


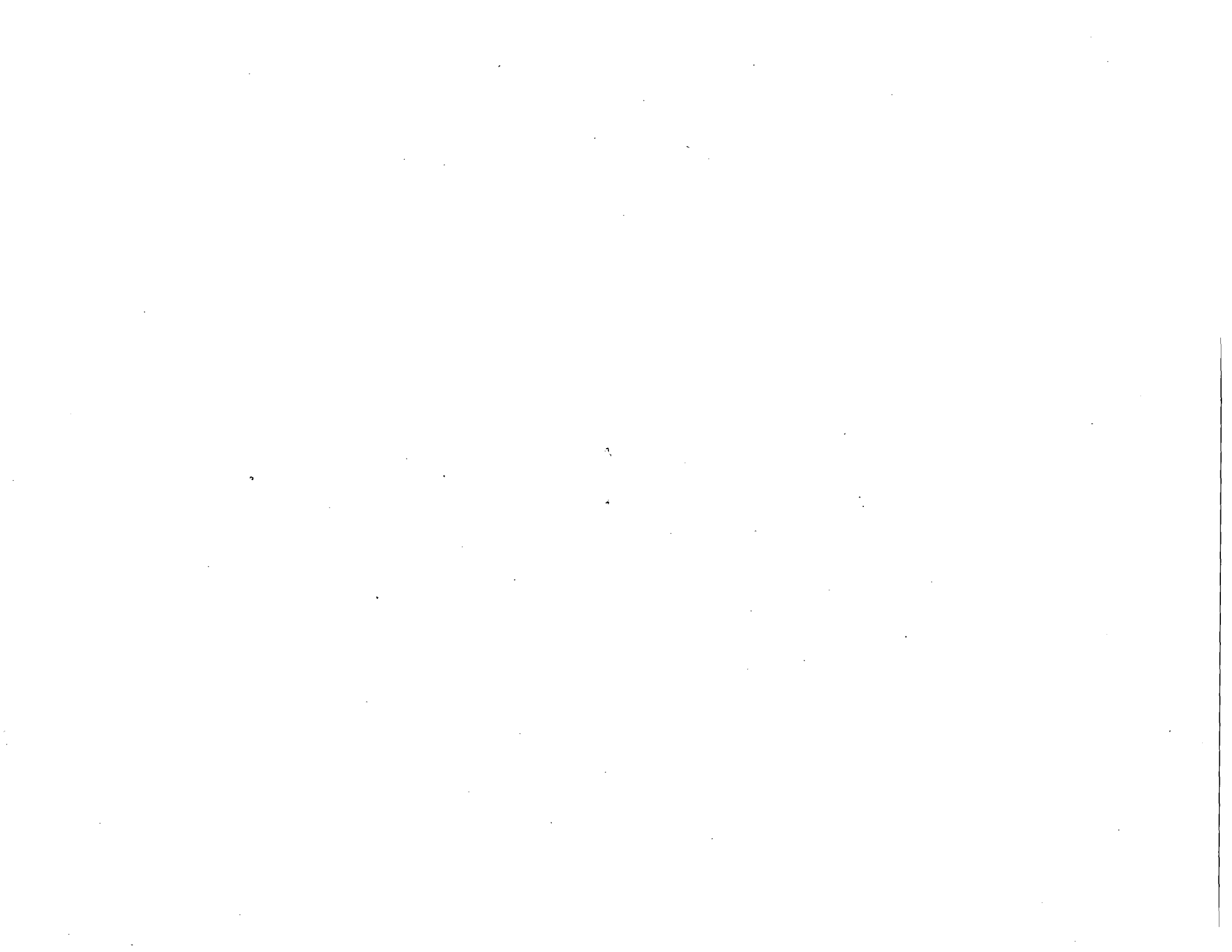
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Shopfloor Struggles of American Workers

From a talk by Martin Glaberman



Shop Floor Struggles of American Workers

That is part of the fundamental reality of work in capitalist society in American society. I submit that what Hungarian workers can do, Russian workers can do and what French workers can do, American workers can do. That's not a prediction—they may not, they may never, the man could push the button and the bombs will destroy civilization and the problems of labor and revolution with it. But as long as the society exists, workers will struggle to stay alive and that's where we have to take our place.

The subject, "Shop Floor Actions of American Workers," seems rather narrowly focused. But it is one of the running themes throughout the Conference. What I want to try to do is put shop floor activities of American workers in some kind of analytical or theoretical framework. One of the things that I have seen over many, many years is that a lot of people on the left, various parts of the left, look at the same thing, look at the same activity, but what comes out has the appearance of being on totally different planets. People interpret things differently; and they interpret things, not in accordance with what they see, but the intellectual framework that they see things with. I think that is important for us to understand. The same strike—it's like the glass that's half full or half empty—was for only a nickel an hour, or, wow! they took on the biggest corporation. Events can be interpreted in many ways. Victories can become defeats, or vice versa.

One of the things I want to start with, because it does provide a framework, and is not simply an event from the past, is something I did some work on a number of years ago about auto workers in the United States during World War II, the kinds of struggles that went on on the shop floor, within the union, between the workers and the government, a complex reality. What it revolved around was the struggle against the no-strike pledge in the UAW. When the United States entered World War II, virtually all of America's labor leaders graciously granted in the name of their members a pledge not to strike at all during the war.

In the first months of the war, the first year, there was an actual drop off in strikes. The end of 1941 through 1942 was a period that put a finish to the late thirties, the massive organizational drives, the sitdown strikes, the violence, all the things that created the big industrial unions. That job hadn't been entirely done. Ford wasn't organized until early 1941. Little Steel wasn't organized, unionized, until the war was well under way, and so on.

Gradually, however, as the war went on, the number of strikes, (by definition all of them were wildcats, all of them were illegal under union contracts and under union constitutions) began to escalate until by the end of the war, the number of workers on strike exceeded anything in past American labor history. What was distinct about the UAW wasn't just that the wildcat strikes were larger in number and more militant, but the fact that something took place which made it possible to make a certain kind of record. It was the only union in which, because there were still two competing caucuses, leaving rank and file workers a certain amount of democratic leeway to press for their point of view, an actual formal debate and vote took place on the question of the no-strike pledge.

A small, so-called rank and file, caucus was organized late in 1943 and early 1944, to begin a campaign around a number of issues, but the central issue was the repeal of the no-strike pledge. It was a very interesting convention in the fall of '44 in which the various caucuses presented their resolutions on the pledge. The majority caucus, the caucus that controlled the leadership, was the Thomas-Addes caucus, which included the Communist Party and which was the strongest on support for the no-strike pledge. They had a long resolution with a list of "whereases," our great Russian ally, etc.... concluding with, "therefore we reaffirm the no-strike pledge."

The minority caucus was the Walter Reuther caucus, and as usual, theirs was a weasel-worded resolution. They were also for the no-strike pledge, except in those cases where plants had returned to peacetime production. Everyone understood that this was a

cop-out, because while there were some plants which had ceased war production, there weren't very many, and most plants had a combination of both, so the no-strike pledge would still apply. Then there was the Rank and File caucus. In the context of the convention it was called the super-minority and it was simply for unconditional termination of the no-strike pledge.

Parliamentary democracy is an interesting thing, and it can be very strange at times. The first vote was for the super-minority and the motion to repeal the no-strike pledge lost two to one, and everybody figured we ought to take Walter Reuther's resolution as the lesser evil, but some people prevailed and said no, let's propose that the convention vote down both of the remaining resolutions. So, this handful of characters distributed handbills the next morning, asking delegates to vote down both of the resolutions. I don't know whether the handbills had any effect or not, but Reuther's resolution was so overwhelmingly defeated that they didn't even have a roll call vote. Then, strangely enough, the majority resolution which was the reaffirmation of the no-strike pledge, was also defeated almost by a two-to-one vote.

So, delegates didn't want to vote for the minority (I assume there were caucus alliances and questions like that involved) but they didn't want the no-strike pledge. Here you had the UAW without a no-strike pledge and all the bureaucrats were up on the platform with visiting government dignitaries and they couldn't deliver their own membership and everyone was running around saying, "What are we gonna do?"

Well, in the UAW, it's still true, the cure for democracy is more democracy. If you vote the wrong way, you get to vote again, and again, until eventually people stay home and you've got enough people left to vote the right way. They said that this issue was really too important to be decided at a convention, it has to be decided with a membership referendum. So they got through, without any whereases, just a simple resolution reaffirming the no-strike pledge, which carried on the condition that there be a membership referendum in which the three caucuses would have representatives on a committee so that there would be no cheating. Or at least not more than the usual amount of cheating.

The role of the Communist Party, and this is an aside, was very interesting. The CP, as part of the Thomas-Addes caucus, accepted this deal—a simple verbal reaffirmation of the no-strike pledge leading to a referendum. As soon as the reaffirmation was accepted, the CP opposed the referendum. All they wanted was the pledge. Anyway, that was one of the many things that led to their ultimate demise in the UAW. That left a bad taste in everybody's mouth.

So then they proceeded to have a referendum. This referendum was in some respects the classic sociological survey. Everyone got a postcard ballot. Errors, cheating, etc. were really kept to a minimum. Everyone on the commission thought that it was as fair as you get in an organization of a million or more members. It took several months to do. When the vote was finally in, the membership of the UAW had voted about two to one to reaffirm the no-strike pledge.

The conclusion any decent sociologist would draw is that autoworkers on the whole thought that patriotism was a little bit more important than class interests, that they supported the war rather than class struggle and strikes, etc. There was a little problem, however, and this is why this is such a fascinating historical experience. The problem was that at the very same time that the vote was going on, in which workers voted two to one to reaffirm the no-strike pledge, a majority of autoworkers struck.

the huge complexes, the Ford Rouge plant, Dodge Main, the Buick complex in Flint and so on. A short while after that, there began a restructuring of the auto industry. In the post WWII period, with automation, these huge complexes declined, some were leveled, and it turned out that that kind of strength, that kind of power to shut down production which also encourages militancy was shifted from these huge complexes to stamping plants. Workers on the picket line at a Chrysler stamping plant in Sterling township in the early '70s knew that if they were down one day, Dodge Main and Lynch Road and another Detroit plant would shut down. After two days, Windsor, Ontario would close and then St. Louis on the third day.

But suppose you're working in a plant making nuts and bolts and there are sixteen plants doing the same thing. You can't say if I'm on strike something else is going to shut down, and you're not as militant, mainly because you're not a fool. You can go out on strike for six months or a year and nobody gives a damn. Maybe if it's a small company, the owner may give a damn, but nobody else does. Very often workers who are the most oppressed and seem the most unwilling to fight, are that way for excellent reasons, for their sophisticated sense of where they exist in the economic and social reality. If they're a small chicken processing plant in a small town in Mississippi or Alabama, it's not like the Rouge. There are limits to what you can do and people have to understand that.

Obviously, if anybody is involved in any of this, you encourage as much militancy and activity as is reasonable, but, I submit, you do not stand in judgment because workers are not as revolutionary as you are, because there's a lot you can learn about workers' sense of reality and where they stand and what's possible and what's not possible. If you're in that kind of a situation, you're also in a situation where neither you nor your family has any economic reserves. You don't have benefits, you don't have health insurance, you don't have vacation pay, you're getting minimum wage. If you go on strike for a week, how do you eat? What I'm saying is that workers tend to understand that—I don't mean they're right all the time, but they have a sense of reality which radicals need to learn from and to participate in struggles on that basis.

In any case, it seems to me that in the framework of this conference, some of the things we will be talking about are clear in terms of mass struggles. You can get a glow of satisfaction from victories of Spanish stevedores or strikers somewhere else or from national resistance in certain countries, but it's important to understand that we have to put the working class in a national and international context, that we view the struggle as constant, that we do not accept the artificial separation of economic struggle versus political struggle, struggles for reform versus struggles for revolution. That everything that it's possible to get, workers fight for and we have to accept that and we have to find out why workers fight for one thing and not for the other.

Very often, workers make a lot of decisions that people don't hear about, or only hear about indirectly.

Before Chrysler bought American Motors, there was a possibility of the big-Jeep plant in Toledo being shut down. All of a sudden, Jeeps began to come off the line with doors welded shut, with paint scratched, etc. That's a kind of vote. Who made the decision? Well, American Motors backed off, because it's the sort of thing you can't air in public. The customers will say they don't care if it's worker sabotage or company mismanagement, they're not buying that car.

if on the other hand, as a vanguardist or sectarian, you always talk about a revolutionary potential and ignore that, then you're not talking seriously about a real revolutionary potential in a real society with a real working class with all its contradictions.

There's a very interesting phrase in Marx's German Ideology. He says a revolution is necessary, not simply because you can't overthrow bourgeois society in any other way, but because without it, you cannot transform human beings to create the kind of society that a future society can be. You do not create Communists and then make a revolution. You make the revolution and that, in his phrase, gets rid of all the crap of centuries. And short of the revolution, you can't get rid of that crap and that must be part of one's awareness of the nature of shop floor struggles.

The traditional question is reform versus revolution, and it's usually presented as a dichotomy. There are those who want to reform capitalism and those who want to overthrow it, as if there's nothing in between. What workers get in their struggles are essentially reforms. They continually transform capitalist society, they create new institutions, they fight for the right to vote, they fight for reforms like Social Security and unemployment compensation. I submit that in reforming the society in which they live, they create the basis to overthrow it. If you haven't won any victories or had any defeats in the constant struggle of trying to improve your life by a nickel an hour or a better pension or by health insurance, then you don't have the capacity to overthrow this society and create another one. But so long as that struggle on the shop floor is continuous, is permanent, then the potential for a revolutionary solution is always there.

And it doesn't consist of waiting around until we convince 51% of the population of the necessity of a socialist society in the United States. It consists of people who are concerned with that, who want to transform society looking at workers objectively and honestly and trying, not so much to teach workers as to learn from them. It is necessary to probe and uncover workers' activities, to report them and to learn from them. As an example, in the early days of the CIO the radicals had the idea that the more conservative workers wanted overtime and the more militant workers did not want overtime. The fundamental reality was very different—what workers wanted was the right to decide. That is, in the old-fashioned phrase, they wanted workers control of overtime.

Now, of course, the union has really turned that over to management because what you have, at least in the auto industry, is compulsory overtime, with certain very modest restrictions.

In one of the major negotiations with the Big Three in auto the union entered the negotiations with a set of demands. It was one of those times when there was a clear rank and file upsurge. The union leadership was neglecting the hostility among rank and file workers to compulsory overtime—ten hours a day, six days a week forever. That destroys you as a physical human being: it destroys your family life. The union had to add that to its demands and they won a great victory, which was that if you worked a full two weeks, you could refuse the second Saturday. As it turned out the victory of voluntary overtime became management's answer to the problem of chronic absenteeism— if you work overtime, you're likely to take Monday off, that is, substitute a time-and-a-half day for a straight time day. So, what the union won was to take a minor victory and to turn it into a major new instrument of control for management.

There's another kind of example. Back in the early days of the UAW, the key plants were

god this foreman did me in and tomorrow we're going out. There's another element which relates to the reality of parliamentary democracy—you only have to look back a short way to the US presidential election to see how this works—and that is that a majority of autoworkers didn't vote in the referendum. So the vote was a two to one vote of those who voted, and many more struck than voted.

How do you deal with this? Workers say one thing and do another. It seems to me that that is an element which is crucial to understanding working class activity. You can turn it any way you want. You can say workers are stupid, they can't understand that what they are doing is contradictory. On the other hand, if you believe in the revolutionary potential of the working class, then the problem is to understand how these contradictions appear. And more than that, to understand that contradiction is an essential element, not just of bourgeois society as a whole, but of the working class which embodies in itself the contradictions of bourgeois society.

To visualize it is fairly simple: you're not voting on the shop floor you get this postcard, you're sitting at the kitchen table, you're listening to the radio news with the casualty reports from Europe and the Pacific and you think, yes, we really should have a no-strike pledge, we've got to support our boys. Then you go to work the next day and your machine breaks down and the foreman says, "Don't stand around, grab a broom and sweep up," and you tell him to go to hell because it's not your job and the foreman says he's going to give you time off and the next thing you know, the department walks out.

There's no contradiction in the worker's mind. Workers don't cause strikes: bosses cause strikes. If you want to end strikes, get the bosses to behave. It's not simply self-justifying reality. Workers in general don't want to strike—they can't afford to lose time. Yet they find themselves compelled, in order to be human beings, to behave as human beings, to carry on actions on the shop floor. Which in fact means that life on the shop floor, or the office floor, or the mine shaft, or anywhere else, is a constant struggle.

Conflict and struggle is the reality and it takes all sorts of forms. Some you might approve of, some you might not, but if you're trying to understand the reality, the reality is: work stinks, people fight against it. If they do it in nice ways like organizing a wildcat strike, that's good. But there are ways which are not so good—absenteeism, sabotage, getting drunk in order to forget the past week and hopefully the coming week, taking drugs, changing jobs—there's a whole panorama, all of which is an attack on work in capitalist society, an attack on the reality of capitalist control of that work.

The reality is that in a war which was probably the most popular war that America took part in, workers in fact, if not in their minds or in theory, said that given the choice between supporting the war or supporting our interests and class struggle, we take class struggle.

The importance of this example is the historical accident of having the postcard ballot, the membership referendum, but the reality happens often enough. In the Vietnam war, for example, the picture most people have is of middle-class radicals, the new left, fighting against the war and the hard-hats supporting it and beating up the anti-war students. Yet, more war production was stopped by workers carrying on ordinary strikes in the course of their lives in the plants, than by the whole antiwar movement put together.

There were strikes at Olin-Matheson, which made a difference on the Missouri Pacific railroad —

weeks and the shortage of planes and war material reached the point where the Johnson government was getting ready to take over the plants to stop the strikes.

It was not because the workers were anti-war, some probably were, some weren't. What the workers were doing was trying to live as human beings in the process of production. I think the important thing to understand about working class struggle is: (1) it is an inherent necessity and takes place all the time whether or not you like the forms it takes, and (2) the bourgeoisie is constantly aware of that revolutionary reality or potential or possibility and goes to great lengths to protect against it, to derail it and to prevent it.

In fact, if you want to get a radical perspective on the American working class, I recommend you do not read the left press, read the Wall Street Journal and Fortune. They're serious about that stuff: they have to deal with it. They go to all kinds of lengths, when necessary and when they can't control what workers are doing, to reincorporate workers into the system of production. A few years ago it was called job enrichment—let the workers think they have a say in what they're doing. That didn't work too well, so now there's Quality of Work Life—you work out a different agreement with unions so they're no longer antagonists, you've got to join together to keep discipline on the shop floor.

One of the problems is, that the general analysis tends to lead in the hands of most analysts or historians or sociologists or radicals, to saying that that's interesting, workers are militant but what does it all mean? They support capitalism, they're racist, they're sexist, they're divided by skill: skilled workers against unskilled, older workers against younger. That's part of the reality. As long as capitalism exists, that's an inevitable part of the reality, unless one believes you can go around and convince everybody with some abstract definition of solidarity to all become good socialists together and we take over the society.

It doesn't work that way. Marx said that the ruling ideology in any society is the ideology of the ruling class. If you can change that before the revolution, you don't need a revolution. You can just go around and convince everyone that if that ideology is wrong, then accept your ideology. That, I submit, is the concept at the heart of the vanguard party. The party embodies the right ideology and if you have enough people following you, you can do whatever you want. You can make the revolution, or you make what amounts to a counter-revolution and introduce totalitarian state capitalism, as in Eastern Europe.

How does one lead to the other? How do you take something like wildcat strikes, which have no visible leadership above the local union level, and transform that into some kind of revolutionary potential, despite the divisions, the contradictions, etc.? It seems to me, not so much as a matter of argument, but as a matter of method, it's important to look to the highest points that the working class reached internationally in the post-WWII world.

In 1956 in Hungary, a country that had been dominated by a totalitarian dictatorship for ten years, where all means of education and information were controlled by the state, the Communist Party, where there were no independent organizations of the working class, there was only the official trade unions and the official Party, period.

In October of 1956 there was a massive demonstration organized by dissident students in support of developments in Poland, where the Poles were resisting attempts by the Soviets to further dominate Polish society. The government was mixed in its reaction: it permitted the demonstration and then it didn't permit it. Finally, the demonstrators demanded that their demands—which consisted of a whole range of things, including

government radio. The government didn't respond. The demonstration took place at a radio station, in another part of Budapest. It was late in the day and people had gathered. They joined the demonstration. When they reached the square in front of the station, the police opened fire, and the Hungarian revolution had begun.

There was some street fighting. There were signs that the Hungarian army was not going to support the government. The civil police either melted away or joined the demonstrators or turned their arms over to the demonstrators.

Then, within 24 hours, the workers of Budapest took control of factories, offices—the means of production—and created workers' councils to run them. Within 48 hours, it had spread across all of Hungary. It in fact toppled the Communist Party, which had to be reorganized under another name with a figurehead government under Imre Nagy put in place. After a couple of weeks, the revolution was crushed, not by any power within Hungary, but by an invasion of Russian tanks.

In the spring of 1968, there were massive student demonstrations in Paris, with street fighting that lasted for a couple of weeks. Seemingly unconnected with that, there was a sit-in at a small aircraft factory in Nantes, in which the workers imprisoned the plant management. And then, the same thing that had happened in Hungary, happened in France. Within 48 hours, ten million workers had occupied the factories. It didn't go as far as the Hungarian revolution, although it wasn't defeated and it came within a hair's breadth of toppling the DeGaulle government. In hindsight, the difference seems to be that there weren't the visible cracks in the military structure that appeared in Hungary, which allowed workers to go further than they might otherwise have gone.

The Hungarian revolution, the French revolt, Solidarity in 1980 in Poland, the Czechoslovakian revolt in 1968, are absolutely unintelligible in any kind of traditional radical or liberal or conservative sociological and political framework. What are all the arguments? You can't make a revolution without a party and a press. You can't make a revolution unless you have the possibility of discussing with each other—program. You can't make the revolution unless there's a depression—there was no depression in France, there was full employment. In other words, all of the criteria that seem to be an essential part of the radical mentality even short of a vanguard party point of view, seem to be absent.

How could that happen? How could workers who couldn't even talk to each other beyond the next machine for ten years in Hungary, in 48 hours take over the entire productive plant of the country? How could French workers do the same thing? (Again the role of the CP was interesting. They tried desperately to get the workers out of the plants and into traditional strike situation, walking up and down with picket signs. Next to DeGaulle, the CP was probably the most counterrevolutionary force in France.)

I submit that you can't understand one without the other. If you do not have constant struggle on the shop floor, with all its contradictions, if all you have is peace and quiet those struggles don't mean anything, you can't have a Hungarian revolution, you can't have a French revolt, and you can't have the equivalent in the United States. Marx said many years ago that you cannot interpret strikes in terms of how little or how much they economically, that there is a political character to them. They are resistance to life in a society. You win some, you lose some and you learn from all of them. In capitalism, you win more than you lose. Occasionally, you have great victories, more often you have great defeats. But if you haven't done that for one or two generations, then it's idiotic to talk about a revolutionary