

Reflections on Movement-building Strategies for the Current Period

Defining missions, targeting oppressive sources and the lessons from the mass struggle.

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These remarks were delivered by the author at the November 7-9 Workers in Solidarity and Education (WISE) Conference sponsored by the Labor Studies Center at Wayne State University in Detroit.

I am honored to once again participate in the Workers in Solidarity & Education (WISE) Conference sponsored by Wayne State University and its Labor Studies Center.

It is always a pleasure as well as a challenge to present ideas to union members in the current period. The working class in the United States and internationally is undergoing tremendous changes in the way the labor market is structured, impacting the way our employment tasks are carried out and the degree to which we are compensated in the production process.

Of course the capitalist system is inherently exploitative and oppressive. If we look back on any period in U.S. history it has been categorized by the struggle between those who are part of the ruling class and the people.

As an agricultural society molded through the expropriation of the land of the Indigenous people, the kidnapping and forced exploitation of African labor, the conquering of areas now known as America, and the ongoing imperatives by the ruling class to extract as much surplus value out of workers as possible, there was born an industrial society which during the 20th century surpassed all other economies in recorded history. Nonetheless, the question became in the 19th and 20th centuries as to what would be the role of the working class, the rural proletariat and the intellectual strata in regard to its approach to overcoming class exploitation, national oppression and gender inequality.

We are still facing these questions today at the conclusion of the second decade of the 21st century. As we move forward into the future many aspects of our existence are becoming even more uncertain. Issues of job security, conditions of employment, workplace safety, environmental degradation and consequent climate change are upon us with an increasing sense of urgency.

Surely it is not enough just to go to work every day while those social changes taking place both inside and outside our places of employment are determining whether we will be able

to earn a living in the not too distant future and under what circumstances. Although these questions have philosophical implications, they are by no means abstract and devoid of reality.

Many atmospheric and geological scientists are saying the earth is literally burning up before our eyes. In the state of California where some of the most expensive real estate is to be found any place in the U.S. and the world, many people are awaiting the destruction of their homes, schools and jobs. Homelessness is a reality for hundreds of thousands while the current government in Washington is in a state of denial. The dysfunctionality of the political administration of the capitalist state is so obvious that we can often marvel at the degree to which certain world powers boast about their purported supremacy over other forms of governance.

The so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us. The potential for a labor market structure where there are fewer hours and less manual labor should be considered an advantage for all concerned. Nevertheless, without social planning such a scenario has actually lowered real wages and fostered widespread uncertainty in regard to how we can make a decent living, maintain health for ourselves and families and rebuild a sense of community and social cooperation.

Our Mission and its Significance

Dr. Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist who was born in 1925 in the French Caribbean territory of Martinique, in his last work entitled "The Wretched of the Earth", begins the book with these profound words:

"Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."

Fanon served in the French resistance forces against the Nazis during World War II and would later train as a physician. He was deployed to work for the colonial power of France in the-then colony of Algeria located in North Africa. Although he was ostensibly considered to be a part of the French governmental system he soon realized that the plight of the Algerian people under colonialism was analogous to that of the situation of Africans in his own country in the Caribbean.

Soon enough he switched sides during the Algerian independence movement joining the National Liberation Front (FLN) to fight for the independence of this oppressed nation which had been under French occupation since 1830. Fanon only lived to be 36 years old. However, in his brief years as a professional and political activist made a tremendous contribution to human freedom.

Our organization, the Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice (MECAWI) and later the Moratorium NOW! Coalition to Stop Foreclosures, Evictions and Utility Shut-offs, were formed in 2002 and 2008 respectively. We see our mission as being clearly related to the quote cited above from Fanon. We have defined our mission as one of eradicating injustice, social inequality and the lack of self-determination.

The Pentagon budget of the U.S. is the largest of all military expenditures by all combined states throughout the globe. Our slogan became during the initial phases of the Afghanistan

and Iraq military interventions by the U.S., under the-then President George W. Bush, Jr., was “Money for Our Cities, Not for War.” We recognized the link between the thirst for war, the profit-making obsession by the ruling class and the declining standards of living for the people of the U.S., particularly those of us who live in majority African American municipalities such as Detroit.

Imperialist war is also tinged with racism and national oppression. Most people will not voluntarily accept domination by external or even internal elements. The security of the capitalist system is based upon its military dominance and capacity to dictate the terms of economic organization within society and the character of international trade. Under imperialism, which V.I. Lenin described as the highest stage of capitalism known as international finance capital, it is the banks which determine the trajectory of production and therefore the character of social relations within the labor market.

Moratorium NOW! Coalition and the Housing Question

It was only a few years after the expansion of the Pentagon war machine that we witnessed the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression during the period of 1929-1941. The work of MECAWI was transformed significantly as it scrambled to address the burgeoning housing crisis of 2007 and early 2008.

The city of Detroit was one the earliest municipalities negatively impacted by the fallout from racist sub-prime predatory lending. Detroit was the city where the majority of families owned their homes, including and especially African Americans. This was an important asset which distinguished the city from other urban areas in the U.S.

For this very reason the city was targeted in the predatory loan strategy aimed at maximum profitability for the financial institutions. Many of the homes were over assessed in value so the owners could be offered loans far in excess of the actual marketability of the houses. It would only be a matter of a few years that these schemes collapsed. Insurance on the overinflated mortgage value of the homes made it far more profitable for the banks to foreclose than to keep people in their communities.

When the world capitalist system was on the verge of collapse in late 2008, the Bush administration came to the Congress to ask for a bailout. The initial payment was \$700 billion to the banks and large insurance firms such as AIG. Later two of the big three auto companies were placed into bankruptcy with huge bailouts for General Motors and Daimler-Chrysler. Workers suffered tremendously through layoffs, pay and benefit cuts, the closing of plants and dealerships. The Great Recession institutionalized the two and three tier pay scales in auto production. Workers within the automotive industry have still not recovered despite the recent strike at General Motors which lasted for six weeks.

Moratorium NOW! Coalition called for an immediate halt to all foreclosures and evictions. The rallying cry was “bailout the people, not the banks.” The banks should pay for the crisis they created and the workers and oppressed people must be empowered to redress the exploitation which they had been subjected to by capital.

Stemming from the housing crisis was the imposition of municipal bankruptcy through emergency management. Moratorium NOW! Coalition intervened in the Detroit bankruptcy both in the courtroom and outside in the streets. The mission was to change the narrative by placing the onus of responsibility on the banks which had literally destroyed the city.

The Housing Question is not new to the capitalist system of the 21st century. Frederick Engels wrote on these issues during the mid-19th century in Germany and Britain. Engels describes the insecurity of the working class and the scarcity of suitable housing along with the incessant rising rents and forced removals at the aegis of capital. However, even though in Detroit there are still tens of thousands of abandoned vacant housing structures, the issue of quality housing and access to utilities and water make the writings of Engels relevant for our activism today. Therefore, it is not possible to speak about the housing crisis or the mass water shutoffs without apportioning blame on finance capital. Absent of the seizure of the resources which rightfully belong to the proletariat can these issues be adequately addressed and resolved. (See [this](#))

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These remarks were delivered by the author at the November 7-9 Workers in Solidarity and Education (WISE) Conference sponsored by the Labor Studies Center at Wayne State University in Detroit.

The conference attended by hundreds of labor union members, officials, educators and journalists, was held at the Greektown Casino Hotel in the downtown area. Abayomi Azikiwe spoke to a day-long course on Civil Rights, Labor History and Social Unionism.

According to description of the conference:

“The Labor Studies Center at Wayne State University has created the WISE (Workers in Solidarity & Education) conference series that is committed to the teaching and learning of workers through innovative and advanced labor education programs. Our WISE educational events focus on empowering workers by strengthening highly sought after skills including leadership, communication and strategic planning. WISE@Wayne conferences will also provide the space for workers from various industries, occupations, experiences and backgrounds to connect through common struggles and identify effective strategies that build solidarity and power in their workplaces, unions and communities.”

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