

# Organizing for Defeat

## The Relevance and Utility of the Trade Union as a Legitimate Question

Brian Green

Volume 62, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/l1t62cnt01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Green, B. (2008). Organizing for Defeat: The Relevance and Utility of the Trade Union as a Legitimate Question. *Labour / Le Travail*, 62, 153–169.

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

## CONTROVERSY / POLÉMIQUE

# Organizing for Defeat: The Relevance and Utility of the Trade Union as a Legitimate Question

**Brian Green**

*The continuity of struggle is easy: the workers need only themselves and the boss in front of them. But the continuity of organization is a rare and complex thing: as soon as it becomes institutionalized it becomes used by capitalism....*

Mario Tronti, *Lenin in England*

THE DECLINE AND RETREAT of the North American labour movement in the past two decades has been a matter of extensive commentary and scholarly and political debate.<sup>1</sup> While these discussions have contributed immensely to our understanding of economic restructuring and strategic imperatives for the labour movement's continued political viability, much of the literature is limited to either a "counting of the dead" or a focus exclusively on the aggressive strategy of capital in the post-Keynesian era. Surprisingly little has been said about unions themselves and the relationship between their organizational consolidation as partners of a once ascendant Keynesian class compromise and their subsequent paralysis in the face of the collapse of that compromise. This paper will attempt to initiate such a discussion by tackling these questions: how did the historical development of the trade union form render it

1. See Steve Babson, *The Unfinished Struggle: Turning Points in American Labor, 1977–the Present* (Lanham 1999); Harvey Krahn and Graham Lowe, *Work, Industry and Canadian Society* (Toronto 1998); George Ross and Jane Jenson, "Post-War Class Struggle and the Crisis of Left Politics," *Socialist Register*, 22 (1985–1986), 23–49; Donald Swartz, "Capitalist Restructuring and the Canadian Labour Movement," in Jane Jenson and Rianne Mahon, eds., *The Challenge of Restructuring: North American Labor Movements Respond* (Philadelphia 1993), 381–402.

particularly vulnerable to the ravages of capitalist restructuring? And what, then, might this suggest about the future viability of the union as we know it?

This paper does not pretend to provide a detailed or especially nuanced historical record, that having been amply provided by historians of labour whose work is referenced throughout these pages. Rather, I trace the broad contours of trade union history<sup>2</sup> only as a context in which to analyze the strategic and organizational crisis of the official labour movement – a crisis which is best understood not as a victory of capital over the working class, nor as a widespread abandonment of economic struggles, but rather as a result of expanded struggle by an expanded global working class, and the movement of anti-systemic conflicts beyond the plane for which the trade union organization was prepared. Rather than a crisis of struggle and a victory of capital, then, the challenge to mainstream labour (and traditional left political parties) can be understood, at least in part, as a crisis within the left, a crisis brought on by the extension of popular demands beyond Keynesian limits, beyond the organizational capacity of the trade union, and beyond the parameters of settlement embraced by traditional left organizations.

## The Birth and Expansion of the Trade Union

In North America, the birth of the modern trade union is generally traced to approximately 1880, as the *industrial* enterprise came rapidly to replace the farm and the family-based shop as the heart of economic production.<sup>3</sup> Implying greater physical and cultural distance between employers and employees, technological displacement, de-skilling and larger workgroups, industrial capitalism required new forms of organization and mobilization by which workers could effectively present grievances and win concessions in the workplace. The trade union emerged within this political-economic context, initially as an association of skilled, white, male workers to wage defensive struggles that sought to prevent the degradation of labour in industrial capitalism's "satanic mills."<sup>4</sup> Building on traditions of artisanal guilds, these craft

2. The historical sketch in this paper is intended to present only the broadest trends and general tendencies in North American labour. For more complete histories, see re: the us, Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais, *Labor's Untold Story* (Pittsburgh 1955); Philip S. Foner, *The History of the Labor Movement in the us* (New York 1972); or re: Canada, Krahn and Lowe, *Work, Industry and Canadian Society* (Scarborough 1988) or Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1983), to name only a few of the best known.

3. See also Babson, *Unfinished Struggle*; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1974); Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto 1989); James K. Rinehart, *The Tyranny of Work: Alienation and the Labour Process* (Don Mills 1996).

4. See, for example, Babson, *Unfinished Struggle*; Heron, *Canadian Labour Movement*; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State and American Labor*

unions articulated a demand for fair wages, respect for skill, and privileging of their members over the mass of “unskilled,” “common” workers unleashed by the expansion of industrial production.<sup>5</sup> In short, they were constituted by, represented, and defended what has been commonly referred to as an aristocracy of labour, and sought not to overturn the rule of capital so much as to win and/or protect a privileged place within it.<sup>6</sup>

It was only with the advent of World War I, however, that this emerging labour movement won its first major victories, taking advantage of the international crisis and the demand for increased productivity to wrest concessions from capital and state. Governments in both the US and Canada responded to labour’s challenge with a dual strategy of accommodation and repression, the former reserved for craft unions, which sought an increased share in the profits generated by capitalism; the latter pursued relentlessly against a rapidly expanding industrial unionism, which (archtypically) sought to organize all sectors of the working class and whose struggles were explicitly aimed towards the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

This industrial union movement, represented initially and incompletely by the Knights of Labor, and most notably by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the One Big Union (OBU), was to play a key role in the future evolution of labour organization, impacting the development of unions many years after its disappearance from the scene. Characterized by the diversity of its membership, its emphasis on organizing unskilled mass labour, direct action tactics, and class-struggle discourse, the ideal-typical industrial unionism stood in dramatic contrast to its craft-oriented counterpart.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, industrial unions attempted to break, if only partially and

---

*Activism 1865–1925* (New York 1989); Rinehart, *Tyranny of Work*.

Even many neoconservatives acknowledge the profoundly stabilizing influence of craft-oriented unions. Troy, a proponent of Milton Friedman’s unfettered capitalism, rails against the emerging “social movement unionism,” while recognizing and lamenting “Old Unionism’s acceptance of capitalism and rejection of socialism.” Leo Troy, *The New Unionism in the New Society: Public Sector Unions in the Redistributive State* (Fairfax 1994), 119.

5. Jonathon Cutler and Stanley Aronowitz, “Quitting Time” in Joseph Cutler and Stanley Aronowitz, eds., *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation* (New York 1998), 10–11.

6. Consider, for example, a satirical verse written in response to the hostility of many skilled machinists to the proposed inclusion of “less-skilled” boilermakers in their union. “Aristocrats of labor/ we are up on airs and graces./ We wear clean collars, cuffs and shirts,/ likewise we wash our faces./ There’s no one quite so good as we/ in all the ranks of labor./ The boilermaker we despise/ although he is our neighbor. Cited in Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 197.

7. See Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Sam Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York 1999); Heron, *Canadian Labour Movement*; Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990); Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*.

8. Paul Buhle, “The Legacy of the IWW,” *Monthly Review*, 57 (June 2005), 13–27; Staughton Lynd, ed., *We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana 1996).

gradually, with the limited notion of “working class,” which had defined craft unions as exclusively the organizational terrain of white, urban, male workers.<sup>9</sup> Often articulating an organizational vision that included industrial workers, agricultural labourers, and the unemployed, and that rejected the racial and gender segregation typical of their more “respectable” counterparts, unions such as the IWW envisioned a working class far more broad and diverse than that typically emphasized by the mainstream industrial and political left.<sup>10</sup> As their successes grew in the years leading up to World War I, and particularly after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, industrial unions represented a significant threat, if not to the legitimacy of the state, at least to the ability of capital to generate a stable rate of accumulation and maintain popular legitimacy, and to the trade union as the organizational model for class struggle and the vehicle for worker representation. This movement, then (along with the more generalized socialist ferment in the World War I and Bolshevik Revolutionary years), can be largely credited for forcing a strategy that was to emerge initially after World War I and be entrenched in law after World War II – accommodation of the state and capital with craft unionism in order to address the most glaring inequities of capitalism, politically marginalize the “radical element” within labour, and designate anti-capitalist labour movements as “Bolshevik,” thereby justifying their fierce and often bloody suppression.<sup>11</sup>

The industrial relations regime that emerged in the interwar period, then, had two related antecedents: the existence of a craft-based, defence-oriented and politically cautious trade unionism with a long history of defending skilled, white, male workers; and the violent repression of alternative forms of organizing rooted in anti-capitalism, mass action and cross-sectoral working-class mobilization. That is, it was largely the mass action and anti-capitalism (whether socialist, anarchist, or syndicalist) represented by industrial unions that opened political doors for craft-based organizations to gain official legal recognition, and the frequent cooperation of the latter in repressing Bolsheviks

9. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 200–201.

10. For more on industrial and mass-action unionisms, see Lynd, ed., *We Are All Leaders; Leier, Where the Fraser River Flows*; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*. For information on the successes and failures of industrial unions in politically organizing diverse groups of workers, see Philip J. Dreyfus, “The IWW and the Limits of Interethnic Organizing,” *Labor History*, 38 (Fall 1997), 450–470; Lisa McGirr, “Black and White Longshoremen in the IWW: A History of the Philadelphia Marine Transport Workers Union Local 8,” *Labor History*, 35 (Summer 1995), 95–119; or Ann Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW,” *Feminist Studies*, 9 (Summer 1983), 335–358.

11. For more detailed information on the legal consolidation of trade unions and the repression of alternative organizational forms, see Buhle, *Taking Care of Business*; Buhle, “The Legacy of the IWW”; Foner, *The History of the Labor Movement*; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*; Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995); or Joseph McCartin, “An American Feeling,” in Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris, eds., *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise* (Cambridge 1993), 67–86.

and anarchists, which consolidated the legal standing of AFL affiliates as the “legitimate” voice of labour and as a partner in the tripartism that emerged in the post-World War II years.<sup>12</sup> As capital enjoyed its post-World War I heyday on the heels of the war-years’ accommodation with craft unions, the stage was set for a drastic reorganization of capitalist governance. Not only were profits skyrocketing amidst the post-war reconstruction, but the protections enjoyed by craft unions during the war years and their cooperation in the identification, vilification, and repression of “the reds” had established a major political precedent. It could not be undone without provoking extensive resistance from even the most moderate of labour organizations.

### Depression, War and the Keynesian Reconstruction

The years after World War I saw an attempt by capital to withdraw its recognition of the trade union movement. This was precisely the historical moment when capital enjoyed windfall profits associated with post-war reconstruction.<sup>13</sup> The combination of rapid and often reckless capitalist expansion and massive resistance by both unionized and non-unionized workers to the imposition of austerity and the removal of legal protections led by 1929 to the collapse of the North American economy. As Ford understood well, mass production without a corresponding accommodation of worker demand (i.e. overproduction combined with underconsumption) had rendered capitalism visibly vulnerable to mass protest. With the onset of the Depression, then, a new strategy was called for, one that could reignite economic growth, stabilize the accumulation of capital, ensure the creation of a consumer market (i.e. increase wages), and weaken the attractiveness of alternatives to capitalism. That strategy emerged in the *General Theory* of John Maynard Keynes,<sup>14</sup> and was to fundamentally reconfigure capitalism for several decades and to institutionalize in North America a particular form of working-class association, with specific goals, specific strategies, and a specific organizational form – what we now understand as the trade union.

The Keynesian strategy, as used here, is shorthand for a package of reforms involving state policy, economic planning, welfare, and industrial relations that came to influence government (and to a lesser extent corporate) policy between the late 1930s and the late 1940s, and that maintained its currency

12. Buhle, *Taking Care of Business*; Buhle, “The Legacy of the rww”; Bill Fletcher, “Notes for SEIU/ Afram Talk” (Speech on the State of US Labour, unpublished manuscript 2005); Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*; Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape*. For a broad examination of the relationship between the threat of mass movements and the legal recognition of formal organizations, see Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York 1979).

13. Babson, *Unfinished Struggle*, 42–43; Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 189–190.

14. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Cambridge 1936). For a review of Keynes from the political right, see Troy, *The New Unionism*, 126–127.

until the 1968–1973 period. “Keynesianism” is attributed to Keynes in that he, more than any other figure, identified the crisis of capital as a political crisis and suggested that the recognition and incorporation of working-class demands could be more economically and politically lucrative than ongoing struggle, crisis, and reform. It must be recognized, of course, that Keynes himself neither anticipated nor planned all of the various components that came to be associated with his more general theory.<sup>15</sup> I do not suggest, then, that Keynes himself is solely responsible for, nor even directly involved in all things “Keynesian,” as that term is employed. Rather, his *General Theory* represents the most sophisticated and complete encapsulation of the capital-side class analysis that informed the restructuring of the world economic system around Bretton Woods, and that guided economists, planners, and policy makers in a sizable part of the world through the mid-20th century.

The term “Keynesian model,” then, refers here to the expansion of state regulation, legal recognition of unions, and implementation of protective legislation to prevent a recurrence of the social collapse of the Depression years. Explicitly accounting for and attempting to address the inequalities produced by capitalist development, the need to maintain balance between rates of production and consumption, and the reality of working-class mobilization, Keynesian strategy aimed to direct class antagonism through legal channels and incorporate wage demands into capital’s own growth strategy. It thereby institutionalized and managed what had previously been a challenge to capital itself.

The compromise involved three groups – collective capital, the state, and the unionized industrial working class, whose mobilization in the interwar years had threatened to destabilize the system from within. Trade unions were recognized as legitimate representatives of working-class interest, and were ensured a strictly circumscribed place within the system of political and economic governance in return for their commitments to pursue their interests through legally recognized and legally managed channels and to cooperate in the anti-Communist campaigns of the Cold War. Without recounting the specific history of labour’s “rationalization” and political integration into tripartism (a history whose struggles, gaps, and silences have been well-documented elsewhere<sup>16</sup>), the result of this arrangement was an organizational form whose democracy was modeled on the liberal state. Trade unions participated in maintaining industrial stability so long as collective agreements were

15. The “Keynesian” industrial relations package in North America, for example, emerged from the works of others (who both preceded and followed Keynes himself), including Sumner Slichter, *The American Economy: Its Problems and Prospects* (New York 1948) and John R. Commons, *Institutional Economics* (Madison 1934), as well as the mediation practices and arbitral decisions of William Leiserson and George W. Taylor.

16. See, for example, Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape*; Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London 1988); Kim Moody, “Towards an International Social Movement Unionism,” *New Left Review*, 225 (September–October 1997), 52–72; Ross and Jensen, “Post-War Class Struggle,” 23–49.

honoured by employers, winning monetary compensation generally pegged to productivity and profit increases. They were junior partners in governance, to be sure, but partners nonetheless, whose own success was to be measured by the success of overall capitalist development.

But the Keynesian strategy included another component as well, one directed toward the provision of basic needs and the prevention of abject poverty. This social wage was comprised of an ensemble of welfare policies that ensured relief for unemployed workers, a guaranteed level of subsistence, and provision of basic health care and education, among other things. Managed by the state and distributed as universal entitlements, these provisions went farther than the productivity deal in terms of their interference with classical economic logic, in that they provided for subsistence separated from the requirement to work and the limitation of intraclass competition for jobs. What is more, the social wage extended far beyond the unionized, industrial sector, and contributed to the development of a widespread system of social benefits that was not conditional upon capitalist growth, as was the productivity deal.

Keynesianism's combination of an entitlement system that separated work from subsistence, and that was applied across the population with the explicit incorporation of unions into industrial development and the pegging of wage increases to productivity thus had contradictory implications. Particularly relevant for the labour movement, however, was the fact that its involvement was limited to that side of the deal that did link productivity to wages. This produced a situation wherein the state alone managed distribution according to need while the official representatives of the working class managed distribution according to productivity, and linked themselves to the collective capitalist rather than the collective social body. The long-term implications of this for labour have been studied extensively,<sup>17</sup> but one particularly useful approach is that articulated by C.L.R. James, for whom Keynesianism institutionalized a system of capitalist/trade union co-management.

For James, the Keynesian system recomposed the official union movement as a "bodyguard of capital,"<sup>18</sup> effectively assigning to it a managerial role in the production process. The industrial relations regime consolidated the formalized collective agreement, with its legalized procedure for settling disputes, as the single most important tool of the union, thus formalizing the union's commitment to limit job action and to oversee the maintenance of production according to the terms of that agreement.<sup>19</sup> Important as a legally binding document protecting workers' collective rights, then, the collective agreement and the entire industrial relations system that evolved from it also

17. Buhle, *Taking Care of Business*; Moody, *An Injury to All*; Moody, "International Social Movement Unionism"; Ross and Jenson, "Post-War Class Struggle"; Swartz, "Capitalist Restructuring and the Canadian Labour Movement."

18. C.L.R. James, F. Forest and Ria Stone, *The Invading Socialist Society* (Detroit 1972 [1947]), 21.

19. Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape*.



brought labour, industry, and the state together in a tripartite partnership to manage the conditions of capital accumulation. Ultimately, this partnership existed to determine the parameters within which labour could be exploited, to standardize compensation, and to ensure that capital could expand without unnecessary disruption.

Finally, the introduction of Keynesian strategy reconstituted the union's internal structure, formally dividing the trade union as legal-political entity from its membership. Though not reducible to an oversimplified "bureaucratization," this formalization of the union organization armed its executive members with specific knowledge and disciplinary powers,<sup>20</sup> while at the same time disarming workers of the very direct action and workplace-based strategies that had forced capital's recognition of labour organization in the first place.

But the shift from workplace mobilization to legal resolution of disputes had implications beyond the disempowerment of rank-and-file members and the renunciation of creative strategies for immediate and direct worker action. Not least of these was the growth of a professional servicing staff whose expertise was not in the area of struggle but in negotiation and law. The professionalization of unions emerged as a natural consequence of the industrial relations regime that governed Keynesian-era capitalism, and certainly served the immediate interests of labour in that context. The processes of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration by which labour peace was maintained required that all parties bring to the table a common language, common skills, and a common political culture, all of which it was deemed necessitated the retention of labour relations specialists by unions no less than by management. These union staffers brought with them extensive knowledge of the legal system, political strategies often gained through involvement with electoral politics, and a detailed knowledge of procedure and process to operate large organizations with efficiency. What they rarely brought, however, was an understanding of immediate industrial dynamics, an intimacy with the workers they represented, or an ability to shift from boardroom to workplace strategies. As a result, labour found itself tied to a legal process for dispute resolution that was effective only so long as the tripartite arrangement remained respected by all parties. Those enmeshed in this tripartism, however, could neither anticipate the unravelling of that compromise nor cope with the suddenly and dramatically more antagonistic environment that emerged after the mid-1970s.

### **Crisis of Keynesianism, Crisis of Labour**

The gains won by trade unions under Keynesianism are traced directly to the crisis of capital in the interwar years and the ability of working-class organizations to leverage that crisis. Through the institutionalization of the Keynesian

20. Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape*, 36–40.

system, however, a dramatic change had taken place: the official organizations of the working class had tied their success to capital's, with the result that a crisis of capitalism would now also manifest itself as a crisis within the labour movement itself. When the Keynesian system broke down in the early 1970s, so too did the very *raison d'être* of the formal union movement, ushering in a period of crisis from which organized labour has yet to recover.

The crisis of the Keynesian order has been discussed at length,<sup>21</sup> and its detailed review is beyond the scope of this paper. There are, however, factors that both contributed to and emerged from that system's collapse that are of particular relevance in considering the ongoing crisis of labour. First, it must be acknowledged that Keynesianism as a system to manage capitalism emerged out of capital's compromise with only one particular sector of the global working class: industrial, unionized, located in the global north, and generally white and male.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, the implementation of Keynesianism as state policy involved the provision of extensive entitlements to a wide array of workers, unionized or not. Nor was that social wage limited to populations in North America and Europe; throughout what is called the Third World, national governments instituted their own variants of Keynesianism, together most notably referred to as *import substitution industrialization*, which privileged organized industrial labour relative to agricultural and subsistence workers, and that established, too, entitlements that extended at least to urban dwellers. There was, then, precedent for working-class sectors excluded from the productivity deal, and without formally recognized organizational structures, to mobilize for inclusion in and/or increases to the social wage without being tied to institutional arrangements pegged to productivity or legally governed dispute resolution mechanisms.

The political implications of this situation, as it emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has been analyzed extensively. But what is significant is that the crisis and collapse of Keynesianism was rooted largely in the rebellion of sectors of the global working class that had been excluded from the institutional arrangements of tripartism, but that had been able to take advantage of the social wage. Just how this was configured varied widely across the globe. Women demanded recognition of domestic labour as work, campaigned for wage equity and equal opportunity in paid employment, and sought community over isolation. Third World workers exploded in rebellion from Vietnam to Angola to Iran to Guatemala, while civil rights and black nationalist movements surged forward, particularly in the US. Students refused a life path limited to

21. Harry Cleaver, "Close the IMF, Abolish Debt and End Development," *Capital and Class*, 39 (Winter 1989), 17–39; Samuel Huntington, "The United States," in Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki, eds., *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York 1975), 59–118; James O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (New York 1973); Ron Phillips, "The Failure of Keynesianism and the Collapse of Bretton Woods," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 8 (1985), 1–25.

22. Ursula Huws, "Fixed, Footloose or Fractured?" *Monthly Review*, 57 (March 2006), 25.

school-career-death in favour of the multiplication of desire; ecological movements mushroomed in response to agribusiness, environmental degradation, and the nuclear threat; agricultural labourers formed unions inspired by both organized labour and emerging social movements. General strikes erupted in Czechoslovakia, France, Mexico and elsewhere, drawing together students, feminists, industrial workers, migrants, and the unemployed. Diverse and often fractured though they were, these struggles shared in common a post-Keynesian sensibility, in that they all emerged from a popular re-evaluation of the social value invested in (re)productive activity and a new social valorization of such intangibles as leisure, desire, and freedom.<sup>23</sup> Waves of conflict circulated globally, inspiring and drawing on one another, what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call a “convergence and accumulation of struggles”<sup>24</sup> for which the Keynesian order was entirely unprepared.

As numerous scholars have shown, the rebellions of the 1968–1973 period – so often referred to as post-class “new social movements”<sup>25</sup> – cannot be properly understood without direct reference to capital’s social order generally and the social wage particularly. Building on the “fiscal crisis of the state” thesis of James O’Connor, Christian Joppke notes that the universal entitlements, or “collective consumption” associated with the welfare state diverted significant dollars from private capital to the public, making the social wage largely independent of productivity or free market logic.<sup>26</sup> As demand increased and expanded, particularly in the context of civil rights, post-colonial, feminist, and student movements, the abilities of capital and the state to finance compromise were stretched to the breaking point: capitalist welfarism and its system of tripartite governance were no longer compatible with the accumulation of capital.

By the mid 1970s, scholars on the right and left were in agreement that the Keynesian strategy had outlived its due date.<sup>27</sup> A debt crisis stretched across First, Second and Third Worlds<sup>28</sup> as the Keynesian state responded to the crisis

23. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge 2000), 273. For more on the “new social movements” of this era, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London 1985), and David Plotke, “What’s So New About New Social Movements,” *Socialist Review*, 20 (1990), 81–102.

24. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 264.

25. Claus Offe, “New Social Movements,” *Social Research*, 52 (1985), 817–867; Hank Johnston, Enrique Larana and Joseph R. Gusfield, “Identities, Grievances and New Social Movements,” in Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston and Joseph R. Gusfield, eds., *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia 1994), 3–35.

26. Christian Joppke, “The Crisis of the Welfare State, Collective Consumption and the Rise of New Social Actors,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32 (1987), 240–241.

27. O’Connor, *Fiscal Crisis of the State*, 5–10; Huntington, “The United States.”

28. For more on the origins and development of the debt crisis, see W.R. Cline, *International Debt and the Stability of the World Economy* (Washington, DC 1983).

with further public spending,<sup>29</sup> yet this strategy only exacerbated the conflict. As the rate of profit dropped, individual firms sought concessions from their unionized employees, the latter steadfastly refusing to accept smaller wage increases than they had achieved during the boom years, with the result that strike levels peaked in the early 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Socialized capitalism could no longer provide a stable regime for accumulation, and capital's collective wisdom fell behind a new strategy to restore its ability to generate profit. That strategy, generally referred to on the left as neoliberalism, emerged in theory in the early 1970s and was implemented as policy through the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> It ushered in a drastic reduction in wages, deep cuts to universal entitlements, and intense political repression of popular movements that resisted austerity.

This, then, was the situation facing the North American trade union movement in the years after 1973: its organizational structure had been designed to fit a tripartite model of negotiation and "fairness"; its sources of strength in periods of crisis, worker mobilization and direct action, had been to a great extent suppressed in the repression of industrial unionism (an assault in which the trade unions actively participated), and largely abandoned by both executive members and servicing staff; its ultimate recourse was to a framework that based remuneration on the rate of profit (now frequently the rate of loss); and it had disavowed solidarity with workers in the Third World and with huge numbers of potential allies at home in order to win favour with the Cold Warriors of North American political administration.<sup>32</sup> In short, it had established itself to operate in a political-economic order governed by Keynesian principles, and was entirely incapable of responding when capital abandoned that strategy for another, far more aggressive, orientation.

## Trade Union Paralysis and the Renewal of Class Struggle

The fate of organized labour between the 1970s and the present has been the subject of extensive discussion, as analysts and activists alike have sought to explain the crisis and identify strategies for renewal. Some, like Craig Heron,<sup>33</sup> consider the current challenge to be not unlike others faced and survived in earlier eras, and simply reiterate that the conditions of inequality are

29. Cleaver, "Close the IMF," 21; Huntington, "The United States," 75.

30. George Caffentzis, *From Capitalist Crisis to Proletarian Slavery* (Jamaica Plains 1998).

31. Vincent Navarro, "The Worldwide Class Struggle," *Monthly Review*, 58 (September 2006), 18–33.

32. Buhle, *Taking Care of Business*; Gerard Greenfield, "The ICFTU and the Politics of Compromise," in Ellen Meiksins Wood, Peter Meiksins and Michael Yates, eds., *Rising from the Ashes? Labor in the Age of Global Capitalism* (New York 1999), 180–189; Ursula Huws, "What Will We Do? The Destruction of Occupational Identities in the 'Knowledge-Based Economy,'" *Monthly Review*, 57 (January 2006), 19–34.

33. Heron, *Canadian Labour Movement*.

themselves enough to ensure an ongoing role for the union movement. Others, such as Steve Babson in the US and Bryan Palmer<sup>34</sup> in Canada, recalling the years of industrial unionism's strength, take the current crisis as an opportunity for labour to relearn the skills of cross-sectoral organizing and direct action so that it may play a meaningful role in this era of naked capitalism.<sup>35</sup> And still others, among them Ian Robinson and Paul Johnston,<sup>36</sup> take note of tentative steps toward cooperation with community-based social movements as well as renewed organizing and international solidarity, hopeful that these, together with the apparently emerging realization that the old system is no more, promise a democratization and radicalization of labour to meet the challenges of the present. But for all their insights, each of the above approaches either fails to address in any significant way the responsibility of unions for the current impasse, or resurrects earlier forms of organization without considering either their limitations or their applicability to the present. More fruitful, I would suggest, is an analysis which begins with four premises:

- acknowledgement of the collapse of Keynesianism as definitive and final
- appreciation of the fact that capital's success in imposing austerity is related to the trade union movement's inability to mount any effective resistance or to articulate an alternative to the status quo, which itself is a product of the contemporary trade union model and Keynesian industrial relations regime associated with it
- recognition that *working class* refers not to an identifiable and static group, but to a relational position; recognition, too, that class positions are constituted plurally by, for example, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age etc; that is, though the collective class subject can be identified across temporal, geographic, cultural, and political boundaries, and is in that sense "universal," the shape and appearance of that subject is transitory and shifting
- appreciation that the above implies that different forms of organization are suitable to different eras and different incarnations/compositions of the class, and that a renewal of effective popular struggle against capital will likely require the creation of *new* organizational forms and *new* strategies appropriate to contemporary circumstances; moreover, these new forms and strategies cannot be expected to emerge within organized labour, but are more likely to be found in the multiplicity of resistances to austerity and the sectors that played such a key role in rupturing the Keynesian deal in the first place

34. Babson, *Unfinished Struggle*; Palmer, *Working Class Experience*.

35. Fernando Gapasin and Michael D. Yates, "Labor Movements: is there hope?" *Monthly Review*, 56 (June 2005), 3–12; Ross and Jenson, "Post-War Class Struggle."

36. Paul Johnston, "The Resurgence of Labor as Citizenship Movement in the New Labor Relations Environment," *Critical Sociology*, 25 (2000), 139–160; Ian Robinson, "Neoliberal Restructuring and us Unions," *Critical Sociology*, 24 (2000), 109–138.

In other words, what we understand to be the trade union is an organizational form that originally emerged to serve the needs of a very particular group of workers – white, “skilled,” and male – whose relative privilege in comparison with other workers was threatened with the ascent of industrial capitalism and the Fordist mass worker. Insofar as that model was expanded and reconfigured after the 1930s, the labour movement consolidated its victories in a tripartite industrial relations regime that acknowledged the legitimacy of workers’ demands only as they facilitated productivity increases and were pegged to a steady rate of profit. When, once again, a political recomposition of global working class struggles effectively challenged the limits of entitlement in the post-1968 era, the trade union model was thrown into crisis not only by its lack of preparation or the political conservatism of some of its members, but precisely because its organizational structure and strategic vision were thoroughly bound up with the tripartite model and with the Keynesian compromise.<sup>37</sup>

This is not to suggest that unions are a monolithic whole without their own substantial cleavages. Indeed, within any labour federation one need not look far to find examples of stereotypical “union bosses,” highly critical activists of the labour-left, representatives of various community organizations, and everything in between.<sup>38</sup> Different unions are characterized by profoundly different approaches to everything from internal democracy to organizing strategies. But the point is that despite these differences, there is a founding myth of uniform class identity, a deep-seated investment in Keynesian-style partnership, and an organizational commonality to unions in general that constitutes their role in relation to both employers and members. And it is not clear that an organization formed on a fundamentally different basis should have anything substantial in common with the union as we know it.

Recognition of all this is not just an academic exercise. It has enormous implications for working-class organization as well. First, and most importantly, an acknowledgement of the fundamental disjuncture between the trade union organization and the contemporary composition of the broadly defined working class challenges the continued relevance of unions, not just for those on the right eager to reassert capital’s unfettered ability to command, but also for those on the left who would participate in the creation of a new workers’ movement grounded in the real material, cultural, and political conditions of post-Keynesian globalized capitalism. That is, regardless of general aims or overarching objectives that may or may not continue to motivate workers’ struggle, is there any reason the dominant trade union form should be considered anything other than a specific organizational response to a specific

37. Hugh Finnamore, “The End of Unions,” *The Financial Post*, 15 January, 2004; Fletcher, “Notes for SEIU/ Afram Talk.”

38. William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, “Old Unions and New Social Movements,” *Labour/ Le Travail*, 35 (Spring 1995), 195–221.

set of economic, political, and cultural circumstances? Is there any reason to assume that the general form of workers' organization should be considered timeless when it is clear that the composition of the working class is not? Is there reason to assume that an organization created in, by, and for a particular political-economic arrangement could maintain its effectiveness when virtually all the conditions of its formation and reproduction have been undone – not only its rules of operation and its political privilege, but the very core of its membership (i.e. the urban industrial proletariat), its most critical foundation? Although a defensive left has dismissed these questions as ideological mystification by the theoreticians of capital, and though there is certainly ample evidence that such mystification has been produced ad nauseam, it is nonetheless imperative that activists and analysts of anti-capitalism consider such questions seriously as part of their ongoing strategic and organizational work. Indeed, some have already done so<sup>39</sup> – though these contributions are too often invisible or deemed marginal to those of us (scholars and unionists alike) used to seeing trade unions and left political parties as the primary forms of radical organization.

It is notable that even those on the left, those who consider themselves critical of the typical North American trade unionism of the past decades, are reluctant to extend their critique to the union in general. In their examination of relationships between trade unions and their staff, Stinson and Richmond locate continued antagonisms of gender and class within the labour movement in a “‘business unionism’ – hierarchical, authoritarian, and non-inclusive” that is resistant to mobilization from within, defensive in the face of criticism from its own ranks, which “does not value and involve those at the ‘lower end.’”<sup>40</sup> I certainly would not suggest that their concerns are misplaced, or too sharp. Rather, the problem with this framework is that it presumes a substantial qualitative difference between business unionism and trade unionism more generally. On the contrary, I would suggest that the basic structural characterizations applied to business unionism apply equally to the most activist and progressive of contemporary North American labour, and that these arise precisely from the form and structure of the contemporary union as a formal organization modeled on, and partnered with, the state. Certainly business unionism, Gomperism, and union gangsterism represent the worst of labour's historical record, not only masking but deepening privilege; brutally attacking civil rights, feminist, and other labour organizers; and offering support to imperialist military, political, and cultural initiatives. Certainly defenders of this record remain entrenched in a significant number of contemporary labour organizations. But what is lost when these themselves are identified as

39. Finnamore, “The End of Unions.”

40. Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond, “Women Working for Unions,” in Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto 1993), 40.

the problem, full stop, is the fact that what we call business unionism represents only the most explicit of more general and widespread tendencies, only the "ideal-type" of a model that continues to drive the labour movement, its more progressive as well as its most reactionary incarnations.

After 75 years of organizational development geared precisely towards partnership, the trade union as organization cannot be assumed to have anything in common with a post-Keynesian, post-Cold War, global working class. On the contrary, the contemporary North American labour movement has been designed and built to participate in boardroom planning sessions and cannot not continue to seek this role, whether in the Canadian Labour Congress's attempt to distance itself from anti-free trade activists or the AFL-CIO's bid for partner status in the occupation of Iraq and, frighteningly reminiscent of the Cold War, the destabilization of Venezuela.<sup>41</sup> The problem is not a business unionism that is too professional or too bureaucratic, nor even that unions are in league with management. Rather, unions are management. Unions are not victims of an industrial relations regime; they are an industrial relations regime. And if many decades ago there were any justification for the narrow and self-serving notion of "working class" on which the trade union was built; and if many decades ago the statist model of organization made some logical sense; and if many decades ago the strategy of tripartism managed to win some very significant gains – even if all this is true, the last 30 years have taken us somewhere else entirely, where new strategies and new methods of organizing are required.

While the mainstream labour movement has been in retreat for the past three decades, a dynamism has emerged in sectors long overlooked or deemed outside of or secondary to the class struggle. A wave of anarchist activity, particularly among youth, has rekindled the "drop-out" sensibility of the early 1970s, now often interwoven with a sophisticated analysis of how small-scale actions and lifestyle resistance can hearken alternatives not only to capital but to the organizations of the left. In Western Europe, the United Kingdom's Reclaim the Streets, Italy's social centres, and a diverse network of "temporary autonomous zones" seek to combine community building with resistance by emphasizing reclamation of public space and event-specific organization.<sup>42</sup> In Canada advocates of "direct action" from the resurgent rww, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, and Montreal's No One Is Illegal emphasize fiercely anti-capitalist strategies for day-to-day, often individual-specific confrontations, helping to establish a culture of winning.<sup>43</sup> From specific grievances against, for example, Monsanto in India or Shell in Nigeria, struggles of

41. Buhle, "The Legacy of the rww"; Kim Scipes, "Labor Imperialism Redux," *Monthly Review*, 56 (May 2005), 23–46.

42. Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements: Action and Culture* (Oxford 2006).

43. Richard Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (Toronto 2005).



indigenous peoples, squatters, home-workers, anti-globalization activists and “Third World” women (in both the North and the South) have exploded in recent years, not simply on an issue-specific basis, but as efforts to resist the central thrust of neoliberal restructuring<sup>44</sup> and its attack on the remaining commons, be it defined as geographic, political, economic, or cultural space.

The forms and strategies of struggle associated with these diverse movements have been discussed, particularly by post-structuralist and feminist scholars,<sup>45</sup> but remain marginal in treatments of traditional working-class movements, such as trade unions. The question, then, is whether and how these struggles can be linked? How can new working-class movements take shape beyond the traditional party and trade union models? How can the present diversity of rebellions be considered not as competitors or even strategic allies, but as different trajectories of the same movement, broadly understood? Such a movement positions itself against commodification of human relationships; against the unending intensification and expansion of work; against the corporatization of public space, from parks and community centres to ideas and seeds; against the submission of democratic governance to “economic” imperative; and against the barrage of intellectual warfare that insists “there is no alternative” to the supremacy of the market.

I am reminded, as I consider the currency of the trade union model in the present, of a cartoon published in *Punch* magazine over 100 years ago. As a curate and bishop are sitting down to breakfast together, the bishop comments on the other’s meal, “I’m afraid you’ve got a bad egg, Mr. Jones.” The curate, anxious to avoid giving offense, replies, “Oh no, my lord, I assure you that parts of it are excellent!”<sup>46</sup> There can be little doubt that the North American trade union movement’s legacy has been a curate’s egg, but for far too long the left has sought different ways to prepare or present the dish, at times to retain the protein, at times to avoid offending the bishop. But now, with the rapidly spreading example of dynamism and ferment outside of the labour movement,

it is more important than ever to recognize the curate’s egg for what it is, and

44. Remy Herrera, “Three Moments of the French Revolt,” *Monthly Review*, 58 (June 2006), 13–24; Navarro, “Worldwide Class Struggle.”

45. Amrita Chhachhi and Renee Pittin, “Multiple Identities, Multiple Strategies”, in Amrita Chhachhi and Renee Pittin, eds., *Confronting State, Capital and Patriarchy: Women Organizing in the Process of Industrialization* (London 1996), 93–130; Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (Durham 2000); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London 1986); Swasti Mitter, “On Organizing Women in Casualized Work” in Shiela Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter, eds., *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organizing Among Poor Women in the Third World and the First* (London 1994), 14–52.

46. *Punch*, November 9, 1895.

seek instead an entirely new source of energy. We've been sick enough for long enough.