

Contradictions of Labor Solidarity

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The articles above bring welcome attention to a key issue - possibly the key issue facing us today: left political responses to "globalization." Bonacich, Arnbruster, and Nash each advance our understanding and indicate directions for future work. What strikes me, however, is how far we have to go, both as a movement and as theorists. In material terms capital is cons ahead of labor in establishing international ties. As a Marxist I believe that theory develops in symbiosis with practice; predictably, therefore, our limited material practice is associated with underdeveloped theory. As these pieces demonstrate, we have specific sharp insights, case studies, and examples of ideas that need to be part of a general theory, but such a theory doesn't exist even for us, academic members of a section that provides the most promising theoretical base for developing a theory of international labor solidarity. It certainly does not exist in the consciousness of rank and file workers.

The internationalization of capital gives it huge advantages in struggles with labor. Two basic labor responses are possible, each embracing one side of a contradiction: protectionism or international labor solidarity on a scale and at a depth that can match capital. The dominant left response unequivocally endorses a strategy of building international labor solidarity; most workers and many unions are more inclined to protectionism, often associated with xenophobia. The readers of PEWS News undoubtedly want me to say 'we're right, the workers are politically retrograde and need to switch to embrace the left-academic position.' Let me make an intentionally provocative case: it's not that simple. Workers also have hold of an important truth, and we need to take it seriously.

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Each of these approaches faces enormous problems. The nature of a real contradiction is that it cannot be wished away simply by embracing one side or the other; each pole captures something important and simultaneously involves huge problems. The left position stands with internationalism, ever and always. That stance comes in part from the shaping events of many of our political lives: struggles against racism and U.S. imperialism (above all in Vietnam). The contradiction is that the left often finds itself arguing for the international free market, essentially saying that it is illegitimate and inappropriate to interfere with the sanctity of markets. Carried to an extreme that position requires the total dominance of capitalist values and organizational practices, and makes it impossible to develop or carry through any alternative.

The other side of the contradiction, protectionism, involves a massive danger for left politics: racism, nationalism, and xenophobia. As an attempt to limit the impact of

capital's internationalism, protectionism has almost invariably involved racist (e.g. anti-Japanese) and anti-immigrant stances ("they" are taking "our" jobs; we need to keep "them" out). But it is also an assertion that the economy should not be driven by an unfettered market, that limits need to be imposed on the drive for profits, and that some means must be found to protect workers and the environment in order to put human needs above cost-benefit analyses.

We need to develop a general theory of international labor solidarity, a theory that recognizes the need for local community built on planning and some degree of protection from an unfettered market, and that simultaneously embraces international labor solidarity, rejecting all racism, nationalism, and xenophobia. Such a theory can develop only in relation to praxis. Each of the above pieces helps move us in that direction. Arnbruster does so through a careful examination of successful cases of labor internationalism, cases where praxis contradicts (and is in advance of) theory. Nash proceeds by insisting on the importance of the (top-down) actions of central bodies (and I note that Barbara Shaler, the AFL-CIO's new international director, openly refers to the old regime as the AFL-CIA). Finally, Bonacich progresses with a series of stimulating observations detailing some of the key problems that must be addressed by any attempt to develop a general theory (or practice).