Living Conditions in the United States

I. Introduction

Why has social unrest grown in American society in the 1960's? What conditions is this unrest responding to, and what are the relations between these conditions and the forms of unrest? For some, the answer to these questions is obvious: the social movement arose when people looked around and discovered wrong and injustice everywhere, and decided to do something about it. But what made people aware of this injustice? Why didn't they do anything about it in the 1950's, when by all the standard indicators, poverty and oppression were worse in America than in the 1960's? Or have things gotten worse in the 1960's?

The main content of this article is a demonstration that in fact living conditions have deteriorated for several parts of the working class since the mid-1950's. These include youth, women, and blacks. In contrast, conditions for white, now middle aged men workers have improved, at least until very recently. These conclusions are reached by examining not only the standard wage and employment statistics, but vital and social statistics as well. Hence I argue that the unrest has grown out of a deterioration of living conditions.

Different conditions in different parts of the present and future working class have led to movements which are distinct in aims, rhetoric, and style of action; the student-youth revolution; the black and brown liberation movements; the wildcat strikes, led to a considerable extent by young workers; and the women's liberation movement. Since actual conditions have divided the workers, the people suffering the deterioration tend to see their problems not growing out of their social position as workers, but centering on their youth, sex, or race. The existence of a group of older white male workers, whose conditions continued to improve through the decade, reenforces these tendencies and provides the background for the concept that the "working class" has "become reactionary."

From this picture of the present, I try to discuss the conditions under which a general class movement might emerge. Without the growth of such a movement, the rulers will be able to divide and conquer as before, despite the deterioration of conditions and the rise of general but fragmented unrest. This discussion involves comparison with the statistics of past revolutionary situations. The present looks a lot like past revolutionary situations. But it has many of the same critical imbalances which made those situations abortive, the most important of which is the widening division within the working class.

What has produced these changes in living conditions? These changes are the inescapable results and the essential preconditions of the course of economic change. But by this I don't imply a mechanical relation, which is assumed by most leftists: deterioration of conditions comes only during depressions. For some parts of the working class, conditions get worse straight through the boom. This experience of depression within boom is now more widespread than in the earlier history of capitalism.

The treatment of economic movements here is just a sketch. What I try to describe are the relations between these movements and their social and biological consequences. I intend to develop an analysis of these economic movements themselves from their own proper perspective in greater detail in a future article.*

II. Conditions have improved for white men workers that are now middle aged.

To understand the position of white middle aged men now, we must go back to the end of the 'twenties and the Depression. At that time, young labor market entrants were few in number compared to the rest of the labor force, due to the cutoff of immigration and the long fall of the birth rate through the '30's. These young workers also had an educational advantage over the less literate older workers, due to the great upswing of high school education of the workforce which extended through the '20's and '30's. In the wave of

*The data on which assertions in this paper are based will be published in full sometime this fall as a book or extended article.

unionization that emerged in response to the Depression, the young workers often led in the struggle and became more organized than the older.

This contrast betweeen young and old is evident in the vital and social statistics. Going into the Depression, the older workers suffered a specially disastrous decline of living standards. Their suicide rates reached a huge peak as unemployment rose, and those admitted to mental hospitals, drug addiction and alcoholism treatment centers were primarily these older workers. Younger workers suffered a rather mild deterioration in the Depression. Their suicide rates rose to less than half the rate reached in the slowdown before the First World War, and other indicators of stress show only moderate rises.

As unemployment was sharply reduced by the Second World War, the young workers were in great demand, due to their superior education and their relatively small numbers, which were further reduced by the draft.This group is at the core of the great surge of unionization which made its greatest gains in membership during the 1940's. Unions then served to win gains for their members and the tight labor market made it easy to extend unionization widely.

After the war, young workers benefitted not only from unusually high wages, but from the lowering of interest rates and easy availability of credit which comes at the end of long cycle depressions. Many were veterans, and have benefitted through the postwar period from this fact, by VA mortgages and other benefits. Within this group, the inequality of income distribution has been reduced through the upswing and most of the postwar period, as income for the lowest ranks rises more rapidly than for the higher-paid workers.

Thus this group had an exceptionally favorable labor market position, due to its relative numbers, education, organization, and timing relative to demand for labor in reaching labor market and marriageable ages. As a result, they were able to marry younger, and their wives, after the war, could remain out of the labor force, at home having children. Many more young people married as well (1940-57), bringing proportions married at ages 20-24 back to levels reached in rural America before the impact of industrialization in delaying and breaking down marriage. The birth rate reversed its historical trend downward and peaked in the baby boom of the midfifties.

The conditions for reproduction improved rapidly, as the infant mortality rate declined more swiftly than in any previous period, the fetal death rate fell, and the proportion of infants born at low birth weights and unfavorable gestational periods reached lows in the midfifties. Age-specific death rates, particularly death rates reflecting stress (suicide, cirrhosis of the liver, ulcers) fell rapidly for this group as well.

Higher wages and low mortgage interest rates enabled the white workers of this age group to move out of the central cities to the fringes, powering the housing boom of the postwar period, which peaked in 1950. This movement contributed to the rapid fall of death rates from infectious diseases, as people escaped the crowded old central cities. But the conditions in the cities improved at this time as well, reflecting a great boom in hospital building, active public health programs, and the general upswing of production for people's needs. This is evident in the conditions of the blacks who migrated to the cities from the South at this time. In contrast to the second great period of massive black migration, the sixties, conditions improved in the late forties for urban blacks.

As political repression and a slowly rising trend of unemployment developed after the war, the unions became more and more organs for protecting the position of workers already organized, rather than aiming at great new gains in either standard of living or scope of organization. After the midfifties, the proportion of the labor force unionized levels off and declines, as new labor market entrants are not organized. This pattern repeats the experience of the First World War and the twenties.

We will discuss the slowdown of the economy, 1957-63, and the boom, 1965-69, more later, but here we must note that the conditions for the whites of this small, highly unionized group continue good through this whole period. Their real after tax wages continue to rise, and the trend toward equalization of income within the group goes on, though at a slower pace. However, this improvement is won only at increasing costs. To keep ahead of inflation, higher costs of education for their children, rising medical expenses and finally taxation, the wives have been sent to work after having three or so children, increasing family income from this side. Death rates for this group, now aged 30-45, have levelled since the mid-fifties.

Against the background of these real conditions, the patriotism and lack of social or political consciousness among these workers is not hard to understand. Their conscious lives begin in the midst of a great collapse of the economy, but they have reaped a greater increase of standard of living on the upswing of the cycle than any other group of workers in the history of American capitalism. Because of their special position, they have been able to maintain or increase this standard until very recently. With homes and families already established, they are no longer free to try out new social arrangements to deal with new problems, and to them there seems to be no necessity for this innovation.

III. Conditions for young people are deteriorating.

In sharp contrast with this favored group, however, younger workers entering the labor market and marriageable ages since the midfifties have suffered a deterioration of living conditions. This reversal grows out of the slump in the production of things for people's needs after the early fifties. There are definite reasons, as we shall see, why this slump affected young people more than older people.

Housing construction peaked in the early 1950's, and has declined, with cyclical variations, since then. The housing that has been constructed is more and more high priced, responding to the demand of the middle aged workers and the uppermost part of the young income distribution. Three quarters of the new housing priced under $15,000 is now mobile homes, recreating in a more affluent style the automobile camps of the Depression. Per capita protein, vitamin, and calorie consumption peaked during the Second World War or the late 1940's and have declined since then. Nutrition surveys show a rise of malnutrition in the postwar period, resulting in worse nutritional deficiencies among the American poor in the 1960's than in underdeveloped countries. The rapid expansion of medical facilities from the mid-thirties through the late forties slowed its pace thereafter and in many large cities, facilities have deteriorated to the present.

This decline in production for people's needs is part of the change in the composition of the social product which marks the fifties and the early sixties. The profit rate in productive investment declined steadily from the peak in the early fifties, slowing investment and producing a trend rise in unemploy-

ment rates. From 1957 to 1963, there was no net accumulation of capital in manufacturing. More and more of surplus went into military spending, consumption of the rich, advertising, and other forms of waste. These changes, punctuated by the rising trend of interest rates, speculation in stocks and land values, fit perfectly well into a classical model of the end of a long cycle. Had they continued without any compensating influences, the economy would have been in depression by the mid 1960's. As it was, the economy went through a slowdown similar in many respects to that just before the First World War, with unemployment averaging 6%, 1958-63.

But at this point, a number of influences came to operate which kept the economy from collapse. The returns of US imperialism abroad, including profits and cheapening of resources, were coming in at a greater rate, supporting profits here; a sharp upsurge of credit expansion in the private sector allowed new investment to proceed with increasing external financing, after the period of major reliance on profits for investments. After 1965, large government deficits resulting from Vietnam war spending also stimulated the economy, as did redistribution of taxation through tax cuts on invested profits.

But perhaps most important of all in preventing the collapse of profits in production were certain labor market developments which have resulted in the deterioration of living conditions for youth, women, and blacks. For reasons which we will analyse, each of these groups has developed as an enlarging source of cheap labor for the capitalists, reducing labor costs and temporarily staving off the downtrend in the profit rate.

While the long decline of the birth rate up to 1935 resulted in proportionally declining numbers of workers coming to labor market entry ages through the midfifties, the sixties see the children of the baby boom, 1935-57, begin entering labor market and marriageable ages. The first flood of their numbers swells the ranks of teenagers in the midfifties, and this movement combined with the stagnation of the economy results in a sudden large jump of teenage unemployment rates after 1957. Thereafter, successively larger numbers of youth reach labor market ages, completely reversing the previous demographic history of American capitalism. The unemployment rate of young workers goes from very low in the late forties and early fifties to consistently high, 1958-64.

While the slowdown of the economy resulted in a slowing of income rise for the highly-organized white group, for the majority of young labor market entrants, real after tax income falls from 1957 to 1964. Also, in contrast with the age group preceding it, inequality is growing rapidly in the young age group, reflecting the divergence of college-educated workers from high-school educated blacks and whites. The allocation of surplus to war and the running out of the educational-advantage for college trained workers after 1967 have confronted recent BA, MA and PhD graduates with a growing glut of their labor market as well.

The special position of the favored labor group had allowed it to gain greater and greater proportions of the social product through struggle as it moved into prime working ages in the midfifties. Sharp recessions, following one on another with greater frequency and at higher unemployment levels, 1949-61, did not suffice to break this power. With the influx of unorganized young labor in the sixties, more effective competition was introduced onto the labor market. Whole new areas of employment were created outside union lines, reducing labor costs for the capitalists in some jobs to make up for the rising costs in others.

Although the repeated recessions and political repression did not suffice to achieve a cut in labor costs, these measures did serve to beat down the surge of unionization of new parts of the working class. By the midfifties, the union organization had been integrated into the lower levels of the control structure of the ruling class. With fewer gains possible, the leaders of the unions concentrated on getting job security for those already employed, against the risk of rising unemployment. Such security within the system depended on the creation of distinctions between different kinds of workers: middle aged against young (seniority), male against female, white against black, despite the performance of equal work. The other hierarchical structures of the workplace also took on this conservative, divisive character in the period of stagnation of the economy. This is a fundamental reason for the labor market weakness of new labor market entrants in the sixties.

These changes have also given a new lease of life to divide-and-rule tactics, as the eyes of new labor market entrants (especially blacks) are focused on the fact that a small part of the workforce is able to defend its position by excluding new members, rather than on the slowdown of job growth which lies behind this organizational change.

The drop in income and rise of unemployment for young workers resulted in a fall in proportions married among young people, which began for teenagers in the midfifties and extends to young adults in the sixties. Over age 30, proportions of women married are still increasing; under age 30, there is a decrease more rapid than in any previous depression. The decline in marriage is accompanied by the characteristic rise in illegitimacy, venereal disease, and even prostitution, again repeating the experience of past depressions. Birth rates come down at an accelerating pace from the peak reached in 1957, touching a point by 1969 well below the low of the 1930's.

Conditions for reproduction deteriorate as well, as evident in the rise of low-birth-weight infants, the shift of birth timing away from optimal periods of gestation, the rise of the fetal death rate, and the slowing of the decline of the infant mortality rate, from the midfifties through 1964. These changes come about both among whites and blacks, "middle class" youth as well as the poor, although at a greater rate for the low income workers.

Associated with the stagnation of the economy, 1957-63, infectious disease case rates rose from lows reached in the early fifties, peaking around 1963. At first, the incidence rises for all age groups, but increasingly in the sixties, as rates have come down for the middle-aged group, they have remained high for young people. This shift in age composition is also evident in mental hospital admissions and drug treatment center admissions rates, crime rates, imprisonment rates and death rates reflecting stress. For young people these rates are rising rapidly from low levels attained on the upswing of the long cycle; while for the relatively small, now middle-aged white male group, these rates remain low or have fallen recently.

The deterioration of conditions is evident in death rates as well. Since 1961, death rates in the age group 15-24 have turned up in trend, for both blacks and whites, after falling rapidly on the upswing of the long cycle. This upturn is more serious for males - a 25% increase to 1968 - but occurs among females as well. War deaths and other deaths outside the

United States are not included in this account. If they were, the upturn at 15-24 for males would be a 70% increase. This increase in death rate reflects the strong rise of suicide homicide, accidents and some infectious diseases such as pneumonia and influenza. The level of the suicide rate for young people has now risen well above what it was for this age group in the Depression, and is approaching previous historical highs.

This deterioration of conditions is concentrated in the large cities, particularly in the areas of the country, such as the Northeast, which have not received great shares of military spending. In contrast, the situation in the South and Southwest has improved through this period, though relatively more slowly for young people, because of the large concentration of military spending in these areas.

The expansion of education and the draft have absorbed the numbers and delayed the entry of the baby boom children to some extent. To this extent, the competition from this source has been less effective in sustaining the profit rate through depressing labor costs. But the political consequences of an even more rapid collapse of living conditions for a whole generation have been avoided by the rulers as well. The cost in taxation has been paid by the already employed workers.

Part-time and temporary employment have also risen, especially for the greater numbers of teenagers and young adults "kept off the streets" by high school and college. Again, this provides a convenient, flexible and cheap new addition to the labor force; but will there be full-time jobs for these youth when school is over? Young people are increasingly conscious of the fact that nothing special, and perhaps nothing at all is waiting for them outside of school. The army trains them to kill, and cannot guarantee a job when they get back. This growing uncertainty about their future combines with the industrialization of education and the proletarianization of their future work to make the schools an opening battleground for the struggle which is emerging from the conditions we have

IV. Women

We have pointed out how in the boom of the long cycle, women in reproductive ages withdraw from the labor force and get married, stay at home and have children. As income rise slows, and as the burden of taxation increases, more wives past peak reproductive ages are sent to work to maintain the already established family's position. But as more and more women under age 30 are single, the labor force participation rate of young women has gone up even more rapidly. This rise reflects both the rise in single women and the increased competition in the young labor market as a whole, forcing young families to send the wife to work as well. Thus the economic forces of the evolving long cycle have resulted in a great upsurge of women's labor force participation in the 1960's.

Women workers have the advantage, from the capitalist point of view, of being a low wage group. In general, women receive little better than half what men do for the same work. The experience of the sixties repeats, on a larger scale, the experience of the twenties for women. Toward the end of the boom phase of the long cycle, women of all ages are brought into the labor force, while the labor force participation rate of men goes down. This trend continues right through the depression of the cycle, and is only reversed on the (postwar) upswing as women in reproductive ages withdraw from the labor market to have children. Like young people, women now serve to hold down labor costs and stave off a falling profit rate.

The present cycle has a unique twist in this aspect. The labor force participation rate of white middle aged men, the small group, has not fallen, The labor force participation of young men, black or white, has fallen rapidly since the late fifties; while the labor force participation rates of young women have gone shooting up. In addition to the effect of higher unemployment in depressing wages in the young labor market, increasingly sizable proportions of young men are without income altogether. Meanwhile, the influx of female labor of all ages has meant a rising trend of female unemployment rates. Like youth, women form an increasingly large proportion of total unemployment.

In contrast to the situation for men, there are only small differences in the deterioration of conditions for younger or middle aged women. Suicide rates for women of all labor market ages have increased dramatically, the fall of age-specific birth rates is only a little more rapid at younger ages than at older, and the deterioration of birth conditions is similarly only a little more marked for young women than older women. Income has risen less rapidly, on the average, for full-time employed women than for men since the late fifties, and again there is increasing inequality of the female income distribution, growing out of greater labor market competition.

V. Past capitalist experience is repeated in the 1960's.

If we put these trends into historical perspective, we find that they repeat - over a short time span - past capitalist experience. About 1830 death rates began to rise in the growing industrial cities, especially at labor market entry ages, and continued to do so until around 1875. The influx of immigrants - aged 20 to 30 - depressed the labor market and prevented large cyclical increases in wages. Living standards deteriorated as cities grew without adequate sewer systems,

water supply, transportation, or housing, and death rates from infectious diseases and stress deaths rose. The proportion of females married and the birth rate declined; the rise in women's participation in the industrial labor force begins at this time.

After 1880 this trend in urban areas is reversed. Death rates start to fall, particularly in childhood ages, as a result of immunization against specific diseases, installation of sewers, trash collection and other sanitary measures, purification of city water supplies, and a trend rise in real wages of city workers. After the depression of the 1890's this improvement of conditions becomes particularly marked. The proportion of women marrying at young ages rises, the birth rates in industrial areas go up, and the decline of infant mortality begins. These trends continue through the twentieth century, interrupted by the depression before the First World War and the great Depression of the 1930's, modified by the special factors affecting particular cohorts that we have discussed.

The changes of reproduction on the farm follow a different course. Through the 19th century, farm death rates were about half urban death rates; women married earlier and more women married than in the cities; birth rates were higher and infant survival better. The areas of most rapid rural settlement - the North Central - had higher incomes for people of migratory ages as well. Migration from the farm to the industrial cities did not become a large-scale phenomenon in America until the 20th century; up to that time the growth of the industrial labor force was largely supplied by increasing immigration and declining natural increase in the urban areas.*

Despite these favorable conditions, however, farm birth rates fall steadily through the nineteenth century. This reflects two things. First, land for expansion eventually got used up; the closing of the frontier comes gradually through the late nineteenth century, and with it, a change in the farmer's attitudes about how many sons he could produce with some hope of a good life. Also important was the creation of the national and international market for agricultural commodities. In the context of competition from ever-larger commercial farming and growing productivity, the family farm was squeezed out. In the initial phases of this process, more and more family income had to be spend on improving equipment and land, and less could thus be spent on children. Another way of seeing this same development is to note that the market moved in such a way as to extract a growing surplus from agriculture to support the growing industrial cities.

Up to 1910, per capita farm income generally rose, with cyclical fluctuations in response to the booms of urban demand for food and materials in the long cycles. But after that time, increased productivity and world competition caused it to fall, more or less steadily, through the teens and the '20's to the low reached in the depths of the Depression. This prolonged fall was accompanied by an even more rapid fall of farm birth rates. 1910 marks the cessation of net migration to the farm area in America; after that time, the rapid demise of the family farm supplies an ever-increasing internal source of industrial labor force growth. Responding as it does not just to the increase of employment and wages in the cities, but to the forces eliminating the family farm, this source of labor power also can be out of step with labor demand emerging from capital accumulation.

*The immigrants most often came from countries where a past rise in natural increase had combined with agricultural depression and slow capital accumulation to make a large part of the emerging labor force superfluous.

VI. The blacks have suffered the worst decline of living standard.

This is especially true of the blacks. They were first squeezed out of the South by the establishment of the racist system there in the late nineteenth century, and migrated to the Northern cities during the First World War and the 1920's, in response to the demand for labor. This is the period of rise of venereal disease and precipitous decline of the black birth rate. The Depression sees the beginning of the breakdown of black marriage as well. While for whites, the fluctuation of birth rates has a large component of planning, for blacks, the changes in birth rates have been proportionally larger than for whites and much of this change has evidently been due to increase of sterility arising from disease and malnutrition.

Large government subsidies to agriculture and increasing prices on the upswing of the long cycle made farming once again profitable, and after the 1930's there was a large and continuing increase of agricultural productivity. But in the competition, both black and white small farmers were eliminated as viable units; and large capitalist farms increasingly reaped the benefits. Now less than 5% of the workforce is on farms. The people forced off farms supplied a big addition to city labor force growth on the boom. As we have pointed out, their conditions improved at this time, as is evident in the rapid decline of the black infant mortality rate, the upswing of black marriage and births, and the rapid decline of black death rates through this period, particularly for urban blacks.

But the early fifties mark the turning point to levelling or decline of conditions for the blacks, some five years before the turn for whites, and at a higher level of death rates. This is the point at which black infant mortality levels and in the northern cities starts to rise. The proportion of infants of low birth weight rises continuously through the fifties and sixties for blacks, to the point where it is now comparable to the proportions prevalent in the colonies of the free world empire - 15% as opposed to the suburban white rate of 6%. This rise is most serious in the Northern cities. The increase of death rates at labor market ages is also greater for blacks than whites since the early sixties, and has a larger component of infectious diseases. Black death rates are now comparable at most ages to the death rates of blacks in South Africa.

The fall of the black birth rate is as rapid as the white, and once again there is evidence that in many places, this is due to a rise in sterility. The breakdown of marriage and the rise of illegitimacy and venereal disease have accelerated for blacks in the sixties.

As among women, this deterioration of conditions is not confined to the young age group, although this is the group with the greatest deterioration. In many respects, conditions are now worse in many Northern cities for blacks than in the South. It is ironical that the only states in which black infant mortality has continued to decline rapidly are the states with development resulting from military spending.

After the forties, when black labor made great advances, the flow of labor out of the South has continued, but in an economy not generating sufficient jobs to keep up with their rising numbers. The blacks now move into central cities in

decay, where death rates are rising. They suffer unemployment at twice the white rate, and income in all occupations for blacks is little more than half what it is for whites. Welfare payments, taxed away from employed workers, allow some of them to exist, when in the South they might have starved for lack of work.

The welfare payments also sustain blacks as a large unemployed pool, and their emergence as a sizable low-wage urban labor force has made profitable the performance of many tasks that would have otherwise been eliminated or mechanized. To this extent they also serve to sustain the profit rate by counterbalancing with their losses the gains made by unionized white male workers. Much the same analysis applies to the Puerto Ricans that have immigrated to the big cities and the Mexican migrant workers whose importation was essential to the profitability of large agriculture until the latest wave of mechanization got under way.

VII. The boom of the Sixties.

The result of this reduction of labor costs was a temporary reversal of the downtrend of the profit rate, and thus an extension of the long cycle beyond the point at which it would normally have collapsed into depression. While I have pointed out that this extension was at the expense of growing parts of the labor force, it is important to evaluate the achievements of this expansion, if only because they represent to many the evidence of the triumph of Keynesian economics in controlling the economy.

This expansion has two parts: before and after the beginning of heavy Vietnam war spending. From 1961-65, unemployment averaged 5.5%, and all the trends in living conditions that we have described worsened. From 1966-69, unemployment averaged 3.7%. (Unemployment came down most rapidly for the small, highly unionized age group, less rapidly for women and youth, and hardly at all for black teenagers.) But as unemployment fell, inflation and taxation rose, abolishing the normal wage gains made after 1965. The total unemployment rates achieved were above those of the Korean war (3.0%) or World War II (1.6%), despite huge government deficits. Thus the Keynesian triumph has amounted to a moderate reduction in unemployment and a falling real wage.

The picture in vital and social statistics is equally equivocal. From 1965 to 1969, the infant mortality rate, the fetal death rate, and the infectious disease case rates (except for the young) have declined. The infant mortality rate remains above that in many other countries, for which the declines of mortality have been continuous through the sixties and at a greater rate. The proportion of infants of low birth weight stops increasing, but does not decline, in this second period. Housing production appears to be levelling through the sixties, but with the pricing shift I have referred to. Per capita nutrient consumption has moved up, but it would require the continuation of this trend for five or more years to reverse the effects of the previous downtrend.

However, the movement of age-specific birth rates, death rates, and marriage patterns continues the trends established in the late fifties. The major deterioration evident in vital and social statistics continued unbroken, with a slowing or reversal in a few indicators. When these indicators are looked at in various regions of the country, we find that in the parts that had the worst deterioration through the early sixties, there are no reversals.

The result of the saving in labor costs has been the extension of the long cycle beyond the point at which a depression would normally occur. Thus after the boom of the sixties, interest rates are higher, the profit rate lower, and the debt-dependence of capital expansion greater than before. The weaknesses of debt expansion are evident in the collapse of the Penn Central and the troubles of the Ling-Temco-Vought empire. In general, those parts of capital which expanded most rapidly through the sixties—those associated with war production—are now the most overextended and in danger financially. Special measures by the government, such as the proposed $750 million loan to ailing industries, may help to avert a general financial collapse. But these measures will further increase taxation and along with the unchecked development of the long cyclic trends, will more and more choke off production for people's needs.

Although a general depression will probably be averted, even government advisers project an economy limping along at unemployment rates above 5% for a year or more, with the inevitable worsening of all the trends of deterioration that I have discussed. It is this prospect, of depression for part of the working class, combined with slow decline of conditions for the rest, rather than full scale depression, which should be the focus of attention.

This is especially true since the influx of youth, women and blacks will continue unbroken at least through the next decade, as past birth rate changes, decline of marriage, rising living costs for families and the elimination of blacks from the South continue to exert their effects on the labor market. As in the sixties, this will be a factor favorable to profits through continued cheapening of labor. But this means a more rapid decline of living standards for those who are the cheap laborers.

VIII. Comparison to Past Revolutionary Situations

How do these prospects compare to the situations in the past when working people have organized themselves to do something about the capitalist system? Examination of the statistics for Germany and Italy during and after the first world war, and France during the revolution of 1848 and the Commune of 1871 reveals certain common characteristics of past revolutionary situations. The economy is generally in chaos, not producing for people's needs, because of a crisis: war, depression, or both. Stress has risen for a period of years to high levels, as evident in the rise of death rates and particularly suicide and other stress rates. In all of these situations, this deterioration is most concentrated on the younger age group of workers. While in all the situations referred to, the worsening of conditions was much more dramatic than what has happened in the last decade in America, there are evident similarities, which will probably develop further in the 1970's in the same direction.

This experience is in contrast to that of the Depression in America. Then, the older workers had the worst shock, while for younger workers, the worsening of conditions was only

moderate and rapidly followed by the development of very favorable conditions. Now this picture is reversed. The part of the population—the young—which is most free to take an active part in struggle has already suffered a decline for over a decade, and if a depression occurs, will undergo an unprecedented increase of stress. If there is no depression, the same result will come more slowly.

There are other similarities as well. In all of these past revolutionary situations, the deterioration of conditions was less for middle aged people than for the young. In Germany, for example, the death rates for middle aged people rise only very little or fall, through the crisis, 1913-23; while for young people, death rates nearly double their prewar value through this period. This divergence corresponds to the widely different forms of political action taken by old and young at this time. The young swelled the ranks of the "crazy" left communists, against whom Lenin wrote his famous pamphlet, *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*. They rejected all activity within the electoral machinery or the trade unions, and were ready in spirit, but not in numbers, organization, or means, to seize power immediately and proclaim the soviet republic. The middle-aged workers, on the other hand, followed the trade unions, which led general strikes against right-wing military takeover of the already existing parliamentary government. While they were ready to use the most powerful tactics, these aimed essentially at preserving the bourgeois system which they hoped could yeild them further gains.

The depression within boom that has developed in America in the sixties has created a similar divergence, which is only thrown into higher relief by the impact of the draft on youth, particularly black youth. At various points, parts of the population feel themselves driven to rise against the system, unorganized, unprepared, and without any chance of success. The central question, for which there is no clearcut answer now, is whether the sluggish continuation of "growth" without depression will result in a sharp decline of living standards for the "protected" group of workers as well. If it does, the prospects of more unified class activity open up—prospects which may be suggested by the wildcat strike movement now developing.

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