Social Justice: Too little and Too Late to Demand More Pay and Better Jobs? (Part 2)

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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When the Titanic is in view of the giant iceberg, is it the moment to start reforming shipping practices? When Fukushima has blown, is it time to ponder how to better power the industrial economy? Is it not instead imperative in both cases to reverse course or sharply turn away? Clearly, we need to keep our eye on the ball, and keep from being distracted by fear tactics: headlines about Qadhafi, bin Laden and the next boogeyman.

On the economic and social justice front, despite the ecological reality of our life support system's possibly shutting down, the same old liberal call for reforms is heard. Granted, an unjust economy is at root of today's threats, and beneficial changes could ameliorate much. But we need to examine just what "we" are demanding, and double check the "vision factor." Where do we need to be going in a post-peak oil world? What kind of culture is called for when Western Civilization is apparently heading toward human extinction?

My previous article this week, "Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation," is now Part 1, and you are reading Part 2. The "dominant critique" was identified as the increasingly unworkable demand for reforming a broken, illegitimate system. The day after the article appeared on Culture Change, and the day before it appeared on AlterNet.org and quoted in CommonDreams.org, Noam Chomsky's article on the labor movement was published on Truthout.org.

This is one way to look at May Day and the labor movement's challenges:

The International Assault on Labor

In most of the world, May Day is an international workers' holiday, bound up with the bitter 19th-century struggle of American workers for an eight-hour day. The May Day just past leads to somber reflection. A decade ago, a useful word was coined in honor of May Day by radical Italian labor activists: 'precarity.' It referred at first to the increasingly precarious existence of working people 'at the margins' - women, youth, migrants. Then it expanded to apply to the growing 'precariat' of the core labor force, the 'precarious proletariat' suffering from the programs of deunionization, flexibilization and deregulation that are part of the assault on labor throughout the world.

Chomsky goes on the bemoan "slower economic growth" at the hands of the "state-corporate" that should not "enrich and empower the rich and powerful."

Many know Chomsky to be a sharp observer, but for our times his analysis and prescription are far too narrow. Another way to look at the harshness of being a laborer or poor person is that too many people in today's world are taking too much from nature. To demand equality in modern society when there are too many people for the ecosystem is to live in a fantasy of unlimited resources. Do not peak oil and economic collapse have anything to do with the fortunes of labor and capital? Assuming these are tomorrow's concerns, Chomsky's complaint about the assault on labor is not about a new phenomenon, although it has had twists and turns for centuries. So what's new? Now, finally, we have a new ball game because the very culture of our material world is being turned upside down.

Yes, greedy capitalists exploit people. But what do the people want, to enjoy the trappings of civilization as consumers while still destroying the planet? Unfortunately, yes, in today's dominant culture. To want a different life would be truly revolutionary, but as John Lennon sang in Working Class Hero, "You're still fucking peasants as far as I can see." He explained in the song that people's desires were, after conditioning, limited to wanting to live "like the folks on the hill" and" doped with religion and sex and TV."

Are Chomsky and his fellow practitioners of the dominant critique looking for a continuation of working for capitalists or state bosses, but under kinder conditions? Slicing profits in half? Is that his vision? What's so great about the 8 hour

day, except that it's more tolerable than the 12 hour day? What was radical decades ago is just reformism with no future. Resistance for its own sake, without total vision, is mostly futile.

The strategies and tactics of uprisings and hoped-for uprisings are examined in detail in my recent article Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation (Part 1 of 2 parts). It appeared on AltNet.org on May 5, 2011.

Questioning the idea of work is a recurring interest of mine and a few others. Please see the offerings below.

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Further reading:

Noam Chomsky on labor, Truthout.org, May 4, 2011

The Xtremes: Subversive Recipes for Catastrophic Times, by Ronnie Cummins, Common Dreams

Is "More Jobs" Sustainable or Necessary in the Post-Peak Oil World?

Why it's best that people lose their jobs in this unsustainable economy by Jan Lundberg, 16 November 2008

Unlucky to have a job: Prospects for social change amidst the culture of work, by Jan Lundberg, 18 June 2007, Culture Change Letter #162 (expanded on June 27, 2007)

I community, do you? - Anti-work, pro-community Culture Change Magazine issue 20 (never printed), by Jan Lundberg, Miguel Valencia, Susan Meeker-Lowry, 2002

The right to be poor - and to thrive: Toward a Constitutional Amendment, Culture Change e-Letter #57, by Jan Lundberg, March 30, 2004

Working Class Hero:
song lyrics from John Lennon's first solo album, 1970