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What happened to the workers' movement?

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Too often people on the radical left find ourselves thinking with concepts we've inherited from the past that have become misleading because the realities to which the concepts refer have changed fundamentally. This happens a lot when we talk about the workers' movement.

As New York City transit union activist Steve Downs put it,

We speak about the labour movement and I think we tend to do it out of habit or maybe generosity or maybe even embarrassment, but there is no labour movement in this city or in this country, frankly... there is no unifying vision, there are no widely-accepted goals, there certainly is no forward momentum.

In 2013 former members of the Italian revolutionary socialist group Sinistra Critica who went on to form the Communia Network put forward an argument about the "dissolution of what we called the 'workers' movement'." They argued that

a historical era has ended in the wake of the crisis of class culture and the dissolution of the network of relationships between trade unions, political parties, associative and cooperative structures. The synergy of those institutions of the workers' movement has been down by a progressive loss of consciousness caused not only by the blows of capitalism in crisis, but also by the failure of so-called "communism" realized in several countries – whose ruins fell down on the same subjects who has to be liberated – and by the hegemony conquered by the social-democratic tendencies (then "social-liberal" ones) in that movement itself, tendencies that delivered many institutions created by the movement to the logic of profit and market that they claimed to fight.

That history is behind us, even if it still generates monsters in the present times. We are living today the slow time of reconstruction, reconstruction of ideas and material power of social subjects.

In 2015, the editors of the communization journal *Endnotes* offered an ambitious look at the "*longue durée*" of the global workers' movement, "A History of Separation." It argues for what its authors call "a periodising break." Their goal is "to allow us to relate to the past as past, and the present as something else," while recognizing important elements of continuity. The workers' movement, they argue, "was not simply *the proletariat in fighting form*, as if any struggle today would have to replicate its essential

features. It was a particular fighting form, which took shape in an era that is not our own.” The workers’ movement was “not the same thing as organised workers’ struggle.” Rather, for roughly one hundred years beginning in the late 1800s it was a mode of organizing, “an apparatus, an urban machine, which bound workers together and kept them so bound” in both certain kinds of paid workplaces and in neighbourhoods. To the extent that it succeeded, it relied on “an affirmable class identity” with which union and party activists could convince workers “to suspend their interests as isolated sellers in a competitive labour market, and, instead, to act out of a *commitment* to the collective project of the labour movement.”

The workers’ movement “embodied a certain idea” about how capitalism could be replaced. Consequently, it “made for a definite communist horizon, which imparted a certain dynamic to struggles and also established their limits.” At the heart of this was a “vision of their destiny, with five tenets”:

- (1) Workers were building a new world with their own hands.
- (2) In this new world, workers were the only social group that was expanding; whereas all other groups were contracting, including the bourgeoisie.
- (3) Workers were not only becoming the majority of the population; they were also becoming a compact mass, the collective worker, who was being drilled in the factories to act in concert with the machines.

- (4) They were thus the only ones capable of managing the new world in accordance with its innermost logic: neither a hierarchy of order-givers and order-takers, nor the irrationality of market fluctuations, but rather, an ever more finely-grained division of labour.
- (5) Workers were proving this vision to be true, since the class was realising what it was in a conquest of power, the achievement of which would make it possible to abolish class society, and and thus to bring man's prehistory to a close.

It was this vision that motivated workers to struggle. Between 1875 and 1921, *Endnotes* argues, this vision had tremendous appeal to workers, which “explains the movement’s exponential growth” in that period. But “Today there is everywhere a commonly felt absence of the institutional forms of solidarity that formed the backbone of the workers’ movement.” In our era,

All that remains of the workers’ movement are unions that manage the slow bleed-out of stable employment; social democratic parties that implement austerity measures when conservative parties fail to do so; and communist and anarchist sects that wait (actively or passively) for their change to rush the stage.... none is likely to rejuvenate itself on the world scale. The workers’ movement is no longer a force with the potential to remake the world. That it was such a force

was what gave life to these currents within the workers' movement: they no longer make sense; their coordinates have been scrambled.

Class antagonism persists, and struggles still happen. However, "the diverse fractions of the working class no longer shape themselves into a workers' movement." When particular groups of workers struggle, they may identify as workers. But when broader struggles arise, workers do not identify as part of the working class but "as citizens, as participants in a 'real democracy,' as the 99 percent, and so on." Such identities seem "to widen their capacity to struggle" in a way that identification with the working class does not.

The kind of arguments that *Sinistra Critica* and *Endnotes* propose, with their emphasis on discontinuity, are important. They have the merit of registering important changes that much of the far left ignores, denies or minimizes. Today most radicals have little sense of the present as a moment in history with distinctive features and how these differ from the contours of previous periods. Adherents of the revolutionary left are more likely to have definite views about such matters. However, on the far left the present is often understood in relation to whichever momentous historical events a political current treats as most important (the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Revolution, the Chinese Revolution...). The era in which we live is rarely recognized as a period that is profoundly discontinuous with the years c. 1840-1970 during which the traditions of the revolutionary left took shape. That's one

reason why absurdities like socialists in Texas reading about Lenin for guidance in building their organization are not uncommon today. With too much of the far left intellectually imprisoned in archaic thinking, there's value in stressing that the workers' movement and the political horizon linked with it are now truly in the past — but also that capitalism, the working class, class struggle, bureaucratic mass organizations born of the workers' movement, and the potential for a self-governing society are still features of the crisis-ridden world we're trying to change.

In order to help us orient ourselves, it's worth addressing the question of how the workers' movement came to an end. Although *Endnotes'* description of what remains of the movement is evocative, its explanation of the movement's passing is inadequate — capital's inexorable tendency to atomize the working class while simultaneously making individuals objectively more interdependent coexists with the historical investigation of class struggles and geopolitical forces in a way that isn't synthesized convincingly. By “the workers' movement” I don't mean any and all mass organizations of the working class. Instead, I'm referring to something more specific: configurations of workers' organizations with a strong relationship to at least a small but significant minority of the class that affirm a commitment to the creation by workers of a fundamentally different society.

The first world-historic blow to the movement came earlier than is often realized, and was delivered by Stalinism. The

fact that this history is not well known today and that nostalgia for a stronger left in the past still leads some people to be insufficiently critical of “Communism” makes it important to recount how Stalinism damaged the workers’ movement. The belief that socialism was being built in the USSR and later elsewhere undoubtedly bolstered the workers’ movement internationally in certain ways. But that was false hope. When council democracy ceased to function in Russia in 1918 social supremacy passed from the working class to the leadership of one segment of the class, suspending the possibility of transition to socialism. Trapped in an impossible situation, a substitutionist revolutionary leadership evolved into rulers committed to modernization rationalized as “socialism in one country.” The last flickers of the fires lit in 1917 were snuffed out in the late 1920s with the completion of what Gareth Dale has aptly called a “modernizing counter-revolution” that consolidated the rulers of the USSR as a class. Stalinism crushed the already-subordinated workers’ movement in the USSR, turning its organizations into appendages of the party-state as it launched its industrialization drive. Its emulators in China, Cuba and other countries did the same whenever they came to power.

Sadly, the connection in workers’ minds between the idea of socialism and the “Communist” regime was so strong that the workers’ movement was weakened as more people outside the USSR learned of the horrors wrought by Stalinism. The vigorous efforts of the anti-Stalinist radical left to challenge the equation of socialism with

“Communism” had little success. The eventual collapse of most of the “Communist” societies dealt a further blow to the idea that the working class could remake society for the better, an effect that was often underestimated by socialists who rightly recognized that counter-revolution had long ago triumphed in the USSR. The mutation of China and Vietnam into “market Stalinism” had a similar ideological impact.

The rulers of the USSR also did enormous damage to the workers’ movement in many other countries through the politics and organizational measures imposed through the Communist International. The most disastrous case was Germany, where “Third Period” sectarianism was a major obstacle to united working-class action against fascism. In China the Comintern’s directive to support the nationalist Guomindang left the urban workers’ movement unprepared when the nationalists turned on it in the late 1920s. But Stalinism’s political impact was much more pervasive. From the mid-1930s its politics of seeking popular front alliances with “progressive” wings of ruling classes damaged workers’ organizations around the world. In Spain the murderous and literally counter-revolutionary actions of Stalinist forces succeeded in snuffing out workers’ and peasants’ power where it existed, as well as suppressing anti-Stalinist radicalism. Although this was not the only reason for Franco’s victory, it did weaken the effort to defeat fascism. Internationally, workers’ movements were weakened by the “Communist” promotion of politics whose horizons were now, rhetoric aside, firmly within the existing society.

Fascism, the Second World War and the Cold War dealt further blows. The workers' organizations built in West Germany after 1945 did not share the commitment of their formidable pre-1933 ancestors to the creation by workers of a new society; in the East, workers were denied the right to organize independently of the party-state that claimed to rule in their name. In the US and Canada, unions emerged from wartime and post-war strike waves as more stable but also more bureaucratic organizations. In the US, a small opening for a left party independent of the Democrats was quickly lost. Wartime nationalism, for which in Mike Davis's words "progressives and popular front leftists were among the most zealous missionaries," swept through the white majority of the working class. This was then "redeployed in 1946-7 as a virulent anti-communism" that fuelled the successful ruling-class campaign that destroyed most workers' organizations pledged to a vision of a different society and marginalized the weakened survivors. In Canada, the impact of wartime nationalism and Cold War anti-communism wasn't as devastating as it was in the US. A minority of the working class continued to support the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, but the party's "socialism" came to mean reforms within capitalism, not far-reaching social reconstruction.

As the post-war capitalism boomed, the working class underwent significant changes internationally. Yet it would be a mistake to make too much of how higher living standards, suburbanization, the growth of women's participation in wage-labour, the expansion of "white

collar” employment, and “Third World” immigration affected the remaining workers’ movements in the advanced capitalist countries. If some workers did not identify with the movement they encountered, dominated as it was by white men drawn from particular segments of the class, this was not an entirely new problem. The fact that these workers often pushed to be included in unions and/or organized autonomously within the orbit of the workers’ movement (as in the Indian Workers’ Association in the UK, self-organized groups of African-American workers, and initiatives by women workers in many countries) testifies to the movement’s enduring political magnetism. During the long post-war boom a workers’ movement in the specific sense of the term I’m using here also emerged for the first time in a few places, including Quebec; in a number of other countries, perhaps most notably India, the movement grew in strength. Nevertheless, in some parts of the world the movement became weaker in certain respects during these years, although this was often masked by robust working-class combativity and solidarity. For example, in Britain, as Duncan Hallas perceptively observed in 1971, “A new generation of capable and energetic workers exists but they are no longer part of a cohesive movement and they no longer work in a milieu where basic Marxist ideas are widespread... Not only has the vanguard, in the real sense of a considerable layer of organised revolutionary workers and intellectuals, been destroyed. So too has the environment, the tradition, that gave it influence.”

These developments in the half-century prior to the end of the post-war boom and the restructuring out of which neoliberal capitalism emerged are part of the decline of the workers' movement; that decline does not begin only in the mid-1970s. Since then, we have seen the neoliberal reorganization of capitalism followed by its crisis, which has now lasted a decade. The working class in most places has undergone significant decomposition, to use one of the useful concepts generated by the *operaismo* current of Italian marxism[1]; elementary forms of unity and solidarity among waged and unwaged members of the class have been eroded both inside and outside the sphere of paid workplaces. Even more damaging, inherited “infrastructures of dissent” — the term Alan Sears offers in *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* for “the means through which activists develop political communities capable of learning, communicating and mobilizing together” — have often disintegrated and not been replaced.

Many social changes have led to these losses. These include the dramatic decline of strikes, the shrinking of union coverage, the loss of workers' rights and cultures of workplace collectivism, the cultivation of insecurity, “negative solidarity” (the stance captured by the motto “if I don't have it, they shouldn't either”) and competitive individualism inside and outside the paid workplace, and the deepening of divisions rooted in racial oppression. The tendency to class decomposition was already underway before the collapse of “Communism” and the open embrace of neoliberalism by union officialdoms and social

democratic party apparatuses in the 1990s. Since then, it has gone further, though not without important bursts of self-activity that began to recompose the class in 21st century conditions, for example in France, Bolivia, Venezuela, and China. The result has been the dissipation almost everywhere of the remnants of the workers' movement (Greece is perhaps an exception). This dynamic of decomposition has bedevilled efforts to renew class-struggle anti-capitalist politics since the fall of Stalinism, and it grounds the contemporary structure of feeling identified by Enzo Traverso in *Left-Wing Melancholia*.

Where does this leave those of us who remain convinced that a socialist politics for our times must be an internationalist politics of the self-emancipation of the working class, one that's resolutely anti-racist, feminist and queer liberationist and that recognizes the importance of both autonomous organizing by members of oppressed groups and united workers' struggles in the workplace and community spheres? To start, we should recognize that classical marxism was a product of conditions radically-dissimilar to our own (as was classical anarchism). Strategic concepts of the early Comintern like the revolutionary party, the united front and the workers' government assume the existence of forms of class organization and consciousness that in most regions haven't existed for a long time. This doesn't necessarily make them unworthy of study (although anyone who still thinks socialist groups today should organize themselves along "Leninist" lines "as if" they were large organizations that could meaningfully be called revolutionary parties,

“only smaller” — the micro-party model — hasn’t learned much from the history of the far left since 1945). But it does mean these concepts can’t be “applied” in today’s conditions.

As the Italian marxists quoted at the outset put it, ours is “the slow time of reconstruction, reconstruction of ideas and material power of social subjects.” The extent of working-class decomposition imposes this pace on efforts to foster workers’ self-organization and solidarity. This temporality is terrifyingly out of synch with the speeds at which the climate change crisis is worsening and political events are happening (Brexit, Trump’s win, the growth of right-wing populist and fascist forces...). Although bold political initiatives and surprising wins are possible (the obvious lesson of, for example, the ascent of Corbyn-led Labour as well as the Sanders campaign and the emergence of a new left in the US, and, on a smaller scale, of the \$15 and Fairness campaign in the Canadian province of Ontario), the advance of class-struggle politics is constrained by the political condition of the social forces on which these politics depend — not union officials or even union and community activists but the layers of the working class open to taking collective action against employers, landlords, corporate polluters, governments, and other state authorities when it seems that fighting back makes sense.

Recognizing this powerful constraint should direct our attention to the “need to start where the working class is, rather than where [we] might like it to be,” as Sheila Cohen

puts it. A good first move is to try to listen and watch attentively, using theoretical tools but trying to avoid imposing preconceptions. Most of us can contribute in at least some small way to fostering elementary forms of resistance where we work or live, and in these increasingly unpredictable times (who foresaw Corbynism, the influx of thousands of radicalizing people into the Democratic Socialists of America, or the hopeful “#MeToo moment”?) there are sometimes opportunities to do more. We can support and learn from promising instances of working-class self-activity wherever they happen, from neighbourhood anti-austerity campaigns to strikes to initiatives for change within unions to anti-racist protests. We can acknowledge and try to overcome the unhelpful tendency of radicals on the margins to huddle together rather than engage with people who are taking action but haven’t yet drawn the conclusions we have. Intellectuals working in academic institutions can, in addition to organizing where we are, develop relationships with, to quote Cohen, our “‘organic’ counterparts — as facilitators, researchers and educators in the cause of developing actually existing class organisation and resistance.”

Such an open and experimental approach is the most promising way to contribute to the possibility of reinventing a class movement through which people can effectively defend themselves within contemporary society and work for its supersession. Such a reinvention is what is called for by social struggles today, after the end of the movement that so profoundly shaped our traditions.

[1] I have addressed *operaismo*'s contribution to theorizing class in "Reorienting Class Analysis: Working Classes as Historical Formations," *Science and Society* 68.4 (2004-2005).