

How Can It Be Possible ?

"How can it be possible?" we keep asking as internationally we live the worst defeat the working class has suffered since World War II. That the defeat is quite real is undeniable. If the collapse in the standard of living in the industrialized countries and the devastating pauperization of the Third World were not enough, the destruction of human lives today and throughout the seventies and eighties should confront even the blindest with this reality. From the millions killed by starvation in Africa and Cambodia, to the thousands tortured in Chile and the Philippines and the extermination of the population in El Salvador, Guatemala, Lebanon and Palestine, our losses in what increasingly appears as a third world war are immense. Equally appalling is the apathy presently reigning in the U.S., which in itself is a defeat.

How can it be possible then? How can it be that thousands are massacred every day, almost under our eyes, and not a cry is raised, the only audible sound being the obscene squabbles of the politicians voicing some "displeasure" and reassuring us the blood is not on their hands. How can it be that in the USA itself millions are suffering and yet all one can hear is the call for more jails or more electric chairs to save the expense of the jails?

Economists will tell their story of interest rates with their clean charts so hygienic that not a limb, not a single death, can show through them. Psychologists have already packaged wholesale explanations ranging from the "me generation" to the alleged achievement by the masses of a "new maturity" in assessing what is or is not possible. All together, the sciences will tell us the issue is so complex that we should never hope to find an answer.

But it seems to us, instead, that the question is more simple. We're being defeated because we have allowed ourselves to be divided, at home and internationally. The forms that these divisions have taken, the means by which they have been achieved, tells the history of the 70's and 80's. The strategy of scarcity, whether accomplished by planned curtailment of resources (oil crisis/underproduction, etc.) or projected in an apocalyptic vision of rapidly diminishing resources coupled with growing over-population, was a classical strategy of division. To the

generalization of workers demands (less work, more income) through the 60's, the ruling class has responded with the claim that there is not room enough for everybody--in fact today it is not clear if there is room enough for anybody.

From the very start, that is from the 1974 oil embargo that signalled the beginning of the counter-attack, national chauvinism and racism have been the pillar of all economic strategies. The Arabs, we were told, caused our suffering. The Arabs, in fact, were so much the villains through the 70's, so much identified as the cause of our present and future poverty, that one wonders whether one of the reasons for the indifference presently displayed by the average American in front of the butchery perpetrated against them with their sacred tax dollar is not due to the fact that for years they have been identified as the cause of our present and future poverty. The game of course has been played in reverse as first falling consumption in the USA and now high interest rates are blamed for the economic strangulation of Third World countries and the repressive measures that accompany them.



But the use of national chauvinism to justify a massive attack on the working class did not end with the Arabs. With the valiant assistance of the unions from the UAW to the ILGWU, U.S. capital blamed its own attack on auto and textile workers on the Japanese. At home, capital pitted blacks vs whites, women vs men, women vs blacks, "Americans" vs Mexicans and Vietnamese, documented farmworkers vs "illegal aliens", the elderly vs the young. For years now we have been living in a Hobbesian society where the one is at war with all, and therefore reduced to spending all its energies to erecting fences around itself to protect whatever can be scraped from the pile from the attacks of the surrounding world.

From this point of view, capital's strategy has succeeded. We have been divided from one another and, thus isolated, more easily brought back in line. Never has the old truth, that capital conquers only to the extent that it divides, appeared so visibly true. That the unions have been indispensable accomplices in this process is easy to document. Chavez, the hero of the farm-workers struggles, organizing armed patrols to keep at bay and fight off "illegal aliens at the border" is the most visible, but not the only, example of the way in which proletarian struggles have been turned into struggles among proletarians, within a strategic perspective that assumes that whatever they win we lose and must pay for.

This scenario was played over and over through the 70's and continues to be played with the assistance not only of the unions but of wide sections of the "movement", whose strategy has justified a universal competition among different sections of the working class, nationally and internationally.

At the economic level, the critique of consumerism and materialism of the US working class has ideologically cleared the way for the capitalist use of austerity since the mid-70's. This critique, which accused the "over-consumption" by the metropolitan proletariat of being the primary cause for the poverty and exploitation of the Third World was moralistic, racist and sexist. Moralistic because instead of considering class relations it focused on the supposed moral qualities of the working class: greedy, soulless, overindulgent, deprived of class consciousness, egoistic, willingly exploitative and imperialistic. This critique pitted the workers in the metropolis against the workers in the Third World, telling the latter we are the enemy, we are the cause of their exploitation, and they cannot expect anything from us at all. Guilt-tripping was the

only strategy left--except we were all encouraged to do with less. Capital of course jumped on the bandwagon of the demand for "lowered expectations."

Now that poverty in the US has become a mass reality on a scale unprecedented since the Depression, we can see the political fallacy inherent in these accusations. We can see that eating one hamburger less in the USA does not add one hamburger to the well-being of the "underdeveloped" countries, as their increasing pauperization daily shows. *Weakening the position of workers in the U.S. does not help the Third World.* It only strengthens capital, giving it more power to discipline both. Today the hamburgers we do not eat, the cars we do not buy, buy instead the weapons used against the rebellions in El Salvador and Guatemala, and pay for the massacres in Lebanon as well as for more jail and surveillance at home.

This critique was also racist and sexist and divisive with respect to the U.S. proletariat, for it did not see that "over-consumption" is a lie for the vast masses of women, blacks, Latinos, immigrants both documented and undocumented, migrant workers and elderly--for whom the attack on "consumerism" could only have repressive consequences, justifying further cuts in their standard of living.

Rather than focus on the poverty, absolute and relative, of the working class, and its exploitation by capital, the left focused on its buying power. The left thus ignored a) the working class defense of a hard-won standard of living; b) that capital uses this buying power as a basis of the reproduction of labor power for capital; and c) that at the end of the exhausting work-day (which is far more than 8-4 or 9-5), a worker finds it very hard to be "creative" (as the left wishes them to be), finds it hard to do much more than muster the energy to "consume" in order to relax enough to work again the next day. The left critique also justified the claim that if these people are not better off it is their fault, because abundance is a matter of fact in the USA.

Only capital has a direct interest in accusing the working class or any sector of it of consuming too much. What is too much and who is to decide what proletarian needs are or should be? Most important, do we expect capital to redistribute what we give up into their hands? And if we do not, what purpose does it have to tell workers they are consumeristic, except to weaken their struggle and justify capital's attack on everybody's standard of living?

Equally divisive was the left's attack on the "welfare state"--a bourgeois term

to define those programs the working class has won in its struggle over the reappropriation of surplus. The struggles of the unwaged in the sixties--blacks, women and students--forced capital to widen these programs. For the first time, thousands of unwaged proletarians received a social wage for their work, causing a) a shift in the use of tax money from military spending (which decreased compared with the fifties even in the midst of the Vietnam War), and b) a shrinking in the amount of unwaged labor capital could exploit, and consequently the diminished need for inter-proletarian competition for jobs. Last, but not least, the struggle of welfare mothers in the sixties--a direct upshot of the black movement--posed for the first time a key feminist issue: payment by the state for the work women do reproducing the work force. It marked the beginning of a direct confrontation by women with collective capital in the form of the State on the question of reproduction, whereas traditionally women have been treated by capital as appendages of the male wage, whose work can be directed, controlled and organized by the control and organization of the male wage.

From AFDC to SSI to Medicare, none of these programs were ever sufficient for our needs, and benefits were obtained at the price of many controls, as is always the case in every work-wage relation. The strategy of the unwaged was to demand more, to expand on the basis that had been built. The left instead joined capital in attacking the social wage won by this sector as wasteful, parasitic and presumably demeaning because "unearned". In the place of the social wage, unanimously, all brands of the left demanded more jobs. Result: a proletarian struggle for reappropriation of surplus not only was not supported, but was attacked as a form of defeat: welfare recipients were divided in left policies from "real workers", a suicidal step at a time when capital was making every effort to mobilize the "tax payer" against the "lazy bums on welfare". The capitalist ideology that defines only certain jobs as work, thus enabling profit from an immense amount of unpaid labor, was reinforced. Moreover, at a time, particularly around 1971-73 when capital was besieged by blue collar struggles (Lordstown, miners) and blue-collar blues (absenteeism, alienation, dissatisfaction with work), the left emerged as a staunch defender of the glory of work, insisting that only through the job--as defined by capital!-- can a worker respectably earn its income and be a part of the working class.

By attacking the basis of women's demands for wealth and autonomy, all the

pious mouthings about the "poor" which the left uttered came to naught, for the left agreed with capital that women's work is not real work, thus should not be waged. While the left calls for the "socialization" of housework, capital builds MacDonald's, laundromats, high-cost daycare, frozen dinners, TV's, etc., etc., --all of which are consumed by women working two and three jobs, but only one with a wage. And the women's movement joined in, saying that liberation could only come with that second, waged job.

The "problem" with paying wages for housework, complained the left, is that the money will have to come from the "productive" workers; the left cannot conceive that victories can be won, that wealth can be reappropriated from capital, partly because they assume that the "overconsuming" working class has been bribed by capital. Better, said the left, for the men to keep the wage or for women to work even more (is housework really work?) to get a wage. Moreover, continued the left, housework should not be paid by the state because then the state would exert control over housework--as if, on the one side, the state and capital did not now control (or try to) women's work; and as if, on the other side, the left were opposed to the state when, in fact, virtually every leftist in the U.S. wants the state, only "their" state-- in which (at last!) women will become "productive."

The flip side of the statist left has been "alternativist" left who, equally enamored of work as the statist, perpetuate the illusion (as we showed in the first two issues of Midnight Notes) that one can simply step outside of capital, that one can go beyond capital and the state by simply ignoring them. But for the majority of people everywhere, "do it yourself" is impossible in the absence of resources, and becomes only a tool for the right to justify reducing welfare, just as mainstream left criticism of the welfare state fed the right-wing criticism of "throwing money at problems", of welfare as "demeaning", of work as "ennobling".

Thus the left critiques in both forms strengthened the power of the state. Rather than demand more from the state in exchange for the work already done, the left criticized the state for bribing the working class and called for more work. This critique facilitated the right wing attack in which the state now "gives" less and is less accessible to working class demands. By attacking the working class

precisely on the terrain the working class used in its attack on capital--over the appropriation of the product of work and over the doing of the work itself--by calling for "renunciation" and glorifying work--the left aided the capitalist defeat of the U.S. working class in the 1970's. The left thus helped re-establish the divisions within the class and aided capital to use the more powerful sectors against the less powerful.

Whether today capital still is in crisis or not is debatable. That we are is dramatically evident in our daily lives. We should ask not what capital's problems are, as the left loves to do, but how can we overcome the ways in which we find ourselves divided.

The crisis is a white working class shooting on blacks because they are convinced that that's the only way to keep their jobs. The crisis is women and blacks fighting around who should go first in thousands of workplaces around the country, both seeing each other as the cause of their poverty and discrimination. The crisis is women being forced to sterilize themselves or to submit to enormous physical and psychological pain to stay in a mine or construction job or chemical plant in order to escape wagelessness or the female wages of the typing pool--this rather than putting their energies for the abolition of these jobs. The crisis is a U.S. working class that now lines up to build weapons because this is the only way that they can put food on the table--which may prompt the question, *What do you have against a mugger?* since robbing and killing a few people is a generous act compared with the destructive power we are willing to create against ourselves and thousands of us in the world for the price of a wage (at an "honest" job, of course). The crisis, finally (?), is a country where the death penalty has become a popular demand to deal with those the system cannot accommodate within the boundaries of productivity--a popular demand because the assumption has prevailed that it is either you or me--there is not enough for both and one of us must go.

Competition is the name of the game and has been through the 70's and 80's. You have to compete, capital has told us since the first oil embargo, because natural resources are shrinking, scarcity is around the corner, everything--coal, oil, gas--is dwindling. We are too many, we consume too much. We are putting unbearable strains on the scanty resources of the earth. The left approved. Those more ecologically minded worried about the earth. The marxist-leninist reminded us of the Third World. In all cases the only possible

strategy following from these perspectives was either reduce our numbers or (which in the end amounts to the same thing) reduce our "entitlements". To the extent that this strategy has "succeeded" we are now fighting out--who is to go. And, as usual, those at the bottom pay the highest price.

We would not go so far as to blame the left for the crisis of the working class--the left does not have that importance in the U.S. The class certainly has enough divisions for capital to utilize, with or without the left. But we should not minimize the impact of the left either. In the left, we are dealing with organizers and information-producers who can significantly shape struggles and thus can reduce, hamper, limit, confine, compromise and otherwise damage a movement. Moreover, in the left we find persons who have the time to propose what might be an alternative to what we have now, and to suggest how to get there. The "spontaneous" actions of the class moved toward less work and more income, to a refusal of capitalist command and discipline, to less hierarchy and division in the class. The left glorified work, accused the class of overconsumption, urged discipline and formed organizations frequently little different from the corporation, the school, the army.

Why would anyone struggle for the goals and with the means proposed by the left? The struggles of the 60's and early 70's bypassed what left existed. Rather than help to develop and further what the class actually pushed, the new left recreated the old left with the old demands--and accused the class of having a backwards consciousness and activity. In doing so, the left reaffirmed the capitalist division of the working class and so helped defeat the class and pave the way for Reagan, the right and a new capitalist organization of our exploitation.

