

**Notebook / Carnet**

Andrew Parnaby and Todd McCallum

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# NOTEBOOK / CARNET

Andrew Parnaby and Todd McCallum

IN TERMS OF CONTENT, given the blanket coverage of various labour-related websites and mailing lists, N/C will no longer publish “calls for papers” and other conference information. As always, though, N/C welcomes commentaries on contemporary issues related to labour and the working class. Submissions should be about 1000 words in length and sent to: Andrew Parnaby and Todd McCallum, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, FM 2005, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF, A1C 5S7; e-mail: [parnabya@uvic.ca](mailto:parnabya@uvic.ca); [4tlm8@qlink.queensu.ca](mailto:4tlm8@qlink.queensu.ca).

## Can Class Still Unite: Lessons from the American Experience

Sherry Linkon and John Russo

IN AN AGE where American politics is seen as a battle between “compassionate conservatism” and “practical idealism,” it’s nice to know that class still matters. The following is an abbreviated version of a paper presented at a conference organized by the Higher Institute of Labor Studies at the Catholic University Leuven (Belgium) in January 1998. Professors Linkon and Russo are active in the Center for Working-Class Studies, an interdisciplinary research and teaching center at Youngstown State University devoted to the study of working-class life and culture. Started in 1996, the CWCS has been at the forefront of advancing a new working-class studies that, at once, acknowledges worker agency and the importance of the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender in the formation of

individual and group identity. The complete manuscript can be found at the CWCS website, <http://www.as.ysu.edu/~cwcs/>

THE QUESTION OF WHETHER class unites has, historically, been different for the United States and Europe. The discussion of class in America has always been paradoxical — stressing both classlessness and a vision of “middle class” as synonymous with “American.” At the same time, polls show that almost 50 per cent of Americans define themselves as working class; but only a small percentage of workers belong to working-class organizations such as trade unions.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, women and people of colour have often felt barred from full membership in the working class and its institutions, which have linked whiteness and maleness with privilege for some and the exclusion of others. Consequently, when class has not been ignored or denied in the US, it has often been perceived as divisive. [...]

The conflict within traditionally class-based institutions like labour unions is mirrored in a growing debate among American left intellectuals. For example, Todd Gitlin, a former leader of Students for a Democratic Society and a professor at New York University, has argued that the American left failed because it abandoned “commonality” and class struggle in favour of a narrowly-defined political identity focused on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Gitlin is correct that this focus on identity has led to a backlash against the left within working- and middle-class communities. Yet, as critics such as black labour historian Robin D.G. Kelley and philosopher Iris Young have argued, such arguments privilege class over other categories and ignore the importance of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles to the universalist themes of class struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Differences and divisions among identity-based social movements are not unexpected, as Tim Jordan has argued: “Each social movement creates its definitions of society from its members’ perspective and so ... it can be expected that these definitions will be different and contradictory.”<sup>4</sup> Jordan’s statement reminds us that we cannot simply wish away divisions between social movements. Rather, if class is to unite, we must learn how to link these movements without asking participants to deny their own frames of reference. Here, recent social movement theory can augment traditional approaches to class. Using the 1997 United Parcel

<sup>1</sup>V. Navarro, “Excluding the Others: The Middle Class – A Useful Myth,” *The Nation*, 254, 11 (March 23, 1992), 361.

<sup>2</sup>Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked By Culture Wars* (New York 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Robin D.G. Kelley, “Identity Politics and Class Struggle,” *New Politics*, 6, 4 (Winter 1997), 84-96; Iris Young, “The Complexities of Coalition,” *Dissent* 44, 1 (Winter 1997), 64-69.

<sup>4</sup>Tim Jordan, “The Unity of Social Movements,” *The Sociological Review*, 43, 4 (November 1995), 680.

Service (UPS) strike, frame analysis may be helpful in developing strategies for building coalitions that incorporate divergent perspectives. [...]

Unions have begun to form multi-identity coalitions that are creating more inclusive leadership and incorporating identity-based issues into union practices. For example, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's focus on women helped him win the election, and he, in turn, added more women to the executive council and other leadership positions, including Linda Chavez-Thompson as executive vice president. And while the organization's recent convention included all too many "old style" unionists who, as JoAnn Wypijewski wrote in *The Nation*, "cut the deals, sell out the members ... [and] hate the left," the convention also featured Jesse Jackson's claim that rather than having a national discussion on race, which President Clinton declared as a central goal for his administration, it was time to talk about "the Grand Canyon of American life, ... the vertical gap between wealthy and workers, between rich and poor, the canyon between haves and have-nots."<sup>5</sup>

It has not gone unnoticed by advocates of identity politics that, while income gaps between blacks and whites and women and men have declined over the last 20 years, inequality within racial and gender groups has grown. Labour organizers and left academics are beginning to understand how class is lived through race and gender and how important it is to organize in a multi-cultural context. In a recent article in *Working USA*, Manning Marable argues that while people of colour and women have good reasons to be sceptical about white male leftists who argue for a broad-based working-class coalition, they also have much to gain from such an effort.<sup>6</sup>

The UPS strike in 1997 provided another hopeful sign when it generated stronger than expected broad-based support both nationally and internationally for the protection of part-time workers. Despite the inconveniences of the strike, the relatively high wages of UPS workers, and the company's efforts to capitalize on the old image of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) as corrupt, the majority of Americans supported the union's position. While some in the media have argued that this is largely a matter of customers having positive relationships with their UPS drivers, this hardly seems a complete explanation. Rather, the IBT reasoned that to gain support for the strike, it was necessary to emphasize issues with which people could identify. Consequently, it chose part-time employment — a class/work issue that transcends lower/middle class divisions. That strategy paid off, helping the union win public support and undermining UPS's anti-union rhetoric. As the president of UPS told CNN, if he had known that it would become a national referendum on part-time employment, UPS would not have precipitated the strike.

<sup>5</sup>JoAnn Wypijewski, "Union Time," *The Nation*, 265, 2 (28 December 1998), 3-4.

<sup>6</sup>Manning Marable, "Black Leadership and the Labor Movement," *Working USA*, 1, 3 (September-October 1997), 39-48.

The IBT also put together an international coalition that many believed was as essential as the part-time work social justice campaign. While UPS knew that its 80 per cent market share of the small package business in the US made it strong enough to withstand a long strike, its European business was much more vulnerable. In the last three years, UPS had spent more than one billion dollars to upgrade its European facilities and to launch a full-scale attack on its European competitors. UPS's investment in its European corporate operations was threatened when the IBT gained international support (through both direct and indirect actions) from its international trade secretariat and independent unions. No doubt, international organizing and working-class solidarity contributed to the early resolution of the strike. The UPS case indicates the potential for international labour solidarity in the global economy when organizing around work-related issues.

These developments demonstrate the importance of linking workplace issues with other social and psychological factors influencing individuals' participation in social movements. Erving Goffman approaches this through the study of "frames," which he defines as "schemata of interpretation" through which people understand their own lives and the world around them.<sup>7</sup> [...] The first step in building support for the strike was a year-long internal campaign among UPS workers, highlighting the significance of part-time employment as a threat to job security. This was a form of frame amplification, which helped intensify union members' existing attitudes. Second, the IBT had to develop a mass media campaign to generate support among those in the general public who shared the strikers' concerns about part-time employment. They also used direct interpersonal and intergroup networks to reach out to international unions as well as to women's and African-American organizations that have traditionally been concerned with employment issues for women and minorities. These are both examples of frame bridging, which creates links between "ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames."<sup>8</sup> Third, the IBT had to extend existing frames for both its members and the public by expanding the narrow definition of the strike to allow it to be seen as a broader social justice campaign. This, too, they accomplished primarily through their mass media efforts as well as the involvement of figures who are identified nationally as representing social justice movements, such as Jesse Jackson. In the process, the Teamsters transformed existing frames, jettisoning old beliefs about what labour unions were and reframing the meaning of "working class" to include not just industrial workers but all workers, regardless of their race or gender, who are threatened by economic restructuring. [...]

If class is to unite, we have to change the way we talk about class. Theories that depict class as a universalist structure or in static terms of social stratification

<sup>7</sup>Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston 1974), 21.

<sup>8</sup>D.A. Snow *et al.*, "Frame Alignment Process, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review*, 51, 4 (August 1986), 464-481.

or that cast labour politics only in terms of industrial relations are clearly insufficient. In fact, such theories can be misleading in developing and understanding the potential of both organized and unorganized segments of the working class and their political behaviour. Rather, behaviours and interests are determined not only by economic position but by a confluence of factors salient to an individual's social, political, and economic life, of which class is but one factor. Not only race and gender but also job-related differences, issues of place, and public discourse about class and work affect how people see themselves and how they respond to organizing efforts. [...] As our brief frame analysis of the UPS strike suggests, class theory must consider the psychological and social factors that influence whether individuals perceive themselves as members of the working class and how they act on that identification. [...]

Class will unite when it is understood that capitalism can not exist without class and that, while capital may be winning the battle over the restructuring of work and workplaces at the moment, it has not won the class war. Perhaps, as the UPS example shows, the best hope for greater equality in the future is the development of inclusive, international, multi-racial labour and working-class movements organized around specific work-related issues. If Europeans and Americans can incorporate these lessons, surely class can still unite.

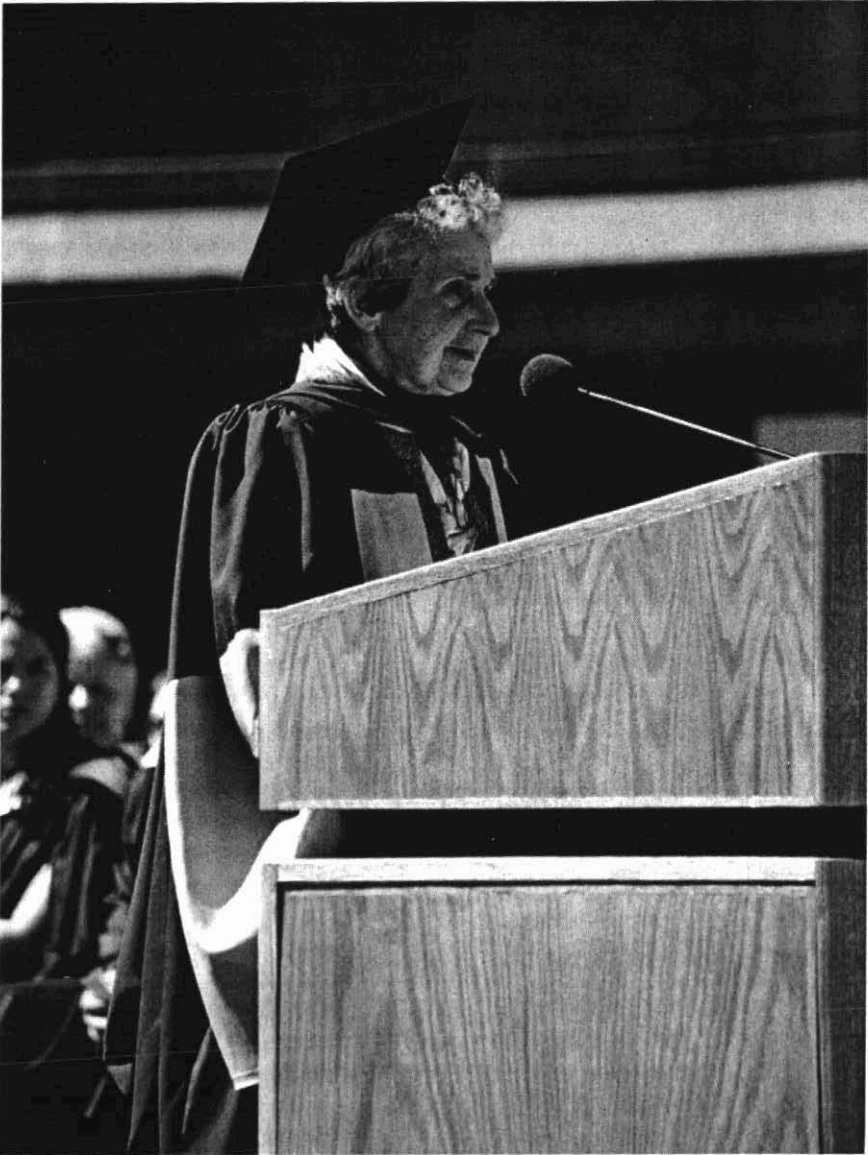
## Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree for Madeline Parent

Joan Sangster

AT THE CONVOCATION for the Conferring of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science Degrees for Catharine Parr Traill College, Otonabee College, and Julian Blackburn College of Trent University on 4 June 1999, the Honorary Graduated was Madeline Parent. In recognition of her outstanding work in the trade union and feminist movements, Parent was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. Professor Joan Sangster, Chair of Women's Studies, introduced Parent and paid tribute to her historic contributions to improving the lives of workers and women in Canada.

*Madame Chancellor, Madame President, graduates and guests,*

Today we are honouring Madeline Parent, a woman whose name is virtually synonymous with the struggle for social justice in Canada. Madeline has given



Madeleine Parent. (*Can Grad Studios, Etobicoke/Trent University.*)

important leadership to that struggle, often embracing unpopular causes, and facing down authorities who abused their power with an intense courage which has become legendary. As a trade union leader, feminist, and social activist, Madeline has fought dauntlessly for over 50 years for equality, fairness and dignity: equality for women, fairness for working people, and dignity for all peoples.

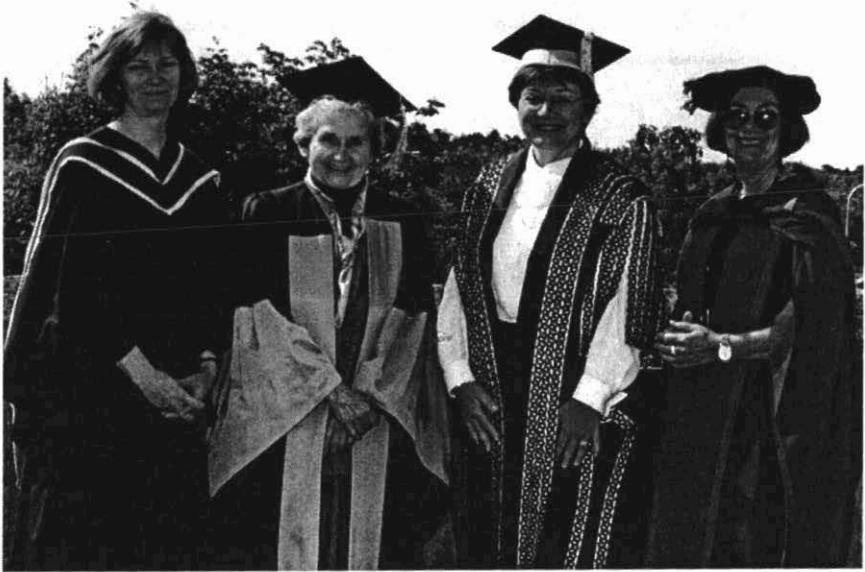
Born in Montréal, Madeline came of age during the Depression, and studied sociology at McGill, where she campaigned for federal scholarships for students who could not afford to attend university. Education, she believed then and now, must *not* be a privilege only for the affluent. Even as a student, Madeline took on unpopular causes, organizing a meeting on campus in 1939 to hear Thérèse Casgrain speak for Québec women's right to vote, despite the opposition of some McGill professors — a reminder to our graduates that to question the authority of ones' professors is not always a bad thing.

After graduating, Madeline volunteered with the Workers Educational Association, teaching night classes to workers and trade unionists, and in 1942 she joined the Québec campaign to unionize war workers. But it was in the cotton and woollen mills of Québec that Madeline would truly make history. Madeline and her co-organizer and future husband Kent Rowley led a massive campaign to unionize the textile mills, notorious for their harsh working conditions. Many women worked 55 hours a week; children began as early as 14, sometimes younger, and earned meagre wages for arduous work. Ignoring the companies' and the Church's opposition and intimidation, the first strike in 1946 secured a contract, and for women, equal pay for equal work. Madeline's successes as a union organizer earned her the undying animosity of Québec's Premier Duplessis, who wielded inordinate legal and police powers, as well as anti-communist rhetoric, to try and paralyze her organizing work. Madeline and Kent were arrested, more than once, and charged with seditious conspiracy. Madeline, though sentenced to two years in jail, was later completely cleared of the charge.

When Madeline and Kent turned their energies to the organization of textile and other workers in Ontario, they became advocates of another unpopular cause at that time: Canadian unions. Long before the Canadian Auto Workers, Madeline helped establish a Canadian union for textile and chemical workers, as well as a Canadian union centre, the Confederation of Canadian Unions. Québec and Canadian union autonomy, she believed, offered workers a direct means of challenging their leaders, of shaping their own policies and destinies.

In 1972 Madeline was a founding member of NAC, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, serving as the Québec representative for many years. She has been in the forefront of the struggle for women's equality in Canada for decades, and remains active too in the Coordinating Committee of Solidarité Populaire Québec, a coalition representing women, youth, the elderly, immigrants, and anti-poverty groups. She has also very actively supported the struggle of





Left to right: Joan Sangster, Madeleine Parent, Mary Simon (Chancellor, Trent University), Lynn MacDonald (friend and co-worker of Ms. Parent). (*Can Grad Studios, Etobicoke/Trent University.*)

Aboriginal peoples for self government, as well as equality rights for Aboriginal women.

Madeline's activism has always encompassed many causes, and she has consciously connected the struggles of women, workers, minorities, and the First Nations for equality, fairness and dignity. In unions, she encouraged women to take their rightful place as leaders; in the women's movement, she urged attention to the needs of wage-earning women and working peoples. Whether she is drawing recent immigrant women into unions, explaining the unique aspirations of the people of Québec, or speaking out on behalf of the First Nations, her vision of social justice is comprehensive and inclusive. Although Madeline is known for her defence of Canadian autonomy and unions, her vision is also international in scope. In the 1990s, she dedicated her time to combatting violence against women through NAC's campaign to support Croatian and Bosnian women in prisoner-of-war camps, and to make rape of prisoners-of-war a war crime.

Although Madeline retired officially from her union job in 1983, she has never retired from her work for social justice, nor from her quest for equality, fairness and dignity for women, working peoples, new immigrants and the First Nations. She is renowned in the women's and labour movements, not only for her leadership,

commitment and passion, but for her inspiration of generations of activists. It is an honour to present you, Madeline Parent, for the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

## Question the Sun! A content analysis of diversity in the Vancouver Sun before and after the Hollinger take-over

Donald Gutstein, with Robert Hackett and NewsWatch Canada

NEWSWATCH CANADA (formerly Project Censored Canada) conducts independent research on the thoroughness and diversity of Canadian news coverage. *Question the Sun!* is the result of a series of content analysis studies of the Vancouver Sun, undertaken by students in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University in 1998. The work has been refined and condensed into this report by Donald Gutstein and Robert Hackett, faculty members at Simon Fraser University. The following is an excerpt taken from Section Five, "Unequal Contest: Business and Labour Coverage," based on samples taken from the final three months of 1987 and 1997. The full report, which also examines how the Sun covers provincial elections and the poor, as well as the paper's transformation under Conrad Black's ownership, can be found at their website, <http://newswatch.cprost.sfu.ca>

ON 9 DECEMBER 1997, the Vancouver Board of Trade released the results of a survey conducted for it by the Angus Reid Group. This story ran on the front page of the Sun's business section with the headline, "More businesses poised to flee BC, survey shows: Alberta prime destination for Vancouver firms that say they'll move all or part of operations." Why were they planning to leave? Business reporter Bruce Constantineau explained: "Survey respondents cited several problems in BC that curtail business activity, including an 'anti-business' government, strong labour unions and high taxes." Board of Trade chair Bob Fairweather was the only source quoted in the story, which also ran in the Montréal *Gazette*, *Edmonton Journal*, and other Southam newspapers.

The Sun followed with another story the next day on the front page of the business section by business reporter Wyng Chow: "Pro-union laws hamper 60% of BC business, survey shows: Tax reform joins need for more flexible labour regulations at top of respondents' wish lists." The only source quoted in this story was Angus Reid, the Board of Trade's pollster. Two days later, the Sun ran an interview with BC's Small Business and Tourism Minister Jan Pullinger, who was

quoted as saying, "It's really just a minuscule amount of businesses who say they might leave." In contrast to the two earlier single-source stories, Pullinger had to share coverage with Canadian Federation of Independent Business representative Suromitra Sanatani, who countered with the claim that small business was "absolutely disheartened by things like the tax burden in BC and the labour legislation." [...]

Finally, on Saturday 18 December, nine days after the original story, the *Sun* ran three items on its editorial pages which, for the first time, provided an alternative perspective on the Board-of-Trade survey. [...] The third item was a letter to the editor from Liz Poyser, executive vice-president of the Angus Reid Group, complaining about the *Sun*'s coverage of her firm's survey. She explained again the Angus Reid methodology: a questionnaire was mailed out to all members of the Board of Trade. The response rate was ten per cent, a low rate which "affected the reliability of the data." Both the survey itself and Angus Reid's remarks "clearly state that the survey is not statistically valid." *Sun* staffers were aware of this, she noted; yet in reporting on the poll "two *Sun* writers incorrectly extrapolated these results to all businesses in Vancouver or BC." *Sun* columnist Vaughn Palmer was one of the accused. In the offending column, Palmer had taken another opportunity to attack the NDP government: "The premier's hold on the surly bonds of reality slipped another notch..." But was Palmer the one with a tenuous grip on reality? "A recent survey by the Angus Reid Group suggested that a significant number of businesses — roughly one in four — were [sic] thinking of moving all or part of their operations out of BC," Palmer wrote, ignoring Angus Reid's caveat.<sup>1</sup>

The *Sun* did not issue a clarification or retraction on any of its stories.

Two months later, on 11 February 1998, the Labour Relations Code Review Panel — a government-appointed joint labour-management committee — released a public opinion survey which found that "most British Columbians think labour relations in the province are generally working fine and the Labour Relations Code is not in need of a major overhaul." The survey was conducted by MarkTrend Research on behalf of the panel. In contrast to the Board of Trade's low rate of return, this study was conducted over two time periods, October 1997 and January 1998, using a sample for both surveys of just over 500, giving it a margin of error of +/- 4.4 per cent at the 95 per cent level of confidence (19 times out of 20). The study concluded "that there was strong public support for the legitimacy of unions and their value to society as a whole." A Canadian Press wire story began this way: "A poll conducted for the panel reviewing the Labour Code suggests most British Columbians support the role of unions in society."

The *Sun* did not run this story.

Hyping bad, if erroneous, news about unions, ignoring good news — is this the *Sun*'s approach to reporting on labour-management issues? And how does the

<sup>1</sup>Vaughn Palmer, "Clark wings it, slipping the surly bonds of reality," Vancouver *Sun*, 11 December 1997.

*Sun's* labour reporting relate to Conrad Black's well-known antipathy to organized labour? He explained his peculiar view of unions in his 1993 autobiography, *A Life in Progress*: "Once laws existed to protect workers against capricious or exploitive employers, most unions became enemies of productivity increases through automation, advocates of feather-bedding, and a mortal threat to any sense of community in an enterprise .... I found mainly corrupt Luddites among the leadership, who were less concerned with the welfare of their membership than I was." And further: "I felt passionately that [Margaret Thatcher] had redeemed her country from vassalage to the thugs of the Labour union leadership."<sup>2</sup> Have Black's views on the appropriate roles of labour and business filtered down to the newsroom? [...]

Labour coverage in general, as many researchers have found, focuses primarily on disruptive events. Strikes, negotiations, disputes — these are the stuff of front-page stories in most dailies. In comparison, business coverage incorporates the day-to-day rather than the dramatic, and routinely includes a range of topics — government, the economy, social affairs, as well as industrial relations — that support the business community's activities.

Table One shows that for both years [1987 and 1997], there was twice as much coverage of business as labour and that articles about labour tended to be focused on disruption, that is, events which interrupt economic life. Strikes and negotiations accounted for nearly 50 per cent of stories about labour. The 1987 Canada-wide postal strike occurred during our monitoring period. Near the beginning of the dispute, strikers tearing grills from "scab" trucks generated a front-page story. As the dispute became resolved through negotiation and government back-to-work legislation, stories took a less confrontational angle and, consequently, receded to the middle pages of the news section. By contrast, business news covered a wider range of topics, including day-to-day items such as financial losses and gains, investments, forecasts, and acquisitions. This routine coverage was augmented by features on companies, and profiles of business leaders. Rarely were specific unions or union leaders profiled.

<sup>2</sup>Conrad Black, *A Life in Progress* (Toronto, 1993), 124, 418.

TABLE ONE

Business Topics	(n=115)	Labour Topics	(n=53)
Financial Losses	13.9%	Strikes	26.4%
Financial Gains	13.0	Negotiations	20.8
Investments	13.0	Labour Relations	15.1
Acquisitions	8.7	Trade-Union-Activity	13.2
The Economy	7.8	Working Conditions	5.7
Bankruptcy	4.3	Wage Settlements	5.7
Loans	3.5	Wages -General	5.7
The Recession	0.9	Industrial Accidents	3.8
Other	34.8	Occupational Health	1.9
		Other	1.9
Total	99.9	Total	100.2

We coded articles according to whether they illustrated upbeat or positive implications (e.g., financial gains for business, power for labour), downbeat or negative implications (e.g., downsizing for business, low-income for labour) or neutral implications towards the subject [...] Both business and labour received more downbeat than upbeat coverage, but news about labour was far more likely to be negative (Table Two). Almost 30 per cent of business items were positive in contrast to only 6 per cent of labour items. In other words business items were five times more likely to be framed positively as labour items. Moreover, business received nearly one positive article for every negative article, while for every positive labour item, there were five negative ones.

TABLE TWO

	Business	Labour
Positive	29.8%	6.0%
Negative	34.5	30.4
Mixed/Neutral	14.3	2.4
N/A	21.4	61.3
Total	100.0	100.1

Next, we looked at the sources quoted, their frequency, and their role in relation to business or labour issues (Table Three). Generally, the first source cited is the one who sets the agenda or defines how the reader is to understand the issue. All opposing sources presenting counter-viewpoints are responding to the issue rather than defining it. For instance, in an article about striking Vancouver municipal workers, Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen was given voice in the opening lines of the piece and so was allowed to define the situation: "There are other things we can talk about, but not money." Further down the page, the union was allowed to respond: "We'll need some more money in the package somewhere."

TABLE THREE

	Business	Labour
Absent	44.0%	81.0%
Defining	31.5	8.3
Responding	11.3	7.1
Defining and Responding	1.2	0.6
Mentioned	11.9	3.0
Total	99.9	100.0

Our research indicates that, in labour news, business spokespeople were usually present along with labour voices. Business people were sometimes even allowed to define issues in labour stories. In contrast, labour spokespeople were nearly invisible in business news. Although labour contributes to business activities on a daily basis in routine ways, the voices of working people were absent from the business pages. The *Sun* gave labour neither the opportunity to define nor to respond to business issues. We interpret this finding as highly significant. The vast majority of Canadians are paid employees, yet the *Sun*'s coverage disproportionately emphasized the voices of business people and the self-employed in its pages, giving them the opportunity to define issues in ways that favoured this small proportion of the population.

How did business and labour coverage measure up since the Hollinger take-over? We found that business news dropped dramatically in the news section and increased significantly in the business section. The 1987 business section contained a brief synopsis of the business world, in contrast to 1997's business section, which was about five times larger. In 1987, specialized reporters covered both labour and business; in 1997, 9 or 10 business reporters and one part-time labour reporter did the job [...]. Moreover, as business coverage rose, labour coverage dropped. Of the items we collected for 1987, two-thirds were about business, and one-third about labour. In 1997 business coverage increased to three-quarters of the items collected, and labour coverage decreased to one-quarter. [...]

Importantly, the *Sun's* increasing emphasis on business coverage and its decreasing attention to labour issues started before the Hollinger takeover. After all, it was before 1997 that labour ceased being a regular beat. But the disparity in the *Sun's* reporting on the Board of Trade and Labour Relations Code Review Panel polls occurred after Black took over .... We must conclude that [the *Sun's*] management approved the lack of balance in labour-business reporting, allowed it to continue, and even widen.

## No. 1 Mine Remembered

Roger Stonebanks

OLD NO. 1 MINE, near downtown Nanaimo, is back on the map. Once the city's biggest employer, with as many as 1,000 miners and 150 horses and mules, it was also the biggest producing pit on Vancouver Island. No.1 closed for good in 1938. It had not run out of coal in the miles of tunnels and workings underneath Nanaimo harbour, but it had run out of markets, as oil relentlessly replaced it as a source for power and heating. The big Extension mines seven miles southwest of Nanaimo, once owned by the Dunsmuirs, and the smaller coal mines around Nanaimo suffered a similar fate; they closed down in the 1930s and 1940s. Everyone got on with life and work. The forest industry grew. So too did wholesale goods distribution to Island points and the retail trade, exploding in the 1950s with a string of shopping centres from one side of the city to another. The local economy, like the economy of North America in general, was undergoing a significant transformation. And the city that coal built in the 19th century, starting with Dunsmuirs' original Wellington mine, forgot its working-class past.

The miners at No. 1 raised eighteen million tons of coal from 1883 to 1938. Millions of tons of rock rubble went to fill in part of downtown Nanaimo by the harbour. Miners opened up No.1 in the employment of the British-owned Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company, reorganized a few years later into New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company and known for its enlightened manager, Samuel Robins. Robins recognized the Miners and Mine Labourers Protective Association, in contrast to his successors, who kept the mine non-union. Sold in 1903 to Western Fuel Company of San Francisco, it was bought in 1927 by Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Limited.

No. 1 Mine was the scene of the worst mining disaster in British Columbia, then or since, on 3 May 1887 when 148 men were killed in a double explosion, the first caused by an unprepared and badly placed charge of explosive, the second by exploding accumulated gas and coal dust that was plentiful throughout the mine,

followed by fire and after-damp (carbon monoxide). Only seven miners on the evening shift emerged alive. The explosions blew the top off the mine, sending flames and debris hundreds of feet into the air. It took days to bring the fire under control. In the wake of the disaster, the BC government, long in the back pocket of the province's industrialists, added new protections in the Coal Mines Regulation Act for controlling coal dust in the mines. Rather than the mine owners, Chinese miners, who were paid a third to a half the wages of white miners, were unfairly held responsible for the disaster by white workers; because of their foreign ways, whites argued, Chinese workers were unsafe to work with. But the fatal explosive charge was set by a white miner, the Chinese worked in a different part of the mine, and no fault was found against Chinese workers by the coroner's jury. In the end, the company responded to the anti-Asian demands of the white miners — a popular cry among all levels of society — by excluding Chinese from underground work.

For many decades, every 3 May, the flag at the Nanaimo Bastion, a small fort built for the defence of the early white settlers, was lowered to half-mast to honour the victims of the explosion. But like the demand for coal, the tradition fell away. By 1999, even the site of the mine was not well known. One book said it was at the foot of Dickson Street, but it no longer existed. No trace of the mine was left and the waterfront on which it had stood had been extended seaward. The history of class experience and class conflict linked to No. 1, like the working-class past of many communities, had disappeared from public view.

But the combination of an idea — more of a criticism really — of Nanaimo's South End Community Association, an organization based in the city's working-class district, and renewed civic pride put No. 1 back on the map in the summer of 1999. In an anniversary feature article in the *Victoria Times-Colonist* (2 May 1999), I wrote, in sadness, that there was no plaque to commemorate the mine or the 1887 disaster and the Bastion flag was no longer flown at half-mast each 3 May. "Perhaps by this time next year old No. 1 will be commemorated," I said. Well, not for Charles Torhjem, president of the South End Community Association, to wait a year for recognition of No. 1 and his neighbourhood which was the historic industrial and residential heart of Nanaimo. He had an annual Heritage Celebration picnic on 26 June. He was bound and determined to get a sign erected on the site of old No. 1. And he succeeded. He enlisted the support of the Nanaimo City Council; public and private subscriptions paid the cost (a few hundred dollars) for the sign. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

More than 100 people, including Nanaimo Mayor Gary Korpan and MLA Dale Lovick, went on the Heritage Walk on 26 June 1999, through the south end of Nanaimo, and then stopped for the official unveiling of the sign at the corner of Esplanade and Milton Street, just outside the Van-Kam Freightways terminal. Two people with direct ties to the mine and the neighbourhood helped with the unveiling: eighty-one-year-old Annie Clark, whose husband once worked in No. 1 and had died in another mine, and Harry Mills, eighty-eight, a former No. 1 miner. "In the



south end of Nanaimo you were never in need," Mrs Clark said at the ceremony. "You always had a friend. You didn't go hungry. If you were sick, you were helped. Everyone rallied." The sign is set in a sturdy wooden frame with a shingled covering. The inscription notes the importance of No. 1 mine to the community for more than half a century and concludes with an "In Memoriam" to the 147 miners and one rescuer who were killed on 3 May 1887. "They are remembered," concludes the sign. And so they should be.

## Revolution, Counterrevolution and The Working Class in Russia: Reflections on the Eighty-Second Anniversary of the October Revolution

David Mandel

### *The Paradox*

DESPITE THE THREE QUARTERS of a century that separate the October Revolution from the collapse of the Soviet system and capitalist restoration, the two events are part of the same socio-historical epoch: the soviets' seizure of power in 1917 inaugurated a social revolution; the fall of the bureaucratic regime and the restoration are the final chapter of the counterrevolution begun under Stalin in the 1920s. The intervening 75 years were a period of co-existence and struggle of revolution and counterrevolution, a period whose complexity does not lend itself to any simple formulation.

In both cases, the immediately determining factor was the correlation of forces between working class and bourgeoisie. From this point of view, a comparison of the two events offers a striking paradox. On the one hand, a very small working class in a largely backward, peasant country took the leadership of society and left a determining imprint on the further course of social development. On the other hand, a huge working class in an industrialized, urbanized country was incapable of influencing the course of social change, watching helplessly as hostile social forces reshaped the social system in their own image.

The Russian working class of 1917 was a relatively small minority surrounded by a sea of peasantry. It was recently formed — most of its members had grown up in the countryside in peasant families. Its general level of formal education was low. Yet, it assumed the leadership of the revolutionary democratic movement and led it to victory. Of course, the October Revolution was more than one revolution. Among other things, it was a peasant revolution and a series of national-liberation revolutions. But it achieved victory because it was predominantly a workers'

revolution. The abolition of private property, the planned economy, full employment, the relatively large and growing social wage and basic economic security did not all appear at once, but they had their origins in the workers' revolution.

Various interrelated factors contributed to the unexpected longevity of a system that, from an historical point of view, ultimately proved to be only transitional. A central factor was the strength of the initial working-class impulse at the origins of the revolution and the resulting social weakness of the bureaucratic dictatorship that eventually emerged. Without property on which firmly to base its power and without any real legitimacy (the facade of a soviet democracy was assiduously maintained), the Soviet bureaucracy existed in *permanent fear of the working class*. It could not survive without its totalitarian repressive apparatus — Gorbachev's liberalization, which was the immediate cause of the regime's collapse, amply proved that.

*At the same time, fear of the workers prevented the bureaucracy from achieving the security and stability it desired and which would have required its transformation into a new propertied class, a bourgeoisie.* Around 1989, after his attempts at reform had fatally undermined the system, Gorbachev, in fact, did opt for restoration. But his fear of the popular reaction prevented him from proceeding in a consistent or decisive manner. Gorbachev and his Prime Minister Ryzhkov were quite open about these fears when they replied to criticism from the radical restorationist forces, with whom, nevertheless, they openly agreed in principle. The Polish experience and the rising and increasingly politicized labour unrest in the USSR showed that the leadership really did have something to fear.

But once the regime fell (it collapsed much more than it was overthrown), the working class almost immediately ceased to have any tangible influence on the course of social change. At most, it has had a small, indirect impact on the particular means chosen and on the pace of reforms, but not on their direction. Although the Yeltsin regime's repressive capacity cannot begin to compare with that of the old regime, it nevertheless does not fear the workers.

In this article, I offer some elements of comparison of the workers' situations in the period of socialist revolution and that of capitalist restoration in order to shed some light on the paradoxical fact of working-class hegemony in 1917 and its political marginality today. The comparison will deal mainly with factors affecting working-class consciousness, the "subjective" side of things, since the "objective" situation (roughly, that over which the labour movement can have little direct influence) was, on the face of it, much more favourable to the workers at the time of the collapse of the system than in 1917. To the objective factors mentioned above, one can add the relative homogeneity of the Soviet working class, all working for the same employer (the state), who determined their basic material and work conditions, which were relatively egalitarian, as well as the weakness of the domestic capitalist forces: during or after the failed *coup* of August 1991, had the workers wanted to take power, there was no armed force prepared to stop them.

*The International Context*

The crisis of the bureaucratic regime at the end of the 1980s occurred in a period of major setbacks and weaknesses of the socialist and trade-union movements across the world. Not only were there no successful socialist models (the "Communist bloc" countries were themselves stagnating bureaucratic dictatorships and/or in the process of restoring capitalism) or advancing socialist struggles that Soviet workers could emulate, but even victorious defensive battles were few and far between, as the bourgeoisie successfully hacked away at the postwar "welfare state." In these circumstances, the argument of the pro-capitalist forces within the Soviet Union that "the whole world has embraced the market," that capitalism alone was "normal," was convincing to many workers.

Moreover, these forces were backed up by the ideological, political and financial support of the international bourgeoisie. The international labour movement, in contrast, was practically absent from the equation, except as a mostly negative factor. The small amount of aid offered was aimed at helping Russian unions better adapt to capitalism, not to fight for an alternative. Even worse, the AFL-CIO, which had by far the strongest presence in Russia, consciously directed its "aid" at splitting the labour movement in order to develop and reinforce an actively pro-capitalist labour current.

The international situation also played a central role in the October Revolution. It occurred in a period of mounting labour strength, marked by the formation of mass unions and workers' parties in the industrialized countries. While the outbreak of war and the betrayal by most of the socialist leadership was a setback, it was not a decisive defeat. The war itself eventually became a powerful radicalizing factor, contributing to the unprecedented postwar labour upsurge that swept Europe and did not completely exhaust itself until the defeat of the German October of 1923. All over industrial Europe, it was the bourgeoisie, not the workers, whose decisive action was paralyzed by the perception of a lack of alternatives (to socialism).

*Workers' Consciousness Fostered by the Old Social System*

The relationship between the exploiting and exploited classes is the central factor shaping the consciousness of the oppressed class, even if its particular content at any given moment is determined by concrete historical experience and socio-political conditions. The Soviet Union was a *sui generis*, transitional system, a hybrid with elements of both capitalism and socialism, while itself being neither. It was a totalitarian dictatorship of the party-state bureaucracy based upon a nationalized, planned (or administered) economy, whose official ideology was a castrated version of socialism spiced with nationalism. Under Brezhnev it even acquired the shameful, semi-official label of "actually existing socialism." Pre-revolutionary Russia, in contrast, was an absolute monarchy resting upon a capitalist economy bearing strong vestiges of feudalism. Workers in both systems were wage labourers,

with their core element employed in large-scale, mechanized factory production. But these were two very different social systems and, accordingly, the worker consciousness they generated also differed in significant ways.

#### A. *Class Independence versus Subordinate Collaboration (Corporatism)*

The central issue of working-class consciousness is how workers perceive themselves in relationship to their exploiters: are workers' basic interests tied to those of all other workers in fundamental opposition to their employers and the exploiting class; or are their basic interests linked to their enterprise and so to their employer? Although real-life consciousness is always more complex and contradictory than these "ideal types," these are always the fundamental choices before workers. The exploiters and their ideologues constantly promote among workers one or another form of subordinate class collaboration; revolutionary socialists promote ideological and organizational independence of workers from the exploiters, though they do not rule out temporary, tactical co-operation from an independent organizational and ideological base.

One of the most striking traits of the Russian labour movement in the years leading up to the revolution (this became especially marked in the labour upsurge of 1912-14) was the strength of its attachment to a position of "class independence" from the bourgeoisie, both in the enterprise and at the political level. It was this issue, more than any other, that divided the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, and which explains why the Bolsheviks became the predominant political force in the Russian labour movement from at least 1912 onward (with a brief pause after the February Revolution). The Bolsheviks rejected political alliance with the liberals, viewing them as fundamentally opposed to democratic revolution. They encouraged and led workers in collective actions whose demands were directed at once against the employers and the state. Even workers who did not support the Bolsheviks supported one of the other socialist parties, but never a bourgeois party.

The Russian bourgeoisie was a reactionary, pro-Tsarist class. Its liberal elements were a small minority with little influence before 1917. The close collaboration between employers and the police in repressing the labour movement left little room for illusions about shared interests of workers and the bourgeoisie. Pre-revolutionary Russia was a socially and politically polarized society where even the *intelligentsia*, which historically has often acted as a bridge between the classes (though ultimately serving the ruling class), had almost no presence in the labour movement after the 1905 Revolution.

*Soviet society presented a much more complex and contradictory picture. On the one hand, the bureaucracy's monopoly of power, the repressive framework of social relations, did foster among workers a sense of "us against them," the bosses (nachal'stvo). But this coexisted, on the other hand, with a strong element of promise, which became especially pronounced under Brezhnev. When Perestroika*

was going sour, some workers would refer to the Brezhnev period as their "golden age."

The bureaucracy itself was organized in a hierarchy of power and privilege, each bureaucrat under the thumb of his or her own bosses. This tended to blunt the distinction between "us" and "them," since workers could view themselves merely as the bottom rung of a continuous ladder. The bureaucracy has often been referred to as a "caste," but in fact it was far from a closed group. Most of the last group of leaders of the Soviet Union, including Gorbachev and Yeltsin, were not children of functionaries. Conscientious workers were urged to study to become engineers, and from there many began careers in the administrative hierarchy. Many directors began their professional lives as workers in the same plant. Conversely, children of bureaucrats rarely became bureaucrats, preferring careers in privileged professions such as science and journalism.

But more important were the clientelist, often corrupt, relations that flourished especially in the declining period of the regime, when the central leadership's control over the bureaucracy progressively loosened. In these conditions, the dual role of the enterprise director, the minister, or the first secretary of a territorial party committee became much more pronounced. These functionaries remained representatives of the state in the production unit, the economic sector, or the territory they administered; but, at the same time, they also acted as representatives, lobbyists, defenders of the employees of the enterprise or the sector, or of the residents of the territory *vis-à-vis* the state. The economy was becoming increasingly "feudalized."

The importance of the social wage, administered largely by the enterprise (including housing, sick pay, pensions, subsidized leisure and vacations, healthcare, pre-school childcare and more), as well as the growing distribution of scarce consumer goods through the enterprises, also reinforced corporatist attitudes. Workers were often called upon by management to "consider the situation of the enterprise," that is to agree to periodic massive overtime and poor work conditions, to help the enterprise meet plan targets. And while refusal did entail certain risks, the workers' generally positive response to the appeals was also based on a perception of their interests as linked to those of the enterprise and to management.

Of course, for this system to work, management had to give something in return. Besides the social wage, this took the form of managerial flexibility in slack period on work schedules and on violations of discipline. Management also tried to ensure that workers got their bonuses (a large part of the take-home wage), whether these were merited or not by real production results.

### *B. The Social Content of the Democratic Revolution*

These aspects of worker consciousness were an important element in 1917 and in the period of Soviet collapse. These periods offer some striking parallels and contrasts. In the first case, the democratic revolution (overthrow of Tsarism) was

soon followed by the workers taking power in both the state and in the enterprises, a socialist revolution. In the second case, the democratic revolution (the collapse of the bureaucratic regime) was quickly followed by the complete exclusion of workers from political and economic power in a rapid restoration of capitalism.

In February 1917, although the workers briefly followed the Mensheviks in giving administrative power to a liberal government, they nevertheless immediately formed their own separate class organizations, the soviets, whose mandate was to set the policy for the liberal government to administer. In the enterprises, too, workers set up independent class organizations, the factory committees, which did not hesitate to encroach on managerial power when workers were faced with the threat of mass layoffs or plant closure. The factory committees arose entirely from below — they had not figured in the program of any party, though the Bolsheviks quickly embraced and led them. But there was no significant tendency for workers in *their separate enterprises* to seize them collectively. It was clear to the factory-committee activists that workers' control could be effective only in the context of national regulation and planning of the economy and that that required a soviet government.

The point is that in 1917 workers reacted to the economic crisis in an essentially class-independent, solidaristic way. This was very different from the reaction of workers when the bureaucratic regime fell, also in the midst of a deepening economic crisis. The latter-day workers never formed their own class organizations, political or economic.

The differences in the character of the two democratic revolutions are equally striking. The February Revolution was entirely a movement from below. In the ensuing months, the masses never lost the initiative. Even when they agreed at first to hand administrative power to the liberals, they insisted on retaining "control" through their soviets, which alone commanded armed force.

The renascent Soviet labour movement also played an important role in the downfall of the bureaucratic regime, but it was not an independent role, and the movement never embraced more than a minority of the working class. It is difficult to evaluate the precise impact of the movement "from below" on the fall of the regime, but it seems clear that it owed much to a "revolution from above" by the forces of capitalist restoration (within and outside the bureaucracy), that were able to manipulate and co-opt the popular forces. In the crucial moments of August 1991 (the failed "conservative" *coup*) and December 1991 (the dismantling of the Soviet Union), the workers remained passive bystanders. Had the downfall of the bureaucratic regime taken the form of a popular revolution, the restoration would have been a much more problematic endeavour. The restorationist strategists were keenly aware of this and strove for an alliance with the pro-capitalist elements in the bureaucracy in order to avert the necessity of a popular mobilization to bring down the old system.

Under *Perestroika*, organizations arose in the plants that were concerned with the issue of economic power and property. These labour-collective councils, or STKs, were formed originally on Gorbachev's command and were given limited, ambiguous self-management powers. The STKs formed a national movement in 1990, after Gorbachev decided to suppress these self-management bodies as part of his turn to restoration.

This movement, although fundamentally opposed to the old bureaucratic system, was itself heavily influenced by corporatist ideology. Even its most radical elements accepted the idea that workers' earnings should be dependent upon the market performance of their enterprise. The movement's basic demand was to transfer the enterprises to the "work collectives." It offered no overall conception of the national economy beyond self-managed, collectively-owned (a minority supported leasing from the state) enterprises linked to each other only by market relations. In practice, this was capitalism, but it would start out with worker-owned enterprises.

It is thus not hard to see how the movement became easy prey for the restorationist forces. The movement's leaders in Russia lent their support to Yeltsin, who promised to make the STKs the foundation of his government. He did pass some laws making it easier for employees to become collective owners, but when his privatization program was introduced, it ruled out collective ownership of the shares of newly privatized plants. The STK activists consoled themselves with the fact that the program at least made it easy for the members of the "work collective" individually to acquire a majority of the shares, if not all, as they had hoped. But since shares could not be owned collectively and since the workers were incapable of organizing themselves to pool their shares, Yeltsin, prompted by the IMF, easily achieved his goal of totally excluding workers from any influence in enterprise administration.

### *Experience of Collective Struggle*

The class consciousness of the pre-revolutionary Russian workers did not spring ready-made from the social relations of Tsarist Russia, even if the latter did offer them a favourable terrain. (It is worth noting, for example, that the soviets arose spontaneously in Ivanovo and St. Petersburg in 1905.) It developed in the course of a relatively brief, but extremely rich and intense period of class struggle. Despite strong repression, the labour movement coexisted with the Tsarist regime for a quarter century. Without this experience of struggle, especially that of 1905 and 1912-14, it is hard to imagine 1917 taking the course it did.

To this one must add the role of the Bolshevik party, which was crucial to the outcome of 1917. However, the party should not be seen as a totally independent factor. If there was a such a party, it was because the social conditions were favourable. Its relationship to the worker masses and to the labour movement was a dialectical one. Especially after 1905, this was an overwhelmingly working-class

party, uniting the most conscious, revolutionary workers, themselves organically linked to the worker masses. This party was the result of an entire epoch of class struggle and accumulated experience.

In contrast to *Tsarism*, the *bureaucratic regime*, precisely because of its fragility, could not tolerate, even for a brief time, any independent labour organization or movement. Soviet workers were unable to win themselves any autonomous space within the system until Gorbachev's liberalization opened it for them. This liberalism proved almost immediately fatal to the regime. It was not that Gorbachev desired an independent labour movement, but he was unwilling to use mass repression to put it down.

But Soviet workers were given too little time. They entered the period of overt political crisis of the regime with almost no experience of collective struggle or independent organization beyond the shop level, and few even had that. Spontaneous explosions had occurred from time to time on a larger scale before the Gorbachev period, but they were localized and quickly repressed, leaving almost no trace in the collective consciousness. Only the experience of independent collective struggle could have enabled Soviet workers to overcome the corporatist legacy and to forge organic links of solidarity among themselves.

### *The Economic Collapse*

Economic collapse played a key role in both periods. A consequence of the imperialist and civil wars, the economic collapse that followed the October Revolution, along with the civil war and the needs of state-building, were key factors in the dispersal of the working class, a process that did not even begin to reverse itself until 1921. It was only in 1926 that industry recovered to its pre-war levels. The high rate of unemployment had a severe dampening effect on labour activism. As a result, soon after the October Revolution, the working class ceased to be an independent historical subject. The workers played a critical role in the civil war victory, but soviet democracy soon gave way to the party dictatorship. There were many conscious, dedicated workers in the party, which was very much a revolutionary movement dedicated to the workers' cause. But the working class as such, to the degree it still existed, had no direct means of influence over it. This set the stage for the eventual rise of the bureaucracy.

Russia's economic crisis today, though less severe than that of the civil war, is occurring in peacetime, and, as such, its depth and length are probably unprecedented in modern times for any major country. But more to the point, it hit the labour movement when it was still in an embryonic stage of development, greatly slowing down, if not completely cutting short, its development. The working class is undergoing a process of social decomposition only somewhat less dramatic than that of the civil war period. Paradoxically, the rapid erosion of the old social bases of corporatism (the paternalistic state and enterprise management, job security, the social wage, as well as the repressive framework) has not only not weakened its



hold on workers and their leaders, but, if anything, reinforced it. Today corporatism goes under the official title of "social partnership." The persistence of dependent class collaboration is very much a consequence of the deep insecurity and the sense of impotence caused by the economic crisis.

One of the political motives behind the policy of restoration through "shock therapy" was, in fact, quickly to cut the social ground from under potential worker resistance. The workers' demoralization made possible Yeltsin's *coup d'état* of October 1993 and the establishment of what is for all practical purposes a dictatorship, albeit a "soft" one. (Outside of the *coup* and the wars against Chechnya, there has so far been no need for mass repression.) The *coup* was directed immediately against the parliament's opposition to Yeltsin's economic course, but it was also a preventive measure against potential worker resistance. (It was made known that Yeltsin had ready on his desk the decree disbanding the main union federation, whose president initially supported the parliament against Yeltsin.) The *coup* proved very successful in snuffing out any latent militant tendencies among the union leadership.

### *Conclusion*

This comparative analysis gives some idea of what it will take for the Russian working class to again become a subject of history. It leads to conclusions that are not optimistic for the near future. But it would be wrong to simply write off the Russian working class. There has been a certain tendency to do that among Western socialists in the wake of the dashed hopes raised by *Perestroika*.

For one thing, the social and economic conditions that have contributed to the weakness of the Russian working class will change, and are beginning to change. But one of those conditions is the strength of labour and socialist forces in the developed countries and also their more direct forms of support for their counterparts in Russia. It is worth repeating that much of the immense tragedy of Russia's 20th-century history is linked to the weakness of socialist forces in the developed capitalist world. The peoples of the former Soviet Union have paid the heaviest price for the absence of socialism in the West. At the same time, the bureaucratic dictatorship in the Soviet Union, directly or indirectly, played an important role in holding back the revolutionary potential of the Western working class, which today is itself paying an increasingly heavy price for the absence of socialism on a world scale.