

Origins of the trade union bureaucracy

OFTEN in the labour movement the cry is heard: "If only our trade union and Labour Party leaders would fight for us the way the Tories fight for their side!" But they don't.

Most trade union leaders behave like house-trained tabby cats towards the government and the bosses. Why? The Marxist answer is that the full-time trade union leaders form a distinct social layer — a middle class layer in fact.

In the early years, workers who became union full-timers were, in time, declassed. A number of current trade union leaders never knew industrial life but went straight from college to a career in the trade union bureaucracy. It is one of the central elements in the present lack of trade union militancy. Only a democratic rank and file movement can mend this situation.

Brian Pearce explains the origins of the trade union bureaucracy.

IN 1892 the "civil service" of British trade unionism numbered between 600 and 700. After the Reform Act of 1867 and the Ballot Act of 1872 had created an important working class electorate largely immune to old forms of pressure, the ruling class began to pay special attention to trade union leaders.

Engels observed in 1874 that "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 inquiry was suddenly made into the wishes and needs of the working class." On the advice of the Liberal politician Mundella, the Trades Union Congress held at Nottingham in 1872 was officially welcomed by the city corporation, the delegates were banqueted and invited to the homes of leading citizens, and so forth — the first time such things had happened.

Trade union leaders were pressed to accept seats on Royal Commissions, and in 1886 the general secretary of one of the most important unions stepped into a job in the Labour Bureau formed by Mundella as President of the Board of Trade, an organisation from which the Ministry of Labour later developed. During the 1880s outstanding trade union leaders were more than once entertained by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) at Sandringham. In 1890 Broadhurst, secretary to the Trades Union Congress, was exposed as having accepted a gift of shares from Brunner, the chemicals industrialist, in return for political support at an election.

The years of comparative industrial peace, between the 1850s and 1880s, had seen "a shifting of leadership in the trade union world," as the Webbs put it, "from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officials expressly chosen from out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity."

To the epoch of "defence, not defiance", corresponded the emergence of a generation of trade union leaders of a different type from those who had laid the foundations in the bitter days of the Combination Acts and Tolpuddle. It was between these "sober, business-like" men and sections of the capitalist class "that the political alliance was forged which, in different forms and phases, has been with us ever since — 'the bourgeoisie cannot rule alone'."

These trade union leaders saw their task as essentially one of peaceful negotiation with the employers, and this gave rise to a whole network of social relations separating them off from their original class. Assured of a permanent position with a secure income, the trade union officials — "a closely combined and practically irresistible bureaucracy", as the Webbs called them in their book *Industrial Democracy* which Lenin translated while in exile in Siberia — soon found their different life-experience reflected in a different outlook on the class struggle. In the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism* the account of the career of a typical official given to the authors in 1893 by a member of one of the great craft unions is quoted:

"Whilst the points at issue no longer affect his own earnings or conditions of employment, any disputes between his members and their employers increase his work and add to his worry. The former vivid sense of the privations and subjection of the artisan's life gradually fades from his mind; and he begins more and more to regard all complaints as perverse and unreasonable. With this intellectual change may come a more invidious transformation. Nowadays the salaried officer of a great union is courted and flattered by the middle class. He is asked to dine with them, and will admire their well-appointed houses, their fine carpets, the ease and luxury of their lives..."

"He goes to live in a little villa in a lower middle-class suburb. The move leads to dropping his workmen friends; and his wife changes her acquaintances. With the habits of his new neighbours he insensibly adopts more and more their ideas... His manner to his members... undergoes a change... A great strike threatens to involve the Society in desperate war. Unconsciously biased by distaste for the hard and unthankful work which a strike entails, he finds himself in small sympathy with the men's demands and eventually arranges a compromise on terms distasteful to a large section of his members."

Brought constantly into friendly intercourse with well-to-do businessmen, civil servants and capitalist politicians, trade union leaders, the Webbs observed, were tempted to bring their spending power up to the same level as that of their associates by making "unduly liberal charges" for their travelling expenses, and even "to accept

from employers or from the government those hidden bribes that are decorously veiled as allowances for expenses or temporary salaries for special posts."

This situation, thus already recognisable in the early 1890s, is still with us today.

Parallel with the rise of the corps of permanent officials was the weakening, during the years of "the servile generation", in trade union democracy. Such institutions as the referendum and the initiative "withered away." The shifting of the basis of the branch in many unions from the place of work to the place of residence helped to atomise the membership and increase their dependence on the officials. The Trades Union Congress of 1895 saw a conscious and open move by the officials to cut away a possible line of rank and file control over their doings, by excluding the representatives of the trades councils, the very bodies which, less than thirty years earlier, had summoned the TUC into existence.

"The trades councils were in fact shut out partly in order to exclude 'agitators' whom the trade union leaders regarded as irresponsible busybodies, and partly in pursuance of a definite policy of centralising industrial control in the hands of the national trade union executives. Obviously a Congress in which two or three million votes might have been cast by the delegates of local bodies would have been a great deal more difficult for the platform to manage than a Congress in which a very small number of national trade unions would cast, under a system of block voting, a majority of total votes. The TUC might have been a very different body if the trades councils had retained their original place in it. That, of course, is precisely why they were not allowed to retain it."

Round about 1909, when EJB Allen published his pamphlet *Revolutionary Unionism*, wide sections of the workers became aware that the militant policy their new circumstances urgently demanded was being sabotaged by their officials. Allen listed a number of examples of what he called the "treachery of officials" in preventing necessary strikes on various pretexts. He wrote:

"This kind of business is notably on the increase, particularly since the workers have been fools enough to pay this kind of official £200 and more per year [1909 money!] to do nothing in Parliament except betray their interests and run around after different capitalist politicians... in order to be remembered when there are some government jobs going."

Fred Knee, of the London Society of Compositors, remarked bitterly in 1910 that, "there are some trade union leaders who are so prosperous that they at any rate have in their own persons achieved the harmony of the classes." ■

● From *Some Past Rank and File Movements*