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Reviving Working Class Politics: Canadian Labour and the Struggle for Public Services

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The trade unions ought not to forget that they cannot continue to hold the position they now occupy unless they really march in the van of the working class. – *Friedrich Engels*

Introduction

This article begins with an exploration of the work of Marx and Engels in an effort to shed light on the progressive potential and political limitations of trade union organizing as an end in itself. Although trade unions emerged from the working class, they did not come to represent the interests of the class as a whole. While organizing workers at the point of production is not only important but necessary, Marx and Engels argued that in failing to come to terms with the root sectionalism of trade unionism organized labour risked impeding the formation of an alternative political and class project. Challenging the entrenched power of capital and the state, they argued, required the development of a class-oriented trade unionism that sought to develop the radical potential of the working class as a whole. In doing so, however, trade unionists would need to come to terms with the structural constraints of organizing within the political and economic parameters of capitalism, developing a counter-culture of resistance that pursued social justice and workplace democracy. In making their case, Marx and Engels maintained that unless unions took the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back while they still had *some* capacity to do so, they risked extending the impasse of labour and becoming more an impediment to rather than an instrument of a radical working class politics.

In what follows, I explore the relationship between Marx and Engels' theoretical insights and their contemporary relevance to the general circumstances of Canadian labour. In doing so, I explore demographic shifts to the makeup of the organized sections of the working class, drawing attention to an increasingly feminized and public sector-centred labour movement. Although the long-standing pattern of labour radicalism may have shifted from the private to public sector over the course of neoliberalism, I make the case that while strikes and other forms of labour protest are important and

necessary they rarely translate into a political and class-conscious movement beyond the immediate event. This raises important concerns about how trade unionists understand the dynamics of capitalism, the challenges confronting organized labour as a social and political force, possible remedies put forward for challenging the power of capital and the state, as well as the relationship of organized labour to the rest of the working class.

Finally, as I argue in section three, making the case for an expanded public sector counters the prevailing orthodoxy of neoliberalism and challenges private capital accumulation as the engine of economic growth raising a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. In creating new inroads into spaces currently seen as private, Canadian labour, rooted as it is in the public sector, may begin to challenge the structural power of capital and the state, enhancing democratic control and potentially serving as an example for other sectors of the economy.

Marx and Engels on the Progressive Potential and Political Limitations of Trade Unionism

For Marx and Engels, the combination (Marx's term for union) of workers represented an initial attempt on the part of labour to collectivize their power and defend themselves against the imperatives of capital:

> The immediate object of trades' unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediencies for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labor. This activity of the trades' unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalized by the formation and the combination of trades' unions throughout all countries. [Marx 1866][1]

While trade unions were important for sporadic and episodic "guerilla fights" between capital and labour, they argued that they were still more important as "organized agencies for superseding the very system of wage labour and capital rule" (Marx 1866). In their view, the freedom of association to collectively bargain on behalf of and in accordance with other workers was for them a fundamental *potentiality* that under definite social conditions embodied an emancipatory force capable of transcending social relations of servitude. As Engels elaborated:

> [Unions] … feel bound to proclaim that they, as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social circumstances ought to yield to them as human beings; because silence on their part would be a recognition of the social conditions, an admission of the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit the workers in good times and let them starve in bad ones. ... But what gives these unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. [Engels 1845]

Because trade unions were among the first attempts by workers to constrain competition, Marx and Engels much-admired their demands for improved wages, workplace health and safety standards, a shorter working-day, an end to child labour, respect for prison labour, the collection of workplace statistics, union recognition and legislative safeguards.[2] As workers struggled together, unions increasingly began developing a counter-culture of resistance that served as a guiding framework for programmatic demands, popular educationals and collective strategizing. Despite being separated by trade, language, skill, ethnicity and religion (notwithstanding significant exclusions), many workers came together in makeshift community centres seeking to break down prescribed sociocultural, political and economic barriers. This included socializing at meetings and community events, sharing resources, experiences and collectively developing strategies for resisting managerial prerogatives. These 'labour tem-

1 Of course, such an assertion is today hardly revolutionary, although it increasingly seems so. But placed in historical context, apart from the aristocracy and bourgeoisie that were intent on restricting labour's ability to unite, Marx and Engels encountered a good many radicals (e.g. Bakunin) whom were also hostile, if not unsympathetic, of workers' rights to organize collectively.

2 Placing the context of growing labour activism in perspective, Engels (1845) wrote: "It is, in truth, no trifle for a working man who knows want from experience, to face it with wife and children, to endure hunger and wretchedness for months together, and stand firm and unshaken through it all. What is death…in comparison with gradual starvation, with the daily site of a starving family, with the certainty of future revenge on the part of the bourgeoisie."

ples' were often built by volunteer and unemployed labour, and financed largely by individual donations (Eley 2002; Kimeldorf 1973; Lipton 1973). The emphasis was on overcoming employer and state efforts intent on dividing and separating workers in order to socially and politically defeat them. For these reasons, Marx and Engels suggested that unions possessed the potential to become "schools of socialism." However, as these nodal points of community participation faded or were forcefully expulsed from view, often incorporated into official trade union structures where radical/socialist views were marginalized or severely repressed by state and capitalist militancy, the sociocultural and political praxis of organizing working class communities often became disembedded from the formal practices of organized labour.

While organizing waged workers at the point of production was necessary, Marx and Engels insisted that failing to carry such political momentum forward beyond the workplace could potentially impede future gains. This meant at every opportunity turning seemingly 'economic' advancements into political openings that could translate gains for a small number of workers into larger ones for the benefit of the class as a whole. But while craftsworkers and later industrial unions increasingly became larger and more organized, the failure to translate these gains to the non-waged, especially for ethnic minorities and women, deepened existing cleavages among the working classes.

For Marx and Engels this played a dual role. First, in fomenting internal working class resentment aimed at a so-called "labour aristocracy" and second, in leading some unionized sectors into an alliance with capital – to be mediated by a "neutral" state – and social democratic parties in the hopes that such improvements would continue. The irony for Marx and Engels was that rather than developing the capacities of workers as class organizations, unions were increasingly becoming less "points of attack" or "agencies of organization" as they had hoped, than they were integrating the logic of capital into the process of production and trade union practices (e.g. tying wage gains to increases in productivity and encouraging competition rather than demanding the abolishment of the wage labour system). In other words, although unions emerged out of the working class, they were not representing the interests of the class as a whole but rather the sectionalist interests of their own members even if some gains were extended to others.3 In narrowly devoting their energies to maximizing the value of their members' commodified labour power, unions were increasingly failing to come to terms with the systemic tendencies that progressively undermined the extension of those workplace gains to the non-unionized, un(der) employed and those who work but are not paid (e.g. caregivers and domestic workers responsible for social reproduction).

As a consequence, Marx and Engels became increasingly concerned with what they saw as the growing opportunism and trenchant economism of elected union officials. For instance, they wrote of "venal trade union leaders" who in finding employment with the liberal party were able to deliver working class votes.[4] This worked to not only depoliticize but declass the growing militancy of trade unions, while integrating workers into the dependent orbit of capital. Writing of the perverse ability of political parties to draw votes from labour unions whose class interests were largely hostile to the party they were supporting, Marx and Engels anticipated to a significant extent the gradual integration, discipline and when necessary expulsion of the more militant and radicalized trade union activists.[5] (All problems that have increased by several orders of magnitude in the ensuing 150 years).

Lured by the competition for self-preservation among workers, trades unionists increasingly moved away from building the union as part of asserting the interests of the class as a whole and instead towards

3 As Marx (1866 n.p.) put it, "Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements."

4 Reflecting on this point, Marx wrote: "When I denounced them [trade union leaders] at the Hague Congress I knew I was letting myself in for unpopularity, calumny, etc, but such consequences have always been a matter of indifference to me. …In making that denouncement I was only doing my duty" (Marx 1874).

5 "[Because] every class struggle is a political struggle...The organization of the proletarian into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves" (Marx and Engels 2002:229).

the preservation and betterment of their own memberships. This was accompanied by an increasing entanglement of labour unions with officially social democratic parties that accepted the logic of capital and thereby an electoral landscape that marginalized extra-parliamentary and extra-judicial actions in favour of incrementalism, unionism as an end in itself, "reformism" and representative democracy.[6]

In their view, this depoliticized, even co-opted, form of trade unionism hindered the formation of an independent working class political initiative. In protecting their marginally advantaged positions at the expense of the unorganized and underemployed majority, unions were essentially paving the way for their own decline. Seeking to reorient and broaden the scope of trade unionism in the form of a class unionism, Marx argued:

> The trade unions are an aristocratic minority. The poorer workers can not join them: the great mass of workers, driven daily by economic developments from the villages into the cities, remain outside the trade unions for a long time, and the poorest of all never belong to them. The same goes for the workers born in London's East End, where one out of ten belongs to the trade unions. The farm workers, the day laborers, never belong to these trade unions. The trade unions by standing alone are powerless – they will remain a minority. They do not have the mass of proletarians behind them. [Lynd 2001:53]

In other words, when unions focused almost exclusively on workplace gains, particularly those economic in nature, exclusion from the benefits of unionization often aroused working class resentment. And while their gains often translated into some concessions from capital or legislative benefits for the non-unionized, these came to be associated with the party in power rather than the class struggles which led to their making. Moreover, these legislative gains would always be under attack and temporary owing to the volatile fluctuations of market demands. Marx and Engels argued that a one-dimensional emphasis on union gains was a political trap because capital and the state promoted the view that "privileged" unionized workers gained at the expense of their non-unionized counterparts. Instead, they emphasized that neither protective legislation from the "great trade union of the ruling class" (i.e. the state), nor the resistance of the trade unionists alone abolished the main thing that had to be eliminated: "The capital-labour relationship, which the antagonism between the capitalist class and the wage-working class always generates anew" (Lapides 1987:161). For Marx and Engels, if trade unions were going to have a progressive future they needed to recognize that while they could bargain within the system they could not escape the political and economic contradictions that stymied their continual expansion owing to their class exploitation. The challenge before unions, then, was to simultaneously improve the working conditions of their members while extending those gains to the non-unionized, underemployed and unwaged as part of generating a socialistic class consciousness.

As long as capitalistic social relations were dominant and the imperatives of cut-throat competition, labour rationality and profit maximization most important, Marx and Engels argued that the working class would remain in a position of modern-day serfdom.[7] As such, they stressed that the labour movement alone was incapable of abolishing the root causes of workers' distress. Unless unions made an effort to broaden their aims and advocate on behalf of and in accordance with all of society's oppressed (i.e. class-struggle unionism), unions risked degenerating into almost reactionary enclaves of privilege, upholding the manifest divisions of the working class and stunting its political development. Rather

6 See Kolasky 1990; Penner 1992; Bercuson 1990; Upchurch et al. 2009; Carroll and Ratner 2005. Also, writing in response to the development of social democratic trade unionism and the inability of unions to represent the class as a whole, Engels wrote: "The trade-union movement, among all the big, strong and rich trade unions, has become more an obstacle to the general movement than an instrument of its progress; and outside of the trade unions there are an immense mass of workers in London who have kept quite a distance away from the political movement for several years, and as a result are very ignorant. But on the other hand they are also free of the many traditional prejudices of the trade unions and the other old sects, and therefore form excellent material with which one can work" (Engels 1871).

7 Thus Marx and Engels emphasized the need to challenge the centrality of "wage-slavery." Certainly improved wages were important but would amount to little more than "better payment for the slave, and would not win wither for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity" (Marx 2001:118-119).

than applying palliatives, trades unions must cure the malady: if unions were to become progressive forces of movement, rather than reactionary, even if defensive, opportunists, this meant building unions as expressions of working class unity.[8]

But of course this did not mean that unions should dogmatically assert the one 'right way' forward, but rather that they must lead to the radical left.[9] Marx and Engels were vehemently critical of doctrinal sectarians and narrow-minded trade union leaders that sought to put their goals and ambitions above the interests of the working-class: "It is far more important that the movement should spread … than that it should start and proceed, from the beginning, on theoretically correct grounds. There is no better road to theoretical clearness of comprehension than by one's own mistakes *durch schaden warden* [to learn by bitter experience]" (Engels 1866). Instead the challenge facing trade unionists was to go about actively building the political and organizational capacities of both its membership and the class in its entirety.[10] As they argued in the *Communist Manifesto*:

> The real fruit of their battle lies not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of the different localities in contact with one another. [Marx and Engels 2002:229-230][11]

For Marx and Engels the recognition of the simultaneously classed, gendered and racialized underpinnings of production and reproduction (notwithstanding important weaknesses) was central to developing the political capacities of workers to challenge the rule of state and capital (Anderson 2010).[12] But while they emphasized the transcendence of class privileges, they were aware that intersecting axes of oppression would not be mechanically resolved with the overcoming of class rule. They were apprehensive, however, about a politics based on differences alone and sought the means through which the diversity of the working class could be transformed via a class project that genuinely acknowledged and addressed these differences while recognizing their social and political interdependencies. In other words, a working class social and political formation united in difference.

Of course, this is not the place for a detailed overview of debates about class, but a few general points are nevertheless necessary to emphasize. For Marx and Engels classes are not things, a partition where neatly demarcated typologies, iron-like, clearly separate the producers from the appropriators.

8 "Apart from their original purpose, they [unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves as acting as the champions of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men [the unorganized and unwaged] into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as agricultural laborers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions" (Marx 1866).

9 Extending their analysis to include intellectuals, professionals and party leaders, Marx reminded: "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot, therefore, go along with people who openly claim that the workers are too ignorant to emancipate themselves but must first be emancipated from the top down, by the philanthropic big and petty bourgeois" (Marx and Engels 1879).

10 As Marx (with guidance from Engels) wrote: "That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves, that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule; That the economical subjection of the man of labor to the monopolizer of the means of labor — that is, the source of life — lies at the bottom of servitude in all its forms, of all social misery, mental degradation, and political dependence; That the economical emancipation of the working classes is therefore the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means; That all efforts aiming at the great end hitherto failed from the want of solidarity between the manifold divisions of labor in each country, and from the absence of a fraternal bond of union between the working classes of different countries; That the emancipation of labor is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists, and depending for its solution on the concurrence, practical and theoretical, of the most advanced countries; That the present revival of the working classes in the most industrious countries of Europe, while it raises a new hope, gives solemn warning against a relapse into the old errors, and calls for the immediate combination of the still disconnected movements." And thereby declared: "That all societies and individuals adhering to it will acknowledge truth, justice, and morality as the basis of their conduct toward each other and toward all men, without regard to color, creed, or nationality; That it acknowledges no rights without duties, no duties without rights" (Marx 1864).

11 In other words, despite important, even if short-lived victories "it is necessary that our aims should be thus comprehensive to include every form of working activity" (Marx 1871).

12 As Kevin Anderson has recently reminded, "Marx's mature social theory revolved around a concept of totality that not only offered considerable scope for particularity and difference, but also made those particulars – race, ethnicity or nationality – determinants for the totality" (Anderson 2010:244). See also, Brown 2013.

Classes do not exist independently of the changing historical circumstances and social relations in which they arise. For Marx and Engels, the "Lazarus-layers" of the working class are constantly shifting and redefining themselves, displacing past relationships and recreating them anew.[13] The concept of the working class never precisely delineated a specific body of people but was rather an ongoing expression for a social and historical process. Of course, in analytical terms the working class can be defined based on its relationship to the means of production and those who must sell their labour-power in order to live. But a broadly defined working class politics is about all labourers and their families, their paid and unpaid experiences, and the ways in which intersecting axes of oppression simultaneously influence other dimensions of social life.[14]

Put differently, it is necessary to do away with the notion that class oppression is experienced only when one works for a wage or participates in paid employment. Rather class oppressions penetrate deeply into the very fabric of social life and includes the waged, unwaged and those denied a change to work because their skills are apparently unproductive or of inferior efficiency. Thus the working class is constantly changing not only in terms of how it sees itself but also in its relationship to others within the class. As Marx and Engels argued, unions needed to look beyond limited membership gains and seek to advance social and political ones that extended to the class as a whole. If organized labour was going to have a progressive future it would need to be anchored in a politics that oriented its struggles toward the emancipation of the entire working class and therefore the transcendence of class privileges. Certainly much has changed since the time of Marx's and Engels's writings. In what ways are their insights useful to the Canadian labour movement, particularly public sector workers, today? How have compositional changes impacted private and public sector trade unionists? And what challenges might this pose?

Shifting Demographics and the Feminization of Organized Labour

There have been major structural shifts to the composition of union membership by sex, age, industry and sector over the last three decades. Recently, public sector unionism has eclipsed private sector unionism in terms of both density and militancy. Whereas public sector union density stayed relatively consistent from 1984 to 2003 hovering around 72 percent, total Canadian private sector density fell from 26 percent to just over 18 percent. By 2011, private sector union density had fallen to just 16 percent, while public sector density remained largely unchanged (Uppal 2011:6). This has taken place in conjunction with a significant shift in the gender makeup of Canadian labour. From 1977 to 2003 women's share of unionization rose from just 12 percent to 48 percent. And by 2011, more than 32 percent of women were unionized compared to just 29 percent of men (Uppal 2011:6; Akyeampong 2004:5). These aggregate density measures, however, mask important differences for public and private sector workers. In the private sector, men's union density rates continue to outpace women (19 percent versus 12.5 percent), but the reverse is true in the public sector where women are concentrated in higher numbers (73.2 percent versus 68.5 percent). While public sector unionization rates have remained fairly consistent over the past three decades – buoying total union density (around 30 percent) – private sector unionization has been nearly halved.

In Ontario for example, once the heartland of industrial unionism in Canada, total union density has fallen from 37.6 percent in 1984 to just 26.6 percent in 2011 (second-lowest to Alberta). Here too, total union density rates mask important differences between public and private sector work. While the former has stayed relatively consistent over the last three decades fluctuating around the 70 percent mark, private sector union density fell from 19.4 percent in 1997 to 16 percent by 2011 (Uppal

13 In other words, as Braverman argued more than three decades ago, "classes, the class structure, the social structure as a whole, are not fixed entities, but an ongoing process, rich in change, transition and variation, and incapable of being encapsulated in formulas, no matter how analytically proper such forms may be" (Braverman 1998:282).

14 See Thompson 2002; Roediger 2005; Collins 2003; Paap 2006; Fletcher Jr. and Gapasin 2008; Moody 1988.

20011:6; Akyeampong 2004:5). Paralleling national trends, women continue to outpace men in the rate of unionization in the public sector, while men tend to predominate (although in much lower densities) in the private sector (Uppall 2011; HRSDC 2011). In addition to the long-term gender and sectoral changes in union density rates, important changes in full-time and part-time work arrangements have also changed the distributional makeup of Canadian labour.

Between 1984 and 2002, full-time-equivalent union density has fallen from 45 percent to 33 percent, whereas part-time union density has remained stable around 24 percent. By 2011, the full-time rate of union density had fallen to 31 percent, while the part-time rate was 23 percent. However, among men part-time employees had a lower rate of unionization than full-time employees (18 percent versus 29 percent), while women's rates were slightly higher (25 percent versus 32 percent). By 2009, women made up 47 percent of the labour force and, although more women worked part-time than men, close to 73 percent of women who worked were full-time (Uppal 2011:9; Statistics Canada 2010).[15]

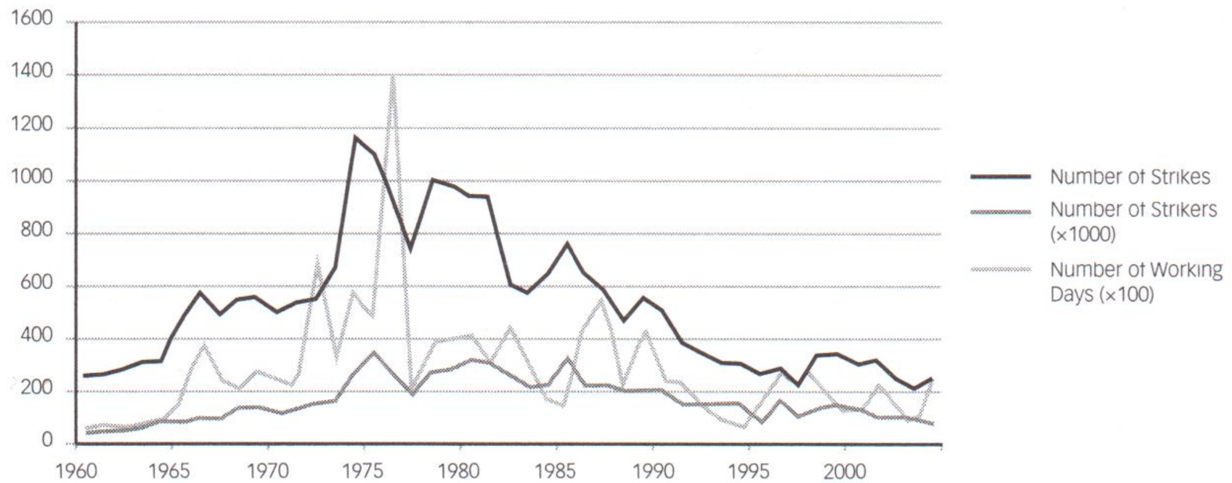
While women earned an average hourly rate equal to 81 percent of men's wages in 1998 by 2009 this had only risen marginally to 84 percent indicating an ongoing gender wage-gap. However, among full-time women who were unionized their wages were equal to 95 percent of men's wages, while unionized part-time women earned an average of 8 percent more (Uppal 2011:10; Statistics Canada 2010). Thus the evidence suggests that unionization plays a far greater role in reducing gender-based wage discrimination than equity-seeking legislation does. In addition to being concentrated in the public sector and in greater numbers among full-time workers, recent data also suggests that unionization is increasingly associated with older and higher educated workers. In 2011, 36 percent of workers aged 45-54 were unionized compared with only 14 percent of those aged 15-24, with marginal increases the further one goes up the distributional ladder (HRSDC 2011). There has also been a significant domestication of trade union organizations. For instance, in 1962 international (largely U.S.) unions accounted for two-thirds of all Canadian union members, but by 1995 this number had dropped to 29 percent. Over the same period, national union representation had risen from 21 percent to 57 percent (Akyeampong 2004:7). By 2010, the share of international unions in Canada had fallen to 27 percent, while Canadian-based unions rose to 67 percent (HRSDC 2011:14). Much of the shift from international to domestic unions has had to do with the simultaneous growth of public sector unionization as well as the general decline of unionization in the goods-producing sectors as capital restructured and relocated to the global south.

Today public sector unions are the first (Canadian Union of Public Employees: 601,976), second (National Union of Public and General Employees: 340,000), sixth (Public Service Alliance of Canada: 188,462), eighth (Fédération de la Santé et des Services Sociaux: 122,193) and tenth (Service Employees Internal Union: 92,781) largest of all Canadian unions. While some of these unions are branching out into the private sector, their members remain largely concentrated in the public sector. In other words, public sector unions today represent nearly 60 percent of total union coverage in Canada (HRSDC 2011:14). By 2011, just nine of the largest unions covered 50 percent of all trade unionists in Canada.[16] This suggests, paradoxically, a simultaneously concentrated yet highly fragmented representational structure. But while the sectoral and demographic composition of labour may have changed, has this resulted in a corresponding wave of trade union militancy or closer identification with one's class interests?

15 Research by Marshall (2011:13-14) shows that the employment rate between men and women is converging. Whereas in the 1980s men's labour force participation rates were 12 percent higher than women, by 2010 the gap had fallen to less than 3 percent. Likewise, although women continue to do the majority of unpaid domestic labour, Marshall's data suggests that time spent on domestic labour and childcare rates are becoming increasingly similar between spouses in Canada. A parallel narrowing of the housework gap has been found among teenage boys and girls. On the whole, progressively, from late baby boomers (those born between 1957 to 1966) to Generation X (born between 1969 and 1978) and those in Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1990), there has been an increasing similarity in men's and women's involvement in paid employment and housework, although the substance of the latter remains hotly contested.

16 All of these unions have over 100,000 members. Another 42 percent of trade unionists are in unions with more than 10,000 members but less than 100,000, while the remaining 8 percent are in unions averaging around 2,000 workers. HRSDC 2011:14.

Figure 1: Labour Militancy in Canada, 1960-2004



Source: Briskin 2010: 222

In terms of trade union militancy – a rough gauge of working class consciousness and confidence in collective action – the responses since the 1990s have been generally mild in comparison with previous decades of workplace discontent. (See Figure 1.) Where such stoppages have centred has also shifted. From 1970 to 1981, the data reveals a particularly heated decade of trade union militancy. But since then the number of strikes, workers on strike and work days lost to strikes has declined in lockstep. Research suggests moderate and declining levels through the 1980s and a sharp drop in the 1990s, continuing through the 2000s (Gunderson et al. 2005).[17]

Perhaps more tellingly, however, the data also reveals an important shift away from the long-established dominance of private sector trade union militancy. As Briskin (2010:223) notes:

> Even though many public-sector workers are deemed essential, denied the right to strike, and possibly legislated back to work, between 1995 and 2004, 27 percent of all stoppages (787) were in the public sector (the highest percentage since public-sector unionization). The stoppages involved more than 71 percent of all workers on strike. Furthermore, in this period, almost 20 percent of all work days lost were in the public sector.[18]

Comparing the period 2001-2005 to 2006-2010, federal work stoppages declined from 4 to 2, while provincial work stoppages declined from 32 to 17. There has also been a considerable fall in the average number of workers involved in major work stoppages: a decrease of 91 percent in federal jurisdiction and 68 percent in provincial jurisdiction over the same periods. (HSRDC 2011:16.) As Figure 2 shows, the average number of workers involved in major work stoppages has also declined significantly, although with important differences in the public and private sectors.

The average duration of strikes also reveals some important insights. Comparing 2001-2005 to 2006-2010, the average duration of major work stoppages in federal jurisdiction dropped from 50 to 13 person-days not worked, whereas this increased from 20 to 24 for workers under provincial jurisdiction (HRSDC 2011:10.) From 2005 to 2010, 90 percent of all work stoppages occurred under provincial jurisdiction. Part of this is explained by federal devolution onto the provinces which, despite delivering the bulwark of services, had their revenue drastically reduced in the form of tax points and transfer payments. On the whole, from 2000 to 2011 the total yearly amount of workplace stoppages four times reached new all-time

17 The highpoint of worker involvement in strikes was 1976 when strikes involved some 18 percent of total employment. Since 1999, they have dropped to about 1 percent of total employees.

18 Additionally, Gunderson et al. 2005 suggests this number may actually be even higher when contracts settled through direct legislative intervention and those denied the right to strike are included.

Figure 2. Sectoral Strike Activity, 1960-2004

		Number		Workers		Work days lost	
Year	Sector	#	%	#	%	#	%
1960-1994	Public	3751	17.8	5,177,586	47.0	77,634	11.8
	Private	17310	82.2	5,831,247	53.0	582,706	88.2
	Total	21061	100.0	11,008,833	100.0	660,340	100.0
1995-2004	Public	787	27.3	1,334,162	71.7	24,392	19.5
	Private	2096	72.7	526,343	28.3	100,376	80.5
	Total	2883	100.0	1,860,505	100.0	124,768	100.0
1960-2004	Public	4538	19.0	6,511,748	50.6	102,026	13.0
	Private	19406	81.0	6,357,590	49.4	683,082	87.0
	Total	23944	100.0	12,869,338	100.0	785,108	100.0

Source: Briskin 2010:223

lows, while the total yearly amount of person-days not worked twice reached new all-time lows.

Over the same period, workers under provincial jurisdiction six times reached new all-time low workplace stoppages, while setting a new yearly low for the total number of person-days not worked (HRSDC 2012). When disaggregating these stoppages, it is revealed that from 1960 to 1994 educational services, health care, social assistance and public administration accounted for about 7 percent of all strikes and 14 percent of all striking workers. Between 1995 and 2004, however, these sectors had come to represent 17 percent and 38 percent indicating growing public sector militancy in the context of workplace conflict (Briskin 2010). Moreover, public sector strikes tend to involve much larger numbers and be shorter in duration, whereas private sector strikes have fewer workers and are longer in duration. The escalation of public sector trade union militancy can in part be attributed to the increasing participation of women and ethno-racialized groups in union activities and particularly in leadership roles. "Women have promoted women's leadership, challenged traditional leaderships to be more accountable, encouraged unions to be more democratic and participatory, organized networks of women's committees to represent their interests, and pressured unions to take up women's concerns as union members and workers – through policy initiatives and at the negotiating table" (Briskin 2010:219). But what does militancy actually reveal? Is militancy alone indicative of trade union offensives, defensive struggles or a growing awareness of class consciousness?

As Michael Mann (1973) has argued, while strikes can be explosions of class consciousness the working class solidarity they generate rarely gathers momentum beyond the immediate event. Hence while strikes may lead workers to question the unequal relationship between employers and employees, those concerns rarely translate into a coherent awareness of class differences and class struggles, let alone critical assessments of deficiencies in the political structure or capitalist system.

While strikes are certainly important and can go a long way toward galvanizing broader community support in defense of decent jobs, legalistic straightjackets and authoritarian employers, they rarely translate into a clear ideological opposition and political perspective. Because workers are not inherently radical or conservative but adapt to the structured conditions they face, any process of radicalization will inevitably be uneven and fraught with ongoing tensions as diverse interests, levels of class consciousness, experiences and political preferences come into play. The challenge, then, confronting Canadian labour and activists, is to revive the dormant state of class politics lest unions continue to face both resentment from the unorganized sections of the working class as well as mounting pressures from capital and the state to rescind past achievements.

Far from creating a crisis of neoliberalism, the capitalist classes have emerged emboldened in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Ironically, despite a significant economic downturn that should have put labour and activists on the offensive, many are more atomized than ever. As Marx and Engels argued, should unions strive to regain their once prominent role in the pursuit of social justice and workplace democracy they will need to take the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back while they still have *some* capacity to do so or risk continuing along the several decade long union impasse and general decline in living standards. But as James Rinehart reminds, unions are paradoxical institutions:

> While they are an effective vehicle to advance workers' interests, they have also become a force for accommodating workers to corporate capitalism… Unions emerged in response to alienation and exploitation, but collective bargaining, the defining characteristic and essential function of unions, takes as given the prevailing power relations at the workplace… At best, unions nibble away at the margins of power, modifying but not altering in any fundamental sense relations of domination and subordination. And since capitalist power is at the heart of alienated and exploited labour, unions are not in a position to offer real solutions to these conditions. This does not alter the fact that, in capitalist society, unions constitute critically important organs of struggle and are still the only viable means most workers have to realize better lives on and off the job. [Rinehart 2006:203-4]

In seeking alternative forms of trade unionism, rank-and-file workers, labour organizers, academics and activists have generally converged on three points: (1) issues related to union bureaucracy, transparency and calls for deeper democracy; (2) the need to avoid economism and include issues related to workplace harassment and gender/racial oppression; (3) and a focus on increasing militancy and developing social movement coalitions.

Many have engaged in a lively debate as to what such forms a militant, grassroots social movement unionism might take.[19] My focus here, however, is on the irreconcilable limitations of unionizing within a social system premised upon the exploitation of one class by another and the structural and systemic imperatives that stymies the extension of unionization to the non-unionized and unwaged which lies at the heart of capitalism.

As argued throughout, challenging the consolidated power of capital and the state requires developing a broader ideological framework in which to anchor political-economic ambitions. Given the continuing onslaught of neoliberalism within the context of a reinvigorated austerity agenda, understanding the capitalist context that leaves workers dependent on the imperatives of capital is crucial to developing a political program potentially capable of reversing labour's decline. Part of the problem, as Sam Gindin (2013:3) has pointed out, is that:

> Capital does the investing, organizes production, manifests the application of science and technology, provides the jobs, and generates the growth and tax revenue for social programs and public employment. The understandable inclination of workers with only their labour power to sell is to accommodate to this naturalized reality, and this is expressed in the union form as the instrumental mechanism to meet their needs.[20]

While the power of unions lies in their willingness to act collectively in the interests of members, unless the root sectionalism of labour is addressed renewal efforts are unlikely to be successful. In order to potentially reverse the cumulative defeats which have befallen Canadian unions over the era of neoliberalism, a renewed labour movement, in addition to reclaiming strikes, sit-ins, work-to-rule campaigns, mass secondary picketing, workplace takeovers and sustained general strikes, will need to come to terms with the way capitalism permeates all avenues of peoples' lives. Absent a fundamental critique of capitalism, labour will continue to cling to the false hope that capital and the state will treat labour as an equal partner at the table when such a system of

19 For typological overviews see Albo and Crow 2008; Ross 2007; Camfield 2008. See also Kumar and Schenk 2006; Tait 2005; Turner et al. 2001; Brofenbrenner et al. 1998.

20 It is for these reasons that Marx and Engels stressed that: "Instead of the conservative motto, a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, they [unions] ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword abolition of the wage system" (Marx and Engels 1865).

exploitation is premised upon the very subordination of labour to the logic of capital.

The consequent tendency for labour, as Marx and Engels pointed out, has been that rather than fighting their true enemies – the capitalist class and state which sustains them – the tendency among the working class has been to fight the enemies of their enemies and particularly amongst themselves.[21] This is a common and widespread phenomenon, often illustrated as such: How can public sector unions demand a pay raise when the private sector is getting battered? Is this why taxes must be raised? Are unions to blame for a particular company moving elsewhere to take advantage of "competitive" wages? It is often claimed that unionized workers should be happy they have a job at all – "someone who's unemployed will do it for half the wage." These sentiments and this fragmentation is not without cause, of course. As Michael Lebowitz (2003:122) has reminded a "necessary condition for the existence of capital is the ability to divide and separate workers – in order to defeat them. Rather than a contingent, incidental characteristic...this is an inner tendency of capital."[22] In other words, given the structural antagonism central to the production and reproduction of social life, only clearly articulated political messages rooted in an understanding of capitalism's inner processes may stem or reverse labour's decline.

Looking forward, because Canadian labour is generally older, suggesting that unionization was inherited rather than explicitly fought for, a class perspective must be regenerated in order for unions to come to terms with how to renew themselves as a social and political force. Beyond episodic displays of labour's potential, most clearly demonstrated during mass job actions, it is unlikely that labour will be able to remake itself without a simultaneous renewal of the radical and anti-capitalist left. Additionally, as Thom Workman (2009:130) has argued: "Without an enriching dialogue about capitalism in Canada, an informational network that counters the nonsense of the nightly news, a working-class culture that affirms the insights and experiences of working people and the coherent resistance of organized labour, all we are left with is a diverse collection of issue-based, resource-poor, small-scale organizations biting at the heels of the corporate Leviathan."

Building on worker dependency and union sectionalism, and absent collective identities and alternatives:

> Working-class families found individualized ways of 'getting through' that reshaped working-class consciousness and contributed to the reproduction of the neoliberal ethos. Working hours increased dramatically, young workers stayed at home longer, married couples moved in with parents to save for a mortgage, credit cards became ubiquitous, families increased their debt loads. Housing became an asset to be used to obtain even more credit; stock markets were anxiously watched for their impact on pensions; tax cuts were welcomed as the equivalent of wage hikes. Intensified competition and worker dependence on 'their' corporations weakened class solidarities, as did two-tier wages within the workplace (alienating the very young workers that union renewal would depend on). [Gindin 2013:5]

Because neoliberalism not only subjugated and attacked working people but integrated and built upon workers' social interdependencies, a successful project for union renewal will need to reestablish an emphasis on working class politics. As part of this process a renewed Left would need to have connections both inside and outside of the labour movement and seek to link these issues across workplaces, engaging in political debates and organizing across communities. This requires simultaneously working to build the capacities of the entire union to fight back against concessionary demands; developing a movement inside the union that pushes for enhanced democratic participation and control; a radically feminist, antiracist, class struggle-oriented political praxis that engages with the struggles of the broader community; and educational efforts intent on building a cadre of workers and activists that embody intellectual understanding and are active.

21 As Marx and Engels put it: "At this stage, therefore, the proletarians do not fight their enemies, but the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy, the landowners, the non-industrial bourgeois, the petty bourgeois" (Marx and Engels 2002:229).

22 Or as Marx (in Anderson 2010:20) argued: "This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power."

The stark reality is that unionized, non-unionized, underemployed workers and those in transition continue to be hard-hit from the aftershocks of the global financial crisis. On average, laid-off workers from the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s suffered an 18-35 percent contraction in wages five years after being laid-off (Bernard and Galarneau 2010:11).[23] The 2008 recession seems to have intensified these long-term trends, but with important demographic differences. Whereas a larger share of those who lost employment in the 1980s and 1990s were predominantly male and employed in the manufacturing sector, workers laid-off during the period 2008 to 2011 were older, better educated, equally male and female and tended to work in service-oriented professions. While 46 percent of laid-off workers in the 1980s came from primary industries, this ratio had declined to 43 percent in the 1990s downturn and 38 percent during the 2008-11 recession. Likewise, almost 40 percent of laid-off workers were aged 45 or older, twice the rate observed in the 1980s (Chan et al.:14).

On average, workers who were laid-off between 2008 and 2011 and found employment within one-year saw their average weekly wages fall from $734 to $703. In other words, one quarter of re-employed laid-off workers saw their weekly wages fall by 23 percent or more, while 10 percent experienced losses of more than 50 percent.[24] Finally, workers who lost union coverage while moving across jobs experienced average hourly wage losses of 16 percent and (average weekly losses of 17 percent, while workers who moved from a firm with at least 100 employees to a smaller firm experienced hourly wage and weekly wage losses of 11 percent and 15 percent. Workers who changed both occupations and industry saw average weekly wages fall by 10 percent. In contrast, employees who gained union coverage or moved to firms with 100 or more workers averaged weekly wage gains of between 8-11 percent suggesting an ongoing union wage premium (Chan et al. 2011:20).

Since the recession, the quality of work has continued to degrade with most new positions being part-time, temporary or self-employed. This has hit youth (15-24), the elderly (55 and over), women and racialized persons especially hard as long-term unemployment has surged from 15 percent before the downturn to nearly a quarter of jobless people ever since. In light of ongoing attacks against public services, labour unions and activists within the context of austerity, a radical working class politics that places social justice and workplace democracy on the public agenda is sorely needed.

Making the Case for an Expanded Public Sector

David McNally (2001:175) has recently argued: "Every mass movement to change the world begins with struggles to reform society. No movement for radical change begins by demanding revolution as such." Any movement seeking an alternative to neoliberal capitalism must find ways of integrating both immediate and medium-term demands with larger systemic ones in mutually-reinforcing ways. Of course, unless concessions are resisted more will follow. But resistance is not a proactive strategy in and of itself: making the case for an expanded public sector must be part and parcel of any coherent strategy for transformative change. In the face of ongoing attacks against labour, many Canadian unions have been unable to stop, let alone reverse demands for concessions. Part of the challenge confronting labour, particularly those advocating for enhanced public spending, has been to demonstrate the social, political and economic value that public services (and taxation more broadly) provides.

Research by Hugh Mackenzie and Richard Shillington (2009) has shown that the average Canadian enjoys approximately $17,000 in annual public services; roughly equivalent to the average annual earnings of an individual working full-time

23 Like workers laid-off between 1993 and 1997, workers who lost employment between 2002 and 2006 found themselves in a much more polarized labour market: more than one-half of total wage losses and gains exceeded 20 percent. Moreover, the data confirms a downward trend in the quality of work as roughly 14 percent of laid-off workers over 1993-97 and 2002-06 found themselves in employment with lower skill levels than the job lost. Similarly, while approximately 16 percent of laid-off workers over the period 1993-97 lost pension coverage, this had risen to 20 percent for workers over 2002-06 resulting in more than 6 in 10 jobs providing no pension plan (Bernard and Galarneau 2010:14-15).

24 These findings are consistent with similar results over the period 2006 to 2008 (Chan et al. 2011).

at minimum wage.[25] With broad-based tax cuts the reverse is true. In reducing the Goods and Services Tax by 1 percentage point, this deprived public coffers of some $5.7 billion (and growing) in annual revenue. The irony, however, is that some 80 percent of Canadians actually lost out. Instead, the top income quintile benefitted the most. For households with incomes between $110,000 and $200,000 the net gain was roughly $50 per year, while households with incomes over $200,000 saw net gain averages of $200 (Mackenzie and Shilington 2009:21-22). Using those tax dollars to fund, for example, a national childcare program or redirecting them to local governments would have been a far more responsible, productive and socially just use of general tax revenue than symbolic reimbursements. Expanding healthcare, public infrastructure, education and pensions has the potential to reduce dependence on markets and on the private sector. What's more, there has never been a better time to undertake the massive expansion of public infrastructure as governments can borrow money at historically-low rates making large-scale public reinvestments feasible.

What's more, a number of authors have suggested progressive reforms designed to mitigate volatile market swings. This includes increasing taxes on financial activities, eliminating tax preferences for stock options and capital gains, reversing corporate tax cuts, raising income taxes for high-income earners and corporations, clamping down on tax evasion and loopholes, instituting an inheritance tax, raising the minimum wage and implementing a universal basic salary without means testing or work requirements (Brenan 2012; Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2012; Blais 2002). But while enhanced "regulations" on capital are important and necessary for any radical strategy aiming for a more equitable and just society, a focus on redistribution must bear in mind the class exploitation that happens pre-distribution (i.e. extraction, production, social reproduction), raising a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. In other words, rather than continuing to rely on the private sector as the engine of economic growth and investment, an alternative political economic framework must come to advance a vision of democratic social planning within a vastly expanded public sector. It is here where the power of Canadian labour, rooted as it is in the public sector, has a chance to demonstrate the socio-political and economic advantages of universal public services. Without undercutting the structural power of capital and the private sector, plans to expand public services will always be at the mercy of the capitalist class and state more broadly. Thus pressures must include aims to not only "re-regulate" but to democratize and socialize the sector as a whole – the opposite responses to austerity and privatization.

Of course, in order to accomplish this it is necessary to change the social attitudes about the conflicting roles of the public and private sectors as well as taxation more generally, while making the connections between social justice, universality and demands for deeper democracy. Starting with increasing the tax share borne by the extremely wealthy is an important remedial step, but increases to corporate and income taxes are only a portion of the remedy. Focusing only on the rich reinforces a perverse kind of individualism that reinforces populist anti-tax sentiments. Making the case for an expanded public sector through massive investments in health care, education and public infrastructure may potentially reduce a dependence on private capital and markets, and shifts the focus away from deepening market incentives to extending collective capacities for the public good. In other words, by extending the scale and scope of public services (e.g. pharmacare, early childhood care, etc) they could become instruments of popular control and democratic social planning, which might create openings for democratizing broader aspects of the economy. It is worthwhile recalling Marx and Engels' truism that the equalization of classes was incompatible with the logic of capitalism, and that while greater 'balance' is impor-

25 Of course, the extent of usage changes through the life cycle. For example, seniors benefit less directly from public education than they do, say, from healthcare and pensions, although earlier, particularly if they were parents, the opposite was true. Furthermore, the authors of the study demonstrate how the median Canadian household realizes a $41,000 in yearly benefits from public services, which is equivalent to roughly 63 percent of median disposable income in a 2.6 person household. Also, more than two-thirds of Canadians benefit in some direct form from public services, which are equal to nearly 50 percent of households' total earned income. Education, social services and healthcare in particular, account for 64 percent of total public spending, thereby playing a significant redistributive role (Mackenzie and Shillington 2009:6).

tant and necessary a renewed working class politics must seek ways of transcending relations of social exploitation.

In this regard, renewed hopes about the viability of a social democratic resurgence is a non-starter as it is both politically misleading and fails to understand how capital(ism) has evolved over the course of neoliberalism (Bello 2009; Fernandez 2009; Desai 2009). Through the crisis, social democracy has moved further away from labour and increasingly toward centrist, even reactionary, positions. Equally important, it is necessary to recall that the demise of the Keynesian welfare state occurred not so much for a lack of creativity in policymaking, but rather because of its inability to sustain capital accumulation in light of rising working class standards of living and democratic/popular decision making capacities. This is a contradiction Keynesianism and social democracy are powerless to overcome. The working class struggles and mobilizations that launched the Keynesian welfare state emerged from an earlier period of capitalist crisis backed by militant trade unions and socialist-inspired political formations. However, social democracy today, particularly in its New Democratic form, has rid itself of whatever radicalism it may have had in the past having made peace with capitalism. Keynesianism and social democracy have shed any past commitments to "reformism," having instead taken up the mantle as responsible managers of neoliberalism. (Carroll and Rater 2005; Evans and Schmidt 2012).

In other words, neoliberalism has eroded whatever 'progressive' remnants of social democracy that once remained. In fact, social democracy has increasingly shown signs of intellectual confusion having failed to break ideologically or politically with a social dependence on capital, let alone meaningfully intervene in recent labour struggles. Today, the New Democratic Party (NDP), in its various forms, has no transformative vision of society, adheres to the economic agenda of neoliberalism and displays no interest in challenging the logic of capital or the democratic functions of the state. The tenures of Premiers Rae in Ontario, Dexter in Nova Scotia, Doer in Manitoba, Romanow and Calvert in Saskatchewan and even Mayor Miller in Toronto, for example, lead precisely to these conclusions as each sought to deal with the structural constraints imposed by neoliberal policies (and capitalism more broadly) by further entrenching market reforms, demanding concessions from workers and a strict adherence to fiscal orthodoxy. Moreover, the NDP, like the Liberals and Conservatives, remain trapped in top-down organizational structures with little interest in building mobilizational capacities with labour or at the community and grassroots level (Carroll and Rater 2005; Evans and Schmidt 2012). Dedicated organizing strategies by Canadian unions' intent on creating new inroads into spaces currently seen as the sacrosanct domain of the private sector must emphasize the social value of extending public services. Making the case for an expanded public sector challenges private capital accumulation as the engine of economic growth and raises a set of demands for non-commodified labour and services. This means not only expanding the redistributive role of the state but actually taking the lead in ensuring that access to housing, public transit, pensions, healthcare, as well as improved working conditions, immigrant and environmental rights are available for all. In not adequately reinvesting its profits in decent jobs, the private sector is openly admitting that it cannot provide decent jobs for everyone. The dead end of neoliberalism and austerity will only make things worse. Reducing public spending will increase unemployment, weakening consumption and exacerbating inequality. Rather, widely socializing the means of production with large-scale investments in the public sector could boost overall employment, fuelling domestic demand, and improving the work and living conditions of Canadians through a more equitable, participatory and democratic form of governance and social planning.

Collective political action has historically been organized labour's most effective tool for progressive change. What structural changes to the broader political economy (e.g. enhanced capital mobility, re-regulation, offshoring) have not finished off labour as a progressive force in working class politics, anti-union legislation (e.g. "right to work," changes to certification procedures) seeks to consolidate. While the courts have played an important role in protect-

ing basic rights to freedom of association, extending some gains to the unorganized and establishing workplace minimums, its progressivity has always been the result of sustained politicization and class struggles. As Larry Savage (2009:18) has argued,

> No constitutional document, however progressive, can replace the need for sustained political struggle to protect and enhance workers' rights...over the long term, it may turn out to be the quickest path to irrelevancy for a labor movement that continues to tread water in an era of neoliberal globalization.

Considering the anti-workers architecture of the law (Glasbeek 1999), relying solely on the courts and the legal system to protect and enhance workers' rights and freedoms is an apolitical strategy that declasses trade unionism and is unlikely to be successful. As an alternative, a class-oriented labour movement espousing a renewed working class politics may offer a way out of the impasse of Canadian labour.

Conclusion

The shape taken by struggles over austerity and social services may determine whether neoliberalism continues uninterrupted or alternatively whether something new and historically unique can capture the public's imagination. Given the scale and scope of what labour unions and the working class is collectively up against, organizing solely around specific issues and particular constituencies – as impressive and energetic it may be – cannot add up to the kind of strength, organization and structure that is needed to bring about significant change. To that end, labour unions remain the largest, most organized, resourced and stable institutions – institutions of a class "in itself" but not yet "for itself" – fighting against the rule of capital. But, as Marx and Engels stressed, while trade unions must be a central part of this progressive political renewal, their renewal is equally dependent upon a broader revitalization of working class politics. The course of neoliberalism has thoroughly beaten back what vestiges remain of trade union militancy, notwithstanding important exceptions, while social movements generally remain isolated in small-scale and resource-poor coalitions. New coalitions, alignments and networks will most certainly emerge as the austerity agenda hardens. The inability of organized labour and social justice communities to significantly challenge the imperatives of capital and the state belies the need for a new kind of radical, anti-capitalist political project suited to the current social conjuncture. Accepting the existing social relations as unalterable would be to recognize the right of capital to exploit labour. As Peter Mieksins once put it: "To abandon class politics and the effort to unify the working-class becomes a sure way of maintaining the capitalist mode of production" (Mieksins 1986:118). The challenge facing trade union and social justice activists is to move left of social democracy – to the radical and anti-capitalist left – or risk increasingly becoming an impediment to rather than an instrument of a renewed working class politics. The failure to do so may regrettably amount to an historic class defeat.

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