After three decades of the waning of trade unions as a social force, their generally anaemic response to the Great Financial Crisis cannot but be registered. With the failure to build on the golden opportunity offered up by Occupy’s demonstration that audacious action can touch a populist nerve – punctuated by the eventual defeat of Wisconsin labour’s recall electoral strategy over a year after its exemplary occupation of the state assembly (which predated Occupy Wall Street by six months) – the left today confronts a more discomfiting question: does the rejuvenation of unions still really remain possible, or are unions now exhausted as an effective historical form through which working people organize themselves? To be clear, the issue is not whether unions and union-led struggles are about to disappear. Unions will stagger on, sometimes very heroically. They will carry on organizing, bargaining and filing grievances. And they will continue to strike, march, demonstrate and on occasion remind us of working-class potentials. But trade unions as they now exist no longer appear capable of adequately responding to the scale of the problems working classes face – whether the arena of struggle is the workplace, the bargaining table, the community, electoral politics or ideological debate.1

Although a recent symposium on unions in developed capitalist countries concluded that ‘the declining trend is visible everywhere’, this essay will focus on the impasse in US labour.2 The last time the US working class faced a comparable economic and internal crisis, during the 1930s, industrial unionism came to the fore. What new form of working-class organization might explode onto the agenda this time? Then, communists and socialists were vital to the formation and orientation of unions, at a time when radical organizers were inspired by the notion that workers could become the historical agents of a new society and unions might become schools for socialism. Is it still credible, in light of recent history, to believe that working people might one day be at the centre of radical social transformations?3
Such questions are intended to be sobering rather than defeatist. Offered in the spirit of having ‘no illusions but not be disillusioned’ these questions rather express the extent of what needs to be taken on if union and working-class renewal is to be seriously addressed, and impel a closer consideration of the interplay between the condition of unions and that of a left committed to moving beyond capitalism.

The chasm between the socialist idea on the one hand and socialist organizational capacities and popular sentiments on the other, seems to foreclose for now – particularly, but not only, in North America – any mass recruitment of workers and young militants to an explicitly socialist party or even explicitly pre-party formation. This points to a seemingly more modest project: how can unions once again serve as even effective reformist organizations and – directly related – how can the socialist idea once more become part of serious political debate? In today’s context, the realization of even such restrained objectives would necessitate bringing radical perspectives and institutional innovations to the struggle, creating new openings for restoring the left’s relevance. An underlying barrier to this, however, is the long-standing critique that unions are at their core sectional organizations: though they emerged from the working class, they do not represent the class as a whole. This is not likely to change through any dynamic only internal to unions; nor can we expect new working-class parties to arise suddenly to solve the problem. What is possible, and urgently needed, is the introduction of new intermediate institutions – more than unions, short of a party – committed to building the working class as a social force both in and beyond the workplace.

NEOLIBERALISM AND FATALISM

The extensive union renewal literature of recent decades has generally focused on the need to combat bureaucratization with more internal union democracy; more inventive militancy to surmount the division between the economic and political in union tactics; and developing community outreach and broader coalitions. Each is indisputably vital to any attempt to rejuvenate the unions as social actors. Yet bureaucratization can only go so far in explaining why there have been so few revolts within unions (if workers can’t deal with their own bureaucrats, how can they be expected to transform society?). Also, unions can be more democratic and combative yet this may only translate into more aggressively pursuing their own specific needs, what Raymond Williams called ‘militant particularism’. And too often, overcoming the gap between the economic and political in union strategies only means shifting mobilizations into the mainstream electoral
or lobbying domain. As for coalitions, however positive their roles around specific issues and campaigns, bringing together groups that are themselves weak and not truly mass movements is unlikely to produce, in any longer-term strategic perspective, an overall positive sum greater than the inadequate parts.

The more fundamental problem in a good deal of the renewal literature is the lack of engagement with the capitalist context that leaves workers enmeshed in a dependence on private capital accumulation: capital does the investing, organizes production, manifests the application of science and technology, provides the jobs and generates the growth and tax revenue for social programmes and public employment. The understandable inclination of workers with only their labour power to sell is to accommodate to this naturalized reality, and this is expressed in the union form as the instrumental mechanism to meet their needs. Unions bring together subsections of the working class with diverse interests, levels of class consciousness and political preferences, and union representation is often inherited with the job rather than explicitly fought for and chosen. Unity is built around specific demands internal to the group, generally revolving around the commodity price of those workers’ labour power and specific working conditions, thereby constituting a narrow kind of solidarity.7

It is true that states have reinforced such sectionalism by limiting secondary picketing and political strikes, and employers have likewise reinforced a narrower outlook by their readiness to concede to workers on economic demands while steadfastly refusing to negotiate broader demands. But the basic problem remains. Though there have indeed been very significant moments when unions reached beyond their sectional limits and demonstrated an inspiring potential to think and act like a class, as unions ‘matured’ and institutionalized those remarkable moments – while not disappearing – tended to become rarer and more fleeting. The point is that unless the root sectionalism of unions is confronted, union renewal will flounder. Members who see their union in instrumental rather than class-building terms will treat dues as equivalent to their payments to an insurance agency. And leaders who may, also for instrumental reasons, need to mobilize their members from time to time will still retain concerns that such mobilization not ‘get out of hand’. Even the coalitions which unions establish or join primarily forge relationships that maintain segmented interests rather than build class interests and construct any long-term collective project.8

While at times in the past it was possible to make certain gains in spite of the liabilities of sectionalism and to have those gains spread to other workers, today sectionalism is a decisive barrier even to defending past gains. Limited
in their vision and fragmented in their structures, unions have been no match for the offensives of employers and, above all, those of the state. In this respect, the first significant defeat the American labour movement suffered after the mobilization and reorganization of the 1930s came not in the 1980s but immediately after the Second World War, when a strong capitalist class confronted a strong working class. It involved the defeat of the radical left within the unions, amid anti-communist repression and the all-too-ready accommodation to it by most of the union leadership. This was sustained by a growing belief among workers, made credible by the postwar experience, that the gains in wages and benefits that unions achieved at this time proved that capitalism could provide much of what socialism promised – and do so at very much less risk. But as high employment in the 1960s provided space for a rank-and-file militancy, which often rejected the narrow terms of the so-called social contract that had been forged between unions and management, this came to be seen by capital as an obstacle to profitability, just as capitalist globalization was already accelerating. Over the following decades, as the resolution to the crisis of Keynesianism took the form of a turn to neoliberalism, the capacities labour had developed in the good times proved woefully inadequate in the face of this. As it turned out, both the way unions had embraced the social contract and the limited form the rebellion against this took had set the stage for the second defeat of labour – one that this time was not limited to the so-called radicals within the labour movement but rather extended to unions as institutions and beyond them to the working class as a whole.

As rank-and-file militancy was broken, worker fatalism replaced the old social contract as the key to reproducing capitalist social relations; as Terry Eagleton has put it, ‘It was not illusions about the new capitalism, but disillusion about the possibility of changing it, which proved decisive’.9 Workers still resisted, but such resistance was now intermittent. The number of strikes fell (right across the developed capitalist countries) and the repertoire of resistance saw less and less of work-to-rule campaigns, sit-downs, plant takeovers, and mass secondary picketing. Ambitious demands largely disappeared from working-class politics, a development one worker described as ‘leaving all our hopes outside in the rain and coming into the house and just locking the door – you know, just turning the key and “click,” that’s it for what we always thought we could be’.10

Such resignation reflected a collective failure by unions and the radical left to come to analytical and organizational grips with neoliberalism as not just an alternative ideology and set of policies but, as Greg Albo has put it, a historically specific form of social rule.11 For capital, the quarter century
preceding the current crisis was (notwithstanding widespread notions on the left of capital’s prolonged profitability crisis) a second ‘golden age’, involving remarkable restructuring of industry amid technological advance and global capitalist competition and interpenetration. For working people this new golden age of capital brought permanent insecurity, the grossest inequalities, the destruction of community, and the subordination of democracy and the social imaginary to both the ideology and practice of ‘competitiveness’ and to keeping bond markets happy. The very gains made by unionized workers over the postwar period left them open to trying to save the greater part of those achievements by accepting concessions. The lack of any sustained counter-response gave credence to the view that neoliberalism was ‘the most successful ideology in world history’.13

That ideology was given decisive weight by the material changes neoliberalism wrought in people’s lives, above all by extending and deepening the commodification of labour. Absent collective alternatives – that is, absence of a vision and especially the practical mechanisms through which to fight – working-class families found individualized ways of ‘getting through’ that reshaped working-class consciousness and contributed to the reproduction of the neoliberal ethos. Working hours increased dramatically, young workers stayed at home longer, married couples moved in with parents to save for a mortgage, credit cards became ubiquitous, families increased their debt loads. Housing became an asset to be used to obtain even more credit; stock markets were anxiously watched for their impact on pensions; tax cuts were welcomed as the equivalent of wage hikes. Intensified competition and worker dependence on ‘their’ corporations weakened class solidarities, as did two-tier wages within the workplace (alienating the very young workers that union renewal would depend on). Economic restructuring, in forcing relocation in search of jobs, broke up working-class communities. As picket lines and demonstrations gave way to these individualized responses to retain access to consumption, solidaristic sentiments faded and collective capacities atrophied; Marx’s account of capitalism as a system that ‘dissolved the world of men into a world of atomized individuals, hostile to each other’ never looked more accurate than in recent decades.14

The fall in unionization along with cutbacks in social programmes and intensified competition in labour markets not only increased social inequality between labour and capital, but also within the working class.15 Even when the most powerful and unionized sectors made concessions, this only led to still greater concessions from workers in weaker positions. While after-inflation wages among auto assemblers, for example, were flat in the three decades before 2007, in manufacturing as a whole they fell by 10 per cent, in retail
by 17 per cent, and the federal minimum wage fell by 26 per cent. Those outside the workforce fell even further behind. These growing inequalities, exploited by the cynical electoral tactics of the Republican Party, fostered mutual resentments between the lower-paid (who no longer believed they could approach the levels of unionized workers), and the higher-paid (who resented the taxes they paid to support others).

The frustrations over inequalities among working people were often expressed through a discourse of identity politics that tended to obscure the relevance of class itself. Class in the concrete does of course always include differentiations by gender, race, legal citizenship, age, etc., and the life experiences and concerns of working people – and therefore the potential spaces for organizing – extend beyond workplaces. But ascriptive identities and class are in fact, as Adolph Reed Jr. has insisted, mutually constitutive. The increased academic emphasis on identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s was especially ironic since it coincided with a simultaneous deepening of the salience of the underlying class foundations of capitalism. Neoliberalism’s most profound achievement was the degree to which the North American working class was divided, demobilized, disoriented and left ineffective.

UNIONS IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

It was the persistent workplace and workforce restructuring – intensified management control, downsizing and outsourcing, relocation of production and recomposition of the workforce into various degrees of precariousness – that made worker resistance and the expansion of unionization so much more difficult. In the thirty years before 2007, manufacturing employment fell by 28 per cent but employment in plants with 1000 or more employees (i.e. those workplaces that were previously more amenable to unionization) fell by almost 60 per cent. The location of jobs shifted to the low-wage and anti-union US South, but the job turmoil continued even there, as in many cases China’s even lower wages helped make China the ‘new US South’. In 1980, there were 7.5 million unionized workers in US manufacturing and, had this matched the growth in the workforce, this would have increased to 11 million by 2007; in fact, this fell by a stunning 6.1 million to only 1.4 million, more than 80 per cent below the 1980 level. By 2011 union density in the private sector was below 7 per cent – a third of its level at the end of the 1970s and below where it was over a century ago.

There is no denying the extent of the external pressures on unions, but that emphasis has also tended to let unions themselves off the hook. Unions’ too-ready acceptance of there being no options is fundamental to any honest account of the crisis they are now in (even during the Great Depression, economic restructuring had opened some doors to union
success). Though the share of jobs that US MNCs located outside the US was growing – in the twenty years since 1989, 64 per cent of their jobs growth occurred abroad – foreign-based MNCs like Toyota, Siemens, and Samsung simultaneously offset some of this with investments in the US.\(^{25}\)

Much of the job relocation since the early 1980s remained internal to the US and if the industrial unions only had followed and organized the factories in their traditional sectors, this would have contributed to reversing one of the American labour movement’s most momentous earlier failures, that of organizing the American South.\(^{26}\) While the outsourcing of components undermined one group of workers, workers at the new sites often emerged with potentially more power since they could now shut down a large number of assemblers. And if the reduced size of workplaces has made unionization in manufacturing more difficult, there were new opportunities in the service sector, where the average size of workplaces (like Wal-Mart) has actually grown.\(^{27}\) In fact, though manufacturing workplaces are more susceptible to the threats of closure brought on by globalization, seven of every eight jobs are now in services (private and government), a good portion of which cannot simply pack up and leave to escape unions.\(^{28}\)

Unions that are narrowly focused on their dues base, rather than building the power of the working class, are unlikely to mobilize the energy, resources, cross-union cooperation, community support and strategic creativity needed to unionize in these more difficult times. As well, the particular bargaining and campaign strategies of such unions have often further weakened the goal of expanding unionization. For example, the UAW bargaining tactic of trading off workplace rights for (minimal) protection of wages and benefits undermined unionization in the Japanese transplants where the key to unionization rested on the very promise of workplace protections against arbitrary management practices (management was quite happy to pay near union wages to keep unions out and retain full workplace authority).\(^{29}\)

The most significant factor in undermining the ability of American unions to defend values distinct from that of capital was the intensification of competitive pressures.\(^{30}\) There are two issues here. First, competition has an asymmetric class impact. When particular businesses lose out to more effective competitors, capital as a class emerges stronger. For workers, however, competition undermines their most vital asset – their solidarity – and so leaves them weaker as a class. Second, the emphasis on being competitive implies strengthening American corporations and sacrificing or undermining specifically worker concerns. This also applies to public sector workers, where the argument is that too much spending on social services and public sector wages diverts resources from, and damages, private sector
competitiveness. There are of course circumstances in which workers don’t have the bargaining power to simply say ‘no’ to concessions, and temporary defeats are unavoidable. What is crucial, however, is that unions have all too often internalized competitiveness as a goal rather than treating it as a real-world constraint that may call for tactical retreats and demand responses beyond collective bargaining. Once making concessions becomes central to protecting jobs in the name of the ‘new reality’, unions themselves become vehicles for lowering the expectations as well as disciplining recalcitrant workers. This effectively shuts the door to discussing alternatives; making concessions becomes the only alternative to job losses, and membership mobilization is channelled into lobbying to fortify corporations (e.g. support for subsidies) rather than challenging corporate power. Occasional flights of radical rhetoric aside, union leaders have all too often come to play a disturbing role in socializing workers into accepting the limits imposed by the constraints of competitiveness.

The practice of contemporary unionism has not only left workers especially vulnerable to the entrapments of neoliberalism, but the prospects of escaping this through unions’ own devices are distressingly dim. All the factors that traditionally produce tendencies on the part of union leaders towards cautious behaviour are amplified today because the more radical strategies, tactics and organizational changes that are needed to effectively respond might bring even greater internal instability to their institutions, and their own place within them. An especially frustrating aspect of this is how little institutional time unions set aside, in spite of their obvious plight, for a genuine rethink of their structures and strategies. A good many union leaders seem to have learned that the general lowering of expectations over the past three decades has actually made their life easier. Nor, in spite of certain admirable attempts by pockets of militants at building rank-and-file oppositions, are there many signs that these activists are winning the battle for transforming unions. It is not difficult to understand why: such initiatives quickly have to confront the isolation of workers from each other even inside single workplaces – never mind across the companies and sectors their unions represent – and this is not easily overcome given the limited access ordinary members have to the information and analysis available to the union leadership. And apart from their limited organizational capacities, oppositional caucuses have generally exhibited limited perspectives beyond their own unions. The general absence of a class-based frame of reference, with connections to past experiences and lessons, is reflected in the lost strategic capacities and confidence that come from sustained opposition across unions and take workers beyond sporadic localized rebellions.
BEYOND FATALISM: WORKERS’ ASSEMBLIES

Workers are neither innately radical nor inescapably conservative, but often a confused mixture of both. This reflects the daily-lived contradictions workers experience by virtue of being dependent for their own and their family’s day-to-day wellbeing on a system that undermines their own sense of humanity. Having hopes that a better world is possible is a dimension of overcoming this, but hopes are, after all, still only hopes. The great unresolved dilemma is the absence of the kind of structures through which workers can overcome their debilitating fatalism and gain the confidence to ‘concretize hope’.34

For socialists, engaging in efforts to rebuild an effective, even if reformist, trade union movement is a moral imperative (defend working people) as well as a general strategic principle (remain grounded in the ‘actually existing’ struggles of the working class). But it is ever more a practical necessity for achieving even those small victories that keep the left going as a social force. In fact socialists will be essential to overcoming the labour movement’s demoralizing fatalism, bringing a vision beyond the immediate, an understanding of the capitalist context within which unions are acting, and a class perspective on what needs to be done. This means reversing the postwar marginalization of socialists within the trade union movement: the class outlook of socialists that was formerly rejected is now a condition for union revival. The polarization of options under neoliberalism provides potentially fertile organizing ground, and socialists will have much to contribute to its tilling and seeding. More radical ideas now have the potential to take on a relevance that is not just ideological; as the moderate is exposed as being impractical, what does become practical is the radical. The argument that unions need to think bigger even to win small is not a matter of sloganizing but accurately reflects the actual conditions. And this applies not just to policies but also to tactics and strategies. Without downplaying how difficult the terrain has been for socialist interventions, the contradictions that have emerged out of the very successes of neoliberalism have created openings for building a base within unions around relatively radical practical reforms.

The notion that a priority for socialists should be the renewal of reformist unions needs to be seen differently than a project of renewing social democracy. Social democracy also presents itself as standing for reform, but in offering alternatives that are only ‘less worse’ and in channelling frustrations almost exclusively towards electoralism, social democracy sells illusions of alternatives. That is why, in spite of initial trepidations, capitalists have come to live with and sometimes even welcome social democrats. Unions, on the other hand, are now under constant and severe attack and
that is because even their moderate demands and tactics – whether they be limiting the commodification of labour power in the workplace, defending the social wage or engaging in strikes that temporarily disrupt the right of owners to manage their property – are today seen as negatively impacting accumulation and possibly even opening the door to more dangerous questions about capitalism. Militant unions, unlike a modernizing social democracy, are viewed as a threat to capital (even if they are only a threat to the level of profits).

One strategic direction often proffered for union revival, in light of neoliberalism’s twinning with globalization, involves unions’ institutional extension across borders. This is misconceived. A working class that cannot build solidarity domestically cannot do so internationally. Moreover, such goals as extending domestic bargaining to the international level can lead to the reproduction of business unionism: that is, trying to raise standards within a particular international sector rather than – and often at the expense of – building domestic class solidarities. As Raymond Williams has observed, ‘A new theory of socialism must now include place. When capital has moved on, the importance of place is more clearly revealed’. Internationalist sensibilities are certainly very important, but there is no substitute for taking on the fight at home and thereby creating greater space for struggles abroad (as opposed to making concessions and undermining workers elsewhere). Though the struggle is always international in substance (what happens in one country affects the balance of forces in another) it is nevertheless always national in form (struggles are local and engage the national state); as Marx and Engels understood, ‘The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie’.

This is not a matter of directing all strategic attention to Washington and Wall Street. It is a matter of building an organizational infrastructure for developing class cohesion, anti-capitalist perspectives and socialist strategy. One crucial part of this is an educational infrastructure. The renewal of unions, with its requirements for establishing, sustaining and linking activists across unions and in the community, necessitates accountable structures and an extensive infrastructure of support: cadre development, reading material, regular communication, forums for exchanging experiences and strategic discussions, backing for specific strikes and campaigns. This is no less true in trying to carry out the kind of educational work that might break the hegemony of capitalist culture. For example, when the crisis first hit, an effective educational response would have required immediately initiating dozens of forums in each of hundreds of cities with a capacity to not just get people out, but provide facilitators and the most informed resource people
on a grand scale and also have mechanisms in place for evaluating what the forums revealed about popular understandings and readiness to act, which questions needed better answers and what kind of follow-up, in terms of both education and protest, might be most effective.\textsuperscript{37}

This is why we raise the fundamental significance of establishing some form of intermediate institution such as workers’ assemblies. The notion of turning to class-based, community-rooted assemblies as a response to frustrations with the stagnation of unions had been raised at a Washington meeting of North American labour activists in 2005 and it inspired, in the wake of the financial crisis, the formation of the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly (GTWA).\textsuperscript{38} This was conceived very differently from the types of assemblies associated with the widespread explosion of protests in public squares – from the Indignatos in Spain to Occupy in the US, and most recently in the Quebec student strike (where it also motivated the formation of supportive neighbourhood assemblies) – which have been much more reflective of an incipient zeitgeist. The type of assembly raised here was primarily inspired by the goal of building a left rooted in the working class and changing the role of unions.

The workers’ assemblies need to be distinguished from coalitions of progressive groups meeting to represent their particular interests and political perspectives and negotiate specific and temporary campaigns. The workers’ assemblies must, rather, be based on \textit{individuals} coming together to develop a new layer of politics.\textsuperscript{39} Whatever union and community activism these individuals were previously involved in would continue; the assembly would be a space where they are committed to rebalance their time to include the search for a broader politics and are open to this experience affecting politics in their ‘home’ activity. That these assemblies are to be community based expresses an explicit determination to go beyond the primacy of building specific union caucuses so as to focus instead on building networks of activists across workplaces and sectors, incorporating non-union as well as unionized workers, and mobilizing across the widest spectrum of social and economic needs. Nor is this a matter of a localist turn away from national politics; the expectation is that, given the limits on solving problems locally, the various urban, suburban and rural assemblies would ultimately federate in a nationwide assembly of assemblies. While the assemblies would be engaged in campaigns flowing from immediate needs, the growing understanding among activists that capitalism is itself the limit on genuine reforms implies measuring success not only in terms of the reforms achieved, but in terms of the development of the class capacities to challenge and eventually transform capitalism.
These four elements – individual membership, community-based, class-focused and anti-capitalist in the ultimate goal – are the foundational elements of workers’ assemblies. The distinction between such assemblies and other non-union but worker-oriented formations like Workers Action Centres (WACs) and Unemployment Centres lies not in any antagonism but in their scope. For all the crucially important services they provide, their focus is on an otherwise neglected section of the class, not the class as a whole.\(^{40}\) The impressive and innovative tactics often introduced (many of which include lessons for assembly members) are meant to replace, in less favourable circumstances, what unions might have or should have done. Though their experiences vary considerably, WACs have been limited by their dependence on external funding; weak organic links to unions; makeshift ties to the largely precarious workers they serve; the difficulties of cadre development when worker turnover is so high and the consequent heavy dependence on staff; and a general inability to move beyond their local base.\(^ {41}\) This issue of limited scope is also a factor in assemblies that are primarily concerned with process in the context of sustaining protests, rather than the strategic organizational and capacity-building questions that arise in relation to supporting but also moving beyond protest.

Trying to develop the strategic and organizational capacity to change unions is aiming high. But unlike the near-term formation of a mass socialist party in North America, it is \textit{imaginable}. The party question can perhaps only re-emerge organically – out of the practical experience, knowledge gained and strategic questions posed by the uncertain dynamics of such intermediate organizations between the workplace and the party-political sphere. If sponsored by a political party, the pressures to subordinate such intermediate organizations between the workplace and the party-political sphere to the ‘higher understandings’ of the party would risk undermining the organic development of their participants – something witnessed with both social democratic and communist parties as well as in union organizing fronts. Even should such intermediate institutions express a ‘lower level of consciousness’ than a revolutionary organization, the space to experiment, act and learn (including from their mistakes) is crucial. That said, it is through such developments that the first waves of recruiting individuals to a radical party might be nurtured. Yet even once such a party came into being, these intermediate institutions would remain critical. Given the great gap between those ready to form a party and its potential recruits, the danger is that the party would institutionalize a relationship between a minority confident in their own leadership role and an uncertain majority looking to follow. As Lucio Magri once put it:
Between the party and the masses there must be a third term, which mediates the relationship between them: autonomous and unitary political institutions of the working-class. These institutions must emerge right across society (factories, offices, schools), with their own structures — in which the party then acts as an element of stimulus and synthesis… a creative revival of the theme of soviets is today essential to resolve the theoretical and strategic problems of the Western Revolution.42

The process of initiating and sustaining workers’ assemblies is bound to introduce a number of problems. To begin with, in the absence of a wave of workers in struggle, the assemblies cannot themselves easily invent struggles that open the door to engaging the working class. There is as well often a geographic disjuncture between a left active in the urban core and potential constituencies often spread throughout the suburbs. Moreover, the dormant political legacy of recent decades has left activists with a dearth of organizing skills, especially those crucial to making inroads into unions with their protective bureaucracies, and also into diverse, fragmented and individualized communities. Perhaps most serious, the very looseness of assemblies in terms of the diversity of political views, levels of political development and degree of commitment makes it extremely difficult to develop organizational coherence. This in turn leaves the assembly vulnerable to the familiar hyper-activism of running between struggles without any sense of priorities and perspectives; to barriers, because of the lack of consensus, to developing cadres who are both activists and organic intellectuals; and, as a consequence of a lack of ideological and organizational clarity, seeing commitments fade and members slipping back into private lives and more comfortable (because more immediate) earlier activism.

These dilemmas highlight the significance of continuously re-evaluating the activities and structures of the assemblies and giving the greatest weight to trying to develop a degree of coherence, however imperfect. They also bring to the fore the importance of unifying demands which in the process of mobilizing to realize them, concretely pose the questions of purpose and strategy. Crucial here are the kind of ‘structural reforms’ which, as Andre Gorz best explained, are designed to ‘modify the relationship of forces, the redistribution of functions and powers, [and introduce] new centers of democratic decision-making’, all conceived in a manner than can ‘prefigure a socialist transformation of society and move towards it’.43 What gives any such reform its radicalizing potential is the combination of its content and the ideological and organizational historical context, which is to say it depends on the ability of capital and the state to accommodate a particular set of
demands and the relative capacity of proponents to frame their demands in ways linked to broader solidarities and more profound changes.

There is a vital distinction between working-class demands for what might be termed *static* reforms that are oriented to moving society from one equilibrium to a quantitatively higher (better) equilibrium, and *dynamic* reforms which are inherently contradictory and unstable because they affect the capacities, balance of power and expectations among the participants and so invite further changes and new uncertainties. The strategic challenge of an intermediate political programme is to stretch static demands in a dynamic direction and introduce new sets of demands rooted in the current state of the struggle but with a strategic dynamic potential. In light of this, the directions emphasized below are as much orientations as policies. Their focus is on trade union renewal through bringing a class perspective into union activities, and linking this to new directions that, in taking us beyond the narrow political culture that currently dominates policy debates, reach towards the socialist idea.

1. *From bargaining to jobs*

‘The last 30 years have changed us’, the CEO of Gallup recently noted by way of introducing what he described as one of the firm’s most consistent polling results: ‘The primary will of the world is first and foremost to have a good job. Everything else comes after that’. The implication for unions could not be more profound since unions have traditionally been structured around the conditions and price of workers’ labour power, not whether they have a job in the first place. This inability to address their members’ top priority is a problem in itself and, because of the related insecurity, also undermines the union capacity to deliver on what they are allegedly structured to do – defend and improve wages, benefits and working conditions. There can be no union renewal without addressing access to decent jobs. Unions had previously avoided this contradiction by looking to growth and Keynesian stimulus to provide the jobs while the union concerned itself with negotiating labour’s price. Though fiscal stimulus does have currency at this particular moment – even many economists, mainstream commentators and corporate heads have come to see that fixing the banks is not enough to restore growth and save capitalism from itself – Keynesianism is dead and buried as a long-term strategy for addressing worker job security. Capital has made it abundantly clear that its strategies for growth now rest on worker discipline, containing inflation and increasing international competitiveness – all of which militate against worker job and social security. There has been growth in recent decades but, driven by the restoration of profits and weakening of unions, it
has brought ever greater inequality while not delivering the levels of private investment that can bring anything close to full employment, never mind well-paying secure jobs.45

The point is that job security and job quality can no longer be responded to without directly confronting free trade and market deregulation, private control over workplace closures and outsourcing, tax policy, capital controls and especially the power of financial institutions over the allocation of society’s profits and savings. This implies not just better policies but a rethinking of how unions see themselves and relate to the overall working class. Consider, for example, the recent auto bailouts. Rather than linking jobs to saving General Motors, this could have been framed as saving communities and the impressive productive capacity that resides in the skills of workers and the potentially valuable tools and equipment sitting idle. Rather than accepting competitiveness as the arbiter of our material lives, what should have been raised was democratic planning within an expanded public sector. Instead of supporting private profits by way of getting more cars on the road, auto unions in the US and Canada should have been mobilizing the public – along with other unions like the United Steelworkers as well as the construction unions – for the planned conversion of the hundreds of facilities that are being closed to address long-neglected infrastructural needs, especially the oft-cited environmental demands that will dominate this century: transportation and energy grids, the design and retrofitting of housing, modifications to the equipment and processes employed in factories and offices. This demand could have been reinforced by reminding workers and the public of the technically remarkable conversion of auto and other plants during the war and back again after.46

2. From jobs to community development

The development of plans for a particular sector necessarily involves a spatial dimension. Raising the question of community/regional impacts opens the door to issues that go beyond ‘jobs’ in the abstract to addressing what might be produced, for whom and with what environmental implications – that is, an overall community plan to address what common sense suggests any society should provide: productive work or training for anyone who wants it. It is generally assumed that everyone has the right to an education and it is not a stretch to aggressively insist that everyone has the right to a job. One way of institutionalizing this is through establishing elected local institutions – job development boards – to take on responsibility for canvassing the community for unmet needs and unused skills, providing technical expertise to convert plants in danger of closing and running economic literacy classes
to expand the capacity for broad participation. As with any radical proposal that challenges capitalist logic yet is implemented within a society that is still capitalist, this will soon come up against barriers if not outright contradictions. In such circumstances the key is to push on those barriers, rather than accept them as parameters that fence us in. For example, one such barrier is funding; without funding no serious plans can be implemented. This brings us back to the need to challenge bankers’ control over the distribution of society’s savings and profits and the importance of replacing that private control with a banking system that is a democratically run public utility.

This is also intimately related to the way workers savings are now integrated into capitalist finance. Consider for example the erosion of workers’ pensions as corporations forsake commitments made to workers in order to preserve commitments to stock and bondholders. The intensification of competition has rendered dysfunctional the ‘private welfare state’ which developed out of collective bargaining under the old social contact. Companies with shrinking workforces and carrying rising numbers of longer-living retirees cannot maintain pensions against companies with no pension plans or with a much younger workforce – all the more so now that the asset inflation which fuelled the growth of institutional funds has been so compromised by the current crisis in global finance and the low interest rates on safe sovereign bonds. The pensions of workers should clearly be supported (defensive reforms), but a number of cascading contradictions point to more far-reaching demands (structural reforms). One is that the minority with private pensions is vulnerable to political isolation, so the focus must be on universal pensions. But if based on past income, this reproduces worklife inequalities; a more solidaristic principle is needed. Then there is the question of how pensions are funded and the monies invested. Investing pension funds with an eye to social priorities, and especially the kinds of job creation and industrial conversion goals and agencies as outlined here, would challenge the way capitalist financial markets function, and help sustain broader demands for turning financial institutions into public utilities for democratic economic planning.

3. Public sector leadership

A key programmatic focus for structural reform must be public services. Here too jobs are at stake but the strategic question is the potential leadership role of unions in the retention and expansion of the services rather than the sectional issue of the jobs. Public sector unions generally understand the importance of playing some leadership role on this terrain and getting the public on their side. But press releases and convention resolutions won’t do
it. A cynical public needs to be convinced that this isn’t just opportunism; unions need to redefine and prove their commitment to the ‘general interest’. This entails changing every aspect of how these unions function: how they allocate resources, the focus of their research and the role of union staff and appropriate staff training. It involves developing the confidence and capacity to place the level, quality and administration of services on the bargaining table, to criticize inadequate services and proposals on how to make them better, to establishing supportive links between front-line workers and those who depend on the services they provide and involving them in discussions on union bargaining demands and how strikes are conducted.49

Unions might, for example, not just reference the importance of services as they go into negotiations but actually make the level, quality and democratic administration of services a priority bargaining demand. And in contemplating strike action, unions must come to grips with the contradiction of positioning themselves as defenders of public services and then withdrawing those services when negotiations break down. Direct actions may be unavoidable but at a minimum, creative ways must be found to inject class into the form that strikes take (and to demonstrate to the public that withholding services is a last resort). Garbage collectors might refuse to pick up garbage in the most affluent neighbourhoods, or drop the garbage off in the financial centre to make the connection between finance and austerity. Postal workers might strike but (as they did in a 1990 strike in Canada) still deliver pension and welfare checks. Bus drivers have on occasion refused to collect fares, introducing passengers to transit as a decommodified service. Tax assessors might use their knowledge to expose corruption in the tax system, establishing themselves as whistleblowers in the service of the public. Long-term care workers might replace a strike with a work-in: instead of withdrawing services, workers would be brought into particular workplaces to demonstrate the kind of care that is possible if we really took patient care seriously. And, to cite another Canadian example from the nineties, when workers administering unemployment insurance (UI) were given quotas to lower the number of insurance recipients, the union prepared pamphlets to be given to recipients outside UI offices on how they should respond to questions so there could be no regulatory basis to cut them off. Union staff distributed the pamphlets rather than the union members working inside the UI offices, thereby protecting the latter workers from being disciplined.

While strikes involving the withdrawal of services will still sometimes be necessary, public sector unions must never ignore the fact that they are not just negotiating with ‘an employer’ but with the state. What must end is the
practice of allowing the state, in strikes with a broader strategic significance, to take on locals one-by-one. Such struggles only have a chance of winning – as opposed to going through the motions of demonstrating some resistance – if they involve the resources and capacities of the union as a whole: mass demonstrations that mobilize the community around the services (as opposed to primarily union wages and benefits), rotating strikes across locals and sectors, extending the solidarity to the rest of the public sector unions and eventually also bringing private unions into direct actions.

4. Building the class

It is one thing to emphasize the crucial importance of providing workers with organization through which to struggle; it is another to collapse union renewal to a growth in union members. Making union growth into a strategic priority has sometimes been successful on those narrow terms, but its overall legacy has been weaker unions and few compensating breakthroughs in new sectors. This particular path to renewal has included accommodations with corporations that have sacrificed workers’ needs, and a reallocation of resources to organizing at the expense of servicing commitments and treating strikes as costly diversions from that priority – followed by curbing internal democracy when that single-minded direction was challenged.50

Yet at the same time, there are the failures right on unions’ doorstep: unions currently don’t even retain contacts with those members who lose their jobs, a practice that leads to resentment carried into other work experiences (‘the union only cared about me when I was paying dues’). The reason for such neglect lies in the uneasiness in dealing with the frustrations and expectations of workers who have lost their job when it seems there is nothing to do about it. But this very response raises disturbing questions about union commitments to organizing: if unions can’t even mobilize former members can they really be expected to mobilize new workers? A unionism with a class sensibility would prioritize making their union halls into social spaces for laid-off members – places to stay in touch with co-workers, get information and support in accessing social rights, see films, participate in educational and mobilize for jobs.

When the CIO made its breakthroughs in the inauspicious 1930s, the key was thinking ambitiously and reaching beyond sectional interests. The issue was not only organizing ‘more’ workers but also giving institutional expression to what John L. Lewis grandly referred to as ‘this mighty surge of human sentiment’. The goal was organizing unskilled as well as skilled workers, independent of race, gender or ethnicity and doing so across the mass production industries, from mining through auto, steel, rubber,
textiles and electronics (the first thing the miners did once they made their breakthrough was to send hundreds of organizers – a good many of whom were communists – to support the unionization of steel). The unions then established were still sectional organizations, and as the unions were institutionalized that bias became all too clear, but the spirit of class that pervaded the period was unmistakable and had real effects on society. It is necessary to rekindle this to make union organization viable today in low-wage private services or in the anti-union US South.51

It is true that workers looking to join a union are themselves pragmatic; they are not looking to ‘build the class’, but to address the specifics of their own direct oppression. The point, however, is that success in bringing workers into unions increasingly depends on the union itself having a larger strategic orientation – one centred, in fact, on building the class. What a class-based unionism introduces is a broader range of creative tactics to bring workers in, even if a business-minded ‘cost–benefit’ calculus (i.e. low dues base and high servicing costs) suggests otherwise. It requires organizing campaigns based on regional cooperation across unions rather than the counterproductive competition among unions. It requires locating the appropriate organizing space for a better integration of workplace issues with concerns over societal conditions like housing and public transportation, opening further avenues to reaching and mobilizing workers.52 And where the main concern is to make sure that workers without collective bargaining recognition are part of the labour movement, the door must be opened to introducing individual membership in unions, particularly for precarious workers. If a concentration of membership develops in a particular workplace, this can become the base for a traditional organizing drive and the new bargaining unit could subsequently choose to join whichever union it prefers. But even where the organizing potential is limited, the positive initial contact and goodwill established may pay dividends in future organizing drives in other sectors involving this or other unions.

5. Retrieving time

Recovering time away from work is a precondition for all struggles. The working class cannot act as an agent for either union renewal or social transformation if workers do not have the time to read, think, attend meetings, discuss, analyze, strategize, dream and act. Yet such time is incessantly shrinking. Through the 1980s and 1990s, when the US population grew by 25 per cent, hours of work in the US increased by 46 per cent; the rise in hours of work per family (primarily the hours of women) was more important than debt in explaining how working-class families maintained
consumption during these two decades. In Europe and Canada, earlier trends to reduced work time were generally halted or reversed. Men could once depend on a gendered division of household labour to allow them time for activism, but with spouses in the workforce and feminism’s positive impact on the labour movement that patriarchal option has largely vanished.

Radical calls for reduced work time such as ‘30 for 40’ (thirty hours work for 40 hours pay) do not get us very far. In a movement that can barely keep up with inflation, such a demand smacks of empty sloganeering and would quickly be marginalized. Moreover, such a general demand ignores the differences and inequalities within the workforce. Some workers are concerned with getting more, not less, hours of work because they are stuck in involuntary part-time work or their wages are simply too low to meet needs. This suggests that breakthroughs in work time will have to be part of cultural changes that give greater weight to control over time relative to control over purchased goods; that see the relatively higher-paid workers leading the way by committing to fight for productivity gains in the form of time off rather than wage increases; and a reallocation of gains in paid time off so it impacts daily life as opposed to being concentrated on periodic breaks (vacations) and at the end of workers’ lives (retirement). As well, work-time issues are inseparable from other social issues. The expansion of full-time jobs is a time-saver for those now running between two or three jobs. Management pressures for worker flexibility – essentially the deeper commodification of labour power – must be countered with an alternative notion of ‘worker flexibility’ that speaks to accommodating work and work schedules to the rhythms of active lives beyond work. And concerns with getting to work and back, socializing family responsibilities and access to non-commercial goods – that is accessible and affordable transit, child-care and well functioning public spaces – are all also time demands.

CONCLUSION

Soon after the introduction of the auto assembly line, the head of Henry Ford’s Department of Sociology (sic) cheekily declared that ‘Mr. Ford’s business is the making of men and he manufactures automobiles on the side to defray his expenses’. The ‘making of men’ particular to capitalism’s requirements was in fact one of capitalism’s central challenges and achievements, and this raises the most daunting question confronting socialists. Can we really expect workers to contemplate, let alone achieve, an alternative society – shaped and limited as they are by capitalism, their capacities fragmented and narrowed, their imagination privatized and expectations withered, their dependence on bosses and elites confirmed on a daily basis, and their consumption of commodities now compensating for the surrender of their power to do?
We can look for a measure of hope in the numerous contradictions of capitalism, optimism in the many acts of human kindness and solidarity we experience, and confirmation in the continuity of popular resistance. But history adamantly asserts that resistance and social transformation are a painfully long way apart and that we cannot draw comfort from any convincing proof that socialism is inevitable or even possible. The best that can be said is that there is also no proof of its *impossibility*. Socialism is a contingent idea that depends on the broadly defined working class coming to recognize that the personal costs tolerated under capitalism, the dreams set aside and the surrender to arbitrary authority were and are sacrifices wasted – and then acting on that understanding. Workers may or may not provide the spark for new possibilities, but if socialism is possible, it is only so if the working class comes to be at the centre of the struggle.

Is this assertion of possibility merely socialists’ secular inflection of religious faith? To the extent that it means acting in the context of uncertainty and without any guarantees of success, a degree of faith is indeed involved. But the profound difference lies in the fact that emancipation is not expected from an external force but from human agency, and that the socialist project can’t override material reality. The socialist project is subject to the test of experience and new knowledge and therefore needs continuously to be modified; it is made within history. In this regard, it may seem from current observations that ‘human nature’ confirms socialism’s improbability. But the question, as Gramsci phrased it, is not ‘what is man?’ but ‘what can man become?’ In that sense, the project of remaking the world is not only made *within* history but it also *challenges* history. It is contingent on what humans learn (and unlearn), the choices they make and their collective ability to invent new structures for both self and social transformation. This involves the existential choice to live our lives as if working-class potentials to create a new world can in fact be realized.56

NOTES


The recognition of this stretched in the twentieth century all the way from Lenin’s critique of ‘economism’ in *What is to be Done?*, originally published in 1902, to Eric Hobsbawm’s Marx Memorial Lecture, ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted’, first published in *Marxism Today*, September 1978.


There was nothing new in this. An article in the February 1971 Canadian edition of *Time Magazine* cynically captured the disciplining and expectation-lowering impact of downturns: ‘Adversity has its uses: the recession has played a calming role in America. Looking for a job takes precedence over looking for trouble. Unemployment undermines the counterculture’s confidence in a cornucopia able to forever satisfy both the straights and the dropouts. And
in subtler ways the recession has lowered the general tolerance of uproar, enhancing the concern for private welfare at the expense of political concerns and street theatrics. Sidewalks are too narrow for [both] protest marchers and food stamp lines’, p. 23.


19 ‘The paradox of our times is that the more class position determines people’s lives, the less people think of themselves as members of a class’. Mimmo Porcaro, ‘Labour and Life: Memorandum for a Future Investigation of (Class?) Consciousness’, Transform, 2, 2008, p. 45.

20 As Delphi autoworker Gregg Shotwell put it speaking to precariousness even within organized mass industries: ‘We are all temps. We are all disenfranchised. We are immigrants in the land where we were born’. Gregg Shotwell, Autoworkers Under the Gun, Chicago: Haymarket, 2011, p. 142.


23 The decrease in unionized workers in manufacturing was in roughly equal parts due to the decrease in jobs and the decrease in unionization. Though manufacturing output increased faster than GDP, its higher productivity growth led to a 38 per cent decrease in the numbers employed while unionization in manufacturing fell from over 35 per cent to under 11 per cent. From 1980-2007, the private sector workforce outside of manufacturing increased by 41 million while the number of manufacturing workers fell by 8 million and the number of unionized manufacturing workers fell by over 6 million.
Steven Greenhouse, ‘Union Membership in U.S. Fell to a 70-Year Low Last Year’, New York Times, 21 January 2011. The headline actually understates the historic low; union density was higher in 1901 than it is today. For data on the early 1900s see Leo Troy, ‘Trade Union Membership, 1897-1962’, Review of Economics and Statistics, February 1965, Table 2. (The 1901 data is for the non-agricultural workforce; this has no substantive effect on the comparison).


Similarly, the union’s ‘Buy American’ campaign identified American-based corporations as ‘good’ and Japanese-based assemblers inside the US as ‘bad’, alienating workers they were trying to organize and also confusing its own members, who regularly shipped components to the Japanese plants alongside shipments to GM, Ford and Chrysler.

The chief executive officer of Caterpillar recently articulated the latest stage of corporate aggressiveness, ‘You really have to aim the guns out no matter where you are, whether it is government, private business or whatever institution it is – your school for that matter – and really look at your competitor and beat them because if not, they are going to beat you’. Douglas Oberhelman, quoted in Jeff Gray and Kevin Carmichael, ‘Bracing for trouble on the picket line’, The Globe and Mail, 7 January 2011. Chrysler, whose majority owner is Italian-based Fiat, led the charge in a special Super Bowl ad to put aside ‘differences’ and restore American competitiveness ‘in the second-half’. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, 83,000 workers competed for 2500 jobs paying $30,000 a year. UAW president Bob King said that in such circumstances, unionization ‘is ultimately up to the companies’ (i.e. on making a deal at the top). Bernie Woodall and Ben Klayman, ‘UAW organizing drive targets VW, Daimler in U.S.’, Reuters, 29 December 2011.

A particularly significant example is the two-tier system, which discriminates against and alienates new, generally younger workers – the very workers that renewal will depend on. By 2015, the maximum wage rate for a new hire at the
Detroit Three auto assemblers will be about one-third below a veteran worker doing the same work and after inflation will remarkably be below where it was sixty years ago. For a passionate workplace-rooted critique of the UAW’s descent into selling concessions to its members, see the collection of articles in Shotwell, *Autoworkers Under the Gun*.

32 The publication *Labor Notes* has made a brave attempt, through the neoliberal years, to link these opposition groups.

33 For an excellent discussion of the strengths and limits of recent reform caucuses see Jane Slaughter, ‘The Vision Thing: Keeping Union Reform on Track’, *Labor Notes*, 27 April 2012.


38 The Washington meeting established the *Center for Labor Renewal* and included trade unionists, representatives from Worker Action Centers and a few academics; Bill Fletcher Jr. introduced the case for class-based community assemblies. This was further elaborated in Bill Fletcher Jr. and Fernando Gasparin, *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path to Social Justice*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, pp. 170-9.

39 One of the important differences between the proposal laid out by Fletcher and Gasparin (*Solidarity Divided*) and the GTWA was that the former was seen as a coalition while the latter is based on individual membership. The GTWA emerged out of a series of meetings among socialists and activists through 2008 who were increasingly frustrated by the limits of what they were each involved in – however positive much of that was. The Assembly meets twice a year with interim general membership meetings once a month, holds coffee house educational and forums, and its campaign work is carried out primarily through committees (currently on free public transit, interventions against the attack on public sector unions, and feminist action). It is expressly anti-capitalist, which in practical terms means openness to radical alternatives, and committed to balancing intellectual and activist work. For an overview of the GTWA, see Herman Rosenfeld, ‘The Greater Toronto Workers Assembly: A Hopeful Experiment’, *New Politics*, XIII-3(51), Summer 2011.


41 There are, nevertheless, some exciting experiments among these centres with important organizing lessons for the left, e.g. the Los Angeles Labor Community Strategy Center, the Miami Worker Center, POWER in San Francisco, and the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia.


45 Even at relatively low unemployment rates, decent jobs are no longer necessarily provided – in 2004, the unemployment rate was down to 4 per cent but workers were no less insecure because restructuring was so intense (the positions were opening up were either inferior or not accessible to workers newly unemployed). The reserve army is no longer just the unemployed but also includes the precarious and low-paid in a context of accelerated restructuring. See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011; and John Evans and Euan Gibb, ‘Moving from Precarious Employment to Decent Work’, Discussion Paper 13, Global Union Research Network, Geneva, 2009.


