

On Strikes, Generally Speaking

Strike action is always an attempt by workers to resolve the contradictions of class society on their own terms. What do I mean by that? Cuts to wages, welfare provision and attacks on civil liberties are a way for the ruling class to resolve those contradictions on their terms. Strikes are a means for workers to engage in the struggle over how society should be governed in a language that matches their own experiences and interests. Even where workers are engaged in a form of work that is not immediately productive of commodities, when they strike they articulate these experiences and interests as a class in the face of wider forms of capitalist oppression and the management regimes of the bosses. This act of dissent can form the basis of a clarion call for revolutionaries to echo throughout the wider working class movement. Strikes can introduce new phrases into the sentences of workers suffering our rulers attempts to resolve class conflict on their terms.

Demonstrations, protests, and meetings are all important ways for the working class to take political action in support of it's experiences and interests, but action in the workplace is how the political is made into a practical effect on the direct relationship between workers and bosses. In a strike workers encounter the necessity of unity, the active implementation of democracy, the tactics of the bosses to divide us, the arbitrary nature of the rules of behaviour in a workplace, and the hidden compulsions of capitalism get revealed in practice.

Taking this position as our starting point, we can see that each strike is a microcosm of the balance of forces between workers and bosses in society. But, as with every turn of phrase the meaning of the words depends on who speaks them, to whom, and how they are spoken. This is where the question of analysis comes in. When revolutionaries agitate to spread strike action, the effectiveness of doing so relies upon when, where, and how that the idea is articulated. For revolutionaries to be effective at spreading strike action this is about locating in each individual strike the particular phrase that sums up the general conversation our class is always having with itself. When we have located this phrase, it then embodies the immediate sense of what we are all thinking and feeling. This is the basis for the art of slogan writing. The slogan has to summarize the often contradictory sentiments affecting our class at the time. It summarizes by clarifying our classes ideas into a specific demand or call to action that aims to resolve the sense of this contradiction in the terms of the working class, rather than on the bosses terms.

A slogan is useful so long as it articulates an analysis of the current position of the working class in society that matches the immediate sentiments of those same workers. A slogan fails if it fails to link the analysis to the sentiment. A slogan may present a formally correct analysis of what would benefit the workers movement, but may not in actual terms relate that analysis to the sentiment of the class. For example, it might be formally correct that a system of workplace councils is the full realization of working class rule, but calling for them would be pointless in a situation where revolutionaries were encountering historically

low levels of industrial rebellion. Therefore slogans are practical interventions insofar that they aim to have the effect of generalizing an analysis as it relates to the mood of the class.

There is a point of tension that whilst relating an analysis to the mood, a slogan has to also put forward a statement of action. A slogan that is too abstract doesn't embody the correct course of action to tip the mood towards attempts by workers to resolve the contradictions of class society for themselves. The bosses will be using their media, their intellectuals, and their institutions to make their interests seem like common sense. A slogan that expresses the mood of workers does not necessarily challenge the common sense that the bosses would have us believe is in our interests. The unity of analysis and mood has to argue for of a course of action, or it does not push the activity of workers towards winning the battle between them and the bosses.

The slogan calling for a General Strike is a key question for us as revolutionaries today. But, the question of whether or not to call for a General Strike is actually itself not the correct question. The correct question is *how* and *why* do we see a General Strike resolving the immediate contradictions between workers and bosses in the here-and-now, and what *kind* of General Strike would be best able to do this?

To explain why these are key questions, I will look at the ideas of George Sorel. Sorel used the idea of the General Strike in a completely wrong way in order to understand it's effectiveness. For Sorel, the General Strike was a heroic myth that created the simple idea of an inevitable triumph of will by the masses away from the deviations of intellectuals and against the ruling class. For him, the goal of a General Strike was as an act of force, and he was hostile to any intellectual attempt to understand the variations between different forms of General Strikes. His belief in the General Strike as a heroic myth, and his subsequent failure to root his understanding of the General Strike in the material reality of working class life is what lay behind his shift from being a syndicalist supporter of Lenin to a fascist who sympathised with Mussolini. For Sorel, all that mattered was force.

Gayatri Spivak, the postcolonial thinker and activist has also written about the development of the idea of the General Strike over the course of history. She argues it mutates from the anarchist name for a strike that grips a whole city, through Rosa Luxembourg's formulation of it as representing a pre-revolutionary crisis moment, via Sorel's myth, then Ghandi's notion of mass civil disobedience, through to today's use of the idea of a General Strike by the Occupy movement in the US. Whilst she is correct to argue there are different meanings to the phrase 'General Strike', she locates them at the same level as Sorel. That is, the difference is still one based on how the idea is used as a myth.

For revolutionaries, the General Strike is the condition of generalising strike action. It emerges as a struggle rooted in the workplace that challenges in practice the bosses power over workers, and therefore the source of the bosses power in wider society. If a General Strike is managed from the top-down by the bureaucrats in the trade union movement, it's ability to fully express the hopes and anger of the working

class becomes limited. No doubt, it would still be an impressive show of force, but force is not enough. The General Strike has to awaken in workers a sense of self-determination - that they can for themselves move on to challenge further everyday oppressions in the workplace and society. There is therefore a difference between a General Strike that deepens the process of radicalisation and self-activity because it is led by workers from below, and a General Strike that is ordered into line as a negotiating tool by the trade union bureaucracy. Trade union bureaucrats will see the general strike in the same way as Sorel, as a show of force used to gain an advantage. Revolutionaries understand the General Strike to be a moment of rebellion, in which workers are moving to liberate themselves from the bosses force. When a General Strike emerges from below it will leave the bureaucrats and formalities of the law behind it, whereas a General Strike from above will be pulled away from trespassing against the laws of the State. The former can eventually be sold out by the bureaucrats, the later has already put up for sale by them. This does not mean that bureaucrats cannot be sincere about wanting a General Strike, but it will be the case that those words mean something different to them than to the revolutionary. That difference in meaning results from, and will result in, a difference in practice.

The difference between the two forms of General Strike is also not a hard and fast one. Instead, we should think of them as two opposed tendencies within the workers movement between the power of the rank-and-file and the compromised position of the trade union bureaucrat. The intervention of the revolutionary is to push at the tendency that would have the rank-and-file of the workers movement in the driving seat. We would have to tirelessly agitate for the workers to seize the initiative from below, taking the form of arguing for risking the next step - refusing to return to work and pulling in local demands to deepen the process of rebellion. Therefore the slogan calling for a General Strike can only be effective in shifting the balance in favour of workers if in practice it will be able to pull around it and deepen pre-existing industrial struggles. If these struggles do not exist, then the call for a General Strike becomes an abstract idea relying on the myth that the pure force of a General Strike will somehow create these conditions. This is a repetition of the mistakes made by Sorel, and turns the General Strike from a practical action into a pure idea.

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