



# **PROFESSIONAL POISON**

How Professionals Sabotage  
Social Movements, and Why  
Workers Should Lead Our Fight

**SUSAN ROSENTHAL**



*For Aaron, Aisha, Doug, Eileen, Jane,  
Joyce, Judith, Mike, Patricia, Ron,  
Sabina, Sandy, Ted, Trevor, Wendy...  
and all the other working people who  
could run the world much better than  
it's being run now.*



# *The Cause of Labor is*



# *The Hope of the World*

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# Foreward

by Patricia Campbell

Overworked nurses often complain that nurses are their own worse enemies. We are trained to accept our lot, while senior nurses plan the policies that keep us oppressed.

Nurses cannot understand this. I often hear my coworkers say, “Don’t they know what it’s like on the floor? Haven’t they been here?” *Professional Poison* explains why nursing supervisors are more loyal to employers than to their former colleagues.

*Professional Poison* confirms my own experience that union officials are also professionals who help employers to manage the workforce.

Once, when I was a workplace representative in a mainstream union, my coworker and I waited for a senior union official to join us for a meeting with management. After waiting for some time, we were finally ushered into the manager’s office. We were astounded to find that our union official had been meeting with the employer while we were kept waiting outside!

Understanding is empowering. I recently represented a union member against two professional managers in the health service. Having read *Professional Poison*, I was ready for them.

As I heard their tale of woe, “there is no money” and “things are different now,” I thought, “Oh yes! Things are different now.”

We told them that our union would not tolerate budget-driven decisions that compromise patient care. How can there be no resources, when a private dental company in Northern Ireland has just been given £17 million from the National Health Service?

Rosenthal is right. Rank-and-file workers must lead the fight for improved conditions.

In Ireland, our rank-and-file controlled Independent Workers’ Union is growing steadily and making real gains for workers.

We are the many; they are the few. The arguments in this pamphlet are essential to tipping the balance in our favour.

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**Patricia Campbell** is a community psychiatric nurse in Belfast, Northern Ireland, president of the Independent Workers’ Union of Ireland and co-founder of its affiliate, [UNIVERSI](#), a health workers’ union.

# Professional Poison

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## *How Professionals Sabotage Social Movements, and Why Workers Should Lead Our Fight*

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by Susan Rosenthal

### Introduction

Have you lost your job or your home, or do you fear losing them? Are you drowning in debt? Do you fear for your future and your children's future?

This deepening crisis is squeezing millions of people beyond their ability to cope. Yet policy makers are more concerned with “restoring profitability” than with helping human beings.

What we need is a groundswell of anger that rejects “business first” policies. Yet what we have are thousands of organizations that are too small to make a difference. Why aren't they bigger? Why aren't they united? Where is the mighty roar of protest that we need?

While the policy-makers and the professionals who created this crisis have been discredited, most social change organizations are also led by professionals who think they can manage the system better. That's no solution when the problem is the system itself – a system that puts profits before people.

This pamphlet explains why professionals refuse to challenge capitalism, how they promote pessimism and passivity, and why we need workers to lead the fight for a better life and a better world.

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**Susan Rosenthal** is a Canadian physician and co-founder of  
[International Health Workers for People Over Profit](#)

# What's a Professional?

The term “professional” is often used to describe work that is done well, for example, “that was a professional repair job.” The term also refers to those who are paid for their work, like professional writers and athletes.

In this discussion, the term “professional” refers to people who are specially trained to serve employers and other authorities – to help them make profits and maintain social control.

Professionals may manage the working class directly, as workplace managers and supervisors, or indirectly, as doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, journalists, bankers, bureaucrats, professors, psychologists, psychiatrists and police.

At work and in society, professionals have authority over working people and make decisions that affect their lives.

Professionals think of themselves as natural leaders because they have more education than the average person and more confidence due to their social status. As a result, professionals often head social change organizations.

However, as we shall see, professional qualities and characteristics are the opposite of those needed to change society.

In *Disciplined Minds*, author Jeff Schmidt explains that professional education has a dual purpose: to teach specific skills; and to mold a managerial class to serve capitalism.

“When the professional training system does not malfunction, it selects and produces people who are comfortable surrendering political control over their work, people who are not deeply troubled by the status quo and are willing and able to do work that supports it.” (*DM*, p.144)<sup>1</sup>

## Medical School

Most students apply to professional schools with the dream of making the world a better place. However, these schools select and graduate only those who are willing to serve the existing system.

In 1970, I began medical school with a group of students who were determined to change the world. Our heroes were physicians like Norman Bethune, Ché Guevara and Salvador Allende, who had just been elected president of Chile. We named our student lounge after Bethune and proudly hung a poster of Ché.

Three years later, the economy was in recession, the employers were on the offensive, and a U.S.-backed military coup had murdered Allende and crushed the Chilean worker's movement.

If any of us were still rebels, we kept it to ourselves. One outspoken student was forced to repeat her year. A more stubborn one was kicked out.

I got into trouble by informing a patient that she had almost died from being given a medicine to which she was allergic. The higher-ups were concealing this mistake to avoid a lawsuit, even though the patient would probably die if she took the same drug again. I "broke ranks" because I had been taught, and I believed, that patient welfare should always come first. Silly me.

The school convened a committee to determine if I should graduate. Fortunately for me, a sympathetic professor reassured her colleagues that the problem was "a lack of professional socialization" and that she would take care of it. Afterwards, she warned me that I had to "learn to play the game."

That's when I realized that medical school has two functions: to teach students the skills that they need to work as physicians and, more importantly, to ensure that their first loyalty is to their superiors, regardless of their patients' needs.

## **Brain Washing**

Hospital training provides the perfect brain-washing conditions and the final testing ground for medical graduates.

We were run off our feet, deprived of sleep and food, dominated, interrogated, humiliated and confined to the building for days at a time.

Our heads were stuffed with facts. We were taught to give the "right" answers. We were expected to question, but never to question our superiors. We did as they said, even when we knew

they were wrong. We learned to cover their butts and our own. By the end of our training,

“...deep down something has changed...Students who once spoke critically of the system are...careful not to be provocative – not to do or say anything that might displease individuals in authority. Any opposition is now sufficiently abstract and theoretical to not be provocative.” (*DM*, p.121)

At graduation, my formerly diverse class looked and talked the same. Somewhere along the way, we had traded our dreams of social change for money and status. We were the successful products of the professional training system.

## **Conservative Professionals**

The ruling class needs professional help to manage the capitalist system, and professional think-tanks developed to meet this need.

In the U.S., the Brookings Institution was founded in 1916 and the American Enterprise Institution in 1943. Like most U.S. think-tanks, they are conveniently located in Washington.

During the 1960s, American universities became centers for student organizing against the war in Vietnam and for civil rights for Blacks, women and gays. Even professional students were becoming critical of the system.

In 1970, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell joined his colleagues in expressing concern that universities were turning out too many left-wing professionals. To counter this trend, he proposed that wealthy conservatives finance more think-tanks.

The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973, and the Manhattan Institute and the Cato Institute followed.

Flush with funds from corporate donors, these and other conservative think-tanks pay professionals to promote corporate interests on Capitol Hill, in newspaper and magazine articles and on radio, television and the internet.

Two conservative victories of the 1990s, the attack on welfare

and zero-tolerance policing, were hatched inside conservative think-tanks.

The attack on affirmative action was supported by racist books like *The Bell Curve*, which came out of the American Enterprise Institute. And the Cato Institute continues its push to privatize social services, including Social Security.

Conservative think-tanks oppose unions, government-funded services, abortion and gay marriage. They promote private schools, private health care, lower taxes, anti-immigration policy, tougher prison sentences and expansion of “the war on terror.”

The oil industry funds conservative professionals to deny or minimize climate change.

The tobacco industry supports conservative professionals to dispute the link between tobacco and cancer.

Taser International pays conservative professionals to ensure that no judge or jury ever cites their product as a factor in anyone’s death.

When society goes into crisis, an army of conservative professionals is mobilized to defend the existing power structure.

Provided with easy access to the media, conservative “experts” insist that borrowers, not banks caused the collapse of the financial system, that governments should bail out industry, not industrial workers, and that profits should be protected, while workers should sacrifice their wages, benefits, pensions and social services.

## **Liberal Professionals**

Liberal professionals also play an important role in preserving capitalism. When conservative professionals are discredited and people lose confidence in the system, liberal professionals serve as the voice of caution and moderation.

The American two-party electoral system uses conservatives and liberals as a kind of tag-team to stabilize the system.

When people turn against the conservative Republican Party and demand change, the liberal Democratic Party steps in to advocate evolution, not revolution. When little changes and people become fed up with business-as-usual, the conservatives stage a

comeback, until they too are discredited and replaced.

The American two-party system has proved highly effective in preventing the rise of any alternative to capitalism.

## **Professional Activists**

Professionals who want to improve the world, through their jobs or in social change organizations, are handicapped by their professional training.

As the following sections explain, the skills that are required to serve an oppressive system are the opposite of the skills required to challenge that system.

Take the example of medical professionals who care for the oppressed and exploited, the sick and the injured. These professionals are conditioned not to support their patients' struggles against the system, because that would turn troubled people into troublemakers. Instead, "the helping professions" practice social control disguised as treatment.

## **Social Control as Treatment**

Medical professionals are trained not to question the health of the society to which the patient must be adjusted, but to make the best adjustment possible.

Physically-injured workers receive only those treatments that support the quickest return to the work that injured them. Psychologically-injured workers are treated the same.

Psychiatrists, psychologists and other therapists divert people away from their conflicts with the system and focus instead on the patients' own faults, failings and inner conflicts. The burden of change is laid upon the patient, who is expected to adapt to the system. The system itself is never questioned.

As more people fall victim to unbearable social conditions, medical professionals have fewer resources with which to manage them. Professionals who protest these conditions or raise social questions are condemned as "political." In reality, not protesting and not questioning are equally political.

## Professional Loyalty

I recently spent a morning handing out leaflets protesting cuts to staff and services at our local hospital. Most of the workers took a leaflet, but an ER physician, a nurse and an ambulance attendant refused on the basis that “It wouldn’t be professional.” Why did the workers and the professionals react so differently?

Employers and workers have conflicting interests. Bosses want workers to produce as quickly as possible to boost profits. Workers want to slow down to preserve their health. Bosses want to lower wages to cut costs. Workers want higher wages to pay their bills.

Because their interests conflict, employers must dominate workers.

In contrast, employers need their managers to be loyal and to fear their disapproval. So, while workers must be subordinated, professionals are trained to subordinate themselves – to accept without question the politics and priorities that are built into their work and into society.

To meet the needs of employers, professional schools train students to embrace the goals of their superiors *as if they were their own*, so that the professional will function as the eyes and ears of the boss and carry out the boss’s wishes when the boss isn’t there.

That’s why the hospital workers welcomed my leaflets, while the professionals (and the workers who think of themselves as professionals) rejected them.

The professional deference to power makes it easy for professional reformers to be incorporated into the same power structures they set out to change.

When the system goes into crisis, the ruling class will offer professional reformers a small share of power if they agree to administer the same austerity policies they formerly opposed.

Few professionals refuse, because they believe they can manage the system better than anyone else. Of course, the system they hunger to manage is oppressive and corrupt, but that’s no problem for professionals.

Professionals are enamored by power *in any form*. The greater

the power, the more eager they are to subordinate themselves to it.

As soon as the Nazis took power in Germany, professional associations of engineers, lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, scientists and other professionals rushed to pledge their support because “good subordinates don’t make moral judgements about their superiors.” (*DM*, p.207)

## **Professionalism is Anti-Union**

Employers use “professionalism” as a weapon to control the workforce.

Being a professional means that you *never* question your superiors or the social order, even to save your job. As one magazine advised, “If you’re laid off, don’t get angry and make a scene. Be a professional, and leave quietly.”

Employers in hospitals and other healthcare settings play the professional card to promote class snobbery and drive a wedge between more-skilled workers and less-skilled ones.

An emphasis on professionalism can block nurses from recognizing their interests as workers, despite the fact that, with the exception of nurse managers and supervisors, most nurses are working class.<sup>2</sup>

Studies show that patients fare better when nurses are unionized. However, non-unionized nurses are easier to exploit, so managers call on nurses to act professionally. That means nurses should never organize to defend their working conditions and their patients’ rights, and they should never “abandon” their patients by working-to-rule or going on strike.

In reality, all health workers have more in common with one another other than they have with managers who care more about the budget than they care about patients’ needs.

Nurses and other skilled workers can feel proud of their dedication and expertise and also reject professionalism in favor of militant unionism.

In California, unionized nurses fought and won Nurse-to-Patient Ratio legislation that was bitterly opposed by employers and politicians who condemned the nurses as unprofessional.

## **Professionals are a Conservative Force**

Whether professionals are personally conservative or liberal, their special training and their managerial role combine to make them a conservative force in society.

Studies show that the stereotype of the independent-minded professional and the close-minded worker is the reverse of reality. Because professional education has a hidden curriculum of subordination, the college-educated are more likely to trust the people in power.

Schmidt cites a 1970 U.S. Gallup poll that asked whether or not people favored an immediate withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. Those with more education were more likely to support the government and the war. The college-educated opposed immediate withdrawal by more than two to one, while those who had not gone past elementary school were evenly divided. High school graduates fell between these two groups.

Subsequent polls have shown the same connection. The more time people spend in school, the more likely they are to trust the authorities and to accept government policies.

Compared with students, workers seem more conservative because they are more reluctant to get involved in political protest. Workers fear losing their jobs, and they know that employers view political activists as troublemakers. In contrast, students have less to lose and are freer to organize.

## **Liberal Beliefs, Conservative Practice**

Compared with workers, professionals seem more progressive because they are usually more informed.

In practice, professionals share the same views as the authorities they serve, making them much more conservative than the workers they manage. Schmidt notes,

“[A]lthough professionals may be liberal on this or that question of the day, they tend to be very conservative on a

long-standing issue of much greater importance to society: democracy. Discuss politics with a liberal professional and you will not hear a word in favor of a more democratic distribution of power in society, perhaps because in the professional's view ignorant non-professionals make up the large majority of the population. Even the most liberal professionals tend toward authoritarianism in their social visions." (*DM*, p.13)

Professionals don't question the system, so they respond to social problems in a predictable manner:

They begin by expressing sincere concern and a genuine desire to help. When moral pressure fails to solve the problem, professionals will "adapt to reality" and become the managers of misery.

Instead of condemning the system, professionals call for charity to support the victims of the system. They never organize the victims of the system to fight for themselves.

Professionals see nothing wrong in appealing for help to the source of the problem. They will ask for government funds to research the impact of government cuts, and they will appeal to the food industry to support food banks. Schmidt concludes,

"Whatever the issue, the rebel and the expert stand out in sharp distinction to each other. In any discussion, the expert's lack of political independence – his loyalty – becomes apparent immediately, as he confines his thinking to technical solutions – making adjustments, fine-tuning the system. He may offer a multitude of ways to deal with a problem, but, as if by magic, not a single one would reduce the flow of profits or otherwise disturb the hierarchical distribution of power." (*DM*, p.204)

## **Professionals are Elitist**

Employers rely on professionals to keep the workforce under control, so professional schools select candidates who are elitist and reinforce this characteristic.

Elitism is the anti-democratic belief that only a select few are

capable of being in charge and making important decisions.

This emphasis on elitism ensures that “professional training does anything but produce people who envision a more democratic social order.” (*DM*, p.208)

In social change organizations, professionals do not see it as their mission to develop other people’s confidence and skills. On the contrary, professional leaders subordinate others, as they were subordinated in their training. The result is two-tiered organizations composed of experts and their subordinates (“somebodies” and “nobodies”).

Why should Martha summon the courage to give a talk, if the leader can do it better? Why should John chair a meeting, if the leader can do it better? And why should Jane organize a rally, if the leader can do it better?

Daily humiliation at the hands of bosses, bureaucrats and professionals keep most workers feeling so low that they think they have no choice but to accept similar treatment in their own organizations.

## **Professionals are Authoritarian**

Having been indoctrinated by authoritarian institutions, professionals carry authoritarian methods into their social activism.

Leaders who see themselves *primarily* as experts or authorities believe that they are entitled to lead because of their superior knowledge and social position. And they insist on maintaining their position as leaders, even when they fail to advance the organization’s goals.

Leaders who demand that others defer to them at all times do not challenge capitalism; they reinforce it. This is a turn-off for anyone who wants to fight the system.

People who question the social order are rebels, and rebels won’t put up with authoritarian leaders in the movement. They will challenge the lack of democracy, or they will leave.

Leaders who enforce top-down control by bullying and other underhanded methods find that they are left with only submissive members, and submissive people do not challenge anything.

Schmidt concludes,

“Individuals who call themselves radical professionals, but who think of themselves as professionals first, are in essence liberals. Such people make the social reform movement unattractive by bringing to it the same elitism, the same inequality of authority and ultimately, the same hierarchy of ‘somebodies’ and ‘nobodies’ that turns people off to the status quo in the first place.” (*DM*, p.266)

One cannot counter the inequality of capitalism with organizations that are steeped in inequality.

## **Professionals Promote Cults**

Professional leaders are genuinely committed to the goals of their organizations, whether those goals are to improve social services or facilitate revolutionary change. The problem is not their commitment, but their corrupt conviction that these goals can be reached *only if they are in charge and everyone does what they say*.

Frustrated with the presumed stupidity and incompetence of official policy-makers, professionals and aspiring professionals view their organizations not as a means to challenge capitalism but as a means to promote themselves as better policy-makers or advisors to policy-makers.

Organizations that are dominated by such professionals become cults. The organization’s *stated* goal doesn’t change, but its *actual* goal is to promote the leader.

When this happens, all the social relations of capitalism are reproduced: unaccountable leaders, top-down decision-making, a division between “somebodies” and “nobodies,” bullying, betrayal, corruption and deceit.

Cults are structured to keep the leader in power. Principled debate is discouraged in favor of uniformity in thought. Those who question the leader are treated as disloyal and are isolated or expelled. Deference is rewarded, and initiative is crushed or

micro-managed to prevent rival leaders from developing.

To boost the leader's image, the size and influence of the organization is inflated. Work done by others is credited to the leader, while mistakes and failings are blamed on the members.

When these organizations fail to grow, as fail they must, everyone but the leader is blamed.

A misguided belief in the leader and a lack of confidence in themselves can cause members to accept the oppressive structure of their organization and their own subordination, even to the point of opposing calls for more democratic decision-making.

On the rare occasion that professional leaders are voted down, they do not respect the will of the majority. They leave the organization to form rival groups, taking as many members as possible with them. They will insist that they are leaving on matters of principle, but the only principle involved is their conviction that only they are qualified to lead the movement.

## **Consensus is Undemocratic**

Professionals reject majority rule in favor of consensus decision-making or deciding by general agreement.

Consensus decision-making is based on the lie that everyone has the same interests under capitalism. In reality, the interests of employers and professionals conflict with the interests of workers, who are pressured to submit to their "superiors."

Consensus decision-making favors professionals and students who have time and energy for the long discussions needed to reach unanimous agreement.

Working people cannot talk all night because they have to take the babysitter home and get up early for work. Organizations that don't respect such time constraints can't retain working-class members or help them to develop as leaders.

Professionals have more time and more confidence to promote their views, so they tend to dominate groups that rely on consensus decision-making. These "leaders" are not voted in, so they cannot be voted out. The result is unaccountable leadership.

Consensus decision-making is democratic in theory and

authoritarian in practice. To prevent continual paralyzing conflict, dissenters are pressured to submit or leave.

In time, consensus-based organizations become too uniform to incorporate new members. That's no problem for professionals, who prefer small over large, exclusive over inclusive, process over results and talk over action.

Professionals prefer to lead small groups that fail to reach their goals than be rank-and-file members of larger, more democratic and more effective organizations.

## **Angry Professionals**

Some professionals become so disgusted by the work they are required to do that they turn against the system they were trained to serve.

In her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson, a government-employed biologist, condemned the damage caused by DDT and other pesticides. In 1971, military analyst Daniel Ellsberg leaked top-secret government documents exposing Washington's lies about its war against Vietnam. Carson and Ellsberg were hounded mercilessly, and Ellsberg narrowly escaped assassination.

These courageous "whistle-blowers" are the exception, because professional schools do their best to exclude advocates for the oppressed who will cause trouble for employers and other authorities. As a result, professionals are also poor advocates for themselves.

I recently received an appeal for funds to support physicians who are cracking under the strain of too much work.

In 1998, 62 percent of Canadian physicians reported that their workload was too heavy. By 2003, 46 percent of doctors were feeling "ineffective, emotionally overrun and exhausted by their work." By 2008, one in four physicians reported some form of mental illness (primarily depression) that was serious enough to interfere with their jobs.

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) attributes this growing crisis to higher work loads, inadequate resources and loss of control over how medical care is provided.

Instead of demanding more staff and more resources to ease the workload, the CMA launched a National Physician Health and Well-Being Program “to enable physicians to create their own health and well-being strategies.”

In the U.S., the Joint Committee for the Accreditation of Health Organizations advises physicians that the key to managing stress is “putting yourself first, staying healthy and paying prompt attention to illness. If you do that, no one gets impaired.”

In Britain, psychologists are studying the “learning style” of doctors to identify which ones are more likely to “burn out” at work.

*None of these measures solve the problem of too few people doing too much work.* On the contrary, they blame the victim to protect the system.

We need a united front of *all* health workers (doctors, nurses, technicians, orderlies, cleaners, kitchen staff and clerical workers) along with patients and their families to demand more funding for healthcare. But professionals will never organize it, because they are programmed to uphold social divisions, not break them down.

Professionals view group action as disloyal and “low class.” They would rather suffer in silence, blame themselves or leave their jobs than be labeled as common agitators and troublemakers.

“Professionals are angry about abuses of power, but having no vision of how power in the schools, in the workplace and in the larger society could be distributed more democratically, they naturally look for ways to make the present hierarchical power structures work. Here the choices are limited – re-staff the hierarchy with ‘better people’ or give those at the top even more power so they can ‘act decisively.’ So even the most well-meaning individuals end up reinventing some such elitist or authoritarian solution.” (*DM*, p.208)

## **The Truth is Not Enough**

The professional response to injustice is not to organize people but to educate them. Professionals believe that social change takes

place at the individual level, and if enough individuals know enough about the problem, then society will (somehow) change.

I once attended a lecture by Dr Helen Caldicott, whose mission is to educate the public about the dangers of nuclear power. As Caldicott neared the end of her speech, a young woman cried out in terror, “We’re all going to die! We’re all going to die!”

Facts can anger people into action, but they can also reinforce passivity and pessimism.

Everyone knows that smoking damages your health. Everyone knows that fast food clogs your arteries. Everyone knows that lack of exercise shortens your life. Yet people continue to smoke, eat fast food and fail to exercise.

The knowledge that they are harming themselves does not empower most people; it provides them with more evidence of their powerlessness.

The shock-them-into-change strategy doesn’t work when it comes to health. Yet professionals still embrace it as their strategy of choice.

When explaining how bad things are proves ineffective, the shock factor is jacked up, as if yelling louder will make the difference. When that fails, pessimism sets in, and the bulk of humanity is written off as ignorant or uncaring.

Professionals never blame capitalism for social problems. They blame the victims of the system for making bad choices (“People were irresponsible to take out mortgages they couldn’t afford”) and for being apathetic (“People just don’t care enough to stop the war”). The reverse is true.

Capitalism is structured to prevent most people from having any control over their lives or society, *regardless of what they know*.

Professionals don’t understand their own role in maintaining that control and in generating that “apathy,” which is not apathy at all, but a profound sense of powerlessness that stems from class oppression.

It’s infuriating to hear the same professionals who manage, justify and prop up this corrupt system blame ordinary people for not doing more to solve the world’s problems!

# Who Needs Educating?

Professional reformers alternate between lecturing the public on how it should behave and appealing to the people in power to make “wiser” decisions.

“[The professional does not call] for breaking down the hierarchy and distributing the power democratically to those who do the work, but for more “intelligence” at the top – an elitist approach, which weakens alliances with non-professionals. He challenges the staffing, not the structure. He fumes, ‘Incompetents! Stupid bureaucrats! These idiots don’t know what they’re doing!’”(DM, p.209)

The fight for public healthcare is filled with professionals who are busy documenting the inefficiency of private, for-profit healthcare systems.

There’s no question that public systems can deliver more services to more people at lower cost. However, the function of capitalism is to maximize profit, not to meet human needs. Most professionals refuse to acknowledge this, preferring to spend their energy and ours in useless efforts to “educate” politicians.

At one lecture I attended, the speaker emphasized how much waste there is in the medical system – money spent on restructuring and privatization that would be better spent on patient care. From a human perspective, this is true. But from the perspective of capitalism, this is not waste at all, but the planned and profitable transfer of public funds into private hands.

The people in power know exactly what they’re doing – putting profits first. The professional “dares not admit to himself that those he serves may be smart and well-informed but simply have different class interests – that is, he cannot risk admitting to himself that he has been hired to serve interests that conflict with his own.” (DM, p.209)

We don’t need to “educate” politicians about the “waste” in the system. We need to *reject* their pro-business agenda and demand that people’s needs come first.

# Why Workers Should Lead

I thought up this little story to describe the three classes:

A dozen CEOs are meeting and the light goes out. It's not their problem and they find another room. A dozen professionals are meeting and the light goes out. As they wait for someone to come and fix it, they discuss the importance of light and how frustrating it is not to have it. A dozen workers are meeting and the light goes out. They fix the light.

Where professionals are talkers, workers are doers. Without their daily labor there would be no goods and no services, and the global economy would grind to a halt.

Where professionals are individualists, workers are socialists. Despite the divisions and competition imposed by capitalism, workers must cooperate on the job. One worker doesn't build a car; many do.

Workers must also pull together to improve their conditions and to defend themselves against the employers' relentless demands for higher productivity and more profits.

When the going gets tough, professionals can leave the movement because they have personal alternatives. Workers don't have personal alternatives. They must move forward together, as a class, or they can't move forward at all.

Cooperation and solidarity are embodied in the working-class slogans, "United We Stand; Divided We Fall," "An Injury to One is an Injury to All," and "What We Want for Ourselves, We Want for All." These principles fit the needs of humanity equally well.

The working class is our best hope for abolishing the rule of profit and solving humanity's most pressing problems. That's because the working class is the majority class, the most organized class, the most globally-integrated class and the only class that actually produces anything.

The working class continues to produce for capitalism, because it does not yet believe in its ability to produce for itself. And workers' unions are structured to keep things that way.

## Union Professionals

Most unions are dominated by professionals, but it wasn't always this way.

Genora (Johnson) Dollinger describes the confidence and self-organization of auto workers in 1937, when they fought the largest corporation in the world (General Motors) to win a union.

“Every time something came up that couldn't be settled, or the workers got a tough foreman who told them, “Go to hell,” they'd shut down the line. The men were so cocky, they'd say to the foremen, “You don't like it?” They'd push the button and shut down the line.”<sup>3</sup>

During the late 1930s, American unions were so powerful that employers needed the government's help to crush them.

In 1938, Congress formed the Special Committee on Un-American Activities to rout out “radical subversives.” After WWII, anti-communist propaganda was used to purge socialists and other radicals from the labor movement.

Union professionals helped to gut the unions. Between 1949 and 1950, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) expelled 11 Communist-Party-led unions. By 1954, 59 unions barred communists from holding union office, and 40 unions prohibited communists from being members.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, union professionals bargained away workers' control on the job in exchange for higher wages and benefits. As a result, the unions were transformed from fighting organizations controlled by workers to bureaucratic organizations dominated by professionals.

In the 1970's, union professionals helped employers to “downsize” and “restructure,” arguing that concession contracts were necessary to save jobs.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, working conditions got even worse. The more profits rose, the more employers demanded and the more union officials conceded. By 2005, the unionization rate

for private-sector workers in the U.S. had dropped below eight percent, the lowest level in more than a century.

## **Class-Divided Unions**

Today's unions are working-class organizations of self-defence *and* part of the management system of capitalism. While most union members are working class (the rank and file), most union officials are professionals who help to manage the workforce.

Unlike other professionals, union professionals are elected (although many are not). Also, union professionals are paid by the people they manage (union members) and must provide them with services in return. In all other ways, union professionals (also called officials or bureaucrats) are just like other professionals – they accept the priorities of the system, and they make sure that the people they manage do the same.

Union officials talk tough, and they will even lead struggles for workers' rights, but they would rather compromise with employers than unleash the power of the rank and file. Not only do union professionals fear losing control, they could also lose their jobs because activated workers don't need professional leaders; they are quite capable of organizing themselves.

Like all professionals, union professionals have the same goal as employers – to keep the company in business. And that means keeping it profitable.

When workers rebel in wild-cat strikes, union officials help employers get workers back on the job. Afraid to challenge the system, union professionals do what all professionals do; they lower expectations of what the system can deliver.

Betrayal by union professionals has spurred workers to build democratic, rank-and-file groups inside their unions (Teamsters for a Democratic Union, New Directions, United Health Workers-West, etc.). In *Democracy is Power: Rebuilding Unions From the Bottom Up*, Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle write,

“Let's be clear: the goal of our movement is not just bigger unions. It's for working people to function as human beings –

not bootlicks, not cogs – starting with our jobs, where we spend most of our waking hours. When we leave our jobs at the end of the day, we should be as healthy as when we started. We should be able to look at the next day, and our retirement years, with a feeling of security, not dread. Our larger goal is for workers to exert power collectively in the workplace and society — and for that you need much more than bigger unions. You need powerful workers.”<sup>4</sup>

Achieving this power requires union members to organize *across* unions – in workers councils. This step is crucial, not only to fight bosses and union professionals, but to lay the foundation for a democratic, worker-run society.

## What is Democracy?

Most people have no idea what real democracy is.<sup>5</sup> “Democracy” literally means “rule of the people.”

Genuine democracy is alien to capitalism, which is based on the rule of the capitalist class. Under capitalism, as in any class-divided society, a powerful few make decisions that serve their interests, while the majority has no say. The majority gets to vote, but not on anything that matters. This *illusion* of democracy is necessary to secure majority consent to minority rule.

Fake democracies separate politics and economics. The electorate is not allowed to vote for a different social system, only for candidates with different ideas on how to run the capitalist system. The social priorities and the day-to-day operations of capitalism are decided by executives, bureaucrats, judges, generals, financiers and professionals who are never elected.

Workers don’t get to vote on what goods they will produce, what services they will provide, the conditions of work, economic and social policy, war and foreign relations, etc.

Fake democracies display a huge gap between what most people want and what politicians deliver. In the U.S., most people want a government-funded medical system, yet politicians refuse

to provide it. While public officials emphasize terrorism, taxes and crime, a 2005 poll found that terrorism was a priority for only nine percent of Americans, taxes were important to only six percent, and crime was a key issue for only three percent. Jobs, healthcare, war and the environment are much more important. However, these vital matters are never put to a vote.

Real democracy requires community and cooperation. The powerful people who run this world have no problem with these *concepts*, but they totally oppose any effort to bring them to life by abolishing class divisions.

To protect their undemocratic system, the capitalist class must turn people away from any consideration of shared social control. They've done an excellent job.

While everyone loves the concept of community, the term "communist" gets no such love. The question, "Are you a communist?" is equivalent to asking if you are a serial killer, a wife beater or a child molester.

Real democracy poses such a threat that the ruling class will unite with sworn enemies to prevent it.

## **The Paris Commune**

In 1871, as the Prussian army advanced on Paris, the French king and his troops fled to Versailles. Determined to defend their city, the people of Paris organized the world's first democratic government, the Paris Commune.

The Paris Commune was a government of the people for the people. During the two months of its existence, the Commune disbanded the police and armed the population to defend the city. Abandoned factories were reopened under workers' control, and plans were made to provide free education, day nurseries and equal pay for women.

The word "communist" was first coined to describe supporters of the Paris Commune. Around the world, the rich and their supporters spat this word with fear and contempt, while working people embraced it with pride and hope.

Refusing to tolerate a people's government in the capital city,

France's rulers made a despicable deal. They agreed to suspend their war with Prussia if the Prussians would allow the French army to enter Paris, destroy the Commune and retake the city. Surprised by this treachery, the Commune was crushed.

Despite this defeat, the Paris Commune and subsequent working-class rebellions and revolutions inspire us with what is possible. While cynics point to a string of defeats as a reason not to keep trying, each defeat teaches us more about what we need to do to succeed in creating a global working-class democracy.

## Keeping Us Down

The ruling class is so frightened of real democracy that it can't let working people have *any* control over their lives. Who we have sex with, who we marry, whether we reproduce, how we raise our children, what drugs we take and even our personal beliefs are all heavily controlled by the State. Violation of the personal right-to-decide is so taken-for-granted that ordinary people get caught up in debates about *how* the State should control individual behavior. *The right of the State to dictate such matters is rarely questioned.*

Genuine democracies treat individual matters as strictly personal. The Paris Commune abolished "the morality police." The Russian Revolution struck down all legislation regulating personal behavior, including laws against homosexuality, prostitution and abortion. Divorce was granted on request. In contrast, socially harmful behaviors like hoarding and speculation were not tolerated.

The opposite happens under capitalism. Exploitation and oppression are practiced freely, while individual behavior is micro-managed.

Supporters of capitalism defend its lack of democracy by claiming that the majority doesn't know how to make good decisions. There is some truth to this – *the majority would make decisions that aren't good for the capitalist class.*

Conflicting class interests are the real reason why workers are denied any power and why the capitalist class needs a professional class to oppress the working majority.

## Professional Poison

The capitalists can end this economic crisis only by driving down the standard of living of the working class – making people work harder for less. They can't do this by force alone; they must convince us to make this sacrifice. And that's the job of professionals – to convince us that there is no alternative.

When workers refuse to be bamboozled and move to solve their own problems, professionals move to block them, because professionals cannot imagine workers running the world.

During the 1980's, liberal economist Jeffrey Sachs pressured Poland's mass working-class movement, *Solidarity*, to reconcile with the capitalist class because, as he put it,

“What, after all, were the alternatives? Civil war? A quick descent into a new tyranny? Anarchy? A new conflict with the West?”<sup>6</sup>

Sachs, the economic professional, rejects the possibility of a society run by and for the majority class.

As the current crisis deepens, liberals like journalist Chris Hedges warn that if the system is allowed to collapse,

“A furious and sustained backlash by a betrayed and angry populace, one unprepared intellectually and psychologically for collapse, will sweep aside the Democrats and most of the Republicans. A cabal of proto-fascist misfits...will find a following with promises of revenge and moral renewal.”<sup>7</sup>

Both conservative and liberal professionals view workers as a mindless rabble who will instinctively follow hate-mongers and tyrants.

In reality, the individualistic professional and middle classes have historically formed the core of fascist movements.

Working people are much more organized and sensible. That *anything* works in this world is due to their collective efforts.

## Our Challenge

Three interconnected poisons are paralyzing our movement:

- Professionalism – “Let the experts handle it”
- Passivity – “What I do doesn’t matter”
- Pessimism – “It’s useless to try to change anything”

We must overcome them all if we want to move forward.

**Professionals dominate the social movements, not because they are the best organizers and the best problem solvers, but because workers feel too unconfident to challenge them.**

Fortunately feelings can change, and they change fastest when people move into action. The challenge is to convince working people that they *can* organize themselves to solve their own problems and to find ways to demonstrate this *in practice*.

## The Power of WE

Capitalism deliberately divides workers by nation, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, etc. to ensure that people are too disorganized and too fearful to challenge the rule of profit.

Solidarity is the best medicine. Those daily deprivations, that churning anger and that sinking dread all vanish when you join with scores of others to yell at the tops of your lungs, and the sound bounces off the buildings telling the whole world that you are FED UP and won’t take it any more!

Spirited rallies, marches and pickets, even small ones, generate a deep sense of joy. Being a part of something bigger than yourself and feeling a sense of mutual support raise people’s hope and confidence.

What does it change? It changes *us*. As we work together for our common benefit, we break down the walls between us. As we feel our united strength, we raise our expectations of what we can achieve. Passivity and pessimism give way to the energy and passion that can push our struggle forward and change the world.

## A Victory for One is a Victory for All

Workers can accomplish a tremendous amount when they organize to solve their own problems. Consider the occupation of Republic Windows & Doors.

In December, 2008, 250 members of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union, Local 1110 were given three days' notice that their Chicago factory was closing and they would get no severance pay. Shocked and angry, the workers voted to occupy their factory and *demand* what was owed to them.

The 6-day occupation brought messages of support from across America and around the world. Thousands of people donated food and sent money. Solidarity pickets sprang up outside the factory and at branches of the Bank of America, which had refused to extend credit to Republic, despite being given \$25 billion in federal bailout funds.

On December 10, the Bank of America agreed to pay the workers \$1.75 million in severance and vacation pay and medical benefits. Inspired by this victory, Visteon workers in Belfast and London successfully occupied their factories a few months later.

The working class is an international class, so that any worker's victory is a victory for the entire class.

## Apply Working-Class Solutions

Professionals respond to problems at work, or anywhere else, in one of the following ways:

1. There is no problem.
2. It's your problem. Stop whining. You're lucky to have a job.
3. There's no money to solve the problem.
4. If there is a problem, you must go through "proper channels."

These responses are designed to contain problems, not solve them. The workers in Chicago, Belfast and London applied a much more effective working-class response.

A working-class response to problems:

1. If even one person has a problem, there is a problem.
2. If anyone has a problem, then everyone has a problem.
2. People's needs come first. Find the money.
4. Do whatever it takes to solve the problem.

This strategy can be applied to any problem. Take the example of a hospital that refuses to pay the overtime premium for ER nurses because "it's not in the budget."

This is a problem for *every* nurse in the hospital, not just in the ER. And it's a problem for all the patients who will have fewer nurses to care for them. And it's a problem for all the families of the nurses and all the families of the patients. It's also a problem for the entire working class because if one section can be forced to work for less, then everyone can be forced to work for less.

As many people as possible should be mobilized, inside and outside the hospital, to demand that the nurses be paid and to demand this in public and as loudly as possible.

Most important – do not be divided! If any individual or group is targeted, then everyone must mobilize in their defense.

The professionals will scream, "that's not how we do things!" They will attack the nurses for being "unprofessional" and "disloyal" and for not "working through proper channels." Ignore them. These "channels" were designed to individualize social problems to protect the power structure.

Using working-class tactics, we can begin to win small victories. Each victory will make it easier to win the next one as we gain skill and confidence. Each setback will force us to clarify what we are up against and what we need to do differently.

This rotten system takes so much and gives so little. The role of professionals is to prevent us from seeing that the solution lies in our own hands, the hands that make everything work.

With the working class in the lead, we can free ourselves from the inequality, deprivation and brutality of capitalism. And we can build a new world, where we all pitch in to take care of one another.

## Notes

1. *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives*, by Jeff Schmidt (2000). Rowman & Littlefield, 293 pages.
2. For more on workers who perform some managerial functions (social workers, grade-school teachers, prison guards and ground-level soldiers) see, “The grey zones,” pp.149-150, [\*POWER and Powerlessness\*](#), by Susan Rosenthal (2006). Trafford. 237 pages.
3. *Striking Flint: Genora (Johnson) Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Strike*, (1996). Chicago: Haymarket, p.25. Also available [online](#), pp.35-36
4. *Democracy is Power: Rebuilding Unions From the Bottom Up*, by Mike Parker & Martha Gruelle (2005). Detroit: Labor Education and Research Project, p.xi.
5. “The Lies that Bind Us, [\*POWER and Powerlessness\*](#), pp.82-94.
6. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Time*, by Jeffrey Sachs (2005). Penguin Press, p.135.
7. “[Resist or Become Serfs](#),” Chris Hedges, *Truthdig*, April 6, 2009.



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