

[Robert Brenner](#)

24 February 2016

0 comments

The Paradox of Social Democracy: The American Case (Part One)



*The apparent viability of Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic nomination and the left-ward drift of opinion amongst, especially, young Americans has raised the question of the prospects for a Social Democratic turn in American politics. In an essay that first appeared in the 1985 edition of *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* Robert Brenner provides a detailed and cautionary analysis of the likelihood of achieving social democratic goals through the Democratic Party and presents an overview of the forces that stymie the reform of American capitalism. Brenner is the author of many important interventions in world economics including: The Boom and the Bubble, Merchants and Revolution, and The Economics of Global Turbulence. You can read parts two and three of the essay [here](#) and [here](#).*



I A New Social Democracy?

A very long time ago — in the Palaeolithic days of the new left of the later 1960s — few red-blooded radicals would have been caught dead inside the Democratic Party. This was the era of the student and anti-imperialist movements, of SDS; of the militant Black movements, of SNCC, the Black Panther Party, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers; and of the nascent rank and file movements among industrial and public service workers. In those days, it was strictly the politics of the streets and of mass direct action. 'Power to the people' definitely did not mean 'part of the way with RFK.' The Democratic Party was recognized as firmly wedded to American imperialism, as expressed in LBJ's Vietnam War, not to mention Harry Truman's A-Bomb over Hiroshima or his Cold War or Kennedy's Bay of Pigs. Moreover, despite the fact that workers, Blacks, and the poor did vote, in their majority, for the Democratic Party, that Party was viewed as clearly pro-capitalist, anti-working class, and anti-Black. Neither workers nor Blacks controlled, nor even much participated in the Democratic Party. So, it was hardly surprising to the 60s radicals that the Party never tried to repeal the viciously anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act,

that it refused to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at its 1964 convention in place of the arch-segregationist official delegation, and that the Kennedy presidency failed to achieve a single significant piece of social legislation.

Indeed, the one lesson that the new left absorbed, at least superficially, through its rather vague notions of corporate liberalism and participatory democracy, was that the labor bureaucratic, party politico, service professional, and Black petty bourgeois elements which constituted the core of official reformism could never be counted on to put into effect even their own programs. Left to their own devices, they would find a way to compromise with ‘the powers that be.’ The first generation of the new left grew up on the rather crude slogan of ‘never trust a liberal,’ and their successors did not forsake that credo. The accepted premises, therefore, for an effective new left politics were understood to be an organizational and political independence from the forces of official reformism, a reliance on militant direct action to impose reforms from the outside, and the sort of direct democracy inside the movements which was anathema to the party, labor, and Black bureaucratic forces that dominated the Democratic Party and the official institutions of liberalism.

Today, in the Democratic Party, nothing fundamental has changed since the 60s. But in most other respects, we live in a different political world. Above all, the mass direct action movements which made reforms possible and which provided the material basis, so to speak, for the rise of radical organizations and ideas have suffered more than a decade of disastrous decline. In connection with the deepening crisis of the international economy, the secular decline of American manufacturing, and the accelerating offensive by employers against all sections of the working class and the poor, the decline of the movements is *the* overriding factor determining the political universe of the left. The militant mass movements which motivated hundreds of thousands of people to strike, to demonstrate, to sit-in and to sit-down in the 60s and 70s — these were, and are, the only real sources of power for the left. These movements provide the *indispensable* basis for actually winning reforms and imposing policies on the government — above all in periods like this one of economic contraction. In consequence, they provide the critical condition for making left

perspectives realistic and, in this way, the necessary basis for winning people to a left worldview. For, as a rule, people will not maintain a political perspective — no matter how empirically and logically compelling — unless they can see a more or less immediate possibility of putting it into practice. The decline of mass direct action movements over many years, and especially the collapse of rank and file working-class organizations, is thus the overriding reason for the disarray of the left, as well as of liberalism, and it has opened the way for massive confusion.

Unable to suck mass movements out of their thumbs, the majority of leftists in the U.S. for more than a decade have relentlessly searched for *substitutes*, new social agencies and new political strategies. By the late 70s and early 80s, there had issued inside the left — though nowhere else in society — a broad commitment to move in the direction of a ‘new social democracy.’ In late 1978, Doug Fraser, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and a self-styled socialist, revealed that there was a ‘one-sided class war’ going on against the American working class. He subsequently withdrew from Secretary of Labor John T. Dunlop’s Labor Management Advisory Group (whose explicit function was indeed to manage labor) and convened the ‘Progressive Alliance,’ a new multi-constituency organization ostensibly designed to ‘revive the spirit of Selma and the sit-downs,’ support grass roots organizing efforts, and bring the disparate movements together. The Progressive Alliance drew large numbers of liberal and social democratic officials from the women’s, Black, environmental, and consumer groups, as well as from the unions, to its first meeting.[1] A short time later, the New American Movement (NAM), the last surviving organization of the new left, merged with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), the official social democratic organization in the U.S. and a member of the Second International, to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In the meantime, since the early 70s, the overwhelming majority of those who had survived from the Black movements of the 60s had immersed themselves in a single-minded electoralism, aiming to capture key offices in the cities both north and south. By 1984, Manning Marable, a well-known Black writer and a national officer of DSA, was hailing this tendency, too, as a new (Black) ‘social democracy.’[2] Indeed by 1984, all wings of this new social democracy had found

their fore-ordained home inside the Democratic Party. Almost the entirety of the American left, in one incarnation or another, participated in the 1984 election in support of the Democratic Party candidates. The campaign of Jesse Jackson for president constituted the near-exclusive focus of the left's organizing efforts throughout the election year.

Not surprisingly, the proponents of this new social democratic strategy have justified their approach in terms of a return to realism. 'We were ultra-left,' say the ex-Maoists, who have forsaken the 'New Communist Movement' in order to invade the Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson campaigns. 'We have to get out of the sandbox into the real world,' say the ex-CP *realpolitikers* who have joined DSA in order more effectively to implement the old popular front line inside the Democratic Party. What all this means, in brief, is that to be practical you have to relate to the Democratic Party, since that's where the action is.

Proponents of working in and for the Democratic Party argue, then, that because the Party has been historically and is today *the* party of the mass movements and *the* party of reform, it must be the central vehicle for left struggle. These progressives point to the fact that a majority of working people, Blacks, and other oppressed groups, even now, generally vote Democratic. But they fail to distinguish between the passive, private, and individualist act of voting and the active, collective, power-creating act of organizing to confront the employers or the government. The pro-Democratic Party progressives also notice, quite properly, that the unions, the official Black organizations, and the official women's organizations constitute the backbone of the Democratic Party. But they fail to distinguish between the interests of bureaucratic and middle-class elements which dominate these organizations and which represent them inside the Democratic Party and the very different interests of the rank and file and working-class elements which constitute the membership of these organizations but play essentially no active role inside the Democratic Party. The new social democrats point out further that the stated programs of the 'left' Democratic Party officials, Black politicians, and trade union leaders are generally at the left extreme of the political spectrum in the U.S. today, and that, if implemented, these programs

would amount to a giant step forward for the American people. But they fail to distinguish between talk and action, what's on paper and what's implemented. They simply ignore the near-total incapacity not only of Democratic Party Congressional majorities, but also of fully fledged social democratic governments around the world, to impose reforms upon capital throughout the period of crisis which began in the early 70s. Nor do they recognize how totally committed these parties have been in power to austerity and attacks on the working class. Finally, those who would rebuild social democracy in the U.S. point out that social democracy in general, and the Democratic Party in particular, has appeared as the 'vehicle' of those great waves of reform which have, periodically, shaken the advanced capitalist countries. But they fail to distinguish between the immediate legislators of reforms and the creators of the mass political offensives which actually made reform legislation possible. They characteristically, and disastrously, neglect the tumultuous mass movements which transformed, willy-nilly, what hitherto had been do-nothing reformist politicians into agents of social and political change.

II The Paradox of Social Democracy

The point is that most of the U.S. left, like most of the left throughout the world, still remains transfixed by social democracy's passive mass base, its left paper programs, and its historic association with reform. They refuse, therefore, to take social democracy seriously as a distinct social and historical phenomenon — one which represents distinctive social forces and, as a result, advances specific political theories and strategies, and, in turn, manifests a recognizable political dynamic within capitalism. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the evolution of social democracy has been marked by a characteristic paradox. On the one hand, its rise has depended upon tumultuous mass working-class struggles, the same struggles which have provided the muscle to win major reforms and also the basis for the emergence of far left political organizations and ideology. The expansion of working-class self-organization, power, and political consciousness, dependent in turn upon working-class mass action, has provided *the* critical condition for the success of reformism as well as of the far left. On the other hand, to the extent that social democracy has been

able to consolidate itself organizationally, its core representatives —drawn from the ranks of the trade union officials, the parliamentary politicians, and the petty bourgeois leaderships of the mass organizations of the oppressed — have invariably sought to implement policies reflecting *their own* distinctive social positions and interest — positions which are *separate from* and interests which are, in fundamental ways, *opposed to* those of the working class. Specifically, they have sought to establish and maintain a secure place for themselves and their organizations within capitalist society. To achieve this security, the official representatives of social democratic and reformist organizations have found themselves obliged to seek, at a minimum, the implicit toleration, and, ideally, the explicit recognition of capital. As a result, they have been driven, systematically and universally, not only to relinquish socialism as a goal and revolution as a means, but, beyond that, to contain, and at times, actually to crush those upsurges of mass working-class action whose very dynamics lead, in tendency, to broader forms of working-class organization and solidarity, to deepening attacks on capital and the capitalist state, to the constitution of working people as a self-conscious class, and, in some instances, to the adoption of socialist and revolutionary perspectives on a mass scale. They have done this, despite the fact that it is precisely these movements which have given them their birth and sustained their power, and which have been the only possible guarantee of their continued existence in class-divided, crisis-prone capitalism. The paradoxical consequence has been that, to the extent that the official representatives of reformism in general and social democratic parties in particular have been freed to implement their characteristic worldviews, strategies, and tactics, they have systematically undermined the basis for their own continuing existence, paving the way for their own dissolution.

For these reasons, even those most intent on calling into existence a new reformism have before them an ironic prospect. To the extent they wish to create a viable social democracy, they will have to maintain their political and organizational *independence* from, and indeed systematically to *oppose*, those who represent actually-existing social democracy. To the extent, on the other hand, they end up, as they have until now, merging themselves with the official forces of

reformism, they will be disabled for carrying out what is clearly the cardinal (if enormously imposing) task facing those who wish to implement *any* left perspective: to rebuild the fighting capacity, organization, and left political consciousness of the working class and oppressed people. Indeed, to the degree that the proponents of a new social democracy bind themselves to already-existing reformism — its distinctive organizations, leaderships, strategies, and ideas — they will contribute, if unwittingly, to the further erosion of collective and class-based forms for pursuing workers' interests, and thereby encourage the adoption of those individualistic and class-collaborationist forms of achieving workers' interests which literally pave the way for the right.

None of this is mere logic, nor is it ancient history. Remarkably, the American left has crystallized its own trend toward social democratic politics immediately in the wake of an extended series of experiments in social democracy in Europe, experiments that have proven catastrophic for the entire left. By the mid-70s, through most of Europe, the social democratic and Communist parties had succeeded in channelling the energies of the mass worker and student movements of the previous decade into the parliamentary/electoral arena and, on this basis, had achieved for themselves practically unprecedented positions of political authority. At the same time, the near totality of those leftists who had, during the late 60s and early 70s, constructed a small but significant extra-parliamentary left out of those same mass movements also moved *en masse* into the ostensibly revitalized and reconstructed Eurocommunist and Eurosocialist parties. Their justification for this turn? Precisely the same one invoked by America's new social democrats: entering into these organizations appeared to them the best way to hook up with the workers, to fight effectively for reforms, and to rebuild the mass movements.

The results are now plain for all to see. The Communist Parties outside Italy have suffered massive, probably irreversible decline, as the European working classes have seen no need for two mass reformist parties and have preferred to back the official ones. Much more importantly, labor and socialist parties in Portugal, Spain, and above all France have won smashing electoral/parliamentary victories and ascended to

‘power.’ In every case, these electoral campaigns and electoral victories took place in the wake of alarming *declines* in working-class organization — indeed as more or less explicit *substitutes* for working-class action nevertheless, most of the left insisted on interpreting them as in themselves mass movements and, therefore, as working-class triumphs. What has been the outcome? In every case, with no independent mass movements to ‘keep them honest,’ the labor and socialist governments have used their newly-won authority to ‘restructure’ their national capitalisms in the interests of international competitiveness. In the process, they have imposed upon the working class policies of austerity even more vicious and thoroughgoing than those of their conservative predecessors, and have undermined further the workers’ main defensive organizations, especially the trade unions. The consequence of social democratic hegemony has been neither a new period of reform, nor an opening to the left. On the contrary, capitalist restructuring under social democracy has brought about the most massive political demoralization of the working class and the most devastating discrediting of socialist and Marxist ideas within memory. Not surprisingly, the medium term consequence has been to breathe vibrant new life into long-discredited right wing political perspectives, to prepare not only the revival of the most virulent forms of free enterprise ideology, but also the emergence of a dynamic crypto-fascism — above all, and not accidentally, in Socialist France. So, once again, the paradoxical but predictable dynamic: in the absence of mass movements to supply their own, independent material force for reform and for the rise of left ideas, the most decisive victories of social democracy have issued, in the end, in the most decisive undermining of social democratic perspectives, organizations, and movements in Europe since the 1950s. This despite a deepening long term capitalist economic crisis which has brought the highest levels of unemployment and the most severe suffering for the working class since the 1930s.

III The Dynamics of Reformism

Activity, Power, Consciousness

It should be a commonplace within the left that the indispensable condition for beginning to reconstruct working-class organization, power, and political consciousness is the rise of mass direct action by working people against the employers and the government, in the factories and the offices, as well as in the streets. This is because, as a rule, it is only where working people have *in fact* broken through their own passivity, created new forms of solidarity, and, on that basis, amassed the power needed to confront capital, that the goals of reform and revolution *premised upon* collective, class-based action can appear at all relevant and practical. In the absence of class solidarity and collective power, working people are reduced to the 'other side' of 'what they really are' under capitalism, viz. sellers of commodities, notably their own labor power. If people cannot, *in fact*, struggle for their interests by means of class-based organizations and class-based strategies, they will find that it only makes sense to treat the social world, its institutions and balances of power, as *given*, and to pursue their interests by devising the individualist and class collaborationist strategies which will allow them best to pursue the competitive struggle among commodity sellers.

Because of the profound interdependence of collective action, social power, political effectiveness, and political consciousness, abrupt, large scale changes in the level of working-class struggle have tended to be the condition for significant political transformations — the onset of broad waves of reform, the transition from craft to industrial unionism, the rise of mass social democratic parties and the like. At the same time, because class-based strategies tend to *depend on* collective mobilization of social power, working people and oppressed groups normally confront a classic double-bind: without a significant level of organization and power, it seems suicidal to initiate collective action; yet, without a significant level of collective action, it is impossible to amass organization and power, and to develop consciousness.

Understandably, even the ideological and organizational intervention of socialists is often useless for actually breaking this bind. Historically, then, as Rosa Luxemburg clearly saw, 'the unconscious movement tends to precede the conscious movement.' Her classic account of the mass strike phenomenon captures the psychological dynamics of mass working-class movements in general: 'The first direct action

reacted *inward* . . . as it for the first time awakened class feeling and class consciousness . . . This awakening of class feeling expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian mass . . . quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was the social and economic existence which they had endured for decades.' Thus, 'the moment that the real, earnest periods of mass strike begin, all those calculations of "cost" [which previously had discouraged working class initiatives] become merely projects for exhausting the ocean with a tumbler.'^[3] The result, in potential, as Luxemburg goes on to explain is not only the emergence of unprecedented forms of organization, involving previously disorganized layers, around novel demands, but the politically self-conscious confrontations of workers with capital and the state, and the placing of socialism itself once more on the agenda.

Once in struggle, people can find meaning in hitherto irrelevant strategies requiring working-class collective action and hitherto utopian goals requiring working-class power. As winning becomes conceivable, it is reasonable to try to do what is required to win: to break the law and confront the state, as well as to develop new forms of social connections with 'outside social forces — between organized and unorganized, between employed and unemployed, between Black and white. Correlatively, as collective action leads to collective power, it makes sense to consider broad programs of reform which hitherto were incapable of inspiring action. In other words, it is in the process actually constituting themselves as a class in order to struggle that workers come to conceive the interconnected notions of a class-divided society, of a strategy of class struggle, and of socialism as a goal as constituting a reasonable perspective.

Reformism as an Ideology of the Working Class

Naturally, periods of mass activity are temporally limited. Although trade unions, social democratic parties, and revolutionary groups, as well as mass organizations of oppressed people, tend to establish themselves at high points of struggle, they must operate for significant periods in an environment shaped by relatively low levels of working-class activity. Indeed, in 'normal' times, working-class activity takes on a character the reverse of that in periods of mass upsurge. By its very nature, it is

sharply limited in scope: mass political parties tone down their rhetoric of class; trade unions organize workers from only a particular firm, craft, or industry; shopfloor militants can attract only a small proportion of their fellow workers. Attempts to spread struggles beyond a narrow sphere do not as a rule meet with success.

In such periods of downturn, the minoritarian and restricted character of working-class activity appears to be its natural and permanent character. It therefore tends to form the material basis, the starting point, for the formation of working-class political consciousness. Class-wide attacks upon the prerogatives of the capitalists, let alone the transition to socialism, are off the agenda. A majority of working people conclude, therefore, that they must accept as given the basic ground rules of the capitalist system — especially the requirement for capitalist profitability as the basis for the operation of the system. It is the apparent unchallengeability of capitalist property and the capitalist state which forms the necessary, although *insufficient*, condition for the widespread acceptance within the working class of reformism — viz., the worldview and strategy for action which takes the capitalist property system as given, but asserts the special interest of the working class within it, above all, the working class's 'right' to appropriate a 'fair share' of the total product. In turn, because it tends to be consolidated in periods when working-class organization is relatively weak, the reformist perspective is almost invariably associated with strategies for reform requiring minimal working-class mobilization — routinized (often symbolic) strike action, institutionalized collective bargaining, and above all the electoral road. Unable to carry out the class struggle in an all-out way, the workers seek *alternative* methods to defend their interests.

Nevertheless, reformism, like any other worldview, can command widespread acceptance only on the condition that it provide the basis for successful action. Thus, given even a minimum of working-class organization, reformism tends to be widely attractive in periods of prosperity precisely because in such periods the threat of even limited working-class resistance — symbolized by the resolution to strike or a victory at the polls — actually can yield concessions from capital. Since filling orders and expanding production are their top priorities in the boom, capitalists will tend to find

it in their interests to maintain and increase production, even when this means concessions to workers, if the alternative is to endure a strike or other forms of Social dislocation. In fact, as the economy expands, capitalist competition almost always drives up the price of labor, whatever labor does, and this gives an appearance of effectiveness to workers' organizations, and of the reformist perspective, even if these are actually quite weak. On the other hand, in periods of economic contraction and falling profits, the capitalists' first priority is to increase competitiveness in stagnant markets. Since increasing competitiveness depends on cost-cutting, employers will often choose to weather a long strike or social unrest if they can thereby achieve significant reductions in labor costs. Moreover, the very fact that capitalist profits are shrinking gives capital a tremendous weapon in periods of economic downturn. Since profits are the only category of income which can be assumed regularly to go back into expanding production and increasing employment, even workers find it hard to deny that the capitalists' share, above all others, must be protected as the pie shrinks, and that (by the ironclad logic of arithmetic), the working class must be prepared to make sacrifices. *All else being equal*, declines in profitability and the general outlook for business actually tend, *in themselves*, to increase the power of capital vis à vis labor. Under conditions of economic crisis, then, unless an explosion of working-class struggle can radically transform their level of organization, power, and consciousness, workers will find reformist ideas decreasingly relevant or attractive. With strategies requiring class action against capital apparently impossible to implement, working people will increasingly find it reasonable to resort to individualistic and class-collaborationist strategies, and will adopt the pro-capitalist, right wing theories which make sense of these strategies.

Reformism as the Ideology of a Distinct, Non-Working Class Social Layer

Under conditions of low or diminishing struggle and minoritarian working-class activity, any working-class organization and leadership — trade union, political party, or whatever — will be obliged to make certain compromises with capital and to relinquish, for the time being, certain programmatic ends and strategic options. To do otherwise would be to ignore the actual balance of forces and invite suicidal defeat.

The recognition of this reality — which in certain periods is the dominant one — constitutes the critical point of departure for those who argue for building a new social democracy by entering into reformist organizations and by merging with reformist forces. The new social democrats view the conservative outlook and strategies of the official reformist organizations and their leaderships as *merely reflecting* the temporary balance of class forces and the momentarily reigning political consciousness. They logically conclude, therefore, that they should enter into and seek to build these organizations, since, on their assumptions, as working class activity once again increases, and new strategies and ideas become more appropriate, these organizations and their leaderships will, more or less naturally, adjust their perspectives in a radical direction.

Nevertheless the view that the political limitations of today's reformist organizations and their leaderships simply mirror the political limitations of the rank and file of these organizations is partial and profoundly misleading. For it fails to take sufficiently into account those critical modern social forces which constitute the *permanent* social basis for reformist institutions and ideas, give to reformism its *consistent* character, and provide its chief sources of creativity — i.e. the trade union officials, the parliamentary politicians, and the petty bourgeois leaderships of the organizations of the oppressed. Any political strategy that seeks to revitalize social democracy from within must look to these elements. Now, the official representatives of the reformist organizations obviously do depend for their very existence upon the establishment of these organizations, and these are almost always initially created out of militant mass struggles. Moreover, as the class struggle dies down, the reformist leaderships tend to adopt political and strategic alternatives which appear quite similar to those adopted by the majority of the working class in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, the reformist standpoint does not have the same causes or the same significance for the reformist officialdom as it does for rank and file workers. The majority of workers adhere *temporarily* to reformist perspectives because, under conditions of waning struggle and minority organization, they believe these perspectives are the best ones they can realistically act upon. In contrast, the official representatives of the reformist organizations tend to adhere to a reformist political

worldview on a *permanent* basis. Constituting a *distinct social layer* with distinctive interests quite different from those of the mass of the working class, these elements adhere to reformism as an expression of their drive precisely to free themselves from dependence upon their working-class base and to secure their long term acceptance by capital. This fundamental difference becomes crystal clear when the level of working-class activity and organization begins to grow. As the class struggle heats up, the transformation of workers' self-activity creates the potential for the transformation of workers' consciousness in radical direction. But for the reformist officials, the same is not true. As the class struggle intensifies, these elements do not dissolve or change their political approach. On the contrary, they seek to contain the struggle and channel it into the classic form of reformist activity — forms which they hope will be acceptable to capital.

The Labor Officialdom, Parliamentary Politicians, and the Petty Bourgeois Black Leadership

Simply put, the labor officialdom, the parliamentary politico and the petty bourgeois leaders of the Black organizations adhere permanently to a reformist perspective because it offers them the theory, strategy, and tactics through which they can best pursue their own reproduction as they are. Labor bureaucrats, parliamentary politicians, and Black officials no longer work beside, or share the conditions of, those they represent. This is fundamental, as the requirements for *their* survival cease to be the same as those of the rank and file workers or the people in the community. They are not *directly* affected by the pressure from employers upon wages and working conditions or from the government upon social expenditures for the community. Nor is their ability to defend their own conditions of life, as it is for the rank and file they represent, *immediately* dependent upon their capacity to build a counterforce by organizing their fellow workers for struggle. Instead, the material base of the trade union bureaucrats, the party politicians, and the Black officials becomes the organizations for which they work, and, in turn, the increasingly self-conscious groups of officials who operate the union, the party, or the Black organization. The organization — and the bureaucratic group which founds itself upon it — not only

provides the officials with their means of support, thereby freeing them from the drudgery of manual labor and the shop floor. It constitutes for them a whole way of life — their day to function, formative social relationships with peers and superiors on the organizational ladder, a potential career, and, on many occasions, a social meaning, a *raison d'être*. To maintain themselves as they are, the whole layer of officials must, first and above all, maintain their organizations. It is thus easy to understand how an irresistible tendency emerges on the part of the trade union officials, the party politicians, and the Black leaderships to treat their organizations as ends in themselves, rather than as the means to defend their memberships — to come to conflate the interests of the organizations upon which they depend with the interests of those they ostensibly represent.

As representatives of the organized sectors of the working class, the trade union officials have historically constituted the critical — and archetypical — social layer attached to reformism. The trade union officials naturally understand that the fundamental threat not only to the workers whom they represent, but also to the organizations upon which they depend, is the capitalist class — a class 'permanently' self-organized and 'permanently' dominant. The indispensable condition for the survival of the unions and thus of the officials' own continuing existence as officials is acceptance by capital — specifically, the capitalists' recognition of the unions and the capitalists' acceptance of the rules of parliamentary democracy. Ultimately, the capitalists' acceptance of the unions and of parliamentary democracy can only be assured by the organized power of the workers. Nevertheless, the trade union leaders are excruciatingly sensitive to the fluctuating strength and the potential weakness of the organized workers: they understand that even at the height of the class struggle, indeed especially at that point, there is an enormous risk of defeat, and thus of the destruction of their organizations. To the extent that they are able to do so, they increasingly seek to protect their organizations — and, in their minds, their memberships — by renouncing all those broader forms of struggle which provide the ground for broadly ranging attacks on capital and, in turn, the basis for socialist ideology — not only militant direct action, but organization which goes beyond the immediate workplace or industry to link organized with unorganized, employed with

unemployed, workplace with community, etc. But even while undermining workers' militancy and self-organization, the officials must still appear to defend their constituencies, within the limits imposed by the requirements of defending capitalist profitability. This, in the end, is a difficult trick to pull off. But historically, the official labor movement has relied on two basic strategies as consciously-conceived substitutes for direct action: (1) constituting, with the help of the state, permanent institutions to regulate worker-employer conflict; (2) the electoral/parliamentary road.

Collective Bargaining

Establishing regular institutions for the (temporary) coexistence between capital and the labor officialdom – the traditional forms of collective bargaining — has, classically, depended on striking a 'deal' between labor officials and capital. The officials must be prepared to pledge to reduce labor disturbances and enforce labor discipline. In turn, the capitalists must be prepared to make regular concessions to the workers for which the officials can take credit, since this is the requirement for their being able to maintain the allegiance of the majority of workers and to isolate militants. This deal is not without cost to the capitalists and benefit to the workers, and the capitalists will therefore accept it only to the extent they are forced to do so, and to the degree it is worth their while to pay extra for labor peace in exchange for smooth production. Capitalist expansion and high profitability are, almost always, the necessary conditions for the deal.

In the context of this bargain, the union officials are free to develop their 'organization within the organization' and their own special role. They negotiate a contract; there is an agreement not to strike throughout its duration; instead, the officials settle disputes through the grievance procedure and ultimately compulsory arbitration. The officials 'service' the rank and file, enforcing the contract in grievance procedure. But as the other side deal, they must also compel the membership to adhere to contract and limit any sort of shopfloor resistance. To this end, they must move to undercut all independent organization of the rank and file and to curb rank and file control over the trade union itself, curtailing union democracy.

Like reformist practices generally, collective bargaining in the context of the deal has a dual significance. On the one hand, it *does* reflect the momentary interests of the working class in a period of declining and minoritarian organization: under the circumstances, most workers see no choice but to accept it as the best they can get. On the other hand, the labor officials find in ramifying institutions of collective bargaining, not only an essential *raison d'être*, but also an important basis for their material existence and a critical foundation for their *modus vivendi* with capital. In the hands of the officials, the functioning of collective bargaining ceases merely to reflect the momentary (unfavorable) balance of class forces between capital and labor; it serves to dissolve workers' self-organization and workers' power, and in this way has the effect of tipping that balance further in the direction of capital. Thus is produced, once again, the classic paradox of reformism: although the union officialdom may rise to great heights during the boom on the basis of its ability to secure labor peace and the apparent well-being of workers, it does so at the expense of the workers' self-organization and thus of its own power and position over the long term. As the expansion gives way to contraction, the officials are less and less able to make collective bargaining work for their constituencies or themselves: the employers break the deal and unleash their offensive; the workers see fewer reasons to support either the officials or their reformist strategies; the officials watch their organizations erode and their whole worldview lose its credibility.

Electoralism/Parliamentarism

The electoral/parliamentary road constitutes the definitive strategy of all those distinctive social elements characteristically tied to reformism, because it appears to provide the means to overcome the central dilemma they face: how to retain their mass working-class bases without having to organize their constituencies for direct action against capital. In election campaigns, isolated individuals can be mobilized to cast their ballot privately and individually, in favor of pro-working class candidates around a reform program. In this way, it appears possible to amass power and win reforms without the risk of mass struggles like strikes or street confrontations.

Nevertheless, to adhere to a primarily parliamentary strategy is to fall victim to the classical social democratic illusion: that balance of class forces favorable to the working class can be constructed inside the state by electoral/parliamentary means, apart from the massive strengthening of the workers against the capitalists in the shops and in the streets. The electoral approach is illusory because, contrary to appearances, power in capitalist society is not normally exercised through control over the state and through force. So long as capitalist property relations hold, the capitalist class, through its control over the means of production, retains control over the investment function, and thereby holds the key to the development of the productivity of labor, to economic growth, and to economic prosperity — and, on that basis, to employment, social stability, and state revenue. Since capitalist investment depends on the capitalists' ability to make a profit, short of revolution, all elements of society find sooner or later in their own interest to ensure capitalist profitability. 'What's good for GM is good for the country' captures an important aspect of reality under capitalism.

In this context, it is clear why those who hold positions in the state, even those elected on programs representing the interests of workers, are under enormous pressure to 'be responsible,' to support policies that will safeguard profits. To do otherwise would risk the malfunctioning of the economy and all that entails. The politicians are aware that, short of challenging capitalist property itself — taking control of production away from the capitalists — it is impossible to carry out, over an extended period, an anti-capitalist program without inviting the withdrawal of investment funds and ultimately economic chaos.

Even so, it needs to be emphasized that, like collective bargaining, the electoral/parliamentary road has a dual significance. On the one hand, under conditions of limited working class mobilization, the majority of workers *are* likely to favor the electoral road: electoralism appears to constitute a substitute for action, a way for workers to fight for their interests without having to face the enormous dangers of confronting the capitalists. Moreover, like collective bargaining, the electoral road can, under certain conditions, appear to function very well for the

working class. In periods of prosperity, especially in the wake of fairly substantial working-class mobilizations, it is often in the interests of capital to accept reforms, rather than risk social disruption.

On the other hand, because the gulf which separates the social democratic parties' bureaucracies from the working class as a whole is even greater than that which separates labor officialdom its membership, the social democratic party politicians are positioned to respond to the needs of capital even more sensitively and immediately than are labor bureaucrats. Union leaders must, in many cases, respond to the organized interests of (usually localized) groups of rank and filers who have been brought together in production and who have had the experience of collective struggle and collective self-organization in their union and on the shopfloor. In contrast, the party ostensibly represents the 'class as a whole,' but since workers are, *in practice*, able actually to organize themselves as a class only rarely, the official party and its machine are generally under little pressure from, or control by, their atomized electoral base. Nor (in the absence of mass working class direct action) can the periodically radicalized and aroused party rank and file generally exert more than the most partial and temporary pressure on the parliamentary delegation and apparatchiks who rule the party. This is, in part, because the professional politicians generally command an institutionalized apparatus explicitly designed to ensure their control over the organization and insulate them from the pressure of the party membership. But it is also because the politicians can, in most situations, claim with some justice to represent the party's real base — viz., the broader electorate, which is generally far more conservative than the rank and file party members and which will decide the one question of moment to the whole party: whether or not it will win the election. Free to accept the rules of the game, the reformist professional politicians may demand the workers' rightful piece of the growing pie in periods of prosperity, but as prosperity gives way to crisis, they will have little choice other than to translate 'fair share' into 'austerity' for their worker constituents. However, as the reformist politicians increasingly assume the role of restorers of capitalist profitability, the working class finds fewer reasons to prefer them to the outright representatives of capital, or even to

distinguish between the reformists' perspectives and those of capital itself. Consistent reformism leads once again, to its own dissolution.

Rationalizing Capitalism Through Corporatism

Unable to confront capitalism, and acutely aware of their consequent dependence upon the health of the system, the official forces of reformism have been among those most concerned to understand the operation of capitalism and to devise plans to make it function better. Perhaps more than any other groups, the labor bureaucracy, reformist politicians, and the official representatives of the established organizations of the oppressed have been the leading proponents of conscious, society-wide attempts to regulate those economic dislocations which they see as caused by capitalism's anarchy and its unequal distribution of income. One need attribute no special cynicism to reformist officials in pursuing the policies they do. On the contrary, they view their interests as coinciding with those of (capitalist) society as a whole, and their ideology as expressing the general interest. Indeed, given the particularist interests of the individual capitalists and their necessary competition with one another, the capitalist class as a whole may actually be less capable than the reformist leaders of devising and promoting policies in the interests of overall capital accumulation. As is well known, the trade union officials, reformist politicians, and official Black leaderships have been the most consistent proponents of government intervention to regulate the economy. They were the prime apostles of Keynesian efforts to smooth out the cycle by means of regulating demand. They are today the leading exponents of industrial policy to make their own national capitalisms more competitive in the international economy. Through these approaches, the reformist leaderships strive to ensure and restore capitalist profitability and economic growth, for that, in their view, is the indispensable condition for the improvement of the condition of the working class, as well as their own survival. Given their belief in the permanence of the capitalist property system, they have no other choice.

Nevertheless, in order actually to have their policies put into practice, the official reformist leaderships know that they must secure the cooperation of the employers,

for they have no intention whatsoever of imposing upon them (since this would require working-class mobilization). For this reason, as the economy enters into crisis, the official reformist leaderships seek, with increasing single-mindedness, to eschew all forms of resistance and to force corporatist or collaborative arrangements with the employers at the level of the shop floor, the firm, and the economy as a whole through which they can have implemented their rationalizing plans. But as the economic crisis appears more inexorable and as their own self-disarmament increases their weakness, their plans for the reform of capital appear ever more quixotic and their ability to influence the employers declines. As they forward ever more desperately their plans for collaboration, they encounter an increasingly ferocious capitalist offensive. Unless a revitalized workers movement deters them or the economy's miraculous recovery reprieves them, the reformist leadership will pursue to its conclusion their lemming-like drive to self-destruction.

Read parts two and three of the essay.

Notes:

1. Stan Weir, 'Doug Fraser's Middle Class Coalition', *Radical America* (January-February 1979)
2. See 'The Paradox of Reform: Black Politics and the Democratic Party', *Southern Exposure*, 12 (February 1984), pp. 23-24; 'The Left in the 80s', *Changes* (March-April 1984).
3. *The Mass Strike* (1906).