

State Unionism in the United States

INTRODUCTION: THE U.S. LABOR ARISTOCRACY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE "BORING FROM WITHIN" STRATEGY

What do Mary Kay Henry, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) president, Terence O'Sullivan, Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) president, and every AFL-CIO president since 1979 have in common, beyond being opportunistic bourgeois misleaders of their respective unions? Interestingly enough, none of them have actually spent any real amount of time working in the fields and sectors their unions claim to lead and represent. While it might sound strange or contradictory for an accountant, lawyer, economist, or business administrator by trade to lead a union that is supposed to represent proletarians, semi-proletarians, or the lower petty-bourgeoisie (teachers, nurses, etc.), it's actually more common than you might think. At most, many modern union presidents have only worked in the sectors they supposedly represent for brief periods in high school, undergraduate, or right after graduation, and even then that is not always the case.

The examples go on and on. Terence O'Sullivan was a high school teacher and then owned an information technology company before becoming part of the professional organizing staff of the Laborers' Union. Richard Trumka, leader of the United Mine Workers and AFL-CIO before his death, was a lawyer. Lee Saunders, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), is an economist. Many, like Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Liz Shuler, current president of the AFL-CIO, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, or Teresa Romero, president of the United Farm Workers (UFW), are lifelong professional labor organizers who began working as staff in their respective unions straight out of college, without ever actually working in the sectors they claim to represent the interests of.

Traditionally, the establishment unions, like one of the predecessors of the AFL-CIO the American Federation of Labor (AFL), were characterized by revolutionaries as being led by what Lenin and Engels called the "labor aristocracy". In *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin described how because of the "super-profits" generated by imperialist monopoly capitalism through its exploitation of the colonial and semi-colonial nations:

"[...] it is possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the "advanced" countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.

This stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is the principal prop of the Second International, and in our days, the principal social (not military) prop of the bourgeoisie. For they are the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism. In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie, the "Versaillese" against the "Communards".

Unless the economic roots of this phenomenon are understood and its political and

social significance is appreciated, not a step can be taken toward the solution of the practical problem of the communist movement and of the impending social revolution.”

In this way, Lenin (and Engels before him) argued that a section of the proletariat had been, in essence, “bribed” by the respective capitalist classes of the imperialist nations to function as agents of the bourgeoisie within the labor movement itself. This labor aristocracy then set about creating a large strata of officials and bureaucrats within the major labor unions, the fate of which we will touch on later, and worked to limit the revolutionary consciousness of the workers, expel and isolate socialist and communist elements, and keep the labor movement focused on “bread-and-butter” economic goals rather than political goals that had to do with seizing state power for the working class. The complicated questions that arose from how to deal with this new section of “bourgeoisified” workers, and the reformist social fascist political parties they were associated with, defined a great deal of revolutionary strategy and debate in the imperialist core throughout the twentieth century.

In contrast to the “dual unionism” of the anarcho-syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), after the October Revolution, the original strategy of American Communists within the US labor movement was to “bore from within” the establishment business unions rather than create their own independent “red” unions. The goal of this work was to slowly develop influence within the AFL, and eventually CIO, unions, consolidate their militant left-wing-opposition through the use of extra-union organizations like the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), and eventually overthrow the labor aristocrats and “misleaders” at the top of the main business unions. Once the labor aristocrats and their bureaucratic officials were purged from the labor movement, the unions’ proletarian class leadership would be restored and they could once again become as Marx called “schools of war” in the struggle against capitalism.

In a brief summary that came with every pamphlet they printed, the TUEL described itself as:

“[...] a system of informal committees throughout the entire union movement, organized to infuse the mass with proletarian understanding and spirit. It is working for the closer affiliation and solidification of our existing craft unions until they have been developed into industrial unions. Believing that all workers should stand together regardless of their social or other opinions, it is opposed to the common policy of radical and progressive-minded workers quitting the trade unions and starting rival organizations based upon ideal principles. That policy is one of the chief reasons why the American labor movement is not further advanced. Its principal effects are to destroy all radical organization in the old unions and to leave the reactionaries in undisputed control, The Trade Union Educational League is in no sense a dual union, nor is it affiliated with any such organization. It is purely an educational body of militants within existing mass unions, who are seeking through the application of modern methods to bring the policies and structure of the labor movement into harmony with present day economic conditions. It bespeaks the active cooperation of all militant union workers”

Not every member of the Comintern adhered to this strategy, as evidenced by the split between the christian democratic and socialist/communist labor unions in imperialist countries like Italy, Spain and France. Indeed eventually, during the Third Period, the CPUSA was pushed by the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern/RILU) to abandon the “boring from within” strategy given its lack of results, despite nearly a decade of work, and form independent “red” unions under the umbrella of the new Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). Even before the strategic shift of the Third Period, there had been opposition to the CPUSA’s policy of mainly limiting itself to work within the AFL.

From his exile in the Soviet Union, famous former IWW leader and Communist “Big” Bill Haywood wrote in a letter:

“The remedy for Bankruptcy is not the TUEL confining itself to the AFL or part of the Working Class. If so, what becomes of the revolutionary slogan “To the Masses! To the Masses!” Where are the unorganized? What about the colored race ... In the national trades what has become of the great basic industries, agriculture and oil? Agriculture is primal [sic]. Are they to be lumped in the miscellaneous trades, with the unions of feather strippers and coconut crackers?”

Haywood’s reference to the “colored race” comes from the fact that the AFL unions were as a rule segregated or prohibited non-white membership outright. It is not a coincidence that the CPUSA formed their famous Sharecroppers Union in the US South during the TUUL period, when by breaking with the AFL they also fully broke with racial segregationism. Furthermore, the TUUL’s largest section was always its Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, whose mostly female textile and garment workers had also struggled under the misogynist leadership of Samuel Gompers’ AFL.

In an early echo of the rank-and-file caucus strategy to come, during the “boring from within” TUEL period the CPUSA had run a series of left-wing opposition candidates in opposition to the reactionary labor aristocratic leaders who controlled the establishment business unions. After their “Save the Union” slate failed to win against arch-opportunist leader of the United Mine Workers John Lewis despite a number of serious defeats the UMW had recently suffered under his leadership, secretary of the RILU and veteran Bolshevik A. Lozovsky wrote to CPUSA chairman William Z. Foster:

“THE QUESTION OF SETTING UP AN INDEPENDENT UNION MUST BE RAISED, otherwise you will never escape from this vicious circle. You may have 99 percent of the votes but if the secretaries under Lewis [tear] up your ballot-slips, make fictitious ones, bring hirelings to the Congress, you will have to remain in the power of Lewis to the end of time.”

It is worth noting this letter was sent in 1927, a year before the Comintern officially adopted the resolutions of the Third Period against social fascism which produced the turn towards independent “red” unionism in the US.

In the US context, the pre-WW1 Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and 1928-1933 Trade Union Unity League mark the only times where independent “red” unionism would be the dominant tactic among the US revolutionary left. Except for the small five year TUUL period, from the end of the end of World War 1 until now the American Left has basically pursued different variations of William Foster’s original “boring from within” strategy.

Although inspired by workers organizations outside the establishment business unions, like the Revolutionary Union Movement organizations and League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the militants of the 1970s New Communist Movement in the U.S. generally embraced the Fosterite strategy of developing forces within the establishment unions in order to take them over. For example, in response to a letter questioning why they don’t “take the lead in forming an entirely new labor movement” the pro-Deng Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), which was the second largest so-called Communist Party in the US at the time after the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), wrote:

“The CPML is opposed to the idea of abandoning the existing trade unions and instead of building new, independent or “pure” union organizations.

It is true as you say that the trade unions today are completely under the domination of reactionary misleaders who employ a powerful bureaucratic machine to suppress the rank and file. The Meanys, McBrides and Frasers are bought-and-paid-for agents of the bosses within the workers’ movement, whose job it is to preach narrow reforms while keeping the system of exploitation and wage-slavery intact.

But, on the other hand, there are nearly 20 million workers in U.S. trade unions, and these workers are concentrated in the most basic industries. Their struggles set the pace for the whole working class.

The importance of the trade unions lies in the fact that they are the most basic and accessible mass organizations of the working class. All workers, regardless of their level of political consciousness, can and do unite in unions to wage common struggles against the bosses.

Under class conscious rather than class-collaborationist leadership, unions could organize the 80 million unorganized workers and be an even more powerful force against the capitalists.

“It is the task of the Party,” states the Program of the CPML, “to win the broad masses of workers in the trade unions to socialist revolution and communist leadership.” We can’t do this standing on the sidelines of the workers’ existing organizations.

Our policy is to work within the unions and mobilize the masses to drive out the corrupt labor bureaucrats. We direct our main blow politically at these reformist and revisionist traitors, exposing them to the workers on the basis of their own experiences.”

From the perspective of the CPML, and their NCM descendants like FRSO, despite their reactionary leadership and the ideological, political and organizational dominance of the labor aristocracy within them, the unions remained *“the most basic, comprehensive organizations of the workers. We build them, defend them from capitalist attack and fight to transform them into organizations of class struggle. In the course of organizing in the shops and unions, we strive to win the broad masses of workers to see the need for socialist revolution and communist leadership.”* This line was generally referred to as the “class struggle unionism” line, and in many ways remains the default line among American “revolutionaries”, anti-revisionist and revisionist alike, to this day.

The RCP of the time pursued a similar route, seeking to form a new TUEL-like organization called the National Workers Organization. While accused by groups like the CPML of practicing “dual unionism” by forming a national “intermediate workers organization”, the NWO was very clear in its founding document that:

“The general problem with the unions today is not that the unions are no good and the working class needs new ones in their place. The problem with the unions is that the top leadership is hopelessly reactionary and wedded to the owning class. These jackanapes need to be cleared out and replaced by officials who are going to lead the workers in fighting the companies. The national workers organization sets this as one of its tasks and not the destruction of the existing unions.”

Ironically, once the strike waves and spontaneous labor militancy of the 1970s ebbed and ended, almost right after they created the NWO, the RCP would exit the labor movement and trade union struggle almost entirely in the 1980s, and looking back claim that most of their 70s labor work was economic, rightist and “workerist”. Those NCM militants who remained in the labor movement either ended up joining the very labor aristocracy they had once condemned, and played a major role in Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 Democratic presidential primary campaigns, or slowly faded into irrelevance.

Despite the collapse of the NCM, Trotskyist labor organizer Kim Moody would keep the “boring from within” strategy alive, although it was now called the “Rank and File Strategy”, and fell under the umbrella of a new organization/publication called Labor Notes. With Labor Notes, Moody and his co-founders wanted to create a new TUEL, but without the explicit connection to revolution or a proletarian vanguard party that the original TUEL or the RCP’s National Workers Organization had had. Instead of further revolutionizing an already spontaneously militant and insurgent labor movement, Labor Notes would seek to “revitalize” a now stagnant and declining US labor movement by organizationally linking a network of various “rank and file opposition” caucuses within the establishment unions and supporting their slates during union officer elections. The publication and its associated network of labor activists, which still exist to this day, has become the preeminent “progressive” labor organization in the country, in particular among the DSA and other “left” Democrats.

Thus, the American revolutionary left has pursued a “boring from within” strategy within the labor movement for, with the exception of a brief break during the Third Period, now more than a century. In a never-ending saga, like Sisyphus, would-be US revolutionary workers and labor activists have been attempting to drive out the reactionary labor aristocratic leadership from the establishment trade and industrial unions in an almost unbroken line from 1921 until now.

Why have these efforts failed to produce anything meaningful, outside of a few formerly “red” unions of the old 1930s CIO like the UE and ILWU who pride themselves on their “militant radical past”? Why have the programs of even the “left-wing oppositional caucuses” devolved from supporting World Proletarian Revolution, to supporting any union officer, no matter their political beliefs, who will promise to not concede “too much” during the next round of contract negotiations?

While the answers to these questions are obviously complicated, and generally tied to broader questions about revolutionary struggle in our context and why generations of communists in the imperial core have failed to make progress towards the conquest of political power, they are in any case fundamentally tied to the question of the character of the establishment unions. Specifically what their class character is, what our relationship to them should be, and thus what our strategy and tactics for work should be within the labor movement.

UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING THE “STATE UNIONISM” ANALYSIS TO THE U.S.

Unlike their North American counterparts, many Brazilian revolutionary labor activists generally use the term “state” rather than “business” unionism to describe their current establishment union centers. The Workers’ League (Liga Operaria), an independent trade union center, describes the history of state unionism in Brazil in the documents from their 2006 Third Congress:

“As a result of a split in the ruling classes, the Vargas State sought, in a first phase, to control the labor and trade union movement by bringing it into the state apparatus. One of its first

measures was the creation of the Ministry of Labor in 1930, with the clear objective of elaborating a trade union policy aimed at containing the working class within the limits of the state and to formulate a policy of conciliation between capital and labor. The aim of the "unionization law" of 1931 (Decree 19.770) which, contrary to the freedom of trade union association that existed at the beginning of the association at the beginning of the 20th century, created the pillars of state unionism in Brazil. Trade unions were recognized and made official by the Government, and in order to obtain "legal status" and represent the working class, they needed not only to be registered in a registration in a notary's office, they also needed to be recognized by the Ministry of Labour. The law prohibited all "ideological propaganda" (read communist) in trade unions.

In the presentation of the unionization decree, Lindolfo Collor, first Minister of Labor of the Vargas government, said: 'The unions or associations of classes will be matters of their immediate prerogative, under the cautious eyes of the State' and at a rally attended by workers and trade unionists in São Paulo in June 1931, he said: 'It is high time to replace the old, negative concept of class struggle with the new, constructive and organic concept of class collaboration'. The decree also established the Ministry of Labor's financial control over the resources of the unions, prohibiting their use by workers during strikes and defined the union as an organ of collaboration and cooperation with the state. It allowed delegates of the Ministry of Labor the right to participate in workers' assemblies, prohibited the development of political and ideological activities within the trade unions, prohibited their affiliation to international trade union organizations, denied the right to unionize to civil servants, and limited the participation of foreign workers in trade unions, since a good part of the combative workers' leadership was still of foreign origin in those days. It can be said that the only favorable to the working class in this law - defined by the workers as "a summary of the 'Carta Del Lavoro' of Italian fascism" - was to guarantee unity. For the rest, it tied the unions to the state.

[...]

Towards constructing a class-conscious [classista], combative and independent unionism

The Workers' League emerged from our break with state unionism in September 1995. The Workers' League was formed at its first Congress held in March 1997. It has marked its existence by the defense of the class-conscious and combative struggle and by the relentless fight against opportunism, corporatism, class collaboration, legalism and pacifism so characteristic of this old and bankrupt Brazilian trade unionism, represented by the current trade union centers.

The prospects for the growth of red trade unionism are very promising with the working masses of our country. The condition for this is to fight always to our revolutionary and class-conscious principles, always putting the interests of the masses at the forefront, the interests of the poor and oppressed masses of our country, serving the struggle of the workers at the world level."

The implication of this analysis of the character of the establishment unions, shared by many Latin American Marxist-Leninist-Maoists in their respective countries as well, is much more profound than it might appear at first glance. In this analysis, the establishment unions are not the "basic organizations of the workers", fundamentally proletarian structures, but with an upper layer of reactionary labor aristocrats controlling them which must be driven out. Instead, the once "basic organizations of the

proletariat” have become incorporated into the bourgeois state itself, and are now tied at the hip with the bourgeoisie through their state apparatus. As in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, these “unions” are now more like domesticated state-sanctioned workers associations rather than the spontaneous creations of “free labor” as Marx described them. While the majority of their members are still workers, the state unions derive their structure, leadership, and legitimacy from the bourgeois state’s administrative apparatus and legal system, not from the workers themselves, their supposed “membership”.

Although the analysis of Latin American revolutionaries like the Liga Operaria certainly stems from their broader conception of “bureaucratic capitalism” being the primary mode of production in their semi-colonial context, it is still relevant to an advanced industrial imperialist capitalist nation like the United States. One needs not go farther than the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (or Wagner Act), which established the modern National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) system, for proof of the similarity between the establishment of the Brazilian state unions and our own state bureaucratic labor apparatus.

In its opening section, the National Labor Relations Act states its purpose as: “AN ACT To diminish the causes of labor disputes burdening or obstructing interstate and foreign commerce, to create a National Labor Relations Board, and for other purposes.” It goes on further to describe how:

“Experience has proved that protection by law of the right of employees to organize and bargain collectively safeguards commerce from injury, impairment, or interruption, and promotes the flow of commerce by removing certain recognized sources of industrial strife and unrest, by encouraging practices fundamental to the friendly adjustment of industrial disputes arising out of differences as to wages, hours, or other working conditions, and by restoring equality of bargaining power between employers and employees.

Experience has further demonstrated that certain practices by some labor organizations, their officers, and members have the intent or the necessary effect of burdening or obstructing commerce by preventing the free flow of goods in such commerce through strikes and other forms of industrial unrest or through concerted activities which impair the interest of the public in the free flow of such commerce. The elimination of such practices is a necessary condition to the assurance of the rights herein guaranteed

It is declared to be the policy of the United States to eliminate the causes of certain substantial obstructions to the free flow of commerce and to mitigate and eliminate these obstructions when they have occurred by encouraging the practice and procedure of collective bargaining and by protecting the exercise by workers of full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of their own choosing, for the purpose of negotiating the terms and conditions of their employment or other mutual aid or protection.”

In this way, during a period of profound economic and social crisis, the bourgeois state under the FDR administration created the NLRB in order to establish a state regulatory system, and associated administrative apparatus and body of labor law, that would incorporate the establishment business unions of the time as a constituent part of the bourgeois democratic state. The bourgeois state would provide these unions with official legal status provided that they played by the rules of the new state-regulated collective bargaining system, limited the militancy of their members, and as the infamous Taft-Hartley bill later established, purged their ranks of all “anti-American” and politically “subversive” elements. These US state unions would now derive their ability to collectively bargain

through bourgeois labor law and their recognition by the NLRB, not through the independent and spontaneous actions and demands of the workers themselves. Thus, in the decades following the formal recognition and reconciliation between establishment labor and capitalism mediated through bourgeois legislation and the courts, the fate of the major unions became wedded to the strength and health of the bourgeois democratic state, and in particular its counter insurgency welfare arm.

The state unions of the European fascist governments were in many ways simply advanced manifestations of a broader trend developing in all bourgeois states, even bourgeois democratic ones like the United States, towards corporatism and a stronger more-developed repressive apparatus (sometimes referred to as the increasing “reactionization” of bourgeois governments). This trend is in turn a symptom of the shift from the original chaotic “market capitalism” of Marx’s time to the imperialist monopoly capitalism Lenin described as ascendant in his era.

THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN "STATE UNIONISM"

Obviously the transformation of the establishment unions from basic organization of the workers dominated by the labor aristocracy (a business union) to appendage of the bourgeois democratic state (a state union) did not happen over night. Indeed the transition seems to have been slow, occurring over decades, such that year by year the difference was difficult to notice and that only by looking back and comparing the major unions of the early twentieth century with the major unions of today we can really see the differences and distinctions emerge.

While generally capitalistic, or at most social democratic, in their thinking, it cannot be denied the labor leaders of the pre- and immediate post-war (1900s-1950s) American labor movement were by and large products of the spontaneous workers movement. John L. Lewis, Samuel Gompers, Margaret Haley, etc. were all labor aristocrats, bourgeoisified workers who had sold out the members of their unions for political and economic privileges. Nevertheless, they on some level objectively originated from within the working class and had spent a significant amount of time as wage laborers before being bought-out and becoming bourgeois labor lieutenants and union officers.

By the 1960s-1980s however, during the beginning of the great “crisis of organized labor”, a new strata of so-called “labor leaders” began to emerge that did not originate from the conservative sections of the working class, the labor aristocracy, but instead came directly from the legions of internal union staffers, “labor relations specialists”, lawyers, bureaucratic labor regulators, labor economists, researchers and union accountants that had ballooned in number following the passage of the Wagner and Taft-Hartley Acts. They were business administration, political science, economics, labor relations, and law graduates from some of the most prestigious American universities, and they went straight from college to working as staff, lobbyists or consultants to major American business unions. At most they worked a token few years within a given field or enterprise before being promoted to full-time paid organizing staff.

They worked their way up internally within the newly consolidated ladder of union bureaucracy and committee positions that now ran the establishment unions. They protected their own interests and continuously multiplied, forming layers upon layers of internal union structures and bureaucratic features. The governance committees, departments, and organizing staff of all the major unions were now dominated by a strata of thoroughly petty bourgeois and bourgeois professionals who derived their legitimacy not from their experience organizing their fellow co-workers and laborers, but from their knowledge of, relation to, and ability to influence the courts, NLRB, Labor Department, and other

assorted labor regulatory processes and structures of the bourgeois state. By the 2010s, the major unions would employ an army of around 100,000 organizers, accountants, researchers, staffers, and other assorted professionals outside and above the already large array of elected union officers and agents.

Much like the staffers of the NGO-complex which developed in parallel during the same time period among the urban and rural poor, the primary concern of this professional strata that now controls the major establishment unions is not even the growth or strength of the mainstream labor movement, but whether or not their unions are in compliance with federal financial and labor regulatory rules and whether or not they have the support of the bourgeois political class. Workplace agitation and organizing takes a backseat to electoralism and federal lobbying. Effective use of spontaneous walkouts, political and solidarity strikes, and industry-wide organizing is turned in at the door of NLRB-controlled collective bargaining system in favor of limited “unfair labor practice strikes”, no strike clauses during the duration of a given contract, and the role of the union as the ultimate “contract enforcer.”

A simple analysis of the structure of a major modern union, like the United Auto Workers (UAW), reveals the scope of this new strata. The UAW lists on their website twenty-seven different professionalized departments under the jurisdiction of the union executive leadership (Accounting, Arbitration, Auditing, Circulation, Civil Rights, Community Action Program, Community Services, Conservation and Resource Development, Consumer Affairs, Education, Governmental and International Affairs, Health and Safety, Information Systems, Legal, Legislative, Organizing, Public Relations and Publications, Purchasing and Supply, Recreation and Leisure-Time Activities, Research, Research Library, Retired Workers, Time Study and Engineering, Social Security, Strike Assistance, Veterans, and Women’s), the majority of which are oriented towards the legislative, welfare and legal arms of the bourgeois state rather than towards their supposed “members”, i.e. the workers themselves.

The finances and expenditures of the major establishment unions also gives us a view into the shifting role and function of the former “basic organizations of the proletariat”, where instead of using their resources to grow the activity and organization of the workers, they increasingly spend more and more money on state-sanctioned bribery and lobbying. For example, according to campaign finance website OpenSecrets, which only has data going back to 1990, national and state teachers unions gave a total of \$4,780,443 in political contributions during the 1992 presidential campaign. By the last presidential campaign, 2020, this number had ballooned to \$66,440,967. Instead of increasing strike benefits, expanding their operations, incorporating and training up a new generation of “rank-and-file” labor activists, and generally engaging in the class struggle, the modern establishment unions now spend hundreds of millions of dollars of the workers’ own money each year on political favors and lobbying in the halls of the bourgeois democratic state.

Even though this vast misappropriation and channeling of the workers’ money into the pockets of bourgeois politicians is often chocked up to the poor decision making and ill deeds of a few select “misleaders” at the top, the reality is that dividing the broader professional strata of labor staffers and the individual locals of major unions from their central leaderships, because they are somehow more “grassroots” and “proletarianized” than their higher-ups, misses the forest for the trees. The labor aristocracy and the bourgeois state they serve, in combination with the broader trends and transformations of American imperialist capitalism in the last century, have reshaped and restructured the major establishment unions into fundamentally class collaborationist state institutions.

While the development and dominance of the new strata of bourgeois and petty bourgeois professionals who now lead, control, and spend the resources of the labor movement is an undeniable manifestation of this transformation, the fundamental mechanism for the transformation of the establishment unions into unrecognizable bourgeoisified state workers associations is the “union-management collaboration”/contract system enshrined and institutionalized by the National Labor Relations Act and NLRB system. In their pamphlet “Mass Organization At The Workplace” NCM group Sojourner Truth Organization explains at length the existence and effects of what they call the “contract unionism” system:

“All existing unions accept the contract system, in which labor and management agree to certain terms of employment for a specified time period. In a contract, management agrees to provide a certain standard of wages, fringe benefits and working conditions. The union, for its part, agrees to keep its members working under the agreed terms. The ability of a union to secure a favorable contract depends on two things: first, its ability to stop production during the period of negotiations, and second, its ability to prevent interruptions in, production during the life of the contract.

Thus, the nature of the contract demands that the union do what no workers organization should ever do - maintain labor discipline for the boss. The unions become part of the companies disciplinary apparatus, present at every point of grievance in order to prevent any disruption of production. That this mediating function of the union is well understood by the employers can be seen in the fact that virtually any time a group of workers in an auto plant or steel mill ceases work in protest over some grievance, the foreman or supervisor rushes to call the union officials to persuade the workers to resume production. This explains why the institution of company paid grievance time for union officials has been so generally accepted in basic industry, so that, while there may occasionally be haggling over the amount of time spent by various officials on 'union business,' the basic principle is never questioned.

At the heart of the union's regulatory role is the grievance procedure, which establishes legal channels for resolving contractual disputes, and thereby makes direct action by the workers 'illegal.' behind the grievance procedure is the arbitration machinery, which has built-in conditions reinforcing collaboration with the employer.

Even the ability of a union to fight at contract time - in theory the time when there are no restraints - is limited by its acceptance of the contract system. For example, employers are able to prepare for strikes by building up inventories during the last months of a contract - often aided by contractual provisions for compulsory overtime. The unions are forced to accumulate huge treasuries to sustain long strikes, which have become increasingly difficult to win when the employer is a large monopoly rather than a small family business. In addition, these treasuries make the union more vulnerable to injunctions and legal suits over the use of mass picketing, boycotts and other traditional weapons of labor struggle. They also make the unions into banks, insurance companies and real estate holders, whose interests, to say the least, are not the same as the class interests of their members.

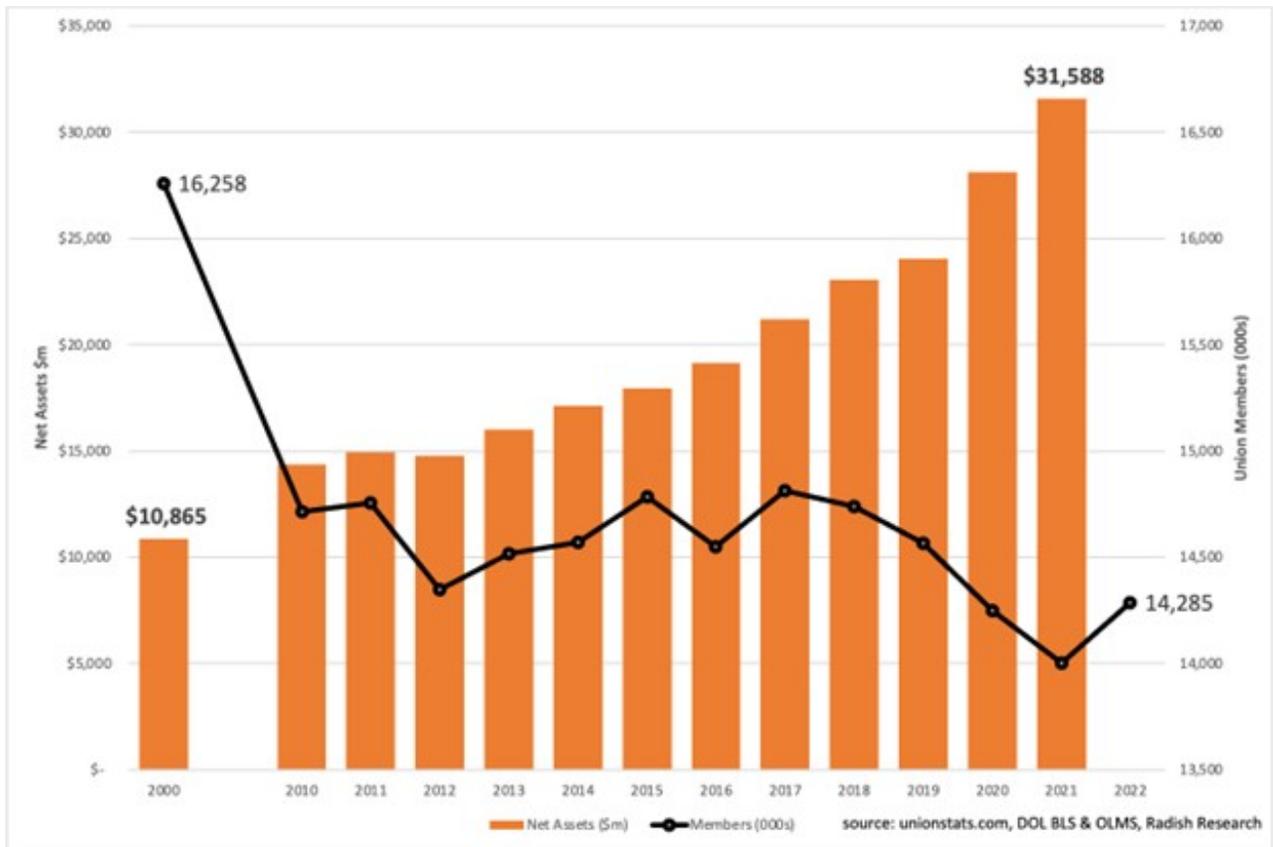
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We could go on and on. But the point is that every one of the great gains of the CIO drive to organize the mass production industries - seniority, the grievance procedure, the written contract, dues check-off, paid time for officials - has been transformed into a means of strengthening the authority of management. It is not possible in this paper to review the steps in this transformation. For now, it is enough to note that the regulating role which unions, to some degree, always fulfilled has become their dominant aspect.

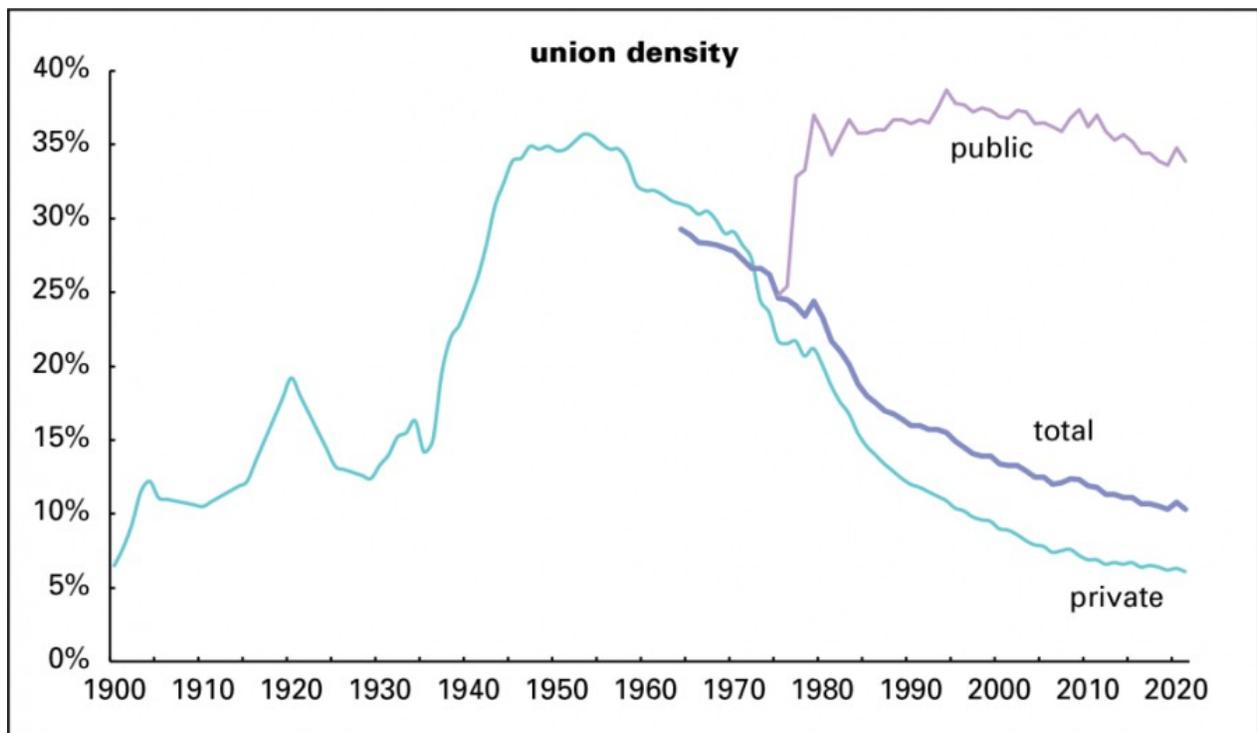
It is easy to cry 'sell-out' at the typical labor agreement. Certainly sell-outs are common. But the root of the problem does not lie in bad leadership or even bad policy, but in the institution of the contract itself. Indeed, one could well argue that the more conscientiously, within its own lights, the union defends the contractual interests of its members the more firmly it 'rivets the laborer to capital' as 'the wedges of Vulcan did Prometheus to the rock.'"

Although the Sojourner Truth Organization was describing the function of the establishment unions within heavy industry, and we view their complete opposition to all contracts or written agreements with employers as an ultra-left error, in our organization's experience with the grievance procedure and prevailing contract system within the education and logistics sectors much of this description rings true. For example, the "Association Representative Handbook" given to Massachusetts Teachers Association elected officers, which is ironically considered a more "militant union" that has been under the control of its "left-wing rank-and file caucus" for nearly a decade now, devotes fifteen pages to "representative as contract enforcer" and only a half page to "representative as organizer". Within the IBT and other more proletarian/industrial sectors, the enforcement of job seniority, part-time versus full-time distinctions, and other contract-linked divisions often make the union more akin to a "second supervisor" than an authentic representative of the workers.

The section about how establishment unions increasingly take on the features of banks, insurance-providers and capitalistic asset managers is also very prescient. A 2022 report entitled "Labor's Fortress of Finance" meticulously describes how the establishment unions' wealth and assets have reached ever souring heights, despite the fact the number of workers they encompass reach ever greater lows. According to this report, outside of their significant pension funds, in 2021 the major unions held a combined \$31,588,000,000 in net assets (stocks, bonds, real estate, cash, etc.) a nearly \$21 billion increase from the \$10,865,000,000 in net assets they held in 2000. Meanwhile according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in that same period, union membership of the total U.S. workforce fell to an all time low of 11.3%, with a disgracefully small 6% of all private sector employees in U.S. belonging to unions. Furthermore, according to this report, 85% of current union revenue comes from dues collection, meaning that for the last two decade workers have literally funded a \$20 billion asset expansion of the establishment unions, with nothing but further retreat and retraction to show for it.



(Chart from *Jacobin* article: <https://jacobin.com/2023/02/finance-unionism-union-density-decline-american-labor-movement-mass-organizing>)



(Chart from *Jacobin* article: <https://jacobin.com/2019/01/union-density-united-states-2018-bls>)

In reaction to this data, publications of the New “New Left” like the *Jacobin* have called for “aggressive spending” on tens of thousands of new union organizing staff to help develop a new wave of strikes and union expansion. This complete lack of awareness of the structural implications of expanding an already overgrown layer of union bureaucrats and petty bourgeois labor staffers is contradicted by their own admission, in an article on the possibilities of a “*Labor Party in the USA*”, that the establishment unions are tied at the hip with the bourgeois state to such an extent that the establishment unions will be hesitant to support even attempts at a reformist “labor party”:

“And while labor in the private sector has eroded to the point of near oblivion, labor’s relatively strong position in the public sector has been maintained to a significant extent, for better or worse, through political alliances with Democratic Party officeholders. The marriage may not be barren, but it has given us some rather disappointing children.”

The New Deal order has been dead for decades, but US labor is, with very few exceptions, still committed to the party-union alliance it struck with the Democratic Party in the 1930s. Despite the diminished returns, it will continue to be very difficult for the socialist movement or anyone else to draw labor out of the Democratic coalition and into a new and untested political formation. The relative openness and flexibility of US political parties is what drew labor into the Democratic Party’s orbit in the first place. So long as unions can exert influence and protect their organizations through alliances with Democratic officeholders they will continue to do so.

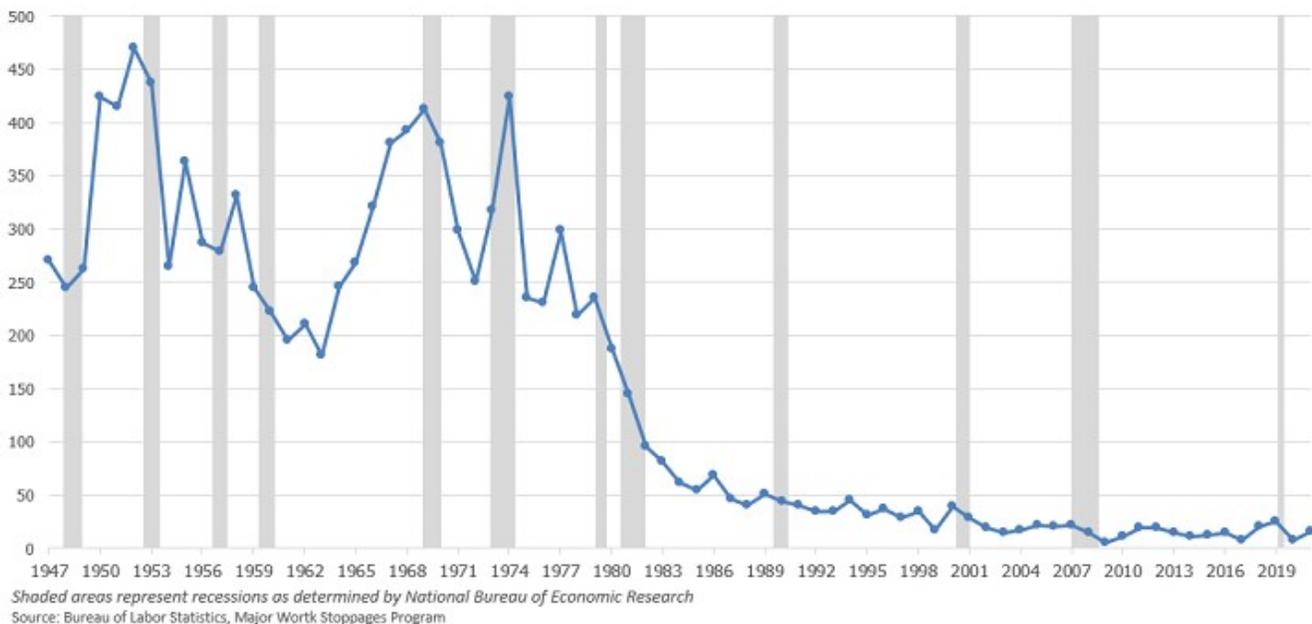
None of this to suggest that the formation of a mass independent labor or working-class party is an impossible task. But there are good reasons why the Republican Party is still, almost 170 years after its founding, the only third party in American history to become a major party. If the

new socialist movement does manage to get a viable new party off the ground, expect the unions to be among the last to get on board with it.”

Though author Chris Maisano uses the term “[Democratic] party-union alliance” to describe the current objective situation facing labor, it is more apt to say that the establishment unions exist within a “state-union alliance”. Specifically, the establishment unions have been incorporated into the bourgeois state as an appendage of its New Deal-era welfare apparatus, which is in large part why most unions find themselves so attached specifically to the Democratic rather than Republican party in the United States.

The NLRB-facilitated contract system and growing financial and legal entanglements of establishment labor provided the “carrot” by which the business unions felt obliged to incorporate themselves within the framework of the bourgeois democratic state. Following the strike wave of the 1970s, the federal government reined in the major unions even further through an expansive use of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, which became the major “stick” of the state outside of Taft-Hartley. The finalization of the state control of the establishment unions can be seen rather dramatically in the precipitous drop off in large strikes starting in the 80s and proceeding until the present day, although that is also in part due to relocation of many major factories outside of the Northeast and “Rust Belt” areas.

Chart 3. Annual work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947 - 2021



(Chart from <https://www.bls.gov/wsp/factsheets/summary-of-work-stoppages-in-the-united-states.htm>)

In a systematic campaign against what the federal government entitled “labor racketeering”, the state used the mechanisms provided by RICO and the little known Red Scare-era Hobbs Act to literally take formal control of a variety of union locals around the country. For example, using federal RICO-charges the entire national IBT was put under formal government supervision from 1988 to 2018, with a government appointed committee of three court officers given the same amount of power as the office of IBT president for much of that period. While justified as a campaign against the influence of the mafia and “organized crime” within the establishment unions, the real reach and implications of RICO’s use being broadened to labor was much larger and consequential than most are willing to

admit. Even up to the modern day, RICO charges are used by the state and capitalists to discipline establishment unions for even very basic militancy, such as in 2022 when the 3rd District Appeals Court allowed a corporation to sue the SEIU using the RICO Act after workers allegedly “vandalized” their workplace before a strike.

RICO laws and the Hobbs Act have made it so that almost any perceived or real use of force or threats against employers by NLRB-recognized unions can be turned into a charge of “labor racketeering”. In this way the establishment unions merger with the state apparatus is in essence a “deal with devil” that has robbed them of most of their effective tactics and strategies in exchange for legal recognition and institutionalization. Some on the “Left” mistakenly view this legal disciplining of the state unions, and the back-and-forth between them and other arms of the bourgeois state, as a sign of their persisting or potential revolutionary character. What this fails to take into account is that the American bourgeois democratic state apparatus, like all bourgeois states, is made up of various factions and interests which endlessly squabble among themselves while nevertheless maintaining the same fundamental class interests. It would be like saying that local state governments have a fundamentally antagonistic relationship with the broader American bourgeoisie because of the seemingly endless fight between the “state rights” and “federal power” camp in U.S. domestic politics.

THE U.S. LEFT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH STATE UNIONISM

Despite the great effort by many of the so-called “socialist Left” in the United States to defend the “revolutionary potential” and “key role” of the establishment unions, the character of the establishment unions as a major component in the current bourgeois monopoly capitalist system is something the people who actually lead and influence these unions are happy to admit. In a position paper that has come to define much of the establishment unions’ strategy and tactics since it was published in 2013, influential professional labor organizer Rich Yeselson speaks candidly from a perspective where the establishment unions are slaves to the wants and demands of the bourgeois state, and where somehow the interests of “labor” and the working class itself are now completely divorced from one another:

*“[...] Taft-Hartley isn’t going anywhere. Its land mines still detonate. And it still defines the legal and political context in which labor must operate as it tries to map out a strategy for the future. **An aggressive organizing strategy, of the sort labor attempted when John Sweeney took the helm of the AFL-CIO, just doesn’t work because the smart union strategists can’t compensate for a mostly (though not entirely) uninterested working class.** But labor can, without undertaking lengthy and expensive campaigns to organize new sectors, work to buttress the areas in which it is already strong, extend its alliances with other progressive groups, and even train the worker leaders of tomorrow. I call this “Fortress Unionism,” and **I believe it’s labor’s best play until the day arrives, if it ever does, when the workers themselves militantly signal that they want unions.**”(emphasis ours)*

Yeselson goes on to argue, as we have already explained, that the interventions by the bourgeoisie state into the labor movement from the 1930s – 1940s: “... bureaucratized labor unions. Unions required more and more lawyers—and more and more union stewards adept at labor law—to untangle the welter of laws, board decisions, judicial decisions, and contractual obligations that now ensnared the modern labor organization. This pervasive legalistic framework made the labor titans increasingly cautious, and it drained the energy and creativity out of the members and their rank-and-file leadership—the idea was to wait for the lawyers to tell them what would fly before the NLRB or the

courts.” This now dominant legalistic framework, in Yeselson’s eyes, means that establishment labor’s best strategy for the foreseeable future is to defend the current contracts and sectors they still have:

*“And then...wait. Wait for the workers to say they’ve had enough. **When they demand in vast numbers collective solutions to their problems, seize upon that energy and institutionalize it.**”*

*That is how massive union growth occurs—workers take matters into their own hands **and then unions capture that energy like lightning in a bottle.***

[...]

*As the San Francisco Chronicle editorialized in opposition to the 1946 Oakland general strike, sustained worker activism disrupts “the orderly process of daily life.” This may sound melodramatic, but there is no substitute for it. And when the workers do signal, the existing unions and their memberships should stand ready to help. **Unions were invented at the same time as modern capitalism. The system generates problems for employees that only collective representation (or the threat of it) can mitigate. An ostensibly democratic capitalism without unions is barely more thinkable than it would be without capitalists. The workers are willful when they want unions. Keep your eye on them. The unions will follow.**” (emphasis ours)*

There is a lot that can be analyzed and dissected in this position paper: how it openly embraces (like most contemporary “labor” leaders) unions as a class-collaborationist counterbalance which makes capitalism “ostensibly democratic”, how it claims modern establishment unions’ key purpose is to “institutionalize” the spontaneous demands of the workers for “collective solutions” within the framework of the bourgeois state, how even from the perspective of the professionalized organizing strata modern labor is basically dead in the water strategically. It is worth considering how we have gotten to the point where, with a very serious and sober tone, high-ranking labor organizers/strategists like Yeselson can take as one of their fundamental conditions that “the working-class” is “uninterested” in “labor”.

Can soldiers and generals be “mostly uninterested” in the military? Can doctors and nurses be “mostly uninterested” in medicine? Do carpenters need to be re-convinced of their interest in wood? It is a statement which makes no rational sense on its own, unless you accept the reality, already evident to the leaders of the contemporary labor movement, that modern establishment “labor” is divorced from and no longer synonymous with the “workers themselves”. That “labor” is now composed of legalistic institutions, state-sanctioned associations of employees, that are led by an alliance of petty-bourgeois professionals and working-class sell-outs tied at the hip with and regulated by the courts and state welfare apparatus.

Of course the workers are still interested in their own spontaneous struggles and labor politics abstractly. Even mainstream opinion polling shows that a majority of the US population has a positive view of the idea of labor unions. The question is whether the working masses are interested in the current state-sanctioned labor centers represented by the AFL-CIO, Change To Win, the IBT, and the other establishment unions.

The social democratic and left-Democratic press has done a thorough job analyzing and documenting the very real employer repression and anti-union propagandizing in the multiple recent failed attempts unionize Amazon centers in Bessemer, Alabama, upstate New York, and California, as well as the intentionally difficult and protracted NLRB union certification process. What the contemporary

“socialist press” has failed to do on the other hand is interrogate the material conditions and internal contradictions, which as Marxists we understand are primary, behind the seemingly endless retreat of the labor movement from the working class that the failure of attempts to unionize Amazon encapsulates. The labor movement has always faced fierce repression, and suffered many bitter defeats, but now seems unable to even organize a single medium-sized or small-sized enterprise, much less a whole sector or major industrial conglomerate. Through a rightist misuse of the slogans “solidarity” and “unity”, seemingly basic questions afflicting modern labor work remain unanswered or under-analyzed.

If the unions are so weak, why do they have more resources at their disposal than they have ever had in their entire history? If the state is so hostile to contemporary unions, why do public sector unionization rates dwarf private sector membership rates and bourgeois politicians feel safe appointing current and former “labor leaders” to high-ranking government offices, committees, boards and positions? If the problem is simply who’s at the top, then why do waves of victories of “progressive” candidates from “rank-and-file” caucuses in union elections seem to change nothing? If contemporary establishment unions are fundamentally working-class organizations, why have they not experienced dramatically higher activity or renewed growth during recent peaks of working-class militancy like they did in the past, but instead increasingly rely on legislative processes, new regulations, and changes in bourgeois officialdom to meet their demands? And if the Labor Department constantly monitors and regulates the internal function of establishment unions, and has shown its willingness to formally seize control of the unions or retract collective bargaining rights when necessary, why do revolutionaries expect the bourgeois to allow them to peacefully take power and transform these same unions?

The more you begin to look beyond the mindless sloganeering of both the left and the right, the objective and scientific reality of the modern labor movement becomes undeniably clear. The establishment labor unions, or American state unions, are state-sanctioned collective bargaining units, nothing more, nothing less. They are punished when they step out of that role, and the modern collective bargaining system is designed to make state union officialdom a “partner” and ally of the bosses and capitalists when it comes to disciplining their employees and enforcing the terms of the contract. The state unions then become one of the primary enforcers of a thousand of policies, tiers, and categories created by the bourgeoisie to divide the workers, divisions the old industrial unionists once sought to destroy.

Given this reality, why then do so many self-proclaimed revolutionaries continue to advocate for confining our work within the AFL-CIO and other establishment unions? Why are they so loyal to institutions which so many everyday workers already view with either ambivalence, suspicion or disappointment?

One basic reason for this unprincipled and unproductive “united front” has to do with the class character of the contemporary American “left”, which is primarily composed of the lower and downwardly mobile petty-bourgeoisie rather than the proletariat itself. These radicals of petty bourgeois origin and occupation can easily sympathize with and relate to the strata of similarly petty bourgeois professionals which run and control the establishment unions. Indeed many “would-be” radicals are, formerly were, or aspire to be professional “full-time” organizers, or are friends with and in the same social circles as these “labor” professionals.

A second, interconnected reason for this alliance is that the U.S. “left” has proven itself broadly unable to break with the bourgeois state in a variety of sectors, not just in the sphere of labor work. Many would-be American radicals are caught up as pawns in the struggle between different factions of the

bourgeoisie, as represented by the Democratic and Republican party. The struggle of class against class, of proletariat against bourgeoisie, is put aside in favor of the struggle between the “socially progressive” and “social conservative” wings of U.S. imperialist capitalism. Placed perpetually on tailist footing, under the banner of “harm reduction” these “revolutionaries” primarily work to defend the few-remaining social reforms and organs of the ailing welfare apparatus of the New Deal and Civil-Rights era, the establishment unions among them.

A third, and perhaps more understandable reason, argues that because there are still millions of workers who are members of the state unions the best way to win political leadership over them is by winning leadership positions within the structure of these institutions, and leveraging our forces within the establishment unions to “make them more militant” and “push them left”. These comrades fail to understand that the Marxist position has always been that we do work and seek to lead the workers and masses wherever they are located, not that we seek to capture and reform every organization the workers are a part of. For example, while the Italian and the German Communist parties infiltrated and did work among the workers within the state unions created by their respective fascist governments, they never abandoned the principle of independent proletarian initiative, organizational structures, and political lines when doing work within these institutions and never fooled themselves that the Fascist state would somehow allow the Communists to take over and peacefully transform structures the fascists themselves had regulated and controlled.

TOWARDS A REVOLUTIONARY POSITION ON STATE UNIONS

As Marxists we understand that dialectically, over time, things can transform into their opposite. Everything is a unity of opposites, and what might have began as an organization where the proletarian aspect was dominant over the bourgeois aspect can, in the twists and turns of class struggle, become an organization where the bourgeois aspect is dominant over the proletarian aspect. While this process also leaves open the possibility of the opposite occurring, as proletarian revolutionaries we understand that such a process will be inherently violent, combining destruction and construction in the same way the New State supplants and replaces the Old State in the course of people’s war.

Relevant to this point is the CPUSA’s line on the pre-NLRB phenomena of “company unions”, described in their TUEL pamphlet entitled simply “Company Unions”. Authored through a collaboration of Robert William Dunn and previously mentioned TUEL leader William Z. Foster¹, the pamphlet explains how, in order to increase production, fight the influence of both the independent red and non-red unions, and enforce labor peace during the First World War, many capitalist enterprises began forming their own “councils”, “shop committees”, “associations”, and even “unions” as employer-sponsored rivals to the existing trade unions of the time. These organizations, created on the initiative of the capitalists themselves, were recognized as legitimate by the newly created “National War Labor Board” (sound familiar?!), developed by the state to manage the economy during wartime. The TUEL correctly identified the “company unions” as inherently class-collaborationist institutions, tools of the state and capitalist classes that had to be broken with and combated. It’s worth understanding though that between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000 workers were members of these organizations during the late 1910s and most of the 1920s, making them the second largest “labor” conglomeration outside of the AFL.

1 Edit: The original published version of this piece mistakenly identifies the pamphlet’s author as William Dunne, another Communist labor militant of the time, rather than correctly as a collaboration between Robert William Dunn and William Z. Foster

In an incredible conclusion section that foresees the rise of state unionism, the original and greatest American champion of the “boring from within” line himself, William Z. Foster, writes:

“An especially menacing feature of the company union movement is the pronounced tendency of the trade union bureaucracy to accept its principles and practices and to transform the trade unions into company unions. This tendency expresses itself through the so-called B. & O. Plan and the "new wage policy" adopted by the American Federation of Labor at its recent convention. Refusing to militantly fight against the employers, the trade union bureaucrats are surrendering to them, by entering into agreements with them to raise production and to abolish strikes. The adoption of the B. & O Plan was a long step in the direction of company unionism and class collaboration generally. Already sections of the employers and the trade union bureaucrats foresee a practical merging of the trade union and company union movement. In such a consolidation the demands of the reactionary bureaucracy would be comparatively simple. Neglecting the interests of the workers as usual, their principal demand would be for the maintenance of some sort of a dues-paying organization which would serve to pay their fat salaries and to finance their labor banks and other trade union capitalist schemes. In return for this concession, they would defend the interests of the employers even more militantly than now against the insistent demands of the masses in general and the 'left wing' in particular. The occasional outcries of the bureaucrats against the company unions cannot hide the fact that these same bureaucrats are tending strongly in the direction of accepting company unionism.” (emphasis ours)

The B & O Plan (Baltimore and Ohio Cooperation Plan), was a “union-management cooperation plan” proposed by the B&O Railroad Company to “improve morale” and increase “incentives to efficiency” among their workers by formally recognizing and regularly meeting with their union in exchange for the union’s commitment to reduced militancy and perpetual “cooperation” with the company on all issues related to wages and working conditions (once again, sound familiar?!). The analysis presented in the pamphlet shows how TUEL activists, even while at the time still working within the AFL business unions, were able to see and address the increasingly likely possibility that the trade unions led by the labor aristocracy could turn into their opposite and fully embrace company unionism through the creation of collective agreements with the employers, mediated by the state apparatus, that contained no strike clauses and wedded the establishment unions and employers together in joint management of the workers.

While generations of would-be labor radicals have used the Trade Union Education League period as justification for the never ending struggle to wrest control of the establishment unions from their current leadership, the TUEL’s line on what to do with the company unions shows it’s not exactly clear any TUEL leader, even Foster, would endorse their approach given the character and structure of the major modern unions:

“The fight against company unionism must be made a special point of business by the trade union movement. To destroy the company unions is an essential part of the great task of organizing the unorganized millions in the industry. The slogan must be, "Destroy the Company Unions and form Trade Unions." If necessary we must penetrate the company unions when they have a mass following and disintegrate them from within, utilizing the resultant movements among the workers for the inauguration of wage and organizing campaigns. The experience during the movement of the steel workers in 1918-19, as well as

*among other groups of workers, shows clearly that the workers will not only demolish the company unions, but also use them as starting points for the formation of real trade unions. But the fight against company unionism must be accompanied by a militant struggle in the unions against its first cousins, the B. & O. Plan and the various forms of **trade union capitalism**, such as labor banking, trade union life insurance, etc. The Trade Union Educational League, embracing the most conscious and progressive elements among the workers, **must carry on an unremitting campaign against the B. & O. Plan and every other manifestation of class collaboration.** It must play a leading part in the consolidation of the unorganized masses, in the development of a new leadership for the unions, in the mobilization of the working class for a policy of real struggle against the employers. **Company unionism, including its trade union phase, the B. & O. Plan, is a menacing barrier to the progress of the workers. The road to working class emancipation lies through its shattered fragments.**" (emphasis ours)*

We can see from this pamphlet that while the Trade Union Education League was willing to do work within the reactionary business unions of the AFL, and attempt to transform them into "class struggle unions" from the inside out, even they were unwilling to accept openly class collaborationist institutions like the National War Labor Board, the company unions, and anti-strike contracts like the B&O Plan as part of any real and authentic trade union movement. When the CPUSA did eventually work within the NLRB-sanctioned CIO union center during the late 1930s and 1940s, it's important to remember this occurred in the context of the CPUSA rightist Browderite interpretation of the Comintern's Popular Front line wherein the party openly sought a "united front against fascism" with the FDR administration and "progressive-wing" of the Democratic Party. With the opening of the Cold War following World War 2, it would be the very NLRB-mechanisms that the CIO opportunistically utilized so heavily that allowed for the bourgeois state to turn around and intervene in the labor movement to repress and purge revolutionary workers as never before.

With this historical background in mind, we can characterize U.S. state unionism as the state-sanctioned and state-promoted merger of the preceding trends of company unionism on the one hand, and the right-wing of the business union leadership, which advanced what the Trade Union Educational League called "trade union capitalism", on the other. Labor law, the New Deal, and the resulting bourgeois democratic welfare apparatus institutionalized class-collaborationist company unionism as the only acceptable form of "unionism" the establishment unions could take, and created the set of "labor institutions" which now dominate the U.S. labor movement even though they are alienated from the working-class itself. With the "left" of the labor movement destroyed and scattered during the Second Red Scare period, by the time the militants of the NCM attempted to "bring communism home to the workers" by taking over and transforming the establishment unions, they were dealing with an entirely different type of labor organization than the revolutionaries of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s had.

This new state unionist "labor organization" was the main organ of the national-level "union-management cooperation plan" implemented by the FDR administration and expanded under subsequent presidents, and was the basic organization of a state bureaucrat-labor aristocratic alliance, not a basic organization of the "workers themselves". In 2023, the "practical merging of the trade union and company union movement" the Trade Union Educational League warned about and foresaw in 1926 has been long since achieved.

But if state unionism dominates the modern labor movement and establishment labor structures, what then is to be done?

The first corrective that recognizing the modern labor movement as dominated by state unionism obliges us to make is that the vast trash heap currently masquerading as “labor strategy” or “labor mass work” on the U.S. “revolutionary” left must be cast aside. Calls to “build a fighting labor movement”, push the major unions to be “more militant”, build links with “organized labor”, “support labor”, and “stand in solidarity” with the workers are meaningless without, as the Brazilian comrades describe, a decisive break with American state unionism. All revolutionaries in the labor movement must strive to construct “a class-based, combative and independent unionism” in the United States without exception.

By not rejecting state unionism, the slogans of the U.S. left become at worst blatant tailism of the “progressive”-wing of the bourgeois state apparatus, and at best a call to reconstitute the establishment unions as AFL-style business unions rather than modern state unions (AFL-style business unions which merged with the state apparatus and company unionist structures to get us into this mess in the first place). That second call is how we end up with “left-wing rank-and-file caucus” Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDFU) supporting Sean O’Brien for IBT president, despite the fact that O’Brien is a well-known reactionary “good old boy” with a mobbed-up Teamsters official father and had been temporarily suspended from the Teamsters less than a decade prior for openly threatening TDFU members who challenged a buddy of his. O’Brien and most of the candidates of the so-called “rank-and file caucuses” and “union reform” slates represent a “progressive” state unionism that emulates the bread-and-butter establishment unions of the 1950s and 1960s while Hoffa Jr, a lawyer who never worked a real job in his life, represented a continuation of a conservative state unionism even most Democrats found unpalatable. Where Lenin once criticized the call to “lend the economic struggle a political character” as rightist and fundamentally anti-revolutionary, the call of most of the current U.S. left has devolved into “revive the economic struggle” without even a passing mention of politics or the revolutionary political struggle.

By not breaking with state unionism, the “strike support” and “labor solidarity” work of the DSA, PSL, ISG and assorted American socialist alphabet soup becomes a united front between a predominately petty-bourgeois left and the professionalized organizing staff of the establishment unions, that is, a united front of the “progressive” petty-bourgeoisie with itself. It’s worth noting how the DSA and other supposedly “left-wing” organizations describe their labor work. An article from *In These Times* describing the DSA’s recent labor campaigns quotes a DSA-linked organizer as stating there “is a war on the working class in this country and the only way we are going to win is by building an army of organizers” and goes on to describe the DSA-initiated Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee as: “involved in 186 active campaigns and has assisted in union wins at Trader Joe’s, a Manhattan theater and a hospital in Austin, Texas, among others.” Here even a DSA-friendly article describes the dark reality we have explained above, where instead of educating the workers in class struggle and forging the advanced workers into the bones of an independent and class-conscious workers movement, we build an “army” of petty-bourgeois professional organizers and have them go among and organize the workers and attempt to expand the reach of the establishment state unions. And even they must admit they have only had success organizing at “Trader Joe’s, a Manhattan theater and a hospital in Austin, Texas.” Hell, our organization has had some “success” organizing among workers at a handful of UPS hubs and public schools, but you don’t see us parading the most basic work building links and leading small sections of the masses as successes worthy of applause.

The PSL and other so-called “Leninist” groups are no better, with the PSL’s most recent article on the IBT-UPS TA debacle claiming: “A contract victory at UPS shows the power that workers have when they are organized in a fighting union. The task now is to spread this organization to the nonunion

corporations in the shipping and logistics industry. Sean O'Brien and the rest of the Teamsters leadership have spoken on many occasions about the importance of organizing Amazon." Here the supposedly "communist" PSL tails even the bland social democrats of the Amazon Labor Union by claiming that somehow the Teamsters' leadership's betrayal of their promise to strike to win major concessions from UPS means they are a "fighting union" (which backed down from fighting) and that revolutionaries should work to expand their influence and reach spread to non-Teamsters organized corporations in the logistics industry. The absolute dominance of state unionism in the United States means establishment unions can do the absolute minimum, i.e. threaten a strike, and be applauded as heralds of a new "fighting" labor movement worth harassing an otherwise disinterested working class into supporting.

The second corrective is that revolutionaries in the U.S. must soberly reckon with the reality that the path to revolution in our country lies through either splitting or outright destroying most, if not all, of the establishment state unions, and constructing a new powerful, combative, independent and class-conscious alternative union center in their place. It is a reality that, even if we stick our heads in the sand and refuse to recognize, will be forced upon us in the course of any serious revolutionary struggle in the United States. If we were to pursue the route of most mainstream "Left" organizations and confine our labor work to expanding and attempting become the leadership of and transform the state unions, and then act as socialists with even the most minor fidelity, the bourgeois state would inevitably seize control of and attempt to purge us from the state unions we legitimately threaten to take over, thus forcing an organizational split upon us on their terms. Such a split was forced upon the ILWU, UE and other Communist-controlled CIO locals during the Second Red Scare and it will certainly happen again if revolutionary workers ever pose a serious threat to the American capitalist order.

This recognition of the state unionist reality of the modern labor movement should not be confused with a call to completely abandon the state unions, as Lenin criticized in *"Left Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. U.S. revolutionaries must continue to agitate, penetrate, and organize within the employer and state-sanctioned collective bargaining units (i.e. state unions) as the CPUSA did within the company unions and the Communists of the 1930s and 40s did within the fascist state unions. In doing this revolutionary workers and labor activists can avoid isolation from the sections of the working-class and lower-petty bourgeoisie organized within the state unions, and utilize these state-sanctioned bargaining units to intervene in and lead the struggle for revindications and reforms. The role of revolutionaries within the state-controlled bargaining units must be to expose and undermine the state unionist center, the harmful role of state interventions and the NLRB-system, and agitate among the workers for an independent class-conscious unionist current. The role of revolutionaries within the state unions is not to do as almost every "left-wing" group has done following the recent last-minute UPS-IBT Tentative Agreement and proclaim "solidarity" and "unity" with every betrayal of the workers by the state unionist structures and bully/pressure the workers into accepting every wretched compromise and concession.

This is also not to be confused with a call to dogmatically view all currently existing unions as equals. For example, even during the TUUL Red Union period the CPUSA continued to pursue a "boring from within" strategy within the American Federation of Teachers due to the widespread militancy and relatively advanced political consciousness of the members of that particular business union. The vast majority of the major establishment unions (AFSCME, IBT, UAW, NEA, SEIU, etc.) are, however, part of the state unionist current within the labor movement and must be dealt with and understood as such.

As the TUEL wrote regarding company unionism, "the road to working class emancipation lies through [the] shattered fragments" of state unionism. This is inevitable because one of the key tasks of

proletarian revolutionaries within the labor movement is to develop the class consciousness and organic organization of the masses by carrying “on an unremitting campaign against” all “manifestations of class collaboration” in the process of revolutionary class struggle. The term “organic” is important here because a basic characteristic of any true unionist current is that its bodies and organisms derive their legitimacy and support from the workers themselves, not from the state, employer, or any other body alien to the masses. The revolutionary tactic of developing cadre and “professional revolutionaries” cannot be distorted into a call for petty bourgeois professionals, lawyers, and other varied “union staffers” to dominate and control the spontaneous workers’ movement.

The third corrective is that revolutionary workers must begin developing and implementing our decisive break with state unionism now, not at some prophesied ideal point in the future. Because they are currently largely foreign to the workers and base themselves in the machinery of a weak and feeble American welfare apparatus, the state unions already are essentially irrelevant as a real and powerful organizing force outside of the public sector and a few isolated “union cities” and unionized industries and enterprises. In the mostly unorganized sectors and enterprises, where the large majority of America’s working masses are located, we must begin preparing the basis for the independent class-conscious unionist current that is necessary if we ever wish to achieve revolution in the United States. As part of this long-term goal we must begin to seriously grapple with the task of collectively organizing workplaces and leading workers without the state unions and with only the most minimal necessary contact with the state labor regulatory apparatus. It is in the unorganized sectors that we must start to explore in earnest with all available energy the possibilities and potential for red unions and independent unions.

In the service, restaurant, agricultural, light industry, and many other sectors the state unions meant to represent the workers within those industries are quite literally almost non-existent. For example, according to a recent bourgeois press report the United Farm Workers’ “membership is so low that UC Merced researchers say farmworker union membership is now statistically zero. Today the UFW focuses its efforts on political advocacy, hoping for better election outcomes by making accommodations such as at-home voting.” In the unorganized sectors, many state unions have essentially given up the pretense of being traditional trade or industrial unions, and have explicitly made the jump entirely from trade union to NGO. Why revolutionaries would tie themselves to institutions which are not only thoroughly corrupt and reactionary, but also have “statistically zero” active support among the workers they supposedly “organize and represent” defies all logic. Revolutionary organizations that work within these sectors should focus on consolidating the advanced and bringing up the intermediate masses within independent union or proto-union structures that allow not only for political and ideological autonomy, but are also made up of and based within the workers themselves rather than university campuses and the American domestic NGO-complex.

The originally independent Amazon Labor Union and Starbucks Workers United campaigns, which state unionism increasingly subsumes and ties to its failing machinery, are examples of the potential independent unionism has even now, when many so-called “leftists” continue to tail the workers and demand they enter into weak and compromised state unions rather than organize independent worker-led unions the masses are more willing to trust. It is within Amazon, Starbucks, or other enterprises organized under similar “independent” unions that the famed “boring from within” strategy becomes more legitimate or possible, as these supposedly “novel and new” independent unions are much more equivalent to the historical business unions of the pre-state unionism era than the current establishment labor centers. Such a tactic is however still complicated by the fact that state unionism is so prevalent, and has such a strong hold on the labor movement, that even these independent unions can quickly morph into their opposite. This can be seen most readily by the rapid stagnation of the ALU and recent

formation of the ALU Democratic Reform Caucus, which (correctly) alleges ALU is so already dysfunctional it needs new leadership and a thorough reformation of its current structure and method.

In the sectors and enterprises already organized by the state unions, our primary task is to undermine state unionism and encourage independent worker initiative by constructing a political organizational apparatus and system of support separate from and opposed to the professionalized petty bourgeois state union centers within the state-sanctioned bargaining units. Given the inevitable split and expulsion that will be forced upon us by the bourgeois state if we are to have even moderate success regionally or nationally, we must never liquidate our forces within the state union apparatus itself. Instead revolutionary workers should utilize shop papers, clandestine activist networks, and independent shop floor or building-level organizing committees to mobilize the workers within the state-sanctioned bargaining units to struggle for their daily demands and agitate among them to raise their political consciousness and educate them in the theory and practice of class struggle. These independent red labor organizations should form the basis of the red fractions within the state unions that will eventually split and as Dunn and Foster wrote of the company unions, use the old establishment state unions “as starting points for the formation of real trade unions.”

CONCLUSION: THE LABOR MOVEMENT WORKERS DEMAND

This is the work organizations such as New Day at UPS and the Southern New England Labor Council want to accomplish. We call on all those who unite with our analysis to reach out, carry out a decisive break with state unionism, and join us in forming a new independent, combative and class conscious unionist current within the contemporary labor movement. Furthermore, we call on all those who disagree with our analysis to demonstrate how the establishment American unions remain independent of the bourgeois democratic state, are not state-sanctioned class collaborationist institutions, and are mainly products of the spontaneous movement of the workers themselves. The workers demand an end to their exploitation, and our task is not to lead them back into the arms of the bourgeois democratic state, but instead lead them on the path to proletarian revolution, on the path in which they will take their destiny in their own hands and lead humanity into a classless society without exploitation or oppression. It is for this historic task we work, not for the further enrichment of a handful of privileged labor lawyers and professional “labor leaders” who will use the hard-work and revolutionary energy of the masses to further their own careers and win themselves seats in the halls of power.

Even though it might seem daunting, the reality is that separating ourselves from the stagnant and dysfunctional organizing center that is state unionism is a profoundly liberating goal. In building the bones of a real independent, combative unionism based among the workers themselves, we free ourselves from the essentially impossible task of transforming the establishment unions. A task which would entail somehow radicalizing the already existing “reform caucuses”, then winning in internal union elections that are stacked against “subversive” candidates, then purging and deconstructing the mass of corrupt union officers and union professional staffers without provoking a split (which is complicated by the fact most union staffers are themselves protected by and organized within their own state unions), and then finally somehow unshackling these newly-revolutionized establishment unions from the restrictions of modern labor law without provoking a federal backlash and takeover.

Instead of playing bourgeois politics, we must devote our time to organizing and building up the organic capacity and leadership of the workers themselves. We must finally be able to combine legal and illegal methods in ways all successful historical workers movements have, and harness the spontaneous energy of the masses towards developing and expanding the class struggle rather than

funneling it back into the endless hamster wheel of class collaboration. In breaking with the state and class collaboration, we put the essential tool of the labor union back in everyday workers' hands, and help reconstitute the deep, powerful and independent mass movement that is the fertile ground of any revolution. Furthermore, in breaking with the professionalized NGO-like state union organizing centers, on a practical level we give ourselves many more possibilities tactically and strategically, as the spontaneous and grassroots activities of workers themselves are much less regulated, and exist more in a kind of legal "gray-zone", in comparison to the highly-monitored activities of the large state unions.

Of course a thorough break with state unionism also brings with it a new Pandora's Box of practical and theoretical questions regarding what should be our goals, forms, methods, tactics, and strategies in the current period. How should revolutionaries participate in and lead the spontaneous workers movement in such a way that they avoid either the error of class-collaboration and corporatism/social fascism on the one hand and the error of sectarianism and effective isolation from the masses on the other? Is the NLRB-contract system a poison pill, as some revolutionaries claim, or can the existing contracts be modified and still used in ways that win the economic and political demands of the workers without tying them closer to the bourgeois state? What does a "red" or "independent" union look like and how would it even function in the modern day on a large, industrial-wide, scale? What is the appropriate level of clandestine revolutionary workers should have in the state unions and in ultra-repressive enterprises like Amazon? The possible questions go on into infinity, because the uncomfortable truth is that we will only begin to be able to answer these questions through bitter and sustained struggle, through summation, investigation, and social practice.

As revolutionaries, as Marxists, as workers, we have a duty to learn from the heroes and struggles of the past. But recognizing, learning from, and paying respect to the labor struggles of the past does not mean dogmatically following their strategy and tactics despite the fact we now live in a much changed and alien world. Humility does not mean blind deference. Rather, in our context, humility means recognizing the reality that we are much weaker and less-developed than our revolutionary predecessors, and reckoning with the fact that if those much greater than ourselves have failed to "transform" the establishment unions for nearly four generations in a row, we are hardly in a place to mindlessly copy and paste their strategies, but successfully this time. We ask all those who are skeptical of our positions and analysis to move beyond knee-jerk reactions and to truly explore for themselves whether their own work, their own strategies for "socialist" labor organizing, are leading us on a path to working-class revolution, to communism. All those who read this document should look into the history of the unions meant to represent them, whether they are a member or not, into the history of labor struggles in this country, into the concrete conditions of our economy and their workplace, and find for themselves if there is anything worthwhile in what we write.

It is a simple truth that state unionism will never bite the hand that feeds it. We all understand that the more than half-century long stagnation and decline of the labor movement must come to an end if a revolution is to ever succeed in our country. Much more difficult to recognize is that the only actual way to do this, the only feasible way to truly revive a class-conscious, independent, and combative trade unionism in the United States, necessarily involves revolutionary workers breaking with the trend largely responsible for labor's decline in the first place: state unionism.

State unionism is a dead end for all involved except the capitalists and those at the top. Even if tomorrow supposedly "labor-friendly" capitalist politicians like Joe Biden used executive orders and other means to make it legally easier for the state unions to expand, not only could any so-called "gains" be easily reversed by the next administration or even Biden himself, but such expansion would

lead the workers back into the swamp of state-sponsored “labor-management partnership” rather than out of it. Strengthening the dying state unionist centers reverses rather than builds on spontaneous working-class militancy and rebellion, and thus becomes a completely self-destructing goal for any would be “revolutionary” or rank-and-file working-class activist in the labor movement.

Instead, let us once-and-for-all cast aside vile collaborationist phrases like “responsible corporations”, “fair capitalism” and “labor-friendly administrations (political, corporate or otherwise)”. Let the workers fight for themselves in the more than two-hundred year-old class-war that has already been declared against us, and let us make the slogan of the renewed revolutionary working-class labor movement once again be “class against class.”

For a combative, class-conscious, and independent U.S. labor movement!

Southern New England Labor Council