THE FIGHT FOR CONTROL:

Militants in the Trade Unions

Organised Labour v. the Capitalist Offensive

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Printed by The Prinkipo Press Ltd. (T.U.), 182 Pentonville Road, London N.1. 01-837 9987.
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 factural 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 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 revolutionaries 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 leaders, 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 structural 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 encouraged many workers 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 legalization 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 1869 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 mounting a struggle against 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 institutional dispute has become necessary, they have shown that they 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 go on to 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, quick rank-and-file action is in direct conflict with the requirements 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 renegotiations: witness Will Paynter and Dave Bowman, who chose precisely the time of sharpened class struggle to resign from the Communist Party and openly align 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 leadership has been established. 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 revolution-ary 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 are practically all 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 capi-talist 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 unreliable, 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 are the only ways the 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 frequently quoted.

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 organisa-tion.(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 remaining 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 employment 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) a more rapid expansion of 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. Trade 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 obsta-cle 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 is 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 the capitalist state, in 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 pay-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 unions in general to obtain national agreements. 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 ascendency 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 completion of productivity deals. 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 intractability 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 immediate effect has been a very serious reduction in the living standards of masses of workers. 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.

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. It is clear that any effort to change this present stage of British capitalism, it is the strength of the working class and the weakness of the bourgeoisie and its agencies. The main thing is to create a natural 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. Similarly all redundancies should be opposed and work-sharing countered. Strikes should be supported and the very tactics used by the employers leading to an increased awareness of the workers of the need for revolutionary action.

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. 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 millions 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 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 these organizations 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 universities 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
brings 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 fragmenta-
tion of the left are overcome and the workers’
and anti-imperialist struggles are assured greater
solidarity than if every group did its own on its
own. Making this distinction between united
action committees and united fronts is 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 campa-
igns 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 gene-
ralised 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 to make the case and make and up
and make general propaganda for the idea of perma-
nent 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 to be merely educational organisa-
tion 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 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
combating and freely critiquing 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
bureaucrats as real militants. It is best, by far,
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 full emancipation of the working class
or it is their fate to be transformed into state
machine and be used more and more to police
the working class—no third way exists. And
nowhere is this more true then 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 was set up and there was a
real demonstration in London on May 1st. But
because this movement was restricted to
defensive demands and the main one was con-
ceded 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 poli-
tical struggle combined with transitional
demands is essential if anything at all is to be
achieved.

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 elemen-
tary organisations of the working class in which
workers receive their first lessons on organisa-
tion. They can be much more than that, how-
ever. They can become the great working class
school in which all political struggles in the
class struggle are fought out. It is through the
arena in which workers learn to distinguish
between opportunism and revolutionary poli-
tics. The task remains, therefore, to build up
nuclei of revolutionary workers in every 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 Rus-
sians 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 co-existence” 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 Interna-
tional Socialist group, has written an interesting and
informative book on this topic. As a former workshop
activist I can’t appreciate that this study would be of
value. The book’s main weakness, as I see it, is its
“economist” orientation, especially its almost com-
plete ignoring of the question of “workers’ control of
work”.
(4) A transitional demand is one which bridges
the gap between the consciousness of people in struggle
as workers and the ideas which make up their
demands. It is distin-
guished from the most militant democratic trade
union 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 maxi-
mum 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 con-
nsciousness. It is distinguished from the most radical
reformist demand by virtue of the fact that it is impos-
sible 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..." Discussion 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 example of transitional demands is that of workers’
control over hiring and firing. An element of this
already exists in well-organised sectors in times of
considerable prosperity. However, when management
wishes to make workers work longer or to slacken
their pace of work or to make demand or in the interests of rationalisation, a very apt
slogan will be that of no sack, but work sharing. It will
not be raised but will be met and dealt with unduly
by the capitalist power. Of course, it will not be fully transi-
tional unless it is linked with a refusal to accept a
in wages when work is shared. If the capitalists
then say they cannot afford this, a demand of the opening
of the books to verify this should be the response —if
then, as is very unlikely, this demand is granted and the
workers are forced to work for full wages, the
appropriate slogan will be for the workers to take over
and run the factory themselves.

The problem of transitional demands is, of course, that of the revolutionary
demands, is of course, that of the revolutionaries
involved in a particular struggle. Only they will be able to judge the concrete and immediate
interests of the masses.

However, a revolutionary organisation should seek to insert
the method and concept of transitional demands into
every struggle it becomes involved in.

(5) Perhaps the only case to be on guard against the
true and one-sided presentation of Lenin’s ideas on
this topic is a C.P. and S.L.S. (not to speak of some
extreme Marxist groups) statement that when he
complimented 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 revolu-
tionary consciousness and the effect on workers
taking part in struggle is a very complex process.
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