

Discussion

The Unions: caught on the ebb tide

Bill Warman

Communists have always had the responsibility of making clear their ideas on the role and character of the labour movement, and in particular the trade unions. In doing so, men like Marx, Engels, Lenin and Pollitt have not hesitated to be quite sharp in their language when they thought it was needed, and forthright in proposing the changes that they felt were necessary to bring about a strong, determined fight for the future working class and the winning of socialism.

However, Tony Lane's article in the September issue, couched as it is in general terms, conveys a feeling of defeatism, a lack of confidence in the men and women in the trade unions and a paternalistic 'talking down' to the working class.

Country versus town

The impression given of the transition of industry from town to country is that it is a very recent development. Nothing is farther from the truth.

During the 1930s, as an unemployed worker, forced by the means test to live on my parents' meagre income, I travelled from London to the Morris Oxford, Cowley, factory, then well out in the country. The place was non-union, like the majority of factories in Oxford at that time. I had a rough time as

did other trade unionists, and eventually I had a row with the authorities and was sacked. This same factory later became highly organised and has remained so to the present day. Numerous such examples can be quoted from my trade union activities.

As for the cities, Tony Lane refers to the establishment of quarterly meetings of shop stewards by the AEU in the 1930s. This was an important step forward for that union at the time. However, there was much to do in industry then to take this step towards establishing greater unity in the workshops. The AEU leadership, like most of the engineering unions, was against joint shop stewards committees (JSSC). Each union pursued its own line in the factories, and it was the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions which carried out the negotiations for all the unions in engineering with the exception of the AEU which continued to remain outside the Confederation until the 2nd World War.

Campaigning by the militants in the unions for JSSCs finally broke this down. Communists played a major part in these campaigns. This is an example of the way we should be prepared to bring about improvements and changes in trade union structure. It also shows the advances made during the

past fifty years, from which it is possible to make further progress.

Referring to the organisation of new sections eg, health workers, council employees etc, it seems to me that Tony Lane very much underestimates the importance of these developments. True, they may not have the same muscle as the miners or electricians have, but they are very important allies for trade unionism, helping to give the lie to press campaigns by Tories, SDP, Liberals and some right wing Labourites on the unpopularity of the trade unions. The tremendous solidarity actions that have taken place around the health workers' dispute constitute a very high level of trade union achievement. Leadership by the TUC on this issue has been in advance of any previous action for many decades. It is a pity that a similar stand was not taken on the ASLEF dispute.

Incomes policy

Whenever I hear of incomes policies for the trade unions, I am reminded of the famous reply of Marx in *Wage Labour and Capital* to Citizen Weston:

'Citizen Weston illustrated his theory by telling you that when a bowl contains a certain quantity of soup, to be eaten by a certain number of persons, an increase in the broadness of the spoons would produce no increase in the amount of the soup. He must allow me to find this illustration rather spoony . . . Citizen Weston, on his part, has forgotten that the bowl from which the workmen eat is filled with the whole produce of the national labour, and what prevents them from fetching more out of it is neither the narrowness of the bowl nor the scantiness of its contents, but only the smallness of their spoons.'

Any incomes policy that is designed to rob Peter to pay Paul is sure to fail and can only succeed under capitalist economics in setting worker against worker. Under socialism, the picture would be different, but it is naive to think that a fair and equitable wages policy is possible under capitalism. That does not exclude the steps being taken in many engineering establishments to reduce ridiculous differentials between workers on the shop floor. For example, in some Coventry factories 80 different rates were reduced by negotiation to six or eight, by agreement between the JSSC and the workers. Such agreements are a very different proposition from nationwide incomes policies which are designed to share out a fixed amount from the wages pool, leaving the employers with the lion's share from their profits.

The attempt to blame the lack of an



incomes policy for **the** low level of morale amongst working people is completely unacceptable. Naturally, the fact of nearly 4 million unemployed has introduced a lessening of militancy in the workers' ranks. However, this is not the first time the workers have been forced into retreat. After the 1926 General Strike the workers hardly dared raise their heads until 1939. It is well to note that sections of the people were in retreat long before the trade unionists. Students have long ago forgotten the heady days of 1968 — many of them have retreated to the SDP!

Shop stewards

This part of Tony Lane's article really reaches an all-time low in his widespread criticism of shop stewards. As Pete Carter points out in his contribution to *Marxism Today* (Nov 1982) I have never hesitated to criticise those in the trade union movement who have climbed on the backs of trade unionists to carve out a career for themselves — **men** like Citrine, Bevin, Tewson and others come to mind; also the need for trade unions to bring themselves up to date in the light of a changing world on such questions as amalgamation, greater democracy etc.

All these questions need to be constantly under review if we are to ensure a strong united trade union movement to withstand

the attacks from all sides against us. I believe we are better equipped now than ever before to fight back when the time comes against the present reaction. The TUC General Council has continued to challenge the Government at every level and, despite the weaknesses arising from the antics of Chappell, Weighell and Boyd, its stand for workers' rights is without precedent. This would not be possible without the support of thousands of shop stewards up and down the country. Of course, there are among them some who take advantage of their position to benefit themselves as do some full time officers. This is by no means a new phenomenon but it is a gross slander on the great majority of shop stewards to generalise from a few individual cases. I am privileged to be in regular contact with shop stewards, in Coventry and district, all of them continuing to carry out their duties to the workers with very little thought for themselves.

The shop steward is the most democratic representative of the working class. He/she is elected every year or two depending on union rule and he/she is under daily surveillance of the members. Compare this with an MP or a full time official. Undoubtedly the shop stewards are one of the most important links with the working class. They have too often been taken for granted but without

them the trade unions would be very **weak** indeed.

One of the greatest weaknesses on **the** shopfloor is in the area of communication. There is a weakness in the failure to see as a priority the need to win members for the principles of trade unionism: district officials do not see the importance of keeping the members informed of union policy, and very often union literature, eg, the TUC material on Tebbit, is bogged down between the district committee and the shopfloor. It is vital to overcome these problems if we are to have an informed membership who understand what it is they are expected to defend and if need be fight for. This becomes increasingly urgent in light of the new threat coming once more from the USA — the attempt to introduce the 'Union Busters' organisation to British employers. A spokesman for the AFL-CIO, Charles Macdonald talking of this organisation says:

'I think it's sophisticated and controlled terrorism. What they do in organising a campaign is nothing short of a terroristic campaign, working as much as they can to exploit the fears that employees have of losing their jobs.'

The trade unions must start now to nip in the bud this new threat before it is allowed to get off the ground.

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