

Labour/Le Travailleur



Reply to Glaberman

Tom Langford

Volume 37, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt37cri02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Langford, T. (1996). Reply to Glaberman. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 37, 238–242.

REPLY TO MARTIN GLABERMAN

Tom Langford

MARTIN GLABERMAN offers an important perspective on the question of class consciousness. I first encountered Glaberman's ideas in the New Hogtown Press pamphlet, *The Working Class & Social Change* (1975); in his commentary on my article he has returned to a number of the themes raised in that pamphlet. Glaberman's views are rooted not only in his 20+ years of experience as an auto worker, but also in his active involvement in the Detroit-based revolutionary organization led by C.L.R. James. In the 1940s and 1950s, James and his colleagues came up with a distinctive Marxian approach to the question of socialist transformation, involving strong elements of libertarianism and syndicalism.¹ There continues to be much food for thought in this anti-bureaucratic and anti-vanguardist approach, and consequently I welcome Martin Glaberman's comments on my article.

I will begin with a general observation before dealing with five specific criticisms. There is considerable affinity between the conceptions of class consciousness outlined by Glaberman and Georg Lukács.² Both present class consciousness as a supraindividual collective consciousness. Both claim to have discovered the authentic class consciousness of the proletariat through dialectical study of the historical process. Finally, both emphasize that authentic class consciousness is something quite distinctive from the beliefs/feelings of individual workers, even consciously socialist workers.

¹Two key works by the organization were C.L.R. James, F. Forest [Raya Dunayevskaya] and Ria Stone [Grace Lee], *The Invading Socialist Society* (Detroit 1972 [1947]); and C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality* (Detroit 1974 [1958]). The latter book was published after the bitter 1955 split between Dunayevskaya and James, and should not be taken to represent the former's views. For background information see Grace Lee Boggs, "Thinking and Acting Dialectically: C.L.R. James, the American Years," *Monthly Review*, 45, 5 (1993), 38-46; and Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London 1988), chapter 3.

²Compare especially Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit 1980), 121-134 and Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London 1971), 46-82.

I have opposing views both on the nature of class consciousness and on the relationship between the proletariat and history. I treat working-class consciousness as a distinctive form of individual political consciousness. It involves particular beliefs/feelings about intra-class and inter-class relations, and is most likely to develop and be expressed during the course of a worker's participation in collective struggles. Yet although the consciousness of class is closely connected to class activity, the two concepts are distinct in my framework. When workers wildcat, they wildcat; what their consciousness is at the beginning, during the course, and at the end of the wildcat is a matter for study.

I also believe that history gives us possibilities, not necessity. Glaberman would have us believe that the Hegelian perspectives on the proletariat's role in history of the early Marx, Lukács, and himself have some mileage left. In *The Holy Family*, quoted by both Lukács and Glaberman, Marx presents the proletariat as having an essential "being" which will "compel" it to play a particular role in history. What are the prospects for a teleological Marxism which claims a determinate theoretical knowledge of the future? I would say: not so good, either as an intellectual current or a political movement. Marxists need to continue discussing these issues, although I hope that we will treat what Marx "really said and thought" as a starting point and not a conclusion for our contributions.

Now for some specific points. First, Glaberman correctly points out that what Lenin said in 1899 about *when strikes can be successful* in Russia is of little utility in a study of the success or failure of the 1987 inside postal workers strike. But I used Lenin's "On Strikes" for a different purpose: to derive a generic model of the *effects of strike participation on workers' consciousness*. Furthermore, my analytical strategy was not to woodenly apply Lenin across time and place, but to use his observations as the basis for generating an ideal type — a sociological abstraction employed as a heuristic device in empirical investigations.

Second, Glaberman uses his commentary to try to rehabilitate Lenin as an opponent of Leninism. I would feel greater sympathy for this argument if Lenin himself had done more to critique the ultra-centralist views found in *What Is To Be Done?* More to the point, if we are to return to the writings of classical Marxists, is not Rosa Luxemburg's work a far better starting point for a libertarian Marxism which emphasizes working class self-education through collective struggle and the importance of participatory democracy?³

³In 1904, Luxemburg critiqued Lenin's views on party-movement relations and the degree of centralist control in the revolutionary organization in the classic article, "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy." In Dick Howard, ed., *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York 1971), 283-306. A recent paper by Staughton Lynd demarcates the organizational approaches of Lenin and Luxemburg and presents a detailed explication of Luxemburg's ideas on the self-activity of workers. "The Webbs, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg; Models of Renewal and Decay in the Labor Community," paper presented at the North American Labor History Conference, Detroit, 21 October 1995.

Third, Glaberman claims that I defined consciousness "by verbal statements of belief." He is wrong. Workers' orientations were defined by studying both what they said (in interviews and informal conversations) and what they did (on the picket line and on the shop floor).⁴ This correction, however, does not put Glaberman and me on the same methodological wavelength. Glaberman is very aware that striking workers may have differing attitudes towards a strike.⁵ The relationship between individual attitudes and action over the course of a strike was precisely the focus of my research. But this is apparently a subject unworthy of investigation for Glaberman because that supraindividual force, working-class consciousness, only makes its appearance on the historical stage in the form of mass working-class actions such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

This leads to a fourth point of disagreement: the role of consciously socialist workers in the struggle for socialism. My position is that the present-day socialist movement in Canada needs the contributions of activist workers who have been broadly politicized along non-sectarian lines and who are linked together in community networks. Glaberman's syndicalist and anti-bureaucratic ideals lead him to disagree. He sees socialism, already implicit in workers' experiences in capitalist workplaces, as exploding spontaneously in the form of a workers' council movement⁶; while I see socialism as an ongoing political project in which mass working class protests are important moments for education, organization, and revolutionary change. If consciously socialist workers expect that the protests of the working class will follow a particular blueprint, then they will fulfil the conservative, bureaucratic role which Glaberman expects of them. But if con-

⁴"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 picture of their workplace behaviour between the strike's conclusion in October 1987 and spring 1989," *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (Fall 1994), 109-10.

⁵*Wartime Strikes*, 130.

⁶One of the memorable statements in the book *Facing Reality* is: "It is agreed that the socialist society exists," 106. Glaberman concluded a 1952 pamphlet written for rank and file workers with this argument:

"... the new society appears within the old. A society in which the workers, every one of them, takes his part in planning production, in carrying out the plan, in developing himself by helping his fellow men, in helping society by developing himself. It means the total reorganization of society inside the factory and outside the factory, a society of freely associated men under no one's domination.

It is this that the workers are driving toward today, in ceaseless struggle. It will take only the slightest spark to set off the tremendous explosion that will unite the small groups of workers buried in a thousand factories and mines, that will transform the million actions directed at one end into one action achieving that end. In this upheaval the labor bureaucracy will be the first to fall, unwanted and unlamented by people who have taken their destiny into their own hands — to a man."

Punching Out (Detroit 1973 [1952]), 32.

sciously socialist workers expect the unexpected, and act to support workers' self-activity wherever it arises, they can help workers to see and develop the socialist possibilities in everyday working-class life and in collective struggles.

Glaberman and I have different views of what a socialist revolution is all about. We agree that socialism must involve participatory democracy in workplaces; and that a severe crisis could spark militant action by groups of workers, leading to a dramatic challenge to monopoly capitalist rule in Canadian society. But where Glaberman sees the natural development towards socialism in the life experience of the proletariat, I see a political project which cultivates particular historical possibilities while attempting to deflect other possibilities. This project involves much more than workers' control; it includes the difficult application of egalitarian and libertarian ideals to every sphere of social life. Through active and ongoing dialogues, we need to define and build support for a wide range of socialist policies, both to achieve what we can now through present-day institutions (including organizations of socialists), and so that socialist tendencies will have a chance of winning the day in the tumultuous politics of any crisis.

My final point is in defence of the union "officials" (Glaberman's term) in the Hamilton Local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) in 1987. As I mentioned in the article, the Hamilton Local had insufficient dues to pay for the release time of even one executive member. Thus, each of the six executive members had full-time positions with the post office, as did all the other workers I identified as leaders of the Local — stewards, former executive members, and former stewards. I can add that no honorariums were paid for union service. The rank and file had great praise, and few complaints, for the leadership of their local union.

One of the fascinating things about the strike was that the Hamilton Local ran its own show. No staff from the regional or national union office ever made appearances at executive meetings, in the Local's union office, or at strike headquarters. There was thus a large degree of local control in this strike — control largely held by workers because of the close ties between the union executive and rank and file.

Martin Glaberman is suspicious of my finding that union leaders in the Hamilton Local were more likely to be collectivist in orientation than the rank and file. Perhaps the additional information I have provided will convince him that, in 1987, the Hamilton Local of CUPW did not fit the conventional model of a bureaucratized union.

Free On-Line Document Search... Discount on Document Delivery



UnCover

Announcing *Access to UnCover*

**Document search and delivery for readers of
*Labour/Le Travail***

You can now access free of charge the UnCover on-line data base, which indexes table of contents information from over 17,000 journals. You can also order delivery of full text from any of the articles in the data base and receive a \$2.00 discount per article off the regular document delivery price.

With *Access to UnCover*, you can search for articles by topic, by author, or by journal. You can then order on-line the full text of articles for delivery by fax within 24 hours. Document delivery fees will be billed to your credit card.

Access to UnCover is available to you now over the Internet. Simply telnet to the *Access to UnCover* Address:

allen.carl.org

When prompted for your Password, enter: deliver

New benefit: Discount on Reveal

Your *Access to UnCover* Password now also entitles you to a 20% discount on UnCover's new *Reveal* service. With *Reveal*, you receive by e-mail the tables of contents of journals you select—right after each issue is published. In addition, you can also receive weekly topical alerting by creating keyword search strategies. To sign up for *Reveal* at your 20% discount, call 800-787-7979 and mention your *Access to UnCover* Password.