

The Labor Aristocracy: The Material Basis for Opportunism in The Labor Movement Part II: The U.S. Labor Movement Since World War II

by Max Elbaum and Robert Seltzer

Introduction

For almost 40 years, several generations of U.S. communists have been regularly predicting an imminent radical (sometimes even “revolutionary”) upsurge in the political motion of the U.S. working class. The basis for such optimism—which has never been realized—has been a touching faith that monopoly capitalism’s historically deteriorating position will spontaneously unleash the revolutionary potential of the U.S. working class and an equally ritualistic belief that capitalism’s decline proceeds in a simple, uninterrupted downward motion.

Today a similar simple-mindedness is being reproduced in the ranks of the communist movement. Once again, the readily visible dislocations of the U.S. economy are being greeted as the inevitable harbingers of a new political consciousness in the ranks of labor. Once again, every ruthless victory won by capital—such as the breaking of the air-controllers’ strike—is seen as giving rise to a new dimension of class consciousness bound to affect even the highest strata of the workers. And once again, the slightest political motion by the trade union leadership to act in defense of organized labor’s economic position—such as the AFL-CIO-

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organized Solidarity Day march in September 1981—is hailed as the dawning of a new day in the politics of the labor movement.

The irony of this type of analysis, which can only be characterized as an exercise in wishful thinking, is that of all the contenders in the political arena, communists are supposed to be the most consistent and thorough materialists. While the political representatives of the bourgeoisie are expected to engage in systematic self-deception, communists should be characterized by the most ruthless objectivity. However, when it comes to analyzing the U.S. working class, the bulk of U.S. communists might well learn something from that hard-nosed representative of the once-revolutionary U.S. bourgeoisie, John Adams, who declared: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."

The stubborn fact of the matter is that no mass radical upsurge in the U.S. labor movement is occurring, nor is one on the immediate horizon. Despite worsening economic conditions with all their brutal effects on U.S. workers, class collaboration remains by far the most powerful political influence in the organized labor movement. This collaboration takes the form of active support for the political and economic interests of U.S. capital worldwide and of underlying commitment to the private property system. And this opportunism, far from being foisted on a resistant rank and file by corrupt union leaders, enjoys widespread and sometimes even enthusiastic support in large sections of the working class, both organized and unorganized. In fact, the grip of opportunism has hardly been seriously challenged—it is nowhere near resounding defeat.

This phenomenon can be summed up as the continued domination of U.S. working class politics by a social-imperialist trend,* indeed, a social-imperialist trend whose record of class collaboration is virtually without precedent in the history of the international working class movement. At the center of this trend is the leadership of the AFL-CIO, whose politics crystalize the contemporary U.S. brand of social-imperialism: all-out support for imperialist foreign policy, defense of racism, and commitment to the Democratic Party as the principal

*Social-imperialism refers to the politics of those in the labor movement who strive for social reforms and sometimes profess a certain desire for "socialism," but who do so on the basis of support for imperialism. The term originated during World War I to describe the leading European parties of the Second International—and their affiliated trade unions—who cynically collaborated with their "own" bourgeoisies. Each party speculated on a patriotic victory that would result in a host of economic benefits and reforms for the workers of its particular nation.

political instrument through which "labor's interests" will be advanced. Contrary to the self-deception of much of the left, the AFL-CIO leadership is not at all isolated from much of its rank and file in advancing these politics. Rather, this opportunism, which for more than 30 years has made organized labor an active partner of the U.S. bourgeoisie worldwide, is firmly rooted in a sizeable social base within the working class itself. Lenin's comment more than 60 years ago that "a section of the proletariat has deserted to the bourgeoisie" certainly could have been made with equal validity about major sections of the U.S. working class since the end of World War II. That these sections of the class have been, at times, exceedingly "militant" in pursuit of their own economic aims cannot alter the fact that this militance has been at the service of getting a better deal within the ranks of the bourgeois army. In return, these sections of the class provide political support for those policies which serve the interests of imperialism.

Communists cannot approach the task of formulating revolutionary politics for the class struggle in the U.S. or of transforming the U.S. working class ideologically into a revolutionary class without a full and sober appreciation of this reality and what it implies. The first step in such a process is simply to recognize the phenomenon; but this step has proven difficult for a communist movement itself plagued by both sophisticated opportunism and political primitivism. Even acknowledging opportunism in the working class movement will prove insufficient to the political tasks of communists: we must develop a theoretical understanding of the material basis for this opportunism in the present structure and condition of the U.S. working class. Most particularly, this requires an understanding of the theory of the labor aristocracy and the appropriate application of this theory to the working class today.

In *Part I* of this article (*Line of March* #11),* we attempted to reconstruct the Leninist theory of the labor aristocracy, underscoring Lenin's theoretical continuity with the earlier analyses made by Marx and Engels on the problems of opportunism in the working class. As we pointed out, Lenin's particular contribution to this understanding was to identify and draw out the link between opportunism and imperialism and to demonstrate that an opportunist trend in the labor movement had become a permanent feature of the class struggle in all of the imperialist countries.

We have undertaken to reconstruct, reassert, and extend Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy in light of the fact that such an opportunist trend is clearly a defining characteristic of the U.S. labor movement today. In *Part II*, therefore, we will attempt to apply this theoretical

*See *The Labor Aristocracy: The Material Basis for Opportunism in the Labor Movement, Part I: The Theory of the Labor Aristocracy, Line of March* #11, p. 53.

framework to the present motion of U.S. politics. We will specifically examine the past 30 years, when an expanded labor aristocracy was forged and the present social-imperialist trend achieved ideological and political hegemony within the ranks of the working class.

The timeliness of this analysis is underscored by the present stirrings within the U.S. working class as the imperialist international counter-offensive has begun to strike its blows. Without a doubt, these stirrings provide more favorable conditions for communist attempts to win significant sections of workers to a class conscious perspective not yet widely present in the class. However, the new potential can never be realized if communists deceive themselves about the actual political terrain on which we are working. To mistake the initial stirrings of working class resistance for a serious challenge to the politics of opportunism—as much of the communist movement seems to be doing—constitutes a grave and inexcusable underestimation of opportunism's real influence and material foundation. The struggle against opportunism will be difficult enough; any underestimation of the scope of this task will doom all efforts to defeat it before they begin.

Here Lenin's constant reassertion of the crucial role of revolutionary theory to revolutionize practice is vividly brought home. The theoretical analysis of opportunism within the working class movement is a basic condition for taking up and consistently pursuing the political struggle against it.

I. The Politics of Opportunism

In this period of intensifying imperialist crisis, Lenin's statement that "the fight against imperialism is a sham and a humbug unless it is inseparably bound up with the fight against opportunism"¹ provides an especially timely reminder of the all-sided responsibilities of communists. However, communists can never fulfill their responsibilities in leading the fight against opportunism unless we have the clearest understanding of what opportunism actually is and how it manifests itself concretely in the course of class struggle.

Unfortunately, the ranks of U.S. communists have often lacked such clarity. In the first place, opportunism in the working class movement has too frequently been viewed essentially as a matter of personal corruption, bringing in its wake problems of bureaucracy and undemocratic methods of leadership. This simplistic formula of "honest vs. dishonest" is woefully inadequate to explain such a complex phenomenon as political opportunism. It flies in the face of Lenin's comment that "opportunism is no chance occurrence, sin, slip or treachery on the part of individuals, but a social product of an entire period of history."²

Even more commonly, opportunism is erroneously considered a lack of militancy in the day-to-day economic struggles of the workers: the

opportunists are those who counsel hesitancy and caution, while the fight against opportunism consists of arguing for militancy and daring. But this too is inadequate, and the problem of opportunism cannot be reduced to a caution vs. struggle dialectic. Indeed, it is an elementary truth of class politics that there are many occasions in which caution will serve the interests of the working class far better than open struggle.

The point is that opportunism cannot be understood except as a political question. Militancy in defense of the economic position of a section of the working class (particularly its most privileged sectors) and class collaboration are not at all mutually exclusive conditions. Opportunist elements within the U.S. labor movement have demonstrated, on more than one occasion, that they can be quite "militant" indeed in advancing the immediate economic interests of their own sections of the working class. In fact, such militancy helps them to shore up the social base for the social-imperialist trend which, by way of repayment to the bourgeoisie for the economic concessions it is able to gain, helps to deliver the mass of the working class movement to the *political* service of imperialism.

In essence, opportunism is class collaboration. It consists in "sacrificing the fundamental interests of the masses to the temporary interests of an insignificant minority of the workers or, in other words, an alliance between a section of the workers and the bourgeoisie, directed against the mass of the proletariat."³ And the "mass of the proletariat" must be understood as an *international*, not merely national, phenomenon: precisely that we may firmly grasp that, historically, one of the chief expressions of class collaborationism in the working class movement consists in workers standing with "their own" bourgeoisie against other workers and oppressed peoples around the world.

Viewed in this fashion—and for Marxist-Leninists the question cannot possibly be posed in any other way—it is readily obvious that opportunism (the politics of class collaboration) dominate the U.S. working class movement today as they have for the past 35 years. Concretely, this opportunism has had, and continues to have, three main political expressions:

1. Collaboration with U.S. imperialism on a global scale through support for all the main assumptions and initiatives of U.S. foreign policy;
2. Pursuit of policies which reproduce and reinforce the existing stratification within the U.S. working class, principally the reproduction of stratification along racial lines;
3. Throttling the independent political motion of the U.S. working class (in particular, suppressing any socialist tendencies within the class) and tying the working class thoroughly to the bourgeois political system through the Democratic Party.

It is an analysis of these positions, not a mere denunciation of the "lack of militancy" of the trade union leadership, that gets us to the heart of the

politics of opportunism in the U.S. labor movement in the post-World War II era.

The American Flag as the Banner of the U.S. Labor Movement

The chief expression of opportunism in the U.S. working class is a definite social-imperialist trend which quite consciously, even enthusiastically, aligns itself with the broad global interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie. For 35 years, from 1947 until today, this social-imperialist trend has led the U.S. labor movement in an unbroken alliance with U.S. imperialism on every major foreign policy objective designed to secure and extend the imperialist system against the threats of national liberation and socialism.

With anticommunism emblazoned on its ideological banner, the social-imperialist trend which dominates the organized labor movement has supported every major U.S. imperialist initiative of the post-World War II years—from the Truman Doctrine to “contain” communism in 1947 to Reagan’s attempts to regain nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union. It supported the Korean War; the Cold War attempts to roll back the advances of socialism in Eastern Europe; U.S. interventions in Iran, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, the Congo, etc.; the Bay of Pigs; the Vietnam War; the Carter grain embargo on the Soviet Union; and much more. This trend has embraced and even gone beyond all the anticommunist ideological justifications for imperialist policy.

The leaders of organized labor have broken strikes of communist-led workers in other countries and have set up CIA fronts to enable U.S. imperialism to penetrate working class movements throughout the world. And when opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam reached unprecedented mass proportions in the 1960s, it was the leaders of organized labor, led by George Meany, who rallied to the defense of imperialism and even organized physical assaults on the war protesters, and pro-war demonstrations of their own.

In the wake of imperialism’s historic setback in Vietnam, the leaders of this social-imperialist trend—true to form—immediately set about the task of rescuing and revitalizing U.S. imperial power. Lane Kirkland, now the head of the AFL-CIO, helped found and became one of the co-chairmen of the notoriously militarist and jingoist Committee on the Present Danger, founded in 1976 with the avowed purpose of creating a broad public climate of support for an expanded arms program as the basis for new assaults on socialism and national liberation.*

That this long standing orientation of the AFL-CIO leadership has not been modified by the federation’s clashes with Reagan’s economic

*Leading figures of the committee were quickly rewarded with important posts in the Reagan administration after the 1980 elections.

policies is graphically demonstrated by its stand toward the mass movement for nuclear disarmament. Meeting in May, 1982, as the momentum for action on nuclear disarmament was mounting throughout the country, the AFL-CIO Executive Council voted overwhelmingly (17-4) against endorsing the Kennedy-Hatfield proposal for an immediate nuclear freeze, asserting with standard imperialist logic that such a move “would perpetuate the existing theater nuclear force imbalance in Europe” since it would rule out the deployment of new U.S. cruise and Pershing 2 missiles. The Council simultaneously went on record criticizing the growing mass nuclear disarmament movement, asserting that “public protests against nuclear weapons—especially when they pressure only the West—will not, by themselves, lead to our goal of drastically reducing the number of such weapons, nor will they bring about a deterrence of their use.”⁴

Certainly, there are some minor differences of opinion between the labor lieutenants of capital and capital itself on the question of “defense” policy, but, contrary to the illusions of many on the left, they hardly constitute any fundamental rift. In fact, Lane Kirkland and his cohorts are quite clear on the exact nature of their differences with the bourgeoisie’s present political representatives:

“The AFL-CIO’s long-standing support for a strong national defense does not oblige us to support a defense budget that is unfairly financed. The AFL-CIO insists that should Congress determine that higher levels of defense spending in fiscal 1983 are required, this increase should be fully financed by a progressive surtax on income.”⁵

Concentrated in this statement by the AFL-CIO leadership is opportunism in its most classical expression. Collaboration with imperialism in its efforts to exploit and oppress the working class elsewhere—and to attack the working class where it holds state power in the socialist countries—is considered the noblest of enterprises for U.S. workers to support. The only qualification: don’t make the U.S. workers bear an “unfair” share of the cost!

These are precisely the politics for which the term social-imperialist was coined.

Opportunism and the Reinforcement of Racism

Though the social-imperialists within U.S. labor may speak from time to time about protecting workers’ rights and well-being against the “unfair” policies of capital, they hardly defend the interest of every sector of the working class with equal vigor. In fact, the entire orientation of opportunism is based upon perpetuating the existing stratifications among U.S. workers, in the first place stratification based on race. The policies pursued by the social-imperialist trend invariably favor the more

privileged, stable, relatively cushioned sectors of the working class at the expense of its lower strata.

This objectively (and often subjectively) racist orientation of the social-imperialist trend in the labor movement is hardly an isolated phenomenon. It intersects with the broader cross-class white united front which provides the mass social base for the reproduction and reinforcement of racism as a prevailing social relation in U.S. society as a whole. In this sense, the opportunist trend represents the U.S. working class detachment of the bourgeois-led white united front.

The very nature of the trade union movement in the U.S. is a dead giveaway that the policies which hold sway in the ranks of organized labor perpetuate the stratification of the class. Unabashedly, indeed with pride, the trade union movement pursues policies and programs designed to aid and protect the disproportionately white organized sector of the class, while taking little or no responsibility for the disproportionately minority unorganized sector of the class.

This is reflected, first of all, in the fact that since the end of World War II the trade union movement has not undertaken one serious nationwide campaign to organize the unorganized. Entire industries and sectors of industries which economically have been either marginal to the capitalist economy or dependent on sub-standard wages—therefore the “natural” resting place for minority workers—have simply been ignored and bypassed by the trade union movement.

Thus, whatever benefits have been won for the organized sector of the class are not enjoyed by the unorganized sector, who are left to gather whatever happens to “trickle down” in their direction. While unions have fought for wage gains for their members, their attention to the unorganized consists almost completely in occasional and half-hearted calls for strengthening minimum wage laws. In the field of job security, the labor movement has made no attempt to speak to the needs of the unprotected, unorganized workers. Certain unions have struggled for “supplementary unemployment benefits” for their own members. They have done little or nothing to struggle for expansion of the system of state-guaranteed unemployment compensation so that benefits would approximate a living wage and eligibility be extended to workers who are just entering the labor force or unemployed for extremely long periods of time. Similarly, union contracts abound with various health care plans for their members, but the trade union movement has done nothing about the struggle for a system of national health insurance. No self-respecting union is without its pension fund, but the trade union movement has done little to improve and extend the social security system.

Each of these factors has served to perpetuate inequality among U.S. workers, first and foremost inequality based on race.

But it would also be inaccurate to conclude that the trade union movement undertakes even the defense of its own membership in an

undifferentiated manner. Among the organized, the main thrust of the policies pursued by the trade union movement has decisively tilted on behalf of the highest-paid, the skilled, those with the greatest seniority, etc. The intersection of these stratifications with the stratifications of race and sex means the reproduction of racism and sexism as prevailing social relations of oppression even within those areas where the trade union leadership acts on behalf of the organized workers.

And, of course, important sectors of the trade union movement, particularly the traditional AFL craft unions, remain openly and blatantly racist, pursuing exclusionary policies toward minorities which are shamelessly conciliated by the bulk of the labor movement. The building trades offer the most salient case in point. As recently as 1969, for instance, the percentage of Black workers in the building trades was 6.8 percent, the vast majority of these in the category of laborers. Blacks represented 1.6 percent of carpenters, of electricians 0.6 percent, of painters 3.7 percent, of plumbers 0.2 percent, and of iron workers 1.7 percent.⁶ These unions, whose leaders supply a disproportionate number of the top officials of the AFL-CIO, have also been the headquarters for resistance and opposition to affirmative action programs.

While the building trades offer the most blatant example of institutionalized racism in the trade union movement, they are not unique. Long standing consequences of the racist organization of U.S. social relations as a whole remain unchallenged by the majority of trade unions. “Color-blindness” has become a recently discovered virtue by which all attempts to change the social consequences of racism are called “reverse discrimination.” Even in unions with a large percentage of minority workers, the general thrust of collective bargaining agreements has been to favor the interests of the best paid, the longest employed, the most skilled—categories which inevitably overlap with racial and sexual stratification.

Of course, opportunism’s reinforcement of white supremacy is rarely expressed in explicitly racist terms. In fact, the leadership of the AFL-CIO takes great pains to *formally* register its support for certain civil rights legislation and to continually express its abhorrence for racial prejudice. The labor federation at times has even established special departments supposedly aimed at combatting racism. But as Herbert Hill, former labor director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), noted more than 20 years ago about the AFL-CIO’s Civil Rights Department, “Its performance would seem to indicate that its major function is to create a ‘liberal’ public relations image.”⁷

This liberal image, not surprisingly, falls apart in practice. While nominally supporting affirmative action against racism, the trade union

movement by and large opposes its practical implementation in the work force, most often by making such motion dependent on the privileges of seniority. Not only does this stand perpetuate the racist impact of the "last hired, first fired" pattern of minority employment in the U.S., it also serves as an effective block on promotions and on gaining entry for minority workers into the higher-paid skilled ranks of the class. Many unions have become partners in "reverse discrimination" suits by whites who feel they have been unfairly treated as the result of affirmative action. Even in those rare cases when a particular union finds itself on the correct side of an affirmative action controversy, it is, more often than not, considered an embarrassing exception rather than an advanced standpoint. In the Brian Weber case, for example, the Steelworkers' Union defended a training program which gave preference to minority workers—but only on the narrow grounds that overturning it would violate a collective bargaining agreement and *not* because the program challenged racial discrimination. In fact, that union and the labor movement as a whole performed all kinds of political gymnastics to prevent the question of racism from being a major issue in the case!

Even on such a basic and noticeable question as the racial composition of its leadership, the U.S. labor movement continues to demonstrate its firm commitment to the maintenance of racism. Only in the last year or so—a good 15 years after the mass civil rights movement of the 1960s—did the labor movement catch up with the rest of society. It realized that it was just too much of a political embarrassment to have a 35 member Executive Council without a single Black member. Finally awakened to this fact, the leadership's response was to reject the candidates for membership proposed by a majority of Black trade union leaders: it hand-picked its own Black candidate (whom it dutifully elected) in order to guarantee that its deliberations would be not marred or embarrassed by someone who might take the task of representing the concerns of minority workers too seriously.

Labor's Marriage to the Democratic Party

If support for the policies of imperialist war and racism characterize the program of the social-imperialist trend in the labor movement, the crucial instrument for effecting this program and for subverting all tendencies toward independent working class politics in the U.S. has been the political incorporation of organized labor into the fold of the Democratic Party.

While the bourgeoisie hoped to consolidate precisely this relationship with organized labor as early as Franklin Roosevelt's first administration in the first years of the Great Depression, it was not until the post-World War II period that the bourgeoisie fully succeeded in achieving this

goal.* During the period of Harry Truman's presidency, the left-led unions were purged from the CIO, the newborn Progressive Party was qualitatively smashed as a political force, and the trade union movement was firmly brought under the wing of the Democratic Party. For the next 35 years, this relationship continued and matured, suffering not a single serious challenge from the left.

Of course, this does not mean that there have been no ebbs and flows in the degree to which labor has enthusiastically taken up the Democratic Party banner. The high point of the Democratic Party/organized labor romance undoubtedly came during the years of Kennedy and Johnson, when the government's imperialist adventure in Vietnam combined with a heated up economy and rising real wages for organized workers. This period marked the quintessence of labor's program of class collaboration. Lower points were reached in the 1970s. The first occurred at the tail end of the Vietnam war. With both the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party leaderships discredited by the increasingly obvious fiasco in Vietnam, more left-leaning forces within the Democratic Party managed to nominate George McGovern for the presidency in 1972. But the old-line politicians, such as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and the top labor leaders demonstrated the real character of the alliance when, in effect, they "threw" the election to Richard Nixon by completely sitting out the campaign. Likewise, when Jimmy Carter's efforts to restabilize capitalism began to impinge on the prerogatives of the labor aristocracy, the union leaders made little effort toward his re-election in 1980.

Today, however, labor's enthusiasm for the party of Jefferson, Jackson, and Roosevelt is again on the rise. Ronald Reagan's wide-ranging assault on the working class, while aimed principally at the lower strata, has also violated the long standing "gentlemen's agreement" between capital and the social-imperialist trend in labor—namely that the latter's concerns be duly taken into account as imperialist policy unfolds. In response, labor has moved to jump with both feet into the

*A detailed analysis of the complex relationship that existed in the 1930s and the 1940s between organized labor and the Roosevelt administration, a relationship that was the precursor of labor's complete subordination to the Democratic Party, must be taken up at another time. Here we only want to note the following: it was not incorrect in principle for U.S. labor (with the encouragement of communists) to ally itself with the Roosevelt administration on certain issues, particularly when the international situation of the period and the need to forge a worldwide anti-fascist front is considered. However, taking up this alliance was indeed walking a tightrope: due to a combination of the objective balance of forces and certain errors on the part of the working class vanguard, the bourgeoisie generally maintained the initiative in this illicit liaison. The subordination of U.S. labor to the Democratic Party was the ultimate, though hardly inevitable, result of this process.

Democratic Party once again, indeed, to play the leading role in "reviving" this vital instrument of bourgeois rule.

Solidarity Day in September, 1981 was the AFL-CIO leadership's clear signal that it was embarking in earnest upon this course.* Any doubts on this score should have been rendered moot by the AFL-CIO's proclamation that Solidarity Day II would be Election Day in November, 1982, taking the form of a massive drive to defeat pro-Reagan senators and representatives and to elect pro-labor Democratic candidates. Precisely when conditions for an independent working class politics are more favorable due to the deepening crisis of imperialism, the opportunist trend in the labor movement has set out to reinforce its class collaborationist political alliance with capital through the Democratic Party.

Labor's subordination to the Democratic Party has persisted so long and run so deep that it has become virtually a taken-for-granted fact of U.S. political life. In this context, it is quite useful, and quite revealing, to remind ourselves that the U.S. working class is almost the only one in the capitalist world which does not, even in a nominal sense, identify socialism as its political objective. The official political representatives of the workers in other countries (England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, etc.) are obliged, however deceptively, to hold themselves accountable to socialist politics. This fact indicates a measure of class consciousness which is sorely missing in the U.S. working class movement. As a result, the U.S. working class does not have its own party, not even a "bourgeois labor party," to nominally represent its interests.

But what else could be expected in a labor movement ideologically attached to the free enterprise system? U.S. labor will never be able to develop an "independent" political instrument of its own until and unless it adopts a socialist perspective.** What other basis could there be

*Unfortunately, much of the left, thoroughly blinded by "motion" in the labor movement and unable to see where this motion is being directed, has completely missed this point. Naturally, the scale of the mass march and rally demonstrated the wide discontent existing in the working class as the result of Reagan's policies. But by placing themselves at the head of this discontent, the opportunists in the labor movement have already begun the process of diverting it into those channels where it can safely be harnessed to the uses of imperialism. Even the AFL-CIO's decision to "permit" the left to participate in the event was itself shrewdly calculated to short circuit the tentative flirtations with independent political action that the left wing of social democracy has been considering recently.

** Such a perspective would not necessarily have to be a communist or scientific socialist outlook, although ultimately that is the only serious (i.e., politically realizable) socialism there is. We are speaking here, rather, of a broad outlook which recognizes that the present social arrangement operates on behalf of the owners of wealth and property and that the real interests of the workers can only be realized through a system of collective ownership.

for an independent working class party? Without a socialist orientation, the politics of the working class movement cannot rise above the struggle for a larger share of the social product within the framework of capitalism. Such an orientation takes responsibility for making capitalism work. Moreover it can only reflect the outlook of those sectors of the working class who enjoy (or have hopes of enjoying) the fruits of such cooperation with their masters. To be absolutely blunt about it, this outlook implies the cooperation of one section of the working class with the bourgeoisie against the rest of the working class. In this sense, the intimate relationship between the leadership of the trade union movement and the Democratic Party is both the symbol and the instrument of the dominant influence of opportunism in the U.S. labor movement.

The Task Facing Communists

Without the pervasive opportunism which dominates the politics of the U.S. working class, *it would be a thousand times more difficult for U.S. imperialism to headquarter the international struggle against the world proletariat.* This fact can hardly be ignored; indeed, it is the scandal of the international working class movement, although many parties diplomatically avoid dwelling on it. And yet the signal weakness of the U.S. communist movement has been its failure to take the problem of opportunism in the working class seriously.

Some deny it completely, or locate the backwardness with a tiny handful of corrupt labor leaders. But the widespread tendency in the communist movement is to approach the struggle against opportunism with what Lenin aptly called "official optimism," a view which conciliates opportunism by underestimating its virulence and by discovering in every random assertion of militancy in the ranks of the working class—even militancy in defense of the privileged status of sections of the class—evidence of opportunism's imminent defeat.

Today, when conditions for the struggle against opportunism in the working class movement are, perhaps, more favorable (due to the capitalist crisis) than they have been in 30 years, the line of "official optimism" is especially dangerous. Undoubtedly the capitalist crisis will generate, is already beginning to generate, spontaneous political motion among the masses. But in such periods, all political tendencies are in motion, *including opportunism!* And it is precisely the motion of opportunism in the present period which can be (and already is) the source of the greatest confusion among the masses. Unfortunately, the ranks of the communist movement are hardly immune to similar confusions.

This is hardly surprising. Revisionism is itself the expression of such opportunism within the communist movement, while Maoism's blatant class collaborationism and petit bourgeois revolutionism have made the

struggle against opportunism suspect. Neither the complacent revisionists nor the phrase-mongering Maoists have the capacity—by virtue of both their prevailing political lines as well as their broader world outlooks—to take up the struggle against opportunism.

Only our emerging Marxist-Leninist trend has the potential for addressing this profound political question in a thoroughly scientific fashion. To do so, however, requires that we flesh out our theoretical framework and political analysis of opportunism with a deeper historical understanding of its development and material basis. Such is the purpose of the next section of this article.

II. The Material Basis for Opportunism in the U.S. Working Class Since World War II

A. The Polemic in the Communist Movement

The hallmark of a professional approach to revolutionary politics is a ruthless objectivity in appraising the strengths and weaknesses of all class forces at each historical juncture. Judged by this standard, the politics of most U.S. Marxist-Leninists have still not advanced beyond a primitive emotional identification with the cause of the proletariat. Nowhere is this more graphically demonstrated than in the pronounced hesitation and reluctance of much of the U.S. communist movement to face squarely the problem of the pervasive influence of opportunism in the U.S. working class.

The opportunist politics which have dominated the U.S. labor movement for the past 30 years are so readily evident that to deny their existence is to indicate a certain departure from reality. Why, then, does much of the communist movement have so much difficulty in dealing with the problem?

Perhaps the principal impediment is the fact that most of the communist movement is thoroughly unprepared to face the fact that the politics of opportunism are actively supported by sizeable sections, at times a majority, of the U.S. working class. And yet, the existence of such a pronounced social-imperialist trend in the U.S. labor movement and its enormous and unchallenged hegemony for such an extended period remains inexplicable without a massive social base in the working class itself.

But such a view runs smack up against the “workerist” prejudices which hold sway in the communist movement. These prejudices, which glorify the spontaneous class intuition of the exploited as the fount of revolutionary consciousness, have done more to subvert communist politics than have the innumerable paid political agents of the bourgeoisie dispatched to infiltrate the ranks of the communist movement. In particular, these prejudices stand as the principal

stumbling block to our movement’s capacity to place the struggle against opportunism on a scientific and politically rigorous basis.

The communist movement has had much experience with these workerist prejudices raised to the level of theory. And our young trend is no exception.* But here, we want to focus on what has become the most sophisticated conciliation of opportunism in communist ranks: namely, the view that while opportunist politics may dominate the labor movement, there is no significant material base for such opportunism within the ranks of the working class itself. At most, according to this line of argument, an exceedingly small stratum of highly skilled workers may be influenced by their privileged position within the working class to support imperialist politics; and even this stratum does so with much hesitation and inconsistency.

In essence, this is the outlook of the CPUSA, whose leading theoreticians locate the social base for opportunism “with small privileged minorities, set apart from the bulk of the working class”⁸ and who argue that any suggestion that the material base for opportunism is far more extensive “can only lead to loss of confidence in the working class.”^{9**}

It is undoubtedly true that certain left intellectuals in Western Europe and North America, having noted the material basis for opportunism in the working class movement, came to a completely incorrect conclusion: that the working class in the imperialist countries no longer had the basis to become a revolutionary class and that all hope for socialism rested elsewhere—either with the national liberation movements elsewhere in the world or with other sectors of the population (especially the youth). It is typical of the ideological complacency of the CPUSA that it would latch onto these anti-working class views in order to justify its own inertia in the struggle against opportunism. The self-

*The most explicit encounter our trend has had with this backward tendency has been with the “fusion” party building line which made the formation of a vanguard party dependent upon drawing “pure” proletarian forces from among the advanced workers into the ranks of the communist movement. More recently this prejudice has surfaced in the debate over racism, with the “workerists” arguing that there was no material basis for racism within the working class movement since racism ultimately has a negative impact on the condition of all U.S. workers. The proponents of this argument were thus left with the unenviable task—which they nevertheless took on—of explaining away and, in fact, denying the obvious differences in conditions between white and Black workers in the U.S.

** A full examination of the theory and political line of the CPUSA on the question of the labor aristocracy, including an assessment of the major debate within CPUSA ranks on this question in 1968-1970, will comprise a major portion of the concluding section of this article in the next issue of *Line of March*.

serving "error" of the revisionists was to treat the observed phenomena of opportunism and the incorrect conclusions drawn from those phenomena as an integrated whole. A *revolutionary* approach to the same question would not lead to denying the "uncomfortable" fact of the matter but rather would enable the communists to develop a keener sense of the enormity of the tasks before them in the struggle to transform the consciousness of the working class so that it can fulfill its revolutionary potential.

The point is, Marxism's basic insight, that the working class is the only thoroughly revolutionary class and that its historical destiny is the overthrow of capitalism, has been verified a thousand times over the past 100 years and is as true today as ever before.

But—and this is where the controversy lies—to leave the question at this level of generality is of little service to the cause of communist politics. Those politics take on the task of transforming the consciousness of the working class so that it can carry out its revolutionary task. In order to accomplish this goal, the communists must make a careful assessment of the objective factors holding back the political maturation of the working class.

As soon as the communists undertake this task in a sober fashion (beyond juvenile enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause), what becomes quickly apparent is that not every sector of the working class experiences the reality of capitalist exploitation and oppression in the same way. In a broad, historical sense, the international proletariat is a single class. It stands in the same *fundamental* relationship to capital: it is exploited. Likewise, its own real historic interests are bound up in its unity, both as a political force in the struggle for a workers' society and under the conditions of socialism itself.

But this long term historical identity of the proletariat as a single class with no material basis for self-division stands in sharp contrast to the immediate life experience of the working class in which, as every worker can see, different sectors of the class live and work under qualitatively different conditions. The conditions of workers in the imperialist countries, for instance, are vastly different from those of the workers in those countries dominated by imperialism. The regularly employed sector of the class clearly enjoys better conditions and a more stable life than that sector which tends to be more consistently unemployed or underemployed. Workers who by reason of skill, organization, seniority, race, nationality, or sex command higher wages and have greater access to the more desirable areas of employment clearly enjoy benefits not available to those not similarly situated.

This much is obvious. It should not be hard for a materialist to recognize that these undeniable distinctions within the working class would give rise to different degrees of consciousness concerning the relation between labor and capital. We say that it should not be hard, but

for many Marxist-Leninists it obviously is. Looking at the conditions in this way, we can see that the social base for opportunism in the U.S. working class includes large sectors of the class which the prevailing "workerist" prejudice of many Marxist-Leninists refuses to acknowledge as having any material reason to support opportunism.

For one thing, this social base includes large numbers of white workers. Here the actual condition of many white workers stands in sharp contrast to the material conditions of their minority counterparts. Wage differentials, access to skilled work, and employment itself; availability of better housing, health care, and education; physical safety; even aspirations for upward mobility—all these mark distinctions in condition between white and minority workers in the U.S. To suggest that white workers are oblivious to these distinctions and that significant numbers of them cannot be enlisted to defend their status of relative privilege is to be blind to the political and social realities of the race relation in the U.S. today.

Another common prejudice is that there is no material basis for opportunism among industrial workers. Conceding that there may be such a thing as a labor aristocracy, certain Marxist-Leninists argue that it is confined to a small stratum of highly skilled craft workers and that, since this stratum is markedly diminishing in size, the material basis for opportunism in the working class is being automatically undermined. Once again we are dealing with nothing but prejudice in the form of a thoroughly undigested application of a *general* truth of Marxism—that the proletarianization of the working class proceeds most graphically and consistently in large scale, socialized industry—to the historically concrete circumstances. In these circumstances, significant numbers of U.S. industrial workers have stood in a position of relative privilege vis-a-vis large numbers of other workers in the post-World War II period, certainly relative to workers in other countries, but also to many workers in this country. In terms of stability of employment, wage levels, access to pensions and health care, etc., the general condition of industrial workers, especially those in monopoly industry, has been much better than the condition of workers in the marginal industries, in the retail trades and service sectors, the agricultural proletariat, and among the growing numbers of the permanently unemployed and underemployed. There are also significant differentials among the industrial workers themselves, the greatest distinctions corresponding to the racial stratification of the working class. In general, the condition of white workers in industry is substantially better than the condition of minority workers; in addition, the different conditions which white and minority workers in the same industry face when they leave work and function in the larger segregated society is also a material distinction which must be taken into account.

Closely connected to prejudices concerning industrial workers is the

widespread view that there is little material basis for opportunism among unionized workers, again with the possible exception of those organized in the narrow craft unions. But this prejudice also cannot stand before the light of scientific inquiry. The trade union movement in the U.S., aside from a few shallow platitudes, makes no pretense at representing the interests of the working class as a whole. At their infrequent best, U.S. trade union politics are based on the defense of the interests of the organized sector of the class. There is nothing about the fact of trade unionism or membership in a trade union which would make unionized workers immune from the virus of opportunism, and there is a significant material basis in the relatively privileged condition of large numbers of unionized workers to provide a social base for such opportunism. In fact, Engels identified both "factory hands" and trade union members as part of the "privileged" and "protected" minority of workers who provided the social base for opportunism in the English working class in the latter part of the nineteenth century.*

Finally, the fact that privileged sectors of the working class may have fought hard for the gains they presently enjoy does not nullify the fact of privilege or its function as a material base for opportunism. The process through which the readily obvious discrepancies in the conditions of different sectors of the working class are achieved is not the point at issue. The history of the labor movement is filled with countless examples of workers who fought hard for their own more favorable conditions of employment and simultaneously provided the social base for opportunist leaders who betrayed the interests of the class as a whole.

For materialists, all workerist prejudices must give way before these "stubborn facts." Though it may not conform to the wishes of communists, the truth is that, for over three decades, the whole terrain of economic struggle in the U.S. has been relatively favorable for monopoly capital to grant important concessions to the working class. Capital thereby is able to obtain the political and ideological support of large numbers of white workers, industrial workers, unionized workers, and even militant workers. No amount of general exhortations about the revolutionary potential of the U.S. working class can erase this fact.

The material basis of this somewhat unexpected turn of history has been the immense strength of U.S. capitalism in the post-World War II period, in particular its overwhelming hegemony within the world capitalist system. It is precisely this fact that serves as a profound verification of the fundamental point of Lenin's entire theory of the labor aristocracy: that there is an inescapable connection between the growth of opportunism in the labor movement of any particular country and the monopoly position of the bourgeoisie of that same country.

*See Part I of this article in *Line of March* #11, pp. 64-65.

Lenin dealt with different concrete historical circumstances, but his main theoretical propositions illuminate today's reality with stunning clarity. In analyzing nineteenth century England, Lenin attributed the scale of opportunism to be found in the British working class to England's monopoly position vis-a-vis the other capitalist powers of the time. He believed that during the period of England's monopoly, "it was possible . . . to bribe and corrupt the working class of *one* country for decades," but that this had become "improbable if not impossible" because the development of the other imperialist countries had broken England's monopoly.¹⁰

Lenin also noted, however, that with the further maturation of monopoly in other countries, the conditions for opportunism rooted in a labor aristocracy to dominate working class politics now existed in all of the major imperialist powers, and that indeed the appearance of "a *'bourgeois labour party'* is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries, but in view of the desperate struggle they are waging for the division of spoils, it is improbable that such a party can prevail for long in a number of countries."¹¹

But what Lenin did not foresee, nor could have foreseen, was the reproduction (at a higher level of spiral development) of England's monopoly position in the capitalist world of the late nineteenth century by the United States in the period immediately following World War II.

It is this development, the relatively undisputed hegemonic position of U.S. imperialism within the world imperialist system, that sets the conditions for an expanded labor aristocracy in the postwar U.S. working class and explains its capacity to sustain a dominant opportunist line in the U.S. labor movement for a lengthy period of time.

B. U.S. Hegemony in the Capitalist World

The supremacy of U.S. monopoly capital within the world capitalist system after World War II was a development without historical precedent. It surpassed and was qualitatively different from the situation when England played a somewhat similar role in relation to the rest of the capitalist world during the late nineteenth century. Not only was the U.S. dominant in the world capitalist system; its position was undisputed, with no capitalist rival that could effectively challenge that domination either by economic or by military means.

U.S. hegemony rested on the fact that it emerged from World War II not only as a victor imperialist power, but as the only power whose economic, military, political, and ideological strength was not only intact but actually strengthened by the war. What Germany and Japan had not been able to wrest from previously dominant England and France by assault, U.S. imperialism won by support. As Eugene V. Rostow, former U.S. Under-Secretary of State, put it:

"In many ways, the whole postwar history has been a process of American movement to take over positions . . . of security which Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium had previously held."¹²

In the immediate postwar period, and for some three decades thereafter, U.S. monopoly capital achieved a degree of strength relative to its imperialist rivals unique in the imperialist era. In 1948, U.S. industrial production amounted to 54.6% of the total of all industrial output in the capitalist world, or a total greater than that of the rest of the capitalist world combined.¹³ U.S. domestic reserves of raw materials were unequalled, and its extensive international holdings—especially its control over oil resources and production and its domination of the world's marketing system—placed all the other capitalist countries at a profound disadvantage. U.S. banks replaced England's as the world's main source of liquid capital.

Most telling, perhaps, was the emergence of the U.S. as the principal exporter of capital in the world, as the following table shows:

Foreign Investments of Leading
Capital Exporting Countries¹⁴

	1914	1930	1960
	—Percent of Total—		
United Kingdom	50.3	43.8	24.5
France	22.2	8.4	4.7*
Germany	17.3	2.6	1.1
Netherlands	3.1	5.5	4.2*
Sweden	.3	1.3	.9*
United States	6.3	35.3	59.1
Canada	.5	3.1	5.5
Total	100	100	100

Source: Calculated from data in William Woodruff, *Impact of Western Man*, New York, 1966, p. 150, except for the items with asterisk.

* The data for 1960 are very broad estimates, made solely to simplify the presentation on the relative change of the U.S. position.

On this four-fold monopoly basis—dominance in industrial production, control over raw materials, command of liquid capital, and foremost exporter of capital, U.S. capital was able to establish a dollar-based international monetary system, low tariffs, and "free trade" which worked to reproduce its advantages over its rivals. This was further extended and reinforced by U.S. penetration of the internal markets of its imperialist rivals through direct investments in means of

production and ownership of ostensibly European capital,* and the expansion of dozens of U.S. monopoly enterprises into so-called multinational or transnational corporations.

To all this must be added the matter of U.S. military strength. The present relation of military power between the U.S. and the other imperialist powers (in which nuclear weaponry plays a decisive role) is absolutely without precedent in the capitalist epoch. Even at the height of its monopoly position in the late nineteenth century, Britain did not dominate the rest of the world militarily the way the U.S. dominates the capitalist world today. As a result, the ability of any of the other imperialist powers, or even a combination of them, to challenge U.S. hegemony and seek yet another redivision of the capitalist world is qualitatively circumscribed.

But U.S. military strength does more than maintain the present relationship among the imperialist powers themselves. It is the bedrock for defense of the system as a whole in the face of the tide of anti-imperialist national liberation movements and the expansion of socialism which has characterized the postwar epoch. All the imperialist countries are dependent on U.S. military strength in order to stave off the potential of their respective working classes for socialist revolution, for the defense of their share of the world market for goods and cheap labor-power, and to guarantee access to the crucial raw materials and natural resources needed to fuel their industries.

The dilemma of the imperialist system is that its inevitable internal contradictions flowing out of the competing interests of rival monopoly capitalist groupings are mediated by a common reliance on the military dominance of the U.S. As a result, the economic and political difficulties of U.S. monopoly capital have an unsettling effect on the system as a whole and oblige the other imperialist countries—sometimes in spite of their own immediate and pressing economic considerations—to help maintain capitalist stability in the U.S.

Undoubtedly this period of relative capitalist stability is coming to an end. But its ideological impact on the U.S. working class will be felt for quite some time to come. The lengthy period of capitalist stability shaped on the basis of the U.S. monopoly gave rise to a pervasive national chauvinism: the superiority of all things "American" became an article of faith in the innate qualities of character and intelligence in which all (white) "Americans" supposedly shared. This ideology became a

*In the mid-'60s, U.S. capital constituted 72% of the total foreign investment in England, 45% in France, and 34% in West Germany. During this period, according to Magdoff, "U.S. firms controlled over half of the automobile industry in Britain, close to 40% of petroleum in Germany, and over 40% of the telegraphic, telephone, electronic, and statistical equipment business in France."¹⁵

powerful material force which the bourgeoisie successfully employed to forge a cross-class, white, patriotic consensus—one which was at least temporarily shattered by the cost of the Vietnam war and Watergate and which the bourgeoisie is actively trying to reforge at the present time on behalf of imperialist interests worldwide. No one articulated it more clearly than Lyndon Johnson, who called on the people of the U.S. to support the war in Vietnam on the grounds that “they want what we got and we’re not going to let them take it away from us,” fully confident that fertile ideological ground for this class collaborationist plea had already been plowed.

III. Forging an Expanded U.S. Labor Aristocracy in the Postwar Period

While most Marxist-Leninists will readily acknowledge U.S. hegemony within the world imperialist system,* many are still unable to grasp the fact that *a central consequence of the U.S. monopoly was the development of a privileged labor aristocracy which has provided a powerful social base for the opportunist politics which today dominate the U.S. labor movement.* To the extent that the existence of a labor aristocracy is even conceded, its size, location, and influence are, more often than not, so trivialized that the struggle against opportunism has faltered for want of an identifiable foe.

The “theoretical” procedure by which the struggle against opportunism is thus undermined consists largely in “defining out” of the labor aristocracy certain groups of workers—mass production workers, the rank and file of the trade union membership, the “bulk of white workers”, and all those who have fought “militantly” for whatever advantages they possess—to the point where there is really nothing left of the category except a diminishing handful of skilled craft workers and a few labor bureaucrats.

Now all this is very reassuring for those who cannot imagine a communist movement that would dare to confront openly the political backwardness and ideological prejudice of the masses of workers; but it is clearly out of touch with any serious scientific attempt to determine the scope and scale of the material base within the U.S. working class for the politics of opportunism.

But the labor aristocracy cannot be reduced to its traditional “core” of skilled (and, in the case of the U.S., white male) craft workers along with the bulk of trade union officialdom. In speaking of a labor aristocracy we

*Maoism’s departure from reality in this regard, with its invention of an equally hegemonic Soviet social-imperialism in the world capitalist system, has been overwhelmingly discredited and undoubtedly contributed to that trend’s theoretical demise.

mean a section of the working class which, by virtue of its privileged position vis-a-vis the rest of the working class—in income, political influence, job stability, and access to such things as health care, pensions, quality housing, and education—is most susceptible to opportunist political lines which objectively ally it with the bourgeoisie against the interests of the rest of the class domestically and internationally.

While this privileged stratum tends to be concentrated in certain sections of the class—skilled workers, unionized production workers, public employees, and “proletarianized” professionals (teachers, skilled health care workers, technicians, engineers, etc.)—the labor aristocracy cannot be reduced to an occupational profile. Nor is it possible to draw an exact dividing line between the labor aristocracy and the rest of the U.S. working class, since the extension of privilege from monopoly superprofits does not take the form of uniformly high privileges for some workers and absolutely no privileges for others. Rather, there is a steady gradation in benefits from the lowest strata of the class to the highest. Nor would it be fruitful to try to locate sociologically that point when quantity (of privilege) turns into quality. Our concern is not primarily with privilege but politics, which means that we will identify the influence of the labor aristocracy through political practice rather than income levels. Naturally, we would expect there to be a pronounced correlation between the extent of privilege and opportunist politics. At the same time, there is nothing automatic about such a correlation on a case-by-case basis; and in certain areas where a legacy of class struggle unionism has been maintained over a period of time—we have in mind here certain left-led unions which weathered the storms of the fifties keeping alive a broader class perspective—we would expect to find blocs of workers actively fighting opportunism despite their particular privileged positions.

Nevertheless, such exceptions are, precisely, exceptions! The spontaneous correlation between privilege and opportunism, reinforced by the power of bourgeois ideology and the undermining and isolation of the left in the working class movement, was the main trend of development in the postwar period, giving rise to a significant section of the U.S. working class which embodied all the characteristics of an aristocracy of labor: it maintained an economically privileged position relative to the bulk of U.S. workers and workers internationally; it enjoyed an array of political and cultural benefits far surpassing the conditions of other workers; and it served as the stubborn social base of an opportunist political trend supporting wholeheartedly the fundamental policies of U.S. imperialism. This can be demonstrated by examining in more detail the benefits enjoyed by the labor aristocracy, its constituent groupings, its principal organizational forms, and the political process through which opportunism won dominant influence in the U.S. labor movement.

A. The Bribe: The Benefits Enjoyed by the Labor Aristocracy

Nothing, it seems, shocks modern conciliators of opportunism more easily than the designation of the benefits enjoyed by the privileged sectors of the U.S. working class as a "bribe." After all, they argue, these benefits were not simply slipped unobtrusively into the workers' pay envelopes one payday. They were obtained, we have been dutifully lectured time and again, through struggle, frequently militant, fierce struggle; as though the mere statement of the process through which these privileges were obtained rather than their consequences were the decisive question.

In fact, much of the communist movement has even adopted the pernicious habit of automatically placing quotation marks around the word "privilege" as though to indicate that the category itself is specious. In this manner, the blinders of national chauvinism prevent even communists from grasping the fact that what is now "taken for granted" by "hard-working white Americans" is, in fact, immense privilege relative to the working class throughout the world.

The last refuge of these conciliators of opportunism is to charge that such terms as "bribe" and "privilege" bespeak a moralistic rather than a scientific approach to politics. Of course, if one is so determined, it is always possible to find examples, such as the Weather Underground, of those who have made these into moralistic rather than scientific terms. What is conveniently forgotten is that long before petit bourgeois revolutionists appropriated these categories to their own moral imperatives, Marx, Engels, and Lenin had introduced them into the communist movement as scientific categories that were absolutely essential to an understanding of the motion of politics within the working class movement.

Ironically, moralistic mystification shrouds the arguments of those who consider the suggestion that some workers may be "cushioned" from the worst shocks of capitalist oppression to be an unspeakable crime against the revolutionary "purity" of the class as a whole. In fact, a certain judicious rewriting of history to conform to these opportunist prejudices is even now taking place; for any examination of the majority of union contracts negotiated during the '50s and '60s would readily demonstrate that those contracts were more the result of wheeling and dealing than of militant struggle.* It is hardly a secret that the giant

*Statistics on strike activity provide an indication of the intensity of the economic form of class struggle. Workers involved in work stoppages in the U.S. (as a percentage of total employed) declined from a postwar high of 10.5% in the mass industrial strike year of 1946 to 5.2% in 1955, the year of the AFL-CIO merger. From 1956 to 1966 no year found more than 3.9% of the workforce on strike. Indeed, the early 1960s had the lowest level of strike activity since the collapse of

(cont.)

monopolies in steel, auto, and other industries were able to buy labor peace in exchange for contracts heavily tilted to reproduce the existing stratification within the work force, or that the failure of the unions to undertake any serious attempt to organize the unorganized was a direct consequence of the cozy and complacent relationship between the workers already in the unions and the companies.

The fact that certain concessions may be wrung out of the capitalists rather than secretly slipped to the workers under the table in no way changes their ultimate effect, namely the relatively privileged status of those who receive them.

This is precisely the sense in which both Marx and Lenin used the term "bribe," not necessarily as a conscious *quid pro quo* between capital and sections of labor—although the extent to which the process is consciously organized should not be underestimated—but as an actual relation that exists regardless of the process by which it was formed.

Understood this way, the heart of the bribe which capital proffered to help forge the U.S. labor aristocracy after World War II was relatively high, steadily rising, and more or less assured wage levels for substantial sections of the working class. This high wage level was not simply the disbursement within the working class of a share of imperialist super-profits obtained from exploitation of workers in other countries, although these are a part of the process.* More to the point is the long period of relatively steady capitalist expansion from the early 1940s to the mid-1970s and the particular character of that growth.

The huge postwar expansion produced an increased demand for labor power in industry, especially in construction, consumer durables, capital goods production, and military production. This demand for labor-power created favorable conditions for union wage struggles, while the high profits generated (and anticipated) by increased productivity and assured by U.S. capital's monopoly position in the world capitalist system, enabled capital to absorb greater labor costs, provided production could be stable and not disrupted by strikes. But capital obtained more than stability of production. In exchange for assured high wages for remaining workers in these industries, the unions accepted technological advances, automation, and reductions in the size of the

organized labor in the early 1920s. In 1963 only 1.1% of the workforce was involved in strikes. Even when a resurgence of strike activity began in the late '60s, the year of highest activity, 1970, saw only 4.7% of the workers on strike.¹⁶

*Because of the particular nature of his polemic with Karl Kautsky on the essence of imperialism, Lenin, in his writings on the labor aristocracy, emphasized that share of capitalist super profits obtained from the *export* of capital. But he never considered this share to be the only source of monopoly super profits. See Part I of this article in *Line of March* #11, p. 73.

work force. Here is a concrete illustration of how one section of the workers (and let us assume that their interests were militantly defended and advanced by their union representatives) managed to secure extensive benefits for itself by uniting with the bourgeoisie in the restructuring of U.S. production at the expense of large numbers of workers who, from then on, were effectively frozen out of this section of industry.

Just how extensive these benefits were can be illustrated by a few statistics. First, the U.S. working class as a whole enjoyed wages far beyond the reach of workers in other countries during this period. As late as 1970, for example, German workers in manufacturing received only 53.5% of the wages of U.S. workers, Japanese workers 34.3%, and French workers 29%. (Wages of workers in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, were, of course, even lower while comparisons for the years prior to 1970 would reveal even starker gaps.) Second, the extent to which U.S. workers' wages steadily rose during this period was remarkable. Average real weekly take-home pay for production workers in the manufacturing sector increased by 42% from 1946 to 1969; real take-home pay per hour increased in 19 out of these 23 years. Overall, this represented the largest and longest sustained increase for workers' wages in any country in the world during the twentieth century.¹⁷

For a relatively sustained period, the U.S. working class did not confront the normal consequences of the system of capitalist exploitation. Instead, year after year, the expectation of a rising standard of living and gains at every round of contract bargaining became the anticipated and fulfilled norm for large numbers of workers in the post-World War II U.S. But what had become the norm for U.S. workers in this period was *historically abnormal* for the working class of any country and was certainly not the prevailing condition of the international working class, not for workers in the colonial and neo-colonial countries, but also not for most workers in the other developed capitalist countries.

While to a certain extent the income and living standards of most of the U.S. working class rose during this period, the lion's share of benefits was concentrated among a minority of workers, most particularly in the skilled crafts, the proletarianized professions and large numbers of unionized workers in monopoly industry and public service. The average wages for such workers were consistently higher than for workers in the clerical sector, retail trade, agricultural labor, other unskilled labor, etc. It was almost exclusively in these sectors that the wage of a single wage earner was sufficient to support a family, and it is in these same sectors that the image of an "average American family" owning its own home and sending its children to college found a measure of realization.

But higher than average wages were not the only benefits enjoyed by the expanded U.S. labor aristocracy. At least as important in forging a

sector of the working class amenable to the political interests and class outlook of the bourgeoisie is job stability (including the accumulation of seniority rights and promotions) and significant protection from unemployment. These are the workers who can, with some measure of confidence, plan on buying their own homes and acquiring the major modern appliances which have become so much the hallmark of the "American way of life."

The postwar period of capitalist stability and expansion provided the conditions in which a large sector of the working class was significantly cushioned from the shocks of job dislocation and long term unemployment. Unlike the depression '30s and the recent economic downturns of the late '70s, the years 1945-1975 were characterized by a relatively low rate of unemployment. Of course, this cushion did not apply equally to the working class as a whole. However, a sizeable sector of the class did grow accustomed to steadily rising wages, job security, and, at worst, relatively short periods of unemployment.

Even among the unemployed, it is necessary to draw a distinction between those who make up what Marx called the "floating reserve" (those who are temporarily out of work as a result of the constant attraction and repulsion from industry caused by technological advances and market fluctuations) and the "stagnant reserve" of the irregularly employed. This distinction is not an invention of Marxists. It exists in life and is a critical source of the tension within the working class. There is, of course, no impenetrable barrier between these two sections of the industrial reserve. Many individuals may pass back and forth between them. But if, after some period of time, a certain section of the class becomes permanently consigned to the stagnant reserve, and another section is most unlikely ever to find itself in such a depressed state—and this was precisely the situation in the period under examination and to a certain extent (although for a smaller number) continues to define the working class today—then we can certainly speak of sections of the class with two distinct world outlooks.

Periods of unemployment in the protected sector were of relatively short duration, rarely extending beyond what was cushioned by unemployment insurance and not of sufficient length to drain family financial reserves. In a number of industries (steel being the prime example), unemployed workers, depending on seniority, were guaranteed the equivalent of 90% of their employed wage for a minimum of a year. White workers had a distinct advantage over minority workers: seniority protecting their jobs when lay-offs were made and less difficulty in finding employment again when they did lose their jobs.

Government workers during this period were also largely protected from unemployment (especially those employed by the federal government) as a result of the massive expansion of the state apparatus as well as from the protections afforded by the civil service system.

In short, the vast majority of the aristocracy of labor during this period enjoyed job security. Such unemployment as was felt was mediated in such a way as to guarantee that it did not undermine the sector's ideological adherence to the bourgeoisie.

Along with high and rising wages and protection from unemployment, the upper strata of the U.S. working class enjoyed a number of important "fringe" economic benefits. Outstanding among these were health and pension plans.

The twin scourges of sickness and old age have historically hung like spectres over the entire working class. Even the most fortunate and protected of workers could not rest secure from accident, disabling disease, or simply extended illness that could qualitatively undermine a family's economic foundation and plunge them into the abyss of destitution. Nor could any worker feel secure with the prospect of unemployment due to old age looming up ahead.

The struggle to alleviate these dangers has been a preoccupation of the working class as a whole. But while a minimum of protection has been won for most workers (Medicaid, Social Security, etc.), the labor aristocracy has been able to win a much more substantial and reliable protection, largely through union health and pension plans. Precisely because such plans are tied to steady employment with a particular firm or within a particular industry and are not part of a general social wage extended to the entire working class (as national health or pension plans extended to the entire population would be), they served as an important division between the aristocracy and lower strata of the class.

This particular phenomenon provides a telling illustration of Lenin's point that the gains won by a certain sector of the class (frequently as the result of militant struggle) can objectively serve, under the conditions of monopoly bribery, to undermine the interests of the class as a whole and transform the privileged sector into an ally of the bourgeoisie. The chief political representatives of the labor aristocracy, the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, have never undertaken a determined struggle for national health insurance or a massive extension and strengthening of the social security system, which would significantly benefit the class as a whole. Rather, they have rested content with gains that could be won through union contracts for certain sections of the workers. Even more graphically, we have the example of large numbers of workers—principally white and themselves the beneficiaries of contracted health and pension plans with their employers—taking an active role in the "tax revolt" movement of the late '70s and voting for Reagan in the 1980 election in order to reduce government expenditures destined for the lowest strata of the working class.

Besides direct economic privileges, the labor aristocracy enjoyed a host of political and cultural benefits differing in form and degree but not in essence from those enjoyed by the classical labor aristocracy in

Lenin's day. The development of large state-run university systems, for example, served largely the labor aristocracy and petit bourgeoisie (as opposed to elite universities for children of the bourgeoisie and, later in this period, community colleges for members of the lower strata of the working class). Semi-state-supported institutions such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, youth sports programs, veterans associations, etc., largely served the aristocracy of labor. Leaders of the labor aristocracy, particularly the trade union leadership, enjoyed significant legitimacy in bourgeois politics, being consulted on various government boards and playing key roles in the Democratic Party and often in local or state government. Overall, the labor aristocracy (under the name of the "American middle class" or the "average hard-working productive American") was truly taken to the bosom of the bourgeoisie and promoted as an integral and indispensable component of the "great American way of life."

B. Profile of the Labor Aristocracy

Who exactly makes up the expanded U.S. labor aristocracy of the last three decades?

All too often, communist attempts to answer this question have focused on occupational categories such as craft workers or skilled workers or union officials, thus giving rise to a determinist view of politics which sees an automatic connection between certain trades and opportunism.

Such a sociological approach misses the essential political point. The labor aristocracy is an objective social grouping whose existence is called to our attention by the *opportunist politics* which it supports. It becomes more precisely identified by the correspondence of its opportunist politics to its condition of relative privilege vis-a-vis the rest of the working class, a condition it enjoys as the main beneficiary of monopoly bribery. That condition of privilege produces a sectoral interest of the labor aristocracy which is distinct from that of the rest of the working class and which is expressed in its defense of and concern for the reformist concessions it can obtain for itself. Since these concessions are made possible on the basis of monopoly superprofits, the labor aristocracy has a "special relationship" with monopoly capital which gets expressed politically in the defense of the imperialist system worldwide and in the reinforcement of the prevailing social arrangement and class stratification at home.

From this starting point, we can begin to locate those sections of the work force from which the labor aristocracy draws its principal strength and which, for more than 30 years, have provided the opportunist political leadership of the labor movement with its mass social base. By and large, this privileged stratum is to be found among the skilled craft

workers, in the unionized monopoly industries, and among the proletarianized professionals. Within these sectors, they are those with the most job stability and the greatest access to employment. They are overwhelmingly white and predominantly (but by no means entirely) male.*

Skilled Craft Workers

Unionized craft workers, almost exclusively white, male, and predominantly of northern European ethnic background, have historically constituted the core of the labor aristocracy in the U.S. The AFL was organized primarily to represent their interests and was the organizational form through which this labor aristocracy wielded its extensive influence over the rest of the class. Traditionally it has been opposed to other forms of organization of the class, particularly industrial unionism, seeing that its own privileged position rested to a great extent on its own monopoly of skill and organization.

The leverage enjoyed by the skilled craft workers has been undermined over time by the growth of mass production industries and the spread of unionization to other sectors of the class. Nevertheless, this sector of the working class remains numerically large and is well organized in tightly controlled unions. As a result, these workers still constitute a substantial portion of the core of the labor aristocracy in the U.S. Their principal concentration is in the building trades which, of any branch of industry, are undoubtedly the principal preserve of racism in the working class. The leaders of their unions comprise a particularly reactionary sector of the general opportunist trade union leadership.

The "Expanded" Aristocracy of Unionized Production Workers in the Monopoly Industries

Those who insist that, "by definition," the only sector of the working class which can be considered to be part of the labor aristocracy are the skilled craft workers have naturally concluded that, since this sector's leverage is being undermined, the material base for opportunism in the working class is likewise being undermined. Of course the problem with this line of reasoning is that it cannot explain why opportunism in the labor movement has been strengthened and consolidated precisely at the time when the labor aristocracy—as they define it—seems to be vanishing.

In 1953, when the CPUSA (for all its shortcomings) remained the

*This does not mean that there are few or no women in the labor aristocracy. Because the fundamental unit of class membership is the household and not the individual, many women are objectively part of the labor aristocracy because of their husbands' particular employment. These women, of course, still suffer special oppression as women, but this oppression is within the framework of their overall class position within U.S. capitalism.

center of gravity for Marxism-Leninism in the U.S., William Z. Foster advanced a much more political view of the process. Foster was well aware not only of the decline of the skilled craft workers but, more importantly, of the rise of opportunism. And so he noted:

"One of the new labor trends, especially in the U.S., is for the big employers, instead of as formerly, favoring the skilled workers at the expense of the unskilled, to make wage concessions to the stronger unions in general, at the expense of the weaker ones and of the unorganized."¹⁸

Unlike certain communists, the bourgeoisie does not labor under the ideological prejudice that *only* skilled craft workers can provide them with a social base for promoting the politics of class peace in the labor movement. Precisely because the skilled craft workers were declining in numbers and influence and because the most remarkable development in the labor movement was the growth of the mass industrial unions in monopoly industry, it became essential from the bourgeoisie's point of view to draw these new, potentially powerful sectors of the working class into its own ideological orbit. The pressure to do so was further underscored by the particular history of industrial unionism in the U.S.: it was precisely in this area that left and communist political leadership had been able to establish a significant base in the trade union movement and to point the U.S. working class in the direction of genuine class consciousness and internationalism.*

*One lingering reflection of New Left ideology in the ranks of the communist movement is the widespread view that the role of the CPUSA in the labor movement of the 1930s was essentially reformist. (An accompanying anarcho-syndicalist critique sees the CPUSA as essentially "manipulative," meaning that it tried to "impose" its "own" politics on the working class, a charge which would seem to contradict the charge of reformism.) But such a view is thoroughly ahistoric. Under left leadership, the newly organized industrial unions in the CIO transformed the U.S. labor movement by first, making it a cornerstone of anti-fascist consciousness, and second, raising the struggle against racism to a qualitatively new dimension within the ranks of the organized sector of the working class. In other words, the main sections of the U.S. trade union movement were for the very first time beginning to function *politically* on the basis of a specific set of broad based working class interests in the political arena that went significantly beyond immediate economic demands. At a time when the major struggles against imperialist aggression and racism were and are characterized by the conspicuous absence of virtually the whole trade union movement, it is well worth noting that from 1936 to 1950, major sections of organized labor, both leadership and rank-and-file, actively took up such questions as support for the Spanish Republic; opposition to fascism; defense of the Soviet Union; and a whole host of struggles in opposition to racism, racist attacks, and racist frame-ups. If this be "reformism," the modern trade union movement could use a lot more of it.

This new orientation of capital, to promote the expansion of the traditional labor aristocracy so that the social base for opportunism would be more widespread, was thus significantly influenced by the political determination to rout the left from the trade union movement. This process required solidifying the base of the opportunist leadership then on the rise and, more generally, undertaking to "bourgeoisify" the single most important sector of the U.S. working class.

The failure of certain communists to grasp this crucial political point is inexcusable in light of the overwhelming historical evidence that this effort by the bourgeoisie was crowned with great success.

Does this mean, as the conciliators of opportunism charge, that we have "written off" the majority of the production workers in mass industry? The suggestion is absurd. What we are attempting to do is examine the class realities with ruthless candor *in order to lay the foundation for a communist policy of work in the trade union movement that can break the grip of opportunism and win major sections of the class back to revolutionary politics.* Those who continue to obscure this question by empty assertions concerning the presence of only-to-be-tapped revolutionary sentiments within the *entire* class have themselves "written off" the struggle against opportunism.

Of course, the unionized production workers in monopoly industry are not an undifferentiated mass. The most skilled among them often function as a specially privileged "fifth column" within their ranks, backing capital most energetically and exercising a disproportionate political influence within the industrial unions. However, during this extended period of capitalist stabilization, the mass of production workers, too, received important benefits in the forms of rising real wages and relative job security that we cannot afford to underestimate. The seniority system, basically an advance for the trade union movement, insured that older workers (for historical reasons, predominately white and male, especially after the postwar purge of Blacks and women from the work force) would receive the most advantages of the period. These workers have traditionally provided the most active political support for opportunism.

Workers and unions in the monopoly industries have particularly benefited from the extensive military-related production of this period. This has reinforced the labor aristocracy's general tendency toward class collaborationism with an immediate "self-interest" argument for supporting and building up the military strength of U.S. imperialism.

At the same time, these unionized production workers do differ from skilled workers in the degree to which they can be forged into a permanent and unshakeable base for opportunism. These workers function in the sector of the U.S. economy most vulnerable to eventual inter-imperialist competition, a factor which became apparent by the end of the 1960s. Today, U.S. monopoly in these areas has largely been

broken, and it is becoming less and less possible for capital to maintain the concessions of an earlier period.

Another critical factor contributing to the instability of this sector as a fully reliable base for opportunism in the working class is its heterogeneous character. Within this sector there is a significant concentration of minority workers whose own direct and immediate ties to the lower strata of the proletariat tends to inhibit the ability of the sector as a whole to provide as secure a resting place for opportunism as the racially exclusive building trades.

The crisis now overtaking large sectors of monopoly industry, and the "solutions" which are currently being devised by management and union leaders, provide an important insight into the fall-back position of monopoly capital and the depth of the opportunism which has infected even this stratum of the working class. Capital is trying, and for the most part succeeding, to maintain an alliance with the most protected sectors of the workers in their respective industries at the expense of the mass of production workers (based on explicit chauvinism toward Japanese workers). As the *Wall Street Journal* noted shortly before the recent "bail-out" agreement between Ford and the UAW was signed:

"Auto workers may be about to obtain more job security in return for concessions, but the job security they get won't be for everyone . . . [The provisions for] job security would offer certain income guarantees based on seniority—the bedrock of the union movement. But this is likely to mean even less job security for less senior workers and doesn't seem likely to halt the long-term erosion of jobs in the U.S. auto industry."¹⁹

The Proletarianized Petit Bourgeoisie

The iron laws of capitalist development work so as constantly to undermine the class of small property owners, largely self-employed or operating small enterprises with a relative handful of employees—the petit bourgeoisie. (Included in this class are those professionals and intellectuals whose training and skills are such as to constitute a form of property; traditionally these have also been self-employed; doctors, lawyers, architects, etc.; but some, college professors, for instance, may also be employed on a contractual basis.) The tendency toward monopoly, with its economy of scale, makes the economic position of the small entrepreneur untenable. And the business cycle performs the function of the grim reaper, gathering up these lost souls through bankruptcies and foreclosures. At the same time, monopoly employs many previously "independent" professionals, proletarianizing their tasks in accordance with its own technical division of labor.

But the individuals so affected do not disappear. Nor do the functions they previously performed. Rather they and their functions are brought more directly under the control of capital. For instance, tens of

thousands of department managers for huge supermarkets and department stores would, in an earlier period, have been the owners of small retail establishments. Similarly, engineers, accountants, and designers who would once have operated as independent professionals are today to be found on the payrolls of giant corporations. Likewise the previously elite professions, school teachers, highly skilled health workers, printers, etc., have been increasingly proletarianized with the standardization of skills and the simplification of functions.

These workers comprise a significant reservoir of privilege within the working class as a whole. Traditionally they have been resistant to unionism, but this is rapidly changing, particularly among teachers, nurses, social service workers, airline pilots, and other skilled occupations. Many of the unionized workers are public employees, thus benefiting (until recently) from the stability of employment, guaranteed incomes, and enhanced social wage of that sector of the working class.

Taken as a whole, these three sectors of the working class—the skilled craft workers, the unionized production workers, and the proletarianized petit bourgeoisie—comprise the major portion of the reservoir within the working class from which the expanded labor aristocracy of the last 30 years was forged. Their unions have dominated and continue to dominate the labor movement, and it is their interests that are generally referred to when “labor” is discussed as a category.

Obviously not every skilled worker, unionized production worker, or proletarianized professional is part of the labor aristocracy. Racism and male supremacy create significant stratification within these categories and likewise serve to counter certain benefits with oppressive social relations encountered in the broader society. Other gradations of age, skill, nationality, or even individual traits, etc. find their expression in gradations in status among such workers.

But, taking all such qualifications into account, we are left with a numerically large, politically powerful, and ideologically influential upper stratum of the workers who have the world outlook of a labor aristocracy and who have provided and still provide a direct and substantial base for opportunism in the working class movement.

C. Racism and the Labor Aristocracy

Imperialist bribery, fueled by monopoly super-profits, provides the material foundation for the forging of a modern “expanded” labor aristocracy in the U.S. working class. But this crucial monopoly-induced stratification of the U.S. working class intersects with another fundamental stratification in the class, that based on race.

The difference in condition between the “white” section of the U.S. working class (those workers of principally European origin) and the minority section of the class (Black, Latino, Asian, Native American)

has been so thoroughly documented—and not just by communists—that its mere assertion should serve our present purpose. Suffice it to say that such well known economic categories as wage differentials, unemployment, and occupational opportunity readily demonstrate that the most privileged and protected sector of the U.S. working class (where income is high, employment is steady, and benefits are substantial) is overwhelmingly white and that the lower strata of the class (where income is low, employment is highly unstable, and most live below or around the poverty level) is where the vast majority of minority workers are located.

The fact that the labor aristocracy is overwhelmingly white, therefore, is the consequence of the oppressive racial dialectic which has been a central historical feature of the U.S. social formation from its very beginnings.*

The intersection between the labor aristocracy and white supremacy has its political expression in the intersection between the social-imperialist trend that dominates the trade union movement and the cross-class white united front which continues to be the main ideological bastion for the political defense and reinforcement of racism.

The actual function of the labor aristocracy in this regard is to lend legitimacy to the politics of the white united front in the working class, a task which it assumes with considerable enthusiasm since its own privileged condition coincides with the racial privileges based on its racial composition.** At the same time, the white united front serves as a

*For a fuller theoretical and historical amplification of this point, see *Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation, Part II: Theoretical and Historical Framework*, by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing, *Line of March* #8.

** The expansion of the labor aristocracy into significant sections of the unionized workers in monopoly industry has also provided benefits for many minority workers who, in a number of cases (such as the urban auto plants in the Midwest), have been able to gain employment in this area. But the somewhat privileged position of these minority workers has been neutralized and remains largely unrealized because it is mediated by the race relation both within industry and outside it. Within industry, lower seniority and overt discrimination and racial harassment put minority workers in less favorable conditions than their white co-workers. Also, whatever protections minority workers enjoy as part of the unionized production force in monopoly industry is counter-balanced by the racial oppression they confront in society at large. Some minority workers, of course, adopt the outlook of the privileged stratum. But for the most part, their racialized condition introduces a certain political instability within this section of the expanded labor aristocracy. In the United Auto Workers (UAW), for instance, Black auto workers have frequently forced the union leadership to take relatively progressive positions on certain social issues within the general class collaborationist framework that still dominates the union.

crucial ideological vehicle for expanding the influence of opportunist politics in the working class beyond the labor aristocracy deep into the ranks of white workers who are part of the lower strata of the class, employing the appeals of racist ideology to win these workers to identify their own interests with those of the (white) bourgeoisie and upper strata of the working class.

While this intersection clearly is an objective consequence of two historically rooted processes—monopoly bribery of a section of the working class and the social relation of white supremacy—it would not be accurate to reduce the phenomenon merely to its structural logic. The merger of social-imperialism and racism is quite consciously promoted by the most sophisticated agents of the bourgeoisie in the ranks of the working class, the labor lieutenants of capital. This level of consciousness is personified by the top leaders of the AFL-CIO, such as George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and Albert Shanker, and by the “pro-labor” architects of imperialist policy in the Democratic Party, such as Hubert Humphrey, Henry Jackson, and Richard Daley.

D. The Triumph of Opportunism in the Postwar Period

Despite the strong economic foundation for the growth of a social-imperialist trend in the postwar U.S., the consolidation of this trend as the dominant force in the labor movement was hardly a smooth or automatic process. In fact, it took a concerted political effort by the bourgeoisie and all its henchmen to undo and reverse the strong progressive, anti-fascist political climate which existed in the trade union movement at the close of World War II and thus pave the way for the bourgeoisie’s agents to regain control of the labor movement.

As William Z. Foster points out:

“The history of the American trade union movement during the post-World War II years, in one sense, is the story of the systematic demobilizing of the workers’ opposition to the war program of Wall Street imperialism by the top leaders of the AFL, CIO, and Railroad Brotherhoods.”²⁰

The imperialist drive was not confined to the labor movement. It corrupted in every area of politics and was aimed at undermining the influence of a left which had gained a significant foothold in the political life of the country. This point requires underscoring because it directly contradicts certain determinist prejudices which hold that favorable conditions for an opportunist trend to arise translate directly to its inevitable victory in the ranks of labor. The point is that imperialist bribery, even while it may be extended to fairly large numbers of workers, does not automatically mean that these workers will all become opportunists, still less that they will always be capable of imposing a backward ideology and politics on the class as a whole. In the U.S., that

undertaking required a sharp polarization within the ranks of labor and in the country’s political life more generally in order to secure the triumph of opportunism, making it clear that an equally sharp polarization will be required in order to break the grip of opportunism today after 30 years of hegemony within the working class. In other words, within the boundaries of objective conditions, the role of conscious political forces, not least the communists, assumes a crucial importance. Thus, any analysis of the postwar period which only considers imperialism’s economic blandishments to an expanding labor aristocracy necessarily trivializes the bitter political struggle which was required to insure the triumph of opportunism. By the same token, such an approach underestimates the political process required to overcome opportunism, as well as the decisive role of the conscious communist element within that process.

In the postwar U.S., the first crucial step in the political triumph of opportunism was the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. During this same period, 30 states passed “little Taft-Hartley” laws as well. The passage of Taft-Hartley represented a massive reversal of many of the gains won by labor in the Wagner Act a decade earlier, and served notice on the trade union movement that it would be granted a measure of stability and political influence only to the degree that it accepted a role as a cooperative junior partner of aggressive and expansionist U.S. monopoly capital.

Taft-Hartley abolished the closed shop, empowered the government to obtain an eighty-day injunction against any strike it declared a danger to national health or safety, prohibited jurisdictional strikes and secondary boycotts, put wildcat strikes beyond protection of the law. It also mandated that union officers must sign an affidavit denying communist affiliations for the union to be able to utilize the authority of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). President Truman vetoed the act but exerted no effort to fight for his veto to be sustained, and Congress overrode him. While both the AFL and CIO leadership denounced the act, their political opposition caved in after passage. As Foster notes, “The law could have been defeated by a bold refusal of the trade union leadership to sign up under it. John L. Lewis, many progressive leaders, and the Communists proposed just this; but the top AFL-CIO leadership would have none of it. The 1947 convention of the AFL voted compliance with the law ‘under protest,’ which traitorous action caused the United Mine Workers of America to quit the Federation.”²¹

Having thus curbed the power of the trade union movement in general, the bourgeoisie moved to enlist the labor movement on its side in the global struggle against socialism and national liberation. To accomplish this task, it was necessary to isolate and expunge the left and communist forces in the trade union movement. It was in this period, 1946-1949,

that the political character of the modern trade union movement was forged. In these years, the class collaborationist political line which has since dominated the labor movement was advanced, and a leadership committed to such a world view consolidated its power.

This process proceeded within the AFL with little difficulty, since that federation was notorious for its support to imperialism. As early as 1946, the AFL national convention was passing resolutions attacking the Soviet Union and endorsing Truman's gradual turn to the Cold War. The CIO posed a more difficult problem. Within that federation, the Communists had played a leading role ever since its founding. The left headed up eleven major national unions. And, objectively, the CIO leadership had played a positive role in the forging of a genuine anti-fascist front. At its 1946 national convention, the CIO resisted efforts at red-baiting and war-mongering resolutions and even passed a resolution calling for retention of the wartime alliance with Britain and the Soviet Union. The struggle stepped up in 1947, but the CIO annual convention still balked at passing any resolution explicitly endorsing either the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan.

But by 1948, the alliance between the state, capital, and the social-imperialist trend in the labor movement began to sweep all opposition aside. Philip Murray, head of the CIO, demanded that all CIO unions endorse the Marshall Plan and the candidates of the Democratic Party in the 1948 elections. Since Henry Wallace's candidacy in this election on the Progressive Party ticket was an explicit challenge to the Cold War policies of the Truman administration, Murray's demand was nothing but a call for the political surrender of all antiwar, anti-imperialist forces in the CIO. The left-led unions refused to adhere to this demand passed by the CIO Executive Board. There then followed a period of intense red-baiting, organized raids on left-led unions, and a series of defections by a number of trade union leaders who had been part of the left bloc, among them Joseph Curran of the National Maritime Union and Michael Quill of the Transport Workers Union.

The confrontation finally came to a head at the 1949 convention of the CIO when the leadership deliberately split the organization. To fully appreciate the scope of the left's influence at the time and the significance of the split, it should be kept in mind that at this convention 71 of the 308 delegates represented left-led unions with a combined membership of over 900,000. Chief target of the attack was the largest of the left-led unions, the United Electrical Workers (UE) with 450,000 members. At the convention, the UE was expelled from the CIO for opposing the Marshall Plan, for opposing Truman's candidacy in the 1948 elections, and for criticizing the CIO leadership for not having strongly or effectively enough opposed the Taft-Hartley law.

In the months that followed, the other ten left-led unions were also

expelled from the CIO. These were (with membership figures in parentheses): The United Farm Equipment Workers (40,000); Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (85,000); Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers (36,000); United Office and Professional Workers (25,000); United Public Workers (60,000); American Communications Association (15,000); Fur and Leather Workers (100,000); International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (85,000); Marine Cooks and Stewards (6,000); Fishermen and Allied Workers (20,000).

Foster's comment is a fitting summation:

"At the 1950 convention of the CIO in Chicago there was not one left-wing delegate in attendance; the process of transforming the CIO top bureaucratic machine into a tool of the State Department was complete. Thus was perpetrated one of the worst crimes in the whole history of the American labor movement. The CIO rightwing leaders, by ousting the entire eleven progressive unions, had deliberately stripped the CIO of the principal dynamic force that had built the organization and made it into the advanced guard of the American trade union movement."²²

With the full victory of opportunism, the split in the labor movement between the AFL and the CIO no longer rested on a political basis. The merger of the two federations in 1955 represented the full consolidation of opportunism in the organized labor movement and reflected the expansion of the labor aristocracy to include key sections of unionized production workers in monopoly industries.*

The AFL-CIO merger crystalized the dominant influence of opportunism in the trade union movement and served to strengthen the hold of the social-imperialist trend over the working class as a whole. During this period the overwhelming bulk of organized labor moved into line behind the imperialist system, playing a crucial role in amassing working class support for the Korean War; U.S. imperialist intervention in Iran, Guatemala, Lebanon, and elsewhere; and the general strategy of nuclear blackmail.

By the 1960s, when the international struggle against imperialism

*In typical economist fashion, the CPUSA hailed the merger as a means of re-establishing organized labor's bargaining power with monopoly capital. But what the CPUSA failed to mention was that the merger principally enhanced the bargaining power of the labor aristocracy with monopoly capital and that, politically speaking, there was nothing at all progressive about the merger. In fact, the merger represented a further consolidation of opportunism in the labor movement, bringing under the domination of the most reactionary sector of the labor leadership in the AFL whatever remnants of class consciousness still existed in the CIO.

reached a new stage most sharply typified by the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. aggression and counter-revolution, the trade union movement had become one of the imperialist system's most secure ideological havens. Having lived up to its end of the bargain, the trade union movement negotiated with the bourgeoisie on behalf of the most protected sectors of the working class, not only at the bargaining table but also from its political vantage point within the Democratic Party.

The labor movement's conciliation and promotion of racism during this same period was no less odious and marked a sharp reversal from the period in which, under left leadership, the CIO had pioneered in the struggle against racism. This sorry record was effectively captured in the indictment of the leadership of the trade union movement made by A. Philip Randolph in 1961:

"The leadership of the organized labor movement has at no time ever seriously challenged Jim Crow unionism in the South. White leaders of labor organizations, like white leaders of the church, business, government, schools, and the press, marched together, under the banner of white supremacy, in the Ku Klux Klan, to put down and keep down by law or lawlessness, the Negro. . . .

"Instead of meeting the racial-labor issue head on, organized labor has always adopted a policy of appeasement, compromise and defeatism. The evidence exists in the fact that it has recognized and accepted:

- a) The Jim Crow union;
- b) The color bar in union constitutions, rituals, or exclusionary racial policies by tacit consent;
- c) Racially segregated seniority rosters and lines of job progression;
- d) Racial sub-wage differential;
- e) Indifferent recognition, if not acceptance of the concept and practice of a 'white man's job' and a 'black man's job';
- f) Racial barriers against Negro participation in apprenticeship training programs;
- g) Failure to demand Negro workers' participation in union democracy;
- h) Racially segregated state conventions of the AFL-CIO in southern cities;
- i) Racially segregated city central labor bodies of the AFL-CIO.

" . . . Although not unaware of the fact that racial discrimination in trade unions affiliated to the AFL-CIO has existed for almost a century, no profound concern is now manifest by the leadership about this dreadful evil. Instead of becoming aroused and disturbed about the existence of race bias in unions that affect employment opportunities and the economic status of the Negro worker, AFL-CIO leadership waves aside criticism of the movement's racial policies as pure exaggeration unworthy of dispassionate examination."²³

The dominant opportunist line of the organized labor movement has not gone unchallenged. But the challenges have not come in any significant way from within the ranks of the trade union movement as such—yet another reflection of the fact that the material basis for opportunism has substantially penetrated the ranks of organized labor.

Rather these challenges have come from outside the trade union movement, and thus many communists have mistakenly concluded that they came from outside the ranks of the working class. Quite the contrary, these challenges, the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the anti-Vietnam war movement, had significant bases within the lower strata of the working class. This much is readily obvious in the mass character of the civil rights movement, but is also true insofar as the mass spontaneous resistance to the Vietnam war is concerned.*

Of course, much of the visible political leadership of these movements was petit bourgeois. But the strength of the mass anti-racist upsurge rested in the fact that millions of people from the most depressed sectors of the working class were in motion, advancing political demands directly challenging that social relation, racism, which operates to reproduce and reinforce their depressed condition. Likewise, the ultimate strength of the anti-war movement was based in a growing mass ideological consensus within the working class to oppose the war.

The conspicuous distance of the labor aristocracy from both these mass movements has been cited time and again by opportunists as proof that these movements lacked a working class base. What this phenomenon *really* demonstrated was the split *within* the working class and the consolidation of opportunist politics by one sector of the class.

The bourgeoisie went to great pains to portray the contradiction between the labor aristocracy and the more depressed sectors of the working class as a contradiction between labor and "minorities" or labor and "students." But the white schoolteachers in New York City who fought tooth and nail against "community control" of local school boards in minority neighborhoods were not defending the working class, but the interests of a particular protected section of the class against the

*Of course, these challenges did eventually lead to resistance taking form within the unions themselves. The late 1960s and early '70s saw a massive rank and file upsurge in many unions, particularly among Black workers and young workers. There was also substantial growth in public sector unionism and in organizing mainly Latino and Asian agricultural workers. In an objective, and sometimes subjective, sense, these constituted challenges within the trade union movement to the opportunist current that dominated that movement. The point is, however, that these challenges—though objectively working class in objectives and in composition had their roots in mass movements which originated outside the boundaries of the unions proper.

demands of the more oppressed section of the same class. And the "hard hats" who beat up anti-war demonstrators (aside from those who were paid government agents and off-duty police officers) were likewise fulfilling their end of the contract that the social-imperialist trend within the labor movement has made with the bourgeoisie.

Indeed, it is precisely the political stand taken during this period by the social-imperialist trend, rooted in the labor aristocracy, that conclusively demonstrates the class collaborationist character of this trend and the absolute necessity for the struggle against it in the class struggle as it is actually encountered in its most concentrated political forms.

IV. Imperialist Stabilization Coming to an End: What Now for the Labor Aristocracy?

Today the period of relative capitalist stability is coming to an end. The entire world imperialist system is suffering from the effects of a prolonged system-wide recession, endemic inflation, and the inability of the U.S. dollar to maintain a stable international capitalist currency at fixed rates of exchange. New waves of protectionism are felt throughout the capitalist world as the bourgeois rivals each seek to preserve advantages of the past, while, in varying degrees from country to country, the welfare state (for two decades the principal prop of social peace) is systematically being undermined. Add the current enormously expensive and economically unproductive attempt by the U.S. to regain military superiority over the Soviet Union so that the U.S. can reinstitute its policy of nuclear blackmail in the struggle to stem the tide of revolution, and it is clear that the period of relative capitalist stability which characterized the three post-World War II decades is coming to an end.

Within this overall weakening of the imperialist system, it is clear that the period of absolutely undisputed U.S. hegemony over its rivals is also ending. Japanese and German capital especially have mounted a challenge to U.S. domination of certain industries (autos, steel, computers, etc.) and international markets with results that are recorded almost daily in the newspapers. When General Motors maps out its production plans on the assumption that foreign manufacturers will control 40% of the U.S. automobile market, it is clear evidence that a radical alteration in the economic relations between the imperialist powers has taken place.

Overall, this alteration consists of a dramatic rise in the economic strength of Japan and Germany, principally at the expense of the U.S. and Britain, and a significant narrowing of the economic gap between the European Economic Community as a whole and the U.S. This changing relationship can be seen in the following table:

Some Indicators of the Uneven Development of the Leading Capitalist Countries²⁴

	1948	1958	1968	1970	1972
Share of the capitalist world's industrial output (per cent)					
USA	54.6	46.6	44.6	40.8	40.8
Britain	10.2	8.6	6.2	6.1	5.8
France	4.6	5.0	5.2	5.0	5.2
FRG	3.6	8.8	8.8	8.6	8.5
Italy	2.0	3.1	3.3	3.5	3.2
Japan	1.2	3.5	7.6	9.0	9.4
Share of the capitalist world's exports (per cent)					
USA	23.8	18.5	16.2	15.4	13.4
Britain	12.1	9.4	7.0	7.0	6.6
France	3.8	5.6	6.0	6.4	7.1
FRG	1.1	9.7	11.8	12.4	12.7
Italy	2.0	2.7	4.8	4.8	5.1
Japan	0.4	3.0	6.2	7.0	7.8

Similar statistics are not available for the past decade, but there is abundant evidence to indicate that the trend revealed here has certainly continued, and possibly accelerated. In essence, this trend is one more verification that the essentially competitive nature of capital has not been altered by the particular circumstances of an extended period of U.S. hegemony, and that the law of uneven development flowing from the nature of capital itself continues to operate with incredible force.

Inter-imperialist rivalry has not been the only factor working to undermine U.S. hegemony. The advances made by the forces of national liberation and socialism have led to a sharp reduction in the physical sphere (territory, natural resources, and exploitable labor-power) of capitalist domination, further intensifying capitalist competition. These advances have had a particularly devastating effect on U.S. imperialism. As prime military defender and gendarme of the system as a whole, the U.S. has had to shoulder the enormous burdens of financing and conducting the major counter-revolutionary wars and adventures of the recent period, and of maintaining a military establishment and modern weaponry sufficient to that purpose. This burden has been further exacerbated by the cost of maintaining a sizeable labor aristocracy in the U.S. in order to reinforce the necessary popular consensus for imperialism's policies.

The most concentrated expression of this process was the war in Indochina, which the U.S. conducted on the basis of a "guns and butter" policy. This policy meant that the expanded labor aristocracy was not called upon for any economic sacrifices to finance this costly conflict. If anything, there was an expansion of the "bribe" during this period as a

means of securing the support of a significant sector of the working class in a period of rising discontent. One result of this policy was the costly postwar inflationary spiral.

In addition, the anti-colonial movement—even where countries have not wrenched themselves out of the imperialist orbit—has led to an increased bargaining power by a number of raw material exporting countries, also weakening U.S. imperialism economically and politically.

Finally, the laws of capitalist development have worked to undermine U.S. capitalist stability from within, although this process is directly impacted by international developments as well. The enormous development of productive forces engendered during this period accelerated the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall. When the countervailing tendencies of highway construction, expansion into new areas of the world, etc. became exhausted, the U.S. economy began to fall into the stagnation that is in fact the normal condition of advanced monopoly capitalism.

Obviously, we have only sketched the erosion of the U.S. monopoly—and the weakening of the imperialist system as a whole—in the sparsest way. It should also be borne in mind that we are describing a trend at a certain point in its development and not at the end of that process. The U.S. monopoly has been qualitatively reduced, but it is far from having been ousted completely. Similarly, the imperialist system as a whole is qualitatively weaker than it was in the immediate postwar period; but it is still a powerful and dangerous force. (Failure to keep these qualifications in mind can lead to all manner of misassessments. Already the infantile leftists are once again gleefully anticipating the imminent collapse of imperialism's internal economic cohesion. On the strength of this they are asserting that the task of communists is to prepare for the seizure of power within a decade!)

Of course, the weakening of U.S. imperialism's monopoly position in the world capitalist system and the widespread economic difficulties facing the system as a whole certainly have set new conditions for the class struggle. But contrary to the nirvana envisioned by the devotees at the shrine of spontaneity, these new conditions will not automatically or necessarily overcome the powerful opportunist politics which have been and *still are* supported by large sections of U.S. workers.

Certainly the weakening of the U.S. monopoly has undermined the U.S. bourgeoisie's capacity to maintain its system of imperialist bribery of the labor aristocracy at the scale to which this privileged stratum has become accustomed. The resulting cutbacks in the labor aristocracy's benefits through "Reaganomics" has sparked a new interest in political activity within the social-imperialist trend, affecting both its leadership and its rank and file. Undoubtedly, this motion sets more favorable conditions for some forces in the labor movement to break with

opportunism and move towards positions of class solidarity. However—and this is what much of the communist movement is apparently unable to grasp—the spontaneous tendency of the labor aristocracy, conditioned by decades of opportunism, is not to break with class collaboration but to fight bitterly to maintain the alliance with capital even as the terms of that alliance are being renegotiated. And indeed, this is precisely what the present, seemingly "militant" stance of the leadership of the AFL-CIO represents.

Lost in the chorus of hallelujahs jubilantly intoned by much of the left over the trade union movement's new "militance" supposedly shown by Solidarity Day was the unmistakable evidence that the AFL-CIO leadership had carefully orchestrated this massive event as follows. First, by carefully excluding from the official demands of the demonstration any attacks on the military budget or U.S. foreign policy, the opportunist leadership made clear that it had no intention of rupturing the political alliance with capital in support of imperialism's interests worldwide, especially in its attacks on the socialist countries and national liberation struggles. Second, by attacking "Reaganomics" and focusing exclusively on electoral remedies, the opportunist leaders demonstrated that they remain firmly committed to keeping the "interests of labor" firmly ensconced within the safe confines of the Democratic Party. Third, by permitting more "left" demands and slogans on such questions as war and racism to be voiced from the ranks of the demonstration—but not from the podium—the opportunist leaders were sending a "warning" to their capitalist partners of the troubles they might be unleashing for themselves if they undermined the economic position of the opportunists' social base, that is, of the labor aristocracy.

In other words, the opportunist leaders are, in effect, saying to the bourgeoisie: How do you expect us to maintain the influence of imperialist politics in the labor movement if you undercut the *quid pro quo* which has served us both so well for 30 years? This point does not have to be deduced. In their most candid moments, the opportunist leaders say as much out loud. Thus Albert Shanker, head of the United Federation of Teachers and an arch ideological representative of the social-imperialist trend, declares: "A strong foreign and defense policy requires internal social cohesion (which) an economic program that is unjust undermines the possibility of achieving."²⁵

It would be the gravest of errors to believe that in the pursuit of this policy the leaders of the AFL-CIO stand alone against a politically conscious and actively resisting rank and file. On the contrary, in limiting their criticism of Reagan to his economic attacks on "honest, hard-working Americans" and sidestepping the issues of imperialist war and racist oppression, these opportunist leaders are indeed in step with much of their base.

For communists, this should not come as some terrible shock. Even

under the best of circumstances, the spontaneous motion of the working class in response to the economic attacks by capital do not automatically or necessarily lead in the direction of revolutionary consciousness. And under circumstances in which the opportunist trend in the labor movement has had deep roots in the class for over three decades, intersects with as powerful a social relation as U.S.-brand racism, maintains a well-financed and sophisticated political and organization apparatus, enjoys the active support of important sectors of the U.S. bourgeoisie, and faces no serious challenge from its left, it should hardly be surprising that millions of workers do not quickly break with class collaboration and acquire advanced class consciousness.

Obviously, a number of these factors are beyond the ability of communists to alter in any short term sense. However, the factor over which the conscious elements do have some control is the degree to which we will take up in earnest the long term task of criticizing opportunism and explaining its essential nature to the broad mass of workers, particularly those in the lower, unprotected sectors of the working class. To the degree that the left can make some headway at this task, the prospects for mounting a serious challenge to opportunism are not at all dim. For under conditions of economic decline like the present, there is every basis for the lower strata of the class in particular to break the threads which bind it to social-imperialist leadership and take up resistance from a more class conscious (in particular, an anti-imperialist and anti-racist) perspective. And were such resistance to take on significant proportions, more favorable conditions will be set to break certain sectors even of the more privileged workers away from the politics of opportunism.

Decisive to this entire scenario is the degree to which a force enters the field with a penetrating critique of opportunism and a rock-solid commitment to take up the struggle against it. Unfortunately, there is little in the record of most forces on the U.S. left to engender any confidence that they can even identify the face of opportunism in the labor movement, let alone lead the struggle against it. The left wing of social democracy, itself rooted in sectors of the labor aristocracy, is so blinded by anti-Sovietism, complacency about racism, and dreams of capturing the Democratic Party that it is hardly in a position to challenge the prevailing demagoguery of the most reactionary forces in the trade union movement. The Maoist trend, meanwhile, promotes an anti-Sovietism at times more virulent than social democracy's, and is by and large as much a worshipper of spontaneity as any force ever calling itself communist. (Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Maoists and social democrats are increasingly finding themselves working together; in fact the remnants of U.S. Maoism are becoming indistinguishable from and swallowed up by social democracy.)

The CPUSA appears on the surface to offer more hope, given that it

sides with the main forces of revolution and progress internationally and repeats over and over its commitment to take up the fight against racism. Yet the CPUSA is so consumed by a fear of being isolated from the spontaneous movement that it is completely prepared to cater to the movement's most backward prejudices and winds up tailing along behind it. The party's prettification of opportunism, its denial of the existence of a significant labor aristocracy and a strong material basis for opportunism in the U.S. working class, is only the theoretical reflection of this basic ideological flaw.

Even within the emerging Marxist-Leninist trend, many forces have lost their bearings in the face of the readily apparent stirrings in the mass workers' movement and in the face of the seizure of initiative by the opportunist trend. In this context, even understanding the main spontaneous trends at work, let alone directing them, has proven a difficult task. Besides ideological vacillation, becoming overwhelmed by the spontaneous movement and concluding that everything will just work itself out in the end, the main problem has been a lack of theoretical clarity on the history, nature, and role of the labor aristocracy.

Yet, besides ideological staunchness, theoretical clarity on this question is precisely what is needed for directing our political work. (For that matter, theoretical clarity contributes in no small measure to demystifying reality and strengthening communists' ideological fiber). For the present period demands, above all, that communists keep their bearings on why opportunist politics retain such a stubborn influence, and why the struggle against opportunism is both so difficult and so necessary. To perpetuate any illusions that opportunist politics are not now dominant in the working class, that they are being automatically eradicated by declining economic conditions, or that they have no substantial material base and support within the working class itself is to surrender our political responsibilities even before we seriously take up our work.

We are indeed entering a period where new possibilities are opening up to win significant numbers of U.S. workers to a class conscious and revolutionary perspective. For these possibilities to be realized, the grip of opportunism on the U.S. working class must be broken. This requires the leadership of communists—communists who are prepared to surrender prejudice to stubborn fact. The stakes are considerable, for, as Lenin put it, "unless a determined and relentless struggle is waged all along the line against these Parties—or groups, trends, etc. [the opportunists], it is all the same—there can be no question of a struggle against imperialism, or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement."²⁶

In the concluding part of this article in the next issue of *Line of March* we will offer some ideas on how this struggle must be taken up, with the major focus on a critique of how the presently dominant line in the U.S.

communist movement, the line of the CPUSA, liquidates the struggle against opportunism in theory, trivializes it in its general political line, and conciliates opportunism in practice.

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