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Myth of the Vanishing Working Class

Mike Hargis

1994

It seems to be fashionable in the anarchist/anti-authoritarian milieu to downplay, if not ignore altogether, the importance of the working class as an agent of revolutionary change. The belief seems to be widespread that the working class in the de-industrializing first world is disappearing, and therefore that anarchists need to look for other “constituencies” with identities other than class to aim our propaganda at.

Well, just to test out this thesis, I checked some statistics gathered by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Looking at the year 1991, the BLS reports some 116,877,000 employed people in the U.S. Of these, around 62.65 percent, or some 73,227,000 people, were employed as production or non-supervisory workers in private industry. Of these 73,227,000 workers, 22.56 percent (or 16,527,000 people) were working in the goods-producing industries (i.e., mining, construction and manufacturing); 77.43 percent (or 56,700,000) were employed in the service-producing industries (i.e., transportation and public utilities, wholesale and retail trade, financial, insurance and real estate, and other services).

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Clearly the service-producing industries employ the majority of workers, but it is also clear that the goods-producing sector still employs millions of human beings. Besides, only a vulgar Marxist, or an anarchist who hasn't got the foggiest notion of what class means, would claim that the workers in the service industries are not part and parcel of the working class. Anarcho-syndicalists have always maintained that workers of both hand and brain need to organize, not only to overthrow capitalism but to re-organize the economy to feed, house, clothe, educate, entertain, care for the sick and do all those things than hold society together.

Of course, the mere existence of the working class does not say anything about its revolutionary potential, but for anarchists to neglect the task of spreading our ideas within the working class is sheer suicide. It is no secret that the anarchist movement historically has only achieved any societal impact to the extent that its ideas penetrated the working class and influenced its organization. While it is clear that workers are capable of achieving a revolutionary consciousness without the aid of a "vanguard," it is also clear that this inchoate revolutionary consciousness is influenced by the propaganda of revolutionary or reactionary minorities. In Russia Leninism gained the upper hand; in Italy it was Fascism; in Spain, Anarchosyndicalism. In the U.S. at this time, the ideology of racial nationalism (both white and black), leading to race war, has a better chance of influencing the working class than does anarchism—primarily because the anarchist/anti-authoritarian milieu refuses to engage in any kind of working-class agitation or organizing, preferring, instead, to retreat into a cozy counter-cultural ghetto.

If anarchists want to truly change this society we have to get back into the working class. There are no other alternatives.