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## Inequality of Wealth and the Role of Unions

*Home for the Holidays From the Left Coast*

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by JACK HEYMAN

I headed home for the holidays to Lakewood, New Jersey, once a beautiful resort renowned for its lake, pine forests and clean air. At the turn of the last century, it was home for some of the wealthiest in this country. Railroad magnate George J. Gould, then the seventh richest man in America, built a palatial estate with Italian gardens by the town's lake. His financier father and railroad mogul, Jay Gould, once infamously proclaimed, "I can hire half of the working class to kill the other half."

John D. Rockefeller, the richest capitalist in the world at the time, built a 30-room summer residence with a golf course and stables on 300 acres. Lakewood is only a short train ride from New York City. So, these social elites would pack up their entourage- ladies' maids, cooks, stable hands, chambermaids, governesses, china, linens, jewelry and clothing- and take the train to Lakewood.

When I was growing up in the '50s Lakewood was a small, ethnically-mixed, working class community of some 15,000 people. The Gould and Rockefeller estates had been turned into a

college and county park, respectively. Skating on Lake Carasaljo was a favorite winter activity of the townsfolk and we prided ourselves in our local sports heroes who made it to the pros, Jack Arden in basketball and my friend, Dickie Estelle, pitcher for the San Francisco Giants. Lakewood, like Petaluma, California, was the center of a community of Jewish chicken farmers, which during the McCarthy period was riven with anti-communist Zionists on one side, leftists on the other. The chicken farmers are long gone.

Nowadays, Lakewood is a city of nearly 100,000 people, looking more like a Williamsburg, Brooklyn ghetto of 30 years ago than a small, central Jersey town. Its predominantly Hasidic Jewish community runs the local public school board, not without controversy. Their kids go to private religious schools yet they receive public largesse in the form of transportation and educational programs, provoking the ire of townsfolk including secular Jews.

Yet, the most glaring change in Lakewood is its Tent City for the homeless, situated in the pine barrens for the last couple of years. While I was there a man died at Tent City the day before Thanksgiving, freezing to death outside his tent. A week later four homeless men died during a cold snap back in Santa Clara county, California. Homelessness is not confined to Lakewood, New Jersey or San Jose, California. Appallingly, it's a national problem with homeless encampments in every state.

The September 11, 2013, *Los Angeles Times* article ("Income Gap Between Rich and Poor is Biggest in a Century") reads: "The wealth gap between the top 1% and the bottom 99% in the U.S. is as wide as it's been in nearly 100 years, a new study finds." In other words it's worse now than since the Great Depression and even back to the time of the robber barons, Gould and Rockefeller.

## **FOR TRADE UNIONS: CLASS STRUGGLE OR CAPITULATION**

The U.S. is the most unequal of all advanced industrialized countries because the political system here has shaped the economy in ways that have led to powerlessness of the working class. In short, both political parties, Democrats and Republicans, represent the same capitalist class interests. There is no mass party that represents the working class. Unions have the power to reshape the wealth gap between rich and poor to some extent by negotiating decent contracts and striking to achieve that, if necessary. But they're not doing that. In countries like Spain, France, Greece and South Korea, unions have been fighting back and even organizing general strikes. But in the U.S., the trade union bureaucracy has cowered in the face of attacks against workers and, indeed, continues to support the twin party system.

In New Jersey, Republican Governor Christie relished bullying teachers in front of cameras at town hall meetings, as he pushed to cut benefits of public workers. He demagogically blames school teachers and other public workers not the bankers for the economic crisis. Unions in New Jersey have done little to challenge Christie by withholding labor power, i.e. striking.

In Wisconsin unionized state workers tried to maintain their standard of living by courageously fighting to defend collective bargaining rights against attacks from Republican Governor Scott Walker by occupying the state capitol. They inspired workers, many of whom were calling for a general strike, but union leaders derailed that struggle into Democrat Party electoral campaigns to recall Walker and elect Democrats. It failed miserably. Now union officials have turned to the courts, the other part of the political system which is tilted heavily toward the wealthy, the capitalist class.

Democrat pundits like Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under Clinton, and economist Paul Krugman rail against the ever-increasing disparity in wealth, blaming the Republicans. The fact of the matter is the Democrats have been playing a concomitant role in holding down workers. Just recently they agreed to a federal budget that eliminates 1.3 million workers from receiving extended unemployment benefits in the midst of this crisis. Hypocritically, Obama calls income disparity the greatest challenge of our time. To garner workers' votes in the coming election they'll call for raising the minimum wage minimumly for the working poor. The Democrats in New Jersey are calling for a measly increase of \$1 an hour to the minimum wage of \$7.25 tied to the CPI. Christie also supports raising the minimum wage \$1 but over three years. And both parties in a bipartisan effort cut food stamps for the poor. Still, Obama wants to lower social security benefits by using a "chained CPI" which does not reflect real inflation and could reduce seniors' income by some \$20,000 in 10 years. Elephants or asses: a choice of worst or worser for workers trying to level the playing field.

In California this summer when Bay Area transit workers were striking, Democrat Governor Brown appealed to the union officials to call off an effective strike on its fourth day. They readily complied and without a membership vote called the strike off. After further delays, Brown then imposed the state's version of Taft-Hartley forcing transit workers to work while negotiations were supposed to have continued but didn't. When Taft-Hartley Act, tagged the "slave labor" bill, first passed, organized labor was outraged and protested. Now BART union officials actually pleaded for Brown to use his "silver bullet", as they fondly referred to it.

Even after the 60-day “no strike” ban expired, union officials didn’t resume the strike as threatened. A week later two strikebreakers repairing the track were killed by BART managers driving a scab train. Public anger which had been orchestrated by the media against the workers, quickly turned against the BART Board of Directors. But with union officials calling the strike on again and off again, the memberships of SEIU 1021 and ATU 1555 became demoralized. Few showed up for picket duty. Then a tentative agreement was signed, but before the ink was dry, BART Board of Directors stunningly announced that they’d “mistakely” included the Family Medical Leave Act, a paid benefit. The San Francisco Chronicle (December 3, 2013) reported “After six months of contentious negotiations, two strikes and, finally, a hard-won labor agreement, BART’s two largest unions are not about to give in.” But that’s exactly what they did and the membership, angry but demoralized by the unions’ misleadership, ratified the contract. As Marx said, “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.” Since BART workers set the standard for transit and other public workers in northern California much was at stake. Thus, is the inequality of wealth in this country is magnified.

## **DEMOCRATS SHACKLE LABOR**

Worse still, Jerry Brown’s former advisor, Steve Glazer running for State Assembly during BART negotiations ran a despicable, high profile electoral campaign petitioning constituents to outlaw transit strikes. That was no fluke. Former Clinton NLRB chair Gould opined in the Los Angeles Times that banning strikes is insufficient. He says it’ll require binding arbitration as well! (LA Times, Aug. 15, 2013). This is on a par with Scott Walkers’ move to ban collective bargaining. It’s clear that the twin political parties-Democrat and Republican- work to advance capitalists’ interests against labor thereby widening the gap of wealth. Is there any more proof necessary to show that American workers need their own working class party to defend their interests?

More? The repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act occurred under Clinton’s administration. This act built a firewall between commercial and securities firms. According to many economists, its repeal precipitated the latest crisis. Neo-liberal free trade agreements, supported by both parties seal the capitalist’s deal on a global level. Then, there’s the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the longest lasting wars in U.S. history. And overt acts of government repression at home have occurred with both parties at the helm sending a chilling message to organized labor—from Reagan’s shackling and arresting of the leaders of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike in 1980 to Obama’s sending an armed Coast Guard cutter to protect a strikebreaking ship loading

grain at the multi-national EGT dock being struck by the longshore union in Longview, Washington last year.

Historically, when workers' leaders have stood up to represent workers in opposing imperialist wars or organizing strikes, the might of the political cudgel has been wielded against them: imprisoning Socialist railroad union leader Eugene V. Debs and black Wobbly Philadelphia longshore leader Ben Fletcher during WWI and Trotskyist James P. Cannon, leader of the organizers of the Minneapolis teamsters' strike just before WWII, or to move to deport West Coast longshore union president and self-proclaimed Marxist Harry Bridges and maritime labor's great orator Jamaican-born Communist Ferdinand Smith during the McCarthy witchhunt. All this was done by Democratic presidents.

### **WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR THE UNIONS?**

In the midst of the repressive Reagan years, the longshore workers in San Francisco were able to organize an 11-day anti-apartheid cargo boycott on a ship from South Africa. After his release from prison, Mandela on his 1990 world tour acknowledged the role of the longshore union in helping to bring down the apartheid government.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtIkA2oGD4&t=15m58s>

Black South African workers were able to bring down the apartheid regime but not its buttress, capitalism. So capitalism's depredations have intensified wealth inequality. The median net worth for black households in the U.S. is worse than blacks under apartheid according to Sampie Terreblanche, a professor emeritus of economics at Stellenbosch University. (Worse Than Apartheid: Black in Obama's America)

A few corrupt blacks, like former NUM mineworkers' leader now billionaire mineowner, Cyril Ramaphosa, one of the richest men in all of Africa, join whites extracting wealth while sitting atop the black masses. Ramaphosa called on the government to repress the striking miners at Marikana last year. 34 were massacred by police in an act that has been compared to some of the bloodiest during the apartheid regime.

In December, the world glimpsed as President Jacob Zuma was roundly booed by blacks attending the Mandela memorial, a sign of the disenchantment with the ANC government's corruption their impoverishment. NUMSA, the militant metalworkers' union, the largest union in South Africa, has just announced that they are forming a workers' socialist party committed to expropriating the mines to redistribute the wealth to the impoverished masses.

## **The Coming Challenge for the West Coast Longshore Union**

Today, the U.S. trade union bureaucracy, by and large, accepts the domination of the employers at the workplace and collaborates by negotiating concessionary contracts. Even in the once-militant ILWU, the West Coast longshore union, officials show little sign of being up for the fight with grain monopolies. They signed a hugely concessionary contract with multi-national grain monopoly, EGT terminal, two years ago, which whetted the appetites of the other grain monopolies. Now, the union is locked out of grain facilities in Portland, Oregon and across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington, the home port of ILWU President “Big Bob” McEllrath. In an unprecedented waterfront scene, scabs have been doing longshore work for months there. Longshoremen from those locals have been picketing those docks diligently in the face of police and scab harassment. What’s needed is a mass mobilization of longshore workers in all West Coast ports in solidarity with the grain ports. In 1990, when strikebreakers in Stockton were doing longshore work, all ports in Northern California were shut down and longshore workers marched on Continental Grain to chase off the scabs and defend their jobs. That’s what’s needed now to win union jurisdiction.

Soon, the ILWU will be engaged in master contract negotiations for the coast. Before the last negotiations in 2008, longshore workers voted at the Coast Caucus to shutdown all West Coast ports to protest the imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Former ILWU President Dave Arian opposed it, arguing that it would be foolish for the union to organize such an illegal work stoppage, that it might undermine upcoming negotiations. The union could be fined. And President McEllrath wasn’t happy with it but when Los Angeles longshore president Jo Jo Cortez balked at shutting down the largest port in the country with 60% of the ILWU longshore membership, it was questionable whether the anti-war action had enough wind in its sails. Maritime employers had banked on disunity of longshore workers on the Coast with some ports shutting down and others, like Los Angeles, working. To their surprise rank-and-file unity prevailed and the whole West Coast was shut down on May Day, international workers day, to protest the wars. If unity hadn’t prevailed, there wouldn’t have been any real contract negotiations and the ILWU would not have achieved its historic May Day strike against imperialist war. When the employers’ Pacific Maritime Association threatened to sue under Taft-Hartley, the union warned there’d be no negotiations under such coercion. PMA dropped the suit in short order.

Today, with grain monopolies pillorying ILWU in the Northwest ports, PMA is eager to jump in the ring for negotiations. Yet, another crack was spotted in the ILWU. In the port of Oakland, the

most militant port, some longshoremen in violation of the union's long-standing principles, egged on by a few union officials, crossed a picket line of port truckers, mostly immigrant workers trying to organize. Unless ILWU shuts down all West Coast ports to stop the scabbing now in the Northwest grain ports, PMA will have their way. The present ILWU leadership won't do it. It'll take a fire from below, the rank and file, in the militant tradition of the ILWU to do it and to win.

Another longshore action organized a few years ago shows the way forward. In response to AFL-CIO President Trumka's call for solidarity actions in support of the embattled Wisconsin workers, S.F. longshore Local 10, in defiance of the Taft-Hartley Act which bans sympathy strikes, shutdown all ports in the Bay Area. Again, employers threatened a suit but dropped it. Shamefully, Trumka didn't even raise a finger to aid the only union to concretely respond to his call for solidarity actions. That was two years before the ILWU quit the AFL-CIO.

Apparently, Trumka, a former mineworkers' union leader like Ramaphosa, believes that capitalism is the only way society can be organized. But workers' leaders who led historic strikes—like Debs, Cannon and Bridges—believed, in their own way, that socialism is a better system for the working class because it eliminates the inequality of wealth by abolishing capitalism and establishing a system based on human need not profit. The phlegmatic U.S. labor movement, now 11% of the workforce, will continue to atrophy as the wealth disparity grows unless the class collaborationist trade union bureaucracy is replaced by a class struggle leadership. Developments in the South African metalworkers' union, NUMSA, offer a beacon of hope for the future. Will other trade unions, in South Africa and around the world, follow?