Marxism and Trade Union Struggle
The General Strike of 1926

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Published April 1986 by Bookmarks

ISBN 0 906224 25 X

INTRODUCTION

THE KEY question for Marxists is how to relate to the working class. In countries where the workers are organised in unions, this question then takes the form of how should Marxists approach trade unionists and their struggles. Nowhere is the problem illustrated better than in Britain.

The history of the British working class is one of heroism and betrayal. There have been tremendous struggles, ranging from Chartism in the 1840s to the great miners' strike of 1984-5. There have also been a succession of catastrophic defeats engineered by trade union leaders and Labour politicians.

The e vent that best sums up these aspects is the 1926 General Strike. This was easily the biggest single strike in British history. Including the miners, who were locked out by the coal-owners, fully 3V2 million workers were involved. The millions who were drawn into this tremendous show of working-class solidarity felt they were caught up in a battle, not just to defend the miners from wage cuts and longer hours, but for the destiny of their class. The time of the General Strike has rightly been called 'the days of hope' of the British labour movement. Everywhere the rank and file responded to the strike call with a vigour and enthusiasm that exceeded all expectations.

The dreadful end of the strike could not have been in greater contrast. On 12 May 1926 the TUC General Council committed an act of black treachery when it surrendered unconditionally, at the very moment that the numbers on strike climbed to a new peak. The betrayal of the General Strike dealt a crushing blow to the labour movement, a blow from which it took decades to recover.

When Rosa Luxemburg wrote her pamphlet The Mass Strike in 1906, she argued that if vast numbers of workers go into action this is a challenge to both the economic power of capitalism and the

political authority of the state. She showed how, in Russia in 1905, workers had, through their own struggles, transformed their political ideas and acquired the power to change the society around them. In the 1926 General Strike the TUC, aided and abetted by Labour Party leaders, did its best to prevent such developments. Whether in the area of picketing, the movement of essential sup-plies, or strike organisation, the bureaucratic method prevailed.

Those who were on strike were carefully segregated from those who were supposed to continue working. The government strike-breaking operation was, with one or two notable exceptions, allowed to continue unhindered. Above all, the TUC hotly denied that any political intentions could be read into their actions.

That trade union bureaucrats should behave in this way is not, perhaps, so surprising. They have never behaved very differently. What is remarkable, for a strike of such magnitude, is that the bureaucracy had almost total success in limiting the strike and engineering its defeat. Local strike organisations sometimes asked the TUC to clarify its instructions, because these seemed so nonsensical. But once explained, the TUC's instructions were practically never challenged. The contrast between the potential of this mass strike and the historical reality is one of the chief issues for socialists.

To understand the unquestioned authority of the bureaucracy during the General Strike, we must look at the British Communist Party, at that time an avowedly revolutionary organisation. Al-though the Communist Party possessed a limited membership, it had the confidence of substantial numbers of trade union militants. The party should, on the face of it, have acted as a small but serious alternative source of authority to the TUC General Council. Tragically, until the end, the party did not attempt to counter the general direction that the bureaucrats imposed on the strike by word or deed. It did not act as a revolutionary party.

Yet when the Communist Party had been founded in 1920 it had pledged to apply the lessons of the 1917 revolution in Russia, and to build a mass socialist movement in Britain. As part of the Communist International it could draw on the experience of the Bolsheviks in fulfilling this task. Furthermore, in its trade union work it could learn from recent movements in Britain which had overcome the conservative influence of union officials — the war-time shop stewards' organisations and the Unofficial Reform Committee in the South Wales coalfield.

The British Communist Party made pioneering efforts towards building a Marxist party in Britain. Its debates on trade union strategy, unofficial strikes and so on, though they often led to false conclusions, raised many important points which are relevant for socialists today. Although many of its initiatives proved misconceived, as much can be learnt from the mistakes as from the successes.

The Minority Movement, which was set up by Communists in 1924, is a good example. It grew out of a campaign to stop the retreat, a collapse in union power that had been continuing since the miners were left to fight alone on 'Black Friday', 15 April 1921. The Minority Movement quickly attracted the support of a large number of militant trade unionists. But it failed to prepare its membership politically, and in 1926 made no attempt to counter the orders of the union officials during the General Strike.

On the political field the notion of an independent revolutionary party in sharp opposition to reformism, which had been central for the Bolsheviks in Russia, was replaced for the Communist Party in Britain by an effort to act as a left ginger group in the trade unions and Labour Party.

Much of this degeneration can be traced back to the rise of Stalinism in Russia and in the Communist International. In its early days the Communist International had been, under the influence of Lenin and Trotsky, an invaluable guide to revolutionaries. In those years its discussions on trade unionism, though marred by insufficient experience in this field, raised far-reaching questions about the nature of revolutionary intervention.

One outcome of these early debates was the Red International of Labour Unions, which sought to win unions to Communism and away from the reformist federation of unions based in Amsterdam. The Red International of Labour Unions ran into problems because its founders did not understand Western trade unions. But the situation became far worse when the group around Stalin gained pre-eminence in the Communist International. Now the policy was to seek unity between the Russian trade union leaders and reformist bureaucrats in Europe, and this had serious consequences for the political direction of the British Communist Party.

Underlying all these issues is the nature of unions themselves. We offer here a comparison between trade union traditions as different as the Russian and the British in order to highlight some of the

basic characteristics of trade unions. To this is added a study of the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin on trade unionism.

As the epitome of trade union bureaucratic methods, the 1926 General Strike raised problems these thinkers did not deal with. Why does a trade union bureaucracy emerge, and how is its behaviour governed? What is the relationship between trade unionism and Labour Party politics? How important is the division between left-wing and right-wing union officials?

In order to establish guidelines for the work of revolutionary socialists in the trade unions, we must answer these questions. Our first principle must be that of Marx, that 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself. Socialists must therefore always take as their central focus the activity of rank-and-file trade unionists. But to apply this principle in times of retreat for the workers' movement, when a general lack of confidence in the working class leads to a low level of activity, calls for an understanding of complex strategies. In this the experience of the early years of the British Communist Party and the General Strike can be invaluable.

The events of 1926 are not just of historical interest. They are vital for socialists today. The problems we face in the mid-1980s are substantially the same as those of sixty years ago. The names of government ministers and trade union leaders may have changed, but the task we face — to build a mass revolutionary socialist party and to overcome the influence of the trade union bureaucracy in order to release the power of the organised working class — is the same.

TRADE UNIONS IN RUSSIA AND BRITAIN

TRADE UNIONS are deeply affected by the situation in which they operate. This is clearly shown if we compare the history of unions in Russia and Britain—one the home of the world's first workers' state, the other the first haven of mass reformism.

Trade union experience in Russia was very meager. Before the 1905 revolution unions hardly existed. It is true that in 1901 a police chief called Colonel Zubatov organised a sort of union. In Petrograd it was called the Society for Mutual Aid for Workers in Mechanical Industries. Similar societies were founded in other cities. But when, after two years, these began to get out of hand, they were liquidated. The only authentic union established was that of the printers, founded in 1903.

However in 1905, under the impact of the revolution, a limited legalization of trade unions took place. At the same time shop floor organization mushroomed as starosty (shop stewards) appeared, along with strike committees and factory commissions. The latter were directly elected by the workforce and "began to take charge of all matters affecting the internal life of the factory, drawing up of collective wage agreements, and overseeing the hiring and firing of workers."

The revolution also gave a massive impulse to the organization of trade unions. But

> even at the time of the 1905 revolution only a tiny proportion of all industrial workers in Russia—some 7 percent, or 245,555 in absolute figures—belonged to trade unions. The unions which existed were tiny. 349 out of a total of about 600 had less than 100 members; 108 had a membership in the range of 100–300. the number of trade unions with over 2,000 members was only 22. During the period of reaction, 1908–09, they ceased to exist altogether. In later years they picked up, but only to a limited extent. Nationwide trade unions did not exist at all. The few local unions that there were had a total membership of scarcely more than 20,000–30,000 throughout the country.

In the period of reaction after the defeat of the revolution very few of the factory commissions or the starosty survived.

In the. conditions of Tsarism, where unions were virtually illegal, there was no economic or political space for a successful reformist strategy to be pursued by a trade union bureaucracy, since up to the February 1917 revolution the unions had a shadowy existence at best.

After February 1917, however, they grew rapidly. "By October there was a total trade union membership of about 390,000 in Petrograd… Petrograd had one of the highest levels of unionization in the world."

Unlike the British, the West Europeans or the Americans, the Russians built industrial unions. In the West many of the unions were organised on craft or at best trade lines. The term "craft union" denotes a narrow, exclusive union of workers possessing a specific skill in common; the term "trade union" means that workers of several related trades are covered; the "industrial union" is a body which embraces all workers in a branch of industry regardless of their jobs.

In Russia the first national conference of trade unions in June 1917 decided in favour of industrial unions.

> There was pressure from some quarters for "trade unions," but Mensheviks and Bolsheviks united to quash this...The only major union to reject the policy of industrial unionism was the woodturners' union— a "trade union" rather than a strict craft union.

At least 90 percent of trade unionists in Petrograd, the Russian capital, were therefore members of industrial unions.

In Britain the rise of rank-and-file organization independent of the trade union bureaucracy—the shop stewards' movement—took place generations after the establishment of the unions. In Russia shopfloor delegates, the starosty, rose at the same time as the unions or even preceded them. Furthermore, the factory committees they created were, from the beginning, the bastions of Bolshevism. Already in June 1917 the Bolshevik Party had a secure majority on the Central Council of Factory Committees.

In Western Europe it had become customary for workers and their organizations to see a division between the fight against the state, for political change, and trade union struggle to win economic improvements from employers. In Russia no such separation existed because of the repressive action of the Tsarist regime:

> attempts at home-grown reformism never got very far, however, for the simple reason that even the most "bread and butter" trade union struggles foundered on the rock of the tsarist state; all efforts to separate trade unionism from politics were rendered nugatory by the action of police and troops. In this political climate trade unions grew up fully conscious of the fact that the overthrow of the autocracy was a basic precondition for the improvement of the workers' lot. It is true that there was a powerful moderating tendency in the trade unions represented by right-wing Mensheviks such as those involved in the Workers' Group of the War Industries Committee, but even this tendency was verbally committed to a brand of socialist trade unionism which would have seemed dangerously radical to the "business" unionists of the AFL in the USA or the Liberals of the British TUC. It is thus important to bear in mind when analysing the conflict between "left" and "right" in the Russian unions in 1917, that even the "right" was fairly radical by Western standards since it was committed to socialism albeit at some indefinite time in the future.

Russian unions arose at the same time, or even following, the establishment of the soviets, the workers' councils. In Britain we have had trade unions for generations, and not yet a soviet. The soviets also expressed a fusion of economic and political demands that was common to the whole of the Russian labor movement. "The close link... was summed up in the words of one spokesman of the 1905 Soviet: "Eight hours and a gun!" shall live in the heart of every Petersburg worker." From this slogan it can be seen that the Soviet organised both workers' economic struggles against the employers and the political struggle against the regime.

The influence of the revolutionary left—the Bolsheviks—made itself felt in every working-class organization during 1917. Their control of the Petrograd factory committees was matched in May 1917 by a majority on the Petrograd Council of Trade Unions. Only the skilled labor aristocrats of the printers' union resisted in the capital. Outside Petrograd, however, Bolshevik support was smaller, but significant. At the All-Russian Trade Union Conference of June 1917 the Bolsheviks had 36.4 percent of the delegates. In September, at the Democratic Conference, 58 percent of all trade union delegates sided with the party. By October all the trade unions in major industries supported the Bolsheviks except for the important railway workers' association, the postal and telegraph union and the printers.

The experience of Russia was poles apart from that of Britain, where the beginnings of trade unionism were to be found as far back as the end of the seventeenth century. Permanent unions were in existence a few decades later: "...one of the earliest instances of a permanent trade union that we have been able to discover occurs" in the tailoring trade in 1720, wrote Sidney and Beatrice Webb. In 1894 they reported that unions "existed in England for over two centuries." Of today's unions a number have existed continuously, with only changes in name and composition, for one and a half centuries—although eighteenth-century trade clubs and societies were, unlike modern unions, local bodies and much more concerned with mutual aid than their counterparts are today.

By the First World War British trade unionism had already passed through four main phases. In the first half of the 19th century many trade unionists were inspired by the utopian socialism of Robert Owen and the demands for democratic rights embodied in the People's Charter. After 1850 the conservative "New Model" craft unions took centre stage. Their dominance was briefly challenged by the "New Unionism" around 1889 and more seriously during the "Labour Unrest" of 1910–14. At each stage the social conditions of the time played a role. The turbulent changes and economic instability of the early industrial revolution encouraged militant trade unionism and revolutionary politics. The economic boom of the mid-century undermined this movement. Unlike the general trade unions of 1830–34, the "New Model Unions" were narrow and conservative in outlook. As the Webbs commented: "The generous but inescapable "universalism" of the Owenite and Chartist organizations was replaced by the. principle of the protection of the vested interests of the craftsman in his occupation." This stamped the British labor movement with a deep-going sectionalism.

The fact that British industry was not challenged by any other country during much of the nineteenth century meant that the capitalist economy remained healthy. This gave employers much leeway for accommodating the demands of organised groups of skilled men. Although the craft unions had again and again to fight bitter battles against the employers to achieve economic security, when seen in a broad historical context, craft unionism inflicted grave damage on the working class, women and men alike. To the extent that it influenced the working class as a whole it created a tradition of narrow-minded conservatism. Under its influence skilled workers felt no need to generalise their struggle or overthrow the system.

Sectionalism became deeply entrenched in the British labor movement. To give a couple of illustrations: while Russian unions from their inception recruited both men and women, and in Germany women became members of the engineering unions some two decades after its foundation, in Britain, where hundreds of thousands of women worked in engineering, it took until 1943—91 years after the founding of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers—for women to be allowed into its successor, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU).

The loss of Britain's industrial monopoly in the 1880s, and the consequent attacks on wages and conditions, encouraged a wave of union building from 1889, when "New Unionists" attempted to batter down the sectional barriers. But when the wave receded the craft and trade unions still dominated the scene. Still today there are only a few pure industrial unions in Britain—the National Union of Mineworkers being the most important.

Along with sectionalism a powerful trend in British trade unionism was a hostility to open class struggle. The post-1850 "New Model" unions, for example, turned their backs on strikes:

> The Stonemasons' Central Committee repeatedly cautioned their members "against the dangerous practice of striking...Keep from it," they urge, "as you would from a ferocious animal that you know would destroy you...We implore you, brethren, as you value your own existence, to avoid in every way possible, those useless strikes..." A few years later the Liverpool lodge invites the support of all the members for the proposition "that our society no longer recognises strikes, either as a means to be adopted for improving our condition, or as a scheme to be resorted to in resisting infringements."...The Flint Glass Makers' Magazine, between 1850 and 1855, is full of similar denunciations. "We believe" writes the editor, "that strikes have been the bane of trade unions."

William Allan, who as secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was one of the most important union leaders of the century, told a Royal Commission in 1867 "that all strikes are a complete waste of money, not only in relation to the workmen, but also to the employers." Even when forced to use the strike tactic, such unions made sure it was restricted to economic goals. In contrast Russian workers struck for the overthrow of the state.

Another feature in Britain was the complete separation of the economic struggle from politics. This dated from the decline of Chartism. The National Conference of Trade Unions of Easter 1845 decided "to keep trade matters and politics as separate and distinct as circumstances will justify."

In Russia we saw how shop stewards appeared in strength at the same time as the founding of the unions. In Britain the shop steward began as "a minor official appointed from the men in a particular workshop and charged with the duty of seeing that all the trade union contributions were paid. He had other small duties." This limited function was performed by Amalgamated Society of Engineers stewards after 1898, but it was only during the First World War that shop stewards came to play an important role in the labor movement.

Unlike the Russian trade unions, those in Britain were dominated by bureaucracy. Already in the 1850s the full-time official appeared in the arena. As the Webbs wrote:

> During these years we watch a shifting of leadership in the Trade Union world from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officers expressly chosen from out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity.

The Webbs, being Fabians, welcomed the appearance of what they called "the Civil Service of the Trade Union world," because its influence was conservative. In the old craft societies full-time officials were a small proportion of the members and were usually elected to their positions. However it was typical for officials of the New Unions from 1889 to be appointed, and with the massive growth of organization at this time, and especially during the 1910–14 Labour Unrest, the bureaucracy developed into a clearly defined and distinctive group. Trade union membership rose from 1,436,300 in 1894 to 3,918,809 in 1914 but the number of full-time officials expanded at an even faster rate. By 1920 they numbered some three or four thousand.

Writing in their *History of Trade Unionism* (1894) the Webbs said:

> The actual government of the trade union world rests exclusively in the hands of a class apart, the salaried officers of the great societies. This Civil Service of the Trade Union world [was] non-existent in 1850.

They describe well the way the officials became a "class apart":

> Whilst the points at issue no longer affect his own earnings or conditions of employment, any disputes between his members and their employers increase his work and add to his worry. The former vivid sense of the privations and subjection of the artisan's life gradually fades from his mind; and he begins more and more to regard all complaints as perverse and unreasonable.
>
> With this intellectual change may come a more invidious transformation. Nowadays the salaried officer of a great union is courted and flattered by the middle class [in the language of those days, this meant the capitalists]. He is asked to dine with them, and will admire their well-appointed houses, their fine carpets, the ease and luxury of their lives...
>
> He goes to live in a little villa in a lower-middle-class suburb. The move leads to dropping his workmen friends; and his wife changes her acquaintances. With the habits of his new neighbours he insensibly adopts more and more their ideas...His manner to his members…undergoes a change… A great strike threatens to involve the Society in desperate war. Unconsciously biased by distaste for the hard and unthankful work which a strike entails, he finds himself in small sympathy with the men's demands, and eventually arranges a compromise on terms distasteful to a large section of his members.

Another feature of British trade unionism which did not apply to the Russian situation was the integration of union officials into the state. The Webbs noted:

> In 1890 trade union organization had already become a lawful institution; its leading members had begun to be made members of Royal Commissions and justices of the peace; they were, now and then, given such civil service appointments as factory inspectors; and two or three of them had won their way into the House of Commons. But these advances were still exceptional and precarious. The next thirty years were to see the legal position of trade unionism, actually in consequence of renewed assaults, very firmly consolidated by statute, and the trade union claim to participation in all public enquiries, and to nominate members to all governmental commissions and committees, practically admitted. Trade union representatives have won an equal entrance to local bodies, from Quarter Sessions and all the elected councils down to pensions and food and Profiteering Act committees; an influential Labour Party has been established in parliament; and most remarkable of all, the trade union itself has been tacitly accepted as a part of the administrative machinery of the state.

This integration reached a peak when the state felt itself most threatened:

> ...it was during the Great War that we watch the most extensive advance in the status, alike of the official representatives of the trade unions and of the trade unions themselves, as organs of representation and government. It is needless to say that this recognition was not accorded to the trade union world without a quid pro quo (a favour in return] from the trade union movement to the government.

The trade union movement in Russia came into existence with the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. In Britain the rise of trade unions was very much part of the "normal" expansion of capitalism. The "New Model" unions rose during the 1850s amid industrial expansion that for a quarter of a century was greater and steadier than in any other previous period. The rise in unions was not smooth. It paralleled the movement of the economy but the peaks and troughs were more marked. The spring tides of trade union organization in 1872–73, 1889–90 and 1910–18 were interspersed by employers' offensives that cut the size of union membership in 1875–79 and 1892–93.

So trade unionism is not a fixed form. In Russia it showed itself capable of uniting masses of workers and joining them in the revolutionary struggle for power. In Britain it proved equally capable of sowing sectional divisions among workers, whether on the grounds of skill, industry or sex, and in so doing it limited class conflict to the narrow circle of wage demands. The Russian unions avoided the

dangers of bureaucracy and brought forward leaders who were able to serve as an effective channel for the demands of the rank and file. Britain produced a layer of officials who were a block on workers' struggles.

MARXISM, BUREAUCRACY AND THE TRADE UNIONS

OFTEN WHEN people write about the trade unions—and this includes many Marxists—they present them as static and outside the changing stream of history. There are many and various kinds of trade unions. They change all the time. But basically their nature and mode of operation is determined by whether they are an outgrowth of a revolutionary period, or of "normal" capitalism.

What Marx and Engels wrote on unions during the Chartist movement and up to 1848 was radically different from what they wrote two, three or four decades later. There is far more detailed discussion about the role of the trade unions in their earlier writings than in the latter.

In 1844 Engels wrote in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* that unions try to abolish competition among workers; but competition is "the vital nerve of the present social order." Hence the trade union struggle leads inevitably to the struggle against capitalism as a system: it seeks "to abolish not only one kind of competition but competition itself altogether, and that they will do."

Strikes are guerrilla actions against capitalism that can lead to total war against the system. "The incredible frequency of those strikes proves best of all to what extent the social war has broken out all over England," writes Engels. Strikes are skirmishes, "they are the military school of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided...and as schools of war the unions are unexcelled."

The same argument, that the trade unions do change from organising resistance against capital to the final assault on capitalist power, appears again and again in Marx and Engels' early writings. Marx, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) stated:

> If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations, which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favour of wages. In this struggle—a veritable civil war—all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point association takes on a political character .

In *The German Ideology*, completed shortly before this, Marx and Engels had written:

> …even a minority of workers who combine and go on strike very soon find themselves compelled to act in a revolutionary way—a fact [one] could have learned from the 1842 uprising in England and from the earlier Welsh uprising of 1839, in which year the revolutionary excitement among the workers first found comprehensive expression in the "sacred month," which was proclaimed simultaneously with a general arming of the people.

This refers to events connected with Chartism. When parliament rejected the first Chartist Petition in July 1839, the Chartists made a call for a general strike ("sacred month"). At the beginning of November 1839 a rising of miners took place in South Wales which was crushed by police and troops. In August 1842, after the second petition was rejected by parliament, spontaneous actions of workers took place in many industrial centres in the country, which turned into a general strike—the first in history.

> At its height, the General Strike of 1842 involved up to half-a-million workers and covered an area which stretched from Dundee and the Scottish coalfields to South Wales and Cornwall. It lasted twice the length of the 1926 General Strike.

Until the 1905 strikes occurred in Russia, the 1842 strike had involved more workers than any the world had seen. It started in a comparatively small area of south-east Lancashire, in Stalybridge. It engulfed towns and industrial villages east of Manchester, and then Manchester itself. From there it spread to the rest of Lancashire and to Cheshire and Yorkshire. Soon it was reaching out to Lancaster, Norwich, Carlisle and other towns so that it eventually stretched from Dundee to Somerset and South Wales.

The methods the workers used to spread the strike were those of mass flying pickets. They called them "turn-outs": workers of one factory would march to another factory and turn out its workers.

The strike blended economic and political demands.

> It raised the sights of the trade union and labor movement. From demands of an every day, trade-union character, limited to individual trades, it went forward to pose class aims. Its unification of wage demands with the demand for universal suffrage raised working-class struggle to the level of class struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society.

In the conditions of the time the workers' demand for universal suffrage meant a revolutionary challenge. to the capitalist social system. As the Lord Chief Justice stated during one of the trials of strikers in 1842: "If those who had no property should have powers to make laws, it would necessarily lead to the destruction of those who had property."

The formal organization of the strike foreshadowed the soviets of 1905 and 1917. Trade conferences were established to unify the various trades and groupings of strikers. These were organised in all parts of the country. The situation in Manchester was described thus:

> There were the general mass meetings with thousands attending, followed by mass meetings of particular trades: loom weavers, mechanics; the trades conferences of certain trades—the power loom weavers, the mechanics, the various trades and mill hands; then finally, the general trades conference. Each stage led to a higher one, leading to the central trades conference.

The trades conferences were more than the usual strike committees: they

> organised and ran communities, outfaced local magistrates and army commanders, issued permits to work, ensured policing, collected and distributed food, and brought together mass meetings by which entire populations were involved in determining the course of the strike.

Two decades after those events Marx and Engels saw the trade unions as having a far narrower horizon, oriented on narrow and short-sighted goals, incapable of facilitating the march to socialism. In *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865), Marx wrote:

> At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wage system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects, that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. Instead of the

> conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"
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> ...Trades unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, the ultimate abolition of the wages system.

Then in 1871, at the London Conference of the First International, Marx stated:

> …in England, the trade unions have existed for half a century, and the great majority of the workers are outside of the trade unions, (which) are an aristocratic minority. The poorest workers do not belong to them; the great mass of workers whom economic development daily drives out of the countryside into the cities remain outside the trade unions for a long time and the wretchedest (part of the) mass never gets into them...The same goes for the workers born in the East End of London: one out of ten belongs to the trade unions. Peasants and daylaborers never join these (trade-union) societies.

During the preparations for the conference, Engels had written to an Italian comrade along the same lines. In England, he wrote,

> The trade-union movement, among all the big, strong and rich trade unions, has become more of an obstacle to the general movement than an instrument of its progress; and outside of the trade unions there are an immense mass of workers in London who have kept quite a distance away from the political movement for several years, and as a result are very ignorant.

The differing statements of Marx and Engels on the trade unions between 1844–47 and 1865–71 reflected changes in the nature of the unions themselves. The later craft unions were dominated by bureaucracy, imbued with bourgeois ideas, supported the Liberals or Conservatives and depended for their survival on the defence of sectional interests in battles against other workers. They were not the same as the unions that participated in the 1842 general strike or supported Chartism.

The same pattern appears in Lenin's writings. One finds that at a time of revolution, he sees a much more direct tie between the economic, trade union struggle of workers and the political struggle than there is at other times. Thus the actions of workers in a spontaneous strike movement in the Putilov Works in Petrograd at the beginning of January 1905 were a demonstration for Lenin of workers' "revolutionary instinct":

> One is struck by the amazingly rapid shift from the purely economic to the political ground, by the tremendous solidarity and energy displayed by hundreds of thousands of proletarians—and all this, notwithstanding the fact that conscious Social-Democratic [meaning here revolutionary socialist] influence is lacking or is but slightly evident.

Later, during the 1905 revolution, Lenin wrote that "the working class is instinctively, spontaneously, Social-Democratic"—again meaning revolutionary socialist, for this was before the majority of the Social-Democratic parties showed their reformist colors.

Rosa Luxemburg agreed. Writing in the heady days of this first Russian revolution she too stated that the struggle for economic reforms could spill over spontaneously into revolutionary action, but that this could happen "only in the sultry air of the period of revolution." At other, non-revolutionary times Lenin emphasised the great distance between trade union consciousness and revolutionary consciousness:

> the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology...for the spontaneous workingclass movement is trade unionism...and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie.

Without the intervention of the revolutionary party the workers could not cross the abyss between the fight against individual capitalists and the fight against the social system.[1]

It is clear that trade unions which grow in a revolution are *qualitatively* different to those that rise in "normal" times. Complications arise when the "normal" trade unions, with their sectionalism and bureaucracy, enter a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary period, as we shall see. But first let us elaborate on the character of unions in nonrevolutionary times. These organizations both unite and divide workers. The theoretical maximum unity trade unionism could achieve would be a single organization covering the entire working class—the "One Big Union" which was the dream of sortie socialist activists. But this never had the prospect of becoming reality, for the very name trade unionism implies sectionalism.

If the aim of all organised workers was the abolition of the wages system, then of course their common interests could be expressed through one body. But the task of trade unions is different. It is to defend workers' interests *within* capitalist relations of production, within the wages system. The unions exist to improve the terms on which workers are exploited, not to put an end to exploitation. As workers in various industries earn different wages, work under different conditions, the unions unite workers into distinct groups and keep each group apart from one another. The geography of trade unionism matches the geography of capitalism. Here there are low wages, there an increase in track speed or unsafe working conditions. In no way could the same negotiations with the employers cover teachers and miners. Hence there is no place for teachers in the miners' union or miners in the teachers'.

The role of the bureaucracy is rooted in the narrow economistic and sectional nature of the trade unions. A division of labor emerges between the mass of workers and the person who spends his or her time bargaining with the employers. The union official is a mediator between workers and employers. It is this role which reinforces his or her authority within the union. These are the managers of discontent.

> The effect...is to isolate him from those he represents. He is removed from the discipline of the shop floor, from its dirt and dangers, from the immediate conflicts with the foreman and manager, from the fellowship of his workmates, to the very different environment of an office. Even if he is not paid more than his members, his earnings no longer depend on the ups and downs of capitalist production—they no longer involve working overtime, nor are they vulnerable to short-time or lay-offs. If a plant is closed, the official who negotiates the redundancies will not get the sack. Constantly closeted with management, he comes to see negotiation, compromise, the reconciliation of capital and labor as the very stuff of trade

[1] Writers on Marxism and the trade unions have often noted the contrast between Marx's attitudes in the 1840s and 1860s, or Lenin's views before and during the 1905 revolution. However these differences have often been inadequately explained. Examples of this weakness are A Losovsky's Marx and the Trade Unions (New York 1936) and R Hyman, Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism (London 1971). The latter talks of Marxists such as Marx, Lenin and Trotsky as having either an "optimistic" or "pessimistic" approach. But the explanation for the difference between Marx: in 1848 or the 1960s, for example, is not his mood, but the change in the class struggle itself. In 1848 the British unions were a threat to the survival of the capitalist system. In the 1860s they were not. The change was not in Marx's emotional or intellectual make-up, but in the consciousness and fighting strength of the class. It is this that determines the nature of the trade unions.

> unionism. Struggle appears as a disruption of the bargaining process, a nuisance and an inconvenience, which may threaten the accumulated funds of the union. Organization becomes an end in itself, threatening even the limited goal of improving the terms on which the worker is exploited.

Basically the bureaucracy balances between the two main classes in capitalist society—the employers and the workers. The trade union officials are neither employers nor workers. Union offices may employ large numbers of people, but, unlike a capitalist employer, it is not this that gives the union official his or her economic and social status. On the other hand the union official does not suffer like the mass of workers from low wages, being pushed around by the employers, job insecurity and so on.

The trade union bureaucracy is a distinct, basically conservative, social formation. Like the God Janus it presents two faces: it balances between the employers and the workers. It holds back and controls workers' struggle, but it has a vital interest not to push the collaboration with employers and state to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent. For the official is not an independent arbitrator. If the union fails entirely to articulate members' grievances, this will lead eventually either to effective internal challenges to the leadership, or to membership apathy and organizational disintegration, with members moving to a rival union. If the union bureaucracy strays too far into the bourgeois camp it will lose its base. The bureaucracy has an interest in preserving the union organization which is the source of their income and their social status.

The trade union official balances between different sections of the union's own membership. He keeps in check the advanced sections of the union who are the more active and rebellious by relying on those who are more passive, apathetic or ignorant. The official also strengthens his hold on the union by juxtaposing it to other unions. The presence of many different unions in an industry—and therefore the difficulty of organising totally united action—provides the officials of each with a convenient alibi for their own inactivity.

The pressure from employers and state on the one hand, and rank-and-file workers on the other, does not remain in equilibrium. The relative strength of the internal and external forces bearing upon the union shifts and fluctuates. In certain periods the pressure from below is of overriding effect; in others the pressure from the capitalists and the state predominates. On occasion both sets of pressures may be comparatively weak, allowing a large measure of autonomy to the trade union bureaucrat. At other times both may be powerful and the bureaucracy appears trapped between irreconcilable forces. But the bureaucracy always tries to pursue its own needs and so in no case can it be trusted to truly represent those it speaks for.

Of course the bureaucracy is not homogeneous. Union officials in different industries find themselves under varying pressures from below and above. Again, ideologically, union officials are not the same. The division between left and right-wing union officials is significant. Splits in the bureaucracy—between unions or within a union—can weaken its conservative influence.

The *fundamental* fact, however, overriding all differences between bureaucrats, is that they belong to a conservative social stratum, which, especially at times of radical crisis—as in the 1926 General Strike—makes the differences between left and rightwing bureaucrats secondary. At such times all sections of the bureaucracy seek to curb and control workers' militancy.

When we say that the trade union bureaucracy has a dual role, that it vacillates between the employers and workers, we have also to be specific about the parameters of this vacillation. Elsewhere Tony Cliff deals with this:

> The union bureaucracy is both reformist and cowardly. Hence its ridiculously impotent and wretched position. It dreams of reforms but fears to settle accounts in real earnest with the state (which not only refuses to grant reforms but even withdraws those already granted) and it also fears the rank-and-file struggle which alone can deliver reforms. The union bureaucrats are afraid of losing their own privileges vis-à-vis the rank-and-file. Their fear of the mass struggle is much greater than their abhorrence of state control of the unions. At all decisive moments the union bureaucracy is bound to side with the state, but in the meantime it vacillates.

This does not mean that all trade union officials are born bureaucrats from the start. Indeed many win popularity and rise to high office in the unions through their earlier effectiveness as working-class fighters. And this does not apply just to left-wing union officials.

Ernest Bevin was one of the strongest right-wing figures in the trade union movement in the 1920s and 1930s. He played a central role in the 1926 General Strike and its sell-out. Yet even Bevin had established his position by past militancy. His biographer records that during the pre-war Labour Unrest:

Bevin played a leading part in making Bristol a stronghold of the Dockers' Union...Elected to the Trades Council by the dockers, he put new life into the trade union movement throughout the city.

His national reputation was based on two achievements in 1920: leadership of the Council of Action to prevent British military intervention in Soviet Russia and his defence of workers' rights at the "Shaw Inquiry" into dock labor: "The position which he won as the "dockers' King's Counsel" opened the way for him to carry through the amalgamation which set up the Transport and General Workers' Union."

Whatever militant past a union official may have, if he or she acts as guardian of the union apparatus and mediator between workers and bosses for a prolonged period, the habits of bureaucratic thinking must inevitably creep in. Indeed, a militant past may provide just the credibility needed to make a bureaucrat's control of the union all the more effective.

The most important lessons concerning the relationship between the trade unions and the struggle for socialism have been learned in the process of struggle itself—including in particular the 1926 General Strike. Before looking at the General Strike itself, it is useful to set these out here.

Today, as in 1926, the trade union question is the most important issue for revolutionary socialists in Britain as well as in the majority of the old capitalist countries. Socialists who see as their aim the leading of the working class to power can carry out this revolutionary mission only by winning the majority of the working class and thereby their mass organizations, primarily their trade unions.

But the revolutionary party is not the same as a trade union. It does not recruit, like a union, on the basis of separate industries or trades. It is a minority, defined by the common political outlook of its members, who are bound by unity of action and organization. Unions work by a different set of criteria. For them the larger the mass of their membership, the better able they are to fulfill their task effectively. As Trotsky wrote:

> The trade union embraces broad masses of workers, at different levels. The broader these masses, the closer is the trade union to accomplishing its task. But what the organization gains in breadth it inevitably loses in depth. Opportunist, nationalist, religious tendencies in the trade unions and their leadership express the fact that the trade unions embrace not only the vanguard but also heavy reserves. The weak side of the unions thus comes from their strong side .

Thus when revolutionaries approach the trade union question they have to bear the following points in mind. In normal conditions the working class is far from homogeneous. It is only in periods of revolutionary upheaval that the class can achieve a common goal and common socialist consciousness. In such situations, although many unorganised workers may join unions, there is no guarantee that unions will be the chief or the leading mass collective organizations. Trade unions may be supplemented or even supplanted by new organizations— the workers' committees or soviets, which are better adapted to leading a struggle for power.

From this one could draw the conclusion that since the mass of workers can be consciously revolutionary only at the time of revolution, the task of the Marxist party up to that point is to limit itself to pure propaganda and abstain from partial struggles of the trade union sort. This is obviously false, since a revolution does not appear spontaneously, but is itself a product of class struggle. Therefore the workers will have to fight countless limited and indirect battles within the system before they are ready to overthrow capitalism and the system itself is weak enough to be finally defeated. Equally it is only through such struggles that the party can be built to the point where it is able to lead the revolution to a successful conclusion.

If one rejects the limitation of Marxist action to propaganda alone and decides for intervention, what choices are there? The party can encourage the self-activity of the rank and file; or the workers can be used as a ginger group to pressurise union leaders to act on their behalf. The latter choice is dangerous. To believe that pressure from below can force union leaders on to a revolutionary path is to misunderstand the nature of the bureaucracy, to spread illusions in it, and to blunt workers' consciousness and action. Trade union leaders may be induced to obey some wishes of the rank and file, but they will never be able to substitute for the collective action of the masses. The self-activity of the workers is therefore paramount.

In leading workers' struggles, the revolutionary party must have its priorities clear. It must start from the basic contradiction under capitalism: the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It must also take into account a secondary contradiction—that between the trade union bureaucracy and the mass of workers—and a third: the division inside the bureaucracy because of its dual nature. Pulled in different directions by the force of the two major classes in society—the bosses and the workers—arguments develop among the bureaucrats.

These arguments open the door to common action between a revolutionary party leading sections of the rank and file, and the trade union bureaucracy—both the left wing and sometimes the right. This common action can be useful in developing the workingclass struggle, for although even the most left elements of the bureaucracy remain unreliable and unstable, a temporary alliance of revolutionaries with them can weaken the hold of the bureaucracy as a whole. A revolutionary party must know how to exploit the division between left and right bureaucrats, between those who are prepared to make militant speeches (even if they will not act upon them) and those who are openly wedded to conciliation at all times. Through using this division the independence, initiative and self-

confidence of the rank and file may be strengthened, on one condition: the party must make clear that the rank and file *cannot* trust the left officials or put their faith in radical rhetoric. The party must always remind trade unionists that even if bureaucrats put themselves at the head of a movement of insurgent workers, they do so in order better to control that movement.

An alliance with left bureaucrats is only a means to broad *action*. Even the best and most radical speeches should never become a substitute for the action of the mass of workers themselves. Such an alliance, like every other tactic in the trade union field, must be judged by one criterion, and one criterion only—whether it raises the activity, and hence the confidence and consciousness of the workers.

To raise the power of the rank-and-file workers one has to fight for internal democracy in the unions. The degree of internal democracy varies considerably from one union to another. Issues such as the content of the union rulebook or the organizational tradition of the union are important. Therefore the revolutionary party must propose radical safeguards against the bureaucracy: for the regular election of officials and the right to recall them, for their wages to be dependent on the wages in the industry, and so on. Nonetheless the best trade union constitution in the world can remain no more than a scrap of paper if it is not based on the activity of the members.

Revolutionaries cannot be indifferent to the tendency of the trade unions to be incorporated into the capitalist state—a tendency sometimes accentuated by crisis, as during world wars. The fact that complete independence of the unions from the bourgeoisie and its state cannot be achieved without revolution does not mean that the level of this dependence cannot be pushed back here and now.

The improvement of workers' conditions within capitalism—not the overthrow of capitalism—is the common guideline of trade union activity in normal times. In reality unions tacitly accept the framework set by the system and tend either to exclude political issues from discussion or to support reformist political parties that do not challenge the present order of society.

This tendency cannot be ignored by revolutionaries, whose approach to trade union work differs markedly from that of reformists. The latter argue that they are for gradual change and against revolution. But because they wish to improve conditions under capitalism they can move forward only when the system is healthy enough to grant concessions. When the economy is in decline reformists prove themselves very poor fighters for reform and often undermine what gains have been made in the past. Revolutionaries, by contrast, are for both reform and revolution. They are fighting for gains inside capitalism and for overthrowing capitalism. It is through struggle within the system that workers' consciousness of their own interests is built up. This prepares elements in the class for the time when, inevitably, the system falls into crisis and revolutionary leadership is necessary.

The relationship between the fight for reforms and revolution was well expressed in the slogan of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905: "Eight hours and a gun!" The demand for a shorter working day was wedded to a challenge to the armed force of the Russian state. Rarely have the mass of British workers made such a direct connection between reform and revolution, but this does not mean that here and now Marxists should not fight to politicise workers' struggles and the unions.

The revolutionary party must strive to transform the unions into socialist organizations. This must be fought. for even though it can be consummated only at the time of revolution. The campaign to raise politics in unions should go on here and now, and if one cannot win over the trade union movement as a whole, or even an individual union, one can convert a minority to socialist ideas—whether it be the branch activists, a section of a union or individuals in a workplace.

A revolutionary party puts emphasis on the activity of the trade union members. It consistently adheres to the idea that the working class cannot change society unless it changes itself in the struggle— that socialism will come from below. But this does not signify that in the meantime, prior to the revolution, the party does not fight for changes in the personnel of the trade union machine. One cannot denounce the leadership of a trade union unless one is ready to challenge it and replace it. However for a revolutionary to stand for office in a union, especially full-time office, a clear and definite rule must apply. First of all it must be understood that the decision to become a shop steward, trade union branch official, member of a trades council or its secretary, depends on whether, by doing so, it assists the activity of the rank and file, or removes obstacles to this. Union office cannot substitute for this activity. The decisive factor in looking for any union position, therefore, is the possibility of raising the level of combativity of the workers one represents.

The aim of the revolutionary party is to mobilise the working class, and as a by-product to gain influence over the mass organizations of the class, above all the trade unions. But this cannot be fully achieved except at the time of a revolution. It is a mistake to think that the mass of trade unionists can be won, or the official apparatus substantially remoulded rapidly to reflect changes in workers' consciousness *before* the turmoil of revolution. Such a false position could lead either to a propagandist view of union work (trying to win workers to Marxism without intervening in struggle) or to accommodation with the bureaucracy (trying to conquer or influence the top positions).

This does not mean that revolutionaries wait with folded arms till the glorious day comes along. Intervention at every stage is a vital necessity. To the extent that revolutionaries win influence over a number of workers, this must reflect itself in changes in the physiognomy of the union, and in the selection of new leaders. The risk of being sucked in by the machine is great, but abstentionism is not the answer. Instead there must be collective control by the party over the individual and his or her subordination to the party cell in the workplace or the local party branch. There must be a constant effort to control all union officials, and above all those who belong to the party.

In any case, whether the union official is a member of the revolutionary party or a left official supported by the party, the struggle for the election of any official should supplement and not supplant the activity of the workers. Elections in the union should enhance the power of the rank and file, and not substitute for it.

The revolutionary attitude to all union officials should follow the line expressed by the Clyde Workers' Committee in November 1915:

> We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them.

Trotsky also put it well when he wrote:

> "With the masses—always., with the vacillating leaders—sometimes, but only so long as they stand at the head of the masses." It is necessary to make use of vacillating leaders while the masses are pushing them ahead, without for a moment abandoning criticism of these leaders .

Above all a revolutionary party should never forget that the fight for socialism has everything to do with the daily battle at the workplace, against the boss and the bureaucrats, and very little to do with what happens away from it, whether in the electoral field of the unions, or even more so in that of parliament.

LENIN'S CONTRIBUTION ON TRADE UNIONS

THE STRENGTH of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was that they were able to enrich Marxist theory with their own experience and struggles. But their contribution to trade union questions did not go beyond the most general level. Before 1917 *What is to be Done?* was the only well-known work of Lenin dealing with the economic struggle. Lenin later insisted that the pamphlet, written in 1901–02, should not be seen out of the context of a definite historical milieu and the debates in which it was an intervention. Nevertheless it was very clear about the difference between the political work of the revolutionary party (at that time called Social Democracy) and the current function of Western trade unions. In regard to the latter Lenin wrote:

> all they achieved was that the sellers of labor-power learned to sell their "commodity" on better terms and to fight the purchasers over a purely commercial deal...Social Democracy leads the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labor power, but for the abolition of the social system that compels the propertyless to sell themselves to the rich. Social Democracy represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force.

In the years between *What is to be done?* and the First World War Lenin returned to the issue of trade unionism. Again party/union relations were under debate, but this time Lenin wished to rebut the idea that unions should be neutral on political matters. The argument first arose in Germany's Free Trade Unions. These had been set up by German Social Democrats but were now clamouring for an end to "political interference." After much wrangling the following division of labor was agreed upon at a Congress of the Second International held in 1907:

> Both the political and economic struggle of the working class are equally necessary for the complete liberation of the proletariat from the shackles of ideological, political and economic servitude. While it falls to [the parties of] Social Democracy to organise and lead the political struggles of the proletariat, so it is the task of union organization to coordinate and lead the economic struggles of the working class.

When this debate surfaced in Russia it was inevitably fairly abstract since no mass trade union movement existed after the 1905 revolution was smashed. The debate therefore turned on ideal party union relations rather than real ones. The Bolshevik position was strongly against trade union neutrality or the concept of a division of labor between economic and political organizations. Lenin quoted approvingly a resolution passed by his organization in 1907 which stated the following:

> The Congress reminds party units and Social Democrats active in the trade unions, of one of the prime tasks of Social-Democratic activity in them, namely that of promoting the acceptance by the trade unions of the Social-Democratic Party's ideological leadership, and also of establishing organizational ties with it.

This position is the correct starting point for revolutionaries in the unions. They are not there merely to be good trade unionists, nor to preach from the sidelines, but to struggle for ideological leadership.

However this general position does not clarify the complications that arise when a conflict of interest emerges between the trade union bureaucracy and the rank and file. There are dangers of too great

a concentration on official influence at the expense of the grass roots, or an abstentionist approach which leave the rank and file under the tutelage of the officials. These are issues we shall take up later.

When, on the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914, the leaders of the trade unions, together with those of most Social-Democratic and Labour parties, abandoned their internationalist rhetoric and backed a bloody imperialist war, Lenin looked for an explanation of the catastrophe. He found it in the theory of the aristocracy of labor, first sketched by Marx and Engels in relation to the British trade unions.

Lenin's theory had very great strengths. It focussed on the devastating effect of the treachery of leaders and the importance of organization. It tried to explain why it was that those workers who had enough class consciousness, sense of solidarity, and confidence in their own strengths to organise—in other words those who ought to have led the working class forward—were not playing the role of vanguard. This stress on leadership and organization was necessary at a time when many socialists were abandoning both of these principles and adapting to the rightward lurch of the trade union and reformist bureaucracies.

In 1915, in an article entitled "The Collapse of the International," Lenin explained reformism, or to use the word he coined, "opportunism," thus:

> The epoch of imperialism is one in which the world is divided among the "great" privileged nations that oppress all other nations. Morsels of the loot obtained as a result of these privileges and this oppression undoubtedly fall to the share of certain sections of the petty-bourgeoisie and to the working-class aristocracy and bureaucracy.

How big was the section of the working class which received "morsels of the loot"? Lenin says: "these strata...form an insignificant minority of the proletariat and of the toiling masses." And in line with this analysis Lenin defines reformism as "an alliance between a section of the workers and the bourgeoisie, directed against the mass of the proletariat."

The economic foundation of the tiny "aristocracy of labor" was to be found, according to Lenin, in imperialism and its superprofits. He wrote on 6 July 1920 in a preface to his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism:*

> Obviously out of such enormous super-profits (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their "own" country) it is possible to bribe their labor leaders and an upper stratum of the labor aristocracy. And the capitalists of the "advanced" countries do bribe them: they bribe them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.
>
> This stratum of bourgeoisified workers or "labor aristocracy," who have become completely petty-bourgeois in their mode of life, in the amount of their earnings, and in their point of view, serve as the main support of the Second International, and, in our day, the principal social (not military) *support of the bourgeoisie.* They are the real *agents of the bourgeoisie* in the labor movement, the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class, the real carriers of reformism and chauvinism.

Lenin's assumption, that only a thin conservative crust of the proletariat benefitted from the massive expansion of Western capitalism, was flawed. A capitalist economy works in such a way hat its

benefits, if any, cannot be confined to a single section of the working class. As Tony Cliff has written elsewhere:

> The first question one has to ask in tackling Lenin's analysis of this: How did the super-profits of, say, British companies in the colonies, lead to the "throwing of crumbs" to the "aristocracy of labor" in Britain? The answer to this question invalidates the whole of Lenin's analysis of reformism...
>
> No capitalist says to the workers: "I have made high profits this year, so I am ready to give you higher wages."
>
> Imperialism, and the export of capital, can, of course, greatly affect the wages level in the industrial country by giving employment to many workers who produce the machines, rails, locomotives, etc., which make up the real content of the capital exported. This influence of the level of employment obviously affects the wages level generally. But why should it affect only the real wages of an "infinitesimal minority?" Does the increase of employment possibilities, and decline in unemployment, lead to the rise of a small "aristocracy of labor" while the condition of the masses of the working class is hardly affected at all? Are conditions of more or less full employment conducive to increasing differentials between skilled and unskilled workers? They are certainly not...Indeed, everything that raises the standard of living of the mass of the workers, unskilled and semi-skilled, diminishes the difference between their standards and those of the skilled workers. The higher the general standard of living, including the educational level, the easier is it for unskilled workers to become semi-skilled or skilled. The financial burden of apprenticeship is more easily borne by better-off workers. And the easier it is for workers to learn a skill, the smaller is the wage differential between skilled and unskilled workers.
>
> Again, one can argue that imperialism throws "crumbs" to workers through the fact that it gets foodstuffs (and raw materials) extremely cheaply from the backward, colonial, countries. But this factor, again, affects the standard of living not only of a minority of the "aristocracy of labor" but the whole of the working class of the industrial countries. To this extent, by raising general living standards, it diminishes differences between sections of this same working class.

An economic analysis was only one part of Lenin's theory. There were also important conclusions concerning trade unions. The fact that the economic roots of reformism go much deeper than a small layer of the working class meant that the effort to build a revolutionary socialist movement in the West was bound to meet with much greater difficulties than were encountered in Russia, that it demanded a hard and prolonged struggle. And of course no mass party, including a revolutionary party, could be completely immune from the influence of ideas current among the masses.

Lenin's theory not only underestimated the strength of reformism, it misjudged its character. In an article written in October 1916, entitled "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism," Lenin went on to elaborate further the nature of the "labor aristocracy." He came perilously close to identifying it in Britain and Germany with the entire union membership, and hence discussing them as sold to the bourgeoisie:

> In the nineteenth century the "mass organizations" of the British trade unions were on the side of the bourgeois labor party. Marx and Engels did not reconcile themselves to it on this ground, but exposed it. They did not forget, firstly, that the trade-union organizations directly embrace a *minority of the proletariat.* In Britain then, as in Germany now, not more than one-fifth of the proletariat were organised.
>
> Engels draws a distinction between the "bourgeois labor party" of the old trade unions—the privileged minority—and the "*lowest* strata," the real majority, and he appeals to them as not infected with "bourgeois respectability." This is the essence of Marxist tactics!

> We cannot—nor can anybody else—calculate what portion of the proletariat is following and *will* follow the social-chauvinists and opportunists. It will be revealed only by the struggle, it will be definitely decided only by the socialist revolution. But we know for certain that the "defenders of the fatherland" in the imperialist war represent only a minority. And it is therefore our duty, if we wish to remain Socialists, to go down *lower* and *deeper*, to the real masses.

The identification of trade unionists with "labor aristocracy" took a more crude form with the writings of Gregory Zinoviev, who was close to Lenin in the years 1910–17. In an article entitled "The Social Roots of Opportunism" (1915), Zinoviev singled out munitions workers as the most obvious example of those who "sell their birthright for a mess of pottage" and "become a tool of reaction":

> Yet there can be no doubt as to the existence of a small layer of labor aristocrats to whom the cannon and munition kings do throw a bone occasionally from their rich feast of war profits. This minority made good wages even before the war and has enjoyed still higher wages during the war. All kinds of privileges were granted this minority before the war, also. During the course of the war these privileges have become far more valuable for these aristocrats of labor. it is sufficient to point out that this labor aristocracy *has not been sent to the front in most cases.*

Events utterly confounded Zinoviev's analysis. All over Europe precisely these munitions workers, in factories such as the DMW in Berlin, Putilov in Petrograd or Weir's on Clydeside, spearheaded new forms of industrial militancy in the closing years of the war—leading, in Berlin and Petrograd, to revolution. This was at a time when other sections —"the lowest strata"—were still quiescent.

Zinoviev's analysis also suffered from over-simplicity, for he saw the roots of the labor bureaucracy as directly in the labor aristocracy:

> The worker functionaries very often hail from the circles of the labor aristocracy. The labor *bureaucracy* and the labor *aristocracy* are blood brothers.

The connection between the two was far more complex. Taken as a whole the theory tended to equate the bureaucracy with the labor aristocracy, which in turn was equivalent to the entire trade union membership. All this only obscured the different roles of each group and, if taken to its logical conclusion, would have suggested abandoning work in the existing trade unions. Speaking for the Russians in 1920 Radek admitted that "at the beginning of the war many of us thought that the trade union movement was finished."

Lenin's analysis, by counterposing "a minority, the aristocrats of labor...the trade union membership" to the "'virgin soil' represented by the 'lowest mass' of the working class," added to the confusion. One could come to the idea that trade union action which raises wages is in fact a veiled form of bribery. For although this was not Lenin's intention, it would be possible to draw the ultra-left conclusion that the fight for reforms (such as higher wages) is an obstacle to progress since the working class may be bought off by them.

Lenin's study of the origins of reformism was exceptionally valuable for wartime revolutionary socialism in that it cut right through the smokescreen and excuses with which the bulk of reformist leaders hoped to hide their treachery in supporting the war. It showed that they were in fact *serving the capitalist class from within the workers' movement*. At the same time it did not succumb to the despair of many who, shaken by the apparent support of many workers for imperialism, abandoned faith in the working class as the means of revolutionary change.

Finally, the theory served as a knife to cut away the diseased portions of the Marxist movement, thus preserving the health of that principled section which remained. Nevertheless, it was a fairly blunt instrument and was only the most general guide for revolutionaries in Western Europe, who were faced with intricate and complex tactical decisions.

THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL AND TRADE UNION STRATEGY

IN ITS early years the Communist International was a powerhouse for the development of Marxism. It was set up by the Russian Communists, who drew on a wealth of experience in many fields. But, alas, trade unionism was not one of these. The result was that in the years leading up to the 1926 General Strike. there was little aid forthcoming for the British Communist Party in overcoming weaknesses in its own trade union policies.

In March 1919 at the first Congress of the Communist International (or Comintern, as it was known), only the briefest references were made to trade unionism. Its manifesto was penned by Leon Trotsky, who suggested that unions would simply be superseded by soviets for the duration of the revolution:

> The old organizations of trade unions having in the persons of their leading summits proved incapable not only of solving but even understanding the tasks imposed by the new epoch...the proletariat has created a new type of organization, a broad organization which embraces the working masses independent of trade.

It was not clear from the manifesto whether the birth of the soviets meant that trade unions would play a marginal role, or no role at all, in the further development of revolution in the West.

Events proved Trotsky wrong. The trade unions were far from finished, and were enjoying an extraordinary growth in all countries. By 1920 the idea that by simply raising the banner of Communism, revolution would spread, had given way to a more sober assessment of the needs of the moment. Though hopes were still high.

In April–May 1920, Lenin wrote his pamphlet *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder.* In this brilliant essay on Marxist strategy and tactics he based his argument on the experience of the Bolsheviks' rise to power. The booklet illustrated how important was flexibility, the ability to advance or retreat, and the need to work for mass support in hostile institutions such as parliament. On trade unions Lenin emphatically warned against the "childish nonsense" spread by those who argued that Communists should abandon the masses who were now looking to unions by the million.

To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions, said Lenin, meant leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders. Revolutionaries

> must absolutely work *wherever the masses are to be found.* You must be capable of any sacrifice, of overcoming the greatest obstacles, in order to carry on agitation and propaganda systematically, perseveringly, persistently and patiently in those institutions, societies and associations— even the most reactionary—in which proletarian or semiproletarian masses are to be found… We must be able…to make any sacrifice, and even—if need be—to resort to various strategems, artifices and illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges, as long as we get into the trade unions, remain in them, and carry on communist work within them at all costs.

But apart from this most general of arguments there was practically no guidance on how to operate inside the unions. In particular the question of the bureaucracy was barely touched upon.

The second Congress of the Comintern, which opened on 19 July 1920, had a thorough debate on trade unions, for this was now held to be "the most serious, most important question facing our movement." Radek led off the discussion. His major concern, like Lenin's, was to combat the strong European current of syndicalism which suggested that workers should quit the mass unions and set up their own narrow revolutionary bodies. It was essential to quash this argument. Radek thought the task ahead was straightforward:

> The problem is this: partial struggles will finally lead the masses of workers to a general onslaught on capitalism. There is no "new method" in this struggle. If we wipe out the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the bureaucracy in the great mass formations, the trade unions, if we depose them, then these mass organizations of the working class are the organs best able to lead the struggle of the working class on a broad front.

Much of his argument was well-founded. Again, unlike some others, he was prepared to admit that this was a difficult job:

> Now we come to the question of the practical possibility of transforming the reactionary trade unions into institutions of the revolution. In our theses submitted to the congress we issue the following slogan as a general rule for communists: join the trade unions and struggle in the big trade unions to win them. But if we lay down this general rule we should not close our eyes to the difficulties.

There might be exceptional circumstances, such as in America where the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had had to work outside the official union structures because of the intense hostility of the "business agent" officials towards unskilled workers, but Radek repeated that despite this, "We are therefore laying down the fight to conquer the trade unions as a general rule."

The crucial flaw in Radek's analysis was that in correctly opposing the syndicalists, who called for breakaways from reformist unions, he was completely unrealistic in believing that the union bureaucracy could be removed or the official machinery wrested from their control on this side of the revolution. In all probability the bureaucracy in the West, which has existed for decades, will only be broken *after* the victory of the revolution. We shall return to this question later.

British and American delegates to the congress argued against Radek. Without doubt many of the points made by Willie Gallacher and Jack Tanner, from Britain, or Louis Fraina and John Reed, from America, were ultra-left and underestimated the importance of consistent trade union work. Nevertheless the useful points they raised concerning the difficulty of combatting reformism in the industrial field were not at all understood by their Russian comrades. The congress debates convey an overwhelming impression that both sides were speaking languages incomprehensible to each other in more than the literal sense. The attempt to draw lessons from the experiences of Western trade union struggles fell on deaf ears.

To add to the difficulties we find Zinoviev, the president of the Comintern, looking at the situation in an entirely Russian way. He therefore completely misunderstood the reality of trade unionism in the West. Thus he wrote:

> The Bolshevik Party gave in 1913 during its discussions with the Mensheviks the following definition of trade union: "A trade union is a permanent union of the workers of one branch of industry (therefore not simply of one industry) that directs the economic struggle of the workers, and in constant collaboration with the political party of the proletariat, takes part in

> the struggle of the working class for its emancipation, through the abolition of wage slavery, and the victory of socialism."

It is not clear where wishful thinking began and an appraisal of actual trade unions ended, for Zinoviev also repudiated the Webbs' claim that a union had "the purpose of maintaining and increasing wages," saying:

> Our party has never agreed to this phrase any more than it has to that other which defines a trade union as "a union of workers having as its aim to assist its members in times of unemployment and to look after their interests by increasing wages."

If the "true" union was defined by its struggle to abolish the wages system then there was an unbridgeable gap between this and existing bodies led by notorious reformists. The onward march of the masses would either drive these bureaucrats out or the unions would break into separate revolutionary and reformist wings. This was a prospect which Zinoviev looked forward to as inevitable:

> In the course of the proletarian revolution the trade unions will split into sections as the socialist parties have done...The Russian trade union movement must take the initiative in founding a Red Trade Union International as the political party has done in the political field.

In 1920 Zinoviev acted on this idea, and in April the Russian trade unions issued a call for a new trade union international. This was intended to rival the International Federation of Trade Unions, a reformist body which had been disrupted by the war but had been recently re-established with its headquarters in Amsterdam. It was popularly known as the "Amsterdam International." The Russian call was put in these terms:

> The old unions are reshaping, within a year we shall not recognise them. The old bureaucrats will be generals without armies...Red trade unions should unite on the international level and become a part (section) of the Communist International.
>
> We make this proposal to the workers organised in unions throughout the world. In the trade union movement there is impending that evolution and breakaway which occurred in the political parties of the proletariat. Just as all the most important workers' parties left the Second International, so all honest unions should break with the yellow Amsterdam trade union international.

These expectations of rapid Communist advance were confounded. The first task of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) was to woo national trade unions away from allegiance to the Amsterdam International and win their affiliation. But the trade unions in the West retained their cohesion and put up great resistance.

It was established as a general rule that trade unions must disaffiliate from Amsterdam before affiliating to the RILU. But when this did not happen, the rule was altered. In countries where the major trade union organizations remained faithful to the reformist international, individual unions were permitted to affiliate to RILU without severing their connection with the old organization.

Soon the whole situation was totally confused. Communists were called upon to pursue a policy of working within Amsterdam unions, while also being called upon "to break every contact with Amsterdam." These contradictions showed clearly in the resolution of the founding congress of RILU in July 1920. This

> denounced “neutralism” and declared that “the creation of this centre of the revolutionary trade union movement is the starting-point for an embittered struggle within the world trade union movement under the slogan: Moscow or Amsterdam.” But the resolution of the same congress on organization condemned slogans such as “The Destruction of the Unions,” or “Out of the Unions”:
>
> This tactic of the withdrawal of revolutionary elements from the unions, and the abandonment of the many-million mass of workers to the exclusive influence of traitors to the working class, plays into the hands of the counter-revolutionary trade union bureaucracy and should therefore be sharply and categorically rejected.

The loose definition of RILU membership made it possible for Communist leaders to give fantastic figures about RILU’S membership. This led to a curious method of addition which confused the rank and file with the official machinery, and resolutions in union conferences with the opinion of the rank and file itself. After a mere 15 months in existence RILU was claiming 16 million supporters. This sum was achieved by simply combining the membership of the affiliated organizations and those that might affiliate at some time. This mathematical procedure is akin to the union block vote system in which bureaucrats claim to cast hundreds of thousands of votes by merely raising their arms. J T Murphy, then a leading member of the British Communist Party, showed how the RILU total was calculated:

> The German comrades claim that there are three million supporters of the Red International in the unions of Germany, although the union movement has not yet been detached from Amsterdam. The British comrades claim a support of 300,000 workers...In Italy there is reason to believe the Confederation of Labor…will vote in favour of detaching the 2½ million workers from Amsterdam.

In fact the implantation of RILU was far smaller. The 6½ million Russian trade unionists provided a solid core, but none of the other claims of membership stood up to examination. The highest level of official representation that the German Communists achieved at any trade union congress was just over one eighth of the delegates at Leipzig in June 1922 out of a total union membership of 7,895,965. Communist Party influence was much greater in Germany’s works councils movement, but RILU did not look to such rank-and-file bodies as its base of support.

The Italian Confederation of Labor never exceeded 2.2 million in membership and while it flirted with RILU for a time, it never actually joined it. Presumably the British figure of 300,000 cited by Murphy referred to the South Wales Miners’ Federation, which also toyed with affiliation to RILU but never took the final step. The calibre of the claimed British support must be judged against the fact that membership of the British Communist Party itself hovered around the 3,000 mark at this time.

Later 35,000 Indonesian workers affiliated to RILU and in May 1925 Chinese unions with one million members joined too. Growing support in this part of the world threw light on the differences between trade unions in advanced industrial countries and those in backward countries—the prototypes for each being the unions of Britain and Russia. It got to the stage where, at an enlarged meeting of the Comintern executive during February–March 1926, Zinoviev felt the need to ridicule the

> suggestion of a British trade union leader that the world should be divided between two trade union internationals—one at Amsterdam for Europe, the other at Moscow for Asia. But the suggestion contained an uncomfortable element of realism: the boast was now often heard

> that, though Amsterdam might still dominate Europe, the rising trade union movement of Asia turned infallibly to [RILU].

With the exception of France, where right-wing leaders engineered a split in the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) and the left had to set up their own confederation (CGTU), RILU succeeded best beyond Western Europe. It often won official support of unions in countries with low industrialization and repressive regimes which forced workers' economic organizations to ally far more closely with their respective Communist Parties than in the West.[2]

Persistent rumours that RILU was about to be disbanded illustrated that it was a far more hollow organization than it claimed. In February 1922 Zinoviev warned of the need to "combat vigorously all the forces making for its dissipation." Again at the Fourth Comintern Congress, Losovsky reported: "The enlarged executive meeting had put an end to the calls for liquidation."

But three months later Murphy still had to "dispose of the notion which has been running through the mind of many party members in this country, as in others, that there is an intention or ever was any intention of winding up the RILU." The expectation that RILU was about to be wound up had to be put to rest again and again.

Much later, at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International, Zinoviev made a significant avowal of embarrassment at the existence of RILU (he was too cowardly openly to admit the error and complete fiasco of the enterprise):

> The [RILU] was founded at a moment when it looked as though we could break through the enemy lines by a frontal attack, and quickly win over the trade unions...It was during the time when we thought that we should win over the majority of the workers in the shortest possible space of time. You know, comrades, that after that the movement was on the ebb. All the problems, all the tactical difficulties of the Comintern during these five years are rooted in the fact that the development was much slower than we had expected.

The trouble with the whole concept of RILU was not merely that it was ambiguous, but that it was fundamentally wrong. When Zinoviev had spoken at the Second Congress of the Comintern on the preliminary steps taken to found RILU, he stated that the task was to "split Amsterdam" and draw the workers away.

> We can now tell every trades union: "You should leave the Amsterdam International. You have an International of Red Trades Unions, and you should join it."

British delegate Jack Tanner argued that it was inconsistent to urge the workers to stay in the unions while calling on the unions to split from the international organization. When Tanner sought to expand his view in the plenary session of the congress, Zinoviev denied him the floor.

As a result of the contradiction in the basic concept of RILU, one finds leaders of the Comintern and RILU arguing for the splitting of reformist trade unions. Thus Radek, in introducing a discussion on trade unions, said:

[2] In 1925 RILU claimed the entire trade union federations of Russia, China, Java, Greece, Chile, Persia and Egypt; the split federations of Bulgaria and Esthonia, the "ideological identification" of the Finnish unions and "not less than half the organised workers" of France, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Japan, Argentina and Australia. The rest were made up of minority movements. (The Worker, 15 August 1925)

> We go into the unions in order to overthrow the bureaucracy and if necessary to split the unions. We go into the unions in order to make them instruments of struggle. We shall try to turn the unions into fighting organizations; but if the resistance of the bureaucracy should be stronger than we assume, we shall not hesitate to destroy them, for we know that it is not the form that is most important, but the capacity of the workers to organise, and their will to organise the revolutionary struggle.

An open letter from the Comintern executive to members of the German Communist Workers Party (KAPD) of 2 June 1920 stated:

> The new epoch, the epoch of embittered class struggle which is changing before our eyes into civil war, also changes the "free" trade unions into a new organization. Some of these unions we must split. Others will of themselves come over to us, either wholly or in a Majority.

It is an inevitable result of the uneven consciousness of workers under capitalist rule that they are divided along political lines, and so by party allegiance, if the alternatives of reform or revolution take organised form. But trade unions cannot be treated in the same way. The Comintern was not calling for breakaway red unions. That stupidity only came with full Stalinism at the end of the 1920s, and had the effect of tearing workforces apart—with disastrous consequences on their collective organization in the face of the employers. Instead RILU tried to win whole unions to affiliation. But this too ignored the difference between parties and collective organizations such as unions.

RILU was bound to fail because it was attempting the impossible— to be an official mass union body committed to Communist politics *before* a revolutionary crisis made such an organization possible. Once set up, RILU could pursue two courses. It could recognise the period it was in, and stand as an organization of the militant rank and file looking to organise the minority with advanced ideas or who were involved in struggle; or it could pose as a conventional trade union body. It turned down the first alternative. But to achieve the second it would have to broaden its platform greatly and abandon much of its politics—in order to win a majority vote from non-revolutionary trade unionists.

That the Communist International could blunder into such a confused position was evidence of a wrong perception of what trade unions are, and their relation to the revolutionary party. Thus the Comintern described the connection in this way:

> The Communist Party is the vanguard of the proletariat...Trade unions are mass organizations of the proletariat...which unite all the workers of a given branch of industry; they include in their ranks not only dedicated Communists, but also workers who have little interest in politics and workers who are politically backward…

So far, so good. But once again we see an enormous leap in logic, for from this we are told that the relation of the unions to the party

> is to some extent like that of the provinces to the centre. In the period before the seizure of power, the truly revolutionary trade unions organise the workers, primarily on an economic basis, to fight for gains which can be won under capitalism. However, the main object of all their activity must be the organization of the proletarian struggle to overthrow capitalism by proletarian revolution.

The passage continues:

> At a time of revolution the genuinely revolutionary trade unions work closely with the party; they organise the masses to attack capitalist strongholds and are responsible for laying the

> foundations of socialist production. After power has been won and consolidated, economic organization becomes the central focus of trade-union work.

The ideal—the relations between the Bolsheviks and the Russian trade unions at the time of revolution—is not distinguished from the actual, where the unions were under bureaucratic reformist leadership. So we move from a description of unions as they are, to what they should be, without a word on how the transition from one to the other can be effected. Moreover, if the relation of the unions to the party "is to some extent like that of the provinces to the center" then there is no qualitative difference between party and unions. Consequently it is logical to split the unions just as the political organizations of the Comintern had split from the reformist Second International.

The original call for the conquest of the unions was absolutely correct. But the way it was framed led to serious mistakes in judgement. RILU's strategy depended on the hope that, in the short term, unions could be conquered wholesale or substantial sections split off. This excluded the possibility of building a rank-and-file movement which could keep up a consistent challenge to the official machine. Radek, with more extensive experience of Western conditions than many Bolshevik leaders, showed a sensitivity to the value of the rank-and-file movements which had sprung up during the First World War and did not propose to dissolve them immediately. But neither did he advocate a rank-and-file strategy since, like the rest of the Comintern leaders, he telescoped the pace of events:

> When the question is posed as to whether new organizations should be created alongside the trade unions, and what their mutual relations should be, we reply that as long as the unions are dominated by the bureaucracy these new organizations are our bases of support against the trade union bureaucracy. But when communists have become the leaders of the movement, the time has come to let the two streams flow together and to turn the factory committees into trade union organs.

The rejection of a policy of building rank-and-file movements implied a certain expectation about what would happen to a union in a revolutionary crisis. Radek acccepted that the

> tactics of the trade union leaders are tactics of demolishing the class struggle… [But] the general condition of the working class is such that any thought of reformist tactics, of a gradual increase in the real wages of the working class, in their standard of life, is a completely opportunist illusion...It is clear in this situation that the tactics of the trade unions, the objective of communist struggle, cannot consist in repairing the capitalist edifice, but in working consciously for the overthrow of capital.

Note how easily Radek, with a grammatical sleight of hand, puts "the tactics of the trade unions" next to "the objective of communist struggles" implying that both are the same.

The reasoning behind this approach—that the crisis is deep and therefore the trade unions as at present constituted will become revolutionary organs—again undervalued the special role of the bureaucracy and its deep roots. The mechanical logic behind Radek's position could be summarised like this: trade union leaders reared in pre-crisis times will propose reformist tactics. These can no longer succeed. Therefore the leaders will either themselves change or be replaced by revolutionaries. The notion that the bureaucrats might play a central role in defusing the revolutionary situation that threatened them is absent.

In the West, and especially in Britain, where the trade union machine has existed and consolidated over decades, in all probability *the victory of the socialist revolution will precede the destruction of the trade union bureaucracy,* and special methods of organization will be needed to prevent the bureaucracy strangling that revolution at birth. But this was not the Comintern's view. At the Second Congress Alexander Losovsky, who ran RILU almost as a one-man show, insisted on the possibility—even more, the imperative necessity—of transforming the trade unions *before* the revolution:

> Before the October revolution we transformed the factory committees... We will yet transform the trades unions before the social revolution, for the trades unions must become the organ of this revolution.

Only the British and American delegates criticised this approach. Louis Fraina, for example, argued that the bureaucracy was strong enough to hold on to its posts right up to the moment of revolution, and would be in a position to paralyse the movement unless an independent rank-and-file movement organised against it. Therefore the current Communist line was wrong.

> We are of the opinion that it is not the tying-down of the bureaucracy that must be emphasised but the liberation of the masses to proceed independently of the bureaucracy...1 do not quote this as an argument against work in the unions but as an argument against the idea of tying down the bureaucracy. We must fight against this bureaucracy in the unions; it will only be possible to tie them down or finish them off *during the revolution or after it.*

Gallacher raised a valid point about the difficulties posed by a blanket slogan "Conquer the unions":

> It is simply nonsense and ridiculous to talk of conquering the old trades unions with their ossified bureaucracy… We have been active in the British trades unions for 25 years without ever having succeeded in revolutionizing the trades unions from inside. Every time we succeeded in making one of our own comrades an official of the trades unions, it turned out that then, instead of a change of tactics taking place, the trades unions corrupted our own comrades too. We have often made our comrades into big trade union officials, but we have seen that nothing can be achieved for communism and the revolution through such work.

Unfortunately these arguments were simply ignored.

The inner nature of the Western trade unions eluded the Comintern. The Bolsheviks did not see the contradictory character of these organizations, reflecting on the one hand the collective organization of workers and on the other the limitations imposed by the subordination of workers tinder capitalism—such as sectionalism, economism and so on—which were in turn reflected in the trade union bureaucracy. By 1921, when it became clear that the reformist leaders were holding their own, the Third Congress of the Communist International spoke of the need to organise "communists and elements sympathetic to the communists" into "cells within trade unions." But even then such cells were not to work towards independent rank-and-file action so much as

> revolutionising the trade unions, ridding them of reformist influence and the treacherous reformist leaders, and transforming them into a genuine stronghold of the revolutionary proletariat.

So capture of the official machine remained the prime target, although the assault would now be better organised. The ultra-left tactic Of splitting the unions that had marred RILU's early years was replaced with an opportunist tactic of making alliances with left officials.

This possibility too was contained within the original concept of RILU, since the role of the bureaucracy had never been properly understood. In 1920, as a step towards the foundation of RILU, Zinoviev had signed an agreement with people like D'Aragona and Robert Williams. D'Aragona was an unashamed reformist and leader of the Italian Confederation of Labor. He had no qualms about signing a document which declared "the duty of the working class is to unite all trade union organizational power in a revolutionary union which works hand in hand with the political organization of the international communist proletariat" and called for the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Yet weeks earlier this same man had used every ounce of bureaucratic power to smash the independent factory council movement in Turin. And just a few months later he did the same to the mighty "occupation of the factories." Robert Williams, leader of Britain's transport workers and another signatory, was soon to sabotage the miners' struggle by his betrayal on Black Friday. The pamphlet reporting discussions between Zinoviev and these bureaucrats gave no hint that union leaders were capable of such things. Indeed it was entitled "Proceedings of the First Conference of the Representatives of the Revolutionary Trade Unions of Great Britain, Italy and Russia."

Zinoviev was criticised for consorting with such characters. But his defence showed how little he understood the type of "leader" he was dealing with:

> Should I not reach an agreement with Robert Williams…? Of course. But he stands at the head of the Triple Alliance. Why then do not the comrades in the Shop Stewards' Movement stand at the head of this million-strong union? In this way they show that they are sectarians and not revolutionaries.

Zinoviev's mistake was not that he had reached an agreement with reformist union leaders. It was that the agreement by which RILU was established was not about action but about phrases, phrases which gave the bureaucracy a left credibility at no cost, and which made their sabotage of struggle all the more effective. An agreement for action, or a united front, as it became known, would have been totally different, for it would have opened the way to real progress through the activity and self-education of the rank and file.

Duncan Hallas explains the nature of the united front:

> The tactic starts from the assumption that there is a non-revolutionary situation in which only a minority of the working class support the revolutionaries. This can be altered only on the basis of a rising level of class struggle, involving large numbers of workers, many of whom will support reformist organizations. The united front is a tactic intended to win these workers to support for revolutionary organizations, which it can do under favourable circumstances. It is not a bloc for joint propaganda between revolutionary and reformist organizations, but a limited agreement for action of some kind.

In 1921 the united front became an important part of Comintern strategy and was supposedly adopted by RILU as well. However RILU was so confused in its analysis that it found it impossible to apply this tactic successfully. Furthermore, despite its exaggerated claims of support, the Red International of Labor Unions was an embarrassing failure. Losovsky and Zinoviev decided to be rid of it.

In November 1922 Losovsky reported that RILU was now ready to join with the Amsterdam International and end its separate existence in order to achieve a united front:

> How is unity to be achieved? In all its resolutions the RILU has declared itself ready, for this end, to make all the concessions. But it goes without saying that unity cannot be realised without minimum guarantees... We are ready to have unity on condition that both reformists and revolutionaries are assured freedom of propaganda.

Losovsky's proposal had nothing to do with the genuine united front. The essence of that tactic is that revolutionaries do not merge with the reformists they wish to influence, but that the two act together. RILU's call for a joint conference without any preconditions imposed no obligations on the reformists for joint action but "made all the concessions."

Unfortunately, in making this turn in 1922, RILU did not admit that it had been wrong in the past. It did not conclude that instead of attempting to build a trade union international at an official level it should encourage rank-and-file movements. RILU'S search for an end to its contradictory existence took it in a different direction altogether— towards trying to unite with the bureaucrats who led the Amsterdam International. In pursuing this aim revolutionaries in Western Europe were urged to win over left union Officials in their own countries.

The confused trade union policies of the Communist International had been symbolised by the creation of RILU. At first this had encouraged an ultra-left attitude to union work; later on it opened the door to accommodation to left-talking bureaucrats.

Elsewhere Tony Cliff has written:

> The congresses of the Comintern were schools of strategy and tactics. How effective they were depended not only on the quality of the teachers, but also on the background, the level of preparation and quality of the pupils.

In the case of RILU, in which neither Lenin nor Trotsky played any role at all, being far too overburdened with other tasks, the teachers were not very good, and their weaknesses exacerbated those of the pupils.

The mistakes of the first few years of the Comintern were the mistakes of revolutionaries searching for new tactics in an unfamiliar field. But around 1923 a qualitative change took place. The degeneration of the Communist International and the search for alliances with left union officials was the result of the isolation of the Russian revolution. This gave rise to a state bureaucracy in Russia which put its own self-interest above that of the international working class. This process did not fully take hold until after the Fourth Comintern Congress. Until then the Congresses had been a genuine forum for the debate and development of Marxism. After Lenin's illness in 1923 the Stalinist bureaucracy put a stop to development. This meant that the opportunity to correct and improve on the Comintern's trade union strategy, as had been done in so many other spheres, was lost.

This outcome was not inevitable, as is clear from Trotsky's writings. Though driven from a position of influence in the International, he produced the most lucid and penetrating analysis of trade union bureaucracy in Britain and elsewhere right up to 1926. To this we will return later.

The Communist International in 1926 still had not become a direct tool of Russian state policy, and nor was the CPGB a slavish follower of Moscow. Nevertheless the shift towards wooing left union bureaucrats compounded weaknesses already existing in the British labor movement.

BRITISH SOCIALISTS AND INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLE

THE FIRST Marxist group in Britain was the Democratic Federation, which was founded in 1880 and changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884. It was very sectarian. H M Hyndman, its leader, believed that socialism would come through propaganda and education which would go on until a majority of Workers were convinced it was correct. Anything less than socialism was to be deplored as a diversion from the true path. Thus his attitude to trade union action of any kind was dismissive or down-right negative.

The SDF paper *Justice* described the great dock strike of 1889 as 'a lowering of the flag, a departure from active propaganda and a waste of energy.'

> 'We are opposed to strikes altogether,' wrote Hyndman in April 1903. 'They never were a powerful weapon, and now they are quite out of date.' At the time of the threatened railway strike of 1907 Hyndman wrote: 'We of the Social Democratic Party and Justice are opposed to strikes on principle ... Political action is far safer, far better and far less costly.' Even in 1912, the year of the greatest upsurge the working class had ever known, Hyndman repeated: 'Can anything be imagined, more foolish, more harmful, more in the widest sense of the word, unsocial than a strike ... ? I have never yet advocated a strike ... I have never known ... a successful strike.'

In the name of real socialism the SDF leaders scorned the industrial struggle of workers. Once a strike began, however, the Party would give its support in principle. This usually meant a lecture on the impossibility of making real gains while the capitalist system lasted.

This does not mean that there were not several leading rank-and-file activists among its membership, but because the SDF erected a Chinese wall between the final goal of socialism and trade union activity it remained totally divorced from the real struggles of workers. As an organisation it was doomed to irrelevance. As one member put it:

> Every organisation which has some ideals to translate into life, but is deprived of the possibility for action, is apt to degenerate sooner or later into a mere sect ... It ends by withdrawing from the world which it despairs of influencing.

One cannot help sympathising with this cry of frustration from one activist about the 'educational road' taken by British Marxism:

> What's gone wrong with Britain? Here we have been preaching socialism for 20 to 30 years till we have everyone converted or nearly ... The man in the street admits readily enough, that Socialism is the only plan put forward to get him out of that blind alley; he will even agree that Socialism is bound to come if the world is not to go to entire smash; yet he will not join ...

Thus the main Marxist current before the war was the unwitting victim of the very disease of reformism it wished to cure. Reformists always separate immediate issues, such as a wage demand or the winning of an election, from the final goal of social ownership of production, action for which has to be put off to some indefinite future date. The SDF turned this formula on its head and rejected involvement in existing struggles, and trade unionism in particular. In doing so, the SDF rejected the classical Marxist approach which saw a connection between trade union activity and political mass struggle. Nor did it have anything in common with the Leninist notion that the connection between

politics and economics has to be consciously fought for by the intervention of a distinct revolutionary party in all day-to-day struggles.

In 1908 the Social Democratic Federation became the Social Democratic Party. In 1911, after fusing with other small groups, it became the British Socialist Party. It continued to be ineffective, with a paper membership of 11,300 in 1913. The BSP, like its predecessors, continued to focus on the politics of the street rather than the workplace.

Although the SDF chose to ignore workers' struggles they welled up nevertheless. In the 'Labour Unrest' between 1910 and 1914 millions of workers went on strike. The origins of this agitation lay in the combination of many factors which had been accumulating since the turn of the century — economic growth leading to falling unemployment, inflation that cut wages, disappointment with the Labour Party's performance and the conciliatory policies of union leaders. The fact that strike days shot up to more than ten million a year and trade union membership doubled in the period did not perturb the sectarians. The founding conference of the BSP in 1911 made it clear what the majority of delegates felt:

> Their business at that conference was to constitute a political party to work primarily in the political field ... They were not a trade unionist party. [BSP involvement in union work was] something of an impertinent interference in a field with which they had nothing to do. The industrial field was already provided for.

The BSP had no criticism of the union officials as such, since they rejected the whole union movement as irrelevant. One speaker declared:

> as one who has been on the executive of a trade union he was convinced that there was no possibility of the trade unions striking for socialism. The Socialist Party was not out for the pettifogging reforms which the trade unions were striving for.

The BSP contributed the bulk of the membership of the Communist Party at its foundation in 1920. But these members had practically no understanding of the trade union movement and considered the self-activity of workers to have nothing to do with the struggle for socialism. This attitude was to have important consequences.

Though the Labour Unrest passed the official 'Marxists' by, there was a live revolutionary current fighting in its midst. This went under the label of *syndicalism.* In contrast to the belief that change would come through political education and the capture of the state (state socialism as it was called), the syndicalists saw the immediate class struggle as all-important. Syndicalism gave a voice to genuine workers' struggles, and because these varied from place to place and industry to industry, it too took many forms.

The most important syndicalist current before 1914 was represented by Tom Mann, a recent convert from state socialism, who established the Industrial Syndicalist Education League in 1910. His position was unequivocal:

> The time is now ripe for the industrial organisation of all workers on the basis of class — not trade or craft... merging all existing unions into one compact organisation for each industry, including all labourers of every industry in the same organisation as the skilled workers.

Leading syndicalists such as Mann considered themselves to be revolutionary socialists. They believed that if such a union movement could be created it would have to be:

> Revolutionary in aim, because it will be out for the abolition of the wages system and for securing to the workers the full fruits of their labour, thereby seeking to change the system of Society from Capitalist to Socialist.

Although the framework of trade unionism was to be widened to encompass all workers in an industry, nevertheless the pull towards sectionalism (but with bigger sections) remained. Questions of class politics and the state began to appear increasingly minor to the syndicalists. Between 1910 and 1911 Mann, for example, moved from denials that he was anti-political to proud assertions of the fact. The attitude of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League was summed up in this way:

> Politics, like religion, was a matter for the persons themselves; and it was of no concern to the workers whether other workers were Liberals or Conservatives. All that was necessary for workers was to understand the solidarity of their class.

It did not occur to the syndicalists that anyone who was a Conservative might find it difficult to conceive of working-class solidarity except with hostility. On trade union issues the League saw clearly that the existing unions were bogged down by years of conciliation and bureaucratic domination. They directed their fire principally against the sectionalism of the craft unions and the disunity in action that this could lead to. However there was no underlying analysis of why trade unionism had got into this position, nor of the role of the union officials. The nearest the League came to an analysis was this offering from Mann:

> The unions came into existence by means of men who were partially class-conscious only, and they are composed now of men who are partly class-conscious only. But they are truly representative of the men, and can be moulded by the men into exactly what the men desire ... And I am for moulding all the organisations ... We should not say we will have nothing to do with the old organisations.

Another major strand in syndicalism before the First World War was the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). Founded in 1903 as a breakaway from the SDF, it too was marred by sectarianism. It took an even harsher line than the SDF towards involvement in the struggle for reforms:

> The hope of the British proletariat lies in the decay and death of trade unionism, the death of the Labour Party and reformist socialism, and in the birth and growth of Industrial Unionism and the development of a revolutionary political party of sociaüsm.

The Socialist Labour Party took its line from the American socialist Daniel de Leon. Having seen American business unionism at close hand, de Leon called the trade union officials the 'labour lieutenants of capital'. The SLP saw their task as dual in nature. The political party was to destroy the offensive power of the state. But the most important job fell to industrial unions which were to seize control of production from the bosses and institute socialism. They judged that the existing unions could not be adapted for such a task, and while SLP members usually worked within these, they hoped to construct completely new revolutionary unions to take their place. Repeated attempts at forming such industrial unions failed miserably, since their rivals were powerful and well-established.

The SLP clearly recognised the problem of sectionalism and bureaucracy within the trade unions. They sought to wish these difficulties away by setting up their own incorruptible versions. But in Britain, where the best section of the working class was still found in the established trade unions, despite all their failings, this strategy was a sectarian non-starter. During the First World War, however, a number of SLP members were to transform their outlook and take a lead in mass

struggles, so that by 1920 this tiny party brought to the Communist Party some of its finest working-class leaders.

To sum up the situation in Britain before 1914, the official Marxist position on the trade unions was abstentionist. By accepting the narrow sectional definition of trade union struggles put forward by the bureaucrats, the BSP implicitly accepted the domination of these bureaucrats over the unions. The main syndicalist currents, on the other hand, offered a demand for bigger and better trade unions, or an appeal for new revolutionary unions in conditions where such a call was doomed to failure.

The disease of reformism had taken its toll on the British revolutionary movement. Although its members were dedicated and courageous, and many syndicalists showed tremendous skills in leading day-to-day struggle, they were crippled by political feebleness. The official Marxists were equally impotent when it came to genuine workers' movements.

The crisis of wartime, however, was to create a totally new situation which offered greater potential for recovery and growth than ever before.

TWO RANK AND FILE MOVEMENTS

DURING the First World War a militant rank-and-file movement rosé among the engineers, traditionally regarded as archetypical labour aristocrats. This was an 'engineers' war', and as producers of vital munitions they had real bargaining power.

There was one factor which prevented engineering union officials from containing militancy in the same way as they had done before the war. The output of armaments in ever greater quantities required the lifting of all restrictions on production, and use of new machinery and work methods, and above all the employment of untrained youth and women on work formerly handled only by craftsmen. This last change was called 'dilution'. To lead an effective fight against such trends the union leaders would have had to call massive strikes and virtually sabotage the supply of arms 'to the boys in the trenches'. This they were not prepared to consider.

The engineering union bureaucrats could choose whether or not to struggle. But engineers in the workshops could not. By withholding the strike weapon the officials had given the green light to an employers' offensive against all the customs and practices that engineers had painstakingly built up to make life a little more bearable under capitalism. Labour aristocrats they certainly had been, with better pay and conditions than many other workers. But now they were forced to fight and in so doing to take the lead in working-class struggle.

The officials had abandoned the membership. There was no alternative but to create an unofficial movement. Based on shop stewards, this came to challenge traditional trade unionism in a way even more fundamental than syndicalism. The first steps towards independent shop stewards' organisation came in February 1915 when Clydeside stewards led an unofficial strike of 10,000 engineers for a twopence-an-hour rise. The leadership of the strike came to form the Clyde Workers' Committee, which during Christmas 1915 was involved in a battle over the terms by which dilution would be carried out. The government fought back and broke up the committee, arresting its leaders and dispersing them around the country. The following year Sheffield set up a Workers' Committee, and by 1917 a national organisation was in existence capable of leading 200,000 workers on unofficial strike. Independent stewards' organisation existed in enough centres for national conferences to be held and a national administrative committee established to link them together.

Syndicalism had, for all its boundless militant energy, remained within the framework of unionism. The shop stewards' movement represented something more. It consisted of assemblies of delegates elected directly from the rank and file on the shopfloor. Regardless of the particular union they were in, or who their employer was, they met together to represent the interests of all the engineers in the local area. In the days when bosses offered no perks, no offices, no facility time to their stewards, but only the threat of the black-list, these delegates were the direct voice of the rank and file. They spent their time working alongside the people who elected them and experienced the same pressures. Unlike the officials, they were subject to recall should they cease to be representative of the members' wishes, and received no special wages for their work.

The trade union members provided the base of the movement, for organised workers were the only source of collective strength. Shop stewards were also the lowest rung of the union machinery and

still had the task of taking subscriptions. Nevertheless when they came together to form 'workers' committees' they were not simply gingering up the union apparatus. Theirs was not an attempt to control the bureaucracy from below, nor an attempt to set up a pure revolutionary union in opposition to the established bodies. The movement's attitude to the officials was deceptively simple and was summed up by the Clyde Workers' Committee's first leaflet, which we have already cited:

> We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule or law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.

The claim to be able to 'act independently' and 'immediately' was no idle boast. The 200-300 stewards who met together every Sunday on Clydeside united the collective power of thousands of engineers. They had shown their influence in the February 1915 strike and were to do so in several victimisation cases soon afterwards.

The Sheffield Workers' Committee, the most powerful of the English shop stewards' bodies, was equally effective. Unofficial action began during November 1916 in defence of a young engineer named Leonard Hargreaves. He had been called up for military service in spite of the exemption engineers had enjoyed till this time. The Sheffield stewards issued an ultimatum to the government setting a deadline for Hargreaves' return. As J T Murphy, then the leading Sheffield steward, recounted:

> There were not less than two hundred shop stewards waiting for the stroke of four on this eventful day. Standing outside the Institute was a fleet of motor cycles with the cyclist shop stewards ready to be despatched to the engineering centres ... Four o'clock came. The government had not replied. The strike was called... At five o'clock the strike was complete. Ten thousand skilled workers walked out of the factories. Then the government got busy with the telegraph wires ... The third day of the strike saw the capitulation of the government.

The militants who organised such strike action in the middle of world war were socialists and for the most part revolutionaries. Only they dared to lead action that might disrupt the flow of arms. Before the war they had built up a tradition of rank-and-file action and initiative capable of withstanding the combined political and economic attack of government, police, courts, Labour Party and trade union leaders.

With the state and private capital working hand in hand it was possible to show many workers that there was a link between the changes workers were suffering in industry and the political aims of capitalism at home and abroad. There was the chance that economic grievances might be harnessed to a political challenge to the bosses and the state — through a revolutionary party. At the same time, with union leaders openly siding with the bosses, there was a good opportunity to overcome the obstruction formed by the union bureaucracy — by showing that the rank and file could only trust to their own collective strength and independent organisation.

All these possibilities were latent in the wartime situation, as was demonstrated in Germany. There a distinct revolutionary party was gradually to take shape, and out of this the mass Communist Party of the 1920s was to grow. Concurrent with this, engineering stewards' organisation in Berlin became the prototype for a workers' council movement that united the class, brushed the reformist bureaucrats aside and directly threatened state power.

For British revolutionaries to realise the full potential of the times they had to be clear about their tasks. Alas, as we have seen, the tradition of separating politics and economics, typified by the mutual hostility of 'state socialists' and syndicalists, left them ill-prepared. Individual socialists in the engineering workshops moulded workers' militancy into an independent mass movement. But as yet no one had a theoretical grasp of how to connect socialist politics and industrial agitation. The shop stewards' leaders were still in the habit of treating politics as something external to the factories and shopfloor unrest as simply an economic issue.

Jack Murphy, who led the Sheffield Workers' Committee, was typical. As a member of the SLP he was committed to opposing the war and to the overthrow of the state that prosecuted it. But one could never have guessed this from his writings for the wartime stewards' movement. Its best-known publication was Murphy's *The Workers' Committee*, a widely-read pamphlet of 1917. This contained a carefully thought-out plan for a national network of stewards' organisations that would rise up as a rank-and-file alternative to the officials, an important development on the strategy of pre-war syndicalism. Yet in the pamphlet there was absolutely no discussion of the war. Doubtless Murphy was right to point out that:

> None of the strikes which took place during the course of the war were anti-war strikes. They were frequently led by men like myself who wanted to stop the war, but that was not the real motive. Had the question of stopping the war been put to any strikers' meeting it would have been overwhelmingly defeated.

Skilled engineers would not automatically dissociate themselves from nationalist ideas or labour aristocratic pride. But if anything opened the way for arguments in that direction it was the extreme situation of the war and the abject failure of traditional reformism to defend workers' wages and conditions in the face of an all-out attack by the state.

Murphy, Gallacher and the other leading stewards showed great talent in pioneering a mass movement which, for the first time, posed an organised alternative to official methods. But further progress depended on political leadership — the knitting together of that minority who through their experiences had come to under-stand the system as a whole — in other words it depended on building a revolutionary party. But this was not done. Gallacher, for example, might speak on anti-war platforms at the weekend, but at work he saw himself as a steward, a spokesman for rank-and-file opinion at a time when the majority were generally *not* against the war.

Even in terms of a healthy rank-and-file movement, political leadership was essential for long-term success. Take the question of craft sectionalism, which was under attack through the government's promotion of 'dilution'. Gluckstein has written elsewhere:

> From their strong bargaining position, metalworkers could fight this in two different ways: either as a threat to the privileges of the elite of skilled men, or as the first phase of a war against the hard-won rights of *all* trade unionists.

The elitist argument might mobilise the engineers' sectional strength and delay defeat for the duration of the war, but once exceptional conditions ceased to operate in the industry, the ruling-class attack would be redoubled. The only hope for a successful long-term resistance lay in generating a class-wide agitation for militant trade unionism.

May 1917 saw the biggest strike of the war. It came after three years of mindless slaughter and the February revolution in Russia. The 200,000 engineers who stayed out for three weeks followed the lead of the national shop stewards' movement. The strike was sparked off by the spread of dilution to work unconnected with the war effort. The issue was not that workers should refuse to sacrifice themselves to aid imperialist war, but whether a few private firms could join the profit-making jamboree. No one but skilled engineers were directly concerned and when the unofficial leaders were jailed the strike crumbled.

An opportunity to link politics and mass militancy came in early 1918. The Bolsheviks had taken power in Russia, and with-drawn from the war. It was at this very point in time that the British army began baying for yet more men and insisting on wider powers of conscription. The stewards' national administrative council put an ultimatum to the government demanding it scrap the new conscription laws and consider the Bolshevik peace proposals. But the threat of action was undermined by political confusion. *Solidarity*, the paper of the English stewards, carried the ultimatum in its columns, but the same issue stated:

> If only we could be certain that the German workers would follow suit, we would have no hesitation in calling for an immediate policy of 'down tools and damn the consequences'. But we are not in touch with our fellow workers in Germany ... It may be that the German workers would be willing to do the bidding of their warlords ... by attempting to invade these islands. In which case, they would get the surprise of their lives.

With such weak leadership coming from their own newspapers, it was no surprise that the rank and file hardly responded with enthusiasm to suggestions for a strike. In the end the same weak-nesses that defeated the Clyde strategy against dilution — the lack of a consistently revolutionary party and the habit of divorcing workplace issues from political ones — wrecked the chances of a strike against conscription.

Tragically, at the very moment *Solidarity* voiced its fear of German workers, 400,000 German engineers struck against the war, only to find themselves isolated internationally.

The refusal of *Solidarity* to extend its spirit beyond the shores of Britain came directly from the syndicalist split between politics and economics. Because the stewards failed to link the fight in the workshops to wider political questions it meant they were able to maintain militancy on workshop issues, but, by default of a political fight, bourgeois ideas prevailed. So instead of a strike for workers' unity on an international scale many skilled engineers took up the labour aristocratic chant: 'Don't take me, I'm in the ASE' (meaning the Amalgamated Society of Engineers).

The lack of a clear revolutionary leadership condemned the stewards' movement to sectionalism in another way — by restricting their activity to the engineering industry.

These were not the only problems. The central body of the movement was never designed to give leadership. It was only established after much opposition during a 1917 conference of stewards:

> Finally, G Peet set the conference at its ease by assuring it that the national committee would be 'an administrative committee' and not an executive committee and all matters would be referred to the rank and file. This was confirmed by the perambulating title of the national committee, which was 'The National Administrative Council of the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committees'. Thus the first national committee was formed, but held theories which prevented it from giving the leadership which the movement needed.

This attitude to leadership was not an aberration on the part of a few prominent stewards, but a function of the rejection of politics, the element which could fuse a *minority* of the class who held revolutionary ideals into a party capable of suggesting initiatives to guide the struggle of the masses. The stewards understood neither the leading political role of a revolutionary party, nor its ability to guide the immediate industrial struggle of a rank-and-file movement.

Thus one of the main weaknesses of the engineering shop stewards' movement was its opposition to *all* leaderships — whether from official or unofficial sources. Murphy wrote: 'It matters little to us whether leaders be official or unofficial, so long as they sway the mass, little thinking is done by the mass.' The point was underlined by an article he wrote in *Solidarity*:

> ... one of the first principles of the shop stewards' movement and workers' committees, they obey the instructions of the rank and file and not vice versa. This repudiates the charge of the press and those good clear-thinking people who refer to those wicked shop stewards who bring men out on strike. Shop stewards do not 'bring' men out on strike, the shop stewards' duties do not involve 'leadership'. As a matter of fact the whole movement is a repudiation of 'leadership'.

Of course the wartime shop stewards were 'guilty' of leadership. However, the syndicalist blindness to politics in the grand sense also hid from the stewards the leading roles they themselves took in raising self-confidence among the rank and file. For it was leadership that they gave when they suggested initiatives which involved the broadest numbers or mobilised workshops in direct action. This was not comparable with bureaucratic authoritarianism or the pursuit of parliamentary careers, but it was a form of leadership nonetheless.

There was another unofficial movement at work at this time. It was centred in the mining valleys of South Wales and took the form of what we today call a 'broad left'. It too was influenced by syndicalism, but operated in very different conditions from those of the engineers. The contrast between the two movements is instructive.

Mining trade unionism was based on the unity of the workplace, the community and the collective organisation, since the colliery, the union lodge, and the pit village were all found in the same location. Thus the nature of the industry discouraged the division into skilled and unskilled trade unionism that was found in engineering. Most organised coalminers were members of one body, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB). The engineering industry, by contrast, had more than 200 unions. The unit of organisation of these numerous unions tended to be the geographical branch, not the workplace. This was because many members were in small workshops scattered over wide areas, and because each union organised just a section of the workforce in any one factory.

In mining, because there was no split between workplace and union branch, the grievances of the rank and file tended to be channelled directly into the official machinery, as were the efforts of militants. While this situation allowed for greater rank-and-file influence *within* the union, it inhibited rank-and-file action independent of it.

In engineering the union branch was poorly attended and bore little relation to the immediate concerns of the workplace. These were more effectively dealt with by shop stewards who, for much of the time, had to operate independently of the official structure in order to represent Workers on day-to-day issues.

In engineering solidarity meant cutting across the sectional divides between skills and between factories. Miners were still organisationally separated from workers in other unions, but the MFGB was a very large section indeed, and solidarity in the pit was automatically translated into an effort to transform the lodge and district union. None were as skilful in this as the South Wales miners.

As early as 1911 the pit militants could claim a major success. By putting pressure on the machinery of the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF), they were able to dictate the manifesto by which the union campaigned for the fight for a national minimum wage. They could therefore claim some credit for the 1912 national miners' strike which followed.

The militant miners were organised in an Unofficial Reform Committee (URC) established in May 1911. lts title tells us it was committed to *reform* of the union. Certainly this reform was from below, with the maximum mass pressure of the rank and file, but it was still reform of the union machine, not an alternative to it.

The most important publication of the URC was the famous pamphlet, *The Miners' Next Step* (1912), which proposed rank-and-file action and control as a counter to bureaucracy.

The Miners' Next Step was subtitled 'A Suggested Scheme for the Reorganisation of the Federation' in South Wales. It stated that 'the cornerstone of the whole scheme' was 'real democratic organisation'. Traditional trade unionism was to be turned upside down, with the rank and file in total control of the official structure.

I. *The lodges have supreme control* — All the initiative for new proposals, policies and tactics, remains with the lodge. Nothing becomes law in the organisation unless it receives the sanction of the lodges, or a ballot vote of the coalfield.

II. *The executive becomes unofficial* — As has been shown before, democracy becomes impossible, when officials or leaders dominate. For this reason they are excluded from all power on the executive, which becomes a purely administrative body; comprised of men directly elected by the men for that purpose.

III. *Agents or organisers* become the servants of the men, directly under the control of the executive, and indirectly under the control of the men.

From the same ideological starting point — syndicalism — the authors of *The Miners' Next Step* had drawn different conclusions from those of the engineering militants.

Murphy's pamphlet, *The Workers' Committee*, was the clearest exposition of the engineering stewards' movement. It put forward a complete national structure *in competition* with the authority of the existing unions. Such a position was logical for stewards faced with the multiplicity of engineering unions and their craft jealousies, just as the URC's ideas were logical in terms of the mining industry and union.

Because *The Workers' Committee* proposed a separate structure to the official apparatus, it had to be concerned with its own special forms of organisation. This had to embody a mass rebellion against the full-time officials and against union constitutionalism, since both of these reinforced sectionalism in the industry and crippled the workers' fighting strength.

For the URC, on the other hand, the centre of their work was the miners' union constitution, and how it could be improved to give full control from below. The strongest organising force was held to be

the union itself. Of course, to function as an agitational current at all, the Unofficial Reform Committee had to hold meetings. The production and distribution of propaganda required some sort of limited centralisation, but the level of organisation could afford to be low, since the intention was not to substitute for the union, but to improve the union's effectiveness. The internal life of the lodge, regional and national conferences were the real arena for URC militants.

A remarkably loose attitude to self-organisation ran right through the history of the Unofficial Reform Committee until the formation of the Miners' Minority Movement in the early 1920s. Indeed to give a single name to the current of South Wales militancy is a distortion of the truth. In his excellent history of the movement, Mike Woodhouse has discovered a perplexing variety of titles under which the militants could be found to operate. What was common to all of them was a belief in collective organisation as represented by the mass membership of the miners' union, rather than any belief in the value of a separate organisation of militants.

The initial network of contacts seems to have been formed under the auspices of the Plebs League, a body that ran educational classes and was strongly syndicalist in its ideas. The Plebs League and its parent body, the Central Labour College, provided just the sort of loose discussion group atmosphere in which the unofficial movement could operate effectively and the URC returned to this form of link-up many times when more solid organisations crumbled away. The Unofficial Reform Committee itself followed in the wake of a strike at the pits of the Cambrian Combine, and it was the URC that published *The Miners' Next Step* in 1911. A year later the militants were associated with the Rhondda Socialist Society, again a broad-based group in which a variety of opinions could be aired. Expansion in influence led to the South Wales Worker League in 1913. At the end of the year, contact with Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League encouraged the formation of a Trade Union Reform League, soon renamed the Industrial Democracy League.

Even the war could not put a stop to the breakneck turnover in organisation and name. In 1915 a new body called the Pioneer League emerged to pro vide the necessary links. Then there was a gap until 1917 when a new revival took place, this time through Central Labour College classes. Two years later came the South Wales Socialist Society, and an expanded version of *The Miners' Next Step* was published by its 'Industrial Committee'.

This list is not advanced for pedantic reasons, but to show how little importance the URC militants attached to firm organisation outside the local union. It will be noted that most of the above names refer directly to South Wales. As long as the issues confronting mining trade unionism could be fought on regional lines (with occasional sorties on to the national stage, such as during the minimum wage campaign of 1911-12) there seemed little need for anything but a local network. The concept of a revolutionary party was ignored, as was the need for strong and independent rank-and-file organisation. URC supporters believed that what was needed was merely a link between militants, a propaganda outlet (most of these organisations produced their own newspapers — *The Rhondda Socialist*, *South Wales Worker*, *Pioneer*) and a room to meet. Anything as formal as membership cards or rigid constitutions simply did not seem worthy of consideration. As Woodhouse puts it:

> The organisation of the URC was consequently of the loosest form. W H Mainwaring kept a book of about 200 addresses of contacts in South Wales, and in the MFGB generally, and it was

> through these that *The Miners' Next Step* ... was distributed and the particular policies of the URC on specific issues taken into the lodges.

That was in 1911. But ten years later, despite a series of major victories in shaping local and national miners' union policies, nothing had changed. Hewlett, a current URC leader, had to explain the folio wing to the Scottish engineers, with their tradition of strong self-organisation through Workers' Committees:

> I know there is an idea abroad that South Wales is covered by a network of Unofficial Committees. This is not so. In fact, there is no permanent unofficial organisation in the coalfield. What does happen when it is necessary, is that the advanced or rebel element does meet and discuss matters, arrive at decisions, then goes back to their respective pit committees and lodges, put their views forward; have them thoroughly discussed, and if their opinions are accepted the delegates to the councils and conferences are instructed accordingly.

At the base URC militants were linked with the daily struggles of the rank-and-file miners, which they channelled into the union for action. It was this that kept the unofficial movement alive through an extraordinary succession of events stretching from the Labour Unrest to the General Strike and right into the 1930s. This lifeblood flowed as long as these syndicalists maintained contact with each other and expressed the needs of the rank and file in struggle.

The URC was therefore deeply affected by the rhythm of unrest which, like human breathing, lifted the movement up and down ceaselessly.

Another factor reinforced this oscillation. The URC was not a one-way channel. It was influenced directly by the rank and file, but because of its orientation on reform of the South Wales Miners' Federation, it was also influenced from the top downwards. If the aim is to reform an organisation then concessions from above have to be applauded. If the aim is to cajole officials into adopting a certain course, then good behaviour must be rewarded by relief of pressure. This meant that unofficial agitation was switched on or off depending on the current posture of the local union bureaucrats.

A brief survey of URC agitation brings these influences out clearly. In 1912 distribution of *The Miners' Next Step*, and the union reform campaign that went with it, were halted for fear of disturbing negotiators during the minimum wage campaign. As the local press put it:

> someone seems to have thought that publication of the scheme at this moment of crisis and negotiation was inopportune and likely to prove embarrassing. They hold that the minimum wage must be made secure before the conspiracy can be developed.

The settlement that followed and the boom conditions of 1913 led to a collapse in URC activity after its promising start. The *South Wales Worker* is quoted as complaining:

> The Rhondda during the past year has been a place of the dead ... so far as any public activity is concerned. No indication has been evident in the Rhondda of the seething unrest in the outer world.

Yet the Rhondda was the core of the URC influence. The same year official acceptance of much of the unofficial programme dealing with the unifying of wage rates led to further passivity among the organised militants. Why organise separately if the union is carrying out the reforms demanded?

Both engineering and mining activists rejected the idea of leadership. While this was mistaken insofar as it meant denial of a role for revolutionary political leadership, the blanket condemnation was prompted by a thoroughly healthy abhorrence of trade union bureaucrats and parliamentary politicians.

Nevertheless there was a big difference between the miners' aim of reforming officialdom and the engineers' attempts to bypass it.

The Miners' Next Step implied a certain strategy. If the scheme was adopted it could hardly be left to its opponents to carry it out. Working to take over and reorganise the union meant inevitably taking official positions at some point. While the Socialist Labour Party had placed an absolute ban on accepting union positions, the URC was, despite its fear of 'leaders', quite ready to put its best elements forward. As early as 1911 Rees and Ablett of the URC won places on the South Wales executive. Many others with even more famous names were to follow the same path. Thus Frank Hodges — who, as leader of the miners, contributed to the infamous sell-out on Black Friday alone with Jimmy Thomas and Robert Williams — began his career identified with the URC.

The entire history of the URC was one of constant friction between the younger generation of militants fresh from the collieries and those who, pursuing the aim of reorganisation, had gone into the official apparatus. The first evidence of hostility between the new and old militants came in 1914, when Ablett and other URC nominees on the South Wales executive were attacked by one militant in these terms:

> They were pledged to abstain from supporting reactionary policies; they were not to take part in the administration of such policies; they were to keep revolutionary policies and militant programmes to the fore; they were to force the executive committee to take action along the lines laid down by the militant section of the coalfield. Have they done this? Unhesitatingly we answer 'No'. They have ceased to be revolutionary except in words.

Four years later George Dolling and Nat Watkins, soon to be prominent in the Miners' Minority Movement, returned to the attack after a new attempt to revive the URC had failed. Their criticism laid bare one important reason for this failure:

> Today there are those in the socialist ranks who, having grown respectable and law-abiding, act the part of the puppy dogs of capitalism.

Addressing the old leaders of the URC, they went on:

> from you we expect better things. Act and live up to it by writing a line of encouragement so that this work may go on... We write believing that amongst the number which comprised the URC there must be quite a lot who, like ourselves, are dissatisfied with the present state of affairs ... we ought to be a 'Ginger Group' constantly attempting to galvanise the executive committee into life, and focussing their efforts in the direction of our programme.

But the old 'ginger' method had never been fully effective. The process of degeneration and rebirth was built into the method of the URC. Rank-and-file agitation was bound to throw up new and vigorous forces, but exclusive emphasis on reforming the union creamed off the best of them, and isolated them from their base.

A trade union official's origins in an unofficial movement could not give a lifetime inoculation against the disease of bureaucracy. The falling away of direct links with the rank and file, addressing them

from platforms rather than working alongside them and sharing the common experience, had its effect. The URC's candidates inevitably were drawn into official ways of thinking after holding senior positions for some time.

The URC was a channel upwards for rank-and-file grievances, but it was also an escalator which carried the best militants up the structure of the union and dropped them into the bureaucratic mire when they reached the top. In a situation of mass reformism no other fate was possible for trade union officials out of reach of the politics and discipline of a revolutionary party.

Although the Unofficial Reform Committee was in favour of organisation and action separate from the official machine, unofficial strikes were never treated as an alternative to official ones. The URC itself organised countless unofficial actions, large and small, but apart from their immediate objective, the URC leaders saw them primarily as a means of shifting the officials in the right direction. They were not valued for themselves as evidence of rank-and-file self-reliance.

The Unofficial Reform Committee's attitude meant that strike committees never took on a permanent existence apart from the lodge, in the way that engineering strike organisations had done. Thus the miners never developed their own workers' committees.

Like the engineering shop stewards' movement, the Unofficial Reform Committee was vague in its politics. It was felt that maximum unity to win official action on immediate issues was more important than the broader, more hotly disputed questions of the time. This attitude ran right through the various organisations which the Unofficial Reform Committee inhabited outside the official apparatus. It was well illustrated by *The Rhondda Socialist*, one of the URC's temporary mouthpieces. When the paper was accused of being a 'jumble of Syndicalism, Labourism and Social-ism', its editor replied:

> Now there are various 'schools of thought' in the socialist movement ... But we are, as socialists, all united for one objective — we all desire to abolish capitalism and establish the socialist state ... Naturally we differ as to the best means of bringing it about.

When the war broke out the political weakness of the Unofficial Reform Committee led to its complete paralysis. Not that there were no serious industrial disputes in the South Wales coalfields: in July 1915 and again in 1918 there was considerable unrest among miners, but in neither did the URC play a significant role.

The main cause of the paralysis that afflicted the Unofficial Reform Committee was the split in its ranks regarding its attitude to the war. Noah Rees, Frank Hodges and Will John, members of the South Wales miners' executive, supported the war and participated in the recruitment drive. George Barker and Tom Smith, two of the closest supporters of the URC, did likewise, only moving to a position more critical of the war towards its end. Even Ablett, known for his radical views, made no 'unambiguous statement of opposition to the war until 1917; indeed he advanced as a reason for accepting the Lloyd George terms [of July 1915] the need to assist the war effort.'

However things changed when the miners' exemption from conscription was lifted in early 1917. The War Office began a 'comb-out' of unskilled men and in April the situation on the Western Front led it to step up its requirements. By early 1918 the miners were facing the same pressure for conscription as the engineers, with the government asking for 50,000 soldiers and 50,000 reserves. But the revolutionary socialist current in South Wales was even weaker than in engineering, and when the

Unofficial Reform Committee got around to raising the war issue it was most influenced by the policies of the Independent Labour Party.

The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was a thoroughly reformist party which rejected Marxist ideas of class war and preached a sort of 'ethical socialism'. It was led by Ramsay MacDonald, who was a pacifist. But the tenor of his pacifism can be judged from the following quotation. Though he disliked war, he feared even more that strike action might disrupt its continuation:

> under the present circumstances and during a war, purely industrial strikes have no connection with ILP policy ... They belong purely to the wage-earners' industrial policy, and appeal far more directly to the materialised sentiments to which the war party trusts for working-class acquiescence than to the political and spiritual outlook of the

Despite its shortcomings, when rank-and-file miners felt dissatisfied or union officials buckled under pressure from the employers, the Unofficial Reform Committee proved itself a superb fighting mechanism, because it was so deeply rooted in South Wales miners' collective organisation. Like the shop stewards, this movement showed the potential for self-activity and mass struggle on the part of the rank and file.

The unofficial movements in engineering and mining were children of syndicalism. The similarities between them were great — industrial militancy, reliance on the rank and file, but also weakness of politics, looseness of organisation, and an inability to overcome the narrow horizon of their specific industry.

The shop stewards' movement and Unofficial Reform Committee co-existed in time, but they never blended. Each retained very different approaches to trade unionism. Yet in spite of this they both held important lessons for revolutionary work in *all* trade unions.

The stewards' *independent rank-and-file movement* fitted best where there was a self-confident workplace organisation which could be spurred into self-activity. The miners' URC was appropriate when struggle was limited to official trade unionism. It embodied the very best of what a 'broad left' had to offer. Though, like all broad lefts, the Unofficial Reform Committee suffered from the constant influence of the trade union machine, it often proved invaluable in channelling rank-and-file initiatives.

The two movements were able to weaken the hold of bureaucracy by their intervention. Though different, together they offered a manual for effective revolutionary activity in trade unions. But to use these lessons to the full, a strong revolutionary party was essential.

Left to themselves both movements were pregnant with dangers. Without the guidance of a Marxist party with roots in a number of industries and areas, the stewards' movement was easily isolated and smashed once the forces of the officials and government were freed from the constraints of war. The shop stewards' concept of workers' committees, when applied in unfavourable post-war conditions, led to a propagandist dead-end. In Scotland, for example, 'social soviets' were set up which pretended to be rank-and-file bodies when the real ones had disappeared. The URC's method, on the other hand, resulted in successive generations of workers' leaders being turned into bureaucrats, while the rank and file were all too often tied to official structures.

Only a revolutionary party could analyse the changing needs of each period, generalise from the different outlooks born of separate industries, and cure the blindness to politics. Industrial agitation had to be made part of a broader strategy for winning working-class power before it could achieve permanent results. The two unofficial movements could arouse mass action, but could not provide the necessary political leadership for it.