



# RE-EMERGENCE AND ECLIPSE OF THE PROLETARIAT

disaffected communists



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**Cover:** On April 16, 2021, following the murder of Duante Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, protesters set fire to the front of the California Bank and Trust building in downtown Oakland, just blocks away from the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), a building which had been repeatedly targeted during previous rounds of rioting. This protest was one of the last gasps of the George Floyd Rebellion.

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*Re-emergence  
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by disaffected communists



## **‘We’ are not the union**

The union bureaucrats are patting themselves on the back. As the UC strike is followed by a strike of part-time faculty at the New School and strike authorization vote of 99% from graduate workers at Temple University, the leadership of UAW 2865, UAW 5810, and SRU-UAW have been indicating that they believe this strike to be the crown jewel of the current ‘strike wave’ of late 2022. In recent weeks, over 100 Starbucks locations have gone on strike as part of the #RedCupRebellion of Starbucks Workers United, workers at Peet’s Coffee locations have initiated a unionization drive, and Kaiser Permanente reached a tentative agreement with California Nurses Association that provides stronger protections for nurses and patients, narrowly averting a strike by more than 21,000 nurses. The looming threat of a national railway strike just in time for holiday season has nudged both the White House and Congress into panic mode, as both wings of the Party of Capital (including beloved democratic socialists) work to avert catastrophe and ‘save the economy’. This ‘new strike wave’, already heralded as one of the most significant in US history, appears to be firmly anchored in the non-manufacturing sector—e.g., food service, healthcare, education, transportation. Thus, the mandate to ‘build worker power’ coming on high from union leadership seems to be a clarion call with a firm foundation in reality.

We want to examine the matter more closely. While it may be easy to intoxicate ourselves with the elixir of ‘working class power’ when spending day in and day out on the picket line, it is not the panacea that the union sells it as. At the risk of hyperbole, we might even suggest that, when handled by a union bureaucracy, ‘worker power’ is a snake oil. We need only consider the last several years of struggle in the United States for this problem to crystallize before our eyes.

First, a note on some terminology. By ‘workers’ movement’ we mean essentially the ‘labor movement.’ We distinguish this from the proletariat, which is not reducible to the working class or organized labor. Proletarians are, simply put, the dispossessed: those without unmediated access to means of subsistence or means of production. Many proletarians are forced to sell their labor-power for a wage in order to meet basic conditions of survival. Others are not so (un) lucky. Thus, not all proletarians are ‘working class’ in the narrow sense of the term. The proletariat is a far more motley and uneven composition in which the only shared condition is dispossession. For this reason, proletarian struggle is not and has never been limited to the labor movement. The restructuring of the capital-labor relation over the last half century has important implications for the form that struggle takes. We will consider that in more depth briefly.

What has been more impressive than the recent modest uptick in strike activity is the recent spike in the tendency to leave the ‘workforce’ entirely. This trend, which has its roots in the 2008 financial crisis, exploded into a generalized re-

fusal to work under pandemic conditions. The so-called ‘Great Refusal’, alongside firms’ attempts to ramp up production across disrupted supply chains, appears as a ‘tight labor market’ and helps to capacitate workplace strikes by giving workers better bargaining positions. This helps to explain, for example, recent historic unionization in the service sector. Beneath this unionization drive, however, lies the growing gap between the under- and unemployed—a growing surplus population—and the ‘working class’ organizations (unions, the DSA, Jacobin editors, the Progressive Caucus of the Democratic Party) that claim to represent a resurgent labor movement and, through them, the proletariat as a whole.

## Strike and counter-strike

A pessimist might argue that the attention and laudability attributed to ‘strike waves’ is imbued with the substance of counterinsurgency in the wake of the George Floyd Rebellion. This, after all, was a *far more* historically significant wave of social unrest, the form and content of which pointed *away* from work and its affirmation and toward direct conflict with the state and expropriation of the means of survival. It was also *racialized*. It was this early character of the rebellion as a fluid, dispersed conflict over the terms of survival and social reproduction—brought about by the breakdown in the relationship between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of the proletariat, aggravated by the pandemic, and set off by the racialized policing of the crisis—that made it difficult to manage for the brokers and arbiters of ‘working class’ identity. They of course did manage to insert themselves—in the streets, in city council meetings, in progressive caucuses—and in the course of a year historic black-led proletarian revolt had been eclipsed by the ‘return of labor’, the election of the ‘most pro-union president of our lifetimes’, and the subsequent ‘strike waves’, much parroted by union administrators and labor journalists as the most significant since the 1940s peak.

This apparent passage, from ‘disorganized’ rioting, mass looting, expropriation, criminality, and clashes with the state, provoked by the racialized dejection, disaffection, and desertion *from* the workplace, to a resurgent, emboldened, united, and respectable formal labor movement, disguises the far more general *decline* of the strike, of unions, and workers organizations as such. While, in the course of a few years, the recent ‘strike waves’ have come to represent the tactical and strategic summit of the workers movement, they do so against the background of a half-century long downturn in strike activity, unionization, and ‘worker power’.<sup>1</sup> The general decline in the rate of profit by the mid 1960s, the oil crises, currency shocks, and stagflation of the 1970s—in short, the end of capital’s Long Boom—and the subsequent decades of economic stagnation and punctuated speculative bubbles brought about significant restructuring in the composition of capital, the capital-labor relation, and the allocation of capital

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1 For the best historical analysis of this trend, see Jason Smith, “‘Striketober’ and Labor’s Long Downturn”: <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/12/field-notes/Striketober-and-Labors-Long-Downturn>

and labor among different sectors of the economy. The result was the decoupling of capitalist production from proletarian reproduction: the shedding of labor from organized and highly-capitalized manufacturing sectors, the expansion of employment in ‘services’ and non-manufacturing, increased racialized and gendered fragmentation and exploitation of labor, and the growth of ‘redundant’ populations—resulting in the increased informalization and criminalization of proletarian life. In the collapse of the ‘workers movement’, initiated when these tendencies began to characterize the US economy as a whole, a wave of racialized unrest seized those regions abandoned by capital (and, by extension, ‘labor’). This character of social conflict has only been intensified in the most recent cycles of struggle.

## **The curtain has drawn closed on the era of the union**

This dance between the ‘formal’ working class and the messiness of real proletarian existence is nothing new. So let us detour into a very abbreviated history of the classical workers movement in the United States and investigate its limits in the present moment. Regarding the racialization of class conflict, the historical record of the US labor movement—unions especially—is not great, to say the least. Black workers, both in the lead up to the Civil War and during and after the struggle over Reconstruction, were routinely constructed by white workers and their organizations as an abject threat to class solidarity. Idleness and latent criminality were the tropes mobilized to exclude black proletarians from the workers’ movement. During the first half of the 20th century, as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) defeated the Knights of Labor as the representative of the American ‘working class,’ later absorbing the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to become the AFL-CIO, white animosity and antiblack violence (‘race riots’) were routine features in the constitution of the labor movement. During the Great Depression, both the “New Deal” (Biden’s and Bernie’s alleged inspiration for their new era of American labor) and the Popular Front strategy of the Comintern infamously compromised black agrarian workers, dispossessing them from southern agriculture for decades before they could be (partially) absorbed by the industrial recovery of World War II and the post-war economic expansion. The resulting waves of migration into both northern and southern manufacturing belts led to growing industrial militancy among black workers,<sup>2</sup> despite their being relegated by unions to the lowest skilled positions, if they were able to join industrial unions at all. These positions were the first to be automated, as waves of deindustrialization hit black proletarians first and hardest, leading to the growth of what autoworker and UAW member (and critic) James Boggs called the ‘black underclass’.<sup>3</sup>

Around this same time, following an earnestly massive strike wave in 1945-1946 as a glut of workers returned to stagnant industries in the immediate aftermath of WWII, congress passed the Taft–Hartley Act with bipartisan sup-

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2 See, for example, the history of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM): <https://libcom.org/article/drum-vanguard-black-revolution>

3 James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook*.

port. The ostensible representatives of the working class signed anti-communist pledges and began purges of real or suspected members of the Communist Party (if they had not already done so—the AFL was notoriously anti-communist). These twin features—anti-blackness and anti-communism—conditioned the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of US capitalism (i.e., the Long Boom) *and* the golden age of US labor movement (union membership peaked in 1955, the year that the AFL and CIO merged).

The remainder of the story might be more familiar, as policing and incarceration were offered as the only ‘solutions’ to a crisis of growing black unemployment, dispossession, unrest, and rebellion. ‘Criminality’ entered the popular lexicon. Labor organizations, experiencing declining membership and revenue as deindustrialization, deskilling, and labor shedding caught up with the remainder of the workforce, strengthened their appeal to the ‘wages of whiteness.’ Baited into the debate between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor lest they bear the weight of anti-union reaction, they turned on the ‘black underclass’ whose exclusion from the labor force they had themselves facilitated. The reaction, of course, still came. Unionization rates precipitously fell. Racialized incarceration precipitously climbed.

The historical inheritance can be found today: while the professional leftists praise the new labor movement they simultaneously decry ‘crime waves,’ including the uptick of decentralized mass lootings<sup>4</sup> across the United States in the lead up to Black Friday 2021.<sup>5</sup> This attempt to distinguish labor from the ‘criminal’ elements of the proletariat reveals the gap between the growing surplus population and the unionizing workforce as a racialized exclusion—the construction of a ‘virtuous’ labor movement is only possible through the banishment and dejection of the ‘black underclass.’ The ‘service sector’—the only sector of the economy to experience any meaningful employment growth since the Great Recession—is disproportionately racialized and feminized.<sup>6</sup> It also remains the center of recent unionization efforts. Yet, by valorizing only ‘formal’ worker organization and treating the ‘working class’ as a moral rather than objective category, this level of concrete differentiation and class experience is thrown aside and erased in the pursuit of building a unified ‘working class’ identity that is mediated only by acting through the ‘appropriate’ channels of struggle. Though union bureaucrats and professional leftists might be too careful and trained in DEI to explicitly deploy racial animus (can’t lose those journalism contracts and paid positions), they still appeal to a ‘class unity’ that in actual practice is achieved through racialization and heteropatriarchy, contrasting and opposing it to ‘criminality,’ anarchy, and destitution and thereby breathing new life into the ideological conflict between ‘undeserving’ and ‘deserving’ poor.

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4 This is in reference to a series of tweets in late 2021 from the ‘antifascist’ journalist Chad Loder, which have since been removed and their account suspended, in which they praise ‘Striketober’, on the one hand, and condemn crime and looting on the other.

5 It should be noted that much of this occurred throughout California, with its extremely high cost of living.

6 See Smith.



## The shadow of the ivory tower

In the education sector, where the only real function of academic labor is the reproduction of the relation between capital and labor, it is true that strikes occupy a strategic position in the social division of labor. This is perhaps more the case in public sector K-12 education than in a prestigious and selective ‘public Ivy’ research institution like the University of California, but as the university in general has become more of a central instrument in the production and regulation of an indebted and precariously employed relative surplus population, major strikes in ‘higher education’ cannot and should not be dismissed.

Given the university’s integration into its surrounding political economy and geography, as hubs for research and development in STEM fields, as major landlords and employers, and as buoys to demand for the growing service sector, the lustrous facade of campus life is never far from the displaced and dejected, from the crumbling infrastructure of the hinterlands to the logistical networks of major sea, air, and rail ports to the healthcare hubs of every major city. The professionalized life of the university casts a long shadow in the form of the proletariat. Seething animosity is never that far. On the campus itself, student life has become more restive, especially since the 2008 crisis has meant rising tuition and debt and declining prospects for stable employment. The descending ceiling has met an unyielding floor. It is for this reason that, over the course of the last several decades, ‘leftist’ organizing has retreated to college campuses from historical centers in manufacturing and extractive regions. This organizing has generally reflected the sequence of struggle of which it is a part.<sup>7</sup> Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that in 2020 uprisings blossomed adjacent to nearly every University of California campus and in college towns large and small. But it is these very same conditions, which form the basis for the resurgent left seen across the spectrum of student life, that constitute the limit of campus organizing and the poverty of student life in general. Student life is *not* a microcosm or distillation of all the contradictions of the colonial-capitalist hellworld, but largely removed and insulated from its misery and violence.<sup>8</sup> The ‘left’ that has re-emerged on campuses in recent years is as a result largely out-of-touch and highly attenuated. It is vulnerable to recuperation.

## Make the example overflow from the university

7 E.g., the 2009-2010 university occupations provoked by tuition hikes and austerity that preceded the Occupy movement, the Disarm campus police campaigns in the wake of the Ferguson Rebellion, or most recently the Defund and Cops Off Campus campaigns following the murder of George Floyd and the riots of 2020.

8 This of course is not to deny the fragmentation and segregation of workers and students or the differential effects of dispossession and exploitation that occur on and off campus, but rather to redirect critique towards the political aspirations of a Left that would deny these realities in the form of a ‘united front’ or ‘big tent’, which is the general form of leftist organization in the United States and on college campuses in particular. It is this kind of leftist organization that appears more concerned with managing the boundaries of its own edgy political identity—whether radical, socialist, anarchist, antifascist—and arbitrating the acceptable behavior of its membership than it does with understanding the terrain of social conflict, let alone spreading or participating in it.

This is how and why we find ourselves skeptical, not of the strike itself, but of its management by both union officials and rank-and-file leftists and socialists who uncritically adopt the narrative of ‘worker power’ and ‘worker-student solidarity’, without any clear material content. The task, rather, is to understand the conditions of possibility and the limits of this strike. For the rank and file, it is clear that the longer it lasts and the more expansive its results, the greater the economic impact will be on the UC and thus the greater the bargaining leverage. But for us, as disaffected communists, to spread the strike and to generalize its disruption in the daily functions of the university is to interrupt not only the reproduction of the university as an institution, with its ledgers, deadlines, budgets, and balance sheets, but the reproduction of this particular social division of labor and of the capital-relation itself.<sup>9</sup>

The task then is to generalize the strike, first by troubling how it is tactically constituted, and then by expanding the effect of the ‘strike’ itself through activities that might appear external and opposed to it. Here, we must ask: what is a strike? How does it intervene in the reproduction of capital and what other means can be used to extend these effects beyond the formal picket line? How does the composition of capital and labor present itself at the university in our present moment and how does this inform the tactics at our disposal? How does this shift with the trajectory and development of the strike over time, day by day, week by week? The simple and short answer is, in the abstract, to block the flow of value and expropriate at every possible turn. The practical answer is, in the concrete, a more difficult one for you and your friends to decide among yourselves and bring into material reality. To strike means strike; that is a cipher to be wrestled with on the ground, in the unfolding of struggle itself.

It is our wager that the UAW’s tactical paternalism is not at all oriented towards these objectives, but best suited for a return to normalcy, a quick victory for a union in the throes of internal strife, whose administration and bargaining members are fully integrated into the capital-labor relation. They thus have little but disdain and fear for the rank and file, and for a proletariat that wants out of this hellscape of existence, rather than a more ‘fair’ share of the revenues that the hellscape reaps. Once we accept this tension and conflict of interests, we can begin to develop strategic and tactical trajectories adequate to the task.

So, when you hear the strike bosses on the picket line disavow ‘unsanctioned’ activities, criticizing them as ‘divisive’, ‘anarchic’, ‘ineffective’, ‘dangerous’, or ‘distracting’, keep this history and context in mind. It is not unions as institutions that have led us to our present capacities, but militant rebellion both inside and outside the formal work relation. The union claims that this strike represents a historic opportunity for struggle; if so, that possibility will only be

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9 This was precisely the objective of the worker-student action committees that emerged during the revolts of May 1968 in Paris: the overflow of insurrection from the university into everyday life. The formation of the worker-student action committees notably coincided with the spread of wildcat strikes. See Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman, *Worker-Student Action Committees, France May '68*: <https://libcom.org/article/worker-student-action-committees-france-may-68-roger-gregoire-and-fredy-perlman>

realized when our tactical, strategic, and organizational forms break free from the union's official line and revolt spreads like fire from campus to campus. ***It is not too much to demand nothing and take everything.***

