



Workers' Liberty

the trade union bureaucracy

The Trade Union Bureaucracy, from *Off The Rails*, Summer 2010

Union members and activists are usually very loyal to our unions, work hard in day-to-day union organisation and disputes, and support our union leaders so long as they are supporting us. But we also often feel frustrated and demoralised when our unions settle deals above our heads or against our interests, drag heels and shy from a fight, or seek to resolve a dispute as soon as it begins. How often have we been baffled by seemingly bizarre actions from our unions?

If a union exists to defend its members, why would its leaders behave in a way that jeopardises the interests of the very people they are supposed to represent? Is this cock-up or conspiracy? Or is it just that the union bureaucracy making the decisions is behaving like union bureaucracies do?

If we look into what the union bureaucracy has been and is today, and the role it plays in society, we will get a clue as to why it acts as it does. Understanding the bureaucracy is the first step towards challenging it.

What is 'the bureaucracy'?

The word 'bureaucracy' is used for any undemocratic, slow, frustrating institution - in government, councils or other big organisations. The union bureaucracy shares these characteristics, but the trade union bureaucracy is, as Marxist Hal Draper put it, the 'organisational leadership of our class'.

By union bureaucracy, we mean the union leadership: the people and bodies at the top of our unions, where decision-making power is concentrated - not just the individuals who hold these posts, but the posts themselves, and the structures that keep power at the top.

Good leadership is important in a trade union. Where unions have elected leaders more militant than their predecessors - such as RMT's Bob Crow or PCS's Mark Serwotka - those unions have fought for members' interests more effectively than unions with supine leaders such as shopworkers' union USDAW. But they are far from perfect.

Within unions there is a conflict between the bureaucracy and the grassroots or rank and file. *Off The Rails* wants democratic control of unions by the people who work in our industry whose lives are directly affected by the decisions and successes of the union: the rank-and-file members.

A look at history

As trade unions expanded towards the end of the nineteenth century, so did the number of full-time union officials. Alongside this, many working-class people got the vote and a political voice for the first time in 1872. The ruling class saw a new threat that must be controlled and leant on union leaders to perform this function. By 1874, Engels observed, 'the chairmen and secretaries of trade unions ... had overnight become important people. They were visited by MPs, by lords and other well-born rabble, and sympathetic enquiry was suddenly made into the wishes and needs of the working class'.

From the early days of unions, a layer developed between the mass of ordinary workers and the bosses' and politicians' elite.

What do they earn?

Most bureaucrats are full-time union employees. Their position separates them off from most workers. They do not have a manager breathing down their neck all day, their pay is often good and their job



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secure. They are outside the exploitative worker-boss relationship we have to endure.

Life at the top of unions can be closer to that enjoyed by management.

£100,000+ union boss salaries have been criticised in the press recently. And rightly so.

Their different role and life experience gives them a different perspective: they lose touch. How can we expect them to fight as fiercely as if their livelihood depended on it?

Their place in society

Hal Draper adds that the bureaucracy is also 'the channel and the agency for the exercise of bourgeois influence on the working class'. It is 'both of these things at the same time' [ie. both this and the 'organisational leadership of our class'].

Society is divided into classes. The majority are exploited, working-class people, producing the wealth that is enjoyed by the the ruling class. There is a fundamental conflict between those two classes.

The union bureaucracy mediates between these two fundamentally-opposed classes. It exerts working-class influence on the ruling class and vice versa. In a dispute, a union leader will be under a lot of pressure from the company to settle a deal. They will often 'sell a deal' to us, recommending that we accept something short of what we were fighting for.

Even by the late 19th century, their role had already developed into one of 'keeping the peace' between the classes in dispute. An alliance between sections of the capitalist class and union leaders had emerged, which has been with us in various forms ever since.

The way forward

Workers should stand up for ourselves. In a society structured on exploiting us, we need a strong movement to defend our interests. A rank-and-file movement in the unions would be a big step towards this. As ordinary workers instead of union officials, we are inclined to take up issues more vigorously because they directly affect us. We are less vulnerable to management pressure to accept a cooked-up compromise.

The Clydeside shop stewards' movement in the early 20th century said that they would support the union leaderships for so long as they did a decent job in leading workers' struggles; but that when they failed to do so, they would act independently and take over leading the struggle from the shop floor.

OTR pushes for union decisions to be more in the hands of the rank and file because we are less likely to sell ourselves short and it is democratic for decisions to be made by the people they affect.

For a more democratic union movement that really stands up for us, we need a more organised rank and file. Producing OTR is one step towards achieving that.



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Discussion question:

Talk in your group about this question and make some notes. Be ready to report back to the main group. Note that the questions are designed to prompt discussion, not to test your knowledge or catch you out!

In the early days of the trade unions, why and how did the ruling class lean on the union leaders to 'police' and control the unions? Do they still do this now? How?

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US Marxist Hal Draper says that the trade union bureaucracy is both the organisational leadership of the working class, and also a channel for bourgeois influence on the working class. Can you give some examples of the bureaucracy of your union playing each of these roles in your own workplace/industry?

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Can you give some examples of conflict between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy in your union?

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Can you give some examples of how bureaucratisation in your union has damaged

- (a) an industrial dispute, and
- (b) other union activities and campaigns, over recent years?

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Is the problem of the trade union bureaucracy confined to the head offices and national positions? Or can there also be bureaucratisation at a branch, local or other level? Can you give some examples in your own union?

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What privileges do trade union leaders enjoy that makes their lifestyle significantly different from that of the average members? Why does that make them less effective as leaders?

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Some union leaders and officials are much better than others. Does this mean that they are not really bureaucrats, and that there is not really a problem with bureaucracy in those unions?

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Can a good, militant, pro-democracy, rank-and-file union rep become a sell-out bureaucrat? Can you give any examples? How and why does this happen?

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Discussion statement:

Talk in your group about this statement. Do you agree with it? What comments do you have? Make some notes, and be ready to report back to the main group.

'The unions need officials and staff who are experts in skills such as negotiating. Because they have these skills, they will usually know better than rank-and-file members.'

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Discussion statement:

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'It is silly to suggest that trade union leaders exaggerate their achievements and therefore make workers think that small victories are good enough and that we can't win any more. Of course trade unions should celebrate their achievements, otherwise workers will not join and will just feel powerless and demoralised.'

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'If you criticise the General Secretary's salary, you are just chiming in with a right-wing, anti-union media witch-hunt.'

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'It is only fair that union officials and senior staff should have pay that reflects their skills and important status.'

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'Ordinary members can have a say, but the union's Rule Book is supreme, and that says that the leadership makes the decisions.'

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'We need to replace useless, sell-out leaders with better ones.'

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Discussion statement:

Talk in your group about this statement. Do you agree with it? What comments do you have? Make some notes, and be ready to report back to the main group.

"Trade union members elect their leaders and therefore should back them. Socialists should encourage workers to be loyal to their union, and to attack the employers not the union leaders."

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‘We should oppose the leadership of right-wing, bureaucratic unions, but support the leaderships of left-wing, fighting unions.’

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Key points:

Notes to session facilitator

- The bureaucracy was created as the ruling class leaned on the leaders of the newly-formed unions to 'police' and control the unions.
- The trade union bureaucracy is both the organisational leadership of the working class, and also a channel for bourgeois influence on the working class.
- The power of the bureaucracy relies on a lack of participation and democracy inside the union.
- There is a conflict between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy.
- Sociologically, the union bureaucracies are a layer of trade unionists who have attained petty bourgeois and even bourgeois standards of life - better pay, freedom from labour discipline, other privileges - as a caste of specialists in bargaining within the wage-system.
- Trade union bureaucracies concentrate on and exaggerate small advances (or damage-limitation defences) for workers, and discourage workers from thinking that any more is possible.