

## GLOBALIZATION AND LABOUR: DEFINING THE 'PROBLEM'

- Sam Gindin, York University, Toronto

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American pulp writer Don Westlake begins a recent novel with a now-common event: a lower-level manager in his late 40's is laid off from a pulp mill and confronts the possibility that he may never again get a comparable job. Anxious about what he'll be up against as he re-enters the labour market, he puts an ad in local papers for a fictitious job based on his own particular strengths. A pile of responses flows in, which he carefully narrows down to the six competitors he might face if a real job came up. He contemplates his situation:

'...If I were to kill a thousand stockholders and get away with it clean, what would I gain?...If I were to kill seven chief executives, each of whom had ordered the firing of at least two thousand good workers in healthy industries, what would *I* get out of it? ...Nothing...What it comes down to, is the CEOs and the stockholders who put them there are the enemy, but they are not the problem. They are society's problem, but ...not my personal problem... These six resumés. These are my personal problem.'<sup>1</sup>

Reluctantly, he concludes that to adequately support his family again, he must, literally, be ready to 'kill for a job'. He must get rid of the senders of those six resumés.

As heavy-handed as the satire might be, it makes a powerful point: the barrier to popular resistance today is neither that people think the world is fine, nor that people are passive; rather, it is that with no reason to believe that real change is on the agenda, people *actively* pursue other survival options. To maintain their consumption, health care and pensions, working class families have increased their collective hours, gone deeper in debt, refinanced their mortgages, supported tax cuts that favoured the rich in the hope of offsetting their own wage stagnation, accepted more abuse at work, and when that work

was taken away, workers have given up their community roots and wandered off to compete elsewhere for generally worse, but desperately needed, jobs.

The tragedy of this reaction extends beyond the obvious limits of its solutions. Worse still is the individualism and fragmentation such responses reinforce. If incomes are improved through longer hours, more debt, tax cuts, and moving away - then class consciousness and class formation develop radically differently than if wage increases and social programs are won on picket lines, in the street, through mobilized communities. With class solidarity and ideological independence undermined by the form personal coping takes, workers are condemned to face the same constrained options in the future as they do in the present. The political dilemma is therefore not fatalism in the sense that people are passively accepting their fate, but the fatalism of acting within the given 'structured options' - rather than imagining, believing in, and organizing to expand the possible options.

Through the late 50s and into the 60s, alongside the first post-war wave of globalization, the working class had been able to win significant concessions from capital. But that proved temporary. The militancy of workers, even though generally confined to reformism within the system, proved to be more than capitalism could accommodate. Neoliberalism was the response to those earlier achievements. With neoliberalism, those same gains which had earlier been identified as manifesting both capitalism's substantive democracy and its capacity to extend the good life, were now redefined by economic and political elites as system-threatening barriers to the priority of capital accumulation. The post-war security that supported workers' ability to defy employer authority and make untoward demands had become the problem. A Time

Magazine article, addressing the disciplinary significance of the 1971 recession, candidly expressed the logic behind the more comprehensive neoliberal reaction that was to come:

‘Adversity has its uses: the recession has played a calming role in America. Looking for a job takes precedence over looking for trouble. Unemployment undermines the counterculture’s confidence in a cornucopia able to forever satisfy both the straights and the dropouts. And in subtler ways the recession has lowered the general tolerance of uproar, enhancing the concern for private welfare at the expense of political concerns and street theatrics. Sidewalks are too narrow for [both] protest marchers and food stamp lines.’ (February 1971, Canadian edition, p. 23).

It might have been expected that capitalism’s aggressive turn to the priorities of business at the expense of broader needs would, over time, lead to some sort of legitimacy crisis for capitalism. Instead, the opposition’s inability to develop a counter-response led to the actual crisis emerging on the left rather than the right. And that crisis - occasional glimmers of hope aside – continues, virtually everywhere, today.

How are we to understand this impasse? *Can* it be escaped? What are the dimensions – the sites of struggle, principles of justice, strategic orientations, and social agency – of the long march to getting radical change on the agenda? More specifically, how has globalization affected the nation state as the primary site of political activity? What is the relationship between nation-based struggles and the universalist aspect of social justice? How might we counter the authoritative weight carried by ‘competitiveness’? Is Marx’s identification of the working class as the revolutionary agency still credible? And if so, can the decline of unions - the principal organizational site of workers - be reversed and, more ambitiously, renewed so as to contribute to a larger transformative project?

What follows is a brief elaboration on each of these issues.

### ***1. Global accumulation, national reproduction.***

All sites of resistance do of course matter. The political issue is not just how to prioritize which sites are most important at a particular time, but also how to conceive of the relationship between the various sites. In our era, the deepening of globalization seems to have subordinated the salience of the national to the dominance of the international. Yet as early as 1848, and in the context of a keen awareness of capitalism's tendency to globalization, Marx and Engels presciently asserted that 'Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.'<sup>2</sup> Accumulation may increasingly be international in scope, but the social foundation of its power – property rights, contracts, the credibility of currencies, labour rights and labour markets – are established and reproduced at the level of nation states.

When General Motors expands into Europe, Latin America, and China, it is not escaping a dependence on the American state but rather becoming dependent on *more* states as well as increasing its dependence on the international role of the American state. When we speak of the 'internationalization of states' the issue is not a decrease in the role of states but their taking on – sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes reluctantly - the *additional* responsibility, within their own borders, for supporting international accumulation. When the IMF, World Bank, and WTO are targeted as the face of globalization, this should not obscure the fact that, in spite of a necessary degree of autonomy, they serve at the behest of nation states not as their proto-state replacements. This fact of social power being rooted nationally directs opposition to those same national sites, but more than following power is involved. Resistance cannot be separated

from *place*; concrete and sustained mobilization can only occur within historical communities that can only be built nationally before they can aspire to an effective internationalism.

To emphasize the centrality of nation states does not, however, mean a return to a reified notion of identifying social transformation with seizing the state apparatus. The states in question are *capitalist* states not only by virtue of who happens to be at the helm at any moment, but by virtue of their historical development. The particular structures such states embody include capacities, such as hierarchical decision-making, appropriate to managing a capitalist economy and not to the democratic administration of social life. Transforming such states so that the process of democratization can be extended into the economy and everyday life, and so that the state is democratic in the deepest sense of mobilizing and developing popular capacities for self-management, involves struggles inside the state which are simultaneously and aggressively pushed by movements outside the state, and which are ultimately protected from isolation by parallel struggles and movements in other states.

## ***2. The national and the universal***

Until unions, the political movements that represent workers, and the new social movements have developed an effective base nationally, the concrete support they can offer others in the struggle to universalize joint goals is limited. They can and must of course do international solidarity work as they build national movements, but any substantive transfer of technology, any significant shift in resources, any mutually-beneficial restructuring of trading relationships, any reconstitution of international bodies

(as opposed to specific change within an overall paradigm of serving global capitalism) – all this requires having the resources and institutional backing of state power.

This is perhaps most obvious with regards to the American state: the greatest international contribution the American left can make involves coming to grips with their own state. But this strategic emphasis on the national is also true within the third world. For all the impressive contributions the anti-globalization movement has made to a consciousness of international injustices and the need for international solidarity, third-world development does not depend so much on what we can do *for them*, as in acting within our own countries so as to expand the space available for their coming to grips with their own states and ruling classes. As we develop the capacity to struggle more effectively within our own countries, the safe and flexible havens available to corporations become more limited and we help to open the space for struggles elsewhere. In this sense, national struggles are internationalized.

There is an additional, too often neglected, way in which national struggles must be internationalized. Reflecting a desperation for models to inspire it, the left tends to look to particular developments abroad in order to emulate them or judge them, rather than recognizing them for what they are: struggles in process that are feeling their way through new terrains which we must not only support, but especially *learn from*. There has not been enough of the kind of critical but comradely exchange with those directly involved about the lessons - bad as well as good – from what are not so much models as historic *experiments* in social change.

### ***3. Escaping the terrain of competitiveness***

As long as we remain on the terrain of competitiveness, no effective challenge to capitalism is possible. Whatever ‘progressive’ face third-wayists try to place on it – as with ‘training’ or ‘industrial strategies’ - the goal of competitiveness is, to begin with, morally indefensible: its underlying principle is that access to employment for one group of workers essentially comes from undermining the standards - and taking the jobs - of others. At best, it promises permanent insecurity since even ‘winning’ is an inherently temporary and fragile circumstance. And competitiveness is ultimately destructive to building any kind of independent political capacity because the alliances it invites are with ‘our employers’, while the enemy it identifies is other workers. Competitiveness is of course more than an ideological construct; it is a real-world constraint. But there is a world of difference between acknowledging a constraint that we must deal with in the short run, as opposed to raising it to the status of a goal by way of the oxymoron of ‘progressive competitiveness’. The issue is how to cope with this constraint as we move to limit and eventually eradicate its dominance over our lives.

To reject competitiveness, it is important to emphasize, is not to reject being ‘productive’, but to distinguish between being productive for capital, and developing our individual and collective capacities to democratically address the needs we define for ourselves. On the terrain of competitiveness, the removal of tools and equipment from a community may be rational; on the terrain of democratic capacities this robs workers of their productive potentials. Competitiveness directs training towards teaching workers to adapt to technology; the focus on democratic capacities raises controlling technology.

Competitiveness hoards knowledge; a focus on collective capacities looks to generalize and therefore democratize knowledge.

Any practical challenge to competitiveness necessarily implies challenging the freedom of capital to restructure production across firms, sectors, and borders. The issue of limiting capital's freedom to ignore borders inherently involves a degree of 'protectionism', risking a corresponding national chauvinism. It is therefore crucial, as Greg Albo has insisted, to understand this response in the context of the attempt to create and protect national spaces for democratic experimentation with other ways to organize our lives.<sup>3</sup> What we are 'protecting' ourselves against is not other societies – whose popular forces also need to develop such spaces – but capital's unilateral right to decide the allocation of resources, goods, investment and labour. What we are rejecting is not integration into an international economy, but a particular kind of integration: one that dominates, and thereby undermines, what we (again the international 'we') are struggling to build within each of our domestic spaces.

#### ***4. Agency***

Mike Lebowitz, in his important book, 'Beyond Capital' has rigorously argued that although workers clearly fight for gains *within* capitalism, there is no convincing case that the working class will spontaneously organize itself to go 'beyond capitalism'.<sup>4</sup> Why would we expect a working class that is fragmented across competitive workplaces and individualized communities, which is divided amongst diverse identities; whose daily survival is based on its dependency on capital; and whose capacities and hopes are regularly stunted by capitalism – why would we expect such a working class to suddenly rise up (or even think of rising up) against the system as a whole?

Yet if, as Andre Gorz did in the early 80s, we consequently decide to say ‘farewell to the working class’ as radical agency,<sup>5</sup> then we should be aware of the implications: without the working class, radical change simply won’t happen. Though the catalyst for transformative change may come from elsewhere, other movements cannot sustain themselves without unions’ financial and organizational resources, and workers’ strategic location in production and services. The movement can demonstrate; workers can shut down the economy. Even Gorz later acknowledged as much when he conceded, a decade later, that ‘as the best organized force in the broader movement’, it was on the unions that ‘the success or failure of all the other elements in this social movement [would depend].’<sup>6</sup>

The crucial point is that social transformation is not inevitable but contingent - there are no guarantees; and it is contingent on what happens inside a working class that is neither inherently revolutionary, nor frozen in time. Rather, what distinguishes the working class under capitalism is that it contains the *possibility* – and only the possibility - of changing itself as part of, and as an essential condition for, changing society.

An immediate challenge to those larger possibilities is whether workers can revive their unions – if workers can’t even transform their unions, can they possibly transform society? The context is that while capitalism has dramatically changed over the past quarter century capitalism, unions have not. While capital grasped the polarization of options that followed the ‘golden age’ and aggressively pursued its neoliberal option, unions looked for a return to a no-longer possible middle ground and remain unprepared - sporadic struggles aside - to lead any fundamental challenge to the trajectory of the status quo. The revival of unions will consequently require what amounts to a revolution inside

unions. The issue is not simply trying harder, raising targets for monies going into organization, making a greater commitment to democratic practices, or looking to more effective political involvement. These are all of course very admirable things, but given what unions today now confront, even the modest goal of union *revival* - let alone the development of its capacities for social transformation - appears increasingly unrealistic without some larger vision.

Unless unions see organizing as part of building the working class – and not only as gaining members for themselves – the kind of energy and commitment that is needed to generate an explosion of unionization will not come forth. Unless unions see the extension of membership involvement in union affairs as part of developing and generalizing new capacities, including discovering new ways to collectively address common problems, commitments to internal democracy will remain more formal than substantive. Unless unions are ready to act on a view of their members as more than ‘just workers’ but as full human beings whose needs and potentials are blocked by capitalism, politics will continue to bounce between hoping the next national leader won’t be as bad as the present one and the sterility of lobbying without a mobilized power base.

To return to Westlake, the ‘problem’ for those looking to radical change is not the competitive resumé of other workers, the bad corporate apples in barrels full of poison, nor a disembodied, state-less globalization. The problem is a capitalist system that is no longer strong enough to fulfill and generalize promises of human development, but still strong enough to reproduce itself *in spite of* that failure. And capitalism will retain that strength as long as its opposition, most importantly the labour movement, poses no fundamental barriers to capital’s prerogatives. Creating such an opposition means

thinking and organizing on the grand scales that the idea of ‘socialism’ once represented – that is, the revival of the labour movement now depends on the revival of socialist ideas and a socialist movement that exists inside and outside the unions.

Can a new generation of activists and workers convert the failures of neoliberalism in human terms and the ugliness of the now-unconcealed American empire, into the building blocks of such a movement? Can such a movement convert the argument that ‘there is no alternative’, into ‘there is no alternative but to start moving beyond capitalism’? This is where strategic decisions need to begin today.

#### *ENDNOTES*

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<sup>1</sup> Donald E. Westlake, The Ax, New York: Warner Books, p.65.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, London: Merlin Press, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Albo, ‘A World Market of Opportunities? Capitalist Obstacles and Left Economic Policies’, in Leo Panitch, Socialist Register 1997, London: Merlin Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Lebowitz, Beyond Capital, New York: Pelgrave, 2003, p.168 (new edition with modifications and additional chapters).

<sup>5</sup> Andre Gorz, Farewell to the Working Class, Boston: South End Press, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Andre Gorz, Critique of Economic Reason, London: Verso, 1989, 232-3.