The worker’s antagonism to the machine has traveled a long way from the time when he simply wished to smash it. Now what he wants to have done with is his very work. He wants to do something entirely different – express all his natural and acquired powers in an activity worthy of him as a human being.

Raya Dunayevskaya, 1951

The traditional perception of the American working class as apolitical or even backward, since it has never built a labour party of its own or embraced Marxist parties in any significant way, has been challenged in recent decades by numerous writers who have highlighted the militancy and social consciousness that have been integral to the myriad experiences of the US labour movement. The period since World War II provides especially powerful testimony of this combative legacy. The wildcat strikes

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1 See ‘Cooperative Form of Labour vs. Abstract Labour’ [March 2, 1951], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9299.
in the coal, steel, and automobile industries in the 1950s, the formation of militant black caucuses in Northern and Southern unions in the 1960s, and the ‘blue-collar blues’ which defined much social discourse in the US in the 1970s all challenged the traditional view that this ‘working class without socialism’ was lacking in social consciousness and militancy. While much has been written on these and other labour struggles in the post-World-War-II era, the full history of the American labour movement’s contribution to what some have called ‘the struggle against work’ remains to be written. Though that cannot be attempted here, we will focus on one especially important moment in the battle over the nature of work – the coal miners’ strikes in West Virginia from 1949 to 1951, the first wildcat strikes against automation in US history. The reason for focusing on these strikes in this essay is that they help illuminate how revolutionary-Marxist currents which aim to comprehend and connect to spontaneous mass struggles are challenged by new forms of proletarian subjectivity.

I. Coal miners and the US labour movement in the 1940s

Coal miners have long been known as the ‘shock troops’ of the US labour movement. In the 1940s, their reputation was further enhanced when half-a-million went on strike in the midst of World War II in open defiance of the ‘no strike pledge’ supported by virtually every US labour leader. Remarkable as were the actions of the miners in 1943, it was by no means exceptional. Over two million US workers were involved in strikes in 1943. The middle and late 1940s marked one of the most militant periods in American labour history. As one participant in the labour movement at the time put it,

> Labor unrest . . . was a great public concern in the US in the final months of the Second World War. All three major labor centers – the AFL, the CIO, and the railroad brotherhoods – participated in a record number of strikes.4

The number of strikes by US workers further increased with the end of World War II. In November 1945, the United Auto Workers (UAW) went on strike for 113 days against General Motors. By January 1946, industry-wide strikes had spread to the meatpacking, electrical, and steel industries. In February

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3 The phrase is from a letter of Anton Pannekoek to Cornelius Castoriadis of November 8, 1953. It is found in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 10901.