

Marxism and trade unions

An AWL education course

Session notes

**20E Tower Workshops,
London SE1 3DG
www.workersliberty.org**

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Also included:

Extracts from Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* (reading for session 2, not available online)

Extracts from Harry Wicks' *Keeping My Head* (reading for session 6, not available online)

INTRODUCTION

This is a six-part AWL education course.

Its purpose is to give all members a solid grounding in some fundamental ideas about what trade unions are, and the role of socialists in unions and workplaces. We want every member to do this course – members currently active in unions, and those who will be union activists in future, or have past experiences to share. This collective knowledge and understanding will help make AWL even more effective and help develop our ideas. By all means also invite contacts.

The six sessions are:

1. Our Fantasy Union
2. The Marxist Critique of Trade Unions
3. The Bureaucracy
4. The Rank and file
5. The Role of Marxists
6. Workplace Bulletins

The course is designed to be used in a variety of settings. You could run it as a dayschool, in a series at branch meetings, in small groups before/after another activity, as one-to-one discussions. Neither is there a fixed timing for the sessions. You'll need at least half an hour, but could probably go on for a lot longer if you'd like to! Once you have run each session, please contact any members who were unable to attend, to fix up a session with them.

The course is designed to be participatory. We don't want to educate people by lecturing them, but by encouraging them to think, question, disagree and develop ideas. Because of this format, a session does not have to be run by an "expert", but by someone who can facilitate discussion. The facilitator should explain the theme and format of the session; bring and distribute materials, make sure everyone is clear about each stage, and make sure that everyone feels comfortable about contributing.

Each session should start with introductions (if necessary), a brief outline of the subject/format of the session, and (sessions 2-6) feedback from the previous session (see 'follow-up activity' below).

Each session plan includes most or all of the following: reading in advance; a summary of key points; discussion questions; discussion statements; in some, other exercises; follow-up activity. Please use these as follows:

Reading in advance: Please circulate well in advance, by email and hard copy if possible. It's a good idea at the end of each session to give out the reading for the next one. Be aware that some comrades may find the reading more challenging than others. Explain that it might help to note down any points that need clarifying, any questions, any points thought to be particularly significant.

At the session itself, start with a brief review of the reading, bearing in mind that some people may not have been able to read it in advance. Ask if there are any specific questions about the reading before getting into the discussion, but keep this to specific questions and don't let it go on too long.

Bring spare copies of the reading to the discussion, plus copies of any additional reading suggested in 'follow-up activity'.

Questions: Unless there are just two or three of you, divide people into smaller groups (2s or 3s) to discuss these questions. It is best to print/write each question on a separate piece of paper. Share the questions out between the groups, ask them to discuss them, make notes and be ready to report back.

Remind comrades that the questions are designed to prompt discussion, not to test their knowledge or catch them out! Tell them how much time they have, and check that they are making progress during the allotted time rather than getting bogged down on one question.

When the time is up, get everyone back together and go through each question, asking the group which discussed it to give their feedback, then asking for any other comments. Alternate the groups, rather than getting each one to report on all its questions together.

Discussion statements: Divide again, into different 2s and 3s, then repeat the above exercise with the discussion statements. Similarly, they are designed to prompt discussion; we want comments, rather than a straightforward agree/disagree.

Summary of key points: This is a guide for the facilitator. If you feel that any of these points have not adequately come out of the discussions on the questions and statements, please raise these points yourself.

Follow-up activity: It is important that the group agrees a follow-up activity, so that the ideas discussed are put into practice, to ensure further collective activity, and to help newer people get more involved.

As well as those recommended for each specific session, an additional 'follow-up activity' for every session would be to discuss this issue with a workmate / trade unionist who is interested in AWL's politics.

SESSION 1: OUR FANTASY UNION

READING

Fantasy Union of Rail and Transport Workers, Off The Rails broadsheet:
<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/07/03/fantasy-union-rail-and-transport-workers>

KEY POINTS

We want to transform the trade unions, to make them much more effective, in the following ways:

- one industry, one union
- the union being rooted in the workplace
- top-to-bottom democracy
- election and accountability of officials
- an effective, rank-and-file-led organising strategy
- militantly fighting the bosses
- using effective strategies
- promoting equality, fighting sectionalism and discrimination
- actively political
- acting as part of the wider workers' movement
- independent rank-and-file organisation

EXERCISE

Take each of the 11 sections in turn. For each, one person gives a brief introduction, explaining the issue, and giving some examples of how their union measures up. Others may then comment, before moving on to the next issue.

After the whole document has been discussed, divide into groups of comrades active in the same union/workplace (put any individuals in pairs). Each group identifies one idea from the preceding discussion which they are going to take up within their union. Groups/individuals report this back to the main group.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Carry out the idea identified in the last part of the exercise.
Write a similar document for the industry you work in.

SESSION 2: THE MARXIST CRITIQUE OF TRADE UNIONS

READING

Three excerpts from Marx

- *The Poverty of Philosophy*
- *Trade Unions: their past, present and future*
- *Wages, Price and Profit*

Available (together) at <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/5289>

Can we build a revolutionary workers' movement?, Solidarity 3/200, 6 April 2011, answering arguments from activists pessimistic about involvement in bureaucratic trade unions: <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/04/06/can-we-build-revolutionary-workers-movement>

QUESTIONS

How did capitalism reorganise production? What did this do to workers? Why did this lead workers to combine in trade unions?

Marx argues that under capitalism, workers compete against each other, but through combination, we can stop competing against each other and unite to 'compete' / fight against the bosses. What examples can you think of from your own workplace/industry?

Marx says that 'The only social power of the workmen is their number'. Why is this? And what other social power does the capitalist class have that our class doesn't?

If we support working-class struggle, isn't there a danger that the working class will win, and simply become a new ruling class exploiting another section of society?

Other exploited classes in the past have fought back eg. Peasants' Revolt, Spartacus slave rebellion. What is special about the working class and trade unions?

What are the key limitations of trade unions?

Trade unions tend to organise only the better-paid, skilled members of the working class – (a) why? (b) who gets overlooked (c) can you think of any examples that buck this trend?

DISCUSSION STATEMENTS

'Trade unions are just one of many movements that socialists should be active in - others include anti-war, environmental and single-issue campaigns.'

'Trade unions should only concern themselves with bread-and-butter workplace issues eg. wages, hours, health & safety. That's why workers set them up and what they pay their subs for - not to mess about with stuff like equalities, politics and world issues.'

'Because trade unions are only concerned with workplace matters, they only tinker with the existing capitalist system rather than challenge it. Socialists want to overthrow capitalism, so should not bother with trade unions.'

'Worse, trade unions often take up workplace issues in a way that divides the working class and bolsters capitalism eg. maintaining inequalities of wages, or protecting their own members against the interests of other working-class people eg. unemployed; migrant workers.'

'By arguing for better pay, trade unions uphold the wages system rather than challenging it. Instead of fighting for better pay, they should fight the whole wages system.'

'Trade unions are the only organisations of the working class that matter - there is no need for other socialist activity.'

'A trade union – particularly an effective, well-organised one – provides workers with the protection they need under capitalism.'

KEY POINTS

Capitalism created the working class - the working class created trade unions - process known as 'combination'.

Capitalism makes workers compete with each other - combination enables workers to overcome competition between themselves and to unite to 'compete' with the capitalists.

'Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another.'

Capitalism makes the working class into a class of exploited workers. But it only becomes a class 'for itself' by combining and struggling.

The working class can only achieve emancipation by abolishing class society, not by establishing its rule over a new exploited class.

Trade unions are the first permanent organisations of self-defence of an exploited class (previous exploited classes have fought back, and/or formed temporary organisations).

Trade unions have limitations: they are no substitute for a socialist party; they only organise a minority of the working class; they collaborate with the bourgeois system.

It is essential for Marxists to be actively involved in trade unions; but a Marxist is more than just a 'good trade unionist'.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Further reading:

- extract from Frederick Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* - Engels explains how workers built the first trade unions to wage their end of the struggle. He says that trade unions can challenge the whole bourgeois order:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/node/3632>

- Hal Draper, *Marxism and Trade Unions* - a class that US Marxist Hal Draper gave in 1970 - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/tus/1-marx-tus.htm>

- Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, volume 2, chapter 4, 'Trade unions and class'* (not available online - I have pp.83-97, needs scanning; pp.98-114 attached)

- V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?*, Chapter III: *Trade-Unionist Politics and Social- Democratic Politics*:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/iii.htm>
- Leon Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Transitional Epoch*, The Transitional Programme:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm>

SESSION 3 - THE TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY

READING

- everyone to read in advance:

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

<https://www.workersliberty.org/blogs/2010-10-09/union-bureaucracy>

The first section of Brian Pearce, *Some Past Rank-and-File Movements*, 1959:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/pearce/1959/04/rankandfile.htm>

Extract from Beatrice and Sidney Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*:

<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/11/05/webbs-development-trade-union-bureaucracy>

- optional extras / follow-up:

Extract from Rosa Luxemburg: *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions, Section VIII. Need for United Action of Trade Unions and Social Democracy*:

<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/11/05/rosa-luxemburg-trade-union-bureaucracy>

Leon Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, unfinished article found in Trotsky's desk after his assassination, August 1940:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/tu.htm>

QUESTIONS

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?

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?

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

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

How do bureaucrats get away with it?!

DISCUSSION STATEMENTS

'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.'

'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.'

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

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

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

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

'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.'

'Some union leaders are not told what to do by the bosses or the government. They genuinely hate the bosses and the government.'

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

'The reason that trade union leaders sell out workers is because the unions are affiliated to the Labour Party.'

KEY POINTS

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.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Read the additional material listed above.

SESSION 4 - THE RANK AND FILE

READING

At least one of the three articles published here -

<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/07/22/three-articles-trade-union-rank-and-file> - about the rank and file. Each is an article from a Workers' Liberty pamphlet, one each from 1980, 1989 and 1996.

Brief extract from James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement*, about the Clyde Workers' Committee 1915:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/11/05/clyde-workers-committee-1915>

At least one of the following short 'case studies':

- New rank-and-file initiative in Sheffield City Union:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/08/01/new-rank-and-file-initiative-sheffield-city-union>

- Campaign for a Fighting Democratic Union (RMT):

<https://workersliberty.org/blogs/2020-07-26/how-can-we-improve-our-union>

- Call for a rank-and-file Public Sector Alliance:

<https://workersliberty.org/story/2017-07-26/public-sector-unions-strike-together>

- Flying Sparks, bulletin of Jubilee Line Extension electricians:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/node/5329>

QUESTIONS

What is the point of a rank-and-file movement?

According to one of the articles, 'There is nothing so hated by the hardened trade union bureaucrat as the well-organised unofficial movement.' Why?

Give some examples of rank-and-file movements during the 20th century.

Is a 'rank-and-file movement' an organisation of socialists?

What sort of policies should a rank-and-file movement have?

What sort of structures should a rank-and-file movement have?

Is there a rank-and-file movement in your industry/union at present? What potential is there for building one?

Do we need a rank-and-file movement in each industry, or a cross-industry rank-and-file movement?

What demands do we make that would empower the rank and file?

DISCUSSION STATEMENTS

'The rank and file has to organise because of the way the bureaucracy acts.'

'The rank and file has an important role in organising and getting the work done, but shouldn't make decisions – that's the elected leadership's job.'

'A union leader shouldn't always do what the rank and file wants because the rank and file will sometimes get it wrong.'

'We've got decent union leaders, so the rank and file don't need to organise independently.'

'Rank-and-file union members are too apathetic to play an active organising role. that's why we have officials and leaders.'

'Rank-and-file workers have lots of reactionary ideas – the enlightened minority needs to be in charge.'

'Independent rank-and-file organisation is unofficial and outside the union's rule book. It damages the union and undermines its work.'

'You should be loyal to your union, not to a rank-and-file group which is in effect a 'union within a union'.'

KEY POINTS

Rank-and-file movements come into existence because of the inadequacies of the trade union officialdom - distant, absorbed in machinery of the capitalist set-up, corrupted by privilege.

A genuine rank-and-file movement will represent much more closely the views and interests of workers.

A genuine rank-and-file movement, with democratic structures rather than slow-moving, bureaucratic ones, can respond more quickly to developments and disputes.

Rank-and-file movements can put pressure on union leaders to lead more effectively, and can provide an alternative leadership in the face of slowness or sell-outs by the union bureaucracy - "We will support the officials just as long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them." (Clyde Workers' Committee, 1915)

Accountability to a rank-and-file movement is one way of preventing good militants elected to officials' positions from 'going bad'.

A rank-and-file movement is not (necessarily) the same as a 'broad left'. A rank-and-file movement is not created just by getting left groups together.

A bona fide rank-and-file movement must have genuine roots in the workplaces.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Choose one particular rank-and-file movement and research it further. Search the internet, look for books, films, newspaper cuttings, bulletins, even interview people involved.

Suggested further reading:

The Workers' Committee: <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/08/04/workers-committee> and <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/08/24/how-workers-can-find-their-power>

'Trade Unions: a chance to learn from the past':

<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2017-07-26/trade-unions-chance-learn-past>

SESSION 5: THE ROLE OF MARXISTS

READING

- Leon Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Transitional Epoch, The Transitional Programme*:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm>
- V.I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Chapter 6: *Should Revolutionaries Work In Reactionary Trade Unions?*:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm>
- *What we do in the workplaces and unions* from 'We Stand for Workers' Liberty':
<https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2006-03-05/what-we-do-workplaces-and-unions>

QUESTIONS 1 – WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF MARXISTS IN THE WORKPLACES AND UNIONS?

Help workers fight the bosses more effectively?

Build the trade unions?

Supply Marxist wisdom to the workers' movement?

Break workers from the unions and their collaboration with capitalism?

Convince workers of Marxism and recruit them to our group?

Get the unions' support and resources for the campaigns we run?

Fundamentally change the trade unions?

QUESTIONS 2 – DO YOU AGREE THAT IT IS THE ROLE OF MARXISTS TO:

Defend the union against all critics?

Get good militants elected to union positions?

Do whatever we can to make industrial action as effective as possible?

Thoroughly scrutinise the union leadership, and call them to account for all their failings?

Defend the union's policies and the agreements it makes with employers?

Get elected to a union position and carry it out as conscientiously and effectively as possible?

Give the Marxist explanation of every issue to workers at every opportunity?

Raise non-workplace, political issues at every union branch meeting?

Do as good a job as possible representing members in individual casework?

Avoid casework and concentrate on politics?

Keep all criticism of the union internal to the union?

Never support a compromise between the union and the employer?

Advocate sensible resolution of industrial disputes to avoid demoralisation arising from the defeat of the union?

Give attention only to those workers who are active members of the union and are political?

Adapt to the culture of the workplace so as to 'fit in' and gain influence?

Expose the inadequacies of the union leaders to your workmates?

Reprimand and correct workers when they express reactionary ideas?

Teach workers about Marxist theory?

Tell workers the correct strategy for each struggle/dispute?

In multi-union workplaces/industries, identify the best union and promote it above/against the other unions?

Promote – even exaggerate – every achievement by the union?

Be the best recruiter to the union and the hardest-working union rep?

Remember that your priority is the struggle for socialism, and not bother too much about the job itself?

Seek to attain as high a position in the union as possible in order to gain influence?

EXERCISE

Write 'the role of Marxists in the workplace and trade unions' in:

- 200 words
- 6 bullet points
- one sentence (no cheating with an excessively long sentence using loads of semi-colons!)

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

'Audit' your own activity in the workplace and union in relation to the discussion you have had about the role of Marxists. Identify an area for improvement and implement it.

SESSION 6: WORKPLACE BULLETINS

Note: this is a session on why we produce workplace bulletins, not on how to produce them. We have a training session on how to produce workplace bulletins, which uses the materials here:

http://www.workersliberty.org/files/workplace_bulletins.pdf

READING

A selection of AWL workplace bulletins: <https://www.workersliberty.org/union-and-workplace-bulletins>

Taking socialist ideas onto the shopfloor, Workers' Liberty supplement 3/3, March 2006: <http://www.workersliberty.org/files/wl3-3.pdf>

Excerpt from Harry Wicks, 'Keeping My Head: Memoirs of a British Bolshevik' (attached)

QUESTIONS

When did socialists start to produce workplace bulletins, and why?

Why do some Marxist groups produce workplace bulletins, and others not?

As a small group, is producing workplace bulletins really a good use of our limited resources?

What, if anything, is the difference between a workplace bulletin and a leaflet produced for union activists or a union event?

Isn't there a danger that producing workplace bulletins will focus our time and attention too much on detailed workplace matters, and draw our attention away from wider politics?

Isn't there a danger that producing workplace bulletins will lead us to communicate in a dumbed-down, lowest-common-denominator way, and to neglect more complex ideas and theory?

So long as the bulletin comes out, and is decent quality with good politics, does it matter how it is produced or who writes it?

How can our workplace bulletins be distributed?

How should our workplace bulletin be financed?

DISCUSSION STATEMENTS

'We sell and circulate socialist publications - eg. Solidarity - at work, so there is no need to publish a workplace bulletin too.'

'I'm the editor of the union branch newsletter. It is widely read and I can publish anything I like without fear of reprisal or criticism - including articles about wider politics and about socialism. There is no point in also producing a socialist workplace bulletin.'

'We should produce bulletins during strikes, occupations and elections, but I don't see the point in producing them during the quiet times in between.'

'The bulletin is a useful commentary on workplace matters, but it doesn't make any real difference to workers' struggles.'

'Everyone reads everything on the internet these days; they are not interested in a printed bulletin.'

'The bulletin is the responsibility solely of comrades in that workplace; the rest of us do no need to be involved.'

'I don't mind giving it out, but I couldn't possibly talk with the workers I give it to!'

'I'll give it out when I can, but I don't see the need to commit to a regular time.'

'It's much better to talk with workers than give them printed materials.'

'The workplace stories get workers interested, then they get the real politics from the front-page editorials.'

'We should not bother with trivial, local workplace matters. Big politics and important union business only.'

'We want the bulletin to be a broad, rank-and-file publication. So it should not say that it is published by socialists.'

'Articles should be written in language understandable to workers - no long words or difficult concepts.'

KEY POINTS

It is essential for socialists to communicate with workers in the workplace.

Workplace bulletins are a unique medium for making our ideas available to workers who would not otherwise come across them, and for showing our version of socialism to workers who have only seen a version of socialism that repels or disinterests them.

Workers' Liberty has a long record of producing workplace bulletins, and is currently working to step this up.

The process of producing a bulletin is important: it involves discussion on political ideas and industrial strategies, and requires us to work with like-minded workmates.

Workers will trust the ideas of a bulletin they see regularly, during quiet times and lively times, more than one that just appears during strikes or elections.

Producing workplace bulletins helps us to concentrate on the class struggle between workers and bosses, rather than being overly side-tracked into internal union affairs.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Give out an AWL workplace bulletin, preferably in a team. Have a debrief afterwards.

Plan how you might improve the workplace bulletin you are particularly involved with – or even whether it is possible to set up a new one.