

Against the Current

The 1970's have been a baffling, paradoxical and at times disastrous period for the American Left.

On the one hand, by 1970, the U.S. had entered a period of profound crisis in which its long-time hegemony on the world scene was being severely undermined. The fundamental character of the crisis is expressed above all by the steady decline of the nation's industrial heartland. From Boston to Chicago, the cities decay as they watch the decline of their industrial base in steel, rubber, auto, electrical manufacturing, to name only the most prominent. The unparalleled inflation and negative balance of payments are just the monetary expressions of this crisis. Indeed, the increased dispersal of U.S. capital to its industrial plants abroad has raised the spectre of the U.S. entering upon that road which England has been treading for half a century—a tendency toward, and danger of, deindustrialization.

This structural crisis has its ideological and political counterparts. Viet-Nam, Watergate and the "energy crisis" have contributed to widespread alienation and a sense of impotence and cynicism about American political institutions. Massive voter abstentionism is just one manifestation of this disenchantment.

The working class movement in general, and the Left in particular, confront this situation in a confused and disorganized condition. The trade unions labor under the control and disorientation of a leadership whose degree of bureaucratization is unprecedented. This leadership is committed to business unionism, which today assumes the especially virulent form of acquiescing in the attacks on the nation's workers in recognition of the "need to maintain profitability". The promising rank and file upsurge in the late '60s and early '70s was beheaded by the bureaucracy. As a result, the working class, unable to find either political or organizational solutions to its crisis, has retreated, unsure of a way forward, unable to adequately combat the employers' economic offensive.

Outside the unions, the picture is no more reassuring. Despite limited defensive struggles, the movement of Blacks and Hispanics has not retained the great power it displayed in the sixties. Nor have they solved the problem of their isolation from their necessary allies, the powerful sectors of the organized working class, although they can hardly be assigned full responsibility for this.

The women's movement has continued its ideological and practical challenge to sexism and patriarchy. But it is weakened by its inability to establish deep roots among working class women. It is in fact

experiencing defeats today, with its difficulties regarding ERA approval, and the setback on abortion.

Finally, the Left is still working in a situation that was created by its historical and more immediate failures. It is divided into a hundred competing groups. Some of them are separated only by differences which, because of the Left's isolation, cannot be tested in practice. None of them has an organic, not to mention healthy, relationship with the working class. And none has a body of theory rooted in the specific historic experience of the American working class. The Left affected vigorous interventions in the sixties, its struggle against the war in Viet-Nam and its pioneering contributions to the Black, women's and gay movement. But it did not find a way to integrate these struggles into a working class movement for socialism.

Instead, in many ways, the Left has continued to be dominated by various forms of substitutionism—the attempt to avoid or get around the fundamental premise that the "emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself".

In the '60s, substitutionism largely took the form of Third Worldism. Making the simplistic assumption that the working class in the advanced countries had been "bought off" and integrated, revolutionists were diverted from the building of a working class movement in the U.S.

Others, revolutionized by the events of '68, have retreated in recent years to a dependence on left trade union leaders (the new social democracy), and away from the mobilization of the working class rank and file.

Finally, substitutionism has taken the form of "partyism". One group after another, largely isolated from the working class, has proclaimed itself "the party". Invariably, these self-appointed vanguards are bureaucratic centralist. They attempt to make their organization *take the place* of the self-organization of the working class, instead of tapping the power and creativity of the workers autonomous organizations, from rank and file movements to workers councils.

There are however more positive developments. New currents have emerged which, though divided from each other by experience, tradition and often vocabulary, may, over a period of time, be able collectively to build a revolutionary socialist organization—one which is democratic in its practice and internal life, and oriented to the working class at the workplace and in the community.

Scattered regenerative forces open to this project have arisen in several quarters. One has its roots in the best of the democratic, open, self-reliant tradition

of the New Left. This trend is best exemplified by collectives doing working class organizing in both the community and the workplace. Paralleling and intermeshed with these groups are many socialists whose politics were inspired by Third World ideologies and the revolutionary images of the cultural revolution. In the last years, events in China have led many to reevaluate their positions. The consolidation of bureaucratic rule in China, and its increased international links with the most reactionary currents in American and European capitalism, can no longer be seen as isolated errors but must be understood as organically interrelated. As a result, there exists a growing readiness to explore the meaning of these developments for the construction of a revolutionary, democratic politics.

The emergence of these revolutionary currents, searching for political coherence and organization is occurring in a period in which the international economic and political crisis of capitalism gives every evidence of being both sustained and substantial. This is not to say that we can expect any automatic or immediate eruption of a new workers movement. But in view of the long-term loss of confidence in American political institutions, there can be no return to the stability and consensus of the '50s, and we can expect openings for the intervention of socialists.

It is the possibility of drawing together the emerging revolutionary elements in the face of the deepening social crisis which encourages us to assume the task of creating a magazine to be an instrument for open exchange, regroupment and rearming of the movement for socialist revolution. This magazine will seek to establish revolutionary Marxism as a clearly demarcated pole of attraction to the non-sectarian Left. It will be distinguished by its commitment to the following principles: (1) Workers' self-emancipation as exemplified by the role of workers councils in

Russia in 1917, in the Spanish Revolution in 1936, in Hungary in 1956, as well as in the embryonic workers councils and neighborhood councils which were built by the masses in Chile and Portugal in the last revolutionary upsurge; (2) a radical break with reformism and social democracy; (3) the rejection of Stalinism and all forms of bureaucratic and elitist rule; (4) unconditional support for independent organization by oppressed groups.

We do not see the magazine in isolation from the indispensable task of building a revolutionary socialist organization in the U.S. For we do not believe that theory can develop apart from involvement in the class struggle. Consequently, we believe that the growth, effectiveness and ideological quality of the magazine will depend upon the emergence over time of a revolutionary political organization. We see the regroupment of emerging revolutionary elements as part of this process—a process in which **Against the Current** hopes to play a catalyzing role.

The development of a theory and strategy for revolution in America being the central question, the magazine will place special emphasis on the specific character of American capitalist development and, above all, on the evolution of the working class—how that evolution shapes its current practice as well as the intervention of socialists.

We do not have the illusion, even if our numbers were greater than they are, that we alone can carry out the task of political rearming the movement. It will therefore be an essential concern of the magazine to involve other groups and individuals in our work by means of contributions, exchanges and debates. Indeed, the magazine must have as one central purpose the encouragement of a dialogue with other sectors of the revolutionary Left without which the regroupment of revolutionary forces in the U.S. can only be stillborn.

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