

Societal Education, Direct Action, and Working-Class Gains: An Anarchist Perspective

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ABSTRACT. Using an anarchist theoretical framework, it is argued that the working class would obtain greater gains through militant direct action modeled on the labor movement of the past. The history of the 8-hour workday is reviewed as a case study showing that it was won because of radical leaders who challenged existing legal institutional frameworks through societal education, militant ideology, direct action, and violent resistance against state attacks. Positive changes did not occur politically, peacefully, or voluntarily. Instead, oftentimes the *threat of* or *use of* violent resistance and even rebellion had preceded major concessions for the working class. doi:10.1300/J134v11n02_01 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Poverty has been on the rise as the overall living-standards of the working-class population have been steadily deteriorating over the past several decades (Aronowitz, 2005; Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1997). Increasingly, workers are left without healthcare or other basic benefits, while the feminization of poverty, the working-poor, and contingent employment are all on the rise (Peck, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Poverty Tables, Table 4, n.d.; Wolfson, 2003). For example, “In 1968, one person working full-time at the minimum wage would come pretty close to the federal poverty level for a family of four. Today that same full-time, minimum-wage job takes a worker up to just 56% of the poverty line” (Zepezauer, 2004, pp. 136-137). This is reflected in the increasing Gini Ratio of inequality which reached .466 in 2004—the highest since 1967 when it was .394 (U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables-Households, Table H-4, n.d.).

Using the struggle for the 8-hour workday as a case study, the radical pre-1940s labor movement is reviewed through an anarchist framework in search of class action(s) that can increase working-class gains. The evidence will demonstrate that the old labor movement obtained many of its gains by challenging the dominant ideology with its own radical *counter-ideology* emanating from socialists, anarchists, and other radical activists; it created mass support by promoting *societal education* along Anarcho-Gramscian principles; and engaged in *direct action* at the grassroots level with civil disobedience, violent resistance, and even full-scale revolts. Overall, significant gains were not obtained politically, peacefully, or voluntarily. Unfortunately, confrontation through direct action was needed (backed by the threat or ultimate use of violent resistance and revolt by the working class), which was the only recourse that preceded major concessions.

The analysis of the historical record indicates that new radical solutions to poverty and inequality along anarchist principles warrant consideration. Accordingly, it is argued that the working class would obtain greater gains today through direct action spurred by radical ideological challenges to the capitalist principles governing distribution instead of working exclusively within the capitalist institutional/legal framework. However, this requires building a new movement that will incorporate a strategy of grass-roots societal education and the willingness to engage in *Direct Economic Civil Disobedience* (DECD) with resistance to potential reactionary state violence.

Unfortunately, given the limitations of space, the impact of issues such as immigration, globalization, class-cleavages, new technologies, and historical circumstances such as 9/11 are not specifically addressed

here. However, the working class always faced severe obstacles and while these obstacles may have changed, the fundamental principles governing distribution have not. For example, is the Patriot Act more restrictive of radical working-class direct action today compared to the 1800s legislation that outlawed even forming a union or the routine use of armed forces to subdue working-class actions? It is acknowledged that the current environment relative to terrorism creates significant state obstacles to militant working-class direct action that might be branded as terrorist. However, this demonstrates the importance of societal education to address the issue and inform the public that government may be part of the problem and that this is a legitimate societal movement, which may, if pressed, have to resort to self-defense or violent resistance when alternative means of peaceful resolution have been fully exhausted.

This, to some extent, was also what spurred the civil rights protests as a supplement to legislative efforts when the latter were blocked by a clearly racist government. In fact, the government itself has routinely used violence as a legitimate means to an end as with the War of Independence, World War I, and World War II, when violence was seen as the only alternative to capitulation. Furthermore, it will be shown that when the working class engaged in radical action, it was government which was mostly responsible for using violence against protesters and strikers. This was why protesters would find it necessary to arm themselves for self-defense against government-directed military suppression. Hopefully, today such extreme levels of conflict would not be necessary, but history has indicated otherwise (Graham & Gurr, 1969).

THE ANARCHIST FRAMEWORK

In this study, working class and labor are used interchangeably and refer to any person or household that does not own sufficient means of production as to have a relatively high living standard without dependency on paid work. As known, the anarchist principle of self-organization refers to a form of direct democracy (people representing themselves), while self-direction refers to worker owned and operated collective production (Guerin, 1970; Rocker, 1938). DECD is defined as disobeying anti-labor and anti-consumer laws with direct action and the determination to resist potential reactionary state violence by engaging in self-defense. DECD combines Thoreau's (1969) classic analysis of civil disobedience with anarchist direct action defined as the use of strikes, workplace

occupations, boycotts, mass movements, sabotage, and revolutions (Rocker, 1938). Direct action also includes violent resistance to reactionary state violence and suppression.

In addition, anarchism seeks the elimination of all forms of government in favor of self-organization, arguing that any government by definition results in the suppression of the many by the few. This is true of democracies as well in that they are also dominated by elites and therefore will not benefit the working class (Domhoff, 2002). Democracies are acknowledged to provide some benefits as a result of working-class participation but these are seen as minor and perpetually under attack by elite interests (Guerin, 1970). According to Rocker, one of the most articulate exponents of anarchist theory:

Political rights do not originate in parliaments, they are . . . forced upon parliaments from without. . . . even their enactment into law has for a long time been no guarantee of their security. Just as the employers always try to nullify every concession they had made to labour as soon as opportunity offered, as soon as any signs of weakness were observable in the workers' organisations, so governments also are always inclined to restrict or to abrogate completely rights and freedoms that have been achieved if they imagine that the people will put up no resistance. . . . Political rights do not exist because they have been legally set down on a piece of paper, but only when they have become the ingrown habit of a people, and when any attempt to impair them will meet with the violent resistance of the populace. (1938, pp. 111-112)

This is supported by U.S. data indicating a long-term trend from 1970 in declining real wages and benefits due to the rise of and attacks by neoliberal ideologies including the Reagan and all Bush administrations (Peck, 2002; Wolfson, 2003; Young, 2006). Therefore, anarchism argues that the working class can obtain meaningful gains and preserve them only through direct action:

The peoples owe all the political rights and privileges . . . not to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength. Governments have employed every means that lay in their power to prevent the attainment of these rights or to render them illusory. Great mass movements among the people and whole revolutions have been necessary to wrest these rights from the ruling classes, who would never have consented to them voluntarily. . . . Only after the

workers had by direct action confronted parliament with accomplished facts, did the government see itself obliged to take the new situation into account and give legal sanction to the trade unions. *What is important is not that governments have decided to concede certain rights to the people, but the reason why they have had to do this.* (Rocker, 1938, pp. 112-113)

As for fundamental changes benefiting the working class, anarchists argue direct action would have to be revolutionary, leading to new radical forms of societal organization based on the principles of self-organization in civil society and self-direction in production. Such societal change can be both revolutionary and evolutionary. One way of measuring societal change is by the extent to which personnel in positions of domination are exchanged (Dahrendorf, 1959). This results in a continuum of structural change ranging from total change of personnel (sudden) to no exchange (evolutionary change) with partial exchange being the midpoint. However, sudden change may not necessarily be radical but radical change can be sudden or evolutionary. For example, the Industrial Revolution ushered radical yet evolutionary change, whereas the Bolshevik revolution was sudden but left the basic form of authoritarian production and governance unchanged. Thus revolutionary change could refer to and is used interchangeably in the literature to describe both sudden and radical change. What then determines sudden versus radical change? Radical change is positively correlated with the intensity of class conflict, whereas sudden change is positively correlated with the level of violence:

The category of intensity refers to the energy expenditure and degree of involvement of conflicting parties. A particular conflict may be said to be of high intensity if the cost of victory or defeat is high for the parties concerned. The more importance the individual participants of a conflict attach to its issues and substance, the more intense is the conflict. . . . The violence of conflict relates rather to its manifestations than to its causes; it is a matter of the weapons that are chosen by conflict groups to express their hostilities. Again, a continuum can be constructed ranging from peaceful discussions to militant struggles such as strikes and civil wars. . . . The scale of degree of violence, including discussion and debate, contest and competition, struggle and war, displays its own patterns and regularities. Violent class struggles, or class wars, are but one point on this scale. (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 212)

Although sudden and radical change can occur together as with high levels of violence and intensity these concepts could also be mutually exclusive. This paper argues in favor of evolutionary radical change to prevent the rise of new totalitarian regimes as with the Bolsheviks. Also, evolutionary change would avoid great societal dislocations, which often accompany sudden radical changes.

ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL RECORD

First, the historical record supports the argument that societal education increases class consciousness and solidarity within the working class, which in turn functions to increase the intensity of class conflict and therefore radical change. Second, history has proven that when attempting to obtain and maintain meaningful gains, the working class has had to engage in self-defense against violent suppression by the state itself. Moreover, when the labor movement has engaged in significant direct action, its failures have been accounted for by the overwhelming use of government military force. In cases where labor's actual or perceived force and determination exceeded that of state capabilities, concessions were made. In addition, there is increasing theoretical and empirical evidence supporting that direct action, with the unfortunate need of violence for self-defense, may result in greater concessions from the state and employers for the disprivileged rather than political action alone (Asimakopoulos, 2000; Brecher, 1997; Fording, 1997; Piven & Cloward, 1971). The review of the struggle for the 8-hour workday also supports these arguments. However, when labor does not engage in radical action the outcome has been the formation of policies and legal structures that disprivilege the working class and institutionalize its defeat. This has been demonstrated during the past 30 years by the lack of radical action, resulting in significant reductions of working-class gains (Peck, 2002; Wolfson, 2003).

As such, what could be done to spur the working class to engage in such radical actions? According to anarchists such as Bakunin, Malatesta, and Proudhon, the basis for action is societal education (as cited in Guerin, 1970). For example, Gramsci (1971) argued in his theory of hegemony that a precondition for socialism includes the ideological development of a feasible alternative or *counter-hegemony* to existing forms of societal organization. This would be accomplished through the objective societal education of the working class and experience functioning with alternative forms of organization. Rocker (1938) also emphasized worker education

as a precondition for action. Thus, the arguments of this paper also address the motivational basis for the working class to engage in DECD through societal education to increase class-consciousness and in turn, solidarity (minimizing working-class cleavages) that can then be transformed into direct action. This is summarized as education, class consciousness, solidarity, and action.

Societal Education and Class-Consciousness

What made direct action possible by the old labor movement was an active agenda by radical activists of raising class-consciousness through programs of societal education including an independent media, schools, art, and socio-political organizations (Altenbaugh, 1990; Shore, 1992; Teitelbaum, 1993; Weinstein, 1984). Although many working-class organizations and unions would often experience internal disagreement over how to allocate limited resources between societal education and other activities, nevertheless funds would be made available for the former. It was through this outreach to the general public that labor could get its message out, raise class-consciousness, and obtain broad community support for direct action along Gramscian principles of developing *counter-hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971; Shore, 1992). It is characteristic that historically the mainstream media would misrepresent and attack labor while exhorting violent actions by policemen, national guards, and federal troops (Krajnc, 2000; Lindsey, 1994). Consequently, it was fortuitous that the labor movement had its own independently owned and operated media outlets to get its own message to the public. By the early 1900s there were over 323 socialist publications ranging from daily to monthly newspapers and academic publications with a circulation of over two million (Weinstein, 1984). There were also at least three national publications, *Appeal to Reason*; the *National Rip Saw*; and the *International Socialist Review*, with a combined circulation of roughly one million (Krajnc, 2000).

Also at this time labor unions, socialist parties, and other worker organizations would establish and support schools, college programs, and a host of worker education programs (Altenbaugh, 1990; Krajnc, 2000; Teitelbaum, 1993). Among these programs were the Worker Education Bureau, which was affiliated with 40 labor schools; the Highlander Folk School; the Rand School of Social Science; the Brookwood Labor College; the Commonwealth Labor College; and Work Peoples' College. The last two even offered full-time residential programs. These schools

would train future labor leaders, teach workers how to organize, and raise class-consciousness.

Beyond training in the above milieus, songs, theatre, film, and literature were also employed by the labor movement to promote class-consciousness and solidarity (Greenway, 1970; Krajnc, 2000; Zaniello, 2003). In terms of literature and theatre there was Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*; Clifford Odet's *Waiting for Leftie*; and a host of plays performed around the country by labor colleges and groups such as Brookwood, which had three companies. Also, "For ten cents, workers could find themselves heroically portrayed in stories such as *Larry Locke: Man of Iron, Or, A Fight for Fortune, A Story of Labor and Capital*, and *Jasper Ray: The Journeyman Carpenter, Or, One Man as Good as Another in America*" (Montgomery, 1976, p. 116). Furthermore, songs such as *Solidarity Forever* and *Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men* have been recognized by the labor movement as some of the most moving and powerful. It has been said that the (anarchist) Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were the "singest" American union (Greenway, 1970). It is worth noting that the organizations, which had the most voluminous and passionate song repertoires were those which faced higher levels of conflict, such as industrial unions like the IWW. In contrast, more peaceful craft unions of the time like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) lacked virtually any songs. Thus, through the arts, labor raised class-consciousness, whereas the participatory nature and themes of the work promoted solidarity (Krajnc, 2000; Montgomery, 1976).

There was even a vibrant Socialist Party headed by the charismatic Eugene Debs who argued, as did Gramsci, that people had to understand socialism before they supported it (Morgan, 1973; Young, 1999). More importantly, "two major anarcho-communist groups had followings greater than that of the SLP [Socialist Labor Party] in the mid-eighties—the Social Revolutionaries, led by Johann Most, and the Home Club of the Knights of Labor, whose fifty members were all leading officers of local assemblies in New York City" (Montgomery, 1976, p. 123). Overall, a host of anarchist and other radical groups produced leaders which in turn would infiltrate unions and political parties providing ideological leadership while encouraging agitation. Often these radical leaders faced government persecutions and executions as with August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, and George Engel, who were all hanged on November 11, 1887, after being falsely convicted for the bombing at Haymarket Square. In addition, radical leaders, who

were widely respected by the rank-and-file, were purged even by union officials who saw them as a threat to their own power.

Violent Times and Solidarity

In order to understand how the working class obtained specific demands, it is important to understand the broader social context of the times, which was characterized by high levels of intense and violent class conflict. Societal education and the high levels of class-consciousness and solidarity which it produced made it possible for the old labor movement to engage in violent direct actions in defiance of the law, challenging private property and state authority, even turning to full-blown revolts with worker self-organization and self-directed economic activity. The typical government response was to deploy troops, shoot protestors, and violate the law itself. These full-fledged battles were supplemented by executions of labor leaders and left-wing witch hunts and purges. Attacks on strikers were answered by workers and citizens with battles of resistance using rifles, knives, clubs, dynamite, and even cannons (Brecher, 1997). This is exemplified by the historical record of the following strikes: the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 (Dacus, 1969; Foner, 2002; Stowell, 1999); the Pennsylvania Homestead Strike of 1892 (Krause, 1992; Wolff, 1965); the Illinois Pullman Strike of 1894 (Carwardine, 1994; Hirsch, 2003; Lindsey, 1994); the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (Friedheim, 1964); and the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936/7 (Fine, 1969; Linder, 1963). These general strikes led to a *de facto* functioning state of anarchism where worker-citizens self-organized and directed their own production and operated their own cities.

Clearly, the old labor movement was able to engage in mass strikes despite significant obstacles such as injunctions and armed suppression by the state. For example, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 spread from Texas to New York, and involved tens of thousands of workers in multiple cities (Dacus, 1969; Foner, 2002; Stowell, 1999). The Pullman strike of 1894 involved 27 states and over 260,000 workers (Lindsey, 1994). Although these strikes originated within specific companies or industries, they quickly spread to other industries in the form of *sympathy/secondary strikes*. Inter- and intra-industry sympathy strikes were common as an effective tool to exact economic costs on the targeted company. They also forced other impacted companies to pressure the targeted firm to resolve the dispute. Thus, strikes were used strategically to raise the overall economic cost of labor disputes not only for particular businesses, but for business owners as a *class*. Sympathy

strikes also contributed to and demonstrated increasing workers' class consciousness and solidarity (Brecher, 1997; Montgomery, 1976).

In addition, the high levels of solidarity and class consciousness in the 1800s were exemplified in many cases, although not all, by cutting across racial and ethnic lines (Brecher, 1997). According to Montgomery:

Because the weakest links in the chain of labor solidarity were found at the points where the white, black, and yellow races met, the numerous episodes of cooperation between white and black workers during the 1880s provided a noteworthy feature of the labor upsurge. . . . The Knights alone had some 60,000 black members by 1886. More than a fifth of the early members of United Mine Workers in the bituminous fields were black. In 1896, Richard L. Davis, a black leader from Ohio, won the highest vote of any candidate for that union's National Executive Board. The New Orleans docks were a stronghold of biracial unionism. When the white scabmen and packers there allied with the black teamsters to strike for a ten-hour day in October, 1892, the city's Board of Trade offered concessions to the whites but refused to negotiate with blacks. In response, forty-nine unions shut down the entire city and kept it shut, despite venomous attacks on the blacks in the local press. In the end, the Board of Trade capitulated entirely, giving labor one of its greatest victories of the century. (1976, p. 128)

Class-consciousness and solidarity were further demonstrated by the high levels of working-class citizen support. In these cases, strikes would often transform into spontaneous armed rebellions along Anarcho-Syndicalist principles. Cities, such as Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Los Angeles in 1877; Homestead in 1892; Pullman in 1894; Seattle in 1919; and Flint in 1936 were taken over by citizens who engaged in self-rule and self-directed production. These actions were often so effective that institutional power holders considered them a challenge to the capitalist system itself. Workers and citizens also armed themselves and organized into military units in order to defend against state reactionary suppressive violence. For example:

In late July, 1877, train crews on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad struck against a wage cut, triggering a chain . . . of events which President Hayes was to condemn as an "insurrection." Popular anger over the dispatch of troops to reopen the line spread the

strike to Baltimore, where huge crowds clashed with the militia. Simultaneously, work stoppages followed the rail lines across Pennsylvania from both ends of the state into the smallest mill and mining towns. Thousands of Pittsburgh iron workers and other residents defeated soldiers sent from Philadelphia in pitched battle, subsequently burning all property of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Across Ohio and Indiana, workers' committees simply took over their towns, halting all work until their demands were met by employers. A quickly organized strike in Chicago brought troops and artillery to the city, and shots rang out at the Halstead Street viaduct. In St. Louis, thousands of workers closed down the city's industry for several days. Governmental authorities fled the town. (Montgomery, 1976, pp. 124-125)

In 1892, Homestead's governance was taken over by its armed working class, which organized into their own military units:

The Committee has . . . decided to organize their forces on a truly military basis. The force of four thousand men has been divided into three divisions or watches, each of these divisions is to devote eight hours of the twenty-four to the task of watching the plant. The Commanders of these divisions are to have as assistants eight captains composed of one trusted man from each of the eight local lodges. These Captains will report to the Division Commanders, who in turn will receive the orders of the Advisory Committee. . . . The girdle of pickets will file reports to the main headquarters every half hour, and so complete and detailed is the plan of campaign that in ten minutes' time the Committee can communicate with the men at any given point within a radius of five miles. In addition to all this, there will be held in reserve a force of 800 Slavs and Hungarians. The brigade of foreigners will be under the command of two Hungarians and two interpreters. (cited in Wolff, 1965, p. 90)

The *Chicago Tribune* called the Pullman situation in 1894 an "insurrection" (Lindsey, 1994). Meanwhile, in the same year in Los Angeles, Attorney General Olney was warned of pending open rebellion while the commander of the U.S. troops in Chicago, General Nelson Miles, believed the United States Government itself was in danger of being overthrown (Lindsey).

Ultimately, the striking workers at Pullman were defeated because of overwhelming government military forces:

By early July, a total strike had settled in over the railroads of the middle and far West, bringing in quick sequence a federal injunction against the strike, the stationing of troops at all vital junctions of the lines, martial law in Chicago, and the imprisonment of Debs and other strike leaders. . . . After intense debate, the leaders advised their members not to strike. Noting the “array of armed force and brutal monied aristocracy,” represented by “United States Marshals, injunctions of courts, proclamations by the President, and . . . bayonets of soldiers.” (Montgomery, 1976, p. 128)

Following the insurrection, the city of Seattle in 1919 was taken over by its citizens, leading Mayor Hanson to state it “was an attempted revolution which they [the strikers] attempted to spread all over the United States” (cited in Friedheim, 1964, p. 132). Subsequent to Seattle, in Flint in 1936, the city manager was literal when he stated “we are going down there shooting. The strikers have taken over this town and we are going to take it back” (cited in Brecher, 1997, p. 221).

Workers would also blow up factories and buildings to exact an economic toll upon Capitalists. Pittsburgh in 1877 saw over 2,000 railroad cars burn while citizens made sure the fire did not spread to nearby tenements (Dacus, 1969; Foner, 2002). The attack on private property also included mass lootings. Strikers assisted by townspeople would capture railroad cars distributing their contents to the masses. In other instances, citizens would appropriate and operate businesses under their own management as in the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (Friedheim, 1964). According to the *Seattle Union Record*:

The closing down of the capitalistically controlled industries of Seattle, while the WORKERS ORGANIZE to feed the people, to care for the babies and the sick, to preserve order—THIS will move them, for this looks too much like the taking over of POWER by the workers. Labor will not only SHUT DOWN the industries, but Labor will REOPEN, under the management of the appropriate trades, such activities as are needed to preserve public health and public peace. If the strike continues, Labor may feel led to avoid public suffering by reopening more and more activities, UNDER ITS OWN MANAGEMENT. (cited in Friedheim, 1964, p. 111)

Therefore, engaging in mass revolt had the impact of challenging power holders not only financially but also politically. When entire cities were run and operated directly by their citizens, it became a real life experiment in anarchist self-organization as with the Spanish Revolution of 1936. More importantly, it became a functioning example of alternative politico-economic forms of societal organization. This is why the power holders would often have to regain control of entire regions through military expeditions against the American people in the name of capitalist private property rights.

The 8-Hour Workday

The history of the 8-hour workday in America demonstrates that working class gains were obtained through violent direct action with legislation forced to follow accomplished facts on the ground. An early promoter of the 8-hour movement was Ira Steward, who lived in 1860s Boston. With the Civil War as the background, Steward's ideology was abolitionist, recognizing that labor's interests cut across race and ethnicity. A number of prominent 8-hour activists like George E. McNeill, Edward H. Rogers, and Wendell Phillips also recognized the importance of class solidarity inclusive of race (Roediger & Foner, 1989). The movement was fueled by numerous 8-hour leagues and unions which relied primarily on working through the legislative process with signed petitions, lobbying, and supporting candidates for the 8-hour workday. Strikes supplemented the agitation as a secondary tool. Originally, the movement focused on state legislatures rather than the federal government.

In 1864, Chicago became the center of the fight for an 8-hour workday. According to Roediger and Foner (1989), by 1865 there were six 8-hour demonstrations which included 67,000 workers in Northeastern states, while 4,000 people marched in Chicago. In response, Illinois was the first state to pass 8-hour legislation in 1867, which in practice proved virtually ineffective. Workers in Chicago reacted with a demonstration numbering 10,000 declaring a general strike on May 1, 1867, which brought the city's economy to a standstill. Troops were called in and the strike was broken. In 1868, Congress responded with a law which provided an 8-hour day to some federal employees. Unfortunately, all these legislative measures lacked enforcement mechanisms, prompting the National Labor Union to declare in 1867 that 8-hour laws ". . . have been passed by the legislatures [but] . . . for all practical purposes they might as well have never been placed on the statute

books, and can only be described as frauds on the labouring class” (Roediger & Foner, 1989, p. 112).

In response to the political defeats of 1867-68, Steward and the labor leaders realized the importance of societal education in order to obtain broader support. This signaled a shift away from the failed legislative process into one favoring a more radical approach based on direct action cultivated by societal education through 8-hour leagues, social clubs, and union halls.

For example, New York passed 8-hour laws in 1867 in response to threats of massive strikes by New York City workers. By 1872, the ineffectiveness of the laws also prompted massive strikes in Philadelphia, Buffalo, Chicago, Jersey City, and Albany. In New York City 100,000 workers went on strike demanding 8-hour laws be enforced. The agitation was led by the anarchist International Worker’s Association (IWA), Marxists, and various radical leaders winning an effective 8-hour workday for the building trades, resulting in victory marches involving 150,000 people. These victories together with the historical ineffectiveness of 8-hour state laws led the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU), predecessor of the AFL, to demand with direct action an 8-hour workday. This was after President Arthur in an 1881 meeting with FOTLU delegates refused to enforce the federal 8-hour law. This prompted the FOTLU to issue a resolution in 1885:

It would be in vain to expect the introduction of the eight-hour rule through legislative measures . . . [A] united demand to reduce the hours of labor, supported by a firmly established and determined organization, would be far more effective than a thousand laws, whose execution depends upon the good will of aspiring politicians or sycophantic department officials . . . the workmen in their endeavor to reform the prevailing economic conditions must rely upon themselves and their own power exclusively. (cited in Brecher, 1997, p. 54)

As a result, workers increased their agitation, escalating the number of strikes and participation dramatically in 1886 (Table 1). Strikers also armed themselves in anticipation of intervention by state and federal troops as was done during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. “Such brigades of armed workers had grown up in a number of cities, largely in response to the use of police and military forces in 1877. By 1886 they existed . . . in Cincinnati . . . Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, Newark, New York, San Francisco, Denver, and other cities” (Brecher, 1997, p. 57).

TABLE 1. Strike Activity 1883-1886

Year	Number of Strikes	Number of Establishments	Participants
1886	1,411	9,891	499,489
1885	645	2,284	242,705
1884	443	2,367	147,054
1883	478	2,759	149,763

Data from: Brecher, 1997, p. 47.

It is important to note that leadership for nationally organizing the 1886 agitation was undertaken by a small core of anarchists working together with local craft unions and the relatively small FOTLU. “The [Anarcho-] syndicalists provided skilled organizers . . . [they] also made a contribution by organizing armed workers’ militias ostensibly capable of defending strikes. . . . they were the lone attempts by a labor organization to speak to what was a prime concern of prospective strikers—the possibility of attacks by private and public police” (Roediger & Foner, 1989, p. 138). In contrast, the major national union (the Knights of Labor under Powderly) was in opposition to strikes favoring societal education and the legislative process.

In anticipation of the fight for shorter hours, many workers also established 8-hour leagues. The leaders of the leagues included many anarchists, socialists, and revolutionaries. Local unions also began preparations for agitation, despite half-hearted support by national union officials. Prior to May 1886, thousands of workers around the country had already begun agitation by striking and demonstrating. On May 1, there were massive demonstrations in most major cities including Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Milwaukee, and New York. As a result of the demonstration of mass force, over 185,000 workers obtained concessions for reduced work hours by their employers in various industries (Montgomery, 1976, p. 126).

It quickly became clear that the working class would be able to exert its power and obtain greater gains than shorter hours. But, things came to a halt by May 4 with the Haymarket Square bombing. The government used the event as a pretext to crack down on anarchists and other radical leaders who were behind the agitation. Leaders and strikers were arrested without warrants and held for long periods without charges (Roediger & Foner, 1989). Many concluded that the government voided

freedom of speech and association. May Day had casualties as well. Protesters and strikers in many cities were confronted by armed state and federal forces. In some cases, troops were given orders to fire on the crowds and they did. For example, Wisconsin's Governor Rusk ordered state troops to shoot protesters in Milwaukee, killing nine; in Chicago police killed four strikers at the McCormick plant (Brecher, 1997).

Subsequently, the period from 1890 to the early 1900s was characterized by legal challenges to 8-hour laws. The limited response to this was in part due to the chilling effect of the Haymarket crack-down and the elimination of radical anarchist leadership. Another reason was the half-hearted efforts by the AFL under Gompers. Although the AFL declared its intention to fight for the 8-hour workday as of May 1, 1890, Gompers refused to engage in national agitation. He preferred a strategy of allowing specific local craft unions to act alone often with no central direction or help (Roediger & Foner, 1989).

According to Roediger and Foner (1989) the biggest reductions in hours were obtained between 1905 and 1920 with continued direct action. In 1919, for example, 22.5% of the labor force was involved in strikes. The agitation was organized by a small yet radical core of anarchists, including the IWW that cooperated with local unions while the AFL under Gompers caused more harm than good. For example, the IWW organized successfully the miners strike of 1906 at Goldfield Nevada; the successful 1909 "uprising" of 20,000 NYC garment workers; the successful 1912 textile strikes at Lawrence involving 275,000; the 1913 Paterson silk strikes involving 25,000 which failed due to police violence and arrests of leadership; the 1916 Mesabi Range strike involving 10,000. Overall, they were involved in over 150 strikes including the coal wars of 1912-13 in West Virginia and the uprising after the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 where troops using machine guns killed over 32 people. IWW activity also prompted Henry Ford's pre-emptive granting of the 8-hour day and passing of the Adamson Act (1916) extending the 8-hour workday to railroad workers of private companies. The latter was a major success because it was the first time federal law covered workers in private companies. However, the law was passed in response to a pending nationwide strike by 400,000 railroad workers for shorter hours. The government, though, used WWI to crack down on anarchist and communist leadership as it did with Haymarket.

Therefore, by the 1930s, government had to solve the problems of restarting the economy and avoiding revolution due to the Great Depression (Roediger & Foner, 1989). According to one journalist in 1933,

“capitalism itself was at the point of dissolution” (cited in Alter, 2006, p. 3). Bank runs and general civil unrest were reaching a crisis point:

For the first time since the Civil War, armed men patrolled the entrances to federal buildings, while machine gunners perched on rooftops. . . . Unrest was already growing in the farm belt, where mobs had broken up bankruptcy auctions. Four thousand men had occupied the Nebraska statehouse and five thousand stormed Seattle’s county building. The governor of North Carolina predicted a violent revolution, and police in Chicago clubbed teachers who had not been paid all school year. (Alter, 2006, pp. 3-4)

As a result, it was anticipated that Roosevelt would declare martial law in his inauguration speech to keep the nation from revolution. This led the New York *Herald-Tribune* on March 5 to print ‘FOR DICTATORSHIP IF NECESSARY’ with other papers running similar headlines (cited in Alter, 2006, p. 4).

At the time, the popular consensus held that depression was caused by insufficient purchasing power—ironically, a Marxist argument. Roosevelt felt that an independent union movement would be successful in raising workers’ wages, which would then stimulate the economy and ease revolutionary pressures without suspending democracy (Perlman, 1939). However, most union actions such as establishing or joining a union, engaging in a strike, mass protests, distributing union information, and collective bargaining were illegal up until this time, taking place in defiance of law. It was not until the Norris-LaGuardia Act (1932) that workers were given basic protections against *Yellow Dog* contracts (employment on the condition of not joining a union) and injunctions against strikes. Consequently, a number of measures were passed after the Norris-LaGuardia Act as a means of increasing aggregate demand via purchasing power and encouraging union growth. It took the National Labor Relations Act (1935), popularly known as the Wagner Act, to allow workers to legally join unions while forcing employers to recognize collective bargaining. The New Deal also passed legislation establishing the first social safety nets with the Social Security Act (1935).

The government finally legalized the 8-hour workday with the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal. However, it was passed after shorter work hours were *de facto* won by workers in many industries through often necessarily violent struggles. Overall, these laws had been approved in response to years of agitation with

violent direct action. For example, in the midst of the Great Depression, the level of underlying civil unrest was so high that the threat of a popular revolt was believed to be great enough to overwhelm government forces. “With so many banks involved, the U.S. Army—including National Guard and Reserve units—might not be large enough to respond” (Alter, 2006, p. 4). This was unlike the 1800s when government troops usually sufficed to subdue citizen uprisings. As a result of this credible threat of violent revolt against the capitalist system itself, the power holders were forced to offer these concessions. “During the Great Depression, the insurgent group (labor) constituted a much larger proportion of the electorate, and therefore left political elites with little choice but to respond to political violence in a beneficent manner” (Fording, 1997, p. 23). Consequently, the purpose of the New Deal Legislation was clearly to alleviate poverty and hardship caused by the depression to avoid the potential of a *renewed* people’s revolution as in the late 1800s (Alter, 2006; Asimakopoulos, 2000; Roediger & Foner, 1989).

Therefore, the 8-hour workday demonstrates that even basic demands were met only after a prolonged period of agitation from the 1860s to the 1930s, including mass strikes and armed rebellion often led by anarchists (Roediger & Foner, 1989). This exemplifies Rocker’s (1938) argument that even democracies, which represent capitalist interests, did not concede labor rights until after they were confronted by accomplished facts on the ground, resulting from citizens’ direct action. It also demonstrates that favorable labor legislation in America has been forced by years of agitation based on direct action and the determination to violently resist state suppression. Strikers were also joined by citizens, often of all races and ethnicities, providing an example of not only worker, but working-class solidarity. Finally, the 8-hour movement also demonstrates the important role played by radical leaders and ideology disseminated through societal education to promote class solidarity.

CONCLUSION

First, *societal education* through independent media, schools, and art has been, and continues to be important in terms of obtaining popular support, developing *class-consciousness* beyond race or industry, and mobilizing people. Without it, developing class consciousness would be difficult. Without class-consciousness, there is no solidarity and without solidarity, movements fail. It was through this *solidarity* that

workers of the old labor movement would engage in sympathy strikes and obtain the support of entire communities. Consequently, societal education increased the *intensity* of class-conflict and challenged capitalist ideology, making education another form of revolutionary action.

Societal education, in turn, relied heavily on an independent media, which was often run, managed, and owned by the movement itself. Currently, media concentration and pro-capitalist bias have become a well-documented obstruction to objective information and democracy (Chomsky, 1994, 2002; Greenwald, 2004). This is why it will be crucial for the labor movement to develop an independent mass media so as to get its message out and raise support for radical direct action. A current example of media controlled and run by progressive liberals are moveon.org and [Jobs with Justice \(jwj.org\)](http://Jobs with Justice (jwj.org)). In addition, progressive filmmaker and director Robert Greenwald's finance strategy for producing activist documentaries by pre-selling DVD's directly to the concerned public offers an example of grass-roots activist filmmaking.

Furthermore, in order for people to support radical action, the left needs to demonstrate a feasible working alternative to existing structures. People will not engage in action without knowing where it is expected to lead them. This was why Gramsci (1971) advocated developing an *ethical state* and a *disinterested culture*. However, in order for this to take place, there must not only be a free state, but also a free media to provide objective information that could educate the working class. It is through education that people can learn of a viable *counter-hegemony* to the existing economic and political relations. To complicate things, all this would have to be done ultimately at the global level. As Cox (1987) argued, the fact that we now have a global state of capitalism requires that we develop a *transnational historic bloc*.

Second, *ideology* matters. This is closely related to societal education. Radical educators, labor leaders, and activists have played an invaluable role. Third, economic *direct action* has been a core strategy in the past. For example, it was through inflicting financial losses upon power holders through mass strikes, sit-ins, and boycotts that forced previous concessions. This oftentimes included the destruction of private corporate property and the real threat of revolution. Violent economic direct action was revolutionary in that it complimented challenging the power holders' economic base with challenges to their political authority as well.

Fourth, legislation has been repressive of the labor movement, forcing it to operate outside of, and in direct opposition to existing legal frameworks. Labor rights were not given through voluntary changes in

law in the name of progress and social justice. Instead, major legislative changes took place in response to a long history of agitation based on high-levels of *intense violent direct action* and the threat of broader civil unrest. Interestingly, law was violated by the power holders as well. As demonstrated, (when sufficiently threatened), capitalists and government violated existing laws and violently suppressed mass protests. Private guards, police, state and federal troops were all utilized, including heavy artillery and machine gun units, regularly resulting in civilian deaths. This was a standard response any time the power holders felt their institutional grasp loosened by mass movements.

Consequently, history indicates that the working class today could benefit by direct action designed to bring about radical change. Examples of radical goals to be obtained through direct action would include a guaranteed minimum living standard for all (including housing and income); universal healthcare; full-employment policies; fair trade legislation; industrial democracy through work councils; elimination of wealthfare; repeal of corporate status as legal persons for accountability; total prohibition of corporate involvement in the political process; legislation of independent news media, free from corporate control/governance. These stipulations alone could revitalize the labor movement and hopefully bring much needed change for society's poor, underprivileged, and invisible.

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