

Hearing the voice of labor on the economic crisis

Tue, 09/01/2009 - 21:36 — Anonymous

By Dale Parsons

There are "two worlds" in each country, the "rulers" and the "ruled" or to put it more concretely, between workers and non-workers. Never, in my lifetime, has the divide between workers and non-workers in the U.S. been as vast as it is during the current economic crisis. The working class is bearing the brunt of the crisis, yet how much of their actual voice are we hearing in the political debate about the economy?

The intellectual's (spets) still dominate the discussion even though economic reforms will consist of laying off workers (Seven million workers have lost their jobs since the recession began in December 2007!) with the remaining workers still on the job expected to pay for the financial bailout.

And yet, and yet, the capitalist's aren't even smart enough to throw us a bone, such as single-payer health care or the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a measure that would make it easier to organize unions if a majority of workers in a workplace sign cards supporting a union. Its likely defeat is a testament to the intransigence of the capitalists to give the working class any humane consideration whatsoever. In my book, the capitalist's deserve the full brunt of a class war.

'Greed' or division of labor?

Of course the Left is no better. Most of the Left either wants to blame "greedy capitalists" and call for more regulation or proclaim the need for a new mass movement (which they would run of course). The hallmark or pivotal category of the Marxian/Hegelian dialectic, the unity of Theory/Practice, worker/intellectual, mental/manual, so central to Marx's philosophy of revolution, is nowhere to be seen in most leftist discourse by their seeming refusal to bring in the views of actual workers about what is going on. This is another reflection of the division between worker and intellectual that is so central to capitalism.

This is how an article in the *International Socialist Review* ended, "*What's needed isn't a better lobbying strategy or flashier media, but a broad, independent, and militant movement that won't be placated with empty rhetoric or allow its demands to be ignored. The thousands who are becoming politically aware, engaged, and radicalized in this new political era are the future activists in that movement. The task for the left today is to organize and politicize these thousands and to prepare for the struggles to come*" (italics mine.) This is the tired, shop worn "rhetoric" of the vanguard party-to-lead that has demonstrated over and over again for nearly a century its total failure at achieving a successful revolution. Then again, the left doesn't seem to want a successful revolution that creates a new society of "freely associated labor," they only want to "reform" this one. What is needed "is" the unity of Theory/Practice, worker/intellectual, to overcome the division between mental and manual necessary to achieve the "new society."

The Army and the factory

The road to my overcoming the split between mental and manual has been a long one. My adult working life began at the Gerity Shultz Die Casting Factory in Toledo, Ohio in the spring of 1966 where my father worked; I was still in high school. A few months later, my father and I went to work at the Chrysler Plant in Highland Park, Michigan (part of metropolitan Detroit) because we thought it was a big move up. The Chrysler Plant subsequently moved from Highland Park to a suburb of Toledo. One of the reasons for the Chrysler Plant's move was to escape the long history of labor activism at the Highland Park plant.

My stint at Chrysler was interrupted by being drafted into the Army for two years in August of 1967. During my time in the army, I became politicized, as a lot of us were "steps" away from the movement when we were drafted. I was "turned on" to a lot of things during that time, most of which I won't burden you with here. The most important series of discoveries began with the humanist psychoanalyst Eric Fromm through whom I discovered Marx's "Humanist Essays." Marx's description of the very "activity" of labor as alienated was right on target and resonated with my experiences on the production line.

I was disgusted with capitalist production even during the so called "good" times. After being discharged from the Army, I worked several more factory jobs until eventually ending up in construction. I now have a very small-potatoes roofing business, I don't own a home and I lost my medical insurance after a bout with kidney cancer. Looking back on my life, sometimes I think I should have just stayed put and retired from Chrysler, but the way things are going, the benefits from that won't be around much longer either.

Concessions as way of life

I no longer have a production job but I still feel the effects of concessions, give-backs, outsourcing, and so on that workers have had to contend with since the 1970s. These have combined to have a deleterious corroding effect on most lower level occupations, such as the trades, small businesses, certain professional occupations, airline flight attendants, pilots, educators, and others have had to deal with the diminishing consequences generated by the concessions, give-backs and outsourcing experienced at the point of production.

One airline pilot I talked to said his occupation has become a "shit" job. The distinctions between the occupations at the lower rungs of the economic ladder are becoming more and more blurred. I've experienced this personally in my contracting business and on a deeper level when I lived briefly in the "right to work state" of North Carolina where the attacks on workers' rights is more complete. Karl Marx described over 150 years ago how the alienated relationships at the point of production in capitalist society determined "all" the relationships of capitalist society.

Long before the present crisis, the founder of the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism, Raya Dunayevskaya, was writing about the "pauperization of America." Indeed, at no time since Raya Dunayevskaya coined that phrase has it been more concrete in describing the reality of life and labor in the U.S. The current global economic crisis is not, to quote from the article written by the "U.S. Marxist-Humanist," Peter Hudis, "[Today's Global Financial/Economic Crisis and the](#)

[Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg](#)," "a mere cyclical depression in the business cycle in which disequilibrium arises between productive output and consumption. The crisis is far deeper. The main strategy which capitalism has used to try to extricate itself from the economic morass that emerged in the 1970s, when it experienced a serious decline in global profit rates, has been undermined by the bursting of a speculative financial bubble. Simply propping up 'effective demand' in such a situation can by itself hardly suffice."

Baseless recovery

Peter Hudis' is warning us not to be sidetracked by any of the "reforms" being proposed by the capitalists, but to focus on the "*structural* contradictions of the global capitalist system." The most we can expect from any economic reforms is help to stop the bleeding of the capitalists, there will be "no rising tide lifting all boats." Whatever recovery global capitalism will experience will not include most of the working classes of the world, and certainly, not in the US. As the workers in the US already know, there is no economic foundation or industrial base for a recovery here, it's been sent overseas.

The crisis is deepened by the fact that the pace of foreclosures is still rising and if the housing market ever does stabilize, the price of housing will be kept down by an estimated six million excess homes, according to Jason Trennert, chief investment strategist of "Strategas Research Partners." Meanwhile, falling prices have left something like a third of homeowners with mortgages "underwater" or owing more than their houses are worth. One Wall Street firm recently estimated that number could rise to half of all homeowners by 2011.

Adding still further to the crisis is the state of health care in the US. The absence of health care creates a range of consequences, including lower quality of life, increased morbidity and mortality, and higher financial burdens. "In 2002, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) estimated that 18,000 Americans died in 2000 because they were uninsured. Since then, the number of uninsured has grown. Based on the IOM's methodology and subsequent Census Bureau estimates of insurance coverage, 137,000 people died from 2000 through 2006 because they lacked health insurance, including 22,000 people in 2006. Much subsequent research has continued to confirm the link between insurance and mortality risk described by IOM.

In fact, subsequent studies and analysis suggest that, if anything, the IOM methodology may underestimate the number of deaths that result from a lack of insurance coverage." The majority of bankruptcies are due to health care costs, the majority of which had health insurance. Matt Taibbi, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* has written that the Obama Administration was in collusion with the health care industry by agreeing to take the "single payer" option off the table from the start in exchange for being spared the negative ad campaign of the type that was launched against the Clinton and Carter administrations. Whether this version of the story is true or not, it was a disgusting betrayal. As workers have learned, once you start making concessions, the floodgates are opened for more. The so called "Public Option" will probably suffer the same fate as "single payer" unless there is more opposition in Congress than there is at present.

Alternative to capitalism on the agenda

In summing up, the future for the working classes of the world looks pretty bleak for continued existence under this senile degenerate stage of capitalism we find ourselves in. Under capitalism, we can expect hundreds of millions of unemployed workers (there are 200 million in China alone) and hundreds of millions of homeless workers. The existence of this "reserve army of unemployed" will encourage the capitalists to drive down the wages of those still working even more. A quote from page 52 of the *Marxist-Humanist Perspectives 2004-2008* pamphlet explains that "The state today keeps wages low by encouraging global competition, providing corporate tax breaks, and maintaining tight control over a rebellious reserve army of labor through the *prison industrial complex*." If all this sounds familiar, it is because on a historical level, this has all happened before, during what Marx called the "rosy dawn of capitalist accumulation" and the "so-called primitive accumulation of capital."

Marx also taught us, "The incapacity of capitalism to reproduce its own value-creating substance—labor power in the shape of the living, employed laborer—signals the doom of capitalism." In the past, Post-Marx Marxists liked to believe that capitalism would bring us to the threshold of the "new society" by creating a world of abundance and plenty and all we had to do was transition to socialism by a change in management, so to speak. Presumably this new management would hail from a "Vanguard" Marxist party. The experiences of the last century have exposed the absurdity of this notion as well as many half-baked solutions such as the "nationalization of industry and state control of the economy".

I've heard a lot of talk over the past year about how we need to keep Barack Obama honest and keep pushing him to do the right thing, and so on. Instead of pushing Obama to do the right thing, we need to do the right thing ourselves and create a movement toward a new society for ourselves, run and organized by ourselves, what Marx called "freely associated labor".

However, it is difficult to even get started on developing an alternative society without the hard theoretical labor of internalizing Marx's Marxism and working out what it means for today. In sum, transitions or revolutions are no longer sufficient to bring forth a new society. Even revolution, crucial as it is, will not lead to a new society if an organizational embodiment of a philosophy that can answer "what happens after" the revolution is missing.

I would like to quote the final paragraph of Peter Hudis's "Today's Global Financial/Economic Crisis and the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg": "We are now witnessing a surge of interest in and discussion of Marx because of the present crisis. What Dunayevskaya wrote during the 1974-75 global recession—that Marx's *Capital* comes alive at each new crisis point—is once again being confirmed. However, as the editors of the *Financial Times* put it in 'Lessons learned for capitalism's future,' 'Capitalism's worst crisis in 70 years has not prompted a serious alternative vision of society'" (p. 13). This is a sobering truth that we must take very seriously. The responsibility for concretizing the "dialectics of organization and philosophy" by working out that alternative vision is more on our agenda today than at any point in our history."

--Dale Parsons