

THE FIGHT FOR CONTROL:

Militants in the Trade Unions

Organised Labour v. the Capitalist Offensive

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INTRODUCTION

The following article is a reprint from *Red Mole* of 15th September. It was written before the announcement of the Tory Government's anti-trade union proposals. However, those proposals, which amount to a systematic and thorough-going attack on the independence of the trade union movement from the state machine, underline the importance of discussion of the issues raised in the article.

First, of course, we need to have a mass movement against the Government's proposals, but then the problem is posed: where is this movement going? What are its perspectives? And how will it relate to the more general problem of overthrowing British capitalism?

The answers to these questions are just as important as building a mass movement in response to the Tory Government's attacks.

A very learned professor once said: "He who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it." 1969 saw a mass movement, involving two one-day political strikes, against the Labour Government's anti-trade union proposals. 1926 saw a general strike which paralysed the whole capitalist system in Britain. In the pre-war years we saw a strong, viable, militant organisation involving hundreds of thousands of workers—the Minority Movement.

Each one of these movements involved huge numbers of workers in class action. Yet they left the basic structure of British capitalism untouched. The 1969 movement against the Labour Government's anti-trade union proposals, in particular, involved workers taking directly political action, yet it disappeared almost without a trace once concessions were made.

There is no doubt that there will be a mass movement against the Tory Government. Quite rightly, there will be a tremendous desire for unity and hostility towards hair-splitters.

However, we do not want to repeat the history of 1926, 1969 and the pre-war years. However heroic those struggles were and whatever victories they led to, they did not lead us any further along the road to socialism. And that is the hub of the problem. British capitalism is in an irreversible crisis; its leaders are obliged to attack the working class in a desperate attempt to solve this crisis. Therefore any victory—even a dramatic one like forcing the Tories to withdraw their proposals—is a temporary one. We need not only to win battles but the war as well.

As Pat Jordan points out, for *social* reasons there is a built-in tendency for trade union bureaucrats to limit the struggle. This tendency comes together with those of the Communist Party and Tribunites both of which for *political* reasons want to keep the struggle at a purely economic level.

With a strong desire for unity in struggle dominating the thoughts of militants, there is a great danger that the movement will indeed remain defensive, that history will be repeated (because we have not learnt from it) and that the mass movement against the Tories will not lead to a struggle for a socialist Britain.

For all these reasons the International Marxist Group considers it vital that a serious discussion takes place on the problem of transforming the defensive struggle against anti-trade union legislation into an offensive one which will eat into and finally destroy capitalist power in Britain.

We welcome the trade union conferences now taking place and will do our best to make them successful in their task of meeting the Tory onslaught. We will work for the widest possible unity in this fight. But we consider the most important contribution we can make is that of helping to elaborate a socialist strategy for these struggles. We come along with no ready-made formulas or panaceas. We consider those who refuse to listen to the ideas of others as sectarian. But we are of the opinion that it is equally wrong to ignore the lessons of history and of the distilled experience of the labour movement.

In this spirit we offer Pat Jordan's article as a contribution to the discussion. We will welcome comments, enquiries, etc., and we will be especially pleased to hear from those who would like to work with us in the job of constructing an international revolutionary socialist party.

"If hard factual evidence was really needed to confirm that industrial relations remain in a parlous state at a time of acute economic difficulty, no thinking person could do better than study the official returns on stoppages of work through labour disputes, published today... More than 1m. workers are involved in stoppages in the first seven months of 1970, representing the loss of over 6m. working days, more than double the level of 1969..." The Times Business News, August 28th, 1970.

"The trade unions hitherto concentrated their attention too exclusively on the local and direct struggle against capital. They have not yet completely realised their power to attack the very system of wage slavery and present-day methods of production..." From a resolution passed on trade unions by the First International, Geneva, 1866.

According to the press Britain is in the midst of an unprecedented strike wave (the number of strikes being the highest on record) combined with a wages explosion (£9.84m. up per week in the first seven months of this year as against £1.75m. in the same period last year, according to DEP figures).

We don't intend to counter capitalist propaganda by explaining that *actually* the unofficial strikers aren't *really* holding the country to ransom—on the contrary; in fact one of our complaints is that the trade union movement isn't doing just that.

It is more important to consider some of the problems facing trade unionists, and how revolutionary socialists should relate to them. We have a situation in which very large numbers of workers are willing to go into militant action against the employers, the state, and very often, their own union leaderships; however, all this militancy is doing little more than maintaining their present standard of living. Such a consideration will involve taking a look at the history of trade unions, their leadership, their role today, the problems they face and, most important, what revolutionary socialists should do.

Trade Unions Yesterday and Today

Trade unions are the basic organisation of the working class. They arise from the first steps in working class consciousness. The proletariat (i.e.

whose sole and normal method of gaining their livelihood is selling their labour power) face the bourgeoisie as atomised units. Dispossessed of the ownership of the means of production, they face a class, the bourgeoisie, which has the monopoly of their means of livelihood. For most of the proletariat's history it has faced the additional pressure of the reserve army of unemployed. In the elemental class struggle (directly over the rate of exploitation) workers would have been in an absolutely hopeless position but for their power of combination. Trade unions represented, in their origin, the placing on a permanent basis of those powers of combination and unity.

At first the British bourgeoisie responded by trying to break up and smash these organisations. The most dramatic and heroic episodes in the history of the British working class were concerned with the struggle to maintain the unions. Once the employers had learned that it was impossible to destroy the unions without provoking a permanent civil war, they sought to come to terms with them. This change of attitude encompassed many years and was accompanied by a continual tug-of-war in which the employers sought to restrict and emasculate the unions. The capitalists were only prepared to grant full legalisation to the unions when they were certain that by a combination of bribery of strata of workers (the so-called aristocracy of labour) and integration of the leadership of the unions into bourgeois society they could contain them.

The change in outlook is well illustrated historically: Ken Coates in *Trade Union Register 1969* compares the 100th Congress of the TUC:

"A solemn and vast concourse, it followed a series of gargantuan celebrations in which, it seemed, practically all the English Establishment were ready to join. Her Majesty, flanked on all sides by the responsible statesmen of the General Council whom she had ennobled, dined before television cameras to greater honour of labour..." with the **"first congress, a meagre gathering of 34 virtually unknown men, convoked...with difficulty to meet an unprecedented offensive against the unions..."**

One could add that the 1968 circus was a far

cry from the TUC resolution of 1868 which recommended the First International **"to the support of the working men of the United Kingdom, especially of all organised bodies, and strongly urges them to become affiliated to that body."**

Since the development of mass trade unions in the advanced capitalist states, the bourgeoisie has followed this unceasing policy of trying to integrate the trade unions into bourgeois society—aided and abetted in most countries by social democratic leaders. At the height of imperialism's power, this policy was intricately woven into the process of granting reforms—legal, negotiating rights, etc.—which ensured a "place in society" for the trade unions. In social terms this meant institutionalising the social role of the trade union bureaucrat.

The Trade Union Bureaucrat

The trade union bureaucrat is grateful for his enshrinement—he is always ready and willing to stop or moderate rank-and-file struggles. In time of full employment he restrains the workers from taking full advantage of the shortage of labour. In time of war, from his office desk, he assists in the raising of cannon fodder, and he does his best to replenish the depleted labour force from women, the young, the old, and the untrained. In time of capitalist decline he persuades the workers to accept sacrifices "in the national interest". The trade union bureaucrat can be relied upon to discipline "wild-cat" strikers. As the Donovan Report noted:

"Many trade union leaders have gone on record unequivocally as being opposed to such breaches (of negotiating procedures), and we have no doubt of their sincerity in the matter. On occasions when their active intervention in an unconstitutional dispute has become necessary, they have almost inevitably sought to persuade strikers to go back to work..."

Indeed, the trade union bureaucrat is obliged to attack any rank-and-file action outside his control. His whole social position depends upon him being able to "deliver the goods". If he cannot control the rank and file, he is no use to the bourgeoisie. But this very need to control the rank and file means that he must also "deliver some goods" to the workers as well. Thus the trade union bureaucrat's

manoeuvres are determined by his social position.

But we have to face the fact that most people who end up as trade union bureaucrats commence their career as militants (in fact the most effective ones from the point of view of the bourgeoisie very often started out as socialists or even revolutionaries). What goes wrong?

As noted in Rakovsky's famous essay on the dangers of professionalism in the workers' organisations, there is a built-in tendency for the emergence of "professional" or "bureaucratic" interests in the workers movement which are in contradiction to those of the rank and file membership. This is especially the case in times of comparative class peace and the corollary: low participation by the membership.

Trade unions in advanced capitalist countries are especially prone to this danger. Continuous contact with employers (who turn out to be quite pleasant personally), accompanied by a middle-class standard and style of life, psychological pressures such as praise from both employers and government, make a powerful impact on full-time trade union officials. And, of course, unofficial rank-and-file action is in direct conflict with the routinism of a trade union office, disrupting the possibility of a quiet, smooth life.

The best of left-wingers find these pressures extremely difficult to resist. Only a revolutionary ideology, backed by a revolutionary organisation and revolutionary discipline, can enable people to resist integration in such circumstances.

This situation makes doubly criminal the action of those tendencies (starting with the Communist Party)⁽¹⁾ which concentrate upon winning union positions as a strategy against the right wing. This policy is "rewarded" by sensational renegades: witness Will Paynter and Dave Bowman, who chose precisely the time of sharpened class struggle to resign from the Communist Party and openly ally themselves with the right wing.

The answer is not, of course, to refuse to stand for union positions—such a policy would severely inhibit the chances of influencing large numbers of workers once a firm trade union base has been formed. On the contrary, the answer is to go for union positions (when there is rank-and-file backing) but to demonstratively

refuse to be integrated into the middle-class style of life union officials enjoy. A revolutionary trade union official should openly donate large sums of money (all his wages above that of the average member he represents) to left organisations. He should campaign constantly—even to the point of resigning his position should this be a positive step—for regular election of officials, the reduction of trade union officials' wages, and the right of recall by those who elected him. Failure to do this, even on the grounds of preserving a base to "do constructive work", will inevitably begin a process which will end in degeneration.

Shop Stewards

Shop stewards have been the target of the hatred of the capitalist press which is a sure indication that they are more in tune with the rank and file than the trade union bureaucrats. In general they can be distinguished from trade union officials by the fact that they are lay-members and in practice are usually directly elected and even often recallable. Because of the relative increase in the importance of shop-floor bargaining the role of shop stewards has become more and more decisive. In much capitalist propaganda the shop steward is pictured as a wild militant. This propaganda effects some on the left, particularly middle-class students and lecturers who tend to romanticise the working class as compensation for their own guilt feelings about their class origins. The truth is much more complex. The Donovan Report had this to say about management's attitude towards shop stewards:

"Only 2% of managers held that shop stewards were unreasonable, 95% taking the view that they were either very reasonable or fairly reasonable. Four managers out of five thought that shop stewards were either very efficient or fairly efficient at their job. Nearly a third of them thought that shop stewards were a lot of help to management, and most of the remainder that shop stewards were of some help..."

The objective position of shop stewards makes them much more responsive to rank-and-file control than trade union officials but it would be a big mistake to assume that they will, because of this, automatically and spontaneous-

ly become militants, let alone revolutionary socialists. On the contrary, the best shop stewards will be the politically formed ones and even shop stewards are subject to tremendous pressure in their functioning.

Revolutionaries must explain that the present offensive against shop stewards is designed to weaken rank-and-file control over bargaining and union organisation. The left in the trade union movement must fight tooth and nail against moves to integrate shop stewards into the union apparatus (by making them full-time, for instance). It must explain that the obsession of the capitalist press with "unofficial" strikes is because these strikes are the ones which enable workers to directly respond to changes in their situation quickly and decisively. They are the strikes least controllable by the trade union bureaucrats.

Still Workers' Organisations?

Certain people have argued that just as the Labour Party is in its essential function a bourgeois formation so are trade unions basically props for the status quo. Of course trade unions have gone far from their original role—it is not now a question of workers creating trade unions to *meet* the bourgeoisie, the worker now finds the trade union already in existence with its own apparatus and bureaucracy. In many cases a worker will be unable to find employment unless he is a member of the appropriate trade union. In some unions, this is used to control militants, e.g. the ETU. The example of Pilkingtons and the way the GMWU collaborated with the bosses in trying to smash the newly formed General and Glass Workers' Union is fresh in all our minds.

One can have considerable sympathy with these views but they are extremely mistaken. Whilst the trade union bureaucrats have control of the unions they still have to be responsive to rank-and-file wishes. In many trade unions there is a polarisation between "left" and right in the bureaucracy and real battles are fought out. Whilst we must not create illusions in the Jones's and Scanlons, it must be noted that the victory of the tendencies around them in the two largest unions in the country was a big blow to the plans for integrating unions into capitalist planning. Their verbal militancy,

furthermore, helps to make for greater rank-and-file action. Undoubtedly one of the big factors in the present strike wave is the fact that millions of workers believe that their union leaders favour militancy. Thus in a distorted way workers exercise control over their organisation.⁽²⁾

A further test of the essential differences between the Labour Party and the trade unions is shown by a simple fact: no one anywhere in the political spectrum, no matter how right wing, has suggested legal sanctions against the Labour Party. Why? Because it presents no challenge whatsoever to capitalism (instead it is propping it up) and is in no way an obstacle to British monopoly capital's attempts to modernise itself (on the contrary, it attempted to do the job for capitalism). The main social role of unions today remains defending workers' interests.

Some Structural Problems

Trade unionists face many particular problems today:

1. The growth of unemployment which seems certain to increase still further even in the absence of a recession. Unemployment is now roughly double what it was before Labour came to power—one of the few lasting monuments to Wilson's term of office!! Because the economy is so stagnant, unemployment will tend to increase (if production does not increase at least as fast as productive potential unemployment will increase).
2. Whilst year-to-year figures vary, there is a built-in tendency for the proportion of trades unionists in the total labour force to drop. The main explanation of this is that many of those sectors which have been traditional strongholds of trade unionism have tended to decline—mining, railways, shipbuilding, etc.—whilst many of the new industries which have replaced them are more difficult to organise. This factor has outweighed the growth of white-collar trade unionism and the tendency for more women to join unions.
3. Whilst there has been a huge concentration of capital and growth of monopolies, union organisation still corresponds to the old employer/employee relationship. The growth of international monopolies and especially the

developments likely should Britain join the Common Market have had no corresponding response whatsoever from the trade unions.

In general, trade union militants should respond to these problems by fighting for a bold and militant policy of:

- (a) total opposition to redundancies. End haggling about redundancy compensation rates and instead demand no sackings, but work sharing. Every worker sacked is one more unemployed, every trade unionist "on the stones" is a blow to trade unionism.
- (b) a large-scale recruiting campaign especially directed at the young, women, white-collar and new industry sectors. Trades Councils would be the ideal local bases for such a campaign. It goes without saying that such a campaign would be a formality unless the unions can demonstrate by their militancy that unions are worthwhile.
- (c) a campaign to link up trade unionists in combines, industries and internationally. There should be a call for a European rank and file conference to work out a unified response to the attacks of international capital upon workers' conditions.
- (d) a campaign for the social ownership of the "commanding heights" of industry under workers' control.

Present-Day Attacks on the Trade Unions

The bourgeoisie has always, of course, sought to limit the role of trade unions either directly by legal sanctions, victimisation of militants, etc., or indirectly, by persuading trade union leaders to collaborate with them. However, there are a number of special reasons why capitalism is at this stage trying to directly control and shackle the unions.

Firstly, we live in an era of sharpened international competition, and victory in this struggle will go to those who can use the most up-to-date techniques. This means bigger and bigger units, round-the-clock shift working, rationalised division of labour, the sweeping aside of all obstacles to the introduction of new techniques and methods, the more and more rapid replacement of plant and machinery. The normal functioning of "free" trade union bargaining and especially workshop negotiations over the control of conditions is a major obstacle to this process.

Secondly, the operation of modern capitalism means that there must be a strong element of "planning" because of sharpened international competition and the huge risk involved in new investment. This means that every element of cost must be planned in advance. "Free" wage bargaining introduces an element of uncertainty and unpredictability. This is one of the reasons for the capitalists' hatred of the so-called wage drift (the gap between nationally-negotiated wage rates and actual wage rates determined by local and workshop bargaining).

Thirdly, after a long period of comparatively full employment certain sections of the working class have become extremely well-organised and have imposed upon the employers an element of control—workers in some large motor industry factories, dockers, sections of the printing industry, etc. One of the recent aims of the employers, especially under the Labour Government, has been to change the relationship of forces in these fields.

Fourthly, also arising from comparative full employment and the strength of working-class organisation, there has been a shift of importance from nation-wide bargaining to local bargaining. This has lessened the use of payments by results schemes to the employers and enabled certain sections of workers to obtain quite high rates of pay. The corollary of this is moves for parity from other sections of workers in the same industry—giving rise to the famous leap-frogging effect. It also strengthens union organisation at factory and local level as opposed to the power of national organisation and the trade union bureaucracy. As the Donovan Report wistfully noted (page 32), "For a brief period between the wars the conjunction of industry-wide bargaining and heavy unemployment gave trade union leaders an unusual ascendancy in their own organisations"—Things have certainly changed.

Productivity Deals

It is in this context that productivity bargains have to be set. The achievement of a full system of productivity bargaining would be the capitalists' ideal solution. All measures of rationalisation would have to be accepted by the workers before wage increases were granted. Moreover productivity bargains would ensure the com-

plete planning of wage costs. It must be noted that a complete system of productivity deals is utopian from a capitalist point of view, even in the absence of workers' resistance. Uneven rates of development in industry, the need to "lure" workers from one sector to another, etc. would introduce instability into the system—modern capitalism is quite unable to overcome the inherent anarchy of the capitalist mode of production.

In their efforts to get workers to accept productivity deals, employers very often offer what appear to be very high wage increases. Of course, the catch soon becomes apparent: massive redundancies and a terrible speed-up. The most important long-term effect is the loss of control over conditions. The establishment of productivity bargaining, measured day working, etc. on a complete scale would be a big defeat for the working class and should be vigorously fought by all socialists.⁽³⁾

Building a Revolutionary Nucleus in the Unions

In this situation the central task of socialists is to link the extreme militancy of big sections of the working class to the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. If anything emerges from the present stage of British capitalism, it is the strength of the working class and the weakness of the bourgeoisie and its agencies. The mainly "economist" nature of the present strike wave means that after it is over the class relationship of forces will, at best, remain unchanged. Moreover, whilst the struggle is limited to wage demands there is the danger that a whole series of productivity agreements will be the main outcome.

Whilst completely supporting the wage struggles, revolutionaries should seek to insert into them transitional demands and should advocate the complete rejection of all strings.⁽⁴⁾ Similarly all redundancies should be opposed and work-sharing counterposed. Shop stewards should take advantage of the present militancy to assert their control over hiring and firing, shift working, overtime, promotion procedures, etc. There should be total opposition to any state control over unions.

The job of putting these demands into the current struggles is extremely difficult in view

of the small size of the vanguard groups, their isolation and the absence of worker militants to put them forward from *inside the movement*. The winning of workers for revolutionary organisations thus becomes an imperative necessity. However, it is extremely important that these worker militants are won for a total revolutionary position. The concept of winning militants on the basis of industrial struggle alone and then dealing with the political questions is extremely misguided.

The Communist Party has, over the years, won tens of thousands of militant workers on the basis of "servicing" their struggles and needs via industrial fractions and its press. This led to the accruing of a large inactive membership, the majority of whom could not be further politicised because they did not attend meetings. This also led to the phenomena of a large, virtually syndicalist wing in the C.P. which was never integrated into the Party. No revolutionary organisation can afford to have within its ranks unintegrated forces. At time of sharp political crisis when "unpopular" stands have to be taken (e.g. supporting the Arabs in the 6-day war) such elements will be the source of considerable instability and exert an opportunist pressure on the organisation. The C.P. discovered this at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

It is precisely by fighting in all industrial struggles for transitional demands that consciousness will be heightened and the basis of winning militants for revolutionary ideas will be laid. Fortunately we are aided by other factors:

1. that young workers have been affected by the youth radicalisation and many of them are attracted by revolutionary ideas.
2. the Communist Party has now lost its virtual monopoly of the allegiance of political worker militants; and
3. that other sectors have come on the scene which are more politicised than the average militant—Irish workers, black workers, etc.

Revolutionary Consciousness and Trade Union Consciousness

Of course, trade union consciousness by itself will never automatically lead to revolutionary consciousness. Indeed this is one of the most important contributions made by Lenin in his

theory of the Party⁽⁵⁾. However, this does imply the acceptance of the propagandist argument that this revolutionary consciousness will be inserted into the workers' movement by propaganda from the outside. On the contrary, whilst propaganda for ideas of revolutionary socialism is vital at all times, the way of winning masses of people (and especially industrial workers) for revolutionary ideas is by revolutionary praxis. The popularising of transitional demands and the creation of nuclei capable of winning masses of people to fight for those transitional demands and taking these masses of people through an experience is the way to develop revolutionary consciousness on a mass scale.

Getting a Local Base

At a time when revolutionary forces are weak in the trade union field and in many areas confined to one or two areas (and then very often white-collar unions), membership of Trades Councils will give activists contact with a variety of unions and industries. Although at the present stage Trades Councils tend to be conservative, and what left there is tends to the C.P., in time of sharp crisis they can easily become focal points for coordinated militant activities. Revolutionaries should, anyway, try to convert them into instruments for generalising class struggles on a local level. They should be in the forefront of campaigns to break down non-unionism and should become organising centres for local solidarity. Although there are many weaknesses in the Liverpool Trades Council, it has played an important role in this respect over the last few years.

Before one can do serious trade union work or help a living struggle one has to build up a certain minimum of resources. Whereas the strength of ideas can by themselves be very effective in university and intellectual circles, in industry it is the size of one's organisation and the scope of one's press which together with correct ideas is decisive. To effectively assist a living struggle a small group will require a relationship of forces in which it is not swamped. This means that in the first stages the greatest successes will be obtained in those fields where the scale of the struggle is small and the strength of opponents (especially the trade union bureaucrats) is weak. After successes

have been registered, revolutionaries will gather sufficient experience and forces to move into even more important sectors.

United Action Committees

In the absence of a revolutionary party but the presence of burning and immediate tasks which a revolutionary party should tackle, the tactic of the united action committee is paramount. This is usually called the united front tactic, but this is a little misleading. More correctly, the united front refers to the unity of mass organisations of the working class. The united action committee, on the other hand, consists of bringing together on a single issue (or a very minimum programme) all those forces which accept a principled position on the issue. In this way some of the consequences of the fragmentation of the left are overcome and the workers' and anti-imperialist struggles are assured greater solidarity than if every group did its mite on its own. Making this distinction between united action committees and the united front in no way exonerates the refusal of such sectarian organisations as the SLL and CPB (ML) for refusing to take part in them; on the contrary, this concept makes it *more imperative* and brands refusal to take part in principled campaigns utterly reprehensible.

It is essential that revolutionaries spare no effort in forming united action committees to assist present trade union struggles. The call for solidarity in all major struggles should be made. These calls for solidarity should be generalised in the formation of permanent trade union solidarity committees. It is clear that at the present stage it is impossible to do much more than aid each struggle as it comes up and make general propaganda for the idea of permanent solidarity committees. However, sooner or later a crucial struggle will come up, one in which, for instance, the Tories will attempt to—in the words of *The Economist*—"stand firm" against wage increases. The miners could easily be the victim of the Tories' endeavour to end the present wave of wage increases: they are in a comparatively weak position as compared with the dockers, for instance. In such an event the committee of solidarity could become a living reality.

The Institute of Workers Control

The Institute of Workers Control has done extremely good work in popularising the ideas of industrial democracy (for a study of this see the September issue of *International*). However, it has never clearly defined itself or decided whether it is to be a purely educational organisation or an action-orientated body. (And a real workers control campaign needs to be linked with living struggles). On many occasions it fuzzes over ideas (in popularising the ideas of Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, when the latter's definition of industrial democracy equals workers' participation and increased productivity combined with high wages). Seeing "left" trade union leaders as a bridge to the rank and file, many elements in the IWC are extremely reluctant to criticise these trade union leaders. At the same time, association with the workers' control movement gives such people as Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon a left coloration. Failure to criticise them in these circumstances can assist them in keeping this left coloration even at a time when they damp down rank-and-file struggles.

Revolutionaries should continue to support the workers' control movement but it is essential that they do nothing to assist "left" trade union bureaucrats keep their radical reputation. Indeed, a struggle within the workers' control movement for a transitional programme means combatting and freely criticising the ideas of Jones and Scanlon. Such criticism has to be both sensitive and non-sectarian, otherwise it will be incomprehensible to sections of the rank and file which look upon "left" trade union bureaucrats as real militants. It is best, by far, if such criticism comes from trade union militants.

Conclusion

In the present stage of the decline of capitalism, when far from being able to grant reforms it has to seek to take back existing workers' rights, the era of classical trade unionism is over. Either the unions become instruments of political struggle and emancipation of the working class or it is their fate to be integrated into the state machine and be used more and more to police the working class—no third way exists. And

nowhere is this more true than in Britain. Living proof exists of this general proposition in the experience of the struggle against the penal clauses in 1969. We had two political one-day strikes which had the perspective of growing bigger and bigger. A network of trade union defence committees sprung up and there was a huge demonstration in London on May 1st. But because this movement was restricted to defensive demands and the main one was conceded everything collapsed like a pack of cards. The present strike wave could suffer the same fate.

This makes the struggle against limiting the movement to "economist" demands (i.e. bread and butter issues) absolutely imperative. A political struggle combined with transitional demands is essential if anything at all is to be gained.

This is not to say that the trade unions should be converted into political parties. The unions have a different function from that of a political party. They are in essence the elementary organisations of the working class in which workers receive their first lessons on organisation. They can be much more than that, however. They can become the great working class school in which all political struggles in the class are fought out. They can become the arena in which workers learn to distinguish between opportunism and revolutionary politics. The task remains, therefore, to build up nuclei of revolutionary workers in each industry and trade union, working through united action committees.

Pat Jordan

Footnotes

(1) Although this is not the main criticism to be made of the Communist Party's trade union policy. The C.P., despite some muted criticisms of the Russians over the invasion of Czechoslovakia, still basically follows the political line of the Kremlin. This expresses itself in the trade union movement in a special form of "peaceful coexistence" between the C.P. and "left" trade union bureaucrats.

(2) But there is a reverse side to the coin: the "left" reputation of these leaders enhances their ability to defuse struggles at decisive moments. It is extremely doubtful, for instance, whether Deakin could have called off the dockers in the way Jack Jones managed.

(3) Tony Cliff, ideological leader of the International Socialists group, has written an interesting and informative book on this topic. As a former workshop

activist I can appreciate that this study would be of value. The book's main weakness, as I see it, is its "economist" orientation, especially its almost complete ignoring of the question of "workers' control"

(4) A transitional demand is one which bridges the gap between the consciousness of people in struggle as they are now and revolutionary ideas. It is distinguished from the most militant democratic or minimum demand by the fact that it always involves the eroding away of capitalist power and the subsequent enhancing of workers' power. It is distinguished from the maximum or full programme demand by virtue of the fact that it has to seem reasonable to those to whom it is directed, here and now at their present level of consciousness. It is distinguished from the most radical reformist demand by virtue of the fact that it is impossible for the bourgeoisie to grant it. As Trotsky explained:

"It is easier to overthrow capitalism than to realise this demand (for a sliding scale of wages and hours) under capitalism. Not one of our demands will be realised under capitalism. That is why we are calling them transitional demands..." *Discussions on the Transitional Programme*, Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-39.

However, the most well-thought-out transitional demand will remain a propaganda slogan unless it is linked to action. It remains at that level unless it is actually mobilising workers in struggle.

A typical transitional demand is that of workers' control over hiring and firing. An element of this already exists in well-organised sectors in times of comparative prosperity. However, when management wishes to sack workers because of slackening of demand or in the interests of rationalisation, a very apt slogan will be that of no sacking, but work sharing. It will appear reasonable to the workers and yet cut into capitalist power. Of course, it will not be fully transitional unless it is linked with a refusal to accept a cut in wages when work is shared. If the capitalists then say they cannot afford this, a demand for the opening of the books to verify this should be the response—if then, as is very unlikely, this demand is granted and the bosses really cannot afford to pay full wages, the appropriate slogan will be for the workers to take over and run the factory themselves.

The job of working out precise transitional demands is, of course, that of the revolutionaries involved in a particular struggle. Only they will be able to judge the exact mood of the masses. However, a revolutionary organisation should seek to insert the method and concept of transitional demands into every struggle it can influence.

(5) However, one has to be on guard against the crude and one-sided presentation of Lenin's ideas on this topic to the C.P. and SLL (not to speak of some extreme Maoist groups). Lenin explained that when he combated the ideas of the Economists, who had "bent the stick one way", he had to "bend it the other way" in order to straighten it.

In reality, the phenomenon of developing revolutionary consciousness and the effect on workers in taking part in struggle is a very complex process.

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