

# "Right-to-Work," Organized Labor, and "The Proletariat as a Whole"

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On January 31, 2012, the Republican majorities in both the Indiana Senate and House passed "right-to-work" legislation, riding roughshod over both the Democratic minority and tens of thousands mobilized workers and their allies. Indiana thus became the first new "right-to-work" state since Oklahoma, which became one in 2002—and a possible harbinger of more defeats for organized labor to come.

"Right-to-work," of course, means no such thing, as it has no direct bearing on the unemployment rate; its proponents tout it as a means to promote economic development and create new jobs, but no such results have been firmly established. In fact, just the opposite—"right-to-work" states have not benefited from an influx of new jobs, and the general economic effect of 'right-to-work' legislation has been to reduce workers' pay, eliminate benefits, and erode on-the-job protection for those employed. All of this has been documented in study after study.

Organized workers make up *a small minority*—11.8 percent—of what Marx and Engels called "the proletariat as a whole." Compare this to 1955 when organized labor represented about 35% of the U.S. workforce. Associated Press reporter Sam Hananel noted earlier this year, "public-sector workers had a union membership rate of 37 percent, more than five times that of private-sector workers.... About 7.6 million employees in the public sector belonged to a union last year [2011], compared with 7.2 million workers in the private sector." Though the number of union workers increased slightly last year, the actual union share of the workforce dropped from 11.9% to 11.8%, "the lowest percentage of union workers since the Great Depression of the 1930s." Moreover, this slight increase in union membership came after a loss of nearly 1.4 million workers in the last two years alone, with steady declines in union membership since the 1990s and before. Back in 1991 labor lawyer Thomas Geoghegan noted in his book *Which Side Are You On?* (Plume Books ed., 1992, p. 256) that "unions barely organize *0.3 percent* of the workforce annually," with the obvious consequence that "the unionized share of our work force drops every year."

In Indiana, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, organized labor lost 99,000 members between 2001 and 2011, despite a gain of 23,000 from 2010 and 2011. The rate of unionization in Indiana dropped from 14.6% in 2001 to 11.3% in 2011—below the national average. *New York Times* labor reporter Steven Greenhouse notes that while the percentage of union workers in Indiana's private sector, 8.2% in 2011, was above the national average of 6.9%, this was down by nearly 20% since the 1980s because of Indiana's loss of manufacturing jobs. In Indiana and nationwide, then, there were slight gains for organized labor after three prior decades of heavy losses.

Of course, in the past—not really so long ago, though it seems like an eternity now—even non-union workers benefitted from organized labor's relative strength vis-à-vis capital and from the gains it achieved in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, even into the 1970s: the weekend, the 40-hour workweek, overtime pay, a minimum wage that tended to increase over time, relatively high wages coupled with benefits and real pensions that made industrial workers part of that "middle class" whose purchasing power sustained a general prosperity. Significant economic and social gains were made even by the least well-off sectors of the working class—African Americans, Hispanics and other minorities, and women—which, though still unequal compared to those gained by white males, opened doors of opportunity that had hitherto been closed, and fueled social and political militancy

coupled with organizational savvy, much of it learned from organized labor itself. This managed to occur even in those dreary days of Meany/Kirkland complacency and even when the official labor movement was hostile to organizing women and minorities outside of its boundaries.

Each of these real gains, gains made possible by organized labor's former strength, is now under fire and faces demands for massive cutback, even elimination. And not just for the non-unionized but for the unionized themselves, forced increasingly into purely defensive battles just to sustain what they once had without question. Clearly, there is an aggressive class war being waged against "the proletariat as a whole," and the lines of battle have been drawn in crucial states such as Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana. Some labor leaders even publicly doubt that there will be labor unions five years from now.

Organized labor "lifted all working-class boats" when it was a force with strength; now, with its palpable decline, union workers' boats sink along with those of non-union workers. Just as the strength of the organized minority benefitted "the proletariat as a whole," today the decline of organized labor threatens "the proletariat as a whole." But organized labor hasn't seemed to have gotten the message—it still narrowly organizes on its own parochial turf, going it alone and looking out for the interests of only union workers, even in the face of support from non-union forces who realize that more is at stake than just organized labor's ability to provide high wages and substantial benefits and protections for its own membership. Forces such as students, activists and others understand that organized labor is bigger than itself; that it is a beleaguered, steadily shrinking army in the class struggle, of which the attacks on unions are only a part, although the most visible part.

But despite a greater verbal militancy on the part of certain labor leaders, notably AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, and even public statements of support and identification with the Occupy movements, organized labor as a whole is still mired in the discredited, complacent policies of the Meany/Kirkland era; still devoted to the stale "union philosophy" of Sam Gompers, "More!" and still not actively reaching out to and building alliances with non-union forces who understand what organized labor has yet to really grasp—that "An injury to one is an injury to all" and that the vital need of organized labor is to "Organize the unorganized." This was made palpably clear here in Indianapolis, Indiana, where I live, where, both in 2011 and in 2012, Indiana's organized labor force made no effort whatsoever to mobilize non-union workers and supporters to fight "right-to-work," relying instead only on its own minority forces and Democratic Party members of Indiana's General Assembly. The result was a standstill on "right-to-work" in 2011, and a major defeat in 2012, as an aggressive, Tea Party-dominated Republican majority used every method available, scrupulous and unscrupulous, formally democratic and blatantly undemocratic, to ram through "right-to-work" legislation in both House and Senate of the General Assembly and present it for signature to an eagerly-awaiting Republican Governor Mitch Daniels.

In the wake of this major defeat, all Indiana's union leaders and the Indiana AFL-CIO itself would say is "Just wait till the 2012 elections!" Appeals to defeat "right-to-work" during the legislative session were made on strictly economic grounds (i.e., "right-to-work" won't bring the economic growth and increased numbers of new jobs its proponents tout; it's just the "right to work for less" when, as of January 2012, Indiana's unemployment rate was 8.7%, which meant 279,000 workers were without jobs, period!), and this ineffectiveness was seconded by labor allies such as the chapters of Jobs with Justice and other social movement forces. No appeal whatsoever was made to Indiana's 88.7% of the workforce who are non-union to join in solidarity on this issue that vitally affects "the proletariat as a whole," but which Indiana organized labor saw as only affecting itself and made appeals only to others to come down to the Indiana Statehouse downtown to join organized labor's rallies and lobby their state legislators—much of this activity taking place during Super Bowl Week (Indianapolis hosted Super Bowl XLVI on February 5, 2012), when simply to park

one's car cost \$20 per vehicle, where even normally metered parking (if one could find a spot) is \$1.50 an hour, where public transportation in Indianapolis is glaringly inadequate and frequently nonexistent, and where, except for fast food, all downtown restaurants are upscale and expensive—effectively freezing out many supporters such as myself who had the "leisure time" to participate because of unemployment, but not the wherewithal to make their physical presence felt.

The Indiana AFL-CIO merely reflects, rather than tries to change, the generally right-wing, Red State nature of Indiana politics; it deliberately eschewed and stood apart from the several Occupy movements that had grown in Indiana towns, cities and campuses; and tolerated their involvement on "right-to-work" only as long as they followed where the union leadership wished to lead. (One Central Indiana DSA member of my acquaintance once complained that the labor movement here is still mired in the Henry "Scoop" Jackson "Guns and Butter" model of Cold War anti-communist liberalism.) Organized labor as a whole and at the national level is not much better, and is certainly not trying to be a voice for "the proletariat as a whole."

Consider UCubed, the "union of the unemployed" organized by the International Association of Machinists (IAM): it organizes the unemployed only as a voting bloc to pressure politicians to vote for "pro-labor" legislation rather than as an actual, grassroots organization of the unemployed; and on the issue of unemployment, despite occasional calls for a new WPA which are never advanced seriously, is quite willing to follow Obama's lead as advanced in his tepid "jobs program" that would provide only 1.2 million jobs when there are still 13 million workers unemployed, many of them long-term. It's now the case that "help" for the unemployed consists mostly of websites for unemployed workers on how to fine-tune their already-useless résumés for a job market where, despite some recent job growth, there is still 8.2% national unemployment. In some states, of which Indiana is one, because the official unemployment rate is below 9%, extended unemployment benefits will no longer be available; and it's become increasingly fashionable to blame the unemployed for their unemployment, and to require new, humiliating screening of the unemployed (such as mandatory drug tests) in order to "qualify" for the "privilege" of receiving unemployment (which is capped in Indiana at the princely sum of \$390 per week, or the equivalent of 40 hours at \$9.75 an hour; but for many unemployed workers, the amount they can receive is much less).

Indeed, the currently fashionable cry for "right-to-work" legislation and other punitive measures against the very idea of union representation and collective bargaining is yet another capitulation to the "race to the bottom," where the "high wages" achieved by unionized U.S. workers allegedly render the U.S. economy "uncompetitive" with low-wage powerhouses such as the People's Republic of China. Organized labor's chief response to the "Chinese threat" has been only to decry "unfair trade practices" and "deliberate undervaluation of the yuan" and call for sanctions against the Chinese government, not call out in the least for worldwide solidarity with the overworked, low-paid Chinese proletariat. But this is a Chinese proletariat that has become increasingly militant the last couple of years in demanding real union representation and an end to those intolerably-low wages and slave-like working conditions notoriously exemplified in Foxconn, chief manufacturer of the popular Apple iPhones and other electronic gadgets.[1] This militant Chinese proletariat should be seen as a role model, not a threat!

As regards "the proletariat as a whole" internationally, U.S. workers' greatest need is to stand in solidarity with their Chinese and other foreign counterparts, and the U.S. labor movement should be taking the lead in organizing this solidarity. Instead, organized labor focuses on "Buy American" campaigns and other displays of narrow nationalism.

And while it is the Republican Party generally that is most vociferous in beating the drums of "free trade" and blaming unions for making the U.S. economy "uncompetitive," this is truly a bipartisan effort, with not only many leading Democrats but the Obama Administration itself

supporting new "free trade" agreements and touting the return of jobs to the U.S. in low-wage (and "right-to-work") states such as Arkansas.

Instead of cheering low-wage jobs, addressing this travesty should be the labor movement's focus. It is precisely in this neglect of "the proletariat as a whole" that we see where organized labor has gone amiss—failing to organize the unorganized and undermining what it can gain for its own members. Not only are those who are worst-off usually excluded from, even shunned by, the unions themselves, but the situation is made worse for all. The condition of the working poor in the United States is extremely grim:

In 2011, the US Department of Labor reported at least 10 million people worked and were still below the unrealistic official US poverty line, an increase of 1.5 million more than the last time they checked. The US poverty line is \$18,530 for a mom and two kids....About 7 percent of all workers and 4 percent of all full-time workers earn wages that leave them below the poverty line....

These are certainly an integral, numerically significant part of the "proletariat as a whole." They are also certainly among those least likely to be unionized, and that's important—unionization of a significant part of the U.S. and other countries' workforce was crucial to creating the broad "middle-class prosperity" that characterized the U.S. and Western European economies in the 1950s and 1960s, and in expanding the "welfare state" (tepidly in the U.S., more substantially in Western Europe).

Now we're all feeling the brunt. Unionized UAW auto workers who are newly-hired make only around \$15 an hour, down substantially from the average of around \$28 an hour that used to prevail in the UAW-organized shops. Unemployed college graduates are as vulnerable to long-term unemployment now as high school dropouts. In 2010, only 56% of new college graduates found jobs. Young workers looking for entry-level positions will find that their salary prospects are much dimmer than they were a decade ago. Half of all U.S. workers made less than \$26,000 in 2010, and "[S]ome 127.5 million people—are liquid-asset poor. If one of these households experiences a sudden loss of income, caused, for example, by a layoff or a medical emergency, it will fall below the poverty line within three months. People in these households simply don't have enough cash to make it for very long in a crisis."

John Schmitt's January 2012 report, "Low-wage Lessons," is a cornucopia of disturbing facts on low-wage workers in the U.S., who, of course, are overwhelmingly non-union. Schmitt notes further that low wages are "often among the least of the problems facing low-wage workers, especially in the United States," citing lack of health insurance, paid vacations, paid sick leave, paid family leave, "welfare state institutions" and the protection of "labor laws": all those things labor unions historically have won for their members and fought to extend to all workers! But with organized labor in the doldrums and preoccupied with purely defensive battles, "the proletariat as a whole," especially those outside of organized labor, are in a real bind—especially if poor, unemployed, or barely surviving the crisis of the current Great Recession. But too often it's precisely these massive sectors of "the proletariat as a whole" that organized labor has defaulted on, and the left's current preoccupation with organized labor to the virtual exclusion of those workers not in unions have only exacerbated the problems facing not only organized labor—but all those 88.2% of "the proletariat as a whole" standing outside the unions.

Is there hope for the future? Perhaps, with the emergence of Occupy movements on a nationwide, even worldwide, scale after decades of quiescence, along with a greater militancy among organized

workers themselves, especially if they understand the vital need to reach out to their unorganized and unemployed brothers and sisters. Recent moves by the United Steelworkers Union in active alliance with Spain's highly successful Mondragon workers' cooperative network to promote direct worker ownership and workers' cooperatives is also encouraging; but so much more still needs to be done, and organized labor is only playing catch-up. While some labor leaders may be waving their arms and saying "Here we are! Better late than never!" let's hope it doesn't end up with "the proletariat as a whole" ruefully saying after the fact, "Too little too late." That means the left itself will have to do more to reach, organize and galvanize "the proletariat as a whole" and not just its organized sector; not simply, naïvely count on this tiny organized minority of this "proletariat as a whole" finally doing what it should've been doing decades ago.

## **Note**

1. But Apple isn't alone. Popular toymakers such as Mattel and Disney are also prime beneficiaries of horribly-exploited Chinese labor, as is Walmart and the many others firms. All this is extensively documented by SACOM (Hong Kong-based Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour) and other watchdogs. Walmart's toleration of abuse by its Chinese contractors is the subject of a special report by Andy Kroll in the March/April 2012 *Mother Jones*.

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