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Summary: The new expanded edition of Brecher's *Strike!* is a monumental contribution to labor history. This review discusses the book's revolutionary qualities, while also questioning its treatment of the IWW and most importantly, of the intersectionality of race and class -  
Editors

## A Critical Review of Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!*

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San Francisco dock workers on strike against the Iraq war (2008)

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In the field of radical labor history, Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!* is held in high esteem by fellow leftists and labor historians and is considered one of the standard go-to reference books for anyone aspiring to learn labor history. I agree that this book is a must-read source of information on labor's struggles in the United States during the period from 1877 to today. I believe that Jeremy Brecher genuinely cares about the plight of the working class as he painstakingly details numerous labor actions over the past, nearly one-hundred-forty years of labor history. I learned a lot from this book and it would be very difficult to sum up all the various strikes and labor actions he covers. I recommend that everyone read it for the wealth of information and insight this book contains.

We learn a lot from Brecher concerning the creativity and co-operation between workers that has been hidden from "conventional" history. A critical examination of the history of unions and union leaders is taken up, as well, which ranges from the heroic, e.g., Mary Harris Jones (Mother Jones), to the development of parasitic business unionism.

Brecher begins his book by briefly discussing the fact that strikes occurred during the building of the Great Pyramids of Egypt and that strikes had occurred as early as 1636 in North America, where the strikers were prosecuted as illegal conspirators. After recounting a few interesting observations by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, which will remind folks

of what will be developed dialectically by Karl Marx in the following decade, Brecher starts his labor narrative in the year 1877.

Brecher's Chapter 1, "The Great Upheaval," marks the first great American mass strike, which occurred primarily on the railroads in the year 1877. In addition to the mass strikes, Brecher lists several pertinent facts relating to 1877 beginning with what became a monument to the Great Upheaval, the construction of armories in many major cities, built to protect "America not against invasion from abroad but against popular revolt at home." 1877 was four years into the longest depression, which began in 1873, that capitalism had known. The Paris Commune was still fresh in everyone's mind and its effect on the working class was particularly unnerving to the capitalists. The 1877 General Strike grew out of the failure of less violent forms of struggle. Brecher also covers the use of federal troops to break the strikes.

All these facts are indeed important, but if we try to trace the self-development of labor dialectically we see that some important facts are left out, beginning with the fact that 1877 was the year that Federal Troops were removed from the South, thus ending Reconstruction and consequently freeing up more federal troops for use in the class war against labor.

### **The Unfinished State of America's Second Revolution**

Marxist-Humanists regard 1877 as the year of betrayal in the history of Black liberation, which has had lasting consequences to this day for Black liberation and labor. However, the unfinished state of America's second revolution (America's Civil War) isn't the ground where Brecher starts his narrative. The following quotes may help explain what we mean by the unfinished state of America's second revolution. The first quote is from Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1 and concerns the effects of slavery in America on labor:

“In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the agitation for the eight-hour day.”

The following quotes describing capitalism in the United States following the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War are from Raya Dunayevskaya's book, *American Civilization on Trial: Black Masses as Vanguard* (ACOT):

“American capitalism... has been both raised up, and thrown back by the unfinished state of its revolution. Capitalism, not capitalism in general, but American

capitalism as it expanded after the Civil War, sharpened the basic contradictions of the historic environment in which it functioned. *This capitalism was tied to the cotton plantations.*” (ACOT, p. 5, emphasis in original).

“No wonder we have advanced so little from 1877 when Union, ‘one and indivisible,’ meant unity forged in the struggle against labor for imperialist adventures. To understand today’s racism as well as tokenism, it is necessary to return to that page in history when the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ of Northern capital with the South set the stage for the unbridled violence against labor” (ACOT, p 12).

To understand the dialectic of labor we must turn to the past. We cannot understand history in the United States unless we understand Black history. The Black dimension has put American civilization on trial for nearly four hundred years since the arrival of Africans as slaves in 1619 and has been the “touchstone” of American history ever since.

### **Divide and Conquer**

I think those of us who are even remotely acquainted with labor history are aware of the divide-and-conquer strategy used by capitalists to defeat the working class. Racism as the most commonly used form of betrayal is also familiar to most. But what happened to African-Americans following the Civil War has to rank as one of the most heinous examples:

“The three basic constituents of the betrayal, that is to say, the unfinished state of revolution, were (1) the freedmen did not get ‘the 40 acres and a mule’ they were promised; (2) the old slave owners did get back their plantations and thus the power to institute a mode of production to suit cotton culture; and (3) the crop lien system was introduced with ‘new’ labor; share cropping.... Once Congress, in 1867, failed to pass Thaddeus Stevens’ Land Division Act which would have given each freedman 40 acres and \$50 for a homestead, the rest was inevitable” (ACOT, p. 11).

Consequently, most Black workers were to remain isolated in the South for several decades, divided from white workers and from most forms of labor organization bringing Black and white workers together against the capitalists.

Hopefully, I’ve been able to establish the ground needed to give a sense of the conditions on which labor, both Black and white have had to navigate in America. Jeremy Brecher covers most of the labor strikes from 1877 through to our time, but without the category of the Black dimension as touchstone of American as well as labor history, one can easily miss key moments in the dialectic of labor’s self-development. One such moment is that of Populism, which Brecher doesn’t mention and which briefly challenged the rulers of the benighted South. Populism was in some ways a greater threat to the southern “plantocracy” than the Civil War because it was a revolutionary challenge from “within”

the South, not from “without”. Populism succeeded in temporarily establishing white and Black solidarity. Unfortunately, Populism came to an end with monopoly capitalism’s transformation into imperialism that not only re-invigorated racism in the South but brought it to the North.

Brecher takes up the year 1886, the year that became the dividing line in American labor, and the year when no less than 80,000 were out on strike for the eight-hour day<sup>1</sup>. That year, the counter-revolution broke the back of labor by hanging its leaders, the Haymarket Martyrs in Chicago, Parsons, Spies, Fischer, and Engel. Brecher also gives us a very detailed account of the strikes of 1892-94, which included the Homestead Massacre, Coeur d’Alene’s mining strikes, and Briceville, Tennessee miners’ strike where miners gave armed resistance to military attack. Brecher also recounts how “The New Orleans General Strike revealed an extraordinary solidarity among all races and strata of labor.” Brecher ends this chapter with the great

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<sup>1</sup> I think more needs to be said about the importance to both capitalism and the working class in establishing the eight-hour workday. To begin with, the history of labor has shown that if the capitalists had had their way, they would have worked the working class to death. This fact confirms the next fact, that the eight-hour day saved capitalism itself (temporarily), by preventing the capitalists from destroying capitalism’s only value-creating substance, labor. The eight-hour day forced capital to increase productivity through the development of technology that increased the costs of production, thus speeding up the decline in the rate of profit, and consequently, aiding in the demise of capitalism. Finally, the increased productivity through the development of technology helps to insure the success of developing an alternative to capitalism by freely associated labor.

Pullman Strike, writing that Eugene Victor Debs ended that strike because “it might have eventuated in a revolution.”

Brecher’s focus is on “peak periods” of mass strikes and therefore he doesn’t necessarily cover strikes that don’t fit into that pattern, e.g., the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 in Colorado. The Ludlow Massacre was an attack by the Colorado National Guard and company camp guards on a tent colony of 1,200 striking coal miners and their families at Ludlow, Colorado, on April 20, 1914. Approximately twenty-four people, including miners’ wives and children, were killed. Some consider the Ludlow Massacre a watershed moment in American labor relations and perhaps one of the most violent struggles between capital and labor. The outrage over the Ludlow Massacre was influential in promoting child labor laws and an eight-hour workday.

### **From the IWW to the Depression Decade**

Following shortly after the end of Populism came the emergence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Brecher very nearly dismisses the IWW as “more of a social movement than a union.” The IWW was industrial unionism 30 years ahead of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and was built along militant class struggle lines. At its height, the IWW claimed over 100,000 members, with a not insignificant number of Black members. Moreover, the IWW had unions in the prejudice-ridden South. The IWW (or Wobblies) was a militant revolutionary organization

born out of the desperate conditions workers were experiencing during the turn of the twentieth century and brought together, for a time, the poorest and most downtrodden working people from every race and group, along with some larger-than-life characters. What other union has evoked the attention of poets, novelists, and radicals as much as the Wobblies? The Wobblies were imbued with the message of an alternative society run by and for the benefit of common folk. This message was explained, preached and sung around campfires of itinerant workers and in meeting halls across North America and around the world.

The Wobblies were always anti-war and advocated against suspicion and hatred of “foreigners.” The turn of the twentieth century was a very intense period of class war that gave birth to an appreciation of spontaneity and of revolutionary ideas. Many Wobblies enjoyed reading Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. And it was during this period that the Black labor activist Lucy Parsons, the widow of Haymarket Martyr Albert Parsons and a founding member of the IWW, advocated the tactic of “Sit Down Strikes. This was nearly thirty years in advance of the formation of the CIO and its successful sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan in 1936-37.

The IWW led many successful strikes, the most famous being the so-called “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence,

Massachusetts in 1912 <http://www.massaficio.org/1912-bread-and-roses-strike>. World War I and red baiting led to the persecution of the IWW and imprisonment of its leaders, which brought about the decline of the IWW (ACOT, p. 18).

The next period of mass strikes Brecher covers is 1919, which is obviously a very turbulent period in world history with the end of World War I, and, for a brief period of time, the success of the Russian Revolution. The wave of strikes in 1919 was truly massive and extremely diverse, and Brecher does a comprehensive job of covering this period. Of particular interest to me was the Seattle Strike of 1919, where the strikers not only took care of themselves, but also conducted “social services” by the various trades providing necessary services for the entire city of Seattle. In the case of the steel districts of Pennsylvania and the surrounding region in 1919, Brecher writes about the use by capital of between 30,000 and 40,000 Black workers as strikebreakers. These workers had little compunction about this because most American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions had been white only.

One problem here is that Brecher doesn't write about the migration of 1-1/2 million Black workers who moved North before, during and after WWI only to do the worst jobs imaginable and who had to live in oppressive ghettos. Black soldiers who went to fight in WWI for “democracy”, came home at the end of the war to “Jim Crow”, the KKK (who

followed the Black migration North) and the “Red Summer of 1919”. During the Red Summer of 1919, there were 26 race riots. Some of the Black soldiers who went back home to the South after the war were lynched in their uniforms. Can anyone now wonder why so many Black folks were attracted to Garveyism and Marcus Garvey’s back to Africa campaign?

The next period Brecher covers is the Depression Decade and again, he details the creativity and cooperation of workers this time, while they endured the extreme hardships imposed by the Depression. Brecher’s attention to detail makes it all the more inexplicable that he misses the key role Black workers played in the formation of the CIO. Without Black labor, the CIO could not have organized the basic industries where Black labor was pivotal. Furthermore, Black and white unity was now a fact of life that could never again be denied.

Moving on to the next period, “The War and Post-War Strike Wave,” Brecher’s blindspot regarding Black labor continues by not including A. Philip Randolph’s attempt to organize a Black “March on Washington Movement,” which prompted President Franklin Roosevelt to issue Executive order number 8802 barring discrimination in war industries and thus prevented the march. The next notable period of agitation by Black workers ignored by Brecher is that of the 1943 Black rebellions in New York and Detroit. Brecher

does mention very briefly the miners' strike, also in 1943, but doesn't give it the attention it deserves as the only major union-recognized strike of WWII. Moreover, it could have been mentioned that there were a great number of Black workers in the mines.

Brecher explains how WWII had integrated the economy more than ever before and how conditions affecting workers across industry lines created the best conditions the country had ever known for a nationwide general strike. In response, the government took over the regulation of wages and worked out agreements between industry and the unions to control the workers. Brecher ends this chapter with the fact that despite these agreements, there were still wildcat strikes, but fails to mention a most important postwar strike, the 1949-50 Miner's General Strike<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Postwar Era**

The 1949-50 Miners' General Strike was the first strike against the new stage of production, automation, which had taken the form of the continuous miner, and which created a whole new stage of cognition that questioned the very foundation of capitalist production. They raised issues like what kind of labor must humanity perform, and why must there be such a division between mental and manual labor, between work and life. And as alluded to above concerning

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<sup>2</sup> See the pamphlet by Raya Dunayevskaya and Andy Phillips, *The 1949-50 Miner's General Strike*, to grasp the full importance of that historic strike.

the miners' strike of 1943, the mining industry was where Black labor was both significantly numerous and integrated into the union. The 1949-50 Miner's General Strike conditioned the dialectic of both white and Black labor's self-development from that point on. When taking the subsequent Civil Rights Movement together with the workers' battles against automation of the 1950's and 1960's, one could consider these movements in terms of both race and class. Brecher ends his Chapter 6, "The War and Post-War Strike Wave," roughly in the year 1947, just short of President Harry Truman's integrating the Army in 1948 at A. Philip Randolph's prodding, as well as the 1949-50 Miner's General Strike.

Brecher then proceeds with his Chapter 7, "The Unknown Labor Dimension of the Vietnam War Era Revolt." After a cursory review of the 1960's revolts Brecher resumes his labor narrative with the late 1960's and early 1970's. Brecher acknowledges the changed attitude of workers in the late 1960's and early 1970's and their desire for more control over production, but doesn't link this with the fundamental question workers have raised since 1950, "what kind of labor should people do". Consequently, the workers' desire for more control over production seems to appear *ab novo* around the year 1970.

Brecher covers the bigger strikes of the period of 1970 through to our time beginning with the U.S. Postal strike of

1970 and the use of federal troops to break that strike<sup>3</sup>. Brecher's begins his exposition for the 1970's by explaining, "workers' action in the late 1960's and early 1970's was increasingly independent of union leaderships, with wildcat strikes, contract rejections, informal direct action on the jobs, and rank and file caucuses all reaching their highest levels in the post-World War II era." Add to this mix the deepest recession since the Great Depression beginning in 1973, declining profit rates, decreasing wages due to union busting and free trade agreements sending jobs overseas. We can thus easily visualize the end of the so-called "golden age of capitalism", the period from 1947 through 1973. Workers have been in a downward spiral ever since.

### **The End of the Postwar Boom**

I doubt if the above description depicting the end of the so-called golden age of capitalism will be new to many of us folks who lived through it. At any rate, we need to go beyond the mere phrase "declining profit rates" to state bluntly that there will be no return to any "golden age of capitalism" (which I think Brecher would agree with). To better grasp that fact, we need to grasp Marx's concept of

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<sup>3</sup> To those who like to distinguish between the use of federal troops and the National Guard as if the National Guard were kinder, gentler goons, Brecher points out that the National Guard is equipped, trained and supported by the US Army. One only needs to think about the Ludlow Massacre, et al. and the fact that in 1970, 4 students were murdered at Kent State, Ohio by national guardsmen which inspired the murder of 2 students killed by cops soon afterwards at Jackson State College in Mississippi.

“The Tendential Fall in The Rate of Profit,” where he argues that the decline in the rate of profit is organic to the law of motion of capitalism.

I believe the following quotes from Michael Roberts’s blog are relevant here: “The key tests of the validity of the law in modern capitalist economies would be to show whether 1) the rate of profit falls over time as the organic composition of capital<sup>4</sup> rises; 2) the rate of profit rises when the organic composition falls or when the rate of surplus value<sup>5</sup> rises faster than the organic composition of capital; 3) the rate of profit rises, if there is sharp fall in the organic composition of capital as in a slump. These would be the empirical tests and there is plenty of empirical evidence for the US and world economy to show that the answer is yes to all these questions.”

“And Marx’s law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall makes an even more fundamental prediction: that the

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<sup>4</sup> From Marx’s *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 25: “The composition of capital is to be understood in a two-fold sense. On the side of value, it is determined by the proportion in which it is divided into constant capital or value of the means of production, and variable capital or value of labor power, the sum total of wages. On the side of material, as it functions in the process of production, all capital is divided into means of production and living labor power. This latter composition is determined by the relation between the mass of the means of production employed, on the one hand, and the mass of labor necessary for their employment on the other. I call the former the *value-composition*, the latter the *technical composition* of capital. Between the two there is a strict correlation. To express this, I call the value composition of capital, in so far as it is determined by its technical composition and mirrors the changes of the latter, the *organic composition* of capital.”

<sup>5</sup> According to Marx, workers under capitalism are paid the minimum amount necessary for the workers to reproduce themselves, the minimum that is necessary to stay alive and provide future workers for capitalism through their children. Therefore, *surplus value* is equal to the new value created by workers in excess of their own labor-cost and the other costs of production.

capitalist mode of production will not be eternal, that it is transitory in the history of human social organization. The law of the tendency predicts that, over time, there will be a fall in the rate of profit globally, delivering more crises of a devastating character. Work has been done by modern Marxist analysis that confirms that the world rate of profit has fallen over the last 150 years.”

“As Esteban Maito concludes: *‘The tendency of the rate of profit to fall and its empirical confirmation highlights the historically limited nature of capitalist production. If the rate of profit measures the vitality of the capitalist system, the logical conclusion is that it is getting closer to its endpoint. There are many ways that capital can attempt to overcome crises and regenerate constantly. Periodic crises are specific to the capitalist mode of production and allow, ultimately, a partial recovery of profitability. This is a characteristic aspect of capital and the cyclical nature of the capitalist economy. But the periodic nature of these crises has not stopped the downward trend of the rate of profit over the long term. So the arguments claiming that there is an inexhaustible capacity of capital to restore the rate of profit and its own vitality and which therefore considers the capitalist mode of production as a natural and a-historical phenomenon, are refuted by the empirical evidence’.*”

“Capitalism has a ‘use-by-date’.”

<https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2015/12/29/the->

[marxist-theory-of-economic-crises-in-capitalism-part-two/#comments](#)

Brecher traces labor's struggles through the last decades of the twentieth century that saw newer strategies for employer demands for concessions that were often backed by lockouts and the hiring of replacement workers. These forms of employer oppression were met by new and creative strategies of resistance from workers. One of the unlikely concentrations of resistance was Decatur, Illinois, where Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone and A.F. Staley Manufacturing were all located at the time. The strikes at these enterprises started separately and eventually converged into a regional mass strike. Brecher ends his strike coverage on the eve of the millennium with a detailed exposition of the UPS Strike of 1997.

### **Mini-Revolution**

Brecher's last chapter "Beyond One-Sided Class War" ends the book with what he calls "mini-revolts", the very broad range of mass movements more commonly known as, "The 1999 Battle of Seattle", "2006 Immigration Protests", "Wisconsin Uprising", "Occupy Wall Street", "2012 Chicago Teachers Strike", and "Fight for 15". I can only give a whiff of the different movements covered during the past 17 years or so and highly recommend reading Brecher's account of what he calls mini-revolts for yourselves. Brecher's very nuanced and detailed coverage of these

movements demonstrates the interconnectedness and new broader forms of solidarity and organization developing between labor (union and non-union), social justice movements, immigrant rights, anti-globalism, anti-austerity, anti-war, environmentalism, the whole range of activism under the umbrella of intersectionality, etc. All these aspects of human experience are interconnected and should be examined together as well as separately. This can be heartening to us older workers who were wondering how we were going to achieve a revolution for a better life, especially given that presently, only about 12% of the workforce is organized in the work place through unions. Despite the decline of “institutional” unions, I believe we workers have more options than ever before and are no longer restricted to old narrow forms of bureaucratized unionism centered on manufacturing and service industries.

Labor is developing links with more and more diverse groups that hadn't even been thought of previous to the new millennium. One example was the recent support shown between the Chicago Teachers, the low-wage “Fight for 15,” and the anti-Nato Summit protests of May 2012. The 1999 Battle of Seattle had emerged from the anti-globalization movement and found allies with Seattle's King County Labor Council because of the connection they saw between the anti-millennium World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle with the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1919

Seattle General Strike. The year 2006 saw the largest demonstrations for immigrant rights the world had ever seen with close to 5 million people participating, which was supported by both traditional labor unions and by less formal networks. The participants were from all walks of life, including both legal and undocumented immigrants.

Also, as we wrote in 2011: “In Wisconsin, the intersectionality of the protestors was remarkable and saw professors protesting alongside construction workers, African-American and Latin@ high school students rallying with 80-year-old white farmers. University of Wisconsin faculty pledged solidarity with state workers across the system, the elementary and high school teachers, corrections officers and nurses. One of the most active participating groups was the ‘Teaching Assistant Association’ and was involved in every phase of the protests.”

<http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/labor-wisconsin-crisis-american-capitalism-dale-parsons>.

In addition to taking on the banks and allying with many social movements, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) had numerous links with labor worldwide. The most significant labor action by OWS to me was when Occupy Oakland shutdown the Port of Oakland and Longview, Washington terminals on November 2, 2011. At that time, the organizers stated openly that they wanted to stop the "flow of capital."

## Conclusion

This is the last paragraph of Jeremy Brecher's 2014 edition of "STRIKE!": "Working people, along with the rest of humanity, are faced with a future that is unsustainable economically, socially, and environmentally. It will take more than a revolt to put that future on a sustainable basis. Ultimately it will take a transformation of human civilization. But when those in power perpetuate unsustainability, the world can only be put on a sustainable basis when people take control of their own activity and support each other to resist the authority of those in power. Whatever may happen in the future, the heritage of worker self-organization will therefore continue to be a resource that we can draw on to construct collective responses to the problems we face."

As I was completing this review, a colleague pointed out that the 1972 first edition of *Strike!* ended with a completely different chapter titled "From Mass Strike to New Society" [file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/M-H%20stuff/Chapter%209\\_%20From%20Mass%20Strike%20to%20New%20Society.html](file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/M-H%20stuff/Chapter%209_%20From%20Mass%20Strike%20to%20New%20Society.html). This version of "Chapter 9" ended with expositions of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Italian Factory Occupations of 1920, and the Spanish Civil War of 1936-37. (This missing content from the 1997 and 2014 editions is something that other reviews I have read have failed to mention.) While Jeremy Brecher's coverage

of these revolutionary events wasn't the most comprehensive, it is definitely still worth reading.

In conclusion, Brecher's *Strike!* is a most valuable and revolutionary-minded study of working class self-activity and self-organization whose republication should be celebrated. The book's republication is especially timely during a period when young people and workers are questioning capitalism at a level not seen for over a generation.

At the same time, I have pointed to two problems in the book. First, by not discussing the dialectic of Black liberation and its integrality to the dialectic of labor and consequently, the integrality of race and class, Brecher is unable to establish as fully as he could have done the revolutionary praxis through which humanity self-develops. Second, Brecher's neglect of the IWW points to his spontaneist<sup>6</sup> position, which neglects even revolutionary forms of organization, which do not necessarily have to be top-down.

My second criticism is not limited to Brecher's book, but points to a broader problem of our age, how to work out a viable alternative to the existing forms of revolutionary organization (spontaneist or vanguardist), one rooted in a

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<sup>6</sup> The tendency to believe that social revolution can and should occur spontaneously from below, without the aid or guidance of a vanguard party, and that it cannot and should not be brought about by the actions of individuals or parties who might attempt to foment such a revolution.

philosophy of liberation that points toward a humanist alternative to capitalism. Thus, Brecher provides us with a cogent critique of top-down labor organization, but does not offer a real alternative. That is something that the present generation needs to develop.

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