

The Emergence of the Mass Workers' Parties and Trade Unions

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Old-school radical history focused on the debates between radical leaders, and ignored what militant workers were thinking and doing.

In this presentation at the new study group From Struggle to Socialism [1], scholar Charlie Post flips that old method upside-down.

Introduction

When first learned the history of the Second International, it was as a series of political and ideological debates among leading intellectuals, leading to “betrayal” during War. The root cause of social-democracy’s capitulation was seen as an ideological and strategic failure—the embrace of a notion of “all-inclusive” socialist and workers’ parties that would united the “entire working class.”

Today, I think this is no a very fruitful approach to understanding the rise and crisis of the mass working class parties that emerged during the “merger/fusion” of the workers’ movement and socialist politics. Instead, what we need is a social-material and historical analysis.

Specifically, we need focus on the relationship between three waves of mass industrial struggles (1889-1894, 1905-1907, 1912-1914) during the “long-wave” of capitalist expansion from the early 1890s through the First World War. On the one hand, the experience of tumultuous working class self-activity in these strikes that produced a significant minority of workers in a number of countries who embraced revolutionary and socialist politics. On the other, the necessarily episodic character of mass working class struggles, also led to the formation of a socially independent and politically conservative layer of trade union and party officials.

The three major ideological debates that wracked the Second International—“revisionism”/possibility of a piecemeal, gradual reform of capitalism; “mass strike”/role of working class self-organization and activity rather than bureaucratic collective bargaining and grievance procedures; and preparation for the coming imperialist war—were also social conflicts between the “militant minority” of rank and file workers and the union and party bureaucracy.

This analysis is based in our tradition—the tradition of socialism from below’s—theory of working class consciousness and organization. (Mandel) While individuals may be radicalized by exposure to socialist ideas (propaganda), large scale radicalization comes only with mass working class struggles. It is through mass, militant and successful struggles in the workplace and beyond minorities of workers develop a consciousness of themselves as a class with interests separate and opposed to capital, and develop the self-confidence to imagine a world ruled by themselves—a socialist world.

Under capitalism, workers’ struggles are necessarily episodic. Bulk of working class, in most periods, is quiescent as most workers struggle to earn a living and look to their private/domestic

lives for sustenance and support.

Only a minority of the working class remains active—what our tradition has called the “workers’ vanguard”.* These workers attempt to “continue the struggle by other means” during periods of relative class quiescence. This “militant minority” is the potential repository of traditions of militancy, democracy, solidarity and class/socialist politics. Put another way, this minority of the workers are the social basis for revolutionary socialist politics. [2]

A minority of the activist minority takes responsibility for organizations (unions and political parties) that are created by mass upsurges. As these organizations are stabilized, and take on a life of their own, we see the growth of a full-time officialdom/bureaucracy, with a distinct life-style and world-view. The labor and party officials, along with the bulk of the inactive working class, is the social foundation of reformism. Reformism is not the struggle for reform, but the substitution of electoral campaigns and routinized bargaining/grievance procedure for mass action.

The mass social-democratic parties and unions in Britain, Germany, France and Italy, and even syndicalists (reject politics in favor of trade union action) in Spain and France attempted to build parties/unions of “entire class.” They sought to build parties and unions that brought together reformist bureaucrats, radical and revolutionary rank and file worker activists, and the generally passive mass of working class. The reformist bureaucrats dominated these parties and unions, despite Marxian or anarchist rhetoric, during most of the pre-war era. Only the disaster of the First World War convinces the left/revolutionary wing of social-democracy and syndicalism of the need to build revolutionary parties based exclusively among the active, militant and class conscious workers. Mass Strikes and the Long-Wave of Capitalist Expansion, 1890-1914

Prior to the late 1880s, relatively small, mass socialist parties, often with parliamentary representation, and unions of skilled workers (craft unions) had survived the “long-depression” and of the 1870s and 1880s and the intense repression of the 1870s (wake of the Paris Commune) in France, Italy and Germany. In the US, the continuous geographic migration of both capital and labor across the North American continent short-circuited the emergence of significant socialist minorities. Anti-socialist business unionists dominated the surviving unions—mostly in the locally based construction trades and intra-urban transport—tying the unions to one or another capitalist party in the US.

Long-boom 1890-1914 sets stage for the growth of truly mass parties and unions. The pre-War boom led to rapid industrialization/mechanization throughout the capitalist world. The emergence of massive metal working industries and the development of electrical and chemical power increased the size, weight and relative homogeneity of working class. Skill still mattered—especially in the new metal working industries—but the traditional, small scale artisan shops greatly reduced in importance in most countries. The resulting deskilling, speed-up and inflation fueled three major waves of industrial struggle—expanding the size of the workers’ vanguard, the ‘militant minority.’

While the growth of capitalism, and generally low unemployment, encouraged working class self-organization and activity, rising profits allowed capital in certain countries to grant “trade union legality.” Employers in many European countries recognized unions and hoped to tame them—hope to stabilize labor relations through collective bargaining, written contracts and a labor-management administered grievance procedure. This stabilization of unions—along with the growth of parliamentary representation for the new socialist and workers’ parties—expanded the size and weight of the reformist union and party bureaucracies.

Workplace issues—deskilling and speed-up (Taylorism) and wages that could not keep up with inflation—were fundamental to the pre-War strike waves. However, as these strike waves spread and

grew, they took on political demands: the 8 hour day, the expansion and reform of suffrage, and democratic rights (assembly, association, press, etc.)

Each wave of strikes also sees sharpening tensions between the growing “workers’ vanguard” and the labor officialdom:

“Certainly we have evidence that on many crucial questions the working classes revealed that they were prepared to go further than the men who led them. As early as 1889, and as late as 1913, workers went on strike against the wishes of the unions, and in the interval between these two dates they had shown that they were as interested in political agitation as in promoting their economic welfare. Each time, however, both party and unions, convinced that the pursuit of Socialist aims by provocative action would be injurious and fatal, imposed restraints. On purely economic issues, workers in various industries in 1913 and 1914, including the powerful Metalworkers’ Union, were expressing profound dissatisfaction with union leadership and demanded structural reforms to give the rank and file a greater voice in decisions.” Harvey Mitchell, “Labor and the Origins of Social Democracy in Britain, France, and Germany, 1890-1914”, in Workers and Protest (Itasca, IL: Peacock Publishers, Inc. 1971), 99-100 [Speaking of Germany]

1889-1894

Dockers, miners, railworkers across the capitalist world launch mass strikes that establish beach-heads for industrial unionism and promote the growth of Socialist and radical political organizations.

Great Britain: dockers and miners strikes of 1889 launch the “new unions” (industrial unions) and lay the basis for the growth of Marxist (SDF), left socialist (ILP) groups and for the establishment of the LP in 1902-1903.

France: strikes in the generally smaller workshops in Paris and elsewhere promote the development of “revolutionary syndicalism” and various socialist parties.

Germany: Hamburg dockworkers and Ruhr miners strikes in 1889 against the wishes of the leadership of both the SPD (still semi-legal) and the “free” (socialist led) unions. 1890 agitation for May Day Strikes for 8 hour legislation derailed by SPD/union leaderships. After 1891, the SPD becomes a legal “Marxist” party, growing rapidly in membership and parliamentary representation. The socialist led unions grow as well, with their officials seeking routine bargaining and the imposition of a grievance procedure to replace direct action over workplace issues.

US: The Knights of Labor lead struggles that spill over into the agitation for 8 hour day, which culminated in a series of railway workers strikes and city wide strikes for the 8 hour day (Haymarket). In the mid-1890s, new strikes among miners and rail workers culminate in the 1894 American Railway Union strike against Pullman lines. By the late 1890s, the AFL craft unionism and a few industrial unions (UMW, WFM) have stabilized. Politically, the new wave of militancy allows the creation of the Socialist Party in 1900—at all times significantly smaller and less influential than the European workers’ and socialist parties.

Russia: Mass strike wave in the 1890s in metal working, textiles, mining, rail, etc. fails to establish stable unions or mass parties—excluded by feudal Absolutist state. Precipitates first layer of militant, radical workers who become base for growing, albeit decentralized pre-1903 social-democratic/Marxist movement in Russia.

Revisionism Debate 1899-1900. Bernstein speaking for party and union officials who see the labor peace that came with “trade union legalization” and capitalist economic expansion as

permanent and unalterable features of life under capitalism. Belief in permanence of reform. Luxemburg and left speak for rank and file workers' who remain active. Party "Center" and attempt to maintain "all inclusive party".

1905-1907

After nearly a decade (1895-1905) of relative class peace in Europe and US, the end of the slump of 1903-1904 and the Russo-Japanese war unleashes a wave of mass strikes across the capitalist world.

France: mass strikes among workers in small and medium factories, metal workers in larger plants and miners in 1905-1906 leads to the establishment of the CGT, under syndicalist leadership (attempt to build organization of all workers with a revolutionary ideology). Massive struggles provide impetus for unification of various "socialist" parties into SFIO in 1906.

Germany: 1903-1907 Coal miners in Ruhr and metal workers across Germany launch large-scale strikes over workplace issues, again against the instructions of the SPD and union leaders. These strikes culminate in mass political strike in Hamburg in January 1906. Despite the opposition of SPD/union leadership, dockworkers and shipbuilders lead a city-wide strike against attempts to prevent the SPD from taking state government office. Across Germany, the Hamburg strikes spark calls for spreading mass, political strikes for voting and political reform from rank and file workers. Union and party leaders are able to crush the agitation for mass political strikes in 1906.

US: 1904-1910 massive strikes in steel (McKeesport), needle trades, machine making, mining, textiles. The "revolt of the machine proletariat" under the leadership of left-SPers and members of the IWW (main organization of the workers' vanguard in the US), faced strong opposition from the AFL leadership and the right-wing of the SP.

Russia: Combination of war and mass strikes leads to 1905 revolution— first soviets point to the possibility of a workers' revolution leading a democratic revolution that would overthrow the Absolutist monarchy (Bolsheviks), and might (according to Trotsky) begin the world socialist revolution. These debates crystallize the division between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks (originally about the editorial board of Iskra). However, Russian socialists are condemned, again, to illegality and semi-clandestine existence after defeat of revolution in 1906-1907.

Mass Strike Debate: Luxemburg and others on left-wing of social-democracy raise politics of new layer of worker militants who see continued mass militancy at the workplace and across workplaces as key to preparation for revolution. The party "Center" (Kautsky) and the union bureaucrats oppose agitation around the mass strike, fearing anything that could disrupt the growth of parliamentary representation or the stability of bureaucratic unions engaged in collective bargaining and grievance procedures.

1910-1914

Strikes in the metal trades (machine making, steel, auto, ship building, etc.) against speed up and deskilling, led by skilled rank and file workers, coincide with struggles over war preparations across the capitalist world. These struggles see sharpening confrontations between "militant minorities" of skilled metal workers and officials of parties and unions, the latter who want to do nothing to disrupt war preparations.

Great Britain: Massive strikes among ship builders, metal workers, miners, railroad workers and transport (trucking, buses, etc.) shake GB 1912-1914. "One Big Union" a revolutionary syndicalist current modeled on US IWW, emerges to challenge the increasingly conservative leadership of the

TUC, which with the leadership of the Labor Party opposes many of these strikes.

France: The syndicalist leadership of the CGT around Jouhaux oppose agitation and strike action among metal workers. The SFIO sharply divided over war preparations.

Germany: 1912 sees massive political strikes Prussia for women's vote, suffrage reform; and economic strikes of coal and shipbuilding workers. Both strikes are defeated, primarily as a result of the opposition of union officials who fear government repression as Germany state prepares for war. 1913-1914: metal workers (steel, machine making, auto, ship building, etc.) again strike against the opposition of trade union leaders. By 1913-1914, SPD is largest party (in terms of membership, votes and parliamentary representation) in Germany, and their affiliated unions are largest in capitalist world. Both the party and unions have a huge officialdom: some 8,000 - 10,000 party and union full-timers in the years before the war.

US: 1910-1917 sees strikes by skilled workers in steel, railroad repair yards, ship building for "control" of the workplace—against mechanization and deskilling. Growing agitation among unskilled and semiskilled in auto, rubber and textiles. These strikes fuel the growth of IWW and left-wing of SP, and the consolidation of the right-wing of the SP.

Russia: 1912-1914 sees large scale, illegal strikes in metal works, oil, textiles and other industries. Final schism between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, as Bolsheviks become the party of the workers' vanguard, consolidate a cadre of worker militant committed to an uncompromising struggle against both Tsarist absolutism and the liberal bourgeoisie.

War Preparations Debate: The debate within the Second International and among syndicalists about how to respond to the growing threat of imperialist war, manifested in various colonial wars and incidents around 1910-1914. These years see the emergence of "pro-imperialist" wing of social-democracy and syndicalism in France and Spain. These "social-imperialist" arguments combine patriotism and notion that workers in imperialist countries will benefit from colonial profits, improved position of their own bourgeoisie in world market and from armaments expansion.

Pro-war position supported by most party and union leaders, and opposed by the majority of the party rank and file. A minority of party leaders in Germany, France, Italy and the US oppose imperialist war preparation before 1914, but on an increasingly "pacifist" basis, believing that parliamentary action, alone, will be sufficient to stop the war. Kautsky goes as far as to argue that imperialism is "irrational" for modern world capitalism, which requires peace and free trade not war and protectionism.

Left-wing socialists (Lenin, Luxemburg) who call for "turning the imperialist war into a class war" find an audience among "militant minority" who refuse to put aside class struggle at point of production in the interest of "national defense," and who see war a chance to challenge bourgeois rule.

The Rise and Fall of the "All-Inclusive"/"Party of the Entire Class"

All of the European and US social-democratic parties (and in its own bizarre way, French syndicalism) presented themselves to the world as parties or organizations of the "entire working class." Although the majority of party members were revolutionary minded workers—members of the "workers vanguard"—reformist bureaucrats dominated the social democratic parties and unions. These forces dictated their day to day practice—the need to win elections, push for parliamentary reforms and consolidate union recognition and bargaining became paramount over the substantive advances of working class struggles.

Left-wing, revolutionary opinions were tolerated within these parties to a greater or lesser extent. In the US, the left-wing was expelled in 1912 for advocating “sabotage”—wild-cat/unofficial strikes over speed-up and deskilling.

However, outside of Russia, the left/revolutionary currents and the workers’ vanguard did not create its own organizations before the First World War. These minorities had no way to develop a common analysis and practice that could have prepared them for war and revolutionary crises of 1917-1923. None of the leaders of the left-wing of social-democracy, including Lenin, reject the theory of the all-inclusive/party of the whole class before 1914.

Lenin was not unique among the leaders of the left-wing of pre-World War I social democracy. He too shared their strategy of building a party of the “whole class” on the model of the German SPD. (Lih, Lenin Rediscovered) However, the conditions of feudal Absolutism in Russia prevented “trade union legalization” and the growth of parliamentary socialist politics. In Tsarist Russia, there was little or no room for the emergence of a stable layer of full-time party and union officials. As a result, reformist politics in Russia lacked the social base necessary to impose its hegemony on the workers’ movement. This allowed the autonomous organization of the workers’ vanguard into a revolutionary party capable of leading the first workers’ revolution. Put simply, the Bolsheviks’ success was not the result of a superior organizational or strategic analysis—not the result of their theory—but of an accident of history.

First World War and capitulation of the social-democratic parties and French syndicalist leaders to their own national ruling classes marks the end of the “all-inclusive”/“party of the whole class” model of socialist organization. This model had failed to prepare workers for the first imperialist war, the post-war revolutionary crisis that swept Europe or the prolonged employers’ offensive that began in the 1920s. New model of socialist organization—the exclusively revolutionary workers’ party—emerges with the split in the Second International, Russian revolution and the emergence of the Third, Communist International.

P.S.

* From Radicals at work, February 10, 2010:

<http://www.radicalsatwork.org/blog/content/radical-history-bottom>

Footnotes

[1] <http://radicalsatwork.org/blog/content/new-study-group-asks-what-are-secrets-socialist-success>

[2] * EDITOR’S NOTE: The term “workers’ vanguard” as used in this piece doesn’t mean a self-appointed Marxist sect that will lead the working class to salvation. It means all those workers who help lead workers’ struggles, and who keep the struggle going even when most workers’ have given up and are inactive.