

Left Strategy and the Emancipation of Labor: Trade Unionism and the Councilist Alternative

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Abstract

Over the past decade, popular sentiment toward organized labor initiatives has increased markedly in the United States despite a sustained downward trajectory in trade union membership. Increased knowledge of, and appreciation for, the hard-won historical achievements of the union movement in securing safer working conditions, improved remuneration, and social protections help to explain the former, while shifting dynamics in the contemporary capitalist workplace illuminate elements of the latter. Empirical findings suggest that indicators of union institutional relevance may continue to decline as social relations of production persist in reordering labor processes along increasingly internationalized, precarious, and capital-intensive lines. The sustained risk of bureaucratic capture further suggests that the external conditions for the organization of new unions are likely to remain hostile. Internally, critics have argued that the dominant union model has demonstrated an inability to avoid institutional corruption from the technocratic order in which it is situated, and revolutionary industrial alternatives suffer from structural shortcomings of their own, particularly with respect to their ability to be recognized as legitimate bargaining agents. This paper examines the historical engagement with unions on the radical left and provides reasons for skepticism regarding their viability and liberatory potential in the 21st century. Drawing on both Marxist theory and Aristotelian ethics, a worker cooperative and council-centered strategy is proposed.

Recent surveys of trade unionism in the United States have revealed a paradox: relative to previous decades,¹ popular sentiment toward labor organizing initiatives has measurably increased, while trade union membership continues its downward trajectory. Recent data collected from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that 9.9 percent of American workers are members of trade unions, with the figure falling to 5.9 percent in the private sector.² Though a majority of adults believe the decline in trade unionism has been “bad for the country,”³ apart from a few high-profile campaigns, there is little evidence of a resurgence in mass organizing successes. The causal factors behind this inverted trend are manifold but principally structural in nature. This raises serious questions for radicals considering the utility of unions as instruments of class struggle. Should the limited resources activists have access to be used in attempting to surmount these obstacles, or are they better expended on other strategies of emancipation? The answer will depend on one’s apprehension of the history of socialist and communist engagement with the trade union movement, as well as on the horizon of one’s vision of proletarian liberation.

The spectrum of historic Marxist attitudes toward trade unionism ranged from qualified support to outright hostility. Theoreticians of the communist left and councilist traditions mostly objected to their use,⁴ while prominent figures in the First and Second Internationals considered workers’ combinations legitimate responses to capitalism’s exploitation of labor. Their potential as conduits of class consciousness and revolutionary activity, however, was often contested even by those who endorsed their practice. Karl Marx, analyzing the question from multiple perspectives, recognized trade unions as “centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital”⁵ while also noting their unwillingness to attack the system of wage labor itself. Radical infiltration of existing unions, subordinating unions to revolutionary parties, and organizing entirely new revolutionary industrial unions were all proposed and debated as means by which to appropriate unions for broader objectives. These methods endeavored to address the dilemma of trade union consciousness potentially supplanting revolutionary consciousness. In the United States, the Socialist Party of America (SPA), the Socialist Labor Party of America (SPL) under the leadership of Daniel De Leon, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) each represented paradigmatic leftist currents in union strategizing in the 20th century. Despite minority factions

¹ Megan Brenan, “Labor Union Approval Relatively Steady at 68% in U.S.,” *Gallup*, August 28, 2025.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members — 2024* (USDLE-25-0105) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 2025).

³ Ted Van Green, “Majorities of Adults See Decline of Union Membership as Bad for the U.S. and Working People,” *Pew Research Center*, August 27, 2025.

⁴ See, e.g., Anton Pannekoek, “Trade Unionism,” *International Council Correspondence* 2, no. 2 (January 1936); Amedeo Bordiga, “Force, Violence and Dictatorship in the Class Struggle,” *Prometeo* (1946).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1898), 79.

favoring more industrial syndicalist approaches, the prevailing current within the SPA consisted of working within, or alongside, existing trade unions.⁶ Daniel De Leon, by contrast, argued that the “pure and simple” trade union reforms, promoted by the leadership of existing trade unions (e.g., Samuel Gompers), constituted an ideological and institutional barrier to advancing socialist objectives, and therefore promoted a “dual union” strategy wherein new unions would be organized and guided by revolutionary political parties.⁷ The IWW differed from both the SPA’s and De Leonist tendencies in their rejection of formal political alignment, affirmation of the primacy of direct action, and their view that revolution could be achieved by means of general strike.⁸

The result of these varied approaches was abandonment or defeat. De Leon’s efforts in the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance failed to gain traction with working people.⁹ The radical syndicalism of the IWW faced state repression during the First World War, and an aversion to contracts and arbitration restricted their effectiveness to insurgent strike activity.¹⁰ Entryist projects into the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), undertaken by socialists and communists, though initially achieving greater success, faced systematic expulsion by the 1940s.¹¹

Other pertinent lessons can be drawn from a brief examination of what many historians regard as pivotal moments in American trade unionism and labor radicalism.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, for example, illuminates an important historical trend. Although not formally led by trade unions, the Knights of Labor were present in the spontaneous strike activity that was precipitated by railroad companies responding to the Panic of 1873 with a series of wage cuts. Beginning in West Virginia, and soon spreading to surrounding states, thousands of strikers violently clashed with officials, resulting in dozens of deaths. In an early instance of the state unambiguously acting at the behest of capital to subdue resistant labor, following the failure of local militias to subjugate striking workingmen, President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered federal troops to forcibly reopen rail lines and suppress picketers. The Great

⁶ Murray Seidler, “The Socialist Party and American Unionism.” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 5, no. 3 (1961): 207-236.

⁷ Daniel De Leon, *What Means This Strike?* (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1898).

⁸ Paul Frederick Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1919).

⁹ Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), 161, 165.

¹⁰ Ahmed White, *Under the Iron Heel: The Wobblies and the Capitalist War on Radical Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

¹¹ Victor G. Devinatz, “The War on the North American Left-Wing Labor Movement from World War I through the Post-World War II Period,” *Labor Studies Journal* 49, no. 1 (2024): 60–82.

Railroad Strike, while not necessarily indicative of a failure of trade unionism per se, exposed the state-capital nexus and the limitations inherent in one of the primary mechanisms of trade union power, namely strike action. Parallel outcomes are observable in the later Haymarket Affair and Battle of Blair Mountain.

Conversely, the Seattle General Strike maintained a largely non-violent character, yet yielded to an aftermath similarly detrimental to proletarian initiatives. With coordination from Seattle's Central Labor Council, in February 1919, thousands of workers went on a solidarity strike with shipyard laborers involved in a contentious wage dispute with employers. Labor committees emerged and provided essential services to Seattle residents for five days, before union leaders disbanded the general strike. Authorities nonetheless framed the event as containing the potential to foment a "Bolshevik-style" uprising, thereby enabling conservatives to justify further anti-radical measures during the First Red Scare.

Thus we find that, irrespective of the particular methods employed, as union activity or spontaneous labor action approximates proletarian militancy, the state intervenes to safeguard the interests of capital, and frames events in such a way as to shift popular sentiment away from labor radicalism and towards more manageable forms of discontent.

Broadening one's geographical lens reveals two events which are sometimes cited as counterexamples by socialist proponents of union strategies. Syndicalism did, in fact, produce revolutionary activity in both Italy and Spain during the first half of the 20th century. The Italian Socialist Party made significant inroads within existing factory councils and trade unions, provoking the *Biennio Rosso* of 1919-1920, wherein mass strikes and factory occupations brought segments of Italy's interwar economy under workers' control. Likewise, the National Confederation of Labor (CNT), in conjunction with the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), instigated insurrectionary activity during Spain's Second Republic, and attained meaningful control over production in Catalonia, Aragón, and Valencia during the Spanish Civil War of 1936. In both instances, radical organizations contributed to the emergence of revolutionary consciousness in union members, and calamitous instability of weakened liberal states enabled revolutionary activity to transpire.¹² Nevertheless, technical impediments to coordination, as well as fascist counterinsurgency, led to the eventual defeat of both revolutionary syndicalist projects.

Returning to the United States, New Deal reforms and a Keynesian economic architecture are what began the process of integrating trade unions into the national economy in a manner the ruling establishment could sufficiently manage. But it was not until the aftermath of the Second World War, when competitor nations lay in ruin, that the union movement became institutionally

¹² Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Sam Dolgoff, ed., *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1974).

forceful and widely successful, as American labor power became exceptionally productive and profitable in the global marketplace.¹³ This contingent history was instrumental in the emergence of the American middle class, and came to be regarded by some analysts as the “Golden Age of Capitalism.” However, the recovery of Europe and Japan, in addition to the later integration of China into the world capitalist system, hastened the erosion of American labor’s comparative advantage. The move away from Bretton Woods superintendence, and subsequent rise of globalization, further empowered capital with degrees of mobility hitherto unknown, and the liberalization of international markets has now reached world-historic proportions. Organized labor faces additional difficulties from increased factor mobility.¹⁴ Periodic populist backlashes, be they liberal or conservative in character, have proven ineffective in curbing capital’s inexorable drive to global dominion. The changing dynamics of capitalist industry itself have set back organizing efforts further still, with automation and artificial intelligence programs beginning to threaten sectors of the economy previously thought to be immune from displacement.¹⁵ Taken together, trade unions lack favorable terms by which to negotiate with employers, and such requisites are diminishing with increasing velocity.

Assuming the bourgeoisie’s class hegemony over the political establishment could somehow be dislodged, and more favorable conditions for union formation established (e.g., capital controls, the dismantling of the Taft-Hartley Act and Right-to-Work laws, and the regulation of investment decisions), the question of the desirability of the trade union as a strategy of proletarian emancipation remains.

Alasdair MacIntyre, inheriting from the Aristotelian tradition, re-introduced the categories of internal and external goods to the study of ethics.¹⁶ As applied to political philosophy, we find that capitalism’s value-production process generates social relations in which external goods (e.g., power, status, money) tend to become the primary locus of self-actualization and meaning; its most refined instantiation being the possessive individualism of the late capitalist subject. The Enlightenment heritage of bourgeois republics begot the abstract citizen, unencumbered by shared traditions and practices, and capitalist society thereby became detached from teleological frameworks amenable to coherent normative evaluation. Instead, society is governed by institutions which manage individual agents seeking external goods and competing, private conceptions of flourishing. Trade unions necessarily exist within this paradigm. The acquisitive

¹³ Michael Wallace, Bradley R. Ewing, and Marcia K. Nelson, “Union Organizing Effort and Success in the U.S., 1948–2004,” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 27, no. 1 (2009): 13–34.

¹⁴ Michael Acuña, “Class War at the Border,” *Medium*, October 19, 2021.

¹⁵ Dominski, Jan, and Yoonseok Lee, “*Advancing AI Capabilities and Evolving Labor Outcomes*,” 2025, arXiv.

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

individual is not fundamentally challenged by the logic of the trade union; the union itself exists as an ensemble of individual agents strategically cooperating to secure a greater abundance of the social product capitalism accords. As such, unions begin to resemble the dominant institutions of bourgeois society, within which, among other things, the principal-agent problem ensues. Hence, rather than sublating capitalist social relations, trade union managerialism can reproduce them.¹⁷

Communist political philosophy, by contrast, posits the transcendence of the abstract individual, and the affirmation of subjects for whom flourishing is achieved within a community oriented toward a shared telos, i.e., of developing capabilities within and through associated labor. Indeed, for Marx and Engels, the very notion of the isolated individual is ontologically suspect.¹⁸ MacIntyre develops an analogous philosophical anthropology, in which mankind is understood to be inherently socially constituted, while also forging its identity in historically extended traditions, narratives, and shared practices.¹⁹ On this view, in the pursuit of goods internal to practices, man attains an enduring source of meaning. A community of labor might, then, establish a system of councils in which the object of each sphere of work becomes the cultivation of its internal standard of excellence, and participation in the general governance of society similarly becomes a terrain of virtue formation and meaning.

The trade union form is structurally limited in its ability to contribute to such a vision of emancipation. The verdict of history, however, is that the workers' council—the basis upon which a communist commonwealth might be constructed—generally emerges in the course of societal upheaval and revolution. So, beyond pedagogical efforts at raising consciousness, how might activists today advance the virtues upon which associated labor and communal life depend? What could be done to prefigure and germinate a communist tomorrow, absent material conditions generative of revolution? Rather than attempting to find methods to address endogenous corruption and exogenous vicissitudes to which trade unions are demonstrably susceptible,²⁰ activists might instead consider engaging in the organization of worker cooperatives. Though not without internal contradictions of their own,²¹ the results of their

¹⁷ Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *The Political Economy of Participatory Economics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 24–30, 96–102.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 46.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999).

²⁰ Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, *Trade Unions in Western Europe Since 1945* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Walter Korpi, “Working Class Power, Capitalist Class Interests, and Class Compromise,” *Politics & Society* 14, no. 2 (1985): 161–185.

²¹ Methods to overcome longstanding issues of scaling and the threat of technocratic capture, as well as to assist cooperatives in becoming invulnerable to the vagaries of market fluctuation, have been developed. See, e.g., Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

successes may do more to bring society nearer to a post-capitalist future. The model's potential to transform subjects in a manner conducive to communal social relations should be of interest to leftists, and its ability to provide observers with an example of a living tradition outside bourgeois convention is equally significant. Equitable income allocations within cooperatives create a material baseline from which solidarity can emerge,²² and workers' self-management allows members to develop traits of long-term significance.

²² Carlo Borzaga, Sara Depedri, and Ermanno C. Tortia, "Organizational Variety in Market Economies and the Role of Cooperative and Social Enterprises: A Job Satisfaction Approach," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 40, no. 4 (2011): 389–396.