

The Class Struggle in United States

By Pavlito Geshos (nom d'plume)

The objective conditions for a working class upsurge in the United States are 'over-ripe'. By this I mean that, over the last twenty years, 'objectively', the workers have suffered under oppressive working conditions, extreme loss of jobs, wage cuts and denial of job rights by their employers. There has also been a systematic and deliberate failure to protect workers rights by the government agencies that are designed to defend workers rights. This means that the legal rights to organize unions or to demand safe and healthy working-conditions, are not being protected by the United States government.

Those union leaders that are allowed to hold power in the United States are, in general, class collaborationists. These union leaders hold their power by making deals with or giving concessions to the capitalist class and capitalist state. Under the class-collaborationist leadership of the American labor unions, American workers have been led down the path of 'least resistance'. Workers have tried every other option except struggle on a massive scale. Each labor contract, over the last twenty years, has involved concessions to corporate management on some level (loss of wages, benefits, jobs or job rights). Those union leaders who do fight for their members are put under a news media slander attack and/or under legal attack by the capitalist state. Effective 'class struggle' union leaders have been driven out of power. An example of this is the great Teamsters strike against United Parcel Service, which shut down a major sector of the parcel delivery industry in 1999. Ron Carey, the president of the Teamsters Union (union of truck drivers and other workers), was driven out of office by a media campaign that

accused him of campaign finance abuses. The media campaign led to the loss of his re-election attempt.

Indeed, the 'objective conditions' for a working class upsurge (or insurrection) are over-ripe. This means that even the American collaborationist union leaders feel the 'political pressure in the ranks' to provide real leadership for political and trade union struggle. The fact remains, however, that union federations such as the AFL-CIO have continually led workers to believe that the two-party-political-system in the United States provides an alternative that will be pro-labor and pro-union. The official election process has not empowered the American workers, however. The union leadership urges workers to 'vote Democratic' as a solution to unfair government labor policies. Thus mass, direct actions, in the form of general strikes or massive street demonstrations of workers have not been unleashed in recent times. Even so, the class collaborationist union leadership must at least appear to be struggling for workers rights in political actions. The collaborationist union leadership has participated, in a minor way, in general mobilizations of workers and citizens to support liberal issues. As an example of this, the class collaborationist union leadership has supported the so-called 'anti-globalization' struggles. Trade union contingents participated in the November 1999 anti-WTO (World Trade Organization) protests in Seattle and the recent anti-FTAA (Free Trade Association of the Americas) demonstrations in Miami, Florida. While these actions are progressive, they do not call into question the nature of power at the point of production in the American factories.

These 'liberal' anti-globalizations actions have also been severely repressed by massive police actions, in Seattle 1999, Cincinnati 2001, Montreal 2002 and Miami 2003. The strike weapon, even as it was used as recently as the 1970's in massive shutdowns of entire industries such as the Ford Motor

Strike of 1976, has not really been unleashed in recent times. No actions that will give the workers a sense of power (either industry-wide strikes or large nationwide demonstrations) have been organized in recent times. This lack of real struggle is accomplished with extreme repression within the unions through the collaborationist union leaderships. Externally, effective propaganda devices portray those who participate in direct actions as 'radicals' or 'kooks.'

Massive, industry-wide-strikes would be more effective now, in this 21st century, as opposed to the effect such actions have had in the 1970's. The famous mine workers' strike by the United Mine Workers of America in 1977 was the last great exercise of workers power in America. At that time, massive solidarity support rallies and fundraising events helped to bring solidarity to the mineworkers in the 1970's. Yet, in these times, such support efforts for a major strike would be harder to build.

The high level of unemployment and the threat (by the capitalists) of moving factories or products to other low-wage nations, has created a real climate of fear for the American industrial worker. This fear of job-loss, this fear of being pushed into the ranks of the unemployed, has put a major strain on all efforts to make the workers and their unions more militant. While some of the American industrial workers still make relatively high wage-rates compared to other workers in other nations, the level of fear of job-loss (or 'job insecurity') is very high. As some workers feel that they have a certain standard of living to defend, they become more manipulated by the fear of job-loss. While all these things tend to put a damper on effective strike actions at the point of production, there is another perspective to look at.

It should be pointed out, however, that the capitalist system in the United States is much more vulnerable now than it was thirty years ago. This vulnerability is both economic and political. The economic effect of industry-wide strikes would be more devastating now, in an unstable economy (an American economy which is contracting), than in the past. This is also true in terms of the psychological-economic effect. Asset valuations in the United States are inflated, both in real estate and in fictional capital, such as stock market valuations. A massive and successful industry-wide strike might panic asset markets and collapse inflated asset values in the stock market and in the real estate sector. There is also the political vulnerability of US capitalism. This political vulnerability, the possibility that successful, industry-wide strike actions could spread to other sectors of the United States, is also real consideration. These two extreme vulnerabilities of US capitalism mean that any worker resistance (in a unified and disciplined manner), is usually met with extreme police repression and legalistic attack, (against effective strike leaders), by the court system. An example of this is the police repression and legalistic attack against the so-called Charleston Five in 2000. Striking dock-workers who set up a successful picket line at the harbor, were met with extreme and massive police violence by the state Highway patrol. This fighting union leadership was arrested and brought to court on false charges. A support campaign was organized, but the workers' struggle did not spread through the defense campaign for the Charleston Five.

It is this 'vulnerability' of capitalism in America that makes the control of the 'subjective' conditions (the mentality of the workers) so important. Capitalism must continually 'control' the

thoughts and mentality of the workers and of the general population. To this end, various propaganda devices, such as television, radio and popular culture, keep the workers and general population under a type of mental thought control. Furthermore, the control of the workers' thought process 'on the job' is also the required goal of the corporate management in the American factories. Most companies now have a corporate newsletter that repeats the corporate propaganda. Many companies have television sets mounted in the work areas, to broadcast company ideas and propaganda. With this constant bombardment of propaganda, in the public news media and in the workplace, the workers remain in the mind set of the corporate masters, despite the humiliation of the working conditions and working hours.

Many American industries now imitate the Japanese industrial management techniques to eliminate jobs and create two groups of workers. One set of workers is unemployed, the other set of workers is overworked. This implies a type of self-repression by the American production workers. Production workers are expected to be 'competitive' and do extra work. The workweek is extremely long; workers are forced to work extreme overtime hours. Thus more and more surplus value is created with the longer workweeks. American workers are also encouraged to participate in the elimination of jobs, to increase productivity. This management 'mind control' system is built upon the 'Japanese' ideology of 'team concept', or *Kaizen*, which is translated as 'continuous improvement.' American workers are compelled to participate in 'team meetings' to discuss 'productivity and elimination of jobs'. In this worldview, one worker is set against another worker in a competitive mind set, with no concept of union solidarity. Workers are expected and encouraged to fill in for any team member that is absent from work (due to illness or fatigue), and thus take more work upon themselves when the absent

worker's job is finally eliminated. It is the subjective conditions, the mass mentality of the American citizen and the American worker that is the obstacle to effective class struggle in this time period. Thus on a massive scale, the mentality of the American working class is effectively controlled, even if on a small scale, some workers do resist and find ways to struggle.

Recently the American capitalist state has intervened in key struggles, such as the ILA, dock workers' lockout/strike of last year. President Bush invoked the Taft-Hartley law against the Longshoremen's union (ILA) in the labor struggle against the Pacific Maritime Association in 2002. Furthermore legislation that replaces 'overtime pay' with 'comp time' (or paid time off), can also be seen as direct intervention of the capitalist state in purely trade union affairs. Yet, in the face of massive financial corporate scandals, little government enforcement is brought down on corporate criminals who steal the pensions and wages of workers. While workers have a sense that the capitalist state is biased toward corporate interests, there is little resistance to jingoistic flag waving propaganda when the workers are called to fight in another American imperialist war or military action.

This 'blind patriotism' is the key subjective factor by which the working class is manipulated in the United States. This patriotic propaganda was pulled out and paraded in the factories just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The patriotic propaganda now serves to build support for the current war in Iraq. It is this subjective factor in denial of the objective factor that produces extreme tension in the American factories. Workers can see, hear and feel the repression, the change in their job rights, number of jobs and pay rates. Yet American workers refuse to listen to any 'leftist' radicals who have continually proposed effective struggle against the corporate management and the capitalist state.

It is simply this ability of the capitalist propaganda to control the actions and restrict the thinking of the workers that has made it possible for the wage concessions, elimination of jobs and the denial of workers job rights. At this time, there does not seem to be a clear way to overcome some of the control that this propaganda handle has on the workers in the United States.

As in all workers movements, active or inactive, there is a political right and a political left. While the political left wing was destroyed with the anticommunist purges of the 1950's, a New Left wing emerged from the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960's. Many college-educated workers entered the industrial work force with the main intention to participate and lead any workers struggles against the coming economic crisis of the 1970's and 1980's. However, since this intervention into trade union work by communists and socialists coincided with the intensification of the Cold War, it was easy for the anticommunist bigotry of earlier times to be revived. In the 1980's while most trade union leaderships agreed to lead the workers into concessions and other betrayals, a few unions tried to fight back. The air traffic controller's (PATCO) strike of 1981, the Hormel Meatpackers strike and the AP Parts Strike of 1984 (in Toledo, Ohio, my home town), were significant battles that demonstrated the fighting spirit of the American workers against the attacks on jobs, wages and job rights. As mentioned earlier, real trade union leaders who fought for the workers' interests were hounded out of their jobs by news media attacks or legalistic attacks. The official and unofficial power of the state was mobilized against fighting leaderships. The most significant labor battle of this period was the Ravenswood Aluminum workers strike (by the United Steel Workers of America) in 1992. In this strike, an attempt to break the union was stopped, but without any major gains by the workers. Yet the significant non-

development was that no spin-off victories emerged, with each local workers struggle relying on its own resources or with limited reliance on national or international solidarity to achieve victory. The battle against the concessions of the Ronald Reagan era never spread into a national struggle. The union leaderships never had the courage to make a national struggle to save the PATCO labor union. The subjective conditions of the 1980's, with plant closings and threats of plant closings has had the effect of making workers fearful of losing their jobs. Even though there were major attempts in the 1980's to organize the 'unemployed' workers and the welfare poor, as a supporting ally for the trade union movement, there was no major successes in organizing and mobilizing the unemployed workers in the United States in the 1980's.

Thus, the track record of lost battles and battles that were never fought (based upon a failure of official leadership or a failure of workers' consciousness to inspire spontaneous actions) may lead one to think that there is little or no hope for a massive American workers upsurge. In a linear sense, a massive workers upsurge is not on the horizon. Yet this is far from impossible based upon the level of suffering of the workers and the crisis of capitalism. On the surface it appears that the workers are 'conservatized' toward pro-capitalist or Bourgeois ideology. It is true that the mass of the American working class will respond favorably, or at least not-unfavorably, to the call of jingoistic patriotism. Yet even among the most so-called conservatized workers, there is a growing sense that workers have 'given enough' to the god of competition and capitalism. There is a growing sense that the US Government is biased against workers interests (This was seen with the famous dock workers lockout/strike last year, when President Bush used US Labor Law against the workers interests.) The effectiveness of patriotic

calls to support US troops (in whatever war American troops are currently involved) will not stop a working class upsurge when the time is ripe. Furthermore, collaborationist union leaderships have just about exhausted the allegiance of the union membership. As Lenin once said, “as the times become more radical, radicals begin to make more sense to the people.”

It is true that the number of strikes has diminished but the level of official repression and the intensity of the concessions demanded by the capitalist system are inspiring an ‘unconscious’ resentment that goes deeper than the surface appearance of complacency. To say that ‘conservatized’ or ‘patriotic’ American workers will not revolt against more cuts in their jobs, their paychecks or their benefits, is misguided arrogance. However, to say that workers at this time are not disposed to struggle or revolt effectively against such attacks is realistic. Why? The answer is that American workers are not willing to look to effective class struggle leadership, as offered by leftist, communist or socialist parties or groups. The key point to be made here is that ‘conservatized’ workers will look to ‘conservatized’ leaderships as offered by their churches or by certain collaborationist parties such as the Democratic party in the USA. The American worker, by and large, has chosen to be passive, as a mode of behavior, and to that end, they listen to those leaders who advise them to remain passive and obedient.

Now the question arises about how the American workers can be influenced by struggles in other nations. The answer is that the news media itself is a break on this effect. Successful struggles in other nations do not touch the lives nor influence the thinking of American workers. Even the great social forces that shaped the struggles of the 1960’s seem to be frozen by a certain apathetic depression to match the level of economic depression in the United States. In the past twenty years, more and more

workers have been displaced and marginalized into the ranks of the “lumpen” proletariat. It is this continual marginalization, this continual discarding of more and more people into the sub-class of poverty, that provides a great weight of despair for the American class struggle. Furthermore the power and weight of ‘money’, the almighty US dollar, makes a powerful incentive for those who are working, to remain passive, to remain obedient so as to support their homes and families. Yet even in the midst of the effort to remain passive, remain obedient, the deep going resentment of the American workers continues to boil. This resentment is both a manifest and latent function of the crisis. By this I mean that workers are well aware of their own oppression based upon the sacrifices that they have made since the 1980’s. Thus in a manifest way they see their oppression in the workplace. However, in a latent way, unseen and unconscious, they know that their lives are not getting better but only promise to become more and more oppressive in a general sense. This ‘future anxiety’, in terms of inability to retire in comfort, or to make long term purchases based upon a sense of ‘job security’, tends to add to the psychological trauma of the American worker.

Thus, as a thesis, we can say that the idea of a massive, sustained and powerful workers upsurge in the United States is a function of ‘mass psychology’ of an organic whole, not just a function of the increasingly oppressive ‘objective conditions’. This means that no matter what layers of the working class rise to the challenges of the objective conditions, that no major victories of the American working class can take place until the American working class, rises up, *en mass*, for some trade union or economic cause. How will this take place? The answer is unknown, but the trend of individual struggles at individual factories in the United States has systematically been defeated by either direct

oppression or neglect of support by key allies. This thesis is quite dialectical as opposed to linear. In a linear sense, all observers of the American class struggle cannot see any change from the trend of apathetic despair of the working class as a whole. That which appears to be dead or defeated, from a linear standpoint, shall remain dead or defeated. Yet, the ideology of capitalism, even if it is absorbed into the minds of the workers, is an illusion. Repression and exploitation are the true realities of American capitalism. All the illusions, images and impressions broadcast on television programs cannot change the reality of the current situation.

Thus when we speak of any remote possibility of a working class 'movement' in the United States, we must speak in terms of a 'dialectic' possibility. In a linear sense, such a movement, on a large scale, does not appear possible through an evolutionary process. We must conceptualize a 'revolutionary' process that is the antithesis of the current mentality of passive, apathetic despair. We must speak then of 'spontaneous' events. We must speak of mass expressions of spontaneous forms of resistance (with no specific union leaderships) that are unplanned and not really organized. This form of struggle calls to mind collective sabotage actions in a factory, or 'riots' or mass expressions of lawlessness by the large volume of unemployed and underemployed people. These types of actions, although they are not really effective until such time as a class struggle leadership can direct the struggle, are about the only form of struggle that we may see in this time period.

For it is the 'subjective' factor (the mass mentality of the United States citizens) that has limited and dampened the effect of the oppressive 'objective' conditions in the workplace. This means that only spontaneous resistance actions, either on a simultaneous or cascading scale of events, can be hoped for.

All other organized resistance (with real class struggle leaders) will meet with severe police or military repression by the capitalist state or the local agencies. Thus, to give a current report on the 'Class Struggle in the United States', one must say **the American working class is prostrate, flat on its back,** being kicked into total unconsciousness. Yet, even to say this, as bad as it may sound, implies that a dialectic analysis may signal an unexpected change. When with this change (this dialectic transformation of a 'prostrate' class into a 'fighting working class') occur? No one can say when or even if it will occur. All that can be assured is that more and more of the official union leaderships, more and more of the official agencies of the capitalist state in the USA, will become discredited in the eyes of the workers. This means that in the minds of the workers, despite their passive behavior, there is a sense of anger and resentment that is boiling within. A political thinker alone cannot assess the dynamics of a mass psychology. Yet, from a purely political point of view, one can say that when 'fear' turns to 'anger' in the minds of the American workers, linear thinking about the behavior of the American workers (in the American class struggle) will become invalid.

December 4, 2003