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January 14th is the 100th anniversary of Murray Bookchin's birth. Perhaps it is worth looking at his contribution to radical politics.

Bookchin had been involved in the communist youth movement in the 1930s. He eventually abandoned official Marxist organizations for a turn to libertarian socialism. A central feature of Bookchin's politics from the Sixties to the end of his life was his opposition to the worker struggle orientation that was central to syndicalism and many anarchists — as well as Marxists — in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

After World War 2, the general strikes and pitched street battles of workers in the Thirties were a fading memory. The post-war years saw a consolidation of a conservative bureaucracy in the unions. The American working class by the 1960s no longer had the large "militant minority" of radical workers that had been a feature of American workplaces from the early 1900s through World War 2. This led certain radicals to seek out a new "agent" of revolutionary change. Bookchin was an example of this way of thinking:

> "Contrary to Marx's expectations, the industrial working class is now dwindling in numbers and is steadily losing its traditional identity as a class.…Present-day culture [and]…modes of production…have remade the proletarian into a largely petty bourgeois stratum.…The proletarian …will be completely replaced by automated and even miniaturized means of production.…Class categories are now intermingled with hierarchical categories based on race, gender, sexual preference, and certainly national or regional differences."

This quote is from Bookchin's last book, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy.* This shows a certain lack of understanding of how syndicalists — and other socialists — view the working class. The basis for the revolutionary potential of the working class lies in its position as both the majority of the population and its objectively oppressed and exploited situation. Workers do not have their own means to obtain a livelihood. Thus we are forced to seek jobs from employers, to obtain the wages we need to live. And this arrangement forces workers to submit to autocratic managerial regimes where workers are denied control over the decisions that directly affect them day to day in the labor process and the running of the workplaces. Employers own the products of our labor and use this to suck down profits — an inherently exploitative situation.

The working class is heterogeneous and has various layers. The core of the working class are manual workers who must submit to management control in work and are not themselves part of the system's managerial control over workers. According to *The Working Class Majority* by Michael Zweig, this is about 60 percent of the population (when you include their dependents and people who've retired from working class jobs).

Our strategic thinking has to take these things into account. But the capitalist regime has always had a racialized and gendered character in the USA, and these aspects of oppression are present in workplaces and in the way institutions of the system operate. The various aspects of oppression work directly on various segments of the diverse working class population. Class solidarity is encapsulated in the slogan, "An Injury to One Is an Injury to All." If a sub-group of the class is subject to a particular injury — such as race discrimination, sexual harassment, racist police killings, or attacks on immigrants — it is a denial of solidarity to not develop practices of support to struggles around grievances of these groups.

The working class can't liberate itself unless it can "form" itself into a movement that aims at general social liberation — addressing issues like the oppressive character of the state, the patterns of racialized and gendered inequality, and the ecologically ruinous character of capitalist dynamics. Working people can't be successful in struggle against the dominating classes without getting diverse groups of people together and building increasing levels of mutual support to each other's struggles.

at popular education, learning from earlier failed struggles — and with increasing numbers of active workers becoming radicalized and learning organizing skills and so on. Thus a high level of worker struggle and the development of "solidarity consciousness" isn't simply an "automatic" product of the working class condition.

Bookchin never did find a new "agent" of revolution…in USA. And his strategy based on local electoral politics — "libertarian municipalism" — makes little sense and never caught on. Bookchin did influence the radical Kurdish movement in Turkey and northern Syria to adopt directly democratic ideas about governance. But the Kurds had a different strategy. Bookchin was not wrong in emphasizing the potential of neighborhood assemblies as a part of libertarian socialist governance — as a part of community self-management. And assemblies of residents have sometimes taken place in recent times in the course of various kinds of struggles. Thus assemblies of urban residents do have a role to play. As a strategy for change, however, this can't substitute for the importance of mass organizations and struggles in the sphere of production, where working people face the oppressive power of capital in a direct way.

Bookchin was correct that struggles around the fault lines of race and gender and ecological destruction came increasingly front and center by the 1960s and '70s. The struggles of the black freedom movement to break segregation and attack other aspects of racial inequality — and the women's movement and movement of gays and lesbians in that era — influenced the whole Left to come to a deeper understanding of non-class aspects of the social structure that trample freedom. And this has also influenced libertarian syndicalist activists and their organizations. Moreover, our thinking about strategy has to look at the ways that the system changes over time — how new issues come to the fore, new segments of the population have moved into action, and new social movements arise.

Moreover, another 15 percent of the workforce are employed as lower-level "professional" employees with a similar subordination to management — school teachers, ordinary writers, librarians, programmers, and so on. This layer has college degrees and is often paid better than manual workers, but often forms unions and is a potential element in a working class coalition. The working class is *not* declining but is a majority of the population.

The "industrial proletariat" consists of workers in "basic industry" — not only manufacturing but also transport, utilities, construction and extractive industries (quarries, oil and gas fields, logging). Workers in America's highly industrialized agriculture should be included here as this is basic goods production. The workers in these various sectors make up about 25 percent of the workforce in USA. The decline of jobs in manufacturing is mostly due to the way capitalists constantly seek out new technologies and work changes to reduce the number of worker hours per unit of output. This is not new but has been going on since at least the 1920s. The work intensification schemes under "lean production" over the past 40 years — a form of speed up — is the latest twist. Nonetheless, USA still produces about 17 percent of world manufactured output, even though only 12 percent of the workforce works in this area. But jobs in other "basic industries" such as transport and construction have not declined to the same extent. And basic industry is still very central to the American economy — accounting for about half of the country's GDP. Thus development of a militant worker movement in this sector of the economy would have major social clout.

Syndicalism does look to the emergence of a worker controlled unionism that does have disruptive power — as demonstrated in strikes that shutdown the flow of profits to the owning class. With an increasingly globalized and far-flung production system, the logistics or transport and warehouse systems become increasingly important. Thus

the workers in large workplaces — in manufacturing and utility and transport systems — do have a potential power that can be used to advance working class interests with the development of a higher level of class-wide solidarity. Moreover, the workforce have potentially the power to evict the capitalists from control of the system of social production — taking over the workplaces and re-organizing production on the basis of worker self-management of the industries. Bookchin completely ignores this reason for the syndicalist emphasis on worker struggle and self-organization in the world of work. If the working class is to take over collective management of production, there must be a movement of workers in these industries to carry this out. How are they to liberate themselves from the oppression of the capitalist work regime otherwise?

Although syndicalists recognize the importance of "basic industry" for the reasons I've referred to here, syndicalists do not reduce the working class to "the industrial proletariat," but have often engaged in organizing in other industries such as retail, health care and other services. The goal of syndicalism is re-organization of the whole economy under worker self-management.

Bookchin argues that the lower level of worker struggle since World War 2 is due to the fact that people no longer have a living memory of the pre-capitalist era when small farmers ran their own farm or artisans ran their own workshop. The theory here is that the aspiration for "worker control" was based on familiarity with a previous era when producers did control their work. Bookchin maintains that the radical workers in the era of large syndicalist unions…

> "were most often craftspeople for whom the factory system was a culturally new phenomenon. Many others had an immediate peasant background and were only a generation or two removed from a rural way of life. Among these "proletarians,' industrial discipline as well as confinement in factory buildings produced very unsettling cultural and psychological tensions. They lived in a force-field between a preindustrial, seasonally determined, largely relaxed craft or agrarian way of life on the one hand, and the factory or workshop system that stressed the maximum, highly rationalized exploitation, the inhuman rhythms of machinery, the barracks-like world of congested cities, and exceptionally brutal working conditions, on the other. Hence it is not at all surprising that this kind of working class was extremely incendiary, and that its riots could easily explode into near-insurrections."

This theory, to begin with, is an implausible form of economic determinism — as if economic structure directly "causes" people to believe certain things. Secondly, the theory's assumption isn't true. Back in the 1930s many radical workers had no background in the long-gone pre-capitalist era of self-employed artisans and farmers. Often their parents and grandparents had been wage-workers. Moreover, control struggles are still a part of worker struggle today. When nurses fight to defend staffing levels, this is a control struggle. Just recently refinery workers conducted a national strike for the right to shut down maintenance operations they regard as unsafe. That's a control struggle. When teachers fight for smaller class sizes and the resources their students need, that's a control struggle.

To understand the relatively low level of worker struggle in recent decades, it's necessary to look at the way that working class insurgency emerges and develops in an episodic way — in periods of strike waves and widespread struggle. Periods of this sort follow on a protracted period of organizing, efforts