



# INTRANSIGENCE

ISSUE № 4 — MARCH 2019

## PROJECT

Intransigence is a publication aiming at the regroupment of the communist left in North America, based on shared fundamental principles and broad points of agreement. A list of these principles can be found at the end of this issue. Several groups are affiliated so far. You can find their website and e-mail contacts below, or visit our website for more information. Guidelines for submission are also included further toward the bottom of the page.

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## SUBMIT

If you are interested in submitting something you've written to Intransigence, send your piece to [intransigencejournal@gmail.com](mailto:intransigencejournal@gmail.com). Pieces of varying length will be considered, and can cover a range of theoretical, practical, historical, or journalistic topics so long as they are relevant to the publication's themes. But bear in mind this is a political medium, not an intellectual clearing-house.

# INTRANSIGENCE

## PUBLICATION OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

Issue № 4 — March 2019

"The fraternization of the workers of the world is for me the highest and most sacred thing on earth; it is my guiding star, my ideal, my fatherland. I would rather forfeit my life than be unfaithful to this ideal!"

Rosa Luxemburg  
Either Or (1916)

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# EDITORIAL

## MARCH 2019

**I was**

This issue is adorned with pictures of the Spartacus uprising in celebration and reflection of one of our class' most notable battles. Indeed, we are in the process of passing many centennials from October to Kronstadt in which we look back on our class' most triumphant moments and ultimately, our greatest defeat. In wake of the October proletarian revolution, the international working class mobilized against the bourgeoisie. Soldiers abandoned trenches as workers across Europe formed soviets. General strikes in Winnipeg, Seattle and São Paulo turned militant and put in question capitalist rule, while across the largest ocean, Japan witnessed the biggest strike in its history. In the spirit of the proletariat's greatest hours and most tragic defeats, we have included 'Socialism as foreign policy' by Liebknecht in this issue, appearing for the first time in English, a text he wrote just before being carted off to jail.

**I am**

Today, the working class finds itself afflicted by a series of defeats and communists are scattered across the globe in small groups. Living conditions are marked by a steady decline, regional wars scathe the world as great and medium powers are driven to militarism in the face of crisis. Across the globe, workers flee violence and deteriorating living standards in mass migration to which the "national" bourgeoisie drum up the muck of racism to divide our class. To comment on this phenomenon, we have included an article on the recent "migrant caravan", which was brutally tear gassed on the American border. In many parts of North America in particular, processes such as suburbanization have smashed any sense of working-class community. Unaware of their common struggle with their fellow workers, many find themselves soaked in political nihilism. But despite this darkness, the proletariat is an inextinguishable light. In the past few years, from West Virginia to Los Angeles, American teachers have emerged as a section of the class prepared to fight back against decades of cuts. On an international level, thousands of European Amazon workers walked out en masse against

the slave-driving intensity of the Black Friday rush. Only a month later, Canadian postal workers declared a strike against the Christmas rush in which an increase in parcel packages has caused an increase in injuries. The Spanish state did not hesitate to unleash their mercenaries as police charged the striking workers flailing batons and knocking out teeth. Across the Atlantic, the Trudeau government immediately shoved through a back-to-work bill threatening workers with fines for disobedience. More militant struggles have erupted in Iran and Mexico. In Iran, the workers at Haft Tapeh called for soviet organization in December in the face of mass repression, as bosses lined their pockets while workers had not received pay in three months. In Matamoros, Mexican workers in revolt against their horrendous conditions disrupted the capitalist order through wildcat walkouts, which were outside of union control. What revolutionaries must take away from these struggles is that the working class can fight outside the union and parliamentary channels of the bosses; that the working class can fight through its autonomous organs and from its own programmatic standpoint.

The recent wave of working-class militancy cannot be understood separately from the ongoing and deep crisis of capitalism. The truth is, no matter how much the political voice boxes wish to speak of jobs and recovery – since 2008 – capitalism remains in unsettling turmoil, unable to overcome its own logic. In order to stave off the grim reality of the crisis, states have injected trillions of dollars every year to keep the bourgeois order afloat (through tax breaks and hand outs to banks). Fictitious (or interest-bearing) capital has become the dominant pole of the capitalist economy, as the rate of profit has sharply declined in the productive sphere. As much as figures like Trump have been able to peddle illusions to the workers about "job-creation", a cursory glance at the data behind new jobs reveals that most of them are precarious. Is this supposed stimulation of the job market really indicative of recovery when real wages are decimated and the new prospects for labor are found in the gig



economy and temp work? The increase in Uber-style jobs is less of a sign of stability for capital than it is a glaring indication of the deepening of the crisis. In light of this situation, militarism is on the rise. Countries like Venezuela have become a battleground for rivalries between imperialist powers hoping to advance their positions within capitalism. The seriousness of such a situation requires an uncompromising call to proletarian independence, a position taken by Klasbatalo comrades in their article on the political fiasco in Venezuela. Regional conflicts have reduced citadels of civilization into rubble, Europe and Russia practice their tank manoeuvres, American fleets strafe the far pacific staring down their Chinese rival.

Each action having its opposite reaction, the chaos that the bourgeois order has produced has been met with a spontaneous outburst of new proletarian struggles, after decades of defeat and atomization. After such a long period of class struggle being kept in a dormant state, the working class is finding itself no longer able to stand back in the face of such massive assaults. It must now organically produce a new leadership out of these struggles, one capable of carrying the lessons from the past, critiquing the struggles of today, and always pushing the fight onto our own terrain. It is no secret that currently, our forces are well behind in this task, but to push it off for more “ripe” conditions is the suicide of opportunism. While Intransigence is a modest effort, we wish to be a part of the process that ties Berlin 1919 to Mexico 2019.

### **I shall be**

With the deepening of working-class struggle on the horizon, communists cannot sit on their hands. In connection to the lessons accumulated since the revolutionary wave of Rosa Luxemburg’s epoch, the

proletariat is a class that emanates its own program. Revolutionaries today cannot reduce their activity to book clubs and cocktail parties. We cannot proclaim ourselves to be revolutionaries on theory alone. We must fight for the communist programme inside the newly emerging struggle, tying the lessons of the past to our immediate conditions, thus allowing us to draw new lessons. In this issue, we publish a riveting account of one of our comrades organizing in their work place. Set in the drab backdrop of cubicle labor, it highlights the grind, the old traps, and the insurmountable antagonisms between capital and labour. As well, next to a historical account of the US labour movement, we publish ongoing debates from communists across the world, from a critique on “lumpenization” by Prometeo, and a response by one of our readers on the period of transition based on a piece we previously published by Kontra Klasa.

What is the sound of the sabers rattling? What are these crises and assaults on the working class? Nothing but the evidence that this order is built on sand. The proletariat’s combative efforts weigh like a nightmare on bourgeois rule. Again, the working-class steps on the world-historical stage as the class with the capacity to emancipate all of humankind. No longer does humanity have to wander in the foggy swamps of class society, with all its mystifications and illusions. As the capitalists desperately scrounge for profits, our class sees its enemy and draws a line of demarcation. All traps, all mediations are abandoned, and the proletariat finally realizes its autonomy and historic task. With this crisis, the proletariat prepares to once again blow its trumpets and declare itself as the thunderclap of history. We shall be.



Edouard Manet, *The Ragpicker* (1869)



# ON THE LUMPENPROLETARIAT

## AN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND A CRITIQUE

The concept of the “lumpenproletariat” sits uneasily within Marxian class analysis. It is an unstable, even incoherent category, not only in terms of its theorization but at the level of social reality itself. Nowhere did Marx or Engels or their successors provide a rigorous or exhaustive account of lumpens as a group or lumpenization as a process. Rather, there are snippets of text which can be compiled regarding the lumpenproletariat’s role in modern life.

Politically, most Marxists would agree this role is negative — or rather has been at crucial junctures in the past. From the *lazzaroni* of Naples in 1799<sup>1</sup> through the *garde mobile* of Paris in 1848,<sup>2</sup> through the *garde mobile* up to the tsarist *черносотенцы* in Russia after 1905<sup>3</sup> through the *garde mobile* and the fascist *Sturmabteilung* in Germany during the interwar period,<sup>4</sup> through the *garde mobile* members of the lumpenproletariat have often served counterrevolutionary ends. At best, they are considered unreliable; at worst, predisposed to corruption. Either way, lumpens are not to be counted on when push comes to shove.

Yet these are merely scattered instances, not an overarching framework of society. While perhaps of anecdotal significance, they cannot be used to predict how this segment of the populace would act in any given situation. Historic tendencies may of course be noted, but it is important not to make the present just an index of the moments that led up to it. Otherwise one risks lapsing into vulgar empiricism,<sup>5</sup> always a temptation for historians.

Moreover, communists must be extra careful when the concept is deployed against a backdrop like the migrant crisis. Condemnations of lumpen criminality all too easily echo rightwing rhetoric about “law and order.” Such talking-points are already pervasive in the media, with horror stories reported nightly on the news. Xenophobic and racist attitudes are fueled by middle-class fears of gang violence, which is but the flipside of police violence. Ultimately, crime itself is determined by whatever the bourgeois state deems to be legal or illegal at the time.<sup>6</sup>

A pair of recent articles have been published advancing a left communist approach to this question.

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advancing a left communist approach to this question. Nuevo Curso examines the brutal effects of lumpenization in Spain alongside heightened xenophobia,<sup>7</sup> while Workers’ Offensive looks back on the glorification of the lumpenproletariat by the Black Panther Party in the US.<sup>8</sup> Both articles raise a number of salient points, some of which bear repeating, but do so in a rather ham-fisted manner. Greater precision is required for their message to come across, if they want to avoid maudlin moralistic postures.

What the present essay aims to accomplish is thus an historical reconstruction of the category, as well as a critique of its contemporary uses. It will be divided into three primary sections, each subdivided into two subsections:

- First, it will highlight some ambiguities in the Marxist definition of the lumpenproletariat to show how vague it is. These are not simply the result of confused thinking, either, but reflect the real messiness of life at the fringes of capitalism.
- Having clarified the core concept and furnished a material basis, its ideological function can now be laid bare from left to right. On both poles of the political spectrum, the figure of the lumpenproletariat is by turns glorified and vilified.
- Characteristically “lumpen” practices such as looting and rioting may then be interrogated to see whether they impede working-class militancy. Put otherwise, must revolution be on the table for counter-revolution to even be possible?

Just to be clear, the goal here is not to place lumpenproletarians at the forefront of proletarian struggle or make them into the vanguard of the class. Still less does this essay want to replace the proletariat as the identical subject/object of history, as workers remain uniquely positioned to overthrow the capitalist system. Least of all does it seek to rehabilitate the lumpenproletariat as a group or deny

how awful the process of lumpenization can be.

## Ambiguities

### Reconstructing the category

By far the most thorough treatment of the concept of the lumpenproletariat was that of the American Trotskyist Hal Draper. In it he traces its derivation from the Latin *proletarii*, which itself was undergoing a profound transformation during the first few decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The proletariat had not yet come to be fully identified with the emerging class of wage-laborers, and retained some of its earlier connotations as a parasitic rabble [*Pöbel*].<sup>10</sup>

Marx and Engels gestured toward this in their jointly-written *German Ideology*, where they asserted that “the plebeians [of Rome], midway between freemen and slaves, never succeeded in becoming more than a lumpenproletariat.”<sup>11</sup> Quoting the prominent left Ricardian economist Sismondi, Marx explained many years later: “Whereas the Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat.”<sup>12</sup> For Marx and Engels, this reversal was constitutive of the difference between antiquity and capitalist modernity.

Subsequent Marxists such as Nikolai Bukharin would sometimes express frustration at sociologists, who continued to confuse the proletariat with the lumpenproletariat well into the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Engels did suggest at one point, however, that an historic link existed between the two. Although “the lumpenproletariat is a phenomenon which occurs in every phase of society known so far,”<sup>14</sup> it acquired a special status when feudalism began to decay. Near the end of his life, Engels held that these *déclassé* elements comprised a sort of “preproletariat.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most famous line on the lumpenproletariat appears in the *Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels warn of “the ‘dangerous class,’ or the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society.” They concede that “it may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution,” but add that “its conditions of life prepare it far more for the part of bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”<sup>16</sup> Commentators have noted that their prediction came much too true during the

revolutions of 1848 and after.<sup>17</sup>

Following the collapse of the short-lived Orléanist dynasty in March 1848, proletarian unrest started to make itself felt in the French capital. By June it had boiled over into full-blown insurrection, prompting a ruthless response from the government. Reporting on the situation, Engels wrote “the mobile guard, which was recruited from the Paris lumpenproletariat, has already during its brief existence, thanks to good pay, been transformed into the praetorians of power; the organized lumpenproletariat has given battle to the unorganized working proletariat.”<sup>18</sup>

Vienna and Antwerp were the next European cities where the revolution was suppressed. “In Paris the mobile guard, in Vienna the ‘Croats’ — in both cases *lazzaroni*, or the lumpenproletariat hired and armed — were used against the working and thinking proletarians,” Marx recorded in the pages of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Engels commented on the court proceedings against republicans in Belgium to the effect that workers could not have been among the ranks of the monarchists; instead, he reasoned, it must have been *les misérables*.<sup>20</sup>

Who were the lumpenproletarians, though? Of all the descriptions Marx wrote of this group, two stand out for their vividness. The first came midway through his polemical 1850 pamphlet *Class Struggles in France*, referring to:

the lumpenproletariat, which in big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, gens sans *feu* et sans *aveu* [those without hearth or home], varying according to the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong... but never renouncing their *lazzaroni* character; at the tender age the Provisional Government recruited them, thoroughly malleable, as capable of performing the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices as of the basest banditry and the foulest corruption.<sup>21</sup>



And in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

the lumpenproletariat of Paris was organized into secret sections; alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, rogues, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French famously term *la bohème*.<sup>22</sup>

Literary critics have dismissed this passage as a rhetorical flourish, an exercise in mid-nineteenth-century list-making and little else.<sup>23</sup> But academic explanations of this sort no more suffice than efforts to ascribe these views to prejudices stemming from their social origins, to “Marx’s bourgeois outlook”<sup>24</sup> or his and Engels’ “middle-class Biedermeier mentality.”<sup>25</sup> Such facile dismissals explain nothing, assured as they are of the belief that today people know better.

One of the more serious challenges to Marx and Engels’ interpretation of 1848 has been mounted by historians of a sociological bent. Demographic data about the average age, occupation, and residence of the mobile guardsmen casts doubt upon the official Marxist narrative.<sup>26</sup> Quantitative research would seem to indicate that the class background was similar for combatants on either side of the barricade,<sup>27</sup> with the main difference being generational.

However, this objection — though grounded in painstaking archival work — is made in retrospect, and runs up against the preponderant perception of contemporary observers. These include many who actually participated in the uprising. Marx and Engels reviewed several memoirs written by professional conspirators, recalling firsthand their involvement in the events of 1848.<sup>28</sup> Add to that the great wealth of artistic evidence left by Parisian witnesses, from Daumier’s lumpenproletarian caricature “Ratapoil”<sup>29</sup> to the ragmen of Baudelaire’s intoxicated strolls.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, this focus on the lowest layer of the class leaves out a major aspect of Marx’s original formulation. Namely, “the rebirth of the

lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society,” within the Bonapartist state and the finance aristocracy.<sup>31</sup> What he meant by this was not the ordinary crowd of lobbyists and speculators, who despite their lack of scruples normally operate inside the bounds of the law. Rather the schemers and scammers, the Charles Ponzis and Bernie Madoffs of the world, with longstanding connections to organized crime.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, Louis Bonaparte himself was seen by Marx as some kind of “princely lumpenproletarian,”<sup>33</sup> a petty crook who through guile and blind luck had risen to become head of state. Just as the lumpenproletariat would be enlisted against the workers as strikebreakers or scabs, cheap stand-ins, so too was Bonaparte “a *remplaçant*, the substitute for Napoleon.”<sup>34</sup> Unquestionably Marx made generous use of metaphor and clever turns of phrase, but there was a very literal dimension to his belief that Bonaparte was nothing more than a lumpen writ large.<sup>35</sup>

## Definitional problems

Nevertheless, questions remain about the precise character of the lumpenproletariat. Above all, in terms of its class character: Where does it fit into the Marxist theory of social classes? Properly speaking, is it even a class at all? How does it relate to other classic *termes d’art* like “surplus population” and “reserve army of labor”, or neologisms like the “precariat”? Finally, what separates modern lumpens from premodern antecedents in more agrarian societies?

Starting with the last question and then working backwards, a few words can be spared about the specificity of the phenomenon. Of course, as Marx and Engels pointed out, the lumpenproletariat was present in all recorded social configurations. But since this segment of society has always been concentrated primarily in cities, it follows that its presence would only increase with the shift to a more urban civilization like capitalism. Rising crime rates go hand-in-hand with the rapid growth of industrial centers and the societal upheaval that trails in its wake.<sup>36</sup>

“Urban agglomerations have produced

illnesses and epidemics, physical and criminal degeneration, the formation of the lumpenproletariat and of an underworld worse than the highwaymen of previous centuries, and the terrifying rise of all statistics relating to crime," remarked Amadeo Bordiga in 1952.<sup>37</sup> It is fitting that a native Neapolitan would weigh in on the issue, given Marx's view of his hometown as the capital of *Lazzaronitum*. (Ermanno Rea, the late Italian essayist, claimed Naples was haunted by the ghosts of Bakunin, Bordiga, and the lumpens.)<sup>38</sup>

Contrasting the Sicilian mafia with the Neapolitan camorra, as Eric Hobsbawm for example did in *Primitive Rebels*, helps to underscore the difference between the lumpenproletariat and its precursors. The mafia in Sicily held sway outside Palermo, in the villas and villages beyond the reach of Bourbon or Piedmontese rule. Only in American cities like New York and Chicago did it adjust to an urban setting. Hobsbawm's study makes clear its stark contrast with the camorra in Naples, which took shape in the jails,<sup>39</sup> later forming "the quintessential 'mob'."<sup>40</sup>

Paris over the first half of the nineteenth century became virtually synonymous with metropolitan crime. Louis Chevalier, a skillful bourgeois historian, chronicled the pervasive theme of the "dangerous classes" in serial fiction by novelists like Jules Verne, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Eugène Sue (all of whom Marx and Engels read avidly).<sup>41</sup> For Chevalier, the very fact that detailed information was now being kept about the incidence and severity of crime, culminating in the modern science of criminology, attested to a social dynamic without precedent.<sup>42</sup>

Although he was wrong to insist on the singularity of Paris — other cities exhibited similar proclivities — Chevalier was right that the issue here was "not crime itself so much as the pathological nature of urban living."<sup>43</sup> Urbanization everywhere resulted in the creation of a permanent "underclass" which was quite distinct from the brigands and banditos of precapitalist times or the lawless frontier. Now its place in the social structure must be ascertained.

Endnotes, voice of the Anglophone communization milieu, asks in the centerpiece to its fourth issue: "What is the relationship between the surplus population and the lumpenproletariat? Are they one and the same? Marx expounds on the surplus population at length in *Capital*, but does not refer at all to the

lumpenproletariat in that work. He uses the phrase only in his political writings."<sup>44</sup> Strictly speaking, this last claim is inaccurate. Déclassé elements show up in the twenty-fifth chapter of that work, where they are put beneath the relative surplus population.<sup>45</sup>

Various Marxian theorists have schematized the relationship between the total workforce and the different levels of the relative surplus population, which includes the lumpenproletariat. In recent years, Teinosuke Otani has offered a serviceable breakdown of the latter.<sup>46</sup> Bordiga provided a neat overview back in the fifties:

1. The active industrial army, or workers who have a job.
2. *Floating* surplus population, workers entering or leaving the factories in accordance with technical evolution and the changes it entails to the division of labor.
3. *Latent* surplus population, workers leaving the countryside for the factories because of the difficulty of life at the margins of agrarian economy.
4. *Stagnant* surplus population, which is only rarely called upon by big industry: domestic workers [*travailleurs à domicile*], workers employed in marginal activities for a very low salary.
5. Paupers: Chronically unemployed, though able to work. Orphans and children of the poor. Disabled or unemployable persons, widows, etc.
6. Apart from the working class, in what is known as the "lumpenproletariat": delinquents, prostitutes, the underworld [*pègre*].<sup>47</sup>

No doubt this is a much more finely-grained presentation of the lumpenproletariat and its place within Marx's network of categories. Yet the matter is by no means exhausted by this schematic, as it conflicts with some of the other definitions cited above. Is the lumpenproletariat part of the proletariat proper? Or is it made up of precapitalist survivals? This last question is connected with the unresolved issue of lumpenization, whether it was a

one-off or is an ongoing process. Further confusion attaches to recent buzzwords like casualization and precarization.

Guy Standing's newly-minted notion of the "precariat" is a case in point. Although he states that this term is not identical to the Marxist concept of the lumpenproletariat,<sup>48</sup> Standing complicates things by referring to it as another *classe dangereuse* in the subtitle to his book. Moreover, "precarity" is a feature of both proletarian and lumpenproletarian life.<sup>49</sup> While it is important to distinguish precarization from lumpenization, as Nuevo Curso suggests,<sup>50</sup> it is not enough to state this fact without elaborating on it. Each of these processes has to be spelled out.

Sooner or later one wonders if the lumpenproletariat is a class in its own right, or simply a subclass of a larger class. Here and there Marx and Engels referred to it as a *Klasse*,<sup>51</sup> but for the most part they saw it as utterly declassed — as "the scum, offal, and refuse of all classes"<sup>52</sup> or "[the] depraved elements from all classes."<sup>53</sup> Later Engels would get more specific about the class origins of those thus declassed, writing in 1874:

In French the *déclassés* are people of the propertied classes who were ousted or who broke away from that class without thereby becoming proletarians, such as business adventurers, rogues, and gamblers... most of them professional literati or politicians, etc. The proletariat, too, has its *déclassé* elements, making up the lumpenproletariat.<sup>54</sup>

Beforehand the literati had been listed by Marx under the rubric of the lumpenproletariat, but it would appear Engels reclassified them as lumpenbourgeois. Regardless, another ambiguity arises insofar as the degree of differentiation between lumpens and regular proles is left unclear. Marx at one point wrote the two were already "sharply differentiated," but later in the same paragraph said this was only due to the uniforms given them by the bourgeois authorities.<sup>55</sup> However, the government clearly had "to play off one part of the proletariat against the other."

Depending on how one chooses to count, there are only two or three "pure" classes in capitalism. "Society as a whole is more and more split between

two great hostile camps, two great classes directly facing each other," Marx and Engels contended in the *Manifesto*, "proletariat and bourgeoisie."<sup>56</sup> Georg Lukács later added:

Proletariat and bourgeoisie are the only pure classes in bourgeois society, the only classes whose entire existence and development are dependent on the course charted by modern production. It is only from the vantage point of these classes that a plan for the total organization of society can even be imagined. The outlook of the other classes is ambiguous or sterile, because their existence is not based exclusively on a role in the capitalist system.<sup>57</sup>

A third relatively "pure" class could be added to this dichotomy, following Marx's argument in the final volume of *Capital* put out by Engels: "Workers, capitalists, and landowners form the three great classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production."<sup>58</sup> Of course, these classes line up with the three constituent parts of the "trinity formula" that Marx had just finished discussing a few chapters prior — i.e. wages, profits, and ground-rent.<sup>59</sup>

Even the petite bourgeoisie is not a "pure" class according to Lukács, *stricto sensu*, belonging in the final analysis to the bourgeoisie (as its name suggests). Like the grande bourgeoisie, it has access to the means of production necessary to reproduce its own existence. Unlike the grande bourgeoisie, it lacks the capital to employ others to work these same means. For the most part it is divided into upwardly- and downwardly-mobile portions, which are either impoverished or enriched until they merge with the mass of workers or join with the capitalists.<sup>60</sup>

Given that it tends to be absorbed into these purer classes, why does the petite bourgeoisie prove such a resilient feature of capitalism? To begin with, the ranks of the petite bourgeoisie are replenished through periodic crises. Capitalists will buy up bankrupt mom-and-pop shops, smalltime businesses that have gone under, but workers who have scrimped and scrounged will also often have a go at being an

independent proprietor. It is somewhat analogous in the case of lumpens, though this is decidedly less of an aspirational status than *petit-bourgeois*.

With the *lumpenproletariat*, however, its position *vis-à-vis* the social structure of capitalism is more paradoxical than with the *petite bourgeoisie*. Lumpens in a quite tangible sense find themselves outside of capitalist society, or at least beyond its legal bounds. Yet at the same time, their plight is a byproduct of the very system from which they are excluded. Border cases abound as well: How does one classify those who work nine-to-five jobs but sling dope on the side to supplement their shitty wages? Perhaps this is what makes them so difficult to define.

## Polarities

### Leftists and the *lumpenproletariat*

Debates over the revolutionary potential of the *lumpenproletariat* have raged from the foundation of the First Workingmen's International onward. Since the 1860s, then, many have diverged from Marx's deprecatory view of the *lumpenproletariat*, with some even going so far as to assert that this miserable stratum is more predisposed to anticapitalism than its industrial counterpart. Mikhail Bakunin, the voice of anarchist politics during this period, was the earliest to articulate this view.<sup>61</sup> Even Marxists, however, above all Maoists, subsequently followed suit.

A quick note on terminology, regarding leftism and the Left: In recent decades the left/right distinction has been attacked at times as obsolete. Other times it has been defended as still relevant.<sup>62</sup> Whole books have been written that recast the history of the Left as a struggle to forge democracy,<sup>63</sup> or else a critique of everyday life.<sup>64</sup> Communist dissidents have tried to conceptualize the Left as "a movement of negation toward the existent world," which tends toward total emancipation.<sup>65</sup> Though occasionally interesting, these efforts prove to be inadequate.

Right and left might retain relative validity in the sense that one thing can be "to the left" of another thing, or that something can be criticized "from the left". German, Dutch, and Italian communists could thus be said to represent the left wing of the early Comintern. Kantianism was similarly susceptible to materialist

criticism.<sup>66</sup> Later on the Left (with a capital letter) acquired quasi-metaphysical properties as an entity unto itself, a catchall encompassing everything from mass social-democratic parties to Leninist sects to tiny anarchist cells and much else besides.

Usually this is further broken up into an Old Left (1923-1956), New Left (1956-1989), and "post-political" Left (1989-present), commonly disparaged by communists as "the left wing of capital".<sup>67</sup> Prior to 1923, it is somewhat anachronistic to refer to anarchists, social-democrats, and revolutionary Marxists under this generic rubric. But since the controversy between Bakunin and Marx over the *lumpenproletariat* — carried on by their followers over the next fifty years — was so decisive for the debates that ensued, it is worth reviewing their polemics.

Marx and Engels only grew more intransigent, some scholars noticed, on the subject of lumpens as time went on.<sup>68</sup> Quarreling with Bakunin had made matters worse. "All the depravities in which the life of declassed individuals ejected from society inevitably become involved are proclaimed to be so many ultrarevolutionary virtues," Marx and Engels sarcastically sniped, without mentioning Bakunin by name. They continued:

Economic and political struggle on the part the workers for own their emancipation is replaced by the pan-destructive acts of heroes of the underworld — this latest incarnation of revolution. In a word, one must let loose the street hooligans suppressed by the workers themselves in revolutions on the Western classical model, and thus place gratuitously at the disposal of the reactionaries a well-disciplined gang of *agents provocateurs*.<sup>69</sup>

Bakunin replied:

nowhere are there more favorable conditions for the social revolution than in Italy. For there does not exist in Italy, as in most other European nations, a special category of relatively affluent workers, earning higher wages, boasting of their literary capacities,



and impregnated by a variety of bourgeois prejudices such that excepting income they differ in no way from the bourgeoisie. In Italy, it is the extremely poor proletariat that predominates (of whom Marx speaks disdainfully, quite unjustly, as a Lumpenproletariat). Only in them, and not in the bourgeois strata of workers, is there crystallized the intelligence and power of the coming revolution.<sup>70</sup>

Here what ought to jump out at readers is how closely Bakunin's description of workers approximates the category of the "labor aristocracy" developed by Marx and Engels in the Anglo-Saxon context just a few years down the road.<sup>71</sup> More will be said about this in the conclusion, but for now it is enough to point out the similarity. The Bakunist lumpenproletariat was far more capacious than that of Marx or Engels, including the romantic figure of the Cossack.<sup>72</sup> Although outlaws, these adventurers were often conscripted into tsarist regiments to restore order.

Victor Serge went over this disagreement in a 1938 reflection on anarchist thought. "Bakunin, who seems to have never truly understood Marx, in certain regards was unable to shake specifically Russian ideas concerning the role of the underworld in the coming revolution," commented Serge, "attributing a useful and important function to the *déclassés*, outlaws, and bandits. Learning from the experience of the industrial countries, Marx knew that the lumpenproletariat, the subproletariat or the 'rabble' of the big cities, was inclined to serve counterrevolution."<sup>73</sup>

Karl Kautsky featured a salutary reference to lumpens in his popular textbook on *The Class Struggle*, one half of the epochal Erfurt Program (1890).<sup>74</sup> In this work, as well as his disquisition on *The Agrarian Question* (1900), they are described as prone to drunkenness and debauchery owing to their miserable situation.<sup>75</sup> Politically the lumpenproletarian ideal is a communism of consumption, not of production.<sup>76</sup> Among the many Marxists who read and appreciated this treatise by Kautsky was Vladimir Lenin, who defended it from the self-styled "critics of Marx".<sup>77</sup>

During and immediately after the 1905 revolution in Russia, Marxists sought to make sense of the violent antisemitic riots that broke out following the brief revolutionary efflorescence. The social composition

of the pogromists had yet to be ascertained.<sup>78</sup> Lenin saw in this reactionary backlash the hand of the lumpenproletariat, which bore the ideological imprint of anarchism.<sup>79</sup> Rosa Luxemburg echoed this sentiment:

What is the actual role of anarchism in the Russian Revolution? It has become the sign of the common thief and plunderer; a large proportion of the innumerable thefts and acts of plunder of private persons are carried out under the name of "anarcho-communism" — acts rising up like a troubled wave against the revolution in every period of depression and temporary defensive. Anarchism has become not the theory of the struggling proletariat, but the ideological signboard of the counterrevolutionary lumpenproletariat, which swarms like a school of sharks in the slipstream of the battleship of revolution, ending its whole historical career.<sup>80</sup>

Her scorn for this protean social element did not stop there, however. She further derided the various "demonstrations of the patriotic lumpenproletariat carried out under police patronage."<sup>81</sup> Most of her views on the matter were secondhand, cribbed from Russian Marxist dispatches. By Luxemburg's own admission, "the idea that anarchism is the ideology of the lumpenproletariat was already expressed by [Georgii] Plekhanov in his German brochures."<sup>82</sup>

Justified though it may once have been as a reproach to the likes of Bakunin or Nechaev, the charge that lumpens somehow formed the "natural constituency" of anarchists was already outdated by 1905. Not only in Western Europe, either, where an ascendant labor movement had given rise to syndicalism. In Russia as well, anarcho-syndicalists "denounced the 'Nechaevist tactics' of conspiratorial societies and derided their faith in the revolutionary capacity of thieves, tramps, the *lumpenproletariat*, and other dark factors."<sup>83</sup> Paul Avrich has documented this well.

These debates all lurked in the background when the issue was again taken up by segments of the New Left, especially those involved in anticolonial

and antiracist struggles. Frantz Fanon saw in lumpens “the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people,”<sup>84</sup> even though their presence in urban centers along the capitalist periphery was a sign of “the irreversible rot and gangrene eating into the heart of colonial domination.” Despite signaling this decay, Fanon nevertheless held out hope that:

the pimps, hooligans, unemployed, and petty criminals when approached will give the liberation struggle all they've got, devoting themselves to the cause like valiant workers... Vagrants will find their way back to the nation thanks to decisive militant action. Unchanged in the eyes of colonial society or *vis-à-vis* the moral standards of the colonizer, this jobless species of subhumans believe the gun or the hand grenade is the only way to reenter the cities, and thus redeem itself before history. Likewise with the prostitutes, the domestics at two thousand francs a month, the hopeless cases, the men and women who fluctuate between madness and suicide... Restored to sanity, they return to action amidst the great march of a nation on the move.<sup>85</sup>

Yet elsewhere Fanon vacillated, fearing that lumpens could easily be conscripted as irregulars and used to crush rebellion. “If the insurrection thinks it can afford to ignore the lumpenproletariat, this famished underclass will pitch itself into armed struggle on the side of the oppressor,” he worried, paraphrasing the *Manifesto*.<sup>86</sup> Many authors sympathetic to Fanon, for example his biographer David Macey, saw him as incredibly naïve on this score: “Any Marxist knew well that the lumpenproletariat would not play a progressive role in the event of a revolution.”<sup>87</sup>

Just a few years later in the US, the Black Panther Party also adopted a more optimistic stance with regard to these social outcasts. Partly inspired by Fanon,<sup>88</sup> Huey Newton and Bobby Seale went against settled orthodoxy on this issue.<sup>89</sup> “We’d argue with our Marxist friends,” the latter later recalled, “who felt lumpens never did anything but pillage and ignore the revolutionary cause altogether.”<sup>90</sup> Seale once quipped that “Marx and Lenin would probably turn over in their graves if they saw lumpenproletarians and their role

within the ideology of the BPP.”<sup>91</sup>

Newton’s gloss on the category was quite idiosyncratic, defined as “the left wing of the proletariat.” He felt that the lumpenproletariat alone possessed “the potential to act as the vanguard,” carrying the people toward the final climax of the transformation of society.<sup>92</sup> For Newton, automation was leading to structural unemployment on an expanded scale. “Lumpenproletarians in the near future will be the popular majority,” he predicted.<sup>93</sup> This then led him to assert in 1971 that “the lumpenproletariat is the majority, and hoists the revolutionary banner.”<sup>94</sup>

Eldridge Cleaver, one of this doctrine’s original authors, argued that productive technologies would eventually bring about “the lumpenization of humanity.”<sup>95</sup> Upon his expulsion from the BPP, a year or so after Newton’s speech at Boston College, Cleaver took this argument further. “Marxism has had a disastrous effect upon the revolutionary movement,” he maintained late in 1972, “misunderstanding the basic nature of oppression. It wrongly identified the proletariat or the working class as the most radical element of society, when it is in fact the lumpen.”<sup>96</sup>

Workers’ Offensive was thus right to assert: “Glorifying the lumpenproletariat, as the BPP did, has more in common with Bakunin than with Marx.”<sup>97</sup> As the Marxist historian Manning Marable observed, this was an equal but opposite mistake to more milquetoast New Left groups such as the SDS. “Social-democrats tend to substitute white students and professionals for the traditional working class,” wrote Marable. “Neo-Bakuninists make the same error, in the other direction, by exalting the black lumpenproletariat as the main force of social revolution.”<sup>98</sup>

Criticizing the BPP is a tricky matter in the US, where the memory of its martyrdom is still present. Very few organizations have been so enduringly mythologized. Regardless, it is important that the BPP be susceptible to criticism like any leftwing political party. The International Communist Party provided an evenhanded appraisal in 1971, one which took stock of the persecution it suffered at the hands of the police:

Here is an attempt to adjust theory and practice to this social category, searching for fresh strength, a unique path to revolution via the very reasons that the lumpenproletariat has been historically impotent. So the lumpenproletariat, having no opportunity to boycott production by means of a strike and forced to clash in the streets, is seen as more revolutionary... Yet the BPP seems unaware that this also entails inevitable defeat.<sup>99</sup>

Black Panther ideology was straitjacketed from the start by an ill-fitting patchwork of Maoist, Juche, and adjacent notions. (Maoism came to Newton and Seale courtesy of the FBI snitch Richard Aoki, it ought to be added parenthetically.)<sup>100</sup> Of course, none of this is meant to denigrate the legacy of the BPP or belittle its accomplishments. Fervent admirers of the group have even cited the effort to recruit among the lumpenproletariat as a crucial misstep, one which invited violence into its internal culture and gave federal authorities another excuse to monitor it.<sup>101</sup>

## Attitudes of reactionaries toward the lumpen

Various post-Left — i.e., post-anarchist and post-Marxist — musings about the lumpenproletariat may be bracketed for now and dealt with in the final section. Reactionary attitudes toward this marginalized segment of society will instead be examined here, to see how it figured into the historical narrative and cultural tropes of rightwing ideology. Conservatives rarely thought of lumpens in explicitly social terms, though, preferring to look for explanations elsewhere.

Specifically, they tended to displace the class stratification that results from capitalist production onto a preexisting racial hierarchy. In other words, the uneven outcomes of universalized competition can be chalked up to congenital laziness/industriousness or other heritable traits. Jews for example are seen as preternaturally thrifty and cunning, stereotyped as shopkeepers or well-to-do professionals (as lawyers, doctors, or whatnot). Latinos and blacks are by contrast depicted as shiftless ne'er-do-wells, associated with chronic unemployment and urban crime-waves.

Whenever a dominant racial or ethnic group experiences economic insecurity, or feels threatened by

impoverishment, its worst fears and resentments are channeled by rightwing ideologues into hatred of immigrants and minorities. Xenophobia and racism flow from real premises, but are distorted through an ideological prism. Either way, these prejudices substitute *Rassenkampf* for *Klassenkampf*. Marxists do not seek to defend the petite bourgeoisie or lumpenproletariat as such, but attack campaigns specifically targeting Jewish proprietors or black and Latino gangs.

Psychology offers a convenient dyad that captures the reactionary position on lumpenproletarians: attraction/repulsion. Attracted by their brutality, the ease with which they resort to force. Repulsed by their degenerate behavior, how soon they succumb to vices like whoring, gambling, and drink. Beyond any of this, however, reactionaries view lumpens either as a pool of available enforcers there to uphold the existing order or as a readymade scapegoat on which all sorts of chaos can be blamed. This duality will be evident in the survey of reaction that follows.

1905 once again serves as a benchmark, helping gauge the role of different groups in moments of upheaval. Luxemburg vividly described the patriotism exhibited by “lumpen elements, police informers, plainclothesmen, and other hangers-on holding aloft a portrait of the tsar.”<sup>102</sup> She continued in another weekly column:

From all the cities, all the regions, from every corner of the empire come news reports of murder and looting, anti-Jewish rampages, and other bestial excesses by the police, the Cossacks, and the soldiers... Yet again tsarism has resorted to its “tried-and-true,” favorite method of fighting the revolutionary movement. It stirs up the dregs of society, or lumpenproletariat, trying to drown the vanguard of the working class in a sea of blood.<sup>103</sup>

According to the tsarist administrator of Kiev, the mob that ransacked the city in October of that year was made up of such unsavory characters: “Urchins, vagabonds, and assorted riff-raff; it was mostly they who did the plundering.”<sup>104</sup> Demographic inferences

gathered from eyewitness testimony corroborate this account.<sup>105</sup> “Hooliganism” [хулиганство] came to refer almost exclusively to the pogromist lifestyle in the Pale of Settlement, where Jews were confined.<sup>106</sup>

Whether or not the ragged Black Hundred hordes constituted a fascist or protofascist force is an open question, though some have already answered in the affirmative.<sup>107</sup> Less controversial is the claim that the paramilitary Freikorps, unleashed against the unruly Spartakusbund in January 1919, prefigured Nazism in Germany. Recent studies confirm that a large portion of the Freikorps’ membership was seen by contemporaries as “lumpen and work-shy [Arbeitsscheuen].”<sup>108</sup> Even the officers in command of such units regarded the rank-and-file as difficult to control.<sup>109</sup>

Other historians, mostly during the Soviet period, diagnosed the class composition of the Freikorps as lumpenproletarian and petit-bourgeois — two groups ripe for fascism, in the classic Marxian view.<sup>110</sup> (German communists at the time referred to the murderers of Luxemburg and Liebknecht as “lumpen scoundrels.”)<sup>111</sup> As Gilles Dauvé points out, however, this appellation cut both ways: Friedrich Ebert and the ruling social democrats sought to discredit the Spartacists as the party of the lumpenproletariat, as if any opposition to parliamentarism sowed disorder.<sup>112</sup>

The right wing of the workers’ movement, the MSPD, falsely accused the Spartacists of lumpenism while employing actual lumpens to stamp out their uprising. Here the double motion of repulsion and attraction is laid bare. World War I trained an entire generation of able-bodied men to fight, and now a huge swathe of unemployed ex-servicemen with deadly skillsets returned to ruined economies bitter at their fate. Rightwing veterans such as the avant-garde novelist Ernst Jünger speculated about the role they might play:

Bakunin was right in regarding the lumpenproletariat as a much more effective revolutionary force [than the working masses]. Seen from another side, one can say it’s enough to disperse the masses, while the lumpenproletariat must be sought out in its hiding places. Its greater effectiveness furthermore suggests that it owns a real battle plan, the age-old formation of the pack... The lumpenproletariat’s relation to pain is also more

substantial, if no doubt negative. For while the masses kill with machines, tearing apart and trampling underfoot, the lumpenproletariat is directly familiar with the joys of torture. Whereas the masses are moved morally (united in indignation at injustice and evil), the lumpenproletariat is beyond all moral valuations and thus always and everywhere ready to seize the opportunity (with any disturbance of the social order). One must regard the lumpenproletariat as a kind of underground army reserve the social order keeps on alert.

It is to be noted parenthetically here that the word “lumpenproletariat”, as the attentive reader will have not failed to notice, belongs to the outdated vocabulary of class struggle. Yet we are dealing here with an elementary force, which is always present and naturally concealed behind a mask of established economic thought. Today, this elementary force appears in new forms associated with other such forces active in political movements and military actions. Above all, we refer to the appearance of the partisan, who to a great extent has already lost all social hue. Partisans are assigned missions carried out beneath the legal order, surfacing at the rear of invading armies (where operations involve espionage, sabotage, and subversion). During a civil war, the operations left to partisans include missions beyond the bounds of law, which are especially ruthless.<sup>113</sup>

Clearly, the revolution this passage had in mind was not a communist one. Jünger was the exemplar of “reactionary modernism” and an advocate of conservative revolution.<sup>114</sup> Ex-soldiers supplied the bulk of fascism’s street-fighting squadrons, the blackshirts in Italy and brownshirts in Germany. Of all the varied walks of life Marx categorized as lumpenproletarian, the “discharged soldier” is perhaps the most easily forgotten. However, one need only think of groups like the Three Percenters in the US today to get a sense of their potential counterrevolutionary use.

August Thalheimer, one of the first Marxists to theorize fascism, ventured that it was a kind of redux Bonapartism as early as 1923. Fascism, like



Bonapartism before it, pretends to act on behalf of the whole nation, incorporating a range of influences. "Its social composition consists of ejected elements from all classes," wrote Thalheimer, "the nobility, the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, the peasantry, and the working class. With the working class, two opposite yet related *déclassé* poles are present: below, the lumpenproletariat; above, the labor aristocracy."<sup>115</sup>

Trotsky concurred with this diagnosis in his account of "How Mussolini Triumphed" (1932), where he asserted: "No longer able to hold society in a state of equilibrium through its 'usual' police resources and parliamentary screens, fascism rushes to the defense of bourgeois dictatorship... By means of the fascist agency, capitalism sets into motion the masses of the crazed petite bourgeoisie along with bands of the declassed and demoralized lumpenproletariat... all of the countless human beings finance capital itself has brought to the precipice of despair."<sup>116</sup>

Likewise, the Italian communist Angelo Tasca maintained that while the petite bourgeoisie "formed the backbone of fascism in Italy," this had to be granted a wider ambit "to include the son of the family waiting for a job or for his inheritance to *déclassé* of all kinds, temporary or permanent, from the half-pay officer to the *Lumpenproletarier*."<sup>117</sup> However, it fell to the German left communist Arthur Rosenberg to connect the dots between the Black Hundreds in Russia, blackshirts in Italy, and brownshirts in Germany:

In the autumn of 1905 the Black Hundreds committed some four thousand murders through hundreds of Russian towns, to say nothing of all their other crimes. As far as its scale is concerned, this movement of the "true Russian peoples" can certainly be compared with the more recent actions of the blackshirts and brownshirts. At a time of enormous revolutionary tension, when millions of workers were on strike in Russia, when in innumerable villages there were peasant rebellions, and the soldiers and sailors were starting to mutiny, it was still possible for the ruling class to enlist hundreds of thousands of impoverished elements as stormtroopers of the counter-revolution. Hatred of Jews, a stupid and fanatical nationalism, bribery, and alcohol all combined to

pull together petit-bourgeois, lumpenproletarians, and occasionally even rightwing workers... The possibility of stealing and plundering with total impunity drove hordes of professional criminals into fascism's ranks.<sup>118</sup>

Many Marxists saw the rise of fascism in terms directly analogous to mob violence. Bertolt Brecht, for example, likened Hitler's ascension to that of a Chicago mobster in his 1941 play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.<sup>119</sup> Ui, a kind of Al Capone figure, rose from local boss of the outskirts of Cicero to take over the big city — "the world was almost ruled by such a crook!"<sup>120</sup> Statistics bear out the idea that fascists recruited heavily from lumpenized segments of the population, especially their SA units, which engaged in quasi-gangland street warfare with communists.<sup>121</sup>

In terms of the recipients of fascist aggression, the enemy was often portrayed in mass propaganda as lumpenproletarian. Particularly the Roma minority, both in urban centers and wandering along their periphery. Guenther Lewy explains in *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* that this was the rationale given for clearing away squats and caravans outside Düsseldorf in 1936.<sup>122</sup> Robert Ritter, an "expert" on the Gypsy problem (as it was known), for the most part saw them as social parasites and habitual criminals, representing "a highly inferior lumpenproletariat."<sup>123</sup>

Jews were less automatically associated with the "underclass" than their fellow *Untermenschen*, but the fascists aimed to fix this. "The National Socialist plan to force what remains of the Jews down into the lumpenproletariat shows how well its authors know the environment," recorded Max Horkheimer in 1939. "Once Jews have become shabby, they will no longer even benefit from the fleeting sentiment of bourgeois class solidarity: the outrage that even rich people are not safe."<sup>124</sup> Horkheimer viewed this as an essential step in the Jews' dehumanization.

No doubt there were genuine Jewish lumpens, from the characters in Isaak Babel's *Odessa Tales* to real-life gangsters like Benny Siegel and Meyer Lansky. But the point here is that the Nazis

felt the need to relegate Jews to this lowly status, while at the same time drawing upon the dregs of German society for foot-soldiers.<sup>125</sup> Lumpenization took its toll on the Jews of Europe, breaking their spirit of resistance and insubordination. “Even outside of the camps, struggles are rarely waged by the lumpenproletariat,” noted Primo Levi. “People in rags do not revolt.”<sup>126</sup>

Around the same time and for some decades prior, white lynch mobs perpetrated numerous acts of terror across the United States. Race riots often featured lumpen participants. For instance, in 1863 draft riots broke out in NYC that saw hundreds killed and thousands injured. Dozens of black residents were hanged from lampposts or murdered in the streets. Herbert Asbury wrote in *Gangs of New York* (1928) that “the riots were an insurrection of the criminal element against the established order,”<sup>127</sup> an almost perfect description of political lumpenism.

The original postbellum Ku Klux Klan was largely composed of Confederate veterans, and so might be seen in the same light as later fascist paramilitaries. Petit-bourgeois notables were often attracted to the Klan as well, despite its reputation for rowdiness,<sup>128</sup> and together they led a grim insurgency against Reconstruction in the South. Fifty years after it was founded, the Klan was reborn in 1915 from a wide array of social forces. Most were local businessmen, or else middling professionals.<sup>129</sup> Very few could be called lumpens, their reactionary populism aside.<sup>130</sup>

Only after the KKK’s decline circa 1928 did its membership begin to depend on more disreputable types. “Con men and thugs”: this was how the SPLC described the leadership and the rank-and-file of the 1970s Klan, respectively.<sup>131</sup> White supremacist prison outfits like the Aryan Brotherhood also quite obviously fall under the lumpenproletarian heading. Yet in spite of their own overtly criminal character, racists in such organizations continued to decry black and Hispanic youths as dangerous born criminals, prone to all sorts of so-called “thuggish” behavior.

Here again one sees the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of reactionaries toward the lumpen: attraction to anyone down on his luck who belongs to an ethnic or racial majority; repulsion to anyone down on his luck who belongs to an ethnic or racial minority. Nuevo Curso observes their tendency to “[blame] lumpenization on some of its imminent victims.”<sup>132</sup> A

prime example of this would seem to be the rightwing representation of migrants from Central America as potential MS-13 members, when a number of them are in fact fleeing cartel violence.

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Further exploration of the “lumpenproletariat” concept will have to appear in a second installment, which will cover its use in contemporary post-Marxist and communization literature. Riots, looting, and popular fronts remain to be investigated. Special thanks to Jon Locks and Red Hughs for conversations that helped parse this whole fraught subject.

**Walt Auerbach**

## NOTES

1 “The people would’ve won despite the numerical superiority of the soldiery had the miserable conduct of the French admiral Baudin not induced the *lazzaroni* to join the royal side... The Neapolitan lumpenproletariat decided the defeat of the 1799 revolution.” Friedrich Engels. “The Last Heroic Deed of the House of Bourbon.” Translated by Kai Schoenhals. *Collected Works, Volume 7*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1977). Pgs. 24-26.

2 “The Paris proletariat replied [to the Constituent Assembly of 1848] with the June insurrection, but the bourgeois republic triumphed. On its side stood the finance aristocracy, industrial bourgeoisie, middle class, petit-bourgeois, army, the lumpenproletariat organized as the mobile guard, intellectuals, clergy, and rural population. On the side of the Paris proletariat stood none but itself.” Karl Marx. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 11*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1979). Pg. 110.

3 “Craftsmen, under pressure from large-scale industry and the working-class movement... represent an ignorant, hungry, embittered class which, together with the Lumpenproletariat, provides the fighting legions for the Black Hundreds demonstrations and pogroms.” Leon Trotsky. 1905. Translated by Anna Bostock. (Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL: 2016). Pg. 36.

4 “[National Bolshevism] was never spontaneously accepted by the communist masses... It was accepted by the uprooted proletariat, the *Lumpenproletariat*, especially by many groups belonging to the Red Fighting League, which, to a considerable extent, became absorbed by the brownshirts and the blackshirts.” Franz Neumann. *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944*. (Harper & Row. New York, NY: 1963). Pgs. 216-217.

5 “A characteristic of vulgar empiricism (or creeping empiricism, as Engels called it), and of people who treat dialectics with scorn, is that... accompanied by the drums of antimetaphysical battle, they fall into genuine metaphysics.” Nikolai Bukharin. *Philosophical Arabesques*. Translated by Renfrey Clarke. (Monthly Review Press. New York, NY: 2005). Pg. 43. Compare with Trotsky’s similar scorn for “attempts to translate Marxian dialectics into the language of vulgar empiricism.” Leon Trotsky. “Marxism and Eastman.” *Writings, 1932-1933*. (Pathfinder Press. New York, NY: 1972). Pg. 68.

6 “The concepts of crime and punishment are... necessary determinants of the legal form, from which people will be able to liberate themselves only after this superstructure itself has begun to wither away.” Evgenii Pashukanis. *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*. Translated by Barbara Einhorn. (Transaction Publishers. New Brunswick, NY: 2002). Pg. 188.

7 Nuevo Curso. “Xenophobia, Lumpenization, and the Proletariat.” *Intransigence*. (№ 3: November 1, 2018). Pgs. 25-26.

8 Workers’ Offensive. “The Black Panther Party and Glorification of the Lumpenproletariat.” *Intransigence*. (№ 3: November 1, 2018). Pgs. 27-32.

9 Hal Draper. *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Volume 2: The Politics of Social Classes*. (Monthly Review Press. New York, NY: 1978). Pgs. 453-457.

10 Werner Conze. “From Pöbel to Proletariat: Sociohistorical Preconditions of Socialism in Germany.” Translated by Georg Iggers. *The Social History of Politics: Critical Perspectives since 1945*. (Berg Publishers. Dover, NH: 1985). Pgs. 49.

11 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy*. Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works, Volume 5*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 84. Translation modified.

12 Karl Marx. “Preface to the Second Edition of The

Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon.” Translated by Joan and Trevor Walmsley. *Collected Works, Volume 21*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1985). Pg. 57.

13 “Bourgeois historians are inclined to confuse... the parasitic lumpenproletariat of Greece and Rome with the proletariat of the present day... And yet Roman ‘proletarians’ had nothing in common with present-day workers.” Nikolai Bukharin. *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*. Translator unlisted. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1925). Pg. 69.

14 “The *plebeian opposition* consisted of ruined burghers and the mass of townsmen without civic rights: journeymen, day laborers, and the numerous precursors of the lumpenproletariat, who existed even in the lowest stages of urban development. The number of people without a definite occupation and permanent domicile increased greatly at that time due to the decay of feudalism in a society in which every occupation, every sphere of life, was still fenced in by countless privileges. In all the developed countries vagabonds had never been so numerous as in the first half of the sixteenth century. In wartime some of these tramps joined the armies. Others begged their way across the countryside, and still others eked out a meager living in the towns as day laborers or from whatever other occupation that was not under guild jurisdiction. All three groups played a part in the Peasant War — the first in the armies of princes which overpowered the peasants, the second in the peasant conspiracies and in peasant gangs where its demoralizing influence was felt at all times, and the third in the clashes of the urban parties. It will be recalled, however, that a great many, namely those living in the towns, still had a substantial share of sound peasant nature and had not as yet been possessed by the depravity of the present ‘civilized’ lumpenproletariat.” Friedrich Engels. *The Peasant War in Germany*. Translated by Hugh Rodwell. *Collected Works, Volume 10*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1978). Pgs. 407-408.

15 Engels thus scolded Karl Kautsky for his “very inadequate research into the development and role of the *déclassé*, almost pariah-like elements who had no place whatever in the feudal system and were the inevitable outcome of urban development. It is they

who in all cases formed the lowest stratum of urban population in the Middle Ages: devoid of rights and set apart from village communities, craft guilds, and feudal dependence. Though difficult, this should serve as your main basis, for by degrees, with the dissolution of the feudal bonds, these elements became the *preproletariat* which, in 1789, was responsible for the revolution in the *faubourgs* of Paris and absorbed all the outcasts of feudal and guild society." Friedrich Engels. "Letter to Karl Kautsky, 21 May 1895." Translated by Peter and Betty Ross. *Collected Works, Volume 50*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 2004). Pg. 512.

16 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Manifesto of the Communist Party. Translated by Samuel Moore. *Collected Works, Volume 6*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1976). Pg. 494.

17 "The prediction was realized all too well in the course of the revolutions of 1848 to 1849." Draper, Karl Marx's *Theory of Revolution, Volume 2*. Pg. 458.

18 Friedrich Engels. "The Twenty-Fifth of June." Translated by Kai Schoenhals. *Collected Works, Volume 7*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1977). Pg. 142.

19 Karl Marx. "Victory of the Counterrevolution in Vienna." Translated by Salo Ryazanskaya. *Collected Works, Volume 7*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1977). Pg. 505.

20 Friedrich Engels. "The Antwerp Death Sentences." Translated by Salo Ryazanskaya. *Collected Works, Volume 7*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1977). Pg. 406.

21 Karl Marx. The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850. Translated by Gregor Benton. *Collected Works, Volume 10*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1978). Pgs. 62-63.

22 Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire. Pgs. 148-149.

23 "These lists were characterized by their ambivalent celebration of the exotic, their striking juxtapositions of the homely and the grotesque: porters and organ-grinders; rag-and-bone men and acrobats; umbrella sellers and prostitutes; dog-washers and charlatans; jugglers and chimney-sweeps; flower girls and somnambulists... Like Marx, the journalists ransacked other languages and other cultures to construct a spectacle of multiplicity." Peter Stallybrass. "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat." *Representations*. (№ 31: Summer 1990). Pg. 72.

24 Frank Bovenkerk. "Rehabilitation of the Rabble: Why

Marx and Engels Wrongly Depicted the Lumpenproletariat as a Reactionary Force." *Netherlands Journal of Sociology*. (Volume 20, № 1: April 1984). Pg. 36.

25 Robert L. Bussard. "The 'Dangerous Class' of Marx and Engels: The Rise of the Idea of the Lumpenproletariat." *History of European Ideas*. (Volume 8, № 6: 1987). Pg. 688.

26 Mark Traugott. *Armies of the Poor: Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of 1848*. (Transaction Publishers. New Brunswick, NJ: 2002). Pgs. 34-114.

27 See the consideration of Traugott's "organizational hypothesis" in William Sewell. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL: 2005). Pgs. 103-107.

28 "The social situation of this class [of conspirators] determines its whole character from the outset. Proletarian conspiracy naturally affords them only very limited, uncertain means of subsistence. Their precarious livelihood, dependent in individual cases more on chance than on their activity, their irregular lives whose only fixed ports-of-call are taverns of the *marchands de vin* — places of rendezvous of the conspirators — their inevitable acquaintance with all manner of dubious people, put them in that social category known as *la bohème*. Democratic bohemians of proletarian origin are therefore either workers who have given up their work and have as a consequence become dissolute, or characters who have emerged from the lumpenproletariat and bring the old habits of that class with them into their new way of life." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "Review of Adolphe Chenu, *Les Conspireurs and Lucien de la Hodde, La naissance de la République en février 1848*." Translated by Christopher Upward. Pgs. 316-317.

29 "[Honoré] Daumier, the creator of Ratapoi — the Bonapartist lumpenproletarian." Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA: 1999). Pg. 740.

30 From 1851: "One of those mysterious beings, living so to speak off the excrement of great cities... Here is a man whose task is to pick up all the rubbish produced on one day in the capital. All that the great city has thrown out, all it has lost, all it has disdained, all it has broken, he catalogues and



collects, consulting the archives of debauchery, working through the lumber-room of rubbish... [The ragpicker] makes a selection, chooses astutely; he picks up, as a miser seizes on treasure, the refuse which, when chewed over by the divinity of Industry, will become objects of use or of enjoyment. Look at him, in the dark glow of the street lamps whose light flickers fitfully in the night wind." Charles Baudelaire. *On Wine and Hashish*. Translated by Andrew Brown. (Hesperus Press. London: 2002). Pgs. 7-8.

31 "Since the finance aristocracy made the laws, was at the head of the administration of the state, had command of all the organized public authorities, and dominated public opinion... through the press, the same prostitution, the same shameless cheating, the same mania to get rich was repeated in every sphere, from the court to the Café Borgne, to get rich not by production, but by pocketing the already available wealth of others. Clashing every moment with the bourgeois laws themselves, an unbridled assertion of unhealthy and dissolute appetites manifested itself, particularly at the top of bourgeois society — lusts wherein wealth derived from gambling naturally seeks its satisfaction, where pleasure becomes *crapuleux*, where money, filth, and blood commingle." Marx, *Class Struggles in France*. Pg. 50.

32 "Money as a gift and money on tick, it was with prospects such as these that he hoped to allure the masses. Donations and loans — the financial science of the lumpenproletariat, whether of high degree or low, is restricted to this. Such were the only springs which Bonaparte knew how to set in motion." Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Pg. 143.

33 "Bonaparte... was a Bohemian, a princely lumpenproletarian." *Ibid.*, pg. 157.

34 *Ibid.*, pgs. 192-193.

35 "Above all, Bonaparte looks on himself as the chief of the Society of December 10, as the representative of the lumpenproletariat, to which he himself, his entourage, his government, and his army belong, and whose prime consideration is to benefit itself and draw California lottery prizes from the state treasury." *Ibid.*, pg. 194.

36 See the chapter "The Lumpenproletariat as the Criminal Class?", but ignore the dubious comparison made by the author of Marx's notion with the "underclass" of Charles Murray. Mark Cowling. *Marxism*

and *Criminological Theory: A Critique and a Toolkit*. (Palgrave Macmillan. New York, NY: 2008). Pgs. 149-162.

37 Amadeo Bordiga. "The Human Species and the Earth's Crust." Translated by Dan Radnika. *People and Nature*. (April 15, 2012).

38 "Naples possessed a specific abjection... [It was] imagined as prey to at least three specters. These specters were Mikhail Bakunin, Amadeo Bordiga, and the lumpenproletariat; that is to say, the *naturally* infected world of the alleys and the ragged people who inhabited them." Ermanno Rea. *A Mystery in Naples*. Translated by Thomas Simpson. (Guernica Editions. Buffalo, NY: 2003). Pg. 220.

39 "When [the camorra] emerged from the jails is uncertain. Sometime between 1790 and 1830 is the safest guess, perhaps as a result of the various revolutions and reactions in Naples. Once in the open, its power and influence grew rapidly, due to the goodwill of the Bourbons, who after 1799 regarded the lumpenproletariat there as their safest allies against liberalism. Since it came to control almost every aspect of the Neapolitan poor's life — making most of its money by various gambling rackets — it became increasingly indispensable to the local administration." Eric Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels*. (Abacus Books. London: 2017). Pg. 72.

40 "The *lazzaroni* of Naples, the quintessential 'mob,' were passionate defenders of Church and King, and even more savage anti-Jacobins in 1799. Yet they sang songs against the upper classes who in their view had 'betrayed the king,' notably 'knights and monks,' sacked the houses of royalists impartially, and defined as Jacobins and enemies of the king all owners of property, or more simply, anyone with a carriage. This proclivity has time and again tempted unsympathetic observers — and almost every observer, whatever his politics, have been far from complete sympathy with the classical 'mob' — to present it as a collection of lumpenproletarians and criminals out for loot. And indeed there can be no doubt that the demoralized and the criminal, who abounded in great cities, seized their opportunities which, as anyone who has ever spent even a few hours in Naples or Palermo knows, these destitute populations need only too sorely." *Ibid.*, pgs. 148-149.

41 Louis Chevalier. *Laboring Classes and Dangerous*

*Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Frank Jellinek. (Routledge & Kegan Paul. London: 1973). Pgs. 59-141.

42 *Ibid.*, pgs. 147-255.

43 *Ibid.*, pg. 10.

44 Endnotes. "A History of Separation." *Endnotes № 4: Unity in Separation*. (October 2015). Pgs. 103-104.

45 "The lowest sediment of relative surplus population dwells in the sphere of 'pauperism.' Apart from vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat, this social stratum consists of three categories: First, those able to work. One needs only glance superficially at the statistics of English pauperism to find that the quantity of paupers increases with every crisis of trade, and diminishes with every revival. Second, orphans and pauper children. These are candidates for the industrial reserve army, and in times of great prosperity, such as the year 1860, for instance, they are enrolled in the army of active workers both speedily and in large numbers. Third, the demoralized, the ragged, and those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labor; people who have lived beyond the worker's average lifespan; and the victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc., the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, etc." Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. (Penguin Books. New York, NY: 1976). Pg. 797.

46 Teinosuke Otani. *A Guide to Marxian Political Economy: What Kind of Social System is Capitalism?* Translated by Michael Schauerte. (Springer International Publishing. Tokyo: 2018). Pgs. 249-250.

47 Amadeo Bordiga. «Précisions à propos de «Marxisme et Misère» et «lutte de classes et offensives patronales»». *Le prolétaire*. (№ 505: Novembre-Décembre 2012).

48 "In Germany, the term [precariat] has been used to describe not only temporary workers but also the jobless who have no hope of social integration. This is close to the Marxian idea of a lumpenproletariat and is not what will be meant in this book." Guy Standing. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. (Bloomsbury Academic. New York, NY: 2011). Pg. 9.

49 "For all the talk of a disappearing working class within postindustrial capitalism, a substantial part of the modern 'precariat' are proving that they too are part of

that class, albeit a class with a substantially different profile." ER. "The Situation of the Working Class Today." *Revolutionary Perspectives*. (February 13, 2017).

50 "[Some] confuse precarization with lumpenization, without being able to understand either. But the fact is most workers already live under precarious conditions." Nuevo Curso, "Xenophobia, Lumpenization, and the Proletariat." Pg. 25.

51 E.g., "the class of the lumpenproletariat [*der Klasse des Lumpenproletariats*]." Karl Marx. Herr Vogt. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. *Collected Works, Volume 17*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1981). Pg. 155.

52 Marx and Engels, "Review of Chenu and Hodde." Pg. 317.

53 Friedrich Engels. "Preface to the Second Edition of *The Peasant War*." Translated by Kate Cook. *Collected Works, Volume 21*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1985). Pg. 98.

54 Friedrich Engels. "Note to the 'The Alliance of Social Democracy and the IWMA.'" Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 23*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1988). Pg. 454.

55 "[The Provisional Government] gave [the lumpens] their own uniform. It made them outwardly distinct from the blouse-wearing workers." Marx, *Class Struggles in France*. Pg. 62.

56 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Pg. 485.

57 Georg Lukács. "Class Consciousness." Translated by Rodney Livingstone. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1971). Pg. 59.

58 Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3*. Translated by David Fernbach. (Penguin Books. New York, NY: 1991). Pg. 1025.

59 "Capital (profit), land (ground-rent), labor (wages): this trinity form holds in itself all the mysteries of the social production process." *Ibid.*, pg. 953.

60 "In countries where modern civilization has fully developed, a class of petit-bourgeois fluctuates between proletariat and bourgeoisie, ever-renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society.

The individual members of this class, however, are being constantly hurled down into the proletariat through competition. As industry develops they can even see the moment approaching when they will completely disappear.” Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Pg. 509.

61 Edward Hallett Carr. *Mikhail Bakunin*. (Macmillan Press. New York, NY: 1937/1975). Pg. 177.

62 Summarized in an influential book by Norberto Bobbio. *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*. Translated by Albert Cameron. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL: 1996).

63 Geoff Eley. *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2002).

64 Darrow Schecter. *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present: Theoretical Perspectives*. (Continuum Books. New York, NY: 2007).

65 Leszek Kołakowski. “The Concept of the Left.” Translated by Jane Zielonko Peel. *Toward a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today*. (Grove Press. New York, NY: 1968). Pg. 68.

66 “Avenarius fought Kant not from the left, as materialists fought Kant... but from the right, as skeptics and idealists fought Kant.” Vladimir Lenin. *Materialism and Empiriocriticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*. Translated by Abraham Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 14*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1977). Pg. 197.

67 For more on this, see the informative report on the CPGB conference by Amos. “Left-Wing Communism and the Left-Wing of Capital.” *ICC Online*. (September 2014).

68 “Marx’s and Engels’ views on the role of the lumpen-class only hardened as time went on.” Draper, *op. cit.* Pg. 466.

69 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. “The Alliance of Social Democracy and the IWMA.” Translated by Barrie Selman. *Collected Works, Volume 23*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1988). Pg. 555.

70 From 1873. Mikhail Bakunin. “Some Preconditions for Social Revolution.” Translated by Sam Dolgoff. *On Anarchy: Selected Works*. (Vintage Books. New York, NY: 1972). Pg. 334.

71 Draper traces the phrase’s origin to the Chartist Ernest Jones. See *op. cit.*, pgs. 105-108.

72 “The Cossacks and the world of brigands and thieves

includes a protest against oppression by the state and by patriarchal society... Frequent riots, though provoked by accidental circumstances, nevertheless stem from general causes and express the deep and general dissatisfaction of the people. In a way, they constitute a customary phenomenon of Russian life. And so it follows that the first duty, purpose, and aim of any secret organization in Russia is to awaken in peasant communities a realization of their inevitable solidarity with one another and thus arouse them to consciousness of their power. We must merge the multitude of private peasant revolts into one general all-people’s revolt. One of the main means for the achieving of this aim [is] our free Cossacks, our innumerable saintly and not so saintly tramps [бродягу], pilgrims, members of бегуныsects, thieves, and brigands... this whole wide underground world which from time immemorial has protested against the state and statism, and against the Teutonic civilization of the whip... Cossacks, thieves, brigands, and tramps played the role of a catalyst and unifier of separate revolts under Stenka Razin and under Pugachev. Such a tramping fraternity is the best and truest conductor of people’s revolution.” Mikhail Bakunin. “Letter to Sergei Nechaev, 2 June 1870.” Translated by Hilary Sternberg and Lydia Bott. From *Natalie Herzen: Daughter of a Revolutionary*. (Library Press. LaSalle, IL: 1974). Pgs. 252-253.

73 Victor Serge. “Anarchist Thought.” Translated by Mitchell Abidor. *Anarchists Never Surrender: Essays, Polemics, and Correspondence, 1908-1938*. (PM Press. Oakland, CA: 2015). Pgs. 207-208.

74 See Kautsky’s aside on „das Lumpenproletariat“, clumsily rendered into English by William Bohn as the “slum-proletariat.”

75 “Anyone interested in understanding the shamelessness and brutalization that prevails in slum districts might find it more instructive to examine where lumpenproletarians live rather than the shape of their skulls.” Karl Kautsky. *The Agrarian Question*. Translated by Pete Burgess. (Zwan Publications. Winchester, MA: 1988). Pg. 385.

76 “Modern proletarians are... by no means as utterly lacking in means as lumpenproletarians. The latter lack everything, but this is most acutely felt in the shortage of food and other means of consumption (as they are not overbothered by the

lack of means of production). Lumpenproletarians are excluded from the sphere of production anyway, and often exhibit little enthusiasm to be admitted to it. What social aspirations lumpenproletarians have tend towards an ideal of communism as ownership over the means of consumption, not the means of production — an aim which leads to plunder wherever social circumstances facilitate acts of violence, and to beggary wherever this is impossible.” *Ibid.*, pgs. 313-314.

77 “When Voroshilov abuses Kautsky for ‘driving from the ranks of the proletariat genuine working people’ like the lumpenproletariat, domestic servants, and handicraftsmen, he is muddling things together.” Vladimir Lenin. *The Agrarian Question and “Critics of Marx.”* Translated by Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works, Volume 5.* (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1977). Pg. 157.

78 “Not much can be said with certainty about the social composition of the Union of the Russian People, except that it... attracted the support of the lumpenproletariat, ‘backward provincials,’ disgruntled members of the middle class, and at least briefly some peasants and industrial workers... However, the leaders of the movement regarded themselves as spokesmen for a particular middle-class stratum whose position in society was especially precarious, if not threatened altogether by the revolutionaries.” Abraham Ascher. *The Revolution of 1905, Volume 1: Russia in Disarray.* (Stanford University Press. Stanford, CA: 1994). Pg. 239.

79 “In the present [1905] Revolution the task of rallying and organizing the forces of the proletariat, of politically educating and training the working class, is more crucial than ever. The more outrageous the conduct of the Black Hundred government, the more zealously agents-provocateurs strive to fan base passions among the ignorant masses and the more desperately defenders of the autocracy, which is rotting alive, clutch at every opportunity to discredit the revolution by orchestrating hold-ups, pogroms, and assassinations, and by plying lumpenproletarians with drink, the more important is the task of organization that falls primarily to the party of the socialist proletariat. And we therefore resort to all means of ideological struggle to keep the influence of the anarchists over the Russian workers as negligible as it has been so far.” Vladimir Lenin. “Socialism and Anarchism.” Translated by Andrew W. Rothstein. *Collected Works, Volume 10.* (Progress Publishers. Moscow: 1978). Pgs. 73-74.

80 Rosa Luxemburg. *The Mass Strike.* Translated by Integer. *Essential Writings.* (Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL: 2008). Pg. 114.

81 *Ibid.*, pg. 126.

82 Rosa Luxemburg. “Letter to Leo Jogiches, early August 1909.” Translated by Stephen Eric Bronner. *Letters.* (Westview Press. Boulder, CO: 1978). Pg. 125.

83 “It was high time, [syndicalists like Daniil Novomirskii and Maksim] Raevskii declared, to recognize that a successful social revolution required an organized army of combatants, an army that only the labor movement could provide..” Paul Avrich. *The Russian Anarchists.* (Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ: 1967). Pgs. 62-63.

84 “It is among the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men divorced from tribe and clan, that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead.” Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth.* Translated by Richard Philcox. (Grove Press. New York, NY: 2004). Pgs. 80-81.

85 *Ibid.*, pgs. 81-82.

86 “Colonialism finds ample material in the lumpenproletariat for its machinations. In fact, any national liberation movement should give this lumpenproletariat maximum attention. It will always respond to the call to revolt, but the oppressor, never missing an opportunity to let the blacks tear at each other’s throats, is only too willing to exploit those characteristic flaws, namely its lack of political consciousness and ignorance. If this readily available human reserve is not immediately organized by the insurrection, it will join the colonialist troops as mercenaries.” *Ibid.*, pg. 87.

87 David Macey. *Frantz Fanon: A Biography.* (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2012). Pg. xiv.

88 “Huey understood what Fanon was saying about organizing the lumpenproletariat first. Because if you didn’t organize the lumpenproletariat — the brother who’s pimping or hustling or robbing banks, the unemployed or downtrodden who are not politically conscious — if you didn’t relate to these cats, the power structure would set them against you.” Bobby Seale. *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey Newton.* (Black Classic Press. Baltimore, MD: 1991). Pg. 30.

89 “Fanon delivered a devastating attack on



Marxism-Leninism for its narrow preoccupation with Europe and the affairs and salvation of white folks, while lumping all third world peoples into the category of the lumpenproletariat and then forgetting them there... After studying Fanon, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale began to apply his analysis to the conditions faced by black people in the United States, giving it a uniquely Afro-American content." Eldridge Cleaver. *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party*. (Oakland, CA: 1969). Pgs. 5-6.

90 Bobby Seale. *A Lonely Rage: Autobiographical Reflections*. (Bantam Books. New York, NY: 1979). Pg. 153.

91 Seale, *Seize the Time*. Pg. ix.

92 Huey Newton. "Speech at Boston College." *A Reader*. (Seven Stories Press. New York, NY: 2002). Pg. 165.

93 *Ibid.*, pg. 167.

94 Huey Newton. "Intercommunalism." *A Reader*. (Seven Stories Press. New York, NY: 2002). Pg. 193.

95 "Separation and alienation from technology is the basic problem of our era. Concentration and centralization of technical knowledge has engendered this lumpenization of humanity. This has created an utterly dependent population at the mercy of those who control technology. Enslavement by technology is the lumpen condition." Eldridge Cleaver. "On Lumpen Ideology." *Black Scholar*. (Volume 4, № 3: November-December 1972). Pgs. 5-6.

96 *Ibid.*, pg. 9.

97 "One of the major contentions between Marx and Bakunin had to do with the role of the lumpenproletariat... Bakunin considered lumpens 'the flower of the proletariat' because of their supposedly more rebellious nature." Workers' Offensive. "The Black Panther Party and Glorification of the Lumpenproletariat." Pg. 32. Elsewhere in the same article, Workers' Offensive takes Angela Davis to task for misattributing a quote from Marx's *Class Struggles in France* (1850) to his *Civil War in France* (1871): "What Davis extrapolated from that quote on the lumpenproletariat... is a projection of her own politics and not an accurate assessment of Marx's views... She claims he was discussing the Paris Commune, when he was in fact talking about the 1848 Revolution." *Ibid.*, pg. 28. In his article on "lumpen ideology," Cleaver makes similarly glaring mistakes. First, he dates Marx and Engels' *Manifesto* to 1849, two years after it was published, then

refers to *Capital* (1867) as having been written "thirty years later." Cleaver, "On Lumpen Ideology." Pg. 3.

98 Manning Marable. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. (Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL: 2015). Pg. 274.

99 Anonymous. "The 'Black Panther' Movement." Translator unlisted. *Il programma comunista*. (№ 5: 1971).

100 "The Maoist twist, I kind of threw that one in. I said so far the most advanced Marxists I have run across are the Maoists in China." Quoted in Aaron J. Leonard and Conor A. Gallagher. "The Case of Richard Aoki: Berkeley Radical, Black Panther, FBI Informant." *Jacobin*. (August 26, 2018).

101 "Lumpen behavior left the organization vulnerable to government repression." Chris Booker. "Lumpenization: A Critical Error of the BPP." *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. (Black Classic Press. Baltimore, MD: 1998). Pg. 354.

102 Rosa Luxemburg. "The Truth About Kronstadt." Translated by George Shriver. *Complete Works, Volume 3: Political Writings on Revolution, 1897-1905*. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2019). Pg. 335.

103 Rosa Luxemburg. "The Tsar's 'Constitution,' Modified by Mass Murder." Translated by George Shriver. *Complete Works, Volume 3: Political Writings on Revolution, 1897-1905*. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2019). Pg. 263.

104 Quoted in Viktoriya Khiterer. "The October 1905 Pogrom in Kiev." *East European Jewish Affairs*. (Volume 22, № 2: Fall 1992). Pg. 31.

105 "The mob included many youths of 15-18 years of age, lumpenproletarians and hooligans with very few blue- or white-collar workers. Most of the pogromists were drunk." *Ibid.*, pg. 32.

106 "In southern and southwestern cities of the Pale of Settlement where Jews were legally required to live, the word *hooligan* came to be used almost exclusively with reference to pogromists — young Slavic men who engaged in mass violence against Jews and their property or occasionally against students and intellectuals they associated with Jews. In such regions *hooligans* resembled Marx's original 'lumpenproletariat,' street rabble that sided with the police in repressing radical demonstrations." Joan

- Neuberger. *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power*. (University of California. Los Angeles, CA: 1993). Pg. 44.
- 107 "The social composition of [the Union of Russian People's] membership is difficult to determine from available evidence, but even its enemies agreed that besides the lumpenproletariat and disgruntled petit-bourgeois, it was, in its early years, able to attract genuine peasant and proletarian elements." Hans Rogger. "Was There a Russian Fascism? The Union of Russian People." *The Journal of Modern History*. (Volume 36, № 4: December 1964). Pg. 402.
- 108 Ingo Korzetz. *Die Freikorps in der Weimarer Republik: Freiheitskämpfer oder Landsknechthaufen? Aufstellung, Einsatz, und Wesen bayerischer Freikorps 1918-1920*. (Tectum Verlag. Bavaria: 2009). Pg. 122.
- 109 „Lumpen und Unzuverlässige“. *Ibid.*, pg. 140.
- 110 „Im Verlauf seiner Forschungen hat der Autor festgestellt, daß den nach 1918 massenhaft gegründeten völkischen Gruppierungen und Freikorps von allem solche Elemente des Kleinbürgertums und des Lumpenproletariats beitraten“. Marek Maciejewski. *Ruch i ideologia narodowych socjalistów w Republice Weimarskiej: O źródłach i początkach nazizmu, 1919-1924*. (Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe. Berlin: 1985). Pg. 511.
- 111 „Und für die Offiziere der Freikorps, die mit der Säuberungsaktion befasst sind, sind sie ‚Lumpen‘ und ‚Halunken‘.“ Max Gallo. *Rosa Luxemburg: Eine Biographie*. (Econ und List Verlag. Berlin: 1993). Pg. 358.
- 112 "After taking power [in November 1918], the SPD declared the revolution was over, at least in its phase of violence and mass action. Having seized the state, the revolutionary transformation of social relations (what was called 'socialization') was only a matter of time, and would be a progressive and peaceful process... The development of capital still had to continue, since only capital that had arrived at the ultimate stage of its development could be 'socialized.' For this reason, order must reign and the 'Spartacists' must be crushed, 'Spartacists' being another way of saying 'reactionary lumpenproletariat.'" Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier. *The Communist Left in Germany, 1918-1921*. Translated by M. DeSocio. (2006). Pg. 74.
- 113 Ernst Jünger. *On Pain*. Translated by David C. Durst. (Telos Press. New York, NY: 2008). Pgs. 26-27.
- 114 "Ernst Jünger was the most important and prolific contributor to reactionary modernism in the conservative revolution." Jeffrey Herf. *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. (Cambridge University Press. New York, NY: 1984). Pg. 42.
- 115 "Both fascism and Bonapartism aim to be the general benefactor of all classes; for that reason one class is always played off another, constant reshuffling internal contradictions as a result. Even the apparatus of domination bears the same characteristics... The fascist militia is a social counterpart of the Bonapartist army, providing a living for the déclassé elements..." August Thalheimer. "On Fascism." Translated by Judy Joseph. *Telos*. (№ 40: July 1979). Pgs. 117-118.
- 116 Leon Trotsky. "How Mussolini Triumphed." Translation modified. *Fascism: What It Is, and How to Fight It*. (Aarkar Books. Delhi: 2005). Pgs. 18-19.
- 117 Angelo Tasca. *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1919-1922*. Translated by Peter Wait and Dorothy Wait. (Howard Fertig. New York, NY: 1966). Pg. 340.
- 118 Arthur Rosenberg. "Fascism as a Mass Movement." *Historical Materialism*. (Volume 20, № 1: January 2012). Pg. 155.
- 119 Adorno praised Brecht for throwing "a harsh and accurate light on what is subjectively empty and illusory in the fascist leader," but found "the substitution of the lumpenproletariat for those behind fascism" too reductive. Theodor Adorno. "Commitment." Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. *Notes to Literature, Volume 2*. (Columbia University Press. New York, NY: 1992). Pgs. 83-85.
- 120 Bertolt Brecht. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. Translated by Jennifer Wise. (Methuen Drama. New York, NY: 2013). Pg. 88.
- 121 "The SA provided a haven for adventurous and romantic adolescents but also to undisciplined irregulars and the semi-criminal dregs of the urban slums. During the disastrous economic crisis of 1929-1932, the social background of the SA men underwent a significant change. The aging war veterans and ex-Freikorps men were gradually replaced with younger people of the declining lower and middle classes. SA men were not recruited from the soft or timid section of society. Many ruined shopkeepers, unemployed white-collar workers, impoverished farmers, jobless lumpenproletarians, poor students, and malcontent déclassés joined the

SA. A number were young, attracted by the dynamism of the movement, by its fanaticism and rejection of any compromise, the untold opportunities for 'heroic' deeds, and the constant clashes with political enemies. To these must be added many opportunists, sexual deviants, juvenile delinquents and criminals, the dregs of society, who often rise to the surface in times of profound dislocation or collapse. Alongside the unemployed, criminal elements indeed infiltrated the SA and, as a result, the perennial underground struggle between the SA and their opponents took on a gang warfare aspect reminiscent of Al Capone's Chicago." Jean-Denis Lepage. *Hitler's Stormtroopers: The Nazi Brownshirts, 1922-1945*. (Frontline Books. South Yorkshire: 2016). Pg. 104.

122 "Düsseldorf set up a Gypsy camp in July 1936. Fourteen of the families moved there hailed from a large squatter camp known as the 'wild settlement Heinefeld,' which had been closed down; twenty-eight families came from similar locations. The primary motive here appears to have been a desire to rid the city of elements regarded as belonging to the *Lumpenproletariat*. On a large lot at the edge of town near the Höherweg four barracks were set up for families, with each married couple having one room. A fifth barrack was built for single persons. Eventually Gypsies living in caravans were also brought there." Guenther Lewy. *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 2000). Pgs. 21-22.

123 *Ibid.*, pg. 47.

124 Max Horkheimer. "The Jews and Europe." Translated by Stephen Eric Bronner. *Critical Theory and Society*. (Routledge. New York, NY: 1989). Pg. 91.

125 "Let this society suffer any severe shock, such as it is bound to suffer; let there be again millions of unemployed, and we will see the same lower middle class alliance with the *Lumpenproletariat*, from whom Hitler

recruited his following, running amok with antisemitism." Isaac Deutscher. "Who is a Jew?" *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2017). Pg. 58.

126 Primo Levi. "Self-Interview: Postscript to If This is a Man." Translated by Robert Gordon. *The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961-1987*. (The New Press. New York, NY: 2001). Pg. 191.

127 Herbert Asbury. *Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*. (Vintage Books. New York, NY: 2008). Pg. 108.

128 "The Klan had many former Confederate officers, including a number of generals, and drew from among the best citizens in areas in which it rode. Nevertheless, as Klansmen themselves boasted, they were a 'rough bunch of boys'... The method of the Klan was violence." David Mark Chalmers. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. (Duke University Press. Durham, NC: 1987). Pgs. 9-10.

129 See the chapter on "The Class Composition of the Klan," where it is revealed that "the single most common occupation among local Klansmen was owner or manager of a small business." Nancy MacLean. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. (Oxford University Press. New York, NY: 1995). Pgs. 54-55.

130 See the chapter "Reactionary Populism: The Politics of Class," where Maclean specifies "the [Klan's] critique of economic concentration aimed not to promote radical democratic change, but to avert it." *Ibid.*, pgs. 77-78.

131 Sara Bullard. *The Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence*. (Southern Poverty Law Center. Montgomery, AL: 1997). Pgs. 32-36.

132 Nuevo Curso, "Xenophobia, Lumpenization, and the Proletariat." Pg. 26.







# ORGANIZING IN THE WORKPLACE

## STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED IN THE STRUGGLE

In providing you with the background events leading up to the organizing effort, my hope is to convey the full context so that you can compare it to your own working conditions, and decide if organizing makes sense for you. I doubt that my situation was exceptional. You may have at one time or another experienced something like what is described below. Hopefully, if this is something you can relate to, then you can then see yourself moving forward in your own struggle. The piece will be released in three parts. The first part covers the background as well as the initial ramp-up of organizing activity until recognition. Later articles will cover struggle once recognition was reached, and the positive and negative experiences involved in building a contract.

### Prologue

In 2013 the job market was limited. Only those lucky enough to be employed prior to the crash had “good” full-time employment if they could hold onto their job for dear life, along with anybody else hired in that period who was lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time. The level of desperation among workers had not yet subsided, although this was many years into the economic slump following the Great Recession. Employers could choose from dozens of candidates for a position such as “data entry specialist” or for a low-pay internship. In one instance, I tried to apply for a municipal government position that had an applicant cap of one thousand. The job was posted at four o’clock, and I hastily filled out the application right at four, only to be denied because the cap had been reached. The mood was grim where I lived at the time. Unemployment was over 11% and this was perceived as the new normal.

I had spent more than a year looking for full-time work after college. I had left my own home state for a big New England city that had slightly better prospects. Still, in this new city, I was nothing more than a temp worker, taking soulless assignments cleaning up spreadsheets for ghastly corporations. The cost of living was astronomical, with the need to make rent forcing

me to sell parts off my car or work these jobs. Any city that had below average unemployment rates during the Great Recession had high rent—this was law of recession economics. This meant that I took any assignment to any job, and this was what kept me from having to live out of my car. By 2015 I had begun to lose hope that I would find full-time work and had begun to consider the dreaded return home—jobless and hopeless—destined to find myself constantly between meaningless jobs. Returning home meant living at home, being in the situation where my soon-retiring parent would be expecting my financial support, not the reverse. This was an untenable situation for many reasons, but biggest of all was that I knew that I had student loans, and I had the audacity to think that I deserved to find stable-enough employment to have a modest, responsible existence, where I could make my way enough to support my mother if and when she could no longer work.

When I landed a temporary assignment working in social services, I felt I must have been like the lucky ones, mentioned earlier, that happened to be at the right place at the right time. This assignment on paper was no different than the others, but soon I realized that I was working on an important annual project, and that my role was not insignificant, even as a temp worker making less than a living wage. Unlike previous assignments, there was a noble goal behind the work, even if I knew that our contribution was a small bandage over the gaping wound of one of the largest crises affecting capitalism. The project involved research design, data collection, statistical analysis, and reporting of information that would be used to allocate funding for housing. There was no realistic amount of funding that would have been able to provide the services necessary to alleviate the problems the capitalist system had created, I thought, but at least I wasn’t working in debt collection. My work was distant from the services the agency provided, but it was a critical component in the administration of those services. I include this in my story because I want to emphasize the precariousness of my living arrange-

ments. It was beyond my expectations that I would find public sector work that was adequate, between my partner and I, to cover rent and loans. I also want to emphasize that precariousness and desperation are not excuses to avoid organizing with co-workers. In fact, as I continue this story, I will explain why organizing is a weapon against precarious employment, and certainly is beneficial in alleviating financial desperation.

## Beginning

On my first day, I was thrown into a maelstrom. The organization was of course poorly staffed. There were three people hired full-time working on the data team, eight contracted employees involved in the field end of the project in the coordinator team, and one manager overseeing everyone. As a temporary hire, I worked to assist the data team, whose purpose was to design the data collection tools, collect data, analyze it, and produce reports. In accordance with maintaining my anonymity, the anonymity of others involved, and in order to avoid infusion of boring details in this story, I will limit my discussion of the details of the work. It was, however, heavy on administrative data analysis. Given the size and scope of the project and the size of the city served, I was almost surprised that it was left up to only three full-time people to do this. I was not surprised, however, since I know that many public sector jobs were cut, and the organization was running about as lean as it possibly could. This meant that the data team and the coordinator team worked very long hours. Toward the end of the first month, at the height of the chaos, the staff worked every day of the week, and for more than eight hours each day. I was required to work no more than eight hours a day because the organization could not afford to pay me overtime. I overheard, however, that the organization pushed its full-time employees to stay on site for up to sixteen straight hours. For international readers, and for those unfamiliar with “exempt” work as it exists in the United States, this means working for sixteen hours, with no guaranteed breaks, for the same pay as working eight hours. Someone working 125 hours (this really happened) in a single week made no additional income, and received no additional compensation, such as compensated time, in lieu of overtime pay. While full-time staff are required to fill out a timesheet, the

timesheet is always to be filled out for 80 hours over two weeks, regardless of the real number of hours worked. Several of the coordinators that year slept at the office. One person was going broke paying for additional child care as a single parent who was virtually never home. Management was aware of the intensity of the workload, but at this point and given the culture of constant understaffing and under appreciation, this was perceived as “just part of the job.”

The working conditions I had witnessed over the course of the first few weeks did not deter me from seeking a full-time job at the agency. I knew the work was intense, but since the pay was considerably more than my temporary hourly wage, I thought of it as a necessary sacrifice to get my foot in the door. And really, getting my foot into any door was my priority. The pay in retrospect was inadequate given the amount of work and other factors such as the cost of living in the region. Similar jobs in the same city paid as much as ten thousand dollars a year more than this agency paid. Surely, though, I could use this as an opportunity to build a couple years’ experience, something that was a requirement for every entry-level job I had applied for. It was in this sense that I had felt lucky. I was poised for the position based on the skill requirements, I was quick to understand the material and the scope of the work, and I was desperate enough to be willing to do anything for a full-time job. The problem, of course, was that there were only three positions I could have applied for and they were all filled. I had to think strategically about the possibility of any one of those people leaving their position. I had to prove that I was worth keeping around for as long as I could, not only for the chance to get hired, but because I needed a steady paycheck.

The first day, I was given the simplest tasks imaginable. I moved boxes, and placed data collection sheets into their appropriate box to be shipped off to field sites where data would be collected. Within two days I was assigned to a computer, where I was told that I needed to clean up the database of volunteers. As part of data collection, thousands of volunteers sign up online and are assigned to go to different field locations. The web application failed to correctly assign volunteers. Given that there were

roughly two weeks left before volunteers would be deployed, this incident was treated like an utter calamity. In messing around with the back-end of the site and making calls to hundreds of volunteers to verify field locations, I was able to get things back in working order. This impressed management, who at this point anticipated that the whole project was destined to fail. Within the first week, I was assigned additional duties as a result of my success on that task. While many of the coordinators were very good about following up and maintaining their volunteer data, one coordinator was notably absent, and their region was effectively my responsibility. The other coordinators worked closely with me to pull through and mend this problem. By the end of week 1, what became abundantly clear to me was that working at this agency was different than any of the previous work. In previous assignments, I had felt like I was completely new and inexperienced for the entire duration. In six weeks, you could still feel completely unwelcome, falling back on “I’m new” when the inevitable “Who are you again?” question is raised. Within the first week at this agency, I felt like I had worked there for six months. I had gotten to know everybody on the team, and given the type of high pressure, close quarters work, solidarity was strong among everybody involved.

At the height of data collection, a week of sheer madness takes place in which everyone involved is over-worked to the point of physical collapse. This week involves executing a project involving thousands of people, essentially coordinated by a team of under fifteen people. The fact that it happens at all amazes me. The fact that it happens annually, on schedule, with so few people behind the project, is astonishing. Being a part of the organization of this project taught me a great deal of knowledge in a short amount of time. It dispelled a lot of illusions that I had about government work. For one, although I was never much for believing in the stereotypical “cushy government job”, working for this agency demonstrated to me that this was often a complete myth. Certainly somewhere, some administrator is sitting at a cubicle, doing nothing and living easy off their government salary. I would suggest that this is rarely true in the “real world” of public sector work. A lot of the work is done by people who are expected to do the work of five people for the salary of one person, or four-fifths the salary of the private

sector market rate for the same job. A lot of it is thankless and goes unappreciated because it is either invisible, or it is so far removed from the public-facing element that it might as well be. I encourage the reader to question their understanding of who makes sure that there are an adequate number of garbage trucks and sanitary workers to pick up their trash, or who is tasked with ensuring that buses show up in ordered intervals. None of this is fascinating or glorious, but a lot of it is essential for modern, advanced industrial society to exist at all.

One last invaluable lesson learned is the importance of communication with co-workers. It was not my expectation that anyone would be amenable to communist politics, but I found out quickly that often they were. If “communism” was still a word to avoid, “solidarity” and “labor” were not. I quickly learned where people stood. I learned that I was not the only one who felt that the system was a failure, that our work, as noble as it may seem, was an assignment to navigate a sinking ship. The general sentiment was that this organization was a place to carve out enough of a resumé to find permanent work somewhere else. Quickly I realized that few people who were hired before I started were there for a total of a year or more. The mission of providing social services to very needy people was perhaps just enough to motivate people to hold out for this long. Part of the problem the agency faced in its working conditions had to do with terribly high turnover and burnout, which meant that every year the annual project started from scratch, with new staff with no institutional knowledge, working off old step guides and other cryptic files saved to the network drive. These new staff would get thrown a tremendous workload that no one can realistically anticipate, only to conclude that the pay simply won’t justify another day there. The result was the manufacture of disillusioned cynics. If for one moment I could have convinced myself that there was hope to achieve the goals of the agency, that moment is long forgotten. What is still clear is that this work has value, and that it keeps some people off the streets and warm at night. What was unfortunately clear from the start was that no one valued the people who make this happen. No one considered the reality that there were people

working at this agency that quietly qualified for its services, demonstrating that the “mission” was a farce. While I found that it was best to keep my politics quiet at first, I eventually realized something that I only understood theoretically, but not in practice. It turns out that hard working conditions create antagonism, that the material relation between worker and boss is the source of this antagonism. And it turns out that ideas that seem lofty, risky, or extreme can become reasonable in the moment. This moment, far removed from the grainy pictures of strong men wielding hammers or marching in strikes, now fought by office workers in cubicles, still can only be understood as struggle.

## Changes

Management implied that the long hours were expected, and that they would subside once the data collection period was over. They seemed blissfully unaware that the data collection week was only one part of the whole project. Once the data is collected, there are months of data validation, analysis, and the preparation of reports. Still, the component that relies heavily on volunteers is only one of four major components in the project, and the other components required many hours of work preparing, collecting, validating, and analyzing. Extended hours would go on for months and were the norm for months prior to the big data collection component. About half of the year involved late stays in the office, constant planning of one’s life around this project. It should also be noted that taking any time off during this half-year is strongly discouraged. Most people leave within a year, and barely accrue vacation, but rarely use whatever they earned.

During the post-collection period, I was given additional tasks. It was clear to management that I had the qualifications of one of the full-time analysts. It wasn’t long before I was treated as if I was just another analyst, and people had forgotten that I was making under fifteen dollars an hour as a temporary worker. The data team relied on my skills, and I made use of them coming up with heuristics to make work go faster. I felt I had to pull my own weight given the monstrous amount of work piled on the other staff. It was shortly after the data collection week, as I saw the workload increase more rather than subside as was promised, that

I started to notice the cracks. Before long, there were incidents of people taking out frustrations. Solidarity was breaking down and exhaustion turned into anger at one another. Seeing people break into tears became commonplace. Observing people drag their drained bodies into the office left me feeling guilty that I would leave at a reasonable time each day. Management likely noticed this and hinted to me that they were upset that I was leaving after 8 hours, rather than staying for ten or more. Soon I started to get the hint that they wanted me to work longer hours, and indeed I did work longer than I was legally supposed to on more than one occasion. At the time this felt like a necessity to simply keep my job, and to keep my co-workers from being mired in work until midnight.

I began to feel the effects of the high-pressure work environment. I had a long commute, so waking up early to arrive on time became a big challenge. I was always exhausted but could not sleep. I would bring work home, so it could get done without it being apparent that I was working past my allotted time. It was around this time that one of the other temps hired to work on the project quit before their contract was to end. I had asked them why, and they stated clearly that the work wasn’t worth it. The agency hired several new temporary staff, and it was strongly implied that I would train and supervise them, despite this being a clear violation of my job classification as a mere temporary data entry specialist. I did this out of the same fear that drove me to work extra hours at home. It was not long that the other temps stayed on the job, and I watched more faces enter bright and leave sullen.

Part of the job involved making phone calls to service sites all over the region. This component of the project was extremely challenging and required a team of people making calls and following up with providers. The other aspect that made this component so demanding was the deadline, which was extremely difficult to meet. Compliance was poor, and we often had to send people to providers to collect their data. With hundreds of providers to collect from, the component left the analyst working on the project in a heightened state of panic for weeks. The mental burden of the task was enough to drive anyone to protest and walk off. Eventually, this



is what happened. Several days before the project was due to be completed, the staff person assigned to it quit. This component became my full-time assignment. I was approached immediately as a possible candidate for the position.

Earlier I had mentioned that there was a coordinator that did not do much work, and this coordinators' workload became mine. This coordinator, strangely enough, became the director of the entire department responsible for the project at around this time. No one in the department thought this made any sense. After all, the coordinator was a contracted, short term position, and was the lowest on the hierarchy rung, below supervisor, manager, associate director, and then the director. Either way, this director was incompetent, extremely toxic, and ran the department despotically. Anger and confusion at this megapromotion bubbled over and manifested as gossip. While no one at this time was convinced that the agency was running as smoothly as could be, this turn of events seemed to be the executive management throwing us off a cliff.

In response to the gossip, the new director called several witch-hunt meetings. In these meetings staff were berated like disobedient children. A typical meeting would begin with an "ice breaker" in which the department director would start, usually with something passive aggressive toward everybody in the room, or sometimes targeting one person. Following the awkward introductory theatrics, each department member would be asked to go over "areas of improvement," which, designed like a struggle session, was intended to shame and humiliate staff for making mistakes. Failure to atone to the satisfaction of the director would lead to a later scheduled one-on-one "my door is always open" interrogation. Despite offering no support and not listening to staff concerns about overwork and other difficulties with working conditions, the director seemed to be intimately involved in every task, micromanaging coordinators' and data analysts' tasks, placing roadblocks between us and task completion. This level of observation allowed the director to find faults, and then use them as material for the next department meeting grilling.

With all of this, I did grow hesitant about applying for the full-time position. However, I decided to go into it planning to leave if something else came up.

Much like the other staff, I felt like the job was temporary and I had low expectations. In rationalizing the petty psychological torment I was signing up for, I applied thinking that the bond I had with co-workers was worth the trouble, and that I felt obligated to them. Full-time work meant paying off loans, finding a decent studio apartment, and putting many of my immediate money troubles behind me. There were other reasons to view this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me, but I often wondered what the cost would be.

## First Steps

At this stage, in Spring of 2015, labor organizing was not on my mind. I was starting my first "real job" out of college, setting up my insurance and other basics. I wanted to keep out of trouble long enough that I felt secure in my job. However, given the conditions—my own experience with them, and the experience of my co-workers that were also at their breaking point—I felt compelled to talk to others about what we were all going through. Their quick and positive reception to my complaints being raised against the agency did not surprise me. I wanted to push further though. I realized that this was an opportunity to talk seriously about organizing. And by organizing, I mean coordinated struggle in the workplace, making demands, and fighting to see those demands are met.

Every workplace will have its pain points. The most important issue on the table for a non-unionized workplace will likely be wages. When thinking about working conditions, consider the hours that you work, the tasks doled out by management, role clarity and being asked to do work well outside of what you are hired to do, and general mistreatment of staff by management. Another major issue will be at-will employment. Having some due process procedure in place that can prevent spontaneous termination is something few often consider. Certainly, as union representation has diminished, so too has any memory of what it is like to have due process on the job. At-will employees are subject to the whims of their managers, who are often selected for their managerial positions based on their own willingness to fire an employee. Em-

employees with due process can argue that just cause is needed for termination.

Before I move on to organizing strategy, I want to emphasize the purpose of this piece and my intent as an author. Communists need to understand that unions often serve reactionary functions. Union bureaucrats actively campaign for bourgeois political parties and raise money for candidates. The role of unions over the last century or more has been to shape the narrative for the working class in favor of nationalism and patriotism, and away from internationalism and revolutionary activity. Unions have acted as a mediator and bridge between capital and labor that has undermined class struggle, often at the most important turning points in world history. Many workers today are disillusioned by unions, often seeing through self-serving leadership. You may run into people who have horror stories about unions betraying workers, compelling workers away from the picket line and back to the shop floor without their demands being met. People are often more concerned with how much the union dues will be, simply because labor struggles involving unions have been few and far between, perhaps they are unaware of what benefits, financial or otherwise, ever come of them. Most labor struggle today involves old unions fighting a defensive battle in the mode of retreat, simply trying to hold onto gains won by past generations. There is a real sense among many workers I have encountered that unionizing is a lost cause, that the reaction will always be stronger, and that the compromises will be too much and the risk too great. It may help the reader to know that I tend to agree with these sentiments, but that there is still value in the labor struggle that I participated in, and there will be value in your own struggle. There is a real, tangible benefit to workers in the struggle for better working conditions and pay. These simple improvements that we can win for our class, ranging from covering increases in the cost of living to sleeping a little more soundly due to less stress in your workday, are not trivial in aggregate. But I believe, more importantly, knowing that real, tangible benefits are won through struggle is the single most important lesson in organizing. In this period in history, workers are growing disconnected from the few remaining elders that remember what it was like to participate in high-risk struggle for better working conditions—and not in defense, but in a direct assault against the capitalist class.

Witnesses to these past labor victories remember them, and they internalized these events. Workers today who passively observe a labor struggle may gain the courage to do the same in their workplace.

## Part I. Getting to Recognition

Sitting in the lunchroom and griping about the day was a part of my ritual. In that daily pattern, I heard stories from co-workers in every department, each department with its own seemingly irreconcilable problems. In order to cope, the standard practice is to joke sarcastically, feigning enthusiasm for the job. In August of that year, a time when workload cooled down and stress dissipated only to return in another month, co-workers of mine were sitting around the lunch table like any other day. However, what I overheard gave me pause. They were talking about other government agencies and departments that were unionized, and how they would be thrilled to have that kind of job security, pay and benefits. Although I had debated talking to coworkers about organizing prior to this, I struggled to find a moment in conversation that felt like it wouldn't backfire. Additionally, I was never quite sure how to read others and what their attitude about organizing would be. This was the first clear indication that I wasn't alone and that there was no longer an excuse to stay silent. I decided to join the conversation. The two co-workers in question worked at the agency for longer than I had, and had stories of their own that seemed to top the worst of mine. Before lunch had ended, I suggested that we talk again about the subject. If I recall correctly, we made jokes about how dangerous it was to even say the word "union." Later in the day I bumped into one of the two co-workers, and she confirmed that she was serious about meeting up outside of work to talk about organizing. For the remainder of the day I sat at my desk, trying to think of what steps to take. I knew there were unionized workplaces, and non-union workplaces, and in spite of my political convictions I honestly had no idea where to start. I wanted to be prepared before any serious discussion took place. The first resource I could think of was the Internet.

What I was able to ascertain from Internet searches made me realize that there really wasn't

much out there in terms of a guidebook on how to organize. Most memorably the short and sweet guide, produced by the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers Union, pointed me in the right direction. However, a guide like this can only tell you the most basic steps necessary to organizing. It cannot prepare you for the real act of speaking to co-workers, and of coordinating the effort. If you have never seen organizing in action, you will need to improvise, and take leaps of faith from time to time, but you will always want to be careful. In the case of the lunch break conversation, having that conversation felt dangerous. The reality is that it was risky. Not only did I not know how my co-workers felt about organizing, but what I was not aware of at the time was that certain managers were strongly rabidly anti-union, and would have started the retaliation clock ticking if they had heard us talking. I would only find this out later.

We met again shortly after the first conversation. We agreed that working conditions as they stood were not adequate and that something had to be done. We talked through options. First, we acknowledged that our best gamble on the success of the whole endeavor would be to reach out to a union local that represented workers like us. We were not certain this was the local or the union for us, and we were not sure if they would have answers for us. However, we thought it would be a good place to start because they had presence in our city, and any organizers that they had working for them would likely be familiar with the environment, conditions, and the culture of our co-workers. I volunteered to give a call to the local and see if they had any interest in working with us.

At this point, my major concern was the union itself. I considered alternatives, like simply organizing independently and making demands with no backing from a local. I considered the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or alternatives to the more reactionary and established unions. I came to the conclusion that the organizing effort had to succeed in getting its demands met, and given the high risk of retaliation, we were going to need to win legal protections.

Deciding on a labor union meant moving forward with contacting an external organizer. The

union local we contacted was surprisingly eager to work with us and to send someone out to meet. This external organizer met with us, the group that formed into a “union organizing committee,” at this point consisting of three staff. She was there not to direct the effort, but to provide us with strategic advice and assistance where and when needed. She was surprised that we had formed a committee and had progressed as far as we had. She mentioned that most people who contact a union in hopes to organize are single individuals with no concrete plan. Our plan was to continue with our approach and prepare for the formation of a committee that consisted of at least one member from each major department. At this point, we acknowledged that we were off to a good start, and that we were ready to carefully start talking to other coworkers to build this committee.

In the beginning, you will not want to go wide with outreach looking for support. Instead, you will need to learn how to listen. Pay close attention to what others are telling you. Try to figure out where they stand politically on related topics. Try to steer conversation in the direction of working conditions. If you get resistance, back off and try talking to someone else. If you get a positive response, you will likely be able to tell immediately, but don't get ahead of yourself. Know the political atmosphere, and stay observant of the “ideological place” your coworkers are coming from. They are not going to be natural born communists, and some will be rather conservative. But don't write them off, and don't underestimate them. Before I began getting to know coworkers better, the agency seemed to be dominated by mainstream liberalism, traditionalism, and a general “you're on your own” individualist attitude. I was surprised to meet anarchists and other leftists throughout my activity. Overall, a wide spectrum of ideology was represented, but among just about everybody, there was uncertainty and hesitation.

The resistance to the idea of a union that I encountered was couched in a larger critique of unions. Often people would argue that unions are ineffective or disinterested bodies that provide too few protections, and seek to perpetuate themselves. My response became refined over time, but it was important to stay consistent and to avoid lying. I emphasized that the actions in our struggle against the boss were our actions. I focused my emphasis on the ability that the

workers in our agency have to halt all work. Ultimately, neither “the union” nor upper management were a source of strength. The power was all ours. If we agreed to an action, management can only sit idly by and watch us take control of the situation. They are powerless to make the organization run if we choose to make it stop. This message is convincing and powerful for a lot of people. It is a reality that exists even in the absence of a union. It is the always-present state of the relation between workers and bosses. Often we get so wrapped up in acknowledging and submitting to the chain-of-command in our workplace, that we forget who outnumbers who, and who actually produces the good, service, or product that represents the reason why we bother to come into the office in the first place.

Fear of getting fired is a major deterrent for support, for obvious reasons rooted in material necessity. However, even the fear of getting fired can be assuaged by pointing out that any one of us punished for our organizing activity is backed by the rest of us that are willing to take action.

I made note to be discreet when organizing at first. Staying somewhat secretive early on is important, considering that any talk of solidarity actions in the event of retaliation or terminations is hollow until you have the support that you need. Making the case that we are building our collective strength is the single most effective and persuasive argument. It was also by and large the least cynical argument. Some people are interested more in money or better benefits and that alone is enough of a motivator for their support. For many, the legal protections were persuasive. Due process or binding arbitration, although often undermined, convinced a number of people that the success of this struggle was going to provide more job security. I was often weary of relying upon this argument, however, because of the weakness of legal protections we have today. If I resorted to citing any protections we were to gain from a contract, I made sure to emphasize that the power behind any contract is always the power that we were willing to wield, by taking action or stopping work if the agreement is violated. No contract is worth a damn if you can't get the workplace to commit to an action in defense

of the agreement.

The newly formed committee discussed these points and engaged coworkers who we agreed would be the best candidates for committee membership. An important step in organizing is finding the people who will go the extra steps necessary to maintain momentum and to build trust and to develop lasting connections with coworkers. These core members become a committee that represents every large department in the agency with at least one person. Before you move beyond committee formation, you will need to plan for the following stage, which is called “recognition.” Recognition is the process of collecting signed union cards that represent a vote of confidence in the organizing effort. Once you have an emerging committee with at least half of the departments represented, you will want to start thinking deeply about the organizational structure of your workplace. Our committee collected names and personal email addresses of members of the “bargaining unit,” organized by department, title, and level of support for the organizing effort. Union membership is determined by job classification and level of authority a worker has within the hierarchy of their workplace. Our classification was the lowest in the hierarchy and consisted of non-supervisor staff. It contained the largest share of staff. This is good in one sense, since it means that we have a great deal of power within the agency, but it also means that we need to cover a lot of ground in order to reach majority support. For recognition, this means we will need fifty percent plus one support from a the largest share of agency staff. Unless you are organizing a tiny workplace, you will want more than a simple majority. You should set a goal of more than sixty percent of your bargaining unit signing a recognition card. In order to quantify this goal, you will need to know exactly how many people are employed, and exactly what their classification is. If you can get a copy of your workplace organizational chart, this will be extremely useful in determining your progress.

Support tends to snowball during the recognition process. You will likely get a small number of enthusiastic supporters early. These people tend to stand out based on their attitude toward current working conditions. Identify these people first, and find out if they are willing to chip in more support than just a recognition card. There is a high probability that you



will encounter die-hard anti-union coworkers as well, (e.g., “My father was a union man and he got laid off and lost his pension!”). The obvious advice here is that you will not get through to everyone, and to of course pick your battles wisely. Not everyone is either a major supporter or major detractor. Many people fall in the middle somewhere. Expect to run into coworkers that will claim to support you, but that support never goes beyond support in spirit. Typically they won’t sign a card, but they will look the other way if you are talking to other coworkers in their vicinity. They might come to meetings and help in other ways, but are fearful that signing a card will somehow “mark” them. Be careful with coworkers that are this indecisive. They may be motivated out of fear. They may have hopes for a promotion out of the bargaining unit in the near future, and they might fear losing the promotion opportunity outright if management found out they support the organizing effort. There is always the chance that they might switch sides. Beware of fence straddlers that will show interest in organizing, but who will bog you down with questions about dues, contractual minutiae, and other obligations that they fear will emerge as a result of a signed union contract. These folks tend to be unsure about everything, and convincing them to choose sides should not be your highest priority until you are certain you have reached out to everybody else, and you still need more recognition cards.

There is one more type of coworker that we encountered while organizing. This faction, whom I refer to as “the loyalists,” will work diligently to undermine your efforts, perhaps by providing information directly to management, or by subtle sabotage of your meetings. Certainly, management will play the role of loyalist if there is no staff person that is willing to spy for information on your activity. Rank-and-file loyalists are more of a threat than managers, since they can weasel their way into meetings and justify their presence with phony enthusiasm. The danger of a loyalist as a participant in your organizing cannot be overstated. They can be difficult to identify, and maybe you will be lucky enough to have a workplace without a loyalist. Pay close attention to who they socialize with, what their attitudes about management are, and keep an ear

out for slip-ups.

In my workplace, each worker had their own cubicle. Well, there was one cubicle that was shared between two people. I was one of those people, and the other person had a fondness for management. This arrangement didn’t come to fruition until several months into active organizing. It is possible that this was just a coincidence. However, given the sheer amount of supervision and the repeated one-on-one meetings with management that preceded my desk being moved, the coincidence angle seems less and less plausible. It is more likely that I was being monitored for my activity. Although we maintained our secrecy as best as we could, it was clear that some information had gotten out. We took it as an inevitability, and did not let it deter us. I continued with my office work and organizing activity, and focused on making myself out to be a model employee during period of heightened suspicion. I came in to work early, closely monitored lunch and other breaks, and tried my best to meet deadlines. I had encouraged anybody who supported organizing to do the same. Dubious lines of questioning about working conditions, about open door policies, or intrusive questions about coworkers fall neatly under the category of retaliation, and would be unfair labor practices in a legal sense. In this stage of organizing, you are not protected by a contract. You are protected by a law that states that it is illegal to fire you for attempting to organize a union. Obviously, your employer can fire you for doing something other than working during hours, but in spite of this law, there still is nothing to stop your employer from firing you if you are an at-will employee. At-will employment means that they can “terminate an employee at any time for any reason, except an illegal one, or for no reason without incurring legal liability.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, if you can fire someone “for no reason without incurring legal liability,” then you can indeed fire someone for an illegal reason, and simply claim it was for no reason at all.

Keeping tabs on growth in the organizing was vital for adjusting our goal. If the total number of employees in your organization increases, you will need additional recognition cards to reach your sixty percent goal. It took us months to achieve the necessary number of cards for recognition. During that time, the organization grew dramatically. This was definitely coincidental with regard to our organizing, as there was

new funding and plans for expansion. However, this can also be a tactic. If management is aware of your activity, they may hire new staff, even where no new staff are needed. They may use this tactic to dilute signed card majorities, but the tactic has other benefits for management. New staff are included as part of the bargaining unit, and are less likely to want to risk anything. They are less aware of the problems in the organization, which means you risk coming off as dramatic when you explain the working conditions. It was always part of my tactics to initiate new staff by taking them out for coffee and giving them the rundown on how the organization operates. I would tell them that the job is going to be rough, but that there is hope that the winning of a contract will improve things, and might even make the place tolerable for planning one's career around. I found that many people were not ready for the sustained levels of disappointment they would encounter. In addition to waves of new recruits, the organization started experiencing increased turnover, pushing our card numbers down with each supporter who found a (union) job elsewhere with better compensation and, less stress, and sometimes even a defined benefits pension. Our committee met regularly, and discussed plans to push through these obstacles to reach our goal for signed cards for sixty percent of staff in just a few short months. This plan felt ambitious, but we understood that the agency had plans for *doubling* the number of staff over the course of the next year.

Our largest department consisted of workers who performed field services. This department was the lowest paid and had the most complaints against management. Consensus among workers in this department was that their labor was treated as nothing more than sanitation work, and that this attitude put many of the workers in vulnerable situations. The population that the department worked with were themselves vulnerable, and this escalated their concerns over working conditions. Workers under high financial and emotional stress, that are frequently sent into physically hazardous conditions to provide their services, are more likely to experience illness, injury, or burnout. It was apparent that the way the department was set up, these staff were going to be very receptive to org-

anizing. Our committee delegate from this department had a lot of work to do. They had dozens of contacts to maintain, many of whom were only in the office for a few hours on a given day. The workers were issued phones used to maintain contact with one another, but it was well understood that these phones were regularly surveilled and that communication had to be conducted either in person or via personal cell phones. All operations had to be covert and very careful.

Despite extra caution owing to being under close supervision by management in this department, our committee member and organizer faced retaliation after some weeks of successful organizing. Management brought them into the office to discuss some unspecified problem. The unnecessary incident involved another staff member and our committee member talking about the union. Both were written up and reprimanded. The event gave us pause, but we were committed to any action necessary to prevent or reverse further punishment or termination if it came to that. The reprimanding backfired in the end, when any mention of it brought workers in the department closer to our cause. By recognition, I can safely say that every eligible member of the bargaining unit in that department had signed a card, and was ready to fight if management threw another punch. The most anxiety-provoking month of my employment in the organization was the period in which we were under ten recognition cards short of our goal. I spent the day pacing from cubicle to cubicle, using any real-work excuse I could to justify paying visits to coworkers that had been holding out on signing a card. The committee likely walked to DC and back making rounds. We all learned our talking points, our strengths and weaknesses in making convincing arguments. I came to memorize everybody's most important issue, and spent off-time thinking of ways to articulate a better case for why signing a card would be in their interest.

Every card was a small victory, but we knew the focus on getting to sixty percent was necessary. Given the rapid expansion of the agency, it became apparent that we struggled to maintain an up-to-date employee roster. If we relied on a mere simple majority, we risked miscalculating and falling short. Once the labor relations board receives your recognition cards, there is no hiding your organizing activity. The organization will be notified quickly that the cards were submitted. If we had fallen

short, we could have risked a battle between management and the organizers that none of us could afford. Retaliation was kept to a minimum by our strict adherence to work rules and secrecy. Filing for recognition blows the door off of the whole operation. Having a majority doesn't necessarily mean victory either. Employers can dispute the results and force an election. Elections must follow certain rules, and by law the employers and union organizers must adhere to rules that make it challenging to persuade coworkers to vote yes. In spite of the obvious benefits of staying covert about organizing until the recognition cards were filed, we decided after discussion to go public shortly before filing. We reasoned that this would encourage support, if we spoke out in support of our efforts, and that this support would bring us to where we needed to be.

By putting ourselves in directly in confrontation with management, we showed that staff could now stand up and take action, and given our strength it was very unlikely that the agency would retaliate against us. I agreed to be one of the people that would speak, and the organizer from our field-work department also agreed to speak. They would make a short speech at the end of the all-staff meeting, taking advantage of the questions segment management afforded us (up until this point), and I would speak at the commission meeting, which is a meeting of the governing body appointed to oversee our agency. Since our all-staff meeting and the commission meeting were scheduled close together, we planned to use this several week period to collect our last few cards.

Prior to delivering my speech, through determination and a lot of persuasion, we were able to get enough cards to file for recognition with the labor relations board. We cut it very close, but the benefit to filing beforehand meant that we could change our statement to management. We could now ask for their cooperation, and acceptance of our decision to form the union. If they were to accept the decision of the labor board, this would trigger no election and would mean we wouldn't need to deal with a long and drawn out election campaign. It is possible that they could dispute our filing, or pull some other legal maneuver to prolong

the process in hopes that we will lose steam. Strategically and preemptively coming out against any of these actions puts management on notice that we are aware of the multiple tricks they may use to delay recognition. From my perspective, the planned speech was a chance to be assertive and to make it known that I am backed by the collective action of the entire agency. Anyone else willing to take a stand would also be backed by this collective strength.

Standing in front of the commission was absolutely terrifying. I trembled as I delivered my speech. I requested that management not interfere with our organizing, and I laid out a case for why we were organizing. The cost of living in our city was pushing many of us into poverty. Hourly employees felt compelled to work in dangerous situations, often pressured to work overtime. Salaried workers were regularly brought to the breaking point. We all lived in a state of fear in our day to day interactions with some of the management. Most importantly, I was able to deliver the message that we had filed for recognition, and that this was the time to accept our decision to organize.

Cooperation with the workers would make the transition to a union workplace easier for everybody. I gave no indication that actions or strikes were on the table. In fact I didn't mention them at all. It is important as an organizer to avoid resorting to more aggressive tactics until they become necessary. Escalation of tactics shows that the power of the rank and file exists, and that they are willing to make small steps to express that power. It gives your coworkers the confidence to move toward more daring expressions of that power. A good escalation campaign could be to start a sticker campaign, to delivering a petition, to lunch walkouts, and then work-hour walk outs. With each step taken, coworkers become emboldened to take measures into their own hands. My hope in standing up to the commission was to start the wheels moving on a campaign of escalation that would force rapid concessions on working conditions before a contract was ever signed and executed.

**Magnus Zeller**

# REMEMBERING KARL LIEBKNECHT

## AN INTRODUCTION TO “SOCIALISM’S FOREIGN POLICY”

Karl Liebknecht was not a great theorist. Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, with whose name he will be for-ever linked, he wrote no major treatises on forms of protest or political economy (and even had his doubts about the labor theory of value).<sup>1</sup> Nor was he a skillful politician. Before the war he was mostly known for being the son of Marx’s colleague and SPD cofounder,<sup>2</sup> while after the war he was far too reluctant to break from social democracy once and for all.

Yet Liebknecht was a man of principle. Sebastian Haffner, a famous liberal historian, described him as “one of the most courageous men Germany ever produced.”<sup>3</sup> He proved himself capable of sudden flashes of insight, moreover, some of which can be read in the fragment that follows. Liebknecht wrote this piece in April 1918 from Luckau prison. Although rambling at times and jotted down hurriedly, it deals with crucial themes such as the dialectic of inside and outside, subject and object,

consciousness and conditions. It thereby remains relevant today.

What Liebknecht hopes to ascertain here is what Trotsky attempted to theorize some years later as the “propitious moment,” specifically in connection with the failed German revolution, re-flecting on the lessons of October 1917.<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács couched the problem in rather more philo-sophical terms as the *Augenblick* — that is, the fleeting glance or blink of an eye in which the class-conscious proletariat can subjectively intervene within the objective course of events and disrupt the capitalist totality. Often this was discussed as the “ripeness” of conditions.

“Rosa and Karl went to their deaths almost somnambulistically,” Paul Mattick later recalled.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a grim sense of foreboding hangs over their last articles, as if they already knew what was in store for them. Today, a century after the crushing the Spartacist revolt and the murder of its leaders, it is fitting to revisit works left by these slain revolutionaries.

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### NOTES

1 For more on this see his *Grundzüge einer Marxkritik*, posthumously published in 1922.

2 Wilhelm Liebknecht. Luxemburg would sometimes joke that Liebknecht had been “born into” the party. Prior to August 1914, Karl had devoted most of his energy to bolstering the youth sections of the SPD. His decision to vote against credits for war made him the sole elected voice of opposition, and resulted in his trial in 1915 and jailing until November 1918.

3 Sebastian Haffner. *Failure of a Revolution: Germany, 1918-1919*. Translated by Georg Rapp. (The Library Press. New York, NY: 1973). Pg. 140.

4 Incidentally, this was Bordiga’s favorite Trotsky pamphlet (apart from *Terrorism and Communism*): “What does it mean to lose the propitious moment? The most favorable conditions for an insurrection exist, obviously, when a maximum shift in our favor has occurred in the relationship of forces. We are of course referring to the relationship of forces in the domain of consciousness, i.e., in the domain of the

political superstructure, and not in the domain of the economic foundation, which may be assumed to remain more or less unchanged throughout the entire revolutionary epoch. On one and the same economic foundation, with one and the same class division of society, the relationship of forces changes depending upon the mood of the proletarian masses, the extent to which their illusions are shattered and their political experience has grown, the extent to which the confidence of intermediate classes and groups in the state power is shattered, and finally the extent to which the latter loses confidence in itself. During revolution all these pro-cesses take place with lightning speed. The whole tactical art consists in this: that we seize the moment when the combination of circumstances is most favorable to us.” Leon Trotsky. *Lessons of October*. Translated by Naomi Allen. *The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-1925*. (Pathfinder Press. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 232.

5 Paul Mattick, Sr. *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. (Merlin Press. Monmouth: 1978). Pg. 95.









## SOCIALISM'S FOREIGN POLICY

International socialism, by virtue of its socialist and international character (that is, qua socialism and internationalism), can neither know nor tolerate any contradiction between its internal and external politics. Homogeneity and continuity of its internal and external politics are for it unconditional postulates. From each side it demands one and the same socialist, international, revolutionary spirit.

The task of socialist politics, supported by the class-conscious proletariat, is the following: to promote social development in the direction of the socialist order, etc., by means of proletarian class movement. In the moment of peripety 1 through the garde mobile this movement assumes the character of social revolution in the narrower sense. Social revolution is possible only if a decisive part of humanity is ripe for the socialist order. But this ripeness is the overripeness of the capitalist

order, the completion of its social-developmental task.

Does it follow, then, as superficial schematics sometimes imagine, that socialist politics must promote capitalist development so as to accelerate the emergence of necessary preconditions for social revolution?

The ripeness of society [for revolution] is not an absolute but a relative measure, even in an economic and technical respect. Whether society is ripe for the socialist order depends not only on the degree of its economic development, but on its overall social development in the broadest sense. Above all, on the degree to which the consciousness, insight, will, and active determination of the proletariat [has been developed], namely from the spiritual, moral, and psychic level of the working

masses.

Insofar as this psychic factor does not arbitrarily drop out of the clear blue sky, but rather results from the masses' entire respective living conditions, its measure is hardly determined by extrahuman or extrasocial powers. Man's psychic faculties also include the capacity for self-movement within certain limits, the capacity to augment given faculties through systematic action within these limits. This applies to society as well as to the individual. Compare their education. And as far as these capacities exist in either case, however they may be objectively conditioned or determined, men are not prevented from exercising them within certain limits. Just as the freedom to examine, resolve, and act which various groups of men claim for themselves appears imaginary from the standpoint of social psychology, so too is the notion of individual free will from the standpoint of personal psychology. In the broadest sense of man's psychic and spiritual nature, the effect of the powers of the human soul cannot be other than individuals and groups working together, counteracting, and interacting with each other, objectively entwined, although they seem to act independently of one another. In this convoluted process, teeming with self-deceptions—in which the overall social psychology, and from it the material social activity, finds complete expression—everyone has to act with all the forces and impulses of which they are capable for themselves and in relation to others, so they will contribute their part to the realization of the objectively required and determined processes of life for the whole of society.

To bolster the psychic factor, in order to hasten the possibility of socialist society—that is the specific task of socialist politics, its revolutionary task. By fulfilling this task, it helps create the conditions to systematically cultivate the germs and conditions of socialist society within the capitalist order, especially in political and economic terms. Dialectically, therefore, it has the effect of bringing society's point of ripeness as near as possible.

It is often said of capitalism that the more it triumphs, the more it is its own gravedigger. This correct kernel of "catastrophe theory" is correct only because the counteraction [*Gegenwirkung*] increases, not only in equal ratio to it but in an even higher proportion. Such counteraction is neither in support of capitalist triumph nor its corybantic accompaniment, à la [Paul] Lensch,

but is rather our task—the task of the struggling proletariat.

In the question of capitalism's unfolding, in its capitalist essence, socialist politics is purely critical. But this critique is also creative in that it carves out and cultivates the faculties that are still in control [of this unfolding], which can be used by the socialist movement as still latent elements of its development.

The foreign policy of socialism is not merely the extension of its internal politics beyond national borders, which are from a socialist standpoint contingent. More than any other social principle, it is identical both in idea and practice to socialism's internal politics. For the external as well as internal politics of socialism are equally rooted in international social contradictions. Socialism expresses the class interests of the international proletariat, of which each national proletariat is merely an isolated splinter. In the context of international class struggle, every national contest between the classes is merely a dependent subprocess. Which is to say that they are only special applications of essentially international socialist principles to the concrete forms where class antagonisms appear in detail and in their totality, either locally or overall, in the concrete conditions of class struggle (exhibited either specifically in the interior of individual states or generally over and above state borders).

From the primacy of the international over the national viewpoint, the primacy of external over internal politics follows in principle. The internal politics of socialism are thus only a special case of its external politics. And what imperialism says is therefore necessarily true of socialism, albeit in an opposite sense: "Victory inwardly and victory outwardly require one another."

The aims of socialism's foreign policy must be socialist, as must their means. Socialism seeks to promote social development in the direction of the socialist order, which must be international [in scope]. Promotion of this development occurs through all socially suitable faculties—the socialist faculties of a working class still opposed to capitalism on the basis of capitalist society. But it also occurs through the influence of the developmental power of capitalism itself: insofar as the socialist movement

gauges the type and energy of the power that it casts against the opposing measure of imperialist power and its degree of antisocialist danger, in order to ensure as simultaneously as possible the ripeness of the capitalist regions most important for socialist transformation. The means of socialism's foreign policy are the various forms and methods of the revolutionary class struggle.

No more than one of the internal there is a socialist instrument of the foreign policy of socialism that could be outside the class struggle.

**Karl Liebknecht**  
**translation by Walt Auerbach**





# THE BIRTH OF SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES



"Our political lineage comes from Marx and Engels, the First International, the revolutionary years of the Second and Third, Liebknecht, Luxembourg, Lenin, Daniel de Leon, Trotsky, and the opposition to Stalinist counterrevolution in Russia. The events that we connect with are the Paris Commune, the Russian revolution of 1917, the German revolution of 1918-23, the hundreds of thousands of men murdered by the present Russian system, in its destruction of the revolutionary tendencies; with the Spanish insurrection of the 19th of July 1936 against the clerical-military reaction and the insurrection of May 1937 against Stalinism and Popular Front; with the hundreds of thousands of men murdered by Francoism. We also demand the insurgent action of the German, Polish, Hungarian proletariat, etc., against the Moscow regulations."

"Beginning" Alarm #1, 1958.

Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, Luxembourg, Lenin, Trotsky... are commonly mentioned in Marxist "pantheons." But Daniel de León? Who was he? What led the revolutionaries of the Spanish Communist Left to place an American socialist leader alongside the great theoreticians and historical leaders of Marxism? Why is he practically forgotten today? In order to answer these questions, we are releasing a series of articles on the history of the labor movement in the United States and the legacy of Daniel de León and the SLP.

## **The foundational milestones of the labor movement in the U.S.**

1866

The National Labor Union (NLU) was formed and directed its energies towards reducing the working day to eight hours.<sup>1</sup> The NLU was a federation of local trade unions which, as was typical at the time, mostly represented skilled workers and craftsmen. Everywhere, the first trade union movement received its impetus from the craftsmen and not the industrial proletariat.<sup>2</sup> However, the NLU served as a bridge between the movement of the craftsmen and the movement of the industrial proletariat in ascendant capitalism.

1869

The Knights of Labor (KOL) was founded in secret and became public ten years after its founding. It was originally a union made up of mostly craftsmen but later ended up playing an essential role in the industrial workers' movement. The KOLs, during the 1880s, brought together both skilled and unskilled workers and experienced massive growth during their early years as a public union.<sup>3</sup>

1874

The crisis caused by the collapse of the Northern Pacific railways in 1873 left more than 180,000 workers unemployed. In 1874, thousands of workers peacefully demonstrated at Tompkins Square in order to demand employment in public works. They, however, were met with the violent force of the State.<sup>4</sup>

1877

The great railway strike showed the maturation of the movement. Machinists and switchmen, i.e. skilled and unskilled workers, went on strike in West Virginia in response to the latest wage cut in a series of wage cuts imposed by the company. The movement soon spread to many other states: The Virginians were followed by the switchmen of the Pennsylvania Railroad, who were striking against the "double-heading" system. Later, when other railroad workers joined the strike, the demand to reverse the last reduction in wages was added. In Pittsburgh, all freight traffic was blocked and strikers, accompanied by unemployed workers, marched throughout the city. When the local militia refused to fire on the workers, 600 Philadelphia militiamen were sent to shoot into the crowd. Unfortunately for the militiamen, the strikers successfully fought them back and, after driving the militiamen from the city, destroyed company property with all of their fury. In St. Louis, the strikers were able to take full possession of the city and an executive committee was elected at a meeting convened by the Socialists.<sup>5</sup>

## **The WPUS**

The WPUS was made up of the Marxists, who were the members of the 1st International and were

referred to as the "Internationalists," and the Lassallean current. The Marxists understood the struggle for economic improvement and the parliamentary struggle as two facets of the same process, while the Lassalleans—following the theory of the "iron law of wages" of their founder—saw the struggle for better wages as useless. After the death of the IWA (International Workingmen's Association), both tendencies had united in Germany to form the SPD at the famous Gotha congress.

As a result, when the nineteen U.S. sections of the International met in 1876, the SPD was the model that they chose to follow. At that time, the vanguard of the class in the country was made up mostly of German migrants and, consequently, most of the labor press was published in German. The platform of the Internationalists, which put trade union activity first and the need to delay electoral activity until the party was mature enough, ended up prevailing in the conference.<sup>6</sup> The Lassalleans, however, won the majority of seats on the national executive committee. Philip Van Patten, a Lassallean, became the first secretary<sup>7</sup> of the party born of the conference: the WPUS.

## **The WPUS and the railway strike in St. Louis**

All this informed how the St. Louis section of the WPUS would react to the great railway strike of 1877. From the start of the great strike in St. Louis, the executive committee sent delegates to different stores in order to spread the strike while the strike committee of East St. Louis, implementing General Order n°1, dedicated itself to blocking the railroads. The WPUS urged the workers to include the demand for the eight-hour day and to refrain from resorting to violence. These were not merely statements since metalworkers were organized by the committee in Carondelet for the express purpose of preventing vandalism and violence.

On July 26, the members of the executive committee proclaimed that the objectives of the strike should be the dispatch of proletarian delegates to Washington, the nationalization of the railroads, a public works program for the unemployed, and "the recall of all charters of all national banks, together with their whole currency." This last demand was influenced by the greenback movement. This petty-bourgeois populist movement, described by Engels in 1892 as "humbug",

had, as its demand since 1868, an increase in the circulation of paper money.

The committee continued to send delegates to extend the strike in other areas and cities. But while it contributed greatly to the success of the workers' seizure of power in the city, it ended up fearing the strikers more than the state forces. On the same date, they turned their backs on the workers when they issued a proclamation saying that "...in order to avoid riot, we have determined to have no large procession until our organization is so complete as to positively assure the citizens of St. Louis of a perfect maintenance of order and full protection of property." This move by the WPUS was driven in part by profound racist prejudices. They feared that more and more black proletarians would join the big marches and demonstrations. Albert Currin, one of the local leaders of the WPUS, boasted that the local party organization was trying to "dissuade any white men from going with the n----rs."

The same leader declared in an interview that, "A gang of n----rs...sent word that they wanted to join the [Workingmen's Party]. We replied that we wanted nothing with them. "In marked contrast to the local leadership of the WPUS, the strikers welcomed the black proletarians with open arms. When a black boatman asked the striking workers if they would support the black proletarians, the strikers responded with a resounding "We will!"<sup>8</sup> What we are looking at here is basic class consciousness: the struggle shows in practice that it cannot be extended and consolidated without breaking all divisions based on "identity". That, regardless of what the multiple oppressions have "taught" each of us who "we are", as a class we are not a confluence of individuals and their "identities", but the first step in the reunification of a society and a consciousness split by the division of society into exploiters and exploited with the thousands of oppressions that adorn it.

The massive meetings that the WPUS ended up canceling were the way in which the workers could become unified; something which is essential to their constitution as a political class; as a revolutionary subject. The strength and unity of the strikers and their organization were destroyed by the

cancellation of the meetings. The WPUS, instead of responding to the experience of the strike and its needs, behaved like a head divorced from its body.

## **The collapse of Lassalleanism**

Lassalleanism represented the stratum of the craftsman in decantation. The craftsman, as a stratum, was being split into the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The craftsmen, skilled workers endowed with feudal privilege, were either being converted into an "independent" petty bourgeoisie or becoming proletarianized. Lassalleanism thus expressed ambiguous, if not openly reactionary, aspirations such as the bourgeois state taking "socialist measures" by creating cooperatives or taking responsibility for the education of children. These are ideas that Marxists in the German party have had to face from the moment of the merger and even long after, as can be seen in Marx's "Critique of Gotha's Program" and Engels' "Erfurt Program".

Transplanted to the conditions of the US south, that attachment to the feudal and identitarian distinction of the craftsman, that vague aspiration of the democratic petty bourgeoisie, was manifested in the form of racism and defense at all costs of small property hand in hand with the state. The Lassallean leadership went so far as to affirm that it would collaborate with the state authorities to avoid damage to property. Instead of aiding the strength and disciplined organization of the workers, the Lassalleans ended up dividing and paralyzing the workers by holding on to the arm of legality and the state. But obviously, the state wasn't going to meet their aspirations. Soon after the strike was repressed, John S. Phelps, the Governor of Missouri, ordered the general responsible for the administrative apparatus to distribute arms to the St. Louis authorities and to:

collect such ordnance and ordnance stores as were recently sent to St. Louis by my orders, to be temporarily issued to the citizens who were called upon to aid the civil authorities in preserving the public peace.<sup>9</sup>

Before the strike was repressed, the Governor of Missouri issued a proclamation ordering the striking workers to disperse. The executive committee replied that the strikers would not give in unless their demands

were met, but, it shamelessly urged the workers to just be patient. In the end, the municipal and federal forces ended up storming the city and repressing the strike on July 27th and 28th. The railroad strikes in the other U.S. states were also repressed at around the same time.

The executive committee's actions, its conciliatory stance toward the mayor, its attempt to appeal to local merchants, shameless racism, and its attempt to moderate the resistance to repression expressed one of the poles toward which Lassallean "social democracy" could lean. Faced with proletarianization, the remaining craftsmen could fantasize about becoming a petty bourgeoisie with state aid or accepting their inescapable future as proletarians. The executive committee of St. Louis took the first road, even at the cost of growing confrontations and clashes with the party base and the movement.<sup>10</sup> The final decanting of Lassalleanism, between petty bourgeoisie and proletariat, between past and future, at the end, between state and class, was thus staged in the U.S., tens of thousands of kilometers from the Germany in which it was born and seven years after the Paris Commune.

## **The Socialist Labor Party**

But the railroaders' strike was neither limited to St. Louis nor did it serve only to show the theoretical and moral collapse of Lassalleanism. In fact, it was the first massive strike in the United States, the first manifestation of the working class as a political subject capable of asserting itself, as the Manifesto says, nationally, that is to say in all the territory and in front of the national state as a whole. A new historical epoch was then opened in the development of the workers movement in the United States that responded to the expectations that Marx himself had shared with Engels in the first moments of the railway strike:

What do you think of the workers in the United States? This first eruption against the oligarchy of associated capital which has arisen since the Civil War will of course be put down, but it could quite well form the



starting point for the establishment of a serious labor party in the United States.

And indeed, the WPUS won a large number of votes for the first time in the fall election of 1877<sup>11</sup> after reconsidering the position adopted at its founding conference only a year earlier.

The change in tactics was accompanied by a name change. From then on, the party would call itself the "Socialist Labor Party" (SLP). What Engels wrote to Sorge in 1889 applies equally well to the labor movement in the United States in 1877:

The people are throwing themselves into the job in quite a different way, are leading far more colossal masses into the fight, are shaking society much more deeply, are putting forward much more far-reaching demands: eight-hour day, general federation of all organizations, complete solidarity. Thanks to Tussy [Eleanor Marx Aveling] women's branches have been formed for the first time – in the Gas Workers and General Laborers' Union. Moreover, the people only regard their immediate demands themselves as provisional, although they themselves do not know as yet what final aim they are working for. But this dim idea is strongly enough rooted to make them choose only openly declared Socialists as their leaders.

The SLP continued to grow until in 1879 it was composed of 10,000 militants spread over a hundred sections.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, as a result of the experience of the 1877 strike, the unions grew massively both in size and number of members. Between 1879 and 1880, KOL membership grew from 9,000 to 28,000 members. And by 1885, there were already 111,000 members.<sup>13</sup>

A significant number of SLP members participated in these self-defense groups, causing immense controversy within the SLP. The SLP National Executive Committee considered that the paramilitary groups were giving the wrong impression of socialist politics and objectives. They ended up ordering party members to withdraw from paramilitary groups, causing the "Arbeiter-Zeitung" and the "Vorbote" to denounce them for "interfering with the local rights of party

affiliates." But the discussion remained open, and a heated debate on the subject took place in the Allegheny's convention of December 1879. Albert Parsons, known for his participation in the '77 strike and who later, disillusioned with the SLP, would become an anarchist, attempted to win a vote of no confidence against the National Executive Committee for its ban on the participation of SLP members in paramilitary groups. Philip Van Patten, the Lassallean party secretary, demanded from the delegates a "definitive vindication" of their position. In the end, the party leadership was maintained and Philip Van Patten was re-elected as national secretary.<sup>14</sup>

Stuck between a Lassallean leadership and an anarchist opposition, the party could not even affirm an independent class policy in the electoral arena, which disillusioned many militants. The SLP did not even stand alone in the national elections, but rather always relied on populist and petty-bourgeois parties. The SLP signed the "greenback compromise", a temporary alliance with the agrarian populists, a move which finds its parallel in the PSOE in Spain and its "republican conjunction." To top it off, the 1880 campaign in which judges Walsh and Gibbs stuffed the ballot in order to get their candidate J.J. Grath to win the elections, angered thousands of workers and led them to wonder whether electoral mobilization was worth the effort since the elections themselves proved to be a terrain clearly rigged by the local bourgeoisie.<sup>15</sup>

Many SLP members ended up joining the "social-revolutionary clubs." Philip Van Patten argued, rightly for the first time, that the members of these clubs could not be members of the SLP because their apoliticism and their defense of paramilitary organizations were irreconcilable with a workers' party. But anarchism grew as the electoral failures of the SLP mounted. Johann Most arrived in the US just a year after Van Patten argued against the revolutionary clubs. Johann Most was a Bakuninist German immigrant who ended up promoting anarchism among the workers, multiplying its overall strength and influence. Most promoted terrorist tactics, rejected the unions, and participation in elections. Meanwhile, the anarchists in Chicago soon asserted what would later be known as "anarcho-syndicalism", presenting the unions as embryonic

organs of the future socialist society. According to the program of the then recent Anarchist International (IWPA):

The International (IWPA) recognizes in the trade union the embryonic group of the future 'free society'. Every Trade Union is, nolens volens, an autonomous commune in the process of incubation. The Trades Union is a necessity of capitalistic production, and will yet take its place by superseding it under the system of universal free co-operation. No, friends, it is not the unions but the methods which some of them employ with which the International finds fault, and as indifferently as it may be considered by some, the development of capitalism is hastening the day when all Trades Unions and Anarchists will of necessity become one and the same.<sup>16</sup>

Although Marx and Engels considered union struggle essential to the advance of the labor movement, they never thought that unions could be the embryonic organs of socialist society. Trade unions are, by nature, reformist organizations that, by their position in capitalism, are incapable of transcending it and much less of being the organs through which it would be abolished. The progressive role of trade unions, during the period when capitalism was expanding, was always limited to what the labor movement could achieve within the limits of capitalism.

The popularity of this form of anarchism was undoubtedly partly provoked not only by the need to participate in the trade union struggle, but also by the inadequacy of the SLP in tackling it. The weakness of the reformist line followed by the SLP leadership, the revisionist idea that revolution could be carried out peacefully through the ballot box, threw many members of the SLP into the arms of the anarchists. By 1883, the SLP had only 1,500 members, while the Chicago Anarchist International had 7,000.<sup>17</sup> That year, in the midst of a clear organizational disaster, Philip Van Patten, the party's national secretary since 1877, left his post.<sup>18</sup>

The weakness of the socialist movement and its leaders had fueled anarchism, which, according to Marx, was the "great war horse of their master Bakunin, who has taken nothing from the socialist systems except a set of slogans." Class violence—its ability to impose its

needs and those of society over the institutional fabric of the bourgeoisie and state apparatuses—becomes messianic, group violence, defended by both the pro-union anarchists of Chicago and the anti-union anarchists of New York. An era of dynamite worship begins which dissolves the collective capacity of the self-organization of the class. Lucy Parsons, a prominent anarchist who was one of the founding members of the anarchist International, addressing the "tramps" and unemployed, admonishes:

but stroll you down the avenues of the rich, and look through the magnificent plate windows into their voluptuous homes, and here you will discover the very identical robbers who have despoiled you and yours. Then let your tragedy be enacted here!... Send forth your petition, and let them read it by the red glare of destruction...you can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able to understand; for they have never yet deigned to notice any petition from their slaves that they were not compelled to read by the red glare bursting from the cannons' mouths, or that was not handed to them upon the point of the sword. You need no organization when you make up your mind to present this kind of petition. In fact, an organization would be a detriment to you; but each of you hungry tramps who read these lines avail yourselves of those little methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land. Learn the use of explosives!

It is evident in this text, as her denial of the necessity of organization demonstrates, that her concept of the role of violence in revolution was completely divorced from the demands of the movement and real class struggle. In reality, the same can be said of her anti-parliamentarianism, which contrasted greatly with the Marxist orientation towards the question. For Marxists, parliamentarianism was always a question of tactics,

not strategy or principles. The socialist parliamentarians only voted for the extension of political rights for the class, they did not enter into the discussion or voting of budgets, for example. Electoral participation was first and foremost a tool for the organization and political mobilization of the class. Like participation in trade unions, it was about developing the capacity and presence of the class as a political subject in bourgeois society while it offered such an opportunity.

The anarchist rejection of "politics", not only of electoral participation during ascendant capitalism, but of politics in general, reduces anarchism to a merely "expressive", aesthetic movement, turning its militants in the best of cases into true "liberals with bombs" incapable of contributing anything to the proletariat's struggle for emancipation from capitalism.

### **The party before Daniel de León**

Neither the Lassalleans nor the anarchists were able to understand two fundamental ideas: that tactics depend on the great historical framework given by the development of global capitalism -- and therefore have an expiration date -- and that the organization of revolutionaries either provides a direction to the outbursts of combativity or only serves to leave the class defenseless against the political, economic and repressive attacks of its antagonist. When the party meets to try to regain ground at the 1883 Baltimore Convention, the actions they take will be even more counterproductive. In an attempt to regain the disillusioned former members, the party would give more autonomy to the sections, abolish the post of national secretary, and weaken the power of the national executive committee.<sup>19</sup> If in organizational terms, one can only speak of a weakening, in programmatic and tactical terms, the setback was direct and brutal. The poor electoral results that we mentioned previously led them to retract from electoral activity. The party ended up accepting the need for violence to achieve socialism, but nevertheless, defended their role in their 1886 manifesto as:

a propagandistic organization which goes hand in hand with the great labor movement that is now refermenting the society of the world, and we shall be revolutionists only when forced into being such by legislation and persecution

withholding from us the means of a peaceable propaganda.<sup>20</sup>

Although it limited itself to this propagandistic role, the SLP began to recover members, increasing its sections from thirty to forty-two. By 1886, there were sixty sections. At the same time, the workers' movement, increasingly focused on the struggle for the eight-hour working day, gained momentum in 1886. The SLP, encouraged by new growth, eagerly resumed electoral participation.<sup>21</sup>

But at the same time, the "Central Labor Union" (CLU) would play an important role in the 1886-87 election campaigns. Several SLP members convinced the CLU to participate independently in the 1886 elections. The "United Labour Party" (ULP) was created for this purpose. It was the first attempt to create a "Labor" party, i.e. a trade union party, in the USA. The new party presented the agrarian populist Henry George, who advocated the abolition of all taxes except the land use tax, as a candidate for mayor of New York. The result: 68,000 votes, much more than anyone expected.<sup>22</sup> But when described by the press as anarchist and socialist, Henry George reacted by separating himself from the socialists who made such a result possible.<sup>23</sup>

When the ULP, during the preparation of the program for the 1887 elections, accepted Henry's proposal for a program based on "tax reform" that was devoid of labor demands, the SLP pronounced itself against it and ended up being expelled from the ULP. The split, which dragged not only members of the SLP but also workers in the CLU, had led to the foundation of the "Progressive Labor Party". The Progressive Labor Party nominated its own candidates but was unable to receive many votes. At the same time, the repression of Haymarket, which struck against the unions as well as the anarchists related to them, dismantled the anarchist International. The repression and the crude opportunism of the unions both worked to generate a vacuum, a new opportunity to restart the U.S. labor movement.

### **The "coup" of 1889**

The New Yorker Volkszeitung, a private newspaper

that was composed of SLP members which appeared a year after the 1877 railway strike, was to play an important role in the subsequent developments of the SLP. The Volkszeitung had started with a capital of 1,100 dollars, donated by the SLP. The newspaper was able to sustain itself through individual subscribers, as well as through the backing and financial support of the unions, which would later bring the group closer to the "American Federation of Labor" (AFL).<sup>24</sup> The electoral disaster of 1887 convinced the Volkszeitung team that conditions were not conducive to electoral participation. W.L. Rosenberg and the majority of the SLP National Executive Committee, on the contrary, were hostile to the unions and wanted the SLP to maintain independent political and electoral action. As a result, for the first time, the SLP participated independently in a national election, but with poor results.

In contrast, the people grouped around the Volkszeitung gained strength through its pro-union stance as the vigorous fight for the eight-hour working day spread. In the New York Section of the General Assembly, they obtained a majority, dismissed Rosenberg, and elected three new members to the National Executive Committee. At the party convention, the political orientation differed from the "old SLP" in that it supported, without reservation, the eight-hour day movement and eliminated once and for all the Lassallean slogan of government-funded cooperatives.<sup>25</sup>

All this was happening a year before Daniel de León entered the SLP and changed its character drastically. As we have seen, the SLP was characterized by a multitude of internal conflicts and tendencies from Lassalleanism to Anarchism. The party was theoretically and organizationally weak and characterized by political confusion. Lassallean influence played a disastrous role in the St. Louis strike of 1877. But strengthened by the impulse of the strike and the rise of the labor movement in general, the SLP intermittently participated in the elections. Internal divisions and electoral failures fed each other by sharpening programmatic differences without ever finding any clarification. The fundamental differences were on the unions, electoral participation, and the self-defense groups. When the party regained attention, aided by the disintegration of the anarchist International and the growing movement for the eight-hour workday, it faced a new electoral disaster after its conflictive association with the Henry George

movement. Finally, the Volkszeitung, an expression of German immigrant socialists in New York, would bring about a partisan "coup d'état" in 1899 with which trade unionists would displace the Lassalleans.

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# CARAVAN MIGRANTS TRAPPED ON THE FRONTIERS OF CAPITALISM

Some 6,000 members of the US military have been deployed on the US-Mexican border to keep out the continuing flow of migrants from Central America, especially Honduras. At the same time, the new Mexican President "AMLO"<sup>1</sup>, is assuring his military that he will continue to deploy them in the capacity of military police. All this over a comparatively small group of migrants from Central America. They are fleeing for their lives from a Central America where decades of "anti-communism" bestowed the blessings of democracy in the form of death squads and Washington's "War on Drugs", thus fostering the creation of an intractable gangster narco-bourgeoisie. Indeed the gang problem in Central America today was largely caused by the constant deportation of migrants from the US back to countries in Central America that thus exported US-based gangs to countries like Honduras and El Salvador. Indeed while there is xenophobic sentiment against immigrants, there also exists among American workers a total revulsion at their treatment at the hands of US and Mexican authorities. This creates the basis for class solidarity across capitalism's frontiers and this is the real motive for building walls and borders.

With the ousting of former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya<sup>2</sup>, and the vicious repression that followed came a refugee crisis that bourgeois propagandists hide under the name "migrant". In order to keep the refugees from flowing northwards on the infamous freight train line, "la bestia", the US government under Obama relied more on the Mexican government to patrol the US border on Washington's behalf. The US government has been paying the Mexican government for this service since the days of the Obama administration, some time after the coup in Honduras. The main difference in the situation now is that Trump is doing with the US military what Obama was doing via payoffs to the Mexican government. The massive deportations of the Obama era are the direct precursors to the blatant state repressive violence of the Trump administration.

While deploying the US military to "secure" an

American border might seem like an unusual measure the general trend in the US for decades has been to clamp down on immigration. Since the crisis of capitalism began to reassert itself in the 1970s the impetus among the bourgeoisie in the US has been to increase legal penalties and punish those migrants who didn't arrive with the proper paperwork. This has the effect of repressing those who already reside in the US. Any migrant worker will hold back from asking for assistance or expressing a political opinion if they are afraid that Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents will come after them. Indeed the increasing intervention of the military in social conflicts from Ferguson<sup>3</sup> to the protests at the border represent a true threat to all workers.

The current bourgeois imperative to keep the migrants out of fortress America underlines the existing weakness in the US economy that belies the rosy employment narrative of statistical fabulists. The labor market isn't actually "tight". If it was the bourgeoisie wouldn't be nearly as hostile to immigration as they are. The US traditionally has been able to take advantage of the pressure of immigration to suppress wages. Likewise an indigenous working class citizen can always be played off against the migrant workers. The same xenophobic capitalist ideology filters down from the bourgeoisie and its sentiments can be heard around us all the time. Immigration is also important to the bourgeoisie for purposes of political patronage: this is apparent in the Democratic Party of today as it was in the Democratic Party of Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall in 19th Century New York. Immigration policy as it has arisen in the imperialist epoch has helped engineer the ethnic, religious and racial makeup of the American working class. Indeed ethnic groups like the Ukrainian nationalist community, or anti-Castro Cubans often achieve a special status and gain the ears of the capitalists in power.

Bourgeois nationalist migrants take higher priority. The big difference in the migrant-refugee crisis on the US-Mexican border today is that capitalism is in an intractable global crisis. A hundred

in the industrialized capitalist metropolises. Today it is primarily proletarians that are uprooted. While the remittances the migrant workers are able to send home end up becoming crucial sources of capital flowing back to the migrant workers' states of origin.

Increasing militarism, hostility to migrants are interconnected aspects of the crisis of capitalism. One of the greatest determinants of racism and xenophobia is war, and the US is always at war. In fortress Europe navies are deployed in the Mediterranean to keep out migrants most of whom are refugees from the wars that imperialist powers have turned into massacres in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, South Sudan, Northern Nigeria and Yemen.

Even if the Central American migrants were allowed in they would find a US dominated by low wages and high rent. Even now the major population centers in California are surrounded by tent cities, the majority of whom have been in existence for five or more years, that is to say—in existence since the Great Recession. What is happening on the US-Mexican border is reflected across the entire capitalist world. If the bourgeoisie no longer has use for exploiting its own workers and labor force partici-

ation remains at historic lows, they certainly would not want any more labor coming into the country.

The brutality towards migrant workers is unanimously supported across the whole spectrum of bourgeois political power. There is no serious constituency among the ruling parties to maintain a larger "reserve army" of labor internally than already exists. This political reaction made manifest in the use of the military repressive forces of the state says as much about the insecurities of capitalist power as it says about the crises that have produced these migrant workers. In a world that will one day belong to the proletariat there is no place where workers are welcome. A true communist society wouldn't be uprooting people over decades of imperialist robbery and violence. In a global society where all real needs are properly catered for there would be no desperate need to move but there would also be no restriction on free movement anywhere. States, frontiers and passports would be confined to archives and museums.

Workers of the world—you have no country! But "we have a world to win." [Marx]

ASm





# AGAINST ALL CAPITALIST FACTIONS! FOR PROLETARIAN INDEPENDENCE!

In the past few days Venezuela's latest political drama has fluttered across the world press. On January 23 Washington declared that it recognizes Juan Guaidó, the leader of Venezuela's opposition, as the country's legitimate president with Trump stating "The people of Venezuela have courageously spoken out against Maduro and his regime and demanded freedom and the rule of law... I will continue to use the full weight of United States economic and diplomatic power to press for the restoration of Venezuelan democracy."<sup>1</sup>

In harmony with the giant power, 11 countries in the Lima Group, not long after declared their support for Guaidó as president, with the European Parliament backing the dissenting National Assembly but not throwing full support behind Guaidó. In response Maduro ordered American diplomats out of the country, alleging the United States was attempting a coup d'état.<sup>2</sup>

It is of course true that the United States has long desired a friendly government in the oil rich nation. It is well known that the United States backed the coup in 2002 and headlines such as: 'Venezuela Is a Disaster. Time for a Coup?'<sup>3</sup> are not rare in the American press. This particular headline appeared in the *New York Times* on September 2018. The piece attempts to justify a possible coup by claiming Venezuela's violation of democracy and human rights and the humanitarian crisis caused by Venezuela's so-called socialist policies. Indeed, Venezuela's foreign rivals are always at the end of their chairs when proclaiming their love of democracy and the efficacy of capitalism. But this capitalist rag is blinded by the analysis of the class it represents. It attempts to portray the crisis as merely political and national. The truth of the matter is the crisis in Venezuela can only be understood in the context on the ongoing global capitalist crisis. The truth of the matter is that whether we are talking about the anti-Maduro United States or the pro-Maduro Russia it is not a matter of democracy or legitimate government but of their own imperialist interests.

Contrary to the cries of both the Venezuelan government and the American and Brazilian backed opposition to "Bolivarian Socialism", Venezuela remains, as before, a state-capitalist economy based on the ex-

traction of oil rents. The current Chavista government has fed on the surplus-value generated by the working class in Venezuela for nearly two decades.<sup>4</sup> And of course with the capitalist nature of its economy lingers the cloying threat of the well-known capitalist crisis. It is with no surprise with an economy extremely based on oil profits and with little investments in other industries that in June 2014, when international oil prices plummeted, the regime could not help but be thrown into crisis<sup>5</sup>, and as always the misery has been placed on the working class.

In 2017, Venezuela's GDP fell 35% below 2013 levels, or 40% in per capita terms and the minimum wage declined by 75% (in constant prices) from May 2012 to May 2017.<sup>6</sup> Mixed with hyperinflation the Venezuelan working class faces hunger, a lack of basic medical needs and an increase in crime. "According to a survey of June 2016 in Mirante state, 86% of children are afraid of having nothing to eat, 50% of them had gone to bed hungry given that there was nothing to eat in the house".<sup>7</sup> In 2016, 74% of Venezuelans had lost an average of 19 pounds and the Venezuelan Health Observatory claimed a 100-fold increase in the death of newborns in hospitals.<sup>8</sup> Of course the extreme suffering of our class has not stopped the malicious chase for profits by the capitalists, high ranking bureaucrats and military officials. Many of whom are finding lucrative opportunities out of the crisis—such as exploiting exchange controls by selling cheap gasoline purchased in neighboring countries for vast profits.<sup>9</sup>

But to talk of the crisis in Venezuela alone is to miss the point, and when done by the various sections of the bourgeoisie seeks to screen the global proletariat from their shared universal condition in the face of global crisis and to rob us of class independence. The 2014 fall in the price of oil did not just hoist suffering on Venezuelan workers. The once booming oil industry of western Canada now has economists claiming that thousands of oil and gas jobs lost during the Alberta recession are gone for good.<sup>10</sup> Once the destination of many workers from the rest of Canada, the Alberta oil industry has told

workers to return to the rust belt of the east, only to find the impending closure of the GM Oshawa Assembly Plant slated for the end of 2019!<sup>11</sup> While it is true that the fall in the price of oil has not hit the Canadian national economy as hard as the Venezuelan national economy, it is undeniable that this crisis is not simply a national affair due to poor policy making, but rather a crisis of global capitalism which places the misery on the world proletariat.

The political drama in Venezuela has yet to completely unfold. What is already clear is that the various imperialist interests are finding themselves driven into tension and conflict with one another. As the United States backs away from a Syria in ruins, and with the Russians first in line to receive the \$200bn-\$500bn reconstruction contracts from Assad<sup>12</sup>, the United States has turned its gaze to another corner of Russian-Chinese influence. Trade wars and regional conflicts have become the norm. Russia enjoys a small victory, China banks on its Belt and Road Initiative and increasing influence in Asia and Africa<sup>13</sup>, and the United States continues to count on its economic dominance and its fleets of nuclear powered aircraft carriers.

In this crisis the working class has no interests with any section of the bourgeoisie. Neither Maduro nor Guaidó have anything to offer the working-class in the face of this turmoil. The United States, Brazil and Russia seek nothing but the best outcome in line with their own imperialist interests. Looming is the possibility of war. Guaranteed is civil instability and declining living standards. The Canadian “Communist” Party has declared: “The Communist Party of Canada gives full support and solidarity to the PSUV government which is defending Venezuela’s sovereignty, independence and right to national self-determination”.<sup>14</sup> But this is nothing but petty bourgeois phraseology. As published in the Left Bolsheviks’ journal *Kommunist*:

Modern capitalist foreign policy is closely bound up with the supremacy of finance capital, which cannot abandon the policy of imperialism without threatening its own existence. There-

fore, it would be extremely Utopian to advance anti-imperialist demands in the field of foreign policy while remaining within the framework of capitalist relations... The answer to the bourgeoise’s imperialist policy must be the socialist revolution of the proletariat.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, to declare allegiance with a Maduro regime which brutally exploits our brother and sister Venezuelan workers can only distance us from them. The solution to economic crisis and imperialism is working class independence on an international scale. Revolutionaries must work to connect local struggles with the total struggle against capitalist barbarism, and that includes complete opposition to imperialism and militarism. Communists must strive to place these words in every workers’ heart: “The fraternization of the workers of the world is for me the highest and most sacred thing on earth; it is my guiding star, my ideal, my fatherland. I would rather forfeit my life than be unfaithful to this ideal!” – Rosa Luxemburg.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)
- 2 [aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com)
- 3 [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)
- 4 [leftcom.org](http://leftcom.org)
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- 6 [thenextrecession.wordpress.com](http://thenextrecession.wordpress.com)
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# WORLD REVOLUTION OR “BUILDING SOCIALISM”?

## CRITICAL REMARKS ON KONTRA KLASA'S 'NOTES ON THE TRANSITION TO COMMUNISM'

“We leave to others, to the “technicians” and to the recipe makers, or to the “orthodox” of Marxism, the pleasure of engaging in anticipations, of wandering the paths of utopianism or of throwing into the face of proletarians of formulas emptied of their class substance...” - Mitchell, Bilan<sup>1</sup>

Issue #2 of Intransigence features a text by Kontra Klasa<sup>2</sup> outlining their conception of the transition to communism. The starting point of this text is the existence of a “communist dictatorship” established over some territory, and it explores what options this “communist dictatorship” would have in a capitalist world.

In the language of Kontra Klasa’s article, the revolution is “against value and property,” the revolution, we are told, “would imply immediate abolition of most forms of property,” the aim of the revolution is thus the destruction of capitalist social relations and the implementation of measures for the production of communism. The “revolutionary zone” simply “expands” and “brings more resources under its control,” and in this “revolutionary zone”, “the general structure of the communist system of provisioning will already be in place” as production and distribution are regulated according to a “scientific social plan based on human need.” Having read this text, what is striking is the absence of political considerations in it, their view of the revolution and the transition to communism denies the primacy of political factors in favour of technical and administrative ones, all of which runs contrary to the Left Communist understanding of the revolution.

In the fifth of his series of articles on the period of transition for Bilan, the journal of the Italian communist left in exile in France and Belgium, Mitchell<sup>3</sup> wrote:

the **essentially international** problem of the building of socialism—the preface to communism—cannot be resolved in the framework of one proletarian state, but only on the basis of the political defeat of the world bourgeoisie, at least in the vital centres of its rule, the most advanced countries.

While it is undeniable that a nat-

ional proletariat can only undertake certain economic tasks after installing its own rule, the construction of socialism can only get going after the destruction of the most powerful capitalist states, even though the victory of a “poor” proletariat can take on a huge significance if it is integrated into the process of development of the world revolution. In other words, the tasks of a victorious proletariat with regard to its own economy are subordinated to the necessities of the international class struggle.<sup>4</sup>

And in his critique of the ideas of both the Dutch Left, as outlined in Jan Appel’s *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, and Adhémar Hennaut, leading figure in the Left Opposition in Belgium and the quasi-Trotskyist *Ligue des Communistes Internationaliste*, Vercesi wrote:

The mistake made in our opinion by the Dutch left communists and with them the Cde Hennaut is to put themselves in a fundamentally sterile direction, because the foundation of Marxism is precisely to recognize that the foundations of a Communist economy can only occur on the world stage, and never can they be realized within the borders of a proletarian state. The latter may intervene in the economic field to change the process of production, but in no way to permanently establish this process on communist bases because on this subject the conditions to make possible such an economy can be achieved only on the international basis. To break the Marxist theory in its very essence is to believe that it is possible to carry out the economic tasks of the proletariat within a single country. We are not moving towards the fulfillment of this supreme goal by making the workers believe that after the victory over the bourgeoisie they will be able to directly direct and man-

age the economy in one country. Until the world victory these conditions do not exist and to get in the direction that will allow the maturation of these conditions we must begin by recognizing that within a single country it is impossible to obtain definitive results; it must first be recognized that the very institution of direct control of the workers over the economy is not possible. Apart from its economic objectives, of enormous importance, as we shall see later, the victorious proletariat finds its main task in the open proclamation that it is impossible for it to establish the very foundations of communism, but that to arrive at this result, which is by no means peculiar to it, it must put the State at the service of the world revolution, from which only the real conditions for the emancipation of workers can spring up from the national as well as the international point of view.<sup>5</sup>

For the Communist Left, the revolution is primarily a *political* event, its aim is the establishment of the worldwide dictatorship of the proletariat, not the “abolition of value” within the geographic constraints of some “revolutionary zone”. Society can only begin to embark upon wholesale social transformation *after* the victory of the world revolution, and any economic measures taken by an isolated “communist dictatorship” function as *palliatives* in the face of the hardships of the revolutionary period, they are nothing more than half-measures, until after the revolution succeeds on a world scale.

The period of transition is not limited to any “revolutionary territory”, but necessarily a global process, for the overcoming of a global mode of production, and the social classes and capitalist social relations will persist, but gradually disappear in the course of this process. All this is contradicted by Kontra Klasa’s claim that “the individual member of the society in transition” is “a person who perhaps labors but is no longer a worker or proletarian because this implies that the working-class, and hence all the classes of capitalist society, can be abolished within the borders of the “communist dictatorship”, even before the victory of the world revolution and the beginning of the worldwide transition to communism. Therefore, the transition does

not, according to Kontra Klasa, have to be a world-wide process.

Not only do they claim that “the individual member” is “no longer a worker or proletarian,” but Kontra Klasa also suggest that this individual might “have to fulfill a labor obligation, imposed as much as possible on all available members of society equally. In the latter case, compulsion will be open and direct [...] Direct, open compulsion is of course far from pleasant, but it is a sharp pain that disappears quickly.” It was always understood by Marx that the abolition of classes and capitalism entailed the reclamation of productive activity as a free and conscious pursuit for the direct satisfaction of life’s needs and wants by communist humanity, since what we know and experience as ‘work’ today is simply the form taken by productive activity (useful labour) in the specific social and historical context of a society dominated by relations of exchange and value. The abolition of classes, the association of ‘free and equal producers’, is incompatible with the existence of forced labour, if only because along with the disappearance of classes and capitalist social categories, coercive institutions also disappear.

Kontra Klasa recognise that the “communist dictatorship” cannot avoid trading on the world-market in order to obtain goods. They write: “production of trade goods would proceed along roughly the same lines as production of other goods,” that “the revolutionary zone” would “have no currency of its own, either because such currency was never necessary to begin with, or because the short time in which currency is issued will be hyper-inflationary to pay whatever debts might hinder access to the world market,” and would “set its prices in whichever “foreign” currency proves most convenient.” It “could set those prices at will, administratively, since there would be no costs of production.” These are “goods which have a price, but not value in the full sense since no abstract labor is embodied in them. This will enable the revolutionary dictatorship to consistently undercut other sellers.” What makes all of this absurd is that it is based on the rather naive supposition that a “communist dictatorship” which:

- has “no currency of its own”

- or a worthless currency because of hyperinflation
- which sets “prices at will, administratively [...] in whichever “foreign” currency proves most convenient”
- and “consistently undercut[s] other sellers”

will even be allowed to trade on the world market to begin with.... The reality is that such a revolutionary territory would face severe embargos, sanctions, or blockades and be cut-off from the foreign trade. No country on Earth would tolerate a “revolutionary dictatorship” which “consistently undercut other sellers.” If it is to escape death by isolation, the policy of a territory where the proletariat take power has to be geared towards the goal of a successful, global extension of the revolution. As such, the success of the world revolution will depend less on the *internal* factors of the revolutionary territory, such as effective technical administration, the development of a system of “scientific” planning, or its rapid social transformation, than on the *external* factors, such as the international balance of class forces and the political situation of the world revolutionary wave, of which the political victory of the proletariat in one region is simply an episode. All this depends on effective organisation, winning the support of masses around the world, and preparing for the possibility of class confrontation acquiring the form of military struggles and carrying these out effectively, among other things.

Kontra Klasa’s perspective is based on the delusion that communists can avoid the messy world of political struggle, in their article the world revolution and transition to communism will simply be smooth, rational, and orderly processes, achieved through through planning and trading, and the problems that will arise from this process will primarily be of a technical nature. Eventually the “communist” dictatorship will impose “harsher and harsher terms of exchange”, thereby destroying the world-market, until finally the good news: “human society enters integral communism”. And all this without the agency of the world proletariat, and without worldwide political organisation (a world communist party), action, or world revolution(!)

It is also unclear how Kontra Klasa imagine their policies will actually be implemented. Their “communist dictatorship” appears to stand above the masses, the

struggle, and the society. They conveniently avoid dealing with the internal structure of the “communist dictatorship”, so it is not clear where the decision-making power rests in their “communist dictatorship.” Do Kontra Klasa believe that the working-class will make the decisions, or do they imagine a collective of planners, or technocrats, will engineer the perfect society from above, and on behalf of the masses? The most intellectually-brilliant, rational schemes for transition are worthless without the enthusiastic support of the working-class, and any attempt to impose an agenda that includes rationing and forced labour upon the working-class will inevitably be met with resistance.

And finally, Kontra Klasa took as their starting point the existence of a “communist dictatorship trading on the world market,” without ever explaining how this came to be. In reality, it is likely that such a “communist dictatorship” would emerge in the course of a world revolutionary wave. Since the communist party of the future will be a single, worldwide organisation, without any regional or national character, it will avoid fusing into any nation-state, or adopting as its cause the interests of any single “revolutionary territory”. Communists will not have any interest in taking power for themselves, decisions will be taken by the class, and the party will participate in this without attempting to substitute itself for the class. In reality, communists are only a part of the class, in Onorato Damen’s words “the relationship between the party and class is dialectically linked, with both on the same level, i.e. placing special emphasis on neither the party nor on the class. We see the party as a part of the whole (the class).”<sup>6</sup> The revolutionary organisation, according to Damen, “would have to avoid becoming the instrument of the workers state and it would have to defend the interests of the revolution.”<sup>7</sup>

Against Kontra Klasa, we maintain that the fate of the great social explosions of the future, which will demand “all things for all men,”<sup>8</sup> those future attempts of the wage-slaves and unemployed to “leap from the realm of objective necessity to the realm of objective freedom,”<sup>9</sup> depend above all on the political victory of the world revolutionary wave. In contrast to the left-capitalists of Kontra Klasa, the communist left defends the view that the primary objective of the world communist party, and proletarians in the revolution-



ary territory must be political, not economic—*world revolution*, not “*building socialism*.”

## Anonymous communist

### NOTES

1 Problems of the Period of Transition (Part 1), *Bilan* no. 28: [http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id\\_article=826](http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id_article=826)

2 A communist group in Croatia, quotes are from their article: <https://intransigence.org/2018/07/09/notes-on-the-transition-to-communism/>

3 *Bilan* – published from November 1933 to February 1938 (46 issues in total), was established as the successor to the *Bulletin d'information de la Fraction de Gauche Italienne* (the last issue of which was published in February 1933). In the pages of *Bilan*, we find internationalist reflections on everything from the rise of fascism, the theory of the 'decadence' of capitalism, the Spanish Civil War, anti-fascism and the Popular Front, Hitler and Nazism, Stalinism and the Great Terror, Trotsky and the Fourth International, and the international build-up to the Second World War. Among the most important names behind *Bilan* were Ottorino Perrone ('Vercesi') and Virgilio Verdaro ('Gatto Mammone') – the co-editors, and Jehan van den Hoven ('Mitchell').

4 Italian Left 1936: Problems of the period of transition, ICC: <https://en.internationalism.org/ir/2008/132/bilan1936>

5 Party - International - State / VII - 3rd Part: The Soviet State, *Bilan* no.21 [http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id\\_article=299](http://www.collectif-smolny.org/article.php3?id_article=299)

6 'Axioms of Revolutionary Theory and Practice', *Bordiga Beyond the Myth*, Prometheus Publications.

7 Damen, quoted from *The Bordigist Current* (1912-1952)

8 'Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity', C.L.R. James: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/diamat/diamat47.htm>

9 Ibid

# BASIC POSITIONS OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

1

We denounce capitalism, whatever its apparent form of government, as a social system based on the exploitation of man by man.

2

We denounce the so-called “socialist” countries as brutal exploitative regimes to be overthrown by the working class.

3

We support communism as the only means capable of saving humanity from its extinction under capitalist barbarism.

4

We reject all interclassist struggles and ideologies as alien to the proletariat and contrary to its interests as the universal class.

5

We encourage self-organized struggle for workers’ immediate interests and for revolution, beyond any legal or economic framework that might fetter their activity—including the union form and its bureaucracy, opposed to the rank and file themselves.

6

We affirm, in this moment, the total decadence of the capitalist system—its inability to contribute further towards social development—and the immediate need for a communist revolution on a global scale.

7

We advocate the establishment of a revolutionary party to function as the nerve center of the class.

**"The fraternization of the workers of  
the world is for me the highest  
and most sacred thing on earth; it is  
my guiding star, my ideal, my  
fatherland. I would rather forfeit my  
life than be unfaithful to this ideal!"**

**Rosa Luxemburg**

**Either Or (1916)**