Workers' Liberty
Reason in revolt

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Trade unions yesterday, today, and tomorrow

From the "organising agenda" to the

By Martin Thomas

Union density is falling, and has been falling for decades, almost across the world.

New independent trade union movements made great advances in Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa in the 1980s; Sweden's high level of union density continued to increase until about 1990; Brazil's unions gained a rise in density between 2000 and 2006, after a decline in the 1990s; some Scandinavian countries, and Belgium, where unions are intertwined with the welfare system, have limited their losses; but generally the picture is of decline through the neoliberal decades from the early 1980s.

Falling union density has come together with a falling blue-collar proportion in the workforce, but the two trends are not locked to each other. In some white-collar sectors, union density has held up, or even increased since the 1960s. In blue-collar sectors, union density, has generally declined; many of those sectors have been dramatically restructured, or have disappeared completely in some countries, as technologies and change more and more industrial enterprises gear to global rather than local supply chains and markets.

The bastions of trade-union organisation are now usually in the public services, notably education and health care. An important role in the trade-union movement for school teachers is not that new: as long ago as 1914-18 the teachers' union was the only union in France resilient enough to keep functioning continuously throughout World War 1. Health-care is a relatively new area for union strength.

In many other countries, again, union membership is ageing, and very low among young workers. Rates of industrial action, and the wage-share in value-added, have decreased world-wide.

The facts are grim. In response, we need analysis and understanding, not despair.

In the long view of capitalist development, the period between World War Two and the 1970s was an exception. The most basic cause of the retreat of union membership, though by no means the whole story, is a return to the capitalist norm.

World-market capitalist competition has become more intense. The system has become more subject to periodic crises, profits have become more unstable, capitalists have become more anxious to tighten control over workers and to reduce costs.

From the 1940s to the 1970s much of technological progress was the expansive rolling-out, within national terrains and often within stable corporate structures, of techniques accumulated in the 1930s and 40s, but stifled or sidelined by depression and war. Since then new waves of technology have rapidly restructured industries and supply chains on a global scale, and continue to do so.

The decline in manufacturing jobs in the older industrial countries is not mainly or mostly due to those same jobs being moved to other countries. The new manufacturing jobs, worldwide, have generally been new jobs using new technologies and new supply chains. And manufacturing jobs are decreasing in number in "newly industrialised countries" — certainly Brazil and Korea, and probably now (though the statistics are slippery) in China.

Manufacturing, is still a central sector, but the nature of jobs there is changing, and jobs described as "services" are becoming the majority everywhere. Although containerisation has cut jobs in ports, it has come with a big expansion of the broader logistics industry.

Fundamentally, unions have failed to be quick enough on their feet in response to the changes in the terrain on which they operate.

In Britain and some other countries, big defeats in class struggle in the 1980s pushed along the decline. But those defeats do not explain it all. Over its history the working class has, again and again, recovered from more severe defeats, even from defeats like the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871.

The capacity to recover from defeat is inbuilt in the condition of the working class within capitalism. However big capital's victories, it still has to recruit and concentrate new armies of workers, and in that process to give unions scope to rebuild.

In Britain, and some other countries, again, changes in industrial relations law have shifted the terrain. But those do not explain it all, either. Industrial relations law has changed little in many countries where union density has declined.

Unlike in previous eras of trade-union setbacks, over the recent decades there have been few attempts by governments to ban unions outright, or replace them by state agencies having the name "trade union" but none of the reality. In the era when the German labour movement established itself as the world's best-organised, before 1914, state employees were banned by law from joining the main unions (linked to the Social-Democratic Party, SPD), attending SPD meetings, or subscribing to SPD publications. Today, by contrast, in most countries unions are stronger in the public sector: governments have pushed down union density in their direct workforces less than private bosses have in theirs.

There have not even been many battles where private bosses have sought to de-recognise unions completely, rather than taming them or bypassing them by greenfield operations. In Britain, there have been some, but as one analyst writes, "instances of actual de-recognition... have in fact been limited. Examples are mostly concentrated in newspaper publishing and coastal shipping..."

And adverse laws can be changed. After 1900 British unions, though then weak and with the Labour Party only an infant junior partner of the Liberals, managed to get the Taff Vale Judgement (where a judge effectively changed the law, by making unions liable to repay the costs to bosses of industrial disputes) reversed within six years by political campaigning. In 1997 the British unions got a government formed by the Labour Party, in whose conferences they had a majority vote. And yet they did not press that government to reverse the multiple laws against trade-union action between 1979 and 1992; they contented themselves with some minor legal changes facilitating union recognition, the chief fruit of which was a number of "sweetheart deals" getting unions recognition in return for smothering workforce resistance, like Usdaw's deal in Tesco.

DEMANDS

Omissions in the 2017 Labour manifesto were telling. Labour now had a left-wing leadership which was keen to, and did, put union demands into its manifesto.

Yet somehow the manifesto proposed only repeal of the most recent Tory anti-union legislation, of 2016, and not repeal of the far more wide-ranging laws introduced between 1979 and 1992. Activists suspect that the union leaders did not ask for the wider repeal, or even advised against it. Being able to tell members that the law prohibits effective action is often a comfortable let-out for cautious union leaders.

In short, the continuation of legislation which restricts trade-union activity, and the failure to reverse the big industrial defeats which neoliberal regimes imposed in order to make their first decisive inroads, are as much effects of diminished union vitality as causes, or more so.

Leon Trotsky, as well as being a leader of the Russian revolution, had observed and worked closely with labour movements in many European countries and the USA. In 1938 he wrote the following, not in a casual article, but in a major document summarising his conclusions from decades of activity:

"The workers now more than ever before need mass organisations, principally trade unions. [Life refutes] the preachments of those ultra-left doctrinaires who have been teaching that trade unions have 'outlived their usefulness'.

"[Yet] trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20 to 25 percent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better paid layers. The more oppressed majority of the working class is drawn only episodically into the struggle, during a period of exceptional upsurges in the labour movement.

"As organisations expressive of the top layers of the proletariat, trade unions, as witnessed by all past historical experience [have] developed powerful tendencies toward compromise with the bourgeois-democratic regime".

There were some countries even then — Sweden and others, including Australia — where union density was above Trotsky's "20 to 25%" figure. Trotsky would have been aware of that: his point was that those were exceptions.

The much higher union densities in a number of better-off capitalist countries between the 1940s and the 1970s were also exceptions, historical exceptions, achieved on the basis of unprecedentedly rapid and (relatively) smooth expansion of capital, and union movements strongly committed to all-round compromise.

Karl Marx's words from *Capital* were relevant: Under the conditions of smooth expansion of capital, workers' "dependence upon capital takes on a form endurable or 'easy and liberal'... They can extend the circle of their enjoyments; can make some additions to their consumption-fund of clothes, furniture, etc., and can lay by small reserve funds of money. But just as little as better clothing, food, and treatment, and a larger peculium, do away with the exploitation of the slave, so little do they set aside that of the wage worker. A rise in the price of labour, as a consequence of accumulation of capital, only means, in fact, that the length and weight of the golden chain the wage worker has already forged for himself, allow of a relaxation of the tension of it". Unions prospered as experts in relaxing that tension. Governments and most big employers found that affordable.

Closer to the capitalist norm were the conditions which Vladimir Lenin wrote about in 1917: "the [German] Social-Democrats were able to achieve far more than in other countries in the way of 'utilising legality', and organised a larger proportion of the workers into a political party than anywhere else in the world.

"What is this largest proportion of politically conscious and active wage-slaves that has so far been recorded in capitalist society? One million members of the Social-Democratic Party — out of 15 million wage-workers! Three million organised in trade unions — out of 15 million [and a total population of 68 million]!...

"If we look more closely into the machinery of capitalist democracy, we see everywhere, in the 'petty'... details of the suffrage... in the technique of the representative institutions, in the actual obstacles to the right of assembly (public buildings are not for 'paupers'!), in the purely capitalist organisation of the daily press, etc., etc. — we see restriction after restriction upon democracy... In their sum total these restrictions exclude and squeeze out the poor from politics, from active participation in democracy".

The decline in union density over the last era is not a change of capitalism towards a regime impossibly hostile for unions, but a return to the capitalist norm, in an era more closely approximating "pure capitalism", worsened by failure by unions to respond to stormier, more difficult times after decades of relative ease.

The decline of union density in OECD countries (mostly older-industrialised countries) is not the whole picture. In many countries, in Eastern Europe, in Russia, in Latin America, in Spain and Portugal, where in the 1970s trade unions were repressed by military dictatorships or suppressed in favour of state agencies which were "trade unions" only in name, there are now real and autonomous, though usually weak and unmilitant, trade unions.

The working class has grown enormously world-wide, and in recent years has probably become for the first time the biggest social class in the world, outnumbering the peasantry. In China (and some other countries, notably Vietnam) where industry has grown rapidly, there are still no real legal trade unions, but the swelling numbers of strikes indicate that manifold proto-union forms of worker organisation must exist underground.

To get good figures for world-wide union membership is difficult, but today the International Trade Union Confederation claims to represent 181 million workers in 163 countries. Discount a lot for inflated returns, and that is still a large number. In 1945, the World Federation of Trade Unions claimed 60 million. That smaller figure was definitely inflated by including tens of millions from the USSR's official "trade unions", which were so much organs of the government and management that in 1967 Alexandr Shelepin was appointed to head the "trade unions" as a demotion and career shift after nine years of heading first the political police, the KGB, then the Central Committee de-

"democracy and solidarity" agenda

partment overseeing the KGB.

By comparison with what we have had in the past, the trade union movement is very far from being without resources, or facing impossibly hostile odds. The question is whether and how to mobilise the resources, and whether or how to try to beat the odds.

Dan Gallin, former general secretary of the International Union of Foodworkers, sums up the story: after 1945, "the trade unions... developed an over-reliance on the state. No longer was there any aspiration to represent an alternative society. Amidst the newfound peace and prosperity, the labour movement had disarmed ideologically and politically...

"Decades of complacency... diluted and trivialised its ideological and political heritage... Still powerful trade-union organisations were led, far too often, by blinkered and politically ignorant leaderships, geared to administering gains of earlier struggles rather than to organising and engaging in new struggles, generally unquestioning in their acceptance of social partnership...

"While the labour movement was asleep, the world changed dramatically... [with] new communications and transport technologies...

"The real crisis of the labour movement is a crisis of identity and perspective, and... this is the crisis we need to resolve in order to become capable of organising the world's working class... [We need] the vision of freedom, justice, and equality that inspired [the labour movement] at its origins and made it the greatest mass movement in history".

A short tour of history will help us put the facts into perspective.

MARX

When Karl Marx, in the 1840s, declared that trade unions and "combinations of workers" were central to the self-liberation of the working class, he was not repeating some generally-agreed truism, but arguing a case dismissed by the majority of the socialists of the time.

"In spite of both of them [i.e. both bourgeois ideologues, and socialists disdainful of unions], in spite of manuals and utopias, combination has not yet ceased for an instant to go forward and grow with the development and growth of modern industry... 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 the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages... In the struggle... this mass [of workers] becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself".

At the time there were scarcely trade unions anywhere except in Britain. And, there, in Britain, early efforts at mass trade-unionism like the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union of 1834 had collapsed quickly. The stable trade unions were, and until the late 1880s continued to be, fairly small societies of skilled workers — as much welfare agencies which helped their members find jobs, get help when unemployed or sick, or pay funeral expenses, as class-struggle bodies, and often narrow-minded and exclusionary towards "unskilled" workers. It took the insight of a thinker like Marx to see their future promise.

From the late 1880s to 1914, unions expanded seriously in Britain and in many other countries. Numbers were still small. Germany's labour movement, widely regarded as the world's best-organised, had only 2.5 million members in its main union confederation, in a population of 68 million, in 1914. Britain's trade unions were bigger, but still had only four million members, a density of 23%.

World War One brought a surge of union membership. Governments anxious to maximise war production with workforces reduced by military conscription were ready to allow or even help unions to expand, in return for wartime cooperation.

After the end of the war, as workers sickened by the slaughter and inspired by the example of the Russian Revolution rebelled, and governments and bosses came to think that trade-union concessions were for them a much lesser and more manageable evil than social revolution, unions grew further.

The main German union confederation, for example, was up to eight million members by 1920.

As immediate post-war ferment subsided, unemployment grew, and bosses regained confidence, unions were pushed back. Engineering bosses in Britain staged a two-month lock-out in March-June 1922. The German union confederation was down to 2.5 million members by 1932, and then was outlawed altogether in 1933, as Italian unions had been outlawed in 1924-6.

Elsewhere, in France and especially in the USA, where unions had previously been weak, union membership grew in the 1930s, but through hectic struggles, not through gradual processes of organic growth.

In World War Two, unions had already been banned in the Axis countries. Real trade unions had already been suppressed by Stalin in the USSR.

In Britain and the USA, though, the same process happened as in World War One: governments anxious to get war production, and unable to rely on the forces of capitalist market competition to promote discipline and productivity, allowed or helped trade-union membership to rise steeply.

As the war ended, the bosses' thought was, as an influential British Tory put it: "If you do not give the people social reform, they will give you social revolution". Trade unions were allowed, even encouraged, to organise in the countries of previously Nazi-occupied Europe and in Japan, where they had been crushed. In France, for example, unions gained numerous legal guarantees of recognition and places for their officials in the state social security and pension systems.

There was a backlash similar to that in the 1920s. In the USA, the anti-union Taft-Hartley law was passed in 1947; in the same year, the US occupiers helped the Japanese bosses beat down Japan's militant new unions. But, as capitalism entered a long period of fast and relatively smooth growth, the backlash was very much milder than in the 1920s.

The big capitalist corporations, enjoying stable profits and stable growth, considered the costs of dealing with unions — which of course sometimes included fighting harsh battles with them over particular wage-and-conditions demands — pretty much unavoidable, but entirely affordable. In France, even after a "soft" military coup in 1958 gave President De Gaulle the power to rewrite the constitution and substantially sideline parliament, unions were still able to grow with more-or-less favourable legal conditions.

The 1970s brought a new period of repeated, sometimes deep crises and of instability in profits. International capitalist competition, which had gradually increased over decades of falling trade barriers and falling freight costs, broke through to a much more intense level.

SURGE

The first result was a surge of working-class struggles across the world, which often at first won sizeable victories and in many countries led to new rises in union density.

But the stakes had been raised. The period from 1945 to the early 1970s had never been one that could continue forever, but an exceptional one, in which capital in the richer countries could expand fairly smoothly within a system of US hegemony, gradual freeing of trade and expansion of trade relative to output, and the gradual rolling-out of new technologies initiated in the 1930s but then at first stifled by collapsed world trade and by world war (cars, plastics, white goods, TVs).

There was even more talk about automation and new industrial revolutions in the 1950s and 60s than there is now, but in fact there were fewer drastic disappearances of old industries, emergences of new ones built on global supply chains, and top-to-bottom restructurings and re-sitings of continuing ones, than there have been since the 1970s.

Capitalist leaders responded more nimbly, more adroitly,

and more determinedly to the new conditions than union leaders did. The old relatively easy give-and-take was gone. Labour movements had two choices: to mobilise their accumulated strength to end capitalism and deploy the new technologies on lines of socialism and workers' control, or to muddle through with little perspective beyond damage-limitation. Since the combative rank-and-file battles of the 1970s had nowhere generated political forces strong enough to displace the old, uncombative leaders of the labour movements, they went for the second, and worse, choice.

Trying to turn the clock back is no answer. The labour movement cannot force capitalist governments to return to walled-off economies and old technologies, any more than we can bring back the handloom-weaving workforce of early 19th-century Chartist days. And if we could, if we were strong enough, then we wouldn't want to: we would want a socialised economy, adapting technologies to social goals under democratic workers' control, over a territory covering many present-day states. Socialism cannot be built in one country.

Labour movements can win reforms in countries with high technology and open to the world market. The Scandinavian economies still have very high union densities and good welfare provision, and yet are considered by the high-capitalist World Economic Forum to be among the most "competitive" in the world, because they have high levels of technical expertise and good infrastructure. Brazil's union density was pushed up, and living standards for its poorest people were raised steeply, by reforms introduced by the Workers' Party government after 2002. Despite all the shortcomings of the Socialist Party administrations in Chile, they have introduced laws to increase trade-union rights, and union density has risen modestly.

Nor have economic changes produced sectors impossible to organise. By the 1970s the car industry was seen as a bastion of union strength in many countries. But in their first decades the car factories were seen as places "impossible to organise". Only after long and sometimes bloody battles did Ford in the USA recognise unions in 1941. In the USA,

Unions were slow to respond to the challenges of "containerisation", but technological change does not equal weak organisation

again, the chief activity of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in its heyday before 1914 was organising precarious, insecure, short-contract workers thought "impossible to organise".

Changes in the workforce mean that unions have to be quick on our feet, and if we limit ourselves to conserving membership in "traditional" sectors then we will decline. But the changes do not necessarily make new sectors harder to organise than old ones. The spread of tightly-timed global supply chains gives more groups of workers industrial power by creating "pinch points" in those chains.

Unionists often say that the expansion of consumer credit has made union organising harder, because many workers, even on high wages, spend up to their credit-card limits, and box themselves into being narrowly focused on maximising wages to service their debts. There are surely some like that. But figures from the USA show a heavy concentration of maxed-out credit-card holders among students, not among better-paid workers. When workers say they "can't" take industrial action because "they can't afford it", very often they are giving what they think sounds like a respectable reason, but the real reason is that they just don't want to. If that response is common, it is an effect of union weakness, not an original cause of it.

In some ways the expansion of consumer credit eases industrial action. Urging his fellow-employers to support the Dublin lock-out of 1913, to break the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, William Martin Murphy declared: "Every one of the shareholders will have three meals a day... I don't know if the men who go out can count on this". And indeed, even after transporting many of their children to England to be cared for in trade unionists' families there, the Dublin workers were starved into defeat. In the longest strike or lock-out today, workers have many ways to avoid starving, and defer debt until later.

Unionists also say that young workers are reluctant to join unions, and fail to understand union culture. Unionisation rates are lower among young workers. Yet surveys in the USA, in the UK, and in Ireland have shown more favourable attitudes to unions among 18-24 year olds than older people. In the British general election of June 2017, in which Labour was closely associated with unions and pro-union attitudes, 18-29 year olds voted almost two-thirds for Labour and scarcely 20% for the Tories, while people over 60 voted over 60% Tory and scarcely 20% Labour. Young people join unions less because most of them have their first jobs in areas like fast-food, in which unions have little presence and mostly make little effort. Their jobs are often short-term. Even if young workers are pro-union, they are less likely to join unions than workers who expect to be in their jobs for a long time, and who find other unionists in their workplaces when they start.

Trade unions can roll along, reproducing themselves, in stable industrial environments, without much political input. The history of the movement, though, tells us that most young trade-union activists start off being young activists of the political left before they become trade-union figures.

Even in the Britain's conservative New Model Unions of the 1850s and 1860s, leading people like George Odger and Robert Applegarth had been Chartists before they became trade-union figures. All the leading figures of the French CGT of 1895-1914, avowedly syndicalist and anti-political, had been political activists in one or another of France's small socialist parties of the time before they became trade unionists (the one exception, Emile Pouget, had been an organised anarchist). Samuel Gompers, the father of US "business unionism", was inducted into labour-movement activism by Karl Laurrell, a former leading member of the First International, and learned German as a young man in order to be able to read socialist pamphlets.

A new generation of young workers will be organised into trade unions, not just by older trade unionists doing steady work in the areas where they are already organised, but by a big-enough core of new young people being inspired and educated as social activists, and taking their inspiration and education into their workplaces to organise other young people round them.

CRITICAL

A critical determinant of recent decades was that the crises of the 1970s hit labour movements which, in Dan Gallin's words quoted above, had "gone to sleep" for two decades.

Everywhere social democratic parties, which had had an influx of new young members after 1945, saw their memberships decline and age, and their ambitions fade.

The Communist Parties were major factors in the unions in many old industrial countries. But they too brought a culture of decline and diminished aspirations into the crises of the 1970s. By 1970, no-one could simply be a naive admirer of the USSR. Thinking like that of the British CP journalist Alison Macleod was widespread in at least part of the minds of many CP members: "We knew about it [the crimes of Stalinism] and we did not care. We had, by an act of will, decided not to care... [we] had insisted on being lied to". Or like that of the former British CPer Doris Lessing: "It was the most sensitive, compassionate, socially-concerned people who became Communists... These decent, kind people supported the worst, the most brutal tyranny of our time".

The roots of the decline of trade unionism since the 1970s were planted long before the 1970s, in the period when the trade unions were a powerful "estate of the realm", confident and even complacent about their future.

As Dan Gallin puts it:"The unions concentrated on their presumed 'core business' — collective bargaining with 'social partners' — the [labour-based] parties concentrated on elections, and the movement lost its roots in society". The "civil society of labour... vanished".

One index is the decline of the working-class press. From 1912 to 1964, the British labour movement had a daily newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, from 1922 owned by the TUC. In 1933 it had the biggest circulation of any newspaper in the world. In 1964, long before neoliberalism, in a period when the unions were confident about their influence and strength, the paper was sold off, and became *The Sun*, under which name it is notorious today as the vilest of the capitalist press.

The German SPD's daily *Vorwärts* — once a source of light for millions of workers — was restarted after 1945 as only a weekly. In 1989, before the decline in union density, which started in Germany only in the 1990s, the SPD reduced it to an SPD members' bulletin, which now appears only six times a year. The French Socialist Party's *Le Populaire* had the biggest circulation in the country, after the CP's *L'Humanité*, in 1944-6: it declined to a 27,000-circulation one-sheet bulletin by 1954, and was abandoned in 1970, at a time when the labour movement was expanding fast. *L'Humanité* itself declined from 600,000 circulation in 1945-6 to 170,000 in 1954.

Unions still have union journals, and now they have websites. But the best that can be said of the best of them is that they enable union activists to search for information about conferences, campaigns, and so on without difficulty. None of them thinks of seeking a readership outside union members.

The crises of the 1970s themselves galvanised thousands of new young activists. Yet the new groups of young activists were just not strong enough to make a decisive change in the direction of the labour movement, or even to establish a continuing political presence strong enough to generate an increasing flow of sparky new organisers for the movement. With all the political weaknesses of the new left-wing currents (the heritage of ideas on which they could draw had been heavily "overgrown" in the previous decades), they could not break through the accumulated tangle of "overgrowth", both ideological and organisational, on the movement. Or not quickly enough: the bosses were moving faster.

Internationally, unions were and are slow to respond to capital becoming more and more transnational. There are now some dozens of "global framework agreements" between global union alliances and transnational corporations. But work for such agreements started very late — the first was in 1988, the second in 1995 — and many of them commit the corporation to no more than respecting ILO conventions. The International Trade Union Confederation runs no international campaigns, but is focused instead on "advocacy within the major global institutions".

It was not that economic shifts in the world market, from the 1980s, made it impossible to fight; rather, the inability to fight of the union leaders let those economic shifts be carried through on capitalist terms, thus further weakening the unions.

From about 1999 through the first years of the 21st century, there was a new wave of radical activism among young people, represented in the "global justice" movement which gathered at protests at meetings of the IMF, WTO, etc., the World Social Forums and in organising networks like Students Against Sweatshops in the USA, No Sweat in Britain, ATTAC in France and other countries; the protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and climate activism.

That those youth mobilisations eventually ebbed is no surprise. The labour movement has always, among all the varied "social movements" which arise in capitalist societies, been unique in its permanence and durability, which is why, despite all the setbacks of the last decades, it remains much more potent than most of its leaders think. The surprise is that the wave of mobilisations had so little carry-forward in bringing new workplace activists into the labour movement.

Part of it must have been the hesitant condition of the political left. After 1989-91 the Communist Parties, already low on morale and numbers, collapsed almost everywhere. Whatever else about them, they had recruited and trained young people to become union activists: now the presence of "CP"-minded people in the unions became almost entirely one of top leaders, keen to keep their positions, but lacking any drive to draw in and educate new young people.

Those Communist Parties, or the states they promoted as

models of "socialism", or a selection from those states (Cuba though not the USSR, for example), had heavily shaped and influenced the left (including left wings in social democracy, and including many of the most dissident groups) for decades. The political poisons which seeped out from them still infect the terrain of the left. Excavating and rebuilding healthy ground takes time. The new young activists hesitated to call themselves "socialists", instead using slogans like "another world is possible" or "smash capitalism and replace it with something nicer".

And part of it was many of the young activists being siphoned off into NGOs and into full-time union organiser jobs.

There is no reason to idealise the old type of full-time union official who came up from the shop floor. To become a union official, for them, was often a way of moving from dirty, noisy, physically-strenuous jobs to wearing a suit, working easy hours in a quiet and clean office, mixing in a friendly way with managers, and having an income and a way of life similar to theirs. As one British trade-unionist critic put it over a century ago, "they at any rate in their own persons achieved the harmony of the classes".

The new young organisers straight, or almost straight, from university may well start off better. They have chosen to be union organisers when they could get easier and better-paid jobs. However, the principle under which they are employed is that they are accountable to the top union leaders, not to the members; and they are shifted from one organising task to another by the leaders, so they do not develop even informal accountability to any particular group of workers. If they make a "career" in the union movement — and after a while they may have little choice but that, or NGO jobs, or think-tanks, or becoming MPs, since few employers will like a resumé filled with union-organiser work — then they must do so by pleasing the top leaders, and adapting to the prevailing union-leadership culture. And what will the former radical youngsters be like after decades in that "career"?

Since the 1990s, many union leaders have announced a new "organising agenda", which they say is a feistier response to neoliberalism than the previous "service agenda" which "sold" union membership to workers as a portal for individual services, cheap insurance, legal advice, and so on. The results have been poor, though, and closer inspection indicates that the problem lies not in any invincibility of neoliberalism, but in the weaknesses of the union approach.

Michael Crosby is a former Australian union leader who became director of the Australian Council of Trade Unions Organising Centre; then went to work for SEIU, the US union which has most pushed the "organising agenda"; then to the "European Organising Centre" set up by the "Change to Win" unions in the USA; and finally returned to Australia to be president of the United Voice union. He wrote the textbook for the "organising agenda": *Power at work: Rebuilding the Australian union movement* (2005).

Crosby is candid about his "organising agenda" as being driven, top-down, by the top leaders of unions. The leaders should start by increasing union dues; merging union organisations to get economies of scale in administration and servicing; and thus freeing resources to employ an army of "external" organisers who will "think about nothing else other than building the union's power in non-member workplaces".

In approaching non-union workplaces, those organisers should be cunning and tenacious. Starting with one or two contacts — maybe workers who were union members elsewhere, and have kept up their union membership on transferring to the new workplace — they should assemble a list of names and addresses of workers, and systematically visit them at home.

Once they have sufficient numbers from home visits, they should construct a "map" of the workplace, enabling them to organise and monitor a process of spreading the union message from one worker to another in each section, on each shift, and to key "opinion-formers" among the workers.

ACTIVITY

Collective union activity in the workplace should generally start with low-key actions focused on low-key demands winnable from even the nastiest employers. Bit by bit they should build up to winning union recognition.

And — here comes the crux — once the union is recognised, it should ease off the pressure, and shift organisers to new areas. The union must not "abuse its agreement to act cooperatively by pursuing ongoing industrial action to settle disputes…" "The union office… will not normally be assessing grievances, looking for opportunities to organise and agitate workers to build power".

The aim is "to persuade employers that it is in their commercial self-interest to allow their employees to make a rational judgement about collective representation free of the intimidatory behaviour advocated by Big Business's political wing… [to] reach a mutually beneficial accommodation with employers".

Dismissing a class-struggle alternative by caricaturing it, Crosby states: "We cannot win… if we are suggesting that the endpoint of organising is the construction of a workers' soviet which will deliver edicts to management backed up by ongoing collective action… [And] workers won't tolerate a state of permanent revolution…"

Crosby wants union activists in the workplaces, but with a carefully controlled level of activism. He advises full-time union officials, when "picking" delegates, to avoid "the loudest", "delegates… behaving badly, table-thumping, unreasonable demands, a refusal to be constructive in sorting out workplace problems". His complaint is not about "loudmouths" who may speak too long and too loud, shutting out other members. And not about "loudmouths" who get themselves discredited both with workers and with bosses by making promises and threats which they don't deliver on. No, Crosby bases this advice on complaints from managers who, he assures us, "were not anti-union", but had been put off by "loudmouth" union delegates. In other words, he advises full-time union officials not to "pick" delegates who cause fear and anxiety to managers by being tough and stubborn.

Unions, says Crosby, should not fight "unfair dismissal" cases where the member's case is too shaky. Doing so uses resources which should instead be directed to organising new sites. Once a workplace has been organised, unions should look for alternative ways for "workplace leaders" to "build the collective consciousness of the workers". He suggests "organising a blood-bank collection drive… [or] activities designed to build solidarity with workers in other countries". Another option is to mobilise union activists to "green" workplaces by switching off unnecessary lights, economising on use of paper, turning up air-conditioning temperatures, etc.

His recommendations on unions' political activity explicitly dismiss the idea of mobilising more union activists to use the positions to which unions are entitled in the Australian Labor Party. Instead, unions should have their leaders use the influence which the union's "power", demonstrated in rallies and protests, gives them when lobbying politicians.

He emphasises education within the unions, but sees it as top-down. "The vast bulk of our... members haven't got a clue about what is happening in their society", so it falls to Crosby and his pals to give them that "clue".

"In the vast majority of unions", writes Crosby, "the leader has the ability to determine the future of every staff member there". His call is not to change that hierarchy but to use it more efficiently. He recommends less election of union officials, and stricter "performance management" of the officials by the union's top leaders. One of his arguments against elected officials are likely to be tied to the "constituency" of workers who elected them, and thus less manoeuvrable for purposes of organising new areas.

With some caricature, a Crosby-model union can be described as having five parts:

- a membership paying higher dues;
- a corps of workplace activists settled in "mutually beneficial accommodation with employers" but meanwhile keeping busy by organising among workers for blood donations, switching off unnecessary lights, etc.;
- one corps of full-time officials sitting in a call-centre dealing with members' individual grievances as efficiently as possible;
- another corps of full-time officials who are geared to "think about nothing" but recruitment in fresh workplaces, whose success is measured in new-member numbers regardless of durability or organisation, and who are constantly moved on from area to area so that they have no long-term accountability (even informal) to organised workers; and
- a union leader who can "determine the future of every staff member" and will get rid of the laggards and misfits among the officials.

It is a caricature because Crosby concedes that some bosses require not only one-off, but also repeated, pressure to nudge them into "mutually beneficial accommodation", and that unions must offer some democracy. But Crosby does want to push unions as far towards the caricature model as possible.

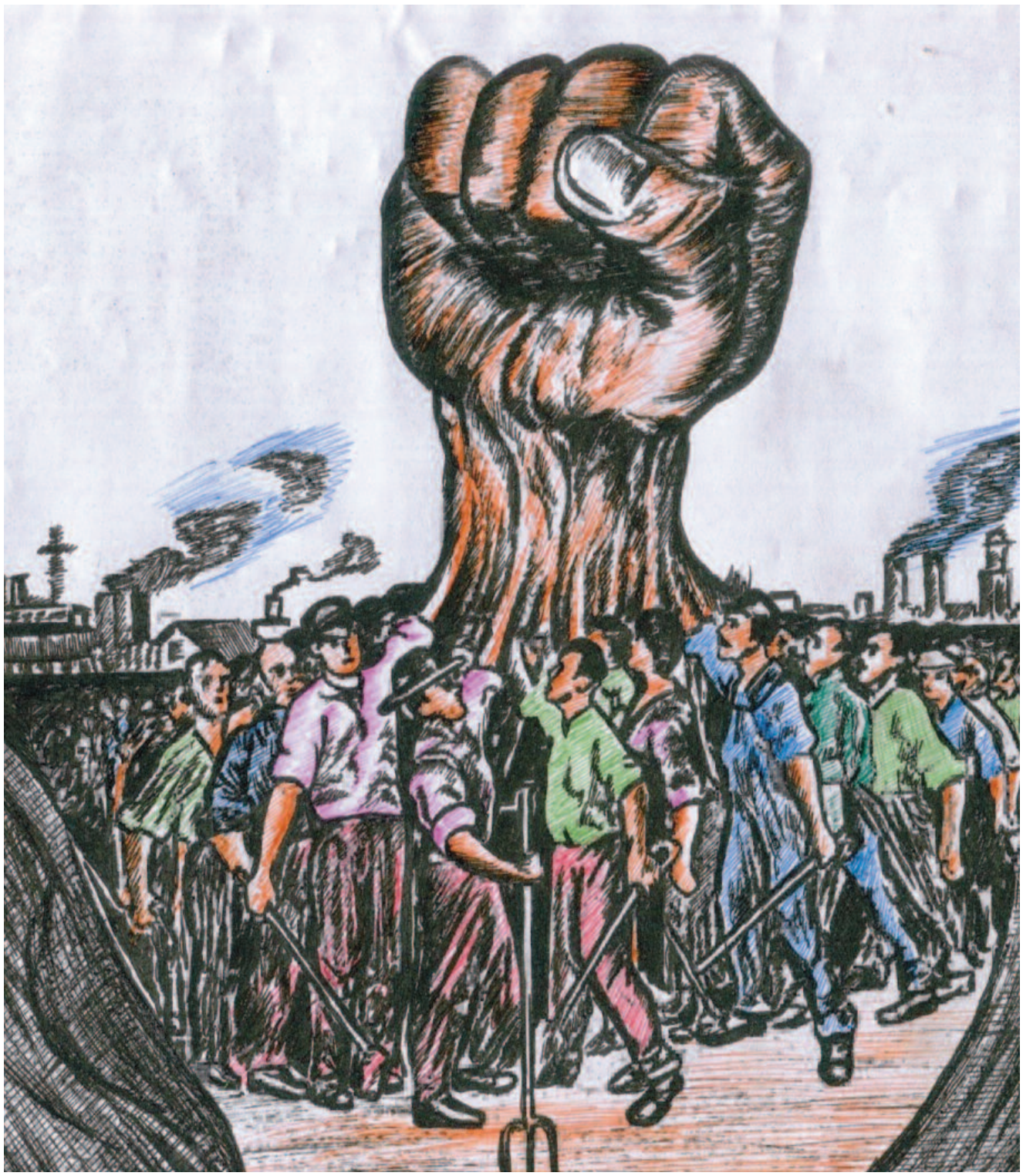
Missing from Crosby's vision is the idea of unions organising sustained, militant cross-industry campaigns for positive demands, responsive to and accountable to rank-and-file workers. But that is the core of what's needed now. Such a strategy would include unions employing full-time organisers, but in very different terms.

INDUSTRIAL

Historically, the most active trade unionists have generally supported union mergers, especially mergers which bring all grades of workers in a particular industry into one union. However, many of the mergers of recent decades lack industrial logic.

They are driven by "business" calculations. Small unions seek a bigger one to merge into, so as to save their officials' jobs; big unions seek small unions to annex, so they can offset membership decline without having to go out and organise new areas. The result, as the US labour writer Kim Moody has pointed out, is organisations with large hierarchies of officials and memberships scattered over many different industries. Each particular industrial group within the membership has much less weight relative to the bureaucracy than it would have in an industrial union, and when it has a grievance against the bureaucracy will find it difficult to gain support from members in other industries, for whom the first industry's issues are distant or even incomprehensible.

Dan Gallin puts it well: in the trade union movement, the problem of bureaucracy is more hurtful than elsewhere because the movement's "administration, its own civil service if you wish, must represent people who have no other



source of power than their organisation. If this organisation ceases to be responsive to their needs, they lose everything...

"Democracy is not a state of being, it is an activity, it is in fact hard work, and it is a constant work in progress... That is why it is the responsibility of every progressive and democratic trade union leadership to maintain constitutional and practical conditions in which membership participation and control is ensured and welcomed, without making conditions of participation too onerous for ordinary members".

Union leaders need "politics based on the values that were at the origins of the labour movement and that made it great: solidarity, selflessness, respect for people, a sense of honour, and the modesty that comes with the awareness of being a soldier in the service of a great cause, a contempt for self-promotion".

It is probable that, in the current phase of capitalism, union densities will never be pushed back up to their rates in the era of 1950s and 1960s social consensus. It is certain that union strength can be rebuilt.

To regain strength, the unions need, not Crosby's "organising agenda", but a "democracy and solidarity" agenda.

One model for us is the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of its heyday, before 1914. The IWW organised thousands of workers disdained by the main union leaders of the time as "unorganisable", by this approach:

- industrial unionism (as against craft unionism)
- energetic and colourful class-struggle education, propaganda, and agitation, in "civil society" as well as in workplaces, through IWW newspapers, songbooks, free-speech fights, and so on
- low membership fees
- low or no initiation fees
- concentrated, high-intensity waves of organising
- addressing workers in new areas with a set of demands to be won by the union once organised (developed after a lot of preliminary discussion with workers in those areas) rather than with general agitation about the advantages of having a union in the abstract; following up the recruiting drive with immediate preparation for action on those demands
- organising areas by getting volunteers to go in and take jobs in those areas, then talk union on the job
- helping new recruits to elect their own job delegates and committees of delegates, and to take control of their own organisation
- trying always to make industrial action short, sharp, and decisive. If a dispute dragged on regardless — constantly and imaginatively trying new active tactics. Never leaving the workers passive
- an open, democratic approach, with disputes always run by strike committees elected from the workers and regularly reporting back.

In terms of trade-union tactics, the IWW's decisive mistake was its "principle" of never signing agreements with the bosses. You could join the IWW to be a revolutionary activist, or to organise a more-or-less immediate strike in your workplace — but not for routine trade-union activity. Thus the IWW found it hard to consolidate a mass membership and a permanent on-the-job organisation anywhere (except on the Philadelphia waterfront, where it did sign agreements).

That false principle can be rejected while still adopting the IWW's positive methods.

Unite NZ: Organising the unorganised

In 2008 Mike Treen, a leader of the Unite union in New Zealand, came to Britain and spoke at meetings organised by the No Sweat campaign against sweatshop labour about how Unite had started.

In 2005-6, over those two years, there was a campaign to re-unionise the fast food sector as well as call centres, hotels, casinos and similar industries.

At the end of that campaign we had union-negotiated collective employment agreements at all of the big fast food chains: McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, Starbucks, Wendy's and some smaller ones.

We had recruited two to three thousand fast food workers. And we had organised a major political campaign associated with the key demand for $12 [about £5] an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates for 16 and 17 year olds countrywide. From beginning of this year we will have a $12 an hour minimum wage and the abolition of youth rates in fast food. Winning those key demands was a big issue in New Zealand's broader political and industrial news.

Where did it all start? It was a very long way from here. In the early 1990s, the New Zealand labour movement went through a deep recession, lasting five or six years. During this period, industrial activity declined to the lowest point since records began. Union membership went from 49% of the workforce to 22%.

Industrial laws were adopted that made it very difficult for unions to organise: outlawed strikes outside the negotiating period, outlawed political strikes, outlawed solidarity strikes. It made it very difficult to access workplaces to recruit etc. It was illegal to organise industrial action for a multi-employer collective agreement.

When the law was brought in every single worker was put onto an individual agreement that was the same as their previous collective agreement, but in order for the union to be able to continue to negotiate on your behalf you had to sign an individual authorisation. It was very difficult for some unions to manage that. Many were eliminated overnight.

BUREAUCRACY

The central bureaucracy of the union movement capitulated completely to these changes and refused to organise broader industrial struggle, let alone a general strike, despite the fact that there was overwhelming sentiment for such a struggle and a general strike. Motions calling for it in workplaces were crushed by the bureaucracy.

The impact of the recession and the new law was intensified by the demoralising effect of this failure to resist. From that time real wages were under sustained attack. In New Zealand real wages, hourly rates, for unskilled workers declined by 25%. Real incomes for the people we represent declined by 30% or 40%.

All of the legal wage protections which stipulated overtime rates, Sunday rates and so on, went. Minimum conditions were now very limited — three weeks holiday, five days sick leave, that was about it, especially in areas were the workers were more vulnerable. The unions had no strength. Everything else had to be negotiated again. It was a stunning assault on working people.

Officially unemployment was 10% (although in real terms higher). Official unemployment for Maoris (who make up 14% of the population) was 30%, again higher in real terms. Working-class communities in south Auckland were devastated.

The free trade policies adopted by both Labour and the Tories [the New Zealand National Party] led to massive factory closures. The entire car industry was eliminated, textile industries were closed. Other industries with traditionally strong union organisation, like the meat industry, were restructured and thousands lost their jobs. There used to be four meat plants with one or two thousand workers each. There is now one plant.

Union bargaining became concession bargaining only. Over 15 years there was no attempt or struggle to maintain levels of income or organisation. In so far as you had a collective agreement, it was how much below inflation your settlement was going to be. It was accepted that it was

going to be below inflation. There were exceptions, but in general that was it, especially in the private sector.

In the private sector levels of unionisation went down to 9%. In other countries union rates went down, but collective bargaining coverage remained very high (in Australia for example). In New Zealand that wasn't the case at all.

Concession bargaining remained the norm until 2005. In that year things began to change. Even the more conservative unions, for instance the engineering and manufacturing union, were calling for 5% when inflation was running at 3%. This was a radical change. But it happened far too late.

From the mid-1990s there was a sustained economic recovery. It came after a decade of rising employment. Unemployment levels are down to 3.4% of the workforce, one of the lowest in the OECD. From 1996 the union movement should have been reorganising and rebuilding in the private sector. Unemployment was no longer the terror it had been prior to 1996.

In 1999 a Labour-Alliance [the Alliance Party was a leftish split from Labour] government changed the law on union rights. Union organisers regained access to workplaces. The unions now had the right to pursue multi-employer collective agreements through industrial action. Political and solidarity actions are still outlawed, and you can only take action in the bargaining period. But there are few other limitations. You don't have to give notice to employers or ballot for example. In 2000, replacing striking workers with outside scabs was also outlawed. However, there was still voluntary unionism, there was a free market in unions and the unions still competed for each others' members.

Left activists, in the Alliance Party, were bewildered by the failure of the unions to take advantage of this new law. If someone rang up a union for help, it wasn't a recruiting opportunity. They would refuse to talk to you. If you weren't a paying member of the union you had no rights to any support. The loss of confidence in organising workers for struggle, the cynicism involved, was total. However, more struggles began to happen in the mid- 2000s, as some unions began to raise their sights.

As a consequence of the implosion of the Alliance Party [over sending troops to Afghanistan, which the left opposed] some of us were liberated from the parliamentary framework; we were able to reorient, to help to organise the people we'd claimed to be the political representatives of. We needed to re-earn the right to speak for working people. In the 2002 election the vote for the Alliance Party (now two organisations) collapsed.

Many of us still wanted to be part of a political anti-capitalist project, but we felt we had to re-earn the right to do that. One way we can do that is by seriously engaging in struggles to advance the interests of workers, through political and industrial campaigning. In some cases that involved getting jobs with existing unions.

In my and Matt McCarten's case there was another job we wanted to do — to organise the working poor, to re-unionist the precarious. We decided to form a new union.

In the end we didn't have to do that because a little union called Unite existed, with less than a hundred members, run in a voluntary capacity by Alliance Party union officials, with a broad membership clause. We were given the mandate to do an organising campaign in Auckland and an initial donation of $500.

We had a gut feeling and confidence that we could do this. We did not believe young people wouldn't join a union if they were asked and we had the right now under the new law to ask them.They were on the minimum wage, and with minimal unemployment there was not much to lose even if you did stick your neck out. It would always be possible to get another job with no rights.

Surveys also said that the main reason people don't join unions everywhere in the world is that nobody asks them. That statistic applies to young people as much as anyone else.

We had no plan B. This was not play acting. We borrowed, begged, stole money to do this. We weren't new to this, of course. Matt had been a union organiser and leader of the hotel workers' union, leading a struggle to democratise it, before he became President of the Alliance Party. When Matt said he was going to do something, people took note. They gave or lent us the money we needed.

In Unite, we faced no encumbrances. No-one telling us they knew better.

No one telling us about the "organising model". I had never heard about the "organising model" until we started doing this. We were told off for not following the model that had been so successful in the previous decade in organising no one at all! It was almost like a religious mantra with some unions.

Our premise was to have a public political campaign, and that we were going to throw everything possible at the organising effort. We had three or four paid organisers, on the minimum wage. That's all. All the rest was done by volunteers.

These workers had nothing to lose. But in order to fight, they had to believe you were going to fight with them, you weren't going to be there one week and gone the next week, you were going to come back. If they were victimised you were going to protect them. If you could show that militancy, people would rise to the occasion.

We tested it out in a couple of places, and as we had no bureaucracy involved, we could change our minds, switching things around if they didn't work.

MEMBERSHIP

We had a membership form which we copied off another union with all the usual personal details. One day one of our organisers, a hotel worker and volunteer, went to one of the nice hotels in Auckland to speak to the housekeepers and came back with a notebook full of names and addresses of people interested in joining the union, 60 names. We thought "if only she'd taken some membership forms."

Then we thought, hang on, all the information we want is name and address, phone and email. So our membership form became like a petition, with half dozen names per sheet. The process of signing up became more collective.

We made our fees simple. Our fees were 1% of earnings up to a maximum. We had to give people something before they started to pay. We told them we would deliver the company to the negotiating table. You don't have to pay the fees until we've got them to sit down with your representatives.

We hand over the memberships at that point. Everything is a collective process and there is no chance of victimisation. What we achieve at the negotiation is up to you we said. That depends on how many members you have, how willing you are to fight, what sort of struggle you want to organise.

A lot of people hadn't seen a union before, they didn't know what a union was. Our message was that you can't negotiate individually, you can only do it as part of a collective.

The trial in two places, two cinema complexes, was a great success. It was a very young, very casualised workforce. We signed up around 300 workers, which was pretty much everyone.

We discovered the big issues were ones involving personal dignity. These kids were given two free tickets each week, but they were taken off you for every petty infraction. If you were five minutes late, if you had a sick day, looked the wrong way at the manager, you lost your "comps". The main issue was having the tickets as a right.

We also got an extra five minutes on the paid break in the shift inserted into the contract, so that people could actually have a cup of tea, or a cigarette, or whatever. This was the first time a paid break had actually been negotiated in New Zealand for a very long time.

We also found that we could sign people up very quickly. That gave us confidence to move on.

We were never going to be able to organise trench warfare in these industries, pull people out for long periods of time. But we were going to be able to push employers into signing agreements.

We went after the brands with a public, political campaign, to humiliate them.

In May 2005 we launched a recruitment drive in against Restaurant Brands, who run Starbucks, Pizza Hut and KFC in New Zealand. They were the biggest. They had 7,000 employees, the biggest employer of young people in the country. We signed up about 1,000 members in Auckland.

We had little strikes, for a couple of hours each, in different stores, moving from store to store. This helped build confidence. But it wasn't enough. So then we did marches in Auckland, a Town Hall meeting with a broad range of speakers, a big concert in the park. But none of this was enough.

Then a group of high school students came to us and said they wanted to organise a strike of their own. They had been inspired by this campaign (and many of them worked in the stores). They wanted twenty buses, so we hired twenty buses. They filled them! The police tried to stop them marching, but they streamed through the centre of town, stopping, sitting down and screaming outside every fast food outlet. A few days later the company called us and said they wanted to talk.

We got a deal. Security of hours, a youth rate that was 90% of the adult rate, minimum length of shifts, union rights. It was only a matter of time before we knocked over McDonalds. They fought it. They gave a pay rise to all the non-union staff, they threatened to sue workers who went on strike, they threatened to sue us; but we won. The very last was Burger King.

What was proved conclusively was that young workers will fight if they think they have a chance of winning.

During the campaign there were lots of texts and email messages going out. We did mass texting and emailing to let people know what was going on. We should have a regular electronic newsletter, that's on our agenda. Even when we do our stop-work meetings, at Sky City for example, we will do a mass text to everybody. We use it whenever we have an event.

How will we keep up the membership? We have an absolute insistence on routine visits to all of the sites. We have a monthly newspaper, which gets out to all of the sites. We also have a constant process of trying to identify delegates and get them to our regular delegates' conference. They have a role in maintaining the organisation on their site. We can keep up membership through developing a delegate structure.

Getting the supervisors in is very important. They are the people that carry the experience to pass on to new people. We are careful about formulating demands in contract negotiations that relate to that group, and each time we've negotiated we've managed to win improvements. We've not had to have strikes in this round, mostly, though there have been a few in the picture theatres.

Generally the employers know we could cause them quite a bit of difficulty if they don't negotiate seriously. So delegates are pretty proud of the union and make sure people join the union.

We have mostly kept up the membership, despite the huge turnover, so we must be doing some things right.

We are now looking at ways to get the minimum wage up to something like $15 an hour (which is almost two thirds of the average wage). If we can do that for some groups of workers, it will help win it more generally. The next big thing is to raise the bar of the minimum wage. We need to develop a pubic campaign around that.

The other thing is fluctuating hours. Hours are more secure now, but not good enough; the companies are still are still not obliged to offer regular hours. There is still lots to be done.

Unions as centres of organisation

From Hal Draper's book *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*

The historical problem in the socialist movement [before Marx] was seeing the positive side of trade-unionism; there was never any lack of denunciation of the limitations, deficiencies, and faults of trade unions. The socialist orthodoxy that Marx overturned leaned exclusively on the latter.

[Marx, by contrast, argued] that "the working people, in the management of their colossal Trade Societies" also prove themselves "fit for administrative and political work". This applies not only to the training of union officials — who sometimes become fit only to administer a labour market — but, in a larger sense, to the growth in organisational and administrative know-how that permeates far down into the ranks of a union with an actively participating membership.

Marx took care to point out to the Lassallean socialists... that:

"Combinations, together with the 'Trade Unions' growing out of them, are of the utmost importance not only as a means of organisation of the working class for struggle against the bourgeoisie — this importance being shown by the fact, inter alia, that even the workers in the United States cannot do without them despite voting rights and the republic — but in addition, in Prussia and Germany generally, the right to organise is a breach in police rule and bureaucratism ... in short, it [the right to organise] is a measure to make 'subjects' come of age..."

In a draft resolution on "Trade Unions — Their Past, Present and Future" which Marx drew up for the 1866 congress of the [First] International, he wrote:

"Their past: Capital is concentrated social force, while the workman has only to dispose of his working force [labour power]. The contract between capital and labour can therefore never be struck on equitable terms, equitable even in the sense of a society which places the ownership of the material means of life and labour on one side and the vital productive energies on the opposite side. The only social power of the workmen is their number. The force of numbers, however, is broken by disunion. The disunion of the workmen is created and perpetuated by their unavoidable competition amongst themselves.

Trade Unions originally sprung up from the spontaneous attempts of workmen at removing or at least checking that competition, in order to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. The immediate object of Trade Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediencies for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity of the Trade Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalised by the formation and the combination of Trade Unions throughout all countries.

On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trade Unions were forming centres of organisation of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trade Unions are required for the guerilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as organised agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule.

Their present: Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trade Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements. Of late, however, they seem to awaken to some sense of their great historical mission...

THEIR FUTURE

Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation.

They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions...."

The kind of trade-unionism that Marx opposed had been strongly enough criticised in the International resolution of 1866... Business unionism is an apt description.

Business unionism needed little theory; bourgeois political economy provided more than enough for its purposes. It existed entirely within the confine of the ruling ideas of the ruling class. As a bourgeois enterprise, it took on the same shortsighted, blinkered concentration on considerations of immediate advantage that historically distinguished its masters.

One of the self-defeating forms of business unionism was the guildlike job trust. Many unions were shackled not only by bourgeois traditions but also by "workingmen's traditions, inherited from their first tentative efforts at independent action, such as the exclusion, from ever so many old Trade Unions, of all applicants who have not gone through a regular apprenticeship; which means the breeding, by every such union, of its own blacklegs [scabs]". "Then the dockers are raising an outcry against the immigration of foreign paupers (Russian Jews)".

"In a country with such an old political and labour movement there is always a colossal heap of traditionally transmitted rubbish which has to be got rid of by degrees. There are the prejudices of the skilled unions... the petty jealousies of the various trades, which become accentuated in the hands and heads of leaders into outright hostility and battles behind the scenes; there are the clashing ambitions and intrigues of the leaders (and so on]..."

"The fools want to reform society to suit themselves but not to reform themselves to suit the development of society. They cling to their traditional superstition, which does them nothing but harm, instead of getting quit of the rubbish and thus doubling their numbers and their power and really becoming again what at present they daily become less — associations of all the workers in a trade against the capitalists. This, I think, will explain many things to you in the behaviour of these privileged workers".

Later, at the time of the New Unionism movement in Britain, Engels wrote: "These new Trade Unions of unskilled men and women are totally different from the old organisations of the working-class aristocracy and cannot fall into the same conservative ways; they are too poor, too shaky and too much composed of unstable elements, for anyone of these unskilled people may change his trade any day. And they are organised under quite different circumstances — all the leading men and women are Socialists, and socialist agitators too.

"In them I see the real beginning of the movement here".

Ramparts for the workers against the bosses

From Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*

In England… permanent combinations have been formed, trades unions, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the employers... The organisation of these strikes, combinations, and trades unions went on simultaneously with the political struggles of the workers, who now constitute a large political party, under the name of Chartists.

The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations.

Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance — combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist.

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 the 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.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends becomes class interests.

In the bourgeoisie we have two phases to distinguish: that in which it constituted itself as a class under the regime of feudalism and absolute monarchy, and that in which, already constituted as a class, it overthrew feudalism and monarchy to make society into a bourgeois society. The first of these phases was the longer and necessitated the greater efforts. This too began by partial combinations against the feudal lords.

But when it is a question of making a precise study of strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organisation as a class, some are seized with real fear and others display a transcendental disdain.

An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society. For the oppressed class to be able to emancipate itself, it is necessary that the productive powers already acquired and the existing social relations should no longer be capable of existing side by side. Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.

FALL

Does this mean that after the fall of the old society there will be a new class domination culminating in a new political power? No.

The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of every class, just as the condition for the liberation of the third estate, of the bourgeois order, was the abolition of all estates and all orders.

The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.

Meanwhile the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is a struggle of class against class, a struggle which carried to its highest expression is a total revolution. Indeed, is it at all surprising that a society founded on the opposition of classes should culminate in brutal contradiction, the shock of body against body, as its final denouement?

Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.

It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions. Till then, on the eve of every general reshuffling of society, the last word of social science will always be:

"Le combat ou la mort; la lutte sanguinaire ou le néant. C'est ainsi que la question est invinciblement posée."

["Combat or Death: bloody struggle or extinction. It is thus that the question is inexorably put."]