

The need for Workers Party struggle against Trade Union politics

Don Franks (Delivered at **Marxism 2006 Wellington**) (from the Workers Party website: <http://workersparty.org.nz>)

When I first came across Lenin's assertion that "Trade union politics is bourgeois politics" I was a bit disconcerted; it didn't sound quite right. It was a long while before I learned the difference between trade union politics and trade unionism. The two things are not identical.

Trade Unionism is simply the organisation of workers to fight for workers interests. It may involve agreement not to undercut each other, strikes for higher wages, or against wage cuts. Trade union action may involve the use of capitalist state mediation services and it may also involve illegal strikes in support of workers overseas.

Trade Union Politics is trade union action limited to activity within the laws of the capitalist state.

In New Zealand trade union politics arose alongside the development of trade unionism. Combined effects of long years of hardship, the exposures of sweating and an international upsurge in the labour movement led to a surge in organisation among workers in 1889-1890.

It was the first time that unskilled and semi-skilled workers had organised themselves on any scale in New Zealand: Union membership rose from 5,000 to 63,000 in the space of one year. This wave of organisation was strongest in the transport occupations with the Maritime Council being formed to array the seamen, watersiders, miners and, railwaymen into a single organisation. Many improvements were won in a short space of time.

However, the movement did not last. The employers were quick to counter attack by provoking a strike of all sections of the Maritime Council except the railwaymen. The strike was defeated by a shortage of funds and scabherding. No sooner was it over than the employers set about cleaning out unionism with a wave of wage cutting and victimisation.

The events of 1890 woke the capitalists up to the realities of working class strength. Clearly a continuation of the *laissez-faire* relationship between capital and labour would

lead to further serious outbreaks of class struggle and a grave disturbance to the interests of business. A new bosses strategy was needed, and that was what the Liberal government of 1890 set about developing.

The Liberal Party's policy had two sides to it. On the one hand it brought in legislation to outlaw the worst excesses of capitalist dictatorship laws on factories, mines, ships and offices; workers compensation; old age pensions. On the other hand it sought to moderate the class struggle by involving the state in the bargaining over wages -and conditions ' of work. The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act was passed in 1894. Under this act disputes between employers and unions had to be submitted to a state-appointed tribunal (the Arbitration Court) for resolution: Strikes were made illegal. Although it was passed over 100 years ago the basic thrust of the IC and A Act still underlies current state policy towards control of the working class.

Industrial defeats of 1912 and 1913 turned workers towards politics as a means of improving their conditions of life. In 1916, the Labour Party was formed" espousing the goal of "socialism" but proposing reformist methods of achieving it.

By the nineteen twenties, the workers' movement in this country was clearly divided into two branches - the reformist(represented by the Labour Party) and the revolutionary (represented by the Communist Party).

The depression of the early thirties brought the greatest suffering to the working people since the 1880s. There was massive unemployment (a quarter of the workforce), savage wage cuts, bankruptcy of small farmers and the indignities of relief work and labour camps. Workers became more politicised than ever before, but were more attracted to the "evolutionary socialism" of the Labour Party than to the revolutionary politics of the Communists. The CP's main achievement was in the leadership of the Unemployed Workers' Movement which agitated for the interests of the unemployed.

Labour's election victory in 1935 coincided with economic recovery and this enabled considerable improvements to be made in New Zealand's social welfare system. The fact that these improvements were made by the Labour government (and tolerated by the capitalists) shows the impact of working class opinion in New Zealand politics workers have only been prepared to accept the continuation of capitalism on the condition that their security and standard of living has been improved.

The Labour government also introduced compulsory unionism. No longer did workers have to fight for the closed shop. Union membership jumped dramatically from 81,000 in 1935 to 250,000 in 1939. At the same time the powers of the state in union affairs were greatly increased - for instance, with the provision for deregistration of unions in 1939.

Compulsory unionism had the effect of creating paper unions dominated by a few reformist leaders and with little rank and file, participation. A powerful group of class collaborationist officials headed by F.P. Walsh came into existence. They co-operated closely with the economic policies of the government.

This trade union politics is the prevalent ideology and practice of unions today.

Generations of New Zealand leftists have confused Trade union politics and Socialist politics. The Socialist Unity Party (SUP) is a prime example. The pro Soviet Union SUP split away from the CPNZ in 1965 over questions of reform and revolution. The majority of union officials in the CPNZ went with the SUP. From 1965 until its sudden demise on the fall of the Soviet Union, the SUP was an important player in the union movement, because of its linkage of fulltime officials placed in militant unions. Despite its name, the SUP was an enemy of socialism. The party was hostile to any serious discussion of socialism at any workers meetings and consistently urged workers to support Labour, no matter what Labour did. The SUP argued against political strikes and manouvered to limit strikes and workers self activity of any kind. The party did deals to get its members elected to top positions and recruited by offering free trips to the USSR and other Eastern bloc countries.

Other left forces in the union movement practiced Trade Union politics as well, sometimes because of yielding to conservative pressure and sometimes through political inexperience and ignorance.

I wrote in a recent letter to a comrade:

"Although there can be various degrees of ongoing unity in action there is always friction between revolutionary socialists and union functionaries and there will ever be, because, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out to us so clearly, we're on fundamentally different roads. Since 1973 I've been struggling with this problem as a revolutionary and a unionist, in various positions from member, delegate, management committee member, union branch president and FOL conference delegate. More often than not I would lean towards trade union politics instead of revolutionary politics, in the hope of doing the best thing for the workers. Looking back, and thinking hard about these episodes I think most of the times I did that I was wrong, and in fact the workers cause suffered - both in the long term and in the short term. That's why I rave on a bit about stuff like that today, because I don't want to see another generation of revolutionaries fuck up, like we did. The road of trade union politics leads inevitably to a foul rotting junkyard where there are no principles, where every workers demand is expendable, where the demand of capital is the final brutal arbiter."

Today we stand on the threshold of a small communist revival in the union movement. We have comrades active in several unions and union campaigns.

How can we stay embedded in union organisations and union campaigns while retaining and espousing our politics?

First, we need to make a basic decision - are we really socialists first and foremost? If we are, then we are obliged to fight for our WP politics day in and out. Fighting for our

corner does not mean being a left bore who talks nothing but politics. It does mean that when there is a workplace or union debate of any moment then we openly put our socialist view of the matter. If we do this we will be told, by officials - and sometimes by other workers that this is not the time or place, that there is plenty of time for all these theories later etc etc. We need to realise that this pressure is the expression of capitalist ideology in the workers movement and that it will be our constant unwelcome companion. We must insist on our right to express our opinion.

Second, we need to support our comrades who are in the front line of union struggles. Each branch must become a supportive collective, where union and workplace struggles are discussed and debated. The branch should be a reliable place where WP union activists can draw strength and wisdom, where they can discuss mistakes, and gain inspiration to press on in difficult struggles.

Different levels of union organisation throw up different aspects of trade union politics. In some cases the problem will be a manipulative careerist union secretary. In other cases, the problem may be the trade union politics of keen young functionaries who genuinely see socialist politics as being disruptive to the "main issues"

Another problem is that fact that we must sometimes use the 'proper channels' ourselves. For example, an illegal strike is a much better way of achieving reinstatement than mediation, because it enables workers to exercise and feel their collective power. But on some occasions, the only options to defend a sacked worker are mediation or nothing. These things are not always absolutely black and white. It's necessary to be able to use the 'proper channels' without acquiring or spreading any illusions about them.

My own view is that after a day's participation in union struggle we should often look back and ask ourselves the question - did I act as a Workers Party member today, or was I really just behaving like any other member on the union Management Committee?