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The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret
by Michael Zweig

Before World War II, the American labor movement primarily struggled for collective bargaining. Following the war, though, the attitude of business towards unions changed. Corporations cared less about the right of collective bargaining than they did about its scope. As part of the general strikes of 1945 and 1946, Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers, demanded a 30 per cent wage increase for workers and, more importantly, that General Motors not raise the price of any of its products. General Motors and other industries perceived Reuther's attempt to influence prices as inroads upon "The Right to Manage." 1 "Even today," a management representative told the 1945 National Labor-Management Conference, "efforts are continuing on the part of certain unions to extend the scope of collective bargaining to include matters and functions clearly the responsibility of management" (176-77). In 1946, GM President Charles E. Wilson warned the Senate committee on amendments to the 1935 Wagner Act of the need to confine collective bargaining to "its proper sphere" in order to save "what we have come to know as our American system" from a social revolution "imported from east of the Rhine. Unless this is done, the border area of collective bargaining will be a constant battleground" (181). True to his red-baiting words, Wilson and GM endured the UAW's 113-day strike (which cost them nearly 89 million dollars in lost production) all in the name of preserving the authority and power of management from the working class and their trade union representatives (183). "The company," David Brody argues, "thus defined the terms for dealing with the UAW. The union was accepted as a permanent presence. Benefits would be forthcoming at regular intervals and in decent increments. The essentials of management authority had to be left alone" (185). Further, the terms GM chose to deal with the UAW would define how management chose to deal with labor across industries and throughout the second half of the twentieth century. "As in post-war Detroit," Brody argues, "money ordinarily took precedence over industrial democracy" (190). The inviolability of money and management authority effectively repulsed any remaining move by unions towards industrial democracy, the vague but nevertheless rallying vision of "the goal of producers to reduce the degree of employee subjugation" and participate in (if not control) workplace decisions and production. 2

I raise this moment from the depths of labor history because it provides an implicit critique of the more pragmatic arguments in Michael Zweig's otherwise remarkable and dead-on new book, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*. Zweig, professor of economics at SUNY-Stony Brook and the founder of the Group for the Study of Working Class Life, has written a passionate, readable, and useful analysis of contemporary debates about working class identity and politics, even if, as I shall suggest, his diagnosis of the problems confronting the working class is more accomplished and persuasive than his prescriptions for a cure.

By far the most original contribution Zweig makes to the discussion of working class politics is to restore the category of working class to the American class structure. Indeed, Zweig argues that not only does the

working class exist in this structure, but that working class people constitute the majority of Americans. Zweig's account thus consciously resists the myth that the United States is a middle-class society. Zweig establishes this working class majority by categorizing people not by income or lifestyle--which, in his view, show "the results of class, but not the origins of class" (3)--but by "the power and authority people have at work" (3). By examining U.S. Department of Labor Bulletins that group people by occupations, Zweig assigns "employees to the working class or to the middle and capitalist class according to the degree of authority and independence the employee typically has on the job" (28). Furthermore, "the great majority of Americans [who] form the working class...share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss" (3). Measured in this way, according to Zweig, the working class numbers 62% of all workers, the middle class 36%, and the capitalist class 2%.

Yet most Americans continue to believe the myth that "the 'middle class' is the typical and usual status of Americans." Their belief in this myth effectively dissolves working class identity. For Zweig, this missing working class identity is directly related to the decline of working class economic conditions since the 1970s. Zweig, therefore, devotes one of his strongest chapters to how politics, popular culture, and the academy combine to deny working class identity. He ably deconstructs the belief that upward mobility and higher education destabilize class hierarchies. Zweig also exposes the role of consumerism in grouping people not by what they do but by what they buy--thus substituting income and lifestyle for power in the construction of one's class identity. Furthermore, he argues that the media and popular culture either misrepresent working class identity or participate in the suppression of such a category in the first place. Zweig traces these myths, misrepresentations, and absences to Cold War anti-Communism, which made class talk intolerable and anti-American. In a by-now perhaps familiar but no less useful argument, he also takes the radical politics of the 1960s to task for dismissing "the working class as a backward, hostile enemy" (53). Zweig is especially critical of those activists who too easily bought into the media-generated myth of the "reactionary [white male] worker, enemy of social progress" and activists who therefore "recast politics solely in terms of race and gender" (53).

For Zweig, this misrepresented and occluded working class subjectivity has accompanied--and, in some sense, precipitated--the "class war from above" in the last decades of the twentieth century. In this period, union power has declined, real wages have fallen, and the distribution of wealth and income between the working class and capitalists has shifted dramatically upwards. Therefore, Zweig argues, "A resurrection of working class social, political, and cultural life, proudly defined as such, would contribute to strengthening people's sense of dignity, as well as increasing the power and authority of working people in the larger society" (62). In other words, working class identity must precede working class praxis. And for Zweig, nothing is more important than increasing the power and authority of working people since to do so necessarily involves taking power and authority away from capital. "Then, as history and current experience shows, the pursuit of profit leads too many business owners to too easily abuse workers, ruin the environment, and corrupt the political process. Economic problems come from the economic system, and the structure of power within it, that favors one class and disfavors others. Too few people have too much power over culture, education, the economy, and the institutions that affect the life chances of us all" (75).

Zweig's program for seizing this power and authority from capital ranges from the traditional--increasing union membership, increasing regulation of corporations, increasing the social wage, enforcing International Labor Organization and environmental standards in international trade--to the implausibly ambitious. The latter involves regulating competition itself--the centerpiece of Zweig's prescription for transforming working class politics and the social, political, and economic conditions in the United States more generally. Zweig identifies two forms of competition: constructive and destructive. His argument is worth reproducing at some length:

Competition is constructive when the firm improves the quality of its product to attract

new customer. . . [,] when new technology improves worker productivity so the product can be produced more cheaply. . . [,] [and] when worker skills and productivity are improved through training, which can result in higher wages as well as lower costs of production and a competitive advantage in the marketplace. But competition often takes other forms with negative consequences. A company can lower its costs by reducing wages and benefits. The company can demand that the workers simply work harder through longer hours or old-fashioned speed-up. . . . It can lower costs by cutting corners on quality health and safety standards. The company can get a competitive advantage by shifting its costs of production to the public, demanding subsidies or tax breaks. Sometimes the company saves money by spending less on pollution control, forcing the surrounding community to suffer the consequences or pay to correct them. Somehow, workers must apply enough pressure to prohibit these destructive forms of competition. (124)

So, too, in the realm of international trade, where “we need enforceable standards to keep the drive for profit from going over into greed. The problem for working-people is to find ways to limit the power of capital and to promote competition through better productivity and quality, not through a cross-border hunt for the lowest wages” (145). In short, Zweig wants to avoid “the race to the bottom,” whether for wages, benefits, health, safety, or environmental standards and whether in domestic or multinational trade. For Zweig, workers will apply this pressure by unions gaining enough members to exert influence on the federal government (either through the Democratic Party or, even better, a Labor Party) who will in turn legislate regulations and oversights that will make these destructive forms of competition off limits to corporations.

Zweig offers a millennial vision of working class power and its capacity to produce a socially responsible capitalism. His is an ambitious and inspiring vision of social change--one that recognizes the need to radically rethink the distribution of power and decision-making in the corporate economy and the government that cradles that corporate economy. Yet, sad to say, Zweig’s vision outpaces even the potential conditions he imagines necessary to achieve it. In short, Zweig overestimates the willingness of American unions, the key to his program of worker power, to engage in radical social change. His discussion of unions also troubles both his conceptual and pragmatic arguments about working class power and politics:

Unions are the most basic and oldest form of worker power. Through unions, workers are able to exert strength of numbers and to offset the power their employer has because he owns the business and has property rights on his side. The evidence is abundant that unions do improve the lives of their members, and the decline in workers’ living standards over the last quarter of the twentieth century coincided with a steady decline in the percentage of workers protected by collective bargaining. (122)

We need to pause here to note how far Zweig swerves from his original concern with the relation between class and power. Zweig begins his book by categorizing the working class not by wages and living standards but by the degree of power and authority (or lack thereof) at the workplace. Yet in his discussion of unions, worker power is expressed in higher wages and living standards. What gets lost in this transformation is the concept of worker power on the job, at the work site. To be fair, Zweig is arguing for a different kind of control; that is, control over culture, politics, and, ultimately, capital itself. But he does not return to where he began: control at the workplace. To point to this discrepancy is not to argue that wages and living standards aren’t important--indeed, to some degree, they are primary. But here we must return to Walter Reuther and the UAW. Reuther’s strategy of industrial democracy would have attempted to influence the decisions of corporations towards a more socially responsible capitalism--increasing wages without increasing the price of commodities. In other words, Reuther imagined working at the level of the economic, at the level of production and decisions about production. Zweig, however,

imagines working from the political and governmental back to the economic--but never, really, back to the level of production. Instead of workers and their unions making decisions about wage, health, safety, and environmental policy or even production itself, Zweig's vision involves workers regulating those decisions about policy and production made by capital. Only indirectly, rather circuitously, or perhaps not even at all would that power eventually make its way back to the shop or hotel or restaurant floor in the form of workers' control "over the pace and content of their work" and "the degree of authority and independence the employee typically has on the job." In still other words, the working class, as defined by Zweig, will always be with us: they will never exercise control over that--the workplace--which makes them working class in the first place.

But such a discrepancy between control and wages does not, in the end, matter much anyway, since Zweig underestimates the historical reluctance of American unions to engage in the sort of politics his vision of working class power requires of them. Just as Ruether and the UAW exchanged money for industrial democracy, so too would Zweig exchange money (and power in other realms) for democracy and worker control. As Stanley Aronowitz argues, "the post-war working class surrendered its emerging goal of determining what is produced, how much, and by what means." ³ I am trying to suggest that we have not left that era behind: the post-war exchange of industrial democracy for salary and benefit increases exists even today--indeed, few can remember when the exchange even happened. Furthermore, this social contract between unions and corporations severely limits the ideological scope of current and future working class and labor movements. The social contract between unions and corporations, in addition to trading control over investment and the workplace, insisted on the separation between the economic and the political. "Unions," Aronowitz argues, "have always represented themselves to workers as economic instruments: participation in electoral politics is always presented as an extension of the collective bargaining function, rather than in social or ideological terms. Socialism--or even a broadly anti-capitalist ideological politics--is strictly excluded from the daily discourse of the trade unions" (76). In short, the union Zweig imagines as the agent of a social democratic, anti-capitalist discourse and praxis has not existed in the United States since Walter Ruether and the UAW, and then only briefly and weakly. Neither does Zweig offer any evidence that the AFL-CIO has changed its ideological stripes--even with the shift towards increased organizing and increased participation in progressive social issues represented by the election of John Sweeney in 1995.

Finally, in an example that might be more familiar to readers of *Workplace*, one of the most disappointing aspects of the otherwise laudable recent graduate student unionization campaigns has been the willingness with which these unions have guaranteed not to interfere in "academic decisions." Indeed, universities have insisted they would not recognize graduate student unions (to the degree that they have) unless those unions agreed not to interfere in what we might call "The Right to Administrate"--that is, decisions over admissions, tuition, course requirements, or distributions of funding. Instead, following the pattern the American labor movement has established since World War II, grad unions have contented themselves with securing contracts and gaining wage and benefit increases. However necessary and just, these wage and benefit increases will do nothing to alter the structure of the corporate university. Neither, to return to Zweig, will unions as currently ideologically constituted do anything to alter the structure of corporate capitalism. Since the end of World War II to last week's organizing drive, unions have generally limited their claims to bread and butter issues--rarely, if ever, either ideologically or practically, engaging in the sort of social democratic politics Zweig asks of them. To be sure, Zweig is critical of unions who tend to only ask for "more"--a tendency symbolized by the title of John Sweeney's book *America Needs a Raise*--rather than "different. . . : different values, different ways of treating people, different ways of competing" (129). But he is quiet about how exactly this change in union values will come about, especially when the American labor movement for the last fifty years and a majority of the working class majority itself believes that only management and capital--or their representatives--are qualified to make decisions about the economy and production.

Notes

1 See David Brody's discussion of this strike in *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), pp. 173-214. Hereafter cited in text.

2 Paul Buhle, "Workers Control." Eds. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1992), p. 847.

3 Stanley Aronowitz, *Working Class Hero* (New York: Pilgrim P, 1983), p. 93. Hereafter cited in text.