

## Edward Thompson's Warrens: On the Transition to Socialism and Its Relation to Current Left Mobilizations

Staughton Lynd

Volume 50, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t50pre01>

[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

Lynd, S. (2002). Edward Thompson's Warrens: On the Transition to Socialism and Its Relation to Current Left Mobilizations. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 50, 175-186.

Résumé de l'article

Edward Thompson a élaboré une vue distincte de la transition du capitalisme au socialisme. En refusant la concept d'un changement catastrophique dans lequel le parti d'avant-garde servirait comme le noyau institutionnel d'une nouvelle société, Thompson a constaté que le capitalisme s'est fait « embrouillé » à l'intérieur par un réseau d'institutions locales, autonomes et de la classe ouvrière qui a préfiguré un monde socialiste. Au milieu des années 1960, toutefois, Thompson s'est tourné vers d'autres affaires et a manqué de résoudre le débat invétéré sur la gauche à propos du rôle des syndicats dans une transition au socialisme. Les événements récents à Seattle, Québec et Gênes suggèrent que les travailleurs et les étudiants agissant par l'intermédiaire de nouvelles institutions improvisées pour l'occasion doivent travailler en semble pour y apporter des changements révolutionnaires. La même tendance s'est révélée aux événements des activités de la classe ouvrière au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, comme en Russie en 1905 ou en Hongrie en 1956.

# PRESENTATIONS 1: LEGACIES OF E.P. THOMPSON

## Edward Thompson's Warrens: On the Transition to Socialism and Its Relation to Current Left Mobilizations

Staughton Lynd

THE PROBLEM OF THE TRANSITION from capitalism to socialism has nagged at and puzzled me all my adult life. As a high school student I pursued my political education during the half hour trip to school on the New York City subway. I devoured Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station*. I read Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*, still my favorite novel. And I also read a book by an ex-Trotskyist named James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*.<sup>1</sup>

Burnham argued that the bourgeois revolution occurred only after a long period during which bourgeois institutions had been built within feudal society. The position of the proletariat within capitalist society, he contended, was altogether different. The proletariat has no way to begin to create socialist economic institutions within capitalism. Hence, he concluded, there would be no socialist revolution.

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York 1940); Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine* (New York 1937); and James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World* (New York 1941).

Staughton Lynd, "Edward Thompson's Warrens: On the Transition to Socialism and Its Relation to Current Left Mobilizations," *Labour/Le Travail*, 50 (Fall 2002), 175-86.

I have no distinct memory, but I assume that when I got off the subway and back to my parents' home I reached for Emile Burns' *Handbook of Marxism*, or some such source to find out why Burnham was wrong.<sup>2</sup> The problem was I could not find an answer. Nor have I have been able to find one during the more than half century since. In 1987 I rephrased Burnham's argument in *The Journal of American History*:

The transition from capitalism to socialism presents problems that did not exist in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In late medieval Europe, a discontented serf, a Protestant artisan, an experimental scientist, or an enterprising moneylender could do small-scale, piecemeal things to begin to build a new society within the old. He could run away to a free city, print the Bible in the vernacular, drop stones from a leaning tower, or organize a corporation, all actions requiring few persons and modest amounts of capital, actions possible within the interstices of a decentralized feudal society. The twentieth-century variant of this process, in Third World countries, also permits revolutionary protagonists in guerrilla enclaves, like Yen-an in China or the Sierra Maestra in Cuba, to build small-scale alternative societies, initiating land reform, health clinics, and literacy. But how can people take such meaningful small steps, begin such revolutionary reforms, in an interdependent society like that of the United States? A localized strategy runs into the problem of what might be called "socialism in one steel mill": the effort to do something qualitatively new, requiring tens of millions of dollars, in a hostile environment ....<sup>3</sup>

In the year 2002 one might rephrase the problem this way: If, as anti-globalization protesters affirm, another world is possible, how do we begin to build it, here and now?

# I

Edward Thompson, too, was intensely concerned with the transition from capitalism to socialism, especially during the decade 1955-1965, in which he wrote and published *William Morris* (1955) and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). One of Thompson's first attempts to discuss the transition to socialism was an essay called "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," published in 1957 in *The New Reasoner*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Emile Burns, *A Handbook of Marxism: Being a Collection of Extracts From the Writings of Marx, Engels and the Greatest of Their Followers. Selected so as to Give the Reader the Most Comprehensive Account of Marxism Possible Within the Limits of a Single Volume* (New York 1935).

<sup>3</sup>Staughton Lynd, "The Genesis of the Idea of a Community Right to Industrial Property in Youngstown and Pittsburgh, 1977-1987," *Journal of American History*, 74 (December 1987), 926-958, reprinted in Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca 1997).

<sup>4</sup>E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London 1955); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963); and E.P. Thompson, "Social-

There Thompson asserted that “mankind is caught up in the throes of a revolutionary transition to an entirely new form of society — a transition which must certainly reach its climax during this century.” Several other comments about “the period of transition,” “the phase of the transition,” and “the transitional stage,” are scattered throughout the essay. What is of greatest interest is Thompson’s response to the thesis that the working class has not developed, and can not develop, under capitalism a new society within the shell of the old. Here is what he wrote:

The best, most fruitful ideas of Trotskyism — emphasis upon economic democracy and direct forms of political democracy — are expressed in fetishistic form: “workers’ councils” and “Soviets” must be imposed as the only orthodoxy. But Britain teems with Soviets. We have a General Soviet of the T.U.C. [Trade Union Congress] and trades soviets in every town: peace soviets and national soviets of women, elected parish, urban district and borough soviets.<sup>5</sup>

In these remarks, Thompson implicitly asks us to choose between two views of the transition from capitalism to socialism. One is expressed in the song by Wobbly Ralph Chaplin, “Solidarity Forever,” when the song affirms: “We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.” In this perspective the new world will arise, phoenix-like, after a great catastrophe or conflagration. The emergence of feudalism from pockets of local self-help after the collapse of the Roman Empire is presumably the exemplar of that kind of transition. A second view of the transition from capitalism to socialism compares it to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The Preamble to the IWW Constitution gives us a mantra for this perspective, declaring: “We are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”<sup>6</sup>

Thompson opted for the second paradigm. Confronting the question, “Where is the proletarian new society within the shell of the old?,” Thompson answered in another essay from the late 1950s, “Homage to Tom Maguire.” There he discussed the genesis in the late 19th century of the Independent Labor Party (ILP), an organization that Thompson insisted “grew from the bottom up.” According to Thompson:

The ILP gave political expression to the various forms of independent or semi-independent working-class organisation which had been built and consolidated in the West Riding [of Yorkshire] in the previous thirty years [that is, from the 1860s to the 1890s] —

---

ist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *The New Reasoner* (Summer 1957), 105-143. My thanks to Peter Linbaugh for locating a copy of this essay and sending it to me.

<sup>5</sup>Thompson, “Socialist Humanism,” references to “transition,” 105, 106, 107, 110, and 139; references to “Trotskyism,” 140.

<sup>6</sup>Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor 1964), “Solidarity Forever,” 26; and “Preamble,” 12.

co-operatives, trade unions, friendly societies, various forms of chapel or educational or economic "self-help."<sup>7</sup>

This was a more concrete description of the "British soviets" invoked by Thompson in his essay on socialist humanism. Sheila Rowbotham remembers how, about this time, "Edward Thompson started to tell me about the northern [that is, north of Britain] socialism, how for a time changing all forms of human relationships had been central in a working-class movement."<sup>8</sup>

Edward Thompson's fullest engagement with the building of a working-class new society inside the shell of capitalism came in a book called *Out of Apathy*, published in 1960. Thompson wrote three essays for this volume. One is justly remembered and often reprinted, entitled "Outside the Whale." It is a tour de force in which Thompson details the retreat of Auden and Orwell from the enthusiasms of the 1930s. The other two essays, unjustly forgotten, are the introduction and conclusion to the volume.<sup>9</sup>

In these essays Thompson introduced a metaphor central to his view of the transition from capitalism to socialism: the rabbit warren. For a society to be criss-crossed by underground dens and passageways created by an oppositional class is, in Thompson's 1960s vocabulary, to be "warrened." British society, he wrote, "is warrened with democratic processes — committees, voluntary organisations, councils, electoral procedures." In Thompson's view, because of the existence of such counter institutions, a transition to socialism could develop from what was already in being, and from below. "Socialism, even at the point of revolutionary transition — perhaps at this point most of all — must grow from existing strengths. No one ... can impose a socialist humanity from above."<sup>10</sup>

Thompson condemned the neglect of the issue of transition by persons calling themselves radicals. "[W]hat we mean to direct attention to is the extraordinary hiatus in contemporary labour thinking on this most crucial point of all — how, and by what means, is a transition to socialist society to take place." Further, in his view: "The absence of any theory of the transition to socialism is the consequence of capitulation to the conventions of capitalist politics."<sup>11</sup>

Thompson then reaches a critical point in his argument. The difficulty in thinking about the transition from capitalism to socialism, he contends, derives in part

<sup>7</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire," in E.P. Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York 1994), 24 and 26.

<sup>8</sup>Sheila Rowbotham as quoted in Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (New York 1994), 41.

<sup>9</sup>The other essays are: "At the Point of Decay" and "Revolution," in E.P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London 1960), 3-15 and 287-308.

<sup>10</sup>Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," 6; and E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," in E.P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy*, 194.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 294 and 296.

from a mistaken notion about the difference between bourgeois and socialist revolutions to be found in the writings of ... Joseph Stalin! Thompson finds the distinction most fully and dangerously expressed in Stalin's *On the Problems of Leninism* (1926). Here is what Thompson says in *Out of Apathy*:

The conceptual barrier [to thinking about the transition from capitalism to socialism] derives ... from a false distinction in Leninist doctrine between the bourgeois and the proletarian revolution. The bourgeois revolution (according to this legend) begins when "more or less finished forms of the capitalist order" already exist "within the womb of feudal society." Capitalism was able to grow up with feudalism, and to coexist with it — on uneasy terms — until prepared for the seizure of political power. But the proletarian revolution "begins when finished forms of the socialist order are either absent, or almost completely absent." Because it was supposed that forms of social ownership or democratic control over the means of production were incompatible with capitalist state power: "The bourgeois revolution is usually consummated with the seizure of power, whereas in the proletarian revolution the seizure of power is only the beginning."

Thompson's footnote to this passage reads: "The quotations here are taken from Stalin's *On the Problems of Leninism* (1926); but the influence of this concept is to be found far outside the Communist tradition."<sup>12</sup>

How does Thompson propose that we rebut the distinction between the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions? He proposes a dialectical understanding, in which the simultaneous containment and alternative potential of working-class institutions are appreciated:

[I]f we discard this dogma (the fundamentalist might meditate on the "interpenetration of opposites") we can read the evidence another way. It is not a case of *either this or that*. We must, at every point, see *both* — the surge forward *and* the containment, the public sector *and* its subordination to the private, the strength of trade unions *and* their parasitism upon capitalist growth, the welfare services *and* their poor-relation status. The countervailing powers are there, and the equilibrium (which is an equilibrium *within* capitalism) is precarious. It could be tipped back towards authoritarianism. But it could also be heaved *forward*, by popular pressures of great intensity, to the point where the powers of democracy cease to be countervailing and become the active dynamic of society in their own right. This is revolution.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 300-1. I can confirm that the passages quoted by Thompson can be found in *Works of Stalin. Volume 8* (Moscow 1954), 22. The late Marty Glaberman called my attention to a similar passage in Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution. Volume 3* (New York 1937), 168-169, wherein Trotsky argued that the vanguard party must provide for the proletariat the "social advantages" that a network of pre-revolutionary institutions gave the bourgeoisie.

<sup>13</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 301-302 (emphasis in original).

I can not resist further quotation from these most politically important of all the words Edward Thompson ever wrote.

Certainly, the transition can be defined, in the widest historical sense, as a transfer of class power: the dislodgment of the power of capital from the “commanding heights” and the assertion of the power of socialist democracy. This is the historical watershed between “last stage” capitalism and dynamic socialism — the point at which the socialist potential is liberated, the public sector assumes the dominant role, subordinating the private to its command, and over a very great area of life the priorities of need override those of profit. But this point cannot be defined in narrow political (least of all parliamentary) terms; nor can we be certain, in advance, in what context the breakthrough will be made. What is more important to insist upon is that it is necessary to *find out* the breaking point, not by theoretical speculation alone, but *in practice* by unrelenting reforming pressure in many fields, which are designed to reach a revolutionary culmination. And this will entail a confrontation, throughout society, between two systems, two ways of life.

Throughout, Thompson’s emphasis is on the positive, building on existing strengths, as opposed to a scenario of catastrophe and apocalypse. In Thompson’s words:

[S]uch a revolution demands the maximum enlargement of *positive* demands, the deployment of constructive skills within a conscious revolutionary strategy — or, in William Morris’ words, the “making of Socialists.” ... Alongside the industrial workers, we should see the teachers who want better schools, scientists who wish to advance research, welfare workers who want hospitals, actors who want a National Theatre, technicians impatient to improve industrial organisation. Such people do not want these things only and always, any more than all industrial workers are always “class conscious” and loyal to their great community values. But these affirmatives coexist, fitfully and incompletely, with the ethos of the Opportunity State. It is the business of socialists to draw the line, not between a staunch but diminishing minority and an unredeemable majority, but between the monopolists and the people — to foster the “societal instincts” and inhibit the acquisitive. Upon these positives, and not upon the débris of a smashed society, the socialist community must be built.<sup>14</sup>

Edward Thompson touched upon these same themes five years later, in the course of his polemical exchange with Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn entitled “The Peculiarities of the English.” The occasion was the comment of Anderson and Nairn that after Chartism, which crested about 1850, the English working class ceased to be a revolutionary force. Note once again the dialectical cast of Thompson’s response as well as the recurrent comparison of working-class institutions to a “warren.”

[T]he workers, having failed to overthrow capitalist society, proceeded to warren it from end to end. This “caesura” [after 1850] is exactly the period in which the characteristic class in-

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, “Revolution,” 303-305 (emphasis in original).

stitutions of the Labour movement were built up — trade unions, trade councils, T.U.C., co-ops, and the rest — which have endured to this day. It was part of the logic of this new direction that each advance within the framework of capitalism simultaneously involved the working class more deeply in the *status quo*. As they improved their position by organization within the workshop, so they became more reluctant to engage in quixotic outbreaks which might jeopardize gains accumulated at such cost. Each assertion of working-class influence within the bourgeois-democratic state machinery, simultaneously involved them as partners (even if antagonistic partners) in the running of the machine ....

We need not necessarily agree with Wright Mills that this indicates that the working class can be a revolutionary class only in its formative years; but we must, I think, recognize that once a certain climactic moment is passed, the opportunity for a certain *kind* of revolutionary movement passes irrevocably ....

[I]t is possible to envisage three kinds of socialist transition, none of which have in fact ever been successfully carried through. First, the syndicalist revolution in which the class institutions displace the existing State machine; I suspect that the moment for such a revolution, if it was ever practicable, has passed in the West. Second, through a more or less constitutional political party, based on the political institutions, with a very clearly articulated socialist strategy, whose cumulative reforms bring the country to a critical point of class equilibrium, from which a rapid revolutionary transition is pressed through. [Attentive Thompson watchers will recognize this second scenario as that set forth five years before in *Out of Apathy*.] Third, through further far-reaching changes in the sociological composition of the groups which entail the break-up of the old class institutions and value system, and the creation of new ones.<sup>15</sup>

Writing in 1965, Thompson thought that some combination of the second and third strategies might hold most promise. The bottom line for all discussion, in his view, was: "It is abundantly evident that working people have, within capitalist society, thrown up positions of 'countervailing power'." The New Left — already in 1965 he called it "the former New Left" — had sought to pursue "reformist tactics within a revolutionary strategy." But whatever the verbal trappings, he concluded:

We have stated a problem, but are no nearer its solution. The real work of analysis remains: the sociological analysis of changing groups within the wage-earning and salaried strata; the points of potential antagonism and alliance; the economic analysis, the cultural analysis, the political analysis, not only of forms of State power, but also of the bureaucracies of the Labour Movement.<sup>16</sup>

Edward Thompson did not himself pursue the analysis for which he called. In 1965, the same year in which "The Peculiarities of the English" was published, he took a full-time position at Warwick University and disappeared in the general direction of the 18th century. Much that was marvelous ensued, and in the early

<sup>15</sup>"E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York 1978), 281-282.

<sup>16</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities of the English," 282.



1980s Thompson emerged from academia to spend half-a-dozen years in ceaseless agitation against the nuclear arms race, an agitation that may have hastened his premature death. My point is only that, to the best of my knowledge, he did not pursue further what he had termed the unresolved problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism. We shall have to attempt that task ourselves.

## II

If another world is possible, and we want to begin to build it within the womb or shell of capitalist society, how should we proceed? What institutions can serve the working class in "warrening" the old society with the emerging institutions of the new?

### *A. State of the Debate*

The most obvious answer is: trade unions. In "Value, Price and Profit," Karl Marx wrote in 1865: "Trades Unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital." The next year, in instructions drafted for the British delegation to the 1866 congress of the First International, Marx expressly compared the work of trade unions as "centres of organization of the working class" to what "the medieval municipalities and communes did for the middle class."<sup>17</sup>

The limitations of trade unions, however, soon became apparent. Capitalism was furthest advanced in Great Britain. In their *History of Trade Unionism*, published in 1894, and *Industrial Democracy*, published in 1898, Sidney and Beatrice Webb summed up the evolution of trade unions in that country. The Webbs found that the "revolutionary period" in the history of the British labour movement had passed with the agitations of a beginning period, 1829-1842. The militant opposition of these early years gave way to the business unionism of the trade unions at the close of the 19th century, a development the Webbs saw as positive on the one hand and inevitable on the other.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works. Volume 20* (New York 1985), 149 and 191-192, as quoted and discussed in Kenneth Lapides, ed., *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions* (New York 1987), and in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution. Volume 2* (New York and London 1978), 99-101.

<sup>18</sup>In what follows I repeat arguments first presented in Staughton Lynd, "The Webbs, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg," in Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope*, 207-220.

<sup>19</sup>Lynd, "The Webbs, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg," 261, n15: "Solomon M. Schwarz, a Russian Social Democratic labor organizer in the early years of this century, agrees that Lenin 'must have been influenced by the views he formed while translating Sidney and Beatrice Webbs' *Industrial Democracy*.' Schwarz observes, 'The immense bibliography of the second and third editions of Lenin's *Sochinenia* contain not one major work on the subject [of trade unionism] that came out after the Webbs'.' Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Russian Revolution of 1905: The Workers' Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism* (Chicago 1967), 326."

The Webbs' conclusions powerfully influenced Lenin, who, together with his wife Krupskaya, translated the Webbs' *Industrial Democracy* while in Siberian exile.<sup>19</sup> In *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), Lenin proposed a revolutionary strategy that accepted the findings of the Webbs with regard to the development of trade unions. "The history of all countries," he wrote, "shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness." Socialist consciousness could only be brought to workers "from without." The spontaneous labour movement, Lenin wrote elsewhere in the same pamphlet, "is pure and simple trade unionism." Hence the task of socialists was "to *divert* the labour movement, with its spontaneous trade-unionist striving," and bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.<sup>20</sup>

Only three years later — dialectically, as it were — the Russian revolution of 1905 imposed a powerful corrective to Lenin's analysis in *What Is To Be Done?* Without significant assistance from the various revolutionary parties, the Russian working class embarked on a year long general strike and created autonomous institutions from below: the improvised central labour bodies known as "soviets." Throughout this course of self-activity workers sacrificed and died for political objectives as well as economic ones. Rosa Luxemburg found in the revolution of 1905 a dramatic refutation of what she termed Lenin's "pitiless centralism," which, in her view, imposed a "blind subordination" of all party organs to the party center and expressed "the sterile spirit of the overseer."<sup>21</sup> There the debate has rested ever since.

### *B. Workers and Students*

I want to suggest a third alternative. We are not limited to the options of students giving political instruction to workers (as suggested by Lenin), or workers, hard-pressed by earning a livelihood, generating a political ideology on their own. We can imagine a third model: students and workers cooperating as equals, horizontally, to bring about fundamental social change.

This idea suggested itself to me in the following way. The late Marty Glaberman repeatedly urged me to find out more about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. This was the event that more than any other inspired his faith in a working-class revolution organized by the workers themselves. In Hungary, Glaberman insisted, workers, deserted by the official unions, without a vanguard political party, and lacking even a newspaper of their own, spontaneously created workers'

<sup>20</sup>V.I. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" in *Collected Works of V.I. Lenin. Volume 4* (New York 1929), 136-138 (emphasis in original).

<sup>21</sup>Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* Bertram D. Wolfe, ed. (Ann Arbor 1970), 84-86 and 94.

<sup>22</sup>These materials included Andy Anderson, *Hungary '56* (London 1964, reprinted Detroit 1976); Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956* (New York 1976); and especially, Bill Lomax, ed., *Hun-*

councils that made a successful revolution which would have proceeded to reshape Hungarian society but for the intervention of Soviet tanks.

So I read the materials Marty Glaberman sent to me.<sup>22</sup> Here is what I concluded:

1. Khrushchev made his famous speech denouncing the misdeeds of Stalin in February 1956. In April 1956, Hungarian students and intellectuals formed the Petofi Circle, named for a patriotic poet of the 19th century. Soon, the meetings of the Petofi Circle were attracting thousands of people. The issue was freedom to speak and write the truth. As of September 1956, protest in Hungary was still in the hands of intellectuals.

The demonstration in October 1956 that turned into revolution was organized by the Petofi circle and other student groups. Workers joined in, magnificently, with far-reaching demands. But STUDENTS CAME FIRST.

2. How shall we understand this? To say that students came first, chronologically, is not the same thing as to endorse a vanguard theory. What I see is:

a. Students were fighting *their own* fight. They were not energizing or instructing workers.

b. To whatever extent Gramsci is right about the *hegemony* of ruling class ideas, students/intellectuals broke through it: they gave workers the space to act and think for themselves.

c. Similarly the defiance of students may have helped workers to overcome whatever *deference* they felt toward social superiors.

3. I have been accustomed to say that when the Progressive Labor Party invaded Students for a Democratic Society in the late 1960s, PLP was wrong in the way that it related to people but that its message — that fundamental social change without the working class is impossible — was correct. I would now wish to add that the message was wrong, too, insofar as it denigrated the necessary role of students.<sup>23</sup>

These impressions excited me because they corresponded to my own experience in the 1960s. I was part of a movement against the war in Vietnam that students began at a time when the AFL-CIO and almost all trade unions in the US supported the war — just as the AFL-CIO presently supports the “war against terrorism.” But as we learned at the Pentagon demonstration in 1967 and thereafter, the antiwar movement could succeed only when working-class young men in the military services refused to fight.

Students came first. And this is understandable, given the fact that most students are not yet committed to livelihood and support of a family, and are in a setting and a period of their lives where excitement over general ideas is encouraged. But protest grew to the point that it could stop the war only when the working class weighed in.

---

*garian Workers' Councils in 1956* (Highland Lakes, New Jersey 1990), which contains a number of remarkable oral histories.

<sup>23</sup>This is the substance of a letter I wrote to Marty Glaberman and Carl Oglesby, 18 December 2000 (emphasis in original).

Once having perceived this pattern in Hungary, and in my own experience of the 1960s, I began to see it everywhere. It was apparent in France in the spring of 1968. In a more complicated way it was evident in Poland in 1980-1981. Perhaps most interesting, it also appears to have been the shape of what happened in the Russian Revolution of 1905.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 is generally thought to have begun on “Bloody Sunday” in January 1905, when Father Gapon led several thousand factory workers to the Tsar’s Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. The workers carried a petition requesting a minimum wage and an eight-hour work day; freedom of speech, press, and association; the release of all political prisoners; the right to organize unions; and election of a constituent assembly. Soldiers opened fire, killing dozens. The rest is history.

But there was a pre-history to Bloody Sunday. Against the background of military defeat by the Japanese and the assassination of the minister of the interior, conventions of teachers and doctors were broken up by the police. A congress of delegates from provincial assemblies (*zemstvos*) passed a resolution favouring a national assembly with real powers. Beginning in late November 1904, liberals organized a series of banquets ostensibly to celebrate the 40th anniversary of judicial reform. Maxim Gorky wrote to his wife about one such banquet: “There were more than 600 diners ... in general, the intelligentsia. Outspoken speeches were made, and people chanted in unison, ‘Down with the autocracy!’ ‘Long live the constituent assembly!’ and ‘Give us a constitution!’”,<sup>24</sup>

On 28 November 1904, there was a bloody assault by soldiers on student demonstrators. That evening 35 workers crowded into Father Gapon’s apartment. The group decided, in the words of one participant, that the workers should “add their voice” to that of the students. Father Gapon was asked to draw up a petition to present to the Tsar.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, when in the fall of 1905 workers gathered to form a new kind of institution called a “soviet,” where did they assemble? At the universities! Trotsky (who was to become chairperson of the St. Petersburg soviet) writes of St. Petersburg: “[T]he doors of the universities remained wide open. ‘The people’ filled the corridors, lecture rooms and halls. Workers went directly from the factory to the university .... [A]s soon as the worker crossed the threshold at the university he promptly became inviolable.” The first meeting of the St. Petersburg Soviet was held on 13 October at the Technological Institute. The second meeting, on 14 Octo-

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (London 1996), 172.

<sup>25</sup>N.M. Varnashev, “*Ot Nachala de Kontsa Gapanovskoi Organizatsiei (Vospominania)*” [From Beginning to End of Gapon’s Organization: Recollections], in V.I. Nevski, ed., *Istoriko-revoliutsionnyi Sbornik* (Leningrad 1924), 201-202, as quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday: Father Gapon and the St. Petersburg Massacre of 1905* (Princeton 1976), 135.

<sup>26</sup>Leon Trotsky, *1905* (New York 1971), 83-84, 105, and 108.

ber, took place at the larger physics auditorium of the same institution. “[O]n the evening of the fourteenth the higher educational establishments were overflowing with people.”<sup>26</sup>

The same pattern — students first, then, and decisively, workers — shows itself in the current anti-globalization demonstrations, beginning in Seattle. There the slogan — “teamsters and sea turtles together at last!” — obscured the fact that the national Teamsters union was primarily interested in keeping Mexican truck drivers out of the United States, just as the other national sponsoring union, the United Steelworkers, wanted most of all to keep imported steel out of the US market. Neither national union was concerned about the welfare of workers in other countries.

But for many rank-and-file workers there was a genuine discovery of solidarity with student demonstrators. Repeated in Québec City, Genoa (where the son of a trade union official was killed), and elsewhere, the pattern is clear. This is not a students’ movement or a workers’ movement. It is a movement of students *and* workers.

The temporary spokescouncils of anti-globalization protestors are very different from the kinds of institutions (guilds, banks, corporations, or free cities) whereby the bourgeoisie built up a base of power within feudal society. But they are not so different from the radical Protestant congregations that were also part of the capitalist new society within the shell of the old. Moreover, although it would be dangerously misguided to suppose that *national* trade unions, under any conceivable leadership, will ever lead the way to fundamental social change, *local* unions are potentially a different story.

In Youngstown and Pittsburgh there have been local unions — Local 1397 USWA in Homestead PA, Local 1462 USWA in Youngstown, and Local 377 IBT in Youngstown — which, for a time, brought together all the forces of change in a community, providing a place to meet, resources, and a cadre of activists committed to political as well as economic transformation.

When my wife and I moved to the Youngstown area in 1976 we determined that in any organizations that we helped to create, workers would be a majority, so that meetings would have an atmosphere in which workers would feel comfortable. Now, it seems to me, our initial meetings must include both rank-and-file workers *and* students, and our movement must be a movement of workers and students from Day One. The warrenning must be done. There are a million pitfalls, as the past warns us. But there is no other way.