GLOBAL ISSUES:
BRINGING CLASS BACK IN

Sam Gindin

Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

This pamphlet series is meant to encourage principled debate amongst the left and the working class to advance a viable socialist movement in Canada. Democratic debate is encouraged within and beyond the Socialist Project.

1. Sam Gindin (2004). *The Auto Industry: Concretizing Working Class Solidarity: Internationalism Beyond Slogans*.
2. Leo Panitch (2005). *Whose Violence? Imperial State Security and the Global Justice Movement.*
3. Carlos Torres, et al (2005). *The Unexpected Revolution: The Venezuelan People Confront Neoliberalism.*
4. Hugh Armstrong, et al (2005). *Whose Health Care? Challenging the Corporate Struggle to Rule Our System.*
5. Labour Committee (2007). *The Crisis in Manufacturing Jobs.*
6. Richard Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui (2008). *The Oaxaca Commune: The Other Indigenous Rebellion in Mexico.*
7. Labour Committee - Socialist Project (2008). *Labour Movement Platform.*
8. Michael A. Lebowitz (2009). *The Path to Human Development: Capitalism or Socialism?*
9. Socialist Project (2009). *Financial Meltdown: Canada, the Economic Crisis and Political Struggle.*
10. Marta Harnecker (2010). *Ideas for the Struggle.*
11 . Angela Joya, et al (2011). *The Arab Revolts Against Neoliberal Economies: Confronting Capitalism?*
12. Stefan Kipfer, et al. (2012). *Free Transit.*
13. Greg Albo and Carlo Fanelli (2014). *Austerity Against Democracy: An Authoritarian Phase of Neoliberalism?*
14. Sam Gindin (2015). *Global Issues: Bringing Class Back In*

To download these pamphlets and to learn more about the Socialist Project, see our website at
www.socialistproject.ca

Global Issues

Bringing Class Back In

Making Workers 6
Canadian Exceptionalism 11
Disorganizing the Class 13
Getting From Here to There 19
Conclusion 33

Sam Gindin

"The new unionism [of the 1930s] brought dramatic new tactics such as the sit-downs, new strategies that included industry-wide bargaining, and spread new forms of in-plant democracy based on the shop steward system. Today union structures are again in crisis, but nothing comparable to the labour explosion of the 30s has yet emerged or is even much talked about. When those of us who support labour by silencing ourselves out of sensitivity to the assault it's facing, we do labour no favour. Nothing is more important to the renewal of the labour movement than to soberly confront the mess it's in and encourage the most open and creative discussion of how it might move on."

The following is a slightly revised version of an address delivered in Edmonton, Alta at a conference of the Alberta Labour History Institute.

Over the past three decades a rather astonishing change occurred in the trajectory of capitalist societies. Working class achievements that were formerly seen as examples of capitalism's success – rising standards of living, growing economic security – were suddenly redefined as 'problems'. Concessions and permanent insecurity became the new norm, rising inequality the new inevitability.

The catch-all term to describe this was 'neoliberalism' and Adolph Reed, a prominent U.S. political scientist, nicely summarized its essence as 'capitalism without a working class opposition.'[1] This succinctly highlights the kind of society we get when labour is weak. But more important, it pushes us to confront the limited resistance of labour to that rightward shift since the end of the 1970s. This period did of course witness examples of courageous struggles and moments that brought glimpses of labour's potentials. In fact, the response of Canadian labour was generally more impressive than elsewhere. Yet given the extent of the assault on working people, labour's response was too sporadic, too timid, and far too narrow in scope. It's this failure that I want to discuss – not in any spirit of giving up on unions, but as part of demanding more from this crucial institution.

The last time there was as profound an economic breakdown as the recent financial crisis was in the 1930s. The contrast between the labour movement's current reaction and the earlier one couldn't be starker. Then, with the predominantly craft-based unions reeling and trapped in exclusive, increasingly bureaucratized structures, a rebellion within the labour movement – with communists playing a prominent role – gave birth to industrial unionism, an inclusive unionism committed to organizing across skills, race and gender.

The new unionism brought dramatic new tactics such as the sit-downs, new strategies that included industry-wide bargaining, and spread new forms of in-plant democracy based on the shop steward system. Today union structures are again in

crisis, but nothing comparable to the labour explosion of the 30s has yet emerged or is even much talked about. When those of us who support labour by silencing ourselves out of sensitivity to the assault it's facing, we do labour no favour. Nothing is more important to the renewal of the labour movement than to soberly confront the mess it's in and encourage the most open and creative discussion of how it might move on.

In addressing this, I want to set out three arguments. First, that unless we bring the notion of *class*, in all its complexities, back into our strategies, no renewal of labour is possible. Second, to speak about bringing class into our unions isn't about abstract ideological pronouncements; it's about addressing the very practical needs of the working class, its responsibilities and potentials. It's also not about putting forth radical policy alternatives if we're not at the same time building the power to actually act radically. And that involves transforming everything about unions' structures and functioning. Third, unions alone – even stronger and better ones – aren't enough. Success in defending and advancing the lives of working people will require new forms of working class organizations beyond unions.

> Above all, capitalists fear that workers might begin to question capitalism as the natural order of things, and wonder if capitalism has run its course and might be replaced with a more humane alternative.

Making Workers

Capitalists have always had a contradictory relationship to the working class: they need workers to generate profits, but bringing workers together opens the door to unions and resistance. This tension extends to the role of states. For all the

rhetoric against state intervention, capitalists in fact need strong states for, among other things, protecting their property and making and managing markets. But the risk of workers using their electoral power to influence these states leaves capitalists nervous about regulations (with their limits on how corporations make profits) and taxes (which make social claims on those profits). Capitalists are also worried that instead of following private sector workers, workers in the state sector might themselves set the standards – as they did to a significant extent in the late 60s. And so capital tends to articulate the importance of restraining the state even as it increases its practical dependence on it.

Above all, capitalists fear that workers might begin to question capitalism as the natural order of things, and wonder if capitalism has run its course and might be replaced with a more humane alternative. This priority of keeping workers in check has a long history and in this regard, the introduction of the auto assembly line on the eve of WWI is especially revealing. By then the Ford Motor Company already had a 'sociology department' to spy on workers both on the job and in their personal lives. The concern was to ensure they lived up to Henry Ford's moral code and more important, that they shied away from unions.

The head of this department declared at the time that 'Mr. Ford's business is the making of men and he manufacturers automobiles on the side to defray his expenses.'[2] This was more than a clever line. The making of the kind of men and women that could fit capitalism's often inhuman needs was always critical to the making of capitalism, and remains so today. Ford's control over labour included both direct repression and ideological integration, but repression was too blunt an instrument and corporate ideology was too contradictory – workers quickly saw that the promises never matched actual experiences.

These limits were driven home at the time through individual expressions of resistance; workers simply left and the company had to hire 4 workers for every one that stayed (a turnover rate of almost 400%, compared to a norm of about 4% or

less today).[3] Henry Ford's solution was to substantially increase the material inducement to stay by famously introducing the $5/day wage. This of course came with increased speedup and restrictions: to qualify, workers had to refrain from gambling or drinking, immigrants had to take classes to learn 'the American Way', and any man with a wife in the workforce was excluded. In any case, that innovation proved temporary. With intensifying competition squeezing profits, Henry Ford's 'generosity' didn't last very long.

During the depression, General Motors (GM) faced a related problem, but this time the concern wasn't the individual resistance reflected in worker turnover, but the arrival of unionism and collective resistance. A telling response was two documentaries produced by the company.[4] The first, in mid-1936, was called *Master Hands*.[5] With innovative film techniques and an operatic score by the German composer Richard Wagner played

by the Detroit Philharmonic, the film takes place almost entirely within the workplace and pays tribute to the remarkable skills and muscular labour that went into the design, development, and production of cars. A short sixteen months later, however, GM surprisingly shelved that film, replacing it with another by the same film-maker called *From Dawn to Sunset*.[6] This later film begins in a suburban home. The worker wakens to a hearty breakfast prepared by his proud and fawning wife, kisses her goodbye on the way out the door, and joins thousands of other workers driving to work, this time for a relatively short interlude on the assembly line. He is soon back to take his wife shopping where they are happily welcomed by local businessmen. Then comes a relaxing time at home listening to the radio and reading.

What accounts for this drastic difference in the two films? Though so close together chronologically, they were separated by the great distance of the industry's unionization. The first was made before the wave of sit-downs led by the United Auto Workers (UAW), the other after the union was recognized. While the end product in the first film was a car, in the second it is a pay check, transforming the active power to collectively produce into the passive power to individually consume.

Like Ford, however, GM couldn't fully implement this strategy, this time primarily because of the depression. But that strategic focus on what was called 'productivism' – emphasizing labour-management co-operation to prioritize the size of the pie to be distributed – was revived by U.S. business and the American state in the more favourable circumstances following WWII. It quickly spread to Canada and Europe. But its spread was not automatic. Coming out of the war, many workers and returning soldiers were receptive to the left's more radical emphasis on questions of power and equality, the extension of worker rights in the workplaces and democratic public control over investment.

The strategy corporations and states implemented to deal with this was double-edged. One aspect was a concerted drive to isolate and repress the radical left. A good many union leaders, competing with the left for leadership or looking for respectability,

were complicit in this assault. The other, 'friendlier' message was that workers could, within capitalism, slowly achieve the essence of the security and material well-being that the left promised – and with less risk. In retrospect, that purge of a relatively small but strategically important minority turned out to be a very decisive defeat of the Canadian labour movement as a whole. The outcome was that working class politics was generally narrowed to operating within capitalism, and worker demands were likewise generally narrowed to focusing on wages and benefits. Nevertheless, in the relatively full employment days of the 1950s and 1960s, workers did make very significant economic gains, negotiating what were essentially private welfare states for themselves and were even able to retain some workplace rights.

Yet once again, aiming to tie the interests of the working class to the success of capitalism proved contradictory. In the late 60s, workers made confident by employment security stood up to management authority and maintained their heady expectations for rising consumption even as the exceptional conditions for the post-war boom faded. In that context capitalists found it increasingly difficult to both buy off worker militancy and meet their profit goals. After a great deal of uncertainty through the 70s over how to respond, capitalist states regained their footing and countered with the series of policies we now label neoliberalism. The vulnerability of workers to this new aggressiveness had its roots in the post-war defeat of the left and some of labour's best activists, but it was also related to labour's recent successes. Those successes now increasingly depended on the particular skills developed through periodic bargaining and the technical-legalistic practice of grievances, and less on the organizing, mobilizing and community-building skills developed in the earlier period. The more recent set of skills were of limited help in coming to grips with the nature of the attacks labour now faced.

Canadian Exceptionalism

And yet the Canadian working class continued to demonstrate a remarkable resilience and strategic sophistication. Neoliberalism came to Canada in the mid-70s, earlier than in the other developed countries, including the U.S.. This 'anticipatory neoliberalism' was rooted in the fear among Canadian elites, ever sensitive to Canada's economic ties to the U.S., that the continuing militancy of Canadian labour threatened the competitiveness and profits of corporations operating in Canada. When the government imposed controls on collective bargaining, this brought on a one day general strike on October 14, 1976 – the first such action in Canada since 1919 and the first general strike in North American since the 1930s. Yet as impressive as the protest was, it did not force a reversal in the trajectory of state policy.

In the mid-80s, Canada initiated free trade talks with the U.S. to consolidate Canada's special access to U.S. markets. This deeper economic integration tied Canadian workers even closer to the uniquely weak American labour movement, with an expectation on the part of Canadian elites that this would help discipline Canadian workers. The breakaway of the Canadian autoworkers from their U.S. parent in the midst of the drive to neoliberalism and continental integration suggested that something special was emerging within Canadian labour. This was confirmed as Canadian unions launched, along with their movement partners, one of the most vigorous educational-political campaigns against free trade anywhere. In spite of widespread opposition to the trade deal, the Liberals and New Democratic Party (NDP) split the oppositional vote and free trade prevailed (whether a defeat of free trade would have ended or only postponed the free trade juggernaut is of course a different story).

Another decade later, in the mid-90s, this time in response to a right-wing Ontario government looking to accelerate the

erosion of the welfare state, labour and its movement allies carried out a uniquely creative tactic: a series of rotating community-wide general strikes that came to eight communities over 2 1/2 years, a highlight of which was some 250,000 demonstrators – the largest ever in Toronto – shutting down the city's core. These 'days of action' slowed the right but it too didn't reverse the trend.

Such responses on the part of Canadian labour – and there were other significant province-wide protests in British Columbia (BC) and Quebec – demonstrated an impressive capacity to go beyond the confines of unionism and act politically, including a notable emphasis on popular education and recruiting young workers to activism. Through that process, de facto political leadership on major issues shifted from the NDP to unions. In each case the NDP believed that labour's actions misunderstood

the public mood, hurt the NDP's electoral chances and diverted labour activists from elections to the politics of the street. Yet what was confirmed was both the bankruptcy of the NDP's cautious leadership role and, in contrast, the labour movement's potential as an agent of social protest.

And yet measured in terms of the stated goals, this politicization was disappointingly unsuccessful. As has often happened in the past, the demoralization of having done everything possible and still failing, set the stage for even greater defeats. Some tried to channel the frustrations back to a more pragmatic support for the NDP, but that very emphasis on pragmatism pushed others to go further and make deals with the liberals. A good many union leaders, concluding that industrial action and street politics were futile, turned to corporate deals with employers, with some grumbling occurring from a disoriented rank-and-file but little actual opposition.

Disorganizing the Class

If the Canadian labour movement mobilized its members, built effective alliances with social movements and introduced innovative tactics, why then did it still fail? Before getting to where the labour movement fell short, it's important to appreciate the depth of what it was up against. For capitalist elites the crisis of the 1970s, like that of the previous crisis of the 1930s, had raised the dangerous prospect of countries turning to protectionism and capital controls and thereby interrupting the continued making of global capitalism. Neoliberalism served to avoid such national divisions *between*

Neoliberalism served to avoid such national divisions between capitalists by uniting them in class warfare against each of their respective working classes.

capitalists by uniting them in class warfare against each of their respective working classes.

Crucial here was the extent to which, directly and indirectly, neoliberalism was able to reinforce already existing barriers to the formation of workers into a coherent oppositional class. As the then president of the UAW, Doug Fraser, angrily declared at the end of the 1970s, a class war was being waged but only one class – the owners – were fighting.[7]

This issue of class requires some elaboration. Workers may be a class in terms of their place in society, but this doesn't necessarily translate into identifying themselves as such or acting accordingly. Powerful forces within the regular operations of capitalism divide workers, tie them to employers rather than each other, and reduce them to isolated individuals. Workers are not only divided by workplace and by personal characteristics like gender and ethnicity but are also stratified by income levels and in their relation to work (full-time or part-time; employed, unemployed or unemployable). The neoliberal deregulation of labour markets – whether through the erosion of legislated labour standards, moving the public sector to private sector norms or active de-unionization – heightened the inequalities and stratification *within* the working class and thereby exacerbated its internal fragmentation.

Workers are, as well, dependent on their employers for work and wages. Based on daily experiences, it is no surprise that workers tend to identify their bosses as the bearers of economic and scientific knowledge, the ones with the capacity to organize labour power into marketable goods and services. Neoliberalism's emphasis on 'competitiveness' tied workers even closer to the success of their specific employer and distanced them from other workers. There was also a notable class asymmetry in the impact of competitiveness: when businesses fail, the resultant concentration of capital in the strongest firms strengthens capital as a class; however when workers compete, their most basic weapon – their solidarity – is undermined and workers are weakened as a class.

Another barrier to the development of the class is short-termism. The precariousness of workers' lives inclines workers to focus on what is immediate, downplaying the longer-term perspective needed to build a challenge to capitalism. This was amplified as neoliberal restructuring deepened job insecurity and eroded social safety nets. The collateral damage of that restructuring also brought the destruction of working class communities that had, over generations, developed a level of class identity that would take a good many years to rebuild.

Neoliberalism's restraints on wages had the further impact of influencing the *form* in which workers now got access to consumption, a development that proved especially significant to disorganizing workers as a class. Consumption, especially for unionized workers, came to depend relatively less on winning wages on the picket line and social benefits on the street and more on individualized responses: families, and especially women, worked longer hours; workers went into debt; sons or daughters moved in to their parents homes with their partners to save for a mortgage; homes were reduced to assets to borrow on and stock market gains were cheered as protecting pensions; tax cuts were treated as a wage increase not a social loss. Responding in this individualized way, solidaristic impulses faded and collective capacities for struggle atrophied.

Absent a class vision, and especially the structures through which workers could confidently engage in collective struggle, an energy-draining fatalism spread: a sense that what happens can't be influenced, that workers weren't actors in their own lives.

This ability of the state to build on labour's existing weaknesses and negatively influence the creation of a self-conscious working class has left workers in a debilitating limbo. Absent a class vision, and especially the structures through which

workers could confidently engage in collective struggle, an energy-draining fatalism spread: a sense that what happens can't be influenced, that workers weren't actors in their own lives. Capitalism once presented itself as the best option; now it went a step further and claimed to be the *only* option. With personal survival deemed the only realistic goal, workers themselves became implicated in reproducing the competitive, individualized spirit of neoliberalism.

The left often laments workers' lack of radicalism or blames union leaders for this state of affairs. But though trade union leaders, having been elected to lead, obviously bear a disproportionate responsibility for what does and doesn't occur, the problem goes much deeper. It lies in the very nature of unions. Unions are sectional, not class organizations, representing specific groups of workers with particular skills or sharing a common workplace or subsector. That focus on the self-interests of a subgroup – as opposed to a larger, solidaristic class vision – is fertile ground for workers seeing unions as an insurance policy: dues are exchanged for bargaining and representational services. That in turn invites a tendency to leave most of what happens in unions to leaders and technical experts, setting the foundation for the bureaucratization of union structures.

In the immediate post WWII years, this organizational form nevertheless delivered the goods. It made gains that also spread to other parts of the working class. But as recent history emphatically asserts, that moment is effectively over. Sectional unions have proved to be no match for what workers are up against under neoliberal capitalism. Even when Canadian unions made the fight and reached beyond their particular interests, such as during the very politicized days of action, they eventually returned to their separate collective bargaining rounds.

Sectional unions have proved to be no match for what workers are up against under neoliberal capitalism. Even when Canadian unions made the fight and reached beyond their particular interests, such as during the very politicized days of action, they eventually returned to their separate collective bargaining rounds.

when Canadian unions made the fight and reached beyond their particular interests, such as during the very politicized days of action, they eventually returned to their separate collective bargaining rounds. There was no ability to put the days of action in the context of a broader struggle, no organized concern to develop the young workers who were introduced to an exciting activism through these actions, and no strategy for continuing to build capacities and alliances in the communities that had been mobilized but then abandoned as the protests moved on to other cities.

This shouldn't be surprising. On their own, labour leaders are either overwhelmed with just keeping their organizations going or in some cases – because it makes their own job easier – even quietly content to see their members blame globalization and neoliberalism for everything and lower their expectations of the union and its leadership. As for the rank-and-file, they are in the main too cut off from each other and from other struggles and don't have the historical memory, confidence and resources to successfully sustain pressures for a radical re-orientation.

Inspiring examples of unions 'doing it right' certainly do, as noted before, periodically come up. But for such examples to become the rule rather than the exception, and for labour to accomplish broader goals, requires a different kind of organization with a much *deeper* politics: one with feet both inside and outside unions, grounded in the working class but also specifically geared to look beyond the daily grind of bargaining and workplace representation so it can address the wider context faced by workers and unions. This was traditionally identified as the role of a socialist party – an organization that didn't reduce politics to making the compromises necessary to win the next election and then convincing workers of the limits of the possible. Rather it was an organization that was singularly committed to the long-term project of building the working class, in all its complexities and dimensions, into a social and political force.

In this regard, it bears emphasizing the extent to which workers' 'own' social democratic parties have not only ceased to

Inspiring examples of unions 'doing it right' certainly do periodically come up. But for such examples to become the rule rather than the exception, and for labour to accomplish broader goals, requires a different kind of organization with a much deeper politics: one with feet both inside and outside unions, grounded in the working class but also specifically geared to look beyond the daily grind of bargaining and workplace representation so it can address the wider context faced by workers and unions. This was traditionally identified as the role of a socialist party – an organization that didn't reduce politics to making the compromises necessary to win the next election and then convincing workers of the limits of the possible. Rather it was an organization that was singularly committed to the long-term project of building the working class, in all its complexities and dimensions, into a social and political force.

play this role (which was in any case always limited) and have actually contributed to *disorganizing* the class. Social democracy has come to believe that capitalism is the only way to run a developed economy and underlying its policies and ideology is how to best manage capitalism. In the context of intense competition and corporate mobility, this has involved social democratic parties educating workers to accept the logic of competitiveness and ultimately to accept neoliberalism itself as 'the only option', at best claiming that they intend to implement a 'kinder' neoliberalism. Absent a vision of society beyond capitalism, respect for workers as the social agency with the potential to realize that vision, and the party as the critical vehicle for developing that potential, social democracy has instead served to confuse, demoralize, disorient, divide and disarm workers.

Getting From Here to There

Since no such mass socialist party yet exists in Canada, the intimidating question for those concerned with getting from here to there is how to better defend the working class and start a process of union renewal today, while also laying the groundwork for the eventual development of that indispensable party. For the moment, the critical strategic element seems to lie in trying to bring class sensibilities into unions, and I want to spend the rest of my talk raising what this might concretely mean by touching on a number of specific issues.

1. Class and internal democracy

The first point should be obvious but often isn't. A movement committed to a more profound democracy and equality in society has to be all the more democratic and egalitarian internally. As Lois Weiner has put it, 'if unions are not

democratic, even if they fight for social justice, they perpetuate hierarchical relations that disempower workers.'

This is not just a matter of principle and example, but also of being *effective*. The democratic skills we aspire to developing can only emerge through democratic participation; a movement run exclusively from the top, as opposed to leaders being catalysts for the widest and deepest participation, is inherently limited in sustaining mobilization. And a class divided along gender and race can't be expected to act as a coherent whole; solidarity depends on an *active* organizational commitment to establishing the fundamental equality of all its members both inside and outside our unions.

2. Dues vs. building the class

The blame for the limited success of unions in organizing new members, whether in the more stable or precarious sectors, falls primarily of course at the feet of employers and the state. But it is in no small part also a reflection of unions seeing organizing

in terms of increasing the dues-paying membership rather than as building the working class. Among other things, this leads to counter-productive competition among unions for dues-paying members as opposed to – what today seems unthinkable – unions actually cooperating across union boundaries. And it is only an orientation to building the class that is likely to make organizing into the kind of crusade that can elicit the commitment, energy, and resources needed for making the breakthroughs into new sectors.

Some unions have come to understand that the community and not just the workplace frames worker attitudes. But what remains rare, as Jane McAlevey has emphasized, is an appreciation of the capacities of workers to be trained to *themselves* become key organizers in the sub-communities they inhabit – churches, schools, ethnic groups, community centers, sports clubs, etc.[9] Appreciation of the significance of the community may also lead to new working class structures to both organize and represent workers. It may, for example, be that city-wide unions rather than sectoral unions are the best way to gather and represent fast-food workers or even all precarious workers in a city. Or that city-wide worker assemblies are the best way to bring unionized and non-union workers together as a solidaristic and political urban force.[10]

In all the attention given to organizing precarious workers, it's rather remarkable that so little attention has been paid to recently laid off union members, many of whom are now the very same precarious workers unions talk of organizing. Staying in touch with those former members through information sessions, educationals, and cultural events at union halls retains contacts that can be converted to organizing opportunities as these workers move on to their new jobs and also makes it possible to mobilize them around union campaigns for jobs and social benefits. Ignoring these former members is not just a missed opportunity but a political danger, as frustrated workers come to resent the union as only considering them important when they were contributing dues.

3. Unions and public sector leadership

While public sector unions have focused on bargaining and workplace grievances, the state has imposed severe political limits on outcomes that go beyond the more publicized budgetary constraints. They have negated seniority rights of teachers, privatized health care services, and rushed to remove the right to strike where it was effective. Responding to this clearly demands coordination beyond particular workplaces, sectors and unions. What, for example, should the overall goals be? Should there be an all-out strike or rotating strikes? Which sectors should go first so the unions, not the state, set the tone? And ultimately this aggressive attack on workers and social services demands the participation of not just the public sector unions but the entire working class and labour's allies.

Governments have been able to isolate public sector workers by framing the choices as spending money on worker compensation or on public services. This has been reinforced by contrasting the condition of public sector workers to the concessions swallowed by private sector workers, the inability of young workers to find work, and welfare recipients who have seen their social assistance eroded. In combatting this, public sector workers are certainly right to defend their pay and argue for higher taxes on the rich to pay for decent services and fair compensation. They can emphasize that workers' frustrations with ever-higher workloads and deteriorating working conditions are directly related to the deterioration of the level and quality of services. And they can point to conference resolutions that confirm the strong support of their unions for social services. But none of this will convince a sceptical public, including other workers.

The only way to make inroads with the public is to concretely demonstrate – through what public sector unions do in bargaining, in their relationships to service recipients, and on the streets – that it is the public sector workers and not the state, who

are the defenders of and leaders in the fight for adequate, high-quality and responsive social services. This would entail the most significant changes to *all* of labour's strategies, tactics and structures. It implies reallocating union resources, building new local and sectoral as well as national capacities, a profound deepening of membership participation, rethinking how unions relate to the community, daring to publically expose poor services while speaking to how they could be improved, and taking the unprecedented step of placing the level and quality of services on the bargaining table as *priorities*. More generally it involves developing the confidence and vision to move beyond fighting on the enemies' terrain – a terrain on which competitiveness and keeping bankers happy has dominated all else.

It also means creatively addressing how to use workers' workplace leverage to supplement strikes. In the 2009 garbage strike in Toronto, for example, garbage piled up in public parks and angered the public. Wouldn't it have been better to take the garbage to Bay street parking lots to symbolically make the connection between the banks and austerity? Was it possible to limit the strike at its start to rich neighbourhoods to highlight the class essence of the struggle, in particular, the refusal of the rich to support social services by accepting increased taxes on their rapidly rising wealth? Might bus drivers, instead of starting with a strike, continue to work but refuse to collect fares? And when ordered to collect fares could they do so passively, refusing to enforce fare collection as a health and safety issue? Should unions play a whistle-blowing role in exposing flaws in the public service rather than defensively denying them? Should unions be setting up public sector councils in every section of the public service consisting of both workers and their clients to defend social services?

4. Unions and jobs

The argument that strengthening corporations and weakening unions will lead to decent jobs has been exposed. Though sitting on hordes of cash, pro-corporate policies haven't led to the investment adequate to establish anything close to full employment, and certainly not well-paying secure jobs. The problem isn't the weakness of corporations but their unchecked power.

There is a contradiction at the core of unions that especially surfaces in times of employment insecurity. The top priority of members is to hang on to their jobs, but unions are not inherently institutions for getting or keeping work; they are about the price of conditions of worker's labour power once they are working. This problem is compounded by the fact that the job insecurity also undermines the union ability to deliver on the bargaining unions are allegedly structured to do. It is difficult, in short, to imagine union renewal without addressing access to decent jobs.

Prioritizing job security can't help but raise radical issues. Modest interventions that don't challenge private control over the economy bring only modest results. Seriously addressing jobs means recognizing that the radical has now become the practical. It demands confronting corporations over closures, free trade, deregulation of markets, anti-worker flexibility, tax policy, capital controls, and especially control over the banking system and the allocation of society's profits and savings. This is all the more so if the issue isn't jobs in the abstract, but their impact on equality and the environment.

Consider this in the context of the recent auto bail-outs. Instead of pushing for policies that lead to more cars on the road, independent of whether this makes social and environmental sense, the union could have pointed to the much greater conversions that occurred during WWII and reconversion after.[11] The union could then have argued for the planned changeover of

valuable tools, equipment and worker skills rejected by profits and the market to alternative social uses such as the environmental demands that will dominate the rest of this century: transportation and energy grids, the design and retrofitting of housing, modifications to the equipment and processes employed in factories and offices.

Addressing jobs would then be framed not as saving GM but as saving communities and the impressive productive capacity that resides in the industry and workforce; not in terms of restoring profits but in terms of addressing social needs; not as accepting competitiveness as the arbiter of our material lives but as raising democratic planning within an expanded *public* sector. Regionally, it might involve community plans that guarantee what common sense suggests any society should provide: productive work or training for anyone who wants it. It's assumed that everyone has the right to an education and it is not a stretch to aggressively insist that everyone who wants to contribute productively should have the right to do so. This might be done through establishing elected local institutions – job development boards – to take responsibility for canvassing the community for unmet needs and unused skills, providing technical expertise to convert plants in danger of closing, and running economic literacy classes to expand the capacity for broad participation.[12]

5. Labour and the movements

Most of the anti-establishment energy since the late 90s has come not from labour but from social movements such as Occupy, the G-20 protests, idle no more, and environmental campaigns such as that targeting the tar sands and the Enbridge pipeline. These movements have looked to the labour movement for resources and support and labour in turn has gotten a degree of popular legitimacy from their movement links. This is an unambiguously positive development and it should clearly be encouraged and deepened. Yet its potential for reviving the labour

and building an alternative politics that brings labour and the social movements together needs some sober assessment.

Three particular problems are worth highlighting. First, though labour and the movements may have a loose consensus around the opposition to neoliberalism, an effective coalition would need to be more specific about joint priorities. Especially difficult would be overcoming cultural and political differences to come up with joint tactics and strategies. For example, many movement activists see their particular issue as the end point of their politics, not as a step toward a larger politics, and quickly run out of steam.

Second, the social movements in Canada are not mass movements. Their base of activists is generally small, the issues they focus on specific not general, and they have shown little capacity to move beyond protest to build and sustain a larger politics. Given labour's own weakness, the problem is that adding two floundering movements together doesn't in fact give us all that much. This was made especially clear at Occupy's peak. Occupy created an opening by showing that audacious action can meet with sympathy and their 1% slogan demonstrated the same is true for introducing a class language, even if oversimplified. Unions responded with logistical support – when what was really called for was leveraging their workplace presence to occupy spaces that weren't just symbolic: government buildings, schools, and factories. But that kind of joint action didn't emerge and Occupy soon faded.

A third issue is that labour approaches social movements as 'others' with whom to ally politically, rather than recognizing them as often representing those parts of the working class unions so often ignore. Worker action centers, immigrant rights groups, personal care support networks, and anti-poverty organizations all represent parts of the working class which have fallen on, or are stuck in, hard times. And a good many social movements are not 'others' in another way: they focus on those dimensions of working class life that extend beyond the workplace (such as environmentalists addressing the air working class families

breathe and the water they drink, community groups fighting hospital or school closings, housing and tenants groups demanding affordable housing).

6. Social movement or class-sensitive unionism?

Among those sympathetic to labour movement renewal, the term 'social movement unionism' has been used to characterize, against 'business unionism', a unionism with broader perspectives. However useful a role this distinction once played in initiating a discussion on union direction, it now obscures more than it clarifies. Essentially *all* unions now self-identify as 'social movement unions' and this speaks to the

vagueness of the term. The issue here is not only the range of commitments this might involve – from charity work to financially supporting allies in their own organizing – but something more profound. While turning to social movement unionism focuses on *adding* activities to what unions were doing, what it avoided was the more controversial discussion of the *internal* changes unions needed to undergo if union were to contribute to a 'class sensibility'.

The point is not to imagine unions being transformed into class institutions in the sense of representing the class as a whole – their very nature in terms of representing particular workers and sectors limits this. Rather, it is that a class sensibility emphasizes: a) workers as agents (what Marta Harnecker calls 'protagonists')[13] with the potential to be organizers in both the workplace and the community; b) that bringing class into the analysis of what workers face and who stands with them can strengthen their particular struggles; c) raising class is part of raising a vision that imagines, and pushes workers to think about, their role in bringing about an alternative different society; and d) the possibility of unions, in combination with socialists, opening the door to serving, even to a limited extent, as 'schools of socialism' that might recruit workers to the socialist cause.

To move to *this* kind of unionism, however, demands a virtual revolution *inside* union — not just adding external functions — because it implies changing so much about unions in terms of relationships to members, the focus of research, the allocation of funds, the role of staff and the kind of training that staff and activists get, the weight of more general internal education, new internal structures for relating to the community and other unions, the very nature and place of collective bargaining as the lifeblood of unions, the approach to grievances, the relationship to political parties, etc., etc.

7. The environment and democratic planning

Working people are increasingly aware of the environmental crisis and its threat to themselves and their families. And many unions now have progressive environmental positions. But to seriously deal with this crisis can't help but raise a range of uncomfortable issues that will need to be taken on: the profound restructuring of jobs and industries, changes in how we consume and what we consider valuable, rethinking our cities.

Trying to overcome this by expecting that people will be galvanized into action by the warning that the end is imminent is, however, counter-productive (which is certainly not to say that scientific truths should be hidden from people). Because we are not anywhere near building the social base required to comprehensively deal with the environment, such predictions only lead people to despair and to give up rather than to mobilize. The world will likely still be here decades from now. The issue is how much uglier and inhospitable it will be and the extent to which income inequalities will be extended to even greater inequities over access to air, water, and nature.

It therefore seems more useful to frame the environmental crisis as part of the broader struggle against neoliberalism. If dealing with the environment will make restraints on consumption necessary, the costs should be equitably shared as part of a radical redistribution of income and wealth. This also points to the importance of a cultural shift in the balance between individual consumption and collective consumption. And it would mean linking jobs and the environment through both desperately needed infrastructural renewal (including mass transit); and, as mentioned earlier, the conversion of potentially productive facilities rejected by the market to the production of socially useful and environmentally necessary products and services.

All this would impel us to place democratic planning on the agenda and start talking about making private banks into public utilities so we control the financial resources to implement the above. Going further, it poses the question of whether capitalism, with its fundamental orientation to competition, profits and thoughtless growth, has itself become the main barrier to environmental sanity.

8. Internationalism

Social justice is universal and so the responsibility of any progressive movement is to oppose *all* forms of oppression – whether they be class-based or not – at home and in all parts of the world. A crucial aspect of internationalism has always been to fight against the interference of our state or other states in the experiments of other countries to develop a better society. And environmental deliberations must include an appreciation of the fact that if the Global South is to catch up to us and the environment is to be preserved, the developed countries may need to consciously grow slower. Where particular struggles break out from time to time, like an especially significant strike abroad, our support should clearly be there. And as globalization pushes desperate workers out of their countries in search of a livelihood

and our country brings them in so as to access their labour, we should join their fight for basic rights and fair treatment as part of the broader working class.

Yet the reality we keep coming back to is that if the labour movement can't establish solidarity between private and public sectors at home, between steel workers and auto workers, between workers in Alberta and Ontario, it is naive to imagine workers building any deep solidarity with workers much more separated by distance, history, language, and social context. If we can't develop our power domestically as a class, we can't be of much help in struggles abroad.

Our greatest contribution to internationalism is therefore to make the fight and build the working class at home. Concessions undermine workers elsewhere; gains expand the space for others to make gains. As for more dramatic international support, like massive transfers of technologies and skills to support development in the Global South, this can't be done until we actually control that technology and live in quite a different world than one based on private corporations competing for profits. In the case of Europe today, a crucial question is whether working classes across Europe (and especially in Germany) can demonstrate the solidaristic capacity to limit the aggressive determination of their *own* states to crush the Greeks and instead push their states toward accommodating to the expressed frustrations and needs of the Greek people.

The issue of internationalism raises a further difficult question, especially for Canadians. Given the degree of integration of Canada's economy, military and state with the U.S., how far can Canadian workers actually go if change is not also occurring in the United States? Two points seem crucial in trying to deal with this dilemma. First, we can't fully win if there aren't parallel struggles occurring elsewhere, above all in the U.S., but neither can we wait for that to happen. So we need to start where we are, even if any gains will remain incomplete. Second, our relationship to the American empire means that our strategies must include moving to reduce our dependency. But that too is a class question,

not a national one; the opposition to such a direction would first and vehemently come from *Canadian* business.

9. Middle class?

My last point addresses one of the greatest ironies of the present moment. At a time when the reality of class divisions is more evident than ever, workers seem to increasingly reject their self-identification as 'working class' in preference to describing themselves as part of a vague 'middle class'.

This involves more than a pragmatic attempt to find a legitimate language for defending workers. To begin with, such language excludes a good part of the working class that is decidedly not 'middle-class': the poor, the unemployed, those in precarious work or non-union low-paid jobs. In the U.S. in particular, 'middle-class' has become code for excluding poor blacks and immigrant Latinos. While dividing the working class in this way, the notion of workers as 'middle class' tends to integrate the unionized and relatively better paid workers into an amorphous grouping that extends to professionals, entrepreneurs, and lower management, some of whose incomes are up to a quarter of a million dollars annually. This comes with a political agenda focused on lower taxes and government cutbacks. What gets marginalized are issues potentially shared across workers - issues like dignity on the job and the pressures of increased workloads; the restructuring of the economy and despair over decent jobs for our kids; the threat to social programs of particular importance to working people like health care, the quality of education, unemployment insurance; the inadequacy of minimum wages, welfare rates and pensions; the legalized corruption in the private sector as well as within the state.

Capitalist elites have understandably been happy to see workers disarm themselves by repudiating any talk of 'class', 'class conflict' and 'class struggle'. For the labour movement, however, this retreat from class is also a retreat from workers'

historic potentials and responsibilities as agents of transformative social change. To explicitly speak on behalf of the working class is, as labour historian Nelson Lichtenstein puts it, 'to begin to educate millions of Americans to the realization that their future is linked to their own capacity for organization and empowerment.'

Conclusion

The great breakthrough of trade unionism came from the understanding that workers had precious little power facing employers on their own and needed to establish their own permanent institutions independent of employers and governments. As times change so do workers' strategic needs. The lesson of the past three decades is that the answer to the problem of our weakness as individuals – unions – are, on their own, also not enough and the notion of the 'collective' must be raised to the class as a whole.

Not only does the working class need multiple collectivities beyond unions to deal with all the class issues raised earlier, but it also needs a broader, over-riding organization with a larger vision. That organization – a socialist party of a new kind – would have to transform these various fragments, above all the unions, as part of bringing them together. Most generally, the point of the party is to develop our individual and collective understandings and capacities to confront capitalism and dream again of creating a new society.

At a moment when we cannot simply declare the formation of such a party of the left, what needs exploration is what can be done in the interim to make it possible down the road. What kind of initiatives, intermediate organizational structures, networks of activists across every workplace and in every community, and education and strategies can create a social force that can begin the unmaking of capitalism? •

References

1. Adolph Reed Jr., *New Labor Forum*, 12 December 2013.

2. Reverend S. Marquis, Director, Ford Department of Sociology, cited in Wayne Lewchuk, 'Men and Monotony: Fraternalism and Managerial Strategy at the Ford Motor Company.' *The Journal of Economic History*, 53(4), December, 1993.

3. Ibid. For current rates of turnover see U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, JOLTS. http://www.bls.gov/jlt.

4. These films were brought to my attention by historian David Sobel. Rick Prelinger, in an internet notes tells us that "[I]n a now-obscure magazine article and book called 'Business Finds Its Voice,' (text available on 'Our Secret Century' CD #2, Capitalist Realism)," there's an outline of how 'From Dawn to Sunset' was part of a strategy to diffuse union support in twelve cities where Chevy plants were located. See: http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/17748/22206.

5. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bT6txm4RpA.

6. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbeSVmEwBMk.

7. Doug Fraser, July 17, 1978, letter of resignation from the Labor-Management Group, a private group that emerged after the collapse of the U.S. President's Labor-Management Committee. See http://www.historyisaweapon.org/defcon1/fraserresign.html.

8. Lois Weiner, Presentation Santa Barbara, Speech.

9. See Jane McAlevey with Bob Ostertag (2014) *Raising Expectations (Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*. New York: Verso.

10. See Bill Fletcher Jr. and Fernando Gaspasin (2008) *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path to Social Justice.* Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 170-9.

11. See Greg Albo, Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch (2010) *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives.* Oakland, CA: PM Press, Chapter 5.

12. See Leo Panitch (2000) 'Strategies for Labour,' in Panitch and Leys (eds.) *Socialist Register 2001*. London: Merlin Press.

13. See Marta Harnecker (2014) *A World to Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

14. See Nelson Lichtenstein (2012) "Class Unconsciousness: Stop Using 'Middle Class' to Depict the Labor Movement," *New Labor Forum*. 21(2): Spring, p. 13.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

SAM GINDIN spent most of his working life as Research Director, then Assistant to the President, of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). He subsequently became an adjunct professor at York University in Toronto, Canada, facilitating a seminar in Social Justice and Political Activism and is now retired. He is the co-author with Leo Panitch of *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*.