

Workplace struggles in Kansas

New union at Structural Steel

By Anonymous

Almost from the start STO's political approach to organizing among workers had four axioms.

First, workers' consciousness is a mixed bag containing competing and contradictory notions interwoven with each other — generally reflecting the dominant (bourgeois) social relations and the embryonic forces that represent their supersession, the principal instrument of dominance being white supremacy.

Secondly, the development of mass class consciousness was given the highest priority and set our strategic tasks.

Thirdly, the point of production is the place where mass class consciousness is most likely to develop. Relations among all classes and sectors, most importantly their own role as producers and potential rulers and not just wage-laborers, would become realizable.

Fourth, such realization can only come through a critical understanding of their own (workers') experience.

In addition STO developed an analysis of the trade union as an institution within capitalist society that leaned very heavily on Gramsci. (See *Soviets in Italy* by Antonio Gramsci, reprinted by STO.) "Objectively, the trade union is the form that labour as a commodity

social relations such as white supremacy and male supremacy. They can also reflect high levels of struggle present at other points in society.

Therefore any mass radicalizing of consciousness as a break with bourgeois consciousness must take place outside of the trade union structure — particularly in unmediated relations of conflict, such as direct action or shop floor activity.

The above axioms and analysis are not widely accepted on the left. Instead, workers' consciousness is either treated as a blank tablet to be inscribed upon by communists, or as totally dominated by bourgeois ideology. In either case, development is treated in a linear fashion, one step at a time. Militant trade unionism is thus considered a step along the way to "class consciousness."

Further, with the appropriate quotes from Lenin, the majority of workers are considered to be too poisoned by capitalism to cross into the Promised Land except by dint of a vanguard which *alone* has compass and map.

Generally, trade unions are considered workers' organizations temporarily taken over by bureaucrats and/or labor aristocrats. It is these bureaucrats/aristocrats who are considered to be the bearers of bourgeois ideology among the workers. If only they can be

Paper of the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee (November 1974), one of the five features of class struggle unionism is:

Schools of Communism: The trade unions should seek to educate their members as to the basis of the capitalist mode of production and to the inevitability of the proletariat's exploitation as long as capitalism exists. The trade unions should consistently use the spontaneous economic struggle to elevate the consciousness of their membership and their class. Obviously, the highest level of attainment of that consciousness is Marxism-Leninism, the science of the proletariat. This should be the goal of every trade union. Every trade union should seek to draw its membership close to the communist party, [page 22, italics in original]

In his article *The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions under the New Economic Policy*, Lenin says something quite similar and describes the trade unions as "a school of communism" with tasks of "raising the level of the masses," providing the "transmission belts from the Communist Party to the masses," etc. [*Lenin on Trade Unions*, pages 476-7] Lenin's account obviously provides the sour-

workers' consciousness is a mixed bag

necessarily assumes in a capitalist regime." [*Soviets*, page 14]

Although STO underwent some shifts along the way, the trade union institution with its contracts, labor laws, appeal boards, and seniority lists, was seen as *actively* working to integrate workers' struggles into the capitalist system. A corollary was that trade unions mirror, and sometimes promote, other

thrown out and replaced by "class struggle unionism" the trade unions can take their rightful place as revolutionary vehicles.

There is a pernicious variant of the above position which should be dealt with here. That is, that trade unions are or should become "schools of communism" under capitalism. For instance, in *The Trade Union Question: A Position*

ces and the basis of the popularity of the "school of communism" notion.

What is forgotten is that Lenin is speaking of the trade union in a specific period — the transition from capitalism to socialism after the working class ostensibly had state power. Such a role could not be universal. It certainly could not be the role of an institution which

arises to market a commodity, labor-power.

A school of communism must be based on the actuality or potentiality of workers as freely associated producers. A school of communism is not a lecture hall. It is an arena of critical self-consciousness that seeks to destroy the marketplace, not sell at it.

PWOC's, and others', notion of a school of communism dovetails nicely with their version of labor/aristocrats/bureaucrats as the source of bourgeois ideology amongst the class. If the backwardness of the trade unions is due to bad leadership, rather than the reverse, then communist leadership must mean revolutionary trade unions.

Finally, there was one other conception, mostly an estimate, that dominated much of STO's production organizing for some time. It was expected that the seventies would be a period of heightened class struggle

which would surpass in scope the Black rebellions and student demonstrations of the '60's, and that it will arise — indeed has already arisen — outside of the existing organizations which manage discontent: the labor unions, [editorial, *Insurgent Worker*, Spring 1974]

It was believed by STO that almost any real struggle would spill outside the trade unions because of their moribund character. The heightening of struggle and the death of trade unions were seen as inextricably linked. As the events at Kansas City Structural Steel show, reality is more complex than that.

In 1973 the workers at Kansas City Structural Steel decided they had had enough of the cowardly (continued on page 16)



Fighting white supremacy at General Hospital

By Marty Delgado

The title of this article reflects the deliberate way I went about organizing at Kansas City General Hospital (KCGH), not because of a prescribed formula, but because of all things that divided and held back KCGH workers, the most damaging was white supremacy.

The system of subtle and not-so-subtle privileges for whites that reinforced this split had to be attacked head-on if we were to struggle successfully against the other obstructions — male supremacy, professionalism, and just plain fear — and take on the management. KCGH is only one case of uncountable others where white supremacy is decisive in political organizing, but it is one where I as an STO member, with the support of my branch, put into operation this guiding strategy with some success.

An initial and crucial point is this: not all that happens in the hospital comes from the hospital, a fact especially important in organizing among whites and Blacks together. Black workers at KCGH have a life not only inside, but also outside the hospital, which is *distinct* from white culture — an obvious fact, but one all too many white activists ignore. School segre-

gation, busing, racist attacks, police brutality, church, who is aware of the latest gunshot case, etc., are issues common to a Black culture: a life situation which transcends the hospital's treatment of its workers and helps to shape the actions of Black workers there.

This culture, shared by Black workers, can best be seen as part of a common struggle against *national* oppression. At KCGH the struggle sometimes emerges in open, clearly articulated forms involving broad issues. More often, it is seen in spontaneous responses to the actions of doctors and supervisors.

Far from narrowing the struggle, the spontaneous, nationally oriented actions — those focusing on independent Black grievances and Black workers' solutions to them — not only emerged as a stronger unifying force among Black workers, but also were critical in developing the broader class struggle of Blacks and whites together. This was true *both* because the struggle for Black demands represented a pole of resistance and militance to which exploited white workers could turn *and* because both white leftists and Black members of the *Transmission*, our underground newsletter (continued on page 12)

Hospital

(continued from page 11)

for two years, moved to organize white workers who were willing to support Black initiatives.

It is not the intent of this paper to try to "prove" our line. Rather, I've attempted to give a glimpse of what our work looks like within the working class, although KCGH is just a small example.

Over a year ago Irwin Silber of the *Guardian* hoped to bury us when he referred to our strategy for revolution in the U.S. as the "discredited white-skin-privilege line." Recently, STO has been accused by the *Guardian's* William Gurley of abandoning the working class both in theory and in practice (November 23, 1977). What this paper aims to do is to give people a *real* example of our workplace organizing, although to listen to Silber and Company, you'd think we weren't doing anything there anyway except telling white workers that they weren't exploited but were "benefitting" from the oppression of Blacks!

I worked at KCGH mainly as an orderly from January 1975 to March 1977. I also worked a short time as assistant printer, messenger, and dietary aide. Half my total time as an orderly was spent "on the floors," assisting nurses with patients. The other half was spent in the surgery recovery room, mostly transporting patients. Internal transportation jobs are ideal for getting around, meeting people, and making contacts, which is what I did.

At the time, this hospital work was a project of Kansas City Workforce, a Marxist-Leninist Collective that was part of the now-defunct "Federation." Although Sojourner Truth Organization wasn't formed as a national organization until April 1976, Chicago STO was a Federation member, and by January 1975, Kansas City Workforce had already begun to operate in line with STO politics.

My first task at KCGH was to begin publishing a monthly newsletter we called the *Transmission*.

I worked with two other white leftists, and together we attracted a core of Black and white workers who helped put out the paper and initiated and carried out job actions. All told, besides myself there were four leftists, nine Black workers, and two white workers in and out of this core group during these two years.

The make-up of the hospital workforce, almost 1,000 workers, was roughly 50 percent white, 50 percent Third World (mainly Black), and 75 percent women. Before moving to a modern structure, Truman Medical Center (TMC), in December 1976, we worked in a decrepit, roach-infested old building — the prototype city hospital.

Our first few newsletters attracted a lot of interest because of our analysis of city hospitals in capitalist society: administrative waste, budget cutbacks, and layoffs. Our emphasis in each case was on the white supremacist character of the hospital's actions. Specifically, we tried to focus on how Black workers and patients were more adversely affected than whites by each squeeze and the extent to which this differential effect was used to control not just Black people, but whites as well.

Using this approach, we built a stable nucleus, as well as a solid base of support within the next few months. Our base was initially among Black workers but expanded in time to include substantial numbers of white workers as well. Although we managed to reach numbers of white workers, the whites in our core group tended to be more peripheral (except for me and one other). The Black workers were the driving force behind the newsletter; they saw it as "their paper."

The paper had a lively, popular style, and sparked discussion and debate throughout the hospital whenever it came out. After we began publishing regularly, more and more workers looked forward to the next issue, mainly, I think, because they saw it as reflecting their views and aspirations. Finally

they had a voice to counter the official company propaganda.

But our audience didn't write us too many letters, and a fraction of the staff did most of the actual writing. It was the job of the whole staff, therefore, to collect oral accounts of events, and verify, discuss and interpret them before finally putting them on paper. We were trying to win workers to our politics, as well as inspire direct actions.

Direct Action

Besides producing the paper, we carried out direct actions: several marches by Black and white workers on the personnel office to protest firings of Blacks; an unsuccessful "independent union" drive; a women's march on the security director's office; a worker-community meeting held at a local Black church; disruption and walkout of a kangaroo union election meeting; various spontaneous job actions on the floors which we led or inspired; and the standard legal maneuvering in and out of the EEOC and NLRB.

Of all these struggles, the last was the least important. Consistent with STO's position that it is the *process* of struggle as much as its outcome which shapes workers' consciousness, what I tried to promote was direct action and participation by the workers themselves. This approach caused head-on conflicts with our liberal lawyer, who tried to channel our struggles into constant legal dead-ends. The lawyer's tactics were varied, and he went to extremes, including using anti-communism, in his fight for control — a fight he ultimately lost as the group moved in a more nationalist direction.

White Supremacy and Male Supremacy

While there isn't space to give adequate treatment to our work around male supremacy, I want to raise it briefly, particularly as it related to the question of white supremacy. A women's march on the security director's office involved Black and white women

united in opposition to discriminatory enforcement of parking regulations. The security director was forced by the women to back down — a victory we were able to write up as a model for other white workers. In addition, the struggle helped build confidence among women workers and encouraged them to take more initiative in our group.

White women tended to be more militant in departments made up mostly of Black women, who stood as a pole against the "may I help you?" servility that many white nurses take on. I think workplaces like hospitals, where women make up a majority of the workforce, are the best arena in which to organize women, to bring more of them into the struggle, and to develop women's leadership. This is true despite the fact that for these women, as for all women, their main oppression is at home — a fact that inhibits their participation in the struggle at the workplace.

Because of our strategic emphasis, however, we did not organize women primarily as women. Nor did we make the fight against male supremacy co-equal to the fight against white supremacy. While we did struggle with many backward ideas in our group and in the hospital, my observation was that "women's issues" were seen by the women (particularly the Black women) as mainly class and national issues.

Despite numerous discussions about the male chauvinism they experienced at home and at work, many of these women understood without any socialist analysis that the fight against male supremacy wasn't a strategic issue. Black women felt no compelling reason to unite with white women "as women," where they did feel compelled to unite with Black men.

Organizing an Independent Union Drive

In the fall of 1975 we began trying to organize an independent all-workers' union. The campaign fol-

lowed the momentum we'd built up by our previous fight against discriminatory layoffs. The proposed independent union was in opposition to the existing service employees union, a company operation which was invisible in the hospital. Our objective was to raise the level of struggle and to use the drive, in addition to (and distinct from) the *Transmission*, to provide a larger organizational framework for anti-white-supremacist organizing.

Though an alluring organizing device, it was a mistaken tactic from the beginning. To succeed, we would have had to organize three separate city health institutions — and there still would have been no guarantee of an NLRB election. The inevitable defeat, plus the legal machinations involved, caused us to lose a lot of momentum and demoralized a lot of people.

On the other hand, the union drive helped in some ways. It made the whole *Transmission* staff into organizers, in addition to writers and distributors of the paper. These new forms of struggle raised a lot of questions for discussion (sort of like "mass work within mass work"). The drive brought to a head an internal debate on how to organize: fighting white supremacy vs. dollars-and-cents reformism.

Our organization, the Health Workers Organizing Committee (HWOC), also gave us an up-front cover to stage various actions, although it was fairly obvious to people that the same folks were putting out the underground paper. (Actually, this wasn't *exactly* true — at its peak HWOC consisted of twenty workers, most of whom *weren't on* the paper.)

Despite my efforts to keep HWOC a separate grouping from the *Transmission*, versus our lawyer's efforts to make the paper the organ of the union (which had its own newsletter), most workers identified both as the same! This was true primarily Because of the similar line against national oppression and white privileges and the need for a united opposition to both.

Most white workers initially viewed HWOC as an exclusively "Black union." It was the Black workers on the *Transmission* who insisted on a strong critique of that view, which they correctly saw as causing divisions. This did not interfere with their assessment, however, that *their* main activity was among Blacks, and that whites had the responsibility to organize white workers.

The fact that Black workers saw these tasks as distinct, does not imply that they viewed them as antagonistic. They were clear that this form of separatism and autonomy were not the same as white-initiated separatism, the ruling-class-fostered division in the class *which most white workers still accept*.

Expansion into New Forms of Struggle

By the spring of 1976 the union drive was running out of gas. Our work shifted to creating new forms of struggle, including trying to expand into the community. During this period we also went through an internal ideological struggle — reformism vs. socialism — which was muddled by some petty-bourgeois individualism and anti-communism and marred further by my own failure early on to raise socialism as an issue before the whole group.

With Black workers' position worsening at KCGH and a rash of injustices to Black patients, there was more consolidation around specific Black issues and demands. This trend manifested itself in an attempt to organize the community based on a growing realization that it was friends and families of the Black workers who suffered the most from cutbacks in care and services at General.

The form this struggle took was something more than the "fight for equality" or minimal "special demands" of Black workers. When an article appears saying "It's Nation Time" (with no apparent relation to Jesse Jackson's original use of that phrase), when an elected leader of the group says outright that he

thinks Blacks are *a* nation, when Black workers on the *Transmission* unanimously decide "we need to concentrate on our own people," and when Black supervisors join the union drive because it's "for our people," the fight has gone beyond reformism: it is an embryonic national struggle.

The militant direction the struggle was taking did not emerge all at once. During the previous year and a half at KCGH, I had observed scattered seeds of this tendency.

Black file clerks had shut down the medical records department for several hours over the firing of a militant Black supervisor, forcing the administrative heads to come down in person to meet with them and reopen the department.

During layoffs, while the union was handing out "bump" notices and the white RNs were allying with the administration in pleading for more city funds, Black workers were meeting with the NAACP trying to figure out how to fight the racist layoffs.

Soon after the move to the new hospital, as a protest against unfair assignments, Black nurses on my floor (along with me) sat down at the end of report one day until the head nurse agreed to let them run the floor for a day (which they did with ease).

All these events made clear *who* the most advanced workers were and where I as a white communist should begin. (The most advanced of the Black workers mentioned above in each case were to become part of HWOC/*Transmission*.)

Also, those actions in which workers caused a slowdown or shutdown of the work, or briefly took over managerial roles (as in the last example), reflected embryonic socialism, without their necessarily knowing it. Despite the usual pessimism found in the working class of its ability to rule, the aspiration towards workers' control emerges sporadically, and we constantly raised that issue in our articles. (And job actions are complicated in a hospital setting where patients are dependent on you, a

fact exploited many times by the administration.)

Winning White Workers to Fighting White Supremacy

Identifying nationalist sentiments as the most militant wing at KCGH and organizing toward it, rather than away from it, was not only possible, but was also the most revolutionary track. This is not to say, however, that it was easy. In each instance, white acquiescence had to be overcome. "Normal" reluctance of workers in a period of lull in the class struggle to stick their necks out reached epidemic proportions among white workers. Many Black workers, on the other hand, felt they had nothing to lose.

Recognizing that white workers are afraid of losing what Black workers don't feel like they have to begin with, and defining that differential as an operative fact of white skin privilege, we saw our task as winning white workers to support those distinct demands of the Black workers. We never tried to coax Black workers away from distinct demands and independent organizing forms, into a "unite and fight" trade union struggle.

Our aim was to build a revolutionary milieu with a nationalist core. Black workers frequently posed the questions in terms of attacking white skin privileges (though not necessarily using that phrase — more often using stronger terms). We encouraged such formulations and made it a priority to draw out those white workers we were able to reach, for support. Our successes, while limited, were significant.

Even the most advanced Black workers were caught in the bind of fighting for principled alliances versus "softening the line" to try to expand their base of support. The white support we were able to mobilize helped build an atmosphere of militancy by encouraging the most revolutionary demands and actions of Black workers, instead of forcing the Black workers to water down their demands in

order to mobilize sufficient support to continue.

Our efforts to win white workers to support distinct demands of Blacks at KCGH were focused not primarily on humanitarian principles, though that played a part. More important, they were based on the political premise that those privileges white workers hold are not in the interests of white workers as part of a class (or, in this case, in the interests of white workers as part of the KCGH workforce). Our efforts brought out the most proletarian among the white workers.

A gay orderly repudiated an *extra* privilege when he joined Black workers in protesting a racist unit manager who was his lover. A white RN [registered nurse] stuck up every time for a Black LPN [licensed practical nurse — below RN in the health care hierarchy] on her floor who was harassed repeatedly.

An orderly from Independence who at first had to be taught by Blacks on his floor to stop saying "colored" later joined HWOC and *Transmission*, because "I know Blacks get the short end of the stick." An LPN and an RN were the only whites to sign a petition protesting the purge of Blacks from a surgical floor. People like these were among the most solid, least vacillating among the white workers.

"Little" acts like these were usually inspired by the example of Black workers and showed real breakthroughs in consciousness. For this reason they generally resulted in harsh treatment from authorities (closer to what Blacks experience every day). All these workers eventually were forced from their jobs as a result of this support. This bleak fact, together with the few but nonetheless striking changes of consciousness we observed, left us with serious questions:

Is it suicidal to do this kind of organizing if the most proletarian, militant workers end up losing their jobs? What gains can we make at one small, relatively insignificant

workplace, absent motion in the working class generally? Can we prove — or disprove — our line in this period, through limited examples of its use at the workplace?

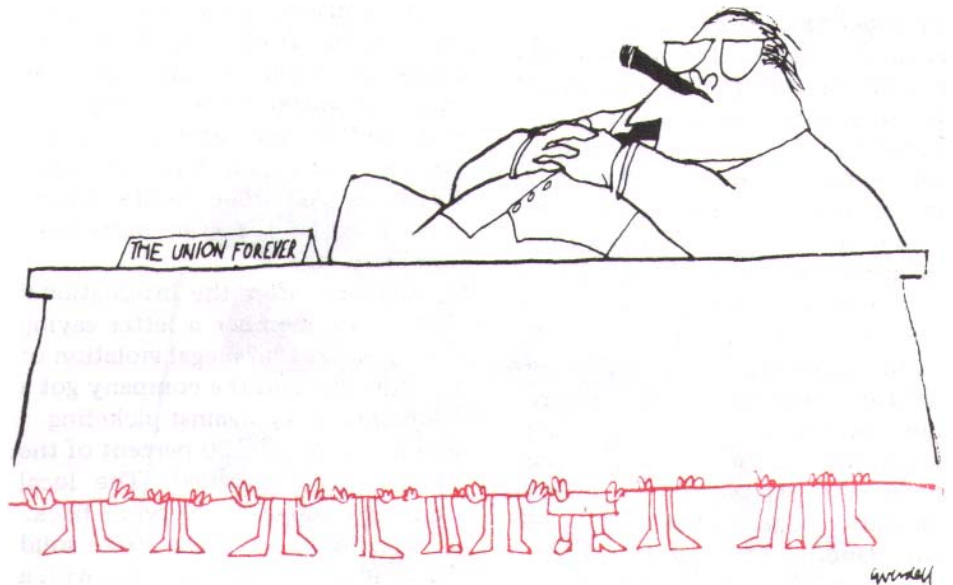
Conclusion

The most significant observation I made during my two years at General was that those white workers we were able to win to fighting white supremacy were convinced not by abstract reason or simple exhortation, but by the militant, independently organized struggles of their Black co-workers that we helped develop. This activity posed the question of class and race most sharply: which side are you on? What helped broaden this base was whites seeing other whites, even a few, in motion alongside Blacks (with no concomitant watering down of politics to accomplish this).

Those white workers who were turned around by these struggles were *convinced* of the correctness of their actions. I think we were pretty successful, especially with the more advanced, though to a much lesser degree on a mass level, in exposing how privileges work to keep us divided, and how national oppression/white privilege exist in tandem.

When workers draw these lessons from the act of struggle, it is a one-sided distortion — though one often made by the U.S. left — to conclude that the struggle is suicidal because it ends in firings. A person who has been coherently and impressively convinced one time retains his/her newly learned convictions and understandings and applies them to new situations. This is the stuff of which working class leaders are made. On a broader level, one may ask: would it be suicidal if we could help inspire that kind of activity en masse? Of course not! When we do, we will know we are winning.

On the other hand, I do not want to draw any extravagant conclusions from my experiences at KCGH. As I said earlier, I cannot



prove our line with this paper. My experiences are very limited: limited resources from my branch, only two years on the job, a non-industrial workplace, and a period of relative quiet in the class struggle. Furthermore, I doubt that any group can prove that they can move masses of workers to revolutionary consciousness.

At this point most workers are denying *everybody's* line. Mass work in this period raises more questions than it answers. In that sense it is more useful for cadre development and party-building than for trying to prove a line. But even if it yields more questions than answers, gains made among white workers can be important, and I think they are *expected* by Third World groups.

This approach follows Lenin's dictum that oppressor nation communists raise constantly the issue of national privilege among workers *within* the oppressor nation. In line with that, it seems to me that there are three ways to react to a spontaneous national struggle like the one we found at KCGH: ignore it, try to corral it, or encourage and develop it. If you hold, as we do, that the struggles of oppressed peoples have been the motor driving the class struggle in this historical period, then you'll encourage its development.

Postscript

As a postscript, or "this is where I must have come in," three months after I'd left the hospital some Black nurses from the old *Transmission* staff called me for help putting out the first (and unfortunately the only) *Transmission* at the new Truman Medical Center. (We'd stopped printing before the move from KCGH.) These nurses worked on the floor I had worked on and wanted some technical and political assistance putting out a new issue, because there had been new firings and repressive policies.

While I did the printing and outside distribution, they assembled all the Black nurses from the floor and collectively wrote the new issue, under the headline "LPN Phase-Out Begins With Blacks!" and with the slogan "It's Nation Time." They later called our former lawyer for legal advice, but it was clear whose approach had made the biggest impression on them as to the best form of struggle (mass vs. legal). Within a week several hundred *Transmissions* appeared all over the hospital, many of them traveling aboard the sleek new telelift cars normally used to transport supplies.

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Steel

(continued from page 11)

regime of mostly older white workers that had run their Ironworkers' Shopmen local. They went to the Teamsters. After some runaround that soured them, the Teamsters sent them back to the Ironworkers.

The Ironworkers' international rep dismissed the old local officers for corruption, and a new reform slate more representative of the young white, Black, and Chicano workforce was elected. The reform slate did what any good union should, vigorously prosecuted grievances against sex and race discrimination, and insured the democratic handling of union affairs.

In July 1975 the second industrial accident death in 8 months occurred. The shop had a long history of accidents and safety violations. An ineffectual union-management safety committee existed. The most militant section of the local leadership decided they had used the grievance' machinery as far as it was going to go and organized a wildcat strike over safety conditions.

As in most situations where a contract sets the terms of labor, wildcat strikes were forbidden and illegal. The strike did not follow the normal pattern of a predetermined sphere of negotiations. Thus normally submerged patterns of struggle emerged, and spontaneous disruptions did determine the course of events.

Many of the most silent, backward workers stood up in meetings and demanded not better working conditions but their "humanity" in precisely those terms. When the police came to the lines, the determination of mass pickets of otherwise passive workers made them decide not to try anything. The moral authority of the strike prevented anyone from trying to scab,

Another element besides the spontaneous burst of freely associated activity wedded the usually more passive workers to the active and advanced. The authority of trade union leadership encouraged struggle now, as much as it had

discouraged it in the past.

In addition, the local leadership, in an effort to unify its own ranks as much as anything else, called the strike a "safety walkout" and said it was protected under Section 502 of the National Labor Relations Act. The local's lawyer was called in for even more legal authority.

However, after the International sent every member a letter saying the strike was an illegal violation of the contract and the company got a court injunction against picketing — within three days, 20 percent of the workers had returned. The local leadership then sent everyone back.

In order to keep the strike solid for as long as they did, even with a constituency of above average militancy, the local leadership had not from the beginning declared that what they did broke the contract and needed to be defended in any case. What united the backward with the most active was also what broke the strike — the strength of bourgeois authority among the workers.

After the strike the International Ironworkers imposed a trusteeship and removed all the local officers. The local was charged with having unauthorized meetings, unauthorized spending of money, the refusal of officers to "order the men back," etc.

The company fired six of the militants and suspended another 22 more. The company had also made a number of visible improvements in the safety conditions of the plant during the two-week strike.

The militants considered the strike a qualified success. The rest of the workers were mixed up about it: they thought the strike had lost them their union, the strike had lost them their leaders, they had "showed" the company, and the International and the courts were scabs.

After the strike STO saw its main task as relighting the sparks of class consciousness that had developed and flickered. This involved developing forms of activity in which the workers' power could directly

be expressed, as well as isolating and exposing bourgeois influences.

But events were not that simple. It was true that a large number of workers were mobilized to the local's trusteeship hearing before the International. They thumbed their noses at the International's legitimacy and walked out en masse early in the proceedings.

It was also true that in the legal mediation on the firings, Section 502 had been held valid, and everyone was rehired with back pay. The "walkout" was now considered legal.

The strength of lawsuits became an important factor in the developing consciousness. A lawsuit was filed against the trusteeship. Partly as a result of the legal victory, a renewed spurt of resistance began on the shop floor.

A newsletter began to be irregularly published by a small group of militants, including STO.

What was not started was a mass mobilization against the trusteeship. Although practically no one thought the International was worth a damn, and 80 percent signed petitions against the International, and several mass attempts were made to get off the dues check-off (unsuccessfully), the legal suit was thought by many to be adequate.

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During the early period of the trusteeship a vacuum opened up among the workers. The fact that the International had so blatantly sided with the company and then had been found legally wrong meant they were completely discredited.

The fact that experience had taught them that other Internationals were just as bad, closed the union-hopping option. And the experience of a rank and file reform movement succeeding in gaining office and then being squashed at the first moment of real struggle made that avenue distinctly unappealing.

The active militants now formed a core of organization on the shop

floor. The forms of struggle 'followed the conditions of production of steel fabrication — slowdown, work-to-rule, agitation against foremen, mass refusal of unsafe work, etc. Over time it was able to experiment and stretch the limits of what could be done, always beginning with the most militant and drawing in the others through the forced socialization of production.

The vacuum pushed the shop floor organization to perform more and more like a union. Regular monthly meetings were held to plot strategy, and dues were collected in each department each payday. But this union had no legal or contractual access to the company. It had no dues checkoff.

It was a *dual union*.

It was what others might call a class struggle union, *although no union reform strategy had produced it.*

The fact that this organization of workers existed illegitimately caused the company-International legitimacy to lose its hegemony. Therein lay the potential of the movement.

The fact that it was an organization for bettering the terms of sale of labor-power, and its authority among the workers rested on its capacity to fulfill that role, posed the problem. In order to do so, it had not only to fight the company and win concessions, it had to represent all the workers, the most backward as well as the most advanced.

Over the course of the next year the shop-floor-organization-turned-union drew up a constitution, chose a name — Industrial Workers Union, elected officers, won an NLRB certification election, and then lost a four-month strike for company recognition. The fact that communists were part of the leadership of the movement meant that many progressive stands on race and women's issues were taken.

Since dues were collected on the shop floor, every member participated directly and regularly in the direction of events. The 30 percent Chicano workforce was easily able

SUPPORT the STRIKE

at K.C.
Structural
Steel!

"An Injury to One is an Injury to All!"

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS UNION



This leaflet was passed out in the community by Structural Steel workers.

to project itself into the surrounding Chicano neighborhood and get support during the strike. And since it was a visible anti-AFL-CIO force, it drew the interest of workers throughout the city who wanted to struggle against their unions.

The shift also meant moving away from basing the strength of the union on its weakest members. Once the union was the certified representative of all the workers, events put pressure on the union leadership to manipulate the back-

ward members to maintain optimum strength against the company.

Any lack of reasonableness on the part of the leadership cost it support among backward workers. Any reasonableness was a show of weakness the company would exploit. The company had no reason to collectively bargain with such an outfit that would not guarantee "laborpeace" in return for certain concessions.

After a four-month bitterly fought strike for company recogni-

tion and a contract, the Industrial Workers Union withdrew its certification. In return the company allowed the ones they fired to collect unemployment benefits uncontested.



The estimate that the seventies would be a period of upsurge outside the trade unions figured heavily in STO's work for some time. Instead, as seen by the insurgency in coal, the established Internationals retain a great deal of elasticity. Where they don't, as at Structural Steel, and the struggle temporarily spills outside the union framework, the struggle itself proves the hegemony of the trade union form.

The most promising avenue for developing the revolutionary potential of the factory struggle would be its integration in a social bloc posing a challenge to capital, with the foremost revolutionary element being the national liberation movements internal to the U.S. state.

But in many cases these elements don't exist, except in embryo. At Structural Steel, STO encouraged the movement to develop such ties as could be made. Thousands of leaflets were passed out in the community and at plant gates during the course of events.

Special ties were developed with the Chicano community. Carmen Collazo, daughter of one of the imprisoned Puerto Rican nationalists, spoke at a union meeting about the Puerto Rican struggle for inde-

pendence and the case of the Five, two weeks before the NLRB certification election.

In spite of every intention, the movement at Structural Steel remained a singular isolated event in a sea of calm. The ability to transcend its own limitations as a trade union struggle was directly undercut by the absence of other social movement. And its ability to sustain and win its own fight was also undercut.

A rough analogy would be the Black rank-and-file organizations that sprang up in the late sixties and early seventies. After they had gathered their own forces and tested their strength in battle, the number one obstacle to further progress was the white worker. It was the problem of the white worker that broke the back of the movement. It is the backward worker, not the militant, that sets the pattern of most of what passes for class struggle in this country.

In classical Leninist pre-party theory [see *A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social Democracy, Collected Works, Volume 4*] advanced workers are revolutionary socialists who provide the link between communism and the mass movement. They, in fact, determine the direction of the mass movement. It is in this sense, as an avenue to the mass, that STO's limited theory addressed the nature of the advanced worker.

On the other hand, it is common on the left to address the advanced worker because of the *absence* of a revolutionary social bloc. Concretely that means integrating the advanced with the socialist movement. It is in this sense that the special effort directed at the advanced took place in the work at Structural Steel.

The success of STO's effort in that direction, and there was some, was directly contingent on the growth of the workers' movement. The growth of the movement at the plant brought the advanced forward as actual leaders and at times the decisive forces. This movement provided the real basis for their interest in Marxism.

In spite of a concerted and conscious effort to separate the development of the advanced into revolutionaries from the temporary ups and downs of the class struggle, events proved differently. The advanced and militant workers exist as a part of the working class movement, and their development is contingent on the development of that movement as a whole.

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Was the struggle at Structural Steel a defeat or a dress rehearsal? One pole of opinion in STO holds that the main lesson to be learned is what it is possible for the class to do, even in times of abject quiet. They claim it is the duty of revolutionaries to point out the possibilities of struggle. There is some merit to their general argument.

Historically, revolutionaries have used Paris in 1871, Russia in 1905, Hungary in 1956, or France in 1968 in such a manner.

In part, the answer depends on what the workers learned from the struggle. Here too there is some merit to their particular argument. After the strike was over and many had returned to work, a small wave of Chicano workers quit over the unfair treatment of one of their number.

This author holds that not every struggle builds up the fighting capacity of the class. Otherwise STO's position on the trade unions would be meaningless, since there would be no recognition that some struggles *integrate* workers into the system.

Only struggles which *break* with bourgeois ideology and social relations represent what could properly be called a dress rehearsal. At this point it should be obvious that the struggle at Structural Steel did both.

I believe that socialists should concentrate on being critical of the workers' movement. Not to prove, like is common among most Marxist-Leninists, that nothing can be gained without a vanguard party. But precisely to show the tasks ahead.