

The Trade Union Movement.

In order to understand the Trade Union Movement today one must briefly consider its origins.

At the time when the fast development of capitalism and industry enforced brutal exploitation of the masses, the workers were completely at the capitalists' mercy. The newly-formed working-class was disunited and defenceless in the face of the class enemy. The combination into Unions was a big step forward for the class.

It enabled the workers to deal collectively with the employers. The workers set out to combat competition among themselves, to defend wage levels against capitalist attack, to reduce working hours and to fight for other improvements. They strove to improve the appalling working conditions and to limit child labour.

One cannot deny the great improvements won for the workers by the Unions. With the capitalist motto being maximum profit, this means maximum exploitation of the workers, and the Trade Union movement played an important part in:

"holding the money greed of the bourgeoisie within certain limits."
(Engels, Condition of the Working Class...p.245)

The development and strengthening of the Trade Unions progressed through defeats and victories, covering a long period of time. The workers first had to organise in illegality, and the pioneers of Trade Unionism were fiercely oppressed. However, there were some opportunists and reactionaries active within the movement from its start.

As capitalism developed into imperialism this trend was confirmed. The social basis for opportunism was an upper section of the working-class bribed by the capitalists, the labour aristocracy as defined by Lenin:

"...why does England's monopoly explain the (temporary) victory of opportunism in England? Because monopoly yields superprofits, i.e. a surplus of profits over and above the capitalist profits that are normal and customary all over the world. The capitalists can devote a part (and not a small one, at that!) of these superprofits to bribe their own workers, to create something like an alliance (recall the celebrated "alliances" described by the Webbs of English Trade Unions and employers) between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists against the other countries..."

"On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism - press, parliament, associations, congresses, etc. - have created political privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops. Lucrative and soft jobs in the government or on the war industries' committees, on the editorial staffs of "respectable", legally published newspapers or on the management councils of no less respectable and "bourgeois law-abiding" trade unions - this is the bait by which the imperialist bourgeoisie attracts and rewards the representatives and supporters of the "bourgeois labour parties"."

(Lenin, Imperialism and the Split in Socialism, 1916)

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It is not the object of this paper to debate who nowadays belongs to the labour aristocracy or does not. But we shall examine the position of trade union leaders today, in the light of Lenin's analysis. They have become cut off from the working class by their economic conditions, their way of life and their way of thinking.

They receive higher salaries than most workers. Alan Fisher of NUPE earns an estimated £10,000 a year. NATFHE General Secretary, Tom Driver, gets £11,500 a year. The smallest of them all, Scanlon's salary stood at £5,500 in 1976, but he for instance can earn £100 in one hour when he came to give a lecture to students in a university. This salary is usually supplemented by perks and fringe benefits. In NUPE, for example, mortgages advances to officials amounted to £259,308 in 1975, i.e. 6.7% of the contributions. In the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades the budget listed £171,051 under assets: loans(houses, cars etc.)

Union leaders also get additional income from their participation in all sorts of government bodies, at local and national level, arbitration boards, industrial tribunals etc. For example, Les Kemp now ex-national secretary of the building and construction section of the TGWU accumulated the following posts:

- chairman of Corby development at a salary of £4,432.
- vice-chairman of Peterborough Development Corporation at £1,996 p.a.
- part-time chairman of the Construction Industry Training Board at £1,320 p.a.all this on top of his yearly union salary.

These Trade Union leaders are part of the establishment through their collaboration in official government committees and commissions of inquiry. For instance, Lord Wright, President of the TUC in 1968 was also president of the Consultative Committee of Production and Science in Britain. Lord Cannon(AUEW), member of the General Council of the TUC, was also a member of the National Economic Development Council, together with Frank Cousins(TGWU), Ron Smith(Union of Post Office Workers) and Sydney Green(NUR). Further examples of the posts Trade Union officials accumulate are in the GMWU: Lord Williamson, also director of Securicor; Lord Cooper governor of the London School of Business and Director of Telefusion Yorkshire, National Ports Council and Atlas Foundations.

It is no surprise if these leaders acquire a bourgeois outlook. In fact, it becomes difficult to distinguish them from their bourgeois co-directors. They forgot long ago what a shop floor is like. Their workplace is the negotiating table and their whole approach is based on compromise, not on class struggle.

In addition, trade union leaders are now at the head of a massive apparatus, with a heavy bureaucracy and complicated financial interests. The Trade Unions employ numerous workers, clerks, secretaries, research workers etc. The AUEW spent £2,797,337 in 1976 on wages and expenses for staff, out of a total of £5,402,736 overall administrative expenses. NUPE increased its administrative expenses from £1,995,103 in 1974 to £3,315,571 in 1976. The most paradoxical situation is reached when appointed officials employed by the Union threaten to

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take industrial action for higher salaries.(eg. NUPE 1973)
The Trade Unions also have at their disposal printing presses, teaching and cultural institutions, such as the WEA Ruskin College at Oxford. The TUC training college takes 700 union officers every year. They set up an Institute of Occupational and Tropical Medicine in 1967. These are just a few examples of the many pies in which the trade unions have a finger. They also have a large amount of capital which they invest. eg. TGWU investments are £21,477,270, largely with the view of propping up the rule of the Labour chieftains. Trade Unions have thus taken an increasing role in the running of the state.

The rank and file members of the unions have very little control over the massive union finance and bureaucracy, which is bound to slow down democracy within the unions. So in practice, it is quite difficult to change a trade union official, and the higher you get in the hierarchy the more difficult it becomes to change one. In some unions the General Secretary is elected for life. The undemocratic nature of unions is reflected, for example, at the national conferences, which are cleverly manipulated so that emergency motions from the top take precedence over the ones from the base. And those are then carved up again into composite motions.

Even at the level nearest to the rank and file workers, you can very often find shop stewards who do not reflect the will of their members. And it is not always easy to change them, because of their sometimes friendly relations with management. And this is in spite of the improvement that shop stewards represent as compared to appointed officials.

The TUC is the height of this discrepancy between rank and file workers and leaders. The TUC is part of the establishment and does not represent the workers at all. On almost all occasions the Trade Union leadership and the TUC have adopted anti-proletarian and anti-communist. They were the artisans of the split in the WTUF; together with the American Trade Unions they helped to set up the rival FFTU, which is in fact a tool of the CIA. They also actively supported the Marshall Plan after the war, which was the instrument of American imperialism.

Their reactionary character was clearly exposed in the British colonies, where the colonial Trade Unions asked help from their British counterparts. The latter constantly tried to limit their struggles to economic struggles and tried to stop them from joining the national liberation struggles. In the West Indies the British Unions set up a yellow Trade Union to oppose the one that already existed, which was too militant. They constantly refused to send aid where the colonial Trade Unions attacked the British Empire or where communists were involved, as in Cyprus and Malaya.

The position of the TU leaders was not always as clear as it is today, when they openly agree with the government on keeping wages down.

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At times they appear to be quite militant. Invariably, in periods of prosperity there are more strikes and relative social advances. Pushed by the base, TU leaders even support these strikes and appear to be quite militant. But in times of recession, the leaders back out. One must remember, that the Trade Unions are only a defensive weapon, they did not set out to change the capitalist system, nor can they.

"All these efforts (of the Trade Unions) cannot alter the economic law according to which wages are determined by the relation between supply and demand in the labour market. Hence unions remain powerless against all great forces which influence this relation. In a commercial crisis the trade union itself must reduce wages or dissolve wholly; and in a time of considerable increase of the demand for labour, it cannot fix the rate of wages higher than would be reached spontaneously by the competition of capitalists among themselves. But in dealing with minor single influences they are powerful. If the employer had no concentrated collective opposition to expect he would in his own interest gradually reduce wages to a lower and lower point; indeed the battle of competition which he has to wage against his fellow manufacturers would force him to do so, and wages would soon reach the minimum. But this competition of the manufacturers among themselves, is under average conditions, somewhat restricted by the opposition of the working class." (Engels, Condition of the Working Class...p.243)

This helps to explain why the workers allow this state of affairs : today. Strikes are not being seen as a way out of the crisis. The Social Contract, supported by the Trade Union leaders, seemed to be a plausible plan, as a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain. The underlying reason for this attitude is very clearly analysed by Lenin in "What is to be Done?" Lenin explains how the bowing to spontaneous struggles in the Trade Unions led to reformism, which is bourgeois thinking. The economic struggles led by the TUs are not apolitical; they are very political indeed, but it is bourgeois politics if left to its own spontaneous development.

"Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement then the only choice is: either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a third ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non class or above class ideology). Hence to belittle socialist ideology in any way, to deviate from it in the slightest degree means the strengthening of bourgeois ideology. There is a lot of talk about spontaneity, but the spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to bourgeois ideology, it means developing according to the programme of the Credo, for the spontaneous labour movement is pure and simple trade unionism, is "Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei", and pure and simple trade unionism means the ideological subordination of the workers to the bourgeoisie. Hence our task, the task of social democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the labour movement, with its spontaneous trade unionist striving from under the wing of the bourgeoisie and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary social democracy. (Lenin, What is to be done, Chapter 2)

The prevailing bourgeois ideology which we are facing in Britain is social democracy, which explains why the rank and file membership of the Trade Unions allow their leaders to take such counter-revolutionary positions.

The best illustration of this is the Labour Party, which is a political wing of the trade unions: a bourgeois party. There is a strong link between the Labour Party and the trade unions; two thirds of the trade union members pay a political levy to the Labour Party.

The influence of the revisionist ideology through the CPGB grafts itself onto the social democratic ideology. Their seemingly communist phrases added on to what is essentially reformism, gives a militant varnish to social democracy. They are outright anti-revolutionary. Their posturing as communists tends to put workers off communism altogether.

In Russia Lenin criticised the members of the Party who belittled the role of the Party. In Britain there is no Party. How can the working class throw out the reformist line, corrupt leaders, the Social Contract, when there is no alternative course of action proposed? The proletarian line is not put forward by a revolutionary party. What else is there to be chosen, but a vague promise of stabilisation if we make some sacrifice now.

OUR TASKS IN THE TRADE UNIONS

There is no need to emphasise the importance of our role in the Trade Unions. In Britain where 50% of the workers are members of trade unions, where trade unions have existed for over 200 years, it is essential for a Marxist Leninist to be where the masses are already organised, and to make use of the trade union organisations to carry out their revolutionary task.

In the first place as communists, we care for the long term and immediate interests of the masses.

We must make full use of the Trade Unions as defensive weapons, and fight over such questions as wages, unemployment, working conditions.

This must go together with a fight for democracy in the Trade Unions, exploring the existing democratic channels to their full extent, and endeavouring to change the rules and conditions where they are undemocratic. We need to encourage shop floor workers to take and retain the initiative in struggle. They must make sure that their will is respected and defended by the leadership at all levels. In the long run, it means a questioning of the hierarchy and structure of the Trade Unions wherever these hamper the democratic process. The Marxist Leninists must participate in the Trade Unions, including in such bodies as the Trades Councils. Our aim should not be to pull workers out of the existing trade unions. That would lead nowhere. We need to fight inside those trade unions which exist.

However, this is not to exclude any other form of organisation. As the situation changes, as the crisis deepens, and we approach a revolutionary situation, these alternative organisations might arise, but we cannot say what they will be now.

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If we do not ruthlessly expose the trade union leadership, the TUC and the Labour Party in our trade union work, we will only be encouraging trade unionist ideology, i.e. the reformist trends among the working class. We must combat social democracy in all its forms; we must expose social democratic lines wherever they appear especially under the guise of Left-wing demands, such as "workers' control" put forward by the Trotskyites and others.

The C.P. is particularly pernicious, as it takes up such militant postures. But it is reformist, revisionist militancy, so that although they may look like hardliners, they are in fact only confirming and strengthening the bourgeois ideology in the working class. The Labour Party needs to be exposed and opposed; one should strive to withdraw the Trade unions' political levy to the Labour Party. However, we ought not to be hostile to the ordinary membership of the Labour Party.

All this can only be achieved if the Party has a leading role in the Trade Unions. This does not mean that Party members have to scramble for executive posts in the trade unions. In the Trade Union Movement we want the Party to assume ideological leadership. We will need factory cells, cutting across Trade Unions and reaching beyond them, to carry out revolutionary propaganda and action among the workers. The cell's task would be to link up everyday issues with an understanding of capitalist society and the need for revolution.

It is also important to take up other issues, beyond the day to day problems of wages etc. One such important issue is racialism. This needs much time and effort. It must be fought. It is a vicious weapon of fascism. The fight for democracy and self-reliance combined with the fight against racialism, provides good safeguards against the increase of fascist influence within the trade unions, although the anti-fascist fight must be conducted everywhere.

The Party should agitate in the Trade Unions and on the Trades Councils on all the important debates - cuts, unemployment, Ireland and all aspects of the line. All propaganda material, leaflets, newspapers etc., would be used to this effect. The Party will coordinate all struggles in the Trade Unions and elsewhere among the masses, giving them a common revolutionary perspective.

Further Notes On Trade Unions

Britain is the country, in its size range, with the most heavily organised work force, in the trade-union sense, and it is indicative of the degree of "proletarianisation" involved that by the fastest growing sector the "non-industrial, the white-collar so called.

This does not mean that these are revolutionary in their outlook, any more than are the more traditional industrial bodies. But it does indicate a collective consciousness, a sense that advancement in the end can only come in unity, and hence the first steps to throughgoing class consciousness. Opportunism in these and all these sections of the trade unions is the dominant theme because of the peculiarly organic way in which the Union developed in Britain it is difficult to generalise, as each union has its own unique problems, its own unique constitution, but as evidence of the multifarious roads to opportunism, one can cite the sectionalism of the craft unions, which although never as bad as eg the AFB in the U.S, were still collectively opportunist in their defence of their own narrow interests, enough so for Lenin and Engels on occasion to refer to them as part of the "Labour Aristocracy", although on other occasion they speak only of their leaders. On the contrary the big general unions are indeed so general that their unity is to some extent spurious, with inner union disputes and a lack of common interest enabling them to be dominated by full time executives or officials.

We cannot look for the roots of trade union opportunism solely in undemocratic constitutions, nor in the dictatorship of full time officials. Many unions have extremely democratic constitutions with elected officials etc, etc, but they nonetheless are shamelessly, rightwing (NU R), some others have a less democratic constitution with appointed officials (ASTMS) yet contrive to be "nilitant", or left wing in appearance. Not one of them has a revolutionary perspective.

Once again despite the appearances the union funds are not large enough to give them an interest in capitalism's survival on that score.

Most unions, especially at base level (though not always) are the mass organisations of the working class. Workers with any degree of class consciousness are involved in them to some degree, as they are not in the Labour Party, for since in Britain, now as at the time when Engels wrote, politics are bourgeois politics, it is through the trade unions that class war has been fought. Herein lies their importance to us. By not participating in them we deny ourselves the opportunity of showing the inadequacies of such and of imbuing it with a consciousness of the need for revolution. Equally we ignore the potentialities of mass work in contacting the millions of workers active in this field.

Needless to say, economism and other form of opportunism present serious dangers to a party conducting such work-- but we cannot avoid such dangers by eschewing union work, we must fight it resolutely at the scene of infection, and when we say the union are so infected we also mean that the class itself suffers the same disease.

Historically, while it is true that trade unionism was born in struggle, it is a distortion that all unions were as do the CPBML. Class collaboration has been a continuing feature from the very beginning (nb the asrs the ASE) and many unions were more benefit societies than class struggle organs.

Conversely many were under strong revolutionary influence when founded (GMWU and Eleanor Marx) and the others went from one to the other and then back again. These waverings represented not the personalities of the leaders, nor anything exclusive to the unions, but ideological struggle within the class.

Why does it seem that in this struggle in the unions that the dice is loaded in favour of the sellouts, the social democrat and opportunists? Because the unions and the class must necessarily even as they engage in class struggle be under the pressure of the ideology of the ruling class.

Because when the strike is over--the boss is still there, to be negotiated with. Because if capitalism is always going to be there it is essential to co-operate to some extent to ensure that firm A, or country B does not successfully close us all down. All this logic flows inexorably from the one premise that capitalism will survive a that there will not be revolution.

And here leadership become essential. As a militant class-conscious worker ascends the union leadership as many do, his distance from the rest of the workers, in continuous involvement with the ruling class and its agents becomes a stronger and stronger force. Not just the possibility of revolution of socialism, but its desirability becomes into question. Unless that he has the strength and discipline of revolutionary party behind him. Even then we will have defections, but with the lack of such a party in Britain, it is attribute to the class, not that so many succumb, but that any survive the course.

Any work that we do must be in the mass. Communists must be elected to positions---but as communists, with the support of these workers. And when elected they must use their positions to develop yet more support.---not as with the revisionists or the CPBML's Asset-stripping to get more votes more positions, but to develop the revolutionary consciousness of the workers---to build the revolutionary party. We can do this not by empty sloganising, nor name calling of the union apparatus, but only by participating in, organising the day to day struggles, and being better at it than every one else, and by clearly relating it as Stalin said to the "planetary questions of revolution, of socialism.

In our unions, in our unionised working class we have fertile fields, but crops do not grow of themselves, nor can the plough be let to turn the soil at random. The work must be planned and co-ordinated. Unplanned work leads to futility which develops into despondency---and that is one of the surest roots of opportunism. To do this work we need the Party, to build the Party we must do this work. Both must proceed together, and means we must start now

CWM