

WHAT USE ARE THE UNIONS?

THE TOLPUDDLE MARTYRS



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REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS

50p

The Tory Government are bringing in even more restrictive laws on taking industrial action. Already it is very difficult for employees to take legal and effective action to defend their wages and working conditions. The new laws in the Trade Union Bill will make it even more difficult to do so.

ANTI-TRADE UNION LAWS

Following the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985 the Thatcher Government brought in laws making it much more difficult for workers to legally engage in effective industrial action. The trade unions protested but did not take any practical action to resist the new restrictions. The defeat of the miners had brought about a general demoralisation among trade unionists. If, they thought, a traditionally militant group such as the miners could not resist the State then what hope for the rest of us? Rather, they tried to work within the severe limitations of the new laws. The Labour Party, a party founded by trade unions, mainly accepted and upheld this anti-working class legislation.

CHANGES IN THE UNIONS

During the nineteen eighties and nineties the trade unions lost millions of members. This was mainly because of the decline of traditional industries with a high density of union membership such as steel, coal mining, engineering and car manufacturing. Also the defeats suffered by unions in these industries made membership less attractive. Another factor was the repeal of the trade union laws passed by the Labour Government in 1975. This legislation cajoled a lot of unwilling employees into union membership instead of them joining of their own free will. Many discontinued their membership when the opportunity arose.

Partly as a result of this decline in membership there were many amalgamations resulting in fewer and larger unions., e.g. UNISON, UNITE. The trend towards monopoly works not only among competing capitalist firms but among trade unions as well. (There is competition between trade unions to recruit members.) This created many new full-time positions to administer these large bureaucracies. A lot of the people going into these jobs were not union members with a history of grass roots activism but young graduates seeking careers. During the nineteen nineties the considerable fall in trade union membership and thus income brought about a reduction of full-time posts in some unions but subsequently most of these office-holders are well-

entrenched.

Instead of trying to improve earnings and terms of employment through collective action the officials put the emphasis on providing "services" for individual members - Industrial Tribunal representation, industrial injuries claims, personal insurance, etc. This model of trade unionism originated in the USA where it is known as "business unionism". It conceives of union members as clients paying a fee for services provided by professionals. Union members are encouraged to embrace this passive role rather than see themselves as active participants. Members expect the union to do things for them rather than conceiving of themselves as active agents determining their destiny. The last thing the new generation of trade union officials want is any serious confrontation with employers. Losing such actions could jeopardise the officials' large salaries, fringe benefits and generous pension schemes. They justify their generous terms of employment on the grounds that this is what the union is trying to achieve for its members and thus officials should not be paid the much lower levels of remuneration the typical member receives. These people are comfortable in and happy with their positions and just want to jog along by attending to members' individual problems rather than leading serious industrial actions.

Most people like to construct a positive self-image of themselves. We do not want to conceive of ourselves as self-centred and uncaring of other people. In the case of union officials they see themselves as realistic, as having an objective appraisal of what it is possible to achieve in difficult circumstances, as safeguarding the interests of the members. The officials tend to see activist members who push for a more militant approach towards employers and the State as unrealistic, as advocating policies which could lead the union into a compromising if not disastrous situation. Thus the officials consider it essential that they maintain firm control over union policy and activities.

WHO RUNS THE UNIONS?

In theory the trade unions are democratic organisations where the members as a whole determine policy. But in actual practice it is *the full-time officials together with some of the elected leaders* who typically make the important decisions. Very often the structure of union organisation at the local level makes it difficult and impractical for the members to participate in policy-making. Branch meetings are often held at times and places which make attendance inconvenient or impossible. This suits the officials and leaders

because they want to monopolise policy formation and decision-making. They see themselves as specialist professionals and they don't want ordinary members interfering in an amateurish way.

It is true that the national executives of unions are elected by the members and the leading officials such as general secretaries are elected. Thus it might seem that this should guarantee that a trade union does in reality act in the interests of its members. This is often not the case. One problem is that the full-time officials are well-embedded in the union's organisational structure which they run on a day-to-day basis. Members of an elected executive committee may be carrying out their duties on a spare time basis or with little remission time from their employment. They have limited opportunity to get to grips with the finer details of the everyday functioning of the union. Furthermore, the full-time officials often do not want the elected ones to know too much about what is going on. The officials mediate relations with employers, the State, the media and other bodies external to the union. They have the advantage in this respect over the elected leading members and this gives the officials a certain amount of power.

There is a tendency for elected leaders to become incorporated into the union bureaucracy. Sometimes they are allowed secondment from their employment, especially in the public sector, to carry out their union duties. Alternatively they get leave of absence from their jobs and the union pays their salaries. Either way, these people are in a rather different situation from that of their previous work roles and usually a more pleasant one. Often opportunities arise to serve on governmental and quasi-governmental bodies which pay fees and also enhance self-esteem. High level elected union officials go off on trips abroad to liaise with their counterparts in other countries and attend international conferences in pleasant locations. People in these positions experience strong pressures to become absorbed into the union's organisational culture and do not want to make trouble for themselves by coming into conflict with the full-time officials. Many will opt for a quiet life and getting involved in serious industrial action would disturb their peace.

Incorporation of members into the union's bureaucratic structure and culture also occurs at the middle and lower levels of the organisation. Members get time off work to carry out union secretarial duties and financial administration. For some union tasks members get paid (honorariums) for their services. Some members treat these tasks seriously and do put in their best efforts in the service of their fellow members. Others treat such positions simply as little perks which go with the job and take a minimalist approach

towards their duties. Either way, occupancy of these positions is often within the gift of the officials and there is a tendency for the occupants to be behold- ing to their benefactors. It is unions with predominantly low status working class members which operate in this way, especially unions based in the public sector such as UNISON.

The typical full-time union official is a well-educated graduate enjoying the sort of salary and benefits which the managers they negotiate with also have. In terms of income, status and culture union officials are often more similar to the managers and administrators they deal with than they are with their own members, especially the low paid ones. Indeed the full-time officials are managers of personnel such as secretarial, administrative and maintenance employees within the union. Furthermore, their attitude towards their mem- bers is basically managerial, seeing them as a human resource to be organ- ised and used. Within private companies and public sector organisations managers hold forth about employees "participating" and "being empow- ered". In reality this sort of talk is only an ideological smokescreen to try to obscure work regimes where employees' rights and benefits are being whit- tled away. A growing trend in large business corporations has been for sala- ried managers to increasingly usurp control from the shareholders and their elected representatives on boards of directors. The managers have got away with awarding themselves enormous salaries and bonuses at the ex- pense of low pay for the employees and reduced dividends for shareholders. There is a parallel trend to this development in the trade unions. The full- time officials have taken control away from the members and their elected executive committees. As a member of UNISON recently said to this writer: "The union is a business run for the benefit of the full-time officials and not for the members." Under capitalism there is a general trend towards *monop- olisation* in the economy i.e. fewer but larger firms. It is hardly surprising that the same organisational trend can be seen with the trade unions which are a dialectical response to their opposite, capitalist business enterprises.

At the heart of trade unionism is the contradiction between the *subjective* desire to live under capitalism and the *objective* necessity to fight it. This unresolvable tension is summed up in the slogan "A fair day's wages for a fair day's work.". In reality there is no such thing. On the one hand trade unions are a way in which employees attempt to defend and improve their pay and conditions in the face of exploitation and oppression by employers. On the other hand unions are a way in which workers are controlled and con- tained within the confines of the existing capitalist system. In Britain today for most trade unions, especially the large ones, it is the latter aspect of this

contradiction which is principal. The unions keep their members in line with the capitalist system.

There are some exceptions to this dominant pattern. Some smaller trade unions are still effective in defending their members' wages and working con- ditions. RMT, ASLEF and the FBU are notable examples. They have shown a willingness to engage in serious industrial action to defend and improve their pay and conditions. It is true that given the work they do these people are in an objectively strong position. Withdrawal of their labour has immedi- ate serious consequences for their employers and members of the public. But this is also true of many other employees but they do not take advantage of their positions. What is noticeable is that these smaller unions have ac- tively functioning democratic structures where the members exercise real control over elected leaders and appointed officials. Furthermore, the mem- bership is clearly and definitely working class unlike the larger unions which have significant proportions of middle strata members, e.g. UNISON. Many middle strata people do not identify themselves as working class, e.g. social workers, and wish to be seen as distinct from and superior to the working class. Thus they hesitate in taking serious industrial action, something they see as alien to them and likely to diminish their social status. Another con- trast between the smaller, more militant unions and the large general unions is that particular, sectional interests of different types of employees tend to get lost within larger organisational structures.

In some larger unions there are pressure groups which try to bring about more effective and militant actions by their unions. These are not usually very successful. Part of the reason is that it is difficult to gain influence within the existing organisational structures given their entrenched domination by conservative elements. Another reason is that very often the modus operan- di of these pressure groups is not so different from those they are up against. For example, proposing resolutions at poorly attended committee meetings which even if passed are ones of which the great majority of members are blissfully unaware. Even when such small pressure groups manage to get more militant policies formally adopted as national union policy it does not necessarily follow that the mass of members would take appropriate industri- al actions. This is because the more militant policies have been adopted as a result of manoeuvring within the bureaucratic structures of a union rather than through winning mass support among the members.

Another more general factor which weakens trade unions in general and works in favour of empowering full-time officials is the decline of trade union-

ism as a significant component of the general culture of British society. Forty years ago everyone knew what trade unions were and what they did. This was true of both people with favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards trade unionism. Today many people, especially younger ones, are only vaguely aware of the nature of trade unionism, about what trade unions are and what they are supposed to do. A university lecturer told me that when she told her students that there was to be a one day strike by their teachers the students were surprised to learn that strikers do not get paid for the time spent on strike. It could be argued that this state of affairs has come about precisely because of the failure over the last thirty years of the unions to effectively defend their members' pay and conditions.

WHAT HAVE THE UNIONS BEEN DOING?

The short answer is 'Not much'.

During the period of the Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 the decline in trade union membership was reversed. This was because there was a rise in the number of employees in the private sector. It was easy for unions such as UNISON to recruit people because these unions were well-entrenched in public sector organisations with helpful agreements with the employers such as union subscriptions being automatically deducted from employees' pay. The unions did not have to struggle to recruit new members in the face of opposition from hostile employers. The rise in membership of unions such as UNITE and GMB to some extent compensated for their loss of members in the private sector.

Towards the end of this period the Labour Government started to attack and undermine the pay and conditions, particularly pension rights, of public sector employees. (This began before the financial crisis of 2008 resulted in a massive rise in government debt.) With the formation of the Coalition Government in 2010 this assault intensified and the cuts policies of this government have brought about a massive reduction in the number of public employees. Unions such as UNISON and PCS have only offered largely token resistance with the consequence that there has been a deterioration in real pay rates and pension scheme terms. The tactic used in industrial actions to defend pay and pensions has been the one day stoppage where all the members in a given sector, e.g. local government, come out for one day. This is of little inconvenience to the employer and thus does not achieve its declared objectives. Potentially more effective tactics are avoided, e.g.

bringing out key groups of workers for extended periods.

Also there has been a general assault on pension schemes in the private sector with no effective union resistance. In the case of Asda USDAW renegotiated the terms of the company pension scheme so as to worsen them for the employees. At the same time, the movement for a 'Living Wage' arose. This was initiated by UK Citizens, an organisation of socially concerned Christians. It has had considerable success in persuading employers to raise pay rates above the National Minimum Wage level including that of civil servants in a number of Government ministries in London. The unions have not been involved in this successful campaign. This really is a damning indictment of the ineptitude of the unions.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE UNIONS?

Or have the unions got a future? If the Trade Union Bill 2015 is passed - and it will be - then the possibilities of taking effective industrial action within the framework of the law will become even more limited. The TUC and its constituent unions are opposing this legislation but not by effective means. They are calling for and holding marches, demonstrations, rallies, petitions, etc. but the Tory Government will take no notice. Some leftist organisations, especially Trotskyist ones, are calling for industrial action in opposition to the Bill. Given their strict conformity to the law, the unions will not take such action because it is illegal and their funds could be sequestered by the Government. This would threaten the security of the positions of the full-time officials and that is the last thing they want. The Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party are calling for a general strike against austerity and the Bill which is even more unlikely to occur. Indeed, even if a general strike took place it would be a disaster for the working class. Historical experience in Britain and elsewhere shows that capitalist states can easily handle and defeat such actions.

So what can be done? One possibility is for groups of employees to take "unofficial" actions, outside of the formal trade union organisational framework, in defence of their pay and conditions. Under the present legislation this has happened. Postal workers have taken such industrial action "independently" of their union, the CWU. The union leaders deny any knowledge or involvement with the unofficial action and thus escape prosecution from the State. If the present union leaders are smart then they will be anticipating such eventualities and preparing to encourage and facilitate

them. They would be channeling off and hiding away funds which could be used covertly to assist strikers. They would be working out the discrete organisational measures necessary to support workers involved in such disputes. It is unlikely that the fine ladies and gentlemen now leading our unions are doing any such thing with the possible exception of the leaders of the smaller, more militant unions. When all is said and done, these people have very little experience of participating in and leading any sort of industrial action. Given their law-abiding character, they have no taste for subverting the law of the land in the interests of their members. There would be nothing new about this sort of tactic if it were to be taken. Two hundred years ago the framework knitters in the East Midlands area were operating at a time when trade unions had been declared illegal. They had a public, legal organisation called the Framework Knitters' Association and simultaneously operated in an underground and illegal way taking direct action against their employers. Very few of the knitters were ever caught by the authorities.

What some of the union leaders are probably hoping for is that some of their members will defy the new trade union laws but independently of the unions to which they belong. This would undermine the authority of the new laws but without exposing union leaders and officials to the danger of prosecution. At the same time dissatisfied members might decide to try to sort out their useless unions although given the bureaucratic entrenchment of present leaders and officials this would be difficult. Or taking unofficial actions could weaken the attachment of members to their unions and result in them leaving and even setting up new, more militant fighting trade unions. This is what some low-paid workers, such as cleaners, have been doing in London. This is a very positive development. The fact of the matter is that union membership has been declining for over thirty years, especially in the private sector. What is more, the membership is ageing with a declining proportion of young employees finding union membership attractive given the unions' poor performance. The unions are literally dying on their feet and conflicts over the new laws could precipitate a crisis whereby the unions undergo a radical transformation or fall apart.

Many leftists look upon trade unions with a certain reverential awe, as if there is something sacred about them. Such illusions should be cast aside. Trade unions are down to earth practical organisations whose purpose is to defend and improve the pay and working conditions of employees. There is nothing proto-revolutionary about them. The reality is that most trade unions in Britain today function so as to control and restrain employees from taking effective action in defence of their earnings and terms of employment. Now, the

unions could well be facing their Waterloo. This not a bad thing but a good thing. It could lead to a rejuvenation of the existing unions or the formation of new, more militant workers' organisations. But neither of these things will happen if we don't consciously strive to make them happen.

Some Revolutionary Praxis Publications

Political Economy: A Basic Introduction

This brief introduction to Marxian political economy was first published by the Communist Party of Great Britain during the nineteen seventies. It has been reprinted because it provides a very clear outline of the basic concepts and theories of the Marxist analysis of the functioning of capitalist economies. Capitalism is a very dynamic system which undergoes continuous change such as the trend towards globalisation, first predicted by Karl Marx during the mid-nineteenth century. Even so, its essential, underlying features remain the same throughout its development over time.

£2.00

Work – A Four Letter Word?

The central concern of Karl Marx was the loss of people's control over their own lives which occurs in class societies, especially under capitalism. He called this condition *alienation* and for Marx the main and central aim of the revolutionary project is human beings regaining control over our collective life. This pamphlet is a clear, concise explanation of alienation and how we can overcome it.

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Stalin on Trotskyism

Trotskyists persistently try to play down the great differences between the political outlooks of Lenin and Trotsky. But in fact the experience of the Russian Revolution and subsequent revolutionary upheavals have confirmed the essential correctness of Lenin's perspective on revolutionary upheaval as opposed to Trotsky's theory of "permanent revolution". Here Stalin outlines and contrasts the very different revolutionary theories of Lenin and Trotsky.

15p

Mao Tse-tung, Marxist

A concise and clear introduction to the revolutionary theory and practice developed under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. Written in 1978 by David Fernbach, the author sets out to locate the main features of Mao's development of the doctrines of Marx and Lenin as these took shape in the practical context of China's class struggles and her struggle for national liberation and socialist transformation.

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Mao Tse-tung: Revisionist or Revolutionary?

Some leftists criticise Mao for the United Front policy that he led the Communist Party of China in developing and applying during the course of the Chinese Revolution. They claim that this constituted a serious revisionist deviation which meant that socialism would fail to be achieved in China. This pamphlet takes issue with this criticism and argues that the United Front policy was correct in a backward semi-feudal, semi-colonial society.

0.50p

Mao on Revisionism

One of the great achievements of Mao Tse-tung was to identify the danger of revisionism within the international communist movement and to lead the fight against it. During the mid-nineteen fifties he saw that the changes taking place in the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin were heading towards the restoration of capitalism. At the same time revisionist elements were growing in strength within the Communist Party of China. Learning from the negative experience in the Soviet Union, Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to overthrow the capitalist-roaders in China. The Cultural Revolution did not succeed in achieving its aims and after Mao's death there was full restoration of capitalism in China. Even so, there are indispensable lessons to be learnt from this anti-revisionist struggle.

0.25p

Did Mao Really Kill Millions During the Great Leap Forward?

For several decades there have been many attempts to undermine and destroy the reputation of Mao Tse-tung by asserting that he was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people during the Great Leap Forward of 1958-61. This article, originally published in *Monthly Review*, critically examines the allegations made and scrutinises the evidence on which

they claim to be based.

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The Death of Marxism?

A major political doctrine of modern times was Marxism and fifty years ago it seemed to be in the ascendant. Russia and China were undergoing socialist transformation and most anti-colonial movements drew their inspiration from Marxism. Now, with the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and China, Marxism as a political ideology appears to be a spent force. In large parts of the world where Marxism had a mass following it has been displaced by Islam. So, is Marxism an outdated, irrelevant ideology in a state of terminal decline? Or can it and should it undergo a revival?

£1.00p

On the Necessity of Revolutionary Violence

The pretensions to revolutionary Marxism on the part of most existing left-wing groups in Britain today are exposed. All of them reject violent insurrection as a necessary and unavoidable part of the revolutionary upheaval. Britain is no different in this respect than any other country.

0.30p

For Real Democracy & After the Election

Written around the British General Election of 2001, these articles attack the fundamentally fraudulent and undemocratic character of the present political system. The major attempts to achieve revolutionary transformation to truly democratic societies are briefly reviewed and a call is made to renew the revolutionary project.

0.30p

Can Capitalism Go Green?

Climate change is really happening but governments are showing themselves as unable to agree upon effective measures to contain this worldwide threat to humanity. The fundamental cause of our environmental problems is the capitalist system which either grows or dies. Its insatiable appetite for natural resources is causing massive environmental devastation. Only socialism can reverse this destructive process.

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Computers, Capitalism, and Socialism

The most significant new *force of production* to have emerged within contemporary capitalism is the *new information technology*. This has been having an enormous impact on the functioning of the economy, the state and everyday life in capitalist societies. At the same time this powerful technology is undermining the continuing viability of capitalist economic exploitation. However NIT is also a force of production which is absolutely essential for the construction of a planned socialist economy under mass democratic control. Information technology is a force of production essentially incompatible with capitalist *relations of production* but one which is absolutely necessary for the renewal of the socialist transformation of society.

0.50p

Media Representations of the Socialist Period

Examines the ways in which mass media such as novels, films, radio and television present Russia and China during the periods when they were undergoing socialist transformation. Most of these images are unremittingly negative and this places an obstacle in the way of renewing the revolutionary project. Suggestions are made for combating this reactionary propaganda.

0.30p

Labour: A Party Fit for Scabs!

The Labour Party was founded by the trade unions. Yet throughout its history it has always done its utmost to prevent workers defending and improving their pay and conditions by means of taking industrial action. So why are the Labourites scabs and what can we do about it?

25p

Dead Left Rituals: Leftist Ruts and How to Get Out

In Britain today the types of political activity engaged in by organisations claiming to be revolutionary are pretty ineffectual. The various types of activities are reviewed and assessed. Then the reasons as to why leftists stick with these *dead left rituals* are analysed. The political basis for more effective revolutionary political action is considered and more potent ways of challenging capitalism are suggested.

£2.00

Workers in Britain have been suffering worsening terms of employment and cuts in real wages and pensions. Britain has the oldest trade union movement in the world yet on the whole it has been unable to resist these attacks on the working class. Why is this? What's gone wrong? And what can be done about it? These are the vitally important questions addressed here.

“The functionaries of our political organizations and trade unions are corrupted — or rather tend to be corrupted — by the conditions of capitalism and betray a tendency to become bureaucrats, i.e., privileged persons divorced from the people and standing above the people.”

—Vladimir Lenin

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