



## Unionism, austerity, and the Left: An interview with Sam Gindin

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*Last November Platypus organized a teach-in led by Sam Gindin of the Canadian Auto Workers on "Public Sector Unionism, Austerity and the Left" at York University in Toronto. What follows is an edited version of the interview Andony Melathopoulos of Platypus conducted with Gindin as a follow up to the teach-in.*

**Andony Melathopoulos:** Clearly these are not very good times for public sector unions, not only in Canada but worldwide. What characterizes the current situation? How does it differ from what unions have faced historically and how they could respond, not only in the 1990s, but during their formation in the 1960s?

**Sam Gindin:** In the 1960s, there was an explosion of the public sector and also, an environment dominated by militancy. But militancy can only take you so far. You have to develop the capacity to challenge structural constraints, and that wasn't on the agenda for labor. The result was its defeat, and, simultaneously, the strengthening of capital. At the time we didn't see the scope of this defeat—our present moment has really shown its scale. One would think the current crisis resolutely delegitimizes capital and the financial system, creating an opening for the radicalization of labor. Instead, labor is weaker than before and capital stronger. This should be recognized as the product of a generational defeat of the labor movement, itself connected to the militant movements of the 1960s. The crisis then is one stemming from the initial *strength* of labor and its collapse rather than as a crisis of international competition. Any gains made by the Left in the 1960s restructured production in such a way that is not without relation to present-day capital. Throughout the 1960s, the organized working class in Europe and North America continued to pose a threat to capitalism, so much so that capital and the state spent a decade trying to figure out how to respond. Even the United States, the supposed core of the global capitalist economy, encountered its limits, such as inflation. So by the end of the 1970s, it became apparent the working class must be broken, and it didn't just happen overnight. It continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, because you never know how far you can go, how many gains fought and won in the past can be lost.

So the 1980s and 1990s are much of the same story, the story of the weakening of the working class and the deepening of capitalism. Even as the United States pushes further towards being the dominant global power, it struggles through the deep recession well into the 1980s, as capitalism emerges at its most dynamic. By the 1990s, capital is integrating eastern Europe and China, and India emerges as a dominant power. Fewer and fewer speak of

leaving capitalism, a common consideration even in the problematic ways it was espoused in the 1960s. Workers' expectations were once quite militant about not wanting the world to continue the way it was. But over time, they have begun to adjust. To maintain your lifestyle, you begin to work longer hours, the kids stay at home longer. What used to be collective struggles began to be solved by individuals. By the late 1990s, the limits of such an approach became incredibly apparent. People began to borrow, using their home as an asset, getting more into debt. So the 1990s are not just about the defeat of labor, but that defeat as the product of a reconceptualization forced by the state of politics, about the complete breaking down of expectations, the reintegration of people in capitalism as individuals rather than a class. Thus capitalism emerges from the 1980s and 1990s dynamically restructured and restored, and labor and the Left leave feeble.

**AM:** You describe this period largely as a response by capital and capitalists. What about the politics of the Left through this period? Are they adequate? I mean, historically hasn't the Left been able to politicize the most dynamic edges of capital reproduction in a way in which it seemed unable to do between 1960 and the present?

**SG:** That's a good question. There are forms of resistance, but in the absence of emancipatory politics, they end up becoming part of the defeat. In 1976 we had a general strike in Canada. The question becomes, what happens if you have a general strike, everybody is intoxicated by their power, and the next day, nothing happens? There wasn't a politicization, much less the onset of a revolution. The 1960s prove exemplary in regards to why the Left ought not exaggerate its power: cultural revolution and anti-war protests do not fundamentally challenge capitalism. While unions could have taken advantage of the moment of capitalist growth to ask for changes in working conditions and hours, they could not challenge capitalism. And while militancy creates a certain space for the Left to raise other questions, nobody was thinking about what unions are, what their inherent limitations are, or what kind of political organizations we need in the long-term. The Left took for granted the existence of a strong working class rather than recognizing that its survival was tied to the fate of working class politics.

So while the 1960s was a period of militancy, we shouldn't exaggerate how far left it was. There was left activism, but there is a difference between being active against the war in Vietnam, and raising the question of socialism. Let me make it more radical. There is nothing spontaneous about workers becoming revolutionary. There is reason to think that they should collectively resist, and then there is reason to believe that they might form organizations for that resistance. But unions are sectionalist organizations, and have no instinct towards the revolutionary. At one historical moment they might be militant, they might inspire, they might raise standards, they might develop confidence, and in another moment in history they might be ineffective, their response might be towards conserving their own existence. It can easily

become "necessary" to reproduce an organization and the conditions that produce that organization. How you break this cycle is hardly objective.

I would characterize the moment right now not as one in which capitalism is legitimated by people thinking it's fair and democratic or that it creates a beautiful world. This might have been so once in capitalism's history. I think right now what reproduces capitalism in developed countries is that workers have actually achieved a lot, and the promise is that you can keep *most of it* if you do not protest. It's a conservative orientation. This is symptomatic of a fatalistic view towards changing the world altogether. I don't know that the Soviet Union's existence really inspired people to another alternative when I was active, but its failure did evoke the belief that nothing else was possible. You didn't have to believe in the Soviet Union, but when you saw that even those guys wanted to be capitalist, it was devastating. Fatalism allows for the lowering of expectations, for wanting to hang onto what has been achieved so far. This can't be overcome by just talking to people, part of it is developing an understanding of the world, but to understand the world you have to feel like it can be changed. Not having organizations capable of expressing our frustrations, whether political organizations or unions, certainly contributes to this pessimism.

**AM:** Could you expand more on the connection between unions and politics? It seems in the present, union activity increasingly greases the wheels of the electoral success of the New Democratic Party (NDP, social democrats) and Liberal Party in Canada, or the Democratic Party in the U.S. At points in this conversation it seems that what you have in mind for an organized form of politics almost appears to be unions in themselves, yet you also suggest there are limits to how far a union movement can independently generate its own politics. What characterizes these limits?

**SG:** Unions can be involved in radical moments, but they certainly aren't able to revolutionize the world in the absence of a Left. Unions today are not in the place to offer spaces for people to listen to more radical ideas, to push political parties or to join them, but are busy just defending themselves, handling grievances, busy competing with one another within industries. But even in their best moments, unions are only a fragment of a much larger, complicated world. The rank and file need to be linked to a Left.

A major issue here is that you have to understand class, a class built for the purposes of transforming society. That doesn't happen spontaneously. Your experience as a worker doesn't teach you that, it teaches you dependency. Class consciousness requires an organization beyond even the most radical union, whose interaction with workers is about understanding their position in society and their links to others. That is the kind of organization you need, and without it, workers look to the union to be merely instrumental in maintaining the world as is. They look to a party in the same way, instrumentally and pragmatically, especially if a party doesn't even pretend to be radical. But even a party like the NDP, which in the short term will be of little help to the individual worker, doesn't have ambitions to be a radicalizing factor for

workers. You look at the party and wonder, how does a party change the world without a newspaper or a journal where they think through difficult things?

**AM:** To turn to the material base for class consciousness, there is a way in which organizing in the public sector, from the perspective of capital and its reproduction, limits its dynamism. As you pointed out, reducing public services were linked to regenerating the dynamic character of capital after the crisis of the 1970s. How can something that is increasingly unimportant to capital reproduction generate a progressive transformation from within it?

**SG:** Well, you certainly don't want to get trapped into arguing for a larger state but you do want to argue for a fight for a more democratic state and workplace. Right now, that kind of strategy, in itself, is only a strategy for giving unions a way to start a struggle rather than passively saying they can't do anything. It has some chance of building alliances and opening the door to begin thinking of issues in class terms, in terms of challenging who runs the workplace and questions about the priorities of the state. But, and this hasn't happened yet, the next step is to honestly and soberly say to people, if they want this they have to become more radical.

This is also true in the private sector. You can't win in auto manufacturing unless you say, "we have a whole different vision of what this productive capacity should be used for." So in each sector you have people making demands that can't be realized unless they fight collectively. But even if they fight collectively, they can't win if it's just about militancy, so then you have to raise questions about capitalism. I don't think any demands take you anywhere automatically, but some allow more than others. You begin to raise questions about who decides what's valuable and what we think is valuable. You raise questions about production and consumption, and democratic planning—it raises a whole bunch of questions about what kind of economy we will have. To me class consciousness is when people know, and you can say to them honestly, "if you really challenge capitalism as a social system, there is going to be chaos and your living standards are going to fall, but it will be an investment in the future." When workers accept that then they are class conscious. When you tell them that when you get rid of capitalism everything will be better, that's not class consciousness.

**AM:** There seem to be two issues for the Left to consider. The first are organizational problems in which the Left could, for example, create the means for workers to overcome the sectionalism of the union movement. The other is the issue of the Left being able to advance a utopian vision. But utopian impulses can misrecognize the potential of a given historical moment, and as you point out, organization can serve very instrumental ends. How would these two elements come together to make a reinvigorated Left?

**SG:** The question is, how do you build a movement that can begin to think in class terms to transform the conditions for unions, or in other words, how do you build a culture where

socialists can influence rank and file workers without supposing that the line between political organizations and unions isn't real and necessary? I think we need to begin by appreciating the limits of unions, but also the potential. On the other hand, one needs a Left beyond unions, a Left that raises questions that wouldn't be addressed otherwise. The Greater Toronto Worker's Assembly (GTWA) is trying to think about how we create a new layer of politics beyond ineffectual coalitions, but we are really struggling because, while we do not want to begin from a point of immediate rigid consensus, we are beginning to recognize how crucial it is to develop a cadre of workers and activists who both embody intellectual understanding and are active. This is especially difficult if you want to be honest about the obstacles we face as a movement, but the role of the Left is to challenge things, to reflect on our failures, to resist repeating the notion that the working class are victims. The prime crisis for both labor and the Left today is the inability to rethink and reinvent our movements, our organizations. We end up reproducing archaic or inept modes of understanding and changing the world. So while I see some movements with good impulses, there aren't many that would be organizationally capable of producing a critical cadre, recruiting from the rank and file, developing socialists, promoting education.

**AM:** There is a way in which, for example, socialism, or Marxism, are subjective aspects of capitalism. They emerge from capitalism but are reflexive and, in their best examples, comprehend its emergence historically. Of course some types of socialism are romantic, and understand their task to mount a resistance to modernity, but some might consider it a transformative process, and not from the outside, but through capitalism. With this in mind I want to bring the conversation back to something you said earlier about patterns of consumption eroding working class capacities. I wonder how much of this is more a product of the degradation of left politics and its growing inability to politicize the changing character of capital?

**SG:** Resistance does come from within capitalism, but for me, Marxism is the attempt to look at capitalism from a perspective that can imagine overcoming it altogether. When I watch comrades jumping from the socialist ship, when they seemed at one point to recognize that capitalism would produce nothing but catastrophe, I wonder what about the world convinced them otherwise. I think many have been disillusioned by the failure to fight for bigger things, a failure which has marked the labor movement for well over a quarter century now. This does seem to suggest that Marxists aren't immune to the cynical fatalism that there may be no going beyond capitalism. I wonder what caused this. Was it a degradation of the politics of the Left? Was it the increasing mindset that one is compensated through individual consumption, not through collective politics? I'm not exactly certain how things have gotten so bad, but it seems to me that without a Left that can keep alive some sort of utopian impulse, some refusal that things must be the way they are, and without organizations that can collectively raise these questions, only individual responses, however unsatisfactory, "make sense." Because for

workers themselves it seems very hard to develop alternative perspectives. When it became evident that the working class would cease to experience increases in standards of living, reflecting social mobility from being on the street or on the picket line, the reaction was not social rebellion or political upheaval. Workers weren't radicalized—they responded to social problems by assuming the responsibility personally. Instead of understanding capitalism as systemically incapable of producing a world of equality or justice or extended freedom, a consciousness that would have to be politically contextualized and delivered, those demands were met by working longer hours, changing one's family structure and how it behaves, and debt, all of which only further the kind of dependency produced under capitalism. If you are so busy working you can't explore yourself intellectually or politically, the opportunities for a Left are slim.

**AM:** As you pointed out earlier one of the reasons why working class neighborhoods surrounding the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) vote conservative is that there is a certain freedom that capital is generating that they do not want to lose. Wouldn't a socialist politics have to engage that subjectivity and understand the ways in which it could advance politically? Without historical consciousness, how could you tell that the ways in which things are getting worse aren't completely natural?

**SG:** Without a historical perspective, you would have to make sense of regression in other less effective ways. When times are bad I think people begin to get nostalgic for an imagined past. You get rid of a specific set of politicians and replace them, and for a while, you might have new hopes. That can keep you going for quite a while. You might even get quite militant, but the militancy is about returning to the past. The difficulty is to eventually convince people of the emptiness of a certain kind of life, without being patronizing. It's enormously difficult, because you are not actually presenting them with a tangible alternative. The role of the Left, then, is to be able to take advantage of a moment to politicize people.

**AM:** Would you agree that the questions arising from this process will not provide political clarification without a ruthless critique? I mean hasn't your experience been that many groups who already consider themselves anti-capitalist or working class use these categories as a way to affirm their own practices, not to change them? Isn't it true, as Adolph Reed wrote, that "the opposition must investigate its own complicity"? Put another way, what does it say about the Left in the present if the only way to have a conversation about capitalism with activists is to put critique to the side?

**SG:** The starting point for reinventing the Left is first, to appreciate the extent of our defeat, and second, to acknowledge that we were not in fact that strong and effective before that defeat, that our defeat was produced out of the limits of our analysis and structures. This means that a ruthless critique of ourselves is fundamental. But this can't mean a retreat from

activism until we've fully clarified the "right" response. Critique and discussions must not occur just by talking among ourselves; self-examination must occur alongside engagement in struggles. Otherwise we're just talking to ourselves with no reality check.

The problem in bringing a wide range of people together in something like the GTWA is that the early focus is on developing working relationships and the fragility of those relationships means that any political discussions are very cautious and tentative—building bridges gets in the way of the critiques and discussions essential to building a new politics. I don't know a way out of this dilemma other than trying to ensure that such caution is transitional and that at some point the "risks" of the harder discussions must be put on the table. We haven't gotten to that point yet in the GTWA. Some of these discussions have been forced on us where we plan events and have to get to the roots of why we don't agree on certain specifics. But the difficult discussions have not really started. Some think it will be impossible to do so without fracturing the organization, that people are too embedded in their current activism, whether in the movements or unions, to seriously re-examine what we are doing. I think these pessimists are likely right, but the possibility that this may in fact work, or that we may learn something from the experience that leads to trying again in a more promising way, is good enough reason to work through the GTWA. I cannot think of an alternative way of working that is more hopeful. | **P**

