Workers' Struggles, Past and Present

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Introduction
by James Green

This reader contains a selection of articles about workers' struggles in the United States published in the journal Radical America during the fifteen years from 1967 to 1982. The topic headings correspond to some of the main political and historical concerns of the activists and historians who have written for the journal. These include the struggle for control at the point of production, the problem of organizing the unorganized, the relationship of rank-and-file militancy to union politics, and the quest for workers' control.

The writers who have contributed to this collection share certain perspectives on workers' struggles. First, these writers examine the unrecognized potential of mass struggles organized by rank-and-file workers themselves. In the past, labor historians concentrated largely on organizations and their leaders, and often ignored the struggles and aspirations of ordinary workers. Second, Radical America historians extended their inquiry beyond the traditional economic and political concerns to include social and cultural questions. As a result, RA never confused the history of unions and political parties with the larger story of working-class struggle. Indeed, the journal took a critical view of labor organizations for failing to represent the working class as a whole and for reducing the goals of workers' struggle to narrow economic and institutional demands. The struggles described in this reader involve much more than issues of wages and working conditions. They also center around issues of dignity, freedom, and control.
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*Radical America* emerged from the student and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. This is a bit ironic since those movements spurned class analysis and rejected the labor movement as an agency of radical change. Paul Buhle founded *Radical America* in 1967, and for the first four years it was published mainly by a group of radical graduate students at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. That campus had been swept by militant actions against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and had spawned an active chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a radical organization that reached its peak in 1968. Indeed, until 1970 RA called itself “An SDS Journal of American Radicalism.” Buhle and the other editors wanted to explore past radical movements and draw lessons the New Left could use in its own organizing efforts.

The New Left developed during the early 1960s in the political vacuum left by the suppression of the Communist Party in the late 1940s and the repressive McCarthy period that followed. The New Left, however, had little in common with the old Communist Left. Young radicals did not defend the Soviet Union as a socialist society. Indeed, the student movement was not explicitly socialist at first. For example, SDS's Port Huron statement of 1962 adopted a vague moralistic stance attacking the Cold War mentality and calling for a revival of democracy. Young radicals of the 1960s shared a disgust with the cultural conformity, moral hypocrisy, and political apathy that characterized the era.

Inspired by the civil rights movement in the South, the New Left grew in certain private colleges and a few leading state universities like Wisconsin, Michigan, and California. SDS drew important lessons from the black freedom movement, which seemed to embody the concept of “participatory democracy,” the notion that people could and should make “decisions that affect their lives.” The explosive “free speech” fight at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964 crystallized New Left opposition to the modern university as a bureaucracy serving the needs of the military-industrial complex. In 1965 SDS sponsored a march on Washington protesting increased U.S. intervention in the Vietnamese civil war. In the next few years, an anti-war movement spread across the nation's campuses, fueled by anti-draft activity. Uprisings of urban blacks, which began in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965, continued in the bloody encounters of 1967 and in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. At the same time a black power movement led by revolutionaries challenged the established leadership of the civil rights movement and the strategy of gaining racial integration with non-violent tactics. The growing militancy of the anti-war and black power movements led many New Leftists to adopt revolutionary political views on racism, imperialism, and capitalism.

While many New Leftists turned increasingly toward Marxism and Leninism, the movement continued to espouse cultural radicalism. Student rebels not only embraced cultural revolution as it appeared in Cuba and
China and in the ideas of black nationalists; they also experimented with radical cultural activities at home. In the early sixties many students identified with folk culture as expressed by singers like Bob Dylan, but later on they turned to the more alienated forms of “acid rock” that celebrated youth culture and drug use. Young people also experimented with communal living and their own underground art forms. Though New Left cultural criticism attacked the traditional family, the movement and the counterculture were male-dominated. During the late 1960s radical women in the civil rights and student movements began to criticize male chauvinism in the movement and create their own cultural activities like consciousness-raising groups. From these roots sprang the modern feminist movement, and a vital critique of hierarchical, authoritarian politics. Radical America was especially influenced by the New Left’s cultural radicalism and by feminist ideas about culture and politics.

In 1969 and 1970 the New Left broke into factions, with one group maintaining the old Marxist-Leninist view about organizing a vanguard party to lead the working class and another faction holding to its support for black nationalism and youth rebellion. The anti-war movement had been the engine of radicalism in the late 1960s. It receded when massive protests against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970 failed to force a withdrawal of American troops. By the end of that year the New Left ceased to exist as a movement. Various forms of radicalism had taken on a life of their own. Black nationalism as represented by the Black Panther Party flourished briefly but suffered from severe police repression and internal dissension. The women’s liberation movement charted its own course. While some feminists remained hostile to Marxism, others began to espouse a kind of socialist-feminism. Some of this thinking appeared in Radical America during the early 1970s. Those in the New Left who took youth rebellion to its extreme conclusion disappeared into the Weather Underground and suffered imprisonment or exile. Far more student radicals joined Marxist-Leninist groups, took jobs in factories and moved into working-class neighborhoods, and became active in local unions. In its own way Radical America took this turn toward the working class. Indeed, its attention to labor history had been there from the start. In 1970 labor historian David Montgomery, socialist and former union activist, issued this appeal: “American socialists cannot hope to develop a valid theoretical perspective for our times without an accurate assessment of the present aspirations of this country’s industrial workers.”

In 1971 Radical America moved from Madison to Boston, a symbolic break with the journal’s roots in the student movement. The editors were now former students who worked as teachers and in various “movement jobs.” In the issue announcing the move editors Paul Buhle and Jim O’Brien evaluated the eclipse of the New Left and emphasized the narrow middle-class base of 1960s radicalism. The editors announced that RA would
continue to be "largely concerned with the history, development and prospects of the American working class." And since American Marxist theory had been so limited, they would continue to look to the European left when it shed light on developments in the U.S. Paul Buhle bravely set out "39 Propositions" about Marxism in the U.S. and advocated a "new kind of political formation" in which cultural freedom and liberation from racism and sexism became an integral part of the struggle for working-class power. In sum, Radical America had anticipated the New Left's turn toward working-class politics, but it did not welcome the return to the conventional Marxist-Leninist formulas for party building. Some RA writers drew upon more imaginative kinds of Marxism and followed the suggestions of George Rawick, whose 1969 article on "Working-Class Self-Activity" (Chapter 6) stressed the inherently radical nature of struggles workers organized for themselves.

Of course the New Left turn toward the working class resulted in part from renewed labor militancy, which was generated by the pro-business policies of the Nixon administration and by the recession that followed as the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam and decreased war-related production. In 1969 West Virginia coal miners launched their own political strike to force the passage of a black lung compensation law. Black autoworkers in Detroit who were disciplined after a wildcat strike formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. In France and Italy massive uprisings of workers and students in 1968 and 1969 took the official trade unions and left-wing parties by surprise and showed that young workers were open to New Left ideas and to autonomous forms of mass organization. In this country a young generation of factory workers rebelled against speed-up and authoritarianism, notably at the new General Motors assembly plant in Lordstown, Ohio. Moreover, rank-and-file union members openly opposed conservative union leaders, most dramatically in a 1970 national postal workers' wildcat strike and in Appalachia, where the formation of the Miners for Democracy followed the murder of union insurgent Jock Yablonski and his family. In 1972 Stan Weir, a socialist veteran of workplace struggles since the 1940s, outlined the new alignments of class forces in the seventies (Chapter 12) and emphasized the exciting possibilities for radical change, especially among younger workers affected by the anti-war movement and the 1960s counterculture.

During the 1950s and 1960s the dominant school of labor history took a very limited view of what workers and their organizations could accomplish. Professor John R. Commons and his students founded this school of interpretation at the University of Wisconsin, where radical history students would publish Radical America many years later. The Commons School produced impressive institutional histories of trade unions which often justified narrow, conservative forms of organization on the grounds that workers demanded no more and conditions allowed for no more. Socialist
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ideas about class-conscious solidarity and worker control allegedly came from utopian intellectuals, not from hard-headed workers.

Early issues of RA, on the other hand, showed that workers had been agents of radical change. Mass strikes, like the ones described by Mike Davis (Chapter 3), showed how unskilled, non-union workers could challenge capitalist control. The activity of the Industrial Workers of the World (or Wobblies) demonstrated to RA historians the unrecognized radical potential of mass struggles organized by workers themselves and supported by revolutionaries who were willing to follow the workers' lead. The Wobblies believed in direct democracy versus bureaucracy, direct action versus electoral politics, equality versus hierarchy, and internationalism versus nationalism. These were values New Left radicals could readily embrace, all the more so because they were held by proletarians, not students.⁶

Marxist historians did construct an alternative to the Commons school's interpretation by emphasizing class struggle. For example, Philip Foner produced a series of important books detailing the disastrous effects of exclusionary business unionism on the labor movement. Rank-and-file workers, he suggested, would have taken a more class-conscious route if they had not been misled by Samuel Gompers and other conservative officials.⁷

New Left historians faulted this Old Left version of labor history on several grounds. In the mid-sixties, radical historians argued that Foner's class-struggle approach ignored the way in which the "corporate liberals" in business and government had co-opted the labor movement. Trade union leaders from Samuel Gompers of the AFL to Sidney Hillman of the CIO found accommodation more attractive than confrontation. James Weinstein also rejected the Old Left's criticism of Socialist Party reformism. The socialist movement provided a viable alternative to business unionism until it was suppressed during World War I and split apart by the new Communist movement in 1919.⁸

These new viewpoints appeared in Studies on the Left, a journal founded in 1959. A number of the editors and contributors studied at the University of Wisconsin with William Appleman Williams, the leading New Left historian. In The Tragedy of American Diplomacy and other works Williams explained U.S. expansion abroad as a result of capitalists' search for new markets. Big business and its political allies defended imperialism, but so did many leaders of farmers' and workers' organizations who also wanted foreign markets for the goods they produced. Williams's interpretation became important to New Left attacks on modern U.S. imperialism, especially in Vietnam.⁹

Other New Left intellectuals expressed more direct pessimism about workers' capacity for change. The radical sociologist C. Wright Mills described postwar labor leaders as "pro-capitalist" managers of discontent. In his well-known 1960 letter to the British New Left, Mills said he did not
understand why some New Left writers "clung so mightily to 'the working class' of advanced capitalist countries as the agency of historic change, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really impressive historic evidence that now stands against this expectation." In 1963 philosopher Herbert Marcuse published his influential book *One Dimensional Man*, in which he analyzed the cultural and political bases of corporate domination in America. Marcuse saw workers alienated from work and from politics and escaping into consumerism."

Radical America historians shared some of these critical perspectives but they rejected the pessimism of the early New Left theorists. They also criticized the historical work in *Studies on the Left*, which ceased publication in 1967, the same year RA was founded. Those historians who emphasized the hegemony of corporate liberalism concentrated largely on organizations and leaders without examining the activities of ordinary working people. They also read back the conservative status quo of the post-World War II years into earlier periods. In doing so they "virtually read class conflict out of American history.""

Radical America historians needed a theoretical approach that transcended the economic determinism and political elitism of the Old Left as well as the cultural pessimism of the early New Left. Since left theory in the U.S. tended to be one-dimensional, RA historians looked for a more imaginative Marxist approach to history and politics. They turned to the work of two activist historians from abroad, C. L. R. James and E. P. Thompson, to whom this book is dedicated.

C. L. R. James, born in Trinidad, became a leading Caribbean intellectual through his writings, which ranged from fiction to cricket reporting. He was best known for his powerful 1938 history of the San Domingo slave revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. During the 1930s James lived in England, where he joined the Trotskyist movement and helped form the pan-African nationalist movement. When James came to the U.S. in 1938 he joined the small Trotskyist movement and plunged into learning about American conditions. As a spokesman for an opposition group within the Workers' Party and later as the leader of his own little group in Detroit, James published a remarkable collection of philosophical and political writings before his deportation from the United States in 1953."

James called for a return to Marxist fundamentals and to dialectics as outlined by Hegel and applied by Marx and Lenin. All historical development occurred through "self-movement, not organization or direction by external forces," he wrote. Applying dialectical Marxism to Russian history, James argued that the Communist Party bureaucracy had captured the Soviet Union and created what he called state capitalism. Alienation afflicted workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe just as it did in the United States and Western Europe. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 showed that working-class self-activity in Stalinist states could lead to out-
right rebellion. Nothing so dramatic touched the U.S., but the same contradictions existed. Socialist intellectuals should emphasize to workers their own power and bring out the “socialism that exists in the population, the resentment, the desire to overturn and get rid of the tremendous burdens by which capitalism is crushing people.” Intellectuals should not lecture workers on correct political lines, James maintained, but they should make their views known “as a contribution to that democratic interchange and confrontation of opinion which is the very life-blood of socialist society.”

*Radical America* started publishing C. L. R. James’s writings in 1968, and they appealed strongly to the New Left sensibility. James’s revolutionary optimism contrasted favorably with the view of the modern worker as a one-dimensional economic man. His book *Facing Reality*, written in 1958, also seemed to one young reader to be “full of practical suggestions for socialist activity that were decidedly different than the shoddy manipulations many of us associated with ‘vanguard’ politics.”

Finally, James demonstrated the importance of cultural activity through his writing on black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. In *The Black Jacobins* he employed the notion of self-activity to show how African slaves used their own cultural traditions and the ideas of the French Revolution to create an autonomous national liberation movement that overthrew the master class as well as a succession of imperial armies and then founded the black republic of Haiti. The essays in this collection by Harold Baron, Manning Marable, and Ernest Allen share a similar perspective on the importance of independent black movements for the class struggle as a whole. Furthermore, as a James associate, George Rawick, showed, the concept of self-activity could be useful in understanding not only black liberation movements but workers’ struggles of all kinds. Rather than despairing over the lack of theory, the corruption of unions, or the absence of a strong Socialist Party, *RA* writers were inspired to examine actual workers’ struggles, past and present, to see in what ways they prefigured the coming socialist society.

E. P. Thompson’s historical and political work also shaped *RA*’s approach. After the Russian army suppressed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, Edward Thompson left the Communist Party of Great Britain. He then became a leading activist in the peace movement and the British New Left. His hugely influential book *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, showed New Left historians that culture could not simply be reduced to “superstructure.” Culture had a life of its own and influenced politics in ways previous Marxist historians had ignored. Thompson believed that class was a “historical relationship” that emerged in different ways at different times, and that class consciousness emerged in unpredictable ways depending on historical and cultural contexts. Rather than be governed by theories or laws of history, he studied the “peculiarities” of the English and emphasized the political importance of unique cultural traditions. These ideas proved liberating to radical historians in the U.S. who
were laboring under the weight of the social science theory that America was an exceptional place, free from class conflict and class consciousness. 17

By 1968 historians like Herbert Gutman, Jesse Lemisch, Staughton Lynd, and George Rawick had written about the serious resistance movements created in the U.S. by peasant immigrants, revolutionary sailors, colonial tenant farmers, and rebellious slaves. 18 These insurgents were not to be dismissed as "primitive rebels" but rather understood as conscious working people whose struggles generated serious social conflict and created important cultural forms and political ideas. Just as Thompson carefully and lovingly described the Romantic poets, village atheists, and utopian artisans who attacked the new capitalist order in Britain, radical historians of the 1960s described dissenters in this country. If historians stopped looking for some ideal form of proletarian socialism, the history of workers’ struggles in this country looked very exciting, not exceptionally passive. Perhaps the New Left’s cultural radicalism made it easier to identify with the romantic rebels of the preindustrial era who expressed their dissent in peculiarly American voices. 19

In order to write what Jesse Lemisch called a “democratic history from the bottom up” RA historians adopted the methods and approaches Thompson and other social historians used to study ordinary people’s lives. They also employed the oral history techniques first introduced by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s and popularized by Studs Terkel in the 1960s. 20 Staughton Lynd, fired from his teaching job at Yale for his “strident” protest against the Vietnam War, led the way in applying oral history to radical concerns. He helped to organize a workshop in Gary where steelworkers criticized the 1971 contract and wrote alternative provisions based on the demands of rank-and-file caucuses and insurgent locals. He also worked with Alice Lynd interviewing veteran union organizers who explained how the early militancy of the CIO had been deflected or suppressed. Lynd used some of these interviews in his historical essay (Chapter 9) on the rank-and-file steelworkers’ movement of the early 1930s and why it failed to create a more militant, democratic national union. 21 Like James and Thompson, Staughton Lynd showed how an activist historian could work outside of the academic establishment and write sophisticated history that addressed present-day tasks of movement building.

In 1971 RA began a series on “Work in America” which featured subjective accounts of alienation and resistance on the job. Some of these reports examined the role of the informally organized work group as a locus of resistance and creative activity; this approach provided a useful alternative to studies focusing entirely on unions and other formal organizations. For example, one lively report on resistance and sabotage in an auto factory revealed what the author called “counter-planning on the shop floor.” This, he argued, was a new social form that could succeed modern unions and provide the basis for a less bureaucratic, more democratic organization, like
the workers’ council. In “Their Time and Ours” a Chicago postal worker offered a surrealistic account of how people’s “play time” allowed them to oppose a regimented labor process. In the capitalist labor process play seemed to be irrational or escapist because it represented the refusal “to submit to the brutal ‘rationality’ of work.” In a worker-controlled post office, play would be a regular part of the work day. John Lippert’s article on “shop-floor politics” in a Cadillac assembly plant (Chapter 18) also describes how play unified the vanguard group of workers who rejected the “wages for work exchange.” In another article in the “Work in America” series a Detroit clerical worker discussed the “work community” and distinguished between the informal work process which brought workers together, often in cooperative efforts, and the “authority system” which workers often refused to take seriously.22

Other RA writers also employed the informal work-group concept, especially Stan Weir, a former seaman, dockhand, and auto worker. He argued that informal work groups acted as the cadre for organizing the CIO industrial unions in the 1930s and for the wildcat strikes against the wage freeze and the speed-up during World War II. He has criticized left organizing theory for focusing entirely on formal trade union and party structures without addressing workers’ informal group life where militancy and creativity have often originated.23 In his analysis of workers’ struggles (Chapter 12), he insisted that in the 1970s the left would remain isolated from spontaneous and potentially radical outbursts of working-class militancy and political activity unless it developed a new theory and practice based on the reality of workers’ daily lives.

The informal work group was clearly the center of the “work community” described by Susan Porter Benson explains in her revealing article on “the clerking sisterhood” (Section I). RA has yet to publish articles following Benson’s suggestion that women workers’ group life differed significantly from that of craftsmen. Indeed, the journal has not fully explained why some informal group activities, wildcat strikes for example, involve militant opposition to capital and the State while others may also involve the exclusion of minority and women workers. Furthermore, the emphasis on group activity and work culture has rarely extended beyond the capitalist workplace to the home, the family, the community, and other social settings. In recent years, feminists writing in RA have studied various working-class cultural activities like watching daytime television, organizing Tupperware parties, and joining family camping groups. They have also explored various cultural spaces used by women like beauty parlors, battered women’s shelters, and self-help groups.24 And they have explained how these seemingly “free spaces” are still affected by traditional cultural forms that inhibit liberation. It has been difficult, however, for historians to discover this dimension of working-class life in the past partly because sources are lacking. For example, Marxists and feminists intensely debated
the politics of housework in RA during the early 1970s, but the journal never published a historical article on women’s work in the home or on the housewife’s place in the working-class community. This gap in RA’s cultural approach to history is particularly unfortunate because the social historians who have studied workers’ daily lives often romanticize traditional culture as a basis for resistance and exaggerate the freedom women enjoyed within their own sphere.25

Radical America, however, was influenced more by feminism than were any New Left or labor-oriented publications that continued into the seventies. Indeed, in 1970 the journal published a special issue on women’s liberation and a year later featured a pathbreaking article by three women’s historians who combined feminism and class analysis.26 Another special issue on women’s labor in 1973 aimed toward a synthesis of Marxism and feminism, but this merger would prove elusive. As RA editor Linda Gordon explained, Marxists had not provided a “good definition of what class is for women.” The working-class experience had to be understood “not just in the shop but also the home, in bed, in ball parks and movie theatres.”27

In other words, RA’s failure to move historical analysis beyond the workplace and the political group to include the family and the community could not be blamed simply on lack of sources or lack of imagination. There were conceptual and political reasons as well. From a feminist viewpoint, the journal still focused largely on wage-earners as economic and political beings, not as human beings in the fullest sense. This criticism, which came from within the editorial collective as well as from the outside, forced the editors to reexamine their approach.28 A reconsideration seemed all the more necessary as the political situation changed. By 1979 it appeared that “cultural crises—the family, sex, religion, crime, abortion, homosexuality—easily compete[d] with economic ones for popular attention and anxiety.” The New Right’s appeal to working people centered almost entirely on cultural and sexual issues, and the Left had no serious or appealing cultural response.29 The challenge Radical America carries into the eighties is to model its political and historical work on an original insight of the women’s movement—that “the personal is political.” In recent years the journal has expanded its definition of what is political in order to explore more fully the prospects for human liberation from the frightening world capitalism has made.

Since Radical America formulated historical questions through its understanding of contemporary struggles, the discouraging events of the seventies led to a reconsideration of the journal’s approach to autonomous workers’ movements. The rapid collapse of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, discussed here by Ernest Allen (Chapter 14), showed how difficult it was for a militant group to oppose the recognized union and maintain shop-floor power in an industry. The disbanding of the Miners for Democracy followed the victory of a reform slate in the United Mine
Workers Union and indicated how easily independent movements could be incorporated into trade union structures. The founding of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974 seemed to promise an autonomous arena in which socialist-feminists could make direct contact with women workers, but within a short time top labor union officials took firm control of CLUW and outflanked the left.\(^3\)

In Europe the large New Left formations of workers and students did not survive long in the 1970s. The Italian extraparliamentary Left, which exerted a strong influence on RA’s politics, suffered from factionalism and repression. The largest group, Lotta Continua, experienced police harassment and false identification with Red Brigade terrorism. The New Left in Italy revealed the exciting possibilities of a radical movement autonomous of trade union and political party structures. Lotta Continua also developed an interesting body of post-Leninist theory in which the idea of “mass vanguards” replaced that of the self-appointed vanguard party. Even before its suppression, however, the Italian “autonomista” movement left many questions unanswered. Its militants had not clearly shown how to link up various autonomous struggles without the leadership of a union or party, and they had failed to integrate the kind of cultural or feminist analysis that emerged from the New Left.\(^3\)

Of course all of these initiatives suffered from the impact of a worldwide economic slump. In the U.S. inflation and unemployment discouraged militancy, and the level of wildcat strike activity dropped off dramatically. Unofficial strikes still erupted and RA worker-writers confirmed the important role of informal work groups in these autonomous struggles. But shop-floor reports also indicated that these locally initiated insurgencies remained quite isolated.\(^3\) Even the coal miners’ strike of 1977–1978, which came closest to being a national struggle controlled by the rank and file, failed to break out of the legal and organizational nets that weighed so heavily on independent workers’ movements (Chapter 17).

Of course socialists could celebrate victories in other parts of the world during the seventies, notably the triumph of Left-led national liberation movements in Vietnam, Angola, and Nicaragua. But RA had never adopted Third World political models as readily as had some segments of the New Left. The military strategies adopted by Marxist-Leninists abroad seemed of less relevance to workers’ movements in industrialized countries than the Left-led movements that mobilized workers in countries like Chile, Portugal, and Poland. But of course the revolutionary workers’ movements in these countries all met with crushing defeat.

These events led to a shift in discussion about workers’ struggles. Initially, working-class self-activity and autonomous struggle were the main subjects of the journal’s inquiry. During the 1970s these subjects became problems for debate and reconsideration. For example, in 1972 a special issue on working-class militancy during the Depression underlined the
radical potential of self-organized workers’ movements. In 1975 a similar issue on labor in the 1940s placed far more emphasis on the ways in which unions and the government joined employers to restrict rank-and-file militancy and to expel the organized Left from the labor movement.  

Some RA writers then returned to the Old Left’s study of the objective conditions that inhibited or defeated class-conscious movements and to the early New Left’s emphasis on the co-optive effects of state intervention and regulation. Contributors also followed Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in studying how capitalists used scientific management and technology to deskill workers and to fragment work groups. The journal also concentrated more on the divisive role of racism and sexism in working-class struggles. Early articles on the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the CIO showed how black and white workers united and fought together, whereas later issues explained how racism had become the main obstacle to working-class unity. Located in Boston, RA was strongly affected by the violent school-busing crisis of the mid-seventies when the struggle against racism seemed far more vital than any effort to manufacture unity among black and white workers.  

This turn toward a more structuralist analysis of the workplace emerged together with criticism of RA’s emphasis on spontaneity and its somewhat anarchist perspective on the need for autonomous struggle. After the New Left and black power movements disintegrated and the women’s movement suffered from fragmentation and frustration, leftists who read and contributed to *Radical America* participated more in established organizations, notably local trade unions. The contributions to this book by worker-writers like Dorothy Fennell, John Lippert, and Dave Wagner discuss the possibilities and limitations of such activity. Labor historian David Montgomery, who first called upon the New Left to make an assessment of working-class struggles in 1970, questioned the view that unions always functioned as “agencies which deprived workers of the power to control their own destinies.” Surely, union leaders, structures, and demands had been “successfully incorporated into American capitalism time and again,” but this happened to all kinds of workers’ struggles that stopped short of taking real power. Even workers’ councils had been bureaucratized or absorbed by trade union structures. Nonetheless, union organization could “unleash shop-floor struggles in the first place, rather than contain them.” For Montgomery a dialectical relationship existed between spontaneity and organization, not a one-way line from militancy to bureaucracy. Socialism grew from “the work and living patterns of working people” and not just from the intervention of external vanguards. Like Edward Thompson and C. L. R. James, Montgomery maintained that socialism would take root in the “mutualism” that developed from workers’ “daily struggle for control of the circumstances of their lives.” This mutualism appeared in workers’ “values, loyalties and thoughts” as well as in their daily actions, but such spontaneous
activity could "only triumph by becoming increasingly conscious and articulate." As Montgomery reminds us in his concluding essay, "The struggle for workers' control advances only as it moves from the spontaneous to the deliberate, as workers consciously and jointly decide what they want and how to get it."[38]

As a result of this sort of discussion Radical America developed a more subtle approach to the relationship between spontaneity and organization. At the same time, feminist criticism deepened the journal's understanding of the relationship between culture and society and between personal and political life. Questions of strategy and tactics will continue to be debated within the pages of Radical America, and so will the political and historical questions about how best to understand workers' history. But the journal's approach will undoubtedly remain fixed on how workers themselves create new insights and new strategies in their ongoing struggle for power. Jeremy Brecher, a frequent contributor to the journal, clearly summarized this approach. "If socialism grows from the work and living patterns of working people," he wrote, then "we should look for its development in their working and living groups, not in the formal or radical organizations that, at least for the last 50 years, have been external to those groups." The class struggle itself creates the basis for socialist consciousness. Only through their own action can workers see evidence of their potential power. "It is only because workers stick together that their co-operative take-over of society is conceivable," Brecher concludes. "It is only because they plan and organize their actions themselves that the planned coordination of production by those who produce could be imagined."[39]

Political events in the seventies and early eighties did not obviously confirm this optimistic view of workers' struggles. But for a journal that rejected the conventional models of left politics and refused the accept the limits of existing organizations, it was necessary to take the long view of human liberation. For example, even in defeat, Poland's Solidarity confirmed some aspects of RA's original approach to working-class movements. Solidarity reaffirmed the enormous resiliency and creativity of workers' oppositional activity. The movement's spectacular emergence in the Lenin Shipyard occupation at Gdansk in 1980 came after decades of workers' resistance to state-dominated party and trade union organization. Solidarity seemed to fulfill the expectations for a revolt against "state capitalism" in the East discussed by C. L. R. James in his writings about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The Polish workers' struggle showed how "new organization" began with "free creative activity" and how bureaucratic party organization had become "the obstacle, the opposite" of workers' liberation.[40]

Solidarity's origins in the Gdansk occupation reminded RA of the American auto and rubber workers' sitdowns of the 1930s, the Hungarian workers' councils of 1956, the French factory occupations of 1968, and the
Chilean cordones of 1972–1973. In each case, wrote RA editor Frank Brodhead, workers built "a community of struggle and self-government around great concentrations of capital and industry." And in each instance they resisted efforts to end direct, democratic control over the means of production. More specifically, Solidarity revealed the tactical value of organizing horizontally in various workplaces and communities so that "class-wide regional organizations" replaced vertical organizations based on industrial and professional distinctions. In this collection, Staughton Lynd suggests such a horizontal approach in his description of the fight against plant closings in Youngstown, Ohio (Chapter 16). In that struggle to assert workers' control over investment decisions, the international union played a negative role, while the coalition-building effort within the community actually raised questions of socialism, questions that rarely arose in internal union fights.

Solidarity relied a great deal on traditionalism and nationalism for its cultural appeal, forces which have a very different significance in U.S. workers' struggles. The movement's spontaneity and reliance on local autonomy also exposed it to counterattack by the state, though it is not clear that Solidarity could have accomplished as much as it did with a more tightly disciplined, centralized organization. In any case, for all its limitations, Solidarity indicated again how a self-organized workers' movement could break out of the bureaucratic limits imposed by the party, the unions, and the state, and, by making a strong cultural appeal, come to represent the whole society's desire for liberation. It was this kind of movement whose precursors Radical America historians sought in studying workers' struggles, past and present.

NOTES

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2. This description of the New Left is based upon James O'Brien, "Beyond Reminiscence: The New Left in History," Radical America 6, no. 4 (1972): 11–49.


4. David Montgomery, "What's Happening to the American Worker?" Radical America Pamphlet (Madison: Radical America, 1970), p. 1. Also see Jim
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6. For specific reference to the student movement's affinity for IWW politics, see Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967), p. xii.


15. Ibid., p. 105.


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33. See James Green, “Working-Class Militancy in the Depression,” RA 6, no. 6 (1972): 1-35, and "Fighting on Two Fronts: Working-Class Militancy in the 1940’s," RA 9, nos. 4-5 (1975): 5-47. Nonetheless, the 1940s issue was criticized for exaggerating the political significance of wartime wildcat strikes and for ignoring racist “hate strikes.” Even in studies which described American labor as being on the “defensive,” RA’s emphasis on spontaneity and autonomy in workers’ struggles remained strong. See Joshua Freeman, “Delivering the Goods: Industrial Unionism during World War II,” Labor History 19, no. 4 (1978): 570-593. Also see the response to these criticisms by Mark McColloch, “Letter to the Editor,” Labor History 20, no. 3 (1979): 470-474, which objects to the idea that RA historians saw workers just as “economic beings” concerned only with “shop-floor issues.”


