

What Happened to the American Working Class?

Tuesday 3 July 2012, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2010).

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The collapse of the financial sector of the United States detonated the current global economic crisis, and its auto industry was soon crumbling as well. [1] Yet, though it all began here, American labor unions and workers have been slow to respond and their response has been weak. Millions of workers in hundreds of French cities have struck and demonstrated repeatedly against their government and against the banks and corporations throughout the spring of 2009, and the story was similar in Italy and Greece. Tens of thousands also protested the economic crisis in Iceland and Latvia. Throughout China there have been thousands of protests against layoffs, some of them violent. Only in the United States, the center of the storm, has the working class shown almost no signs of fight.

With the exception of a few street demonstrations in New York and San Francisco, some symbolic protests by a handful of rank-and-file auto workers, a small heroic strike and occupation by 300 Republic Window workers in Chicago, and a tour by the United Steel Workers calling for the creation of industrial jobs in Canada and the United States, the American working class took virtually no action in its own defense. Though unemployment reached 8.5 percent and over 13.2 million people were without jobs, virtually no strikes or work stoppages of any significant size were reported in the United States in the spring of 2009. [2] As the crisis unfolded in late 2008 and early 2009, many wondered, what had happened to the American working class?

Steven Greenhouse, labor writer for *The New York Times*, surveyed a group of academics, union officials and labor activists who suggested that the reasons for the passivity of the U.S. working class were the American ethos of individualism, the workers' self-conception as part of the middle class, and the general weakness of the labor unions. [3] While there is some truth in all of those, the

explanation has to be sought in deeper structural changes in American capitalism and the working class itself as seen in historical perspective.

The 1930s Upheaval

While the great labor upheaval of the 1930s has now almost faded from living memory, still the successes and failures of those events some seventy years ago continue to influence the course of contemporary developments. The great strikes of 1934 in San Francisco, Toledo, and Minneapolis, the sit-down strikes of 1936-1938 in rubber and auto, and the entire labor rebellion of that period were led on the ground by and large by labor leftists, Communists, Socialists, Trotskyists and others. The revolutionary left provided not only strategic leadership for the large scale struggles, but also the local militants who had established relationships in workplace and communities. [4]

Strategically important to the industrial union movement as it developed and spread were the Communists who had established strong relationships with small groups of African-American workers. With African Americans living and working in cities throughout the North since the Great Migration of World War I, the left-black alliance proved key to the victories in the industrial unions. The Communists' commitment to advancing blacks' civil and political rights, as well as the their social acceptance of African Americans within the Party and its various party and non-party organizations, established a model for the CIO, though it was only unevenly adopted within the new labor congress. [5]

The leftist organizers began in the early 1930s with three goals: the organization of industrial unions, the building of a working class political party, and the establishment of socialism in America. [6] Those goals would not be realized because of rival leaderships in the working class, because of the role of the Democratic Party and Roosevelt, and because of the growing power of state institutions over labor. We should not forget that during the heyday of CIO organizing, not only left political parties, but also forces as distinct as the Catholic Church, the Democratic Party, and even Ku Klux Klan members could be found involved in various organizing efforts. The American working class has never been homogenous, and not all workers followed the most radical leaders. But what distinguished the CIO era was the brief period of left leadership in the early 1930s, gradually ceding control to bureaucratic and business union forces.

John L. Lewis, the conservative leader of the United Mine Workers union, seeing the beginning of a great labor movement in the making, ran to put himself at the head of it. Lewis led the fight to separate from the AFL, established the CIO, and hired leftists to work for it as organizers. Lewis shared the leftist organizers' desire for industrial unions, but he had much less interest in building a working class political party and no desire whatsoever to create a socialist America. Rather he hoped to see the CIO transformed into a business union different from the AFL principally in its scale and scope. [7]

Meanwhile, Senator Robert F. Wagner, Democrat, and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins from New York crafted the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which for the first time legalized labor unions and also brought their activities under clearly defined government procedures and institutions. The new state structures and regulations tended to strengthen the emerging labor bureaucracy which was the sole collective bargaining agent in each workplace. [8] The Fair Labor Standards, Act which provided for a minimum wage and maximum workweek, also formed part of the New Deal labor legislation.

While Lewis worked to tame the new unions' workers in their relations with the employers, Roosevelt succeeded in domesticating them politically, drawing them into the Democratic Party.

With his New Deal social programs, Roosevelt succeeded in capturing the support of the Socialists and Communists as well as the unions of the old AFL and the new CIO. The Communist Party, then in its Popular Front phase, turned from militant opposition to Roosevelt to tacit support. While the Communist Party put up its own candidates in the elections, it threw its political weight behind Roosevelt and the Democrats. By the late 1930s the Communists were dissolving their workplace cell structure and instructing their members to participate in Democratic Party organizations. Given their influential labor organization and their close ties to black activists, the Communists' support for FDR and the Democrats played an important role in redirecting the radical labor movement back into traditional capitalist politics.

With the CIO Political Action Committee leading the way in the 1936 election, the unions entered the New Deal coalition and with that gave up their political independence. The Roosevelt administration then in effect negotiated between capital and labor a new social pact based fundamentally on the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), Fair Labor Standards Act, and Social Security. While about a third of American workers, particularly industrial workers, saw dramatic improvement in their lives, many other working people did not fully share the benefits of the reforms. The New Deal pact would prove to be a durable social contract that would last into the 1970s, cementing the relationship between capital and labor, between the bourgeoisie and society at large.

Similarly, Roosevelt's success, with the help of the Communist Party, in capturing the new workers' movement, represented a key turning point in modern American history. With labor and the left supporting Roosevelt, the possibility of building a working class political party became virtually impossible. Without their own party, American workers would find it difficult to chart their own course and to learn from their own mistakes. That fundamental failure of the 1930s means that today, 70 some years later, workers still have no political vehicle for their aspirations. [9]

Class Solidarity, Unity and Consciousness?

The period from 1933 to 1939 represented the high point of working class militancy and organization in the history of the American labor movement. The Communist Party and other left groups leading sections of the working class achieved a real breakthrough in terms of workers' organization, combativeness, and class consciousness. Yet the initial breakthrough did not lead on either to the completion of the process of unionization, nor to the building of a labor party, and certainly not to a struggle for socialism.

Many factors impeded the realization of working class unity: American individualism, the acquisitive culture, ethnic divisions, the sense of craft pride or industrial identity to the exclusion of class identity, the divisions between the AFL and the CIO, the still subordinate role of women, the failure of the unions to reach many industries and workers, and the fact that the South had not yet been organized. Yet the greatest barrier to class solidarity and class consciousness remained race. The system of racial segregation in both South and North, the deep penetration into the society and popular consciousness of Social Darwinism and pseudo-scientific racism together with simple race hatred, and, above all, white workers' sense of race privilege and the unwillingness of many to work with blacks as well as the AFL's historic practice of excluding them from the craft unions, acted as powerful barriers to solidarity. [10]

The CIO began in some places to overcome those barriers, especially where the Communist Party and its black allies had formed the core of an interracial working class movement, but the process never became complete, never became common to the working class as a whole. The American working class never succeeded in completing the tasks on the agenda in the 1930s because white

workers, except in specific industries and regions during brief periods of union upheaval and organization, could not imagine a common interracial working class project to remake the nation together for the benefit of all. Both the idea of interracial cooperation and the goal of common benefit for all represented a step beyond the existing consciousness of white workers at that time, a step they could not take. That such a step was possible is shown by those areas where black and white unity was achieved under the Communist-black leadership in the 1930s. Race remained the American working class's Achilles heel and white racism the fundamental impediment to social progress.

The New Unions Tamed

The new unions came out of the 1930s as powerful organizations made up of militant, battle-tested workers, many with radical leaders in leftwing parties. World War II transformed the unions as both the AFL and the new CIO entered into partnership with the government and the employers to win the war. Most labor officials worked to subordinate the union to the goals of government and the demands of the employers. The Communists, supporters of the Allies, became the most ardent enforcers of the wartime no-strike pledge.

With the war over, working class demands for higher pay led to strikes throughout industry in 1946, the largest in the nation's history. The 1946 strike wave, however, failed to rekindle the militant labor movement of the 1930s, in part because unions failed to convey the sense that they were fighting for all working people. Beginning in the late 1940s unions began for the first time to fight for pensions and health and welfare plans for their members. The perception developed that union workers were a privileged section of the working class. The privileges and the perception would over the following decades undermine the unions' ability to claim to speak for all working class and poor people.

The turning point for the radical labor movement that had arisen in the 1930s came with the failure of Operation Dixie, the campaign to organize workers in the South. The CIO's right wing led the campaign, excluded left wing organizers, declined to reach out to black workers, and hesitated to tackle the racist character of the Democratic Party in the South. The CIO leadership even attempted to appeal to the race prejudice of white workers in order to get them to sign up with the new unions. But, organized on that basis, Operation Dixie proved an utter failure, with fewer unionized workers in the South at the end of the 1940s than there had been at the beginning. The failure of Operation Dixie not only retarded social progress in the South and stopped the forward motion of the labor movement, it also established the basis for a white power reaction first in the form of the Dixiecrats (1948), later in the George Wallace Campaign (1968), and finally in Nixon's strategy of winning Southern white voters to the Republican Party. [[11](#)]

The opening of the Cold War in the late 1940s led to the anti-Communist crusade, what came to be called, after Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthyism involved the purging of many Communists and other radicals from the unions and from the workplace. The CIO's rightwing not only knuckled under to anti-Communist politicians, but itself also joined in the frenzied attack on the reds. The CIO's rightwing and the AFL together joined, for example, in the dismantling of the United Electrical Workers (UE), some of its members going to a new anti-Communist CIO union, the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE-CIO) or to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW-AFL). Thus the Communist Party's dream of being incorporated into the nascent labor bureaucracy, failed to materialize, though in a few CIO and AFL unions Communists still held on to leadership posts, and the dwindling numbers of Communists remained active in the unions.

By 1955, when the AFL and the CIO merged, American unions had become thoroughly institutionalized in their relationship to both government and the employers. The union officialdom had become a union bureaucracy, a caste apart with its own perks and privileges, its rising salaries and status, and its own ideology, at best an arbiter between employers and workers, at worst the employers' enforcer. Whether one looked at George Meaney and the AFL-CIO, Walter Reuther and the United Auto Workers, or Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters, one encountered variations on the theme. [12] With the entrenchment of this powerful labor bureaucracy, the remnants of the working class activist networks in the unions found their latitude of action reduced, their power limited. The unions the workers had built slipped out of their hands. [13]

During the period from roughly 1950 to 1980, collective bargaining became largely ritualized as employers were often willing to trade higher wages and increased benefits for guarantees of labor peace and management's increasingly free hand on the shop floor. The labor bureaucracy's unquestioned and unquestioning support for the Democratic Party led inevitably to the depoliticization of the unions. The domestication of the labor union officialdom and the institutionalization of labor relations, together with the passage of time and the passing of the "greatest generation" in labor, resulted in the gradual stifling of the layer of working class activists whose shop floor organization in the workplace had not only been the source of the union's power but also represented the social milieu crucial to nurturing a revolutionary socialist left. Without its leftist yeast, the working class loaf fell flat. With its social environment dying, the left also declined. [14]

The Rank-and-File Rebellion of the 1970s

The rise of the Civil Rights movement beginning in the late 1950s, followed by the growth of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the late 1960s, was paralleled by a growth in a counterculture critical of capitalist consumerism, racism, and war, and a new era of labor revolt which began in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s. César Chávez organized the United Farm Workers in California, teachers organized into the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, while public employees joined the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Authorities, all of these often accompanied by political struggles for the right to organize and by strikes to achieve recognition and first contracts.

At the same time movements for union democracy arose, attempting to take the unions back from gangsters, or conservative, do-nothing bureaucrats, or racist union machines: Miners for Democracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, Steelworker Fightback and the Ed Sadlowski campaign for Steelworkers president, and the Dodge Revolutionary Union (DRM) movement (and other such black power movements) in the United Auto Workers union. Workers became more militant carrying out strikes for higher wages, for better conditions, or for greater workers' power in the workplace. In 1971 there were a remarkable 298 strikes in workplaces of more than 1,000 workers, involving a total of 2,516,000 workers that year. Hundreds of thousands of workers engaged in strikes, many of them wildcat strikes, against the Bell Telephone Company, the U.S. Post Office, trucking employers, and the auto companies. [15]

Several small socialist groups emerged rising out of the social movements, their activists converted into revolutionary party builders, and they participated in all of these movements, but in most cases their vanguardist approach — attempting to build their small groups at the expense of the movement — often proved a barrier to any meaningful synergy between the revolutionaries and the small, new layer of worker activists. [16] The decline of the social movements and the deep recessions of 1974-75 and 1979-80 ended that period of working class upheaval without a decisive victory for

rank-and-file workers anywhere except in the United Mine Workers. Despite these democratic movements and strikes, the unions in several industries — mining and trucking most notably — began to lose their dominant role in the core industries.

Deindustrialization and Restructuring

Already by the late 1960s, American corporations faced a profit squeeze exacerbated by growing foreign competition throughout the 1970s, above all from Germany and Japan. In response, U.S. employers initiated a policy that would come to be called “deindustrialization,” a series of shakeouts, particularly in the steel industry and to a lesser extent in auto. The steel companies closed or drastically down-sized older, less productive plants, particularly in the Great Lakes industrial region, while many other employers restructured, moving from the “rust belt” to the “sun belt,” setting up on green fields new plants filled with non-union workers.

The decline of industrial manufacturing particularly in the auto and steel industries in the Great Lakes industrial region that stretches from Duluth to Buffalo and includes Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, all linked together by a dense network of waterways, railroads, and highways, began to break the industrial links that had made that area for 50 years one of the greatest industrial centers on the planet. The unions’ power had been rooted in the social texture — the neighborhoods, schools, churches, bars, social clubs, and little league teams — of the descendants of the Eastern and Southern European immigrants who arrived at the opening of the century and of the offspring of African-Americans who had made the great migration from the plantations of the South.

All of that was ripped apart as employers began to move production to the West and to expand in the South, establishing more efficient greenfield plants in those areas leading to the rise of new urban centers such as San Jose, California, Houston, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia. The industrial developments were accompanied by the breakdown in the social fabric of those Northern cities where racial conflict and white flight had already in the late 1960s and early 1970s carried away much of the capital to the suburbs. The unions’ power had been rooted in people’s everyday existence, and that way of life had been based on work; when the work ended, so did the union, so did their community, and so their culture. No doubt this culture was often racist, parochial (literally and figuratively), patriarchal, and socially conservative, but it also maintained a kind of working class community solidarity against the employers.

Deindustrialization and the runaway to the South dealt a blow to those unions as they lost tens and then hundreds of thousands of members, breaking up social relationships, weakening workplace culture and organization, and often erasing the activist memory of the working class. However, because those industries had union contracts and a seniority-based layoff system, older workers tended to keep their jobs while young workers were laid off. In many plants during the period from the 1970s to the 2000s, the average age of the workforce rose into the 50s, and many workers, some who had lived through an earlier era of union activism, were nearing retirement and they kept often a low profile for fear of jeopardizing their pensions. African-American workers concentrated in Great Lakes region and in industries like steel and auto suffered disproportionately the loss of union jobs, though other black workers would be hired in non-union plants in the South.

Carter, Reagan and Neoliberalism

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government and the employers had also launched a new

political and industrial relations offensive that would later come to be known as neoliberalism. The result was the deterioration of the social compact negotiated by Roosevelt in the 1930s. Democrats and Republicans shared responsibility for the attack on workers. The change began under President Jimmy Carter who oversaw the Chrysler bailout which forced concessions on the United Auto Workers union that broke its big three pattern contract. Carter and Ted Kennedy also promoted deregulation of airlines and trucking with devastating results for unions in those industries. The Reagan government continued the push, advocating privatization, deregulation, open markets, and cuts in the social welfare budget. Reagan's crushing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers (PATCP) and the firing of all 13,000 unionized workers signaled the beginning of an onslaught against unions. Workers became more reluctant to strike as employers turned to "replacement workers," that is, scabs.

After the recession of 1979-1980, with employment shaky and jobs scarce, unions and workers grew more hesitant to strike. The number of strikes involving 1,000 or more workers fell from 298 strikes involving 2,516,000 workers in 1971, the highpoint, to just 145 strikes involving 729,000 workers in 1981. [17] Throughout this period, union density, the percentage of workers in unions, declined from 29.3 percent in 1964, to 19.1 percent in 1984, and then to only 13.6 percent in 2000. While the American working class faced the greatest employer assault since the 1930s, the union officialdom proved uninterested, unwilling, or unable to mount a resistance to the attack and instead bargained concessionary contracts that eventually undermined the industrial unions even further. [18] A few attempts by rank-and-file groups to build anti-concessions movements in the auto workers, the Teamsters and other unions could only slightly slow the unions' retreat. [19]

Restructuring and Offshoring

U.S. corporations continued to restructure, and in doing so they transformed the American working class. Restructuring was driven by the falling rate of profit in manufacturing, by foreign competition, by the past success and institutional gains of labor organization, by the labor upsurges of the 1970s, and by the opportunities offered by either relocating plants to other countries (offshoring) or the use of immigrant labor. Particular corporations opportunistically seized upon the various alternatives, though their individual corporate decisions emerged as patterns of industrial restructuring and working class reconfiguration. [20]

Employment in industrial manufacturing in the United States has declined over the last few decades both as a result of increased mechanization and of the movement of plants offshore. The two factors are, of course, interrelated: increasing competition from low-wage plants overseas leads U.S. corporations either to move their plants offshore to low-wage countries or forces them to introduce more mechanization to make their U.S. plants more productive and therefore more competitive. Both solutions tend to reduce the number of manufacturing workers.

Already in the 1950s and 1960s employers had begun to move their plants to the South, made attractive by right-to-work laws, infinitesimally low levels of unionization, and historically low wages, legacies of slavery and debt peonage. Clothing manufacturers first headed to the South and then moved still further south, right on out of the country to the Caribbean, some to Puerto Rico and some to the island nations. The creation by the U.S. and Mexican governments of the maquiladora program in 1965, through which U.S. plants were encouraged by tax abatements to move south of the border where they could pay wages about one-tenth those paid in the United States, led many manufacturers to move factories to Mexico. Televisions, auto parts, and medical supplies previously manufactured in the United States were now manufactured by American companies in the maquiladora zone. U.S. auto companies established auto assembly plants (not under the

maquiladora regime) in green field areas in northern Mexico. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among the U.S., Mexico, and Canada which took effect in 1994 both ratified the process of the redistribution of industrial manufacturing and encouraged it.

Since the 1980s, international production has been changed by the evolution of complex global manufacturing chains representing a “new wave” of globalization with quantitative and qualitative changes in international trade. Trade reduced U.S. manufacturing employment by 5.7 percent in 1990 alone. The decline of net exports between 2001 and 2006 cost the U.S. the equivalent of 1.8 million jobs. [21] The offshoring that began in Puerto Rico and Mexico soon moved to China, driven in part by Walmart and other U.S. retailers that began to produce commodities of virtually every sort, particularly in the southern province of Guangdong. The problem was not only that individual corporations moved their operations to foreign countries, but also that, in the larger picture, many things once produced in the United States were now as likely or more likely to be produced abroad.

The Decline of Manufacturing and the Industrial Worker

The key factor in the decline of the American working class as a social force has been above all the dramatic reduction in the size and weight of the industrial working class, that is, those workers engaged in manufacturing. The industrial working class includes construction workers, electric power and other utility workers, warehousemen, dockworkers, and truck drivers — altogether about 20 percent of the U.S. working class — but at its core is the factory worker. Factory workers, because they produce commodities for sale on the market and are concentrated in great numbers, have economic power unlike any other group of workers. While manufacturing has been declining as a percentage of all workers since the 1920s, it was the period of deindustrialization and run-away shops in the 1970s and 1980s that marked the most significant decline. The new balance between manufacturing, services, and public employment began to fundamentally reshape American capitalism and the working class.

The industrial worker core had been declining for some time, a result of both new technology and offshoring, and now its decline became precipitous. The statistics tell the story. In 1960 out of a total non-farm workforce of 54,274,000, there were 15,687,000 manufacturing workers representing 29 percent of the total. By 2009 out of a total of 134,333,000 non-farm workers, there were only 12,640,000 manufacturing, representing just 9 percent of the total. That is, manufacturing workers fell in the last fifty years from almost one-third of all workers to less than 10 percent. [22]

Manufacturing workers, especially those in heavy industries such as steel, auto, rubber, glass, and electrical industries, had been among the most highly unionized workers in the country. Such industrial workers often had higher wages than other workers such as those in professions like teaching, in health care, or in services. The industrial shakeouts and manufacturing relocation to the South or offshore devastated the unions, reducing union density and weakening union power. In 1973, 38.8 percent of manufacturing workers were in unions; by 1979 that percentage had fallen to 32.3; by 1990 it was only 20.6 percent; and by 1995 just 17.6 percent. [23]

Despite their deteriorating situation, some workers did resist the employer offensive, such as those at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota, Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union which struck in 1985-86, and those at the A.E. Staley corn processing plant in Decatur, Illinois in 1992. [24] However, they were the exception. The loss of industrial jobs, together with the government's anti-labor policies and the employer anti-union practices, dampened workers' willingness to fight, and strikes continued to decline, so that by 1991 there were only 40 strikes involving 392,000 workers and in 2001 only 29 strikes involving 99,000 workers. [25] The class

struggle seemed to be withering away.

Changes in the Labor Process

The nature of work in both industry and services changed in ways that affected unions and their power. The Taylor-Ford model of industrial production, in particular the mechanized assembly line, gave way to the Japanese model of lean production or what union critics called “management by stress.” Employers created “Total Quality Management” (TQM), “quality circles” and developed the “team concept,” forms of work organization which both challenged the union and reached down to the shop floor and into the workers’ consciousness. Management’s new commitment to the Japanese model led it to confront the unions, demanding an end to rigid job descriptions in preference to more flexible contracts where workers might be multi-tasked. The corporations reduced the union workforce by bringing in part-time and temporary contract workers. Much of this so-called new model of work organization was, however, simply a matter of speed up. [26]

At the same time, a whole series of transformations of the industrial workplace and its equipment through automation, from numerical control in the 1940s and 1950s to computerization and programmable logical controls in the 1980s and 1990s led to a dramatic increase in worker productivity that accompanied the decline in the industrial workforce, the weakening of its unions, and the stagnation of workers’ wages and benefits. [27]

The Increase in the Service Sector

Workers found other jobs, particularly in the private service sector. Once again, the statistics tell the story. In 1960 there were 26,476,000 service workers or 44 percent out of a total non-farm workforce of 54,274,000. By 2009 they numbered 91,666,000 or 68 percent of a total workforce of 134,333,000. That is, service workers went in half a century from making up less than half of the workforce to comprising more than two-thirds of the workforce. [28] The change was important.

Manufacturing workers had power because their labor produced the commodities sold in the marketplace produced the profit that enriched the corporations. The manufacturing workers’ power existed at the point of production, in the concentrated numbers of the huge workforce of the factory, and in the organization of that force in the union with its capacity to strike. Service workers might provide important services of various sorts, but their work was less central to the production of commodities and wealth in a capitalist society. While they had some power at something analogous to the point of production, the moment of the delivery of some services, their workplaces tended to be smaller, and their unions weaker. They were consequently historically less well organized than industrial workers, with unions often representing a much smaller percentage of the workforce. Such unions were historically weak and consequently service workers generally received lower wages and had fewer benefits.

Public Sector Workers

Public sector workers, expanding on the foundation laid by the strikes and organizing campaigns of the late 1960s and early 1970s, came to represent the most unionized sector of the working class. In 2008, while unions represented only 7.6 percent of workers in the private sector, they represented 36.8 percent of public sector workers. Public administration — government clerks, welfare workers, police officers and many others — numbered 8.0 million workers in 2006. Health and education

employed 19 million workers. In education there are over 4.0 million preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and secondary school teachers (excluding special education). Health care (not all public workers) was actually designated the largest industry in the country, providing 14 million jobs — 13.6 million jobs for wage and salary workers and about 438,000 jobs for the self-employed. [29]

Public sector workers have a weaker position in the economy than private sector workers for both economic and legal-political reasons. Public workers provide public services, often essential services, and consequently public workers often hesitate to strike. Medical workers reluctantly strike when they may affect patients; teachers may hesitate to affect children and parents; water workers recognize the essential nature of the service they provide to all. Moreover, an ethic of professionalism and sense of status may inhibit some public employees. And, if they do strike, the result is often that they save their employers' money.

In legal terms, most public employees do not enjoy the same basic labor union rights enjoyed by workers in the private sector, and may be denied the right to strike or have their collective bargaining rights limited. Since they form part of large government bureaucracies, bargaining for public sector workers tends to take place in the public arena and in the city, state, or federal legislatures, usually under the pressure of clients, public advocacy groups and political parties, as well as labor unions. Yet, because school districts and public hospitals often operate more like private employers, teachers and public sector hospital workers unions often behave more like private sector workers in terms of conflict and struggle. Public employee unions have opportunities and the necessity to form worker-client or union-community alliances which can give them a natural political platform that private sector workers do not have.

The largest unions in these sectors — AFSCME and AFGE, the AFT and NEA, and SEIU and the CNA, and the Teamsters and CWA — have been aggressively organizing public sector workers. These same unions have sometimes engaged in competition and hostile raiding of each other's members, with some of them, such as the Teamsters, attempting to recoup in the public sector members they have lost in the private sector. By the 1990s the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) had begun to make progress in the organization of janitors and hotel maids, though not rapidly enough to compensate for the decline of the labor movement as a whole.

The Demographic Transformation of the Working Class

While industry was declining and service and public employment expanding, important demographic developments also occurred. The American industrial working class had historically been made up mostly of white, European immigrants and African-American males, but in the late twentieth century greater numbers of women and new Latino, Asian, and African immigrants began to enter the workforce in ever greater numbers. Women's participation in the workforce rose from 34 percent in 1950 to 60 percent by 2000, and women held down more year-round full-time jobs. Their share of the total workforce rose from 30 percent in 1950 to 47 percent in 2000. Latinos, particularly Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented, also entered the workforce in large numbers, coming to comprise 13 percent of the U.S. workers by 2006 but also accounting for about 40 percent of all workers newly entering the workforce.

Today white workers make up less than 75 percent of the labor force, with Hispanics comprising 13 percent and African Americans 12 percent and Asians 5 percent. Almost one-third of the workforce today is non-white, while women make up almost half of all workers. [30] As women had fewer

children and the baby boom generation aged, the average age of the workforce has risen and that too became a factor in the workforce of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Older workers with more to lose might well find it harder to take militant action against their employers.

Such a profound demographic transformation of the working class could not help but present new challenges. The entrance of African-Americans into new professions, trades, and jobs with victories of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, accompanied by the rising numbers of women, and followed shortly after by Latino and Asian immigrants created tensions around culture and gender, and led to rifts and sometimes conflicts both in the workforce and in society. The labor movement, whose members and leaders had been overwhelmingly white men, often proved unequal to the challenge. The unions, which had resisted incorporating African-Americans into their memberships and into leadership positions, often proved equally inept at the organization of the rising numbers of women workers and Latino and Asian immigrants. All of this meant that the solidarity and unity so important to working class consciousness and action had to be reconstructed on the basis of new groups with new experiences and relationships.

The Ideological Transformation of the Working Class

When during the 1930s workers joined together to engage in collective action including strikes, the establishment of unions, and the negotiation of contracts, their sense of working class identity found expression in politics as well, in a few rare cases in independent working class candidates or local parties, but most often in the New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party. Many workers of the 1930s and early 1940s saw their union action and their Democratic votes as contributing to the improvement of workers' lives. The sense of working class political identity — if not exactly working class consciousness — became to some extent subsumed in World War II in a broader sense of national identity and patriotic feelings, though many still saw the unions and the Democrats as representing their interests as working people. The post-war prosperity and Cold War, however, reshaped American patriotism once again, now defining it as a struggle against the un-American, above all the Communist Party, radicals, and social critics.

The post-war period with its combination anti-Communism, the expansion of the consumer culture, and the emphasis on achieving a middle class lifestyle tended to erode the sense of working class identity. The big city ethnic working class began in the late 1940s to move to the suburbs where both their ethnic and their class identities often became dissolved and then submerged in the broader sense of middle class life represented by the acquisition of house, appliances, and automobile that constituted the center of the consumer's world. White flight from the cities in response to the black ghetto rebellions of the 1960s only accelerated the tendency for many workers to break with their urban past and relocate themselves physically and psychologically in the world of the homogenous white "middle class" suburbs. Some black workers were able to flee the city for black suburbs that offered them a segregated version of the suburban lifestyle.

For some workers, the move was not only out of the city, but also out of the Midwest or the Northeast as they headed for new job opportunities in the West and South. Wherever they went it was the freeway, the suburb, and the shopping mall that formed the geographical landmarks of the new consumer culture. For many, the credit card replaced the union card as their principal sense of identity as suburban consumers. For some, the American middle class individualist ethos replaced the ethnic and working class collective identity. Beginning in the 1970s as American workers' wages stagnated and family incomes proved inadequate to support that consumer lifestyle even with additional female wage earners, the great middle class — mostly now professional, technical, and service workers, though also including industrial workers — turned to the credit card to preserve

their standard of living and status. Debt — the house, the car, the weekly shopping trip — became a way of life.

White Backlash

Unions, meanwhile, their membership shrinking and those members often unwilling to strike, continued to lose economic power vis-à-vis the employer. Consequently, the labor movement also experienced the erosion of its political power as its members began to escape the unions' control, and wandered out of the Democratic Party, with white male union members in particular voting in large numbers for Republican candidates. One study found that in the period from the 1980s to the 2000s about 35 to 50 percent of union members voted for Republican presidential candidates, even though their unions with few exceptions supported Democrats. [\[31\]](#)

The unions' loss of influence over many of their members reflected the influence of a new more conservative news media, from right wing radio talk show hosts to television networks like CNN and FOX. Another factor was the growth of the conservative evangelical churches which often appealed to the white working class. The evangelicals emphasized a version of family values which elided into middle class consumer values, with personal salvation accompanying the acquisitive individualism. A set of conservative principles offered a moral compass for workers disoriented by rapidly changing cultural values, in particular the changing place of women in society. The right wing succeeded in some regions of the country in providing a constellation of issues — opposition to abortion and gay rights, opposition to gun control and Latino immigrants, and support for Christian patriarchal values — that provided a cultural-political alternative for some mostly white workers in the Lower Midwest, the South, and the Southwest. Fear and resentment of the other — independent women, gays, immigrants, and blacks — became the class consciousness of some white workers whose loss of status was even more painful to them than their loss of jobs, unions, and incomes.

By the twenty-first century, the working class in America was different from what it had been even thirty years ago, and certainly different from what it had been 50 or 100 years before. Perhaps the most important change is that industrial zones (the most important being the Great Lakes region) lost their specific gravity in the national economy while at the same time industrial production decreased and the number of industrial workers declined. The decline of the role of the industrial working in the working class, not only factory workers but also miners, utility workers, construction, and transportation workers, weakened the economic and social power of workers. The objective decline of the working class was also accompanied by a subjective decline. The working class at the same time faced the enormous task of assimilating the large numbers of African-Americans, women, and immigrants into the workplace and into union organizations, a task that was often mishandled by unions. Tremendous efforts were necessary to create a new multi-ethnic and multi-cultural union identity, something achieved by only some organizations. The government and employer attack on unions from the late 1970s into the 1990s proved devastating to union organization and to union consciousness. When the attack came on in full force in the 1980s, union leaders had proven lacking in foresight, in skills, and in courage. Workers had always been suspicious of the pork-choppers and the pie-cards, that is, of the full-time union officials, but now by and large they simply had no faith in the union. Workers' centers and other new forms of worker organization, while exciting experiments, remained marginal and small, and proved incapable of substituting for a real union movement. The organized American working class, the real militants, found themselves once again, as in the 1920s, reduced to a small band, deeply committed to the fight and waiting for an opening.

Which Way Forward?

History suggests that the current crisis will sooner or later set American workers in motion, though whether or not they will be able to reconstruct a labor movement remains to be seen. Today, there are only quite small militant minorities in labor and social movements, the sorts of activists who participate in the biannual Labor Notes Conferences and local Jobs With Justice chapters. Those hundreds of activists, mostly young people, people of color, and women, and many more like them in other unions, workers' centers, and social movements have the capacity to begin to rebuild the social movements and the workers' movement. Key to that will be the willingness to take up radical tactics: civil disobedience, direction action, sit-down strikes and occupations, militant confrontations with the employers and government.

Eventually the militant minorities will have to set millions in motion, in struggle against employers and government policies, if they are to have an impact. To do so, militant tactics will have to be combined with efforts to extend solidarity: among workers at different firms or government offices, between workers and communities, among working class movements and social movements, between the workers' movement and the movements of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other oppressed groups. The creation of a solidarity consciousness and the building of a social movement unionism will be essential to re-creating class consciousness. [\[32\]](#)

Even if millions go into motion, however, there is no guarantee that they will not be brought back under the control of the labor bureaucracy and the influence of the Democratic Party. If we in the labor movement are not to recapitulate some of the sorrier chapters in our recent past, we will need to fight to build actions that escape the unions' bureaucratic control and to struggle within the unions for an independent politics of the working class. Key to being able to carry out such a fight will be the existence of a socialist organization involved in those movements and providing leadership at every level.

Today the socialist left remains small, disunited, and often too little involved in the ongoing concerns and struggles of working people. The left must be known as the principled idealists, the strategic thinkers, and the wily tacticians of the movement. The sect and the self-proclaimed vanguard party prove to be obstacles both to left unity and to the reconstruction of a layer of working class militants. Yet at the same time, the left has to rebuild as a movement independent of the labor bureaucracy, the Democratic Party, the foundations, the NGOs, and the institutes. If we are to make progress though, the left will have to be able to overcome its division and create first projects for discussion and cooperation in action, and down the road a new socialist organization. Socialists, however, will prove successful only if we can project a vision of socialism that has freed itself of the history of Stalinism and Social Democracy, and drawing upon the experiences of the feminists, environmentalists, the GLBT movement, and people of color, can make clear that the essential element in socialism is democracy, the voice and vote of working people in every aspect of society, the economy, and political power.

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P.S.

* New Politics, Winter 2010 , Vol:XII-4 Whole #: 48:

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Footnotes

[1] Thanks to Lois Weiner, Charlie Post, Bob Park, Rusty Gilbert, Bruce Levine, and my wife Sherry Baron.

[2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, report of April 2009 on employment and of March 2009 on strikes.

[3] Steven Greenhouse, "In America, Labor Has An Unusually Long Fuse," The New York Times, April 5, 2009.

[4] I use the term "revolutionary left" advisedly, aware that the Socialist Party had a reformist character. that the Communist Party by mid-1935 had entered its Popular Front period during which revolutionary rhetoric, politics and actions were ruled off the agenda, and that the Trotskyists were too small to be considered a party. Nevertheless, still in the 1930s both some leaders and many members of all three organizations considered themselves revolutionaries, even if their conceptions of revolution were diverging in those years.

[5] Mike Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1997), Chapter 6 "The Depression / New Deal Era," pp. 176-230.

[6] David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982).

[7] Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times, 1977).

[8] Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1985]), Chapter 4, "The New Deal collective bargaining policy," pp. 99-147.

[9] Two books which look at the issue of a working class party are: Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972); Staughton Lynd, ed., "We Are All Leaders": *The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

[10] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[11] Goldfield, *The Color of Politics*, 240-249.

[12] Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meaney, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999); Jack Stieber, *Governing the UAW* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962); Ralph C. James and Estelle Dinerstein

James, Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1965).

[13] Charles Post and Kit Adam Wainer, "Socialist Organization Today," Second Edition (Detroit: Solidarity, 2005). This excellent pamphlet goes into more detail about the role of the Stalinist Communist Party in the Popular Front Period in derailing the labor movement.

[14] The analysis put forward here was developed by: C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); Sidney Lens, *Left, Right & Center: Conflicting Forces in American Labor* (Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1949); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meaney, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

[15] The developments of rank-and-file movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s are described and discussed in: Burton H. Hall, ed., *Autocracy and Insurgency in Organized Labor* (New York: New Politics, 1972); Paul J. Nyden, "Miners for Democracy; Struggle in the Coal Fields," Ph.D. Diss. (New York: Columbia University, 1974); James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race & Worker Insurgence: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Dan La Botz, *Rank-and-File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (New York: Verso, 1990); Aaron Brenner, "Rank-and-File Rebellion, 1966-1975" (Ph.D. Diss. New York: Columbia University, 1996).

[16] Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002); A Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: theory and Practice in France and in the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Milton Fisk, *Socialism From Below in the United States: The Origins of the International Socialist Organization* (Cleveland, Ohio: Hera Press, 1977). Fisk's book deals mostly with the International Socialists (IS) which succeeded more than others building rank-and-file groups in a few major unions.

[17] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947-2009," table.

[18] Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (New York: Verso, 1988).

[19] Labor Notes, both an educational center and a publication of the same name, played an important role in the 1980s in supporting auto workers and others who organized to fight concessions.

[20] Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Columbia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) shows how this worked in the textile industry.

[21] William Milberg and Deborah Schöller, "Globalization, Offshoring and Economic Insecurity in Industrialized Countries," Working Paper, U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at:

[22] Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Employment, Current Employment Statistics, databases, historical tables, online. I recognize that simply using the BLS categories for "manufacturing" and "private services" oversimplifies the picture somewhat, but at the same time it provides a useful baseline measure of the change

[23] Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 51.

[24] Peter Rachleff, *Hard Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); Steven K. Ashby and C.J. Hawking, *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). See also Sheila Cohen's account of this period in *Ramparts of Resistance: why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get it Back* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

[25] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947-2009," table.

[26] Mike Parker, *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to QWL* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 1986); Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 1988); Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, *Working Smart: A Union Guide to Participation Programs and Reengineering* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 1994).

[27] David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), best describe the process.

[28] Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Employment, Current Employment Statistics, databases, historical tables, online.

[29] BLS, "Health Care": <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/About/Career-Guide-to-Industries.htm>

[30] Mitra Toossi, "A century of change: the U.S. labor force, 1950-2050," *Monthly Labor Review*, May 2002, pp. 15-28. (Available online at BLS website.); "Women at Work: A Visual Essay," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 2003, pp. 46-50. (Available online at BLS website.); Rakesh Kochbar, "Latin Labor Report, 2006: Strong Gains in Employment," Pew Hispanic Center, September 27, 2006. (Available online at Pew Hispanic Center.).

[31] Chang, Tracy, "Union Members Who Vote for the Republicans," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Sheraton Boston and the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston, MA, Jul 31, 2008, p. 2.

[32] Kim Moody develops these concepts in *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997).