

THE FUTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY TRADE UNIONISM

By HARRY POLLITT

THE development of trade unionism in this country since the end of the General Strike has been clear to every acute observer in the working-class movement. The betrayal of the General Strike by the leadership was, in my opinion, a deliberately conscious act, not merely to escape from an inconvenient situation, but in order that this failure might be used as the basis for the development of their present policy of class collaboration.

Since that time every step which has been made has been in the direction of developing trade unionism as a direct part of the apparatus of capitalist exploitation. We have not yet reached the final stage, but the present position is such that the whole problem of the trades union policy of the revolutionary workers calls for review and clarification, particularly so because of the advent of a Labour Government which will be found to intensify the drive considerably.

It was no accident that, within a few weeks of the Trades Union Dispute Act becoming law, the Edinburgh T.U.C. in 1927 should have taken the first step towards the policy of class collaboration. From that time on the race has been accelerated in every move that has been made, right through the Mond Conferences, and now through the joint co-operation with the Federation of British Industries and the National Confederation of Employers.

At the same time the attacks upon the workers have been steadily increasing, not so much in the direction of national demands on national unions for wage reductions, but in a carefully planned policy of taking factory by factory, pit by pit, or the union concerned with a particular district of an industry, and in all cases making inroads upon workshop customs and practices, reduction of piece-work lists, speeding up and abolition

of concessions formerly won in acute class struggles. If it were possible to collect the data showing the exact effect upon the workers of this planned policy, it would be discovered that colossal inroads have been made upon the workers' conditions.

The statements of workers all over the country comparing their conditions of to-day with those of two years ago constitute the practical proof of the correctness of this claim.

For a time this planned policy of the capitalists and the trade union leaders was carried out without much resistance, just because its nature did not make it a national issue. Yet a study of the trade union journals in which the district organisers' reports can be found over a period of the last two years shows how acute the process has become.

There is now a new awakening taking place. This has manifested itself in such struggles as the Rego strike, the Austin strike, the London Busmen's dispute and the Dawdon dispute. All, be it noted, in industries where the capitalists are precisely those engaged in industrial peace negotiations with the General Council of the Trades Union Congress.

In every one of these disputes, as well as in those negotiations which have taken place in other disputes, the central feature has been the deliberately defeatist rôle of the trade union leaders and the fight that the workers themselves have had to make against both the capitalists and their own leaders. The best example of how far this policy has been carried out was shown during the middle of the Dawdon dispute, when Lord Londonderry could openly issue a Press statement saying he had no quarrel with the miners' officials, either national, county or local. This statement was never repudiated even by the local officials who were actually facing the men.

Simultaneously with these events there is a growth of non-unionism, but this growth represents an entirely different attitude from that which has formerly characterised non-unionism in this country. It is also accompanied by a continually decreasing attendance at trade union branch meetings, and the open scoffing and jeering of the workers in the workshops at the trade union leaders.

This is the situation that the revolutionary workers have to

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face. It does not mean, however, that trades unionism is played out. It does mean that trades unionism has now to be adapted to modern conditions of struggles in the pursuit of capitalist rationalisation and intensified class struggle, and this can only be done by the revolutionary workers frankly discussing the existing situation and how this reorganisation of trades unionism as a fighting force against capitalism and not an appendage of capitalism, can be brought about.

The period of the Labour Government will be one in which, under cover of skilful small concessions, the Government will carry through schemes assisting the rationalisation of industry. These schemes will lower the standards of the workers as a whole. Preparations for new wars will be made under hypocritical phrases of "pacifism," and "no more war," attacks will be prepared on the U.S.S.R. under cover of giving recognition to the U.S.S.R. Attacks will be made on the revolutionary peoples of the colonial countries.

These factors, in conjunction with the hopes aroused amongst large sections of workers that wages advances will be given through a Labour Government, points to a situation in which the Minority Movement has to lead the independent struggles of the workers against the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Government.

This independent rôle and leadership of the Minority Movement is the most important thing that needs to be understood in the present period. The old fetishism of "constitutional action," of "honouring national agreements," of trade union legalism must be destroyed if we are to fight against the capitalists and their agents, the existing leadership.

This issue, therefore, of fighting independently the daily struggles of the working class, in a period of "Courts of Inquiries," of "Independent Arbitrators," and Labour Government betrayals and treacheries, means a complete break with all the old conceptions of confining our activities within the constitutional framework of trade union branches, district committees, &c. New forces have to be won, and new forms of organisation have to be found. I believe that the following line of approach is the one which must be made as a start towards the

winning of the mass of the workers, organised and unorganised, both to our policy and organisation.

(1) *Factory Organisation and Activity*

It is directly in the factories that our strength lies and it is precisely here that so little actual effort is put in to win over this strength. We assume that nothing can be done by factory agitation and organisation, when, as a matter of fact, six months' concentration on any factory in this country on the right lines will win the mass of the workers to our policy and against that of the existing trade union leadership.

It is impossible to be in any workshop two days without being struck by the bitterness, cynicism, sarcasm and disillusionment that is expressed in workshop conversation regarding the existing trade union leadership, and our job is to concentrate our forces upon winning these workers to our constructive policy of militant trades unionism.

What does this mean? It means that in every factory where there is a small group of comrades they should begin to initiate discussions amongst one or two of the workers with whom they have influence, showing the meaning of events which are happening, taking the initiative in calling a meeting of all workers in that particular shop or department, without regard to craft, occupation, union organisation or whether these workers belong to a union at all. Not many will come to such a meeting at first, but some will, and this is a start. At such a meeting as this shop conditions can be frankly discussed and a direct approach made to get outstanding grievances remedied. This will immediately bring our work before a larger mass of workers, who will contrast the efficacy of this method with the long-drawn-out process which has to be gone through in the trade union machine before grievances can be attended to.

Then will come the desire for such work to be put on a permanent basis, and a factory committee can be appointed representing all workers, organised and unorganised. This committee will not be working long before it will feel the need of other weapons with which to fight, and the first of these will undoubtedly be a factory paper. In this paper not only

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shop questions, but wider issues of policy can be discussed, so that the stronger this work becomes the less fear there is of the management being able to operate a victimisation policy. Everybody knows that when an active worker gets sacked, the average man in the workshop who has never been inside a trade branch will say it is a "bloody shame" and he should be backed up, but just because under present conditions in nine cases out of ten this question is left till the complicated trade union machine begins to operate, the sense of grievance and resentment has died down. Whereas a group of comrades could take advantage of such sentiments and make their positions in the factories immeasurably stronger than they are at the present time.

But what the delegates to the Minority Movement Conference have to frankly realise is that without effective factory work and organisations there can be no fight made for better conditions for the working class and no real fight made against the Labour Government and trade union bureaucracy.

(2) The Problem of the Unorganised

It is necessary to state frankly that until recent events the average non-unionist represented the most backward section of the working class. There is always a section of workers who, because of backwardness and apathy, have never been prepared to fight and pay for better conditions, and these have formed the bulk of the unorganised workers.

To-day the situation has changed. Whilst I believe that this type of worker still forms the larger proportion of the unorganised, and they must be frankly spoken to about this attitude because of what trades unionism under the present leadership has become, there are thousands of good trade unionists who have left the trade unions because they disagree with the policy.

I believe that this attitude is fundamentally wrong. Serious revolutionary workers do not leave organisations voluntarily, they intensify their efforts within them and in the factories with which they are associated, to fight for a new leadership and a new policy. If in the pursuance of this course they are suspended or disqualified from holding office in a particular union, our duty is to fight with all our strength to maintain the positions we have got,

and in the degree that we have strengthened our factory organisation we can prevent the process of automatic exclusion and suspension which the bureaucrats have only found possible to operate because of our inherent weakness in the factories.

Therefore we have now to intensify our work amongst the unorganised to bring them into closer relations with the rest of the workers. The approach to this question is not to put the issue of which trade union they shall join as the first step in this direction, but to get them in and around the Factory Committees and factory organisation that we have to set up.

In many recent strikes the unorganised have played a more important rôle than the trade unionists. Austins is the most important case in point, because it was a direct fight against one of the most important employers who have collaborated with the General Council of the Trades Union Congress. Many trade unions have always recognised the rôle of the unorganised in strikes or lock-outs by paying them dispute pay to preserve the solidarity of the men. We have to get them into trade unions to-day, as the basis of new forces, to strengthen our work and task of reorganising trade unionism under our revolutionary new leadership fighting a class battle against capitalism and its agents the General Council.

So that the problem of which union they shall join becomes not the primary, but the secondary issue; the first is to get them clear on the value of factory organisation under our leadership, so that we recruit them for trades unions on a class conscious basis, they will then form the new elements under our control, who in organised fashion are then fighting both the capitalists and the trade union leaders.

At the same time we must face the possibility of the Belfast Trades Union Congress passing a series of recommendations that will carry still further their policy of disrupting and splitting the trade union movement. We cannot fight the existing leaders with only a small number of active workers, the mass of the workers must be with us. This mass are never in the trade union branches, but they are in the factories, and it is this problem of effective factory organisation that comes up every time we consider how best to fight for better conditions, which to-day

involves a fight against two enemies and active participation in what are stigmatised as unofficial movements, but which in reality are the real movements of the workers.

The approach, therefore, to the problem of the unorganised is through the factories, and in that approach we kill stone dead the conception that any section of workers can get anything without fight or personal sacrifice. We are not advocates of non-unionism, we are not now attempting to glorify a section of workers whom yesterday we looked down upon because they were prepared to take all the benefits of trade unionism without paying anything in return.

On the contrary, we want to bring the unorganised into a more effective form of organisation than now exists, and we must not be afraid to assert that where factory organisation exists and all workers are members, that this is better trade unionism, in the real meaning of the word, than is provided by the policy of company unionism, the aim towards which the existing leaders are working. By this method alone can we solve the problem of how to rally all the workers in struggle, at the same time laying down the future basis of the organised working-class movement of this country.

(3) *Work Inside the Trade Unions*

One of the great mistakes we have made in the recent period has been the calm assumption that it was impossible to do any further effective work inside the trade unions, and from the moment the policy of the "Document" was introduced there has been a widespread conception that to fight any further to win official positions in the unions was hopeless, with the result that the bureaucracy has now been able to operate this policy on a much wider scale, and more effectively, I am convinced, than they themselves ever thought was possible.

So far from deserting this field of work, we must intensify our work in winning official positions, particularly in branches, and this follows naturally from our intensification of activities within the factories. This policy must be pursued, even where the "Document" is in operation, and an open fight made with the backing of the workers in the factories to retain these positions. It will lead to the suspension of branches, the withholding of

benefits, the taking of legal proceedings against the revolutionary workers, but in the very degree that we force the bureaucrats to resort to the methods of capitalist repression, so we increasingly demonstrate the correctness of our analysis of the rôle of the trade union leadership to-day before an ever-increasing number of workers.

We do not surrender the fight for the conquest of the unions, but we do look round for new methods to lead the workers in actual struggle in order that we can win the leadership of the workers.

To assist in this struggle we, therefore, not only link up the unorganised workers through the medium of factory organisation, but we should recruit them into the new unions where they exist or the old existing unions as the basis of new forces fighting under our leadership for our policy.

By this combination of increased factory activity and the greater drive within the unions themselves upon the basis of our leadership in all economic struggles, we are taking the concrete steps towards developing the form of organisation and the outlook which alone can effectively realise the conquest of the organised working class under the leadership of the revolutionary workers.

New Industrial Councils

This involves a new outlook in regard to local unifying centres of factory and trade union organisation, and the work begun by the London Industrial Council is an indication of the lines upon which this work should be tackled. The existing Trades Council organisation has become simply a part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the General Council and Labour Party leaders. Our job now is to popularise the formation of new local Industrial Councils that shall serve as the local leadership in all phases of industrial activity. They should be representative of factory committees and trade union branches actually in revolt against the present leadership.

The beginning of this work will develop local strength and contacts, thus enabling more effective leadership and drive in all strike movements in which the workers direct from the factories must assume the leadership, and together with the

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local Industrial Council be able to mobilise the whole of the workers in a particular locality for their support.

I believe that the above represent the main lines upon which the revolutionary movement in its work in the factories and trade unions must now proceed. It will be the task of the Sixth Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement to formulate finally the policy that must be adopted as a result of the analysis that will be made at that Conference of the present situation of British capitalism and the rôle of the trade union leadership. If that Conference gets clear on what is the actual position of British capitalism and the real rôle of its agents, the Labour Government and the trade union bureaucracy, there will be a tremendous support given to the future work of the Minority Movement.

In this new period, the chief tasks of the Minority Movement are to lead and organise strike movements ; independent fights for higher wages, shorter hours, the general effects of rationalisation ; a co-ordinating centre for the activities of the revolutionary workers ; a better and more intense fight in support of our colonial comrades ; the fight against the growing war danger ; struggle in defence of the U.S.S.R. ; for the unity of the workers nationally and internationally.

In the sphere of organisation, its tasks are to consolidate its wide influence into definite organisations. Increase its individual membership, strengthen its groups, win new union branch and district committee affiliations, strengthen its work in the factories to win positions in the trade union branches ; win the unorganised workers to our side ; take the initiative in forming new unions in the new industries that are springing up ; extend its work to new local industrial councils.

If these tasks are undertaken with energy, then in twelve months a situation will exist in which many of the theoretical speculations in regard to problems of strike strategy, the rôle of the unorganised, the problem of new unions, &c., will have been worked out in the actual field of experience and a much clearer conception of the actual day-to-day fight have been realised.

The test of all revolutionary workers is the test of what they are prepared to do in the factories. That is where the face of the Movement must be turned. It is the most important and the

most neglected field upon which the future tactics of the whole organised working-class movement have to be worked out. The test of the genuineness of militant trade unionists and of those who have left the unions because they say they disagree with present policy is what they are prepared to do now towards the development of effective factory organisation from which alone can grow the new forces and leadership that can successfully carry on the fight against the policy of surrender and defeatism that characterises the whole tactics of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Government.