opposed to the bureaucracy. The internet can play an important role, either via the WSWS or other websites designed to provide a forum for workers to raise issues, air their views and link up with other workers. Such work would provide the best possible context for the party to hammer home the need for the political independence of the working class, for socialist policies, for a class offensive as the only way to defend jobs, living standards and basic rights.

We said that all of this was evident from the party's own analysis of the unions, but that needs to be qualified: it was evident *assuming that the party still adhered to the standpoint embodied in The Transitional Program*, i.e. the standpoint of building a bridge to socialist consciousness by engaging in the everyday struggles of the working class. But that assumption hasn't been valid for many years now. In fact the IC leadership eventually came to use its analysis of the degeneration of the unions as a rationalization for turning its back on the working class. And the result is an unprecedented estrangement of the party from what should be its class base. ***Never before has the Trotskyist movement had so little to do with the life of the working class than it does today.*** There is no justification for this. North's arguments, which we will get to shortly, are a lot of bombast and evasion: he simply equates any demand for engaging in the struggles of the working class with support for the union bureaucracy. Those party members who haven't chosen to forget the history of Trotskyism know that there is something deeply amiss here.

As we noted in *Objectivism or Marxism*, the SEP is a party that “conducts no sustained activity in the working class, no work in the unions, no ongoing campaigns of its own, no attempts to rally or lead workers in struggles over important social or economic issues.” Nowhere on the WSWS can a worker find a clear statement of ‘What We Stand For’, and it is evident that reading the WSWS (or perhaps occasionally writing for it) is the only meaningful ‘activity’ entailed in supporting the SEP. We also pointed out that the WSWS makes no appeals to workers for money, which is indicative of how remote the party is from the working class:

² That analysis is presented at length in the Workers League perspectives resolution of Sept. 1993, *The Globalization of Capitalist Production and the International Tasks of the Working Class*. We will examine this document later in this section.

There was a long tradition in the Trotskyist movement of a ‘Fighting Fund’ that was linked directly to the role of the party and its press as a tribune of the working class: workers gave money because they could see that this was a movement that was fighting for their rights. These funds may not have always been enough on their own to keep the party going but there was an important *political* significance to the fact that at least some of the money that was sustaining the movement was coming from workers’ donations. The disappearance of any fundraising in the working class is really the disappearance of any living relationship of the party to the working class.

In the life of such a movement, workers are increasingly an *alien presence*. Should a worker happen to wander into a public meeting of the party or write the WSWS for advice, s/he is usually subjected to long lectures about the union bureaucracy but given no guidance at all about how to conduct their struggles. A typical example is an Ohio auto worker who wrote in a letter which he titled “Hung out to dry” and addressed to “Anyone that can help.”³ He describes the criminal role of the UAW inside his plant in collaborating with management in assaulting the workers and ends his e-mail with a plea in capital letters: “WHERE CAN WE GO FOR HELP?”

In response, the WSWS serves up 1500 words on the history of the labor bureaucracy, its degeneration and corruption, but there is nothing in the way of guidance or programmatic demands relevant to this worker’s immediate struggle. In passing the WSWS writer (Jerry White) acknowledges: “The building of new organizations to defend workers is an urgent necessity,” but this turns out to be empty rhetoric since in the next sentence this “urgent necessity” has been dropped and the worker is told that he needs to “make a serious examination of the historical experiences of the working class.” Next come some paragraphs about the need to break with the Democrats and build a “new political party” on a socialist program. Is this the SEP or some other kind of formation? Should the worker set up an SEP branch in his factory? And if he does that, what would this branch do to fight the attacks of management and the sabotage of the UAW? It’s all a mystery.

It is only in the last paragraph that the worker’s plea for help is finally acknowledged, but the only advice he is offered is “to study our history and program and consider seriously joining the fight to build our party as the mass political movement of the working class” – in other words, read the WSWS and if you are interested, send us an application form and we’ll get back to you in due course ... or whenever. Was there any follow-up done with this worker? Did the WSWS do an expose on his factory and the role of the UAW in it? There isn’t any evidence in the WSWS archive that anything of the sort happened. The sad truth is that at the end of his encounter with the revolutionary movement, this worker had yet again been “hung out to dry.”

Would that this were some isolated exception, but it is very much the norm when it comes to how the party relates to workers.⁴ The real message here (though of course it is

³ “An exchange with an Ohio auto worker”, July 19, 2005, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/auto-j19.shtml>

⁴ Here are two other exchanges with workers that also could have been used to illustrate this point: “Letter from a US airline worker and a reply”, Apr. 28, 2005

never stated explicitly) is that this worker's concerns are of little consequence. Nor is there any sense that what is going on here is a dialogue in which the party might potentially learn something from this worker. Such 'exchanges' are nothing more than monologues in which the party lectures *at* the worker, and the inevitable – and accurate – impression is one of a petty bourgeois pontificating to the working class. This is a *travesty* of the fight to overcome spontaneous consciousness and bring socialist consciousness to the working class. That fight has always involved Marxists working to *mobilize workers in defense of their rights* in opposition to the bureaucrats. What need is there for a Transitional Program if all that the fight for socialist consciousness entails is serving up lectures to workers?

This is how North responds to such criticism:

In a manner that reeks of the most vulgar pragmatism, you complain that a worker who writes into the WSWS asking for advice is typically given a lecture on the history of the labor bureaucracy but no indication whatever on how to conduct the struggle he is involved in. But tell us, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, how is it possible for a worker to know how he should conduct a struggle in which he is immediately engaged without understanding the historical role of the trade unions?
(38-9)

If insisting that Marxists have to engage in the everyday struggles of the working class is “vulgar pragmatism,” then Trotsky and Cannon were vulgar pragmatists. As for North's rhetorical question, it reveals a one-sided and mechanical conception of how class consciousness develops. How is a worker to gain an understanding of the historical role of the unions? Presumably this will come from reading the WSWS or attending a party lecture. But what about the workers who don't agree or are confused or who don't see the need for lectures and articles in the first place – which is to say, the overwhelming majority of the working class? What does North have to propose to them? Nothing – except more articles and lectures.

This sterile propagandism is completely alien to the traditions of Trotskyism. It ignores the basic truth that workers learn from their struggles far more than they can ever learn from lectures, and that only by engaging in those struggles and providing an alternative leadership to the bureaucracy can Marxists ever hope to gain the trust of workers and win them to the cause of socialism. Of course this is not an argument against lectures on the history of the unions and the betrayals of the bureaucracy, all of which can play an important part in educating workers. But what is sterile propagandism is to restrict the fight for class consciousness *only* to such lectures. You cannot build a bridge to socialist consciousness without fighting to mobilize workers in defense of their rights. Every veteran party member, every member literate in the history of Trotskyism, knows this is true, and therefore knows that the party's abstentionism amounts to an abandonment of the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class.

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/apr2005/airl-a28.shtml> and “An exchange of letters on the crisis in the AFL-CIO”, July 27, 2005 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/aflc-j27.shtml>. One might add here that, on the basis of personal observation, these exchanges are representative of how workers are dealt with at SEP public meetings.

The New York City Transit Strike

North's reply to us on the NYC transit strike is a defense of this sterile propagandism and the abstentionism that goes along with it. He begins by taking us to task for "lavish[ing]" attention on the strike (41) in contrast to other political issues,⁵ but this is an evasion. Our concern isn't with the transit strike as such but with the party's record in that strike and what that record shows about the party's relationship to the working class. It is that relationship which is our primary concern, and we make no apologies for making that a central focus of our critique of the IC. Furthermore, if we needed any other justification for raising this issue, the WSWS editorial board provided it when it issued a statement (Dec. 21, 2005) with a headline that, as we noted earlier, declared the transit strike to be "A new stage in the class struggle".⁶ That extraordinary designation merited "lavish" attention.

In light of that, it was entirely appropriate to examine the WSWS record to see what marked this "new stage" and how the party proposed to change its practice to meet this transformed political situation. And what came to light in the examination we did in *Objectivism or Marxism* was that this pronouncement was nothing more than journalistic rhetoric, and that literally within weeks of making it, the WSWS editorial board had forgotten all about its "new stage of the class struggle" and indeed about the transit workers altogether. But from the standpoint of our critique, that made this strike even more important – because it demonstrated *the completely unserious and purely journalistic character* of the party's orientation to the working class. It demonstrated, in other words, one of the central points of our critique, i.e. that the 'Marxism' of the International Committee is missing its heart – the proletariat.

When it comes to specifics, North begins by distorting the crux of our criticism. He claims that we gave "readers the impression that the SEP was taken unawares by developments, and only managed to issue a statement on the very eve of the strike" (41-2). Not true. What we actually said was: "Though there was a long buildup to this strike and though this was a union where the party had a long history, there were no demands raised until the day before the strike began." Our point wasn't about coverage of the strike but about *the lack of demands* in that coverage. Of course the WSWS wrote statements and articles about the strike, but the essential issue here is whether those articles were part of an intervention in this important struggle or whether they were a *journalistic substitute* for such an intervention, and that is precisely why we looked at the WSWS articles in terms of the programmatic demands they raised – or rather didn't raise. (As for the SEP being "taken unawares" by the strike, this too is a distortion. It would have been absurd to claim that anyone in New York was surprised by the strike, since it was front-page news for weeks before it began. We did criticize the WSWS for being "taken unawares", but not about the strike itself but rather its aftermath, specifically the

⁵ North derides us for having a "provincial outlook" (41) because Alex Steiner is from New York and so presumably this is why we paid so much attention to the strike. In fact, this part of the document was written by Frank Brenner, who is neither a New Yorker nor an American.

⁶ "The New York transit strike: A new stage in the class struggle", WSWS, Dec. 21, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/tran-d21.shtml>

transit workers' rejection of the tentative contract – and there the criticism is entirely valid, as we will see later.)

Our analysis said that the first time the WSWS raised demands on transit was on Dec. 19, 2005, a day before the strike began. North quotes at length from a Dec. 10, 2005 article which he claims constitutes “a clear political-programmatic statement” (43), but a reading of the passages he cites proves just the opposite. They contain no programmatic demands and no guidance to transit workers on how to conduct their struggle, which is what we contended. And though the article talks about the need for “a political struggle”, it does so in an utterly routine manner, using the ritualized phrases that are thrown in at the end of countless WSWS articles. Thus, it calls for “a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political party of the working class,” but it says nothing about how the building of this party will take place, and it doesn't even bother to mention the name of the SEP!⁷ A transit worker could easily be excused for thinking this statement had something to do with the Green Party or Ralph Nader, or perhaps it was proposing that the TWU workers should themselves establish as a political party and then ... do what exactly? It was all a muddle because it was never intended to provide any meaningful guidance to transit workers; it was just an exercise in sterile propagandism, much like the reply to the Ohio auto worker.

North cites other articles the WSWS ran prior to the transit strike, but he can't produce any which raised demands for the strike because there were none, not until Dec. 19. It was only then that the WSWS finally raised its first demand – for independent strike committees.⁸ The unserious nature of this demand, however, was evident from the fact that it was raised literally a day before the strike was set to begin, as if such strike committees could suddenly materialize without any preparation. Moreover, the article gave no indication as to how these committees should be set up, how they should function and above all what they should fight for. It was simply journalistic rhetoric tossed in at the end of an article to give it a more militant-sounding tone. And almost as if to underscore its purely rhetorical character, the demand was tossed out two days later in an editorial board statement issued during the strike itself. After all, who needs strike committees in the middle of a strike?

A summary of the vagaries of the WSWS 'program' for the transit strike is in order here. On day one of the strike (Dec. 20), the WSWS added a demand for mass demonstrations and preparations for a general strike.⁹ Again, as with the strike committees, this was simply tossed in at the end of an article: there was no indication how this would come about and no attempt to provide a focal point like repeal of the Taylor Law around which to mobilize support for such an action. On day two of the strike (Dec. 21), both demands

⁷ “Transit dispute exposes New York City's class divide”, WSWS, Dec. 10, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/twu-d10.shtml>

⁸ “New York City transit workers on brink of class confrontation”, WSWS, Dec. 19, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/tran-d19.shtml>

⁹ “New York City transit workers defy threats and strike”, WSWS, Dec. 20, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/tran-d20.shtml>

were gone: while proclaiming “A new stage in the class struggle”, the only proposals the editorial board could make to the transit workers were the pro forma ones of reading the WSWS and joining the party (though even in that regard there wasn’t an attempt to organize a meeting).¹⁰ On the final day of the strike (Dec. 22), the demand for strike committees was back along with a call for “solidarity actions” but no longer any mention of a general strike.¹¹ Based on this record, we drew the following conclusions in *Objectivism or Marxism*:

Put this all together and the unmistakable impression is of a party that doesn’t take its own demands seriously. How can you call for a general strike one day and drop it the next, or call for strike committees without any program or conception of how to organize them? It is obvious these demands were never intended to be anything more than journalistic phrases, militant-sounding rhetoric to fill out an article. How can anyone imagine a transit worker being attracted to such a vacuous and incoherent policy? How can anyone imagine this stimulating the political consciousness of workers or providing the least challenge to the bureaucracy?

This record constitutes an ‘inconvenient truth’ for North, which he does his best to ignore. Time and again he cites the fact that there was coverage of the strike in the WSWS (even at one point providing a tally of all the articles that were run), as if this were the issue and not the question of what program the WSWS was (or rather wasn’t) advancing. On one of the few occasions when he confronts our criticism, he declares:

One can only assume from this criticism that you did not agree with the emphasis placed by the *WSWS* on the need for transit workers to conduct a political fight – which was the only way that support could be rallied among masses of New York workers, for whom the strike created additional daily hardships. (45)

This is an obvious evasion. Because we criticize the egregiously unserious and inconsistent way in which the demands for strike committees and a general strike were raised, why should this mean that we are opposed to transit workers conducting a political fight? Moreover, it is evident that the term “political fight” in these remarks is more empty rhetoric. It implies that programmatic demands like strike committees and general strikes are somehow counterposed to a “political fight”, whereas just the opposite is the case. Strike committees of rank-and-file workers conducting an illegal strike, a general strike in support of those workers and opposed to the whole apparatus of anti-labor legislation – these are precisely the forms in which workers *enter into political struggle*. It is on the ground of such a fight that a break with the Democrats can become a living reality for millions of workers instead of the tired piece of propaganda that it is for North.

In effect, North has reproduced the non-dialectical dichotomies of classical Social Democracy: we have immediate demands on the one hand and the “political fight” on the other. The Social Democrats focused all their attention on the immediate demands and

¹⁰ “The New York transit strike: A new stage in the class struggle”, WSWS, Dec. 21, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/tran-d21.shtml>

¹¹ “New York transit strikers confront escalating attacks”, WSWS, Dec. 22, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/newy-d22.shtml>

only bothered about the fight for socialism in ceremonial speeches. By contrast, for North immediate demands and the everyday struggles of workers count for very little. Thus, in responding to our criticism about the way the WSWP raised the demand for strike committees, he writes:

No, we did not attempt to write a manual on how to form strike committees. To the extent that workers understood the need for an alternative to the TWU Local 100 leadership and its policies, they would be more than capable of working out the details of creating and running rank-and-file strike committees. But we most certainly did explain what such committees should fight for: the statement outlined the political strategy upon which the fate of the strike depended. (44-5)

This disparaging of the organizing of strikes committees reveals North's estrangement from the life of the working class. North knows perfectly well that the organizational initiative to establish the CIO unions in the Thirties came from socialists and radicals, including Trotskyists (a point we will come back to shortly). Why should it be any different today when it comes to breaking with the putrid hulk of the unions and establishing new mass organizations of the working class? If anything, the level of spontaneous consciousness now is lower than it was in the Thirties, since virtually every trace of socialist culture within the working class has long since disappeared. We are now four generations removed from the CIO struggles and it has been more than three decades since the last major upsurge of the labor movement in the US. Without downplaying the creativity of the masses, there is simply no source of experience or knowledge that they can draw on when it comes to the value and functioning of strike committees. This is where Marxists, with their understanding of the history of the labor movement, can play a pivotal role.

Of course strike committees on their own are not yet an expression of socialist consciousness, but can anyone doubt that had such committees emerged and taken over control of the transit strike, that this would have had an enormous impact on the consciousness of the working class as a whole? It would have signified a major breakthrough against the union bureaucracy, showing workers how they could rely on their own instruments of struggle instead of those imposed on them by the bureaucrats and the bourgeois state apparatus. And such committees would quickly have become a forum for thrashing out competing political positions, thereby creating the best possible conditions for Marxists to fight for a break from the Democrats and to establish an evident and meaningful connection between the strike struggle and the fight against social inequality and the profit system. There is all the difference in the world between delivering a lecture *at* workers and having a Trotskyist member of a transit workers' strike committee drawing political conclusions from the experience of the strike. It is the difference between propagandism and the revolutionary Marxism embodied in *The Transitional Program*.

American Trotskyism and Strike Committees: the Minneapolis Teamster Strikes

Cannon needs to be brought into this discussion to underscore how completely out of line with the history of Trotskyism North's attitude to strike committees is. In his account of one of the great episodes of American Trotskyism, the Minneapolis Teamster strikes of 1934, Cannon stresses the importance of the political understanding of the core group of Trotskyists in the Teamsters union, but the way this political understanding manifested itself was precisely in the organization of the strike:

Proceeding from these general concepts [i.e. of the class struggle], the Minneapolis Trotskyists, in the course of organizing the workers, planned a battle strategy. Something unique was seen in Minneapolis for the first time. That is, a strike that was thoroughly organized beforehand, a strike prepared with the meticulous detail which they used to attribute to the German army—down to the last button sewn on the uniform of the last individual soldier.¹²

Cannon picks up this theme again later in the chapter when he lists what he considers the five important contributions that Trotskyism made to the victory of the strike. Contribution Number One was organization:

Trotskyism made a number of specific contributions to this strike which made all the difference between the Minneapolis strike and a hundred others of the period, some of which involved more workers in more socially important localities and industries. *Trotskyism made the contribution of organization and preparations down to the last detail. That is something new, that is something specifically Trotskyist* (emphasis added).¹³

Clearly Cannon was a big believer in strike committee 'manuals'. The other contributions, incidentally, were a class line of militancy, no trust in government mediators, a general strategy of fighting rather than compromising and "the fifth and crowning contribution that Trotskyism made to the Minneapolis strike was the publication of the daily strike newspaper, the *Daily Organizer*."¹⁴ Of course this newspaper was issued by the strike committee rather than the party, but Cannon's pride is entirely justified: it was a bold innovation that had a big impact on the political consciousness of the Minneapolis workers.

By North's standards, though, one would have to say that all of this "reeks of the most vulgar pragmatism." But Cannon and his comrades were convinced that they were making a powerful contribution to the American working class and to the cause of socialism – and it has always been the judgment of the Trotskyist movement that they were absolutely right in that conviction. Cannon movingly recounts how the party center in New York, which was virtually penniless at the time (this was the depths of the Great

¹² James P. Cannon, "The History of American Trotskyism", p. 148.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1944/ht03.htm>

¹³ *ibid*, p. 156,

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 156-8.

Depression), somehow scrounged together the then-exorbitant price of a plane ticket to get Cannon to Minneapolis immediately so that he could work on a daily basis with the Minneapolis comrades, providing them with political and organizational guidance in their struggle. In other words, Cannon (and no doubt Trotsky as well) felt that the place for a Marxist leader to be in this situation was running strike committees.

This is the real tradition of Trotskyism – where the fight to mobilize the working class in defense of its rights is at the center of the political life of the revolutionary movement. Unlike North, Cannon did not see any distinction between organizing this strike and conducting a “political fight.” The Trotskyists were able to raise the great political issues of the day – above all the treachery of the Democratic ‘friends of labor’ – in the context of the strike itself. And their position was powerfully confirmed when the Farmer-Labor Governor of Minnesota, Floyd Olson, who was supposedly even more of a ‘friend of labor’ than Roosevelt, ended up declaring martial law and having the organizing committee arrested. This is the sort of lesson as to who your real friends are that thousands of workers could readily understand, and it powerfully enhanced the political authority of the Trotskyists and brought an important new layer of working class militants into the party.¹⁵ This is what building bridges to socialist consciousness is all about: it happens by Marxists fighting for leadership in the mass movement of the working class and by demonstrating *through the struggle* that the defense of jobs and basic rights can only happen through a revolutionary offensive against capitalism.

Needless to say, it isn’t always possible for revolutionaries to intervene in a strike the way that Cannon and his comrades were able to do in Minneapolis. In the case of the transit strike, the SEP didn’t have a cadre of members inside the union that could carry out such an intervention. But how is the SEP ever going to win such a cadre? This will never happen without involvement in the everyday struggles of workers around issues like organizing strike committees and agitation around a coherent set of transitional demands – in this case, a socialist program for public transit. Propagandists assume that you win the ‘advanced worker’ through lectures and articles, but the sterility of this conception is betrayed by its circular logic: the worker listens to the lecture because he is ‘advanced’ and what makes him ‘advanced’ is that that he listens to the lecture. In reality, the most militant and determined workers are interested above all in knowing *how to win their struggles*. And the key to that is to show these workers how they can win the support of the *less advanced workers* – i.e. the bulk of the working class – and how they can break the hegemony of the union bureaucracy. That is why the party’s intervention

¹⁵ Some of Cannon’s articles for *The Organizer* are reprinted in *Notebook of an Agitator* (1958). These include a send-up of the ruling class claims about ‘outside agitators’ (“Spilling the Dirt – a Bughouse Fable”), that manages to combine broad humor with serious content, ending with a fictional Trotsky warning his comrades to keep an eye on Olson: “He’s liable to double cross you any minute” (p. 86, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1934/mpls04.htm>). In another article, “The Secret of Local 574”, Cannon talks about the key “idea” behind the strike’s organization: “Local 574 doesn’t take stock in the theory that capital and labor are brothers, and that the way for little brother to get a few crumbs is to be a good boy and appeal to the good nature of big brother capital. We see the issue between capital and labor as an unceasing struggle between the class of exploited workers and the class of exploiting parasites. It is a war. What decides in this war, as in all others, is power. The exploiters are organized to grind us down into the dust. We must organize our class to fight back” (p. 91, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1934/mpls07.htm>).

has to be oriented to mobilizing workers in defense of their rights: only then will the best elements take us seriously.

The Plain Truth Behind Big Claims

But for North these sorts of concerns are beside the point. In his view there was nothing troubling about the WSWS record in this strike. He declares:

The WSWS was not able single-handedly to overcome the sabotage of the bureaucracy. However, it contributed significantly toward raising the class consciousness of the workers, and laying the foundations for future victories. (48)

These are big claims: the image this conjures up is of a major struggle against the labor bureaucracy which, alas, fell short this time but which paves the way for “future victories.” But how does North know this? What evidence does he have that the WSWS raised the class consciousness of these workers? Were any transit workers recruited to the party? Were there any party meetings held where transit workers attended? Was the WSWS swamped by letters from transit workers – or if not swamped, were there at least some? North doesn’t produce a single fact to back up these claims. The only facts he cites are statistics on the number of WSWS articles on the strike: there were 14 articles, of which 8 were distributed as leaflets (47). It’s almost as if North has a magical belief in the power of numbers: produce enough articles, distribute enough leaflets – and it is as if this *in and of itself* will transform the political consciousness of workers.

But there is a fact which reveals a very different picture – of a party utterly remote from the concerns of the transit workers. After the strike was over, the WSWS ran a couple of articles and then dropped the story for nearly a month: there was nothing on transit from Dec. 30, 2005 to Jan. 22, 2006. As it turned out, this was a period of seething anger among the transit workers, which produced a vote on Jan. 20, 2006 to reject the proposed contract. The WSWS report on Jan. 23 noted that the rejection “took the business and political establishment by surprise,” but it clearly also took the SEP by surprise, because otherwise there is no way to explain the lack of coverage on transit in the critical weeks prior to this vote.¹⁶ If the SEP had had anything close to the kind of impact that North claims, the party would have had at least some inkling of the discontent among the transit workers, since presumably those workers whose consciousness had been raised by the WSWS coverage would have turned to it for guidance. But it is obvious that the SEP had no idea what was going on among the transit workers – and that only makes sense if its ‘intervention’ during the strike made virtually no impact.

And it is also obvious that the SEP’s own concern for the plight of these workers didn’t extend much beyond a journalistic interest. In the last article the WSWS ran before the vote, i.e. on Dec. 29, 2005, it correctly attacked the tentative agreement as “a setback” that would “only strengthen the hand of management in exacting greater concessions

¹⁶ “New York City transit workers reject contract”, WSWS, Jan. 23, 2006:
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/jan2006/tran-j23.shtml>

from the workforce, while setting the stage for even deeper attacks against other sections of the working class.”¹⁷ Even without any contact with the TWU ranks, it would have made sense to try and mount a campaign, at least via the WSWs, to demand rejection of this contract. Trotsky says somewhere that revolutionaries should be the first on the field of battle and the last to leave it; our interest in a struggle like this, especially one that supposedly marks “a new stage in the class struggle,” is to test the limits of whatever potential there is for the growth of political consciousness. And as it turned out, there was indeed considerable potential: such a campaign could have opened up important new opportunities to get a hearing from transit workers. But though the Dec. 29 article did call for the contract to be voted down, that was the last time the WSWs was heard from until the actual vote three weeks later. In other words, as soon as the transit story disappeared from the mass media headlines, it disappeared from the WSWs as well.¹⁸

There is nothing worse than a revolutionary leader who tries to obscure problems with empty rhetoric and wishful thinking. North’s assessment of the party’s intervention in this strike is nothing more than a cover-up for a dismal record. The plain truth is that the party posed no challenge to the bureaucracy, it had zero impact on the consciousness of the workers and as for “laying the foundation for future victories,” this would be laughable if the issues involved weren’t so serious. But one thing is clear from North’s remarks: he is determined not to learn a single lesson from this experience. One can only assume that the next time “a new stage in the class struggle” comes along, he will do things exactly the same way – and with exactly the same results.

A Cynical Sneer and a Riposte from Cannon

At the end of his remarks on the transit strike, North tries to turn the tables on us by mockingly demanding “a detailed account of Comrade Steiner’s practical contributions to the struggle,” adding that “it is rather noticeable that you fail to tell us what your activities consisted of during the strike” (48). This is a ploy – and a pathetically obvious one – for deflecting criticism away from the party’s record. Alex Steiner isn’t the leader of a revolutionary movement: his activities as an individual have no relevance to this discussion. (For the record, Steiner did join a picket line at the Jackie Gleason bus barn in Brooklyn on the first day of the strike and he also reposted several articles from the WSWs on various internet lists concerning the transit strike.)

North throws a few more jabs at us, this time on the issue of utopianism. He sneeringly asks if we drafted a statement called “The Transit Strike and Utopia,” declaring that we should have used the strike to demonstrate “how utopianism would have looked in action.” The fact that we didn’t produce such a statement leads him to conclude that “your utopian schemes are largely intended for discussions within petty-bourgeois radical circles. When it comes to the workers, you have nothing for them except the thin gruel of trade unionism.”(48)

¹⁷ “Tentative contract a setback for New York City transit workers”, WSWs, Dec. 29, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/dec2005/tran-d29.shtml>

¹⁸ We raised this criticism of the WSWs’s handling of the strike’s aftermath in *Objectivism or Marxism*, but North completely ignored our remarks.

So, it would seem that we are utopians, which is bad enough, but on top of that we are unprincipled utopians because we hide our “utopian schemes” from the workers, offering them only “the thin gruel of trade unionism.” The intellectual dishonesty of all this is obvious to anyone who has read our documents. We are not utopians but Marxists who are convinced that a socialist culture has to be revived in the working class, and that this requires the revival of socialism as a political ideal. Nor are we syndicalists: again it is because we are Marxists and Trotskyists that we insist that fighting to mobilize workers in defense of their rights is central to raising the political consciousness of the working class. In passing, it deserves to be noted that in both parts of North’s attack on us – for our alleged utopianism and our alleged trade unionism – what is really at issue is the fight for class consciousness, the fight that North has abandoned.

As for North’s cynical sneer about “The Transit Strike and Utopia,” this yet again demonstrates how far removed he has become from the traditions of socialism. It was always a staple of socialist propaganda to have articles and pamphlets explaining to workers, for example, what a public transit system would be like under socialism. This sort of material had important educational value, contrasting the oppressive conditions under capitalism with the immense possibilities that would be opened up for workers (and in this case riders as well) once the tyranny of the private profit system was removed. And when it comes to the NYC transit system, operating under a crushing burden of bond debt to the tune of \$20 billion, there wouldn’t have been anything far-fetched about promoting such a socialist ‘vision’. Indeed, when we consider that ‘There Is No Alternative’ to capitalism epitomizes the zeitgeist we live in, North’s contempt for this kind of educational material promoting socialism is unconscionable.

Again a few words from Cannon are in order here. Surely nobody could accuse him of being either a utopian or two-faced in what he had to say to the working class. In January of 1953 he delivered the last of six lectures on “America’s Road to Socialism,” and this final one was titled “What Socialist America Will Look Like”.¹⁹ It was a subject Cannon had a good deal to say about, expending 8000 words on it. He begins by acknowledging that “the great Marxists ... refrained from offering ... future generations any instructions or blueprints,” but he adds that their writings “do contain some marvelous flashes of insight which light up the whole magnificent perspective,” i.e. of what the socialist future will look like. And he sets out to use those insights as “the guiding line of my exposition.” (As we will get to later, by North’s standards Cannon committed two heresies here: first, he acknowledged that there are utopian elements – i.e. “marvelous flashes of insight” about the socialist future – within the works of the great classical Marxists, and second, he sought to use those elements to educate his own party members and, through them, the working class as a whole. One can easily imagine how North would have vilified this lecture if Cannon’s name weren’t attached to it.)

Our concern here isn’t with the details of Cannon’s American socialist utopia (though much of what he had to say retains its vitality and relevance a half century later), but

¹⁹ James P. Cannon, “What Socialist America Will Look Like,” *The Militant*, Jan. 23, 1953.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1953/socialistamer.htm>

rather with the reason he had for presenting such a vision. The point here wasn't to dictate to future generations. As Cannon says, "We must assume that they will be superior to us, in every way, and that they will know what to do far better than we can tell them." All we can do is anticipate "the general direction of development." So why give such a lecture at all? Because, says Cannon,

the prospect of socialism—what the future socialist society will look like—is a question of fascinating interest and *has a great importance in modern propaganda*. The new generation of youth who will come to our movement and dedicate their lives to it will not be willing to squander their young courage and idealism on little things and little aims. They will be governed by nothing less than the inspiration of a great ideal, the vision of a new world. We are quite justified, therefore, in tracing some of the broad outlines of probable future development; all the more so since the general direction, if not the details, can already be foreseen (emphasis added).

This is precisely the sense in which we have raised the issue of utopia. The subtitle of Brenner's document makes this explicit: "On why utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist consciousness." The type of articles that North disparages, Cannon considered as having "a great importance in modern propaganda." The contrast couldn't be clearer: instead of turning the tables on us, North's remarks only expose how distant he has become from the traditions of revolutionary Marxism. To pick up on his metaphor of "thin gruel," one might say that while Cannon nourished the political consciousness of workers with real substance, what North mostly offers is a lot of hot air.

Marxism and the Unions: the Evolution of a Correct Analysis

We said earlier that the IC had made a correct analysis of the degeneration of the unions, but that this analysis came to be used as a rationalization for abandoning any active intervention in the working class. We can trace that change by comparing two documents: the first is *The Globalization of Capitalist Production and the International Tasks of the Working Class*, the perspectives resolution of the Workers League (predecessor of the American SEP) issued in September 1993; the second is a lecture by North titled *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, delivered in January 1998.²⁰ This comparison will shed light on the SEP/IC's evolution as well on the more general question of the relationship of the Marxist movement to the trade unions.

The WL perspectives resolution presents an extensive discussion (taking up over a third of the document) of what was then the party's new analysis of the qualitative degeneration of the trade unions. It places this analysis within the context of globalization, which spells the bankruptcy of all traditional labor movements that stand for class collaboration and are rooted in the nation-state. The collapse of the Soviet Union two years earlier was a harbinger of what all the various labor bureaucracies were facing.

²⁰ The 1993 WL perspectives document isn't available on line. North's lecture is: <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/unions/unions.htm> . From here on, page references to both documents will be inserted in the text. The text of *Marxism and the Trade Unions* we are using is the pamphlet issued in 1998 as part of the "SEP Lecture Series".

Focusing on the AFL-CIO in the US, the resolution reviews the protracted degeneration of the labor movement – the unbroken record of betrayals by the labor bureaucracy (particularly from the 1981 PATCO strike on), the corporatist role of the unions as an adjunct of management and the bourgeois state, the steep and steady decline in union membership coinciding with the growth in the financial coffers of the unions. “The actual practice of the unions today,” the document declares, “conforms far more closely to the description of a company union or a scab organization than to an organization of the working class” (43).

The resolution then provides an historical assessment of the unions, in the course of which it warns “against the superficial tendency to see the opportunist evolution of trade unions as merely an expression of bad and treacherous leaders” (47). Historically the unions have oriented themselves “on the political axis of nationalism and in opposition to proletarian internationalism” and they “have all coalesced around the politics of class collaboration and ultimately corporatism” (ibid). As this is an important point in relation to North’s later lecture, it is worth looking at it in more detail. The Lenin of *What is to be done?* is brought in: “Lenin was correct when he insisted that trade unionism was the bourgeois consciousness of the working class” and that the revolutionary movement had to be built “in a struggle against trade unionist politics and the reduction of the working class to trade union forms of struggle” (47-8). The resolution then adds: “Lenin by no means rejected the unions outright, but he insisted that they could only play a positive role to the extent they were subordinated to the revolutionary socialist political party of the working class” (48). This is a significant qualification because it indicates that this new evaluation of the unions as being essentially no different than company unions is not a justification for turning away from the everyday struggles of the working class.

This point is elaborated on in the next section, titled “Revolutionary principles versus tactical opportunism”. Here the point is rightly made that opportunism “emphasizes mere tactical prescriptions, and obscures the essential questions of program and strategy” (49) and that, by contrast, Marxists insist on “explaining directly and bluntly to the working class the political character of its old organizations and the social forces which they represent” (51). But this need for not pulling any punches with workers about the morbid state of the unions is not an excuse for abstentionism. The resolution makes this clear:

The Workers League does not ignore the unions or the workers in them. We do not hold the workers responsible for the reactionary character of the organizations within which they are trapped. Wherever it is possible, the party intervenes in these unions (as it would even in fascist-controlled unions) with the aim of mobilizing the workers on the basis of a revolutionary program. But the essential premise for revolutionary activity inside these organizations is theoretical clarity on the character of the AFL-CIO (and its associated unions) and brutal honesty in explaining the unpleasant facts to the workers [ibid].

Let us note here that “mobilizing the workers on the basis of a revolutionary program” has always been understood in the Trotskyist movement to mean a program of *transitional demands*, and there is nothing in this document that suggests any departure

from that – nothing, in other words, that evokes the counterposing of the maximum and minimum programs that characterized classical Social Democracy.

The resolution stresses that the party's aim isn't reform of the AFL-CIO "but the destruction of its political influence and organizational control over the captive members." To that end, the party aspires to lead "a broad-based insurrection by the workers" against the bureaucracy (52). Which clearly means new forms of organization in the working class, not abstentionism:

In order to prepare the working class for the struggle against the bureaucracy, the party must strive to create new forms of struggle among these workers, including factory committees and even trade unions, organized independently and in opposition to the AFL-CIO (ibid).

That bears repeating: "the party must strive to create new forms of struggle ... including factory committees and even trade unions." It is obvious that such an effort would involve a lot of organizational work, including – perish the thought – the writing of strike committee manuals! And let us note here that this work is conceived of as a *preparatory stage* – i.e. "to prepare the working class for the struggle against the bureaucracy." This means that the workers participating in these factory committees and/or unions would be at various levels of political consciousness, and probably for the most part considerably below the level of socialist consciousness. The party's point of contact with these workers would be the struggle to defend jobs, wages, basic rights – and *through that struggle* the party would work to create the level of consciousness necessary to bring about "a broad-based insurrection" against the bureaucracy and a class offensive against capitalism. Moreover, the resolution declares that the party has no intention of restricting these efforts to the unions, and that if anything there is a greater need for work at non-union plants "where the large majority of youth and younger workers are employed" (ibid). It also notes that "serious programmatic attention must be given to the specific problems that part-time and temporary workers confront" (53).

Clearly what this resolution envisaged was a broad and ambitious campaign within the working class. Indeed in reading the resolution today one is struck by its robust engagement with the life of the working class, which is in marked contrast to the pallid objectivism of last year's IEB reports. This reflected the party's involvement in important political campaigns in the working class, notably the citizens inquiry into the Mack Avenue fire in Detroit and the defense of framed Greyhound striker Roger Cawthra. And the resolution calls for the development and expansion of these sorts of campaigns in defense of workers' rights, which it sees as being at the heart of building the revolutionary party. Near the end, the resolution reiterates this theme in the clearest possible terms:

In the coming period the Workers League will have to provide the impulse for and initiate new forms of organization in the working class and in the factories, independent of the trade union apparatus. The Workers League should advocate the organization of factory and work place committees both at union and nonunion facilities. The party should propose that these be built not as appendages to the

official unions, but as independent and rival bodies, as forms of genuine working class organization. They must be democratic organizations of the rank-and-file workers, which seek to mobilize the industrial strength of the working class, unite the employed workers with the unemployed workers, and address broad social issues in the working class neighborhoods, such as the defense of the right to public education and the struggle against evictions and utility shutoffs. The Workers League should initiate and develop the formation of such committees and link them to the struggle for its revolutionary socialist and internationalist program (69).

Reading this 14 years later, the obvious question is – whatever happened to these proposals? Where are the campaigns “to provide the impulse for and initiate” new defense organizations of the working class? Where are examples of the party establishing or helping to set up factory committees? What has been done to reach out to young workers in non-union plants or to temporary and part-time workers? Where are the campaigns to unite the employed and the unemployed? Where, since the Mack Avenue fire inquiry, has there been any work done to mobilize workers against evictions and utility shutoffs, or in defense of public education? The answer to all these questions is the same – there is nothing to report, nothing in 14years! It is almost as if this resolution had been written by a movement that had no connection to the SEP/IC of today.

Rationalizing Abstentionism

The turning away from an engagement in the struggles of the working class can already be discerned in North’s lecture, *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, which was delivered in January 1998, four and a half years after the Workers League perspectives resolution. The lecture was intended as a reiteration of the party’s analysis of the unions, while at the same time contrasting that analysis with the kowtowing to the bureaucracy of various middle class radical tendencies. But on a careful reading it becomes evident that there is a shift of emphasis in the lecture. Whereas the 1993 analysis had been animated by a call for ambitious new interventions by the party in the working class, there is only a passing mention of that in the lecture.

Instead a line of argument is introduced which claims that the “social form” of trade unionism makes it organically reactionary: “The organic development of trade unionism proceeds, not in the direction of socialism, but in opposition to it” (11). This claim is made on supposedly philosophical grounds, and to the extent that the history of the unions is brought in, it is to confirm the philosophical argument. At the same time that trade unionism is being depicted as organically reactionary, there is virtually no mention of the need for the party to involve itself in new forms of struggle in the working class. What this adds up to, as we will see, is a rationalization for abstentionism.

The philosophical argument concerns the relationship of form and content. Here are the relevant paragraphs:

It must be kept in mind that when we set out to study trade unionism, we are dealing with a definite social form. By this, we mean not some sort of casual, accidental and amorphous collection of individuals, but rather a historically-evolved connection

between people organized in classes and rooted in certain specific relations of production. It is also important to reflect upon the nature of form itself. We all know that a relation exists between form and content, but this relationship is generally conceived as if the form were merely the expression of content. From this standpoint, the social form might be conceptualized as merely an outward, plastic and infinitely malleable expression of the relations upon which it is based. But social forms are more profoundly understood as dynamic elements in the historical process. To say that "content is formed" means that form imparts to the content of which it is the expression definite qualities and characteristics. It is through form that content exists and develops.

Perhaps it will be possible to clarify the purpose of this detour into the realm of philosophical categories and abstractions, by referring to the famous section in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, in which Marx asks: "Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labor, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from the form itself." That is, when a product of labor assumes the form of a commodity a transformation that occurs only at a certain stage of society it acquires a peculiar, fetishistic quality that it did not previously possess. Once products are exchanged on the market, real social relations between people, of which commodities are themselves the outcome, necessarily assume the appearance of a relation between things. A product of labor is a product of labor; and yet, once it assumes, within the framework of new productive relations, the form of a commodity, it acquires new and extraordinary social properties.

Similarly, a group of workers is a group of workers. And yet, when that group assumes the form of a trade union, it acquires, through that form, new and quite distinct social properties to which the workers are inevitably subordinated. What, precisely, is meant by this? The trade unions represent the working class in a very distinct socio-economic role: as the seller of a commodity, labor power. Arising on the basis of the productive relations and property forms of capitalism, the essential purpose of the trade union is to secure for this commodity the best price that can be obtained under prevailing market conditions (12-13).

Now, we are the last people who would object to bringing in philosophy into such a discussion, especially since it is such a rare occurrence in the party's lectures or articles. But in this case the resort to 'dialectics' turns out to be spurious. First, the relationship of form to content is conceived of in a static and one-sided way. North views the form (i.e. the union) as the active agent, while the content (the working class) is the passive recipient. But as any student of dialectics should know, what is passive at one moment in relation to its active opposite plays the opposite role at the next moment. It is not only form that determines content but content that can also determine form (or, as Hegel puts it nicely, "'content' is nothing but the overturning of form into content, and 'form' nothing but the overturning of content into form"²¹). What this means in relation to the unions is that the content of the class struggle, although hamstrung by the limitations imposed on it by what we can call here the 'union-form', threatens to overreach the limits of that form. At that point, the possibility exists of the newly emerging content (to paraphrase Marx) breaking up the integument of the existing form.²² Thus what North is

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, (Hackett Publishing, 1991), p. 202.

presenting here is a static formalism that ignores the fluidity of the concepts of form and content.

Second, the analogy of a commodity to a union leaves out something important: workers are not things. A worker is not 'stamped' by union membership to the same extent that a product becomes stamped as a commodity in a market economy. Though in the form of the union, workers are defined as sellers of labor-power, the content of that social relation is the class struggle. It is that content which makes it possible for workers to become conscious of their exploitation and of their revolutionary role as society's chief productive force, thereby empowering them to overthrow the existing relations of production. To state the obvious, a product of labor cannot become conscious; it cannot escape its commodity-form so long as capitalism exists. But workers aren't imprisoned by the 'union-form' to anywhere near the same extent: the dynamic within unions is much more tenuous, with the class struggle always lurking as a threat to the 'normal business' of class collaboration. It is this very instability that accounts for the heavy-handedness of the bureaucracy: they can only maintain their domination by quashing any manifestation of dissent.

This side of the matter is lost sight of in North's ruminations on the trade unions as a social form: for him that form imparts "distinct social properties to which the workers are inevitably subordinated." To be sure, the subordination is real enough, but why is it necessarily inevitable? It is only so if one leaves out the possibility of workers ever being able to attain socialist consciousness so long as they are within unions. In other words, what North is saying here is that purely by virtue of the fact that workers are union members, it becomes impossible for the revolutionary movement to win them over. The historical account of the unions that North offers up is meant to make such a case, but as we'll soon see, it is a highly selective reading of that history. But before we get to that, we can already anticipate serious problems in North's position. Seeing as (according to Lenin) trade unionism is the highest level that the spontaneous consciousness of the working class can reach within bourgeois society, it would seem that if North is right, then any breakthrough to socialist consciousness by the working class becomes virtually impossible. The workers will go on spontaneously reproducing the trade union-form, and that form will then "inevitably" subordinate them to capitalism, irrespective of what the revolutionary party does to reach them. This is a dead-end theoretically, and politically it amounts to giving up on the struggle for class consciousness with a shrug of resignation.

So it is no coincidence that the ambitious proposals for intervening in the working class that had been envisioned in 1993 are forgotten about in this lecture. Back then the perspectives resolution declared: "The party must strive to create new forms of struggle among these workers [i.e. those already in unions], including factory committees and even trade unions, organized independently and in opposition to the AFL-CIO." Even trade unions! But in light of North's lecture, this proposal no longer made any sense: it

²² "The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter on the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated." Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, (Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 929.

would hardly matter if these unions were independently organized and opposed to the bureaucracy because the union-form itself would make them organically reactionary.

And why limit this just to unions? Why can't the same 'formal' principle apply to factory committees or neighborhood committees to fight evictions and school closures or indeed any formation of the working class that arises *spontaneously within capitalism*? Precisely because of their spontaneous character, such formations will start out by accepting the limits of capitalism and seek to bargain for better conditions within the system: for example, a factory committee will seek to be a militant and honest alternative to the official union or else (in a non-union plant) try to establish itself as a union. And to the extent that these committees remain bound by spontaneity – i.e. to the extent that they remain cut off from a revolutionary socialist perspective – then it is certainly true that their 'organic' development will ultimately be in a reactionary direction. But one might as well say the same thing about spontaneous consciousness as such: it is bourgeois consciousness, as Lenin informed us long ago. But this is hardly the end of the matter as far as Marxists are concerned: formations like factory committees are also *battlegrounds in the struggle for class consciousness*. But this is what North's 'formalism' deliberately obscures.

The analysis of the unions in the 1993 resolution had been much closer to a genuinely dialectical conception. It was not form abstracted from content but huge shifts in the world economy brought about by globalization that had pushed the traditional unions past the point of no return. It was in this sense that the resolution had argued against the "superficial tendency" of the petty bourgeois radicals to ascribe the problems of the unions to bad or treacherous leaders: the *deeper* dimensions of the problem were about how class collaboration and nationalist orientations were no longer viable within a globalized capitalism.

But North's lecture moves in a different direction: by rooting the problem of the unions in their form, he produces another kind of "organizational fetishism", one which doesn't transcend the radicals' position so much as invert its terms. In effect the argument now is that the unions were a hopeless cause from the start, and by implication the same would be true of any union-like formation, which is to say any spontaneous formation of the working class. So while the organizational fetishism of the radicals leads to opportunism, North's fetishism-in-reverse leads to abstentionism. But the second is as much an abandonment of revolutionary practice as the first.

What the History of the Unions Really Shows

To be sure, the degeneration of the unions was not some sudden demise of otherwise healthy organizations. It was a protracted process, and to the extent that they have been free of revolutionary 'disruptions', the unions have veered towards corporatism. Their bureaucratic encrustation, the suppression of internal democracy and the all but total exclusion of socialists have rendered the traditional unions largely impervious to any countervailing progressive tendencies. One might add here, however, that even in regard

to this reactionary tendency of the unions, North's 'formalist' argument sheds very little light. We can learn far more from Lenin in *What is to be done?*: there he notes the spontaneous movement of the working class (which includes the trade unions) moves "along the line of least resistance", and for that reason it tends to move in a reactionary direction so long as it is unimpeded by revolutionary consciousness. This is because within bourgeois society it is bourgeois ideology that prevails, and so the line of least resistance is always the line that accommodates itself to capitalism.²³ This insight gets us out of North's prison-house of the 'union-form' and into the dialectic of the class struggle: the line of least resistance is indeed a powerful tendency but by no means an omnipotent one to which workers must be "inevitably subordinated."

In any case, the history of the unions is not just one long, uninterrupted record of degeneration (or of the union-form manifesting its organically reactionary nature, as North would have it). There have also been important episodes in which the class struggle broke through the integument of bourgeois trade unionism, episodes in which revolutionary consciousness gained the upper hand over spontaneity. To be sure, these episodes have been relatively brief, with the line of least resistance eventually reasserting itself. But one could say much the same about the socialist revolution: it has had few breakthroughs, a great many more betrayals and defeats, and eventually even the breakthroughs have been reversed. On the basis of such a record one could use North's logic to argue that there was something 'organically' flawed about the 'form' of the socialist revolution – that while it may not be reactionary, it most certainly is unrealistic. And this is of course a widely held position, but presumably not among revolutionary Marxists.

To make his case, however, North has to downplay or ignore any revolutionary 'intrusions' into union history. He focuses on the labor movements in England and Germany prior to World War One, which he claims provide "the greatest historical test of trade unionism" (30). This is because, though the two labor movements developed in different ways, they ended up in the same, reactionary, place: the German unions, established by the Social Democrats, played no less a counterrevolutionary role than the English unions, which had emerged independently of the socialist movement. And it is certainly true that, as differing paradigms of the development of trade unionism, the English and German examples are significant. But North freights these examples with a much greater burden than they can sustain: he makes them out to be the decisive "test" of trade unionism, a test that had already been passed and failed by 1914!

But the (relatively brief) account that North's lecture provides of the history of these labor movements doesn't come close to proving his case. What it does do is confirm something every literate Marxist already knows – which is that trade union consciousness is bourgeois consciousness. Take the German case, which is the more telling of the two because, as North notes, "the trade unions emerged under the direct tutelage of the socialist movement. Its leaders were diligently schooled in the teachings of Marx and Engels. And yet, in essence, the German trade unions were no more devoted to socialism

²³ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?*, in *Collected Works*, v. 5, p. 386.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm#v05fl61h-373-GUESS>

than those in England” (25). And North goes on to show that the larger the unions grew, the more the union leaders bridled under the control of the SPD, and when it came to the party’s revolutionary wing under Rosa Luxemburg, the animosity of the union leaders “assumed pathological dimensions” (27). By 1906, under pressure from the unions, the SPD adopted the principle of equality between the unions and the party, which meant that from then on “the SPD was effectively ruled by the general commission of the trade unions” (28), and this in turn accelerated the party’s right wing trajectory that ultimately led it to the historic betrayal of August 1914.

North sees these facts as confirming his argument: if union leaders “diligently schooled in the teachings of Marx and Engels” can still betray, then surely the fault lies in the ‘union-form’ itself. But we can far more adequately account for this history by going back to one of the key thoughts of *What is to be done?* – trade union consciousness is bourgeois consciousness. For Lenin, needless to say, this was anything but a rationalization for abstentionism; instead, it meant that Marxists had to wage a persistent struggle within the unions against the spontaneous pull of bourgeois ideology: “[T]he task of Social-Democracy is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.”²⁴

When we consider the history of the German unions in that light, then something important becomes evident that North’s formalism obscures: *the real culprit in this history is not the unions but the SPD*. North makes it seem as if the unions, because of their organically reactionary form, corrupted the SPD and dragged it to its demise, but this is a superficial reading of what happened. The unions were *bound* to end up “under the wing of the bourgeoisie” so long as there was no consistent effort by the SPD “to combat spontaneity.” But “combat” on this front, as on many others, is not something the SPD did much of; on the contrary, at every critical juncture the party capitulated to the pressure of the unions, choosing ‘unity’ over principle. Thus, what seems like a case of the unions dragging the party down is really much more a story about how the party abandoned its revolutionary responsibilities *to resist that pressure* and “divert” the union membership to socialist consciousness. In other words, it was not the ‘form’ of the unions but the *opportunism* of the SPD that was the decisive factor.

As for the ‘diligent schooling’ the SPD offered its union leaders, this did nothing to resist the pull of spontaneous consciousness. The SPD leaders treated Marxism like a catechism: attending an occasional lecture or party school in no way impinged on ‘the real business’ of running the unions, anymore than did the perennial speeches by party leaders about ‘the inevitable victory of socialism’. It was Bernstein’s motto – ‘the movement is everything, the goal is nothing’ – that not only expressed his own reformism but also accurately described the reality within the SPD, despite the angry objections of the orthodox party leaders.²⁵ This is why the German unions are not the decisive test of

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 384-5.

²⁵ Bernstein’s biographer Peter Gay recounts how a prominent SPD leader, Ignaz Auer, wrote to Bernstein to complain, not about the content of his views, but rather about his indiscretion in making them public. Bernstein had wanted the party to pass a resolution acknowledging its reformist character, to which Auer responded: “My dear Ede, you *don’t* pass such resolutions. You don’t *talk* about it, you just *do* it” (*The*

the union-form that North makes them out to be. “No bridge existed,” as Trotsky says in *The Transitional Program*, between the minimum and maximum programs of the SPD,²⁶ i.e. between the nickel-and-diming of bourgeois unionism on the one hand and the socialist revolution on the other. When measured by that standard – i.e. by the extent to which revolutionaries fought to build a bridge to socialist consciousness, by the extent to which they resisted bourgeois consciousness *within* the unions – what ultimately stands out about the German experience is more its similarities to the English experience than its differences.

To bolster his case, North stitches together quotes from Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci to demonstrate that they were frequently critical of the unions, especially of the hostility of the labor bureaucracy to the class struggle and socialism. And it is certainly true that the great classical Marxists were often scathing about the union bureaucracy and they certainly never fetishized the unions in the way that some petty bourgeois radicals do today. Trotsky put it nicely in *The Transitional Program*: “Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution.”²⁷ But this is still a long way from justifying North’s position, which is that the unions *aren’t even a means*. In any case, all the Marxists that North cites could also be quoted as being adamantly opposed to abstentionism with regard to the unions. Their fundamental concern was that revolutionaries had to intervene in the mass movement of the working class.

A relevant example here is Trotsky’s attitude to the German unions in the early Thirties in the course of the struggle against the rising threat of Nazism. These are the same unions that, according to North, had already been ‘tested’ by 1914 and found to be organically reactionary, but that certainly wasn’t how Trotsky approached them. When the Stalinists (in line with their ‘ultra-left’ Third Period) denounced the reformist unions as ‘social fascist’ and abandoned them to set up their own ‘revolutionary unions’, Trotsky condemned this dual-unionism: he argued that all it achieved was to isolate the revolutionaries from the great bulk of the working class, who remained in the traditional unions. Trotsky considered “the restoration of the unity of the trade unions” crucial to the success of the German revolution because this would create optimal conditions for exposing the impotence of the reformists in fighting fascism, thereby winning over the ranks to a revolutionary perspective. Indeed, he insisted that “it is precisely within the trade unions that an exceptionally fruitful field is now open for action.”²⁸

And that epitomizes the attitude of all the leading classical Marxists – that the unions were a potentially “fruitful field” for revolutionaries. Certainly from Lenin’s time on, that view of the unions came without illusions that trade unionism was anything more than bourgeois consciousness. The ‘fruit’, so to speak, wasn’t simply there for the picking; it could only be had through a determined struggle for socialist consciousness. For most of

Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, p. 270). This private remark says a good deal about the internal life of the SPD.

²⁶ *The Transitional Program*, p. 75.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 79.

²⁸ Leon Trotsky, *What Next?* in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, pp. 237, 233.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next03.htm#s13> .

the 20th century, that orientation to the unions was an essentially correct one. What has necessitated a change was the onset of globalization, which rendered the traditional unions largely moribund. But this posed the need for new forms of struggle by the working class, including new unions. North's position has led instead to abstentionism, which is to say, to an estrangement of the revolutionary movement from the working class. And that position is plainly irreconcilable with the tradition of classical Marxism, notwithstanding the selective account of that tradition that North presents.

A Case Ignored: the Russian Unions

A real test of North's theory would have required a case where Marxists conducted a genuine struggle against "the spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie" but were unable to overcome that tendency. And history provides at least one instance where the Marxist movement was able to conduct such a struggle on a mass scale – in Russia. It is significant that North doesn't talk about Russia in his lecture. He does briefly mention it in a polemic against the Spartacists, *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*,²⁹ which was written the same year (1998) as the lecture, but his remarks are anything but illuminating. He writes: "It is worth noting that the Russian unions played no appreciable role in the October Revolution. Indeed, the large rail workers union, which was dominated by the Mensheviks, worked actively against the socialist overthrow."³⁰

This is nonsense. While it is true that there were unions under Menshevik control that opposed the revolution, there were a good many more that sided with the Bolsheviks. (Moreover, as John Reed noted in *Ten Days That Shook the World*, the only reason the rail workers union came out against the revolution was because the union executive deliberately postponed internal elections, knowing that they would be swept out of office by the Bolsheviks.³¹) North is simply trying to evade an important piece of history that doesn't fit with his theory about the organically reactionary nature of the union form. To be sure, the role the unions played in the revolution was a supporting rather than a leading one, but that is all that any Marxist would ever have expected. The unions could never be a substitute for the party, but to the extent that they provided a working class base for Bolshevism, their role in the revolution was indeed an appreciable one. With his eye for the telling detail, John Reed gives us a memorable glimpse at what unions meant to wide layers of the working class just awakening to political consciousness in the course of the revolution:

...Russia was in travail, bearing a new world. The servants one used to treat like animals and pay next to nothing, were getting independent. A pair of shoes cost more than a hundred rubles, and as wages averaged about thirty-five rubles a month

²⁹ Though this polemic was issued in the name of the ICFI, it is evident both from the style and substance that it was written by North.

³⁰ *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, p. 81. <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/slreply/part4-1.shtml#top> . From here on, all page references to this work will be included in the text.

³¹ John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, p. 6, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch1.htm> .

the servants refused to stand in *queue* and wear out their shoes. But more than that. In the new Russia every man and woman could vote; there were working-class newspapers, saying new and startling things; there were the Soviets; and there were the Unions. The *izvoshtchiki* (cab-drivers) had a Union; they were also represented in the Petrograd Soviet. The waiters and hotel servants were organized, and refused tips. On the walls of restaurants they put up signs which read, “No tips taken here—” or, “Just because a man has to make his living waiting on table is no reason to insult him by offering him a tip!”³²

Of course the great ferment of the revolution produced new forms of struggle, most famously soviets as well as factory committees, and the activities of these various formations often overlapped. But the unions were by no means the least important or the most conservative of these formations. Indeed, when it came to the critical moment of the insurrection, it was the soviets that proved to be more of an obstacle than the unions! In *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky writes about the “fetishism of organizational forms” – meaning here the soviets – on the part of conservative elements within the party (notably Kamenev and Zinoviev) opposed to the seizure of power³³: they used the fact that the soviets were still formally under the control of the reformist parties to argue that the insurrection had to be put off indefinitely. For Lenin and Trotsky, the soviets were never (as Trotsky put it elsewhere) “a panacea”,³⁴ and if the obstructionism of the reformists couldn’t be overcome within the soviets, then the alternative was to turn to the factory committees and the unions as the direct organs of workers’ power:

The question, what mass organizations were to serve the party for leadership in the insurrection, did not permit an *a priori*, much less a categorical, answer. The instruments of the insurrection might have been the factory committees and trade unions, already under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, and at the same time in individual cases certain soviets that had broken free from the yoke of the Compromisers. Lenin, for example, said to Ordzhonikidze: “We must swing over the center of gravity to the factory and shop committees. The factory and shop committees must become the organs of insurrection.”³⁵

Thus the test of the Russian experience plays havoc with North’s theory. If it were possible for the Bolsheviks to use the unions as one of their “instruments of the insurrection,” then clearly the union-form is not organically impervious to the revolutionary content of the class struggle. In other words, the class interests of workers are not “inevitably subordinated” to capitalism purely by virtue of this form. It all depends on the extent to which revolutionaries can overcome the prevailing “line of least resistance.”

In this respect, unions are no different than any other spontaneous formation of the working class, including even soviets. There isn’t an organizational form in the working

³² *ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

³³ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 818.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch36.htm>

³⁴ Leon Trotsky, “Thaelmann and the ‘People’s Revolution’”, in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p.79. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/310414.htm>

³⁵ *The History of the Russian Revolution*, *ibid.*

class more closely associated with the socialist revolution than soviets, and yet in 1918-19, the SDP used the workers' councils in Germany (Trotsky called them the "Ebert-Scheidemann soviets") to strangle the revolution, and the SDP's Russian counterparts in 1917 would have done the same, had it not been for the opposition of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, under Stalin the Russian soviets were gutted of any revolutionary content and incorporated into the apparatus of the bureaucratic dictatorship. But it would be perverse on this basis to argue that the soviets as a social form are organically reactionary. As Trotsky remarked in relation to the point he made about the soviets not being a panacea: "The soviets are only an organizational form; the question is decided by the class content of the policy and by no means by its form."³⁶ And that is also true of the unions: it is not their form but "the class content of their policy" which has determined their evolution.

The Russian soviets have long since gone to the dustbin of history and the traditional unions are now joining them there. The task of revolutionaries is to intervene in the mass struggles of the working class, to help develop new forms of struggle – whether that be new unions, factory and strike committees and eventually new soviets as well – and to fight to fill those forms with revolutionary content. This is the only standpoint consistent with classical Marxism, but it is a standpoint that the International Committee, under North's tutelage, has abandoned.

Empty Words About Abstentionism, Revealing Words About Business

Before we leave this issue, two more points deserve a brief mention. First, in the polemic against the Spartacists, North responds to their accusation of abstentionism. When coming from the Spartacists, of course, this is an attack from the right: they deny the unions have undergone a qualitative degeneration and they even deny that globalization marks a qualitative change in the capitalist system. For them, anyone who doesn't keep 'putting demands on the union bureaucracy', as if this were still the Sixties or Seventies, is guilty of abstentionism. Our critique of the IC has nothing in common with this: the real abstentionism of the IC isn't about abandoning an orientation to the union bureaucracy but rather about abandoning an orientation to the working class.

Still, North's response to the Spartacist accusation is revealing, if only in what it doesn't say. To be sure, he has an easy time exposing the Spartacist position on the unions as reactionary. But when it comes to what his own movement does in the working class, North claims that the charge of abstentionism is "a red herring" because "our movement has never failed to intervene aggressively in the trade unions, defending the interests of the workers against the attacks of the employers and the treachery of the union bureaucracy (97)."

Now, if the accusation really were a red herring, then North should have had no trouble citing some examples where the party "intervene[d] aggressively" in the unions, or for that matter among non-unionized workers. If this polemic had been written a decade earlier, North could have cited the party's work in the strikes of the Phelps-Dodge miners or the Hormel meatpackers; half a decade earlier, the Mack Avenue fire case could have

³⁶ "Thaelmann and the 'People's Revolution'", *ibid.*

been highlighted. But North cited no examples, and for good reason, since by 1998 the party had gone for a number of years without conducting any interventions, aggressive or otherwise, in the working class.

Similarly, on the next page when North argues against the Spartacists' organizational fetishism with regard to the unions and raises factory committees and workers councils as alternatives, he can't offer a single instance in which the party has worked to initiate such committees. The issue is presented in broad generalizations: "History has seen the emergence of more broad, democratic and militant types of organization, such as factory committees and workers councils, which transcend the limited realm of struggle over wages and hours and aspire to establish workers' control over the production process" (98-9). In marked contrast to the 1993 Workers League perspectives document, there is little sense here that the party has to play a central role in the emergence of these organizations. Indeed, in the following paragraph, North presents the issue as if the real alternative to the unions is the party itself:

More than a century of historical experience has demonstrated that trade unions in and of themselves cannot provide the means for the working class to organize a struggle against the capitalist system. For this, the working class requires, above all, a mass socialist party, organized on an international scale, whose strategy and tactics are guided by Marxist theory (99).

But what this seemingly orthodox formulation obscures is that you cannot build such a party without intervening in the mass struggles of the working class, and central to that is precisely the work of organizing factory and strike committees as alternatives to the traditional unions. Implicitly, these remarks conceive of party-building as separate from these mass struggles, and we have the IC's record over the next decade to confirm that this was indeed the case. The charge of abstentionism – again not in relation to the unions and the bureaucracy but in relation to the working class – is anything but a red herring.

The second point (again drawn from the polemic against the Spartacists) is noteworthy for what North does say, and this time it concerns, of all things, business. After correctly attacking the Spartacists for glossing over the betrayals of the AFL-CIO, North launches into a stinging denunciation of the latter:

As a social layer, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is distinguished by its narrowness of vision, unscrupulousness in pursuit of personal gain, parasitism, cringing before the bourgeoisie, fear and hatred of the working class, and outright criminality. The unions are led by aspiring petty-bourgeois elements *who have an aversion to honest labor* and latch onto the union apparatus as a means of obtaining a level of wealth and status otherwise beyond the reach of their limited talents and intelligence. In its totality, the bureaucracy embodies a social element similar to that which finds its natural abode in the ranks of organized crime, and it is by no means an accident that the American unions have been so closely linked to the Mafia.

Despite its miserable record in upholding the interests of the union rank-and-file, the basic personnel of the bureaucracy remains the same year after year. *Corporate CEOs are routinely tossed aside when their performance fails to meet the*

expectations of their major shareholders, but the leaders of the AFL-CIO survive one debacle after another. No serious, middle-sized business would tolerate the ineptitude shown by the AFL-CIO leadership. The fact that within the unions such incompetence goes unpunished is a testament to the sclerotic character of these organizations (90, all emphases added).

How strange to find in a Marxist polemic language that wouldn't be at all out of place in a Chamber of Commerce! To be sure, the bureaucrats are thugs and parasites, but Marxists have no need to dredge up bourgeois backwardness in order to make our indictment of the bureaucracy stick. "An aversion to honest labor"?! This is the sort of language that union busting employers use against workers or that reactionaries use against welfare recipients. And why this backhanded tribute to corporate capitalism? It makes it seem as if corporations are models of accountability, with CEOs getting ousted if they aren't responsive to shareholders. This is the sort of blather one expects to find in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Unfortunately for North, in the years since this was written, the image of corporate 'accountability' has suffered some major hits, what with Enron, WorldCom et al. But Marxists hardly needed these stories to understand the proclivities of corporate capitalism. Thievery is in the very nature of capitalist enterprise: most fundamentally of course, workers are exploited by the legalized theft of the products of their labor, but the plundering hardly stops there, extending (where possible) to shareholders, customers, competitors, governments etc. The more modern and efficient corporations have become, the more modern and efficient have become their systems of thieving; it is not for nothing that 'corporate kleptocracy' has become a journalistic buzzword. One might add that, in this respect, corporate CEOs make labor bureaucrats – and even the Mafia – look like pikers by comparison.

And one can only wonder what to make of this remark: "No serious, middle-sized business would tolerate the ineptitude shown by the AFL-CIO leadership." Does this mean that all would be okay with the unions if they were run like a "serious, middle-sized business"? It is bizarre, to say the least, for a Marxist to use the latter as some sort of model. The word "serious" even suggests a degree of admiration for such enterprises. But, to inject some Marxism in this Chamber of Commerce rhetoric, what makes a "serious, middle-sized business" good at what it does is how efficient it is *at exploiting the working class*. So what this criticism of the bureaucracy really amounts to is this: the bureaucrats are 'inept' exploiters and so what they need to become is more efficient at exploitation! And, truth be told, some sections of the bureaucracy came to just such a conclusion and in recent years have turned their unions into a "serious, middle-sized business", earning hefty profits as labor recruiters and junior partners for big multinationals.

No doubt this isn't what North had in mind, but what else can one expect when one indulges in pro-business clichés? And how do we explain this startling lapse by a veteran Marxist leader? For that we need some historical context. The years 1993 to 1998, i.e. the time between the Workers League perspectives document on the one hand and North's lecture on the unions and the polemic against the Spartacists on the other, are also the

years of the Clinton administration and, more importantly, the high point of the dot.com economic boom. This was already a period of bourgeois triumphalism in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but with the dot.com boom the media adulation for capitalism reached tidal wave proportions. The hype was all about how the dot.com boom marked a new era, one of ‘people’s capitalism’ where markets were now the measure of all things, where the stock market was the apex of ‘democracy’ and where computers and the internet had rendered the political divide between right and left ‘obsolete’. Bankers and billionaire investors like Warren Buffett cast themselves as ‘business revolutionaries’ who (in an Orwellian appropriation of the jargon of Sixties radicalism) preached ‘empowerment’ (i.e. of markets) and inveighed against ‘elitism’ (i.e. of anyone who got in the way of markets).³⁷

What gave this hype credibility was the digital revolution, the onset of globalization and stratospheric numbers on the New York Stock Exchange. If one adds to this the disintegration of the old labor movements and a low ebb in the level of strikes or mass struggles by workers in the advanced capitalist countries, the picture is one of a toxic political environment. A revolutionary party that wasn’t anchored in the working class and didn’t pay careful attention to the development of Marxist theory could easily be swept off course. North’s remarks on the virtues of corporations are clearly a symptom of just such a political disorientation. That they weren’t merely a momentary lapse of judgment is demonstrated by the party’s ensuing record of abstentionism with regard to the mass struggles of the working class. There is a link between the admiration for “serious, middle-sized business” in 1998 and the disparaging of “strike committee manuals” in 2006. What happened in the years between 1993 and 1998 was a caving in by the IC leadership to the immense class pressures of bourgeois society. And the result of that has been an unprecedented estrangement of the Trotskyist movement from the working class.

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³⁷ A perceptive account of this period is *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* by the American writer Thomas Frank, best known for his book on right-wing populism, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?*. Frank conveys just how ludicrously over-the-top much of this pro-business bilge was. A characteristic example was a management guru who claimed that in what he called the “Age of Brainware”, traditional class roles were reversed: it was now the workers (designated “the people who lift ‘things’”) who were the parasites, whereas the producers were now the managers and computer specialists (p. 201). We have drawn the material in this paragraph from Frank’s book.