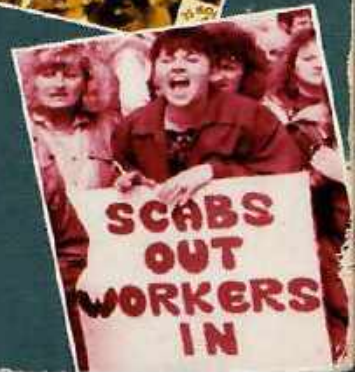




Socialists in the trade unions



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1 Capitalism, the unions and trade union leaders

Workers have only one strength — their collective ability to withdraw their labour and so bring the capitalist system to a halt. The great attraction of trade union power and the reason why millions of workers join unions is that they provide the organisation that can make this power effective.

But the unions also have two fundamental limitations. In the first place they are not usually organisations of the whole class but of only a part of the class. They are *trade* unions and therefore mirror the divisions imposed on workers by the capitalist system — divisions between white and blue collar workers, between engineers and miners, between the unemployed and the employed. Secondly, the unions devote themselves to improving workers' conditions within the existing framework of the capitalist system, not to fighting for workers to take control of the system. To adapt a formulation of Karl Marx's, they combat the effects of capitalist exploitation, rather than striving to do away with the exploitation itself.

These two weaknesses lead to a third. Trade unionism, trade union leaders and, for most of the time, the majority of trade union members, accept that there is a sharp division between politics and economics. Put most crudely, this leads to an attitude which sees unions concerned with the economic struggle over wages, conditions and the like, while the Labour party concerns itself with politics in parliament on workers' behalf. Going along with this idea often means the challenge of the organized working class is blunted. It encourages the belief that the class struggle between labour and capital is a non-political, economic and social issue and that workers' interests are best served through negotiation and reform rather than through the revolutionary transformation of society. It helps stop workers' moving on from demanding a better return from capitalism to challenging the very existence of capitalism as a social and economic system.

When struggles take place on a large scale it's easy to see how important these limitations can become in determining whether workers or the government and the bosses win out. For example, the threat of Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980s was such an explosive, potentially revolutionary challenge to the Stalinist regime there that no such distinction between economics and politics could easily be drawn. The regime not only denied the mass of the population the effective rights of citizenship but controlled the bulk of the economy. Fighting for a wage-increase was a challenge to the state. Where, however, the state is kept at arm's length from the direct struggle between workers and bosses, workers' struggles to improve their situation at work don't necessarily threaten the structure of society, so the division between politics and economics seems to have more basis in reality.

The separation of economics and politics finds its clearest expression where capitalist democracy prevails — in what are called the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America. These involve institutions such as universal suffrage, regular elections, a multi-party system and the liberal freedoms (of speech, assembly, organization and so on). Liberal democracy extends to voting for a government but not to having any say in the running of the company that employs you. You can vote for who you like at election times, but the same people are still there in the board rooms of Shell, Unilever, BP, British Gas and every other company in the country.

Liberal democracy treats everyone as politically equal citizens. So, media mogul Rupert Murdoch has only one vote, the same as the print workers he employs in his non-union print works. But this formal equality hides the huge inequality in their wealth, power and political influence. Murdoch has power because he has capital, his workers have no capital and, consequently, virtually no political influence.

Workers have always had to fight to win the right to vote, the right to free speech, the right to join trade unions and so on. These struggles are an important step in the development of the workers movement. As the great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky argued, capitalist democracy provides a framework within which workers can develop their own class organizations:

In the course of many decades, the workers have built up within the bourgeois democracy, by utilizing it, by fighting against it, their own strongholds and bases of proletarian democracy: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sports clubs, the cooperatives etc.¹

The other side to this relationship is that, while capitalist democracy permits the development of working-class organization (not simply trade unions but also the parties linked to the unions, like Labour in Britain), it also seeks to contain and to incorporate that organization. Many things determine whether such attempts at incorporation will succeed. A weak union movement and a right wing Labour Party will be more easily contained than a powerful, left wing labour movement. A union movement that has just scored a series of victories will be harder to blunt than one that has suffered a series of defeats. But more than any other single factor capitalist democracy's ability to contain the organized working class depends on economic prosperity. A rich and expanding economy is likely to have the capacity to grant improvements in working-class living standards. An ailing economy is less likely to be able to. If the trade-union

struggle is unable to deliver increases in real wages, then workers are less willing to confine themselves within a capitalist framework.

The great waves of economic expansion which the capitalist system enjoyed in the mid-and late nineteenth century and more recently during the Long Boom of the 1950s and 1960s, provided the prosperity which saw both Labour and Tory governments granting reforms. In times of economic boom it is possible, thanks to rises in labour productivity and expanding demand for goods and services, simultaneously to increase both profits and real wages, temporarily escaping the bind which, Marx argued, drives bosses and workers into conflict with each other. But equally, periods of sustained and severe economic slump limit capitalists' room for manoeuvre and forces them to attack jobs, wages and conditions. These assaults often unleash class struggles which can no longer be so easily contained.

The trade union bureaucracy

There is one other crucial condition for the kind of trade unionism typical of the capitalist democracies — the existence of the trade-union bureaucracy, that is, of a social layer made up of full time officials with a material interest in confining the class struggle to the search for reforms within a capitalist framework. At the end of the nineteenth century Sidney and Beatrice Webb, co-authors of the Labour Party's Clause 4, were admiring the formation of a bureaucracy of full-time trade-union officials:

during these years we watch a shifting of the leadership in the trade union world from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of salaried officers expressly chosen out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity.²

Fifteen years later the sociologist Robert Michels detected the emergence of a similar layer of full-time officials in the German Labour Party, the SPD: There already exists in the proletariat an extensive stratum consisting of the directors of co-operative societies, the secretaries of trade unions, the trusted leaders of various organizations, whose psychology is entirely modelled upon that of the bourgeois classes with whom they associate.³

The 1920s saw the consolidation of the trade-union bureaucracy in Britain (and early signs of its willingness to collaborate with the state). This process was promoted by the rapid expansion of union membership during and after the Great War (2.6 million in 1914, 8.3 million in 1920), a series of amalgamations which led to the formation of such giant general unions as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW) — core of the modern General and Municipal Boilermakers union (GMB) — and the growth of national collective bargaining to replace the

district settlements which had set wage rates before 1914.⁴ The commitment of the TUC General Council to class collaboration was also fully demonstrated early on when it hastily called off the General Strike of May 1926. After the strike the negotiations it pursued with top industrialists — the Mond-Turner talks — ensured an official strike call was not issued again until into the 1950s. In June 1940, with the appointment of the TGWU general secretary, Ernest Bevin, as Minister of Labour and National Service in Winston Churchill's coalition government the trade-union bureaucracy's incorporation into the state machine was formalized.⁵

The formation of a conservative labour bureaucracy is inherent in the very nature of trade unionism. The trade-union struggle is concerned with improving the terms on which workers are exploited, not with ending that exploitation. Confining the class struggle within the limits of capitalism presumes that the interests of labour and capital can be reconciled — that higher wages can be won without undermining profitability. The compromises that are forced on workers when the balance of class forces is against them are inevitable so long as the trade-union struggle is kept within the limits of capitalist society. Someone has to negotiate these compromises. Therefore, there is a pressure which encourages a division of labour between the mass of workers and their trade-union representatives. The latter's time is increasingly spent in bargaining with employers. Some of these representatives sooner or later become full-time workers for the union, paid out of members' subscriptions. The effect, whatever the beliefs of the officials, is to isolate them from those they represent.

Full-time officials are removed from the discipline of the shopfloor, from the dirt and dangers often found there, from the immediate conflicts with supervisor and manager, from the fellowship of their workmates, to the very different environment of an office. Even if they are not paid more than their members (and they usually are), their earnings no longer depend on the ups and downs of capitalist production — they no longer involve working overtime, nor are they vulnerable to short-time working. If a plant is closed the official who negotiates the redundancies will not get the sack. Constantly closeted with management, full timers come to see negotiation, compromise, the reconciliation of capital and labour as the very stuff of trade unionism. Struggle appears as a disruption of the bargaining process, a nuisance and inconvenience, which may threaten the accumulated funds of the union. The efficient running of the union machine becomes an end in itself, threatening even the limited goal of improving the terms on which the worker is exploited.

The great German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg well described the political effects of 'the introduction of a regular trade union officialdom' in Germany after 1890:

the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads too easily to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook. Both, however, express themselves in . . . the overvaluation of the organization, which from being a means has gradually changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated. From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace that shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade unions, and the overvaluation of the trade-union method of struggle, its prospects and its successes.

Luxemburg also noted how this was accompanied by ‘a revolution in the relations of leaders and rank and file’, so that ‘the initiative and power of making decisions . . . devolve upon trade-union specialists . . . and the most passive virtue of discipline upon the mass of members’.⁶ The basic process was the same in all the advanced capitalist countries — the emergence of a distinctive social layer of full-time officials with interests different to those of the rank and file. Full timers are at the same time committed to the improvement of workers’ conditions within the limits of capitalism but also reluctant to use even the weapons of economic class struggle for fear of disrupting their relations with the employers and endangering the stability and resources of their organisations.⁷

The conservatism of the trade-union bureaucracy has material, economic roots. Full time trade-union officials are an economically privileged group compared to the workers they represent. A recent study of trade-union officials in Britain showed that 61 percent of General Secretaries earned more than £30,000 per year in 1991.⁸ In some cases the gulf is even wider. Alan Johnson, currently joint general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, receives a pay and perks package worth £72,570 a year, compared to the average of £14,000 earned by the postal delivery workers he represents. Sometimes lay officials and representatives are drawn into the same network of material privileges. Members of the executive council of the union of Rail, Maritime and Transport workers (RMT) are seconded to work full-time for the union during their three-year term, and are paid an annual ‘allowance’, usually worth £28,000.⁹ These material privileges give the trade-union bureaucracy a stake in maintaining the capitalist society which grants them a role negotiating the terms on which workers are exploited. This in turn creates a conflict of interests between the full-time officials and rank and file workers who have an interest in reducing, and ultimately abolishing their exploitation by the bosses.

The struggles workers wage, even simply to wrest reforms out of the existing system, may threaten its stability. So again and again union leaders intervene to prevent these struggles from getting out of control and end them on terms which

fall far short of their members' aspirations. The burning resentment these betrayals create among ordinary workers gives rise, in certain conditions (which we will look at more closely in the next chapter), to rank-and-file organizations which fight independently of the officials.

It is important to understand that while a full-scale trade-union bureaucracy tends to be found chiefly in rich countries like Britain and the US, the tendency towards the development of such a bureaucracy is inherent in any trade-union movement of any size. A good illustration is provided by the case of COSATU in South Africa. Independent unions were built in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s on the basis of strong democratic control by the rank and file. Shop stewards, the workers' lay representatives, were given a key role in the new workers' movement which became increasingly involved in political struggles as time went on. But by the end of the 1980s, as the unions became more and more involved in national bargaining with the employers and the state, even a sympathetic history of COSATU was forced to acknowledge that 'it is usually union officials who wield real power, with elected worker leaders and executive committee acting as a check on the abuse of that power.'¹⁰ So even militant trade unionism isn't immune to bureaucratic tendencies. These tendencies arise from the self-limiting nature intrinsic to trade unionism, its pursuit of a better life for workers within existing society.

Left and right officials

The conflict between bureaucracy and rank and file is the fundamental division inside the trade-union movement. However, many of the British left would dispute this claim. The Communist Party, the key political influence among left-wing trade unionists in Britain until it began to fall apart in the 1980s, argued from the mid-1920s onwards that the main division within the unions was the political one between left and right. Therefore, socialists should concentrate on getting left-wing officials elected. It was on this basis that the CP developed a strategy of building Broad Lefts. These operated essentially as electoral coalitions grouping left wingers together in order to support a left wing candidate in union elections. The CP no longer exists, but the Broad Left strategy is still very attractive to many trade union activists.

The analysis behind this strategy is, on the face of it, quite plausible. Plainly there are deep political divisions among the trade-union leaders. For example, miners' leader Arthur Scargill stands for a very different kind of trade unionism from that represented by right winger Bill Jordan of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU). The most important union controlled by the left, the TGWU, can be counted on to stand up at TUC and Labour Party conferences and defend policies that are substantially different from those

advocated by right-led unions such as the the AEEU. The real question, however, isn't whether these divisions exist, but whether they are more important than the interests binding all union officials together as a distinct social group. Quite contrary to its authors' own views, one recent study found:

officers provided strong evidence of a desire to retain discretion and limit control by union members. For example, 74 per cent of officers reported that they preferred members and lay representatives to present them with 'open-ended' claims (e.g. a request for a 'substantial increase') and 75 per cent disagreed with the statement that, 'The full-time officer should always go along with the wishes of his/her members' . . . most officers were keen to preserve their negotiating discretion and escape from close control by members.¹¹

The divisions among union officials are a consequence of the fact that trade unions are democratic mass organizations. Debates within unions reflect a variety of pressures: some of these involve the intervention of the bosses — usually through the agency of the mass media — in internal union politics. The right-wing leaders of the old electricians' union (now part of the AEEU) benefited considerably from the backing they received from the Tory press. Other pressures come from the rank and file. The battle to win unions for the left is often an echo of great class struggles. Arthur Scargill's election as president of the mineworkers' union in 1981 would have been inconceivable without the series of miners' strikes, official and unofficial, between 1969 and 1974 and his own role within them.

It is understandable enough that rank-and-file activists, impatient with betrayals by right-wing officials should believe that by replacing the latter with left-wingers drawn from their own ranks they can transform the unions into real fighting organizations. But this belief reflects a lack of self-confidence on the rank and file's part, since it invites them to rely on putting the right people at the top of the union rather than on using their own strength and organization. After all, the miners won their greatest victories, in the national strikes of 1972 and 1974, under the leadership of a right-wing president, Joe Gormley.

In any case, the differences between the left and right officials are less important than what unites them. Even the most radical left-wing leader is still part of the same social group as his or her right-wing counterparts — the union bureaucracy. This means that he or she is likely, at crucial junctures, to hold back the struggle, and to strike rotten compromises with the employers. At the end of the 1926 General Strike, the left wing of the TUC General Council headed by Alonzo Swales, A. A. Purcell, and George Hicks agreed with the right in calling off the strike and leaving the miners to fight on alone and suffer bitter defeat after a six-month lock-out. Once again, it was the two great leaders of the trade-union

left, Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the engineers, who played the key role in implementing a Social Contract with the 1974-79 Labour government that led to the biggest cut in real wages for a century.

Two factors weigh particularly heavily with all trade-union officials, whatever their political beliefs. One is the union machine itself — its organization, finances, etc. — which, as Luxemburg put it, they tend to see as ‘an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated’.¹² The succession of anti-union laws introduced by Tory governments after 1979 struck a shrewd blow by bringing the weight of the laws to bear chiefly onto union assets. It is an extremely rare union leader who is prepared to risk the union’s funds in order to prosecute a strike. The National Union of Mineworkers’ leadership was prepared to take this risk during the Great Strike of 1984-85, but it was shunned by the rest of the union bureaucracy which stood by while lawyers representing scab miners were allowed to seize NUM assets. Indeed, the main thrust of Tory anti-union legislation has been less to dismantle the trade unions than to strengthen the power of the full-time officials and give them an added incentive to intervene to prevent strikes by threatening their funds. A survey of managers showed that they only rarely actually used the law in industrial disputes. Rather, as one of them put it, ‘legislation has led to a greater emphasis on the full use of avoidance-of-dispute procedures and involvement of full-time officials. In turn this has led to a more professional approach to establishing and maintaining agreements.’¹³

Union officials are also strongly influenced by a sense of collective responsibility which makes them reluctant to rock the boat. We can see this very clearly in the case of the most prominent left-wing trade unionist to have emerged since the early 1970s, Arthur Scargill. During the 1984-85 strike he strongly pushed for a far more militant prosecution of the dispute than the majority of the NUM executive was prepared to endorse. Yet he never broke publicly with the rest of the executive or encouraged rank-and-file miners to pursue the tactics that could win the strike in defiance of their officials. This allowed the powerful but conservative NUM Area leaderships — particularly that headed by Jack Taylor in Yorkshire — to sit on the strike, and allow it to gradually die from passivity and despair.¹⁴

Even more remarkable was Scargill’s behaviour after the Tory government announced plans to close 31 pits in October 1992. There was an enormous explosion of popular anger. The pit-closures programme provided a focus for all the resentments that had been building up against an economy in recession and the mean and incompetent government presiding over it. Had a general strike been called then, the Tories would probably have fallen. Predictably enough the

then TUC General Secretary, Norman Willis, marched firmly in the opposite direction, calling for a ‘cooling-off period’. The TUC’s policy was for protests — held jointly with the employers, then busy making tens of thousands of workers redundant. Yet Scargill did nothing to challenge this approach in deed or even in word. When groups of miners proposed to occupy pits threatened with closure, he intervened to stop this happening. The Tories were able to shut down even more pits than they had originally envisaged. After the event Scargill denounced the TUC for leaving the miners in the lurch. He was right about this — but he ignored his own failure to lead a real fight against the destruction of the mining industry.¹⁵

None of this means that the divisions within the trade-union bureaucracy are somehow irrelevant. Left officials are more likely to support better policies than right-wing ones. Their election is indicative of some willingness to fight on the part of the rank and file. Therefore socialists should support the trade-union left in its struggles with the right. This is different, however, from relying on any official, whatever his or her politics. Rank-and-file workers must look to themselves, and the organization and solidarity they are able to build, not to anyone at the top of the unions.

The trade union bureaucracy and the state

The trade-union bureaucracy provides the social base of reformist political parties. The Labour Party and its counterparts elsewhere, like the German SPD and the Socialist Parties of southern Europe, seek to reform capitalism, to make it a more democratic and humane system, while leaving its basis in the exploitation of the working class untouched. This corresponds closely to the pursuit of compromise between labour and capital that is the trade-union leaders’ reason for existence.

Sometimes the link between union officialdom and reformist political organization takes a formal, institutional shape, as in the case of the block vote wielded by affiliated unions at Labour Party conferences (though this has been watered down by the introduction of one member, one vote, which gives MPs and members of constituency parties considerably more say than trade unionists in leadership elections). More usually, the connection is an informal one, but the alliance between union bureaucrats and reformist parliamentarians is no less real in countries like Germany than it is in Britain.¹⁶

Trade-union leaders are committed to the reform of capitalism, not its overthrow. If forced to choose between preserving the existing system and a revolutionary struggle against it, they will always choose the former. Tony Cliff provides a classic description of how union leaders — left and right alike —

vacillate as a consequence of their social position and of their ultimate loyalties in times of crisis and class confrontation:

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) and it also fears the rank-and-file struggle which alone can deliver reforms. The union bureaucrats are afraid of losing their own privileges vis-a-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.¹⁷

A particularly clear example of the way in which the bureaucracy always comes down on the side of the existing state in times of crisis is provided by Britain in 1919. Some historians regard this year as the most dangerous year ever faced by British capitalism. Revolution in Europe, widespread industrial unrest, army mutinies, even a police strike: all of these seemed to threaten a ruling class gravely weakened by the First World War. This class, under the skillful leadership of the prime minister, David Lloyd George, nevertheless benefited from the unwillingness of the trade union bureaucracy to confront the state.¹⁸ The Triple Alliance of mineworkers, railworkers, and transport workers threatened to strike in support of the miners' demand for the nationalization of the their industry. The left-wing Labour leader Aneurin Bevan describes the crucial meeting between the government and the leaders of the Triple Alliance, based on what Robert Smillie, secretary of the Miners' Federation and himself a prominent left-winger, had told him:

Lloyd George sent for the labour leaders, and they went, so Robert told me, 'truculently determined they would not be talked over by the seductive and eloquent Welshman . . . He was quite frank with us from the outset,' Bob went on. 'He said to us: "Gentlemen, you have fashioned the Triple Alliance of the unions represented by you, a most formidable instrument. I feel bound to tell you that in our opinion we are at your mercy. The Army is disaffected and cannot be relied on. Trouble has occurred already in a number of camps. We have just emerged from a great war and the people are eager for the reward of their sacrifices, and we are in no position to satisfy them. In these circumstances if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us.

"But if you do so," went on Mr Lloyd George, "have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the Government of the country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. for if a force arises in the State that is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State, or withdraw and accept the authority of the State. Gentlemen," asked the Prime Minister quietly,

“have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?” From that moment on,’ said Robert Smillie, ‘we were beaten and we knew we were.’¹⁹

Lloyd George had the trade-union leaders’ measure. The strike was called off. The same pattern was at work during the General Strike of 1926. The TUC was pledged to strike in support of the miners, who were threatened with pay-cuts. The Tory prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, was intent on achieving a general reduction in wages. The General Council wanted to treat the issue as a trade-union dispute, without political overtones. Baldwin made it a constitutional question, depicting the General Strike as a challenge to the state (as indeed it was). Once it was posed in these terms the TUC’s only thought was to flee the field of battle. Its attitude was summed up by the railwaymen’s leader, J.H. Thomas: ‘I have never disguised that, in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us, unless the government won. That is my view.’²⁰ No wonder that, under leadership of this calibre, the General Strike was soon called off and the miners deserted.

Nor is opting for the state a peculiarly British disease. One of the greatest upheavals in an advanced capitalist country came in France in May-June 1968, when a student revolt sparked off a massive general strike directed at the government of General Charles de Gaulle. It took the concerted efforts of the leaders of the CGT, the main union federation and members of the Communist Party to persuade the workers to end their strike in exchange for wage-increases and a general election.

The same pattern can be seen even in more politically unstable countries than Britain and France. Solidarity in 1980-81 was one of the greatest workers’ movements in history, ten million workers democratically organized against the Polish state. But the union’s leadership under Lech Walesa pursued a strategy they called ‘self-limiting revolution’, which involved seeking compromise between the working class and the Polish regime. Their reward was the imposition of martial law in December 1981, and the wholesale repression of Solidarity, a blow from which the union never recovered. The regime finally collapsed in 1989 because of its own internal weaknesses rather than as a result of the pressure of mass opposition.

The union bureaucracy’s loyalty to the state is the clearest sign of the limitations of trade unionism — of its tendency to confine workers’ struggles within the framework of the existing system by accepting a sharp separation between economics and politics. It underlines the need for a political organization which, rather than seeking reforms from the existing state, supports workers’ struggles against that state. What is wanted is a political party of

workers which seeks to replace the old system with a new form of state based on the democratic mass organizations of the working class. Building such a party is inseparable from the struggles that develop within the unions between bureaucracy and rank and file. Let's take a look at these struggles.

Chapter 1

1. L.D. Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, (New York 1971), p. 158.
2. S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism 1666-1920*, (Edinburgh 1919), p. 204.
3. R. Michels *Political Parties*, (Glencoe IL 1949), p. 19.
4. See J. Hinton and R. Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution*, (London 1975), pp. 18ff
5. On the wartime watershed see P. Addison, *The Road to 1945*, (London 1977).
6. *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, (New York 1970), pp. 214-17.
7. It is important not to confuse the Marxist theory of the trade union bureaucracy with the apparently closely related idea of the labour aristocracy. The latter phrase came into use among socialists in Britain in the mid nineteenth century to refer to the relatively small group of well paid craft workers then organized in trade unions. Compared to the mass of low paid, unskilled, and unorganized workers (many of them women and Irish immigrants), these certainly seemed like a privileged elite. Lenin took the idea much further during the First World War. He argued that the failure of the European labour movement to oppose the war reflected the fact that a substantial group of workers had in effect been bought off with the 'super-profits' the capitalists had been able to gain by exploiting the workers and peasants in the colonial empires. Even in straightforward economic terms this theory doesn't really stand up, since it is very hard to identify any particular group of Western workers who might have benefited from imperialism more than any others. Moreover, it was the group usually seen as the heart of the nineteenth century labour aristocracy — skilled metalworkers — who were in the vanguard of the great revolutionary upsurge of the European working class which swept the continent at the end of the First World War, from Petrograd and Moscow to Berlin, Turin, Sheffield and Glasgow. These traditionally well paid and organized workers were in the firing line because the wages and conditions they had achieved during the years of peaceful expansion were now under attack. In the struggles that developed stark divisions opened up between rank and file militancy and the conservatism of the bureaucracy even within old craft unions like the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. See T. Cliff, 'The Economic Roots of Reformism', in *Neither Washington nor Moscow*, (London, 1982), and T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle*, (London, 1986), ch. 3.
8. J. Kelly and E. Heery, *Working for the Union*, (Cambridge, 1994), p. 65.
9. *Financial Times*, 17 September, 1994.
10. J. Baskin, *Striking Back*, (Johannesburg 1991), p. 461.
11. Kelly and Heery, *Working*, pp. 85-86.
12. See *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*
13. 'Management and Law', *IDS Focus* 62, March 1992, p. 5.
14. See A. Callinicos and M. Simons, *The Great Strike*, (London 1985).
15. See M. Simons, 'A Battle Undermined', *Socialist Review*, December 1993 and A. Scargill's *History Distorted*, *ibid.*, February 1994.
16. See T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History*, (London 1988).
17. T. Cliff, 'On perspectives', *International Socialism* 35 (1969).
18. See C. Rosenberg, *1919*, (London 1987).
19. A. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, (London 1952), pp. 20-1.
20. Quoted in Cliff and Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle*, p. 181.

2 Rank and file movements

Rank-and-file organizations are bodies of work place delegates subject to direct election and recall by the workers they represent. Both their workplace basis and the direct control of non full-time representatives by the rank and file distinguish these forms of organization from official trade-union structures. Official structures are usually organized on geographical rather than workplace lines and the full-time officials, even when they are elected rather than appointed, often hold office for life. Rank-and-file organizations, even though they usually exist within the official structures (and are sometimes closely integrated in them), arise directly from the daily struggle on the shop floor and often in conflict with the trade-union bureaucracy. Usually no-one plans their formation in advance.

The distance of trade-union officials from their members, and their commitment to class compromise inevitably brings them into conflict with the mass of trade unionists. The bureaucrats' betrayals of specific struggles make the rank and file aware of the clash of interests between themselves and their 'representatives' and therefore of the need for forms of organization more responsive to their own needs and wishes. Moreover, the centralized structure of trade-union officialdom and its isolation from the shop floor, can promote the growth of structures in the workplace able to react immediately to the everyday conflicts which arise. Situations where a significant portion of workers' earnings are fixed by local plant or shop bargaining will also encourage the emergence of these structures.

The shop stewards in Britain are a classic example of rank-and-file organizations. They first emerged in the engineering industry in 1892 as agents of the district committees of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), doing jobs like dues-collecting and signing on new members. However,

shop stewards did not confine themselves to supplying information and undertaking organizational work on behalf of the District Committees. The tradition of workshop delegates serving on deputations to their employers continued, and the workshop deputation was a recognized part of the collective bargaining procedures.¹

But if rank-and-file organizations tend to start from wage bargaining in the workplace they can in certain circumstances become organs of workers' power, challenging the authority of the capitalist state. The experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 showed how workers' councils — what Russian workers called soviets — can develop out of the struggle in workplaces over

partial economic demands. The first soviet was formed in St Petersburg in 1905 out of a strike by typesetters who wanted to be paid for setting punctuation marks. It developed into a rival government to the Tsar's, organizing an insurrectionary general strike. Trotsky, the president of the St Petersburg soviet, wrote:

The soviet appears most often and primarily in connection with strike struggles that have the perspective of revolutionary development, but are in the given moment limited merely to economic demands . . . soviets [are] that broad and flexible organizational form that is accessible to the masses who have just awakened at the very first of their revolutionary upsurge; and which is capable of uniting the working class in its entirety, independent of the size of that section which, in the given phase, has already matured to the point of understanding the task of the seizure of power.²

The great Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci, saw that rank-and-file organizations could become organs of workers' power. He did so on the basis of the experience of Italy in 1918-20, the so called *biennio rosso*, when two years of revolutionary struggle saw workers shake society from top to bottom. At the centre of this social and political earthquake were the metalworkers of Turin. They turned their shop stewards' committees — the internal commissions — from bodies for defending the privileges of skilled craftsmen into committees of factory delegates uniting skilled and unskilled, trade unionists and non trade unionists, who increasingly sought to assert their control over production. Gramsci argued:

Today the internal commissions limit the power of the capitalist in the factory and perform functions of arbitration and discipline. Tomorrow, developed and enriched, they must be organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration.³

However, if rank-and-file organizations have the potential to become the basis of workers' councils, there is nothing inevitable about this happening. Indeed, rank-and-file organizations may not develop at all when union organization is weak or when the control of the full-time officials is tight — shop stewards in the United Autoworkers in the US are appointed rather than elected for example. In Britain the strength and militancy of shop stewards' organization have varied considerably depending on the shifting balance of power between labour and capital.

Equally, it is only in certain very specific conditions that rank-and-file organization and revolutionary socialist politics converge. The politics of rank-and-file organizations are usually far from revolutionary. This is inevitable since these workplace organizations, just like unions generally, start by seeking to win material improvements for particular groups of workers within the framework of capitalism. It is only in periods of economic and social crisis, when the

employers and the state are forced to attack rank-and-file organizations, that the workers involved in them are led to think in class rather than sectional terms.

In such circumstances rank-and-file *movements* can emerge which are concerned to fight on the more general class front and to link together workers in different localities and industries. Such movements are usually led by revolutionary socialists, since it is only they who can give rank-and-file organizations the necessary political independence of both the bosses and the bureaucracy.

The Great Unrest and the first shop stewards movement

The years between 1910 and 1921 saw a sharp escalation in the industrial struggle in Britain (see Table 1)⁴. Out of this came the first real rank-and-file movement. Before the First World War British capitalism was under severe pressure from rising industrial powers like Germany and the United States. In response to this pressure employers sought to restructure production, attacking wages and conditions. In industries like mining and engineering this involved a formidable offensive against the workers. It was in these conditions that shop stewards' organization began to develop into a real force. The employers' offensive provoked, a huge explosion of workers' struggles, the Labour Unrest of 1910-14.

The two most immediate characteristics of the unrest were mass strikes and rapid union recruitment. From 1910 until the outbreak of war, working days lost rose to an annual total of 10 million, while union membership increased from 2.1 million to 4.1 million over the same period.⁵ The trade-union movement grew as a result of intense industrial struggles. First came bitter, largely unofficial strikes in the South Wales coalfield in 1910-11. The summer of 1911 saw fierce seafarers' and dockers' strikes in a number of cities and the first national railway strike. These were followed by a national miners' strike in the winter of 1911-12 and a strike by London transport workers the next summer.

The most notable feature of the Labour Unrest was the high degree of aggressive, sometimes violent and often unofficial industrial militancy. The strikers again and again clashed with both their own trade-union officials and with the forces of the state. Thus during the general transport strike on Merseyside in August 1911 the city authorities formed a committee of public safety and brought 3,000 troops and several hundred police into the city. Gunboats patrolled the Mersey to intimidate the strikers. The strike united the working class of Liverpool. The sectarian division between Protestants and Catholics, whipped up at that time by the pro-Tory Orange Order, was temporarily forgotten. One striker remembered that on the great demonstration of 13 August, when 80,000 workers took to the streets, 'the Garston band had walked five miles and their drum-major proudly whirled his sceptre twined with orange and green ribbons as he led his contingent band, half out of the Roman

Catholic, half out of the local Orange band.’ On that day — known on Merseyside as Bloody Sunday — police and troops brutally broke up the march. But the working class of Liverpool fought back. The *Times* described ‘guerrilla warfare’ raging during the days that followed. In one neighbourhood ‘the crowd erected barbed wire entanglements on a scientific scale and entrenched themselves behind barricades and dustbins and other domestic appliances.’⁶

Workers were thus being driven into conflict with the state itself. Moreover, a minority were so embittered by the failure of the trade-union leaders to support their struggles that they began to look for ways of using workers’ growing industrial power directly to challenge the very existence of capitalism. Syndicalism grew in influence during the Labour Unrest. The syndicalists sought to transform the existing, still mainly craft unions into industrial unions each organizing all the workers in a particular industry as the basis of a workers’ state.

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 caused a temporary abatement in industrial militancy and indeed there was a sharp fall in strikes during the war. Like their counterparts in the rest of Europe, the leaders of the Labour Party and the TUC supported their own state’s war effort. In March 1915, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and other unions concluded the Treasury Agreement with Lloyd George, the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer. Under this union leaders accepted ‘dilution’ — the introduction of unskilled workers to do jobs previously done by craftsmen — in order to increase war production. Pressure brought on by this agreement and by war time wages and conditions radicalized many engineering workers. A number of major industrial centres, most notably Glasgow and Sheffield, saw bitter struggles in the engineering industry. These gave birth to the Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committee Movement. This first rank-and-file movement was based on the Workers’ Committees formed on the Clyde, in Sheffield and elsewhere and brought together shopfloor representatives from many different unions and industries to co-ordinate their struggles.⁷

The shop stewards’ leaders were, in the main, revolutionary socialists of one variety or another — men like J.T. Murphy and Willie Gallacher who were later to play a leading role in the Communist Party. Their supporters, however, were mostly skilled engineering workers concerned to resist the erosion of craft privilege. The largest of the strikes called by the SS and WCM, those of May 1917 involving 200,000 engineering workers in 48 towns, succeeded in stopping the extension of dilution to work on private contracts. But the attempt by the leaders of the movement to focus on political issues by calling a national anti-war strike was an ignominious failure.

Nevertheless, the wartime shop stewards' movement represented an extremely important political step forward in two respects. First, the revolutionary stewards developed the theory of independent rank-and-file organization within the unions. Previously, revolutionary socialists had either refused to involve themselves in the unions at all or had sought, like the syndicalists, to replace them or transform them into revolutionary industrial unions that would grow to become a socialist state. The practical experience of building the wartime shop stewards' movement led its leaders to concentrate on developing within the official structures, rank-and-file organizations capable of fighting independently of the trade-union bureaucracy.

The shop stewards movement's attitude to the bureaucracy was summed up in the Clyde Workers' Committee's first leaflet, in November 1915. It remains the best summary of the nature of rank-and-file organization:

We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule or law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.⁸

Secondly, after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 the leaders of the shop stewards' movement began to see the Workers' Committees as soviets in embryo. The SS and WCM's paper argued in February 1919 that 'the Soviet Government of Russia sprung from the Workers' Committees, from the unofficial rank-and-file movement of the Russian people. The shop stewards are the first stage in the Soviet development.'⁹ But if the revolutionary stewards came to see the political potential of rank-and-file organization, they were not so quick to draw another lesson of the Russian Revolution. The soviets had come to power under the leadership of the Bolshevik party. The stewards were slow to see how a revolutionary socialist party acted to overcome the divisions inside the working class, linking together different struggles and focusing them on the battle, not simply with individual employers, but with the capitalist state itself.

The National Minority Movement and the General Strike

The October Revolution was an inspiration to socialists everywhere. In 1919 the Bolsheviks launched the Communist International (or Comintern) to advise and assist revolutionaries world-wide. The Comintern was instrumental in bringing together the various fractions of the British revolutionary left and the leaders of the SS and WCM to form the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. Pre-war British revolutionaries had seen socialist political organization essentially as a

means of spreading ideas. The Bolsheviks' conception was very different. As the 'Theses on Tactics' adopted by the Comintern in 1921 argued:

Communist Parties can only develop in struggle. Even the smallest Communist Parties should not restrict themselves to mere propaganda and agitation. They must form the spearhead of all proletarian mass organizations, showing the backward and vacillating masses, by putting forward practical proposals for struggle, by urging on the struggle for all the daily needs of the proletariat, how the struggle should be waged, and thus exposing to the masses the treacherous character of all non-communist parties.¹⁰

But the British Communist Party was formed against a background that was in many ways unfavourable to revolutionary hopes. The First World War ended in a sharp rise in the level of economic class struggle (see Table 1 on page 30). But by the time the CP was formed in 1920 the initiative had passed to the employers. Trade-union membership tumbled as the bosses went on the offensive. Numbers slipped from 8.3 million in 1920 to 5.6 million two years later, and by 1933 reached a low of 3.3 million.¹¹ The struggles of this period saw workers in retreat. Miners were locked out and defeated after six months in 1926. Engineers had already been locked out and beaten in 1922 while strikes by textile workers between 1929 and 1933 were beaten. The impact of these defeats on rank-and-file organization was drastic. J. T. Murphy told the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922:

In England we have had a powerful shop stewards' movement. But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions. The necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist. How can you build factory organizations when you have 1,750,000 workers walking the streets? You cannot build factory organizations in empty and depleted workshops, while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers.¹²

It was in this unpromising situation that the National Minority Movement (NMM) was launched in 1924 based on previous Minority Movements in specific industries such as mining and engineering. The idea behind the NMM was explained by one Bolshevik leader, Lozovsky, at the Fourth Comintern Congress: 'The aim here must be to create a more numerous opposition trade union movement.' The CP was to 'act as a point of crystallization round which the opposition elements will concentrate' and 'grow concurrently with the growth of the opposition'.¹³

The NMM's aim was to rally the 'opposition elements' inside the unions. But where were these elements to be found — at the top of the movement or among the rank and file? CP leaders did warn against trusting too much in left-wing trade union leaders: 'it would be a suicidal policy', wrote J.R. Campbell in October 1924, 'for the Communist Party and the Minority Movement to place

too much reliance on what we have called the official left wing.’¹⁴ But the main thrust of NMM strategy was indeed to look to the top of the movement and elect and support left-wing trade-union officials. Willie Gallacher wrote in September 1923:

The movement that is springing up all over the country . . . is not a rank-and-file movement, but rather it is one that reaches through every strata of the trade unions. The driving force must necessarily come from the rank and file, but we should never forget that local officials, district officials, and national officials (a few of them at any rate) have never been led away by the desire to settle the troubles of capitalism.¹⁵

The best cure for the betrayals by right-wing leaders was to replace them with left-wingers. Arthur Horner, the Communist miners’ leader, even proposed that:

The National Minority Conference . . . pledges the NMM and all its supporters throughout the country to unceasingly work in the respective trade unions for the concentration of trade-union power in the General Council of the TUC, and the alteration of the constitution of the General Council to admit the best, wisest and most aggressive fighters on behalf of the working class as members.¹⁶

The fruits of this policy became clear in the General Strike of 1926. A revival in workers’ combativity after the postwar slump was marked by the miners’ success in winning a ten per cent wage rise in 1924. The NMM led a ‘Back to the Unions’ campaign to revive union membership. Economic recovery in 1923-4 and the consequent fall in unemployment gave workers greater confidence to take on the employers. On ‘Red Friday’, 31 July 1925, the government and the mine owners withdrew an attempt to cut miners’ wages in face of a threatened general strike. But the prime minister, Baldwin, told the miners’ leaders that ‘all the workers of this country have to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet.’¹⁷ Confrontation had only been postponed. The crunch came in May 1926.

Meanwhile, the revival in workers’ militancy was reflected in the emergence on the TUC General Council of an articulate and verbally very militant left wing — notably Swales, Purcell, and Hicks — whose revolutionary rhetoric dominated the Trade Union Congresses of 1924 and 1925. The influence of the NMM grew rapidly during this period, especially in engineering and mining. The left-wing mood led to the TUC’s participation in an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee set up in the spring of 1925. But when Baldwin finally manoeuvred the General Council into calling a general strike on 3 May 1926, the strike was tightly controlled from the top, with no scope given to rank-and-file initiative and called off on the flimsiest of pretexts after nine days, leaving the miners in the lurch. The CP and the NMM played a minor role, in part because their strategy

was simply to call for support for the TUC left. One of the slogans raised by the CP during the strike was ‘All Power to the General Council’. Two days before the outbreak of the General Strike J. T. Murphy of the CP described Swales and company as ‘good trade-union leaders who have sufficient character to stand firm on the demands of the miners’.¹⁸ But if this were true, why should workers bother to look to the CP rather than the much bigger forces of the TUC?

Within two weeks events proved Murphy’s assessment of the TUC disastrously wrong. The ‘good trade-union leaders’ sold the miners down the river as readily as Ernest Bevin, J.H. Thomas or any other right winger on the General Council. One right winger, Ben Turner, protested in response to Communist criticism of the TUC’s betrayal of the miners: ‘the absolute unanimity of the General Council in declaring the General Strike off did not divide us into left-wingers and right-wingers.’¹⁹

The British CP’s theoretical and political inadequacies were brutally exposed by the General Strike. But these weaknesses were underpinned by the effects of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. By the mid-1920s Stalin and the bureaucracy he had built around him had displaced the soviets as the effective leadership in the Soviet Union. This bureaucracy placed its own interests and that of the state it controlled ahead of those of the world working class — a stance summed up by Stalin’s slogan ‘Socialism in One Country’. The Comintern was transformed into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy. The Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee was diplomatically useful to Stalin, Zinoviev, and the other Comintern leaders. They were therefore reluctant to antagonize their allies in the TUC and so did nothing to correct the British CP’s errors.

The Communist Party and the revival of shop stewards organization

The working-class movement began to recover from the disaster of the General Strike in the mid-1930s. This revival saw the beginnings of a change in the pattern of the economic class struggle that was to prevail until the late 1960s. As Table 1 shows, the number of strikes rose over the period to historically very high levels. At the same time, the number of workers involved in an ‘average strike’ in the 1960s was half that in the 1920s. The length of strikes also fell sharply.²⁰

These changes reflected the emergence of strong shop stewards’ organizations. The new rank-and-file organizations began to develop in the 1930s in some of the new industries like vehicle manufacture, electrical engineering, chemicals, and artificial fibres production, reflecting a reorganization of British capitalism away from old staple industries like coal and textiles.²¹ By the mid-1930s the worst of the Great Depression was over. At the same time, the prospect of another world war led the British government to launch a programme of

rearmament which benefited not only industries producing directly for the military, such as the aircraft industry, but the whole of the engineering sector. The resulting fall in unemployment began to increase workers' self-confidence. The historian Richard Croucher writes:

The effect of seeing old mates, even in ones and twos, coming back into the shops, was out of all proportion to the numbers involved. The iron workshop discipline of the previous two years, when it was not unheard of for men to be sacked for laughing at work, slowly began to dissipate.²²

Nevertheless, it took a hard fight to organize the new industries. For example, the Pressed Steel plant at Cowley in Oxford involved highly automated, dangerous production. The workforce were unskilled and unorganized, consisting largely of 'immigrants' from high-unemployment areas in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and of locally recruited women. 'Workers were often hired and sacked by the day, unable to keep up with the pace required by a driving management.' In 1934 these 'coolies' (as they called themselves) rebelled against the 'slave shop' and, with the support of the TGWU and local Communists (but not the craft unions in the factory), launched a successful strike for higher wages and the right to shop-steward representation. By March 1938 there were 40 TGWU stewards at Pressed Steel representing 2,500 members.²³

As Croucher observes, 'upsurges in the British labour movement, in the 1880s, 1910s, and again in the 1930s, brought an almost entirely unexpected broadening in membership, with previously thought to be among the most "backward" sections of the working class exploding into incandescent militancy.' Thus engineering apprentices, low-paid and denied proper training, launched two strike waves in 1937. The first began on the Clyde in April, and rapidly spread to other areas. Over 150,000 engineering workers took part in a one-day solidarity strike with the apprentices. Later that year, more strikes started in the Manchester area and spilled over elsewhere. The employers made some concessions nationally and many local wage agreements conceded big increases. More importantly, the strikes marked 'a watershed between the dark years of the Depression and the growing strength and confidence evident in the months immediately preceding the war' and a further strengthening of shop steward organisation.²⁴

The revival of workplace trade-union organization was not simply a matter of piecemeal struggles by individual militants in different factories and industries. The Communist Party acted as a political driving force behind the growth of the stewards movement. Its members were among the best fighters organizing inside individual factories. At the same time the Communists sought to link together different workplaces in a movement capable both of supporting particular struggles and pursuing a co-ordinated strategy.

In March 1935 workers at Hawker's Brockworth factory came out on strike with strong support from the company's Kingston plant. Though the strike did not achieve all its objectives:

it was the midwife of the first shop stewards' movement worthy of the name since that of the First World War. The strike occurred in the factories that formed the core of the most important aircraft firm. The Communists were able to use their network of contacts nationally to coordinate joint action and organize support. The CP members had carefully prepared the way for the dispute in both Hawker factories, as well as in the unions themselves. The *Daily Worker* [the CP's newspaper] had been adopted as the official organ of the strike committee, and Tom Roberts, the CP's Industrial Organizer in the Midlands, had been involved throughout. The CP ensured that these advantages were not lost, and acted very quickly to set up a national movement of aircraft stewards.²⁵

Soon after the Hawker strike the Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council was set up. Its paper, *New Propellor*, developed from a support sheet produced during the strike, and was edited by a CP member. By October 1938 *New Propellor* claimed a circulation of 20,000 in 51 factories. The involvement of more and more factories in defence production, especially after the outbreak of the Second World War, helped to spread this movement beyond the aircraft industry. In April 1940 the Council became the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards' National Council at a conference attended by 283 shop stewards from 107 factories, by no means all of which were making aircraft.²⁶

The Communist Party was transformed by its involvement in building shop stewards' organization. The change in the party is well described by Bob Darke, who was an important CP activist in Hackney and a leading militant first among the London firefighters and then the bus-workers in the 1930s and 1940s. Darke joined the CP in 1931 but broke with the Party at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s. In 1931 the Party in Hackney was 'a loose gathering of two dozen intellectual wastrels', 'a little society of cafe-revolutionaries' who 'talked and talked'. Persistent involvement in the local working-class movement changed all this:

When I started active work for the Party I began to enlist working-men like myself, paintworkers at first for I was then working for Lewis Bergers. Factory groups of Communists came into being, then cell fractions inside the unions . . . The Zinken Cabinet Factory had the biggest Party membership. There were soon 20 Communists among the Dalston busmen. Bergers, when I left the factory, had 20 active comrades.

By the time the war broke out we had our fingers in everything. We were a party of working-men and we were a dangerous party, aggressive, militant trade unionists, tried, tough, ruthless.²⁷

When Darke left the CP in 1951 it had 880 members in Hackney, and had at some stage controlled 28 of the 35 union branches in the borough.²⁸ This growth in the CP's size and influence reflected the consistent work carried out by its members in the life and struggles of the working class of Hackney. Regular sales of the *Daily Worker* outside workplaces played a crucial role in building the CP. The same story could be told of many other working-class areas in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s.

However, there were serious weaknesses with the way the CP sought to rebuild workers' organization. The CP resolutely pursued a policy of trying to get left-wing union officials into union positions as the main way forward for workers. Already in the late 1930s the CP-led shop stewards' movement was seeking to find an 'accommodation' with the leadership of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), an approach which was reinforced by the elections of Jack Tanner, a former supporter of the NMM, as AEU President in 1939 and of the Communist Wal Hannington as National Organizer in 1942. The German invasion of the USSR in June 1941 brought the CP behind Britain's war effort. Its stewards opposed strikes and worked with management in Joint Production Committees. When workers' discontent found expression in a strike-wave in 1943-44, they sometimes turned to Trotskyist groups which, though tiny, supported their struggles.²⁹

Chapter 2

1. J. Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement*, (London 1973), p. 80.
2. *Leon Trotsky on China*, (New York 1976), pp. 319-20.
3. A Gramsci, *Selections from the Political Writings 1910-1920*, (London 1977), pp. 65, 66.
4. The struggles and movements of the 1910s and 1920s have been explored in great depth in T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Unions Struggle* (London, 1986), and M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, *Essays in the History of Communism in Britain*, (London, 1975).
5. R. Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914*, (London 1976), p. 73.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 99-100.
7. See Hinton, *First Shop Stewards Movement*.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
9. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 308.
10. J. Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents*, (3 volumes, London 1956), I, p. 248.
11. J. Hinton and R. Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution*, pp. 14-15.
12. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 14.
13. Quoted R. Martin *Communism and the British Trade Unions 1924-33*. ((Oxford 1969), p.28.
14. Quoted Woodhouse and Pearce, *Essays*, p. 82.
15. Quoted Cliff and Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle*, p. 115.
16. Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 117. Cliff and Gluckstein document in detail the Minority Movement's orientation on the left officials.

17. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 129. See *ibid.*, parts two and three on the General Strike.
18. Quoted Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions*. p. 34.
19. Quoted Cliff and Gluckstein *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle*, pp. 246-7.
20. R. Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 26-7.
21. See B.W.E. Alford, *Depression or Recovery?*, (London 1972)
22. R. Croucher, *Engineers at War*, (London 1982), p. 25.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 45,47.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 40-1, 112-13.
27. B. Darke, *The Communist Technique in Britain*, (London 1953), pp. 36, 38.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.
29. Croucher, *Engineers*, chs, 3,4,6.

3. The last upturn: the 1960s and the early 1970s

The full employment brought by the Second World War continued afterwards thanks to the long period of economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s. These favourable economic conditions gave workers the bargaining power on the basis of which shop stewards' organization flourished. By the early 1970s there were 200,000 shop stewards in Britain, a third of them in engineering.¹ They were able to use the conditions of full employment to push up wages plant by plant. This shift in power to the shop floor was reflected in the fact that most strikes were unofficial.

Shop steward organisation during this period operated on the basis of what Tony Cliff and Colin Barker have called 'do-it-yourself reformism'. On the one hand, the authors point out, 'the shop stewards' organizations are largely restricted to the narrow horizon of economic, trade-union demands.' Moreover, they worked on a fragmented, shop by shop basis. On the other hand, the shop stewards' reformism was very different from the traditional reformism of the Labour party, which tells workers to rely on their MPs and union leaders to do things for them. Instead, the 1960s and 1970s saw workers 'doing things for themselves . . . growing in self-confidence and growing in their ability to run things for themselves'.³

The attempts by the employers and the state to break, or at least control the shop stewards forced the stewards to broaden their political horizons. The result, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the biggest class confrontations for half a century.⁴ Under increasing pressure from foreign competitors, British capitalism could no longer easily afford to grant increases in real wages. Instead, living standards had to be forced down if the decline in the rate of profit was to be halted. The succession of crises which began to afflict the world economy in the late 1960s reduced the scope for concessions even further.⁵

The first assault on shop floor organization, mounted by the Labour government of 1964-70, failed in the face of a wave of public-sector strikes in 1969-70. It was left to Edward Heath's Conservative administration elected in June 1970 to resume the offensive. The Heath government's Industrial Relations Act and its succession of incomes policies provoked the largest and most political strikes since the 1920s. Thus 1972 saw a miners' strike which smashed Heath's first attempt to impose a national pay-limit, national stoppages in the railways, docks and building industries; factory occupations by Manchester engineering workers and a wave of unofficial action which forced the release of five dockers' stewards gaoled for defying the Industrial Relations Act. A second miners' strike in February 1974 delivered the final blow, not merely to Heath's second pay-limit but to the government itself.

One historian called the struggles under Heath ‘the most extraordinary triumph of trade unionism in its long conflict with government’:

The Labour Unrest of 1970-74 was far more massive and incomparably more successful than its predecessor of 1910-14. Millions of workers became involved in campaigns of civil disobedience arising out of resistance to the Government’s Industrial Relations Act and to, a lesser extent, its Housing Finance Act. Over 200 occupations of factories, offices, workshops and shipyards occurred between 1972 and 1974 alone and many of them attained all or some of these objectives. Strikes in the public services became more frequent and prolonged. Some of them began to exhibit an ominous concern with the conditions of distribution as well as production. (Thus, some health service employees refused to supply privileges for private patients in public hospitals.)

But it was the coal miners, through their victories in the two Februaries of 1972 and 1974 which give a structure, a final roundedness and completeness which their contribution of 1912 had failed to supply to the earlier experience. First they blew the Government ‘off course’, then they landed it on the rocks. First, they compelled the Prime Minister to receive them in 10 Downing Street — which he had sworn he would never do — and forced him to concede more in 24 hours than had been conceded in the past 24 years. Then two years later their strike led him to introduce the three-day week [Heath reacted to the 1974 miners’ strike by putting industry onto a three-day week to reduce energy consumption] — a new form of government by catastrophe — for which he was rewarded with defeat in the General Election. Nothing like this had ever been heard of before.⁶

The early 1970s saw a return to the pattern of national, official strikes seen in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1971 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders decided to sack 2,500 workers. The whole workforce, 8,500 of them, occupied the shipyard and 200,000 Scottish workers struck in solidarity. Some 80,000 of them demonstrated in support of the UCS occupation. The chief Constable of Strathclyde called the prime minister and told him that he could not be responsible for keeping the peace on Clydeside unless the government backed down. UCS was saved and a wave of 200 factory occupations followed the shipyard workers’ lead.

Strikes were often official, but the rank and file were in the saddle. Shop stewards had cut their teeth in the years from 1965 to 1968 when 95 percent of strikes were unofficial and this power and confidence was now the driving force whether strikes were official or not.

The steward organisation at the north London engineering factory of ENV graphically shows the depth of this confidence. Stewards there got rid of one foreman after another, competing with one another about who could be the first to cause the foreman to have a nervous breakdown. This rank and file confidence also took organisational form. For example, in 1970 the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions — a rank and file body coordinated by the Communist Party and its supporters — called an unofficial one day strike against the Tory Industrial Relations Bill and 600,000 workers came out on strike. Besides this Committee were the London Docks Liaison Committee, the Building Workers Joint Strike Committee, the Exhibition Workers Committee, the London Sheet Metal Workers Organisation and others.

The 1972 miners' strike is another example of the rank and file in charge. Rank-and-file activists organized flying pickets which spread across the country to shut off the supply of coal to the power stations and to industry. They were able to draw on the support of their counterparts in other unions. It was this solidarity spreading through the grassroots which was decisive at the turning-point of the strike — the Battle of Saltley Gates. By the beginning of February 1972 the last substantial stockpile of coke was at Saltley depot in Birmingham. The police were under instructions from the Tory Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, to keep Saltley open. Even 3,000 miners led by the young Arthur Scargill, who at that time was running the Barnsley miners' strike committee, couldn't shut it down. So the miners appealed to the trade unionists of Birmingham. Scargill addressed the East Birmingham District Committee of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. 'We don't want your pound notes,' he told them. 'Will you go down in history as the working class in Birmingham who stood by while the miners were battered down or will you become immortal? I do not ask you — I *demand* that you come out on strike.'⁷

The AUEW voted for strike action, and were followed by a number of other major unions. Scargill describes what happened on Thursday 10 February outside Saltley depot:

miners were tired, physically and mentally desperately weary. . . . And then over this hill came a banner and I've never seen so many people following a banner. As far as the eye could see it was just a mass of people marching towards Saltley. There was a huge roar and from the other side of the hill they were coming the other way. . . . there were five approaches to Saltley; it was in a hollow, they were arriving from every direction. And our lads were jumping in the air with emotion — a fantastic situation . . . I got hold of the megaphone and I started to chant through it: 'Close the Gates! Close the Gates!' and it was taken up, just like a football crowd. It was booming through Saltley: 'Close the Gates'. It reverberated right across the hollow and each time they shouted this

slogan they moved and the police, who were four deep, couldn't help it, they were getting moved in. Capper, the Chief Constable of Birmingham, took a swift decision. He said 'Close the Gates' and they swung them to. Hats were in the air, you've never seen anything like it in your life. Absolute delirium on the part of the people there. Because the Birmingham working class had become involved — not as observers but as participants. The whole of the East District of the Birmingham AUEW were out on strike, 100,000 were out on strike, you know. It was tremendous. And they were still marching in from Coventry and other places, still advancing into Saltley. It was estimated that there were 20,000 in this area.⁸

Reginald Maudling, the Tory Home Secretary in 1972, wrote in his memoirs: The then Chief Constable of Birmingham assured me that only over his dead body would they [the pickets] . . . succeed [in closing Saltley]. I felt constrained to ring him the next day after it happened to enquire after his health! I am sure the decision he took was a wise one, because the number of strikers was so great, and feelings were running so high, that any attempt by the relatively small body of police who could be assembled to keep the depot open by force could have led to very grave consequences. Some of my colleagues asked me afterwards, why I had not sent in troops to support the police, and I remember asking them one single question: 'if they had been sent in, should they have gone in with their rifles loaded or unloaded?' Either course could have been disastrous.⁹

Douglas Hurd, later himself a Tory cabinet minister, then one of Heath's advisers, noted in his diary after Saltley: 'The government is now vainly wandering over the battlefield looking for someone to surrender to and being massacred all the time.'¹⁰ The miners' demands were conceded. The Battle of Saltley Gates was a historic victory. It was a victory for rank-and-file militancy, not for the leadership of the miners union then dominated by the right wing under Joe Gormley.

The same was true of the other high-point of 1972, the release of the Pentonville Five. Dockworkers took unofficial action, against the wishes of the TGWU general secretary, the left winger Jack Jones, to defend jobs against the spread of containerization. This brought them into conflict with the Tory Industrial Relations Act. As a result five docks shop stewards were gaoled on 21 July for defying the law. The dockers marched on Pentonville prison, where the five were being held, and called for strike action from other workers to free them. Their call was answered by Fleet Street printers, Sheffield engineers, Heathrow airport workers, London bus workers, and lorry drivers. The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) announced that it would hold a one-day strike. On 26 July the TUC General Council reluctantly decided to call a one-day

General Strike. That same day, however an obscure government lawyer called the Official Solicitor persuaded the House of Lords to free the five. Workers' industrial power had humbled the law.

The miners' and dockers' victories created a climate of growing panic within the ruling class. Discussing the possibility of a General Strike in June 1972 the *Financial Times* commented: 'most of the leaders on both sides realize this kind of "simple" solution, far from clearing the air, might divide the nation more deeply than at any time since, perhaps 1688, and that whoever won, it might take generations to clear up the mess.'¹¹ During the winter of 1973-74 confidence drained away from the ruling class. Tony Benn describes in his diaries a dinner held for Labour leaders by the Confederation of British Industry at which the latter were 'utterly gloomy'. In December 1973 another leading businessmen told Benn 'we were heading for a slump and food riots and there must be a national government'.¹² At much the same time, one Tory cabinet minister, John Davies, was telling his family to enjoy their Christmas, as it might be their last together. The Heath government's final confrontation with the workers' movement came when the miners struck again in February 1974. The miners brought the government down, but its Labour successor came to the rescue of British capitalism.

The strength and militancy of rank-and-file organization in the early 1970s had not developed in a political vacuum. The Communist Party, still at that time an organization with over 20,000 members and considerable industrial influence, provided the political cement binding together militants in different unions and industries. Communist Party activists played a key role in sectors with a history of militancy — for example, in the South Wales, Scottish, and Yorkshire coalfields. Most figures on the left had been members of the CP, even if, like Scargill, they left it. Their political education came through the Party. Often at a local level coalitions of left-wing stewards, many of them Communists, would meet regularly to discuss politics and strategy and to co-ordinate action. This was true, for example, of the Barnsley Miners' Forum, founded by Scargill in 1967, and of the Manchester engineers' Broad Left, the power-base of Hugh Scanlon, who was elected AUEW president that same year.¹³

However, the main thrust of CP industrial strategy was not to build a national rank-and-file movement but to elect left-wing trade-union leaders. As early as 1945, when CP membership reached its peak of 55,000, its factory branches were disbanded. In 1951 a programme was adopted, *The British Road to Socialism*, which committed the CP to seeking change through parliament by helping to secure the election of a left-wing Labour government. In the unions this meant building the Broad Lefts as electoral coalitions designed to win official positions

for Communists and their left-wing Labour allies. By the late 1960s this approach seemed to be gaining ground, above all with the election of Jones and Scanlon, the so called ‘Terrible Twins’ of the left, to head the two key industrial unions, the TGWU and the AUEW. But the price of this electoral strategy was the CP’s growing reluctance to clash with the left officials. Thus the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, founded by the Party to resist anti-union legislation, led two large unofficial strikes against the Labour government’s proposals in 1969, followed by two others in 1970-1, but made no serious effort to link together rank-and-file militants in the much greater struggles of 1972-74.

Chapter 3

1. R. Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 45.
2. See T. Cliff and C. Barker, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards*, (London 1966) pp. 105, 135
3. See C. Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, (London 1988), ch. 12.
4. See C. Harman, *Explaining the Crisis*, (London 1984).
5. R. Harrison, editor’s introduction to *The Independent Collier*, (Hassocks 1978), pp. 2,1.
6. M. Crick, *Scargill and the Miners*, (Harmondsworth 1985).
7. A. Scargill, ‘The New Unionism’, *New Left Review* 92, (1975), pp. 18-19.
8. R. Maudling, *Memoirs*, ((London 19978), pp. 160-1.
9. D. Hurd, *An End to Promises*, (London 1979), p. 103.
10. Quoted, A. Barnett, ‘Class Struggle and the Heath Government’, *New Left Review* 77, (1973), p. 14.
11. T. Benn, *Against the Tide*, (London 1990), pp. 70, 76.
12. On the Manchester Broad Left see J. Tocher, ‘The Desire for Change’, *Socialist Review*, September 1978.