

The Left Today

We have seen how the left has attacked the actual class struggle, intensified divisions, sown illusions and thus aided the right. We come now to the left's present, to the period most clearly summed up in the left slogan, "Jobs, Peace and Freedom." This slogan, and the program it represents, contains inherent political lies. On the one side, a job is wage-slavery and wage-slaves are neither free nor at peace with their masters; on the other side, capital needs war to enforce discipline and work-slavery--on the working class. The left thus proposes to the working class what is patently impossible. Why?

In the last few years we have seen a growing consensus within the U.S. left, at least in its "official" wing represented by the left-wing Democrats, DSA, NOW (and leftist women's groups), New Left intellectual journals (Socialist Review, URPE, Telos, etc.), anti-nuclear weapons and energy groups (Union of Concerned Scientists, Freeze Campaign, etc.), the Black movement (now mobilized by the Jackson campaign and more generally by elections) and even many of the Leninist-type organizations. They all agree that the best that can be gotten in this period, which perhaps stretches to the 21st century, is a New, New Deal, characterized by jobs--the revival of the old, creaking assembly line, management-union 'corporatism' and worker 'self-management' or 'participation'; peace--a 'reasonable' social-democratic foreign policy, arms-control talks; and freedom--a 'liberal' reproduction policy, egalitarian exploitation of all, a certain type of not-too-repressive state. In varying blends the same story is trooped out and it is the left's contribution to an anti-Reagan, actually anti-transformation, policy that sees the Reagan approach as being too 'destabilizing'--which is not a perception that is exclusively 'leftist.'

The left's program is premised on the total working class defeat which the left's strategies helped to bring about. It takes as essential the mediating role of the present state. It is trying to combine 'austerity' with 'trinkets' like 'workers democracy', 'women's equality', etc., in the context of an old work form. For the left to sell this program to the working class capital's program of wage-deflation, union-busting, budget crisis and militarization must all go through pretty much as planned in order to frighten everyone enough for

there to be a general working class belief that nothing more is possible.

But if Reagan and company are successful in carrying out their devaluation of labor, why should capital settle? Why should capital negotiate any New Deal, New or Old? Capital might respect "subsistence" (whatever that is) in the USA, but it certainly does not want to legislate a bottom...unless forced to do so. For the moment, if capital reduces manufacturing wages to \$4.50 per hour, it might pause at that level; but even then capital will want a free hand in case of 'emergencies' in order to test a new depth--after all, it is called 'free enterprise'. If capital holds all the free cards, why should it relent? Certainly not on the basis of vague threats issuing from the sybilline lips of Tip O'Neill, to be realized by a left no one pays any attention to.

There can be no social democratic solution unless the working class defeat of the early 1980's is decisively reversed. Reagan's approach has made half-measures and stalemated struggles no basis for dealing. There has to be a huge revival of working class struggle across the board to shake off the rising capitalist self-confidence of the last few years.

BUT, and here we have the crucial point, if the working class makes such a leap in the level of struggle, why should people settle for the left's program of a relatively guaranteed \$4.50 per hour with flexitime and anti-discrimination grievance procedures and patched holes in the safety net?

If Marxism predicts anything, it is that the working class struggle in its peaks of victory defines qualitatively new levels of the class relation; this is the famous "progressive" character of the class struggle. The left's program assumes a falsification of the Marxist hypothesis about history: that is, the working class will be able to undermine the present capitalism enough to impose upon capital a leftist program, but not undermine capital too much.

The left has based its program on a very unstable equilibrium, for the tendency of capital is to not allow the system to reach the equilibrium level of the left, while the class struggle which might propel it into the left's equilibrium tends to push it beyond. The left's program, although it appears 'realistic', proposes a most 'unrealistic' solution to the crisis. They hope that Reagan will bite deep enough

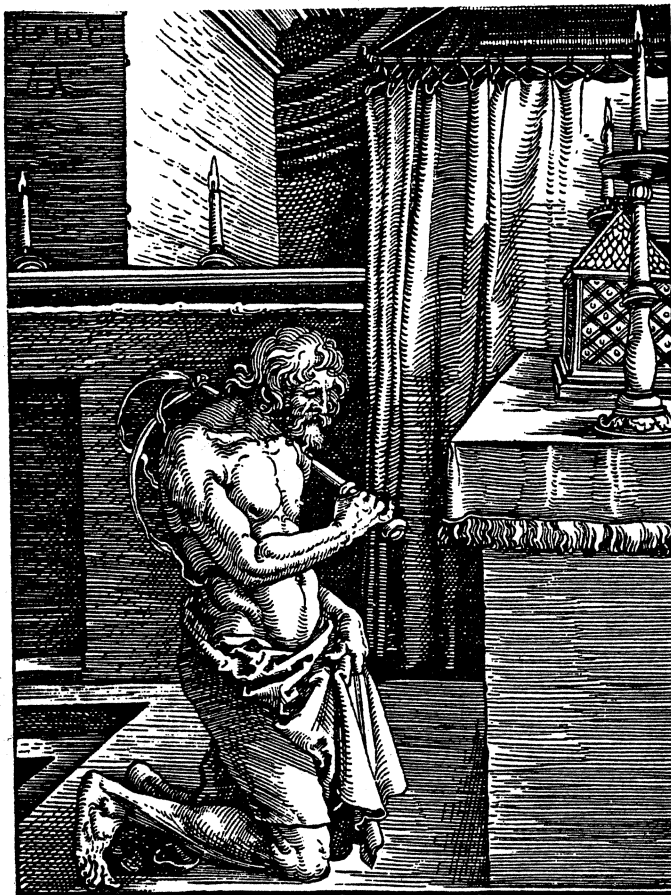
to hurt, but not too deep; they hope the working class will jump up, but then not jump too hard. But the variables are not controllable, nor do they have a natural tendency to 'balance each other out'. With the end of the downward rigidity of wages and the money illusion, Keynesianism holds no attraction to capital; but with the mass experience of the end of 'mass industry' a new possibility is open to the working class, although right now it shows itself as deprivation. So the attraction of Keynesianism to the working class also abates. No one seems to be cooperating with socialism in the 1980's!

Today the left says that no 'demands' beyond minimal subsistence/biological survival can be 'won' (and even this only by alliance with 'progressive' capital to preserve 'civilization'), and to 'win' this requires co-operation with the mediating power of the state. This is the worst possible deal as it combines the social order of the 1950's New Deal with lower wages and more work.

The left, then, accepts the defeat and only seeks to bargain a lower level of defeat for now. The austerity they have morally urged for over a decade has become an increased reality for more and more people; and in the Third World, 'austerity' has become increased starvation.

But a defeat means not only that we eat less well or do not eat at all. In defeat the class picks up the gun--against one another, as Fanon made clear. This is the deepest fact of our defeat, and one's answer to this problem tells one's political story. The left accepts--even urges--the state to be the mediator of the class contradictions within the proletariat.

The death penalty, discussed below, is just one aspect of the state 'mediating' the class division, protecting us against ourselves. But the same thing applies to Russia, the man/woman split, black/white, with the Third World, etc. Are you afraid of Russian tanks, do you want to help the Soviet working class? The Telos crowd says "Support the U.S., it will do the job." Are you angry that men get more money than women, that men rape and get away with it? Many women in the women's movement now say "Cutting the male wage was good, now we're all equal...Rape? Get more and better cops!" Upset about starvation in Africa? Get the government to tax the 'affluent' U.S. working class to send it off to the Sahel. This, after all, is the essence of social democracy in the working class: letting the state deal with our divisions...let government do it. The left in this period has ultimately accepted its role and its horizon in the universe of state power (and in-



deed not even the good old 'revolutionary' state of Lenin--forget about that).

Putting this all together we see that ultimately the left is signing on as cop. For if all you offer are "trinkets with no cargo" then you must be prepared to deal 'realistically' with the ensuing disappointment. For those who are not willing to listen to the left's questionable logic... well, there must be a place for them...

Thus, the left not only has aided the right by its choice of analysis, demands and strategy, not only is at an impasse in which all it can do is function as the left wing of the Democratic party, but also by its choices must also work to discipline any actions in the class which might upset the equilibrium suggested by the left.

This 'logic', once entered into, is hard to then reject because the compromises are too deep. The tragedy is that most of a generation of militants has substantially destroyed itself by accepting the essential logic of capitalism and, at the deepest level, sided with capital against the working class, to bargain over the degree of defeat and the trinkets to be exchanged for acceptance of capitalism. For any on the left who want and think possible the defeat of capitalism in its various guises, the break with the left must be thorough, for the left now is merely the most "human" face of capitalism.