

Class warfare, low class war



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Warfare, Low War When Warren Buffett (2004) wrote to his shareholders in the Berkshire Hathaway 2003 annual report that, " If warfare is being waged in America, my class is clearly winning" it was obvious that Buffett understood the factions in the war and where they stood. He was referring to the ongoing struggle between rich and poor, capital and labor, privileged and underprivileged, and the battle to shift the tax burden progressively downward onto those least able to afford it. Though Buffett was being somewhat sarcastic, he was talking to his wealthy shareholders and they understood winning as expanding their wealth and contributing less to society. To those people, many in the top ten percent of the wealth holders in the US, winning was as simple as playing a game of Monopoly. Winning was in the financial gain, without consideration to the social consequences and cost that would be incurred by the lower classes.

Historically, the lower classes have tolerated a certain degree of worker oppression. The long held myth of American individualism has created a working class that has been slow to unite against low wages, working conditions, and exploitation by the capitalist structure. The belief in manifest destiny, in harmony with an anti-authoritarian attitude, renders many working class people uncomfortable in regards to joining an activist labor movement. They have relied on their industriousness, a belief in the merit system, and have a reluctance to change the system. These same values have staved off corporate rule of the working class, even in the face of firings, violence, and intimidation.

Cultural and social splintering has further hampered the attitude of the American worker. The working class is divided further by the stratification of racism, sexism and ethnocentric attitudes. These internal divisions make it

difficult, if not impossible, to unite the workers behind a common cause.

Capitalism has exploited these class weaknesses to drive wedges between racial and ethnic groups. As Smith (2006) points out, "Whenever employers have been able to use racism to divide Black from white workers, preventing unionization, both Black and white workers earn lower wages." Groups who should share a common goal are split, and end up fearing any organization that would include both parties (Smith, 2006).

Political parties have likewise suffered setbacks due to the promotion of racism and other "isms" in the workplace and society. One of the earliest organizations was the Workingman's Party formed in the late 19th century to unite workers. However, its ultimate goal was to expel the Chinese workers from California (The Workingman's Party, 2000). In the 1930s the Socialist Worker's Party was vilified by the capitalist status quo as being connected to communism. Though they were able to gain some sympathy through the Great Depression, the Red Scare attitudes that dominated the populace would not allow the party to take hold. Labor parties continue to struggle to find a base of support with an adequate coalition that would garner any political clout.

The task facing labor leaders today is to understand the deliberate division that capitalism places on the working class. Racism, sexism, and other social biases need to be understood for the destructive force that they are to all workers. There is a need to work within the complex stratification structure that exists in today's workplace. However, the myth of hierarchy in workplace roles should be exposed so that workers can come to a common goal based on a common set of principles.

References

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