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On Circulation Struggles

Today’s left is beset by a lack of strategic reflection. After decades of being weakened, the various forces that comprise the left have been set on the back foot, reacting against the active forces of capital and the state. They have been fractured into a plurality of small-scale and independent actions that rarely merge into anything larger. In particular, there has been the decline of strategic thinking – the self-reflection on the relationship between means and ends, tactics and goals. This article is intended as a small contribution to the reinvigoration of strategic reflection, examining the recent popularity of the blockade as a potent political tactic. As with every tactic, however, there are limits to its effective use, and the mindless application of this tactic in every situation risks reducing its power and overlooks the opportunity costs involved in channelling scarce political energy into ineffective avenues. That is to say, a lack of strategic reflection not only hinders political success; it actively militates against it.

In recent years, it has become a dogma to claim that struggles around the point of production are largely over. In the West, there has certainly been a significant decline in the share of manufacturing employment – and as a result, a significant decline in industrial action in this sector. Union density has dropped across the Western world, though with marginal holdouts in the public sector. But while it picks out some truths of our situation, the claim that production struggles are over is only a partial perspective. The decline in production struggles in the West has been matched by the rise in other countries. China is perhaps the most notable case, where the labour movement has managed to gain significant increases in real wages through their struggles. A similar story holds for much of Latin America and South Asia as well, and looks likely to take hold in Africa as China and American capital flows into the region searching after new cheap labour sources. So the claim that production struggles are over is a peculiarly Eurocentric conceit. However, to say production struggles still have importance is not the same as saying they will be the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. The latter claim, for a variety of reasons, does not hold.

Moreover, even within the core capitalist countries, production struggles still have some notable efficacy, particularly in sectors dependent on lean production. The reduction in inventory and reliance on just-in-time supply chains means that these sectors are highly susceptible to worker agitation. Yet all this must be set in the undeniable context that manufacturing is in decline in the Western world. And indeed, in relative terms, even developing countries are reaching a turning point where manufacturing employment is in decline. The phenomenon of premature deindustrialisation is likely to be one of the key events these economies will have to face up to in the coming years, and this will have significant effects on the continued efficacy of production struggles.

Because of these changes, many have turned to a focus on circulation as an alternative. Everyone from the romantic insurrectionists of The Invisible Committee to more traditional labour organisers in the pages of Jacobin have announced a new era of blockades and circulation struggles. While agreeing with much of this analysis, I want to outline three possible limits of circulation struggles (undoubtedly many more could, and should, be analysed as well). The first of these is the often scattershot nature of the political pressure. Who are the targets of a blockade? Who could respond in any meaningful way? And how, precisely, are they being pressured? Point of production struggles had ready-made answers to these sorts of questions: the target was the employer (or with more generalised struggles, the national government); and pressure was exerted by stopping the production of a good, which went on to have direct economic costs for the employer (or the national economy). In most cases of blockading, the targets, pressure, and effects are much less clear. Often the ones pressured most are the suppliers and retailers who are affected by a disruption of the supply chain – but given that they don’t own the circulation nodes, they are simultaneously not in any position to respond directly to the struggles. In any case, this pressure on suppliers and retailers is itself scattershot, subject to the contingent composition of goods passing through a circulation node. Which industries are affected? Are imports or exports affected more? What industries can re-route around the blockade? What industries have time-sensitive goods that can’t be re-routed? Such questions are important for understanding the targets, political pressure, and potential efficacy of a circulation struggle, but they too often get ignored. Some unions, such as the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), have a key position in the global economy which allows them to exert pressure without having to worry too much about pinpointing effects, but for most circulation nodes, this will not be the case. Computer modelling can help us understand the chains of power here, as industry reports outline the effects of blockades. But in any case, it is an important question to ask, lest blockades join summit-hopping and marches as routine but ineffective tactics.

A second related problem arises from the potential for these actions to simply enable one segment of the labour force to gain traction, while leaving others behind. This is a general problem, of course, and one not limited to dockworkers, warehouse workers, and truck drivers. It is, in fact, endemic to union organising: how to create solidarity beyond just the particular workplace or industry? There are precedents for various industries building broad-based solidarity. And the ILWU has been supportive of, for example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement. But such questions of solidarity and deploying structural power for ends beyond that of the workplace must remain at the forefront of any strategic theorising about these tactics. How can blockades help the surplus populations being tossed aside by capitalism? Assist unwaged domestic workers? Freelance online workers?

A third potential limit is a more long-term concern: namely, the decreasing size of the workforce involved in circulation. In a recent report, the ILO notes that in the wake of the 2008 crisis, supply-chain-related jobs have dropped and have yet to return to pre-crisis levels. A sluggish turn in global trade, combined with increasing (though still distant) parity in wages between places like China and the core capitalist countries, along with increased automation are likely behind the drop in supply-chain employment. The rise of fully automated ports, self-driving vehicles, and automated warehouses portends even further diminishment of jobs in this sector. Certain stages – such as the picking stage in warehouses – remain labour-intensive, but even this is the focus of immense research to overcome. If one of the classic arguments against the strength of production struggles has been the decline in manufacturing employment, a similar conclusion must follow for circulation struggles as global employment in this area declines. This, in other words, poses a long-term constraint on the power of these struggles.

Despite these qualifications, circulation struggles are likely to become more and more important as surplus populations grow, and as movements around inequality, police brutality, racism, and sexism continue to seek potent points of leverage. Point of production struggles have been significantly constrained in many cases, and point of circulation struggles offer a new avenue for political struggles. But the use of this tactic, as with any tactic, must be situated within a broader strategic reflection on how to build the power of these movements. Only this will enable a better future to be built.