

## A Young Person's View of The Class Struggle

From my earliest days, I was convinced that we were caught up in the class struggle. I had not yet heard of Karl Marx or Das Kapital. I knew nothing about communism, socialism, anarchism, or capitalism. But wherever I looked, the class struggle was taking place.

In grade school, it was the students versus the teachers. Though I shouldn't have, I viewed the teachers as the enemy, the ruling class. We students were powerless. Teachers were supposed to impart knowledge, but most did it through a divide and conquer approach to the student class. Ours was not a classless society. Throughout our school life, we were moved from class to class by the state. We were the oppressed class.

The teachers, the ruling class, pitted student against student. They opposed and undermined any form of solidarity among students. They gave tests, and divided the students. They praised those who received the highest marks, and demeaned those who did not do as well. Teachers would even try to get students to report on each other. In every class, there were the snitchers who turned on their class, who sold out their fellow students. Teacher's pets!

It took me many years to change my view, and see teachers in a different light: As people with whom you could have a friendly relationship. I had to overcome the idea that it would be consorting with the enemy class.

The class struggle existed wherever I looked in my neighborhood. It was certainly the case with regard to the capitalist property owner of our living quarters. The landlord (or landowner) charged us \$25 a month rent for our two room apartment. If we did not pay it, he would evict us. We would be out in the street, with no place to live. Fortunately, my mother always managed to pay the rent, but it was no question that we would have been at the mercy of the heartless Mr. Gordon if we missed a payment. During the depression, many apartments were vacant, and landlords would entice tenants by offering them the first month rent-free. Some tenants would take advantage of the offer, pay the second and third month's rent, and then got back at the capitalist exploiter by no longer paying rent. A hollow victory for the poor renter. After several months, the eviction would come. The capitalist triumphs again.

The relationship between the storekeeper and the customer was another aspect of the class struggle. Mr. Rosenbaum, Mr. Margolis, and Mr. Sheinman were our neighborhood grocer, butcher and druggist. They were the capitalists. They owned their stores, or so I believed, and they stocked them with merchandise, which they sold to their struggling customers, to make a profit. I was aware that the way you make a lot of money is to buy low and sell high. (I had to admit that they didn't make a lot of money from their stores on Longwood Avenue.)

I did not feel animosity, but I was aware that we belonged to two different classes. They were businessmen, and my mother was a poor (unemployed) worker, and therefore I was part of the working class. By the time I grew up and moved away from the neighborhood, Mr. Rosenbaum, Mr. Margolis and Mr. Sheinman, were no longer the local storekeepers. Messrs. Rosenbaum and Margolis were wiped out by supermarkets like the A and P, and Mr. Sheinman, by the likes of CVS. The big capitalists gobbled up the small capitalists. They were able to buy much lower,

and by selling at a price lower than the smaller storekeeper could charge, they drove them out of business.

By the time I started high school, I entered the working class. Almost every student at Stuyvesant High School had a part-time job. I considered my employment as close to socialism as we could get at the time. I worked for the New York Public Library (NYPL), which meant I worked for the city, not for a capitalist institution. The NYPL was not privately owned; it was collectively owned by all the citizens of New York. I did have a supervisor, who was my boss, but he was not making a profit from my labor. I saw him as a petty bureaucrat, and if I had chosen to stay with the NYPL, I could have become a supervisor.

My friends worked for small businesses: garment factories, printers, bookbinders, wholesalers, retailers. Our work was not very different: menial labor, nor were our salaries. But I spoke with pride about working for the library, a non-profit, cultural institution. We provided an important intellectual service. We did not exploit anybody. We did not cheat anybody. My salary was paid out of the taxes of the citizens of New York. My friends' salaries were paid by the capitalist owners of the businesses, from the profits they squeezed out of the labor of their exploited workers. I recognized that their businesses performed a service, but I also recognized the great disparity in the money the workers and the bosses took home.

Thinking about the disparity and the class struggle, I concluded that one way to correct the disparity was for the workers to organize. My mother had been a member of a union, but they could not do much for her when there was no work. During the depression, neither the bosses nor the workers can make a living, but most bosses have the resources to sustain them until times get better.

When things get better, and work resumes, workers will be scrambling for jobs. If there is a union contract, a procedure would be in place for workers to return by seniority; wages would be established so bosses would not be able to hire workers at the lowest wages. I figured that the most practical way to deal with the class struggle is for workers to form unions. By this time, I was a teen-ager, I was learning something about history and economics, and the world around me. I learned that my mother considered herself a socialist, that there were several political parties that called themselves socialist, and that they all talked about "my" class struggle. They talked about the workers as being the "vanguard," and the dictatorship of the proletariat. I wasn't sure what they were talking about.

When I learned more about "my solution—unions," I learned that there were lots of different kinds of unions, with different approaches to the class struggle: craft unions, industrial unions. Labor leaders became my heroes, especially Walter Reuther. I also concluded that the teachers, local storekeepers and even my old landlord, Mr. Gordon, were not the enemy.

By the time I entered college, I had a very different view of the class struggle. I learned a little more about socialism and communism (but not much about anarchism.) I felt indebted to FDR and the New Deal. I believed a progressive government can make life better for all Americans: that if the government supported the creation of unions, created jobs, Social Security, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, health insurance, minimum wages etc, life wouldn't be such a struggle for the working class. There may no longer be such great disparity.

I concluded that one way to bring this about was to organize workers. I was not ready to advocate that the workers own the means of production. I felt that a strong union with a strong union contract would be sufficient. A strong, politically active union would see to it that progressive legislation was passed, and workers were protected on the job. I was no longer a “young person.” I was in college, and on the verge of making a career choice. I thought about teaching. I chose the labor movement as my way to deal with the class struggle.

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