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Letter from the editor

As the seventies roll to an end, it is instructive to look back over the last 10 years, a decade that promised much to the left, in America, and throughout the world.

They really began with 1968—the years prior are somehow a different era. The Tet offensive, when the Vietnamese people decisively turned the war in their favor. Chicago, a Democratic Party convention in a city that was under martial law—delegates walking through clouds of tear gas that had been flung at an American youth raging over injustice at home, and abroad. The Black liberation movement seemed about to crack the racist barriers between Black Americans and equality.

It seemed a new dawn for the left was heralded by events in France, in May and June. Students seized universities and sometimes the streets. 15 million workers were on the brink of confronting the state.

Behind what used to be called the "Iron Curtain" workers, intellectuals, and students tried to make Czechoslovakia live up to its political name: socialism. They were crushed by Russian tanks, dispensing, for all who still thought otherwise, with the myth that the Soviet Union was a force for progressive social change.

The promise was great—prospects for greater change—for a growing movement of industrial workers fighting for a better life, a process that could transform the intellectually-based left into revolutionary workers' parties, capable of leading workers in transforming this exploitative, oppressive system into one based on people's needs. The revolution seemed just around the corner—maybe 10 years away.

But the promises of 10 years ago were not to be fulfilled. The economic crisis worsened, yet the changes in political consciousness necessary to put life into revolutionary perspectives did not come to be.

Predicted mass upheavals of the working class did not happen, although the number of struggles, and their militancy, did increase. Around the world, working people, and others, still look to the liberal bourgeois, reformist social democratic, or Stalinist Communist parties as vehicles for defending their interests.

Still, the economic crisis had its impact. In Chile, there was an attempt to chart a parliamentary road to socialism, which ended in tragedy. In Portugal, the working class, for the first time in a generation, introduced the struggle for socialist revolution back into Europe. In Southern Africa, Angola was liberated, Zimbabwe freedom fighters progressed towards victory, and Soweto lit the skies of South Africa.

In most of the advanced industrial capitalist countries, however, the revolutionary left either stagnated, or even worse, hovered on the fringes of working class life. The development of class consciousness and organization among workers was a slow process.

Looking back, the 70's, in America, have been a decade of reaction and repression: of white backlash and economic hardship; of double digit inflation and deep recession; of ROAR and Bakke; of wage freezes and union capitulation; of anti-abortion legislation and Anita Bryant; Nixon and Watergate; The New Right and the KKK.

Despite this, however, small, but important changes in consciousness have taken place—changes that, for the left in the 80's, could open the door to the working class.

Among the most self-confident of American workers, ingrained ideas are losing their power. The idea that employers and unions have common interests falls by the wayside as, while working conditions and living standards deteriorate, employers demand more and more. The idea that union leaderships look after the interests of the rank and file is discredited, as these leaders become less willing to do whatever is necessary to win anything at the bargaining table. The idea that the government is neutral, and the protector of justice and prosperity withers, as government comes down on the side of employers, time and time again.

After a sleep of 30 years, one idea is gaining ground—the understanding that workers and employers have conflicting interests. Class consciousness is coming back.

(continued on back cover)

the solid, unspectacular AIF plus COLA wage package, in return for not giving the companies much resistance on speed-up and other shop-floor-level problems, while concentrating on new, "pattern-setting" fringe benefits. Lately, those benefits—especially medical—have been getting expensive.

The result is that, while fringes are about 30% of the average U.S. company's payroll costs, they are over 40% for auto companies.

Between 1973 and 1978, wages increased from \$5.20 to \$8.20, or 58%. Non-wage items rose from \$3.00 to \$5.60, or 90%. The increase in benefits far exceeded the rise in hourly wages.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the government has decided to relax its wage guideline, by exempting certain "uncontrollable" benefit increases—for example the hospital-part of medical—from the 7% cost calculation. Perhaps UAW president Doug Fraser knew that these changes were coming when he took a "mildly positive" position on the wage and price guideline plan. Still, if inflation worsens—and many economic experts predict it will—there will be increasing pressure on unions to accept sub-standard contracts.

If that pressure builds to the point where it starts squeezing the big unions, it will be interesting to see where people like Fraser come down. Will they remain "mildly positive" about the government's anti-inflation crusade, agreeing to do what they can to sell bad contracts to their memberships? Or will the whole inflation debate lead to a split between the unions and the increasingly conservative Democratic Party?

Letter from the editor

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Events can highlight processes that have been long in the making. Such an event was the 1978 miners' strike. Rank and file miners systematically took on, and defended themselves against some of the biggest corporations in the world, and against their own leadership, and the U.S. government. Their actions were an inspiration to workers and oppressed peoples everywhere.

For a moment we glimpsed what a labor movement is and what it could accomplish. For a moment, it was clear that there are two opposing classes in America.

It was not only the miners. In union after union shake-ups are going on. An

employers' offensive is forcing American workers to organize and fight just to stay even, much less get ahead. From the reform movement in the steelworkers union to the well-developed rank and file organization in the Teamsters, to the postal workers' overwhelming rejection of their contract.

Political events are also forcing union leaders and others to take independent action. Machinists' President Winpinger's determination to dump Carter and his wage guidelines is one example. Fraser's formation of a liberal-labor coalition several months ago is another. As this coalition is forced to organize pressure on the Carter administration, on its budget proposals or health care, or jobs, it will contribute to building a movement that goes beyond union and contract fights—a movement that can give working people a greater impact on events. Of course, if Fraser and the liberal-labor coalition do nothing more than act as a stalking horse for Kennedy, they will get nowhere.

These changes are small, and are taking place slowly. But that, too, can change. Who expected the miners' strike to develop into the confrontation that it did?

These changes, inside and around the labor movement, will reshape the left in the 80's. As the most conscious workers come to understand the limits of capitalism, through their own attempts to reform it, they become the key to building a workers' revolutionary party in this country.

Today, the deepening economic crisis and the beginnings of a political crisis are forcing working people to look at themselves and others differently. Political fights and struggles are creating the consciousness that working people, acting in their own self-interest, can win,

can change their lives. This consciousness is developing only in ones and twos now, but in the future, growth in numbers will force serious, healthy changes in a timid and splintered left.

The healthiest organizations will be forced to cooperate rather than attack each other. Abstract sectarian barriers for the advancement of the workers' movement will be destroyed.

In this sorting out process a revolutionary organization will be born.

Changes, this new magazine of the International Socialists, is designed to play a role in this process now. Through in-depth analysis and reportage on union reform and other labor struggles, we plan to discuss the significance and problems of the emerging movement. Through discussion and analysis of general political questions facing America today, we aim to raise the questions that the movement will have to come to grips with. Through coverage and analysis of significant international events, we will show that our movement is not alone in fighting for revolutionary change. And, through discussion of basic Marxist theory, we will raise questions of interest and importance to the left.

We want this publication to contribute to a serious dialogue on the left around the questions facing the American working class and the American left.

Despite all the problems of the 70's, the decade is ending on an optimistic note. One of the most despotic rulers in the world—the Shah of Iran—has been forced to leave his country forever. In Britain, over 2 million workers are out on strike against wage controls dictated by a labor government. And here, at home, workers will probably make mincemeat out of Carter's wage guidelines.

Let us hear from you. We welcome criticism, dialogue, and controversy. We have nothing to lose, and a world to win.