

Notes on Class Struggle Unionism under Biden

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Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden meets with union leaders outside at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Harrisburg, Pa., Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

This expands my remarks in a panel with Joe Burns, Donna Murch, and Paul Kirk-Davidoff, organized by Tempest, about class struggle unionism under Biden. Opening and closing remarks of the session on May 30, 2021 were recorded.

The history of our tendency (I say “our” because I identify Tempest as part of that family tree) offers powerful insights about this moment. In my remarks I look back at the tradition of the Third Camp, articulated in publications of and about the Workers Party (WP) and Independent Socialist League (ISL), as well as my involvement in Berkeley with the Independent Socialist Club (ISC) and the International Socialists when it first formed.

In jettisoning Trotsky’s theory of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state, and theorizing instead that Communist regimes represented a historically new social formation, the ISL explored questions about this new social formation that Trotskyists ignored, for example how the ruling class reproduced itself under conditions of nationalized property. The ISL restored and reinvigorated Marx’s theoretical frame that *capitalism is a social system*. I think this conceptual frame underlies all five volumes of Draper’s series “Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution” but Volume II, “The Politics of Social Classes,” best clarifies how understanding the state and the economy demands close analysis of social relations.

The concept of capitalism as a social system, inclusive of economic, political, and social relations, captures the current understanding of “racialized capitalism”: Social oppression has been “baked in” to capitalism’s development, and there is no turning back the clock to undo history. Understanding capitalism as a social system centers struggles for freedom, equality, and justice in our political interventions and principles, including work in unions. Thus our commitment to human emancipation as both process and product of the fight for “socialism from below” doesn’t have to be injected into union activity if we look closely at life at the workplace. Because social oppression is embedded in capitalism, all of its forms, including patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, ableism, configure the workplace and work. Social oppression is not external to work and workers’ organization, so struggles for social justice need not be imported as issues. We need only scrutinize manifestations already present and use these insights in organizing. I suggest formulating the dialectical relationship between working class agency and democracy, an idea in the Tempest principles, thus: *The fight for the fullest democracy, on the job and in the society, informs working class self-activity, and vice-versa.*

Industrialization and the Working Class: Who Counts?

I think Hal Draper’s explanation, in a 1970 class series, conducted in response to debates in the IS about activity in the unions, captures well what class struggle union work means . In Part I of “Marxism and the Trade Unions ” Draper observes

Marxism was and is the only kind of socialism that establishes an integral link between socialism and the struggle for social revolution and trade unionism..which sees the trade union movement as a revolutionary fact, even if and when the trade unions themselves are not revolutionary...It is revolutionaries whose agitation makes reform possible because the reformists give up. Time and again, class collaborationist unions give up the struggle for “more” and settle for less, in order to keep the boss in business, or agree, as in World War II, to no-strike pledges. Only a Marxist revolutionary can mean it consistently.

The struggle for more becomes revolutionary when it goes beyond the capabilities of the system to provide that “more.” That is the link between the Marxist fight for reforms and the revolutionary perspective. It depends on the root idea that the economic problems of the system cannot be solved by the system.. the struggle becomes, in the end, a revolutionary struggle. In the end; but not in the beginning.

In Part II, “Working class lifestyle and the radical sect,” Draper addresses the social and political challenges of industrializing, having students or those with the student “lifestyle” take jobs in unions to do political work. Drawing on the WP and ISL experiences, Draper, as usual, makes his points sharply, clarifying ideas in the question/answer period along with a contribution from Anne Draper. Two points especially relevant to current debates are what I would describe as the Drapers’ essentially uncritical view of industrialization *per se* and his defense of revolutionary socialists working as paid organizers for unions, which Anne reinforced. But a significant flaw in Hal’s presentation was his overview of women workers, which showed unexamined patriarchal assumptions about work and workers, contradicted by historical evidence as well as conditions of the day:

There is, in the working class, something equivalent to the temporary state of being a student. In the past, it has always been true that women workers, especially young

women workers in offices, have been hard to organize because they viewed their jobs as temporary, a situation they pass through on the way to getting married. Whereas the worker who is working in a factory or the like looks upon the union in a totally different way. The union means something different to him than it means to those women workers, or to a certain sector of young workers today who may work for six months and then disappear for a while.

In fact, historically married Black women often worked outside the home whenever they could find paid labor. Despite their wishes, female teachers were forced to quit their jobs when they married, starting with creation of mass public education at the turn of the 20th century until the 1950s. Women worked in the fields organized by the United Farm Workers. And the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the union for which Anne Draper was an organizer, was involved in the unionization campaign and boycott at the Farah clothing company in the early 1970s in Texas, a campaign driven predominantly by Hispanic women.

In contrast to Drapers' assessment of industrialization, Phyllis and Julie Jacobson, looking back on the political past they shared in the WP and ISL, [i] viewed the WP's industrialization strategy more critically, relating its problems to the world view of the sect.

There were some things we did as the Workers Party which we never would have done operating as a league. For example, in the early years we had a policy of sending our members, mostly young people, into industry. And it was wrong, because a lot of people weren't psychologically prepared for it.

People were talked into leaving white collar jobs, or college, to take jobs in shops.... One of the aims of the industrialization policy was to catch up with what the Communist Party had done much earlier. After all, the CP had been very successful in sending their people into the factories and helping to organize the CIO. We also told people that they had to leave New York and go to Cleveland, or Detroit, or Buffalo, which is what people did."[ii]

Draper's intervention about Marxists in the unions responded to debates in the IS in the 1970s about industrialization, the "turn to the working class." During this time, the IS encouraged members who were in white collar unions, some with substantial reform caucuses led by socialists, to leave these jobs and take work in manufacturing, communications, and transportation. Though city teachers organized militant struggles for collective bargaining in the 1960s, frequently conducting illegal strikes that led to jailings, teachers unions (and other unionized occupations in which women dominated, like nursing and social work, often in the public sector) weren't seen as valuable sites of struggle for revolutionary socialists. In fact, entering these occupations to organize could have cushioned an adjustment from the "student lifestyle" to the life of work, giving young members valuable union experience from which the Independent Socialist tendency and the labor movement could have benefited. And of course, unbeknownst to those advocating a wholesale shift to the Midwest was how this strategy would be affected by dramatic alterations in work globally, including outsourcing, concessions, and massive job loss. The IS industrialization strategy, based on a flawed assessment of the period and of what constitutes the working class, echoed the WP's error, made in the expectation of a revolutionary upsurge following World War 2, as well as race and gender blinders about who and what constituted the working class and work.

This history suggests the need for a different approach when circumstances are ripe for socialists to

be encouraged to find work that allows them to help build unions and be involved in workplace struggles. That process requires learning from our success and defeats; alertness to the ways social oppression is reflected in and reinforced by the way work is organized; as well as cultural and organizational norms of unions. “Fit” is essential as we support people to industrialize, with an understanding that work and the working class include public employment as well as cultural and knowledge work in the private sector. Moreover, when we value “democracy from below” and a “rank and file strategy,” organizing demands respect for the work’s value, one’s peers, and skills and knowledge needed to do the job well.

The “more” we demand as socialists in unions must include high quality services when we enter public employment. Often plans to send people into teachers unions for strategic reasons contain no explicit caveats about teachers being well-prepared for the jobs they will take. Yet, the most readily available jobs are in settings serving low-income communities of color, in schools that are “hard to staff” – meaning they can’t hold teachers – because the institutions are dysfunctional and the work exceptionally demanding. Taking seriously a union’s obligation to defend workers’ rights on the job means upholding high entry standards, no less for socialists than for others. Centering the needs of people we serve highlights policies and structures configured by injustice and inequality, products of social oppression.

Biden and the Challenges We Face

Having noted how incorrect assessments of the period led to errors in strategy, I’ll suggest a few ideas rather than make predictions. In education it seems we face the iteration of a new neoliberal project. Rhetoric (or more aptly, propaganda) about Biden being the most progressive President in modern history is based mostly on analysis unsupported by close attention to policy specifics, as well as failure to locate Biden’s policies in what has occurred in capitalism’s use of information technology, to alter work and social policy, globally, in particular for “development” in the global South.

For example, liberal accolades about Biden’s willingness to take on “big tech” are less persuasive when located in the World Bank’s 2021 World Development Report (WDR), “Data for Better Lives.” The report insists data and information technologies must be used for “better public policies, program design and service delivery, in addition to improved market efficiency and job creation through more private sector growth” (Concept Note, p. 1). Foreshadowing Biden’s initiatives, the WDR warns about “the accumulation of data by one actor, and the information asymmetries that this creates for other actors” which “leads to a concentration of power” economic and political (p. 5). Socialists should be pushing unions to scrutinize how Biden’s policies compare to the World Bank’s plan, publicizing and opposing measures that intensify privatization through public/private partnerships, especially through use of information technology to alter work and social surveillance. Few unions are ready to ask these questions and time is running out. More than a decade ago British Marxist Ursula Huws, who advised UK unions about how information technology was transforming work and supply chains, observed that by the time UK unions realized what was happening with outsourcing, all they could negotiate was terms of defeat. We see the same phenomenon in U.S. unions and Biden. Mesmerized by possibilities the PRO act will solve labor’s organizing failures, unions and socialist supporters, perhaps DSA most importantly, are missing the opportunity to intervene on policy specifics that are configuring the future of unions.

As Draper explained, class struggle unionism means fighting for “more” when we are told that is not possible. I add to Draper’s explanation of what distinguishes our work as revolutionary socialists that fighting for “more” includes demands that defend equality and justice for all workers. No one can predict how or when we will see a resurgence of workers’ self-activity or emergence of powerful social movements demanding human liberation. The only verity is they will occur.

[i] Worcester, Kent. "Third Camp Politics: An Interview with Phyllis and Julius Jacobson." *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate* 18.1 (2014). Reprinted in *New Politics*.