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*Capital* and Organized Labour*Carlo Fanelli and Jeff Noonan*

Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him. (Marx 1986: 163)

## Introduction

At the heart of *Capital* is an exploration of an emergent world capitalism, not questions of workers' struggles or trade unions as agents of political transformation. Although trade unions emerged from the working class, they did not come to represent the interests of the class as a whole or the long-term human interest in transforming capitalism into a socialist society. In this chapter we explore these questions scarcely addressed in *Capital*, developing further Marx's critical insights on labour as a transformative social and political force. 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.<sup>1</sup> Challenging the entrenched power of capital and the state required the development of a class-oriented trade unionism that responded to the undemocratic and alienating structures upon which capitalism depends in ways that built upon the radical potential of the working class as a whole. In doing so, however, trade unionists would need to

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Engels made invaluable contributions not only to Marx's theoretical insights, but also to the study of working-class politics. Here, we will generally use the singular Marx, with the caveat that his ideas were heavily influenced by and, indeed, in some cases a direct outcome of Engels' pathbreaking work. See Engels 1977.

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come to terms with the structural constraints of organizing within the political and economic parameters of capitalism, developing a class-oriented counter-culture of resistance that pursued social justice and workplace democracy.

Despite the manifold problems that the history and current leadership of trade unions poses to the formation of a union-informed movement for social transformation, we will argue that it would be a political mistake to turn our backs on the radical potential of unions. Even though labour unions in particular, and the working class in general, have suffered major defeats over the last four decades, it remains the case that millions of workers belong to unions – making them an obvious space in which to build a unified movement for social transformation. But, as Marx argued, unions needed to go beyond depoliticized, economistic struggles – that is, struggles limited to the immediate conditions of work, pay and greater labour market regulation – to building wider solidarities beyond the workplace with the aim of transcending social relations of servitude. Still, even these limited struggles at the point of production implicitly contest the fundamental principle of capital: that capital alone will decide how to use and dispose of the surplus it creates through exploitation and alienation. We will argue that a key task of the left must be to draw out this implicitly radical contestation, and connect success in the struggle to control ever more of the surplus to a long-term struggle for socialism. Since workers' interests and relationships extend beyond the workplace, and paid employment is not the only incubator of struggles between labour and capital, the long-term struggle for socialism is part of the long-term struggle for democracy, a struggle to which Marx's work made an irreplaceable contribution. If direct appeals to class-consciousness sound too nineteenth century today, appeals to democracy continue to resonate. Hence we suggest recasting the goals of trade union and socialist struggle as crucial elements in the struggle for democracy against an increasingly oligarchic and life-destructive moneyed elite.

### The Antagonism Between Capital and Labour

Michael Lebowitz opens his influential book, *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*, by asserting that

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*Capital* is essentially about capital – its goals and its struggles to achieve those goals. Its theme is not workers (except insofar as capital does something to workers), not workers' goals (except to mention that they differ from those of capital) and not workers' class struggle (except insofar as workers react against capital's offensives). Even where Marx made sporadic comments in *Capital* about workers as subjects, those comments hang in mid-air without anything comparable to the systematic logical development he provides for the side of capital. (2003: ix)<sup>2</sup>

Lebowitz here picks up on a theme first explored briefly by Gramsci, in his analysis of the Russian Revolution – a revolution, he claimed, that was 'against *Capital*'. For Gramsci, *Capital* was corrupted by 'positivism and naturalism' and forgot that 'the main determinant of history is not lifeless economics, but man; societies made up of men, men who have something in common, who get along together, and because of this (civility) they develop a collective social will' (Gramsci 1917). The Bolsheviks rejected the 'laws' of capitalist development when they rejected a stagist theory of history and led a revolution in 'backward' Russia (see Schmidt, and Korsika, this volume).

One might respond that it is no surprise that *Capital* displaces class struggle from centre stage. Its focus is the inner process through which labour creates value and the exploitation of labour creates surplus value – hidden truths that workers must understand if their struggles are to be efficacious. Nevertheless, Lebowitz (and Gramsci) are right to argue that the lack of attention to class struggle means that *Capital* is one-sided. In reality, the amount of surplus labour available to capital for conversion to surplus value, as well as the rate at which labour must be paid (which affects profitability), are not a pure function of the inner dynamics of capital itself, but are decisively affected by class struggle. Since the labour power exploited by capital is inseparable from human beings, and human beings react against the harms they suffer, workers are never simply passive objects of economic processes,

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<sup>2</sup> Draper shares this view, noting how 'trade unionism is glancingly mentioned', and that Marx had initially intended to devote a study of labour and trade unionism to planned future volumes of *Capital* (1978: 94).

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mere ‘personifications’ of their functions, but fight back against them as living subjects (Marx 1986: 21).

‘There is a critical silence’ in *Capital*, Lebowitz argues, ‘a silence which permits the appearance that, for the scientist, the only subject ... is capital, growing, transcending all barriers, developing – until, finally, it runs out of steam and is replaced by scientists with a more efficient machine’ (2003: 25). Unless this analysis is situated within Marx’s work as a whole, where the focus is on class struggle and the determination of social conditions by the combined actions of human beings pursuing their interests in determinate circumstances, a mechanistic, deterministic, undialectical and undemocratic Marxism follows. ‘Limited to *Capital*’, he concludes, ‘we have only the mechanical laws of capital, a structure without a subject, a one-sided Marxism’ (Lebowitz 1992: 149). The one-sidedness ignores the fact that the struggle for socialism is not in essence a struggle for a different set of economic laws, but a different way of living in which the satisfaction of fundamental natural and social human needs is paramount.

According to Lebowitz (2003: 27–8), Marx intended to explain the role of class struggle on the operations of capitalism in a volume on wage labour that he never wrote. We are not interested here in the Marxiological question of whether Marx ever formally abandoned the original six-volume plan for *Capital*. Rather, we are interested in the practical question of what the struggle for socialism looks like when we take seriously, as Marx typically did in his political work and as Lebowitz does, struggles *within* capitalism for a shorter working day, higher real wages, and universal access through public provision of needed life-goods. When we take those struggles seriously we discover that the struggle for socialism is neither the necessary product of the working out of the endogenous laws of capitalism nor the result of a voluntaristic, all or nothing, once and for all revolutionary movement, but a process arrayed along a continuum of better or worse lives for working people, determined by the degree of democratic control they are able to assert over the production process, the amount of time outside of alienated labour they are able to secure, the extent to which they are able to satisfy their human life-requirements, and the extent to which the private accumulation of capital is redirected towards the public provision of life-requirement satisfiers.

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These struggles occur within the dynamics of capitalist society, but react back against them, modifying their impact on real human lives. Lives can be better or worse for working people in capitalism depending on whether or not their struggles are successful. The laws of capitalism that Marx explains in *Capital* are not, in reality, forces that can exist independently of the combined actions of people (if they were, they could never be overthrown but only transform themselves into different laws or exist in perpetuity). The difference between natural laws and social laws is that the latter emerge from human action and interaction and change when those patterns of interaction change (see Gose and Paulson, this volume). As Marx himself notes in *Capital*, ‘the economic categories ... bear the stamp of history’ (Marx 1986: 120). While Marx himself in *Capital* often fails to follow out consistently the implications of this position, frequently referring to capitalist dynamics as governed by ‘iron laws’, we must interpret these claims in the philosophical context furnished by historical materialist method, which, as the quotation above reveals, is rooted in the principle that humanity is ultimately a self-determining subject (see, for example, Marx 1986: 7). As such, nothing that the exploited and alienated segments of humanity do to free themselves from alienation and exploitation is irrelevant, nor are the organizations through which those class struggles are expressed irrelevant just in case they are not directed immediately to the overthrow of capitalism. What matters, in our view, is whether the struggles aim at reducing the structural power of capital over human life, and whether they are rooted in explicit recognition of a shared life-interest in reducing that power over human beings, and not whether they are led by trade unions or revolutionary parties, or explicitly aim at revolution in the short term or only at demonstrable improvements in human life within capitalism.

Despite the incomplete picture of the role of class struggle painted by Marx, *Capital* begins to dispel a number of previously taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the capital-labour relationship. First and foremost, Marx shows how:

The directing motive, the end and aim of capitalist production, is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus-value, and consequently to exploit labour-power to the greatest possible extent. As the number of the co-operating labourers increases, so too

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does their resistance to the domination of capital, and with it, the necessity for capital to overcome this resistance by counter pressure. The control exercised by the capitalist is not only a special function, due to the nature of the social labour-process, and peculiar to that process, but it is, at the same time, a function of the exploitation of a social labour-process, and is consequently rooted in the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and labouring raw material he exploits. (1986: 231)

Like the quotation that opens this chapter, here Marx is drawing attention to the historically specific social relations that govern capital accumulation. Of course, for capitalists the purpose of producing a commodity is to make a profit. Before Marx, much of the classical political economy tradition assumed that profits emanated from the act of buying cheap and selling dear. David Ricardo's, and to a lesser extent Adam Smith's, labour theory of value came closest, but failed to distinguish between labour and labour power (see Patnaik, and Thompson and Smith, this volume). Marx showed how workers are paid for their labour power for a certain period of time, and not for everything their labour produces during that time. Because workers produce (surplus-labour) in excess of what they are paid and what their products or services will realize in the market, and this belongs to the capitalist, Marx demonstrated in *Capital* that profits (surplus-value) derived from this discrepancy.

Second, this class-based structural inequality renders workers 'free' 'in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, &c., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own' (Marx 1986: 507). In other words, they are 'free' in the first instance to sell their labour power, that is, unbound from any socio-economic relationships that may constrain the sale of their labour power and, second, of any ownership or control over the means of production in so far as they must sell their labour power in order to survive. Third, this makes labour power also a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market 'converting the working class into a class dependent on wages' (1986: 411) whose value is determined by social subsistence norms. Although 'the value of labour-power is the

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value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the labourer' (1986: 121), market pressures compel capitalists to drive real wages below subsistence levels. Like continuous technological developments that produce mass unemployment and keep real wages down (see Chapter 15 in *Capital*), 'a surplus labouring population is a necessary product of accumulation ... It forms a disposable industrial reserve army that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost ... it creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation' (1986: 411).

*Capital* sought to counter the prevailing orthodoxy of liberal political economy by demonstrating that markets are not governed by opportunity and choice, and that the paired opposition of social classes was the basis for this exploitation. Rather, economic compulsion and political necessity were the driving motifs of capital accumulation. As Wood (2003) has argued, material life and social reproduction in capitalism are universally mediated by the market so that all individuals must enter into market relations in one way or another to gain access to the means of life. Although capitalist class relations give the unique impression that the labourer is a 'free vendor of his labour-power' (Marx 1986: 194), market-dependence is an instituted compulsion: capital has a choice, while wage labour does not.<sup>3</sup> In denaturalizing capitalism, Marx showed how unequal social relations were not trans-historical or unchanging, but rooted in the historically specific imperatives of capitalism – that is, the vampire-like bloodsucking of living labour, cutthroat competition, and labour rationality. To challenge the subordination of labour, it was necessary, in Marx's view, to recognize both the progressive potential and political limitations of unions: 'Instead

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3 Marx concludes then that: 'The creation of a normal working day is, therefore, the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working-class' (1986: 194). He later notes: 'Hence, the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire' (1986: 508).

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of the conservative motto, “A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work!” they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, “Abolition of the wages system!” (Marx 1866a).

## Beyond Trade Unionism

As capitalist social relations gained greater prominence through the 1800s – that is to say, as more workers left or were forced from the countryside, becoming wage-dependent labourers – traditional craftwork and the putting-out system were replaced by urban concentrations of industrial factories. Considering the unsafe and overall dreadful working conditions, vividly chronicled by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, workers increasingly began to organize themselves into unions in an effort to resist unbridled exploitation. This resistance was actively opposed not only by captains of industry who organized militias to violently repress workers, but also by ‘those great trade unions of the ruling classes’ (i.e. states) who sometimes led and in other instances created the conditions for capital to lead in ensuring conditions favourable to capital accumulation; not to mention radicals of various persuasions who refused to recognize the importance of unions in struggles against capitalism (Marx in Lapides 1987: 112; Draper 1978).

For Marx, the unionization of workers represented an initial attempt on the part of labour to ‘organize a regular co-operation between employed and unemployed in order to destroy or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalistic production on their class’ (1986: 448).<sup>4</sup> Because trade unions were among the first attempts by workers to constrain competition, Marx recognized in their demands a fundamental potentiality that under definite social conditions embodied an emancipatory force capable of challenging the power of capital. As workers struggled together, unions increasingly

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<sup>4</sup> As Marx (1866b) noted a year earlier: ‘The immediate object of trades’ unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expedencies 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.’



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began developing a counter-culture of resistance that served as a guiding framework for programmatic demands, popular education and collective strategizing. Not only did this open up the possibility for improving immediate life-conditions in the fight for living wages, workplace health and safety standards, a shorter working day, an end to child labour, respect for prison labour, and the collection of workplace statistics and legislative safeguards, it also generated the conditions for unions to act as ‘organized agencies for superseding the very system of wage labour and capital rule’ (Marx 1866b).

Let us take an example to help illustrate the potential of unions. Not coincidentally, this example is the one exception to the rule of *Capital’s* not focusing on class struggle: Marx’s historical analysis of the struggle for a shorter working day, a struggle in which trade unions played a decisive role. We cannot reconstruct the fine detail of Marx’s argument but instead want to focus on its general structure, to support the political point about the relevance of trade unions and struggles within capitalism to the ultimate overcoming of capitalism we are making. The *drive* of capitalists to lengthen the working day is forced upon them by the competitive dynamics of capitalism. From the perspective of capital, ‘the labourer is nothing else ... than labour-power, ... all his disposable time is by nature and law labour time, to be dedicated to the self-expansion of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for fulfilling social functions and for social intercourse – moonshine’ (Marx 1986: 179).

For workers as subjects, of course, education and social intercourse are not fantastical luxuries but human necessities, *for which they will fight, regardless of the objective requirements of capitalist accumulation.*

After capital had taken centuries in extending the working day to its normal maximum limit ... there followed on the birth of mechanism and modern industry in the last half of the eighteenth century a violent encroachment like that of an avalanche in its extent and intensity. All bounds of morals and nature, age, sex, day and night, were broken down ... As soon as the working class regained ... its senses, its resistance began. (Marx 1986: 184).

Thus, instead of a mechanical determination of the working day by the system requirements of capitalist accumulation, the actual working

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day is the product of class struggle, historically led, in this instance, by English trade unions. ‘The capitalist maintains his rights as purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible ... On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption ... and the labourer maintains his rights as seller when he wishes to reduce the working day ... There is here, therefore, an antinomy, right against right ... Between equal right, force decides’ (Marx 1986: 163–4). What is lacking here is only an unpacking of what is the ‘peculiar nature’ of the labour–power commodity.

The peculiar nature is of course constituted by the fact that labour power is always connected to a labourer who is not an inert thing (despite capital’s construction of it as such) but a living being that can join with fellow labourers to alter their conditions of life. Labourers are human beings that *feel* their exploitation and alienation and react against it as harm that violates their integrity and interests as human beings. In this view, the struggle to limit the working day is not a mechanical reflex against capitalist laws, but a conscious effort to create free time for education, self-development, mutualistic interaction and cultural cultivation.<sup>5</sup> As Lebowitz argues, ‘what happens during free time is a process of production, a process in which the nature and the capability of the worker is altered. It is “time for the full production of the individual”’ (2003: 68). If the entire point of socialism is to replace a society in which need-satisfaction is subordinate to the accumulation of capital, to ensure that resources and social institutions enable the expression and enjoyment of human life-capacities in forms of activity that are meaningful to the agents and valuable to the lives of others over an open-ended human future, then struggles that free the life-time of mortal individuals from alienated labour, even if they do not lead to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, cannot be regarded as irrelevant to that overall project, precisely because they accomplish to a limited extent that which the struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalism hopes to realize absolutely: the satisfaction of the social conditions for all round self-realizing freedom.

Still, it remains true that, as Marx argued, while organizing waged workers at the point of production was necessary, if the trade

<sup>5</sup> For more on the centrality of free time to the structure of a free human life see Noonan 2009; 2012.

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unions failed to carry such political momentum forward beyond the workplace it could potentially impede future gains. This meant at every opportunity turning seemingly ‘economic’ gains into political openings that could translate advances for a small number of workers into larger ones for the benefit of the class as a whole. But while industrial unions became increasingly larger and more organized, the failure to translate these gains to the non-waged, especially for women and racial/ethnic groups, deepened existing cleavages among the working classes (see Federici, this volume). This played a dual role. First, in fomenting internal working-class resentment aimed at a so-called ‘labour aristocracy’ that apparently benefitted at the expense of the non-unionized and unpaid and, second, in leading some unions into ‘partnerships’ with capital (mediated by an allegedly ‘neutral’ state) in the hopes that such improvements would continue.

The contradictions of trade union struggle are nicely illustrated by the struggle for higher wages. The struggle for higher real wages is not only an ‘economistic struggle’ to put more money in the pockets of workers as individual consumers, it is a struggle against their dependence on capital for the satisfaction of human life-requirements. In that respect it is, like the struggle for free time, a struggle *within* capitalism *against* the control that capital and capitalists can exert on human life. ‘The struggle of workers to satisfy their many-sided needs are thus struggles against the position of capital as mediator within society. They are class struggles ... Rather than directed only against *particular* capitals, they are struggles against capital *as a whole*’, even if they are directed in their immediate form against this or that company (Lebowitz 2003: 186). Any success in improving real wages means that economic wealth (produced by the collective labour of workers) is channelled out of the circuits of private capital accumulation towards workers’ power to better satisfy their own fundamental human needs (which are typically priced commodities in capital).<sup>6</sup>

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6 This conclusion assumes that the money is not recaptured by ecologically destructive consumer industries. The coherence of Lebowitz’s position (and Marx’s for that matter) depends upon making explicit the distinction between mere use value and life-value. Life-value is a term that was first developed by John McMurtry. That which has life-value either a) satisfies a real life-requirement, or b) is the enjoyed expression of a core life-capacity (see McMurtry 2011: 214). To illustrate the relevant point here: cyanide has a use

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Lives are good or bad to the extent that they involve the enjoyed expression of life-capacities. The enjoyment and expression of life-capacities presupposes the satisfaction of life-requirements. Capital subordinates the satisfaction of human needs to the conditions of its own reproduction and expansion. Only combined struggle against these forces can ensure that workers are able to better satisfy their needs and realize their life-capacities. Hence, collective struggles for higher real wages can materially improve the life-conditions and lives of workers within capitalism and are thus essential components of the overall struggle against capitalism's control over life-conditions; an essential component of the struggle *towards* socialism.

However, the paradox for Marx, no less than Engels, was that despite radical initiatives like the struggle to free life-time from capital by shortening the working day, overall, rather than developing the capacities of workers as class organizations, unions were integrating the logic of capital into 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 legislative and social gains were extended to the non-unionized and unwaged, in the eyes of Marx they would always be conjunctural and under attack. In narrowly devoting their energies to maximizing the value of workers' commodified labour power, unions were increasingly failing to come to terms with the systemic tendencies that progressively undermined the extension of those 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).<sup>7</sup>

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value, but when used against human beings, no life-value, since its only use would be to kill people. For a complete defence of this position, which we do not have time to pursue here, see Noonan 2011.

7 'In the outside department of the factory, of the manufactory, and of the warehouse, the so-called domestic workers, whose employment is at the best irregular, are entirely dependent for their raw material and their orders on the caprice of the capitalist, who, in this industry, is not hampered by any regard for depreciation of his buildings and machinery, and risks nothing by a stoppage of work, but the skin of the worker himself. Here then he sets

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Combined, these pressures worked to depoliticize and declass trade unions, while integrating workers into the dependent orbit of capital.<sup>8</sup> This was accompanied by the general integration (and in some cases co-optation) of labour unions across much of North America and Europe with social democratic parties that accepted the logic of capital (see Fanelli 2015), and thereby an electoral landscape that marginalized class-oriented labour struggles that sought to transcend capitalist social relations in favour of incrementalism and trade unionism as an end in itself.<sup>9</sup> For Marx, when unions focused almost exclusively on workplace gains, particularly those economic in nature, exclusion from the benefits of unionization would arouse working-class resentment. And although trade union gains often translated into some concessions from capital or legislative benefits for the non-unionized and non-waged, these would come to be associated with the party in power rather than the class struggles that precipitated their making.

While workplace-based struggles, protective legislation and, much later, the ‘welfare state’ took the sharp edges off of capitalist exploitation (albeit for an increasingly limited number of workers), it did not put an end to the main thing that had to be eliminated:

The reproduction of a mass of labour power, which must incessantly re-incorporate itself with capital for that capital’s self-expansion;

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himself systematically to work to form an industrial reserve force that shall be ready at a moment’s notice; during one part of the year he decimates this force by the most inhuman toil, during the other part, he lets it starve for want of work’ (Marx 1986: 315).

8 As Marx 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’ (1866b).

9 ‘The trade unions are an aristocratic minority. The poorer workers cannot 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’ (Marx in Lapidés 1987: 82).

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which cannot get free from capital, and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom it sells itself, this reproduction of labour power forms, in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself. Accumulation of capital is, therefore, increase of the proletariat. (Marx 1986: 435)<sup>10</sup>

For Marx, if trade unions were going to have a progressive future they needed to recognize that while they could bargain within the wages system they could not escape the political and economic forces that stymied the continued enhancement of wages and working and living conditions owing to the structural exploitation at the root of capital accumulation. The challenge before unions, then, was to simultaneously improve the working conditions of their members while extending those gains to the non-unionized, un(der)employed and unwaged as part of generating a socialist class consciousness. Unless unions made an effort to broaden their aims and advocate on behalf of and in accordance with all of society's oppressed, unions risked degenerating into almost reactionary enclaves of privilege, upholding the manifest divisions of the working class and stunting its political development. Rather than applying palliatives, trade unions must cure the malady:

Apart from their original purpose, they [unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the

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10 As Marx notes in *Capital*: 'A larger part of their own surplus-product, always increasing and continually transformed into additional capital, comes back to them in the shape of means of payment, so that they can extend the circle of their enjoyments; can make some additions to their consumption-fund of clothes, furniture, &c., and can lay by small reserve funds of money. But just as little as better clothing, food, and treatment, and a larger peculium, do away with the exploitation of the slave, so little do they set aside that of the wage worker. A rise in the price of labour, as a consequence of accumulation of capital, only means, in fact, that the length and weight of the golden chain the wage worker has already forged for himself, allow of a relaxation of the tension of it' (1986: 436). The shares earlier parallels with his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*: 'An enforced increase of wages (disregarding all other difficulties, including the fact that it would only be by force, too, that such an increase, being an anomaly, could be maintained) would therefore be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity' (Marx 1964: 34).

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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 1866b)

It is important to note however, as Hal Draper has reminded us, that for Marx ‘the trade union movement was not the end of the road for the working class’ (1978: 99), that is to say, it was not the revolutionary vanguard of an enlightened segment of the working class, but a crucial element in the building of organizational and political capacities capable of transcending capitalist social relations. As Marx and Engels stressed throughout their lives: ‘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’ (1879).<sup>11</sup>

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11 As Marx (1864, with guidance from Engels) wrote a few years earlier: ‘Considering, 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 labour to the monopolizer of the means of labour – 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 labour in each country, and from the absence of a fraternal bond of union between the working classes of different countries; That the emancipation of labour 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

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Although Marx recognized the progressive potential of trade unions, he was sanguine about their political limitations. ‘Trades Unions work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital ... They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system’ (1866a). Marx recognized full well that the capital-labour relationship extended far beyond the realm of paid employment. And even though class exploitation lay at the core of Marx’s analysis, this was an intersectional class approach (albeit imperfect) from the very beginning. ‘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).

If organized labour is going to have a progressive future, it would need to be anchored in a politics that oriented its struggles towards the emancipation of the working class as a whole; linking trade union activism with socialism as part of a revolutionary programme. Marx was 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 recognized how multiple registers of privilege and oppression were socially and politically interconnected. In other words, how to build a working-class social and political formation united in difference.

### Conclusion: Socialism and the Continuum of Democratic Struggle

The need, therefore, for workers to go beyond traditional trade union based forms of struggle is unquestionable. At the same time, we exist

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new hope, gives solemn warning against a relapse into the old errors, and calls for the immediate combination of the still disconnected movements; For these reasons – the International Working Men’s Association ... declares: 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.’



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at a moment of history where vanguard revolutionary parties have been discredited, and there is no evidence, in the European and North American contexts, that their fortunes will ever be revived. Thus the question remains: if trade unions and social democracy are incapable of solving the problems they address themselves to because they are not revolutionary, and the historical moment of vanguardist politics seems to have definitively passed, how is the struggle for socialism to be conducted today? The answer to that question lies in the creative intelligence of people in struggle; no theoretical intervention can substitute itself for political practice. What we aim to do in conclusion is not infer a new mode of struggle from abstract principles but instead try to draw out the implicitly radical significance of the struggles within capitalism (for higher wages, for free time, for public institutions) in support of the conclusion that socialism is part and parcel of the struggle for democracy, and the struggle for democracy (as all political struggles) should be understood along a continuum. Reconceiving the goals of struggle as progressively realizable frees the idea of revolution from the nineteenth century image of it as a one-off cataclysm, opening space for new ideas of organization and political strategy that are neither social democratic nor vanguardist (see Hudis, this volume).

Here again, Lebowitz is an instructive starting point. He notes that even when struggles do not ‘transcend the capital/wage labour relation’, they can be significant for the life-value of working people’s lives because they express the fact that ‘a qualitative development ... takes place in the course of such struggle’ (2003: 99). The qualitative development is that workers improve the conditions of their own lives, create life-time and life-space for self-realizing activity and mutualistic interaction, and thus both teach themselves that society is not impervious to collective struggle, *and* make their lives better by realizing some elements of the socialist ideal in their day to day reality.

Since every human life is finite, lived by mortal individuals, revolutionary politics must take into account both the short and the long term. Immanuel Wallerstein puts the point well: ‘People live in the present’, he argued. ‘Everybody has to eat today, not tomorrow. Everybody has to sleep today, not tomorrow. Everybody has to do all these just ordinary things today, and you can’t just tell people that they have to wait another five or ten or twenty years, and it is going to get

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better ... So you've got to worry about today, but you can't worry only about today' (quoted in Boggs 2012: 197). No one can be expected to sacrifice the whole of their present life for the sake of a distant future that they will never experience. A politics capable of motivating people must demonstrate its capacity to improve workers' lives in their own here and now and not just function as a way-station on the way to a promised transcendence. Hence the struggle for free time by shortening the working day without loss of real wages has historically been (and could become again, if it were taken up once more by a revived trades union movement) a victory over the power of capital over the whole of human life. So too the struggle for higher wages. If it is understood as a struggle against the power of capital over human life and not an end in itself or instrumental to higher levels of life-destructive consumption of capitalist commodities, it becomes a basis and a building block for more radical demands. Such struggles can become bases and building blocks if they are used as occasions to raise critical questions: why is it that capitalism permits both mass unemployment and resists shortening the working week without loss of real wages? Why is it that real wages have stagnated while corporate profits have soared? Why is it that capitalism continues to ravage the planet (see Holleman, this volume) even though there is an unshakeable scientific consensus that without drastic socio-economic changes a massive life-crisis awaits us in the not too distant future? When workplace struggles are connected to these sorts of questions workers can realize – without being preached at or otherwise dogmatically exhorted to overthrow capitalism – that the real *implications of their struggles* contest the power of capital over human (and planetary) life.

Let us take another example to further illustrate the point – the struggle for universally accessible public institutions. Here too trade unions have historically played a decisive role. What does the creation of universally accessible public institutions mean? The re-channelling of wealth away from private accumulation towards life-requirement satisfaction on the basis of *need*, not the ability to pay. In other words, the funding of universally accessible public institutions through taxation is another inroad against the power of capital over life. When education, health care, access to cultural institutions, and pensions are taken out of the cycle of commodified exchange and made available to all people *on the basis and to the extent of their needs for them*, real life

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improves: ‘The public provision of goods and services, well-managed in a way that fosters sustainable development and social justice initiatives, and which is accountable to the community, significantly improves standards of living’ (Fanelli 2016: 86). Such improvements take society some way towards instantiating the principle of socialist society: ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ (Marx 1875). Of course, public institutions do not *fully realize* that principle, but nor do they *fully ignore it*, as commodified exchange does. Nor are actually existing public institutions free of invidious, often racialized and sexualized, oppressive hierarchies of power (see Sears 2014: 56, 88). Nevertheless, they do represent a victory over what Lebowitz calls the ‘mediating power’ of capital, i.e., the way it makes people dependent on the possession of money, as opposed to nature and each other, for their life-support.

The road to socialism thus lies along a continuum of struggle against the power capital exerts over people’s ability to satisfy their real life-needs and express and enjoy their life-capacities. This struggle brings to light the deepest contradiction of capitalism, that it masks the real relations of dependence of human life on nature and collective labour with its own structurally imposed dependence on access to labour and commodity markets. Once workers peer behind this curtain of capitalist reification, they see that the real purpose of labour is not the production of private money-value for the capitalist, but life-capital – ‘the *life wealth that produces more life wealth without loss and with cumulative gain*’ (McMurty 2015) – for the need-based appropriation and use of all. Whatever struggles expose this contradiction, recapture wealth and resources for the production of life-capital, and create universally accessible pathways for all to appropriate life-capital are elements of the struggle for a socialist society.

In sum, we have argued that the struggle for socialism must be reconceived as a struggle along a continuum. The ‘political economy of the working class’, implied but largely absent from *Capital*, focuses on the ways in which organized collective struggle can divert wealth from the circuits of capital to the circuits of collective life-capital through which real human beings preserve and develop themselves. Life can be better or worse in capitalism, and struggle that makes life better without overthrowing it should not be dismissed as ‘reformist’

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but understood as part of a continuum of struggle *towards* socialism. People do not fight, normally, for abstractions or slogans, but for achievable goals that will improve their lives. To radicalize the struggle does not mean radicalizing slogans, but treating each victory as a plateau on which to rest for a moment before extending the counter-logic of public provision, need-satisfaction, and democratic control over wealth and resources further into the life-space and life-time dominated by capital.

While union density has declined in the twenty-first century, there are still millions of workers organized by trade unions, a reserve army of *labour activists* that needs to be activated by a more dynamic and creative leadership – mobilized and in turn led by a more active and interventionist rank-and-file – than we find in most unions. Activating this political potential, like rebuilding a socialist movement, must also be conceived along a continuum of more or less, better or worse, as an antidote to all-or-nothing conceptions of revolution. Marx conceived of the struggle of socialism as an extension of the struggle for democracy and understood that effective struggle must be oriented by concretely realizable goals. As Nimtz concludes, ‘Draper’s point about Marx’s democratic credentials are instructive: “Marx was the first socialist figure to come to an acceptance of the socialist idea *through* the battle for the extension of democratic control from below” (2000: 299). Neither trade unions nor social democracy has ever consistently posed the problem of democratic control of the economy from below, but instead limited themselves to demands which appear to be nothing but ‘capitalism with a human face’ (Lebowitz 2003: 168). Nevertheless, as we have tried to show, and as *Capital* implies but does not spell out, struggles within capitalism make a difference to workers’ lives. If socialists are driven by the goal of establishing the conditions for the all-round satisfaction of human needs and the comprehensive development and enjoyment of life-capacities, these struggles cannot be ignored and the struggle for socialism rethought as *struggles* along a continuum rather than a once and for all cataclysm.

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