

Black Feminism In Boston

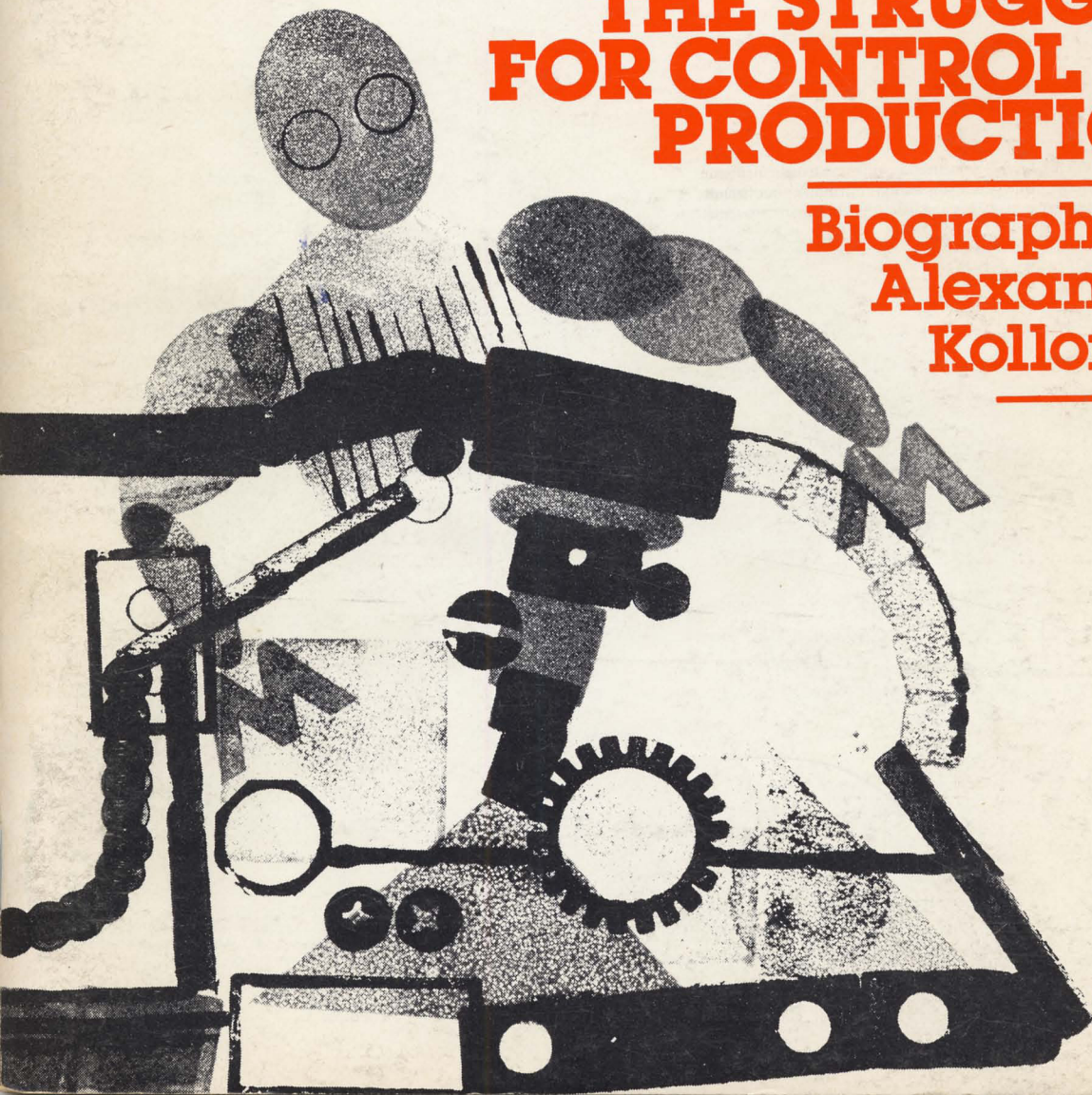
\$2

# RADICAL AMERICA

vol.13, no.6

THE STRUGGLE  
FOR CONTROL OF  
PRODUCTION

Biography of  
Alexandra  
Kollontai



Editors: Frank Brodhead, Margery Davies, John Demeter, Marla Erlén, Phyllis Ewen, Linda Gordon, Jim Green, Allen Hunter, Anne Kenney, Neil McCafferty, Jim O'Brien, Nick Thorkelson, Ann Withorn.

Editorial Interns: Deborah Fuller, Louisa Hackett and Karin Stallard.

Copy Editor: Dorothy Miller Klubock.

Associate Editors: Peter Biskind, Carl Boggs, Paul Buhle, Jorge C. Corralego, Ellen DuBois, Barbara Ehrenreich, Dan Georgakas, Martin Glaberman, Michael Hirsch, Mike Kazin, Ken Lawrence, Staughton Lynd, Mark Naison, Brian Peterson, Sheila Rowbotham, Annemarie Troger, Martha Vicinus, Stan Weir, David Widgery.

*Cover drawing by Joan Green and Steve Watt*

RADICAL AMERICA (USPS #73 880) is published bi-monthly by the Alternative Education Project, Inc. at 324 Somerville Ave., Somerville, MA 02143. Copyright © 1979 by Radical America. Subscription rates: \$10 per year, \$18 for two years, \$7 per year for the unemployed. Add \$2.00 per year to all prices for foreign subscriptions. Double rates for institutions. Free to prisoners. Bulk rates: 40% reduction from cover price for five or more copies. Bookstores may order from Carrier Pigeon, 75 Kneeland St., room 309, Boston, MA 02111. Typesetting by Carrier Pigeon.

Second class postage paid at Boston, Mass. and additional post offices.

# **RADICAL AMERICA**

November-December 1979

Vol. 13, No. 6

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>THE PAST AND FUTURE OF WORKERS' CONTROL</b> David Montgomery	<b>7</b>
<b>NUMERICAL CONTROL OF WORK: WORKERS AND AUTOMATION IN THE COMPUTER AGE</b> Harley Shaiken	<b>25</b>
<b>WHY DID THEY DIE? A DOCUMENT OF BLACK FEMINISM</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI: FEMINISM, WORKERS' DEMOCRACY, AND INTERNATIONALISM</b> Anne Bobroff	<b>51</b>
<b>LETTERS: MORE ON FEMINISM AND LENINISM</b>	<b>78</b>

# INTRODUCTION

In this issue articles by David Montgomery and Harley Shaiken extend and deepen our understanding of the struggle for control in the workplace. Since the publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* by Harry Braverman in 1974, leftists have been more aware of the ways in which capitalists have degraded the labor process by separating the conception of work from its execution. By extending the division of labor, exacerbating it through the oppression of women and minority workers, and then applying science and technology, managers have attempted to reduce workers to the status of robots.

Through the work of David Montgomery and other radical historians, we have also learned about the determined resistance workers have mobilized against management attempts to take complete control at the point of production. These historical studies are of more than academic interest. People involved in daily workplace struggles against speed-ups, computerized technology, runaway shops, and job reclassifications have shown a strong interest in earlier resistance movements mobilized by workers.

In "The Past and Future of Workers Control" Montgomery explains how skilled workers exercised such an amazing degree of craft control by using their knowledge of the work, protecting the secrets of the trade, and enforcing a kind of collectivist code of behavior on the shop floor. This code, which dealt harshly with individual rate-busters, was imbedded in union work rules. These rules became the prime target of violent attacks by open-shop employers and also by scientific managers who tried to break up shop-floor collectivities and to increase individual competition among workers.

---

While the resistance mounted by skilled workers in defense of craft control was inspiring, at times leading to demands for worker control on an industrial basis, it had serious limitations. The same skilled workers who struck against F.W. Taylor's time-and-motion studies and refused to work when foremen appeared, formed exclusionary craft unions, often rationalizing the degradation of unskilled "green hands" on racist and sexist grounds. During World War I, for example, some of the skilled workers' unions struck against the employment of women on the dubious grounds that they would "dilute" the skills of the trade.

Indeed, as Montgomery's other work emphasizes, the code of the craftsman emphasized the ethos of "manliness" in the worker's relation to the boss and his fellow worker. This kind of male chauvinism naturally assumed male supremacy and a fundamental distinction between men's work and women's work. Too often the model of workers' control struggles based upon the deskilling of craftsmen leaves women out. Susan Porter Benson's study of the "clerking sisterhood" (RA, March-April 1978), for example, shows that the informal work group served as an effective basis of resistance for women department-store workers without craft skills. If we assume that control struggles began and ended with skilled workers, we not only reach pessimistic conclusions based on the obliteration of many skilled trades, but we also ignore the experience of the unskilled masses who fought for control in different ways.

Montgomery is aware of these limitations and asks us not to romanticize the skilled workers' struggles, which did often lead in exclusionary directions, but rather to recognize that workers' control has not simply been a utopian notion concocted by intellectuals: it has been part of the daily struggle of working people in this country. The point is not that skilled workers actually contended with capital

for the control of ownership, though the cooperative movement in the 19th century did make this demand; what is important is that the workers' struggle to retain knowledge and decision-making power on the job prevented management from gaining full control of the labor process.

Montgomery and Harley Shaiken show clearly that this struggle is still taking place, especially in the machine shops, where skilled workers have retained a remarkable degree of job control over the years. But there are important differences between the struggles of today and yesterday. Of first importance is the fact that control struggles today are no longer limited to job control among a small group of skilled individuals. "Today's struggles," says Montgomery, "begin with the scientifically-managed factory" and this "means that battles against plant closings, or against take-back bargaining, must embrace much, or even all, of the plant's workforce."

Perhaps then today's struggles will necessarily be more inclusionary than those of the past, but socialists will still be concerned that, given the predominance of white males with seniority in many plants, control struggles will center around the preservation of the relative privileges of a few workers, especially those willing to contest management's drive for control. On another level, the new frontier of control struggles involving plant closings, such as the one in Youngstown, may involve protection of some jobs and not others, or may easily pit one community against another. Here too Montgomery, who is well aware of the limitations of worker-ownership, asks us to consider the possibilities of struggles to reopen closed plants on a new ownership basis. These struggles, such as the one at Youngstown, will tend to require community input, and even open up the possibility of leftist participation.

The possibility of reopening a plant under

union and/or community ownership also raises questions about the value of the goods being produced. There are built-in limits here too. The experiment in worker-ownership by the Vermont Asbestos Group could not really question the use value of asbestos, perhaps the most dangerous chemical substance in use today. But in other plants, steel fabrication for example, reopening under worker-ownership at least raises questions about the social value of what is being produced.

Anticipating the standard left reservations about worker control struggles, Montgomery grants that we can't have "socialism in one factory" or even in one industry or community for that matter. Nonetheless, Montgomery and Shaiken both argue for the importance of these struggles to the left. They both make a similar point about the need to combat technological determinism. The numerical control of machines and entire factories by computer, described by Shaiken, has been widely portrayed as a technological inevitability, not as a product of social choices made by management to degrade and destroy jobs and to gain complete control of production. Technological determinism has contributed to the lack of confidence workers feel about controlling their own work environment. By emphasizing the social choices involved in technological decisions, activists can at least begin the discussion with workers about who makes the decisions that affect their working lives. And under certain circumstances, like plant closings and machine-redesign, the discussion may extend to the question of how workers themselves would run things if they had the chance.

In discussing the invasion of the machine-tool industry by numerically-controlled computers, Harley Shaiken argues that unions must battle for some control over new technology or find that management will use it to take complete control of the mental aspects of

work. Apparently, this plea is having some effect, as the UAW has raised the issue of computer control in its recent negotiations with the auto companies. Ironically, the effectiveness of the machinists' struggle against numerically controlled methods, which have proved to be difficult to install in many plants, has created a false sense of confidence in some skilled workers. Shaiken raises the alarm about the new wave of computer-technology which has descended upon the workplace with unprecedented force. He asks those workers who have experienced the failures of numerically-controlled machinery not to be lulled into a false sense of security. He also notes that experiments in Britain and Norway have allowed unions to win some control over computers for their members. There is nothing inherent in computer technology which necessarily involves total domination by management. Indeed, as Montgomery suggests, the advent of computer technology makes possible new kinds of shared decision-making in production that would have been impossible in the old days when a few workers preserved the secrets of their skilled trades.

The future of workers' control in the U.S. may appear to be more promising now than it was a decade ago. Experiments are actually taking place and the current wave of plant-closings will raise further possibilities. Still, as Al Phaber suggests in a recent article on automation in auto plants (RA, January-February 1979), workers may reject the old-style struggles for control, along with the "jointly managed monotony" projected by GM-UAW "quality of work" committees. They may not want their "old jobs" or their "old struggle" or even their "new jobs." If computerization and automation continue at their present pace, they will not want to be "workers" at all. It would, therefore, be a mistake for the left to support efforts to save jobs at any price. We

---

should oppose the social democratic urge to plan the crisis in the work-place and administer workers' participation without real control. The political evaluation of control struggles should be based on the possibilities these struggles present, not only to save jobs, but to unify workers with each other and with people outside the workplace and, ultimately, to transform the labor process itself.

Anne Bobroff's article on Alexandra Kollontai raises political issues and questions relevant to contemporary politics. Kollontai was the leading spokesperson for women's liberation in the early Soviet period, and for the Workers' Opposition. The latter group fought, in the early 1920s, for democratic workers' control of industry in the Soviet Union. As David Montgomery's article adds to an historical understanding of workers' struggles for control over their skills and working conditions under capitalism, Kollontai and the Workers' Opposition attempted to establish workers' control on a nationwide basis that also shared in political power.

Further, Kollontai's overall political efforts and their ultimate failure illuminate the interconnections between the fate of workers' democracy and women's liberation in the Soviet Union. The failure of the marriage reform program of 1926 was simultaneous with the last moments of revolutionary opposition to Stalinist dictatorship in that country. Looking at Soviet history from this perspective brings our attention back to the connections in contemporary politics between feminist goals

and the possibility of democratic socialism.

Bobroff's appraisal of Kollontai's failure suggests, on the whole, that it was inevitable. The historical task, Bobroff argues, for the Soviet Union at that time was industrialization; implicitly Kollontai's isolation demonstrates the historical impossibility, the lack of conditions for, a mass women's movement at that time. We are inclined to think that this pessimism is founded. Still, some questions about the existence of possible alternatives are in order. The Bolsheviks, consciously or not, relied primarily on the U.S. model of industrialization—assembly line production, Taylorism, centralization and specialization. Were other processes of industrialization possible? Would workers' democracy have been an inevitable obstacle to industrialization, and if so was it because of the cultural backwardness of the Soviet labor force? Outside the Bolshevik Party "populist" economists were proposing alternative economic-growth plans, laughed off by the Bolsheviks as unscientific. Is women's liberation a unique product of affluent and industrialized societies? Was Kollontai an eccentric visionary because of her privileged background, and if so, does that diminish the usefulness of her vision? These questions are not veiled expressions of disagreement with Bobroff's interpretation; they are questions socialists cannot now answer with certainty. Kollontai's work has the unique importance of raising such questions, perhaps because she was pushing against the very limits of the cage of historical possibility.





# THE PAST AND FUTURE OF WORKERS' CONTROL

*David Montgomery*

To speak of workers' control in America is difficult, because little of the theory of the workers' control movement came out of this country. American experience forces us to begin with the world of practice, and then to probe some of the ideological implications of that practice. In fact, American workers have waged a running battle over the ways in which their daily work and the human relations at work were organized over the last century, and in the process they have raised issues which go far beyond the confines of "wage and job consciousness" or "bread and butter" unionism, into which historians have long tried to compress the experiences and aspirations of American workers.

What does "workers' control" mean? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to begin with consideration of its opposite: the separation caused by industrial capitalism between those who direct the work to be done and those who carry out the directions. This separation is rooted in two of the most fundamental characteristics of our economic order. The first is that the historical evolution of capitalism involved a concentration of productive power in collective forms on a scale never before dreamed of. Production became a group activity, and the groups involved have typically become larger and larger over the last century and a half. Moreover, as production has become more collective in form, the technical knowledge which guides that activity has correspondingly become separated from the actual carrying out of the work. It has increasingly become codified in the form of engineering or scientific knowledge, which is in the heads of specialists hired by the owners

to manage the works, rather than in the heads of the workers themselves. This process appeared in manufacturing even before the development of high level machine technology, and it has continued on ever rising levels since the emergence of factories, reaching its highest peak in today's automated firm. Science and technology themselves have been appropriated by capital and confront ordinary working people as alien, inanimate, hostile forces.

The second fundamental characteristic of our economic life is that the bottom line in determining what production methods are to be used and what is to be produced is neither the quality of working life nor the utility of the articles created, but rather the profitability of the enterprise. What is quintessential in capitalism is not simply its historically unique manner of turning out unprecedented quantities of goods, but also that the production of goods is not the basic motive of those who own and direct the factories. The production of profit is their basic motive. Thus how we work and what we are producing are both determined by standards of profitability, accumulation, and cash flow — not by the standard of making life more satisfying during our brief stint on this earth. This distinction was neatly identified by Carter Goodrich, when he wrote in his classic study of coal miners' control struggles in 1926: *It is often said that modern society has chosen efficiency in production rather than richness in working life. [In actual fact,] society makes no choices as such, and the countless individual decisions out of which have come mass production as efficient as that at Ford's and jobs as dull as those at Ford's have most of them been made without the slightest reference to the quality of working life that would result. . . . They are made on the basis of figures of output and cost and profit for the immediate business in the immediate future.'*

Goodrich's book appeared at a moment in

history when the struggle for workers' control over the methods and purposes of industrial production was more explicit, articulate and widespread throughout the capitalist world than at any other time in history, the period around the end of World War I. That period in the United States deserves close attention, but first it is necessary to examine its historical background. For half a century before that epoch there had been much in the daily practice of American workers to challenge the notion, which we encounter everywhere today, that no modern industrial society could possibly function *without* the two attributes of capitalism I have identified: the separation of direction from production and the dominance of profit accumulation over the creation of useful goods and services.

In the late nineteenth century American industry contained pockets of extensive control over productive processes exercised by groups of skilled workers. It is important to speak precisely here, so as not to give the impression that in some "good old days" the two basic attributes of industrial capitalism did not apply. That is not the point. The point is that even within that system numerous and important groups of skilled workers were able to assert their collective control over those portions of the production process that fell within their domain.

Skilled craftsmen then brought into the workplace characteristics which enabled them to challenge their employers, often successfully, for control over the direction of their own work and that of their helpers, and to some extent over what was being made. The first of these characteristics was simply their knowledge of the production processes. The puddling of iron, the blowing of window glass, the cutting of garments, or the rolling of steel was not learned in school or taught to the workers by their employers. It was rather learned on the job in

ways which gave the craftsmen a knowledge of what they were doing that was far superior to that of their employers. No one was more keenly aware of this relationship than the "father of scientific management," Frederick Winslow Taylor. He believed that the first step in systematizing management was for the employers to learn what their skilled workers knew and did, in other words, to study the skilled tradesmen and expropriate their knowledge.

But the control struggles of the late nineteenth century cannot be explained by craft workers' knowledge alone. That technical knowledge was embedded in a moral code governing behavior on the job, a code which was not individualistic, but one of mutuality, of the collective good. Part of this code on all but the most highly seasonal jobs was a clearly determined stint, or level of output, that any decent member of the trade would not exceed. The violator of that code was condemned as a hog, a runner, a chaser, a job wrecker, or some other such choice epithet. To go flat for oneself was simply dishonorable behavior. So was any action by which one worker connived against or "undermined" a fellow worker on the job. This code of mutuality was as important to the collective direction of the job as was the craftsman's knowledge, and it was often embodied in the work rules of unions. In fact, it is in those union rules that the most explicit formulations of the craftsmen's ethic are to be found.

One of the most elaborate set of work rules from the period was adapted by the window glass blowers, gatherers, cutters, and flatteners, who belonged to Local Assembly 300 of the Knights of Labor. They provided, among other things, that blowers should not work at all from June 15 to September 15, when the heat of the glass furnace was hard to bear. Only after the union was defeated by mechanization did summer glass making become routine. The

rules also specified that "no blower or gatherer shall work faster than at the rate of nine rollers per hour, excepting in the case of rollers falling off, or pipes breaking." The "standardize size of single strength rollers" was fixed at 45x58 to cut 38x56." In other words, it was the union that standardized the size of windows in late nineteenth-century America. Poor glass, absenteeism, and drinking which interfered with production were punished by union fines. To help secure obedience to union rules and to decisions of the shop committees, the foremen were obliged to belong to the union and submit to its discipline.<sup>7</sup>

The important point is not just that these rules were elaborate, but that they embodied a moral code for which glass workers were prepared to fight. Consider this description from *John Swinton's Paper* in 1884 of the strike which ensued when the employers tried to compel blowers to produce more than the 48 boxes of glass per week prescribed by their union. The language of the report reveals clearly what glass blowers thought of themselves and of their rules.

*The last fight of the manufacturers was made on the "forty-eight box limit." The reduction of wages was only the excuse. This is no secret. How the high-rolling manufacturer did splutter over this! His gouty limbs stumbled across it, and he broke his grip. He knew that if the limit was taken off, the men could work ten or twelve hours every day in the week; that in their thirst for the mighty dollar they would kill themselves with labor; they would "black sheep" their fellows by doing the labor of two men; they would employ apprentices innumerable to help them through; in their individual reach for that which governs the country (the dollar), they would ruin their association. The men said no. They thundered out no. They even offered to take a reduction that would average 10 per cent all around, but they said, "We will*

*keep the forty-eight box limit." Threats and curses would not move them to make more than forty-eight boxes of window glass a week, and finally, in despair, the grasping dollar-lover gave way and said, "Keep it and be damned." They have it still and they won't be damned by any but their employers.'*

Two aspects of this late nineteenth-century experience should be emphasized. First, even in the setting of modern technology and large-scale production it was possible to have collective direction of the way in which jobs were performed. Moreover, such direction required not only a struggle against management's efforts to control the work, but also a rejection of individualistic, acquisitive behavior. The practical and ideological aspects of this contest were inseparable from each other.

Second, this control by the crafts was the primary target of attack for managerial reformers in the early twentieth century. Scientific management, which might properly be described by paraphrasing today's language, as a systematic job impoverishment program, emerged out of a drive, evident in every advanced industrial country as corporate enterprise waxed larger and international competition grew more intense at the turn of the century, to increase labor productivity. In England, France, Germany and this country there were innumerable experiments with incentive pay schemes, designed to entice workers into going flat out for the almighty dollar, or mark, or franc. Frederick Winslow Taylor entered the debate at precisely that level with his paper, "A Piecework System." Taylor's message, however, was that tinkering with pay systems would not solve the problem. It was necessary, he argued, to go to the root of the problem: to expropriate the workers' knowledge and to support his moral code. Only then could pay schemes serve as incentives to higher output. The instrument which he and his fellow

engineers devised for acquiring mastery over the craftsmen's skills was time and motion study. Through such studies, methods of working could be standardized and presented to the workers as orders from the engineering and planning departments.

Nobody carried these developments further than Henry Ford, who was in the unique position, when he opened his Highland Park plant in 1914, of being able to produce some thousand cars a day without a storage yard. Virtually all of them were sold to dealers the day they came off the line. Ford's engineers were able to devise not only thoroughly standardized production tasks for each of the plant's 15,000 employees, but also extraordinarily specialized machine tools, each of which did just one operation in the fabrication of a single part for the eventual Model T. The plant was also filled with assembly lines, big and small, where components were fashioned, all leading to the final assembly line. In their thorough study of the Ford works, Arnold and Faurote reported that the company had no use for experienced workers. It preferred machine tool operators who had nothing to unlearn, "who have no theories of correct surface speeds for metal finishing, [but] will simply do what they are told, over and over again, from bell-time to bell-time."<sup>6</sup> To run a factory with such operatives Ford also had to have a splendidly equipped tool room, where 270 skilled workers, for whom nothing was "scamped or hurried," created the tools, jigs, and equipment needed by the production hands to carry out their work. Last but hardly least, the company employed an enormous supervisory staff. Everywhere scientific management was introduced, it required a vast proliferation of supervisors. In Ford's machine shops alone 510 overseers of one type or another had the authority to fire any operative. Arnold and Faurote's figures suggest that in early 1914 they averaged almost a firing a day apiece.<sup>7</sup>

The pioneers of scientific management attacked the ideology of the craftsmen, as well as their knowledge. The workers' moral code was contemptuously labelled "soldiering," and their pretensions to directing their own daily tasks were denounced as dangerous folly. The "man who is fit to work at any particular trade," wrote Taylor, "is unable to understand the science of that trade without the kindly help and cooperation of a man of a totally different type of education."

Conversely, craftsmen resisted Taylor's innovations on both the practical and the ethical level. The introduction of time study, standardized work procedures, and incentive pay encountered dogged resistance, especially among metal workers. That resistance cannot be discounted as simple conservatism or "Juddism." A machinist at the Rock Island arsenal, Hugo Lueders, was asked if he objected to the planning of production. He replied: "The men would very readily welcome any system. They want it bad." Like so many workers today, Lueders saw nothing desirable in slipshod management. But he added quickly, "As far as having a man stand back of you and taking all the various operations you go through, that is one thing they do not care for."

Lueders' hostility to time study and standardization was evidently shared by many other workers. When someone in his arsenal was seen measuring a planer, in a way that suspiciously suggested that he was making measurements for standardized clamps and bolts, he was ostracized, and other machinists demanded his instant discharge. At the Watertown arsenal the molders agreed among themselves that, if a stopwatch showed up in their department, all of them would cease working. When time study men did appear at the American Locomotive works in Pittsburgh, the company had been careful to negotiate a prior agreement with the unions, but the workers assaulted the time-

study men and drove them from the plant. The same workers also scornfully rejected incentive pay. American Locomotive had followed a common practice of Taylor's disciples, designed to circumvent workers' animosity toward incentive pay: they divided their employees' pay into two envelopes, one containing the standard hourly rate and the other any premium which a worker had earned. This device was designed to make any individual's acceptance of the new pay plan "voluntary." At American Locomotive, however, workers made a bonfire of the incentive pay envelopes, and the reforming manager left Pittsburgh to try his hand elsewhere. Meanwhile at the Norfolk Navy Yard the mere appearance of time clocks had provoked a general walkout and a union rally in protest, and at Starrett Tool in Athol, Massachusetts, workers passed a whimsical resolution to treat time clocks simply as part of the furniture.



Terms like "Sodom and Gomorrah" and "Pandora's Box," which numerous letters to the editor of the *Machinists' Monthly Journal* applied to Taylorized workshops, revealed the depth and pervasiveness of the feeling in the craft that scientific management was not only a threat to workers' livelihoods, but also morally outrageous. And the machinists' contempt for "the kindly help and cooperation" being offered them by men "of a totally different type of education" was captured in a poem, which Dennis O'Shea wrote for his union's journal in 1908. O'Shea was inspired by the often repeated statement of Carl Barth, designer of the twelve-variable slide rule for calculating machine speeds and feeds, that he dreamed "sometimes in between work and sometimes at night . . . that the time will come when every drill press will be speeded just so, and every planer, every lathe, the world over, will be harmonized, just like the musical pitches are the same all over the world." O'Shea depicted Barth's dream this way:

*The demonstrator sat in his easy chair,  
And as he smoked his cigar dreamed a dream so fair,  
In the haze of the rings of smoke he blew,  
A picture he saw of which I'll tell you:  
In fancy he saw a building grand  
Of which he was in supreme command;  
There were lathes and planers and milling machines, too;  
Of wheel presses and bolt cutters there were quite a few;  
Horizontal and vertical mills by the score;  
Of slotters and shapers a great many more.  
While the shop — my, what a marvelous place!  
Men moved like as though they were running a race.  
And he thought of what a great change he'd wrought  
Since he the other machinists had taught  
To do their work so quick and fast*

*And not to be loafing over their task,  
But make all the money for the company, then  
They'll be treated like cattle instead of like men.*

O'Shea continues by contrasting the new lust for speed with his trade's traditions of quality production.

*And he smiled as he thought of the old slow way  
When a man would turn up one axle a day.  
First he'd center it up so good and true,  
Then take a roughing cut or two,  
And a finishing cut so nice and fine,  
And then roll the bearings to make them shine,  
Square up the ends, then make the fits,  
Take it out of the lathe, and that was it.  
But just look how he had changed this way —  
A man had to do twelve of them now in a day.  
They simply wheel them into the lathe,  
Turn the whole thing up in one mighty shave,  
Throw it out again and then it was done,  
And the lathe man would say, well, that's going some.*

The same contrast is repeated through different departments of the plant. But the poem ends in a delightfully unexpected way, by portraying the "demonstrator" as an offender against working-class morality and as hopelessly outclassed in technical knowledge by those to whom he is issuing commands.

*So his thoughts ran along in this beautiful way,  
And in fancy he could hear the directors say,  
You're such a good man to keep down the pay  
We have decided to raise yours twenty dollars a day. . .*

*Alas at this point the telephone rang,  
And as he took the receiver a voice through it sang,  
Hello! Is this you dear? I am glad you're so near,  
I've just been told something awful I want you to hear,  
The boys say you're a welcher, a piker at heart,*

---

*In a good honest bet you wouldn't take part;  
That you hold your job because of your drags,  
When you ought to be out with a sack gathering  
rags,  
In a cobbler's shop you would surely shine,  
Or at pulling the candy you could do just fine.  
As for teaching machinists why let the thing  
pass,  
Public opinion decides you're an incompetent  
Ass.<sup>10</sup>*

Of course, the attitudes and values evident in O'Shea's poem can be found in American machine shops to this day. One consequence of the modern style of management is the sense of rivalry and mutual contempt which pervades the relations between production workers and engineers. Nevertheless, that animosity was especially explicit during the years around World War I, and it was also then that the struggle against the systematized management was most successful.

Historians have been somewhat misled on this score by Milton Nadworny's study, *Scientific Management and the Unions*.<sup>11</sup> Nadworny correctly argues that during the war years union officials increasingly came to reconcile their views with those of Taylor's followers. But what was happening on the shop floor was quite the opposite. The insatiable demand for labor gave workers a feeling of self-confidence, which produced among other things more strikes during 1917 and 1918 than any previous year in American history, in spite of the no strike pledges of the unions. The records of the National War Labor Board and other agencies which attempted to cool down these disputes reveal that they often involved time studies, incentive pay, and work standardization. The quickest way workers could be convinced to return to the job was to get rid of these innovations.

Many struggles of the World War I epoch, however, involved more than just resistance to

management's new techniques. As union strength grew and workers became more aware of their ability to manipulate government war agencies, workers began advancing their own plans for reorganization of work relations. These plans differed significantly from the familiar craft techniques of the late nineteenth century. Because the erosion of the position of skilled workers was clearly irreversible, workers had to come to grips with the *new* way in which factories operated. To be sure, some crafts in the building trades and many tool and die makers could simply demand standard craft rates and craft rules of the old form. But others, among whom scientific management had already wrought extensive changes, developed novel sets of demands and new forms of self-organization.

Consider the machinists, helpers, and tool makers at the vast Mesta Machine Company near Pittsburgh. They struck in 1917 and again in 1918 for the abolition of time-study and premium pay schemes, the establishment of three or four standard wage rates, the eight hour day, and recognition by the company of a shop committee to deal with all grievances from the plant. This pattern of demands was commonplace by the end of the war, and it deserves attention. First of all, a demand for standardization was arising in this instance not from the managers, but from the workers. The new payment plans had generated a proliferation of individual wage rates, and employers openly defended having "as many hourly rates as there are human beings"<sup>12</sup> in the factory as necessary for the efficient operation of the works. The workers realized that the old standard craft rate was now hopelessly obsolete, but they did try to create a determinate set of classifications to cover everyone, and one with a narrow spread between the highest and the lowest rates.

Second, strikers virtually everywhere demanded the standard work day of eight hours,

and they enjoyed considerable success on this front. The struggle for a shorter work week made more headway between 1910 and 1920 than in any other decade of this century, despite adamant employer resistance. Third, new forms for organizing the collective power of workers were developed. Sometimes craft unions were coordinated through metal trades councils, and many unions opened their doors to unskilled workers, but virtually everywhere some form of shop committee or stewards' body assumed the task of directly representing the rank and file. Workers of this epoch were keenly aware that to speak of "workers' control" without effectively organizing workers' power is to drift into fantasy land.

Finally, as these struggles became more intense, they were increasingly often linked to far-reaching political demands. The munitions workers of Bridgeport, who had been seasoned by four years of chronic industrial battle by 1919, for example, held huge rallies to protest post-war layoffs. From these rallies they petitioned the President of the United States for the "creation of National Labor Agencies to assure in all industries a living wage and every right to union organization; collective bargaining and collective participation of the workers in control of industry"; a reduction of hours; "extensive necessary public works" to create jobs; and finally, the "abolition of competition, criminal waste and profiteering in industry and substituting co-operative ownership and democratic management of industry and the securing to each of the full product of his toil."<sup>13</sup>

This was the age of the Plumb Plan on the railroads, the miners' pamphlet *How to Run Coal*, and the convention of delegates from 30,000 striking miners in Illinois who voted to make a condition of returning to work, the collectivization of the mines. Themes of public ownership, workers' education, and political action played a constant counterpoint to shop

floor demands between 1918 and 1922. Needless to say, the employers fought tooth and nail against all such proposals. Their mood was summed up by President Loyall A. Osbourne of Westinghouse Electric, who wrote as a member of the National War Labor Board to its chairman, William Howard Taft, warning against concessions to labor and against "our Board being used as an instrument of propaganda by the labor unions." Said Osbourne: *It is quite natural that you should approach these questions in a different frame of mind than do we, for you have not for years, as we have been, fighting the battle for industrial independence. You have not had constantly before you as a part of your daily life evidences of bad faith, restriction of output, violence, disregard of obligations and irresponsibility that has ever been the characteristics of their organizations.*<sup>14</sup>

Osborne's statement reflected the determined posture which his fellow employers assumed before the Board. Representatives of Bridgeport's manufacturers, for example, insisted on four principles in their personal relations: total and exclusive control over production by the employers; remuneration of each employee according to his or her individual merits; evaluation of those merits by the employer alone; and the resolution of all conflicts between employers and employees without "outside" interference, from unions or government.

By the end of the depression of 1920-22 the resistance of unions to these pretensions of management had been decisively crushed in most basic industries. All that remained of the formerly overt struggle for workers' control were its faint echoes in the Baltimore and Ohio Plan and a few similar "workers' participation" schemes on one side, and the programs of small, isolated revolutionary parties on the other. Nevertheless, unorganized workers carried on the battle in covert forms. Among



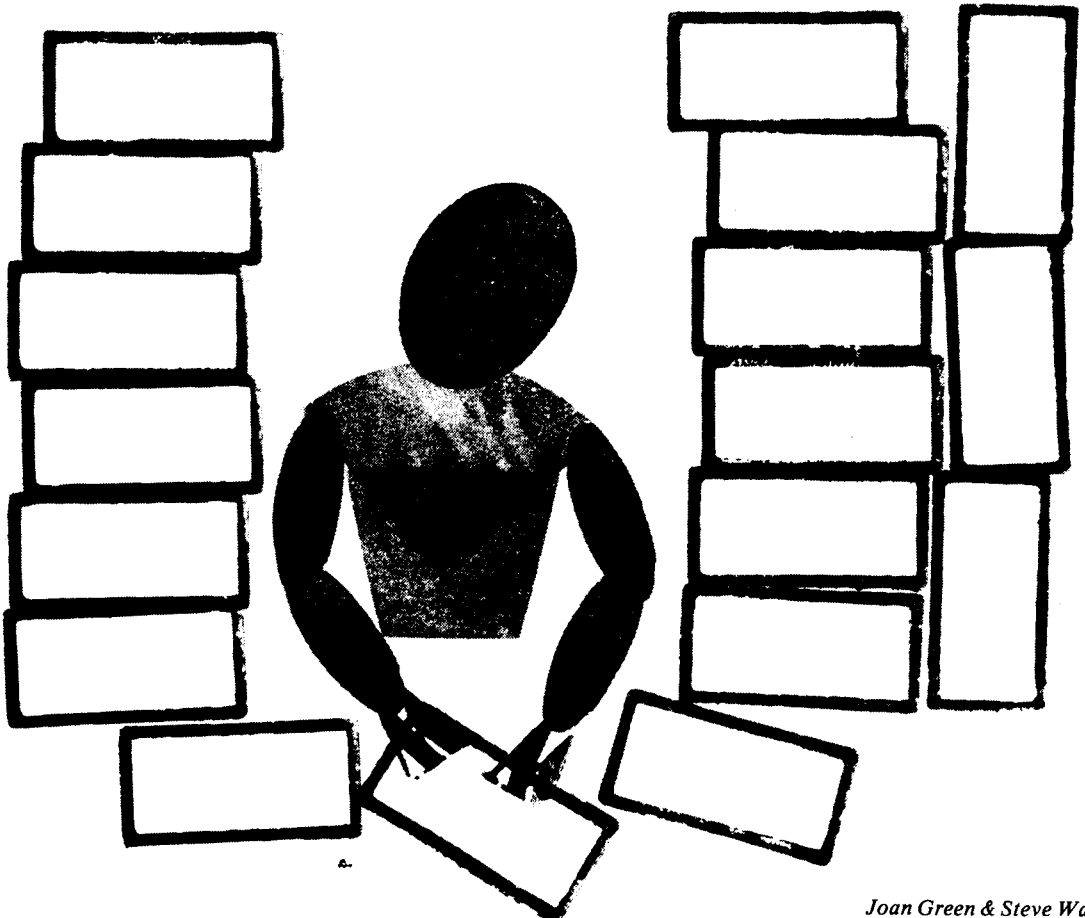
other things, the regulation of output which nineteenth-century craft unions had embodied in the stint did not disappear from American industrial life: it went underground. Instead of being openly proclaimed as union "legislation," restriction took the form of secretive defiance by small groups of workers to management's authority. In a word, the stint had become sabotage.

Moreover, it became something of an obsession with workers, as is evidence by a document liberated from the Chevrolet company's files during the Flint sit-down strike of 1937. This was a report of a spy on workers' conversations

during the first shift. Surely one sign of management's scientific character was the fact that workers were now known by number, rarely by name. A few excerpts from this report suggest the tenor of the workers' discussions of output:

*Employee 7556046... in conversation, was heard to say that he had completed his production by 2:45 P.M., and that he loafed for forty-five minutes before he quit work at 3:30 P.M.*

*At lunch time [on the second shift] the majority of the men had completed from 68 to 70 camshafts and in checking the sheet, it was evident that the other men had the same num-*



Joan Green & Steve Watt

ber. The check-up was made after the final pick-up had been made by 556594 (Leon D. Witham, transferred 10-30-35). When one of the employees had ten completed shafts, and when 594 (Witham) took only two of them, he asked the reason, to which 7594 replied,

"You have turned in 62 and that's enough."

The other was heard to ask, "Why, what difference does it make as long as I only get 124 in the nine hours?" and 7594 answered, "Well, last night they picked the sheet up on me at supper time and if a man has 66 or 70 shafts turned in for the first half of the shift they will expect you to turn in the same amount for the second half so we leave the shafts until after supper, just in case somebody should check the sheet and find out what the men are really doing."

There was considerable discussion among the employees of the plant about production, which conversation started before work this morning and continued throughout the entire day. The discussion was interrupted by the foreman during the lunch period, but was resumed in another location in Plant 5....<sup>15</sup>

This covert style of struggle from the 1920's and 1930's is still very much with us today, but the rapid spread of union contracts during the late 1930's brought some significant changes, and a new challenge to management. With union protection came both a resurgence of the audacity and self-confidence among workers that had been evident during the war years and an eagerness among the rank and file to settle old scores and to change the conditions under which they worked forthwith. Consequently both management and governmental agencies sought to limit the influence which the new unions would have over work relations and production processes and to develop machinery for dealing with grievances which would leave the initiative in production and personnel questions with management. The task was not an

easy one, as employers' laments from the late 1930's about their "unmanageable" workers make clear. But the goals toward which sophisticated managers were striving were neatly summed up by Sumner Slichter in a study published by the Brookings Institution in 1941, *Union Policies and Industrial Management*.

Convinced that unionism had become too securely established in American industry to be uprooted once again, Slichter set out to study in detail the practices and arrangements which affected the ability of workers and of managers to control what happened in their plants. He concluded that from management's vantage point, the ideal form of union would be industrial in form and bureaucratic in structure. Industrial unions were to be preferred to craft, because the latter not only generate chronic jurisdictional disputes, but were also wedded to the vested interests of particular groups of workers within the existing technology of the firm, and thus posed more formidable obstacles to change than a union whose constituency is diffused throughout the whole plant. On the other hand, he warned, an industrial union whose leadership shared the daily experiences of members on the shop floor and sought to solve problems where and when they arose could make a mockery of scientific management. Only officers with secure tenure and a secure contractual relationship with the firm could develop an understanding of management's needs and problems.

Industrial relations did not take the shape proposed by Slichter just because he said so, but they were reshaped in that direction by a lengthy process, which involved the thorough regulation of industrial disputes by "tripartite" bodies during World War II, business' post-war crusade for "management's prerogatives," and the Taft-Hartley Law. That act of 1947 virtually outlawed any union activity other than bargaining over wages and conditions with

---

their members' immediate employers and made unions liable for damages in case of strikes in violation of contracts. As early as the 1950's it was evident that the widespread incorporation of management's rights clauses into union contracts and the increasing rigidity of grievance procedures meant that conflicts over the pace or arrangement of work had reverted to the subterranean, sabotage forms of pre-union days. Strikes about such questions were more often than not unofficial, and in this connection court decisions restricting such strikes on the basis of the Taft-Hartley Act have become increasingly important. Two years ago the district federal court covering western Pennsylvania ruled in the Eazor Trucking Company case that any union was liable to damage suits in case of a wild-cat strike by its members if the union did not do everything in its power to get the members back to work, including replacing the strikers with scabs.

Moreover, what contractual defenses of workers' control over work relations unions have maintained, largely through "past practices" clauses and through the defense of members against disciplinary sanctions, find themselves today under vigorous attack from management's side at the bargaining table. "Take-back" bargaining is the current vogue in management strategy, and its advocates make no bones about the fact that their primary objective is the elimination of whatever obstacles remain in union contracts to their authority over the workplace. "We pay good money," they argue, "and we want output in return."

Of all workers' control issues, the one which has assumed special prominence in our own times is that of preventing plant closings. Here the problem is not how the job is performed, but whether there will be a job at all. Since the workers of American Safety Razor sat down in its Brooklyn plant in 1954, American workers

have often declared that they have a right to a voice in corporate decisions about where work is to be carried on. Most such struggles since that time have employed political strategies: the workers have mobilized their communities to demand that their Congressional representatives or the Department of Defense force the company to continue operating at the old site. A few have used the pressure of strikes and boycotts. In every case the objective has been to force management to bargain over what it always claimed as its exclusive and ultimate authority under "free enterprise," to decide what it wanted to produce where.

In some recent instances workers have sought ways to reopen a plant, which has been abandoned by a multiplant corporation, under their own management, or some sort of community ownership. For example, when Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced that it would close its Campbell Works, local union members enlisted the aid of a ministers' council to promote a movement for acquisition of the plant by the community. The implications of this effort are profound. As the project's economic consultant, Gar Alperowitz, has made clear, community ownership of the mill cannot succeed without new governmental purchasing policies for steel wares that are directed primarily at the needs of urban America, in mass transit, housing development, etc. In other words, if a community-operated plant with any degree of workers' control is going to function, it must have its output determined by the nation's need for use values — by the real and sorely neglected needs of the American people — not by the rule of maximum profitability in the marketplace.

The Youngstown idea has not been carried to fruition, but it has caught on elsewhere. In Buffalo, when the Heat Transfer Division of American Standard threatened to close down, the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council voted to take

over the plant, if necessary, and operate it under union direction. Several plants in Jamestown and Dunkirk, New York, have already been kept alive by their workers' assuming ownership.

This is the setting of the most important discussions of workers' control today. An outstanding example of what is now possible has been provided by the birth and survival of Wisconsin's worker-controlled newspaper, *The Madison Press Connection*. Its origins lie in a long strike of the employees of Madison's major newspapers, provoked when their owners undertook to cripple or destroy their craft unions. Having gone out on strike and realizing that all the skills needed to put out a newspaper were to be found among the people walking the picket line, these workers decided to start their own newspaper as a rival to their scab-operated former employers. The *Press Connection* soon developed a network of readers such as few papers could boast, because in order to get subscriptions and operating funds, newspaper workers had to solicit support from union and farmers' organizations all over Wisconsin. As they did so, the people with whom they talked told them what they thought of and wanted from the newspaper. Responding to readers' suggestions and criticisms (that is, creating something useful for the people of Wisconsin) became essential to the survival of the paper.

Moreover, on my own first visit to the *Press Connection*'s offices and composing room, I saw a work place that looked more business-like — in the true sense of the term — than anything I had seen before in my life. Each department had been physically designed by the people who worked in it, to make their work as efficient, easy, and accurate as they could make it, while it was also equipped with the flowers, pictures, etc., necessary to make the setting congenial. These journalists, book-keepers, layout artists and printers were not socializing:

they were putting out a newspaper of value to the local residents. And they were running it by their own collective decisions.

A group of these workers told me that they had gone to a seminar held by industrial relations experts on the question of workers' participation in management. They had listened to all the projects and experiments described there, saying nothing until close to the end of the day, when one of them put up his hand. He said: "I'm sorry. We can't quite relate to this discussion. You see, we found in the *Press Connection* that we don't need management's participation."



## QUESTION PERIOD

1. Question whether struggles against plant closings can create coalitions between workers and intellectuals.

*Reply.* Let me say that the whole battle against plant closings in the United States is still at a very primitive level compared to what one finds in Italy and France, or indeed in the John Brown Ship Yards in Scotland. There the workers simply took over the yards and kept making ships, after the company had gone out of business.

But the fact remains that the question is becoming more and more widely discussed here. That discussion itself is important. Collective action springs from people's sense of "real possibilities," and awareness of the experiences of others helps shape that sense. Moreover, the ultimate success of any attempt to reopen plants and operate them under workers' management, community management, or any other collective form, can never be

---

achieved if the workers remain in isolation. They must have outside aid, for political support, logistic support, research designs, and sometimes money. The struggle at Youngstown's Campbell Works has been exemplary in this respect.

2. Objection that the Youngstown community effort has sought governmental aid and that reliance on the state would simply replace one form of bureaucratic regime for another.

*Reply.* The control struggles which involve nothing but the immediate participation of those involved are those which emerge out of small groups of workers in direct relationship with each other. An example is the decision of cam shaft turners among themselves as to how many shafts they will produce. Nobody from outside the group is needed for that sort of control — though we must remember that the parameters within which workers make such a decision are decisively fixed by the boss.

When we think in terms of operating a plant, however, two aspects of the question must be clearly confronted. First, it is not possible to build a fully participatory management within the existing economic framework. One cannot make socialism in one factory. Even if The People's Campbell Works was opened in Youngstown, it would still be enmeshed in an economy governed by market rules and oriented in financial and sales practices, as well as in known management techniques, toward the logic of profit. Those who are thinking of producing use values under collective direction within that system are facing an uphill battle every day.

The significance of that uphill battle depends on other developments connected with it., and this is where the political side of the struggle comes in. One factory by itself will sink, or if it survives will not be self-managed very long. In Jamestown, New York, where six factories boast their "self-management," I found that

three of them were impossible to distinguish from any other factory, except that the managerial group may have included as many as a dozen members.

The second point follows from the first. What matters is the connection we make (in thought and deed) between struggles to change work relations and struggles to change the purpose for which we work. In recent years our fascination with the challenge of participatory democracy to hierarchy and bureaucracy has sometimes obscured the related, and more fundamental, challenge of popular economic needs to production for profit. A movement which aims to link collectively-directed production to collectively-determined economic needs cannot be confined to the workplace alone.

Will we then end up with nothing but another ruling bureaucracy? The crucial point is not to pose this question in either-or terms. Our thinking on this matter may be helped by the study, recently published by Andrew Zimbalist and Juan Espinoza, of 420 publicly operated factories in Chile during the Popular Unity government. They found that the actual level of participation of workers in plant management varied greatly from one factory to another. Where the plant had been nationalized by government decree and a governing structure introduced from the outside, the workers assumed actual collective direction very slowly, if they did so at all. On the other hand, where the plant had a long history of organized struggle and the workers themselves were active in its nationalization, their level of involvement was impressive. Their official representatives in those instances reflected an active base among the rank and file, which made "self-management" a living reality — in determining the product line, as well as in work relations. In other words, the dynamics of real political struggle do not allow us to treat action "from below" and "from above" as mutually exclusive.



---

3. If the technical knowledge needed for modern production has already been expropriated by capital, how can labor win it back?

*Reply.* We live in a post-Taylor epoch. That means that the daily control struggles of workers take the form primarily of resistance to the company's aims and directives, because the company possesses the scientific knowledge needed to direct the work, as well as the means of production. The advent of computer technology has intensified this development, by converting the information needed to direct the machinery into electronic impulses, which guide the various operations without human intervention.

But there may be another side to this development. Just as a computer (or numeric) control is the last word in externalizing the operative's knowledge, which now appears in the form of taped directives or printouts, so too this new technology can provide devices which are extraordinarily well suited to the collective direction of a plant. Collective direction is impossible without the general diffusion of information concerning the problems and processes of the factory. If it is possible to get this information spread throughout the plant thanks to printouts available to everybody, if it is possible to create electronic control systems in which workers contribute input (and that is possible), then the technology of computers and automation is at the very least no less suitable than anything we have known before to collective action.

Once this direction is raised on the shop floor, however, we find ourselves face to face with the whole educational system which this society has developed. The network of schools and colleges mystifies and creates monopolies of technical knowledge. It is an indispensable component of capitalist management. To realize the possibilities for workers' control inherent in computer technology, we must change that educational system, along with the factory and the marketplace.

4. How do workers respond to the role of higher education in the management of their working lives?

*Reply.* I think everyone recognizes the extent to which the entire educational system has been incorporated into the capitalist direction of our economy. Different types of education, as Taylor said, are needed for those who direct and for those who carry out the work. How do workers respond to this? They respond sometimes by looking for ways to prove to their own satisfaction that they are still human beings, and that they actually know more than the expert (like the one in the poem, smoking a cigar in his easy chair). This is part of their everyday battle on the shop floor. They also respond by hoping against hope that their kids can find a way up to the top of the ladder, instead of remaining among those at the bottom.

In a more fundamental sense, however, the educational structure of the society appears to workers to be the farthest removed from their influence. Only a political movement, broadly based among workers and necessarily among the students, teachers and researchers in the educational institutions themselves, could address itself to such questions as the role of institutes of technology in the direction of society, in such a way as to produce realistic remedies.

5. How does the earlier kind of worker control differ from today's experiments in worker participation and worker management, which result from plant closings?

*Reply.* There are two important differences. First, the struggle for workers' control in the nineteenth century began with the production process — or rather, with discrete elements of the production process. Molders, for example, collectively regulated the technique and the relations among themselves and between themselves and their helpers in the foundries of many different enterprises. At the high point of

their craft struggle, they fought for a single set of rules regulating molding in many competing enterprises at once. But those molders did not contest their owners' ownership and direction of the enterprise as a whole. Even when they were socialists, they envisaged the transfer of the industry to their complete control as an ultimate objective, not as the immediate goal of direct action. Like the legendary British machinist, they drew a chalk line around "their" territory within the boss's factory, and they demanded that the boss deal with them from the other side of that line.

Today's struggles around plant closings begin with the front office, rather than with the foundry or some other segment of the production process. They aim first and foremost at financial control of the enterprise, to keep it in business. Although some accounts from plywood or asbestos firms indicate that the advent of workers' self-management made personal relations between workers and supervisors less authoritarian and more relaxed, very seldom has the basic pattern of decision-making and supervision inherited from private ownership been quickly and drastically modified. The John Brown Shipyard, occupied by its workers, the Madison *Press Connection*, set up by strikers, and the British and Irish Steam Packet Company of Dublin, where an imaginative works council "advised" the new managers after nationalization so effectively as actually to take command, are three instances in which control of the shop floor and control of the front office were inseparably connected. Nevertheless, the different starting points of the two forms of struggle are crucial. The primary objective of struggles against plant closings is to keep a job, not to change it.

The second difference is closely related to the first. The point of departure for workers' control struggles in the nineteenth century was the superior knowledge of production processes possessed by some workers. Today's struggles begin with the scientifically-managed factory.

That means that battles against plant closings, or against take-back bargaining, must embrace much, or even all, of the plant's workforce. They must also devise new styles of organization, just as their predecessors in the epoch of World War I had to do. Today the problem is to cross the lines of the "bargaining units" defined by the N.L.R.B., so as to mobilize technical and clerical employees (and possibly even portions of the local management facing conglomerate owners), along with the production workers. Also like their predecessors of sixty years ago, they must undertake, through self-education, to learn the whole business, so as to overcome the gulf between mental and manual labor, which scientific management has spawned.

But finally, there is an important similarity between the earlier and the present struggles. Craftsmen battling for control of their trades were keenly aware, as I have pointed out, that to formulate and enforce their own rules meant to repudiate and do battle with the ethic of acquisitive individualism. The more far-sighted workers of that epoch also knew that to achieve workers' control meant to uproot the jungle of capitalism itself, along with its ethical code. It is equally evident today that corporations milk branch-plants dry and abandon them, heap "take-back" demands on the bargaining table in the name of productivity, and, yes ironically, even experiment with "job enrichment" schemes, not to create more of the goods people need, but to maximize their cash flow and their accumulation of still more capital. The struggles of workers and of communities for control over their own destinies in this setting becomes a battle to change the rules of the economic game itself.





## NOTES

1. Carter L. Goodrich, *The Miner's Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (Boston, 1925), 5-6.
2. *By-Laws of the Window Glass Workers, L.A. 300, Knights of Labor* (Pittsburgh, 1899) 26-36.
3. John Swinton's *Paper*, March 23, 1884.
4. Horace L. Arnold and Fay L. Faurote, *Ford Methods and Ford Shops* (New York, 1919), 42.
5. *Ibid.*, 45-46.
6. F.W. Taylor, "Testimony Before the Special House Committee," in *Scientific Management, Comprising Shop Management, Principles of Scientific Management, Testimony Before the Special House Committee* (New York, 1947), 49.
7. U.S. Congress, *Hearings before the Special Committee of the House of Representatives to Investigate the Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management* (Washington, D.C., 1912), 1000.
8. For discussions of these incidents, see D. Montgomery, "Quel Standards? Les ouvriers et la reorganisation de la production aux Etats Unis, 1900-1920," *Le Mouvement Social*, 102 (Jan.-Mar., 1978), 101-27.
9. U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report and Testimony* (Washington, 1916), I, 889.

10. *Machinists' Monthly Journal*, 20 (July, 1908), 609.
11. Milton J. Nadworny, *Scientific Management and the Unions, 1900-1932* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).
12. Attorney for the Bridgeport manufacturers, quoted in Alexander M. Bing, *War-Time Strikes and Their Adjustment* (New York, 1921), 200 n.
13. "Petition for the Creation of National Labor Agencies," National War Labor Board, Case File 132, Box 22, R.G. 2, National Archives.
14. Loyall A. Osborne to William H. Taft, May 31, 1918, in Records of the National War Labor Board, E 15 Administrative Files, R.G. 2 National Archives.
15. F.F. Corcoran to M.K. Hovey, "Suggestions and Information," Henry Kraus Papers, Box 9, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. I am grateful to Steven Sapolsky for bringing this document to my attention.

---

*DAVID MONTGOMERY teaches history at Yale University and is writing a history of workers' control in the U.S.*

---



## THE SARAH EISENSTEIN SERIES in "WOMEN, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE"

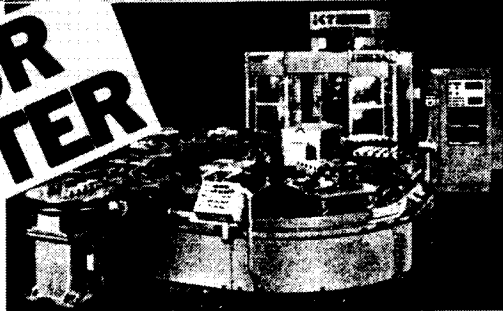
Announcing... a new publication series, established in association with MR Press and dedicated to Sarah Eisenstein (1946-1978), a feminist and revolutionary intellectual who struggled for the liberation of all people.

The series has been created to foster and publish works which speak to and illuminate current social movements. Our central concern is the relation of women's consciousness and collective organization to revolutionary movements in the past and present. We are interested in publishing not only social and political analyses, but also oral histories, autobiographies, reprinted materials, and artistic and poetic works.

For further information about this project, write to the Editorial Committee of the Sarah Eisenstein Series,

c/o Ellen Ross  
890 West End Avenue, Apt. 15D  
New York, N.Y. 10025

# WITH OUR COMPUTER



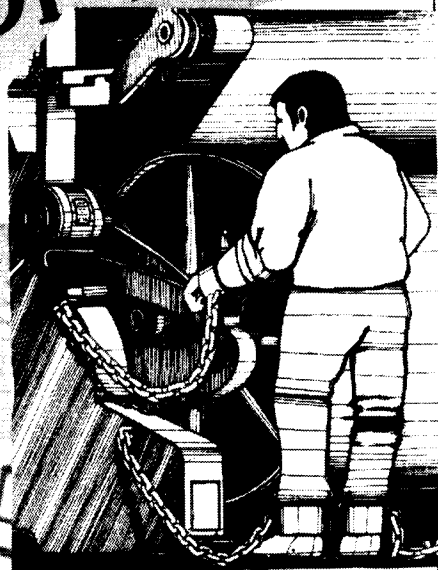
## ...the tool that works without the man

The blade technique — making tools from flint — of Stone-Age man was a monumental breakthrough in tool making. So proficient did he become at this method that he deserved the title of "master toolmaker."

Kearney & Trecker, today's "master toolmaker," is busy developing tomorrow's tools. For example, many of its machines are now being used to make tools for the space program.

and it responds by automatically "round the clock" unattended operation. Of Kearney & Trecker's many machines, the

# MOVE INTO THE FUTURE WITH A MACHINE THAT'S ALREADY THERE.



CPF

## THE FUTURE: ROBOTS:

### *Can they do your job?*

Science for the People

# NUMERICAL CONTROL OF WORK

## Workers & Automation In the Computer Age

*Harley Shaiken*

Earlier this year I attended a conference on robots that was held for industrial engineers and managers. One of the speakers, describing the latest generation of robots, made a try at humor by saying, “the robots we are working on now are so advanced they can do virtually anything a human worker can do. They even join unions and go on strike.” This remark did not elicit very many smiles.

The reason the managerial audience didn’t find the story very amusing is that millions of dollars are being spent to develop technology that will eliminate unions and strikes. As a result, new technology poses one of the most serious challenges that workers and unions will have to face in the 1980s.

The technology of today is largely computer-based. The computer in general, and the micro-processor (which is a computer on a small silicon chip) in particular, are dramatically altering the workplace. This new technology threatens not only a major loss of jobs, but an equally devastating impact on the workers who remain. Management would like to use computer technologies to destroy skills, tighten supervision, and ultimately undermine the power of workers and unions.

These managerial goals are not new. Frederick W. Taylor, the father of scientific management, sought much the same kind of control over workers at the turn of the century. Resistance to such control on the shop floor is also not new. Workers have struggled to counter each managerial attempt at domination since Taylor. What is new and dangerous is

---

management's increased capacity — based in computer technology — to appropriate the control that workers themselves have traditionally exercised on the job. As one worker put it, "They have wanted to slam us for a long time. Now they have the bat to do it with."

The use of computer technology itself does not necessarily result in the increased domination of workers. Technology provides only possibilities. The nature of the solutions chosen depends on who does the choosing and for what purposes. In particular, the flexibility of computer technology means that the production process can be designed in a variety of ways. Some approaches potentially extend worker control and expand human creativity, while other methods degrade job content and destroy skills. One particularly powerful form of computer-based technology that illustrates this is the automating of skilled machining in a process called numerical control (NC). This technology can be used in a way that turns the machinist into a button pusher or it can be designed in a way that not only fully utilizes but also expands the machinists' skills. As we will see, the choice of one technology or way of doing things over another is a social as well as a technical decision.

In the case of numerical control, the scope of decisions is broad. NC was the opening wedge of the computer's entry into the factory almost thirty years ago and is today the leading edge of a massive invasion of computers into manufacturing. NC has spurred a larger computer integration of the workplace. For example, linked systems of computers now centrally monitor or control warehouses, assembly lines, and quality control in some plants.

In the unrestrained hands of management, this technology is designed and deployed in a way that embodies managerial intent: the control over every aspect of production. This intent alone, however, cannot automatically shape the

workplace. It is affected by some powerful and interrelated constraints, both technical and social. Given the managerial intent to use NC for increased control, a number of additional questions must also be asked. For example, is a machine or system technically capable of doing a given job? How much worker input is designed into the system and how much is actually required? What is the level and nature of worker resistance? The reality of the workplace and the direction of technological change are determined by technical possibility and worker response as well as by what management would like to do. In the case of numerical control, management's use of technology does not entirely do away with human input or eliminate worker resistance. It does, however, profoundly change the context in which this input takes place.

Although what follows is mainly about the factory and machinists, it is meant to be a guide to understanding the impact of computer-based systems on workers and the labor process. This analysis of numerical control also helps us to understand the issues that technology raises for all workers on the shop floor. I focus mainly on skilled workers, not because they alone are affected, but because in their case the impact is clearest and the social decisions most dramatic. The success of computer systems in removing control from workers in the technically complex environment of the machine shop has important implications for anyone who works.

## WHAT IS COMPUTER AUTOMATION?

In the past, automation was "hard", inflexible. It was only *effective* in producing parts like automobile cylinder blocks, which are spewed out in the thousands, or in continuous process-industries like oil refining. In the factory, skill was built into the machinery in the form of steel fixtures to hold parts and hardened cams to guide the machine action. When

---

the part is changed, the rigid fixtures and cams have to be altered or scrapped.

In contrast, computer automation is "soft" and very flexible. (The knowledge required to make the part isn't frozen in steel, but is captured in programmed instructions and stored in computer memories. Electronic wizardry converts these instructions into the complex action of general purpose machines.) New parts require only new instructions for the machine. This flexibility extends automation to places it's never been before: skilled work, the office, and even the engineering department.

Flexibility is made possible by the explosion in microelectronic technology. Tremendous increases in computer capability are packed into ever smaller spaces. Some of today's remarkable chips can do what it used to take 65,000 transistors to accomplish. At the same time, the cost of one unit of computer power has dropped a thousandfold since 1970. These developments have already quite visibly revolutionized consumer electronics, from the digital watch to the pocket calculator. The automation that is based on this technology is now reorganizing the workplace.

#### THE EXTENT OF NC AND COMPUTER SYSTEMS IN USE

The potential area in which numerically controlled machines can be applied is enormous. It has been estimated that 75% of all metal-working jobs are in the area of small or medium runs, where this technology could have its chief impact. While today only about 2.5% of the machine tools in the US are NC, this figure understates the current importance of numerical control and its prospects for the future. The higher cost and productivity of NC-machines makes them more significant than their actual numbers indicate. For example, in 1975 only 6.2% of the total number of tools shipped were NC, but they accounted for 28.7% of the

money spent. In some industries, such as aerospace, this technology already represents the backbone of production.

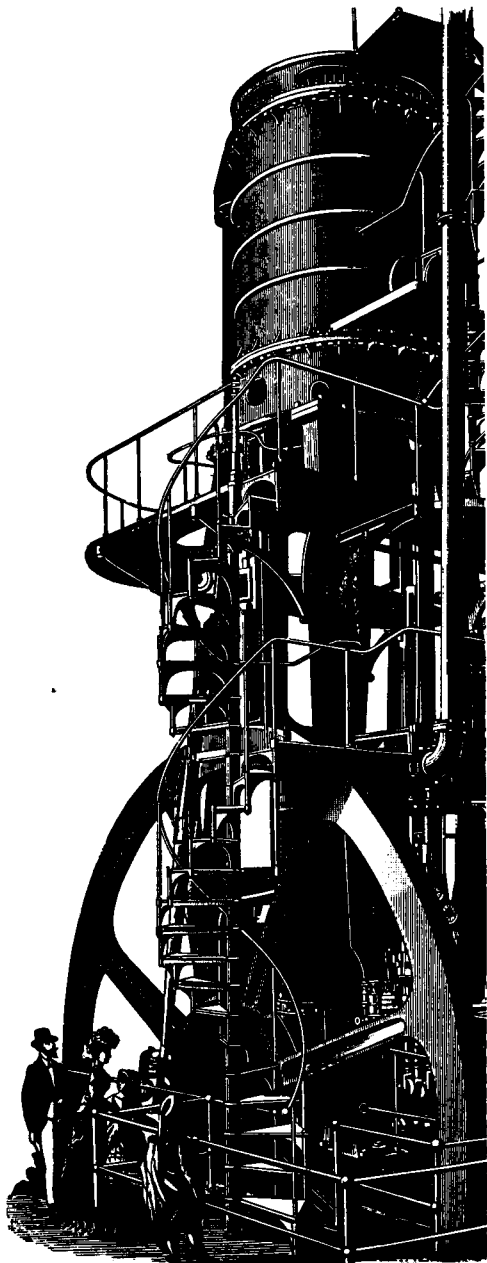
NC, however, is increasingly part of a larger, rapidly expanding computer network. Systems worth 13 billion dollars have already been installed in manufacturing. One industry estimate predicts that this will grow to \$20 billion by 1983. According to E.M. Estes, president of General Motors, 90% of all new machinery in GM plants will be controlled by computers within ten years. An internal GM study predicted a 400% growth in the use of computers in manufacturing between 1977 and 1982.

#### THE MACHINIST FACES NUMERICAL CONTROL

Since much of what follows looks at how computerized automation affects machinists, let us first look at what machinists do. The term machinist is a general one that describes workers who use metal-removing machines. Among the almost unlimited variety of metal-workers are the skilled machinists who work in limited production shops, seldom producing more than 50 or 100 of the same part.

In the past, it has proved impossible to automate this type of work. The constantly changing product doesn't justify the expensive work-holding devices and guidance systems necessary for mass production. Thus, highly-skilled machinists use general purpose machine tools to cut, grind, shape, and turn metal.

Using both skill and the machine, the machinist can translate the information on a drawing board into a finished part. The skill is learned on the job and only mastered after years of experience. It is part science and seems at times to be part magic. Before any metal is ever cut, careful planning is required to prepare the job and select the right cutting conditions, such as the speed of the machine. Once the machinist begins guiding the cutter through the



part, years of experience are needed to spot potential problems and to react correctly if and when they do arise. A slight change in the color of the chip may mean the entire part will warp; a small difference in the sound of the machine could mean a poor finish; a mild chatter of the machine tool might result in a part which will have to be scrapped.

In spite of all the improvements in machine-tool technology of the last one hundred years, a machinist who worked in a machine shop in 1880 would have no trouble getting used to today's conventional machines. For although the power and accuracy of machine tools have been increased considerably, the type of planning required and the amount of control of the operator have remained largely unchanged.

In addition to his skill on the machine, the machinist plays a critical, though unacknowledged, role in the design process. This part of his job appears in no job descriptions, and is seldom, if ever, written about in engineering books. But without it, production would come to a virtual halt. A machinist's ability forms a vital link in translating the designer's concepts into the actual part. It is a familiar sight to see an engineer walk in with a stack of blueprints and ask the worker if a particular job can be done. The machinist carefully studies the prints, looks at the engineer, and says, "Well, it can be done like this, but your way will never work." The machinist might then grab a pencil, mark up the print, and in effect, redesign the job based on his *experience of what will work*. The price management pays for this information is a reliance on the judgment and cooperation of the machinist. When workers feel harassed, they often begin producing parts exactly "according to the print." This "refusal to redesign" is sometimes seen by management as even more disruptive than an actual strike.

The control that a machinist has over *how* he does his job results in a strong sense of inde-

pendence that is often incompatible with managerial authority. All the complex and varied schemes to break this independence, from Taylor's time to today have foundered on one major unresolved problem: managers *have* to talk to the worker before they can talk to the machine. Division of labor and mechanization alone did not give management complete control; it still needs a technology that makes workers' skills and judgment unnecessary and enables managers to supervise their activity ever more closely. Numerical control promises to meet this need.

Numerical control represents a radical departure from the conventional machining I have described. In fact, it is so radical a departure that the National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress describes its importance as "probably the most significant development since the introduction of the moving assembly line."

An NC-machine has two basic parts: the machine tool and the control system. The machine tool itself removes metal in exactly the same way as a conventional machine. The control of a conventional machine, however, is the machinist himself. On an NC-machine, precoded information instructs the machine tool on how to make the part. Automatic systems responding to electronic pulses replace the handwheels and cranks that the machinist formerly turned. The machinist is reduced to making adjustments if something unexpected happens, or stopping the machine if an accident occurs. He becomes a monitor instead of an active participant.

The system was originally called numerical control because strings of numbers determined the operation of the machine tool. For the more complex programming languages of today a more appropriate name might be symbolic control, but as one management consultant put it, "... (a machine buyer) would be deeply preju-

diced against any machine in which the name of the system implied that he would have only token control of the machine." Through NC the parts-programmer now makes decisions on how to machine a part. Decisions once made on the shop floor can now be made in the engineering office. The programmer decides how to make the part and codes that information into a form that will be readable by the machine controller. After looking at a drawing of the part, the programmer not only decides the path of the cutting tool but also the cutting conditions and the speed of the cutter. On more complicated parts, the programmer employs a computer to prepare the machine instructions.

Once the programmer writes a program, he tests it for errors and seeks to improve it. If there are a number of parts to be made, he might watch the production of the first piece and then make any necessary alterations to his instructions. At this point, the input of an experienced operator can be extremely useful and a machinist retains some important leverage. After the program is "proofed out," however, *the knowledge required to make the part has been captured on the tape*. The instructions alone can then produce one part or 10,000 parts.

The technical advantages of NC are impressive. For small production runs, the economic advantages of fixed automation are combined with the flexibility of general purpose machine tools. The precise instructions on the tape eliminate the need for expensive fixtures to hold the part and complicated set-ups on the machine. In some cases, complex parts that could not be made at all with conventional methods can now be machined with NC.

Once the part is on the machine, NC is far more productive than conventional methods. Conservative estimates rate NC-machining centers as being three to five times more productive than conventional machines. This

factor is multiplied because frequently more than one NC machine is assigned to a single machinist. When NC is linked to larger computer systems its productivity edge over conventional systems goes up to 20-to-1 or higher.

### THE SOCIAL PURPOSES OF NC

Management's intent in the development and use of NC is clear: the elimination of skill, the basis for job control by workers. This in turn saps the power workers have on the shop floor. *Iron Age*, a leading management weekly in the metal working industry, goes as far as to compare NC to Frederick W. Taylor's attempt a century ago to reorganize the workplace.

*Numerical control is more than a means of controlling a machine. It is a system, a method of manufacturing. It embodies much of what the father of scientific management, Frederick Winslow Taylor, sought back in 1880 when he began his investigations into the art of cutting metal.*

*"Our original objective," Mr. Taylor wrote, "was that of taking the control of the machine shop out of the hands of the many workmen, and placing it completely in the hands of the management."*

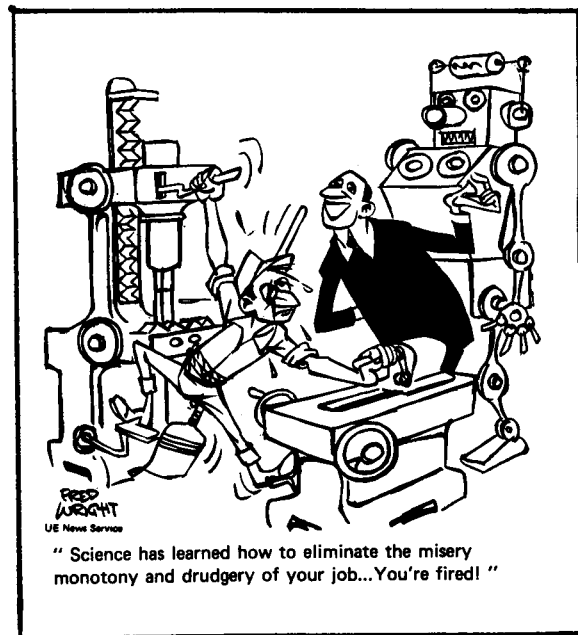
In the case of NC, the total elimination of skill is not inevitable but it is now possible. Unlike those technological changes that result automatically in some skills becoming obsolete (for example, blacksmiths' skills were made obsolete by the automobile), NC is consciously designed and developed to eliminate the power of the machinist. This is illustrated by the technical literature on numerical control. In a sober book called *Management Standards for Numerical Control*, written to introduce managers to the benefits of NC technology, we learn that

*To a great extent, computer and numerical controls were designed to minimize the number*

*of processing decisions made on the shop floor. Such decisions, whether they are good or bad, are nearly always suboptimal. Since the machine operator is largely outside of the machine control loop, manufacturing by automatic controls makes tighter management control both possible and imperative. [Emphasis added.]*

The president of Cross and Trecker, one of the largest machine tool builders in the United States, underlined this process in a recent talk. Delivering the keynote address to the sixteenth annual meeting of the Numerical Control Society, he thanked the 600 engineers and managers present for removing control of the machining operation from the machinist:

*... let me say here that you in numerical control have done us a great service by placing the control of many machining operations in the domain of the process engineer.*





---

## THE IMPACT ON THE MACHINIST

The effect of NC on the individual worker can be devastating. In England, I spoke to a machinist in an aerospace plant who had been a highly-skilled craftsman for seventeen years and who enjoyed his work. For six months prior to my talk with him, he had been running an NC lathe and felt a deep frustration. He eloquently stated his plight: "I've worked at this trade for seventeen years. The knowledge is still in my head, the skill is still in my hands, but there is no use for either one now. I go home and I feel frustrated, like I haven't done anything. I want to work, make things around the house."

A worker in Detroit commented bitterly about no longer having any say in how the job is done. He complained, "It hurts seeing how they try to do some jobs. You want to say something, but they don't want to listen. They have their program and that's it."

For some workers, however, conditions on the job are so bad to begin with that the loss of skill brought about by numerical control merely makes the job seem easier. Hence, a diemaker I spoke with about NC responded, "I don't come to work to have a good time."

Whatever the personal response of the machinist, this discussion deals only with how technology affects the worker. It doesn't describe what technology could make possible if people were put ahead of profits. The vast creative energies of human beings could be tapped in a way that gives them satisfaction and allows them to make a real social contribution. Technology could be designed in a way that brings the most out of people rather than tries to limit them.

While management uses NC to increase its authority substantially, it is not yet technically possible to eliminate totally the input of the machinist. Workers are using whatever input is left to defend their rights on the job.

Metal cutting is so varied and involved a

process that, even on the latest generation of NC-equipment, it is still necessary for the operator to monitor the job. For example, when a metal casting is put on a machine tool, an unexpected hard spot can shatter a cutter programmed for normal cutting conditions. In order to prevent this from happening, the operator is given a switch with which he can override the program and adjust the machine to actual cutting conditions. With the override switch, the operator has the ability not only to adjust the machine to cutting conditions, but also to adjust the machine to management attitudes. *Modern Machine Shop* magazine lamented that "some operators will slow down the feed and lengthen the program time, as they jokingly refer to it, as a 'job security' switch." (It is called a "job security" switch because, if there is not much work in the shop, the pacing of that work will make it last longer.) At one plant I visited, the shop manager complained about a machinist who consistently ran his machine at 75% of the programmed speed. When the program itself was reduced to 75% of its former speed, the operator simply ran it at 75% of the new speed.

At another shop, one operator ran the machine at 60% of the programmed value, removing the dial and recalibrating it at 100% for the benefit of any manager who happened to wander by. The shortfall of parts was apparent at the end of the day, but the managers were unable to pinpoint the cause.

Although this resistance can be very effective in controlling harassment by management in the short run, such defensive gestures are not in themselves enough to protect workers from the eventual impact of new technology. The effectiveness of such tactics in the short run sometimes blinds workers to the dangers they face, and masks the needs for more sophisticated offensive measures in the long run. NC does not eliminate worker resistance. It does, how-

---

ever, change the context and effectiveness of that resistance.

## HOW TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPS: THE NEXT STEP

Technology develops in response to many variables and for a variety of reasons. It is obvious, for example, that technology is often developed to correct technical problems. If an automobile engine leaks oil, the next model of that engine may be designed in a way that seeks to eliminate oil leaks. Similarly, the latest generation of NC-technology is designed in part to combat a problem — the resistance that workers have shown to the last generation of NC-technology. Two examples of this type of resistance-breaking development are adaptive control and direct numerical control (DNC).

Adaptive control automatically senses the actual machining conditions and adjusts the operation of the machine accordingly. If the cutting conditions are causing excessive heat or vibration, the adaptive control unit will modify the speed and feed of the machine to eliminate the problem. Some adaptive control units are able not only to slow the machine down if there is trouble, but also to speed the machine up to take advantage of better-than-expected conditions as well. *The installation of adaptive control thus makes it possible to lock out the override switches* and eliminate this input by the machinist. In fact, adaptive control makes it possible for the machine to run unattended.

Direct numerical control (DNC) links the machine tool to a central computer that both guides and monitors the machine operation. This system is designed to control many of the activities and strategies of the machinist that NC itself may have missed. For example, some systems record each use of the override switch as well as the length of that use. A written record is made and later evaluated by management.

The control possibilities of DNC go beyond record-keeping. The pioneering study for managers, *Computer Integrated Manufacturing*, details management's awareness of some of the shortcomings of NC and of how this more complete system corrects them:

*One company had been plagued by a series of NC-machine stoppages charged to dull tools. When the operator wanted a break from his routine he would decide that the tool was dull, stop the machine, remove the tool, and walk clear across the shop to the toolroom where he would apply for and receive a similar but freshly sharpened tool. He would then proceed back to his machine and install it. Detours past the coffee machine were not infrequent.*

The solution: the use of direct numerical control, instead of the worker, to make the decisions about dull tools.

*When the DNC connection was set up, any detection of a dull or broken tool was immediately signaled to the toolroom by the computer link, together with the location and number of the tool that had been in use at that moment. As an automatic procedure, the tool room foreman would send a messenger immediately with a replacement tool. When this system became established, the number of dull tool complaints dropped by 70 percent.*

## COMPUTER NUMERICAL CONTROL: SOME CONTRADICTIONS

Sometimes, however, the development of technology results in a contradiction for management between how a new design solves a technical problem and how it affects workers. The latest generation of NC technology, Computer Numerical Control (CNC) raises just such a contradiction, since CNC machining paradoxically creates the possibility of *more* control for the machinist.

With conventional numerical control it is impossible to alter the part program at the

**"Within the Unity of Labor Lies the Salvation of America's Workers" — Mike Rinaldi**

# Ford FORD LOCAL 600 (UAW) Facts

PAID CIRCULATION 50,000 COPIES

OFFICIAL ORGAN WORLD'S LARGEST UNION

VOL. 39 — NO. 9

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1979

POSTMASTER: Send only mailing label of undeliverable copies with Form 3575 attached to Ford Local 600, UAW, 18660 Del Arroyo, Dearborn, Michigan 48119

## New Technology — A Strikeable Issue

By MIKE RINALDI, President  
ERNEST LOFTON, 2nd Vice-President  
BOB KING, President  
Maintenance & Construction Unit  
AL GARDNER, President  
Tool & Die Unit

COLA for retirees, higher wages, more paid time off, better benefits, etc., all these gains have one thing in common: you have to have a job and a strong union to collect them. If the automotive companies have their way, a new wave of technology will threaten our jobs, our working conditions, our wages, and our benefits.

A manufacturing revolution is sweeping industry. Cost: \$100 billion by 1985. Object: A massive reduction in jobs and total control over remaining workers. Result: Automation is the biggest challenge the labor movement faces today and for the coming decade. Let's take a look at what this challenge means.

### JOB LOSS

Rather than us making predictions, let's look at what managers and pro-management experts predict. The Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME) recently completed a survey of top manufacturing managers and engineers who predicted that 20% of the workers employed in the direct assembly of a car will be replaced by robots by 1985 and that 50% of the workers will be replaced by 1995.

WHEN I GROW UP  
I'M GOING TO BE  
UNEMPLOYED

foreman on the T.V. screen, and higher management the following information:

1. When the worker punches in or out.
2. When the worker starts his operation.
3. Minute by minute, how fast or how slow the worker is running the operation.
4. Anytime the worker stops work for more than two minutes.
5. Whenever the worker takes a break.
6. Whenever the worker reports back late from lunch.

This system is no different than having a foreman stand over a worker every minute of every working day — a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week time study. This also changes the role of the foreman. He no longer decides whether or not to discipline the worker. He merely carries out the decisions of the computer — no matter how good the worker, no matter how long the worker's service. This destroys any human element on the floor. Even in the early days before a union, Harry Bennett's goons could not police a worker so closely.

IS SUCH A COMPUTER TIME STUDY SYSTEM READY TO BE INITIATED IN THE DEARBORN STAMPING PLANT OR THE DEARBORN ENGINE PLANT, OR THROUGHOUT THE ROUGE?

This unprecedented control over the workforce represents a major change in working conditions — a change achieved under the cover of new technology. The goal is not collecting information, but rather the computer controlling the worker as if he were a machine.

### SAME FOR SKILLED

Skilled workers are monitored as tightly as produc-

highlights of the UAW demands to Ford Motor Company on new technology:

1. No computer system be installed in a way that makes possible the time study, monitoring, or discipline of UAW workers.
2. Union has full access to all information created by any computerized system.
3. No work to be taken away from UAW members through new technology. Full training be given workers on all new technology.
4. The company will not use warranty, leasing, or service agreements to take work from our members.
5. Advance notice must be given to the union on the projected introduction of any new technology.
6. A position of data committeeman will be created whose responsibilities will include monitoring the projected introduction of new machines and systems and their potential impact on UAW workers.
7. A New Technology Committee will be created in each local and unit to assist the data committeeman and keep the membership informed on new technology.
8. A National Joint New Technology Committee will also be created to review problems or disagreements not resolved at the local level.
9. If the National New Technology Committee cannot resolve a problem, the union would have the right to strike upon approval of the UAW-Ford Department, or have the authority to take the issue to the Umpire on a special submission.

### WHAT WE MUST DO

Underlying an effective labor strategy for confronting the problems of new technology is an awareness that

QUESTION: IS THE UNION OPPOSED TO INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY AND NEW TECHNOLOGY?

ANSWER: The UAW and its members have always been in favor of improved methods of production or new technology. If these methods meant improved working conditions, wages, and benefits. Technology can be developed in a way that eliminates undesirable work, utilizes the creative energies of workers, shortens the work week, and allows earlier retirement. But, using technology for speed-up, breaking of work rules, union-busting, or robot-like control over workers must be prevented.

QUESTION: HOW CAN WE STOP NEW TECHNOLOGY?

ANSWER: We do not want to stop new technology. We are only opposed to management's unrestricted use of new technology. There are many alternatives to the way new technology is used. We have to insure that our members share equally in the benefits of new technology and increased productivity.

By MIKE RINALDI  
Local 600 President

Full support of all Ford workers was pledged to the UAW General Motors National Negotiating Committee

machine tool. The machine controller only reads and interprets the instructions punched in the tape, much like a phonograph plays a record. As a result, changes required to correct an error or improve the program would have to be made off the shop floor. This is inefficient: the programmer would prefer to be able to make needed changes and see the results of those changes immediately. Computer Numerical Control makes this possible through the use of a powerful mini-computer which not only directs the machine operation, but also allows the part program to be altered at the machine tool. The program is entered into the mini-computer and "edited" with the ease of changing a cassette tape on a tape recorder. (In fact it is possible to do the programming itself at the machine tool.)

But the machine tool doesn't know if it is the machinist or the programmer that is doing the "editing." Hence, the choice of who alters the

program is a *social* choice, not a technical one. By creating the means for the machinist to edit at the machine CNC makes it obvious that the loss of skill is not a technological imperative but a matter of who owns the shop. This is symbolized by a key on the control panel that locks it against unauthorized use by the operator. As one engineer told me, "The key belongs to the man who owns the machine." Management is often brutally honest about this. The owner of a contract machine shop in Los Angeles stated flatly: "I don't want any operator fooling around with programming. That should be done only in the engineering department." Don Smith, chairman of the Industrial Development Division of the University of Michigan, notes that it would be "very undesirable to have the operator do any programming. This would take away control of the production environment." What management says about new technology is important, but the

impact of CNC on who controls the workplace is best understood by seeing how it is used on the shop floor. In some cases, management is even willing to sacrifice increased productivity in the short run in order to maintain control in the long run.

This point was dramatically brought home to me on a recent visit to an aerospace plant in England. In this modern facility, components for jet engines are manufactured with the extensive use of NC and CNC equipment. At the time of my visit, machinists and programmers were battling over who was to edit the tapes on the computer at the machine tool. The machinists were demanding to do their own editing. It meant more money and more output because the machinists were paid on a group bonus and had been able to produce more when they did their own editing. The programmers were insisting that the editing of tapes was part of *their* job. (The situation was further complicated because both the machinists and the programmers were members of different divisions of the same union.)

This struggle between machinists and programmers was being waged on the shop floor. Some machinists had learned how to do substantial alterations of the tapes and were doing them whenever it made their job easier or increased their group bonus. One worker on a less sophisticated machine had obtained a tape punch and was secretly preparing his own tapes to increase his production. His immediate supervisor knew about the practice but was reluctant to intervene because of the increased production.

Top management, however, was siding with the programmers to preserve more effective control of the shop floor. *Management realized that the ability to produce more was also the ability to produce less.* Control was thus central.

## THE COMPUTERIZED FACTORY

Numerical control is only the leading edge of the computer's impact on manufacturing. Modern computer systems, using micro-processor technology, are inexpensive enough to centralize the control of functions in small shops, and powerful enough to integrate the operations of world-wide giants such as General Motors. The impact of separate working systems is considerable. This will be dwarfed, however, as these separate networks are tied together into the computerized factory.

Manufacturing on all levels will become more integrated. It is already technically possible to go from the designers' pen in the engineering office to the production of a part with no intervening human skills. On the shop floor, the micro-processor potentially extends computer control to every worker and operation in the plant. The computer, of course, only collects and processes information. Its directions to machine tools and control over workers is programmed by management. The nature of the program is, in part, determined by social choice: management seeks to pace and supervise workers as tightly as if they were on the assembly line. The extension of managerial authority is mystified by embedding it in the technology.

The technology itself consists of individual computer systems tied together into a computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) network. On the shop floor, a large central computer manages armies of smaller computers, which in turn direct and monitor various activities. The system routes parts through the shop, controls machine tools directly, keeps track of inventories, and reports what workers are doing. The information is available to management as it's happening. As we have seen with direct numerical control, an important part of this larger network, the computer not only issues instructions to the machine, but also receives feedback



*"In touch with the computer age, this worker controls immense power. But does she feel pride in product?" US Department of Labor Bicentennial History of The American Worker.*

on how those instructions are carried out. In the process the worker, as well as the machine, is closely monitored.

## MANAGEMENT DATA-REPORTING SYSTEMS

We have discussed the use of computer technology to extend managerial authority through the reduction or elimination of skill. The issue, however, is not skill per se, but skill as a roadblock to managerial control over production. Computer technology is also used to weave a net of control over production workers. Here

the issue is not the decline of craft, but the use of technological means for social ends. Since we began in the prototype machine shop, let's continue in the production machine shop where thousands of the same part are produced over and over again. In this case, previous generations of automation have built skill into the machine mechanically. The struggle is to account for and dominate the worker's time.

*Production* magazine clearly defined the problem. "Whenever you have a production machine that is 'operator-paced' you have an opportunity for improvement." In the past, the technological means to extract that "improvement" did not exist. Management was therefore chiefly concerned with the output of the machine at the end of the day.

For example, if a worker ran a machine that produces automobile axles, his production might have been set at 200 axles a day. At the end of the day, he was responsible for those 200 axles and filled out a time ticket stating his production. If management felt that this worker could produce more than 200 axles, a time-study man was sent to time how long it took him to do the job. Short of this — and of the foreman watching the worker more closely — there was not much that could be done. And the foreman couldn't be everywhere at once.

Moreover, the worker often devised ways to do his job faster than the required time. If so, he could work hard before lunch to produce 150 axles, and then take it a little easier after lunch. Some foremen became accustomed to delivering the extra parts to another section early, and even winked at their being produced this way. In fact, if 100 axles were actually produced in the morning and 100 in the afternoon, it could ruin other departments' production schedules, which often took account of the unwritten 150/50 output rate.

A computerized management report system changes this flexibility. The central computer is

linked directly to a mini-computer on the machine. Every time the machine makes a part, or "cycles," it registers in the computer. When the machine doesn't produce a part within the allotted time, that fact is immediately obvious: it is both displayed on a video screen in the foreman's office and recorded on a computer printout. The foreman is instructed to go to the machine and investigate the problem. The printout is forwarded to higher management for analysis. Every minute of the worker's time must be accounted for. The record states how many minutes late he returned from lunch or break, how many minutes the machine was down without explanation, and how many breakdown minutes were recorded.

The role of the foreman changes as well. He no longer decides whether or not to discipline the worker. He only carries out the "automatic" decisions of the system. This of course prevents the supervisor from being too "cozy" with the operators in order to, as one manager put it, "maintain harmony in their mutual work environment."

In one factory in which this system was installed, the workers quickly came to terms with it. They devised a way to keep the machines running empty but recording. The worker would take the break and the machine would "cut air." For a while, everyone was happy: the workers could pace their job, and the computers recorded their numbers.

But then management compared the number of parts recorded with the number of parts produced, and caught on. The company countered by linking the computer directly to the machine motor. When a machine cuts metal, it draws more power than when it runs idle. Hence, management could tell when parts were being produced and when the machine was just "cutting air." No more unauthorized breaks.

Management, of course, insists that MRS's

are only reporting systems that give valuable data while the operation itself is going on. But the technology ties the worker to the machine while it's gathering information. This represents a major change in working conditions achieved under the cover of the introduction of new technology. If the goal were just to collect information, a computer terminal could be located at each machine and the worker could dial in his production at the end of the shift. In this case, the computer would make the collection of data more efficient, but the method would not be particularly different from filling out a time ticket. The worker would be giving information to the computer, rather than the computer controlling the worker.

## THE COMPUTER AND MANAGEMENT

The increased use of the computer has an important impact on how management itself is organized. A more unified management exerts a more direct control over all operations. In the past, an important part of work discipline was maintained by breaking work down into its smallest components and then providing total supervision of each fragment. The price that was paid for this was fragmented and overlapping authority. Management can now use the computer to gain increased control over the workplace without paying the price of its own disorganization. Joseph Harrington, a leading management consultant, describes this impact: *It now seems apparent that things are about to change — not incrementally, but radically. Fractionated management skills are being re-integrated and the new managers with their broader perspectives are directly controlling versatile machines capable of manufacturing diversified and customized products. The total manufacturing effort is being reintegrated into a responsive directable entity. It is a giant step and a step in a new direction.*

This management unity creates a small group

at the top where the independent and creative decisions are made. Small interdisciplinary teams unite areas of management that were formerly quite separate. For example, the staff of engineers who design the product and the staff of engineers who determine how the product is made formerly operated independently of each other. Now they will be an integrated team.

Management unity combined with increased control of production results in greater power vis-a-vis unions on and off the shop floor.

### A LABOR PERSPECTIVE

For workers and unions, the central issue of new technology on the shop floor is one of control. If labor does not find ways to control technology, then management will use technology to control labor. Attempts by workers to have input into the use of technology, however, challenge the most sacred of sacred cows: managerial prerogatives. Management is far

more willing to bargain over wages and benefits than over how the workplace is organized. Yet, the tremendous power of computer-based automation gives labor little choice but to challenge management on this issue.

The design and deployment of computer automation becomes the extension of corporate power on the shop floor. The same callousness that management displays in plant closings or plant relocations is reflected in the use and development of technology. The challenge to this use of technology quickly becomes a challenge to unrestrained management power itself.

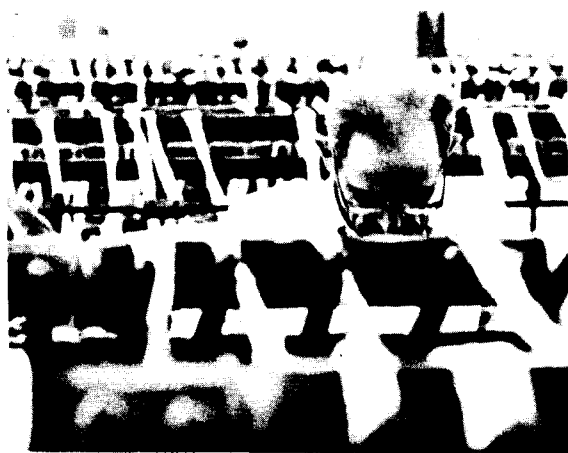
The overall impact that new technology has on workers, of course, transcends what happens on the factory floor. Issues of powerlessness and control in the factory translate into issues of powerlessness and control in the larger society. The overall economic dislocation that results from new technology affects more than one union or one industry. In fact, issues such



as these go beyond what any union can effectively deal with at the bargaining table. Their resolution requires the concerted and determined effort of the entire labor movement in the political arena.

There are, however, important safeguards that are immediately necessary for workers to defend themselves in the workplace. When management is free to use computer automation as it wishes, technology becomes an effective weapon to undermine working conditions and weaken the union. The very flexibility of computer-based systems, however, makes it possible for workers and unions to begin the fight to ensure that technology is used as a positive force in the interests of workers as well as the larger society. The form that management chooses for technology may determine the context in which the struggle takes place: the awareness, concern, and combativeness of labor will determine its outcome.

*HARLEY SHAIKEN is a Detroit-based researcher with a machining background. He is presently writing a book on computer-based automation which will be published early next year.*



**REFRACTORY GIRL**  
Forthcoming double issue:  
Nos 18-19  
**WOMEN AND WORK IN AUSTRALIA**  
Publication date: November 1979

The issue will include articles about unemployment, child care, prostitution, the 1979 Budget, technical college training, domestic labour, the music industry, maternity leave, occupational health. Also: reviews and a bibliography on Women and Work in Australia, 1975 to date.

Double issue rate: \$A3.00 per copy  
*Refractory Girl* subscription rate: \$A5.50 per four issues within Australia; overseas rates supplied on request.

Address:  
62 Regent Street, Chippendale NSW 2007

# RACE & CLASS

A JOURNAL  
FOR BLACK AND  
THIRD WORLD  
LIBERATION

QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS  
AND THE TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE

Volume XXI

Autumn 1979

Number 2

A.SIVANANDAN

Imperialism and disorganic development  
in the silicon age

BASIL DAVIDSON

The revolution of people's power:  
notes on Mozambique 1979

CEDRIC ROBINSON

The emergence and limitations of  
European radicalism

CHRIS SEARLE

Grenada's revolution: an interview with  
Bernard Coard, Deputy Prime Minister

AND  
Repression in the Philippines and in Guyana

*Race & Class* is available to individuals on subscription at £5.50/\$12.00 per annum (£8.00/\$20.00 for institutions)

I enclose £5.50/\$12.00 for one year's subscription to *Race & Class* starting with the current issue.

Name .....

Address .....

..... Zip code .....

Send to the Institute of Race Relations, 247 Pentonville Road, London N1 UK (please send cash with order, cheques made payable to 'The Institute of Race Relations').



A most important event in  
**ASIAN STUDIES!**  
 The 10th anniversary issue  
 of the

# BULLETIN

OF CONCERNED ASIAN SCHOLARS

A focus on Vietnam

To order your single copy, send \$3.50.  
 Bulk rates / Free Index

.....

BULLETIN OF CONCERNED  
 ASIAN SCHOLARS.

BOX W, CHARLEMONT, MA 01339 USA

The Bulletin, a readable, illustrated, scholarly  
 quarterly, began publication in response to the  
 American war in Indochina.

In commemoration of our first publishing  
 decade — and with an eye to the future — we offer  
 critical essays and superb translations on Vietnam by:

*\*Ngo Vinh Long*  
*\*Earl Martin*  
*\*David Marr*  
*\*Marilyn Young*  
*\*Jayne Werner*  
*\*Serge Thion*  
*\*Christine White*  
*\*John Spragens*  
*\*Paul Quinn-Judge*

.....

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

	1 yr.	2 yrs.	3 yrs.
Regular	\$12	\$22	\$31
Outside No. America	\$13	\$24	\$35
Libraries/Institutions	\$19		\$55
Full-time Students	\$10 per year		
Students Outside No. Amer.	\$11 per year		



Socialist Review is a bi-monthly journal of  
 American politics and culture in their interna-  
 tional setting. Issues feature a wide range of arti-  
 cles on politics, social movements, and important  
 theoretical questions.

Subscription (6 issues) \$15  
 two years \$26  
 Sustaining subscription \$30  
 Foreign subscription \$16  
 Back issues \$3  
 list by number

**SOCIALIST REVIEW**  
 New Fronts Publishing Company  
 4228 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland, CA 94609

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Total Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

# ~~8~~ BLACK WOMEN 87 WHY DID THEY DIE?



—This pamphlet was prepared by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston Black Feminist Organization.



# WHY DID THEY DIE?

## A Document of Black Feminism

Beginning in January, 1979, Boston was plagued by a series of brutal slayings of young Black women. The murder count had risen to six by April; by June the headlines read: THIRTEEN WOMEN MURDERED. TWELVE BLACK, ONE WHITE.

Initially, the police and press handled the situation as if there was no reason for concern. The mother of a fifteen-year-old girl, one of the first two victims, says that when she reported the disappearance of her daughter to the police they hesitated to file a report claiming that the girl had probably gone off with a pimp. Within two weeks, her body was found, to be followed by twelve more in a period of five months.

The lack of official concern by city agencies, coupled with cursory press coverage of the murders, forced the Black and Third World communities to organize themselves and to confront the "proper authorities." Community meetings were called in affected neighborhoods and an organization, CRISIS, emerged out of these efforts, attempting to channel people's fears into self-help programs. Self-defense classes were set up, protective neighborhood networks were encouraged and work was done on publicity and community outreach. In addition, marches and rallies were held.

A Boston Black Feminist group, the Combahee River Collective, provided an analysis of the murders that helped Third World women understand what was happening to them. They wrote and distributed the following pamphlet which represents their attempt to confront the obstacles that have kept Black politics and feminist politics at odds. As Black feminists in a Black community they are a small minority. Raising sexual politics in this arena continues to

---

be a difficult task. Yet all women want violence against women to be ended and in a situation where Black women felt clearly threatened as women, the collective was able to intervene and change the parameters of the dialogue.

Many women in the community found themselves up against Black male paternalism. At a memorial rally for the murdered women the cause of the murders was defined as exclusively racial. The immediate strategy put forth by a number of male speakers was a plea to Black men "to protect their women." While many women felt the inadequacy of such a proposal, they were likewise skeptical of alliances with those outside the Black community, white feminists. When eleven white women were raped in another part of Boston, all describing their assailant as a Black man, the press and city officials were quick to recognize their plight and a great deal of attention was drawn to their situation. Caught in the despair of the murders going unattended, one woman said, "those white women were only raped." The structures of race relations do not easily allow Black and white women to identify with each other's common oppression.

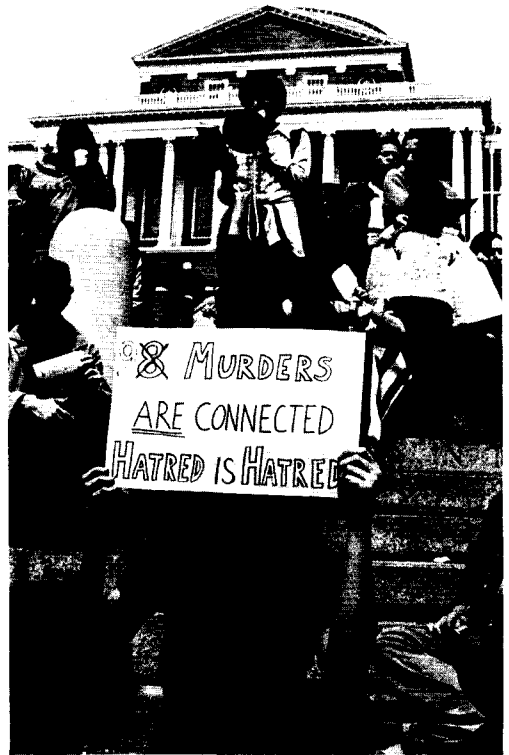
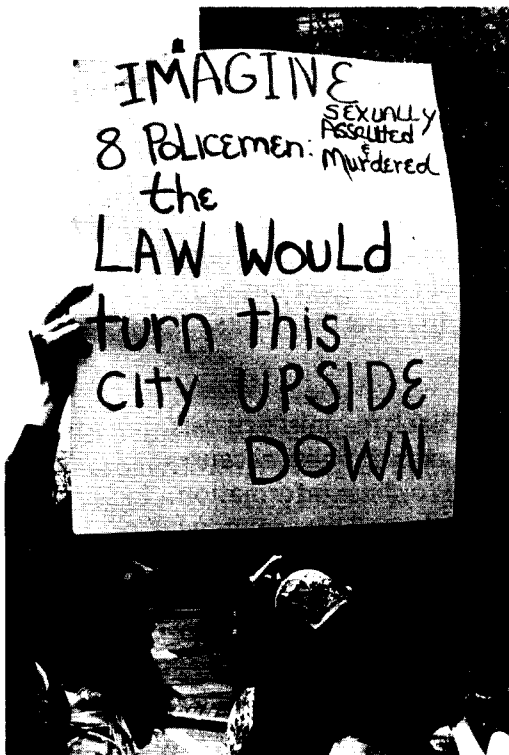
The collective was able to draw from these experiences and articulate the necessity for identifying all the causes behind the murders. They continue by asserting that it is women organizing together that will create the conditions in which women will be free of fear.

The pamphlet has been very successful. It was the first literature to be widely distributed within the neighborhoods most affected by the murders. In fact, the pamphlet became a major tool of out-reach, both for organizations working explicitly around issues of women's safety and for the politics of Black feminism. Many women greeted the pamphlet with a sigh of relief. They recognized the concern and commitment embodied in this simple brochure; and

felt relieved to know about the many organizations that provide services for women. Suggestions for self-protection helped people feel there was something concrete that they could do within the community immediately. 26,000 copies of the pamphlet were printed in English, thousands more in Spanish. So far about 18,000 copies have been distributed. Other organizations have excerpted information for their own literature.

By asking the question "Why did these women die?" and answering with concrete information and political argument, the Combahee River Collective has become a known quantity in Boston's Black Community. Their efforts over the past four years have contributed greatly to the possibility of the newly formed Coalition for Women's Safety — a coalition of Black, Hispanic, and white groups working to develop a program for community safety.

The poem, *with no immediate cause*, by Ntozake Shange, was circulated with the self-help and resource lists as an accompanying pamphlet. In another language, the poem reached the women in the community expressing their rage and determination.



# 8 ~~7~~ ~~8~~ BLACK WOMEN

Recently 6 young Black women have been murdered in Roxbury, Dorchester and the South End. The entire Black community continues to mourn their cruel and brutal deaths. In the face of police indifference and media lies and despite our grief and anger, we have begun to organize ourselves in order to figure out ways to protect ourselves and our sisters, to make the streets safe for women.

We are writing this pamphlet because as Black feminist activists we think it essential to understand the social and political causes behind these sisters' deaths. We also want to share information about safety measures every woman can take and list groups who are working on the issue of violence against women.

In the Black community the murders have often been talked about as solely racial or racist crimes. It's true that the police and media response has been typically racist. It's true that the victims were all Black and that Black people have always been targets of racist violence in this society, but they were also *all women*. Our sisters died *because* they were women just as surely as they died because they were Black. If the murders were only racial, young teen-age boys and older Black men might also have been the unfortunate victims. They might now be petrified to walk the streets as women have always been.

When we look at the statistics and hard facts about daily, socially acceptable violence against women, it's clear it's no "bizarre series of coincidences" that all six victims were female.\* In the U.S.A. 1 out of 3 women will be raped in their lifetimes or 1/3 of *all* the women in this country; at least 1 woman is beaten by her husband or boyfriend every 18 seconds; 1 out of every 4 women experiences some form of sexual abuse *before* she reaches the age of 18 (child molesting, rape, incest) 75% of the time by someone they know and 38% of the time by a family member; 9 out of 10 women in a recent survey had received unwanted sexual advances and harassment at their jobs.\*\* Another way to think about these figures is that while you have been reading this pamphlet a woman somewhere in this city, in this state, in this country has been beaten, raped and even murdered.

\**Boston Globe*, April 1, 1979, p. 16.

\*\* Statistics from the paper "Grass Roots Services for Battered Women: A Model for Long Term Change" by Lisa Leghorn.

# WHY DID THEY DIE?

These statistics apply to all women: Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, old, young, rich, poor and in between. We've got to understand that violence against us as women cuts across all racial, ethnic and class lines. This doesn't mean that violence against Third World women does not have a racial as well as sexual cause. Both our race and sex lead to violence against us.

One reason that attacks on women are so widespread is that to keep us down, to keep us oppressed we have to be made afraid. Violence makes us feel powerless and also like we're second best.

The society also constantly encourages the violence through the media: movies, pornography, *Playboy*, *Players*, *Hustler*, *JET*, record covers, advertisements and disco songs ("Put Love's Chains Back On Me"). Boys and men get the message every day that it's all right, even fun, to hurt women. What has happened in Boston's Black community is a thread in the fabric of violence against women.

Another idea that has been put out in this crisis is that women should stay in the house until the murderer(s) are found. In other words Black women should be under house arrest. (Remember Daryal Hargett, the fifth woman, was found dead in her own apartment.) If and when they catch the murderers we still won't be safe to leave our houses, because it has never been safe to be a woman alone in the street. Staying in the house punishes the innocent and protects the guilty. It also doesn't take into account real life, that we must go to work, get food, pick up the kids at school, do that wash, do errands and visit friends. Women should be able to walk outside whenever they please, with whoever they please and for whatever reason.

**WE WILL ONLY HAVE THIS RIGHT WHEN WOMEN JOIN  
TOGETHER TO DEMAND OUR RIGHTS AS HUMAN  
BEINGS TO BE FREE OF PHYSICAL ABUSE, TO BE FREE  
OF FEAR.**

The last idea we want to respond to is that it's men's job to protect women. At first glance this may seem to make sense, but look at the assumptions behind it. Needing to be protected assumes that we are weak, helpless and dependent, that we are victims who need men to protect us from other men. As women in this society we are definitely at risk as far as violence is concerned but **WE HAVE TO LEARN TO PROTECT OURSELVES**. There are many ways to do this: learning and following common sense safety measures, learning self-defense, setting up phone chains and neighborhood safehouses, joining and working in groups that are organizing against violence against women are all ways to do this.

The idea of men protecting us isn't very realistic because many of us don't have a man to depend on for this — young girls, teen-agers, single women, separated and divorced women. And even if we do have a man he cannot be our shadow 24 hours a day.

What men can do to "protect" us is to check out the ways in which they put down and intimidate women in the streets and at home, to stop being verbally and physically abusive to us and to tell men they know who mistreat women to stop it and stop it quick. Men who are committed to stopping violence against women should start *seriously* discussing this issue with other men and organizing in supportive ways.

We decided to write this pamphlet because of our outrage at what has happened to 6 Black women and to 1000s and 1000s of women whose names we don't even know. As Black women who are feminists we are struggling against all racist, sexist, heterosexist and class oppression. We know that we have no hopes of ending this particular crisis and violence against women in our community until we identify *all* of its causes, including sexual oppression.

—This pamphlet was prepared by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston Black Feminist Organization.



# SELF-PROTECTION

- Do not accept rides from strangers.
- Do not get into unlicensed cab services or cabs with 2 people in the driver's seat.
- Lock your car doors at all times. Check back seat before entering.
- Lock your house door at all times, make sure all windows are locked.
- Vary your route to and from home. Stay on well-lighted main streets. Avoid side streets and alleys.
- Travel in pairs or groups.
- Learn some simple self-defense like how to get out of a hold or how to use available objects as weapons: comb, keys, hair brush, lighted cigarette, edge of books, whistles, salt, red/black pepper.
- Wear shoes and clothes you can easily run in.
- Always have your keys ready in your hand as you enter your house.
- Let someone know where you are at all times and your planned route. Phone ahead to your destination.
- Get to know your neighbors on your street. Keep an eye out for each other. Make an effort.
- If you hear someone in distress, don't ignore it. If you can't safely investigate, call 911.
- Call your local hotline number at **445-1111** if you need to talk or if you have information.
- If you feel like you are being followed . . . check first — change directions, then REACT . . . Stay calm, change your pace, cross street, walk next to curb or in middle of street against the traffic . . . **DO NOT GO HOME**, the attacker will follow . . . run to the nearest lighted place.
- Yell **FIRE!** if someone is attacking you, people are more likely to come to your aid, than if you call "Help".
- Encourage your friends to take these precautions.

This pamphlet can be reproduced  
without permission.

## with no immediate cause

by ntozake shange (author of the play  
“for colored girls who have considered  
suicide . . .”)

every 3 minutes a woman is beaten  
every five minutes a  
woman is raped/every ten minutes  
a lil girl is molested  
yet i rode the subway today  
i sat next to an old man who  
may have beaten his old wife  
3 minutes ago or 3 days/30 years ago  
he might have sodomized his  
daughter but i sat there  
cuz the young men on the train  
might beat some young women  
later in the day or tomorrow  
i might not shut my door fast  
enuf/push hard enuf  
every 3 minutes it happens  
some woman's innocence  
rushes to her cheeks/pours from her mouth  
like the betsy wetsy dolls have been torn  
apart/their mouths  
menses red & split/every  
three minutes a shoulder  
is jammed through plaster and the oven door/  
chairs push thru the rib cage/hot water or  
boiling sperm decorate her body  
i rode the subway today  
& bought a paper from a  
man who might  
have held his old lady onto  
a hot pressing iron/i dont know  
maybe he catches lil girls in the  
park & rips open their behinds  
with steel rods/i can't decide  
what he might have done i only  
know every 3 minutes  
every 5 minutes every 10 minutes/so  
i bought the paper  
looking for the announcement  
the discovery/of the dismembered

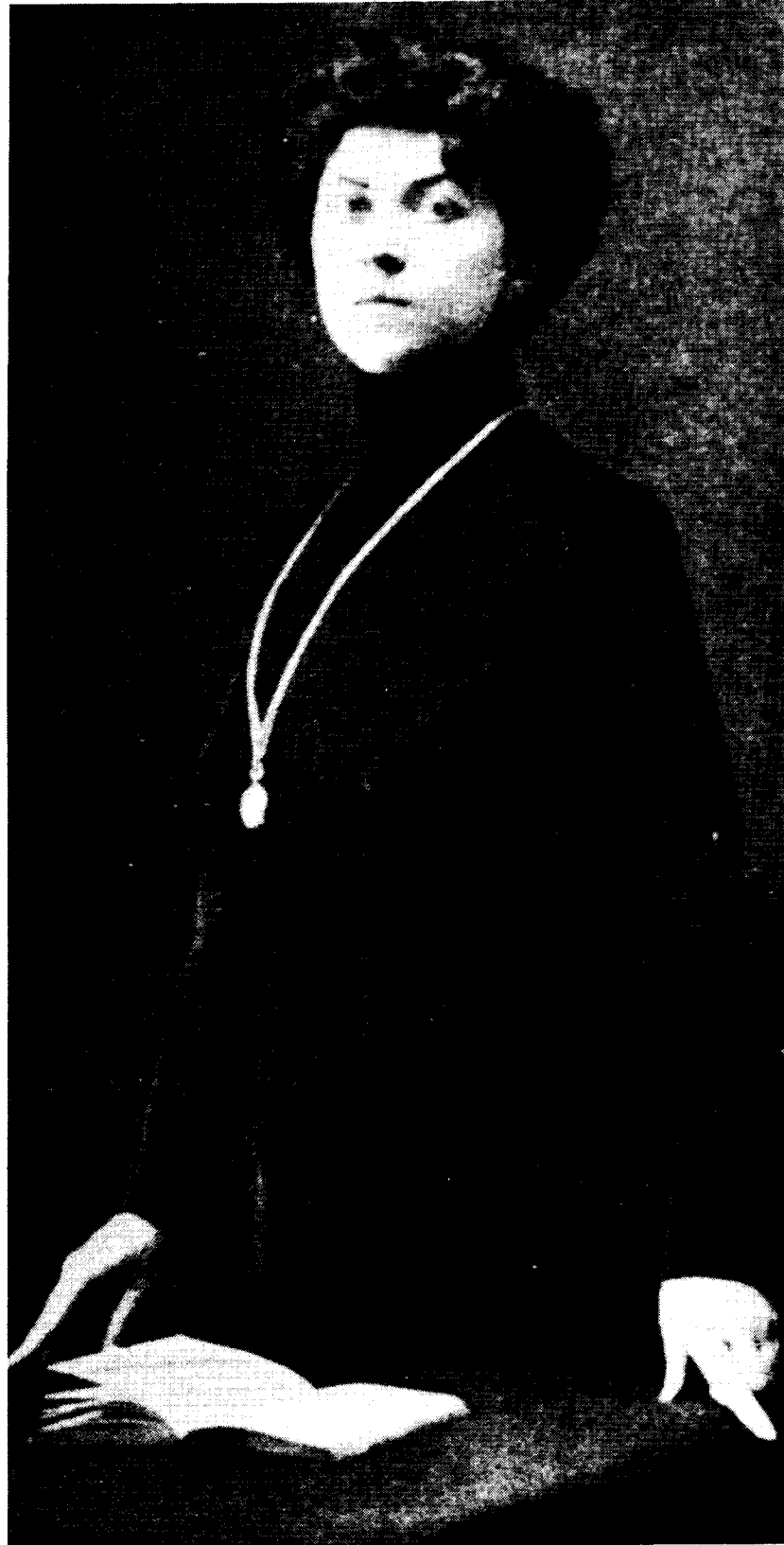
woman's body/the  
victims have not all been  
identified/today they are  
naked and dead/refuse to  
testify/one girl out of 10's not  
coherent/i took the coffee  
& spit it up/i found an  
announcement/not the woman's  
bloated body in the river/floating  
not the child bleeding in the  
59th street corridor/not the baby  
broken on the floor/

“there is some concern  
that alleged battered women  
might start to murder their  
husbands & lovers with no  
immediate cause”

i spit up i vomit i am screaming  
we all have immediate cause  
every 3 minutes  
every 5 minutes  
every 10 minutes  
every day  
women's bodies are found  
in alleys & bedrooms/at the top of the stairs  
before i ride the subway/buy a paper/drink  
coffee/i must know/  
have you hurt a woman today  
did you beat a woman today  
throw a child across a room  
are the lil girl's panties  
in yr pocket  
did you hurt a woman today

i have to ask these obscene questions  
the authorities require me to  
establish  
immediate cause

every three minutes  
every five minutes  
every ten minutes  
every day.



# ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

## Feminism, Workers' Democracy, & Internationalism

*Anne Bobroff*

Alexandra Kollontai was a Russian revolutionary socialist, active from the late 1890s through the first half of the twentieth century.\* She is best known for her work for women's liberation within the Russian revolutionary movement and following the Bolshevik victory of 1917. She was a spokesperson for the Workers' Opposition, a movement of the early 1920s which demanded democratic control of the workplace at a time when the Soviet government was increasing centralization and top-down management of the economy. A committed internationalist, Kollontai contributed directly to the socialist and women's movements of several European countries.

Kollontai spent a large part of her work life in a political minority, opposed by powerful Left leaders. Despite demonstrations of great inner strength and principle, however, by 1927 she had capitulated to Stalin, renouncing all opposition, and applauding Stalinist policy toward workers and women.<sup>1</sup> What caused this turnabout, this surrender by a dedicated socialist to one of the most oppressive regimes history has produced?

Basically, many of Kollontai's ideas came "before their time." Committed to women's liberation and workers' democracy, Kollontai lived at a time when the major historical task of her country was industrialization — a process which oppressed personal and sexual freedom, and prevented fully democratic, collective control of industry and society. Committed also to internationalism and to constant political action, she lived during the period of the ossification of European Social Democracy and the aftermath of its degeneration into national patriotism at the beginning of World War I.

---

\*I would like to thank the following people who read this paper and gave me helpful criticisms and suggestions: Dan Boothby, Barbara Evans Clements, Randy Earnest, Irina Livezeanu, and Louise Tilly.

Given this difficult environment, Kollontai was able to function as boldly and for as long as she did by shifting alliances among those different branches of international Social Democracy whose political positions at various times coincided with her own. By the mid-1920s, however, the rigidification of Marxist political parties in both Russia and Europe almost totally eliminated the field of potential international allies. Cut off from her support, she was soon crushed, emotionally and politically. The woman who had so often opposed a whole range of authorities submitted in the face of the Soviet state's political and personal attacks on her.

The period of the Workers' Opposition was for Kollontai one of transition between these two orientations. It was a time during which all her allies in opposition were workers, a class rapidly losing power to increasingly centralized Soviet institutions. The weakness of these allies led Kollontai to a poorly thought through, partial acceptance of the oppressive political realities around her. This thinking caused major inconsistencies in her views even prior to her recantation.

One aspect of Kollontai's political efforts which never produced strong co-workers was her attempt to consider, from a socialist perspective, what truly liberated sexual and love relationships would be like.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that even on this subject her early writings to some extent reflected major aspects of the repressive social imperatives confronting her. The result was a peculiar blurring between what was probably the most advanced socialist thinking of its time on the subject of sexual relationships, and a streak of something resembling the Protestant ethic.

## CHILDHOOD

Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich (Kollontai was her married name) was born

into a noble family in St. Petersburg in 1872. Her father was her mother's second husband. The loneliness and rigidity of her aristocratic upbringing, typical for her class and period, has frequently been cited as the cause of Kollontai's later radicalism. This analysis is partly true. But by itself it is far too simplistic, for it focuses on personal difficulties as the sole cause of an individual's radicalism. Personal unhappiness may increase an individual's commitment to the struggle for a more just society, but long-term, politically constructive deviation from society's norms requires great strength of personality as well. Such strength can be generated only if very positive childhood influences are also present. Thus we must seek the personal causes for radicalism in much more subtle combinations of positive and negative factors.

As a child, Shura (the Russian diminutive for Alexandra) experienced the advantages of growing up in an aristocratic household. She received an excellent education. She also travelled and lived abroad: in Bulgaria, where her father served the Russian government; in Finland,\* at the country estate of her wealthy lumber-merchant grandfather; and in western Europe. Shura was constantly exposed to her father's professional world of diplomacy and international politics. This international experience, as well as her mastery of numerous foreign languages, later formed the basis for Kollontai's activity in various European socialist parties, as well as her service as a Soviet diplomat in Norway, Sweden, and Mexico.

Kollontai's father was at times emotionally distant with her. Her mother was often overbearing in her efforts to make Shura conform to the restricted role of a young girl of the Russian aristocracy — concerned mainly with balls, pretty clothes, flirtations, marriage, and children. But Shura grew up in a very large household filled with alternative friends, role

models, teachers, and loving companions: her English nurse, her father's Bulgarian personal secretary, her tutor, and many other relatives and servants with whom she interacted, and from whom she first learned of the inequalities and injustices of Russian society. It is possible that this large extended household, which enabled Shura to seek help and love from whom-ever among the people around her could provide it at any particular moment, was the basis for her adult self-confidence in seeking political allies and friends. The abundance of people in her household to whom she could turn for support may have helped her to deal successfully with whatever emotional problems her conflict with her parents caused her. Just as she was able at times to function independently of major childhood authority figures, she was also able to resist political authority as an adult, as long as there were other like-minded people to support her.

Shura's parents were liberals: her father, in fact, went through a dangerous period of disfavor with the tsar for helping to write a liberal constitution for the newly "liberated" Bulgaria (following its war against Turkey, in which it was allied with Russia). Although Shura's mother tried to insulate her from politics, it is likely that her youthful exposure to liberal views in her home formed the basis for her later commitment to left wing politics.

Shura's mother, Alex Domontovich, had herself set an example of deviance from social norms by divorcing her first husband — she was the mother of three children at the time — in order to marry another man with whom she had fallen in love. This was then hardly respectable behavior for an upper class woman; Kollontai later wrote in her memoirs that it "was at that time an act of great courage." The process of obtaining a divorce was a long and difficult one, but at last Domontovich's insistence and determination won out: the divorce was obtained, the lovers were married, and, in

Kollontai's view, "loved each other until their last days." Thus Kollontai, the child of this love-match, was presented in early childhood with her mother's powerful example of personal happiness achieved by fighting against prevailing social norms, for her sexual and emotional freedom.

Domontovich in turn often supported her children's life decisions — even when they were not socially acceptable choices — as long as the child proved her strong determination and willingness to work hard toward her chosen goal. Thus, while one of Kollontai's older sisters became a typical representative of her class — attending balls and parties and marrying according to her station — the other sister, Zhenya, became an opera singer. Since a career in the theater was not at that time considered a respectable one for a woman, Domontovich argued energetically against this choice at first. Nonetheless, once Zhenya proved her determination, her mother supported her efforts. Zhenya ultimately became an opera singer in St. Petersburg, and a favorite with audiences, including the tsar. Shura thus observed another lesson about winning support — both material and social — for a deviant life choice.

Shura's mother was ambivalent about political deviance. Shura had very much wanted to go to school. But her parents, apparently afraid of her absorbing left-wing views there, determined that she would receive her education from a tutor instead. Yet the tutor Domontovich chose, Maria Ivanovna Strakhova, herself held views which were for that time dangerously left wing. Strakhova was an important source of emotional and intellectual support in Kollontai's first gropings for a political analysis with which to make sense of the social injustice that often intruded painfully into her experience.

When Shura was 19, she fell in love with and wanted to marry a poor engineer, Vladimir Kollontai. Her mother was at first opposed to

this socially disadvantageous match. But she ultimately gave in in face of Shura's determination. Shura was very much in love with Vladimir Kollontai: "All of us young girls loved him: he danced the mazurka unusually well and knew how to be merry and make us laugh the whole evening." However, married life with the merry but apolitical Vladimir Kollontai stifled Shura's strivings toward a career of political activism.

### EARLY POLITICAL LIFE

Kollontai went first to Zurich to obtain university training in Marxism and social questions.<sup>3</sup> In Zurich, she quickly became involved in the debate between the left and right wings of European socialism. The right wing followed Eduard Bernstein, a revisionist who argued that new developments taking place in capitalist societies (joint-stock companies, trade unions, the extension of political democracy, and social reforms) would cause a gradual evolution toward socialism, eliminating the need for revolution and hence for radical organizing among the working class. Kollontai soon took the other side, disagreeing with her Zurich university professor who, she wrote, "parroted Bernstein, extolled him to the skies. But I decisively took my stand on the side of the 'lefts,' attracted by Kautsky, engrossed by his journal 'Die Neue Zeit' and by Rosa Luxemburg's articles, especially her pamphlet 'Social Reform or Revolution'...." The following year, her professor suggested that she go to England to study with the famous Beatrice and Sidney Webb, British exponents of gradualist socialism. "But after my very first conversations with them I understood that we were speaking different languages, and without their guidance I began to acquaint myself with the English workers' movement."<sup>4</sup> In 1901, Kollontai established personal connections with Luxemburg and Kautsky (prominent leaders in the left wing of German socialism) and with

Plekhanov (founder of Russian Marxism, then living in exile in Western Europe). From this time onward she maintained constant contact "with the foreign comrades."

The debate between Russian menshevism and bolshevism was not as decisively relevant to Kollontai's political thinking at that time as were the West European issues: "I had friends in both camps. Bolshevism, with its uncompromisingly revolutionary stance, was closer to me in spirit, but my fascination with Plekhanov's personality prevented me from breaking with the Mensheviks."<sup>5</sup>

By 1905, Kollontai was back in Russia, active during the first Russian revolution. It was around this time that Kollontai first became active in organizing Russian working women. I have told this story elsewhere<sup>6</sup> and will therefore simply summarize it here. Kollontai felt a strong commitment to improving the situation of women workers. She recognized that in order to draw them into revolutionary activism, special organizing efforts were needed, focused in part on their particular concerns as women. Kollontai was a very vocal opponenet of liberal middle-class feminists who, beginning around 1905, attempted to unite women of all classes into one organization. Nonetheless, she herself was wrongly accused of "bourgeois feminism" and separatism by both branches of Russian social democracy. Despite their continual opposition, Kollontai engaged in intensive grass roots organizing among women workers, attempting first to form a working women's club in St. Petersburg. Working largely on her own, Kollontai proved to be an excellent organizer, popular among female workers.

While Russian social democracy opposed all efforts directed specifically at women, the European parties endorsed the attempt to integrate feminism and socialism. Thus, Kollontai found the support and encouragement she needed for her organizing efforts not within the Russian party, but among her European con-



tacts. In 1906, Rosa Luxemburg suggested to Kollontai that she attend a conference of German Social Democratic women:

*The conference gave me a source of support in the question of work by the party among women. Meetings and conversations with Clara Zetkin,\* and with the working women Baader, Vengels and others convinced me of the correctness of my efforts to create a party apparatus for work among women.* <sup>7</sup>

Kollontai went to another women's conference in Europe in 1907, this time a German Social Democrat and a leading proponent of socialist organizing among working women, one of women socialists in Stuttgart, part of the Congress of the International. This women's conference held intense political debates over issues around which the Europeans were actively organizing: electoral rights for women and the formation of an international secretariat for work among women. Kollontai found aid and encouragement among her friends at these meetings: "After the Stuttgart conference I returned to Russia with a fully elaborated program for work among women workers, which I began to carry out in the fall of 1907."<sup>8</sup> The major aspect of this program was organizing among working women for participation in a large conference sponsored by Russian liberal feminists. The Russian party did not want Kollontai to take part in this gathering because of its liberal character. But Kollontai, encouraged by her discussions with the European socialist women, was convinced that this conference could be a focus for politically educational work which would convince working women of the need for socialism.

She did not propose to form an ongoing alliance with the liberal feminists, but rather to use their conference for consciousness-raising among women workers. And in fact, working illegally and under constant danger of arrest, Kollontai drew together a small group of work-

ing women who engaged in extensive preparatory work. They made a strong showing at the conference, countering the middle-class women's liberal proposals with their own socialist resolutions.

Kollontai first met Lenin at the 1907 Stuttgart meeting of the International, years after she had established close ties with other European socialists. She found that she agreed with several of Lenin's positions at the Congress, as against those of the Mensheviks. She did not attribute her attraction to some of Lenin's ideas to Lenin himself but rather to her affinity with the position of Rosa Luxemburg and other European socialists in favor of an uncompromising course toward social revolution. The Mensheviks themselves had criticized the "Bolshevik Phraseology" of articles Kollontai had been writing, especially one which she described

Тянь малолетней проститутки. Снимок сделан в Киев в 1904 году



A Nine-Year-Old Prostitute of Kiev (1904).  
M. K. Mukalov, *Deti ulitsy*. SPB, 1906.

as having been "written under the influence of Rosa Luxemburg, after lively and intimate contact with her."<sup>9</sup>

## EMIGRATION

By 1908, as a result of her illegal organizing work among women in Russia and of the publication of her book on Finnish workers, Kollontai was being sought by the tsarist police. At the end of that year, she had to flee to Europe to evade them; she was not able to return to Russia until after the revolution of 1917. Including her time as a student, Kollontai thus spent over half of her active political life prior to 1917 in western Europe. (Most other prominent Bolshevik leaders were also forced to endure long periods of enforced emigration from Russia.)

This phenomenon of emigration by Bolshevik leaders had a significant by-product: tsarist oppression led to greatly increased personal contacts between Russian and European socialists. Such contact was valuable to socialists because of the importance of internationalism to marxism in general, and to the Russian activists in particular. All of the Russian Marxists, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike, agreed that revolution could not survive in backward Russia unless it occurred simultaneously in other countries as well. Communication and coordination between Russia and the various European parties would therefore be important in the event of revolution in Russia.

With this in mind, it is interesting to look at how various Bolsheviks spent their time while living in emigration. Some devoted most of their attention to furthering the revolution in Russia, publishing agitational literature, maintaining conspiratorial ties with the underground inside Russia, and continuing the debates within the Russian Social Democratic party. Their political and friendship networks were focused primarily on the Russian emigre colonies established in some European cities. Lenin, Zino-

viev, and Kamenev, all Bolshevik leaders, lived in this way.<sup>10</sup>

Other Russian emigres became much more a part of the European milieu. Trotsky and Bukharin, as well as Kollontai, were examples of this orientation: their political and friendship networks focused primarily within the European Social Democratic groups.<sup>11</sup>

When Kollontai fled Russia, she settled first in Germany, and joined that country's Social Democratic party. She did a great deal of agitational work, writing political literature and campaigning and lecturing around the country. In the next few years of her emigration her activities were varied. She and Clara Zetkin went to England at the invitation of the British Social Democratic party to help with the struggle against the upper-class suffragists, who were at that time willing to accept property limitations on voting that would exclude working-class women. Then, having moved to France in 1911, Kollontai "became utterly immersed" in the militant movement against rising food prices. In the midst of food riots, Kollontai organized among working-class wives, attending, in her words:

*several meetings a day, giving speeches in squares, at bazaars, in large halls and dark, close little restaurants. A lively and cheerful spirit reigned among the rebelling bondswomen of the domestic hearth. There were a number of women splendid for their strength and energy. Several were distinguished by their gift for words, which [earlier] they had not even suspected.*<sup>12</sup>

Early the next year, Kollontai was invited by the Belgian Social Democratic party to help out during a six-week strike by coal workers. In 1912 she returned to Berlin to work on her book *Society and Maternity*; later that year the Swedish Union of Socialist Youth asked her to do some agitational work in Sweden. Such a busy international schedule, with work all over

Europe and lecture tours throughout the United States, characterized Kollontai's activity until her return to Russia in 1917. She developed personal relationships with Zetkin, Leibknecht, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Lafargue, Laura Marx, and many others, and established close ties with many of the workers among whom she organized.<sup>13</sup>



Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Leipzig, 1909.

## WAR

The major political issue during Kollontai's emigration was World War I. A committed internationalist, Kollontai was shocked at the capitulation to national patriotism of the majority of the European socialists. And with the wartime suppression of left-wing social democracy (Leibknecht, for example, was conscripted into the army and later jailed, while Luxemburg spent most of the war in prison), Kollontai lost her main political allies. Meanwhile, Lenin stepped into the international

arena and began to organize for the September 15 conference in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, of anti-war socialist delegates. Thus, for the first time Kollontai began to work with Lenin — moving, as she always had, toward people who were working for the political positions in which she strongly believed.

All of the small group of anti-war international socialists criticized the war as a struggle among the ruling classes of various countries, each seeking to further its own imperialist advantage by exploiting armies composed of working-class soldiers. But what should be advocated as the alternative to war? Some simply called for a return to peace. But Lenin, Kollontai, and a handful of other leftists argued that this would mean a step backwards to the prewar status quo: such a peace wasn't peace at all but rather a return to the usual everyday violence of class oppression within national boundaries. Therefore, Lenin and Kollontai called for the imperialist war to be transformed into international class war. Imperialist war involved the laboring classes of the belligerent countries fighting against each other at the orders of the various national ruling classes. To transform such war into international revolutionary war meant that the working classes of all countries should unite in turning their weapons not against each other, but against the entire international bourgeoisie: "Long live the international fraternity of workers against the chauvinism and patriotism of the bourgeoisie of all countries!" wrote Lenin. Hopefully, revolutionary seizure of power by the socialist laboring classes would follow in at least some European countries. Only thus could a genuine peace be created and maintained.

This point of view, however, did not prevail at the Zimmerwald conference. There, the majority simply called for "peace without annexations or indemnities." Nevertheless, Kollontai and Lenin continued to fight tirelessly for their position in the months following the

conference. As Lenin wrote, true socialists should

*not deceive the people with... the idea that a peace without annexations, without oppression of nations, without plunder, and without the embryo of new wars... is possible in the absence of a revolutionary movement... Whoever wants a lasting and democratic peace must stand for civil war against the government and the bourgeoisie.*<sup>14</sup>

## THE REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

Kollontai was living and working among socialists in Norway in early 1917. Like other Russian emigres, she was totally unprepared for the events which were about to occur in Russia. She had just boarded a commuter train to return home one evening when, glancing at the front page of another passenger's newspaper, she saw bold headlines: REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA. "My heart stopped!" she later wrote.

Kollontai returned to Russia as soon as she was able. When she reached the Russian border, she found the border guards wearing red arm bands. One of them brought her the tsarist document which had specified her arrest had she attempted to return to Russia. Ripping it up, he said to her, "Under the old regime you would have been arrested here. But now... I have destroyed this document, and you are forever a free citizen of liberated Russia, for which I congratulate you!" It was a moment of triumph for Kollontai.

When Lenin returned to Russia, Kollontai continued to work closely with him: she was at first the sole supporter for his antiwar, anti-Provisional Government stance, which urged immediate seizure of state power by representatives of the working class. Hence the popular song of this period:

*Lenin Chto tam ni boltai*

*Soglasna s nim lish' Kollontai.*

*[No matter what Lenin babbles*

*Only Kollontai agrees with him.*

Most other Bolsheviks believed, based on their readings of Marxist theory of historical stages of socio-economic development, that the Provisional Government, as leaders of Russia's "bourgeois" revolution, should be supported. These Bolsheviks even became pro-war following the February revolution — despite the Provisional Government's continuation of tsarism's imperialist secret treaties with their capitalist allies — because they believed Russia's bourgeois revolution should be protected.

Kollontai's position against the bourgeois Provisional Government and its continuation of imperialist war flowed logically from her internationalism. Her belief in an immediate working class attempt to seize power from the bourgeoisie and create socialism grew out of her general conviction that socialists must at all times take action for positive movement toward socialism — even if the times did not appear fully "ripe" for such movement. This tenet was very similar to Rosa Luxemburg's belief that constant activism would provide the raw material for important lessons to be drawn by the working class. For Luxemburg felt that the revolution would not be successful on first attempt, but rather could be won only on the basis of experience and knowledge accumulated over the course of numerous "dress rehearsals."<sup>15</sup>

## INTERNATIONALISM IN 1917 and BREST-LITOVSK

On the issue of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, which concluded a separate peace between Germany and Russia in March, 1918, Kollontai found herself in opposition to Lenin. Her political allies at this point became the Left Opposition, a group which formed to fight against the protreaty policy. Kollontai's position in this issue was the beginning of what was to become her more general opposition to the policies propounded by the majority of Bolshevik

leadership during the early and mid-1920s.

The Left Opposition during the Brest-Litovsk debate maintained the position toward the war which Lenin had championed so brilliantly before 1917, the position summarized by the slogan "Transform imperialist war into international class war." Lenin, however, now favored the separate treaty with Germany as the only feasible way to save Bolshevik power, given the exhaustion of the Russian army and the failure of revolution to occur simultaneously in Western Europe.

It is generally accepted that Lenin — by far the leading proponent of the pro-treaty stance — formed his opinion on the Brest-Litovsk treaty on the hope that a treaty with Germany would permit a "breathing spell" during which exhausted army and people would be able to rebuild both their will and their fighting capacity in preparation for the inevitable attack on the revolution by capitalist governments.

The Left Opposition argued, however, that the brief respite a treaty might produce could not possibly be sufficient to repair the devastation which had been done to the army and its transport and supply lines. Thus, a treaty had no benefits. The Opposition called instead for

guerilla warfare, "a partisan war of flying detachments,"<sup>16</sup> as the only feasible alternative.

As for the Russian population's willingness to fight, the Left Opposition believed that "precisely because Russia was so extremely war weary, she [sic] could not raise a new army in relatively calm times. Only severe shocks and the ineluctable necessity to fight, and to fight at once, could stimulate the energies hidden in the Soviet regime and bring them into play." And in fact, Soviet Russia was soon embroiled in a civil war from which it ultimately emerged victorious, which suggests that the Left's assessment of the capacity of the Russian people to continue fighting was accurate. Isaac Deutscher also points out that the Red Army was in fact created just as the Left had argued: "on the battlefields, in the process of fighting, and not in the barracks during a calm respite."<sup>17</sup>

Beyond these tactical issues lay even more important strategic considerations. The Left Opposition was sickened by Lenin's willingness to negotiate with capitalist governments. They wanted to adhere to a policy of building alliances only with the international working class and its institutions, believing that no bourgeois government, with or without treaties, would



Bolshevik leaders, Kollontai on the right, Trotsky in profile at left, 1917.

ever concede to a communist country more than external circumstances compelled it to. As Deutscher described this phenomenon in regard to the Brest-Litovsk treaty, "after the signing of the peace, the Kaiser's government did all it could to strangle the Soviets. It could not, however, do more than its involvement in the gigantic struggle on the western front allowed it to do. Without a separate peace in the West it could not have done much more even if the Soviets had not accepted the *Diktat* of Brest."<sup>18</sup> In short, as Kollontai predicted in her speech for the Left Opposition at the Seventh Party Congress, signing a paper agreement with capitalist Germany had little effect on what that power actually did. The German government was deterred from its advance across Russia less because of the treaty than because of its own military weakness at the time. And despite the treaty, it continued to do all it could to damage socialist Russia.

The Left Opposition suspected (correctly) that Brest-Litovsk would be the beginning of a long-term foreign policy based in part on an appeal to capitalist governments. Such an appeal in turn necessitated toning down revolutionary organizing efforts among those governments' working classes. Thus, while the Left Opposition knew its strategy might fail in the short run, they also knew that no other policy had any chance for success in the long run. For any strategy which weakened the Soviet capacity to build alliances with the international working class — the only truly reliable allies any revolutionary democratic socialist society has — would cut the revolution off from the only possible source of aid in its struggle to maintain a genuinely revolutionary social order. As Kollontai said in her speech to the Seventh Party Congress — sounding very much influenced by Rosa Luxemburg's concept of the likelihood of repeated rehearsals before the revolution would ultimately be successful —

"If our Soviet republic perishes, others will raise our banner. This will be a defense not of fatherland [i.e. based on patriotic chauvinism], but of a workers' republic. Long live revolutionary war!"<sup>19</sup>

The Left Opposition, however, did not win out. Trotsky, who had wavered indecisively with a position of "neither peace nor war" (which had gained followers precisely because of its vagueness at a time when taking sides was difficult<sup>20</sup>), finally broke the tie in the Central Committee by casting his vote with Lenin. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918.



Tatar women and their children learn to write at the same time.

## POST-REVOLUTIONARY WORK AMONG WOMEN

Kollontai was appointed commissar of social welfare immediately after the October revolution. She began her work by extending the system of soviets (democratic councils) throughout the commissariat "to provide a mechanism enabling [employees] at all levels to participate in the decision-making process."<sup>21</sup> One of Kollontai's primary goals as head of the commissariat flowed from her conviction that children were the responsibility of society as a whole. She therefore worked toward establishing free maternity and infant care, paid for by the government. However, the Soviet economy



# ПРИВЕТ ПИОНЕРАМ ВСЕХ СТРА

at this point was in a state of near collapse; almost no resources were available to support the commissariat's work. Thus its goals remained largely unrealized.

Kollontai did not remain commissar of social welfare for long. In mid-March, 1918, she resigned for reasons which are now disputed by historians. One thing is clear, however. By this point Kollontai already opposed many of the policies of the new Soviet government: growing bureaucratization, for example, and the frequent arrests of the regime's political opponents. She spent the next several months in retreat from party activity.

Within four months of the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, however, the country was involved in a civil war — actually a revolutionary war in which the counter-revolution was aided massively by a number of foreign governments. With this threat to the new Soviet state, Kollontai rallied again to Party work. She was one of the organizers of a conference of working women in November, 1918, which led ultimately to the establishment of special women's commissions within the party. These commissions were finally formalized in 1920 as a women's department (*Zhenotdel*) which was to have branches, *zhenotdely*, at all levels of the

party. Given her years of involvement with women's issues, it might have been expected that Kollontai would be named head of the women's department. The job, however, was given instead to Inessa Armand, who had been active on the woman question for less time than Kollontai, but had been consistently close to Lenin politically. Kollontai was made head of the *Zhenotdel* only after Armand's death in 1920.

Some Bolshevik women, among whom Kollontai was a strong leader, had far-reaching hopes for the women's sections. But because of varying degrees of opposition within the Party, the functions of the *zhenotdely* were limited to attracting women and to training them for active work in various branches of the economy and government. In other words, the Bolshevik leadership wanted the *zhenotdely* to perform a rather instrumental role in channeling much-needed labor power into the war effort and the reconstruction of the economy. The basis for this attitude of the (male-dominated) leadership did not encourage any group, male or female, to take initiative in creating on-going organizations with which to advance its own liberation. In addition, sexism at all levels of the party severely hampered efforts to form local

---

branches of the women's department.

Kollontai and other women active in forming the women's department hoped for a broader mandate for the *zhenotdely*. They wanted the women's sections to be an arena in which women could take the initiative in liberating themselves. They believed women should be encouraged to establish creative new institutions dealing with food supply, child care, public health, communal housekeeping, and other tasks, which would free women from their domestic burdens. The tension between the two views of the role of the *zhenotdely* continued throughout their existence. Kollontai herself tried to walk a line between them, at time asserting her own view, but frequently adopting the utilitarian perspective of the male leadership, sensing that such compromise was necessary if she were to be permitted to achieve anything at all.

In addition to political opposition, the women's sections had limited resources allocated to them, leading to extraordinary understaffing and overworking of those women who did become active. These conditions severely hampered the capacity of the *zhenotdely* to carry out even the tasks officially assigned to them. Nonetheless, some local organizations were established and maintained, drawing women into participation in various branches of government and party work.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE WORKERS' OPPOSITION, 1920-22

The Workers' Opposition was composed of trade unionists who were proletarian members of the Communist Party.<sup>23</sup> In this respect it differed from all other opposition groups of 1917 through the 1920s (including the Left Opposition), which were composed overwhelmingly of intelligentsia party members concentrated in the upper ranks of the Party. The Workers' Opposition called for more power in Soviet society to be given to the trade unions as

the institutions of working class representation and rule. It believed that since the revolution the party and its bureaucracy had concentrated within itself power rightfully belonging to workers' collectives, and had given in to technical industrial specialists' bid for control over the work place. The Workers' Opposition sought greater democratization, criticizing the rapidly increasing tendency to move away from election and toward appointment of people to posts within the party, government, and industry, and calling for freedom of speech and thought.

Kollontai's role in the Workers' Opposition was limited because she was active during the same period as head of the Women's Section of the party. She also knew she would probably experience retaliation if she became active in opposition. She was, indeed, correct, as we shall see below. Kollontai began to aid the Opposition only after it had been organized by trade unionists, and she performed for it several distinct tasks of a type for which her class background (as contrasted with that of other Oppositionists) had prepared her: she provided the already-functioning Opposition with a much-needed, unified, written statement of its various criticisms and proposals, a long pamphlet called *The Workers' Opposition*; spoke for it in party meetings and Congresses; and finally brought its appeal before the Communist International in 1921-2.<sup>24</sup>

In taking her stand with the Workers' Opposition, Kollontai was continuing her long-held commitment to democratic working-class control of socialist society. Throughout her pamphlet, she stressed the capacity of the working class for mastery of the extraordinarily difficult tasks of "economic construction" (i.e., industrialization): "The Workers' Opposition relies on the creative powers of its own class: the workers. The rest of our program follows from this premise." Kollontai strongly



criticized the fact that the Party was taking factory-level decision-making power away from workers' collectives and giving it to "one-man managements," which ran factories according to the plans of "bourgeois specialists," as they were called.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the role of most workers was being reduced increasingly to development of work discipline and labor productivity; in Lenin's view, the role of the trade unions at that time was solely to educate the working masses to work more productively and to inculcate labor discipline.

Who were the "bourgeois specialists" Kollontai condemned? They were professionals who, during the tsarist period, had been trained and employed in such fields as engineering and scientific management (they were generally not actually of bourgeois class origin).<sup>26</sup> Kollontai described them as

*...the former managers and directors of the capitalist industries. These are not the [pre-revolutionary] magnates of capital, ... whom the Soviet Republic got rid of during the first phase of the revolution, but they are the most*

*talented servants of the capitalist system of production, the 'brains and genius' of Capitalism, its true creators and sponsors.*

Kollontai, like all Bolsheviks, recognized the usefulness of these specialists. But she wanted them to remain subservient to the workers, to act as hired resource people giving technical advice on how to realize workers' specifications for the running of factories. The problem, as Kollontai saw it, was that the specialists were being given the entire task of designing the work process according to the criteria of their training under capitalism.<sup>27</sup> Thus the specialists wanted to set up factory procedures which were frequently irreconcilable with workers' desires to establish arrangements that were first and foremost humane and satisfying to them.

In *The Workers' Opposition*, Kollontai described the social gulf between workers and specialists:

*...in the heart of the Republic, in Moscow itself, working people are still living in filthy, over-crowded and unhygienic quarters, one visit to which makes one think there had been*



Poster announcing the establishment of workers' control in the factories, driving out the church, thieves and capitalists.

no revolution at all. . . .

Dangerous working conditions were still widespread, but the party claimed it was unable to improve them because all resources were being directed toward the civil war effort. "And yet," wrote Kollontai,

*whenever it was necessary to make repairs in any of the buildings occupied by the Soviet institutions, they were able to find both the materials and the labor. What would happen if we tried to shelter our specialists. . . in those huts in which the masses of workers still live and labor? They would raise such a howl that it would become necessary to mobilize the entire housing department in order to correct 'the chaotic conditions' which interfere with the productivity of our specialists.<sup>29</sup>*

The Workers' Opposition believed that there was in addition another phenomenon in Soviet Russia which was robbing workers of effective control over socialist society: bureaucracy. Kollontai wrote,

*Every comrade can easily recall scores of instances when workers themselves attempted to organize dining rooms, day nurseries for children, transportation of wood, etc. Each time a lively, immediate interest in the undertaking died from the red tape. . . . [R]efusal always followed refusal from the central institutions. . . . How much bitterness is generated among working men and women when they see and know that if they had been given the right, and an opportunity to act, they could themselves have seen the project through. . .*

Resources, however, were always allocated by the bureaucracy to projects designed by technical specialists rather than by workers. Kollontai's delineation of where the underlying problem with bureaucratism lay was very significant:

*The harm in bureaucracy does not only lie in the red tape — as some comrades would want us to believe. . . . The harm lies in the solution*

*of all problems, not by means of an open exchange of opinions or by the immediate efforts of all concerned, but by means of formal decisions handed down from the central institutions. These decisions are arrived at either by one person or by an extremely limited collective, wherein the interested people are quite often entirely absent. Some third person decides your fate: this is the whole essence of bureaucracy. (emphasis in original)<sup>29</sup>*

The fact that the party initiated and supported the shift of power and resources away from workers' collectives to the technically-trained elite and the bureaucracy caused workers to feel alienated from the party which had once seemed to represent them. Now the workers felt, wrote Kollontai, that

*The leaders are one thing, and we are something altogether different. . . . [T]hey fail to understand our needs, our life in the shops. . . . [T]hey leave us altogether; they begin to live differently; if we suffer, what do they care? Our sorrows are not theirs any longer.*

The Workers' Opposition called for the reinstitution of several democratic forms — freedom of information, freedom of speech, and a return to the principle of election by workers rather than appointment to fill all posts. Only such measures would return real control to the working class.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, Kollontai accurately observed three institutions in Soviet life which were usurping decision-making and control over resources from the working class: technical specialists, the bureaucracy, and the Party. It is one of the weaknesses of her pamphlet that she was unable to present an analysis which interrelated the three in order to explain why the working class was losing ground after the revolution. The best she could do was to say that the "bourgeois" specialists were a remnant of prerevolutionary capitalism. Kollontai did not recognize that the specialists were not only a holdover from the

---

past, but also a core element in the crystallization of a new class differentiation within Soviet Russia.

This article is not the place to join the debate on the class nature of the USSR today. Kollontai's significance here is that although she did not analyze the new social structure in a sophisticated fashion, she did observe the beginnings of usurpation of power from the working class and remained staunchly on the side of the workers. All other prominent Bolsheviks were at that time compromising with other class interests in the name of "socialism." As Engels wrote about another historical period:

*The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch [in 20th century Russia, the "epoch" of industrialization] when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realization of the measures which that domination would imply. . . . He is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination. In the interest of the movement itself, he is compelled to defend the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests.*<sup>31</sup> (emphasis in original)

Many of Kollontai's Party comrades considered her views naive and blind to the realities of Soviet society. The Workers' Opposition was indeed wrong in its belief that industrialization could be achieved without major compromises with other class interests which would prevent the realization of true socialism with full democratic control over society by the working class. But Kollontai maintained a clear vision of what socialism should be when in some future time the necessary material and social conditions had developed. And prior to that time, she

called for as much working-class democracy as possible given existing conditions.

A further criticism must be made of Kollontai's position on the Workers' Opposition: she incorporated into her thinking some of the very aspects of Soviet society which were causing the developments she criticized. She accepted completely the Bolshevik idea of a one-party state and its centralization of political authority. She had faith that the Party, and particularly Lenin, would always eventually see the right way:

*Just because we believe in the vital forces of our Party, we know that after some hesitation, . . . our Party will ultimately again follow that path which has been blazed by the elemental forces of the proletariat. . . . Not in vain will the rank and file worker speak with assurance. . . 'Ilyich [Lenin] will ponder, he will think it over, he will listen to us. And then he will decide to turn the Party rudder toward the Opposition.'*<sup>32</sup>

Such faith that leaders will always eventually come to agree with their rank and file is certainly tempting fate, and should never replace the rank and file's own power to "turn the Party rudder" itself in the direction it chooses through democratic processes.

Kollontai's acceptance of these oppressive aspects of Bolshevism was undoubtedly a result of the Workers' Opposition's weakness vis-à-vis other tendencies in Soviet society. Kollontai had by 1921 lost all of her prominent Bolshevik allies: first Lenin and then the members of the Left Opposition with whom she fought against the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Her allies in the Workers' Opposition were all workers — a class which was rapidly losing any kind of genuine control over the evolution of Soviet society. This did not bode well for Kollontai's future well-being. She had taken positions in opposition to the majority of her Party comrades on women's issues in earlier years. But at that time she had had close ties among the

European Social Democrats. Now she had lost these friends and allies: Luxemburg and Leibknecht had been brutally murdered and the rest of Left-wing social democracy greatly diminished; and Right-wing social democracy had continued its rightward trend, moving ever farther from Kollontai's concerns and commitments.

In what must have been for Kollontai an attempt to repeat the successful international strategy of her earlier years, she appealed the case of the Workers' Opposition beyond the borders of Russia, to the Communist International, in 1921-2. But by then, the Third International had become dominated by the interests of the Russian state. It unanimously approved the Russian party's policies.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly thereafter, retaliation began against the Workers' Oppositionists. The most painful aspect of this retaliation for Kollontai was her removal from her post as head of the *Zhenotdel*. In addition, hearings held by the Comintern Executive Committee and the Party's Central Control Commission declared the Worker's Opposition to have been in violation of Party regulations.<sup>34</sup> The Central Control Commission recommended that Kollontai and other leaders of the Workers' Opposition be expelled from the Party. Kollontai was ultimately put on probation, which would result in expulsion should she ever again be active against the party line. Lenin himself, at the Eleventh Party Congress, denounced the Workers' Opposition as criminal.<sup>35</sup>

Bolshevik leaders did not restrict themselves to such decorous bureaucratic methods of censure, however. Throughout the 1920s, Kollontai endured repeated sexist attacks which alluded to her sexual theories and behavior as promiscuous and improper. The famous "glass of water" theory, which held that sexual need should be satisfied as blithely and automatically as any other purely physiological need, such as

thirst, was falsely attributed to her. Old Bolshevik comrades publicly made biting sexist remarks about her: Trotsky referred to her as a "Valkyrie." Even Lenin, in a speech at the Tenth Party Congress, made a sneering remark implying that she was engaged in an illicit sexual relationship with a man she had broken off with years before. The remark was especially hurtful to Kollontai because she was by then living in committed, monogamous marriage with another man.

Kollontai felt all of these attacks deeply as they continued, unabated, throughout the 1920s. As Kollontai's former network of allies and friends shrank chillingly to almost nothing, she was effectively isolated and silenced.

## THE 1926 MARRIAGE LAW REFORM

By the mid-1920s it had become clear that the incompleteness of Soviet legislation on marriage, passed soon after the revolution, had worsened women's lives, not improved them. The marriage code of 1919 had made divorce extremely easy to obtain: one of the spouses had simply to appear at a marriage bureau and declare the marriage nullified. As a result, it had become widespread practice for men to marry and divorce many women in sequence, abandoning all responsibility for their children and their ex-wives. Meanwhile, the New Economic Policy, instituted in 1921, caused massive unemployment which hit women hardest. Thus, many women deserted by their husbands were left with children to support and no access to jobs.

Deciding that experimental marriage arrangements had proven unworkable, the Soviet leaders called for a return to traditional solutions: they wanted to reinstitute alimony. In addition, they wanted to make common-law marriages, of which there were many, equally subject to alimony proceedings.

Kollontai by this time had abandoned open

# РАБОТНИЦА



1932  
ФЕВРАЛЬ  
МОСКВА

изд-во ЦК ВКП(б) "Правда"

№6

*Title page of the Soviet women's journal Rabotnitsa*

opposition to the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, the question of marriage law reform was so central to the issues which had most concerned her all her life that she could not resist speaking out on it, despite the likelihood of failure and further ostracism by the Soviet leadership. It was to be her last attempt to present independent views publicly.

Kollontai believed that the marriage reform legislation chosen by the government was an unworkable and unjust retreat to the traditional pattern of marriage. Many men were too poor to pay alimony, especially if they had acquired numerous wives, all of whom they would have

to support. Even men who could afford alimony could easily evade payment because continued enforcement was almost impossible. Another problem was that women who had borne children but had never entered into even a common law marriage remained completely unprotected.

More broadly, Kollontai considered the support of children a responsibility which should be borne by the entire society, not pushed off onto individual men who might be too poor or irresponsible to actually carry it out. She also wanted to free love relationships from all financial constraints. Thus, the central aspect of the solution which Kollontai proposed was a general insurance fund, created by a graduated tax on all citizens. This fund would support maternity and child care costs for all children, regardless of their parents' marital or financial status. In a concession to the economic difficulties which the country then faced, she also proposed that formalized marriages should involve contracts in which the spouses would specify the exact division of property should divorce occur. Such contracts would apparently include the payment of child and maternity support by those husbands who could afford it.

Kollontai's proposal of a general fund appears today to have been a major advance. The tax she envisioned to pay for it was small. At the lowest end of the graduated scale, it amounted to about two rubles yearly for each individual. Thus, at the price of a manageable contribution from each citizen, children would be ensured support, and men and women would be free to enter into relationships based on love, without having to calculate the financial burdens or advantages they might incur as a result.

Kollontai's arguments found little support (partly because they were not well publicized or explained), except among the women students with whom she worked. The Party leadership (and apparently a large segment of the peasant-

ry as well) claimed that the fund she proposed would encourage promiscuity and underwrite individual irresponsibility. Those who criticized Kollontai's ideas were therefore arguing that only the pressure of financial obligation on individual men would improve women's position. Kollontai, on the other hand, knew that such economic sanctions would not change men's values, particularly the quality of irresponsibility which was manifested so pervasively during the early 1920s. Very different methods would be needed to change the character of men's and women's emotional needs and attitudes. In the meantime, Kollontai wanted to guarantee that women and children would be protected from the economic consequences of male sexism.

By the mid-1920s, Kollontai had become so discredited that her proposals did not receive the serious debate which they merited. Her

ideas were dismissed; "slashing attacks in the press accused Kollontai of trying to revive her 'discredited' advocacy of Ultra-Left, decadent, free love by means of the General Insurance Fund, which would further encourage youthful irresponsibility."<sup>36</sup> The Party leadership's legislation, unaffected by Kollontai's suggestions, was passed in 1926.<sup>37</sup>

Kollontai never again expressed public disagreement with the Soviet government. She began to alter the public expression of her own views to coincide with the leadership's.<sup>38</sup> When Stalin defeated the Trotskyist opposition in 1927, Kollontai denounced the latter in *Pravda*. In this article she claimed that the Russian people themselves had rejected all opposition movements, and placed their entire trust in the Party. All defects in Party policy, she wrote, were a result only of the wrongful interference of oppositionists. Kollontai also declared pub-



A Soviet workman has his divorce registered. No date.

licly that under Stalin the Party had liberated women entirely. For example, in 1946 she wrote that the Soviet state "had provided all the necessary conditions to enable her to fulfill her natural duty as mother, educating her own children, as mistress of her own home."<sup>39</sup>

After Kollontai's dismissal as head of the *Zhenotdel* in 1922, she began a diplomatic career in Scandinavia and Mexico. Much of the reason for assigning her to such work was that it kept her out of the Soviet Union, and hence away from any opportunity to become active in support of dissident views. She spent the last twenty-five years of her life engaged in such diplomatic activities as negotiating trade agreements and treaties with capitalist governments. It was an ironic end for a woman who had once been such a staunch internationalist and opponent of any kind of ties with oppressive governments. Perhaps the most ignominious of her activities was her role in negotiating Finland's surrender to the USSR when the USSR invaded shortly before World War II in order to take possession of strategic Finnish territory.

Throughout these years, Kollontai privately maintained at least some of her former views: "publicly supporting Stalin... meant becoming a person of secret pain."<sup>40</sup> Almost completely isolated, Kollontai no longer had the strength or resources with which to continue the independent course which had characterized her political activity all her life until then.

## WRITINGS ON SEXUALITY AND LOVE

Throughout her active political life until the mid-1920s, Kollontai wrote periodically about new forms of sexual and love relationships. She felt that one aspect of socialist revolution should be more healthy and joyful relationships between the sexes (Kollontai never discussed lesbianism or homosexuality, which today have become core elements of feminism). Fully ex-

perienced sexuality would be recognized as natural for both men and women, and each partner would understand the inner emotional functioning of the other and on that basis would love and give support to her/him. Each would be free to dissolve the union easily should it become oppressive. Kollontai realized that a material basis — economic independence of all women, ... socialized housekeeping, laundries, food preparation and, to some extent, childcare — would have to be developed before such relationships could flourish. She felt, however, that socialists should start struggling immediately to raise consciousness around these issues.<sup>41</sup>

Kollontai's thinking here was probably more advanced than that of any other socialist of her time. She recognized that they form the basis for all other aspects of human functioning. A society based on solidarity and collectively among all its members depends, she wrote, *on the intellectual and emotional ties linking the members of the collective. For a social system to be built on solidarity and cooperation it is essential that people should be capable of love and warm emotions. Proletarian ideology, therefore, attempts to educate and encourage every member of the working class to be capable of responding to the distress and needs of other members of the working class, of a sensitive understanding of others.... All these 'warm emotions' — sensitivity, compassion, sympathy and responsiveness — derive from one source: they are aspects of love....*<sup>42</sup>

Loving sexual relationships, said Kollontai, were the source of learning to relate to all other people:

*the person experiencing love acquires the inner qualities necessary to the builders of a new culture — sensitivity, responsiveness and the desire to help others.... The aim of proletarian ideology is that men and women should develop these qualities not only in relation to the chosen*

one but in relation to all other members of the collective.<sup>43</sup>

As the postrevolutionary period revealed, however, such liberated sexual relationships as Kollontai described did not develop. In her lifetime, the material basis for such relationships did not exist — and not only because the country was not wealthy enough to provide sufficient socialized childcare and food preparation. Russian society needed to develop workers whose personalities were suited primarily to work. For the first and most basic task confronting postrevolutionary Russia was industrialization. The country had begun to develop a degree of industry under tsarism, but it was largely under foreign control, and was very small (compared with the overwhelmingly traditional peasant economy). To industrialize Russia would be a tremendously demanding task, as it was for all European countries. Under any system, this process takes many years, and requires huge sacrifices of the working population. Russia was certainly no exception.

One of the first requirements of modern industry is a disciplined labor force: workers who show up at work on time, every day, stay until the factory whistle blows signaling the end of the day, and work hard and with care the entire time they are in the factory. As many historians of other societies have shown, this work pace is much more demanding than that of a peasant society.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, industrialization requires that people become much more self-disciplined in their work habits, that they learn to work constantly, even when they don't feel like it, and even at times when the traditional economic system allowed them to take holidays, time off, or to work as erratically or slowly as they chose. That this inculcation of work discipline was a primary need perceived by party leadership is shown very clearly in a series of articles written for Soviet newspapers

by Trotsky during the early 1920s. He called for the Russian working class to develop a new culture.

*We must learn to work efficiently: accurately, punctually, economically.... The Russian worker... usually lacks the most elementary habits and notions of culture [in regard to tidiness, instruction, punctuality, etc.]. The Western European worker possesses these habits. He has acquired them by a long and slow process, under the bourgeois regime.*

Other examples abound. In another article, Trotsky analyzed why Russian peasant culture was characterized by sloppy work habits and a lack of appreciation of the value of time. In another, entitled "Work is the Basis of Life," he said "The person who does not come to



Foreman at Gorki Auto teaching young peasant girl (Sovfoto)



work on time, wastes time to no purpose in the workshop, busies himself at work with outside matters, or simply takes days off work, is the enemy of socialist Russia, and is undermining her [sic] future.”<sup>45</sup>

How does all this relate to sexual relationships? According to Kollontai, sexual relations form the psychological basis for all other types of human functioning. The kind of sexual and love relationship Kollontai talked about required that society be wealthy enough to allow a tremendous investment of energy and time in emotional interactions and mutual pleasure seeking — a general freeing of repression within the human psyche. This freeing was the antithesis of what the Russian economy required at that point. New work requirements made it necessary for people to repress their desires for personal pleasure and freedom. Sheila Rowbotham draws a dichotomy between the notion of a revolution “committed to release, to the development of free, unrepressed human beings” and the fact that in the Soviet Union, building a new economy “required a great effort of self-discipline — in fact the good old virtues of the bourgeoisie in early capitalism: hard work, abstinence, and repression.”<sup>46</sup>

The ideology propagated by most Bolshevik leaders after the revolution placed a tremendous value on self-denial, sexual and otherwise, which we would today undoubtedly see as Puritanical. As Rowbotham points out, this tendency is evident even in Kollontai’s work. Kollontai vacillated between presenting her vision of the ideal relationship of the future, and praising women who were able to compress their love relations into a secondary part of their lives, subordinate to their work. She frequently wrote approvingly about women who felt free to end relationships when they became a hindrance to their work. In fact, she never wrote about anyone, including herself, who was

actually able to combine love and work. At times it seems that what she advocated was simply that women be strong enough to feel free to make the break when emotions impinged on their capacity to contribute to “socialist construction.” Rowbotham describes this as “a negative freedom: a freedom of non-attachment which tended to appear in feminist thought in this period... which made women conceive of emancipation as meaning denying part of themselves.”<sup>47</sup>

The Puritanical streak in early communist ideology is epitomized by Lenin in an interview with Clara Zetkin in 1920. Lenin chastised Zetkin because she had been organizing around sexual issues among working women in Germany. At the same time, Lenin objected to concern with sexuality among Russian youth as well. Such concern, he said *can easily lead to sexual excesses, to overstimulation of sex life and to wasted health and strength of young people.... The revolution calls for concentration and rallying of every nerve by the masses and by the individual.... The proletariat... does not need an intoxicant to stupefy or stimulate it.... What it needs is clarity, clarity, and more clarity. Therefore I repeat, there must be no weakening, no waste, and no dissipation of energy. Self-control and self-discipline are not slavery.*

Lenin did acknowledge that young people do need joy. Therefore he suggested: *healthy sports, such as gymnastics, swimming, hiking, physical exercises of every description and a wide range of intellectual interests... as well as learning, study, and research.... [T]his will be far more useful to young people than endless lectures and discussions on sex problems and the so-called living by one’s nature.*<sup>48</sup>

The Russian revolution thus provides a clear example of how the economy and social system mold psychology. Even in the realm of thoughts

and feelings, people's options — the society's options — are limited by economic and social strictures. And the two faces of Kollontai's writings on sexuality show how even a thinker advanced for her/his times absorbs and reproduces the economic and social imperatives of her/his historical period.

## CONCLUSION

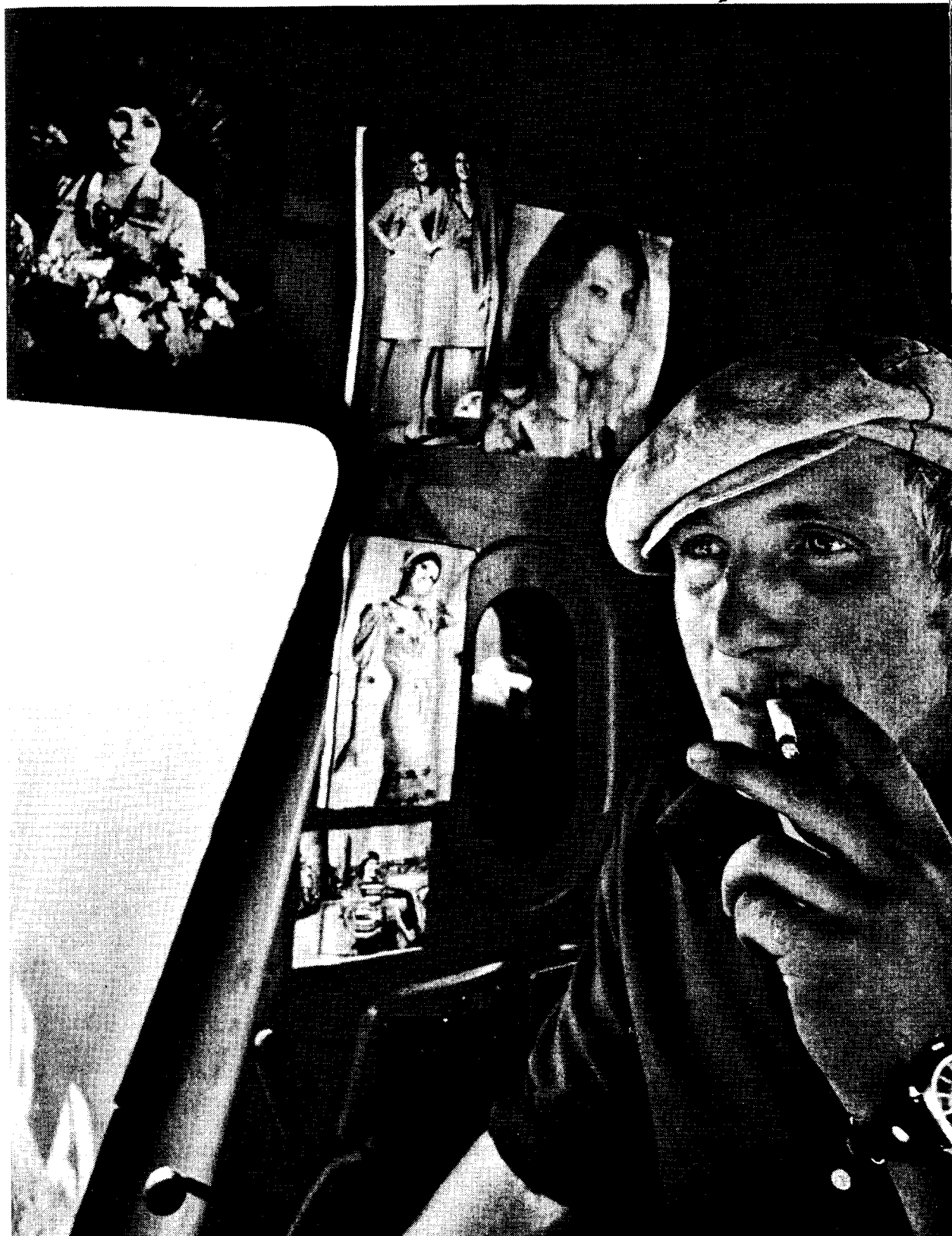
This article has focused on Kollontai's feminist and democratic socialist politics, which she maintained — prior to being isolated and forced into submission to Stalin — across a great variety of political situations with a consistency unusual for prominent Russian socialist leaders. The bases of the positions she took on all issues were both a commitment to the importance of the fulfillment of each person in all areas, from the sexual to the work life; and an equal awareness that such fulfillment can only be achieved when all human beings work together, each having an equal vote, each sensitive to the other's needs, to create and maintain the institutions which facilitate and shape their lives. Her primary commitment to maintaining genuine popular control rather than state power caused her to support the Workers' Opposition and the struggle for women's organizations whose goals and activities would be determined by women themselves. Her unrelenting opposition to those who monopolized power over others informed her internationalism, enabling her to see clearly that the working class of all countries can find true allies only in each other, as against capitalist governments, whatever the apparent political situation.

Kollontai was able to maintain her consistent politics by joining at particular times with different groups of people who shared her politics concerning specific issues. This method of functioning is, of course, not unique to Kollontai; alliance formation is how any individual, group or class survives politically. Kol-

lontai, however, actively sought comrades with the primary goal of furthering her unusually consistent political perspective rather than of ensuring political power. And she enjoyed advantages which gave her exceptional ability to seek support. Kollontai's class position supported her mode of international political functioning. Her financial situation allowed her more freedom than a working class woman, for example, would have, to travel to and around Europe as she chose. The daughter of nobility, she received the kind of elite education which was almost the international language of the Social Democratic leaders with whom she worked. (Thus, Kollontai's class position gave her the possibility of international alliances.)

The fact, however, that such continual shifts were necessary was symptomatic of the ultimately weak position of trying to maintain politics which were advanced for the time. The historical period was not "ripe" for such politics and so any strategy, even one temporarily successful, could at best only buy time. Yet Kollontai continued to take positions based on a clear vision of what a truly revolutionary society would look like, pushing to achieve as much democracy and as much social commitment to women's liberation as was possible, given existing conditions.

I contend that that is precisely the best role that can be played by a socialist living in circumstances similar to those in which Kollontai found herself. What exists in the USSR today is not socialism, and the fact that its basic elements were justified by its founders on the basis of Marxism has given the international capitalist class one of the most potent ideological weapons it could possibly have asked for. Capitalist propaganda has taken full advantage of this opportunity provided to them by Bolshevik leaders: socialism and Marxism are now popularly identified exclusively with highly centralized, undemocratic social systems such as that



which exists in the Soviet Union. Since no one wants to live under a dictatorial regime, socialism has thus been widely rejected on the basis of an inaccurate definition. How much better it would have been if the other Bolshevik leaders had joined Kollontai in raising a chorus of commitment to such issues as women's liberation and democratic control of socialist society — even if the entire party had been forced out of power and into opposition in order to keep speaking the truth.

Kollontai was eventually crushed, as were the ideas or the very persons of her coworkers. But her example and theirs, of steadfast commitment to economic and political democracy in the interest of the fulfillment of every human being — is inspiration to all socialists who came after her.

#### NOTES

1. Alix Holt, ed., *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (Westport, Ct., 1978), last two readings and the introductions to them.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 210-11.
3. This section on Kollontai's childhood is based primarily on her autobiographical reminiscences in her *Iz moei zhizni i raboty, vospominaniia i dnevniki*, Moscow, 1974.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Radical America*, May-June, 1976, pp. 53-4.
7. Kollontai, *Iz moei zhizni*, p. 105.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
10. Robert McNeal's *Bride of the Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1972), is one useful source on life in Russian emigre circles. See chapters 4 and 5 *passim*, especially p. 139 and 144.
11. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (New York, 1965), p. 181, and Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York, 1973), p. 17.
12. Kollontai, *Iz moei zhizni*, p. 119.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 115-22.
14. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, p. 34.
15. John Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk, The Forgotten Peace* (New York, 1938), p. 352. See also F.L.

- Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics* (Oxford, 1966), p. 7, and Paul Frolich, *Rosa Luxemburg* (New York, 1969), p. 255.
16. Bukharin, quoted in Cohen, p. 68.
17. Deutscher, p. 389.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 388.
19. Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo soiuza, 7 s'ezd RKP[b]. *March 1918. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1962), p. 89.
20. Deutscher, p. 374.
21. Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist, The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1979), p. 127.
22. For more detail on this topic, see especially *ibid.*, chap. 7 and pp. 210-14. See also Carol Eubanks Hayden, "The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party," and Richard Stites, "Zhenotdel: Bolshevism and Russian Women, 1917-1930," both in *Russian History* III, 2 (1976).
23. Clements, p. 191.
24. Clements, pp. 191 and 194.
25. Kollontai, *The Workers' Opposition* (San Pedro, California, 1973), pp. 2, 6-7, 17.
26. See J. Azreal, *Managerial Power and Soviet Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), for an excellent portrayal of the bourgeois specialists and their ideology.
27. Kollontai, pp. 6-8, 16, 24.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 21, 34-5.
31. *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York, 1926), pp. 135-6.
32. Kollontai, p. 37.
33. Clements, pp. 202-3.
34. The Bolsheviks were especially angry because Kollontai's pamphlet, "The Workers' Opposition," had been smuggled out to the West (with Kollontai's help) and was soon published by the IWW in Chicago. It gained broad popularity in the West and so was seen as a threat to Bolshevik support abroad. Clements, pp. 216-17.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-20.
36. Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth, "Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai," *American Historical Review*, Summer 1976, p. 310.
37. This section was based on Clements, pp. 236-8, and Farnsworth, pp. 301-10 and *passim*.
38. This was the period in which she revised her well-known *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*.
39. Quoted in Farnsworth, p. 316.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

41. Holt, p. 249.  
42. *Ibid.*, p. 285.  
43. *Ibid.*, p. 289.  
44. See, for example, E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* #38; and Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972).  
45. Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York, 1973), pp. 20, 93-95, 269.  
46. Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (New York, 1974), p. 153. Unfortunately Rowbotham does not seem to recognize the centrality of her own analysis here to postrevolutionary events in Soviet Russia. She makes these points almost in passing.  
47. *Ibid.*, p. 156.  
48. V.I. Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women* (New York, 1972), pp. 104 and 107-08.

---

ANNE BOBROFF is in the history and women's studies program at the University of Michigan. She is currently writing about working women, daily life and political activism in early 20th century Russia. She is also the author of "The Bolsheviks and Working Women, 1905-20," *Radical America*, May-June 1976.

---

# ACHILLES HEEL

a socialist magazine of men's politics, published by a collective of men in London who are committed to supporting one another in writing and publishing.

*Achilles Heel* number 2 is now out. It includes:

- Why must I be a 30-year-old teenager in love?
- Three men share the experiences of their men's groups
- The problem with patriarchy
- Men's Lives: the diary of a male househusband
- Men and feminism

Look for this issue in all radical and feminist bookstores, or send \$2.00 per copy plus 50 cents postage to Carrier Pigeon, 75 Kneeland St., room 309, Boston, Mass. 02111. (No subscriptions)

## Food for thought

Q. Is Red-eye:

- a) an illicitly distilled stimulant
- b) a tactical weapon that zeroes in on hot spots
- c) what you wake up with after a Leninist party
- d) a dirty word in certain circles
- e) a visionary inflammation
- f) a revolutionary magazine

A. all of the above

Articles on the global crisis, the 1978 American strike wave, the Situationist International and much more. An editorial analysis that is guaranteed to give you thirty per cent fewer reifications. The revolutionary magazine four out of five dialecticians recommend for people who read revolutionary magazines.

But don't take our word for it. Send one dollar fifty to:



REMEMBER:  
"IF IT'S REIFIED  
IT'S RIGHTEOUS!"

## Red-eye

Box 1200  
2000 Center St.  
Berkeley, CA 94704

---

# MORE ON FEMINISM AND LENINISM

In the last issue of *Radical America*, Allen Hunter and Linda Gordon made a number of comments on the significance of feminism for revolutionary movements in the USA, which I wish to respond to here. They make those comments while discussing the relevance, for a U.S. audience, of Sheila Rowbotham's article "Socialism and Feminism." While I agree with Sheila Rowbotham's critique of Leninism and her excellent analysis of the contributions of feminism to socialist theory and practice, I feel that Linda Gordon and Allen Hunter go too far in de-emphasising the classic socialist stress on the working class for the socialist movement in the United States. They do not say anything which is explicitly anti-working class. Rather, there is a certain ambiguity in a number of their statements which has made myself and a number of other working class socialists uncomfortable and even threatened, and which has prompted me to write this response. While I think it is significant that I as a working class person, had a negative interpretation of some of their statements, I must also stress that their article helped further my understanding of the implications of feminist theory and practice for socialism, which was Allen and Linda's general goal.

One of the many contributions of feminism to socialist theory has been the realization (which Leninists have vehemently denied) that the working class cannot emancipate women, that it is women as a social group who must ensure their own liberation from a patriarchal system which transcends class oppression and the class system. It should also be equally true that the working class must be central to its own emancipation process in the general struggle for socialism. Allen and Linda appear to be implying in their article that the current social conditions in the U.S. militate against such a 'strategy' and that other social movements have more currency in the U.S. and are therefore more central to the development of a socialist vision in this country. I would contend that discussions about the role of the working class within the socialist movement cannot be reduced to questions of strategy, and that the socialist movement needs the participation of a *self-conscious* working class revolutionary movement in order to successfully challenge the class system.

The contemporary feminist movement has rightly stressed the importance of the subjective content of oppression and has shown that one can only really understand the content of oppression by actually experiencing it: by being a member of that particular oppressed group. That concept implies that an oppressed group can only truly liberate itself by being in control of the process of its liberation. It also implies (because emancipation is an individual as well as a group process) that there should be mass rather than hierarchical leadership in those movements against oppression. These implications have been generally accepted by the Left in regard to the movements against racism and sexism but I feel they have been ignored in regard to the working class.

Many socialist critics of the capitalist system view 'the working class' as a sociological or economic definition which, while expedient to use in theory, does not reflect a commonality between people in reality. Allen and Linda appear to share this belief. For example they say: "The U.S. working class is extremely heterogeneous — ethnically, racially, linguistically, and regionally, *making the dream of a unified proletariat remote.*" Women are also a heterogeneous social group with ethnic, racial, linguistic and regional differences, and even greater class differences, but these do not make the dream of a united women's movement remote, nor do they invalidate the existence of women as a viable social group. I believe that the reason so many socialists have difficulty in envisaging a united proletariat in the U.S. lies not in the heterogeneity of the working class but rather in the socialist movement's inability to understand the totality of class oppression. Socialist theory has reduced working class oppression to 'exploitation' and has subsequently defined 'class consciousness' as an awareness of how the capitalist class exploits the working class.\* These definitions not only lead to a condescending view of working class people's resistance to class domination outside the workplace but, by omitting the subjective nature of class oppression, they also leave open to question the legitimacy of the working class as a real social group.

Often in U.S. history the women's movement has been virtually non-existent and the "woman question," if an issue at all, has been unjustly integrated into some

\*In making these definitions, socialist theorists have generally seen themselves to be 'objective' observers who, by virtue of their politics, stand outside the class system. This objectivity has allowed them to write themselves, their class position and to a large extent the middle class itself, out of the theory of class struggle.

version of the theory of class struggle. While at this point in U.S. history there isn't a revolutionary working class movement, socialists should take lessons from women's history and be wary about denying the immediate necessity for a working class revolutionary movement, and the existence of the U.S. working class as a real and viable social group.

On first reading, I found myself agreeing with many of the points made in Linda and Allen's paper and I could not understand why the implications of some of those points and the general direction and spirit of the paper were so disconcerting to me. For example, I initially took issue with their proposal that Leninist parties or models should dismantle. I was puzzled by my own uneasiness with that statement because I'm not a Leninist and feel that Leninist theory and organizational forms have no relevance for working class people. Eventually I realized that this and other points could not be faulted solely on a theoretical level, and it was only when viewing them through my own life experiences as a working class person that I began to comprehend my disagreements. Initially I thought that my reservations about the dismantling of Leninist groups understandably came from the fact that I was introduced to revolutionary socialist theory by a Marxist-Leninist group, while I was working in a typically boring and alienating factory job. Although I regarded a lot of what the members of that group said as strange and even naive, some of their arguments about class struggle rang true. The couple of conversations I had with them made me take the initiative to learn more about socialism. I found socialist literature to be jargonistic and uninteresting, but I read some of Marx's writings on alienation and amazingly could relate much of what was written to my own life and work, and I've been looking forward to a socialist revolution ever since.

After some further thought I realized that my reaction to Linda and Allen's dismantling proposal lay in the fact that they advocate the dismantling of Leninist models and strategies without at least suggesting some substitute for what I believe is a necessary revolutionary function which Leninist groups sometimes fulfill. This function I'm referring to is not the proselytizing they do among the working class but the fact that they enter into working class job situations *as part of their revolutionary strategy*. That activity for me is the essential activity that must be performed by some part of the middle class left, in order for socialist theory and practice to be revolutionary within the class system. In many ways this opinion is informed by feminist criticisms of the subordination of process to goals, of means to ends. I feel that it is morally wrong for socialists to wait for a

revolution before challenging class divisions within the socialist movement, as well as within society in general. What guarantee can middle class socialists give to working class people that a revolution will suddenly motivate them to give up or deconstruct their more privileged positions within the class system? Will their possession of greater skills and abilities not necessitate that middle class socialists assume positions of power and influence within the new socialist state? And are working class people expected to have faith in the fading away of such a state when they can see the consolidation of class divisions and class oppression in states where socialist revolutions have occurred? Theories of socialist revolution will only be accepted by working class people in general *as a realistic possibility* when they see the revolution embodied in the lives of those people who espouse it.

Working class people often accept that we live in a system of meritocracy, where anyone can succeed if they try hard enough. Obviously they often feel that they have personally failed within this system. I feel that it is necessary for the socialist movement to repudiate that meritocratic ideology in order for working class people to attain the self-respect and confidence necessary for them to challenge the class system. It should therefore be clear that it is somewhat ineffective for middle-class radicals to espouse revolutionary theory and yet at the same time personify success within the 'meritocratic' system and so validate the 'naturalness' of middle class superiority (and privilege) and working class inferiority (and oppression). In much the same way that it would be hypocritical for a man to verbally oppose sexism but in his everyday life hold only the privileges of sexual oppression, e.g., by having his wife do all the housework, child care, etc., it is also contradictory when members of the middle class left speak out against working class oppression and yet maintain privileges based on class oppression, e.g., by working in jobs which have higher status, greater security, higher salaries and are generally more pleasant and fulfilling than working class job situations. In addition, middle class jobs, and the ensuing social networks which they create, also insulate middle class leftists from the daily and subjective experiences of working class people. Theory without practice is sterile and for socialism to be a truly revolutionary ideology each person who espouses it must have in so far as possible, a revolution from within. The feminist movement has provided the middle class left with an understanding of how political the personal is. No man can ever fully understand what it is like to be oppressed as a woman, and no middle class socialist can hope to truly understand the totality of

---

working class oppression if it is not in some way part of her or his life.

While it is true that going from a middle class job to a working class job is a sacrifice, I do not think that it need necessarily be as formidable as it sounds. If middle class leftists were to embark on this course along with others as part of a revolutionary movement, they could create support mechanisms and networks which would make their lives and the lives of working class people a little easier. For example middle class socialists could use their organizational and fundraising skills to help establish radical community centers which could fulfill a variety of needs. Sorely needed community day-care and alternative cultural activities such as radical plays, musical sessions, etc., in combination with political organizing and consciousness raising, would underline the importance of "cosiness," as a revolutionary vision of how socialists would like their lives to be.

A movement of independent leftists to working class jobs and communities could have tremendous implications for the socialist movement in the U.S. today and would provide a much needed revitalization for the left in general. Moreover, the independent left, informed by feminism, has an infinitely greater understanding than Leninism of the totality of oppression and domination. Their emphasis on culture, subjectivity, the personal, the process of liberation, sexuality, etc. make the independent left much more attuned to the reality of working class people's lives, and it is therefore much more equipped to help working class people in the everyday struggle against class oppression than the sterile strategies and economistic jargon of Leninism and 'vanguard' politics in general.

I realise that, in making these statements, I have not made any postulation as to what in fact defines someone as middle class or working class. I feel that someone's class position is as much defined by that person's own subjective awareness of his or her class, as it is by his or her objective position within the class structure. And socialists especially should be able to decide as to their class position without having to resort to discussions of labor statistics and pay scales.

It is also true that many middle class socialists do perform valuable and necessary work for the socialist movement by virtue of the positions which they occupy within the class structure, and only they can evaluate the strategic worth of their role, since at present there is no means by which they can receive a mandate from the people they wish to represent. Others will be unable to give up their positions because of family commitments or fear for their survival and both of these reasons are legitimate. However, I feel it is necessary in order to

maintain "bottom up" rather than "top down" leadership against all forms of oppression, that those middle class socialists should not control the ideology and direction of the socialist movement.

To conclude, it is the class system itself, managed, administered, and upheld by middle class people who personify the 'truth' of the meritocracy, which oppresses working class people in their day-to-day reality. The feminist movement has contributed much to my understanding of that reality by politicizing the subjective content of oppression. For instance, cultural conditioning, self-hatred, intangible social barriers, tangible but seemingly natural or personal social barriers, being talked down to or talked about as if you weren't present, all these and more are part of societal oppression suffered by all oppressed groups including the working class. Oppressed people who see themselves as part of the socialist movement should try to empathize with each other and not try to claim leadership or co-opt the energy of one movement to the other, but should try to integrate into their own struggle the perspectives and goals of all movements against oppression. Also, the middle class left should try not to justify its own position relative to the working class by thinking that the working class has been bought off by materialism. Socialists should realise that the momentary gratification that comes from consuming cannot buy off the anger, frustration and self-hatred felt by working class people because of class oppression. This hatred may come from doing work which is one step up from what could be done by a trained monkey or it may come from feeling inadequate for having failed to climb the social ladder, but whatever its source it is this hatred, if redirected, which will make the working class a revolutionary force.

Neil McCafferty



# REPLY

We are disturbed that Neil McCafferty has understood our argument the way he has. We think that his criticisms are based on misrepresentations of what we said. Since we are writing this response hurriedly, we are not responding point by point, but invite readers to refer to our article in the last issue to decide for themselves. If other readers share any of Neil's criticisms, or have other criticisms of our article, we would like to hear from them.

Neil believes that we underemphasized the importance of working-class organizing in a socialist strategy. We do not think so. Instead we think that to our attempts to face honestly the problems and weaknesses of socialist working-class organizing, Neil has responded as if we were doubting its desirability. We tried to make clear at the beginning of our article that all our comments on feminism and Leninism were to be taken in the context of a commitment to the struggle for working-class power. Neil's criticisms of our discussion of class are examples of a tendency to suppress critical thought through the repetition of faith. We blamed the "difficulty of envisaging a united proletariat in the US" on actual divisions, even conflicts of interest, within the working class. Neil blames it on the inadequacy of socialist understanding. Neil's position doesn't incorporate the deep and stubborn domination of women by

men, including working-class men; or the depth and breadth of racism in the working class as well as in other classes. We wonder if Neil recognizes the full diversity of the working class, or if his images of it are not still those of white male industrial workers, defined by their wage-labor situation.

In the second part of his letter Neil argues that middle-class socialists should somehow join the working class, shedding their privileges and their control over subordinate classes. Concerns about overcoming inequality in power and privilege, and commitment to principles of morality and justice, have been central to socialist thought and practice. Yet asking middle-class socialists to give up their privileges, as he does — abstractly, without strategic or historical considerations, and outside the context of a collective movement that could make such sacrifices meaningful — seems to us guilt tripping, an indulgence we do not think valuable to the working class, to socialism, or even to the moral improvement of middle-class socialists themselves.

We do not know the answer to the dilemma that in certain periods of history there are more middle-class than working-class socialists. (We are not even sure that this is statistically true in the US today — and we cannot here even begin to discuss Neil's questionable definition of who is middle- and working-class — but "middle-class" socialists surely have more visibility and power.) We share Neil's anger and resentment about this state of affairs. But we doubt that moralism or mere expressions of anger can help.

Allen Hunter and Linda Gordon



SUBSCRIBE NOW TO

# RADICAL AMERICA

**RADICAL AMERICA** is an independent Marxist journal, featuring the history and current developments in the working class, the role of women and Third World people, with reports on shop-floor and community organizing, the history and politics of radicalism and feminism, and debates on current socialist theory and popular culture.

-----

Cut out this box and mail to: *Radical America*  
P.O. Box B., North Cambridge, MA 02140

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ \$90.00 sustaining subscriber
- ☐ \$10.00 (1 year — 6 issues)
- ☐ \$7.00 if unemployed
- ☐ \$18.00 (2 years)
- ☐ Add \$2.00 per year for all foreign subscriptions

Make all checks payable to *Radical America*.

\_\_\_\_\_

---

# RADICAL AMERICA

## SPECIAL HOLIDAY GIFT SUB OFFER

