

OCTOBER, 1983

A young labor activist writes
**How to aid birth
of workers' own forms
of organization**

by Jeha Marcotte

This year has shown no let up in the sharpest attack on U.S. labor in decades. The attack has been political — Reaganism, economic — depression, and ideological — unions forcing concessions on workers.

I felt last year that all this would breed a tremendous rank-and-file revolt. It is true there have been important strikes this year, many anti-concessions strikes. But they are as yet individual and isolated. Everyday I feel in the shop the very real objective force of massive unemployment and fear of losing your job, keeping workers down. There can be no setting a timetable on the reaction to Reaganomics. And you can really see at work how the labor bureaucracy is the last barrier to the self-organization of workers for freedom.

But I believe the unions have dealt themselves a death-blow to any credibility they had left with these concessions. With the first great concession of the No-Strike Pledge during World War II, union leadership started down its suicidal path of class collaboration. This collaboration bore fruit early, in McCarthyism's anti-labor Taft-Hartley Law in 1948 which gave birth to "right-to-work" laws. Unions failed to organize the South, and allowed the firing and blacklisting of militant workers from their unions.

Then came the unions' acceptance of Automation, first by John L. Lewis with the introduction of the continuous miner in the coalfields, which miners fought with their wildcat general strike in 1949-50. This path of collaboration has led today to the virtual self-destruction of many unions who know only how to retreat before the onslaught of Reaganism.

Just as the transformation of the unions into the opposite of what they were created to be is total, the workers' break with the labor bureaucracy is total. The form the opposition will take is all that remains to be worked out. Production workers are even saying, "Better with no union to sell you out."

Here in New York the Art Steel workers are a good example. Their office furniture plant had declared bankruptcy and used that as an excuse to withhold half their vacation pay. After a year of the union giving them the run-around, Art Steel workers went right down to the District 65/UAW headquarters after work and held a demonstration inside the offices complete with leaflets showing a cartoon of their organizer taking money from the company and passing it to the union president.

Their attitude is that the union is the immediate enemy standing in your way to fight the company, that there is no hope of changing anything in the union, no work from within is possible, you can only attack it. The workers in my shop, for all the fear that prevents action for now, have exactly the same attitude. I think only some of the Left have not shed their illusion of reforming the unions.

ON THE SHOP FLOOR

What does this mean for our own work in the shop? First seek shop-floor unity, the union of the workers.

Without this, nothing is possible. This can include a struggle to organize a union or get certain reforms in your local. There is no contradiction in that. I reject any fatalism on the part of workers that, since the unions can't be reformed, there is nothing to be done. But because I recognize that nothing less than the abolition of the capital/labor relation can solve our problems, I cannot respond with only activism without bringing in Marx's understanding of our situation and the way out of it.

I am not talking about what others say Marx said, whether they are state-capitalist powers calling themselves Communist or professors here. I mean the vision Marx developed showing both how labor is of necessity an object; just one commodity among others to the capitalist and how that capitalist must constantly, by law of competition, invest more and more in machines to employ relatively fewer and fewer workers; and of the opposite to this, how only workers acting and thinking their own thoughts can free themselves and create a new form of freely associated production relations.

The force of this vision together with the shop floor struggles form the process that must begin today to lead to the classless society. I reject the Left's attempts to organize factions in the unions and get elected to positions, not because that may not be the right tactics for certain struggles, but because of the way I've seen it done. I feel that among the Left there's a lack of respect for and serious dealing with, what workers are saying about "you can't change things that way." There is a fine line between fatalism and the truth! You've got to deal with it. The Left, including anarchists I have worked with, goes on like the Old Left in unions, and the reforms and union positions are taken too seriously, divorced from a real rank-and-file movement.

OPPOSITION CAUCUSES

Some fellow union members tried to set up an opposition caucus of sorts this year. They felt the time was right because of tremendous dissatisfaction in the union over loss of membership, financial mismanagement, corruption and a question of where the union was going. The meetings were attended by various shop stewards and some opposition staff workers.

I felt uneasy at the lack of rank-and-filers but I said o.k., who knows? If it can present itself to the workers in the shops as an alternative, and if the workers decide this is a form of struggle they want, and make it their own... well, it's a chance. But the gap between the caucus, which included several kinds of Leftists including anarchists, and the shop floor was too great.

A caucus like this could work if it was the result of a shop floor struggle, which got to the stage of seeing the need to reach out beyond the one shop, and a caucus of shops, in opposition or in struggle, formed. The way it was, I would go to a meeting, learn all the crap that was going on in the union, and of plans to oppose this at the general meetings of stewards and local officers — which is the wrong ground, is the ground of the bureaucrats, and as we found out in a battle of words, they are the meanest.

I thought our function should have been to simply try to open up communications between the shops, with a newsletter which could both share some of this information with the members and invite them to share their experiences and ideas. Then we would see if we had something. But the "caucuses" wanted to fight the bureaucracy themselves, and got nowhere.

So I'd go back to the shop, and the workers' attitude was, the union is the enemy, it's a mafia, you can't reform it. So what's the use of tactics to oppose this or that corruption of the bureaucrats if it's not part of the shop floor struggle, if it's not a step in the self-organization of the workers? It means nothing to them, no more than voting for a Democrat instead of a Republican. It's not the workers' form of struggle.

The Left cannot hear the workers' criticism even in their seeming passivity. I liked the anarchists compared to the rest of the Left for their position on labor. But in practice Marxist-Humanism is far more radical than anarchists, on labor. Despite their professed ultimate goals of a classless society, anarchists share with the social-democrats or reformers a ready-made idea of what form the struggle must take, instead of really listening to what workers are saying. There is also their lack of fully appreciating how women and Blacks and other minorities have their own ideas and demands.

WORKERS — WOMEN, BLACK, LATINO

Look at how women are treated in my shop. The assembly departments are the only ones that hire women. The better paying jobs, including the skilled toolroom jobs and training positions, hire men only. And only men get transferred to those jobs, even if they start in assembly. One of the men whose wife works in assembly recognized that though his work is heavier, the women work harder because they are stuck at their machines all day and do the same task over and over again, with the boss standing over them. Yet there is one older woman, past retirement age, who got hired in the pressroom around the time of World War II and she is still working there. She is neither stronger nor weaker than most women. I

know it is the same at Art Steel, where once plenty of women worked but only three are left from that war period and none have ever been hired since.

The discrimination against Black workers takes a different form, from what I have seen in my years in various small shops. The problem starts with many bosses who won't even hire Blacks most of the time, especially young Black men.

One department I worked in did hire two young Blacks from a union training program, but the foreman started singling them out right away for harassment and writing them up. After a few weeks he even started getting on my case. My work had not changed or slowed up and I wasn't talking more, so I could only figure it was because these two workers and I got to be friends. The foreman didn't really get off my case till one of these young workers was fired for no reason and the other one laid-off.

Working with immigrant labor has its own particularities. A Latin American friend in another shop has found them when faced with the tremendous exploitation and abuses in a shop and the seeming passivity and fear of the workers, he has had to first help his fellow workers know their rights and what's in the contract, since first it's in English and second it's kept a secret by the union anyway.

He would then help the workers gain the confidence to begin demanding those rights, using tactics which all could agree on, such as a letter to the union signed by a majority of the workers. In his experience, this patient work has been able to initiate a whole process of struggle which escalates with each new victory and each new reaction by the company.

The point is to not get impatient of the process. Activity in labor is not to gain any particular reforms no matter how local, nor any union positions even if you could take over the local. The means is the end — helping the growing self-organization, self-confidence and self-awareness of labor as Subject of history, from individual workers to whole shops, which necessitates both this practical experience and what we call Marx's Humanism.

UNITY OF WORKERS AND INTELLECTUALS

As long as capitalism exists, any reforms can be reversed; but this "intellectual sediment" (as Rosa Luxemburg called it in the mass strikes of Russia and Poland in 1905) is what remains to build on and to create the new society based on Freely Associated Labor. The unity of workers and intellectuals, of workers' own way of knowing, through their experiences and own activities, with Marx's method of knowing not only the present but the future inherent in it, must be worked on now, and for that we in News and Letters Committees participate in these struggles.

Marxist-Humanists cannot simply wait for new forms of workers' organizations to spring up like Solidarnosc (Solidarity Union) in Poland — recognizing Solidarnosc sprang up spontaneously not in a void but in the ground prepared by KOR (Committee for Social Self-Defense), which did bring together workers and intellectuals. I hope workers who read this will write to me at News & Letters to continue an exchange of ideas about where we can go in labor.