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What is a Democratic Trade Union?

To the average American journalist the 'free world' includes France, Spain and Chiang Kai Shek's Formosa just as much as Britain or one of the Scandinavian countries. To him, 'freedom' does not mean freedom from want, or fear, or any other of the four freedoms we used to hear so much about; it simply means what we might call the Fifth Freedom - 'freedom from Commies.'

Most of the British journalists who filled their columns with the recent E.T.U. Executive Council elections gave the impression that they had never asked themselves the simple question, 'What is a democratic Trade Union?' To them a 'democratic Trade Union' was simply one in which the 'Commies' were kept in their proper place. It is, of course, perfectly true that the *Daily Worker* had exactly the same attitude - only inside out. Just as Kadar and the Russians by their presence guaranteed the 'democratic' nature of the Hungarian State, so Haxell and Frazer by their high position in the E.T.U. guaranteed its 'democratic' status.

Democratic Marxists, however, must start from the position of opposing to these Siamese Twins of double talk an actual analysis of the situation as it is. At this point one can imagine an impatient reader breaking in: "Everyone knows what a democratic Trade Union is. It is simply one in which the membership control the leadership, and not the other way around." Unfortunately the problem is too difficult to be solved by a slogan, as six generations of Trades Unionists have discovered. Let us start by denning 'the leadership.' No-one with first-hand experience of manual workers' Trade Unions would deny that the conditions of employment of even the most brilliant rank-and-filer place him at a serious disadvantage in arguing with even a fairly stupid full-time official. The man who is doing the job day in and day out, every hour of his working life, able to draw on a variety of experiences concerning that job, able to study the documents as part of his job, with an office, a telephone, a secretary and often a research department at his back, has a tremendous advantage over the man who is doing the job in his spare time, pushed in between his employment and his family. For that reason the position of the full-time officials in a Trade Union is decisive in assessing whether it is democratic or not.

Now, if we start by examining the position of the General Secretary, the most important official in practically every Trade Union (except perhaps, for historical reasons, the Miners and the A.E.U.) we find that Unions making up nearly four-fifths of T.U.C. affiliated membership elect him in the same way, by ballot vote of the whole membership. But, as is often the case in the labour movement, this apparent unanimity actually conceals major differences.

First of all, statistics* confirm what one would imagine - that in a very large number of cases in practically every Union (except the Boilermakers) the man elected as General Secretary is the former Assistant General Secretary. But there are Unions where the Assistant General Secretary is not elected but appointed. Thus, in the Transport and General Workers Union, Arthur Deakin was *appointed* Assistant General Secretary and after Bevin's retirement was *elected* General Secretary. After Deakin's election Jock Tiffin was *appointed* Assistant General Secretary, and after Deakin's death was *elected* General Secretary. Under such circumstances the election is coming close to a formality — not to give it a harsher name.

In a number of Unions full-time officials are appointed. In black-coated, technical and semi-professional Unions where the standard of living, prospects and status of the full-time official are no higher than those of his active members and sometimes lower this practice, if it permits non-members to be considered for the position, may be a good thing. But, in manual workers' Unions where full-time officials are only chosen from the members, and where those full-time officials have a materially superior standard of life the effect can be deadly.

These appointments are made by the Executive Council (or its equivalent) generally on the recommendation of a small sub-committee which includes the General Secretary. Leaving aside full-time officials for a moment, the serious candidates are all members of leading Committees in the Union concerned, and in cases of national office generally members of the Executive Council. Thus, in the Transport and General Workers Union between 1942 and 1952 no less than 22 members of the Executive Council were appointed as full-time officials, often on the recommendation of the General Secretary whom they as Executive Councillors were meant to control. This is part of the material basis of the phenomenon which used to be known in the movement as 'Deakinism.'

The other part arises from the relation of full-time officials to each other. In Unions where all, or nearly all, officials other than the General Secretary are appointed there is more than a danger that an official who wants to "get on" in the Union, will concern himself

* For some of the statistics used in this article I am indebted to Mr-Vic Allen's study of Power In Trade Unions.

far more with what the official above him thinks of him than with what the rank-and-file below him want. In those Unions where membership of the employing Union is a condition of employment of the office staff this system can give rise to some odd situations. Thus, in one large Union, not only are there a number of prominent officials who have "worked their way up" from employment in the office with no apparent first-hand experience of the way of life of the rank-and-file, but these include close relations of former prominent full-time officials of the same Union.

Long before Lord Acton declared that "power corrupts," British craft Unions were insisting on their leading officials facing periodic re-election. It is true, of course, that this practice can place an official who fails to be re-elected in an appallingly difficult position, and in the mining Unions, for example, the vindictiveness of the coal-owners was responsible for most coalfields electing full-time officials for life. Nevertheless, because of the strong feeling in the movement against putting a man out of a job the chances of an official not being re-elected (except in a period of political hysteria) are small but the psychological effect of the control actually resting with the rank-and-file directly is very healthy for both 'leadership' and 'membership.' It is worth noting that out of 127 Unions representing 99% of T.U.C. membership only 33 both elect their General Secretary by ballot and require him to stand for re-election periodically. It is, perhaps, significant that all but two of these (N.A.T.S.O.P.A. and F.B.U.) are substantially craft Unions—one of them being the E.T.U.

Although the full-time officials exercise a considerable influence in every Union, the making of policy is, in theory at least, the prerogative of the Executive Council or its equivalent. In the old days the Executive was the bugbear of the militant rank-and-filer. Thus when the National Union of Railwaymen was formed by an amalgamation of Unions in 1913 it was agreed that after one period on the Executive a member would not be eligible for re-election until another period elapsed. This rule (popularly known as "three on and three off") was intended to prevent any Executive Council turning into a dictator. It probably was successful in this, but it also played a large part in allowing the General Secretary, the late Jimmy Thomas to become very close to one - because no Executive Council was ever able to really get his measure.

This incident illustrates very well the problem affecting every Union in relation to its Executive. Is the Executive to be strengthened so that it can stand up to the full-time officials? If it is, it often also gets out of touch with the membership. Or is it to be kept weak so that the members control it? If so, it is more likely to be the General Secretary who exercises the real control.

ship had covered the case. Any sane person looking at the facts will ask : would it not be better if a Branch of a Union which believed itself aggrieved either had the right to have its resolution published in the Union journal (as is the case with the Woodworkers) or had the right to circularise other branches (as is the case in the A.U.B.T.W)? What is the sense of placing before "rebels" the choice between tolerating what they honestly believe to be an intolerable fraud, and doing what others equally honestly believe to be great harm to their Union and the movement?

One final point. Democracy in the Trade Union movement does not exist in a vacuum. It is no good having a Union whose constitution is perfectly democratic (if any two people can agree as to what that would be), but which lacks numbers, influence and negotiating rights. A Trade Union exists in order to get bread and butter on a man's table, to protect his wife and children from poverty, to prevent a bullying employer robbing him of his self-respect. Those who believe that only a democratic Trade Union can do that effectively must be prepared to expose not merely those hypocrites who cheerfully discredit the whole principle of elections in order to stay in office, but also those other hypocrites who are silent when "respectable" leaders perpetrate the same actions for which they condemned the E.T.U. leadership so loudly.

All of us - left, right, and centre - might do well to remember the words of Keir Hardie : " Once a man begins to play fast-and-loose with his principles, he gets on a slippery step, at the bottom of which is the slough of time-serving expediency."