Strikes seem to have occurred ever since some people were forced to work for others. There are records of strikes on the great pyramids of Egypt thousands of years ago. But strikes as we know them today arose with modern capitalism, when workers began selling their labor power in the market.

In capitalism, strikes have two rather different aspects. Almost by definition, under capitalism labor power is treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market. So strikes can be viewed as a normal feature of capitalist markets. Workers, like any other vendors in a market, can try to withdraw their commodity from the market if they are dissatisfied with the price that is being offered for it. That is a way that strikes are commonly viewed, for example, by economists.

However, workers are in fact more than just the purveyors of their labor power. Even at work they remain human beings with minds, feelings, social relationships, and a claim to the rights of human beings and of members of their society. Yet at work they must accept an employer's authority -- an authority normally backed by law -- in order to make a living. A strike, viewed in this aspect, represents not just a withdrawal of a commodity from the market, but also a withdrawal of consent from authority, an act of non-cooperation, even of resistance to authority.

Further, the employer is not the only authority that strikes can be used to challenge. General strikes, mass strikes, and political strikes have been used repeatedly around the world to challenge social structures and governmental policies and power.

**Strikes in U.S. History**

Strikes were rare in the United States before the 19th century, though there were a few. During the American Revolution, for example, iron workers in the frontier of northwestern Connecticut didn't like the conditions they were working under, so they stopped work. The revolutionary legislature of the Connecticut colony sent a committee to negotiate with them and settle their grievances. But this was a rather atypical occurrence.

Over the early decades of the 19th century, the era of the industrial revolution, a growing proportion of the workforce became what we think of today of workers -- people who work for a wage for someone else. With that change came the development of strikes as a regular part of life in the United States.

Initially, strikes were treated as criminal conspiracies. Nonetheless, they continued to grow. As more and more Americans became propertyless wage laborers, their power as individuals diminished, but their power as a group became greater. The strike provided a way to exercise some power over their conditions of life and work.

For most of the 19th century and well into the 20th century, most strikes occurred in the context of craft unionism. Workers who could monopolize the skills and knowledge required to do the job in a particular craft could organize a union and withdraw their labor power, often at a
critical juncture. They could thereby exercise economic power and thus force higher wages or changes in their working conditions. Such craft union economic strikes became part of the core strategy of the American Federation of Labor, long the dominant U.S. trade union center, under its longtime leader Samuel Gompers.

A related aspect of craft union strategy was exclusionism. The unions that formed the AFL, with some exceptions, excluded blacks. Many excluded Asians. Many excluded women. Such exclusion was part of the strategy to control the labor supply of a particular craft.

There were always pressures within craft unionism to go beyond the "pure and simple unionism" advocated by Samuel Gompers. There were many instances of union coalitions, sympathetic strikes, and other, more inclusive forms of action, even among AFL unions. But the dominant theme within craft unionism reflected what their critics in the radical Industrial Workers of the World (known as the "Wobblies") used to say: The American Federation of Labor should be called the "American Separation of Labor." The Wobblies put out a pamphlet around 1911 called "Why Strikes Are Lost." It told the story of the "union scab." It recounted a number of strikes in which workers who were members of craft unions continued working while other unionized workers in the same job site were on strike. One by one they would go down to defeat, due to the principle of organizing as a separate group.

There were alternative, more inclusive, traditions within the American labor movement, such as the Knights of Labor, the American Railway Union, and the Industrial Workers of the World. These tried to bring together much wider sets of workers, although the K of L and the ARU were not without exclusionism of their own.

There is another aspect of strikes that is perhaps less often included as part of the story of American labor history. Ever since the Civil War, the U.S. has repeatedly seen periods of worker upheaval: strike waves, general strikes, and all kinds of expression of worker protest. In such periods, worker actions tended to run not to be limited to one group of workers but rather to converge. Often they are described as "spreading by contagion." They fit in many ways what Rosa Luxemburg characterized as "periods of mass strike." These periods tend not only to have a very wide range of different kinds of labor struggles, they tend to be related to economic, political, military, and social crises, rather than just to what is going on in the workplace.

An example, perhaps the first major mass strike in the U.S., occurred in 1877. It was known at the time as "The Great Upheaval." What started as a local wildcat railroad strike in the midst of a deep depression spread into a nationwide railroad strike and then into strikes and mass marches in dozens of cities, with street battles with the police, state guards, and ultimately the United States Army. It included a general strike in St. Louis, perhaps the first in U.S. history.

In 1886, labor conflict again came to a peak in what was essentially a general strike in Chicago and a number of other cities for the eight-hour day. It is often remembered in relation to what is generally referred to as the "Haymarket riot" -- actually more of a police riot than anything else. Hundreds of thousands of workers were on strike across trades and industries in dozens of cities at the beginning of May, 1886, all striking around the demand for shorter hours, usually the eight-hour day.

In 1894, the so-called Pullman strike again shut down the railroads of the country. The strike began in sympathy and support for a group of people who were not even railroad workers but who were working in the shops of the Pullman Company, making Pullman cars for literally not enough money to be able to eat. After strikes and mass actions throughout the country, the strikes was suppressed by Federal injunctions and use of large-scale military and police force.
Throughout this period there was practically no right to strike. The old conspiracy doctrines began to go into legal decay, but it was a normal practice in strikes for employers simply to go to a judge and get an injunction and then have workers and union leaders declared in contempt of court for violating the injunction. From the 19th century into the 1930s, the state frequently acted systematically as a strikebreaker.

Until World War I, most employers opposed unions and worker organization and fought to maintain unilateral control of the workplace. They generally found support from government. With World War I, the tremendous demand for labor led to a shift in government to a two-pronged policy. One prong was to suppress the more radical parts of the labor movement quite violently. So labor leader and Socialist Presidential candidate Eugene Victor Debs spent World War I in prison and the IWW was decimated by violent lynching and beatings, while law-enforcement officials, where they did not participate, turned a blind eye. The other prong was the opening up of government-sanctioned collective bargaining, with the right to organize and bargain for the more conservative, mainstream unions protected by the government and accepted by most large employers.

After World War I, employers, with government acquiescence, tried to roll back these changes by eliminating whatever institutionalization of worker power had developed within the workplace. It is in that context that the great strike wave of 1919 occurred, which had as one of its first expressions the Seattle General Strike of 1919 -- an event which should also be seen as part of the global crisis and revolt of the post-World War I era.

The post-war effort to roll back the beachhead that workers had made in major parts of American industry was quite successful. During the 1920s, the so-called "open shop," the exclusion of worker organization from workplaces, was close to universal. Strikes were few and largely regarded as relics of the past.

In the mid-1930s, a wave of sit-down strikes -- mass occupations in auto and rubber factories and many other workplaces -- shook the country. They played a central role in establishing a very different form of unionism, industrial unionism, which was pioneered by the CIO and later imitated by the AFL. This was a much more inclusive form of labor organization, but one with its roots still very much in the AFL tradition in the sense of viewing what labor organization is about as a relation between a group of workers and their employer.

There was also a fundamental shift in the legal status of strikes and of labor organizations. The National Labor Relations Act established the right of workers to organize and to take concerted action. It thereby seemed to guarantee workers' right to strike, which as we've seen was not a norm through most of American history.

In the wake of the NLRA's passage, however, courts interpreted the Act as guaranteeing not the rights of workers, but rather the rights of unions. Once workers were represented by a union, the right to strike became a right of the union as an organization. Therefore, if the union had a contract with the employer that provided for no strikes during the course of the agreement, strikes again became illegal. In the years after World War II, no-strike clauses were included in 90 percent of contracts. And eventually the courts declared that, even if there was not a no-strike clause in the contract, a no-strike agreement was implied simply by the existence of a contract.

Further limitation on the right to strike came with the Taft-Hartley Act after World War II, which outlawed so-called secondary strikes and boycotts. A strike could only be protected under American labor law if it was a strike against the immediate employer around issues with the employer. Extraneous issues, so-called, like what was happening to other workers someplace else, were not a legally acceptable subject for a strike. Solidarity became, in effect, illegal.
In sum, only an extremely narrow range of strikes were legally protected. Generally, they had to be called by a union; there had to be no contract in place; and they could only be about wages, hours, and working conditions of the immediate employer.

The quarter-century that followed World War II has often been called the "golden age of capitalism." The global economy had an unprecedented annual growth rate of 5 percent a year from 1947 to 1973. There were very few deep recessions. In the United States there was an unprecedented stability in economic growth and in the business cycle.

This coincides with what is often called the "era of institutionalized collective bargaining." It could be marked at the beginning with the strike wave of 1946. As after World War I, employers wanted to roll back the gains that the labor movement had made during the war. This time, however, the battle was fought to a standstill. Major employers thereupon decided that they were going to accept the existence of unions in their plants. That acceptance continued for another quarter-century.

The most recent period of mass strike, though rarely recognized as such, was the Vietnam era. In addition to the more widely-recognized forms of protest by students, blacks and soldiers, it saw huge wildcat strikes by miners, postal workers, teamsters, and many other groups very similar to the patterns of previous mass strikes. It also marked the end of the era in which most large employers bargained collectively with most of their workers.

**The Decline of Strikes**

In the years from 1950 to 1975, the "era of institutionalized collective bargaining", the Department of Labor statistics on "large strikes" (1000 or more workers for one or more shifts) typically show between 200 and 450 large strikes per year. Since then, the decline has been dramatic. The number of large strikes declined every year from 1980 to 1995. In 1995, these strikes hit a fifty-year low. There were only 32 strikes involving 1000 or more workers in the United States, which is one-eighth of the number two decades before. By 1998 the number had rebounded -- to 34.

Why have strikes declined so dramatically in the United States?

First, the economic context: a long period of economic stagnation worldwide. The quarter century that began in 1973 saw annual global growth fall from 5% to 2.5%. In the United States, the years from 1973 to 1997 represent by some measures the longest period of weak economic growth since the Civil War.

The decline of strikes is sometimes attributed to the alleged fact that workers simply had no need to strike any more. This is not too effective an explanation. The period of declining strikes saw a 15 percent reduction in workers' real wages and a 30 percent reduction in real incomes for young families. These wage losses have not been restored by the boom economy of the past couple of years -- wages have barely returned to the level of 1989 and not nearly to the level of 1973. We've also seen the rise of the 12-hour day and the 7-day week; the loss of health, pension, and social safety net protections; downsizing; outsourcing; and the erosion of job security. These reverse the prime historical accomplishment of strikes and the labor movement: modifying the idea that labor is just something traded in a market to the idea that workers are human beings with human rights, labor rights, the kinds of democratic rights that are provided in the United States Constitution, rights to health and social security, and so on. Over the past twenty years we've seen a return to the idea that labor is just a commodity.

Another explanation that doesn't work too well is that the decline of strikes is just a result of high unemployment. True, much of the era of strike decline was marked by high
unemployment. But strikes have not rebounded much during the booming employment of the last couple of years. This contrasts with the long-run historical pattern, in which strikes tend to go up very sharply when wages have declined and then employment has surged. With or without unions, workers have normally turned to strikes at a very high rate in that situation, and we haven't seen that in the past couple of years.

Why?

Strikes in the past 25 years were nasty, brutish, and long. A string of catastrophic strikes runs from PATCO to Staley. Let us examine one case, occurring in a stronghold of unionism, to see some of the sources of failure.

The Caterpillar Corporation is the world's largest manufacturer of earth moving equipment. It has plants all over the world, from Scotland to Mexico to Indonesia. It has been a center of class struggle all around the world. Caterpillar workers conducted a 103-day factory occupation in Scotland in 1987 and a six day occupation in Canada in 1991.

In the United States, the company and the UAW had a cooperation program in the 1980s that was oriented toward creating more efficient production so that American plants would be more competitive. While that was happening, the company also pursued its own restructuring program, which reduced the workforce by 30 percent and built new, non-union plants. In 1991, the Caterpillar Company demanded a whole range of concessions, including a two-tier pay scale, changes in health insurance, and a familiar litany of similar takebacks. Caterpillar Chairman Donald V. Fites said he needed greater flexibility to set wages, benefits, and working conditions, to protect Caterpillar's preeminent position in competition with companies in Japan and Europe.

Workers struck in November, 1991 and the bargaining chair of the largest local told the press, "As long as we hold the line, and don't take our experience in there, we're going to be all right." In other words, the withdrawal of labor power by this group of workers in itself would be sufficient to win the strike and protect them from what the company was trying to do.

After five months, Caterpillar threatened to bring in replacement workers. Caterpillar workers were afraid of permanently losing their jobs, and the UAW leadership ordered the workers back to work. The New York Times commented, "The abrupt end of a five-month strike against Caterpillar showed that management can bring even a union so mighty and rich as the United Automobile Workers to its knees."

Two and a half years later, the UAW ordered its members back on strike. The company attempted to continue production with strikebreakers, and to a considerable extent it was successful. After 17 months on strike, the UAW negotiated a new agreement with Caterpillar, which the workers voted down by nearly 80 percent. Then the UAW "recessed" the strike and ordered union members back to work anyway.

Conditions on their return were horrendous. The NLRB has filed over 250 separate complaints for unfair labor practices against Caterpillar, and found that the company's "pattern of unlawful conduct convinces us that, without proper restraint, Caterpillar is likely to persist in its attempts to interfere with employees' statutory rights." That prediction has proved correct. Caterpillar workers now refer to their workplace as "Stalag Caterpillar."

Why did strikes so often become a disaster? Let me touch on five reasons that are all visible in the story of Caterpillar, but that reflect deeper structural trends; there are no doubt many more that could be added.

First, corporations have gone global. They can threaten to move their work or their facilities. They are able to whipsaw globally: to play workers in their different plants against each other. They also function in global markets in which they compete on labor costs -- a
practice it was a prime aim of the labor movement to eliminate. The result is what has been called a "race to the bottom."

The labor movement, meanwhile, is very divided globally. There was little response among American workers, for example, to the Scottish and Canadian Caterpillar occupations. I suspect that most UAW members in the U.S. didn't even know about them. The attempt by the union here was to make the American plants more efficient in order to compete with the foreign Caterpillar plants. Rather late in the Caterpillar struggle, the UAW tried to bring together a Caterpillar World Council. They did have one meeting. But little came of it, and it isn't hard to see why there wasn't a lot of interest among Caterpillar workers in other parts of the world in supporting workers at U.S. plants, given U.S. workers' previous disinterest in supporting Caterpillar workers elsewhere. In short, we now face a "global separation of labor" as a sequel to the "American Separation of Labor" of the period of national capitalism.

Second, corporations have restructured in pursuit of what Mr. Fites referred to as "the need for flexibility." This is referred to as downsizing, outsourcing, lean production, and the like. Restructuring generally means a change from vertically integrated and horizontally integrated corporations to today's trendy "core/ring" structure. This means eliminating everything except the core functions, and then contracting with a group of satellite suppliers for everything from janitorial services to managing your computers. The result might be called, in contrast to the integrated corporation, the "dis-integrated" corporation. This makes any one group of workers even more powerless vis-a-vis their employer.

Just within the United States, there are dozens of unions that negotiate with most major corporations. There are no bargaining councils in most of these companies. There is little connection and coordination among those dozens of unions within each corporation. So we still also have an American separation of labor.

Third is the end of class compromise. Caterpillar's shift from cooperation to combat was explicit. It is representative of a shift of American corporations from cooperation with unions to a drive to break any independent power in the workplace.

Emblematic of that is the widespread use of permanent replacement workers, which was virtually unknown in the U.S. from the institutionalization of labor law in the 1940s to Ronald Reagan's firing of the PATCO workers in 1980. It is hard to imagine a more powerful symbol of the recommodification of labor than the idea that a company can take an entire labor force, decide it doesn't like its attitude, and just get rid of it and hire a completely new workforce. That is "labor as a commodity" with a vengeance.

Employers' primary goal in such cases appears to be unilateral management control, that is, the elimination of labor as an independent force. To achieve this goal it is not necessary to eliminate unions. The companies have often accepted the continued existence of unions, as long as they do not function as an independent force. This is a different strategy than was followed by the open shop movement in the 1920s, but the results are very much the same.

Fourth is the changing role of the state. One important aspect of this is the atrophy of the institutions of collective bargaining that were created under the NLRA. Today, 15.5 percent of workers are represented by unions. This is the lowest proportion of workers unionized since 1936. Union density is right back where it was before the passage of the NLRA. There is also a breakdown of NLRB protections for workers. One study found that ten thousand workers are fired annually for attempting to organize unions. The Congress recently refused to reappoint an NLRB head primarily because he had shown an interest in defending workers' statutory rights. The gassing and beating in striking workers in Dekatur, and in many other strikes of the past two
decades, also indicate that the role of the state in relation to strikes is quite in continuity with the long-term historical pattern going back into the 19th century.

Finally, there is the question of union acquiescence in these conditions. At Caterpillar, as in many companies, the union actively pursued a cooperation program it hoped would preserve U.S. jobs, even at the expense of Caterpillar workers elsewhere. Such support for workplace, company, and national "competitiveness" has been a hallmark of organized labor's approach throughout this period. So has the limitation of struggles summarized by those memorable words, "As long as we hold the line and don't take our experience in there, we're going to be all right."

Were there alternatives? At the time of the Caterpillar strike, there were three major strikes in the Dekatur area: Caterpillar, Staley, and Bridgestone/Firestone. Locals from all three did actually form an alliance in Dekatur. There were several other companies that were on the verge of strikes. There was serious thought given by some workers to the idea that this situation was moving toward a local general strike. Staley striker Dan Lane, who conducted a 65-day hunger strike, was very conscious that he was trying to move the situation toward a general strike in the city of Dekatur. That idea provides one vision of what it would mean to move toward broader solidarity, something more like the Seattle General Strike, for example. However, the main thrust of the unions involved was not to go in that direction, but on the contrary to try to settle these strikes separately, as quickly as possible, and on almost any terms the companies would accept.

**New Tactics in Social Conflict**

There are some developing approaches that begin to counter these serious problems. Organized labor is beginning to respond to globalization, for example. Although the Caterpillar World Council and solidarity support never got off the ground, there have been a number of strikes where international solidarity has played a crucial role. In the Bridgestone/Firestone lockout, pressure from workers all over the world on B/F, including workers in Japan, Brazil, and Europe, was a major factor in persuading B/F to reverse itself and rehire the workers whom it had permanently replaced. In the UPS strike, one of the shining stars of labor success of the past few years, international pressure, especially by European workers, some in unions, some trying to organize in UPS, played a major role in UPS's decision to back off and come to a settlement. There has been a lot of grassroots international labor activity, including campaigns for labor rights, the anti-sweatshop movements, and support for the Han Young strike. Even when you put all those pieces together, labor is still very far from redefining itself as a global movement, which is what it has to do in order to have any chance of dealing with the global corporations.

There are also some interesting responses to corporate restructuring. The corporate campaigns that accompany many strikes now are, among other things, a way of taking on a company as a whole and trying to find all of the places it is vulnerable to pressure, rather than just focusing on the strike of one group of workers trying to take on the company in isolation.

There are also ways that the reorganization of corporations strengthens workers. For example, there have been a series of local strikes at General Motors plants that have taken advantage of the introduction of just-in-time production. If you can close a plant in Dayton or in Flint, you can close much of a gigantic corporation. The whole North American operations of General Motors, with hundreds of thousands of workers, were stopped by a couple thousand workers in Flint and in Dayton on various occasions.
In Flint, overwork was the problem, because the company wasn't hiring new workers. But the workers' objectives went beyond reducing overwork for those currently employed. The workers made an alliance with the broader community, notably the black ministers. It was based on saying, we're not just going to let them hire temporary workers so that we won't have to work seventy or eighty hours a week. We are going to insist that they hire permanent workers, because the city of Flint needs jobs.

The rise of organizing by labor markets is another interesting response. The big victory that was recently won by SEIU home health care workers in Los Angeles is an example. Part of the strategy there was not to think about organizing employer by employer, but rather to organize an entire workforce that represents an entire labor market. That is also happening through the creation of worker centers, which are again not based on organizing by employer. These most often organize by ethnic group. In Boston, a contingent worker center serves as a base for people who are part-time and temporary workers and contract workers in a wide range of occupations. The living wage campaigns and similar efforts that put a floor under social conditions represent another way of trying to address the problem of corporate restructuring by moving beyond one group of workers organizing or striking just to deal with the immediate employer.

The end of employer indulgence of worker organization, aka corporate class war, is something that the labor movement has only begun to address. Despite all the changes in the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney repeatedly says that he thinks there is a natural community of interest between American business and American workers. The question of whether that has any meaning in the era of global capitalism is one that the labor movement is going to have to face. The era of class compromise is over. Global capital is essentially uninterested in dealing with workers.

Labor also needs to recognize the reality of unequal power. Labor law essentially maintains that collective bargaining establishes equality between workers and corporations. Most unions similarly maintained that they were as strong as the companies. But they are not as strong as the companies. Labor needs to recognize that and think in terms of the tactics and strategies that are appropriate for a weak force trying to deal with a stronger force.

One example is "the inside game." This uses the power of workers' withdrawal of labor and non-cooperation -- but not by going on strike, leaving the workplace, and marching around in front of it. Instead, it uses what the Wobblies used to call "striking on the job" or "the withdrawal of efficiency." Now it is sometimes called "making the workplace run backward."

In response to the changing role of the state, the labor movement is now trying publicly to define the right to organize as a basic human right. It is linking international labor rights and the right of workers to organize in the United States, which is something that has long been outside the paradigm of the U.S. labor movement. A logical corollary would be to expand the same concept to assert the right to strike as a basic human right: to assert that, if workers can't strike, they are living under a form of slavery. Such an approach is necessary because there is no way that workers are going to get power of any significant kind, or be able to be an independent force, within the limits imposed by current labor law.

One of the most significant developments in labor struggles in the past 20 years is the widespread use of non-violent civil disobedience. The labor movement has always been primarily a non-violent movement. But when it has been attacked by state power, its response has been varied. There hasn't generally been a consistent policy not to respond violently in that situation, but rather to respond by some kind of non-violent mass mobilization. The use of
Ghandian techniques and the tactics of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement has become a regular staple of labor struggles over the past twenty years. That provides a way of asserting the unacceptability of government repression, without the danger of alienating the public and making it feel it is dealing with a violent force which it is legitimate for the state to suppress.

Finally, the labor movement's acquiescence in capital's plans for the "recommodification of labor" has begun to change. This is not just a matter of greater militancy, but even more of the goals of strikes. When the Teamsters and UPS workers put the focus of the UPS strike on the problem of part-time work, and defined that as a social problem not just for UPS workers but for all American workers, they hit a huge responsive chord. It was one of the reasons that strike was successful.

We're going to have to think a lot further in that direction:

A lot of Americans are upset about the threat to Social Security. How about a general strike to save social security?

A lot of Americans were very upset about efforts to remove an elected president. How about a general strike in that kind of situation as a way for people to express their desire and commitment to defending the institutions of democracy?

It sounds far fetched -- until we take a look at what's happening in the rest of the world.

**Mass Strike Worldwide**

Worldwide, general strikes and political strikes have been burgeoning. According to labor journalist Kim Moody, "In the last couple of years, there have been at least two dozen political general strikes in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and North America. There have been more political mass strikes in the last two or three years than at any time in the twentieth century." Since 1996 there have been general strikes in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Columbia, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Greece, Haiti, Italy, Puerto Rico, South Korea, and Spain, among others.

The characteristics of these strikes is very different from those typical in the United States. Most of these strikes were not about problems with particular employers. Rather they contested austerity, privatization, denial of labor and human rights, and the slashing of basic services. In most cases they were responses to the pressures of globalization. Generally these strikes had the support of the vast majority of the population. And, while they often had roots in earlier events and activities, they did not occur primarily in places that had long traditions of general strikes of this kind.

France is interesting because it is one of the few industrial countries that has labor union density as low as the U.S. -- around 12 percent. It also has a very divided labor movement. When the government announced that it was going to cut France's equivalent of social security, workers, both union and non-union, began forming local assemblies that cut across union lines. They began organizing a strike, which became a nationwide general strike with huge mass demonstrations and marches.

One of the main demands that emerged from the worker assemblies was that the unions start cooperating. They were forced to cooperate with each other in challenging what everyone saw as a threat: the destruction of the social security system (cut in the name, of course, of international competitiveness). Within a few weeks the government was forced to withdraw its plan. Since then the struggle has continued in a myriad of forms. It also had something to do with why there is no longer a conservative government in France.
Strikes have also played a crucial role in the people power movements that have brought down undemocratic regimes from Poland to the Philippines to Indonesia to Korea. And they have been central to the resistance to IMF "structural adjustment" plans imposed in the wake of global financial crisis in the late 1990s.

It would be premature to describe all this as a "global mass strike." But global capitalism may be creating the conditions for such a phenomenon.

**Conclusion: The Future of Strikes**

One of the things that we learn from history is that new conditions will create new challenges. We're now in the midst of a new global crisis, which comes as a climax to the long era of stagnation. We don't see this in the US because of the bubble economy that we are in, but we are going to see it a lot more.

Economic growth worldwide has slowed to the lowest level in 30 years. At least 40 percent of the world is now in recession. We have catastrophic economic situations in Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Russia, Brazil, and virtually all of Africa. *Business Week* recently wrote, "We live in a deflationary world -- defined by overcapacity and insufficient demand." And *The New York Times* editorialized, "For much of the world, the magic of the marketplace extolled by the West in the afterglow of victory in the cold war has been supplanted by the cruelty of markets, wariness toward capitalism and new dangers of instability."

The kinds of strikes that marked the US in the heyday of collective bargaining from the 1940s through the 1970s seem unlikely to significantly rebound. It is hard to see what will ever restore the power of one group of workers to make gains simply by withdrawing their labor power from their employer.

Strikes may serve again as a vehicle for working people to express their power, but if so they will be strikes of a very different character. If and when that happens, the efforts of workers to change society in the global crisis of 1919 which we commemorate today -- reflected in the life of Rosa Luxemburg and in the Seattle General Strike -- will be not just dead history, but a living source.

During and after World War I, it was often said that workers were being pitted against workers militarily in a global warfare. Today workers are being pitted against workers economically in a global race to the bottom. For those who accept this situation, the strike probably has little to offer. For those who choose to challenge it, strikes are likely to be an essential means of action for a long time to come.