THE LONG REVOLT

AGAINST INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

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The revolt against industrial capitalism began as capitalism first came into being, and probably won't end until industrial capitalism disappears. The new system became visible in Europe about two hundred years ago, as more and more weavers, spinners, shoemakers, metalsmiths and other producers found themselves working for a daily wage under the direct control of other people who owned the workplace, the tools, the raw materials and the goods being produced. By a century ago, that sort of capitalist organization was well on its way to squeezing out other forms of industrial production in most western countries, including the United States. Today most of us who produce anything that other people buy work for a wage on someone else's property. That someone else owns the equipment and materials we use, tells us when, how and for what purpose to use them, monitors our work, and has a great deal of control over whether we work at all. In two hundred years industrial capitalism has absorbed the world of work in most western countries.

People often took up the new type of work willingly, since it was better than starving as a land-poor farmer or as an unemployed craftsman. Yet people disliked and resisted many features of the system from the start. Most of your ancestors and mine, four or five generations back, took part somehow in the resistance. In some

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ways, tracing the revolt against industrial capitalism amounts to checking the histories of our own families as they coped with work in factories, mines and other producing organizations owned and managed by other people.

To think about our family histories, we have to separate the times when many people got together and acted openly from the everyday, individual, often hidden, forms of revolt. The everyday forms include calling in sick, sabotaging the machine or the product, slowing down or working by rule, trading jobs without permission, walking off with company property, refusing to wear your safety goggles, and the dozen other things bosses call slacking, stealing or breaking the rules. Sometimes those of us who do these things are just making a little more room for ourselves in the system, and sometimes we are deliberately trying to get back at the boss. These forms of revolt have their own history. But it's a complicated history, and much of it is invisible. No one has put it all together. All we know is that the things bosses see as slacking, stealing and breaking the rules have been common since people started working for bosses. For anything more systematic than that, we have to turn to the bigger, more visible, collective forms of revolt.

Starting in the eighteenth century, we can see four overlapping phases of the revolt against industrial capitalism. Let's call those phases shock wave, rivalry, downhill slide and power struggle. In the shock wave, people whose own work lay outside the new industrial system acted against its preliminary and indirect effects by attacking people they regarded as profiteering, or by putting pressure on local authorities to correct injustice. In the phase of rivalry, workers

tried to defend their own more or less independent livelihoods by going after the people, machines and organizations in the new system that were undercutting them. The downhill slide was the fate of skilled independent workers as declining opportunity forced them into wage work for other people; they fought to hold onto as much of their autonomy and their control of production decisions as they could. In the power struggle, workers who had no real alternative to full-time wage work fought for better working conditions, better pay and more say in decisions affecting how and when they worked.

We can get a sense of what went on in each phase by looking at one standard form of action from that phase. In the shock wave we have an example that seems unlikely at first glance. It is the food riot. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and North America, when acute food shortages developed and prices rose sharply, the people of a particular town or village often acted together. Sometimes they commandeered grain that was passing through on its way to market elsewhere or in storage for future marketing, and put it in a public granary. Sometimes they forced a baker, miller or merchant to sell below the current market price, or even sold the goods themselves at the price they considered right, then turned the money over to the merchant afterward. Sometimes they went to the town hall and demanded that the mayor commandeer grain or fix prices. And sometimes they roughed up the baker, the miller, the merchant or the mayor who resisted, broke up his wagon, or smashed his windows. Outsiders and local authorities called those events food riots.

One example is a series of food riots that swept southern England in 1766. That year, the whole arc of towns and villages from

which London drew its grain, and from which England ordinarily exported grain to the Continent in good times, threw up conflict after conflict. In Norwich, a textile center to the northeast of London, the multiple food riots included standard market conflicts as well as attacks on the malthouses which held grain awaiting shipment. There the mayor and council mounted a many-pronged defense: arming the "respectable" citizens against the rioters, muzzling the local newspapers, calling in dragoons from outside, and exhorting the poor to keep calm. A poster addressed to potential rioters read:

TO THE POOR

> The MAGISTRATES pity you, and you may be affured they will ufe every Endeavour to obtain PLENTY and CHEAPNESS of PROVISIONS.
>
> The greater Quantity which is brought to Market the more plentiful and cheaper it muft be.
>
> But if the Country are driven out, and not fuffered to come in Peace, there can be neither Plenty nor Cheapnefs.
>
> Rioting will ftop the Provifions from coming to Market, and will increafe the prefent Diftrefs of the Poor, and, at the fame Time, will make it impoffible for the Magiftrates to do any thing to ferve them.
>
> In Compaffion to your Diftrefs the Magiftrates would not read the Proclamation, they wifh to avoid it. -- For GOD's fake do not drive Things to Extremities: The Magiftrates are fworn to keep the Peace, and in all Events they muft do their Duty (Shelton 1973: 98).

The poster says, in effect: we're doing out best; rioting won't help; anyway, we'll punish you if you step out of line.

The same thing happened in America. During the American Revolution, for example, shortages and rising prices stirred many people in Boston to demand local enforcement of the Monopoly Acts, which set maximum prices for necessities and authorized the authorities to search and seize from merchants suspected of hoarding or profiteering.

In 1777, however, a majority of the Boston town meeting virtuously declared:

> We are firmly of the Opinion, if the Acts are repealed, and our Trade freed from the cruel shackles, with which it has lately been injudiciously bound, that a plentiful Import will, as assuredly lower the Prices, as a scarcity has raised them: For it has been a known and acknowledged Truth, by all Nations, which were wise enough to encourage Commerce, that Trade must regulate itself; can never be clogged but to its ruin; and always flourishes when left alone; it is justly compared to a Coy Mistress, she must be courted with Delicacy, and is ruined by force. (Hoerder 1976: 589).

The plain people of the Boston area were firmly of another opinion. William Pynchon's diary for the same year includes these entries:

> April 28: "The Marblehead people and Salem people quarrel for bread at the bakers, and a scramble at the warf in weighing out and selling Capt. Derby's coffee."
>
> July 22: "Mob at Salem demand sugar, and the stores are opened."
>
> July 24: "Ladies mob again on Copp's Hill."
>
> July 26: "A countryman beat for not taking paper for his meat, which (he says) he had sold before" (Hoerder 1976: 596).

What do these food riots have to do with the rise of industrial capitalism? Two main things. First, the food riot rose to new heights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because demand for food from outside involved local millers and merchants much more heavily than before in shipping food elsewhere. In times of shortage and high prices, outside markets became even more attractive. But that withholding of food from the local market is exactly what the so-called rioters were trying to stop. An important part of the new outside demand for the local food came from the growing concentrations of wage workers who did not raise their own food, at

least not enough to survive.

The second connection of the food riot with industrial capitalism is that as the new system arose political authorities abandoned the earlier paternalistic arrangements for assuring the local food supply--the very commandeering, price-fixing and public sale that the crowd tried to implement on its own--and turned to active promotion of production for outside markets. The authorities came to believe, with the merchants and manufacturers, that letting a free market do its work would serve the greatest good of the greatest number. But the greatest number resisted that belief by rioting. In similar ways, tax rebellions, land occupations and a number of other preindustrial crowd actions responded to the shock wave created by industrial capitalism.

The phase of rivalry shows us workers who produced more or less on their own being squeezed by competition from capitalist firms, often from firms using new technologies. Workers attacked the source of the competition. Machine-breaking was the most dramatic form of attack, although by no means the most common. We sometimes call machine-breakers "Luddites" because in 1811 and 1812 Nottinghamshire workers posted a series of threatening notices in the name of a mythical avenger, Ned Ludd of Sherwood Forest--a sort of industrial Robin Hood.

Nedd Ludd spoke for cotton framework knitters, who typically worked at home making stockings, gloves and caps on commission for small merchants. In Nottinghamshire, some of the larger and poorer-paying manufacturers used wider frames and cheaper finishing procedures in their own shops in order to hold on to their profits during a depression in the trade. The competition of their cheap goods threatened both the framework knitters and the small merchants in the cotton trade. A song of the

time ran:

> Till full fashioned work at the old fashioned price
> Is established by Custom and Law
> Then the Trade when this ardorous context is o'er
> Shall raise in full splendour its head,
> And colting and cutting and squaring no more
> Shall deprive honest workmen of bread.

(Colting was hiring unapprenticed men.)

The knitters and some of the small merchants had tried persuasion, negotiation with local authorities and appeals to Parliament before the systematic campaign of machine-breaking began. Then offending manufacturers received threats, sometimes signed by Ned Ludd: stop undercutting the trade or lose your frames. When manufacturers disregarded the threats, disciplined groups of vigilantes visited their shops by night. Here is one account:

> At Basford while three soldiers were in the house of one William Barns, to protect three frames, a party of Luddites entered the house and immediately confined the soldiers; and while two of the party stood sentry at the door with the soldiers' muskets, others demolished the frames; and when the mischief was done, the muskets were discharged and the soldiers liberated, the depredators wishing them a good night. (Munby 1971: 39)

In the case of 1811's Luddism, as we see, mechanization was not the threat, and machines were not the real enemy; the use manufacturers were making of workers and machines was the issue. Elsewhere, mechanization did matter more: for example, the poor but independent handloom weavers who sometimes broke power looms in the same period were really being driven out by the introduction of those looms. Mechanization accompanied larger shops, more capital, fewer independents. When the squeezed workers could not stave off the competition by petitioning the authorities, striking, negotiating or threatening, they sometimes turned to an attempt to put their rivals out of business by smashing

their machines.

The downhill slide brings us to workers on the inside of capitalist industry. Many crafts, such as glass-blowing and shoemaking, moved into factories and large shops without losing all features of craft organization. The workers in those crafts acted something like free agents: Owning their tools, setting their own hours and pace of work, recruiting and paying their own helpers, being paid by the task in a way that resembled selling the finished product to the factory owner. Sooner or later, the owner tried to reduce the workers' independence and to increase his own control over what was being produced, when, and how. He tried to substitute an hourly wage for taskwork, establish a standard working day, take control of hiring and firing, impose his own discipline over talking, smoking, leaving the premises, trading jobs, and other aspects of worker behavior which craftsmen had up until then thought of as their own business.

While some of the less skilled kinds of workers had undergone this sort of military regime from the very invention of the factory, the craftsmen felt it as a serious threat to their freedom--and to the sense of worth they drew from being able to do the job like no one else. They revolted, usually by complaints and passive resistance on the job, sometimes by banding together to strike, occasionally by joining a full-fledged rebellion not only against the individual owner but against the new industrial system.

The Paris Commune of 1871 was a many-sided rebellion, but one of its most visible sides was the effort to reorganize the conditions of work. Among the reforms the rebels undertook while they controlled Paris were the abolition of fines and pay cuts for infraction of work

rules, the prohibition of night work in bakeries, the formation of worker-run production cooperatives, the establishment of free, compulsory public education, the institution of contracts stating a minimum wage and the extensive representation of workers' groups in the government itself.

Although the changes in the organization of work decreed by the Commune were certainly revolutionary, a lot of that revolution consisted of reducing the power of the capitalist over the skilled worker. The general rules set up at the munitions works of the Louvre show the spirit of the time:

> 1. The shop is placed under the supervision of a delegate to the Commune. The delegate will be named by the workers in a general meeting, and will be revocable any time they conclude he has failed in his duties. His responsibility consists of receiving the reports of the shop chief, the bench chiefs and the workers, and to transmit them to the supervisor of artillery supplies. He will give a precise accounting of his operations inside and outside the shop to a council to be discussed later.
>
> 2. The shop chief and the bench chiefs will likewise be named by the workers in a general meeting; like the delegate, they will be subject to recall...
>
> 6. A council will meet each day without fail to deliberate on the next day's operations as well as on the reports and proposals made by the delegate, the shop chief, the bench chiefs or the worker-delegates to be discussed later.
>
> 7. The council is composed of the delegate, the shop chief, the bench chiefs and one worker per bench named as a delegate...
>
> 8. The worker-delegates are replaced every two weeks...
>
> 12. At the beginning of each week, the delegates will name a reporter who will be responsible for the preparation of a report of everything important said during that week. These reports will remain posted in a highly visible and easily reachable place outside the shop...
>
> 14. No worker will be discharged without a decision of the council, after a report by the shop chief. In the case of a work reduction, the last workers hired will be laid off, unless the shop chief cites one or several more senior workers for obvious incapacity or misconduct; in that case, the council will decide...

15. The work day is set at ten hours...(Rougerie 1971: 178).

In the munitions works of the Louvre, the capitalist disappeared entirely. The workers held tenaciously to their control over the shop.

The workers most heavily committed to the Commune were the metalworkers. Observers of the time described the Parisian metalworker as rebellious, quick to quit or complain, usually late for work, often failing to show up for work on Monday after his hard Sunday's drinking, prone to unionize--in short, the very model of the skilled worker with his own tradition who refused to bend to the timing and discipline of the big shop. The metalworkers and others like them fought on the barricades in their own neighborhoods, died under the cannon of the French army, and were arrested, tried and deported by the thousands.

One of the men who helped run the Commune, then resisted its defeat, was the worker-poet Eugène Pottier. He was in hiding in Paris, listed by the police as executed, when he wrote a poem containing this verse:

> Workers, peasants, we are
> The great party of laborers;
> The earth belongs to men alone,
> The idle will have to lodge elsewhere.
> How many of us gorge ourselves?
> But if one of these mornings
> the crows and vultures disappear,
> The sun will still shine.

The chorus of the poem ran:

> This is the final struggle:
> Band together, and tomorrow
> The International
> Will be all mankind.

Eugène Pottier's Internationale caught the spirit of the Commune, and became the theme song of the socialist movement throughout the world. In the background drummed the demand to stop the downhill slide.

The power struggle phase--our last one--grew directly from the reactions of the previous phase, and overlapped with it. Now we are talking

about full-fledged wage workers who had little to say about what, where, how or when they would produce, who owned no part of the tools and materials they handled each day. We are talking about our own time, which began toward the end of the nineteenth century. Workers shifted from fighting against absorption into the capitalist industrial world to struggling for some power and satisfaction in that world. The labor union became the normal vehicle for the struggle, the strike the most common weapon.

Sometimes the strike recalled the drama and scale of earlier rebellions. A little before the Paris Commune, in fact, the U.S. produced a railroad strike that took on the dimensions of an insurrection. The strike of 1877 started on the Baltimore and Ohio line in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The railroads had announced a ten percent wage cut and the doubling of train size without an increase of workers per train. When strikers began blocking the movement of trains, state governors began sending in the militia. In Baltimore, twelve people died in a clash with the troops. In Pittsburgh, another ten to twenty died when the Philadelphia militia, sent in for the occasion, fired on the crowd that was stoning them. The strikers fought back, burned the roundhouse to which the troops retreated, and began to set fire to the entire railroad yard. Other major battles occurred in Reading, Pennsylvania; Zanesville, Columbus, Toledo and Cleveland, Ohio; Chicago and East St. Louis, Illinois.

As the report on the clashes prepared by the Pennsylvania legislature said, the movements:

> were the protests of laborers against the system by which his wages were arbitrarily fixed and lowered by his employer without consultation with him, and without his consent...The immediate cause of the first strike...that at Pittsburgh, July 19th, was the order by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company to run "double

> headers"...This order of itself, had there been no previous reductions of wages or dismissals of men on account of the depression in business, would probably have caused no strike, but following so soon after the second reduction..and the feeling of uneasiness and dissatisfaction existing among the laboring men of the country generally, caused by the want of labor and the low price thereof as compared with a few years previous, all together to set in motion this strike (Taft and Ross 1969: 227).

Today, a century later, the phase of power struggle continues. In 1968, for example, the revolt reached new heights in a number of western countries. Students, who had already been protesting against the Vietnam war and against the academic version of industrial discipline, made common cause with workers. In France, the students stole the spotlight with their sensational graffiti, their barricades, and their long occupation of the center of Paris. But many more workers than students took part in the strikes, parades, demonstrations, and occupations of plants which spread through France in the spring of 1968. It was the largest strike wave ever to occur in France, in fact one of the largest ever to occur anywhere.

At the big Renault factory of Cleon, near Rouen, the strike ran from 15 May to 17 June. There, the action began with about half the workers taking part in the national general strike called for Monday 13 May. That day, a delegation of Cleon strikers joined a demonstration against the government in the streets of Rouen. On Tuesday the fourteenth, union militants began to talk up the idea of a one-hour walkout for Wednesday, with the customary meeting outside the plant gate during the strike. The several hundred workers at the Wednesday meeting decided to march through the plant and call the non-strikers away from their work. Perhaps a thousand workers joined the sweep through the factory. Some proposed sending a strike committee to the management.

After union leaders persuaded the workers to return to their jobs, word came in that the workers of Sud-Aviation, just outside of Nantes,

had occupied their factory and locked in the bosses. Later that day, a group of workers at Cleon again walked off the job, sent a delegation to the factory superintendent, saw the delegation turned away, and stood by as the superintendent, eight of his assistants, and three guards barricaded themselves in their offices. New marches through the plant eventually drew in most of the workers. Almost unintentionally, the workers of Cleon had begun a sit-down strike.

One of the first communiqués of the strike committee read:

> WORKERS OF CLEON
>
> Monday's action demonstrated the deep dissatisfaction of workers and students with the reactionary, antisocial policies of the Gaullist government.
>
> On the 15th of May, at the call of the General Confederation of Workers and the French Democratic Confederation of Workers you took a large part in the walkouts and demonstrations to demand:
>
> --a stepped reduction in work time without loss of pay.
>
> --a general increase in wages, and no pay below 100,000 old francs per month in the factory.
>
> --lowering of retirement age.
>
> --changing of temporary contracts into permanent ones.
>
> --extension of union and democratic rights.
>
> The action of the 15th has already forced the Company to retreat: there won't be any reduction of the bonus for striking, for the first time since that bonus began in the Company.
>
> Faced with the factory superintendent's refusal to negotiate on most of our demands, the workers of the afternoon and evening shift have unanimously decided to strike and to occupy the factory.
>
> Since management continues to refuse to negotiate, we call on you, hourly and monthly workers, to follow the strike and force management to discuss our demands (Collectif 1968: 20).

The workers of Cleon occupied the plant for a month. Although they did not win on every demand they made as the strike wore on, they made major gains on every one of the counts in the initial list. By the end of the strike, however, a significant minority of Cleon's workers were

asking for more: shop-floor workers' committees similar to those which had thrived during the strike, freedom to meet and talk politics during working hours, posting of work-pace standards, steps toward worker control of the production process.

The strike of the Renault workers at Cleon summed up many features of the national strike movement. In 1968, French workers emphasized shop-floor grievances, not just wages and hours; they even launched a number of experiments in worker control of factories and offices. The national settlement which ended the strike wave not only gave workers large wage increases and much-improved pensions and family allowances, but for the first time gave a legitimate voice to union representatives at the plant level. This episode of the power struggle gave French workers a significant increase in their power.

From shock wave to rivalry to downhill slide and power struggle, we see the revolt against industrial capitalism continuing, and even intensifying, but constantly changing form. Looking mainly at dramatic events, as we have here, brings out the change. Yet it is misleading in several ways. Most of the resistance to industrial capitalism wasn't dramatic or large in scale. The big events give the impression that action occurred mainly when things suddenly got bad, when as a matter of fact strikes and some other kinds of working-class action were generally more frequent and more successful when economic conditions were improving. The major conflicts draw attention away from the slow, undramatic but fundamental evolution of workers' organizations. In between the crises, mutual aid societies, fraternal orders, political clubs and unions all played their part in the day-to-day revolt against industrial capitalism.

At its most irreducible level, the meaning of the day-to-day revolt shows up in something an auto union organizer in Lordstown, Ohio told

Studs Terkel about his fellow workers: "They don't want to tell the company what to do, but simply have something to say about what they're going to do. They just want to be treated with dignity. That's not asking a hell of a lot" (Terkel 1974: 193). In exceptional times, as we have seen, workers have asked for a great deal more. But in both the day-to-day and the exceptional cases we find a changing yet persistent struggle to secure a breathing space for humanity in the midst of an inhumane system.

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