

Reprinted from *Labor's Champion*
Organ of the Revolutionary Political Organization (M-L)
May, 1991

The U.S. State is a Machine Oppressing the Working Class

by Jim Rosenbaum & Al Johnson

The U.S. Capitalist State Versus the Working Class Movement



*State troopers attack striking meat packers during
the 1985 Hormel strike in Austin, Minnesota.*

One of the main dividing lines between revolution and reformism, between Marxism-Leninism and revisionism, is their views on the state. All reformists try to convince the workers that the capitalist state is neutral in the struggle with the employers. It is said, by them, that the capitalist state can be a tool for the emancipation of the workers. But this is a boldfaced lie.

In fact, the state machinery in the U.S. consists of a tremendous force for suppression serving the exclusive interests of the rich billionaires. There are not only the millions in the federal armed forc-

es, both active and reserves, with the most modern technological weapons. There are also large numbers of state and local forces -- National Guard, state troopers, city police, etc. The government is constantly building more prisons, though the U.S. already has the largest percent of inmates compared to total population of any country in the world. The number of courts is also increasing.

Class conscious workers are familiar with the history of this machinery of suppression in its uses abroad. In recent decades the U.S. armed forces were sent to attack the peoples of Korea and Vietnam, to crush the insurrection in the Dominican Republic in 1965, to invade and occupy Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, and most recently against Iraq.

Class conscious workers also generally know the history of the use of the state against the national movements of the oppressed peoples within the U.S. From the crushing of the revolutionary Reconstruction governments in the South after the Civil War, to the suppression of the urban uprisings of the African American people in the 1960s and early 1970s, in which hundreds were killed - in Harlem, Watts, Newark, Detroit, etc. - the state has been a tool of terror against Black people. The police attack on the Chicano Moratorium in 1970, which killed many people, and on the Lakota Sioux people at Wounded Knee in 1973 are just two examples of state terror against other oppressed peoples in the U.S.

In this article we shall see how this very same state has been used to trample on the working class movement in the United States.

Marxist-Leninist Theory on the State

The founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, were crystal clear on the nature of the state. Summing up the experience of the struggle of the oppressed classes historically, Engels said: "In reality the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy." This quote, taken from the Preface to Marx's *The Civil War in France*, emphasizes the true nature of the state. Marx and Engels based their position on a thorough study of the history of class struggle in all countries, and particularly of the revolutionary movement that spread throughout Europe in 1848, and on the brief seizure of power by the workers of Paris in the Paris Commune of 1871.

V.I. Lenin further developed the theory of the state based on the revolutionary movements in the early part of the era of imperialism, at the beginning of this century, and particularly on the experience of the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917. He said: "There is not a single state, however democratic, which has no loopholes or reservations in its constitution guaranteeing the bourgeoisie the possibility of dispatching troops against the workers, of proclaiming martial law, and so forth, in case of a 'violation of public order,' and actually in case the exploited class 'violates' its position of slavery and tries to behave in a non-slavish manner. Kautsky [a leader of the opportunist Socialist International] shamelessly embellishes bourgeois democracy and omits to mention, for instance, how the most democratic and republican bourgeois in America or Switzerland deal with workers on strike." (This quote is from *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*.)

It is necessary for all workers to grasp the lessons of the role of the state. All the opportunist and reactionary forces, from the trade union bureaucrats to the phony "socialists," that is the current revisionists, try to make the workers believe that these lessons do not apply to the U.S., that this country is different, that the state here is democratic for all and not a machine to suppress the workers. But this is contradicted by the history of the working class struggle in the U.S. Let us examine some of this history.

The Molly Maguires and the Strike Movement of 1877

One of the earliest periods of large-scale militant struggle of the U.S. working class was during the severe depression of the mid-1870s. As unemployment rose swiftly, the capitalists used the opportunity to reduce wages. The workers fought back to defend their living standards. A seven-month strike of coal miners in 1874-75 was crushed and the workers' organizations were driven underground. The miners, mostly of Irish descent, formed a secret organization called the Molly Maguires. The mine owners hired provocateurs to infiltrate the group and try to involve them in adventurous acts, though these were mainly the work of the agents themselves. The government and the capitalist press then accused the group of being a criminal organization. (We should note that the government uses the same tactics today, imprisoning militant members of the United Mine Workers charged with terrorism, etc. This ruse is also

used to attack those fighting for self-determination for the Afro-American nation and Puerto Rico.)

In the Fall of 1875, the government moved to crush the Molly Maguires. Many leaders and members were arrested and tried as criminals. The capitalist courts accepted the lies of the provocateurs, who were the only witnesses against the accused. 14 were sentenced to jail from 2 to 7 years, and 10 were hanged in June of 1877. The socialist leader Eugene Debs said of the Molly Maguires: "The men who perished upon the scaffold as felons were labor leaders, the first martyrs of the class struggle in the United States."



This drawing of the 1877 rail strike appeared in Harpers Weekly. It shows the Sixth Regiment in Baltimore attacking strikers, who are defending themselves.

That same year, 1877, the growing crisis led to a nation-wide rail strike. The number of unemployed had risen to 3 million, and there were frequent cases of whole families dying of starvation. As with the mine owners, the capitalist owners of the railroad continuously moved to reduce wages. The workers responded with a spontaneous revolt. In many places, the state militia contained too many sympathizers with the strikers, so the capitalists and the governor

called on President Hayes, who sent in armed federal troops to suppress the strike.

Dozens of workers were killed by troops and police, in cities like Cumberland, Maryland, and Pittsburgh and Reading, Pennsylvania. But in several cities, workers drove out the troops with stones, bricks and guns. In St. Louis, the workers took over the city for two weeks. However, the workers' revolt was not highly organized. They were not united with the mass of other industrial workers. They were not led by a revolutionary Marxist party, so that even where the workers drove out the troops, they had no perspective of this as a step towards seizing political power.

In Europe, after the defeat of the Paris Commune, the first workers' government ever, in 1871, the ruling classes strengthened the machinery of the capitalist state. Similarly, in the U.S., the crushing of the struggles of 1877 marked an important point in the development of the capitalist armed forces. The struggles marked the first nation-wide strike movement in the U.S. They showed the unreliability of the militias as they then existed. The capitalists had to respond with the first use of federal troops against strikers in peacetime. And they strengthened the bases of operations for the troops by building the first strong armories and stationing federal troops in the big cities. State legislatures passed conspiracy laws for use against the workers, and the courts applied the doctrine of "malicious conspiracy" to workers' organizations. In this way, the ruling class developed its organs of state power.

The Post-World War I Revolutionary Crisis

The period during and after World War I was one of revolutionary crisis world-wide. The greatest victory for the working class internationally was, of course, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in October, 1917. But a Soviet republic (one based on workers' councils) was also formed for a short period in Hungary in 1919, and governments of workers' councils were set up briefly in several regions in Germany. Throughout Europe, the working class, having suffered so much in the first imperialist war, fought bloody battles with their capitalist class enemies. They also mutinied against attempts to send them to crush the Russian Soviet republic.

The U.S. also underwent a revolutionary crisis. There were many major strikes, including a heroic attempt to organize the steel industry. At that time, only a minority of the skilled workers were

unionized. In September, 1919, 365,000 steel workers went on strike. They were confronted by declarations of martial law in all the steel centers. Workers were attacked by thugs organized by the steel monopolies. Five workers were shot to death in Hammond, Indiana, and many more were wounded. The strike was also undermined by the trade union bureaucrats. William Z. Foster, who became the leader of the strike and was later the head of the Communist Party, USA, said of these bureaucrats: "Their action was treason, not only to the steel workers but to the whole labor movement."



Mounted police attack an unarmed worker in Homestead, PA, during the 1919 steel strike.

At the end of October, the steel workers were joined in their strike by a half million coal miners, whose contract had just expired. The ruling class was afraid of this joint action by two powerful sections of the working class and did everything in its power to force the strikers back to work. A few days before the miners' strike, President Wilson declared: "A strike under these circumstances is not only unjustifiable; it is unlawful." And Attorney General Palmer declared: "Every resource of the government will be brought to bear to prevent the national disaster which would inevitably result from the cessation of the mining operation." Congress passed a resolution

giving the administration full power to deal with the situation and "vindicate the majesty and power of the government." In early November, the Department of Justice issued an injunction restraining the union officials from supporting the strike in any way, either through use of union funds for strike benefits or through "messages of encouragement or exhortation." Thus we see how the "system of checks and balances," praised by all reformists and opportunists as part of a system of "democracy for all," is nothing more than a form of division of labor of the capitalists in their attacks against the working class.

Under this pressure, the bureaucrats who headed the United Mine Workers called off the strike. John L. Lewis said: "We are Americans. We cannot fight our Government." Thus the trade union bureaucrats used capitalist patriotism to undermine the working class movement. The steel strikers, basically isolated except for moral and financial support from a few unions, were defeated.

The most significant struggle during this period was the general strike in Seattle, Washington. In January, 1919, 35,000 shipyard workers struck over wages, and appealed to the Seattle Central Labor Council for assistance. 110 unions voted to join them on strike. On February 6, the general strike began, closing factories and all city institutions. An unarmed workers' guard patrolled the streets, and the workers' organizations themselves decided what emergency services to keep open. The organizations functioned like elementary soviets, or workers' councils, the organs of power in the Russian revolution. Lenin himself highly evaluated the significance of the Seattle general strike.

The ruling class and their agents, the capitalist press, also understood the importance of the strike. They called it the beginning of a revolution in the U.S. and said the instigators were "Russian Bolsheviks." Seattle Mayor Hanson deputized 2,400 businessmen, allowing them to carry guns, and sent troops from Camp Lewis to the city armory. He threatened to place the city under martial law and use armed force if the strike was not called off, but the strikers refused.

The mayor instead decided to let the strike disintegrate from within. The bureaucrats who headed the conservative unions said that the strike had proved its point, calling it off after four days and deserting the shipyard workers. After fighting on their own for another month, the shipyard workers were defeated.

The workers had not thrown out the opportunist union leaders. Even though the workers ran the city during the general strike, they did not know what to do with their power. This again shows the crucial need for a genuine Marxist-Leninist party to lead the workers in the various stages along the road to socialist revolution.

The post-World War I period was one of the most significant in the history of the U.S. working class movement. It also saw the beginning of the organization of a genuine revolutionary communist movement in this country. Two workers' parties were formed in September, 1919, breaking from the reformist traditions and organization of the opportunist Socialist Party. They were unable to achieve unity for several years because of unprincipled disagreements over secondary issues, but they both contained large numbers of revolutionary workers. This and the growing revolutionary crisis led the ruling class to take unparalleled measures of repression.

The Palmer Raids

At that period, towards the end of the mass European immigration, many of the revolutionary leaders were foreign born. Unlike the ruling class propaganda about the masses coming to the U.S. seeking "freedom," the workers came seeking jobs in the growing monopoly industries. And many brought over the ideas then sweeping Europe, mostly revolutionary Marxism but also anarchist ideas. As a result, Congress passed the Deportation Act in 1918, providing for the deportation of "aliens" who were anarchists or who supported the overthrow of the U.S. government by force or violence. U.S. citizens could be convicted under the related Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, under which Eugene Debs, the Socialist leader and presidential candidate, was sent to jail. But the Deportation Act became the main tool used against revolutionary workers.

Under Attorney General Palmer, the Justice Department sent spies and agent provocateurs into the working class movement. Meanwhile, the capitalist press launched a campaign against "communists" and "anarchists and other radicals who are agitating for the overthrow of this government" (New York Times, May 5, 1919). The Department appointed J. Edgar Hoover to head its newly created "Radical Division" of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This division kept track of over 200,000 people and organizations. W.J. Flynn, then head of the FBI, made it clear that these investigations were directed against radicals in the working class movement. He

said: "During the steel strike, coal strike, and threatened railway strikes, secret agents moved constantly among the more radical of the agitators and collected a mass of evidence."

This evidence was not compiled for academic purposes. The "Palmer Raids" were carried out on January 2, 1920. Some 10,000 people were seized in their homes, meeting halls, etc. in over 70 cities. The conditions in which the prisoners were held were outrageous, and several died in detention. So-called "Constitutional protections" were completely ignored - people were seized and premises searched without any warrants, and confessions were obtained by force. The capitalist press did its part by playing up a "red scare." A headline in the New York Times of January 4, 1920, read: "Reds Plotted Country-Wide Strike," and the following day, in an editorial it declared: "If some or any of us... have ever questioned the alacrity, resolute will and fruitful, intelligent vigor of the Department of Justice in hunting down these enemies of the United States, the questioners and doubters now have cause to approve and applaud."

In the end, some 500 people were deported. The raids temporarily blunted the revolutionary offensive among the working class. They also reduced the ranks of the young Communist Parties in the U.S., from some 50,000 at the time of the split from the reformist Socialist Party in 1919 to some 10,000 after the reign of terror had subsided.

State Repression during the Great Depression

The period of the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1939, marked another high point in the upsurge of the working class movement in the United States. It was also marked by intense state repression. Many revolutionary organizers were assaulted, jailed and killed during this period. In 1929, Ella Mae Wiggins, a cotton worker, was murdered by agents of the capitalists on her way to a strike meeting in Gastonia, North Carolina. In 1932, Angelo Herndon, an African-American organizer and member of the Young Communist League, was arrested and convicted the following year of "attempting to incite to insurrection." He was sentenced to 20 years on a Georgia chain gang for attempting to organize Black and white workers in Atlanta. Herndon said at his trial: "You may succeed in killing one, two, even a score of working-class organizers. But you can't kill the working class."

We can give only a few examples of the many struggles that resulted in armed attacks by the capitalist state against the workers. The huge growth of unemployment during the Depression led to the organization of the unemployed, not only against evictions, but to support employed workers on the picket line. A mass country-wide demonstration was called on March 6, 1930, by the Communist Party and the Trade Union Unity League, demanding jobs or unemployment insurance. Many of the demonstrations were attacked by the cops. In New York City, 25,000 cops attacked 110,000 marchers in Union Square. Hundreds were beaten to the ground with nightsticks, and scores were trampled by mounted police. Hundreds more were arrested. Despite such attacks, some 1,250,000 unemployed took part around the country.

In 1932, a Bonus March of World War I veterans was organized to demand early payment of a bonus promised them. The capitalist treatment of the ex-soldiers, who had fought to make the world safe for U.S. imperialism, was typical. As with Vietnam vets and others today, many were out of work and also homeless. Thousands of marchers converged on Washington DC, where they set up encampments. The ruling class ordered the police to move them out. On July 28, the Washington police attacked, shooting and killing two vets. President Hoover then ordered out the Army against the vets and their wives and children. Three officers who later became famous U.S. generals got their start in this attack against the vets. The Army troops were commanded by Douglas MacArthur, joined by Dwight Eisenhower and George Patton. 25,000 people were driven out.

The Sharecroppers Union organized Black and white sharecroppers against the landlords in the Black Belt South. Ralph Gray, an African-American leader of the Union in Alabama, was killed in a shoot-out with the sheriff and his deputies in a raid on a meeting to support the Scottsboro youths in 1931. Several other raids led to other members being killed. However, the Union grew in semi-clandestine conditions, with some 12,000 members at its peak in 1935.



Mass picket lines of striking longshore and maritime workers were organized to shut down the ports during the 1934 strike. In San Francisco, armed police attacked pickets, who fought back with bricks and stones. Two workers were killed and hundreds injured.

Another major struggle that clearly demonstrates the nature of the capitalist state was the San Francisco general strike of 1934. In May of that year, 35,000 longshore and maritime workers along the whole Pacific coast struck for union recognition. Many Communist Party members played an active role. The workers organized mass picket lines at the docks. The local government organs – mayors, governors, congresspeople – were controlled by the Industrial Association, consisting of the major shipping, railroad, banking and other capitalists in the region. These capitalists ordered the cops to break the picket lines. On July 5, 1934, known as Bloody Thursday, hundreds of workers from around the city joined the striking workers at the docks. The police attacked with vomiting gas and guns. Thousands of workers fought back with bricks and stones. Two workers, Nick Bordoise, a cook, and Howard Sperry, a longshore worker, were killed and hundreds were wounded. When the governor ordered in 2,000 National Guard, the workers backed off.

But unions throughout the city called for a general strike. On July 16, 127,000 workers from almost every union throughout San Francisco walked out. Nothing moved except with the permission of the strike committee. 3,000 more troops were sent to the city, but they could not get the workers back to work. Vigilante mobs, some sworn in as special police, wrecked union halls, beat up foreign born workers in their clubs, and destroyed progressive bookstores.

Cops allowed vigilantes to wreck the headquarters of the Communist Party and its West Coast paper, the *Western Worker*, of the Marine Workers' Industrial Union, and of other organizations supporting the strike. 500 older workers and unemployed were arrested, but later released. The strike was solid for three days, after which the AFL bureaucrats leading the central labor body called off the strike. However, the maritime workers stayed out solidly until the end of the month, winning a major victory of union recognition and increased wages.

There were too many clashes with the capitalist state during the Depression to discuss even all the major ones. The great Flint sit-down strike opened the way for the unionization of the auto industry. The sit-down strikes in auto convinced the largest steel monopoly, U.S. Steel, to negotiate with the steel workers' union. But the other major steel monopolies, misnamed "Little Steel," fought an armed battle against the workers. They stockpiled arms for use against the strikers. In May of 1937, in the Memorial Day Massacre, police shot and killed 10 workers picketing the Republic Steel plant in South Chicago. Altogether, 17 workers were killed and over 150 wounded in the strike at plants across the Mid-West. These workers are all martyrs in the cause of the working class.

In the two years, 1936 and 1937 alone, there were 39 times in which troops -- army, National Guard, state troopers or city police -- were called out against strikes. Some 42,000 workers were arrested and at least 42 were killed in these battles. Besides, there were numerous other incidents of union organizers and workers being kidnapped, beaten or driven out of town. Dozens of raids were also carried out against union halls and workers' homes, organized both by police and vigilantes in the pay of the capitalists. Of course, no one was ever prosecuted or convicted in any of these assaults. Despite all of these attacks by the capitalist state apparatus, the workers were able to unionize the major mass production industries in this period. Much of the organizing was led by members of the Communist Party, which was a revolutionary party at that time.

Recent Attacks by the Capitalist State

These examples of state repression are not just of historical interest. They show the truth of the Marxist-Leninist view that the capitalist state, even in the most democratic republic, is a machine to suppress the working class. The periods we have examined were

ones of revolutionary upsurge of the working class movement, and in such times the nature of the state stands out in greater intensity.

But today too, when there is no revolutionary crisis and there is relative calm in the workers' struggle, the capitalists still make as full use as necessary of state repression. Look at the mass firing by then-president Reagan of thousands of air traffic controllers, some of the most privileged workers, during the PATCO strike in 1981. Troops and National Guard were called out against the Phelps Dodge copper miners in their 1983-84 strike, against the Hormel meatpackers' strike in 1985-87, and against the Pittston coal miners during their strike last year. Frame-ups on criminal charges were brought against three Greyhound workers - Roger Cawthra, Harry Lewis and Ray Simes - in the current strike. And court injunctions to prevent mass picketing were used against the Daily News strikers. Scabs who kill picketers during strikes are routinely acquitted in the capitalist courts. This was the case with the scab who drove a Greyhound bus into Robert Waterhouse, killing him, in Redding, California, in March of 1990, and with the scab who hit and killed Edward Horgan on the NYNEX picket line in Westchester County, New York, in August of 1989.

The Capitalist State Machine Must Be Smashed

We see that the U.S. state apparatus, despite its democratic decorations, is a tool of the capitalists for the repression of the working class. The U.S. state is a dictatorship of the capitalist class. It is an instrument of terror employed against the workers to keep them available for exploitation. This tool has many branches including the bought-off trade union bureaucracy. These bureaucrats have done their utmost to undermine the class struggle of the workers, and in particular to limit the workers' demands to reforms that do not threaten the rule of the capitalists. But when the class struggle is on the rise, and in particular during a revolutionary situation, fables of "democracy for all" disappear, as the armed forces are used to jail, murder and otherwise intimidate the workers.

This gives the lie to all the reformists and phony "socialists" who preach a "peaceful transition" to socialism. These illusions leave the workers open to massacres by the capitalist state, which has no intention of allowing the workers to peacefully deprive them of the power by which they protect their system of exploitation. In 1965, the workers in Indonesia were in a very strong position. They

were led by a million member revisionist Party, and had strong trade unions and other mass organizations. But the leadership of the Party had illusions about the nature of the state, and thought it could lead the workers to power peacefully. The capitalists, knowing that their position was in danger, carried out a military coup and slaughtered a million workers and peasants using lists provided by the CIA. Similarly, in Chile, a government led by the Socialist Party and the revisionist Communist Party won elections and formed a government. It spread the illusion that, because Chile had a long tradition of bourgeois democracy, they could move to socialism peacefully. But the Chilean and U.S. capitalists refused to allow this government to even make any reforms that could hurt their interests. The military carried out a fascist coup, throwing out all bourgeois democracy, and killed about a hundred thousand workers. These lessons show clearly that the workers must be very conscious of the nature of the capitalist state; they must be prepared for any attacks from the capitalist state; they must prepare to seize power and smash the capitalist state as a necessary condition for the socialist revolution.

Lenin put it clearly when he said: "it becomes necessary for all bourgeois parties, even for the most democratic and 'revolutionary-democratic' among them, to intensify repressive measures against the revolutionary proletariat, to strengthen the apparatus of repression, i.e., that very state machine. This course of events compels the revolution *"to concentrate all its forces of destruction"* against the state power, and to set itself the aim, not of perfecting the state machine, but of *smashing and destroying it.*" (*The State and Revolution*, Chapter II, Section 2.)

In the U.S. today, it is the task of genuine Marxist-Leninists, consisting of the most dedicated and class conscious workers, to form a political party and to organize the working class in its fight against the capitalist class. It must spread this correct understanding of the capitalist state among the workers. It must win their backing. It must lead the workers not only in general economic strikes, but in mass political strikes, and finally to the stage of insurrection and civil war, to the destruction of the capitalist state apparatus. The workers will then form their own dictatorship over the capitalists, through a government of workers' councils. This government will expropriate (take away without compensation) the means of production - the factories, mines, large farms, etc. - from the capitalists

and make them the property of the workers' state. It will organize centralized, socialist production to meet the needs of the working people, not the profits of the capitalists. The workers' state will be a democratic state, but one that provides and ensures the rights for the laboring people only who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. This proletarian democracy will make the workers the real masters of society. At the same time, the elements of the overthrown capitalist class are repressed to prevent them from returning to power. When socialist construction has removed the conditions for the existence of the capitalist class (big and small) and when the socialist revolution has become victorious world wide, then the socialist state itself will cease to exist. It will wither away since classes will have been eliminated. And with the elimination of classes, the need for a repressive machine against the rich will cease to exist.

Bibliography:

- Karl Marx – *The Civil War in France*
- Frederick Engels – *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*
- Vladimir Lenin – *The State and Revolution*
- Vladimir Lenin – *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*
- Anthony Bimba – *History of the U.S. Working Class*
- Labor Research Association – *Labor Fact Book* (various numbers)
- Robert Dunn (ed.) – *The Palmer Raids*
- Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais – *Labor's Untold Story*
- Harry Haywood – *Black Bolshevik*