Taking socialist ideas onto the shopfloor

Right: The Striker, the factory paper of the branch factory of SMF Hartman at Dresden (Saxony). Zuschläger means “striker” in the sense of one who deals a blow, a militant: it’s not the usual word for one who withdraws his or her labour.

Below: The Voice of the Exploited, Organ of the Communist factory nucleus Weitzen, Austria.

Both produced in 1925.
It comes out once every three weeks, with occasional special issues in addition. The front page has one or two longer stories — at least one of them about general politics, outside the Underground — and the back page carries about a dozen short pieces of workplace news and comment. Each issue is prepared and designed by a meeting of Workers’ Liberty activists and sympathisers working on the Tube, but the bulletin quite often gets material from other interested Tube workers.

The bulletin is distributed in three ways. A number of Tube workers — not AWL members or sympathisers — pay to get a regular small bundle of bulletins posted to them. Others receive it by email, or download it from the AWL website. And the staple is other AWL members (not Tube workers) who round the Tube stations and depots to distribute the bulletin hand-to-hand.

These guidelines give an idea of how we go about collect- ing and selecting material for Tubeworker:

• Tell workers information that no-one else will tell them. Spread important news between the different departments. Tell workers about the management cock-ups that have been covered up.

• Listen to what people are talking about at work. What are their complaints about management? About their working conditions? Have they told you about incidents or causes which arose in other departments, or on other shifts, than yours?

• Give workers ammunition against the boss. Has a manager been excused for a mistake that workers would be severely disciplined for? Are there agreements that are not covered?

By Sandra Marsh

TU B E W O R K E R, on the London Underground, is the longest-running of the bulletins produced by Workers’ Liberty. It has been running for fifteen years now. Its longest and most frequent editor has been Leon Trotsky. Trotsky condemned and fought — as did Martov, co-author of the famous Kautsky-Marx-Trotsky March 1895 pamphlet — the bureaucratisation of the Communist Parties. But that bureaucratisation was no necessary part of a turn to factory bulletins.

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FACTORY newspapers are an innovation in the life of the working-class in both Great Britain and Germany. They have sprung up on the revolutionary soil of the Soviet Union in the form of wall newspapers. During the last year they have also been made in the rich industrial areas of the trans-European East from the capitalist West, assuming the form of cyclostyled factory newspapers and becoming a form of agitation, propaganda and organisation which is really gaining in importance. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that factory newspapers are unthinkable without Communist nuclei. Factory newspapers are the organs of the factory nuclei “by means of which the latter get into touch with the workers in the factories, getting to know them better and exercising Communist influence on all those sections of the communal and office workers into the political life of the factory.” Extract from the Resolution adopted at the Organisation Conference of the Communist International. For this reason factory newspapers must make it clear that they are organs of the Factory Committee, the experience and decisions of which must be given at our disposal has shown that this was not always the case. For instance in Great Britain first factory newspapers were published without indicating that they are the organs of the nuclei, without providing the impression that the Party Committee was a good factory. This was a mistake, especially as there was in Great Britain a very great task of making organisational out of the sympathy of the masses in order thereby to transform the small Party into a mass Party.

Considerable time elapsed, before the factory nuclei and also Party Executives hit upon the right way to publish a factory newspaper, capable of doing justice to the manifold tasks which the Party should perform. Only when first questions are only given second place, whilst the first stage is devoted to a political survey which is too general and is not connected with the life of the factory. The newspapers had to be made up secretly, and the necessary publishing machinery. He called the foreman, and several workers were henpecked of the flesh of the factory.

In France factory newspapers were made up from one communal committee. This explains why the outside appearance of French factory newspapers became almost uniform, and why the same headings and titles are to be found almost in all factory newspapers. Although in many cases the workers employed in the enterprises contributed to the newspapers, they were not of the blood of the workers, nor of the flesh of the factory.

In Germany, on the other hand, the aims of the factory were to create the air of the factory, they were strangers to the everyday life of the factory. In this respect even now nothing is as it should be. For instance caricatures of unpopular foremen or managers and office workers are sometimes included in the fourth number of the newspaper. The editor is either “Look for him” or “On the Moon”, or the address of the manager or foreman had already given it a coat of minium (red oxide of iron) but a certain kind of humour is essential.

The idea prevailed that ordinary Party newspapers deal with far-off questions, and to frighten factory nuclei into ceasing to publish such newspapers were, in order to punish them. The outward appearance of factory newspapers can contribute a great deal to the image of the indifferent masses. Our experience on the field of agitation and propaganda show what great impression can be made by caricatures and good illustrations.

In Germany the factory newspapers used caricatures and humour with great effect. We have in the illustration of the factory newspaper the Horsch works, the Rowntree which shows in two pictures that the same capitalist, which in 1914-18 drove the proletarians dressed in soldiers uniform into the fraticidal struggle, is driving the present to bear the brunt of the war reparations (imposed on Germany by the victors of the 1914-18 war). The factory newspaper of the Bergproletar (which shows in one caricature, did not know until quite recently how to make use of this form of agitation in the factory newspapers.

In factory newspapers the caricatures concerned themselves only with general political questions, although it is obvious that for instance caricatures of unpopular foremen or managers and also caricatures, branding certain odious factory conditions, would appeal to the average worker.

In Britain where the Party is confronted with the great task of securing the introduction of the Factory Acts in 1919 and 1921, and a failed right-wing military coup in 1920 and 1921, and a failed right-wing military coup in 1925, the Party was in danger of becoming an organ for a propaganda in the class struggle.

In Germany the factory newspapers riled the employers and their lackeys. With all means and power at their disposal newspapers are, in order to punish them and to frighten factory nuclei into ceasing to publish such publicity in future.

The editors of factory newspapers were not only simply distributed. They were sometimes sentenced to terms of imprisonment. This happened for instance in Hamburg and in the Ruhr Basin.

In a big Berlin enterprise the chairman of the Factory Council was dismissed on the mere suspicion of having edited the factory newspaper. His dismissal had the support of the Berlin police.

As a result of this, nuclei decided from the beginning in publishing factory newspapers, they had to be very cautious in their collection of the necessary publishing material. The newspapers had to be made up secretely, and the circulation had to be arranged in such a way as not to expose our comrades to the danger of being caught by the detectives who are poisoning the workers and the Party, to whom for instance.

In factory newspapers pursued the aim of establishing the closest possible contact with the masses. But our comrades must be sure to utilise every active element in the factories, our work becomes much more difficult. To prevent this, nuclei should not work too openly and factory newspapers should be published illegally.

The fact that factory newspapers have been published illeg- ally in the capitalist countries and in the most active elements in the factories, our work becomes much more difficult. To prevent this, nuclei must not work too openly and factory newspapers should be published illegally. The newspapers had to be made up secretely, and the circulation had to be arranged in such a way as not to expose our comrades to the danger of being caught by the detectives who are poisoning the workers and the Party, to whom for instance.

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Against our ‘benefactors’

This leaflet was written by Vladimir Lenin after November 7(19) 1895, in connection with a strike of about 500 weavers against bad conditions and new measures introduced by the factory management.

The weavers, by their solid resistance to the employer’s pressure, have proved that at a difficult moment there are still people in our midst who can uphold our common interests as workers, that our worthy employers have not yet succeeded in turning us for all time into the miserable slaves of bosses.

Let us, then, comrades, stand firm and steadfast and carry on to the very end, let us remember that we can improve our conditions only by our common and concerted efforts.

Above all, comrades, don’t fall into the trap so cunningly prepared by Mr. Manager.

They reason as follows: There is a hitch now in disposing of our goods, so that if we keep to our previous working conditions we shall not get the profits we got previously. And we are asked to work harder.

So then, we’ll have to tighten up on the workers, let them shoulder the cost of the bad prices on the market.

But the job has to be done cleverly and not in any old way, so that the worker, in the simplicity of his mind, will not understand what sort of a tithe we are preparing for him.

If we tackle all of them at once, they will all rise up at once, and we shan’t be able to handle them, so we shall first dupe those miserable weavers, and then the others won’t get away.

We are not accustomed to restrain ourselves in dealing with these creatures, and what for, anyhow?

New brooms sweep cleaner here So then, the employers, who are so full of concern for the workers’ well-being, want to quietly and steadily impose on the workers of all departments what they have already imposed on the weavers.

That is different to the fate of the weaving sheds, we shall dig with our own hands a pit into which we, too, shall soon be thrown.

Lastly the weavers have been earning, in round figures, 3 rubles 50 kopeks a fortnight, and during the same period formerly they somehow were able to live on 5 rubles, and families consisting of husband, wife and child on 2 rubles in.

They have sold the last of their clothes and used up the last. All they are left with is 6 rubles 62 kopeks per fortnight, which have already begun to be paid to the families of seven who are still people in our midst who can uphold our common interests as workers.

Workers of the new dyeing department! Twelve rubles a month, all told, is what you now earn, at the cost of 14 1/4 hours’ daily work, saturated from head to foot with the musty芳our of thousands of other people.

Pay attention to our demands: we also want to end the illegal deductions made from you due to your foreman’s inefficiency.

Labourers, and all unskilled workers generally! Do you really expect to retain your job if you keep a day, when the skilled weaver has to content himself with 20 kopeks a day?

Comrades, don’t let the employers’ bait, stand up for one another more firmly. Otherwise it will go badly for all of us this winter. We must all keep a most watchful eye on the employers’ manoeuvres aimed at reducing rates, and with all our strength resist every tendency in this direction.

Turn a deaf ear to all their pleadings about business being bad: for them it only means less profit on their capital, for us it means starvation and suffering for our families who are deprived of their last crust of stale bread.

Can there be any comparison between the two things? They are now putting pressure on the weavers first of all, and we are asked to carry on.

1. An increase in weavers’ rates to their spring level, i.e., by about 6 kopeks per schmitz;

2. That the weavers, too, be brought under the law which says that the worker must be told how much he can earn on a job before he begins it. For working, for example, the existing rates should be accompanied by information about the quality of the wool, the quantity of noils and clippings in it, and there should be an estimate of the time required for preparatory work;

3. That the working time be so distributed that we do not stand idle through no fault of our own; now, for example, things are so arranged that on each piece the weaver loses a day waiting for warp. If the boss wants to rifle our earnings this way, let him do so outright, in such a manner that we definitely know what he wants to squeeze out of us;

4. That the factory inspector sees to it that there is no trickery about the rates, that there are no double rates. That means, for example, that the rates list should not contain two different rates for one and the same kind of article, only with different names. A still more objectionable piece of trickery is the double price given for goods of one denomination. That way Messrs. Thornton dodged the fines laws...A strict record has to be kept of all the fines levied, the total sum of which is not to go into the employer’s pocket, but must be used to cover the needs of the workers of the factory concerned. With us, however—we have but to look at our books—there are empty spaces, there are no fines, and one might think our employers are the most kind-hearted of all. Actually, however, due to our lack of knowledge, they dodge the law and easily fix things to suit themselves.

We are not fined, you see, yet deductions are made from us, the smaller rate being paid and as long as two rates have existed, a smaller and a bigger one, there has been nothing at all to cavil at, they have kept on deducting the money and putting it into their own pockets;

5. That in addition to introducing a single rate, let each deduction be registered in the fines column, with an indication of why it is made.

Then wrong fining will be obvious, less of our work will be thrown away on the streets, and our weavers will be able to sell their goods for the best price.

6. We demand that the payment we make for lodgings be on the pre-1881 level, that is to say, one ruble per person per month, not 3 rubles, and that the employer should let us know what they are we positively have nothing to pay the two rubles with, and in any case, what for... For the filthy, smelly, crowded kennel always in danger of fire? Don’t forget, comrades, that all over St. Petersburg it is considered enough to pay a ruble a month, and that only our considerate bosses are not satisfied with that—so we must force them here, too, to cut down their greed.

In defining these demands, we are not rebelling at all; we are merely demanding that we be given what all the workers of other factories now enjoy by law, the return of what has been taken from us by those who placed all their hopes on our inability to uphold our own rights. Let us, then, show on this occasion that our ‘benefactors’ are mistaken. 

The Nine Elms Spark
Essential tools

Leon Trotsky discussed factory bulletins, and their place in the overall work of a revolutionary organisation, in a letter to his French comrades of January 1938.

I received your large packet of factory newspapers and leaflets, etc. Indeed, this is the only suitable way for a weak organisation with a small paper to approach the least educated masses while not only maintaining but continually deepening its theoretical understanding. A certain type of "democratic centralism" is necessary in the organisation of written propaganda and agitation as well. You approach the workers with the simplest demands and slogans, which flow directly from life in the factory. You are not obliged to draw all the conclusions on every occasion, that is to say, in every article. Every day has its task.

But in order to do this loose, uncoordinated mass work, the party's thinking must be sufficiently centralised and it must find its daily inspiration in a laboratory where all questions, even the most complex, are analysed and sharply focused. The party's thinking must be sufficiently centralised and it must happen frequently that the Mensheviks were defeated, whilst we managed to get our proposals accepted and to win the sympathy of the non-Party workers.

None of this is in any way directed against mass work. Our work in the unions is absolutely decisive. The worst mistake committed by the Bordiga comrades was in wasting their time, energy, and prestige by creating "unions" for their own entertainment. They took their inspiration not from the experience of decades, not from the lessons of the first four congresses of the [Third] International, but from the example of a bureaucrat without program or principles, that is, Sneevliet.

During one of these struggles — I do not remember what it was about — the Mensheviks behaved very badly indeed, and we related this incident in a letter to Vladimir Il'ich. As the incident was very commonplace and not of particular importance, we did not expect to get an answer from Il'ich. But Il'ich did reply, and he let me know that the Mensheviks had been more than once accused of behaving in the same way. It was a most remarkable thing and it happened frequently that the Mensheviks were defeated, whilst we managed to get our proposals accepted and to win the sympathy of the non-Party workers.

I well remember the following incident: in 1907 I was a member of the Managing Committee of the first Moscow Shop Assistants Union (one of the biggest Moscow Trade Unions at that time). We Bolsheviks were only a small but strongly welded group which was persecuted and derided by the Menshevik liquidators. Mockery and derision, demagogic attacks of the lowest kind, nothing was bad enough to serve as a weapon against us.

But we did not allow ourselves to be intimidated, and it happened frequently that the Mensheviks were defeated, whilst we managed to get our proposals accepted and to win the sympathy of the non-Party workers.

Prior to the revolution, I never had an opportunity to see Comrade Lenin, to speak to him, but we Bolsheviks listened of course very attentively to every one of Lenin's words which reached us from beyond the border. More than once stress has been laid on the fact that Vladimir Il'ich considered it his first and foremost duty whilst living abroad to be in as close contact with the masses as possible, to breathe so to speak the same air with them.

Extracts from a factory newspaper

Factory Inspection
(called the Murder Commission)

When there was a factory inspection a few weeks ago the流氓 Figge surpassed himself. No work was allowed to be done from morning to midday, in order that there should be no smell of poison gas or any sign of dirt. Then the Social Democrat Jumpertz appeared on the scene. He looked around and found everything as it should be. Then upon Figge went to the telephone and a few minutes later the murder commission arrived. The CG factory known for its dirty condition was now a marvel of cleanliness before the eyes of the murder commission — the finest and healthiest of factories.

Question:
Why does not the Murder Commission visit the factory unawares and during working hours?

Answer:
Because it is in the service of the capitalist and not the workers!

Extract from a wall newspaper of the nuclei of the Russian Communist Party

A reminiscence

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Worksman's liberty vi

It was about three weeks before the Reichstag election. In the district we discussed how we could mobilise factory nuclei for the struggle and also how we could utilise the election night for the activation of our nuclear work. In this connection we naturally came to speak of factory newspapers. A big nucleus had just then started a newspaper for all the enterprises in our district, but we realised that this was a very

doubtful expenditure. The factory newspaper for a number of different enterprises is nothing but a far from improved edition of the German Communist Party's central paper, the Rote Fahne (Red Flag). A factory newspaper should not be for a whole district, but for the smallest possible part of the district.

We had therefore to establish factory newspapers in every enterprise, big enterprises of course taking precedence. But how was this to come about?

As a rule comrades welcomed the idea as a new opportunity to spread our ideas. They were only at a loss to know how to go about it, for to publish a newspaper is by no means easy!

Firstly to write it, is something that an ordinary proletariat has never done! Secondly, where is the money for the printing to come from? Thirdly, how is the newspaper to be made up legally, for legal methods are impossible, if the whole movement is not to be an unceasing one in a very short time. And finally the circulation!

The question of how to solve these but is it extremely difficult to convince our comrades that they can be solved.

Well, our nucleus met, and objections were coming thick and fast.

How were they to be met? A printer had been found and the money was there. Did not come from Moscow but from the workers of some comparatively better placed enterprises who had made sacrifices.

So I said: Dear comrades, you will have to write and to circulate the paper. As soon as they notice the approach of the police, they make their appearance and rummage in the drawers of the workers who had just arrived by train, they picked up the copies in the night, and were instructed as to their attitude. Their attention was directed to the workers who had the copies, and their mission was to hand them over to the workers of the other enterprises. The copies are stencilled by a woman comrade office worker behind the counter. Editions are printed, while the smaller ones with only 100 or 200 copies are printed by stencil. Workers get rid of them behind the back of their boss, and subsequently duplicated.

Then the great meeting of the nucleus met, and the next morning every worker finds the Spartacist bulletin on his breakfast table. If that cannot be done, unemployed workers living in a particular factory gate and that need to publish the nucleus meets, and the paper is complete! General public. What is that all? There was silence.

Then came a perfect avalanche of accounts of incidents. I added: As I said before we must continually change our mode of work. The factory has four main entrances. We post one seller and two printers inking in these accounts and wrote down the name of the person who was telling the story. The newspapers are printed there.

All right, Karl, you have to write by the day after tomorrow what you have just told us about the last wage negotiations, and you which have to write down the beautiful story of your upsurge! Uproar! But there is no help for it. Finish reading the list of names and tell them where the manuscripts have to be by the day after tomorrow. I also tell them that they should write quite naturally and any grammatical mistakes will be put right by us (in fact I had hardly time to do this). A poet was discovered in our midst who sent a satirical contribution.

Then the question arose if this was a good paper for our election campaign. Everyone admitted that it was not political enough. So our fellow workers would not read the paper, but the Communist Party's newspapers were not on their list of paper. Thus our nucleus misses its aim.

Above all we give after every report quite briefly the conclusions which the workers have to draw from the report, then we give some extracts from the papers of our opponents… hardly had I said this when proposals came thick and fast. A strong tending slogans and the thing is done. Then I said: you know, the paper is complete! General surprise. But what should its make up be like, what should be at the head… What is comparatively unimportant and can be left out if there is not enough space?

The effect was that more wide-awning comrades distributed the paper in the factory. We had a meeting attended by six comrades and discussed the future plan of work.

The newspapers were selected a couple of days before, and were instructed as to their attitude. Their attention was directed to the street issuing themselves as comrade and to theSTRACTS among our fellow workers, and to the sneaks among our fellow workers. Articles should not be too long. Articles, poems etc. should be written in a manner to enable our fellow workers to take to them from their contents and to impart them to others. It is on this practical experience that we have built our factory newspaper which we intend to continue publishing in the same spirit.

The factory which formerly existed more on paper than in reality is now a live institution. Its work which is common work has welded all the members together.

Of course everything had to be done to give the factory nucleus the advantage it should be. The first newspaper came out a week later than it should have done, but the comrades put up with it.

But one cannot blame the workers for their impotence, for we have much to learn in the matter of organisation. We must create an apparatus which can function in the matter of propaganda, and not let our squabbles and their lackeys do not exist, and as if, as in capitalism enterprises, an apparatus which can function in the matter of propaganda, and not let our squabbles and their lackeys miss our aim.

Uproar! But there is no help for it. Finish reading the list of names and tell them where the manuscripts have to be by the day after tomorrow. I also tell them that they should write quite naturally and any grammatical mistakes will be put right by us (in fact I had hardly time to do this). A poet was discovered in our midst who sent a satirical contribution.

The second number is much easier. Some comrade has taken the factory, and has given instructions. I may mention...
Leafleting on the Manchester Ship Canal

Extracts:
Lament of a Social-Democrat

Have I, an old dissenter to vote for a priest? I who have not been to church for the last 20 years? Befriended by Sandel, the editor and the leaders, taught us that the spirit is free. Have they deserved to be thrown today to the rubbish heap? No I cannot deny them, my colour is red and not black, tell me merely for whom I shall, comrades, say for whom you are going to vote?

For the workingman Thälmann!
- From Der Schmierer (The Squeak) factory newspaper of the S&D Factory Germany, The Communist Party was campaigning against the Social Democrats in an attempt to support the Catholic Centre candidate, Wilhelm Marx (no relation), in the April 1925 presidential election.

- Die Pfiffe (The Siren) factory newspaper of the Communist Party was campaigning against the vote?

I shall, comrades, say for whom you are going to vote? I who have no response whatever to Devlin, nor do they have on to the rubbish heap? No I cannot deny them, my spirit is free. Have they deserved to be thrown today to the rubbish heap? No I cannot deny them, my colour is red and not black, tell me merely for whom I shall, comrades, say for whom you are going to vote?

For the workingman Thälmann!

The verse translates as:
A curse on the capitalist, the king of the rich
Whom our poverty could not soften
Who squeezes the last bit of strength out of us
And has us shot down like dogs.

The clean sweep. Issued by the miners of the Courrières, France

From the French Communist Party

Le Coup de Balai

In Marcel A. de G. Chiriéas

The clean sweep. Issued by the miners of the Courrières, France

This article was based on the experience of Workers Fight, from which AWL has developed and which worked inside the International Socialists (predecessor of the SWP) at the time. It was part of a drive to turn IS towards production of factory bulletins at the end of the 1960s. It has been abridged.

The “turn to the class” by IS is currently using the methods of factory leafleting. Presented here is a short report of the experience of using this method on the docks in Manchester.

Leaflets have been published in the Manchester docks for about three years, at first by the old Workers’ Fight group. At the start these dealt with big issues, such as Devlin [radical reorganisation of the terms and conditions of employment on the docks]. Powell and the dockers [when London dockers struck in support of racist Tony MP, Enoch Powell], strikes etc, and they opposed actions against Devlin. In the 1967 strike

Leaflets have been published in the Manchester docks for about three years, at first by the old Workers’ Fight group. At the start these dealt with big issues, such as Devlin [radical reorganisation of the terms and conditions of employment on the docks]. Powell and the dockers [when London dockers struck in support of racist Tony MP, Enoch Powell], strikes etc, and they opposed actions against Devlin. In the 1967 strike

...
Enoch Powell has indeed become a popular name. But who is this man Powell? Is he perhaps better known as a friend of those who marched from the London docks in his support? By no means. He is an extreme right-wing Tory, the Barry Goldwater of the Conservative Party. He makes a lot of angry speeches, mainly they are directed against the working classes in general, and not just the coloured ones.

Workers' Fight leaflet against Enoch Powell, distributed on the Manchester docks, March 1968. Powell, a right-wing Tory, had made a violent racist speech, for which he was sacked from the front bench of the Tory opposition (Labour was in government). London dockers, who had a few months earlier fought a ten-week strike, marched through the streets in support of Powell.

"The Hook", produced at Manchester docks. This issue is from July 1972. The Tory government had jailed five London dockers for picketing, made illegal by new Tory law ("The Act"). A quarter of a million workers immediately struck in protest at the jailings. The TUC declared a one-day general strike for a few days ahead. The government backed and released the five dockers. The anti-union laws were rendered almost inoperable and were repealed by the Labour government in 1974.

Bulletins of the Alliance for Workers Liberty

Bulletins for railworkers produced in Sheffield. These were instigated by the late Rob Dawber and others. Rob died in 2001 as a result of exposure to asbestos at work.