

The California Grocery Strike

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Photo by Nick Ut

"The greatest productive force is the understanding, wisdom, of the revolutionary class itself." (Marx)

The southern California grocery strike involving 70,000 United Food And Commercial Workers members from October 2003 to March 2004 was one of the most significant actions the U.S. labor movement took in the last twenty years.

What happened? The workers lost, betrayed by their union leaders. This defeat was devastating, setting up a spiral of attacks on the lives of people who must work to live, particularly on the minimal health benefits that a few working people still have. The old labor saw, "An injury to one just goes before an injury to all," is already felt in teacher-union contract negotiations.

Could this have been won? Yes, it could, but not within the confines of the law, and not in the confines of the structures of the unions, not within the philosophy of the "labor movement" (i.e., the AFL-CIO with the independent National Education Association tossed in for good measure), not without preparation-and most importantly, not without organization and wise action.

What were the issues? The 70,000 plus grocery workers in Southern California, most but not all of them check-out clerks, struck to protect their wages, health benefits, pension funds, the hours and nature of the hours at work, and their union itself. Grocery clerks are not known as impatient militants. The workers fought because they had to fight. Cornered, they engaged in a battle that few of them fully understood. The sole thing

that was retained after the end of a five-month strike was the right of their United Food and Commercial Workers Union directors to collect dues from the members.

The grocery owners, Vons, Ralphs, and Albertsons, claimed they had to have massive concessions from the union in order to stave off competition from Walmart, now invading their turf. The grocery bosses rightly said that Walmart's edge was not only in its ability to buy in bulk, but its cheap labor costs. Walmart, the largest corporation in the world, pays health benefits to less than one-half of its work force, and often pays only the minimum wage to part-timers. In addition, Walmart sometimes just does not pay at all, having been sued repeatedly by employees who were unpaid for work done.

On the other side, grocery workers were trapped. Because their circumstances demanded it, grocery clerks led the biggest fight-back of the working class in the U.S. in two decades. As is likely to be the case for many other poor and working people faced with dwindling economic futures -- linked to de-industrialization, outsourcing, ruthless competition for cheaper labor and the national promise of perpetual war -- the grocery clerks fought back because they had little choice. That their resistance was weak is testimony to their lack of effective leadership, the education that did not prepare them to fight, and the absence of a social movement to support them.

What is the history of this? Grocery clerks in Southern California are fairly well paid when compared to other grocery workers in the US. Their health benefits are not as good as the benefits of, say, most K12 teachers, but better than most other wage workers -- also true of their pensions. This gave the grocery workers what they themselves see as a middle-class income, whether that is in fact the case or not. Wages of \$17.50 per hour, or \$35,000 per year, were not uncommon. The grocery workers are, for the most part, well trained and hard working, liked by customers, and until the strike they worked regular hours and could make plans with family, etc. -- unlike many grocery workers elsewhere who work odd shifts that change frequently.

The UFCW rank and file in Southern California won this qualified status by taking scrappy action (but not in the last 20 years) and through support and solidarity from the Teamsters Union (Dave Beck, the gangster-Teamster, had a lot to do with organizing the early union on the west coast). The UFCW and Teamsters united those who did the work in the stores with those who delivered the milk. The early affiliates of the UFCW, like the meat-cutters, were particularly tough. But tough does not necessarily translate to truly powerful. Neither the Teamsters nor the UFCW based their strength on a conscious work force able to take action. Rather, the Teamsters trusted the mob and iconic leaders. The UFCW tagged along.

The thrust of UFCW and Teamster activity on the west coast was, for the most part, to organize the bosses, not the workers. UFCW and Teamster leaders, through threats of mob force and occasional mass action, won concessions from the owners -- while many UFCW members never even knew they belonged to a union (unlike the Teamsters who often worshiped racketeers like Jimmy Hoffa and Beck).

Contractual victories set the western UFCW apart from the rest of the country where low-wage employers were able to enter the market, eventually shattering the collective bargaining contracts in the east and mid-west. On the west coast, adults earned a living wage in grocery stores. Elsewhere, grocery clerking is a job for kids.

Action and unity, perverse as some of that may have been, changed the lives of grocery workers, and the appearance of grocery stores. On-the-job engagements, coercion, and the potential solidarity of the Teamsters and UFCW combined produced not only the fairly good wage-benefit base for UFCW members, but they also caused the geography of grocery stores to shift, away from storefronts, retreating well back to more easily defended stores surrounded by open and hard to defend private space.

The ability to control the work place, in essence to open or close it and to control the minute by minute practices on the site, amounts to the daily struggle between workers and bosses. While the Teamsters often complained that they were key to the UFCW's victories, the two unions did deliver in a sense. They exerted, occasionally, the ability to open and close the groceries, or their delivery arteries, and so they won modest gains, though they typically gave up the issue of the daily operation of the stores as a "management prerogative," as is the habit of US labor.

Absent the struggle to control the minutiae of daily production, however, owners were empowered to make grocery labor nearly vanish. Not long ago, labor in the food market was easy to see. Customers either met a one-stop grocer who took orders, obtained the goods, and cashed them out, or they went to the meat-cutter, the baker, etc., and interacted for their purchases. Sides of beef were right in the customer's eyes. The connection of nature, work, commodity exchange, and consumption was fairly easy to make.

Now, in some stores, even check-out is self-service, meaning labor in the grocery store is almost entirely out of sight. Human production has disappeared. People interact only with things. The division of labor is sharpened as an army of supervisors, using the latest technology, watch over a work force whose jobs are reduced to the smallest possible operations. The shopper enters aisles of dazzling aromatized spectacles, choices, about one fundamentally similar option after another, each declaring itself to be a form of freedom, each designed with meticulous care to separate the free shopper from her/his capital. The consumer buys a box, Captain Crunch, not a relation of production (Gilmore).

It is fairly easy to hide steel production. It is a remarkable achievement to erase both nature and the humanity of work in a grocery store. To do that with the active cooperation of the organization that represents the interests of the work force is doubly impressive.

All of the UFCW's sharpest struggles happened during the period of US capital's expansion -- up to around 1975. Therefore, the outlook of the Teamsters and the UFCW, which is the outlook of the entire labor movement today (and has been for about 90 years with only slight shifts), did not completely undermine the effort for more pay, though it conceded most of daily operations decisions to the employers. Capital expanded. So did the wages of some sections of the work force. Then US capital entered a decline, now a dive.

Big Labor's outlook, simply, is this: The unity of business, government, and labor, together in the national interest. This is the stated position of the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (called New Unionism) and is the position of the entire AFL-CIO ("Partners in Production"). There is really nothing new in it at all, although it does coalesce in distinct form from time to time. It can be called "company unionism" in some eras, or a part of Mussolini's corporate-fascist state in others.

Since its founding, the fundamental belief of the AFL has always been to defend US capitalism. This ideology was tested and solidified before and during WWI when the AFL loudly proclaimed its patriotism. The AFL opposed anarchists and communists who called the war an imperialist war, and the AFL opposed the Russian Revolution. The AFL supported the Palmer Raids, and the anti-communist outbursts in the US following WWI. <<http://digital.library.arizona.edu/bisbee/docs/002.php>>

This is the ideology of all US unionism, class collaboration, which by logical extension is rooted in opportunism, racism, sexism, nationalism, support for imperialist expansion, and hierarchy. As a chosen part of the processes of capital, the unions echo it.

The AFL-CIO believes American workers will do better if foreign workers do worse. Support for US corporations, per the AFL-CIO, means money in US workers' pockets. Other than the unforgettable outbursts of the Industrial Workers of the World ("The working class and the employing class have nothing in common") and the Communist Party inspired Congress of Industrial Organizations (leaders of the 1930's sit-down strikes, etc., whose militancy and anti-racism was undermined by their own reformism), this set of ideas, which translate into practice, is what the US labor movement is. People who join unions because they believe they have opposing interests with their employers eventually find that their unions do not agree.

For some workers, the collaborationist view played out well for awhile; white skilled craftsmen for example, who could buy snowmobiles and cottages. Over time, the partnership ploy failed. For some workers, the collaborationist view played out well for awhile -- white, skilled craftsmen, for example, who could buy snowmobiles and cottages. Over time, the partnership ploy failed. Today, the fastest growing sector of the labor movement is prison guards, reflecting the AFL-CIO's acceptance of railroad boss Jay Gould's vision: "I can get one half of the working class to kill the other half."

The AFL and, later, the CIO did little to fight racism and sexism, opposed internationalism, and wedded their leaders to the ruling class in the US. This left the working class divided by class, race, and nation. When finance capital took full control of the US ruling class, meaning that they lost interest in national production, chased chance for an extra buck through outsourcing (and sometimes, as in Enron, produced nothing but just looted), the Labor Movement was utterly disarmed, only able to cling to dues income in hopes of preserving union staff pensions.

The current condition of the working class, decimated and more than organizationally defenseless, speaks for itself. The United Auto Workers union, once the spear-point of North American labor, lost more than one million members in the last 20 years -- and did nothing but organize concessions under the promise that concessions save jobs. The largest local in the UAW is not made up of auto-workers anymore, but State of Michigan employees, an independent union that sought UAW affiliation after the Michigan Education Association refused them entry, because they were not teachers -- MEA conceding to the UAW continued control of state politics.

The collaborationist standpoint also explains why the AFL-CIO spends nearly one-half of its dues income outside of the US, working with US intelligence agencies through the National Endowment for Democracy, the American Institute for Free Labor Development, and other front groups; destroying indigenous left-labor organizations, using both the carrot and the stick, in order to prop up US imperialism. The American Federation of Teachers plays a leadership role in this activity, supplanting what was the

role of AFSCME before the election of Jerry Wurf now quite some time ago. However, this kind of labor imperialism influences every major union, including the NEA and the UFCW, and in many cases sets their course of action. The web sites of the affiliates of the AFL-CIO are awash with patriotic praise for the current oil wars. AFL assistance to US intelligence agencies goes back to their support of WWI, and their willingness to turn in those who disagreed (Billings, p116; Scott, Scipes.) Perhaps an equally powerful demonstration of the subservience of US union leaders to the empire is what they did not do: they never organized the massive military, or even tried.

The grocery workers did not know the history of their class, their unions, and did not understand the circumstances that forced them to fight. This had a lot to do with their loss, and the ease of the betrayal.

Let us come into this from another angle. What should the rank and file of the UFCW have known before they went on strike?

They should have known that this would be a bitter fight. Their employers would pull out all the stops. Walmart would be a serious challenge to the employers who understand that the source of their profits (their life blood and their sole ethic) is exploiting labor.

The UFCW rank and file should have known that every false division in their ranks would be exploited by their employers, dividing to rule. Women make up the majority of the grocery workers now, and a significant number of them are Latinas, Hispanics, and Black women. No women appeared in the visible leadership of the UFCW during the strike.

They should have known their leaders would likely betray them, as had the labor leaders of every major struggle of the last 30 years, from Hormel to the Detroit Newspaper strike and all in between. They should have known their labor mis-leaders shared one key thing in common with the grocery owners: neither party wanted a mass, class conscious group of workers on their hands. <<http://www.pipeline.com/%7Ergibson/IWWCHEST.html>>

This history of betrayal would mean that the workers should have know that they would need their own organizational structure, an inclusive and democratic structure, drawing in as voting members people from the community, other jobs, students, and a cadre of dedicated leaders. The grocery bosses aligned themselves as an organized class. The workers' response would need to match the play.

The UFCW workers needed to know that, despite appearances to the contrary, their struggle would be an international struggle. UFCW, and many US unions, have relied on the idea that they only had to organize the US work force. This appeared to be effective in grocery stores, since consumers are unlikely to out-source their shopping to Mexico. However, the work force in the stores, as well as many of the shoppers today, is truly an international, multi-racial group, sometimes working in stores whose diminishing, narrow, tasks are segregated by race and language. But the key leadership of the strike could well have come from these most oppressed sections of the working class, some of whom may well have had a lot more experience in labor strife than their US counterparts.

The workers should have known that the law is there to guarantee that they lose; that they would need to break it. They should have known that to win the strike would not only require civil strife, but the support of an active, conscious community that

understood what they were doing and why they were doing it. All would need to rise with all. They should have understood that pacifism in this strike would probably mean a loss.

The rank and file should have known that there is nearly no one left in the AFL-CIO, or the NEA, who actually knows how to lead a strike, and of that handful, nearly no one who has ever really led one. For the last 25 years and more the AFL-CIO just organized one series of concessions after the next. The labor bosses in power now are habituated to losing, and are unable to make strategic estimates and tactical plans for a fight, even if they wanted to fight -- and they do not want to fight as that might interrupt dues income and their coming pensions. Even if the UFCW drew on the widely proclaimed vast resources of the AFL-CIO for this strike, the arsenal was empty.

Unfortunately, it is clear that the work force understood none of this, had learned nothing from the period following the 1981 PATCO strike (when newly-elected Ronald Reagan was allowed to smash the air-controllers strike by the inaction of the AFL-CIO). <<http://eightiesclub.tripod.com/id296.htm>>

That the UFCW members did not know any of this is testament to the US educational system which manages to train people to overlook the obvious, to become instruments of their own oppression -- even to desire it -- and to search for someone else to save them, to tell them what to do. The decisive viewpoint that "all of history is the history of class struggle" is obliterated in US schools, as is the base-point of learning anything: you can understand and change your world.

As significant, however, is the success of US public schooling in extinguishing coherent rational critical examination of specific circumstances, in their historical context, inside an educational situation so thoroughly segregated, and segmented, that few notice their sequestration.

San Diego State student-researchers, in the first two weeks of November 2003, surveyed 120 striking workers. Of those who would speak to the students at any length (91), 87 attended US public schools, 77 of them in California. Forty-nine of the strikers had attended a California community college or university. Nine had attended universities or community colleges outside California, but in the US.

Of the 120 strikers interviewed, none was aware of any radical or reformist groups operating in the US labor movement. In answer to the question, "Do you know of any groups in the labor movement that are working to change it for radical or revolutionary reasons?" every striker said, "No." None had ever heard of the Industrial Workers of the World, nor of "Labor Notes," nor of Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

The absence of knowledge of the history or presence of the left would have to be considered when interrogating the strikers' knowledge.

While criticism of the survey from a variety of angles would be quite fair, it is reasonable to extrapolate from the survey and from a modest grasp of the sociology of demographics that the vast majority of the strikers attended US public schools, and the vast majority of those attended California public schools, now widely recognized as one of the worst school systems in the US -- but once seen as the finest free public education system in the world. <<http://www.pbs.org/merrow/tv/ftw/intro.html>>

The schooling the strikers received was a-historical, uncritical, and uncontextualized. More important than the erasure of the understanding that, "all of history is the history of class struggle," perhaps even more damaging than the elimination of methods of rational thinking, is the schools' success in causing students to believe that there is no systematic way to comprehend the world, no way to discover their place in it, and no way to influence the course of their own lives -- a partial explanation of the despairing search for others to tell them what to do. <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/Outfoxing.htm>>

If the critical questions raised above had not been addressed and at least partially answered, the workers should not have gone on strike. There was no question that a fight was at hand. No one in such a fight -- which in some cases was literally a fight for survival -- should engage that battle determined to obey the law -- choosing to lose before the fight has begun. Anyone wedded to obedience should not go on strike, and should lose -- without the fight. With the fight, but without fighting, the UFCW rank and file wound up with what was on the bargaining table the day they first went out. They lost everything they failed to fight for, they lost six months' pay, they demonstrated to all employers the weakness of US labor, and set up the rest of the working class for another attack.

The only redeeming thing about the strike comes through a critical examination of it as a failure. Even mis-guided resistance is more instructive than passivity.

The rank and file accepted their leaders' analysis of the terrain: social, economic and political conditions before the strike. Therefore, they accepted their leaders' strategy and tactics. UFCW bosses believed that this could be a relatively short strike, that they could count on the Teamsters at Thanksgiving (about five weeks into the strike) to disrupt grocery traffic, and that they could manufacture an acceptable sellout (after prancing the rank and file on picket lines a bit, giving them a taste of some hardship and a chance to shout, etc.) shortly after that. Only the closest insiders -- perpetrators -- know the reality, but second-tier UFCW insiders say this is true.

The rank and file of the union did not fully know the issues of the strike until the strike's last week. They could not explain those issues to the community. They trusted their leaders -- locating their power not in the well-informed potential of masses of people, but in leaders whose material lives are significantly better than the lives of the rank and file, and who benefit from the ignorance of the rank and file and of the people as a whole.

Trust in the leaders may extend from a consumer perspective, that is a vending machine view, of unions ("I paid my dues so act for me") that is encouraged by the leadership; giving them a chance to display the reasons for their privileges: time away from the job, extra pay and benefits, more interesting work, etc. Each side alienates the other, each participates; the workers lose.

Most labor bosses prefer to negotiate in secret. Behind a veil of protecting the alleged delicacy of negotiations, they can manufacture sellouts more easily that way. Keeping the rank and file in the dark about the issues in order to preserve the secrecy of the bargaining guaranteed that people in the community, who had a lot to lose should the strike be defeated, did not know what the strike was about.

The rank and file was left with mis-leaders, who did not grasp the real circumstances and had a stake in deception, pretending that they were the only ones who could understand the real circumstances.

The UFCW leadership also underestimated the level of support in the community, interestingly enough. They believed support would be minimal, when in fact support turned out to be considerable -- depending in part on the demographics of the surrounding community.

Within the confines of their small sample, San Diego State University student-researchers concluded that people over 50, but under 70, boycotted the stores during the strike, while stores near university campuses that advertised beer bargains were packed with college students. In any case, despite nearly no understanding of the specific issues of the strike, people in conservative southern California stayed out of the grocery stores in droves, costing the companies millions according to their own records.

The rank and file counted on their local elected political officials to help them out. Time after time, rank and filers were regaled by political leaders at UFCW rallies, promising to stick by them to the end -- as long as they obeyed the law.

The UFCW leadership worried, however, that radicals from universities and communities might try to influence the strikers on the picket lines, so they directed picket captains and the rank and file to beware of outsiders, to refuse to speak about specifics of the strike (details the strikers didn't know anyway), and to send any potential supporter to be cleared by a union leader. San Diego State student-researchers, most of them elementary education majors, reported being told to go home, to stay off the picket lines, unless there was a UFCW sponsored rally, when they would be welcome. But they would not be welcome to speak at the rally, where only properly vetted speakers would be honored.

Striker creativity was stifled by the UFCW's leadership. Strikers were directed, for example, to only use the UFCW picket signs on their lines, to ensure that only the messages of UFCW's controllers would be expressed. The union leadership considered, then rejected, the idea of an internet bulletin board open to all strikers and the community for comments and suggestions, fearing the open play of ideas might challenge their domain. Since it is usually only outside the job that people can express their lives in symbolic, graphic ways, strangling creativity rebounds on strike activity which could be a celebratory outpouring, diminishing it to a routinized system, not unlike being at work -- guaranteeing that strikers would find no joy in their resistance, and be less likely to heighten its levels.

The strikers went out with all of this as background. They believed the fearsome Teamsters would back them up and that their strike fund was a bottomless pit.

What did happen?

Teamsters solidarity amounted to union truck drivers refusing to drive through picket lines, briefly. Instead, the Teamsters drove their trucks up to the picket lines, got out, were replaced by a scab driver who was given the keys, drove the truck through the lines, emptied the truck, and returned it to the waiting Teamster driver -- an odd kind of solidarity.

The Teamsters were concerned that repeated fore-warnings from the grocery bosses, and from state and national officials, threats about enforcing Taft-Hartley injunctions against coordinated labor action like this (theoretically illegal -- as was the company's mutual revenue-sharing, never challenged by the state) might menace their dues income.

At Thanksgiving, the Teamsters did refuse to deliver the trucks to the stores. The grocery masters hung tough through the holiday even though their stores were only partially stocked, and their stores began to grow filthy.

After Thanksgiving, the Teamsters returned to their formal method of scabbing by formally not scabbing.

The UFCW leaders, who thought the grocery bosses might cave in at Thanksgiving, discovered that they would not. The owners shared profits from their nationwide chains and brought in scab managers from all over the US. The united grocery owners planned for a real fight from the outset. The UFCW planned for a mock battle, shammed unity, and were confused by the intransigence and solidarity of the other side.

Not long after Thanksgiving, the Southern California Teamster boss issued an immortal thought: "Well, when things go on this long, the one with the most money wins anyway." Teamster support evaporated.

No serious effort was made to mobilize the "Labor Movement's" vaunted solidarity (in quotes because there really is no labor movement in the US: most people, 88%, do not belong to unions, and what unions exist, do not move). As with other potential supporters, people from other unions were routinely turned away from picket lines. "Big Labor" was only invited to carefully controlled, scripted, rallies that were few and far between.

UFCW and Teamster officers did try, briefly, to organize actions at grocery choke points, food distribution centers, but they never made an effort to sustain the actions, or to hit all ten choke points at once. Their mode of striking was to pretend to strike.

For example, for several weeks in the strike, the UFCW lifted its pickets at Ralphs and told people to shop there, purportedly to split the employers' unity. That never worked. The employers stood solid as a class. The strikers stood isolated, as a union, divided internally by their own hierarchy -- with the union leaders, whose salaries more than double the rank and files', split against the members -- and externally the union was split from other unions, and the community. Structurally, the union could not organize a class. And the union's habits would not allow it.

Controlled pretenses to militancy come from Labor's fears about recreating the real mass militancy that took place during the Detroit Newspaper strike -- violent mass pickets determined to stop scabs, pickets from all kinds of unions, eventually crushed by the actions of UAW goon squads and the UAW leaders' willingness to identify people to the police. Spectacles of militancy, like carefully orchestrated arrests of polite labor leaders in suits, are preferable to the real uprisings of people who want to win. Big Labor learned their lesson and, outside of a few wildcat actions, genuine militancy has not been replicated.

The ideology of the grocery strike was set up as a family quarrel. The strike leadership consistently spoke out on behalf of the grocery owners, praising the quality of their

mutual mission. Grocery owners took out full-page ads proclaiming their devotion to the hard-working employees. Only the grocery owners themselves knew they were lying. The UFCW believed it.

Labor bosses do not want a mass-conscious rank and file in action, determined to win real power: control of work places and communities through direct action, potentially capable of pointing at the hacks and saying, "We do not need another layer of bosses in our midst." Labor bosses do not want class struggle, let alone class war. They have chosen their side, and they know it. Class warfare only exposes them, as traitors.

With no criticism coming from outside the union, or counter-action, the work force is defenseless, unable to defend what their fathers and mothers once won. Unable to control the processes and products they create, the value at work they fashion collectively -- and that they must organize to command, unconscious of the sources of their considerable power -- the workers are taught to rely on paper contracts, lawyers, and union leaders -- anything but their collective sensible strength -- as their line of defense.

Labor leaders know that power is always connected to geography. Workers' power always has a great deal to do with where the workers are. But labor leaders do not want to be where the workers are, on the shop floor, and they want to appear to be the well-spring of power. So they inveigle workers into pipelines of powerlessness, like grievance procedures which, at each step, distance workers further and further from the work place. Workers are also told their power lies in their ability to vote, to influence politicians -- when every lesson of our historical moment says, in the words of the former political action director of the Florida NEA, "If voting mattered they wouldn't let us do it." No labor organization, or federation of unions, can out-bribe Walmart.

In December 2003, the UFCW bargained massive wage and benefit cuts for its members in "Union Town," Detroit, at Farmer Jacks and other stores -- never notifying their California rank and file of this hint for their own fate. The Detroit members were told their concessions would save jobs. Shortly after the ratification, Farmer Jacks, Krogers, and other Michigan grocery chains began closing stores, laying off hundreds of workers.

In January, the enormous 260,000 member California NEA sent a letter to its members urging support for the strike, but the NEA (whose members, school workers, are clearly next in line for an assault on health benefits) did next to nothing to actively support the strike, to send masses of educators, students, and parents to picket lines, or even to offer curricula on the strike to classroom teachers.

In early February, the AFL-CIO leaders announced they were taking over the strike from the locals of the UFCW. The arrival of the AFL-CIO meant, without question, that the strike was lost, to be sold out. The AFL has sold out every major workers' struggle that happened in the 20th and 21st centuries -- or tried to and were beaten back by rank and file action, as in the Great Flint Strike against GM of 1937. But the AFL-CIO wanted a cloak to cover the sellout, so they called a few rallies and a handful of rank and file people got arrested around the state, but nothing serious. <<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~rgibson/flintstrike.html>>

The strike dragged on for more than five months, past Christmas, past February, when strike benefits were exhausted. Striker health benefits were cut off, threatening lives, denying people health benefits and needed operations. Strikers lost their homes, moved to

other jobs and other states and gave up pensions, left vocations they had been in for 20-plus years.

Shortly after, the AFL-CIO and media spokespersons for the union declared that they had won something significant in negotiations: they had saved the union -- and in tough times they had negotiated some other things too. The full contract was never revealed to the rank and file before the ratification vote, but the members by then would have endorsed nearly anything. They were exhausted. The strike was killed on March 1 2004, a little more than four months after it began. One striker said, "They are all thieves, the companies and the unions. They are just sticking it to us."

In April 2004 the UFCW leaders urged their members to "Vote Kerry!" to protect their health benefits.

The deal between the UFCW and the companies includes a two-tier wage system, with new employees making about 45 percent less, significant cuts in health benefit coverages and raised co-pays; it also defers pension rights by extending eligibility by about seven years for many people, and more senior employees lose the control of their hours of work. It is now clear that this makes it possible for employers to shift schedules to give low-tier employees more work time, and could turn top-tier employees into part timers.

The two-tier system divides the work force materially, sets up greedy competition, demolishes the solidarity the rank and file need to make or preserve gains. The two-tier system has been ratified in AFL-CIO contracts all across the US, including in the auto plants, where the UAW's racketeer leaders and the auto bosses declare themselves partners in production. <http://www.freep.com/money/autonews/uaw28_20040428.htm>

This strike, like the Detroit Newspaper strike before it, and Hormel before that, and PATCO before that, demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of the US labor movement. The union movement is structurally, morally, ideologically, and politically unable to meet the crisis ahead -- as competition heats up within the US, and between the US and other countries, in the relentless drive for cheaper labor.

The working class all over the world faces an intense offensive on the part of capital, and the people who represent or ride its processes, capitalists. While the capitalists are surely divided against one another (in the largest sense -- international oil wars) they know their real enemy, as the unity of Albertsons, Ralphs, and Vons confirms. The internal divisions of capital's personifications are secondary to the class war going on everywhere now.

In this context, as in all of their history, the AFL-CIO unions divided people -- by job, race, class, and region (the clerks in Northern California, whose contract expires in summer 2004, were never called out). Only new, mass, class-conscious groups who have an interest in self-actualizing critical rank and file members can overcome the severe test ahead.

What could have been different? What might have been done, or considered?

The grocery strike did not have to be lost, even with the huge structural and ideological obstacle that the grocery owners, the AFL-CIO, UFCW, and Teamsters formed. Things could have gone otherwise, and incipient actions within the strike, while really minimal, offer some clues for alternatives.

Groups like the Rouge Forum organized across the barriers of race and job, bringing high-school and college students to picket lines, offering labor history classes to strikers, joining actions on the picket lines. Labor Notes, a union reform group based in Detroit, offered monthly (mild) criticism of the strike as it went along.

Even so, while there is some value in the scattered disenchantment of the UFCW rank and file with their union leaders, it takes four related things to grasp how the strike could have been won: (1) an ability to abstract -- and make connections, (2) a sense of history; and both these combined offer (3) imagination and courage, (4) to find pleasure in this activity.

The schools the grocery strikers attended eradicated all that. It must be reestablished, in schools and out.

The ability to abstract and make connections allows people to locate themselves in their social and historical context. The ability to abstract is like using a microscope, backing the scope away from an initial object of observation, to see related objects nearby, and to see their interactions. Some grocery strikers did recognize the pivotal nature of the strike vis-a-vis coming attacks on health benefits in the US, but they could not make the connection to war, imperialist expansion, an international war of the rich on the poor, and the resultant intensifying impoverishment of the US working class -- the incessant struggle for profits that sets up every move in capitalist society, which denies its motives. Nor could they recognize the necessity of on-the-line communal solidarity from the outset of the strike, believing their union leaders mantra that this was their strike to win (Ollman).

A sense of history would have defended the rank and file from their mis-leaders, quislings in their ranks. All of US labor history is a history of leadership betrayal, opportunism, by union heads and politicians alike.

A recognition of historical context would have taught the strikers the necessity of demolishing racism and sexism in their own ranks, before it could be used to demolish them. Overcoming these powerful divisions also may have given the strikers the wisdom to accept leadership from minority community people -- many from other nations who have not lost the practice of resistance. History would have demonstrated to the strikers that they had to fight as a class, not as a union.

History would also have helped the strikers see that what appears to be is not necessarily what is, or what is next. In grocery stores, now, what appears to be is that every interaction is an economic interaction, between things: commodity/scanner/purchase; and there is truth in that.

But history, showing how things change, can help show that beneath the transaction are human, social, relationships, and beneath them are the more fundamental relationships of workers and bosses -- relationship always rooted in struggle, always in flux -- never settled by one power shift or another.

The party with the greatest interest to transform the exploitative relationship to a humane one, the party that has an interest in the greatest truth, is the working class which is always critical but not always revolutionary. Workers resist because they must resist. They are critical in practice. Revolution requires theoretical reflection on critical practice -- and a leap of understanding and action that is not necessarily built into critique.

Absent the ability to abstract and make connections, suffering from the erased historical memory that schools produce, the strikers (whose courage could be measured in their tenacity -- but not in their militancy or wisdom) were unable to imagine a strike being done in different ways -- strategies and tactics grounded in an understanding of class war, not a gentlemanly disagreement; the necessity of close human communal connections acting above and beyond relying on union leaders and politicians. The carnival of pleasure that a strike could be, creativity bound to the struggle for the truth, was never approached in this strike. Bored picketers counted their minutes on the line, just as they would at work.

What could have won the strike? Civil strife, well outside the bounds of the law, now nothing but a transparent weapon of the rich; strife that would include poor and working people, students, community people -- all those who had something to lose from losing this strike, that is, nearly every working person in the US -- organized not vertically, as the union movement is organized, but horizontally, *as a class*. <<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/%7Ergibson/OPENLET.htm>>

The National Education Association had thousands of members surrounding the strike, able to reach easily into communities, trained to educate people, skilled school workers often willing to volunteer for the common good as that is the nature of their job. It was glaringly clear that teachers would be next in line for the attacks on health care. NEA did nothing to mobilize serious action on behalf of the strike.

But did the grocery strikers ask for help, or did they assist the teachers in earlier struggles? That is of no consequence. Someone must move first, and the privilege to do so lay with the school work force. Their leaders did nearly nothing -- and neither did the rank and file. When workers wait for someone to initiate what should be a reciprocal cycle of solidarity, they forget that the employers are coming, forced to initiate their attacks by the requirements of the system that they buy.

Civil strife can take many forms, legal and not: building seizures as in the Great Flint Strike, mass marches, teach-ins in high schools and on college campuses, door-to-door visits in communities, Freedom Schooling and guerilla theater on picket lines, and in homes, coffee-clatches where people take note of the barriers in their lives and map ways to overcome them, shop-ins as those led by the militant Michigan State Workers Organizing Committee in the 1970's and '80's when community organizers and social workers led masses of welfare recipients, cut off from aid, who went grocery shopping en masse, and by-passed check-out counters as overwhelmed Detroit cops watched. It takes nothing to imagine how to stop scabs driving trucks on expressways at night.

Civil strife is the kind of discord that wins strikes, and carries lessons for future actions. Civil strife is beyond unionism structurally, pedagogically, emotionally, and practically. Civil strife goes beyond the decorum of parliamentary procedure that is so often used to stifle internal union debate. Civil strife storms the platform and urges action. The Detroit teachers' wildcat strike of the late 1990's was started by a rank and file educator who rushed the platform in a union meeting, grabbed a microphone, shouted, "Everyone who wants to strike, walk over there!" When 90 percent of the meeting walked to favor a strike, the union leadership was rendered impotent (*Cultural Logic*, Volume 2, Issue 2).

Civil strife can also mean a general strike, as in San Francisco of 1934, or an overthrow of authority as in the Paris Commune of 1871, the early Russian Soviets, the

1968 uprisings in France, or the Shanghai Commune, perhaps the high-water mark of failed socialism (Singer, Lenin, Lotta, James. <http://www.californiahistory.net/9_pages/hard_strike.htm>

The union movement, whose leaders tie their privileges and interests to US capital, will have none of this. Indeed, they will be formidable enemies, trying to halt it, as UAW goon squads did at the wildcat Chrysler Mack Avenue sit-down strike in 1973. In order to "preserve the contract," the UAW smashed the health-and-safety strike of their rank and file members, using iron pipes, numchuks, baseball bats, violence, and turned their bruised and unconscious members over to the police. <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/VincentChinChrysler.htm>>

Big Labor is nevertheless a force. Even with just 12% of the US work force in unions, that remains a considerable number. The NEA and the AFT combined represent about 3 million school workers, the largest group of unionized people in the US by a factor of three, strategically placed in what is now the central organizing point of social, political, and economic life in North America: schools. School workers, supposedly skilled and somewhat conscious, have direct contact with the potentially most vital link to social struggle, the youth -- whose class interests are not yet entirely fixed, but whose realistic interests, hopes, are crushed by rising inequality and deepening segregation -- and who must fend off the military recruiters, ghouls in search of new bodies, at the school house door.

However, the AFL-CIO is a federation of unions which offer virtually no internal democracy. As two decades of failed effort seeking to elect new leaders by a variety of reform groups demonstrates, the AFL-CIO cannot be reformed from within. It is worth noting that the radical effort to reform the AFL-CIO over the last twenty years has rarely been an effort to instill self-actualizing class consciousness in the rank and file via the usual routes of education, agitation, direct action, and organization, but has, to the contrary, sought to replace one set of corrupt leaders with another set of reformers -- who frequently became as corrupt as the people they toppled. <<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/%7Ergibson/OPENLET.htm>>

Nevertheless, the federation's unions still have members who control choke points in society. Dockworkers realistically threatened to shut down the oil wars with targeted strikes on the west coast in 2003. Still, they did not strike, perhaps indicating the role their leaders play. Even so, with millions of people in unions, and with no social movement having the resources and commitment to systematically make choices about what industries its cadre should enter, it only makes sense to try to work inside unions -- which many people must join anyway.

But the unions teach people nothing about what they need to know to face the international attack of the rich on the poor. In unions, people learn racism, hierarchy, sexism, subservience, reliance on false leaders, encapsulated thinking, spurious pluralism, retreat, mimicking the habits and work norms of the employer, privilege -- all the aspects of voluntary servitude. Unions are not training grounds for the future -- unless leading people are in them fighting to go well beyond unionism. And those conscious people need to be active over and above unionism. If four toes on one of their feet is in the union, the big toe and another foot must be firmly out, in organizations that prepare people structurally, pedagogically, emotionally, intellectually, habitually, pleurably, for a serious fight that the unions are unfit to engage.

To simply support the Labor Movement is to support a romanticized myth of what never was. US trade unions are the result of the social relations that gave birth to them. Those social relations are rooted in exploitation, racism, sexism, the division of labor (especially mental and manual labor in which the employer seeks to replace the mind of the employee with the mind of the boss) and imperialism. The unions were never formed to overturn that relationship. In the US today, class conscious unionism is banned by the bureaucracy. It is no mistake, only logical, that US unions look like clear-cut mirror images of those relationships within their particular industries.

To just want to defend the unions is to want to defend those social relations, if to make them more humane; but within the capsule of the outlook of house slaves -- and those who want to become them -- opportunistic to the core.

Perhaps this was best summed up by a California Teamster leader in May, months after the southern California grocery strike. In warning Northern California grocery workers about the employers' power, he reiterated, "Look, they have all the money, and that is what is key."

As long as the social relations of capital, the Master/Slave domination that capitalism *is*, persist, he is right. His outlook is the logical outcome of US unionist, and reformist, thinking. The working class has no money, no property, by definition; so they lose.

The crux of the capitalist system is the private appropriation of social labor. We work. They gain. The more we work, the more they gain. The more we work and concede the knowledge of the processes of our work to them, that is, the more they can replace our minds with theirs, the more we enslave ourselves intellectually and financially. The more we witlessly participate in this process, the more we are divided one from another. The more we do this, the richer they get.

However, once the source of all value is understood -- as born in labor -- and the permanence of the Master/Slave relationship rejected, then it becomes clear that money does not settle strikes; conscious people acting with deep solidarity do.

Most people do not want to fight to live. But now they must. Capitalism will not allow its work force to be creative, nor to earn a living wage with the benefits that mean survival -- not even in the locus of its greatest power: the US. It will not allow people time to make humane connections with others. It systematically divides and diminishes all in its reach -- now flailing at hyper-speed. People will fight back because they will be required to fight back; for money, health, freedom, creativity. They fight to be true to themselves and good to others, and perhaps out of hatred for the sheer contemptible venality of capital's favorites.

Civil strife in the future is likely. The US invasion of the world, centered not only on oil but international social control, is costly. The cost is already being shouldered by poor and working people. While no one has a crystal ball, it is reasonable to suggest that civil strife will rise up, with increasing sophistication, in the most exploited communities, especially those of new immigrants and blacks]. Early on, it makes sense to guess that much of this will be spontaneous, as the Mayday 2004 mass actions to shut down the LA ports and highways by un-unionized Latino truck drivers demonstrate. They fought to live because rising gas prices are starving them. They held signs not only about gas prices but: "No War!" <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la_me_truckers1may01_1,6203047.story>

It also makes sense to believe that students, whose dreams of a better, meaningful, life cannot be fulfilled in a collapsed imperial nation, will play a significant role in resistance. School workers can play a constitutive role in all of that.

Over time, with troops spread thin, and the super-military of the US shockingly unable to defeat a non-existent army in Iraq, it will be difficult for elites to quickly squash multiple rebellions in their home base -- but surely not impossible.

Now, Northern California grocery workers are preparing to strike against their bosses, who will use the sellout contract in the south as their goal in bargaining. The struggle in Northern California will differ, at least in form, from the strike that was lost in the south. The particulars are somewhat divergent. For example, the dockworkers, the historic Longshore Workers Union once led by communist organizers and the iconic Harry Bridges, is already involved in the grocery struggle preparations. The dockworkers bring a certain panache of militancy to the effort, even though they themselves were whipped into submission by the containerization of their jobs long ago. What is likely to happen in Northern California, if profound lessons are not learned from the tragedy in Southern California, is not a better struggle, but a more sophisticated spectacle, followed by yet another devastating defeat. This does not have to happen, but it will happen, without purposeful intervention.

Still, at its best, spontaneous civil strife, even the ability to control some work places and communities through mass action, is not necessarily class consciousness, and does not necessarily lead to the obvious task at hand: overcoming capitalism. Relentless strife does not transcend capitalism. Indeed, in some cases it only feeds it. The struggle for cheaper wage labor thrives on destruction. (Singer).

At a certain point in the midst of civil strife, which is the logical and necessary activity of people who have little or no choice but to fight back in order to survive, deeds must mesh with reflection -- *a conscious collective self-examination* that perhaps cannot occur without social practice, but is vital to the mass change of mind that must underpin any kind of sustainable social change for equality and democracy, intertwined. The base for that needs to be begun now. People must be won to fight and sacrifice for a way of life they have never lived, and only imagined.

Here is how Bertell Ollman sets this up:

First, workers must recognize that they have interests. Second, they must be able to see their interests as individuals in their interests as members of a class. Third, they must be able to distinguish what Marx considers their main interests as workers from other less important economic interests. Fourth, they must believe that their class interests come prior to their interests as members of a particular nation, religion, race, etc. Fifth, they must truly hate their capitalist exploiters. Sixth, they must have an idea, however vague, that their situation could be qualitatively improved. Seventh, they must believe that they themselves, through some means or other, can help bring about this improvement. Eighth, they must believe that Marx's strategy, or that advocated by Marxist leaders, offers the best means for achieving their aims. And, ninth, having arrived at all the foregoing, they must not be afraid to act when the time comes.
<http://www.pipeline.com/%7Erougeforum/towardclassconsciousness.htm>

A mass change of mind, even in the midst of civil uprisings, however, is unlikely to occur, and will not find sufficient power to sustain itself, without organization. The mirror images of the failure of any spontaneous reform movement to transcend capitalism and the abject failures of Russian and Chinese socialism (perhaps more than the working class finding itself nationalized, but only a little more), leads not only to the question, "What must people *do* in order to be free?", but also to the deeper question, "What must people know, and how must they *come to know it*, in order to rip freedom from necessity, in order to preserve what they have won -- and yet to wittingly modify it?"

All that is necessary for all people to lead reasonably free, creative, connected, communal, egalitarian lives is right before us, now. All we have to do is decide to share, to change our minds about how we want to live -- and shove aside those whose privileges cause them to disagree. It is easier, and harder, than it sounds.

This change, an overturning in the most literal sense, is a pedagogical and psychological problem that remains unsolved by radicals and revolutionaries alike. Many reformers, radicals, and revolutionaries agree that masses of people must work through stages of learning and acting, before anyone can mention that all of history is the history of class struggle. This is, perhaps, partially a correct analysis of their own experiences, which led them, in a deepening process, to that conclusion. It may also be because they believe the poisoned experiences of the communist movement, really the failures of socialism, have been successfully propagandized by the ruling classes and that masses of people are utterly closed to hearing anything like the idea that the government is little more than the executive committee of the rich.

This is wrong. The loss of the old communist movement is not much of a loss at all -- as it was hardly a communist movement. And, to the contrary, masses of people can easily see the processes around them, once someone who demonstrates a serious concern for them, out of solidarity, says: The working class and the employing class have only contradiction in common. A conscious working class is the decisive side of this contradiction. So what shall we do to learn how to become free?

Saying that, declaring that class consciousness is a life-and-death question, clearly, does not equate with doing it. Without saying it, though, it may never get done.

As the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs both concluded in their last books before their deaths, decades apart: Justice demands organization. This is why the Rouge Forum and similar organizations were founded, seeking to build an egalitarian and democratic movement of resistance and transformation, inside an ignoble society, facing a ruthless opposition. These are the questions that challenge us today.

One week after the end of the strike, San Diego State student-researchers went to local grocery stores and surveyed 34 former strikers at work. It was necessary for the students to separate former strikers from others (some of them former scabs, some just new employees), as a good deal of turnover appeared to have taken place. Of those ex-strikers who were surveyed, 27 said they had won something in the strike. Of that group, 19 said the only thing they won was, "We saved our union."

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Addendum

A Labor Studies Bibliography: <<http://www.pipeline.com/~rgibson/laborstudiesbiblio.htm>>

The Rouge Forum: <<http://www.Rougeforum.org>>

For an opposing view written by a union reformer, see: Michael Yates, *Why Unions Matter*. See also the online publications of "Labor Notes," at <<http://www.labornotes.org/>>.

The debate between social historians and more traditional historians, vis a vis their method of constructing labor history and especially the history of the CPUSA, is summarized in Jack Scott, *A Communist Life* (p5). The fact that the US labor movement was steeped in especially powerful forms of racism from its inception may be related to the unique development of the US, in that slavery and Jim Crow located a semi-colonized work force within the US, as distinct from, say, the British imperial system. This may have deepened the internalization of a sense of supremacy within the white (and usually male) skilled work force, yet at the same time located a profound wisdom and necessity for struggle within parts of the black community which, as W.E.B Dubois, James Baldwin, Eric Foner, James Boggs, and others have demonstrated, has been pivotal for social change in the US. See especially Boggs' *Racism and the Class Struggle*. This key division of the US workforce is treated as a superficial aberration, at best, by the AFL-CIO, which has consistently betrayed even the electoral actions of the black community (see Robert Moses, *Radical Equations*).

The debate between those who believe in spontaneous organization and a rather organic coming to consciousness in the working class, and those who believe that external organizations of professional cadre is sometimes set up as a debate between Lenin's *What Is to be Done*, and all comers, from Rosa Luxembour to Raya Dunayevskaya and many in between. There is an exhaustive bibliography here: <<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~rgibson/freirall.htm>>.

While I cannot accept the idea that people naturally come to understand the whys and hows to overcome capital and build a new world, neither can I accept Lenin's early work which he suggests, in later writings, was unsophisticated, un-dialectical (Ollman p43). I think that his self-criticism is correct. The issue remains a serious problem today. None-the-less, it is clear to me that Lukacs' key point, that consciousness must have an organizational form, is correct.

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