

Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle

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Strategies, Tactics, Objectives

Edited by Robert Ovetz

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Introduction

Robert Ovetz

“You need to take your enemy’s side if you’re going to see things the way they do. And you need to see things the way they do if you’re going to anticipate their actions, respond effectively, and beat them.”

—Tyrion Lannister, *Game of Thrones*, “Beyond the Wall”
(Season 7, Episode 6)

There is little doubt that the global working class is on the retreat and has been for a very long time. Confronted with the strategy of neoliberalism, the balance of power is heavily tilted towards capital. Despite decades of hand-wringing, investigations, reforms, and consolidations and reorganizations of unions, despair has deepened and the assault on workers continues unabated around the world.

The rationale for capital’s assault, however, has been almost entirely unexamined. If the level of repression is an expression of the level of the threat, as the novelist Eduardo Galeano once asserted in his classic book *Open Veins of Latin America* (1997), then the threat of global class struggle is clearly apparent to capital even if it has been overlooked by union leaders, labor scholars, and working-class militants.¹ As Jamie Woodcock has reminded us, “between the placid workplace and the all-out strike there are a range of practices—some collective, others individual—that are worthy of sustained attention” (2016: 99). Capitalism has been in crisis during the entire period of neoliberalism. Is it merely a crisis of its own making or does the working class have a role to play in it?

This book is an addition to a growing body of work by workers and scholars that attempts not only to identify, investigate, and analyze new forms of worker cooperation, self-organization, and struggle, but also to examine the strategies, tactics, objectives, and organiza-

tional forms undertaken by these workers and the possibilities for circulating their struggles across borders and unleashing a new cycle of global class struggle.² To achieve this it is critical that we conduct what are called “workers’ inquiries” into the current class composition in as many strategic countries and sectors as possible. This will help shed light and heat on the current global power of capital and the necessary tactics, strategies, objectives, and organizational forms that workers can and are using to counter and disrupt that power. As a step towards carrying out a global workers’ inquiry this book offers inquiries from nine countries, representing in total about 70 percent of the global population on four continents.

WORKERS’ INQUIRY: NO POLITICS WITHOUT INQUIRY

In 1995, the independent working-class scholar Ed Emery issued a call to form a Network for Research and Action to carry out workers’ inquiries around the world. Emery’s idea was inspired by Karl Marx’s 101-question survey published in *La Revue socialiste* in 1880. Too late in his life to continue the effort, Marx sought to “undertake a serious inquiry into the position of the French working class” to obtain “an *exact and positive* knowledge of the conditions in which the working class—the class to whom the future belongs—works and moves.” His questions broached issues ranging from the workplace to community and government, ending with an open-ended 101st question allowing the worker to include “general remarks.” Marx reportedly never received a response (Marx 1880).

Inspired by Marx’s survey, Emery (1995) argued that the working class should closely study the current class composition before launching into a new round of struggle. As he put it, there should be “no politics without inquiry,” since “the new class composition is more or less a mystery to us (and to capital, and to itself) because it is still in the process of formation.” For Emery, as for the Italian, French, and American autonomist Marxists who rediscovered and reinvigorated Marx’s project from the 1950s to the 1970s, there should be no struggle before we know who we are, the conditions under which we work, how capital is organized, its weaknesses and choke points, as well as our sources of strength, power, and leverage. “Before we

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can make politics,” Emery makes clear, “we have to understand that class composition. This requires us to study it. Analyse it. We do this through a process of inquiry. Hence: No Politics Without Inquiry.”

This book is a response to Emery’s call for a workers’ inquiry into the global composition of class struggle. Its limited scope of nine countries on four continents is meant to be a starting point for examining a class composition “eternally in flux,” as Emery reminds us, at this particular point in which “periodically consolidating nodes of class power” appear, are defeated or succeed, and are then attacked, decomposed, and recreated. The book is intended to be a part of a larger project of carrying out a global workers’ inquiry into the global class struggle that can be further developed and contributed to.

A workers’ inquiry is an invaluable methodology for investigating the class composition at a particular point in time, in a specific workplace, industry, country, or, in its most challenging form which has yet to be attempted, at the planetary scale. Virtually forgotten ever since Marx published his original call, the workers’ inquiry was unearthed simultaneously by the Johnson-Forest Tendency (and later the *Zerowork* journal) in the US, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France, and *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia* and other Italian publications in the 1960s and ’70s. It was soon all but forgotten—with the exception of *Midnight Notes* in the US in the 1970s and ’80s and the book *Hotlines* in Germany in the 1990s—until the resurgence in the past few years of interest in militant worker self-organization. While these efforts carried out inquiries into specific workplaces, industries, and countries, analysis on a global level has only just begun. Such a global workers’ inquiry is long overdue and unavoidable today as capital moves almost frictionlessly across national borders, fleeing workers in one country while propelling itself towards those in other countries.

There are others working along the same lines, seeking to document and examine workers’ strategies, tactics, and objectives in struggle. Among them is Immanuel Ness, who identifies new forms of self-organization displaying innovative tactics and strategies that either bypass or are antagonistic to the bureaucratization, institutionalization, and corporatism of the existing class-collaborationist unions and social democratic parties. The tactic of “contract unionism,” Ness

argues, has tied unions to the state and capital as a mechanism for suppressing and defeating the strategy of working-class militancy (2014: 269–78).³

There are also others carrying out complementary studies of worker self-organized struggles against both capital and contract unions, including Azzellini and Kraft (2018), Dutta, Nowak, and Birke (2018), and Atzeni and Ness (2018). I myself published a historical workers' inquiry from above, examining these very questions in relation to workers in the US during the tumultuous period 1877 to 1921 (Ovetz 2019). Sinwell and Mbatha (2016) have provided a potent examination of the challenge to contract unionism by self-organized Marikana miners in South Africa, while Ness and Azzellini (2011) have documented the continuing emphasis on workers' control as a persistently relevant strategy and objective of working-class militancy. Ngwane, Sinwell, and Ness (2017) further tie this militancy to struggles in both waged and unwaged workplaces and to workers' communities.

The most important text in this emerging series on self-organized workers' movements is Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness's *Choke Points*, which investigates workers' attempts to disrupt key nodes in the global capital accumulation process to assert their demands, shift the balance of power back in their favor, and extract concessions and victories. "Logistics," they observe, "remains the crucial site for increasing working-class power today." Workers are increasingly able to apply their leverage to make the supply chain "unmanageable" because of their global interlinkages. "These workers, although connected in the global supply chain, largely remain divided across region, nation state, industry, and job sector. In light of this, linking these global struggles remains an important task in developing strategies of resistance" (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018: 2–4). *Choke Points* is no less than a series of workers' inquiries into the current technical composition of capital and the possibilities for recomposing working-class power so as to disrupt the global capital accumulation process and extract concessions that will move the struggle onto increasingly more intense terrain.

A similar analysis is offered by Moody's groundbreaking *On New Terrain*, which conducts a finely honed analysis of capital's current

global technical composition supported by extensive detailed research provided by capital itself. Noting that the composition of the working class has been transformed by the changing technical composition of capital, Moody reminds us that “The terrain on which the working class and the oppressed fight necessarily changes as the structure and contours of global and domestic capital changes.” As the class composition changes, the working class is responding by developing new tactics and strategies that increase its potential for recomposing its own power. The old industrial system, Moody concludes, “has been replaced by new and mostly different geographic patterns and structures of concentration with the potential for advances in working-class organization and rebellion” (2017: 2–3).

WORKERS’ INQUIRY AS STRATEGY

This book, however, takes a relatively unique path in that it focuses on an analysis of the class composition and how it can inform new tactics, strategies, objectives, and organizational forms. While not all of the contributions in this book take entirely the same approach or reach the same conclusions, what ties them together is an attempt to carry out, either in part or whole, what is called a “workers’ inquiry” *from below* when conducted by workers themselves, and *from above* when conducted by academic and independent scholars, as partners engaged in co-research (Woodcock 2014: 505; Monaco 2015a, 2015b, and 2017; Curcio and Roggero 2018).

What emerges from these workers’ inquiries is not only that class struggle has never ceased or gone underground during the decades of defeat, but also that workers have been experimenting with new forms of organization, strategies, and tactics that can be found inside, outside, or in conflict with unions. These struggles rarely show themselves in the form of strikes, let alone strike waves, but they are disruptive threats to the accumulation of capital nonetheless.

This observation is informed by re-reading the voluminous economic reports on rates of private investment, return on investment, “redundancies,” “flexibility,” automation, productivity, efficiency, and innovation from the perspective of the working class. This careful re-reading—what Cleaver (1992) calls the “inversion of class

perspective”—finds class struggle to be ubiquitous throughout the global capitalist system. Mario Tronti made the case for inverting capital’s perspective as follows:

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working-class struggles... (Tronti 1966)

This inversion, Tronti argues elsewhere, can demonstrate that “the pressure of labour-power is capable of forcing capital to modify its own internal composition, intervening *within* capital as [an] essential component of capitalist development” (Tronti cited in Wright 2002: 37). Panzieri made a similar point when he observed that “the sole limit to the development of capital is not capital itself, but the resistance of the working class” (1976: 11–12). Kolinko’s workers’ inquiry into call center workers’ struggles in Germany in the 1990s and 2000s spoke to Tronti and Panzieri’s point about how working-class struggle drives capitalist development:

Our starting-points are the specific conditions in a specific sphere of exploitation, we have to try to relate them to the global class contradiction. In reference to ... the usage of class composition (the relation of workers to the organic composition of capital): Workers are confronting the “organic composition” of capital and socialisation of work in many different ways ... We have to face and analyse the problem of how these differences can be overthrown in class struggle. (Kolinko 2001: 10)⁴

In short, if we channel the insight of Galeano, a workers’ inquiry into class composition provides us with confirmation that if there is no worker struggle then there is no need for capital to innovate. Or, as Cleaver observed, “The violence that capitalists required to impose their order reveals the depth of resistance” (2019: 19).

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This book is an attempt to identify newly emerging strategies used by workers and the lessons that can be learned from them and circulated globally. We know a lot about capital's strategy but what do we really know about workers' strategies? The book is a response to this deficiency, lamented by John Womack in his sweeping history of the strategy of disruption:

many Marxist academics considering questions of strategy took only capitalists or managers for strategists. In their accounts workers acted only in "resistance," on the strength of interests, indignation, or solidarity, maybe by "stratagem," but never strategically ... In many other Marxist accounts industrial workers (even "the working class" at large) appeared capable of strategy, but only away from work, in labor markets or politics or culture. (Womack 2006: 207)

From this perspective, accounts of capital's power and working-class weakness come up short. They mistake capital's current effort to impose a new technical composition for a decisive hegemonic victory. This book will argue, counter to Moody's otherwise splendid analysis of that technical composition, that the move to platform-based metric-driven production using contingent labor is capital's strategic *response* to efforts to recompose working-class power. This struggle between the potential recomposition of working-class power and capital's quest to devise tools to control, discipline, manage, and repress it is constantly in flux, pushed and pulled from one pole to another, and never entirely resolved. Marx read class struggle into capitalist innovation when he observed that machinery "is a power inimical to him [the worker]. It is the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the autocracy of capital ... It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt" (Marx 1976 [1867]: 562-3).⁵ The same could be said today: beneath capital's strategy lies class struggle.

Depending on the period we focus on, the tools we use to examine it, and on whose behalf we choose to look, the struggle between capital

and labor continues to ebb and flow. Capital's continued assault on the global working class is not without cause. Class struggle has never gone away but has only adapted, evolved, improvised, and transformed to meet the challenge. Capital and workers are continually engaged in what Alquati (1967) called a "decisive spiral" of struggle that plays out over historical periods. As capital plays its hand, workers regroup, alter their strategy, play their own hand, and take a win. In response, capital withdraws, regroups, alters its strategy, and then plays a new hand, putting workers on the defensive and perhaps even defeating them.

We call this understanding of the dialectical push and pull of class struggle the theory of *class composition*. To push the ebb and flow of that struggle back in favor of workers it is critical that we carry out a global workers' inquiry to understand the strategies, tactics, organization, and objectives of capital and how workers are adapting their own strategies, tactics, and organization to achieve their objectives of responding to, defeating, and transcending capitalism. Marshall Ganz described this interplay between tactics, strategy, and objectives as "turning *what* you have into what you *need* to get what you *want*" (cited in McAlevey 2016: 5).

A NEW CLASS SCIENCE

A workers' inquiry into class composition is not an academic exercise but what Tronti called a "class science." It is clearly partisan in its attempt to identify, document, understand, and circulate the tactics, strategies, organizational forms, and objectives of the workers' struggles being examined (Tronti cited in Wright 2002: 38). As Woodcock explains, "the inquiry aims to uncover the composition of the working class at particular points or in different contexts to understand how struggle will develop" (2014: 507).

A workers' inquiry serves a critically dual role: for workers to inform themselves about their own class power in a particular struggle, and to provide a model for workers to emulate in their own struggles elsewhere. An inquiry uncovers the tactics, strategies, organizational forms, and objectives of both capital and workers with the intention of providing the necessary information about the positions of power

of each in order to further the success of the workers' struggle. In this way, just as the methods of anthropology, psychology, sociology, and engineering are partisan—intended to serve the interests of dominant economic, political, and social institutions—a workers' inquiry is similarly partisan in its intention to serve the interests of workers. For this reason, workers' inquiries are sometimes referred to as “co-research,” “militant co-research,” or “militant inquiries” (Hoffman 2019: 3).⁶ Whatever they are called, they serve to develop a proletarian methodology for documenting, analyzing, understanding, and articulating the current class composition in the interests of workers both inside and outside the waged workplace.

The partisan function of a workers' inquiry can be as varied as those who conduct the inquiries. Many inquiries are a variation on what are called “assets” and “needs” maps of both sides in the class struggle. The intention is to uncover capital's weakness, identify tactics that would create leverage to exploit these choke points, strategies that assert and shift power to workers at the point of production or reproduction, and the objective of extracting a series of concessions that makes the workforce ungovernable in order to disrupt the capital accumulation process. “Workers' *self*-inquiry” has “a tactical agenda” (Thorn 2011: 2).⁷

Workers' inquiries are not used to merely extract concessions but also have the greater objective of rupturing capital and transitioning out of and beyond capitalism. With the myriad of insurmountable and catastrophic crises facing humanity, non-human life, and the entire planetary ecosystem, there is currently no more urgent need than to find a strategy to end capitalism in the immediate future. Because we still live under what Cleaver (2017) calls the “dialectic of capital,” that strategy must be rooted in the refusal of work in the spheres of production and reproduction where capital is organized. Strategically, Tronti reminded us, “When the development of capital's interest in the factory is blocked, then the functioning of society seizes up: the way is then open for overthrowing and destroying the very basis of capital's power” (1980: 28). Because capital is clearly global, the working class, too, needs a global workers' inquiry. Before it can make the politics of revolution, a workers' inquiry into the global working class and its adversary is needed.