

# Trade Unionism and the Workers' Struggle

(WATCH YOUR SLOGANS).

[In view of the increasing industrial activity in the trade union movement, and the desire expressed by a number of prominent "Left wing" leaders for a big forward movement by the organised labour unions, this article by the Editor of the official organ of the R.I.L.U. in this country, "The Worker," on the necessity of not forgetting the basic aims of Trade Unionism, is a timely reminder to all those "Left wing" elements who, in their anxiety to recover the ground lost during the last two years, are apt to use in a flippant way the slogans of our revolutionary movement.—Editor.]

**I**T is exceedingly enlightening to watch how demands and policy, originally propagated by the advanced sections of the Labour movement can be utilised by Labour reactionaries in the interests of Conservatism. Mr. Bevin, pleading with the Southampton strikers to return to work in the name of unity and the General Council; Mr. J. A. Hobson, appealing for co-ordination in order to tie up strike movements, which are likely to be embarrassing to a Labour Government, are familiar examples of this tendency.

In no case, however, has a demand originally put forward by advanced workers been perverted to more base uses than that of "industrial unionism."

During the A.S.L.E. & F. strike, the social pacifists of the N.U.R. worked this slogan, which was once symbolic of revolutionary trade unionism, to death, and used it as an excuse for the most disgusting strike-breaking tactics imaginable.

In a similar way we find the slogan of "More Power to the General Council," which advanced trade unionists have been popularising, finding favour with the social-pacifist Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, which hopes to see the General Council using its powers, not in co-ordinating the workers' struggle, but in stifling forward movements.

These facts make it necessary that the active men of the industrial movement should cease taking their catchwords on trust, and should constantly be examining them in the light of new developments.

## **INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM.**

The struggle for industrial unionism was on the part of its pioneers not only a struggle for a new form of organisation, it was also a struggle against the prevailing practice of the union move-

ment, and against the prevailing conception of the role of the unions in the workers' struggle for emancipation.

The industrial unionists struggled—

1. Against the prevailing craft union form of organisation and for union by industry.
2. Against peaceful and ineffective compromise with the employers, and for a more militant class struggle policy.
3. For the utilisation of the re-organised unions as weapons of struggle against capitalism, and their preparation for the role of controlling production after capitalism had been overthrown.

If we examine the unions approximating to the industrial form, the N.U.R., the T. & G.W.U. and the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, we find that while they are approaching an industrial structure, they are far from adopting the outlook which alone makes better organisation valuable, and without which, larger organisation only leads to bureaucracy, and stagnation. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, for example, is a hopelessly social-pacifist body, having definite arrangements with the steel bosses for the regulation of wages in accordance with steel prices. Its leaders in the past have even betrayed an open protectionist policy in the interests of the boss class. The N.U.R. is also dominated through and through with social pacifism; to the leaders "scientific negotiation" is more important than struggle.

Both those organisations, controlling large forces, have a formidable appearance, but it may be doubted if their real strength is as great as it appears. Effective industrial unity cannot be manufactured by formally bringing together bodies of workers previously separated. Effective unity amongst diverse workers in an industry can only be created through a common struggle against the boss. Unless the workers are welded together in the actual struggle, the strength of the larger industrial organisations is mainly delusive.

Active men must, therefore, beware of propagating amalgamation in a mechanical fashion, without reference to the need for more vigorous struggle, and without reference to the need for trade unionists to organise to hew a way out of capitalism. No mechanical series of measures are any use without a more revolutionary spirit amongst the rank and file.

### **WHERE ARE THE MASSES ?**

To get this will necessitate a very considerable change in our methods. It is astonishing how even the most intensive-

campaign undertaken by active men in an industry merely touches a tiny minority. Resolutions will, of course, be passed by various branches, conferences will be held; the workers in the trade union branches will have a few more talismanic words at their disposal, but the mass will remain untouched.

If we are going to create, not only a change of organisation, but a change of outlook amongst the rank and file, then we must get contacts with the rank and file in the workshops, and there carry on the real propaganda for industrial unity. This is by no means easy to do, especially in those industries where the employers have been annoyed by workshop movements in the past. The job must be tackled, however, and both the Party and the R.I.L.U. must prepare for it by getting not only more workshop letters in their press, but by developing a simple pamphlet literature written, not with one eye on Mr. Karl Radek, and another eye on "Mr. John Smith," but with both eyes on "Mr. Smith," for whom the pamphlet is designed. Only by this continual workshop contact and propaganda amongst the rank and file, only by gathering the rank and file around the active men in the Party, and the Minority Movement can we create that level of consciousness in the trade union membership that will prevent the larger organisations from becoming merely the plaything of bureaucracy, and a bulwark of reaction.

### **SECTIONALISM WITHIN THE GREATER UNIONISM.**

Another feature of modern so-called Industrial Unionism must be noted in passing, particularly with reference to the Transport and General Workers' Union. The pioneers of the industrial unionist idea used to make merry with the plight that the workers in an industry were in with regard to separate agreements.

There might be a dozen different occupations in an industry, each occupation being catered for by a separate union, each union having a separate agreement, terminating at a different time. All the resources of irony at the disposal of the propagandist were called upon to characterise this situation, and it was shown how much better it would be if all the men concerned were in one union, governed by one agreement. To-day, the T. & G. W. U. has organised all transport workers under one union, but has split them up under separate agreements, and is almost as incapable of bringing about common action at the same time as were the older unions.

It is obvious that if this sort of thing is persisted in, the bosses will be able to split up different grades of workers within the same

union almost as effectively as if they were members of separate unions. The real struggle for industrial unionism is, therefore, really just beginning, for industrial unionism is much more than the instinctive huddling together of a number of small unions into one large union.

Our aim in the union movement must not be merely the conquest of the trade union apparatus, but the ideological conquest of the membership. Without this, the various proposals for a concentration of power in the trade union movement might conceivably mean not a concentration of leadership for class struggle purposes, but a Gompers' dictatorship in the Trade Union movement of this country. More power to the General Council means more power for good or evil, and it may well be evil instead of good if the active men do not succeed in establishing an ascendancy over the mass of the workers.

### **THE AIMS OF THE "MINORITY" MOVEMENT.**

This brings us to the question of what should be the functions of the minority groups which are springing up within the unions in various parts of the country, and which will probably come together in a National Minority Movement in the near future. At the present moment the minority groups are concentrating on getting the unions to struggle for higher wages, at the same time bringing before the workers attention certain structural alterations in trade union organisation, calculated to produce a more effective mobilisation of the workers' forces. This is very necessary work. Unless the fighting spirit of the workers can be roused again, all revolutionary agitation is simply a beating of the air. It should be clear to members of minority groups, however, that their task consists of something more than demanding slightly higher wages than the officials are prepared to demand, or by popularising amalgamation proposals.

That "something more" is the popularisation of the conception of trade unionism, not merely as a reformist force under capitalism, but as a revolutionary instrument for participating in the struggle for power, and after the struggle for power, playing a part in the management of industry.

The minority movements must popularise this or leave the working class to draw the inevitable conclusion, that the only difference between the Left wing of the Trade Union movement and the Right is, that the former are concerned with demanding higher wage increases, and are somewhat impatient about the slow progress of amalgamation.

To popularise the conception of the trade union movement as a body which should be concerned with the transformation of the capitalist system, does not mean that we have to indulge in abstract propoganda about the "happy land, far, far away." It means that we should formulate immediate demands that definitely challenge capitalist autocracy in the workshop, such as shop control of piece work, control of hiring and firing, prior agreement before any changes in conditions of production become operative, and so on; that around such demands we endeavour to develop workshop organisation, which will continue to make more onerous demands upon the employing class, thus in a popular and concrete way spreading the demand for the workers' control of industry.

### **THE UNIONS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER.**

Another prejudice that must be broken down by the active men in no uncertain fashion is that which draws an unnatural distinction between politics and industrialism to the detriment of the workers' struggle. It will be remembered, for instance, that prior to Black Friday the railway and transport workers representatives were very much perturbed by the miners' proposal for a National Pool, which was held to be a "political" demand, and the Trade Union Movement in capitalist democracy was held to be within its rights if it made industrial demands on the employers, but absolutely treasonable and subversive if it made any demands on the national government. This belief is still widely held, and if the Trade Union movement is going to play any useful part in the workers' struggle, it must be broken down. The Trade Union movement must be as prepared to enforce a demand for better unemployed maintenance from the Government, as it is to enforce a demand for better wages from the employers. It must be prepared to struggle for a Workers' Government by means of direct action, as well as by voting at elections. This requires to be made plain, because, at the moment, certain people are popularising amongst trade unionists the conception that their role in the struggle for workers' control of industry is purely a passive one. At certain I.L.P. conferences, and in a resolution submitted by the General Council at the recent Scottish Trade Union Congress, the conception is stated somewhat as follows: "The Labour Government is approaching power. It will soon be in a position to nationalise industry. The workers in the various industries must unite their forces, have only one union for each industry, and prepare for the task of participating in the management of their industry, once the

Government has nationalised it." This, to our minds, is avoiding the real question of what role the trade unions are going to play in the struggle to set up a real workers' government, that will be in a position to nationalise industry. Will they be prepared to use their power to smash capitalist opposition to the setting up of a workers' government? Evidently, the slogan of "workers' control of industry" is open to be charged with a social-pacifist content. The Minority Movements have got to make it clear to trade unionists that political and industrial questions are not separable and the trade union movement must be called upon to fight on all class issues that arise.

To sum up, slogans and watchwords being put forward by the active industrial workers are continually being taken up by the trade union reactionaries, and used for their own purposes, and the active workers must, therefore, be continually examining the content of their slogans.

Industrial unionism does not merely mean mechanical amalgamation, it means also the acceptance of a class struggle policy and outlook by the rank and file.

"More power to the General Council" to be really effective demands not merely the conquest of the trade union apparatus by a minority, but the enlarged class consciousness of the rank and file.

"Control of Industry" is to be popularised by the development of demands infringing on the capitalists' right of undivided control. In its complete form it cannot be the gift of a Labour Government to a passive trade union movement, but, on the contrary, a real workers' government is impossible without a direct struggle on the part of the whole Labour movement against the forces of capitalism.

These facts must be borne in mind while formulating our practical proposals and the working class must be approached by our propagandists not merely in the union branches, but in the workshops. This must be done by the Minority Movement organising workshop groups to carry on its propaganda and to set up factory committees wherever possible.

Only in this way can we make it clear that the active men in the union movement are struggling, not merely for higher wage demands, than the officials, but for a different conception of the role of the trade union movement in the workers' struggle.

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