

## Strikes and Class Consciousness

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### Article abstract

This article uses a classical Marxist framework to study the consciousness and action of inside postal workers in Hamilton, Ontario during and after their participation in the 1987 strike by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). At the time of the strike the Hamilton Local of CUPW was 58 per cent women; the article includes a discussion of the impact of gender processes on women worker's consciousness and action. It also deals with three more general issues. First, through a discussion of conceptual issues and the presentation of a multi-level theoretical model, I offer advice on how to proceed with empirical research on strikes and class consciousness. Second, the "culture of solidarity" portrayal of strikers, as developed by Rick Fantasia, is criticized for presenting an over-integrated view of the participation and consciousness of strikers. I argue that one need not romanticize striking workers in order to be optimistic about the political role of the contemporary working class. This optimism must recognize that in a macro context of politico-economic stability, only a minority of a striking workforce can be expected to experience an expansion of generalized class consciousness. Third, I suggest that Marxist political action in the 1990s should concentrate on the development of generalized class consciousness, especially workers' positive sense of class unity, through the organization of local worker solidarity networks.

# Strikes and Class Consciousness

Tom Langford

FROM THE TIME OF MARX AND ENGELS, Marxists have asserted that the actions of a self-conscious working class will be an essential element in any successful anticapitalist movement. The proletariat has revolutionary potential by virtue of its numerical mass and concentration, strategic economic role, and common experiences of exploitation, injustice, and collective resistance.<sup>1</sup> To study the ebb and flow of class consciousness during a strike struggle is to take this assertion seriously.

To study class consciousness would also seem to fly in the face of much recent academic work. A number of theorists have utilized philosophical or empirical arguments to oppose the notion of workers as progressive agents of change.<sup>2</sup> Some, such as André Gorz, argue that new collective agents have replaced the proletariat at the centre of radical struggle in postindustrial societies.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, left-leaning postmodernists assert the importance of a diversity among radical currents and oppose the centring of oppositional politics around a particular group or value system.<sup>4</sup> The postmodern turn also has given prominence to the idea that any

<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Beijing 1978 [1847]), 168; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth 1967 [1848]), 90; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution. Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes* (New York 1978), 40-48.

<sup>2</sup>On the philosophical side see André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London 1982); and Chantal Mouffe, "Working-Class Hegemony and the Struggle for Socialism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 12 (1983), 8-26. The arguments of Gorz and Mouffe add very little to the classical critique of Marxism presented in Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume II* (Princeton 1966). Empirical arguments against the agency of the working class can be found in Alain Touraine, Michel Wieviorka, and François Dubet, *The Workers' Movement* (Cambridge 1987); and Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action Among the Western Working Class* (London 1973).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of different approaches to collective agency see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity: Class, Culture, Social Movements* (New York 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Warren Magnusson, "Decentring the State, or Looking for Politics," in William K. Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice* (Toronto

collective agency is impossible given the character of contemporary cultural and political processes.

In this intellectual climate, the Marxist class-consciousness problematic is hardly *de rigueur*. However, with its stress on both the objective and subjective, workers' interests and identities, this problematic allows research to pursue the links among material circumstances, working-class culture, and political consciousness.

More to the point, there is a strong empirical argument for pursuing the subject of strikes and class consciousness. Although in recent years many analysts have dismissed the radical potential of the working classes in advanced capitalist countries, there has been a surprising dearth of theoretically-informed research on workers. Indeed, much of our knowledge of the consciousness of contemporary workers is based upon unsystematic anecdotal evidence and responses to the questions of pollsters. During the past 20 years, there have been several thoughtful recommendations on how working-class consciousness might better be studied.<sup>5</sup> A recurrent suggestion is to study consciousness in the context of everyday working-class activities or periods of collective struggle. The list of ethnographies of the contemporary working class is growing.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, there have been very few studies of the dynamics of class consciousness during a collective struggle such as a strike.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, debates about collective agency proceed in the absence of evidence which is crucial to the Marxist assertion of working-class agency. This article assumes that informed discussion of the political potentialities and limitations of the contemporary working class requires a solid empirical foundation. At the same time, it reasserts the importance of the theoretical and

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1992), 69-80; Warren Magnusson and Rob Walker, "De-Centring the State: Political Theory and Canadian Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy*, 26 (1988), 37-71; Paul Patton, "Marxism and Beyond: Strategies of Reterritorialization," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago 1988), 123-39.

<sup>5</sup>The recommendations can be found in Martin Bulmer, "Some Problems of Research into Class Imagery," in Martin Bulmer, ed., *Working-Class Images of Society* (London 1975), 163-79; R.M. Blackburn and Michael Mann, "Ideology in the Non-Skilled Working Class," in *ibid.*, 156; Gordon Marshall, "Some Remarks on the Study of Working-Class Consciousness," *Politics and Society*, 12 (1983), 289-93; and Bertell Ollman, "How to Study Class Consciousness, and Why We Should," *Insurgent Sociologist*, 14 (1987), 57-96.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York 1981 [1977]); David Halle, *America's Working Man: Work, Home, and Politics among Blue-Collar Property Owners* (Chicago 1984); Thomas W. Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario* (Montréal 1991).

<sup>7</sup>The most systematic study of the changes in consciousness generated by a strike is Tony Lane and Kenneth Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons* (London 1971). Lane and Roberts conducted extensive fieldwork and a survey while the Pilkingtons strike was ongoing.

political issues raised by classical Marxist conceptions of the development of class consciousness.

The empirical content of this article consists of a case study of the consciousness and action of inside postal workers in Hamilton, Ontario during and after their participation in a strike which lasted from 30 September to 17 October 1987. The Hamilton study prompted me to examine a number of conceptual and theoretical issues associated with the study of strikes, and to reflect on the kind of political initiatives which will help to build upon the class consciousness generated by strike struggles. In this article I focus on these broader issues. My specific objectives are three-fold: first, to encourage and offer some direction to research on strikes and class consciousness; second, to argue that one need not romanticize the consciousness of striking workers in order to be optimistic about the political role of the contemporary working class; and third, to suggest a particular direction for Marxist political action in the 1990s.

### *Background to the Strike and Study*

IN 1987, THE CANADIAN UNION OF POSTAL WORKERS (CUPW) still just represented inside postal workers (mail sorters and handlers and wicket clerks) employed by the Canada Post Corporation. (The union became the bargaining agent for Canada Post letter carriers and truck drivers in early 1989.) CUPW began rotating walkouts on 30 September 1987. The strike was a defensive action: workers struggled to maintain job security clauses secured in previous collective agreements, to limit the employer's rights to use part-time and temporary workers, and to stop Canada Post from privatizing the wicket service jobs held by 4,200 workers across the country. From the first hours of the strike, Canada Post mounted an expensive strikebreaking operation (which ended up costing an estimated \$70 million).<sup>8</sup> The strike became nationwide on 9 October, the day after back-to-work legislation was introduced in the federal parliament. The union complied with the back-to-work Act and ended the strike on 17 October.

My case study of inside postal workers in Hamilton involved three key features. First, because the intention of Canada Post management and the Mulroney federal cabinet to force a confrontation with CUPW was quite apparent before the strike commenced, I committed myself to studying the strike in August 1987 and made a number of research preparations, including design of a questionnaire. This allowed me to begin my research prior to 30 September. Second, since the primary objective of the study was to understand the effects of the strike on the political attitudes and actions of individual workers, I concentrated my research on a sample of 45 strikers. Each study participant was formally interviewed at the time of the strike and again three months after the strike's conclusion. I also observed the activity of each of the 45 workers during the strike, and used information from members of the executive of the Hamilton Local of CUPW to arrive at a general

<sup>8</sup>*Toronto Globe & Mail*, 19 February 1988, A9.

picture of their workplace behaviour between the strike's conclusion in October 1987 and spring 1989. Third, the executive of the Hamilton Local of CUPW went out of their way to facilitate my research; they legitimated my observer-as-participant role during the strike, supplied copies of any strike-related documents in their possession, and (after a 'feeling-out' period) shared their observations and analysis of both events and the consciousness/action of the specific members of their Local.

The sample of 45 was drawn from a population of about 350 CUPW members in Hamilton at the time of the strike. Each of the 45 volunteered to participate in the study, either after reading an introductory leaflet distributed by union stewards prior to the strike, or being personally encouraged to participate by me during the course of the dispute. A conscious effort was made to stratify the sample so that it contained sizeable proportions of men and women; union leaders and rank-and-file; and workers on different shifts. An analysis of the membership records of the Hamilton Local revealed that the sample was representative of the Local's membership in late 1987 in terms of gender distribution (58 per cent women) and years of service in the Post Office.

### *Conceptual Issues*

#### *1. The Types of Effects Generated by Strike Participation*

A MAJOR STRIKE STRUGGLE is a momentous occasion in workers' lives, involving emotion-laden moments of intergroup conflict and ingroup solidarity which are not commonplace in working-class life. It is thus not surprising that some workers report that their worldview has been changed as a result of strike participation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For instance, when discussing the British miners' strike of 1984-85, Beynon reports, "A lot of people say that they've never experienced anything like it. Ever. It has been the major event in their lives. None of them will forget it." In a similar vein, Lane and Roberts note that some of the rank-and-file participants in a 1970 strike in Britain experienced such a change in political outlook and behaviour patterns that "the strike could be rightly described as a revolutionary experience."

A few members of the Hamilton Local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) reported a similar transformation. The most dramatic example is Sally (not her real name), an older worker hired since the last strike in 1981. As a result of the strike, Sally felt a sense of togetherness with her coworkers which was out of step with her past practice. "I'm not usually like that," she explained. "I pick and choose my friends and am basically pretty intolerant of stupidity. But the strike changed me a lot. It's made me more tolerant of fellow workers. I thought some of the people were dummies before, but now ... I can see their side on things." Her coworkers were now described as "brothers and sisters." Concerning national politics, Sally described herself as "a Conservative from way back." But the strike changed all that:

My family were all Conservatives, but I'll never vote for them again. I heard every word of the back-to-work debate on TV. It was depressing how cut and dried it was. The government — Harvie Andre [Minister Responsible for the Post Office] and the other

However, even when workers feel that their entire outlook has changed, it is quite likely that some beliefs have been unaffected by the strike. Furthermore, most strikers experience modest rather than fundamental changes in political beliefs. Therefore, researchers need to distinguish conceptually the major types of changes in political consciousness which strike involvement might create, and be cognizant of the possibility that a certain type of change does not necessarily imply other changes. In my estimation, the most useful model of consciousness change incorporates generalizations about how strikes have affected workers with a theoretical vision of what workers' political consciousness could become. Marxist writing on strikes combines these elements. I have derived a model from Lenin's classic analysis of strikes as a "school of war," but believe the model can stand up as a generic Marxist typology.<sup>10</sup>

According to Lenin, workers are transformed in three different ways by a strike. First, they experience individual empowerment. Second, they gain insight into the nature of intergroup conflict at the workplace and a strong sense of identification with fellow workers (what can be called a workplace class consciousness). Third, they develop some general perspectives on the class character of the whole society and on the need for the working class to unite and struggle (what can be called a generalized class consciousness).

The empowerment described by Lenin has two aspects. First, workers gain in assertiveness and self-confidence: where "in normal, peaceful times the worker does his job without a murmur, ... in times of strikes he states his demands in a loud voice." Second, the strike gives workers new hope that their situation can be better.

In turn, the workplace class consciousness described by Lenin has two main aspects. First, the strike teaches workers that their employer's interests are inimical to their own interests. Second, workers adopt an ingroup rather than a personal point of reference when analyzing the problems in the work relationship: the worker "does not think of himself and his wages alone, he thinks of all his workmates who have downed tools together with him and who stand up for the workers' cause."

In Lenin's view, participation in a strike also generates some general insights about the class character of capitalist societies and the options available to workers in fighting for their rights. First, workers develop a class-struggle perspective on society: "It becomes quite clear to the workers that the capitalist class as a whole is the enemy of the whole working class." Second, since different branches of the state side with the employer in a strike, the workers' eyes are opened "to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of the government and the laws as well." Third,

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Conservatives — put us down time and again. What they were saying was absolute nonsense — just window dressing for what they wanted to do anyway. But I respected what the NDP and Liberals were saying.

See Huw Beynon, ed., *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners' Strike* (London 1985), 1; Lane and Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*, 104.

<sup>10</sup>V.I. Lenin, "On Strikes," in *V.I. Lenin Collected Works, Volume 5* (London 1960 [1899]), 310-9.

strikes show workers "that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united" and that struggle is necessary for working-class advancement. Finally, "every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker's mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital."<sup>11</sup>

The need to distinguish these dimensions of consciousness change can be illustrated by the experience of Joanne, a middle-aged worker who took responsibility for picketing one of the main pedestrian entrances to the Main Post Office in Hamilton on 1 October 1987. Most patrons attempted to walk around the pickets. Joanne's response was to move in step with the patron in a picket line dance until the patron stopped and talked to her about the strike. This sort of assertive strike activism greatly enhanced her sense of self-worth. However, Joanne's empowerment had an ironic twist. A few months after the strike's conclusion she decided to enter a Canada Post competition for a front-line supervisory job. Joanne credited her active role in the strike with providing her with the self-confidence she believed was necessary to take on the supervisory role.

One further aspect of this model deserves special mention. The conception of workplace class consciousness derived from Lenin's *On Strikes*, like the conception of generalized class consciousness, involves separate beliefs about conflict with outgroups and ingroup identification. The distinction between beliefs concerning outgroup and ingroup is also an important feature of many contemporary models of class consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Does Being on Strike Necessarily Imply Changes in Consciousness?

DRAMATIC EVENTS IN A STRIKE STRUGGLE can leave two false impressions: first, that every worker is participating in the strike in a similar way; and second, that the mere fact of participation signifies a major change in political consciousness. An important basis for study is to clarify the notion of strike participation. Participation itself is a multidimensional concept. One dimension of participation is quantitative — the time of involvement in a strike. Other dimensions are qualitative, and include taking on a leadership role and involvement in different forms of protest. Protest action in a major strike can range from symbolic and information picketing, to verbal challenges directed at authorities, to blockade

<sup>11</sup>This last point demonstrates Lenin's belief that workers' consciousness could undergo considerable expansion in the course of trade union struggles. However, he also believed that the educative work of a revolutionary party was needed if workers were to develop a thoroughgoing socialist consciousness. See V.I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (Beijing, 1975 [1902]), 98; Thomas Taylor Hammond, *Lenin on Trade Unions and Revolutions, 1893-1917* (New York 1957), 50-1; and John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London 1988), 33.

<sup>12</sup>Kelly, *ibid.*, 88; Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies, Second Edition* (London 1981), 112; Mann, *Consciousness and Action*, 13.

picketing and harassment of scabs, police, and management, to seizure of property.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, because a worker's participation on any dimension is a matter of degree (rather than being a simple Yes/No situation), participation is a continuous (rather than a categorical) concept. This conceptual understanding suggests that a simple Yes/No measurement of whether a worker participates in a strike is hardly suited to a serious study of the relationship between strike participation and consciousness change.

Another question is also important when considering the individual effects of strikes: what factors *motivate* workers to participate in the strike in certain ways? Workers' prior orientations towards work and family, the employer, the union, and politics in general are not likely to be negated instantaneously by the novel experiences of collective struggle and intense comradeship. Therefore, prior orientations will influence not only how and to what extent a worker participates in a strike, but also the meaning which a worker attaches to particular strike experiences. By taking an individual's motivation for strike participation into account, a researcher guards against treating each and every striking worker as a newborn class-conscious militant.

Evidence from my case study supports these general arguments. Unlike in previous strikes, not a single CUPW member in Hamilton broke ranks and attempted to continue working during the 1987 strike.<sup>14</sup> In fact, four of the five workers whose union memberships had been suspended because of scab activity in previous strikes applied to the union for reinstatement either just before or after the 1987 strike. The absence of scabs from their own ranks was viewed with considerable pride throughout the Local. So was the fact that workers with personal connections to management (for example, wife of a supervisor) or with management aspirations (known because postal workers quickly find out who has entered a posted competition for a supervisory job) engaged in picket duty in this strike, whereas they had not done so in the past. Indeed there was no evidence of opposition to the strike in the union membership. "Not only did we not have a single scab," explained one worker, "but I didn't hear a single person say 'I can't really afford to be out here' like so many people did in previous strikes. People's attitude was 'I'm out here and that's it.' Even the people who didn't picket were 100% behind the union."

But while there was unanimity in the Hamilton Local at one level — absence of internal opposition — there were important variations in the extent of strike involvement and the rationale for involvement. A measure of strike involvement (compiled with the help of key informants on the union executive) classified

<sup>13</sup>A useful typology of protest struggle is presented in John Lofland, *Protest: Studies of Collective Behavior and Social Movements* (New Brunswick, New Jersey 1985), 262-5.

<sup>14</sup>Even if a Hamilton CUPW member had tried to continue working, it is questionable whether he or she would have been successful. A CUPW activist in Kitchener told me that management there had refused to let a CUPW member continue working — when she wouldn't go on strike, they asked her to leave the Post Office.



individuals in the sample into one of four categories. Twenty per cent were never or occasionally involved in strike activity. Another 18 per cent were sometimes involved, with 29 per cent and 33 per cent being regularly and dutifully involved respectively. (Those CUPW members whose involvement was dutiful tended to do extra duty during the strike without being asked.)

However, a simple quantitative measure of extent of involvement is only part of the story. What lies behind the limited involvement of some strikers is also of interest. For some postal workers, the extent of strike involvement was governed by narrow, short-term economic interests. The union's national constitution stipulates that CUPW members are only entitled to strike pay if they take part in strike activities. Every week during a dispute, union locals are required to prepare a list of those members who have fulfilled their commitments. In Hamilton, union members were required to sign a logbook in the strike headquarters so that the local executive could keep track of who was participating. More than a few CUPW members seemed to make only a courtesy call to the picket line each day. However, they would make sure to sign the union's logbook so that if and when strike pay was released they would qualify. (In the end workers received no strike pay since the national constitution specifies that "strike pay shall be provided starting the third week of a general labour dispute," and the union was only out on a nationwide basis for one week in this dispute.)

The preceding example presents an uncomplicated model where workers' prior orientation limits strike participation and thus limits the effects of the strike on consciousness. In another case, however, a certain type of motivation led to extensive strike participation which ultimately had little effect on consciousness. Tactical considerations were paramount for two Hamilton postal workers who had major cash flow problems and wanted a quick end to the strike. Their rationale for dutiful picket line duty was that only a major show of union solidarity would convince the employer that a long, drawn-out attempt to break the union would come to naught. It is important to note that strike involvement did nothing to change these workers' shopfloor practices: they were conciliatory toward management prior to the strike and conciliatory immediately after the strike. Indeed, their immediate objective after the strike was to work as much overtime as possible in order to make up for wages lost while on strike.

One other type of motivation also minimized the effects of strike participation on consciousness. For a number of postal workers, the strike served as a job surrogate. They defined their routine responsibility in this situation as picket line duty regardless of how they felt about the strike. An example is a rank-and-file member who never missed a picket shift despite describing himself as being "not a big supporter of strikes" in general and only a moderate supporter of this strike. After the strike's conclusion he very quickly picked up old workplace routines, and reported that the strike had had little impact upon his beliefs. Thus, when strike participation was defined as a routine duty rather than a moral imperative, participation did not seem to alter workers' consciousness.

We should thus resist the temptation to impute dramatic changes in political consciousness to every worker who is participating in a strike. During the 1987 CUPW strike, many Hamilton postal workers exhibited a situational solidarity. Some of these individuals were motivated to participate by calculations of individual gain; others desired to maintain relations with co-workers, and thus willingly accepted the role of striker for the duration of the conflict. In neither of these cases did public conformity with the union's struggle indicate acceptance of solidaristic values.<sup>15</sup>

#### *A Multi-Level Model:*

##### *Factors Influencing Changes in Strikers' Consciousness*

CASE STUDIES OF STRIKES such as the one I undertook present us with rich, individual-level data. However, such data provide an incomplete picture, since what happens at the individual level needs to be analyzed in its social and historical context. Figure 1 presents a model which integrates individual- and strike-level processes in the context of the political, economic, and labour relations environments of a strike.

This model represents a multi-level approach to the subject of consciousness change. A strike is not simply a generic strike, and workers are not simply generic workers. Rather, both a strike and the workers involved in it are products of a macro economic and political context and the particular labour relations of the workplace. Rosa Luxemburg emphasized how the impact of strikes upon workers was much greater in a period "when the social foundations and the walls of class society are shaken and subjected to a constant process of disarrangement" than in a period of economic and political stability.<sup>16</sup> This point can be extended by recognizing that there are different forms and levels of stability in capitalist societies, and that the extent of consciousness change in a strike is partially determined by the nature of the macro environments.

To some extent the labour relations of a workplace reflect macro environments. However, important factors such as management philosophy and history of working-class resistance also shape labour relations. The model in Figure 1 contends that the labour relations context has a major impact on changes in consciousness experienced by striking workers because it conditions the type of workers who enter the strike, the relative powers of union and management, and the economic/political intentions of the adversarial organizations.

Single case studies of strikes arrive at findings which apply to a single macro and labour relations context. With this type of data, the best we can do is speculate

<sup>15</sup>For a general discussion of the reasons why people conform, see Herbert C. Kelman, "Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three Processes of Attitude Change," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2 (1958), 51-60.

<sup>16</sup>"The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York 1970 [1906]), 186.

about how things might have turned out differently if a particular feature of the environment had been different. Consequently, a long-term objective of research on workers' consciousness and strikes must be to accumulate an inventory of case studies which can then serve as a basis for systematic generalizations about the impact of these levels on changes in consciousness.

The main body of Figure 1 outlines the individual- and strike-level processes which affect changes in workers' consciousness during a strike. It posits that there are seven direct influences on changes in workers' consciousness: (1) established orientations (towards work, family and recreation; the employer and the union; and politics in general); (2) extent and type of strike participation; (3) conflict level and conflict type of the strike (this includes the extent of state intervention); (4) length of strike; (5) public support for the strike; (6) union efforts at strike maintenance; and (7) strike outcome. The model is guided by two principles. First, variable features of strikes (such as the intensity of conflict, degree of support from other workers, and outcome of the strike) influence the process of consciousness change. An example of such cross-level influence is provided in a case study of workers' consciousness and action during the British steel strike in 1980: "The sense of defeat, and the prospect of further defeat to come, meant that overall, individual change was less than might have occurred following a perceived victory. The increased political awareness in these circumstances reinforced people's feeling of their lack of power."<sup>17</sup> Second, workers' established orientations have an important impact upon the over-all character of consciousness change. John Kelly offers a general hypothesis which is consistent with this principle: "Strike participation has much greater effects on those with relatively little past involvement in or experience of trade unionism and industrial action."<sup>18</sup>

The model in Figure 1 is intended as an outline of the complexity of the problem faced by those interested in how workers' consciousness changes during the course of a strike.<sup>19</sup> It can serve as a guide for interpreting the findings of a particular case study, and a reminder of the range of interesting questions which lie beyond the scope of a case study.

### *Limitations of the "Culture of Solidarity" Portrayal of Strikers*

INRICK FANTASIA'S ANALYSIS of the contemporary American working class, strikes and other workplace-based conflicts involve workers in "cultures of solidarity" —

<sup>17</sup>Jean Hartley, John Kelly and Nigel Nicholson, *Steel Strike: A Case Study in Industrial Relations* (London 1983), 15.

<sup>18</sup>*Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, 118.

<sup>19</sup>It should be noted that Figure 1 contains a feedback loop: the strike outcome affects the labour relations context. This implies that the strike has an ongoing indirect impact on workers' consciousness after the strike's conclusion since the labour relations of the workplace recurrently condition workers' sense of empowerment, workplace class consciousness, and generalized class consciousness.

"more or less bounded communities of workers ... representing emergent oppositions to the individualism of American culture and the atomization and acquiescence often held to be characteristic of the common, everyday existence of American workers." According to this perspective, striking workers end up challenging dominant social relations even though they do not set out with this political objective in mind: "The building of solidarity in the form, and in the process, of mutual association can represent a practical attempt to restructure, or reorder, human relations." Fantasia expresses the conviction that "cultures of solidarity are potentially durable associational forms that may shape reality beyond an acute crisis"; however, he also acknowledges "their often fragile, fragmentary, and defensive character."<sup>20</sup> His approach, then, is to juxtapose the unique culture of workers engaged in collective action with the transitory nature of that culture.

This sort of portrayal of strikers avoids a troubling question: what if the transitory character of "cultures of solidarity" partially results from the fact that the solidarity culture amongst strikers is not what it is cracked up to be? This type of question has been raised by those who want to make an empirical argument against the progressive political potential of the working class.<sup>21</sup> However, my objection is along a different line: the interpretive notion "culture of solidarity" tends to deflect our attention away from the experiences of many of the workers who engage in strike action. For example, take one of the key American strikes of the 1980s — the 1985-86 strike by meatpacking workers employed by the George A. Hormel Company in Austin, Minnesota. Employing a "solidarity consciousness" framework, Kim Moody offered this assessment of the strike in a 1988 publication: "The consciousness of hundreds of people in Austin was transformed and, what may be most important in understanding the meaning of P-9 [strikers' union local] for the future of American labor, embodied into a network of Austin-based organizations that refuse to disappear .... Unlike the aftermath of most lost strikes, the leadership did not disintegrate or return to 'normal life.' A sizable body of working-class leaders was created in Austin of a sort that is all too rare in the US labor movement." In a 1990 publication Hardy Green likewise emphasized the solidarity created during the Hormel strike: "Austin's union members and the tens of thousands of workers across the country who came to their defense showed that

<sup>20</sup>Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley 1988), 228-33, 11, 245, 23.

<sup>21</sup>For instance, Gavin Kitching contends that defensive economic struggles (exactly the sorts of struggles which generate oppositional "cultures of solidarity," according to Fantasia) "are perfectly compatible with, and indeed partly the product of, a form of profoundly anti-socialist class consciousness." This 'anti-socialist' class consciousness has two key elements: (1) acceptance of a subordinate position for workers, and (2) militancy restricted to the terms of the wage-effort bargain. Kitching makes the provocative argument that the "defensive and conservative form of class consciousness is a prime impediment to socialist transformation in Britain, and indeed in other parts of the advanced capitalist world." *Rethinking Socialism: A Theory for Better Practice* (London 1983), 16, 26-8.

there is a living culture that believes in mutual support among workers as a practical and ethical necessity." Undoubtedly solidarity was an important element of the Hormel strike, particularly the solidarity which P-9 was able to mobilize from progressives and labour activists throughout the United States. However, the extent and durability of the solidarity among the workers themselves should not be overstated. Green reports that at the height of the strike in late 1985, fully 900 of the 1400 members of P-9 were not fulfilling the six hours of weekly work required by the union. Furthermore, by the late 1980s the legacy of the strike was not nearly as positive as indicated by Moody. It included ongoing strife between scabs and unrecalled strikers, union president Jim Guyette being treated as an "outcast" in Austin, family breakups, strike activists leaving town to find work and, most significantly, serious infighting amongst those who had been at the heart of the "culture of solidarity."<sup>22</sup>

Questions about the depth of solidarity consciousness can also be raised when reviewing the results of two other case studies. The Pilkingtons strike involved more than 8,000 glassworkers in England in 1970. Lane and Roberts estimated that no more than 900 workers consistently supported the strike throughout its seven weeks' duration, and that only 400 workers were activists (200 as "hard-core pickets" and another 200 who could be called out for picket duty at short notice).<sup>23</sup> One of the case studies reported by Fantasia in *Cultures of Solidarity* involved a major strike by 750 food processing workers in Clinton, Iowa in 1979-80. Despite the fact that the employer began advertising for "permanent replacement workers" at the onset of the strike, no more than 200 workers "could be depended upon to participate in most strike activity" and 150 workers became scabs during the course of the dispute. Yet, although he reports this unevenness in strike participation, Fantasia neglects to address the tough questions which follow from such information. What level of strike participation entailed genuine involvement in the "culture of solidarity?" And of those involved in the culture, to what extent did each of them internalize a solidaristic consciousness?<sup>24</sup>

The major problem with the "culture of solidarity" approach to studying strike struggles is that it treats as given two phenomena — intragroup solidarity and solidaristic values/beliefs — which are variable and need to be investigated conscientiously in every case study. "Culture of solidarity" interpretations tend to present an over-integrated view of the participation and consciousness of strikers. This over-integrated view is, in turn, grounded upon a partial understanding of workers' social psychology. In summarizing the findings from three case studies of workers' collective action, Fantasia argues that workers "engaged in new forms

<sup>22</sup>Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London 1988), 320; Hardy Green, *On Strike at Hormel: The Struggle for a Democratic Labor Movement* (Philadelphia 1990), ix, 76, 269-77. See also Barbara Kopple's 1992 documentary film on the Hormel strike, *American Dream*.

<sup>23</sup>*Strike at Pilkingtons*, 105, 169-70.

<sup>24</sup>Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 180-225.

of activity (militant, direct action), created new associational bonds in practical forms (essentially new social movements), and developed new-found values of mutual solidarity (a new sense of 'us', a new sense of 'them,' and emergent moral sensibilities about the values associated with each)."<sup>25</sup> Note that this analysis assumes that solidaristic values necessarily flow from active participation in a strike struggle. However, my research on the 1987 CUPW strike indicated that workers' motivations for participation had an important impact on attitude change: instrumental compliance and role adoption are two bases for strike participation which do not entail the internalization of a solidaristic consciousness. Put in other terms, the "culture of solidarity" approach presupposes that a large degree of the solidarity exhibited in any strike is internalized solidarity, and thus fails to investigate the balance between internalized and situational solidarity in the striking workforce.

The "culture of solidarity" portrayal of strikers has two additional weaknesses. First, it tends to neglect the continuities between workers' pre-strike and strike experiences. Fantasia describes workplace collective struggles as "moments when the customary practices of daily life are suspended and crisis requires a new repertoire of behavior, associational ties, and valuations." This portrayal puts too much faith in the spontaneous emergence of oppositional working-class consciousness. In contrast, a more satisfactory portrayal would analyze both what is new and what is old in the strike, and how pre-existing structures (such as the organization of a union at national and local levels) and established individual orientations condition what emerges during the course of the collective struggle. My preference for this type of analysis is illustrated by Figure 1.

The second weakness concerns an assumption with explicit political implications. Fantasia arranges examples of workers' collective action along a continuum of "cultures of solidarity." At one end of the continuum are rank-and-file shopfloor struggles and at the other end are events such as the 1934 Minneapolis General Strike which are explicitly counter-hegemonic in character.<sup>26</sup> This analytical model implies that every strike is counter-hegemonic to at least a small degree. Undoubtedly this is an interesting hypothesis, but it should not be accepted without critical scrutiny. An alternative possibility is that the elemental solidarity created during an isolated workplace struggle is of a qualitatively different character than the mass solidarity engendered during periods of societal crisis and sustained by oppositional institutions. In this view, small "cultures of solidarity" have a very limited and self-contained oppositional element.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 232-3.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 72, 21-2.

<sup>27</sup>Don Wells' research on the class consciousness of Canadian autoworkers is consistent with this view. See "Holding the Line: Autoworkers' Resistance and the Limits of Class Struggle," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, 256-61, 420-1; and "Autoworkers on the Firing Line," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston 1986), 327-52.

My own preference is to depict strikers as a protest community. The term "protest" conveys that the strikers have a well-defined and limited basis for their action. "Protest" also suggests the organized nature of strikers' resistance. Strikes such as the 1987 CUPW strike in Hamilton are directed by a preestablished union leadership, while rank-and-file leaders quickly emerge in wildcats. Both types of strikes draw upon preestablished social networks among workers. Therefore, a strike is an organized protest not only in its purpose but also in the way it is conducted.

I am thus emphasizing the goal-direction and organization of strike action. This analysis is not meant to deny that emotions such as hostility, anger, euphoria, or dismay are part and parcel of strike struggles, or that spontaneous actions exist alongside organized actions. Nevertheless, I believe it is reasonable to presume that there is a rational and directed core to strikes.

The term "community" has also been chosen to convey a certain image. As a community, strikers share common interests in their relationship with the employer and various state institutions. At the same time, a community is not a monolithic collectivity. The level of participation in and commitment to the protest action is highly variable among the strikers. It is thus useful to see the community of strikers as consisting of a core group of leaders/activists and a periphery of passive strike participants, with intermediate layers of strike participants aligned between core and periphery.

In any strike we would expect to discover that solidaristic practices and values are most developed at the core of the community and least developed at the periphery. The term "community" conveys the practical unity of the strikers, but does not imply that cultural unity is a defining characteristic of strikers. Therefore, an advantage of this perspective is that the extent to which solidarity and solidaristic values have developed in any particular working-class protest community is an open question for investigation.

### *Workplace Class Consciousness Before, During and After the 1987 Postal Strike*

THE PORTRAYAL OF STRIKERS as a protest community implies the need to understand ideological divisions among strikers as well as the definition of the situation shared throughout the community.<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this section is to apply my

<sup>28</sup>Ideology is used in this article to refer to any set of interconnected beliefs and feelings. The elements of an ideology may be interconnected because they grow out of the common experiences of the members of a particular social group and/or because they have been intellectually linked in accordance with certain core assumptions, postulates, and ideals.

There are many types of ideology in a society. One or more of these ideologies can be classified as dominant if it represents the interests of a dominant group as being in line with the 'natural' order of things or the general societal interest.

general recommendation for studying strikers to the Hamilton Local of CUPW at the time of the 1987 strike.

In 1987 inside postal workers earned \$13.43 an hour. This was a good wage for semiskilled workers in Canada, and as a consequence most postal workers were highly dependent upon their jobs. Sixty-five per cent of my sample did not think they could find another job which paid a comparable salary, and 64 per cent thought it probable or very likely that they would spend the rest of their working lives at the Post Office. Furthermore, of the respondents who indicated they might quit their Post Office jobs at some point in the future, 50 per cent said they would do so to start their own businesses. Therefore, only a small minority of the sample (18 per cent) believed they had realistic possibilities for alternative employment as wage earners.

Like most Canadian workers, CUPW members experienced a decline in real wages during the early- and mid-1980s.<sup>29</sup> Still, in 1987 Hamilton postal workers viewed their wage levels as fair or more than fair. When I asked study participants whether they thought inside postal workers "are underpaid, overpaid or paid about right for the work they do," 23 per cent replied "overpaid," 71 per cent "about right" and only 7 per cent "underpaid."

Thirty-six per cent of the sample reported a household income of between \$20,000 and \$34,000, indicating that their own employment income was the main or sole source of support for their household. Thirty per cent had a household income between \$35,000 and \$49,000, 25 per cent between \$50,000 and \$64,000, and 9 per cent greater than \$64,000. There is thus a fairly wide range in the standards of living of the members of the sample. However, this does not mean that those with high household incomes were any less dependent upon their jobs. Workers had made purchases (usually on credit) and established consumption patterns which were in line with their household incomes. In order to maintain their present home lives, then, most postal workers absolutely needed a job at the Post Office. They faced a dilemma shared by all high-waged, semiskilled workers: a high wage expands the sphere of consumption choices and the comforts of home life but increases dependence upon a particular employer. It is not just that a job at the Post Office was a means to a good end; for many workers it was the only means to the end to which they had grown accustomed.

Given this situation, regular wages and even overtime were no longer mere inducements for postal workers: the wage relationship was experienced as coer-

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I accept Bourdieu's argument that ideologies do not have autonomous power: their power "is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e. in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced. What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief." Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA 1991), 170.

<sup>29</sup>Canadian Union of Postal Workers, "CUPW Conciliation Brief III," (Ottawa 1987), 13.



cion.<sup>30</sup> The extent to which this was the case in the Hamilton Local was illustrated by workers' responses to overtime restrictions imposed by Canada Post in June 1987. Workers were informed that they would only be offered two hours of overtime a day before casual employees were called into work. (Canada Post claimed to be worried about the adverse health effects of shifts that lasted longer than 10 hours. Limiting overtime also meant substantial savings in labour costs.) Hamilton postal workers were outraged at this unilateral change in overtime procedure and filed hundreds of grievances in summer 1987. This was an unprecedented number of grievances for the Hamilton Local, considering that a few dozen grievances a year had been the norm before the mid-1980s. Undoubtedly, some of the CUPW members filing the grievances were motivated by a strategic concern for the balance between regular and casual employees in the Post Office. At the same time, I do not believe it is coincidental that members fought so hard to defend the collective agreement when their opportunities to make about \$20 an hour in overtime wages were at stake. Overtime income was a necessity, not a frill, for many workers, and its limitation was experienced as a genuine hardship.

It can be seen, then, that work at the Post Office was an instrument to a decent home life. This does not mean that every Hamilton postal worker was a pure instrumentalist who devalued all but the instrumental aspects of work.<sup>31</sup> However, a certain degree of instrumentalism was universal among them since the market situation of high-waged, semiskilled workers and the individuation of home life dictated such an approach.

Even though they shared an underlying instrumentalism, Hamilton postal workers differed greatly in their characteristic workplace orientations. This was due to two factors. First, instrumentalism is compatible with three distinct orientations: (1) alienated; (2) conciliatory; and (3) collectivist. Alienated workers accept workplace relations as they are and do the minimum required to earn their wage and stay out of trouble with management. Conciliatory workers attempt to improve their situation through close relations and informal understandings with supervisors. Instrumental collectivists attempt to improve their situation by supporting and contributing to group struggles against management. In real-life situations different instrumental orientations may be combined. Furthermore, the way an individual acts to achieve instrumental objectives can change over time. Second, for some workers the instrumental approach was limited by a competing solidaristic approach. Solidarism involves an identification with and commitment to fellow workers and the local union. Therefore, it is a sense of ingroup identity which motivates the solidaristic collectivist to contribute to group struggles against

<sup>30</sup>See Dennis H. Wrong, *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses* (Chicago 1988), 45.

<sup>31</sup>The most famous sociological study of affluent manual workers depicted those workers as devaluing all aspects of work other than wages, and having no interest in building social networks at work. See John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer, and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge 1969), 64-5.

management. The present-day structure of postal workers' home and work lives means that solidarity can never entirely displace instrumentalism. Nevertheless, in some cases a solidaristic ethos has guided workplace action.

Hamilton CUPW members held an interesting mix of workplace orientations in the years preceding the 1987 strike. The 350 CUPW members were distributed between two main sorting depots (each running three shifts) and a number of postal substations and branch post offices. This meant that workplace relations often had a small-shop character. Furthermore, management in the pre-1987 period actively tried to maintain a spirit of cooperation with workers. These factors caused many workers to be conciliatory in orientation. In this circle of workers, the Hamilton Post Office was regarded as an oasis in a desert of bad Canada Post workplaces. As late as 1986 a number of workers demonstrated their allegiance to the Hamilton Post Office by wearing a button which stated "WE'RE NOT THE BIGGEST, BUT WE'RE THE BEST." The low number of grievances filed every year by the Hamilton Local prior to the mid-1980s indicates that a conciliatory orientation was widespread. Given the way that people mix orientations, it is sometimes difficult to assign an individual unambiguously to one orientation or another. Nevertheless, I undertook this task for the sample of Hamilton postal workers. My estimate is that 33 per cent of the rank and file were conciliators in the pre-strike period (but none of the union leaders). This suggests that approximately 100 of the 350 members of the Hamilton Local had a conciliatory orientation prior to the strike.

Yet there was also a strong history of collective struggle in the Hamilton Local. Hamilton postal workers had been in the forefront of the pathbreaking 1965 postal strike, and had actively participated in the national strikes of 1968, 1970, 1974, 1975, 1978, and 1981. Furthermore, the Hamilton Local had developed a record of independent militancy, as illustrated by the extra strike days logged during the summer of 1970 "to deal with local problems."<sup>32</sup>

The Hamilton Local's history of collective action had elements of both instrumentalism and solidarity. Struggles over the years had concentrated on bread-and-butter issues, and the Local had a high success rate. This strengthened the instrumental collectivism among postal workers. I estimate that 26 per cent of the rank and file and 41 per cent of the union leaders were instrumental collectivists in the pre-strike period (representing another 100 of the 350 union members). At the same time, the union leaders themselves were clearly motivated by a strong commitment to their fellow workers and the union; for instance, throughout the fall of 1987 they put in long hours on union business every week without even receiving an honorarium. Prior to the strike it appears that 58 per cent of the union leaders and 7 per cent of the rank and file were solidaristic in orientation; this encompasses another 50 of the 350 members of the Hamilton Local.

Finally, the remaining 100 union members expressed their instrumentalism in an alienated form in the pre-strike workplace. Those with an alienated orientation

<sup>32</sup>Joe Davidson and John Deverell, *Joe Davidson* (Toronto 1978), 73, 117.

were all rank-and-filers. The overall distribution of pre-strike orientations is summarized in Figure 2.

The unity of postal workers during the 1987 strike thus stands in sharp contrast to the deep divisions in workplace orientations which existed in the routine times preceding the strike. During the strike, leaders of the Hamilton Local would regularly marvel at the activism of workers who were normally conciliatory or alienated in orientation. At the time I found it difficult to understand the enthusiasm of union leaders since many of the workers they praised were much less than wholehearted participants. Only when I came to understand that those with a collectivist orientation had been in a minority position in the Hamilton workforce prior to the strike (150 out of 350 when we combine the solidaristic and instrumental collectivists) did the reaction of union leaders make great sense.

The unity of the Hamilton Local while on strike reflected the existence of a shared ideology of protest. This ideology, which cut across preexisting workplace orientations, was based, in the first place, on the factual information about contract negotiations which had been received through the mass media, publications of the national union, and workplace conversations. This information unambiguously established that the employer was demanding major contract rollbacks in the area of job security, and wanted to proceed pell-mell in privatizing the wicket service jobs held by 4,200 CUPW members across the country. Workers were easily persuaded that it was in their collective interest to oppose such measures strongly.

Two additional factors promoted a unified interpretation of Canada Post's intentions in its dealings with inside postal workers. The Letter Carriers' Union of Canada (LCUC), which had tended to be very conciliatory in its approach to contract negotiations, was forced to go on strike from 16 June to 4 July 1987. During that strike the employer hired strikebreakers in an attempt to keep the mail moving, and thus provoked major picket line confrontations across the country. Many inside postal workers saw the letter carriers' strike as Canada Post's dress rehearsal for a major battle with the far more militant CUPW. Indeed, in the post-strike interviews conducted in early 1988, fully 86 per cent of my sample agreed that "the federal government and Canada Post management hoped to smash [our] union in this confrontation."

A generalized negative assessment of the employer's intentions was also encouraged by developments in Hamilton. Criticisms of local management's actions in the pre-strike period centred on two main issues. The first is the most important: the two recently-appointed managers of mail processing and wicket services at the Main Post Office were not widely respected. Both men were seen as keen on implementing directives from above without regard to the concerns of workers or any informal local agreements previously in effect in the Hamilton Post Office. Hamilton workers lost in two ways as a result of the newcomers' managerial style: (1) some objectionable formal methods of work organization and scheduling were introduced in this period which, although common in other cities, had previously been withheld from Hamilton; and (2) management grew less tolerant

of the longstanding pattern whereby workers would take it easy when the mail volume was light as long as they worked hard when the mail volume was heavy. The second local issue concerned the abusive conduct of a couple of front-line supervisors who had recently arrived in Hamilton. Whether the over-all deterioration of the working environment in Hamilton was orchestrated by Canada Post or coincidental with national developments cannot be established (although I suspect that both plan and coincidence were in operation). However, regardless of the cause of the local changes, they had a major impact on the development of an ideology of protest in Hamilton. As David Waddington notes, "Enhanced perceptions of untrustworthiness are liable to have a profound influence on the extent to which arguments are persuasive. For example, assertions that management are behaving in an exploitative or malevolent fashion are more likely to be perceived as valid in an atmosphere of low trust."<sup>33</sup> The breakdown of a comfortable labour-management relationship in Hamilton caused postal workers to be very receptive to critical interpretations of the intentions of Canada Post management in 1987.

Finally, three factors caused Hamilton postal workers to come to a common understanding that a strike was a preferred course of action. First, workers' inferences about the intentions of Canada Post management and the federal cabinet of Brian Mulroney led them to the conclusion that the employer had no intention of entertaining any sort of negotiated compromise with CUPW. Second, the course of events during the LCUC strike was interpreted as a "script" for a successful CUPW strike. Waddington notes that "script-based persuasive arguments possess high intrinsic validity. They involve an established basis for supposing that events will proceed in a certain manner."<sup>34</sup> In the LCUC strike, workers resisted the strikebreaking operation en masse and thus turned public opinion against Canada Post and the government; this forced the employer to agree to a negotiated settlement with terms much better than had been offered before the strike. This chain of events suggested to inside postal workers that a halfway-favourable outcome in their negotiations could only be obtained if they went on strike with the same unified resistance as shown by the letter carriers. Third, the two primary leaders of the Hamilton Local were widely respected by the membership: their integrity was unquestioned, and they were thought to be more intelligent and knowledgeable than anyone in management at the Hamilton Post Office. The belief that workers' local leadership in a strike would be sound helped to solidify the strike as an element of the ideology of protest.

The members of the Hamilton Local thus were prepared to strike when the CUPW National Office asked them to walk off the job early on the morning of 1 October 1987. As can be seen in Figure 2, the strike had a dramatic impact upon the distribution of workers' orientations. A majority (63 per cent) of the Hamilton

<sup>33</sup>David P. Waddington, *Trouble Brewing: A Social Psychological Analysis of the Ansells Brewery Dispute* (Aldershot, England 1987), 20.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

Local were instrumental collectivists during the strike; this majority was an amalgam of workers who had previously expressed their instrumentalism in conciliatory, alienated, or collectivist forms. It is important to note that the employer

Workers who had been conciliatory could have switched to an alienated orientation for the duration of the work stoppage. However, in my sample all of the conciliatory workers become instrumental collectivists. Indeed, only an estimated 13 per cent of the Hamilton Local's membership were alienated during the strike, and all of these workers had previously been alienated. Finally, there was a modest increase in solidaristic collectivists (from 14 per cent to 24 per cent of the membership). Some of those who shifted to this orientation had previously been alienated while others had been instrumental collectivists.

The protest community of strikers and the ideology of protest which integrated that community were situational constructions. Therefore, we should eschew any assumption that the shift in workers' orientations from before the strike to the time of the strike itself is necessarily either a permanent phenomenon or the beginning of an ongoing process of worker radicalization. The protest community, however, in conjunction with the experiences of intergroup struggle and intragroup camaraderie during the strike, represents a new terrain for ideological struggle. There are three primary differences between this new terrain and the terrain normally experienced by postal workers.

First, workers' interest in workplace and national political issues was increased. Second, the contest between competing workplace orientations was transformed. Whereas during routine times prior to the strike a solidaristic outlook was marginalized, during the strike solidarity was an efficacious approach which was constantly being lived and articulated by many activist workers. The strike also temporarily undermined the social basis for the conciliatory and alienated orientations. Thus, the strike had tilted the "playing field" of struggle over practical orientations such that solidarity and instrumental collectivism were the only serious contenders. Third, the combination of heightened political interest and enhanced credibility of collectivist orientations made possible the dispersion of systematic political ideologies among postal workers. In making this third observation I do not mean to suggest that striking workers are highly suggestible and will latch onto any set of structured ideas which is promoted in their protest community. As George Rudé notes, practical beliefs (based on workers' direct experiences and oral traditions) are "stubborn." A certain degree of coincidence between "derived" ideology (Rudé's term for a pre-existent system of ideas) and practical ideas is necessary, therefore, for derived ideas to have any chance at inclusion in the protest ideology. Furthermore, workers do not simply absorb derived ideas like sponges. "In the case of all classes, and not of the 'popular' classes alone," writes Rudé, "all 'derived' ideas in the course of transmission and

adoption suffer a transformation or 'sea-change': its nature will depend on the social needs or the political aims of the classes that are ready to absorb them."<sup>35</sup>

Given this analysis of the *possibilities* for ideological change, the distribution of workplace orientations after the CUPW strike is of great interest (see Figure 2). It is true that some of the pre-strike conciliators became so disenchanted with management that they adopted an alienated posture in the post-strike period. It is also true that there was a small increase in the number of solidaristic collectivists compared to the pre-strike period. However, an over-all assessment is that orientations basically returned to "normal": the conciliatory and alienated groups together constituted a clear majority of the union membership after the strike.<sup>36</sup> The following factors contributed to the relative lack of change. First, the underlying instrumentalism of workers blocked the widespread adoption of solidaristic values even during the strike. Second, the relatively short duration of the strike allowed many workers to drift back semi-consciously into pre-strike orientations. Third, the strike's failure to provide an immediate resolution of any issues turned many workers away from the instrumental collectivist position they had adopted while participating in the protest community.<sup>37</sup> Fourth, workers could not get their problems solved through union action in the post-strike period. The grievance system was hopelessly overloaded, caused in part by "an employer boycott of the collective agreement procedure."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, strike action was no longer a realistic option given the coercive terms of the strike-ending legislation.<sup>39</sup> Recognition of these constraints on union action also undermined support for instrumental collectivism. Finally, during and immediately after the dispute there were no

<sup>35</sup>George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York 1980), 36. See also Harvey J. Kaye, "Introduction: George Rudé, Social Historian," in George Rudé, *The Face of the Crowd: Studies in Revolution, Ideology and Popular Protest* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey 1988), 1-40.

<sup>36</sup>The percentages in the "After Strike" column of Figure 2 actually underestimate the alienation of the union membership. Many instrumental collectivists, and even some solidaristic collectivists, were very discouraged at the situation of postal workers and could be accurately described as "alienated collectivists."

<sup>37</sup>A new contract for the period 1 October 1986 to 31 July 1989 was not imposed by an arbitrator until 6 July 1988. It preserved workers' job security (in the event of cutbacks or closures, workers were guaranteed jobs within a 40-kilometre radius of the old location) but rolled back restrictions on the use of part-time employees and included no new impediments to the Corporation's privatization plans.

<sup>38</sup>John Deverell, "Canada Post Uses New Tactics in Power Struggle with Union," *Toronto Star*, 6 February 1988.

<sup>39</sup>While the compulsory mediation-arbitration process was underway, the legal penalties for defying the legislation included *minimum* fines of \$500 a day for union members and \$10 thousand a day for union officials, and a five-year ban on union officials holding a job with Canada Post or an office in CUPW.

concerted efforts to interpret the strike for the Hamilton membership in terms of a collectivist "derived" ideology such as socialism.

*Gender Processes and Changes in Workplace Class Consciousness*

A STRONG UNION backing up a good collective agreement gives all workers some security and confidence when dealing with the constant harassments of management. This security is especially appreciated by women workers since the actions of male managers and supervisors toward them are often sexist in character. For many women postal workers, the balance of power on the shopfloor in Hamilton was extremely liberating simply because they did not feel constrained to tolerate any kind of harassment from management. Denise, who had been a Canada Post employee for only a few years at the time of the strike even though she had been in the paid labour force for two decades, reported that the Hamilton Post Office was the only place she'd ever worked "where women don't have tension headaches about having to kiss ass. You can open your mouth and say what you think. Women aren't intimidated."

One important difference between women and men strikers was the close attachment many women had to their jobs and the consequent anger they felt toward the strikebreaking operation which threatened that attachment. In part this attachment reflects the fact that while CUPW wages were good for males, they were especially good for females given the continuing segregation of most Canadian women workers into low-wage ghettos.<sup>40</sup> However, that attachment also reflected women's appreciation of the collective power they had to resist harassment in their working lives — a power even more rare in Canadian society than the \$13.43 an hour they were paid for semiskilled work.

My experiences with the protest community of strikers indicate, too, that women workers did not feel the weight of sexism in their relations with male coworkers. As would be expected there was some bawdy humour, but unlike the situations I'd lived through during my five years of wage labour in manufacturing plants in southern Ontario in the late 1970s and early 1980s, women gave much better than they got.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, women took on important leadership roles during the strike; there was no clique of "old boys" at the top who ran the show (as, for example, there had been in the Hamilton Local of the Letter Carriers Union during their strike in late spring 1987).

At the same time, traditional housework and nurturing roles constituted a barrier to many women workers' participation in the strike. In some cases women posties made a determined effort to organize these responsibilities in a way which

<sup>40</sup>For a recent overview of gender segregation in the Canadian labour market and the gender wage gap, see Harvey J. Krahn and Graham S. Lowe, *Work, Industry, and Canadian Society*, Second Edition (Scarborough 1993), 160-75.

<sup>41</sup>For a discussion of gender politics on a shop floor dominated by men, see Stan Gray, "Sharing the Shop Floor," *Canadian Dimension*, 18 (June 1984), 17-32.

facilitated participation. Thus, husbands would be recruited to pick up young children from babysitters and teenagers would be organized to come downtown to the picket line for a couple of hours after high school classes finished for the day. However, other women were expected by husbands to do even more domestic work during the strike than on regular workdays since they were 'on vacation.' It is also important to note that the pressure of family responsibilities was a more important factor in women's participation in the union before and after the strike than during the strike. This is because strike involvement could take the place of a regular work shift, whereas union involvement at other times represented an extra commitment in an already-full schedule. This explains the fact that although women were overrepresented among the Hamilton Local's stewards (compared to the 58 per cent women in the local's membership), only one of six executive members at the time of the strike was a woman. Holding an executive position in a medium-sized CUPW local such as Hamilton's (with insufficient dues to pay for release time for even one executive member) entailed a tremendous commitment of time and energy.<sup>42</sup> Family commitments prevented a number of women CUPW activists from considering a position on the executive. For these women, expansion of workplace class consciousness during the strike was blocked from growing into formal involvement in the local's leadership.

Finally, although most women postal workers did not feel obliged to tolerate the harassment of male managers and supervisors, thus making their work environment relatively non-sexist, they were still faced with ongoing struggles against sexist practice both during and after the strike. The major problem during the strike was the sexual assaults of women workers by a few of the all-male Hamilton-Wentworth regional police officers who attacked the picket line. These cops would purposefully grab women's breasts while pushing picketers out of the way of trucks and buses. They treated this practice as sport. In one case a woman striker berated a cop who had just assaulted her. When she loudly yelled in his face, "Listen, I'm not interested in being treated like that," he sneered in reply, "Oh yeah? Then what are you out here for?"

A more subtle type of sexism was practiced by male supervisors after the strike ended. Canada Post hired special security personnel to videotape strikers during picket-line confrontations. From comments made to strikers after they returned to work, it seems as if a number of local supervisors had viewed the tapes. Immediately after the strike's conclusion, the anger of the women strikers was made light of by male supervisors. One woman was asked whether she was embarrassed by her actions on the picket line. Meanwhile, Denise faced a constant stream of jocular references to how "wild" she had been on the picket line. For instance, when one

<sup>42</sup>This point was graphically illustrated one Thursday in March, 1988, when I met Hamilton Local president Bill Dalglish just after he had finished his work shift at a postal station. He told me he had received 17 separate union business telephone calls over the course of that day!



supervisor was dealing with her, another passed by and commented, "For God sakes, don't make her mad." She was also told by a supervisor, "I'd never get in your way when you are angry. You were livid on the picket line." These comments embarrassed Denise because she did not have the impression that her picket line behaviour had been that extraordinary. Throughout the first week on the job after the strike her constant thought was, "Will I ever live this down?"

By collectively making fun of women strikers' picket line behaviour, male supervisors asserted their own 'superior' emotional coolness and detachment, and attempted to define the women's militant anger as abnormal. The tactic was partially successful since even some of the most militant and dedicated women strikers had their self-confidence shaken in the first days after returning to work.

### *The Problem of Generalized Class Consciousness*

MANY DIFFERENT ANALYSTS have argued that while workers may develop workplace class consciousness during the course of collective struggle, certain aspects of life in contemporary capitalist societies block them from attaining generalized class consciousness. Both objective and subjective factors have been posited as blocking mechanisms. Among the objective factors are the institutional integration of unions into the capitalist system, the affluence of workers and consequent instrumentalism, divisions among workers in different sectors of the economy, the powerlessness of workers compared to big business and the state, and the capacity of representative political institutions to absorb and deflect working-class grievances.<sup>43</sup> The subjective factors are the conservatism of trade-union bureaucrats and the failure of working-class parties to promote class-conscious interpretations of social and political developments.<sup>44</sup> Of course, every one of these factors is likely to contribute to the failure of workers to develop generalized class consciousness. For academic and political reasons alike, however, it would be valuable to have a sense of the relative importance of the hypothesized blocking mechanisms at the present time.

<sup>43</sup>See Perry Anderson, "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action," in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn, eds., *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus* (Harmondsworth 1967), 263-80; Michael R. Smith, "The Effects of Strikes on Workers: A Critical Analysis," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 3 (1978), 457-72; Wells, "Holding the Line"; Mann, *Consciousness and Action*, 51; Kitching, *Rethinking Socialism*, 16-28; Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Action*, 39.

<sup>44</sup>On the problem of trade-union bureaucrats, see Anderson, "The Limits and Possibilities," 277; Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1987), 89-90, 93-4, 100-3. On the importance of working-class parties, see Leo Panitch, "The Impasse of Social Democratic Politics," *Socialist Register 1985/86: Social Democracy and After*, 60-4; and Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order: Social Stratification in Capitalist and Communist Societies* (London 1971), 97-102.

My own reflections on this question begin from two findings. First, Hamilton CUPW members were almost unanimous in their belief that if there was to be a solution to their overall difficulties with the employer, that solution was electoral change. Second, the 1987 strike failed to generate a widespread commitment to the labour movement among postal workers (only 30 per cent of the sample reported that their attitudes toward the labour movement had grown more positive).

The first finding is consistent with John Kelly's proposition that representative institutions and party competition are able to maintain the legitimacy of the state apparatus in the face of partisan state involvement in a labour dispute.<sup>45</sup> Of course, which pro-capitalist party holds power often does make a real difference for the working class. Thus, electoral change is an important component of working-class politics. However, it is significant that electoral change was the only option actively discussed by postal workers during the strike. This signifies the importance of electoralism as a component of dominant ideology in advanced capitalist countries; workers tend to see electoral change as the only realistic and legitimate route of political action.

The widespread acceptance of electoralism reflects the fact that workers are inundated with the electoralism message, not least of all from social democratic politicians and labour leaders. However, it is also important to note that there is an affinity between the instrumental orientation of postal workers and electoralism. The electoral option answered workers' desire for change in the business plan of Canada Post Corporation. At the same time it made no demands upon workers. As a result, workers gained the comforting notion that major changes could take place without them having to change their daily routines. Electoralism does not require solidaristic action and, indeed, passes the responsibility for doing anything onto the political parties. It is consistent with workers' preference to get on with their lives, using work as the means to a gratifying home life.

This analysis raises an important theoretical question: to what extent can progressive political initiatives undermine the hold which electoralism has on contemporary workers? My assessment is that such initiatives will have a negligible effect on the vast majority of workers, simply because electoralism is an ideological element which aligns with their perceived economic interests. In this regard, Leo Panitch is correct to note that political factors mediate the development of consciousness.<sup>46</sup> However, political factors do not have independent effects on consciousness since socioeconomic factors mediate the efficacy of political initiatives. Therefore, it is wrongheaded to construct an argument with this logical structure: holding objective factors constant, the introduction of progressive subjective factors can have a major impact upon the consciousness and political participation of workers. Such an analytical abstraction fails to recognize the contradictory dependence of subjective and objective factors. The implication of this general

<sup>45</sup>*Trade Unions and Socialist Action*, 39.

<sup>46</sup>"The Impasse of Social Democratic Politics," 57-67.

argument is that electoralist ideology has a material basis in contemporary working-class life, and simply cannot be eradicated by exposure to anti-electoralist propaganda or extraparlimentary political options.

I now turn to the second empirical finding (limited support for the labour movement created among Hamilton CUPW members). My analysis begins from the proposition that there is nothing "natural" or inevitable about workers in a capitalist society developing a commitment to the unified struggle of workers against capitalism. Such a commitment involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. The affective dimension is the "class feeling" which Luxemburg highlighted in her discussion of the Russian strike wave of 1905-06:

Class feeling, the class instinct, is alive and very active in the Russian proletariat, so that immediately they regard every partial question of any small group of workers as a general question, as a class affair, and quick as lightning they react to its influence as a unity .... The class instinct of the youngest, least trained, badly educated and still worse organized Russian proletariat is immeasurably stronger than that of the organized, trained and enlightened working class of Germany or of any other west European country. And that is not to be reckoned a special virtue of the "young, unexhausted East" as compared with the "sluggish West," but is simply a result of direct revolutionary mass action.<sup>47</sup>

Luxemburg argued that widespread "class feeling" cannot be manufactured by educational efforts and does not emerge out of routine, isolated struggles. Rather, it is the product of "a constant struggle against the existing order." Most workers partake in such a "constant struggle" only during a period of political or economic instability and widespread collective protest. Luxemburg's perspective is distinct from syndicalism in that she emphasized the importance of political education in giving the working-class movement a socialist aim. However, she also emphasized that only a wave of collective struggle can build the class-conscious will which the movement needs to oppose capitalism.<sup>48</sup>

Building on Luxemburg's ideas, my suggestion is that politico-economic stability is the paramount factor blocking the development of generalized class consciousness in collective actions such as the 1987 CUPW strike. The context of economic stability is reflected by the instrumentalism which guided most workers' action during and after the strike. The context of political stability is reflected by the dominating shadows which electoralism cast on workers' assessments of political options.

This analysis does not amount to a fatalistic call to abandon political activism around strikes. It would be foolish to argue that socialist leadership and a vibrant working-class culture would have anything but a positive impact on the develop-

<sup>47</sup>"The Mass Strike," 198-9.

<sup>48</sup>Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London 1976), 111-2; Rosa Luxemburg, "Reform or Revolution," in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York 1970 [1900]), 88; Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike," 160-2, 205.

ment of generalized class consciousness. However, in periods of stability relatively few workers are in a position to experience a major expansion of class consciousness. Thus, the impact of politico-ideological initiatives is quite circumscribed.

My view is that it is still important for socialists to see isolated strikes as "schools of war," though we need to be realistic about what percentage of a workforce is sitting in the front rows of the schoolroom. For the majority of the Hamilton Local of CUPW, the 1987 strike did not generate a solidaristic perspective and thus did not provide a basis for subsequent solidaristic action. At the same time, I estimate that 64 workers (18 per cent of the workforce) were solidaristic collectivists in the immediate post-strike period. These workers' solidarism was tempered by the failure of the strike to achieve immediate results, the coercive removal of CUPW's right to strike and the post-strike offensive by management in the Hamilton Post Office. Nevertheless, their class consciousness had not dissolved; it was merely muted by the relative lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful solidaristic activity.

### *The Politics of Class Consciousness*

A KEY COMPONENT of traditional Marxist politics has been efforts to nurture and build upon the class consciousness generated by "schools of war." I believe this is still an important component of Marxist politics. However, we need to recognize and not be discouraged by the relatively small proportion of workers who might be interested in our efforts at politicization. We also need to ask: How can class consciousness best be nurtured in present circumstances?

An answer to this question depends, first and foremost, on the type of class consciousness which one is interested in nurturing. For instance, a focus on workplace class consciousness leads to a program of political action which is centred on shopfloor labour-management conflict, and a focus on socialist class consciousness leads to a formalized program of political education. I believe both of these approaches are deficient.

Don Wells has proposed a strategy for slowly building shopfloor resistance into shopfloor insurgency. He advocates a very conservative maxim for implementation of the strategy: "ten victories are not worth one defeat," and is particularly concerned with protecting militants from repression.<sup>49</sup> As Wells' own research has shown, however, shopfloor resistance is severely constrained by the institutionalized power of management and union. Therefore, despite Wells' optimism that resistance can systematically spread beyond the workgroup level, this appears to be an unlikely event. Furthermore, in the event that workers are able to win a series of victories which extend shopfloor control and workplace class consciousness throughout a plant or office, management (and perhaps the union) are going to pull out all the stops to quell worker resistance. They can fire prominent leaders, as

<sup>49</sup>Don Wells, "Holding the Line," 522-7.

happened at the General Motors Van Nuys assembly plant in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. This action engendered a deep sense of powerlessness amongst the militant workers in the plant.<sup>50</sup> And if all else fails, management has the legal right and economic resources to shut down the operation — the ultimate defeat for working-class resistance centred on the shopfloor. My evaluation is that workers are too vulnerable and management is too powerful for this strategy to have any more than sporadic success.

A strategy centred on the deliberate creation of socialist class consciousness is aimed at a very small segment of the solidaristic working class. Workers' personal circumstances must be such that they have the time to participate in the educational process (formal courses, study groups, conferences, and so on). Furthermore, workers who are insecure about their intellectual capabilities, have a negative view of intellectuals and mental work, or simply do not want to be put into yet another situation where they are subordinate (in this case to those who direct the educational process) will not participate. Finally, the dedicated but misdirected work of far Left grouplets has given the very idea of socialist education a bad name in many sections of the labour movement. Grouplets have tended to promote a one-sided and sectarian vision of socialism and to use the educational process as a recruiting forum. As a consequence, workers who might otherwise be interested in doing some systematic study have understandably shied away. A focus on socialist class consciousness thus simultaneously isolates a handful of workers in an education mode, and does nothing to counteract the isolation which most solidaristic workers experience due to the privatism of home life and the limitations on militancy at work caused by instrumental necessity.

These critical comments anticipate my favoured strategy: Marxists would do well to nurture generalized class consciousness, and especially workers' positive sense of class unity. We must not forget that this strategy is geared to a minority of the contemporary working class (workers such as the 64 solidaristic collectivists in the Hamilton Local of CUPW in January 1988). However, this is a numerically impressive minority: dozens of workers in towns, hundreds in small- and medium-sized cities, and thousands in major urban areas. Our primary goal should be to facilitate the collective participation of these workers in struggles at the local level. Examples would be a support picket for a striking union local, a demonstration against a plant closing or cutback in government funding/services, an information picket outside a plant or office where workers are experiencing occupational health or safety problems or a fundraiser for a non-profit community group such as a child care centre. Such activities either involve protest against or the assertion of an alternative to the profit system. Furthermore, they would be low in risk for the participants, energize their existing solidarism and, by broadening the scope of their

<sup>50</sup>Eric Mann, "Labor-Community Coalitions as a Tactic for Labor Insurgency," in Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, eds., *Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community* (New York 1990), 122-3.

in-group feeling and sense of collective power, stimulate the development of generalized class consciousness. It is also important to realize that mass working-class action at the community level would have important effects on different groups of nonparticipants. Workers with solidaristic tendencies would vicariously experience empowerment. And the action would serve to highlight the class perspectives of business and community leaders who are forced to take a stand in response to the collective protest.

The idea of bringing workers together for joint action in their community is hardly new. Labour councils sometimes organize demonstrations, rallies or forums. However, the core participants are invariably the network of activists already involved in the Labour Council. Furthermore, any attempts to draw in a wider circle of workers must depend upon the will and organizing ability of local union executives. As a consequence, Labour Council initiatives either fail to mobilize very many solidaristic workers, or mobilize on an unsystematic, ad-hoc basis. In both scenarios, there is only a weak tendency toward generalized class consciousness.

Similar problems will arise in coalitions between labour unions and community groups. For example, in New Haven, Connecticut a Community-Labor Alliance (CLA) was set up as a coalition of groups and never had access to the membership lists of the member groups. "The lack of lists meant that if the CLA sponsored a rally, it had to ask the leaders of each organization to mobilize their members. The CLA could hope that the rally was a high priority for those busy leaders and that the leaders were skilled organizers. But it could not directly organize large turnouts, develop broad member education and leadership, or even send mailings to the memberships of affiliated organizations."<sup>51</sup> Such experience suggests that to meet the goal of nurturing generalized class feeling through collective action, a network of individuals must be built.<sup>52</sup> Direct contact with individuals means that communications will be much more reliable, workers can be challenged to make a personal commitment to solidarity actions, and some degree of continuity can be built from one collective action to another.

The major problem in building a network of solidaristic collectivists in a community is securing initial contacts. Personal reference is likely to be the primary

<sup>51</sup>Barbara Richards, "The Community-Labor Alliance of New Haven," in Brecher and Costello, eds., *Building Bridges*, 88. Kim Scipes offers corroborating testimony based upon his work in US coalitions: "Working with a range of unions — teamsters, molders, office workers, electrical workers, service employees, etc. — I have never seen a union's mailing list, even when our coalition was working hard to save their members' jobs. In other words, when a local union gets involved in a coalition, it participates only to a limited extent and on its own terms." "Labor-Community Coalitions: Not All They're Cracked Up To Be," *Monthly Review* 43 (December 1991), 38-9.

<sup>52</sup>An interesting experiment is the Workers' Solidarity Club of Youngstown, Ohio, described in Staughton Lynd, "From Protest to Economic Democracy: Labor-Community Ownership and Management of the Economy," in Brecher and Costello, eds., *Building Bridges*, 263-7.

source of individuals: once one person is involved, she or he can be encouraged to pass on information to friends and acquaintances who might be interested. Routine notices about the network in labour, community, and progressive newsletters are likely to yield a few contacts. And major events, such as a large support picket at a strike-bound plant, are especially important since they will attract a few workers who "come out of the woodwork" at a time of crisis to lend support, and will familiarize the striking workers with the network at a time when the practical importance of working-class solidarity is obvious to them. The contact process must be ongoing and cumulative, and thus is dependent upon a small group of people committed to the network and willing to coordinate its growth. The most difficult feature of making contacts is to move beyond the relatively small circle of activists (in the labour movement and sympathetic groups) to the rank and file. A network of activists is certainly of more value than no network at all; however, my idea is to build a network slowly which includes a great many solidaristic collectivists who, for whatever reason, are not presently playing an active role in labour unions or other progressive groups.

Once contact is made, the goals of the network must be presented in such a way that solidaristic collectivists will be morally persuaded to get involved. A simple written description of the goals of the network and how it works is essential. However, workers must also be challenged to put their solidarism into practice. An interesting approach to this problem was developed for the "Jobs With Justice" campaign of the industrial unions of the AFL-CIO in the 1980s.

The backbone of the Jobs With Justice effort would be the "I'll Be There" pledge card. Individual workers and their supporters would be asked to sign a sacred pledge which stated in part, " ... during the next year, I'LL BE THERE at least five times for someone else's fight as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll all start winning."<sup>53</sup>

The general point is that the collectivist conscience of solidaristic workers must be stimulated, and a commitment of participation secured.

The sort of network I am proposing is an end in itself. It has worthwhile goals which should not be subordinated to other goals; namely the immediate goals of support for other workers and assertion of working-class interests on key community issues, and the strategic goal of nurturing generalized class consciousness through collective action. At the same time, a successful network is sure to stimulate political involvement beyond the network itself. "The act of bring people together," writes Barbara Richards, "whether for conferences, cultural events, meetings, or rallies, has an impact. They talk to each other, learn from each other, and make plans well beyond the formal agendas."<sup>54</sup> Workers may be stimulated to study and strategize together, to take a more active role in the conventional politics

<sup>53</sup> Andrew R. Banks, "Jobs With Justice: Florida's Fight Against Worker Abuse," in Brecher and Costello, eds., *Building Bridges*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Richards, "The Community-Labor Alliance," 82.

of a union local, labour council or NDP riding association, to get involved in extra-parliamentary activist campaigns or to investigate progressive social movements. Any of these developments would be most welcome, but it should not be the goal of the network to orchestrate their occurrence. In my view, it is counterproductive to shepherd class-conscious workers into a limited number of intensive political activities. Rather, such workers need to be given the opportunity to widen their political horizons and contribute to political causes as they see fit. A necessary condition for working-class agency is the existence of a sizeable number of workers who are self-consciously political in thought and practice. Thus, the participation of workers in an expanded sphere of political activities should be an intended yet undirected goal of this type of solidarity network.

The 1987 CUPW strike fostered the solidaristic consciousness of some 18 per cent of the Hamilton Local. However, the ascendancy of management power in the months after the strike's conclusion, the inexorable press of work and domestic routines, and the knowledge that involvement in the Local's leadership entailed a large commitment of time limited these workers' opportunities to act on that solidarism. My ideas for building worker solidarity networks are aimed at workers like the 64 solidaristic collectivists among the Hamilton CUPW membership. Marxists need to facilitate organizations which will encourage such workers to act on and develop their solidarism, but which will respect the many factors which may block them from intensive or even regular involvement. For instance, a single mother of two teenagers may, for financial reasons, have to try to work as much overtime as she can fit into an already busy schedule, and thus be unable to make regular contributions to solidarity events. Still, even her occasional participation in a network is a major advance over the political unconnectedness which she presently experiences.

As a socialist political activist I interpret the 1987 strike as something of a missed opportunity. A moment of vigorous collective struggle should be an occasion to get at least a few class-conscious workers to make an ongoing commitment to solidarism, and to put them in touch with a wide range of like-minded individuals. In the past Marxists thought they had all the answers, and promoted single-headed organizations to speak for the working class. Today what Marxists need to do is provide opportunities for solidaristic workers to work together and learn from their collective experiences.

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