

In the beginning is the trade union!

THE trade unions are the basic defence organisations of the working class. They carry out several positive functions: providing elementary resistance to exploitation; defending the immediate economic interests of workers; developing class consciousness and organisation amongst workers; and creating a training school for working class activists.

Marx and Engels were the first socialists to clearly grasp these positive functions. The unions became central to their conception of socialism from below. As Marx argued in the 1840s:

"There exists a class of philanthropists, and even of socialists who consider strikes as very mischievous to the interests of the 'workingman himself'...

"I am, on the very contrary, convinced that the alternate rise and fall of wages, and the continual conflict between masters and men resulting therefrom, are, in the present organisation of industry, the indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the labouring classes, of combining them into one great organisation against the encroachments of the ruling class, and of preventing them from becoming apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production. In a state of society founded upon the antagonism of classes, if we want to prevent slavery in fact as well as in name, we must accept war.

"In order to rightly appreciate the value of strikes and combinations, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by the apparent insignificance of their economic results, but hold, above all things, in view of their moral and political consequences. Without the great alternate phases of dullness, prosperity, over-excitement, crisis and distress, which modern industry traverses in periodically recurring cycles, with the up and down of wages resulting from them, as with the constant warfare between masters and men closely corresponding with those variations in wages and profits, the working classes of Great Britain, and all of Europe, would be a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass, whose self-emancipation would prove as impossible as that of the slaves of Ancient Greece and Rome."

As our socialism is a class-movement socialism, we must direct our attention to where the class is organised, in the first place the trade unions. Through our work in the unions we can root our tendency in the class and in the workplaces.

Trade union organisations — even the

least bureaucratised — have their own limitations. Marx explained in *Wages, Price and Profit*:

"At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady.

"They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries that it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society.

"Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'

"...Trades unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system."

On top of these limitations another problem has developed: the trade union bureaucracy. The working class does not develop power and wealth organically, as part of society it is destined to supplant and outgrow. Its nearest organic equivalent to the intellectual and political representatives which the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie threw up is the trade union bureaucrat.

But these bureaucrats (like all workers who have not made a conscious break to socialist politics) are dominated, more or less, by bourgeois ideas: indeed they are a major channel for the consolidation of bourgeois ideas in the working class. In addition, the officials normally earn considerably more than the average in the trade they represent. They adopt a petty-bourgeois mode of life and grow away from the realities of working class life.

Over time the bureaucracy is an unstable social layer which develops out of the working class and then finds itself in a position as a negotiator between the working class and capital. The bureaucracy and the capitalists are organically linked together. They work together to maintain the system.

The bureaucrats' relationship to the working class is parasitic. The bureaucracy needs the working class, the working class does not need the bureaucracy.

As the trade union bureaucracy develops, trade union democracy declines. This inevitably generates movements of the rank and file against the bureaucracy, but not necessarily a rank and file movement. A sustained, co-ordinated and organised movement of this kind generally requires a political tendency to provide it with some backbone and permanence. It is one of our central aims to help build a new rank and file movement.

We take whatever small beginnings exist, but seek to build rank and file groups based on the structures of the union branches, shop stewards committees etc. rather than just collections of individual members of left groups.

They should take disputes seriously, respond quickly and attempt to seize the initiative. Where necessary they should attempt to function as an alternative leadership in the union. As the old slogan goes, "if the leaders won't lead, then the rank and file must."

We should advocate trade union democracy and fighting politics as the cutting edge of such bodies. Why? 'Trade union democracy' provides an antidote to the pressures of bourgeoisification, while 'fighting policies' allows us to reach out to wider layers of militants who may not consider themselves socialist, but who wish to fight.

If we adopt this approach then we can draw out the political logic of, for instance, a consistent fight for a shorter working week and full employment — which puts the needs of the workers above the dictates of profit making — without presenting our demands in the form of an ultimatum.

This is how the Minority Movement, the Communist-led rank and file movement the 1920s proceeded. They linked the struggle against wage cuts in the mines to the question of a workers' government by way of the nationalisation of the coal industry under workers' control, as a way of imposing a cut in hours not jobs.

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