

# Marxism and Trade Unionism

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Ever since the onset of the international economic crisis in 2008 and the consequent collapse of the Celtic Tiger and the Irish banking system we have seen the abject failure of the Irish trade union movement to mobilise serious resistance to the attempts by successive governments to make working people and the underprivileged pay for the crisis of the system .

There has, it is true, been some opposition: in January 2009 the unions organised a huge public sector workers demonstration of at least 120,000 and on November 24, 2009 held a public sector workers strike involving 300,000. Then in November 2010 the Irish Congress of Trade Unions held another big march of up to 100,000. But on each of these occasions the union leaders failed to follow through. After the November 24 strike the proposed strike for 3 December was withdrawn and massive pay cuts accepted. After the 2010 march they simply did nothing. In other words they led their troops up the hill and promptly led them down again without any serious attempt to make either the last or the present government change course. At the same time the Croke Park Deal, reached in June 2010, in which the public sector unions agreed to accept government plans for 'leaner and more effective public services', ie huge job cuts, in return for no more reductions in public sector pay, has even further weakened the unions and locked them into a position of passive resignation.

This failure has had the most serious consequences for the shape of Irish politics as a whole. It has made it possible for the general disgust and rage at the corrupt and bankrupt policies of Fianna Fail to be 'captured' by Fine Gael, even though they always planned to continue implementing essentially the same policies. It enabled the Labour Party to enter into coalition with Fine Gael with relatively little opposition within its own ranks. It has facilitated widespread acceptance of the idea, assiduously cultivated by the capitalist media, that there is 'no alternative' to massive cuts and abject prostration before 'the markets' and the hitmen of international capital, the IMF. It has meant that so far [these things could easily change] opposition on the streets has been confined to single issue campaigns, such as Roscommon Hospital, the SNAs, the DEIS schools etc) and smallish demonstrations called by the left (the Right to Work Campaign, Enough, Occupy Dame St., the Spectacle of Hope and Defiance,) and the intermediate case of the Dublin Council of Trade Unions anti- austerity march.

It has also led to the development on the left and among those who want to see real resistance (which includes many so-called 'ordinary' ie politically unaffiliated working people) of moods of rejection and condemnation of not only the leadership of the trade unions but frequently of the (Irish) trade unions as such. This can be heard at many meetings and gatherings of the left and more widely among the working class. A particularly crass example of this was the Occupy Dame Street Camp's refusal to support or take part in the above mentioned Dublin Council of Trade Unions demonstration<sup>35</sup>, but this was only an extreme instance of what is undoubtedly a wider mood.

In these circumstances it is useful to go back to basics: to revisit the basic Marxist analysis of trade unions; to review the history of some of the debates about trade unionism in the Marxist movement and to ask whether Irish trade unions today constitute a 'different' and 'special' case, or if, broadly speaking, the traditional Marxist attitude to trade unionism remains valid in Ireland today; and then, in light of these considerations, to try to outline the main tasks of socialists in relation to the unions in the present conjuncture.

## Marx and Engels on Trade Unions

Strikes go back a long way. The first recorded strike was by tomb makers at the Royal Necropolis in Deir el-Medina in ancient Egypt in 1152 BC and was successful. The first recorded strike in America was the Jamestown Polish craftsmen's strike in Virginia in 1619 demanding the right to vote in the colony's elections.

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<sup>35</sup>It is possible, even probable, that a majority of ODS supporters would have voted at the camp's general assembly (s) to back the march but there was always a hard core determined to block the proposal and under the camp's 'consensus' system of decision making that was enough.

The first use of the term 'strike' to denote an organised work stoppage comes from 1768 when sailors, in support of demonstrations in London for 'Wilkes and Liberty' 'struck' or removed the sails of merchant ships in the port thus rendering them unable to sail. [There were many such 'strikes' or 'mutinies' by sailors at this time.]<sup>36</sup>. However trade unionism as we understand it today really begins to develop with the industrial revolution in Britain and the growth of the industrial working class at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. At this time it was illegal under various Combination Acts. In 1834 the utopian socialist, Robert Owen, initiated the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, but it discouraged strikes in favour of forming cooperatives and never really took off. Also in 1834 came the famous case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, agricultural labourers, who were sentenced to transportation for the crime of forming a union.

When Marx and Engels arrived on the scene as communists in the 1840s they found they found that most radicals, socialists and would be revolutionaries were actually opposed to trade unionism. Looking back in 1869, Marx noted, 'in 1847 when all the political economists and all the socialists concurred on one single point - the condemnation of trade unions - I demonstrated their necessity'<sup>37</sup> and Engels concurred 'Marx's assertion is true of all socialists, with the exception of us two'<sup>38</sup> ( In point of fact it was Engels in *The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844* who first took first took up the cudgels on behalf of unions calling them, 'the military school of the working-men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided...And as schools of war the Unions are unexcelled'<sup>39</sup> Marx followed suit, making the question of 'strikes and combinations' a major issue in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), his polemic against Proudhon (then the leading French 'socialist' who was anti-union):

In England, they have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, trades unions, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the employers. 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.... In this struggle - a veritable civil war - all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop.<sup>40</sup>

After 1850 and the onset of a period of reaction Marx largely withdrew from active politics in order to write *Capital* in the library of the British Museum but in 1864 he attended the founding meeting of the International Working Men's Association in London. 'I knew', he wrote, 'that this time "real powers" were involved both on the London and Paris sides and therefore decided to waive my usual standing rule to decline any such invitations.'<sup>41</sup>. The real powers were the French and British trade unions.

In the course of his work with the International Marx frequently defended the crucial importance of the trade union struggle. For example, in 1866, writing on 'Trades' unions. Their past, present and future' he argued:

Trades' Unions originally sprang 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 Trades' Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediences for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity

<sup>36</sup>See Jonathan Neale, *The Cutlass and the Lash*, London 1985

<sup>37</sup>Marx/Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow 1965, p.55

<sup>38</sup>as above p.300

<sup>39</sup>F. Engels, *The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844*, London,1968, p.224

<sup>40</sup>K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, 1955

<sup>41</sup>Marx/Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1965, p.146

of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. **It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts.** [My emphasis- JM]

However, he also injected a note of caution, warning the working class against relying on trade unionism alone and warning the unions against focussing only on the immediate economic struggle.

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.<sup>42</sup>

And he sounded the same note at the end of '*Wages, Price and Profit*' (1865)

Trades Unions work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system.<sup>43</sup>

In 1875 both Marx and Engels sharply criticised the German Social Democrats for failing to deal with the role of unions in their political programme (the so- called *Gotha Programme*)

...there is absolutely no mention of the organisation of the working class as a class through the medium of trade unions. And that is a point of the utmost importance, this being the proletariat's true class organisation in which it fights its daily battles with capital, in which it trains itself and which nowadays can no longer simply be smashed, even with reaction at its worst (as presently in Paris)<sup>44</sup>

As the nineteenth century wore on the British working class movement, on its journey from Chartism to Labourism, became more and more reformist and respectable and this led Marx and Engels to grow more critical of

corrupt trade union leaders [who] never raised a finger for their own brothers in South Wales, condemned to die of starvation by the mineowners. Wretches!... the only workers' representatives in the House of Commons and moreover, horrible dictu [horrible to relate] direct representatives of the miners, and themselves originally miners - Burt and the miserable Macdonald - [who] voted with the rump of the "great Liberal Party,"<sup>45</sup>

Near the end of his life Engels was greatly cheered by the strike wave and rise of New Unionism (representing unskilled workers ) in the East End of London, in which Eleanor Marx and other avowed socialists played an important role. But even here he was forced to note ominous signs of the new union leaders like John Burns becoming incorporated by the bourgeoisie.

I am not at all sure, for instance, that John Burns is not secretly prouder of his popularity with Cardinal Manning, the Lord Mayor and the bourgeoisie in general than of his popularity with his own class.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, although the emphasis shifts depending on the changing situation, we find that from 1844 to the end of their lives, Marx and Engels always defended trade unions as an absolutely necessary element in the class struggle but at the same time never gave them uncritical support or regarded them as sufficient in themselves.

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<sup>42</sup>K. Marx, *The International Workingmen's Association, Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council, 1866*

<sup>43</sup>Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow 1977, p.75

<sup>44</sup>F. Engels to August Bebel, 1875

<sup>45</sup>K.Marx to W. Liebknecht, 11 February, 1878

<sup>46</sup>F. Engels to F.A. Sorge , 7 December, 1889

## Lenin, Trotsky and the Comintern

Tsarist repression made the normal development of trade unionism in Russia impossible and there were no real trade unions before the 1905 Revolution. There was however the strange but instructive episode of the Zubatov unions. Sergei Zubatov was a teenage revolutionary who became first an informer and then later a Director of the Okhrana (the Tsarist secret police). In that capacity, in the period 1900-3, he set about organising workers' 'unions' in order to steal the thunder of the revolutionaries and keep the workers in line. What is interesting is that, instead of boycotting them as might have been expected, Lenin organised his supporters (they were not yet Bolsheviks) to do political work in these police unions<sup>47</sup> and, in almost every case, as the workers' struggle rose, these 'unions' got out of control of their masters. After a series of strikes in 1903, Zubatov was dismissed from his post. Similarly, Father Gapon, who was both a Russian Orthodox priest and a police agent, organized the Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers of St. Petersburg, which led the mass demonstration to the Winter Palace that culminated in Bloody Sunday and launched the 1905 Revolution. In both these cases, therefore, the fundamental class basis of these organisations, in conditions of mass struggle, at least partially overcame the worst possible leadership.

This lesson was not lost on Lenin or the Bolsheviks when it came to organising the Comintern (the Communist or Third International, founded in 1919 as a world party of revolution). The building of the Comintern in its early years involved political battles on two fronts: in the first place against reformism and centrism (centrism referred to the Kautskyite 'centre' of German social democracy and the international co-thinkers, formally Marxist but in practice reformist); in the second place against immature ultra-leftism, which became a significant force in many European countries during the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. On both fronts the question of the trade unions played an important role. In the struggle against centrism the Comintern bitterly denounced the leaders of the so-called Amsterdam Trade Union International (such as Carl Legien, Arthur Henderson and Leon Jouhaux) and sought to persuade unions to affiliate instead to the Red International of Labour Unions based in Moscow. Lenin explicitly compared them to Zubatov; 'The Gomperses, Hendersons, Jouhaux and Legiens are nothing but Zubatovs, differing from our Zubatov only in their European dress, polish etc'<sup>48</sup>. At the same time Trotsky was debating and discussing much more fraternally with various syndicalists from America, France and Spain (Monatte, Rosmer, Pestana etc) 'who not only wish to fight against the bourgeoisie but who... really want to tear its head off'.<sup>49</sup> seeking to persuade them of the need for a revolutionary party alongside of revolutionary trade unionism.

In the struggle against ultra-leftism, which became particularly urgent in 1920 as the post-war revolutionary wave receded, Lenin wrote one of his most important works, *'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, in preparation for the Third Congress of the Comintern. In it Lenin dealt with a number of issues - strategy and tactics, party and class, the policy of 'no compromise', the necessity of participating in bourgeois parliaments - but on the question 'should revolutionaries work in reactionary trade unions?' he was especially trenchant.

The German "Lefts" consider that, as far as they are concerned, the reply to this question is an unqualified negative. However firmly the German "Lefts" may be convinced of the revolutionism of such tactics, the latter are in fact fundamentally wrong, and contain nothing but empty phrases. We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense ...disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions, that it is permissible to turn down such work, that it is necessary to withdraw from the trade unions and create a brand-new and immaculate "Workers' Union" invented by very pleasant (and, probably, for the most part very youthful) Communists, etc., etc....

The trade unions were a tremendous step forward for the working class in the early days of capitalist development, inasmuch as they marked a transition from the workers' disunity and helplessness to the *rudiments* of class organisation... the development of the proletariat did not,

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<sup>47</sup>V.I Lenin, *'Left Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Peking, 1965, p.47

<sup>48</sup>as above p.47

<sup>49</sup>L.Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol.1, New York, p.98

and could not, proceed anywhere in the world otherwise than through the trade unions, through reciprocal action between them and the party of the working class.

We are waging a struggle against the "labour aristocracy" in the name of the masses of the workers and in order to win them over to our side; we are waging the struggle against the opportunist and social-chauvinist leaders in order to win the working class over to our side. It would be absurd to forget this most elementary and most self-evident truth. Yet it is this very absurdity that the German "Left" Communists perpetrate when, *because* of the reactionary and counter-revolutionary character of the trade union *top leadership*, they jump to the conclusion that ... we must withdraw from the trade unions, refuse to work in them, and create new and *artificial* forms of labour organisation! This is so unpardonable a blunder that it is tantamount to the greatest service Communists could render the bourgeoisie.... To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats.<sup>50</sup>

Lenin's polemic was very powerful - there is much more in the same vein as the above - but the basic idea is very simple: there are millions of workers in trade unions and, regardless of their leadership, they are the fundamental mass organisations of the working class; revolutionaries, therefore, are absolutely obliged to work in these unions so as to reach, influence and lead the mass of the working class. Lenin's position carried the day in the Communist International and subsequently has been the starting point in relation to trade unionism for all serious socialists ie socialists who base themselves on the working class.

However there was one weakness in Lenin's argument at this time. In attempting to explain the degeneration of the Second International into reformism and social chauvinism (support for imperialism and the First World War) and the fact that the Social Democrats retained significant support in the working class and in the unions, Lenin used the concept of the 'labour aristocracy' (taken from some of Engels' letters to Marx) which he outlined in his 1916 booklet, *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*.

objectively the *opportunists* are a section of the petty bourgeoisie and of a certain strata of the working class who *have been bribed* out of imperialist superprofits and converted to *watchdogs* of capitalism and *corruptors* of the labour movement...

A privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations.<sup>51</sup>

As Tony Cliff showed in '*Economic Roots of Reformism*' (1957) the idea that imperialism 'bribed' a very small upper stratum of the working class is flawed because none of the mechanisms for this 'bribery' (reduced unemployment, higher wages, labour law reforms, welfare etc) were, or could be, confined to an upper stratum but, instead, raised the general living standards of the working class as a whole in the advanced capitalist countries.

An inevitable conclusion following upon Lenin's analysis of Reformism is that a small thin crust of conservatism hides the revolutionary urges of the mass of the workers. Any break through this crust would reveal a surging revolutionary lava... This conclusion, however, is not confirmed by the history of Reformism in Britain, the United States and elsewhere over the past half century: its solidity, its spread *throughout* the working class, frustrating and largely isolating all revolutionary minorities, makes it abundantly clear that the economic, social roots of Reformism are not in "an infinitesimal minority of the proletariat and the working masses" as Lenin argued.<sup>52</sup>

This criticism pointed to the need for a more developed analysis of the role of reformist trade union leaders than just seeing them as 'bribed' by imperialism. It is a point to which we shall return.

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<sup>50</sup>as above, pp36-44

<sup>51</sup>V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, 1916

<sup>52</sup>Tony Cliff, '*Economic Roots of Reformism*', *Neither Washington Nor Moscow*, London 1982, p.109

As the Stalinist reaction took hold in Russia, from about 1923 onwards, and the Revolution degenerated towards state capitalism, so the Communist International was rapidly transformed from an instrument of international workers' revolution into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. Its main purpose came to be making friends with influential political forces and leaders who might be induced to oppose western intervention in Russia and this inevitably impacted on work in the unions. The most dramatic example of this was the episode of the Anglo- Soviet Trade Union Committee and its effect on the policy of the British Communist Party in the General Strike of 1926.

Established in 1925 the Committee was a joint council of Soviet trade union leaders and members of the TUC General Council (particularly its 'lefts'- Purcell, Hicks and Swales). Its aim, as stated by Stalin, was 'to organise a broad movement of the working class against imperialist wars in general, and against intervention in our country...by Britain in particular'.<sup>53</sup> As a result of this alliance the British CP, in the run up to the General Strike, muted its criticism of the trade union leaders in general and the 'lefts' in particular, even putting forward the slogan 'All Power to the General Council' as if it were a revolutionary soviet. In the event the TUC General Council, including its lefts, ignominiously betrayed the General Strike, calling it off after nine days, without any gains, while the strike was still gaining momentum. The fact that the CP had not warned the working class or its members of the danger of relying on the trade union leaders meant that it was unable either to avert the sell out or gain from it politically.

The whole episode became a major issue in the struggle between the Stalinists and the Left Opposition. Trotsky fought in the Central Committee of the CPSU for a demonstrative exposure and break with the strike breakers of the General Council. Of Purcell, Hicks and Swales he wrote, 'The left faction of the General Council is distinguished by its complete *ideological* shapelessness and therefore is incapable of *organisationally* assuming the leadership of the trade union movement'<sup>54</sup> and 'These 'left' friends, in a serious test, shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy and naturally extended their disappointment to the Communist Party itself, which had only been a passive part of this whole mechanism of betrayal'<sup>55</sup>. In short the left trade union leaders, as much as the right, were not to be trusted in a serious confrontation with the state and it was the duty of Marxists to make this clear to the workers.

In 1928, after five years of moving to the right, Stalin imposed on the Comintern what appeared to be a sharp turn to the left. It was declared that since 1917 there were three periods: 1917-24, the 'first period' of revolutionary upsurge; 1925-28, the 'second period' of capitalist stabilisation ; 1928 onwards, the 'third period' of the final crisis of capitalism and direct revolutionary struggle. This phase which became known as 'third period Stalinism' was characterised by extreme ultraleftism and sectarianism towards working class organisations. The corner stone of this strategy was the theory of Social Fascism according to which the Social Democrats were becoming, or had become, objectively fascist and therefore there could be no question of any united front with them.

What seems to have motivated the 'third period' was Stalin's desire to cloak his assault on Bukharin and the Russian peasantry and his drive to forced industrialisation of Russia in left-wing rhetoric, but its consequences for the international working class and for the international Communist movement were catastrophic. The worst disaster was in Germany where the refusal of the Communist Party to form a united front with the Social Democrats allowed Hitler to come to power without serious resistance, but the 'third period' also wrecked Communist work in the unions internationally.

Just as Social democracy is evolving through social imperialism to social-fascism, joining the vanguard of the contemporary capitalist state ... the social-fascist tradeunion bureaucracy is, during the period of sharpening economic battles, completely going over to the side of the big bourgeoisie.... In this process of the rapid fascistization of the reformist trade union apparatus...a particularly harmful role is played by the so-called 'left' wing.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup>J. Stalin, *On the Opposition*, Peking 1974, p.355

<sup>54</sup>Leon Trotsky *on Britain*, New York, 1973, p.163

<sup>55</sup>Leon Trotsky, *Writings on Britain*, Vol 2, p.253

<sup>56</sup>Resolution of the Comintern Executive, July 1929, cited in D.Hallas, *The Comintern*, London 1985, p.126.

Thus in the space of three years Comintern trade union policy had switched from uncritical support for the left trade union leaders to calling them fascists. The logic of this led to splitting the unions and the encouragement of breakaway trade unions. This was directly contrary to the policy that had been advocated by Lenin. 'We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense ...disquisitions of the German Lefts ...that it is necessary to withdraw from the trade unions and create a brand-new and immaculate "Workers' Union"'(as quoted above). Almost everywhere this was tried the effects were highly damaging because if the socialists and militants had the support of the majority of workers in a given union they would be able to transform it. But if, as was generally the case, they were only a minority then forming a breakaway new union had the effect of artificially isolating the militants from the less advanced workers and leaving the latter in the hands of the reformist bureaucrats and sell out merchants. In other words it actually divided the working class and assisted both the bureaucrats and the employers. Attempting to apply this line the membership of the French CP declined from 52,000 in 1928 to 39,000 in May 1930 and the British CP fell from 5,500 in 1928 to 3,500 in March 1929.

The disastrous nature of this strategy is worth stressing, not because third period Stalinism has any influence today or because it is likely to revive, but because the impulse to form breakaway unions can come from genuine trade union militants - in the midst of, or on the basis of, real struggles - who are rightly disgusted at the behaviour of their union officials. But however good the intentions of the workers concerned it has to be remembered that experience has shown that forming breakaway unions is almost always a mistake.

## **The International Socialist Tradition and the Trade Union Bureaucracy**

The next major contribution to the Marxist analysis of trade unionism was made by the International Socialists in the 1960s and 70s. This was a collective enterprise to which many comrades contributed - Colin Barker, Jim Higgins, Duncan Hallas, Chris Harman, Donny Gluckstein and others - and it was developed in dialogue with many trade union militants who may not have written books or articles but whose experience was fed into the theory; however it was Tony Cliff who was the driving force and leading theorist in the whole process.

The foundation in 1950 of the International Socialist tendency by Tony Cliff (in the shape of the tiny Socialist Review group in Britain) came in the early stages of the long post-war boom. The boom produced about twenty five years of rising living standards and more or less full employment accompanied by slow but steady strengthening of rather unpolitical trade unionism. Industrial disputes were numerous, generally small scale mostly quickly successful. In conditions of it was usually worth employers' while to concede workers demands in order to get production going again. On the basis of this workplace organisation thrived and 'the shop steward' became a figure of national importance - demonised by the right and lionised by the left.

As the boom petered out at the end of the sixties and turned into crisis in the seventies so the British ruling class launched an offensive against the unions. This generated a series of much larger, and more political, set piece confrontations, such as the Miners Strikes of 1972 and 1974 (which led to the 3-day week and the fall of Edward Heath's Tory Government) and the Petonville Five Dock's dispute of 1972 which nearly turned into a general strike (the government capitulated just in time). At first the workers generally won these struggles but union organisation was undermined by social partnership (known as the Social Contract) with the Labour Government of 1974-79. Then came Thatcher and a sustained assault on union power culminating in the major class defeat of the Miners Strike in 1984-5.

Throughout this period the trade union struggle was at the centre of British political life and Cliff and his comrades produced a sustained and, to some extent, path breaking analysis of trade unionism. A lot of ground was covered - the 'shifting locus of reformism' from parliament to the shop floor, the role of incomes policy and anti-union legislation<sup>57</sup>, the attempt to weaken unions through productivity deals<sup>58</sup>, the effects

<sup>57</sup>Tony Cliff and Colin Barker, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards*, London 1966

<sup>58</sup>Tony Cliff, *The Employers' Offensive: productivity deals and how to fight them*, London 1970

of the social contract and the down turn in struggle in the late seventies and early eighties.<sup>59</sup> At the heart of this analysis stood the question of the trade union bureaucracy.

As we have seen the tendency of trade union leaders to sell out the members was nothing new and was observed by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and many others such as Rosa Luxemburg and Daniel De Leon. However this was variously explained by a) personal ambition and bribery; b) their representing high paid 'labour aristocrats'; c) their reformist ideology. Instead Cliff viewed the trade union bureaucracy not as a series of individuals but as a distinct social layer, consisting of local and regional officials, as well as national leaders, standing between and, by virtue of their social role, mediating between the working class and the employers.

This layer was characterised by 1) higher pay (in the case of top leaders, much higher) and better conditions than the workers they represented; 2) the relative detachment of their conditions from those of their members, eg. a union official who gave away a tea break in negotiations did not thereby lose his/her tea break; 3) a working life which led to spending more time talking to management than to the shop floor; 4) a tendency to view disputes not as struggles to be won but as problems to be solved. At the same time the union officials remained ultimately dependent on the existence of the union and its membership to pay their wages, and were therefore subject to pressure from below. If the union officials openly abandoned all attempt to represent their members, the members would either remove the officials or leave the union; either way the officials would be out of a job. Their material interest, without bribery and regardless of ideology, was to maintain the balance between the employers and the workers.

This objective social position produced in the trade union bureaucracy an equally objective tendency to vacillate between the classes. Vacillation went both ways. Under pressure from the workers they could swing, in words and to some extent in deeds, to the left. Under pressure from the bosses (or the media and the government etc) or from fear that the rank-and-file would get out of control, they could and would swing to the right. The political ideology of the individual leader or official (which would normally range from right wing labour to left labour or Stalinist) was irrelevant in this but neither was it the main determining factor. The division between left and right in mattered but it was not fundamental; the fundamental division was between the officials and the rank-and-file.

Here is a sample of the kind concrete analysis of the unions that Cliff was able to make using this theoretical framework:

The large scale movement against the Industrial Relations Bill [Tory anti - union laws] saw a number of important political strikes - December 8th, January 12th, March 1st and March 18th - as well as the biggest working class demonstration on February 21st since the war. The movement, unofficial in origin, could not have developed on the scale it did without the support of sections of the trade union leadership. This support changed the atmosphere of the campaign and made possible the raising of slogans like 'TUC must call a General Strike' and 'Kick out the Tories'. The leftward shift of sections of the official movement - however limited it was - was the factor that made the slogans conceivable, and this shift reflected real pressure from significant numbers of militants within the movement.

These events have important political lessons. The ultra-left illusions that the official trade union movement is dead, that it cannot mobilise its membership and that the sole field of trade union activity for revolutionary socialists are unofficial rank and file committees, have been yet again exposed as dangerous nonsense. The danger now is that the opposite illusion may gain ground.

The vacillation of the trade-union bureaucracy between the state, employers and the workers, with splits in the far from homogeneous bureaucracy, will continue and become more accentuated during the coming period.

The union bureaucracy is both reformist and cowardly. Hence its ridiculously impotent and wretched position. It dreams of reforms but fears to settle accounts in real earnest with the state (which not only refuses to grant reforms but even withdraws those already granted); it also fears

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<sup>59</sup>Tony Cliff, '*The balance of class forces in recent years*', International Socialism 2:6 1979



the rank-and-file struggle which alone can deliver reforms. The union bureaucrats are afraid of losing what popular support they still maintain but are more afraid of losing their own privileges vis--vis the rank and file. Their fear of the mass struggle is much greater than their abhorrence of state control of the unions. At all decisive moments the union bureaucracy is bound to side with the state, but in the meantime it vacillates. It is important to see that this attitude actually introduces confusion and disorganisation into governmental policies themselves.

It is wrong to confuse the employers and the state with the ambivalent union bureaucracy, and to ignore the conflicts between them or to brush them aside. Because of its bureaucratic position, the union officialdom is in conflict with the workers, but because of its dependence on its members it is bound to reflect workers' pressures to some extent. Its policy is not consistent. Even the pattern of its retreats in the face of threats from employers or the state is not completely predictable.<sup>60</sup>

This analysis of the bureaucracy led a strategy for trade union work known as 'rank-and-fileism'. The Communist Party, previously the dominant force on the left of the British trade union movement, and the Labour lefts worked through what were known as 'Broad Lefts'- groups of activists whose primary function was to support and secure the election of left officials - the likes of Hugh Scanlon in the Engineering Union and Jack Jones in the Transport and General Workers Union. In contrast the main purpose of the Rank-and-file groups was to bring together workplace militants so as to enable them to act independently of the officials where necessary. This did not mean abstaining on union elections - the rank-and-file groups would support left against right and sometimes put up candidates themselves - but this was seen as secondary to developing networks and action at the base. A key element in this strategy was the fight for union democracy ie increasing the level of control of officials by the rank-and-file. As Cliff put it :

Apathy toward the trade unions will become more and more an impediment even to the immediate economic struggle for the defence of labour conditions. The demand for worker's control of the trade unions will become more and more vital. This demand can take the authentic form of a demand for radical changes in the structure of the unions, - election of all union officials, right of recall, paying them wages no higher than those of the members they represent - or the purely reformist, opportunist form of the CP and "left" labour - "Vote for X".<sup>61</sup>

At the height of the movement (in the early to mid seventies) the IS/SWP succeeded in building a number of rank-and-file organisations with significant support and substantial sales of their respective papers such as Rank-and-File Teacher, Dock Worker, Car Worker, Hospital Worker and so on. And when the severe downturn in industrial struggle of the early eighties forced the SWP to draw in its horns and disband the failing rank-and-file groups, it nevertheless maintained the principle of distrust of union officialdom and focus on the rank-and-file.

In recent years when a certain political radicalisation (especially in the shape of the anti-war movement) has gone alongside very low levels of industrial struggle the SWP has foregrounded the concept of 'political trade unionism'. This stressed the need of party members to raise in their union branches political issues, such as the Iraq War, racism and Palestine , as well as basic economic issues.

## The tradition summed up

The main conclusions that follow from these 170 years of Marxist engagement with trade unionism can be straightforwardly summarised.

1. Trade unions are the basic mass organisations of the working class and socialists support them, work in them and build their struggle in virtually all circumstances.

2. Trade unions though essential are limited. They are needed to defend the working class against the assaults of capital but in themselves they not able to overthrow capitalism. In addition to trade unions the working class needs its own -revolutionary - party and workers' councils .

<sup>60</sup> Tony Cliff, *'The Bureaucracy Today'*, International Socialism 1: 48 June 1971

<sup>61</sup> Tony Cliff, *In the Thick of Workers' Struggle: Selected Works*, Volume 2, London 2002, p. 139

3. Trade unions need to be, as far as possible, all encompassing organisations of the working class. Socialists, therefore, work as far as possible to maintain trade union unity. In general they oppose breakaway unions which tend to isolate the militants from the more passive majority and make it easier for the reformist union leaders to retain control.

4. Trade unions, almost universally, have developed bureaucratic leaderships which vacillate between the employers and the workers. Socialists, while supporting left leaders versus right in the unions, encourage workers at the base not to trust or rely on union officials and to organise independently of them within the unions.

5. Socialists fight to increase democracy in the unions: for the election and recallability of all union officials, for officials to receive the average wage of the members, for democratic conferences and so on.

## Are Irish Unions Different?

Is there anything so different about the Irish trade union movement as to make the Marxist tradition on trade unions inapplicable here or in need of major revision? I would argue that despite their very poor record in recent years there is not.

It is certainly true that twenty five years of social partnership has been an exceptionally long period of collaboration with the bosses and the state, and that such collaboration not only resulted in the working class's share of the national product decreasing - the share of wages, pensions and social security in the national income fell by 10 per cent in the first decade of social partnership<sup>62</sup> - but also in a huge fall in the level of strikes. In 1979 there were over 1,300,000 official strike days, in 1985 about 400,000 and in 1988 (after social partnership in 1987) under 200,000 falling to about 50,000 in 1989<sup>63</sup>. Moreover this fall in strike activity undermined the role of the shop steward and weakened union organisation in the work places. With wages settled at a national level, there was little for grass activists to do. This is illustrated by the fact that unofficial strikes declined even more than official ones. Whereas in the seventies the number of unofficial strikes substantially exceeded the official strikes, in the nineties under social partnership they almost disappeared<sup>64</sup>. And since 2000 the strike figures have fallen even further, so that in 2002 there were 21,257 strike days, in 2006, 7,352, in 2010 6,602 and in 2011 only 3,695<sup>65</sup>. The extremely low figure for 2011 must be attributed, at least in part, to the effects of the Croke Park Deal of June 2010.

It is also the case that Irish trade union leaders are very well paid, earning far more than their members:

The Irish Times... determined the pay and benefits of the bank trade union IBOA's general secretary, Larry Broderick, from a UK disclosure. His pay last year was €133,518 plus pension contributions of €46,731, a car, bonus and VHI benefits that totalled a further €19,957. His total package was 200,206. John Carr of the INTO has a salary of 172,000 while Peter McLoone of Impact has a salary of €171,313. McLoone's salary is the equivalent of that of the Cork County Manager. The general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, David Begg, has a salary of €137,400. He earns an additional €27,700 from his work as a director of the Central Bank and as a Governor of the Irish Times Trust. With the add-ons, total benefits would top €200,000 easily.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover there is more than a whiff of outright corruption as the very damaging Fas/SIPTU scandal showed<sup>67</sup>.

Finally there is the direct experience of many trade union activists (such as Eugene MacDonagh and Paul Shields) who regularly report on the failure of their union officials, and therefore of the union, to defend them or support any campaigns they try to mount. Eugene MacDonagh was a member of the National Bus and

<sup>62</sup>Kieran Allen, *The Celtic Tiger: the myth of social partnership in Ireland*, Manchester 2000, p. 71

<sup>63</sup>Joseph Wallace, *Industrial Relations in Ireland*, Dublin 2004 p.232

<sup>64</sup>See above, p.231

<sup>65</sup>Central Statistics Office, [http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2011/disputes\\_q42011.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2011/disputes_q42011.pdf)

<sup>66</sup>Fin Facts Ireland, [http://www.finfacts.ie/irishfinancenews/article\\_1018283.shtml](http://www.finfacts.ie/irishfinancenews/article_1018283.shtml)

<sup>67</sup>Michael O'Brien *Luxurious all expenses paid trips SIPTU/HSE training fund scandal*, *The Socialist*, July 2010

Rail Union National Executive victimised for union activity by Dublin Bus who had to wage a battle along with rank and file bus drivers (and with the support of socialist comrades and TDs but without support from his union) to get vindication in the courts. And, of course, it is the combination of all these factors that, along with the general failure to resist austerity, has fed the widespread mood of disillusionment and rejection of Irish trade unions that constituted this article's point of departure.

Nevertheless none of these truly appalling and miserable phenomena change certain basic realities. With 579,578 members in 2011, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions remains the largest civil society organisation in Ireland and, by a very long way, the largest organisation of working people [compared with the 8000 members of the Labour Party and less than a 1000 of the United Left Alliance]. What is more those half a million workers are, by comparison with the **average** (not by comparison with organised socialists), the more class conscious section of the proletariat - they have at least grasped the need for some kind of collective organisation. As a result the trade unions have a far greater mobilising capacity than any other organisation or organisations as was shown by the demonstrations of February 2009 and November 2010 and even the much smaller Dublin Council of Trade Unions anti-austerity march in November 2011. For all these reasons Lenin's arguments of 1920 that is imperative for socialists to work in even 'reactionary' trade unions retain all their force.

International comparisons are useful here. The first thing to realise is that trade unions exist in virtually every country in the world, from Togo to Botswana, from Mexico to Mongolia and, again, the existence of a more or less conservative trade union bureaucracy is equally universal. Trade union density (proportion of the workforce in a trade union) at 38% in Ireland is higher here than in the UK (23%) or Germany (18%) and much higher than in the US (11%). As we have seen the pay of Irish union leaders is shockingly high but not significantly higher than union leaders elsewhere - it has been estimated that 37 trade union general secretaries in the UK earn more than 100,000 a year and Derek Simpson of Amicus had a salary of 186,000. I do not have figures for US trade union leaders but they will almost certainly be much higher.

In terms of their behaviour the Irish trade union bureaucracy may be particularly conservative and undemocratic at the moment<sup>68</sup> but they are by no means unique. There have been periods, especially during Labour Governments, when the British union leaders have acted as a similar break on the struggle and under the Blair government strikes fell to record lows, while American unions have been notorious for their sweetheart deals and their business unionism. Dave Prentis and the (Labour Party) leadership of UNISON, Britain's largest union, have repeatedly witchhunted socialist activists and collaborated in their victimisation (eg the cases of Tony Staunton and Yunus Baksh). But this does not prevent these same rotten leaders changing their tune and when the mood in the class changes and they come under sufficient pressure from below: for example on March 26, 2011 the TUC organised perhaps the largest march in British trade union history and on November 30 mounted the biggest strike since the General Strike, while the support given by the US labour movement to the Occupy movement in Wall St., Oakland and elsewhere was hugely significant. That similar shifts can and will occur in Ireland is shown by the fact that in the midst of the steeply declining strike figures of the 2000s cited above there was the 'exceptional' year of 2009 when there were 329,593 strike days, and by the fact that the Unions have supported the Vita Cortex and La Senza occupations. Another example is SIPTU's recent call for the Household Charge to be dropped - Jack O'Connor sensed which way the wind was blowing and moved accordingly.

To note this does not mean to develop illusions in these bureaucrats. They may move to head struggles only in order then to behead them ie support in one phase of a battle can switch to sabotage in the next. This is what is happening right now on the part of Dave Prentis and others in the Pensions Battle. But is

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<sup>68</sup>One consequence of this would seem to be the relatively high level of breakaway trade unions that have been formed in recent years in Ireland. These have not been 'red' or 'revolutionary' unions, as advocated by German ultra-lefts in 1920 or the Stalinists in the 'third period'. Rather they have been a relatively spontaneous expression of the frustration of ordinary trade unionists at the failure of their unions to represent them and they have often involved switching from one union to another. These instances pose complex tactical issues and it is probably wrong to try to formulate a single one-size fits all policy. But a couple of general remarks are possible. Socialists sympathise with the frustrations of such workers but would usually argue against such moves for the kind of reasons given above, especially the need not to isolate the militants from the majority, and because the new unions tend rapidly to become as bureaucratic as the old. However, if we lose this argument and the breakaway takes place anyway, it may well be necessary for the revolutionary socialist trade unionists to go with and support the militant minority.

does mean that socialists absolutely have to be present and actively engaged in the unions. It means that in their union work they need to develop rank-and-file networks such as SIPTU for Change or the Bus Workers Rank-and-File which can enable them to pressurize the officials and, if necessary, act independently of them and which fight for much increased democracy in the unions. It also means, and this can only come through practical experience, they have to learn how to deal with the endless vacillations of the bureaucrats, resisting every move to the right and taking advantage of every move, large or small, to the left.

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