

The Promise or Problem of Public Service Unionism: Political Implications

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This paper is concerned with the ‘problems’ or the ‘promise’ of public employee militancy. I’ll speak in general, and only make brief references to the situation in Nova Scotia.

My primary interest has been the changes in the occupational structure and the class structure of advanced capitalism. The issue which has brought this question to the fore—front of debate has been the re-awakening of trade union struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s and its spread to groups of employees who, historically, had shown little trade union consciousness and less militancy.

The initial theoretical response to this new unionism was to explain its source in the objective conditions facing white-collar workers—a relative decline in wages, blocked promotion opportunities, rationalisation of work, bureaucratisation—and it was concluded by many that these processes of proletarianisation had finally brought about the polarisation of labour and capital.

This orthodox interpretation—a term which isn’t meant to imply that it is necessarily wrong in all its details—was challenged by numerous theorists, quick to jump on an ascending roller coaster of debate, and I don’t intend to review the contours of this exchange here.

One thing was clear, however. This new militancy of the ‘new middle class’ was predominantly found among public employees. It was state workers who, suddenly, were in the forefront of unionisation in Canada. This fact complicated the question of the class analysis of this new trade unionism.

On the one hand there was the well-established theory of post-capitalism which proclaimed the ascendancy of the ‘new middle class’—professionals, technocrats, administrators, managers—to the position of the new ruling class. In capitalist society this was still a process which had not run its full course. In state socialism, the technocratic revolution had already occurred.

The ‘new middle class’, then, was a class in the full sense of the term because in addition to a coherent social existence, it had its own separate class interest which was distinct from the bourgeoisie and distinct from the proletariat, and ultimately antagonistic to both.

The traditional Marxist statement on the class character of the state tended, in a peculiar way, to confirm this. In its contemporary form this near-functional theory of the state asserts that the state is essentially an instrument for the reproduction of capitalism, that it functions to reproduce capitalism economically, politically, militarily and ideologically. The state, then, is a structural instrument, which maintains capitalist hegemony and therefore is objectively opposed to the interests of the working class.

State workers, it follows, are instruments of this reproduction. Teachers teach the norms of hierarchical authority and petty opportunism conducive to economic success. Welfare workers function to smooth out the class struggle, to divert militancy and to act as agents of social control. Health workers ensure a healthy workforce, ready and able to be exploited. The police

actively suppress class conflict, in its collective expression by smashing strikes, and in its individual expression by creating and then controlling crime among the working class.

Reproductive workers were not only parasitical on the working class by being economically unproductive; they were antagonistic to the proletariat because they produced 'law and order'. Public employees, given their functional role in maintaining capitalist relations of production, were inherently reactionary.

There was, however, an alternative vision to this. It was clear to most that industrial capitalism had solved its difficulties temporarily by a combination of state intervention and fiscal planning, leading to the rapid growth of the state sector. The militancy of public employees in the 1970s, rather than reflecting their own interests as a potential new ruling and exploitative class, was on the contrary an indication that the contradictions of Keynesian intervention had placed state workers directly on the fault line of the contemporary crisis of capitalism. The fiscal crisis of the state had thrust government employees to the forefront of the contradictions of capitalism. Not only were they now engaging in class struggle, but they were beginning to lead it. With some stretch of the imagination, public employees could be regarded as the new revolutionary vanguard, removing that mantle from the likes of students, natives and possibly women — sectors of the population systematically excluded from or experiencing special oppression within social production.

Not only were public employees 'especially militant' but they were 'reproductive' workers and, in this alternative version, this made them doubly progressive. They provided necessary services — essential services — for the working class, and their importance would expand in a post-revolutionary society. They were positioned to best understand the contradictions of capitalism and they had every interest in the expansion of the state and the rationalisation of private capitalism.

In short, their interests were entirely congruent with those of the industrial proletariat, but being state workers they had broader horizons, a 'serve-the-people' mentality, and an interest in the expansion of public capital.

The promise of public service unionism was the likelihood that it could be converted, more easily, into a socialist movement — it had inherently progressive overtones.

As I have constructed these two arguments, I think they are both wrong. The public employee is not inherently reactionary because he/she works for an institution which reproduces capitalism, although the importance of the mental/manual dichotomy for the consolidation of a state elite in post-revolutionary society should not be underestimated. But neither is the state worker in an unambiguous position to defend the interests of the working class as a whole.

The state in capitalist society has a definite class character. This is a fundamental axiom which cannot be reduced. It is comprised of institutions, which reproduce capitalism. Speaking as a Nova Scotian, 'our' provincial segment of the state in Canada is among the most blatant in the country in its overt class character — from the notorious Michelin Bill to the soon-to-be-notorious Free Enterprise Fisheries Bill which gives fishers the rights they already have and denies them the right they need: to bargain collectively with the fish companies.

The class biases of the state remain as the core of the Marxist analysis of the state.

But this acknowledgement is not sufficient for a theory of the state or for an understanding of the problems and promise of public sector unionism.

The state must be seen as a contradictory institution of class dominance in a way that does not assert mere pluralism.

It is an expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie and corporations in general.

This means that it must be separate and have powers to over-ride particular capitals and interests in the interest of the general expansion of capitalism.

Furthermore, it is the instrument of reproduction, not only of capitalism, but of society itself. In this respect education, health, recreation, even welfare are things, which vitally affect the working class. Having these services and resources is in the interests of the working class — if by ‘interest’ is understood short—term interest. I have no desire to dispute the long-term implications of the content of these services for the general maintenance of capitalism. But consciousness and action far more easily occur along the lines of immediately perceivable interests. These are areas of potential conflict between capitalist and emerging revolutionary culture — again defining the latter very broadly.

The separate organisational existence of the state creates opportunities for organised opposition to have an effect on short-term policies. This is especially true of the quasi—democratic form of the state in capitalist societies of the centre. There is room for considerable reform within the boundaries of the general interests of capitalism which, if part of a movement of transformation, can have important implications in the long and short-run. Government workers in the institutions of the state, then, can be allies or protagonists of this struggle and their position is not determined solely by the functional importance of their roles as instruments of capitalist reproduction.

More than this, however, the reproductive role of state workers which is, in part, of interest of the working class, becomes especially important when we evaluate the impact of public employee strikes and the public response to them.

Both of these issues — the provision of essential services and the possibility of apparent political influence (which is more important in the organised effort to achieve than in the actual reform) -- do help to generate legitimacy for the state, although it should be noted that there is a distinction between the legitimacy of ‘the state’ *per se* and the much more frail legitimacy of the governing political party. Disillusionment with the latter often occurs within the context of the accepted legitimacy of the state.

I mentioned room for reforms. Clearly, however, the capacity of the system to grant reforms is dependent on the fortunes of capital accumulation —even with the potential for resorting to deficit financing which, apparently, cannot expand infinitely without sending shockwaves throughout the economic system.

The major shockwaves of the current economic crisis were felt in the late 19⁶⁰s and early 1970s. These included such things as the long—run affects of Keynesian policies and several contingent phenomena such as producers’ cartels and advancing liberation movements in the industrialised world.

Whatever the actual causes of this latest crisis — and Great Recession may be too optimistic — the state has been charged simultaneously, with being the chief architect of the problem, with its budget deficit and an ‘unacceptable’ inflation rate as its chief symptom, and with curing it.

The state was thrust into the frontlines in the battle against inflation and this meant, initially, that it would be taken out of the hides of state workers.

Traditionally the state employee has borne the initial brunt of the battle against inflation, if only as an advanced expeditionary force. In the early 1960s pay ceilings were announced in the public sector. They began as ‘voluntary’ restraints — meaning that the government voluntarily went along with them and their negotiators would take a hard line in collective bargaining — and soon spread to the provinces where such ceilings were legislated.

This attack came at a particular historical time. Living standards had been rising. Reforms had extended collective bargaining rights to public employees, in many cases giving them the right to strike. They had had their first taste of organisational success, rapidly recovering any lost differentials and keeping up with inflation. They were coming off fat times.

And they reacted with a new spirit of militancy to the imposition of selective wage controls, breaking through them, and making gains, which placed the private sector unions in a catch-up position. In the process the public sector unions pushed to the fore—front of organised and militant labour in Canada.

This view of ‘exceptional militancy’ should not be exaggerated. It did seem to come out of a vacuum, in two senses. First, public employees had been quiescent — securely rooted trees in a protected forest. And the traditional proletariat had been less than militant. Added to the failure of student and minority rebellion to seize the future, the tendency to grasp any sign of potential social rebellion was, at least, understandable.

Much of this militancy, however, was situated in Quebec which faced contradictions which were not generalisable to the country as a whole. Over the early 1970s the proportion of militancy among public employees —taking only strike statistics into account — was a little higher than their proportion in the Canadian workforce, supporting the view that they were more progressive or advanced. But the completeness of organisation tends to be high in public service and the degree of militancy was less than proportionate relative to the organised working class.

There are several concrete reasons which limit the collective bargaining of the public employee, some of which relate back to the contradictions of the state. The experience of this new militancy in the early 1970s highlighted these contradictions and those characteristics which made the public sector specific. These influenced the direction and content of collective bargaining.

There are a number of aspects which make the public sector specific and different from the private sector. For example, labour is not sold directly to capital; profit is not the motive of public sector production; use values rather than commodities are produced in the public sector; politics rather than market forces determine public sector production; and the public sector workers are uniquely reproductive and provide essential services.

All of these differences need to be qualified and, expressed as dichotomies, they do not capture the complexities of social reality.

I want to mention one briefly. Most government services are financed directly out of taxes, most of which are personal taxes. This sets up a complicated triad of interests between taxpayers, recipients of state services and public employees, each of which can be mobilised separately, although they overlap concretely. Mobilised as sectional interests, they can be used to oppose government workers — who, incidentally, have all three interests simultaneously.

Logically, as well as concretely, there is no real distinction of interests here. Recipients of services (direct and indirect) pay for them in some fashion, more or less willingly, but are interested in the quality of services and the quality of the relationship with the public employee. Hence the desire for a new, progressive unionism that unites clients and employees in a campaign for the maintenance of quality services at a price that will secure these services. This objective is an important one tactically in the present.

But the main point here is to stress that the outcome of any action is variable because the interests that comprise the various elements are contradictory. It is a truism that the creative resolution of contradictory relationships requires organisation. But the obverse of this is equally true: that the structural requirements or conditions of action lead to fragmentation of interests, to

particularisms and the domination of immediate interests in the absence of organisation.

The actual outcome of a contradictory situation, whether over the quality and direction of state—provided education or services or public employee strikes, is crucially affected by struggle, by tradition and experience and by organisation.

What of the present, then?

Public employees did not stay in the frontlines for long. In 1975, wage controls were imposed, particularly on the public sector. When state workers regained consciousness, they faced a different situation than in the early years of the decade.

Now there is selective controls for public workers in Quebec, British Columbia, Alberta. Soon for federal workers.

It sounds like 1970, repeated.

But there is this difference. There was the decade of the seventies and those experiences. There is now a tradition of militancy in the public sector. Shouldn't we expect a similar militant response? Perhaps even a stronger one?

I think there are many reasons to temper this optimism. It is one thing to emphasise the importance of struggle, and another to assume that only one side is capable of learning. The state has learned at least as much about how to make use of the contradictions of public sector unionism for its ends. They have used the strike in public service to drive a wedge between public and private sector workers, between service workers and the general public and between taxpayers and government workers. Now, by lay-offs, the state is dividing public employees from each other.

There have been years of lost wages, years of an employer and media blitz to weaken unions, years of convincing Canadians that their economic problems, if they don't lie outside the country, are caused by unions and public unions in particular. The working class as a whole is coming off lean, not prosperous, times.

Lest it be concluded that, automatically, the worse things get the better, you should recall the British experience. Thatcherism has brought in its train the highest unemployment since the Depression, greater than the psychological divide of three million which was to be the catalyst for a new 'year of discontent'. The conservatives are cutting the welfare state to the bone. Yet the British labour movement is as quiet as it has ever been and there are few signs of effective opposition.

Lest I end up with too pessimistic a conclusion, it should be clear that situations of contradictory interests do not have a necessary, or inevitable evaluative component. There is no single ideology, politics or response that must be determined to occur in a contradictory situation. People can respond to public service strikes in many ways, and there is no necessity for them to oppose striking workers, even when their services are affected.

One of the lures of social history is that it provides an opportunity to reminisce in the past, when commuters refused to take trollies during a drivers' strike, or chased scab letter carriers down the street with brooms, as they did in 1918. One of the uses of social history is that it reminds us that there were such times.

But when economic circumstances get particularly bad, there is a tendency to emphasise special instead of general interests, to accept those evaluations, those ideologies that represent short-term and particularistic interests. Coming in tandem with the massive government and media propaganda campaign, this tendency is strengthened. And this is especially powerful in the absence of any alternative evaluation which is seen as legitimate by working people. That is, an organised and effective labour movement with wider political initiative and leadership.

The left in Canada has come some distance from the impulse to establish immediate parties, however desirable party formation may be in the long run, and this is partly because the failures of the immediate past have accomplished, as their only positive result, a sense of the distance that must be traversed.

In the immediate future, defeats will outweigh victories for the labour movement. This situation emphasises the importance of fighting to retain the rights that have been won, and now that means the right to strike in essential services and the right to bargain collectively.

What this means for progressives and would-be progressives is, on the practical side, local organisation, alliances with appropriate special-interest groups, willingness to confront misleadership within the labour movement and wider political arena, and debate: a theoretical journal to discuss organisational questions (rather than endless academic posturing) and practical activity. And a labour press.

All very tall orders. And without a genuine working class movement of rank—and-file workers to give it something to focus on, some base in reality to test ideas and practices, it will come to nought. It will lead only to more sectarianism and pre-mature vanguardism.

In conclusion, there are always at least two separate sources of incorrect politics. Right now the problems are 'leftist' ones, chiefly sectarianism and dogmatism and intellectualism. The main pre-condition for a cure for these diseases is practical activity. There are always, in any case, immediate activities of some consequence and the crisis only increases the possibilities. Now the problem is not in the stars, or in objective conditions, but in ourselves, in the subjective factor. More than ever a history of contemporary times must be a history of the left.