

*Illawarra Unity - Journal of the  
Illawarra Branch of the Australian  
Society for the Study of Labour  
History*

---

*Volume 8, Issue 1*

2008

*Article 6*

ILLAWARRA UNITY

---

The American New Left and Community  
Unions

A. Ashbolt\*

\*University of Wollongong, [aashbolt@uow.edu.au](mailto:aashbolt@uow.edu.au)

*Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour  
History.* <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity>

# The American New Left and Community Unions

A. Ashbolt

## Abstract

In the Spring and Summer, 1964, issues of the American new left journal *Studies on the Left*, political economist James O'Connor grappled with the concept of community unions.<sup>1</sup> He argued that increasingly the social basis of working class organizations was in the community. Debate about the nature and efficacy of what could be called community unionism was a feature of the new left's mid-life in the 1960s. The overall intellectual context in which this debate occurred was one of disillusionment with traditional leftist dogmas and pieties. The political context was one reminiscent of the Russian Narodnik movement of the nineteenth century. Thousands of students had worked and were working amongst the black and poor in a variety of projects and, specifically, in the mid 1960s around three hundred students from the organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) immersed themselves in northern working class communities. Organising the poor was the aim of SDS's Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP). Michael Harrington's 1963 book *The Other America* had placed poverty on the agenda but the student new left was itself making it part of a larger question—that of historic agency.

## The American New Left and Community Unions

Anthony Ashbolt

**In the Spring and Summer, 1964**, issues of the American new left journal *Studies on the Left*, political economist James O'Connor grappled with the concept of community unions.<sup>1</sup> He argued that increasingly the social basis of working class organizations was in the community. Debate about the nature and efficacy of what could be called community unionism was a feature of the new left's mid-life in the 1960s. The overall intellectual context in which this debate occurred was one of disillusionment with traditional leftist dogmas and pieties. The political context was one reminiscent of the Russian Narodnik movement of the nineteenth century. Thousands of students had worked and were working amongst the black and poor in a variety of projects and, specifically, in the mid 1960s around three hundred students from the organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) immersed themselves in northern working class communities. Organising the poor was the aim of SDS's Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP). Michael Harrington's 1963 book *The Other America* had placed poverty on the agenda but the student new left was itself making it part of a larger question—that of historic agency.

Taking their cue from C. Wright Mills' influential 1960 "Letter to the New Left" published in *New Left Review*, SDS radicals set about finding a substitute for the working class as the agent of change in capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> Mills had argued that the very notion that the working class was the agent of change was "an historically specific idea that has been turned into an unhistorical and unspecific hope." He saw this "labor metaphysic" as "a legacy of Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic." Ringing bells reminiscent of E.P. Thompson he argued that the working class was not a class for-itself and thus no longer "The Necessary Lever". Yet he also cautioned that the working class could not be written off and implied that certain political and economic conditions could rekindle its

spark. Elsewhere, (in his book *The Marxists*) Mills asserted that the class struggle has now “been institutionalised and limited to objectives whose realization lies within the political system”.<sup>3</sup> Add to Mills Herbert Marcuse’s arguments concerning the integration of the working class into the one dimensional nature of modern capitalist society, British historian E.P. Thompson’s insistence that “a class is that which defines itself by its historic agency” and no such class existed today except in the rhetoric of the far left, and Baran and Sweezy’s belief that the diffused and fragmented consciousness of the modern worker rendered inoperable the traditional theory of proletarian revolution, and you have a veritable chorus on the left questioning the political efficacy of the modern working class.<sup>4</sup> The labour movement, in particular, was singled out as an ossified mass that tended to follow the tune of the corporate elite.

With the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Council of Industrial organizations (CIO) in 1955, a new preamble to the AFL’s original 1888 constitution was drafted. All reference to class struggle was dropped from the preamble. This signalled the labour movement’s acknowledgement of its inclusion in the system. Soon new left revisionist history would probe the labour-capital compromise and see its origins in the acceptance by labour leaders of what was labelled a “corporate ideology”.<sup>5</sup> Labour’s cooperation with the New Deal institutionalised this corporate ideology but it was traceable to Samuel Gompers’ early 1920s policy of working inside the corporate structure. So it was not just high theory which questioned the role of the labour movement, as the movement itself was acknowledging its accommodationist role.

Marcuse recognised that workers’ integration into the system began on the factory floor: “Assimilation in needs and aspirations, in the standard of living, in leisure activities, in politics derives from an integration in the plant itself.”<sup>6</sup> So changes in the character of work and the instruments of production—particularly the technological revolution—had assimilated the workers’ very labour and consciousness to the corporate system. Marcuse’s writings had an enormous impact upon the German new left and, in particular, Rudi Dutschke. When Dutschke proposed that a “revolutionary dialectic of correct transitions” should focus upon “the long march through the institutions”, the influence of Marcuse was clear: the steady subversion of institutional life trumps class struggle in modern technological society.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, in general the European new left tended to connect itself historically to class politics but the American new left, to use the words of Paul Buhle, had

“no mooring in the historical development of class forces that it could understand.”<sup>8</sup> The problem faced by the American new left was that unlike the new left elsewhere it did not develop in some relation to a socialist party or labour party or movement. Paradoxically, SDS did have socialist roots stretching back to the Inter-Collegiate Socialist Society of early last century but that is not the same as growing up in a milieu of labour movement activism,

What group, then, could possibly replace the working class? For Mills it was “the cultural apparatus, the intellectuals” and particularly “the young intelligentsia”. Intellectuals were the immediate radical agents of change. because it was they who were disaffected with and ready to struggle against the operations of power. Even though SDS’s founding document *The Port Huron Statement* had looked to the university as “a potential base and agency of social change”, SDS saw any exclusive concentration upon the university as a lever of social change as indicative of an intellectual detachment from social reality.<sup>9</sup> So it sought historic agency elsewhere. Inspired by the civil rights movement’s role in the south, SDS nominated the poor as the agent of change.<sup>10</sup> Why? Because the poor, the marginalised., the outcast had not been integrated successfully into the system. Martin Luther King’s attempt, prior to his assassination, to construct a poor people’s movement also reflected the feeling that a genuine class politics must focus upon the poor. King in his later years was resuscitating the idea of class rather than abandoning it and here the distinction must be drawn between those intellectuals who were effectively saying farewell to the working class and those who were not. Marcuse, for example, actually retained the working class commitments of his youth, arguing at one point that the precondition for a serious opposition was “the political revitalization of the working class movement on an international scale”.<sup>11</sup>

Focussing upon the poor meant, inevitably, shifting attention from the sphere of work to the community. In terms of political theory, this involved a shift from production to consumption. It also involved a shift in focus from work to everyday life. And here SDS not only mirrored the French Marxist work of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord’s Situationists but also picked up Mills’ idea of personal politics evoked in his book *The Sociological Imagination*.<sup>12</sup> This perspective had an enormous influence throughout the Sixties, initially via Tom Hayden, and finally gelled into the women’s liberation slogan “the personal is political”. SDS’s ERAP, acknowledging a clear politics of everyday life, proposed that the underclass had its

most abrasive contact with elites less at the point of production than in the community itself. Yet a split soon developed in the organisation between those who sought to focus on unemployment (let's call them traditionalists) and those who sought to confront wider community problems (those more in tune with the new politics). Interestingly but unsurprisingly the projects that confronted wider community issues (and the one established by Hayden in Newark was the Newark Community Union Project) tended to be more successful than those that saw unemployment as the exclusive domain. These "community unions" worked on oppression outside the workplace and, to use the words of Todd Gitlin, "implicit in this approach was a sense of the declining salience of the workplace for the American lower classes".<sup>13</sup> Where James O'Connor, with whom this paper started, saw community unions as channels for the waging of class struggle, in the main they reflected a conscious rejection of organised labour. And herein lay an insurmountable problem for the new left—the community affords few of the organisational possibilities of the workplace. So in the summer issue of *Studies on the Left* in 1964, J.H. Williams, while casting doubt upon the viability of community unions, pointedly observed that no force in nature or society throws people together in a social fashion in the way that work does.<sup>14</sup>

The guiding organisational beacon of the community unions was participatory democracy, which in the view of one acerbic critic involved an attempt by alienated members of the middle class to impose their values upon poor people more concerned with material advance than spiritual salvation. Michael Harrington similarly suggested that the young radicals sometimes expected the poor to adopt and enact the values of the community organiser. In that fashion the poor were "assigned roles as abstractions in the morality plays of the disenchanting middle class."<sup>15</sup> It was Harrington's comrade Irving Howe who observed that "the unstructured, atomized and often demoralised 'underclass' has been the most resistant to organization."<sup>16</sup> Harrington and Howe possibly missed the new politics, the "beyond theory" energy and vision, in all this but as the community projects unravelled their words struck a chord.

The dilemma facing the new left was how to make its visionary utopianism accord with the real experience and consciousness of poor people. Sustained by what Harrington termed a "middle class mysticism", the movement was seeking historic agency in those marginalised outcasts whose actual vision would likely be constrained by desires for material well-being. Following the failure of many community unions, Lee

Baxandall observed that the new left could not expect those concerned about their material welfare to constitute a durable ally in the struggle. The main task, he argued, was to build the socialist intellectual community and focus upon the colleges and universities as centres of revolt.<sup>17</sup>

So the American new left perceived community and participatory democracy together as antidotes to isolation and alienation. In doing so they also tried to reconfigure a politics of class in ways that were not always successful. Arguably, indeed, community unions reflected an abandonment of class if not of class issues. Before too long the new left was exploring class in a seemingly more sophisticated way via the lens of the new working class theories. Yet the new working class of technical and professional workers was in the end little different from the professional middle class. Entrusting that class with the long march through the institutions was hardly going to produce a revolutionary outcome despite the fears of the neoconservatives. Little wonder that by the end of the decade SDS had dissolved into two warring factions, one preaching piously the doctrine of proletarian revolution, the other (most prominently the Weatherman group) seeing youth, blacks and the Third World generally as embodying the agency of change.

Yet it is the new left's early work on community and with communities that reflects a political sensibility that we cannot cast aside today. As the union movement's membership dwindles, a wider politics of community becomes a necessity not an option. The obstacles to its realisation, however, are formidable.

## Endnotes

- 1 James O'Connor, 'Toward a Theory of Community Unions', *Studies on the Left*, Spring 1964, 143-8 & 'Toward a Theory of Community Unions, part 2', *Studies on the Left*, Summer 1964, 240-257; also see Wini Breines, *Community and Organisation in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1989, 133.
- 2 C. Wright Mills, 'Letter to the New Left', reprinted in Alexander Bloom & Wini Breines, *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, 61-66.
- 3 C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963, 107.
- 4 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Sphere Books, London, 1968 (1964); E.P. Thompson, 'Revolution Again! Or shut your ears and run', *New Left Review*, November-December, 1960, 24; Paul Baran & Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, Harmondsworth, Penguin,

- 1968 (1996), 349.
- 5 Ronald Radosh, 'The Corporate ideology of American Labor Leaders from Gompers to Hillman', in J. Weinstein & D. W. Eakins (eds.), *For a New America: Essays in History and politics from 'Studies on the Left' 1959-1970*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970, 124-152.
  - 6 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 39.
  - 7 Rudi Dutschke, 'On Anti-Authoritarianism', in Carl Oglesby (ed.), *The New Left Reader*, Grove Press, New York, 1969, 249.
  - 8 Paul Buhle, 'The Eclipse of the New Left...Some Notes', *Radical America*, July-August, 1972, 6.
  - 9 SDS, 'The Port Huron Statement', in Bloom & Breines, *Takin it to the Streets': a Sixties Reader*, 60-1.
  - 10 See, in particular, Tom Hayden & Carl Wittman, 'An Interracial Movement of the Poor?', in M. Cohen & D. Hale (eds.), *The New Student Left*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, 175-213;.
  - 11 Herbert Marcuse, 'The Question of Revolution: An Interview', *New Left Review*, September-October, 1967, 4.
  - 12 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970 (1959), 10-32.
  - 13 Todd Gitlin, 'On Organising the Poor in America', *New Left Notes*, December 23, 1966, p. 18.
  - 14 J.H. Williams, 'On Community Unions', *Studies on the Left*, Summer 1964, 75.
  - 15 Michael Harrington, 'The mystical Militants', *New Republic*, February 19, 1966, 22.
  - 16 Irving Howe, 'New Styles in Leftism', *Dissent*, Summer 1965, 313.
  - 17 Lee Baxandall, 'Issues and Constituencies of the New Left', *Liberation*, April 1966, 21.