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SOME PAST RANK AND FILE MOVEMENTS

The source of rank-and-file movements is the conflict between the struggle of the working class for better conditions and a new social order, and the increasing reconciliation between the leaders of the trade unions and the capitalist class, their growing integration into the upper reaches of bourgeois society. In Great Britain we find the first appearance of such movements in the years shortly before the first world war, and it is significant that the phenomenon was preceded and accompanied by a good deal of comment on the declassing of trade union officials.

In 1892 the 'civil service' of British trade unionism numbered between 600 and 700. After the Reform Act of 1867 and the Ballot Act of 1872 had created an important working-class electorate largely immune to older forms of pressure, the ruling class began to pay special attention to trade union leaders. Engels observed in 1874 that "the chairmen and secretaries of trade unions . . . had overnight become important people. They were visited by MPs, by lords and other well-born rabble, and sympathetic inquiry was suddenly made into the wishes and needs of the working-class".¹ On the advice of the Liberal politician Mundella, the Trades Union Congress held at Nottingham in 1872 was officially welcomed by the city corporation, the delegates were banqueted and invited to the homes of leading citizens, and so forth - the first time such things had happened. Trade union leaders were pressed to accept seats on Royal Commissions, and in 1886 the general secretary of one of the most important unions stepped into a job in the Labour Bureau formed by Mundella as President of the Board of Trade, an organisation from which the Ministry of Labour was later developed. During the 1880s outstanding trade union leaders were more than once entertained by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) at Sandringham. In 1890 Broadhurst, secretary to the Trades Union Congress, was exposed as having accepted a gift of shares from Brunner, the chemicals industrialist, in return for political support at an election.

The years of comparative industrial peace, between the 1850s and 1880s, had seen "a shifting of leadership in the trade union world", as the Webbs put it, "from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officials expressly chosen from out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity".² To the epoch of 'defence, not defiance',

corresponded the emergence of a generation of trade union leaders of a different type from those who had laid the foundations in the bitter days of the Combination Acts and Tolpuddle. It was between these 'sober, business-like' men and sections of the capitalist class 'that the political alliance was forged which, in different forms and phases, has been with us ever since - "the bourgeoisie cannot rule alone". The system which J. H. Thomas admired for "making me what I am" was fairly launched'.³

These trade union leaders saw their task as essentially one of peaceful negotiators with the employers, and this gave rise to a whole network of social relations separating them off from their original class. Assured of a permanent position with a secure income, the trade union officials - 'a closely combined and practically irresistible bureaucracy', as the Webbs called them in their book Industrial Democracy⁴ which Lenin translated while in exile in Siberia - soon found their different life-experience reflected in a different outlook on the class struggle. In the Webbs' History of Trade Unionism the account of the career of a typical official given to the authors in 1893 by a member of one of the great craft unions is quoted:

"Whilst the points at issue no longer affect his own earnings or conditions of employment, any disputes between his members and his employers increase his work and add to his worry. The former vivid sense of the privations and subjections of the artisan's life gradually fades from his mind and he begins more and more to regard all complaints as pervers and unreasonable.

With this intellectual change may come a more invidious transformation. Nowadays the salaried officer of a great union is courted and flattered by the middle class (i.e., in the language of those days, the capitalists). He is asked to dine with them, and will admire their well-appointed houses, their fine carpets, the ease and luxury of their lives He goes to live in a little villa in a lower-middle-class suburb. The move leads to dropping his workmen friends; and his wife changes her acquaintances. With the habits of his new neighbours he insensibly adopts more and more their ideas His manner to his members undergoes a change A great strike threatens to involve the Society in desperate war. Unconsciously biased by distaste for the hard and unthankful work which a strike entails, he finds himself in small sympathy with the men's demands, and eventually arranges a compromise, on terms distasteful to a large section of the members."⁵

Brought constantly into friendly intercourse with well-to-do business men, civil servants and capitalist politicians, trade union leaders, the Webbs observed, were tempted to bring their spending power up to the same level as their associates by making 'unduly liberal charges' for their travelling expenses; and even 'to accept from

employers or from the government those hidden bribes that are decorously veiled as allowances for expenses or temporary salaries for special posts'.

This situation, thus already recognisable in the 1890s, is still with us today. The authors of a sociological study of a Yorkshire mining area, published in 1956, write of the trade union bureaucracy: 'These officials exist on salaries and with expense accounts which must be comparable with those of the people with whom they have to deal from day to day; they grow used, of necessity, to the same kind of life and entertainment as other executives in bureaucratic organisations.' Men who as miners had virtually no prospect of 'social mobility' find themselves very differently placed as trade union officials:

Not only is there the possibility of promotion in the union itself, with at each level the various conferences and meetings in very pleasant places and good hotels, the chance, for those of such inclination, of coming into the public eye through public meetings, the Press, and even the radio and television. In addition, men with trade union administrative experience are more and more thought suitable for posts in management, particularly in the nationalised coal-mines. Here are real prospects of individual success.

As between the National Coal Board and the officials of the National Union of Mineworkers, 'the personnel of the two sides becomes over a period similar to a greater degree than there is similarity between the interests of the officials of the union and its basic rank and file'.

Parallel with the rise of the corps of permanent officials was the weakening, during the years of 'the servile generation', in trade union democracy. Such institutions as the referendum and the initiative 'withered away'. The shifting of the basis of the branch in many unions from the place of work to the place of residence helped to atomise the membership and increase their dependence on the officials. The Trades Union Congress of 1895 saw a conscious and open move by the officials to cut away a possible line of rank-and-file control over their doings, by excluding the representatives of the trades councils, the very bodies which, less than thirty years earlier had summoned the TUC into existence.

The trades councils were in fact shut out partly in order to exclude 'agitators' whom the trade union leaders regarded as irresponsible busybodies, and partly in pursuance of a definite policy of centralising industrial control on the hands of the national trade union executives. Obviously a Congress in which two or three million votes might have been cast by the delegates of local bodies would have been a great deal more difficult for the platform to manage than a Congress in which a very small number of national trade unions would cast, under a system of block voting, a majority of total votes. The TUC might have been a very different body if the trades councils had retained their original place in it. That, of

course, is precisely why they were not allowed to retain it.¹⁰

Just as the emergence of a caste of privileged officials, cosily coexisting with capitalism was reaching completion, a new phase of history opened, that of imperialism, passing into that of the general crisis of capitalism. The conditions characteristic of the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century were swept away for ever, and the workers found themselves under steady and intense attack, at first especially by means of rising prices. Round about 1909, when E. J. B. Allen published his pamphlet Revolutionary Unionism, wide sections of the workers became aware that the militant policy their new circumstances urgently demanded was being sabotaged by their officials. Allen listed a number of examples of what he called the 'treachery of officials' in preventing necessary strikes on various pretexts. He wrote:

This kind of business is notably on the increase, particularly since the workers have been fools enough to pay this kind of official £200 and more per year to do nothing in Parliament except betray their interests and run around after different capitalist politicians . . . in order to be remembered when there are some government jobs going.

Fred Knee, of the London Society of Compositors, remarked bitterly in 1910 that 'there are some trade union leaders who are so prosperous that they at any rate have in their own person achieved the harmony of the classes'.¹¹

THE 'LABOUR UNREST', 1910-14

Growing dissatisfaction with trade union officialdom was coupled from about 1910 with a mood of disillusionment with parliamentary politics. This was caused by the functioning of the Labour Group in the House of Commons as a mere adjunct to the Liberal Party, all other considerations being subordinated to keeping the Liberals in and the Tories out. Syndicalist ideas from America and France found fertile soil among the British trade unionists, and such bodies as the Socialist Labour Party, the Syndicalist Education League and the Plobs League came into being and began developing rank-and-file sentiment for militant industrial policies in an organised way. Tom Mann, James Connolly, Noah Ablett, Richard Coppock, A. A. Purcell and A. J. Cook were among the leaders of the new trend. It was on the initiative of these men that the wave of great strikes began which shook Britain on the eve of the first world war.

The movement began with the unofficial strike of the Northumberland and Durham miners in the early months of 1910. These miners were bitter against their officials for having accepted a change from a two-shift to a three-shift system. The summer saw a similarly unofficial stoppage on the North-Eastern Railway, provoked by a case of victimisation. Then, in the autumn, came the Cambrian

Combine strike, begun against the will of the South Wales Miners' Federation executive. Of the 1911 strike in the docks, Sir George Askwith, the government's conciliation officer, observed: 'The Labour leaders were taken by surprise. Some quickly headed the movement and tried to regain their lost authority. Others frankly expressed astonishment, and could not understand the outbreak.'¹² The railway strike of 1911 began under official leadership in Liverpool, 'in spite of the fact that the executives of the railwaymen's unions were opposed to any railwaymen leaving work or making demands, the officials arguing that they were tied down by the decisions of the conciliation boards, which they had accepted.'¹³ Finally, the general miners' strike of 1912 began as an unofficial movement - and one of its results was the ousting from the South Wales miners' executive of the leaders who had opposed the strike, and their replacement by syndicalists.

A number of economic gains resulted from these strikes, but the outcome fell far short of what might have been. 'The vague shadow of revolution hovered over Britain in those days. The leaders exerted all their strength in order to paralyse the movement . . . strengthening the bourgeoisie and thus preparing the way for the imperialist slaughter.'¹⁴ Ralph Fox, writing during one of Stalinism's Left zigzags, summed up the experience thus:

Practically every one of the great strikes from 1911 to 1914 was begun as an unofficial, spontaneous movement of the workers, rapidly spreading throughout the industry concerned. Only then did the reformist trade union bureaucrats lend the strike the official support of the union, while their swift acceptance in every case of the 'mediation' of the Liberal Government doomed the strike at once to semi-failure.¹⁵

Among the most important achievements of the 'Labour unrest', as the Capitalist Press called it, were two moves towards the unification of the workers' forces: the amalgamation of three railway organisations in the National Union of Railwaymen, and the formation of the Transport Workers' Federation, the germ of the Transport and General Workers' Union of today. Amalgamation was one of the chief demands of the militants, who wanted all craft and sectional interests to be subordinated to the needs of the working class as a whole, and had one union for each industry as their ideal. A metal, engineering and shipbuilding amalgamation committee was set up in 1912, to carry on 'propaganda in the workshops and trade union branches with a view to bringing pressure to bear from below on the national executives',¹⁶ in favour of fusing the unions catering for workers in the industries named. Similar movements sprang up in other industries. This amalgamationist trend 'was for the most part a "rank-and-file" movement of a Left-wing character, keenly critical of the attitude and conduct of the permanent trade union officials'.¹⁷ Nowadays the concentration of the bulk of trade union membership into a few great, powerful amalgamations is taken for granted, and it is worth recalling that the struggle to

bring this about was at first an affair of 'Left-wingers' and 'unofficial movements'.

Coupled with the fight for amalgamation was the fight for workshop organisation. In the early stages of trade unionism the branch had largely coincided with the place of work, but with the expansion of the unions a territorial basis for branch membership had been established in many unions. The militants believed that organisation on the basis of the workshop made for greater effectiveness of the unions as fighting machines - and less 'atomisation' of the rank-and-file in relation to that compact bureaucracy at the top which they had learnt to distrust. Before the first world war, the shop stewards in a number of centres had already begun to come forward as leaders of their members in conflict with the employers, and shop stewards for different unions had begun to come together informally, constituting an 'amalgamated' leadership at local level. The tremendous class battles of 1910-14 inevitably fostered this development by revealing the inadequacies of the type of trade union structure which had set hard in the decades of relative social peace.

Linked with amalgamations of the unions and the building up of workshop organisation was the aim of limiting the power of officials to go against the will of the rank and file, and subjecting these officials to more effective control from below. A comparatively moderate expression of this idea was given by a writer in Tom Mann's journal, the Industrial Syndicalist:

Our leaders must be elected by a ballot of the membership by direct vote, elected for a definite period with definite instructions, and they must prove their competency by being successful . . . We can afford no more lasting failures, even in high places. The only test of competency in this connexion is success. 18

Much more advanced views than this were widespread in the Labour movement at this time. A definitely anti-official, anti-leadership outlook was reflected in one of the rules of the Socialist Labour Party, which wielded great influence among Clydeside militants, that its members must not occupy any official position in a trade union. The most finished formulation of the extreme view is found in the famous pamphlet The Miners' Next Step, brought out in 1912 by the Unofficial Reform Committee active among the South Wales miners. Trade union officials, it was claimed, were wedded to the policy of industrial conciliation, regardless of their members' interests. They were opposed to any increase in rank-and-file control over themselves, because their possession of arbitrary power gave them social prestige and ensured the 'respect' of the employers, with all that that implied.

When the Cambrian Combine men had demanded a ballot on the agreement accepted in their name in 1910 the leaders had talked of a 'growing spirit of anarchy'. The remedy was not to be found in a mere change of leaders, for former agitators who became leaders went the same way as those

they supplanted. (The element of truth in this was to be seen in the later career of A. J. Cook, one of the co-authors of this pamphlet!) 'Leadership implies power held by the Leader . . . All leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions. No man was ever good enough to have such power at his disposal as real leadership implies.' Consistently with this view, the authors demanded a reorganisation of their union so that 'all the initiative for new proposals, policies and tactics remains with the lodge', and the executive (from which officials should be excluded) was to be reduced to merely administrative functions. 19

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE SHOP STEWARDS

With the outbreak of the imperialist war, which their breaking of the 1910-14 struggles had helped to make inevitable, the trade union officials entered into an agreement with the government which virtually abolished trade unionism 'for the duration'. In exchange for this they were taken on to all sorts of committees and given such social recognition as they had never enjoyed before. The war years were a period, wrote the Webbs, of 'revolutionary (they mean, of course, counter-revolutionary BP) transformation of the social and political standing of the official representatives of the trade union world', when the trade union machine was recognised as 'part of the social machinery of the State'. 20 While prices rose steeply, wages were kept down and employers were allowed to chisel away at hard-won rights and safeguards on the plea that the 'war effort' necessitated sacrifices.

What the Judases of trade unionism, enjoying their statesmanlike status, looked like at close quarters we see in Beatrice Webb's notes on the Trades Union Congress of 1915:

The Congress is no better, in fact less hopeful, than in old days, if we assume it to be representative of advanced working-class opinion. The leading men have grown fatter in body and more dully complacent in mind than they were twenty years ago: the delegates have lost their keenness, the rebels of today don't get elected to Congress and the 'old hands' know, from long experience, that it is more of an 'outing' than a gathering for the transaction of working-class affairs. What the delegates enjoy is a joke, it matters not what sort of joke so long as it excites laughter. Indignation, righteous or unrighteous, is felt to be out of place. There is no anti-government feeling, no determination to get evils righted . . . I listened to two officials over their big cigars in the hotel lounge this afternoon. 'The wages are cruel', said one to the other, 'perfectly scandalous.' It was the largeness of the workers' earnings, it appeared, they were complaining of! . . . In so far as there

is any feeling, it is reserved for jealousy between leaders or for the disputes between the unions.²¹

The workers' impatience with the situation created by their traitor leaders broke through into direct action first on the Clyde in February 1915. 'Amalgamationists' among the engineers, together with members of the various Marxist groupings in Glasgow, took the lead in getting an unofficial ban on overtime imposed until the employers agreed to a wage increase that would meet the rise in the cost of living. When the union leaders opposed them, the workers concerned set up a Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee on which all the unions in the engineering trade were represented by their shop stewards, and called a strike. This lasted eighteen days before the combined pressure of the government and the union leaders forced the men back. The committee resolved to remain in being as the Clyde Workers' Committee and its members actively promoted the formation in each workshop in the area of a shop stewards' committee covering all sections. The success of this movement caused tremendous alarm in capitalist circles, and pretexts were found to arrest the chief 'agitators' and deport them from Clydeside,²² and also to suppress the shop stewards' paper, the Worker.

Hardly had the noise of battle died down on the Clyde, however, when it broke out again in Sheffield. The calling up to the army of an engineering worker belonging to an exempt category was taken as a test case by the engineers of that city. Shop stewards improvised a local organisation which brought 10,000 men out on strike in November 1916, and sent delegates to other engineering centres to have the strike extended. The War Office hastily released their victim in order to get the men back to work in the munitions factories. Out of this struggle emerged a network of permanent workshop committees in Sheffield, and a trend towards the unification of these into factory committees and into a workers' committee covering the entire district. The struggle for amalgamation became primarily concerned with building up unity from below at the point of production: 'Make the amalgamation of unions incidental, the amalgamation of workers fundamental.'²³

All through the years 1916-18 there was a succession of strikes in one centre after another, particularly in engineering but also in other industries, notably in the South Wales coal-field, in every case led by unofficial groups. But there was little co-ordination between these actions. Thus, the engineers' strike which began at Rochdale in May 1917 and spread rapidly, did not affect such important centres as Clydeside and Tyneside. The unofficial leaders faced enormous difficulties, every possible obstacle being put in their way by the government, the employers and the union officials. As they began to overcome them and to hold successful national conferences of shop stewards - and as the news of the February revolution in Russia and its consequences began to come in, along with news of mutinies in the French army and other signs of the times - the official leaders of the Labour movement started to vary their tactics. Union officials intervened with the authorities to get arrested

shop stewards released and concessions granted to various sections of the workers. The charade of the Leeds Convention took place, at which men like MacDonald and Snowden talked of setting up councils of workmen's and soldiers' delegates in every locality to work for peace and the emancipation of Labour. The unions of the miners, the railwaymen and the transport workers formed a Triple Alliance and made vigorous-sounding pronouncements about 'conscription of wealth', so that many workers looked to the leaders of this new official grouping of unions as the advance guard in the war on capitalism,²⁴ making unofficial, rank-and-file organisation unnecessary.

When a national leadership of the various shop stewards' committees and amalgamation movements at last came into being in August 1917, it was hamstrung by the syndicalist prejudice against any kind of effective leadership which their experience of corrupt officialdom had fostered in so many rank-and-file trade unionists. What was set up was merely administrative council without any executive powers: all decisions had to be referred back to the rank-and-file before action could be initiated, and the council functioned as little more than a reporting centre for the local committees.

By allowing the official leaders of the working-class movement to make some 'left' gestures, and by granting some real concessions, British imperialism was able, aided also by confused ideas in the workers' ranks, to survive the war intact. But what would happen after the war, when the 'patriotic' considerations which had held back many workers during the hostilities with Germany ceased to apply, and the demobilised soldiers demanded that 'land fit for heroes to live in' which they had been promised? 'With the coming of the Armistice in November 1918 organised Labour was left in what was probably the steepest position it had ever occupied . . . Moreover, for a halcyon breathing-space of eighteen months Labour was in a much stronger position than it had dared to hope.'²⁵

The 'full-employment' period which lasted until the slump began in the latter part of 1920 presented a wonderful opportunity to the militants, and the capitalists were hard put to fend them off. Though the opportunity was taken, with the 'rephrasing' of the munitions industry, to get rid of as many shop stewards as possible and thereby break up the movement in its war-time strongholds, it continued to advance on a number of sectors of the industrial front and its ideas were widely discussed. The shop stewards' movement, wrote a contemporary observer, 'is at once the demand for greater autonomy for the rank-and-file workers as against the contron of the central official, and for more effective organisation against the power of the employer' - demands which 'are not easily separated for the second may depend on the first'.²⁶ In those days 'it looked as though some fundamentally new form of trade union structure was going to replace the established forms'.²⁷ J. T. Murphy's pamphlet The Workers' Committee (1918) sold 150,000 copies. Its central idea was the election

of workshop committees cutting across the boundaries between unions, but given official recognition by the unions: committees which would link up into district workers' committees which 'should not usurp the functions of the local trade union committees but attend to the larger questions embracing all the trade unions in the industry'. These committees would be 'similar in form to a trades council, with this essential difference - the trades council is only indirectly related to the workshops, whereas the workers' committee is directly related'. The formation of these committees, it was argued, would render the union machinery more responsive to the needs of the members 'at the point of production', and would facilitate the desired trend towards amalgamations.²⁸

After the head-on clashes which occurred in Glasgow and Belfast early in 1919 the main method followed by the capitalists, together with the government and the trade union bureaucrats, was the method of concessions, both real and apparent, to tide over the awkward period pending the slump. Railwaymen were given the 48-hour week, engineers and shipbuilders the same. A commission to investigate the possibilities of nationalising the coal industry appeased the miners. Substantial wage increases raised the general level of real wages above that of 1914. An 'Industrial Conference' of representatives of trade unions and employers' federations agreed upon imposing programme of social legislation. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers made an agreement with the employers which accorded a definite status to that union's shop stewards in the works.²⁹ The amalgamation of the ASE with other unions into the Amalgamated Engineering Union seemed to give promise of reorganisation for battle on one important sector, while the Triple Alliance could be trusted to look after most of the others. Much of the workers' confidence in the official machinery and leadership was restored.

Among the militants themselves the confusion of ideas continued. The National Guilds movement enjoyed a brief but deadly vogue, and led important groups of building workers into costly, fruitless and discouraging attempts to take over their industry by setting up in business in rivalry with private builders. Similar notions were widespread in other industries, diverting the workers' minds from the need for political struggle against the Capitalist State. As regards the attitude to be adopted towards the trade unions, on the one hand there was the tendency, especially marked in the unions of the Triple Alliance, to confine oneself to 'vigilance' work, making propaganda for militant policies and warning against the danger of sell-out, while on the other, the prejudice against 'leaders' caused many outstanding shop stewards voluntarily to hold back from contesting union elections and fighting to win footholds within the official machine.³⁰ The principal Marxist groups did not come together into a united Communist Party until January 1921, and then remained very much under the influence of their sectarian traditions and did not try systematically to become rooted in industry until the reorganisation of 1922-23

got under way. By then the slump had set in, unemployment existed on a mass scale, and a succession of industrial defeats (especially 'Black Friday' in 1921 when the Triple Alliance showed its true worth, and the engineering lock-out of 1922) had smashed what remained of the war-time shop stewards' movement and compelled the militants to start painfully building up again almost from scratch.

THE MINORITY MOVEMENT

The regrouping of the militant forces took place under the guidance of the Communist Party, working mainly through what was called the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, headed by Tom Mann.³¹ The RILU fully understood at this time that there could be no question of forming new unions in Britain, nor was there much to be gained by campaigning for affiliation of existing unions to the RILU. The South Wales Miners' Federation, where the 'Reform Committee' elements were strong, declared for affiliation in 1921, but retracted when threatened with expulsion from the Trades Union Congress. Under the guidance of the RILU communists began working, industry by industry, to rally the workers on the basis of specific programmes related both to the problems of the given industry and to the actual structure of the trade union machine.

In sharp contrast to the attitude taken up in a later phase (1929-31), the fact that many workers had left the unions, either through fear of victimisation in a period of slump or out of disgust with the betrayals by the bureaucrats, or for other reasons, was not seen as the end of the trade union epoch, justifying militants in turning their backs on the unions. On the contrary 'Back to the Unions!' was one of the slogans of the British Bureau of the RILU, coupled with 'Stop the retreat!' which was a call to end the policy of surrender to the employers' offensive. All Power, the Bureau's paper, had a circulation by the end of 1922 of 12,000. Rank-and-file organisations, 'minority movements' - from a complaint by some bureaucrat regarding the minority of troublemakers' - were brought into being anew among the miners, the engineers, the transport workers and other sections, and these were eventually, in 1924, gathered together into the National Minority Movement.

I have discussed elsewhere³² this movement's record in 1924-27 and here wish only to draw attention to certain of its features. In the early phase great stress was laid on the need to make the trades councils directly representative of the workshops instead of merely consisting of delegates from trade union branches which were often remote and unrepresentative, to secure the restoration of the trades councils' representation in the Trades Union Congress, and in every way to strengthen the element of rank-and-file control in trade union structure, so as to

ensure that the unions functioned for the purpose they had originally been formed to serve.

The task of the Minority Movement was to make the unity of the trade union movement a real one, to build up the shop and local organisation which should be able to control from below this great mass machine, to fight at every step the apostles of 'civil peace', and uniting the workers, organised and unorganised, on the widest possible front in their everyday economic struggles, build up such a rank-and-file movement as should make impossible a repetition of 'Black Friday'.³³

Unfortunately, although the Minority Movement became an influential centre of propaganda and a ginger group which injected new life into many trade union branches and trades councils, and thereby forced the trade union leaders to put themselves at the head of strikes and to make various 'Left' gestures, as in 1917-20, it did little in practice to establish the workshop and factory committees of which so much was said. In the main it proved able only to spread the idea and urge it upon the official leadership.

The root of the trouble here was probably that the transformation of the Communist Party on to a factory-group basis 'was only begun in earnest towards the end of 1924' and by May 1, 1925, there were only sixty-eight communist factory groups, embracing a mere 10 per cent of the party membership.³⁴ By the time that the political driving force in the Minority Movement had organised itself sufficiently to begin setting up new kinds of mass organisations in the factories, the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee had come into existence, and the Stalinist leadership of the world communist movement had decreed that nothing be done that might disturb the goodwill of the 'Left' bureaucrats. At the party congress in May 1925 a Sheffield delegate observed:

A. J. Cook's speech at the recent miners' conference was completely out of tune with the speeches he had previously been making (i.e. before he had been elected to the secretaryship of the Miners' Federation, with Minority Movement support BP). After we have praised and said nice things about these Left-wing leaders, what will the masses say about the Communist Party when those leaders fail them? We must give the necessary qualifications to our support of these Left-wingers.'

A Glasgow delegate warned of the need to be suspicious of certain trade union leaders who were acquiring an easy reputation for 'Leftness' through prominence in the movement for international trade union unity. Pollitt replied that there was 'just a little danger of overstressing this point . . . The Russian trade union leaders are interested, leaders who have proved their worth to the working-class movement and in whom we have complete confidence'.³⁵

The end of this road was the betrayal of the General Strike, with the Communist Party and the Minority Movement unable to do anything against it but protest and call upon the traitor leaders to mend their ways. It revealed 'the weakness of a Left which could only make propaganda, and which was not so firmly organised in the factories, and localities that it could take the lead in action'.³⁶ A hint of realisation that the movement had been shunted on to the wrong path in 1925-26 appeared in Wal Hannington's pamphlet What's Wrong in the Engineering Industry?, published by the National Minority Movement in 1927, where he wrote, after urging the need for a change of leaders in the unions:

To those who say 'We have seen leaders turn before and what guarantee is there that they will not continue to do so?' we reply, the Minority Movement must be strong enough inside the unions not only to make leaders, but also to break them, if and when they reject the policy upon which they were elected.

But Stalinist policy remained unchanged right down to the end of 1927, and the decision not to resist the TUC General Council's ultimatum to trades councils to disaffiliate from the Minority Movement virtually killed it.

So died the Minority Movement, much as the General Strike had died. Ernest Bevin and his colleagues had called off the General Strike to avoid open warfare with the government: Harry Pollitt called off the Minority Movement to avoid open warfare with the TUC and many executives of trade unions.³⁷

THE 'THIRD PERIOD'

Thanks to the policy imposed upon it by Moscow from the Spring of 1925 onwards, the Minority Movement had done just enough to incur the resentment of the bureaucracy without acquiring the power to fight back effectively. The bureaucracy was able very thoroughly to combine its proscription and bans with the employers' victimisation of militants in that black period of the British working-class movement which followed the General Strike, and so to stamp out the Minority Movement for most practical purposes. For all its weaknesses and opportunist errors, the Minority Movement of 1924-27 had been a genuine expression of a trend in the working class, with real roots in the masses and a relationship to the traditional organisations of British Labour.

Between the end of 1927 (Fifteenth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party) and the middle of 1929 (Tenth Plenum of the executive committee of the Communist International) a change of policy was put through in the

international communist movement which caused the British Stalinists in their industrial work to take off into realms of fantasy and adventure, not to mention crime and treason to the working class. This episode is largely responsible for the attitude of reserve and suspicion towards anything calling itself a 'rank-and-file movement' which is sometimes met among old trade unionists who are by no means bureaucrats.

The original Minority Movement based itself on affiliation by trade union branches, district committees, etc.: individual membership was treated as transitional until the individual concerned had won his branch to affiliate. It was careful to emphasise that it was not an anti-union movement but on the contrary expected its supporters to work for 100 per cent trade unionism wherever they had influence, and could point to many an achievement in this respect. One of the last expositions of the movement's purpose before the entry into what Stalinist jargon called 'the third period' is found in a pamphlet by Fred Thompson called Maintenance for Dockers, published by the Transport Workers' Minority Movement in 1928.

The Minority Movement is an organisation of militant trade unionists who, realising the extent to which the present leadership have committed themselves and the unions unreservedly to class collaboration, have banded themselves together to restore the original purpose and fighting spirit on which the trade unions were founded, to secure a new leadership with a policy based upon a realisation of the class struggle, and a complete reorganisation of the trade unions on lines that will admit of this policy being given effect to.

From mid-1929 onward for period of over two years, this approach was replaced by a totally different one. Not merely was the Minority Movement in its new guise uninterested in winning 100 per cent trade unionism, it declared the trade unions to be cracking up and on their way out, and a good thing too! Not merely did it turn away from the task of winning trade union branches for militant policies, it deliberately sought to exclude branch officers from strike committees and rank-and-file ad hoc committees of all kinds. Special 'red' trade unions were created and then launched by their communist leaders into 'prestige' strikes, the need for which was not understood by the members (though these affairs looked impressive in the periodical reports to Moscow), so that militancy was discredited among those sections of the workers closest to the Minority Movement.

It was of this period in Stalinist industrial policy that Trotsky wrote (in Communism and Syndicalism, 1929) that

the struggle for the party's influence in the trade unions finds its objective verification in whether or not the unions thrive, whether or not the number of their members increases, as well as in their relations with the broadest masses. If the party buys its influence in the trade unions only at the price of a

narrowing-down and factionalising of the latter - converting them into auxiliaries of the party for momentary aims and preventing them from becoming genuine mass organisations - then the relations between the party and the class are wrong.

The Communist Party was showing 'an adolescent tendency to make itself master of the working class in the briefest time, by means of stage-play, inventions, superficial agitation, etc.'; nothing good would come of 'political hysteria which does not take conditions into account, which confuses today with yesterday or with tomorrow'.

Characteristic of the 1929-31 period was a growing disparity between slogans and achievements. During the Bradford woollen strike of 1930, for instance, the Minority Movement shouted to bewildered workers about the 'struggle for power' - but proved incapable of setting up a single independent mill committee. While the Red International of Labour Unions demanded that the movement become a 'real mass organisation based on dues-paying collective and individual membership', setting itself up as an alternative trade union centre to the TUC, the tactics of frenzy were in fact resulting in the isolation and even expulsion of those groups which had retained some mass influence from the General Strike period (e.g. the expulsion of the Mardy lodge from the South Wales Miners' Federation).

Arthur Horner himself eventually spoke out within the party against what was happening: 'Artificial strike committees, really Minority Movement groups, were set up as alternatives to the lodges, without mass contact, resulting only in our isolation . . . The revolutionary movement was effectively bankrupt from every angle.' For this statement he was, of course, reprimanded and removed from the leadership of the Miners' Minority Movement. The shouting to the workers to come and be led, and with a general strike as 'the next step', grew louder and shriller, especially as the international Stalinist leadership kept impatiently contrasting the poor showing of the Minority Movement with what was happening in Germany (where the Nazis were now a substantial and growing force) - there, foresooth, 'all mass movements are conducted under the leadership of the party'.

Those who criticised the suicidal tactics of the 'third period' were dismissed as 'Trotskyist yellow-bellies', just as those who had criticised the opportunist errors of the previous phase had been 'Trotskyist wild men'. After the damage had been done, and without, of course, any acknowledgment to those who had been right all along, Wilhelm Pieck admitted on behalf of the executive committee of the Communist International in his speech of July 26, 1935, at the Seventh Congress of the CI, the justice of these criticisms:

The most glaring example of lectarianism in the trade union movement was provided in Great Britain, where in the face of the sharp attacks of the Right members of the General Council and the vacillations of the

Left trade union leaders the communists adopted (in fact had pressed upon them by the executive committee of the CI: BP) such clumsy and sectarian tactics that the Minority Movement actually fell to pieces. Adopting the course of independently leading the economic struggles, the communists, as a result of former Right mistakes and the inadequate organisational consolidation of the Minority Movement, transferred their main work from the trade union groups to individual members, and from the trade unions to the unorganised workers, and set up their scanty forces against the whole trade union movement. These mistakes were aggravated by the fact that the communists regarded the Minority Movement as the nucleus of new trade unions and discontinued recruiting workers to the trade unions, issuing appeals to join the ranks of the Minority Movement. It must be borne in mind that these mistakes were committed by our comrades in a country where the reformist trade unions possess the oldest traditions. Under such circumstances the communists were found to become entirely isolated from the trade union movement, and the Minority Movement collapsed. It is only with great difficulty that our British comrades, having realised their mistakes and correspondingly altered their trade union policy, are managing to regain their influence in the trade union movement.

THE JANUARY RESOLUTION AND AFTER

It was the out-come of the government crisis of 1931 that gave a salutary jolt to the Communist Party and to its mentors in Moscow, inducing some new thinking on industrial policy. The collapse of the Labour government provided a model opportunity for communist advance, but the actual development of events merely served to highlight the isolation and impotence of the communists.

Meanwhile the fact had to be faced that, independently of the surviving Minority Movement groups, now left high and dry, workers in a number of industries were forming unofficial organisations and carrying on the struggle in their own way - regardless of both the top officials of their unions and of the theories of the Communist Party. In South Wales, the big strike against the 'Shiller Award' was led by the militant Llwynypia lodge of the union. A Builders' Forward Movement arose based on thirty-two London trade union branches. An unofficial movement in the British Iron and Steel and Kindred trades Federation held a conference at which sixty-one branches were represented, drew up a programme for democratising the union, reducing officials' salaries etc., and issued its own duplicated news-sheet. A Members' Rights Movement appeared in the Amalgamated Engineering Union, a Reorganisation Committee among the boilermakers, and a Rules Revision Committee among the furniture workers. All these

developments began in the latter part of 1931, before any change was made in Communist Party policy; they were in no sense created by the Communist Party, as was later alleged by the Right wing and implied in communist propaganda. On the contrary, not only were they largely ignored by the communists but in some cases they were resisted and opposed as rivals to the Minority Movement!

On the initiative of the Red International of Labour Unions, the British Communist Party now undertook an important modification of its industrial policy. This was expressed in what came to be known as 'the January Resolution', adopted by the central committee in January 1932. This decision called for a turn towards the real movements going on among the workers, with abandonment of notions and forms of organisation that constituted a barrier between the communists and these movements. The communists must cease to appear as a self-appointed leadership coming from outside, usually rather late in the day, and trying to impose programmes they had invented independently of the workers concerned. They must cease, too, to seem to wish to weaken and even to destroy the trade unions. In British conditions strike struggles to be successful, must involve trade union branches, and the party should strive to win influence in the branches and among the branch officers - who should no longer be put on the same level as the head-office bureaucrats. The trade union branches must be transformed 'from organs of class collaboration into organs of class struggle'. One of the tasks of the Communist Party members must be to win unorganised workers to join the unions, as part of a general line of strengthening organisation for struggle.

This change of outlook on major problems naturally produced much discussion in the party. It was during this discussion that the Balham group of the Communist Party was expelled, to become the original nucleus of the Left Opposition in Britain. In a series of thoughtful contributions to the Daily Worker (April 14, May 27, June 10), mild in tone though perhaps somewhat abstract and rigid in presentation, these comrades explained that while they welcomed the January Resolution as a step in the right direction of a critical examination of the party's policy and methods, they were worried about the way the resolution put the unions and workplaces on the same footing as fields of work. 'We recognise the great value of every opportunity afforded to us inside the trade union branches. We see the possibilities for work in the unions as well as the limitations.' The structure and constitution of the trade unions made them unsuitable as organs of class struggle; these must be built directly in the workshops and factories. 'We do not deny . . . that the branches can be of great value in building the job organisations, but the emphasis in the resolution is upon the unions.'

King Street had been worried about the Balham group for some time, being aware that a number of its members were studying Trotsky's criticisms and counter-proposals regarding Comintern policy, and was happy to seize the

opportunity of expelling the group on an issue where it could be made to look like the centre of a Left-sectarian resistance to necessary changes in party work. The Balham comrades were in fact far from being alone in warning against the danger that the correction of Left errors might, unless very carefully understood and explained, open the way to Right ones. No less an authority than R. P. Dutt himself noted, in contributions to the Daily Worker of September 14 and 19, 1932, that

under cover of the absolute and agreed necessity of strengthening a hundredfold our work in the reformist trade unions there has begun to appear increasingly a very different tendency - a tendency to preach confidence in the reformist trade unions and in that reformist trade union machine as organs of the working-class struggle.

He stressed that 'we stand for a powerful united revolutionary trade union opposition, firmly based on the trade union membership, on the lower trade union organs, and on factory organisation, which will break the power of the reformist trade union bureaucracy and lead the way to the future powerful united revolutionary trade unionism'. Not surprisingly, J. Shields pointed out in the Daily Worker of September 30 that 'Comrade Dutt objectively comes out on the side of the Balham group'.⁴¹

For a considerable period after the January Resolution the Communist Party's industrial work made little progress, and may even, on balance, have declined. A process of 'falling between two stools' was going on. On the one hand, the Minority Movement, which had become a caricature of its former self, was dropped by many militants to whom it had become an embarrassment. ('Following upon this resolution, group after group of the MM that still existed went out of existence, the comrades claiming that they understood it now to be the line of the party that the MM should be liquidated', wrote W. Allan in Communist Review, October, 1932.) On the other, the persistence of sectarian habits - and of the workers' distrust of the communists arising from these - meant that the successful implementation of new methods of work did not come easily.

All the party activists in the big weavers' strike in 1932 were outside the union. The 'Solidarity Movement' formed out of the strike had no real roots in the lower organisations of the union, and was mainly composed of individual communists. It was inevitable that such a movement could not live long.

So wrote Idris Cox three years afterwards.⁴² So late as October 1932 it was still necessary for the leadership of the Metal Trades Minority Movement to pass a resolution calling on all its members to 'link up with and actively work amongst' the Members' Rights Movement, which had the support of 120 trade union branches and four area councils of the AEU and published its own monthly paper the Monkey Wrench, with a circulation of 5,000.⁴³ John Mahon reported in the same period that a number of the unofficial movements in the trade unions had been allowed to decline or to go

out of existence and that 'one tendency regarded these movements as dangerous competitors with the Minority Movement, and in pursuance of this theory the Builders' Forward Movement was liquidated'.⁴⁴ At the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party, held in November 1932, it emerged that virtually no progress had been made in striking roots in the factories. 'Most of the new members who joined are unemployed, most of the members who left are unemployed.'

There was an outstanding exception, however, amid the disappointments in the field of rank-and-file work. This was the work carried out among the London busmen, which became a 'model' for successful unofficial action. The London Busmen's Rank-And-File Movement arose in August 1932 out of dissatisfaction with the trade union officials' attitude to the employers' proposals, and by November it was issuing a printed monthly paper the Busman's Punch. Pollitt wrote in the Labour Monthly of January 1933:

The experience of the London Busmen's Rank-and-File Movement should be carefully studied by the militant workers in every industry. The determination of the mass of London's busmen (shown in the four-to-one majority ballot vote to resist the company's terms) was expressed through the setting up of a rank-and-file committee consisting of branch representatives who reported back to the branches and secured confirmation of the committee's decisions. Funds to carry out a propaganda campaign were raised through branches; leaflets, pamphlets, and the Busman's Punch were sold through the branches; speakers from the rank-and-file committees addressed the branches.

... And all this work was carried on by a committee drawing its authority from the garages and branches, who looked to it to lead the fight against the company independently of the trade union officials, but with the full force of the trade union branches and garages behind it.

In the case of the busmen, the branch coincided with the place of work, the garage, so that the problem whether to work mainly through the branches or mainly on the job itself, whether to try to transform the branch or to set up a special 'factory committee', hardly existed. The busmen were, moreover, all members of one union. Another favourable circumstance was the existence as part of the official set-up of the Central Bus Committee, composed of representatives of the branches; through their success in the branches the militants automatically obtained a majority on this committee, which then became a powerful instrument for extending their influence and providing leadership to the London busmen as a whole. V. L. Allen notes, in his Trade Union Leadership: Based on a Study of Arthur Deakin (1957):

The National Minority Movement was based on an individual membership of trade unionists: it was a body outside of the trade union movement and, as such, it could be proscribed by unions, and trade unionists who belonged to it could be disciplined. This was not

so easily done in the case of the Rank-and-File Movement, for it was based on the support of trade union branches and shop stewards' organisations and had no individual membership. The communists concentrated on getting powerful lay trade union committees to affiliate to the Movement. In the Central London Area Bus Committee they found one such committee which fairly quickly came under the control of the London Busmen's Rank-and-File Movement. From then onwards its policy ran counter to that of the union executive and there was no way in which the executive could change it except by suspending the machinery, declaring the movement subversive, and taking disciplinary action against its leading members. (pp. 64-5)

George Renshaw, analysing the success of the busmen's movement in the RILU Magazine (February 1, 1933), described how it had all grown from the work of militants in one branch who had got this branch to pass a resolution and then to circulate it to all the garages and call a mass meeting, through which they made new contacts and launched the Busman's Punch - at first as a duplicated sheet.⁴⁵

Inspired by the example of the London busmen's movement, the 'Vigilance' movement on the railways made considerable progress in the early months of 1933 and was expected to prove as viable, but it was soon dragged down by difficulties which did not exist for the London busmen - inter-union rivalries and the problems connected with setting up an organisation cutting across union membership, and the absence of an official leading centre which could be 'captured' as the Central Bus Committee had been. Nevertheless, the agitation carried on by the 'Vigilance' movement, especially through its widely-circulated paper the Railway Vigilant, forced the railway National Wages Board, for the first time since 1921, to reject a demand made by the railway companies, and the movement led numerous successful local strikes.

As the militancy of the workers revived, with signs of recovery from the depths of the depression, during 1933, and as the communists began seriously to apply themselves to work on the new lines, the trade union bureaucracy started to crack down on rank-and-file activities with greater determination than for several years. They recognised that a serious threat to their position was developing. Twelve London members of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers who organised, through a committee representing thirty branches, a rank-and-file conference in June 1933 for the purpose of working out a fighting programme for building workers, were expelled from the union. Ernest Bevin began to introduce amendments to the rule-book to trip up the lower officials of his union who associated with unofficial movements. In union after union the clash grew sharper, culminating in the Black Circulars issued by the Trades Union Congress General Council in March 1935, attempting to make affiliated unions and trades councils deprive their communist members of delegation rights.⁴⁶ It was widely remarked that the 'reds' whom the union leaders were

persecuting were among the best workers for 100 per cent trade unionism. Bert Papworth, who as secretary of Chelverton Road branch initiated the London busmen's movement, had just been decorated with his union's silver medal for recruiting 170 new members. Communists were to the fore in a series of strikes in unorganised factories in the Birmingham area and elsewhere (notably Firestone's, Brentford, and Pressed Steel, Oxford) which resulted in trade unionism getting footholds in previously black spots. The aircraft section of the engineering industry was practically unorganised in 1934 but within three years every important factory was over 90 per cent organised, an achievement mainly due to the Aircraft Shop Stewards' Movement, which issued its own paper the New Propellor, and in twelve months conducted fourteen important unofficial strikes, most of which were successful.

When the Thirteenth Congress of the British Communist Party took place, in February 1935, both the general situation in industry and the position of the communists in trade unions were markedly different from what had obtained at the previous congress. Trade union membership had begun to increase for the first time for many years. The militancy of the workers caused The Times to write of 'the spirit of 1926' showing itself again. Of the 294 delegates to congress, 205 were employed: 234 were trade unionists, and of these nearly two-thirds held positions at some level in their unions. Not long afterwards, speaking on August 20, 1935, at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, J. R. Campbell could with reason depict Britain as being on the eve of great mass struggles, with the workers increasingly impatient of the restrictions imposed on them by the bureaucracy, and substantial prospects for a broad militant movement in industry.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE 'PEOPLE'S FRONT' LINE

It is hard to reconcile the position that had actually come about by the eve of the war, in 1938-39, with the prospects confidently discussed in 1935. The rank-and-file movements which had been surging up again and again in industry in spite of official repression and intimidation, and causing panic among the bureaucrats, had either disappeared or become tame and unrecognisably respectable. The expected major class conflicts had not occurred. G. D. H. Cole writes in his Short History of the British Working-Class Movement (1948):

In the early months of 1937 there were all the symptoms of developing Labour unrest . . . The workers were beginning to feel that, unless they took action immediately to secure improved wages and shorter working hours, their opportunity would very likely be gone; for already economists were beginning to speak of the imminence of a new recession, as soon as

the intensive building of new factories for the purpose of rearmament had passed its peak. Actually, there was a recession, after the relatively high industrial activity of 1937, and even increased rearmament activity in 1938-39 did not quite restore conditions to the level reached in 1937. Thanks, however, to these activities, the recession was much less severe than it otherwise would have been, and the recovery of trade unionism continued at a slow pace up to the outbreak of war in 1939. Right through these years the trade union movement retained its essentially pacific policy. Strikes and lockouts were few and for the most part small, and the trade union leaders gave them little encouragement.

When all due allowance has been made for objective factors, it seems clear that decisive significance attaches to a change in 1935-36 in the political 'line' of the Communist party, which had by then got itself and its fellow-travellers widely accepted as the leaders of the militant movements in industry. As things turned out, the Stalinists headed these movements only to behead them at a crucial stage, because in accordance with Stalin's disastrous diplomacy they assumed the task of seeking alliances with 'progressive capitalists' and holding back the working-class struggle within strict and strangling limits.

Characteristic was the line of development in South Wales. October 1935 saw a tremendous struggle against company unionism, led by the Ocean Combine Committee, which culminated in the 'stay-down' strike at Nine Mile Point for removal of the blacklegs imported during a recent dispute. Several other collieries came out in sympathy, and so also did the railway-men at Merthyr. An attempt by the SWMF officials to close the struggle down was rebuffed and it was brought to a successful conclusion. On the basis of this and previous militant movements in the coalfield, Arthur Horner was elected president of the SWMF in 1936. A splendid opportunity for combining the efforts of communists in official positions with the fight of the rank and file seemed to have been created. Yet, after 1936, rank-and-file activity died down in South Wales. As John Mahon put it, in the Labour Monthly of July 1937, 'the Left' was now 'in control' there. 'The union machine is used to express the workers' demands.'

A bitter struggle in the Nottinghamshire coal-field, the other major stronghold of company unionism, ended with a compromise between the Miners' Federation and the company union. According to the Communist pamphlet Notts United (June 1937) 'this agreement is, it is true, a compromise, but if we examine it soberly and refuse to allow ourselves to be led away by talk of "sell-outs" and "betrayals", it is obvious that it represents a tremendous step forward'. Mick Kane and other leaders of the Nottinghamshire miners had been arrested at Harworth and given harsh sentences under the new Public Order Act, allegedly passed to restrain the Blackshirts. These arrests aroused intense indignation throughout the working-class movement, which was canalised by the Stalinists into a petition campaign. (Kane, sentenced to two years' hard labour, was eventually released in August 1938.)

The rank-and-file movement on the London buses, which appeared to be so firmly based, was outmanoeuvred and smashed by Bevin in the 'coronation strike' of 1937. He deliberately allowed the rank-and-file-controlled Central Bus Committee to take over direction of the strike in order that they might discredit themselves. Similar rank-and-file success to that achieved among the London busmen had not been won among the tram and trolley men, nor among the provincial busmen, and all these groups were effectively held back by Bevin, making the defeat of the strike inevitable. The leaders of the rank-and-file movement could then be ousted from office and their organisation broken up. All this was accepted with surprising resignation by the Communist Party, and the Busman's Punch closed down after the October-November issue. Non-communist leading figures of the rank-and-file movement, bewildered and frustrated, followed the call of W. J. Brown to form a breakaway union.

Study of the literature of the other rank-and-file movements of this period, notably those among the aircraft workers and building workers, shows increasingly narrow concentration on recruitment to the unions and propaganda for amalgamation of the unions. Exposures of the officials and campaigning for democratisation of the unions both faded away. Nothing more was heard after 1935 of the need to work towards a linking-up of all the rank-and-file movement on a national scale, which had frequently been indicated as the goal to be kept in view when communist leaders discussed these movements in 1933-34. The articles about Britain in International Press Correspondence from 1936 onwards, contain little about the industrial front, and the same is true of the Communist International. The British Communist Party monthly Discussion ran articles in its issues of June and July 1936 pouring cold water on the conception of rank-and-file movements: maximum use of the facilities provided by the trade union was the thing, and unofficial movements must never be conceived as permanent in character. At the party congress in May 1937, J. R. Campbell, reporting on the industrial front, said:

We insist that the trade union leaders stop fighting their own militants and start mobilising the working-class to storm the Bastille of unorganised labour. . . . Our demand is for the calling of a conference of trade union executives. . . . A growing number of comrades are being elected to trade union executives and to paid official positions.

One looks in vain in the communist publications of this period for any echo of the idea which had been commonplace not long before and which can be illustrated by two quotations from the Communist Review:

It is clear from experience . . . that many militants still believe that we can force the leaders to head a real fight. In actual practice mass pressure forces the leaders to manoeuvre and to head strikes in order to retain negotiating authority and to betray the strike (October 1933).

H. True

If we can take the reformist unions out of the hands of the reformist leaders, then there is no need for independent organs of struggle and for building a revolutionary trade union opposition . . . We need a Minority Movement because we stand as much chance of capturing the trade union machine and using it for our own ends as we do the capitalist state (October 1932).

At the 1938 Congress of the British Communist Party no report was given on industrial and trade union work as such. J. R. Campbell, who had usually given this report, devoted his time to explaining the menace of 'Trotskyism'. In the report of the central committee prepared for the next congress, which was to have been held in October 1939 but never took place owing to the outbreak of war, we read:

The preoccupation on questions concerning war or peace may seem at first to have led to a dampening down of the struggle against capitalism at home . . . It is not possible to record any big mass movements on the industrial field . . . In the main there has been no real advance made in raising the standards of workers as a whole . . . In many districts there has been serious neglect of this work.

The story of the years immediately preceding the war is a cautionary tale for industrial workers today, with two morals: the need for rank-and-file movements, and the fatal consequences of allowing the Communist Party to get control of such movements. For just as the trade union bureaucracy came closer and closer to monopoly capitalism, so the Soviet bureaucracy, whose agent the Communist Party is, not only lost all interest in promoting workers' revolution but from the mid-1930's onwards became more and more actively opposed to it.

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- 1 F. Engels. 'The English Elections' (February 22, 1874). Marx and Engels on Britain (1953). p. 467.
- 2 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, History of Trade Unionism (1920 edition). p. 204.
- 3 Dona Torr, Tom Mann (1941 edition), pp. 12-13.
- 4 1920 edition, p. 28.
- 5 History of Trade Unionism (1920 edition), pp 466-70.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 589-90. The authors, of course, saw this as a problem arising from the inadequacy of trade union officials' salaries, with the remedy to be found in increasing them!
- 7 According to B. D. Roberts, Trade Union Government and Administration (1956), the total number of full-time officials of the eighteen large unions was in 1952 about 1,600. Roberts states that the commonest level of general secretaries' salaries was between £800 and just over £1,200 a year, while the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress got £2000 a year. Average annual payments to executive council members in attendance fees, hotel expenses, etc., ranged from such figures as £200 in the National Union of General and Municipal Workers to £1172 in the National Union of Railwaymen (pp. 288, 306, 367, 443).
- 8 N. Dennis, F. Henriques, C. Slaughter, Coal is our Life (1956) pp 114-16.
- 9 Raymond Postgate's phrase, in The Builders' History (1923). He uses it in the sense that in the period between the 1850's and 1880s the British workers in the main accepted the capitalist order and merely sought to protect or at most improve a little their position within it.
- 10 G. D. H. Cole, British Trade Unionism Today (1945). p. 192.
- 11 In the Social-Democrat, November 15, 1910; reprinted in Labour Monthly, June, 1950.
- 12 G. R. Askwith, Industrial Problems and Disputes (1920). p. 177. For a good general survey of this period see G. Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England (1936); see also Tom Mann, Memoirs (1923).
- 13 Tom Mann, From Single Tax to Syndicalism (1913) ch vi.
- 14 L. D. Trotsky, Where is Britain Going? (1926) p. 3.
- 15 Ralph Fox, The Class Struggle in Britain, 1880-1914 (1932), p. 71.
- 16 W. A. Orton, Labour in Transition (1921), pp. 93-4.
- 17 G. D. H. Cole, Workshop Organisation (1923), p.17.
- 18 W. F. Hay. in the Industrial Syndicalist, November 1910.
- 19 Cf. James P. Cannon, Introduction (1931) to L. D. Trotsky, Communism and Syndicalism: 'The slogan of "no leaders" - that slogan of demagogues who themselves aspire to leadership without qualifications.'
- 20 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, History of Trade Unionism (1920 edition), p 635.

- 21 Beatrice Webb, Diaries 1912-1924 (1952) pp 44-5.
- 22 The best accounts of this and other industrial struggles of 1914-18 are given in W. Hannington, Industrial History in Wartime (1940), and J. T. Murphy, Preparing for Power (1934). See also W. Gallacher, Revolt on the Clyde (1949) and T. Bell, Pioneering Days (1941).
- 23 J. T. Murphy, quoted in W. A. Orton, Labour In Transition (1921), p. 96.
- 24 One workers' leader who saw the fallacy of relying on the Triple Alliance - a mere pact between top officials - was James Connolly, who wrote in the Workers' Republic, February 12, 1916: 'The frequent rebellion against stupid and spiritless leadership and the call of the rank-and-file for true industrial unity seems to have spurred the leaders on, not to respond to new spirit but to evolve a method whereby under the forms of unity (it) could be trammelled and fettered . . . a scheme to prevent united action rather than facilitate it.'
- 25 M. H. Dobb, Trade Union Experience and Policy 1914-18 (1940), p. 24..
- 26 C. M. Lloyd, Trade Unionism, (1921). P. 244.
- 27 J. I. Roper, Trade Unionism and the New Social Order (1949).
- 28 Typical of the many committees formed unofficially in this period was the River Thames Shop Stewards' Movement, which embraced all trades and grades engaged in shipyard work. It had a membership card, and formed local committees in each shipyard. The organiser was a boiler-maker, the secretary an electrician, the editor of the movement's paper was a woodworker (H. Pollitt, Serving My Time, 1940 pp 92-3
- 29 'The recognised shop stewards were representatives only of a particular union, and were precluded from acting with representatives of other unions, except with the consent of the union's district committee. The shop stewards' movement, where it survived, became officialised; it lost its revolutionary character, and its inclusiveness as a class movement' (G. D. H. Cole, British Trade Unionism Today, (1945) p 169.)
- 30 'The Workers' Committee elements were in opposition to trade unionism! They saw the trade unions as centres of Labour corruption, and were obsessed by the enormous growth of the unofficial movement during the war and the power it had been able to wield. Lenin here insisted on the necessity of combating the corrupt leaders of the trade unions but also stressed the importance of work in the trade unions and recognition of the trade unions as the mass organisations of the working class'. (T. Bell, The British Communist Party, 1937, pp 58-9).
- 31 A. J. Cook and Richard Coppock were among the members of this Bureau.
- 32 'Joseph Redman' (Brian Pierce). 'The Early Years of the CPGB', Labour Review, vol iii, no I, pp. 11-22 January - February 1958. See also 'Joseph Redman', 'British Communist History'. ibid, vol ii, no. 4, pp 106 - 10, July-August 1957.

- 33 Ralph Fox, The Class Struggle in Britain, 1914-23 (1933), p. 82
- 34 Report of the Seventh Congress (1925) of the Communist Party of Great Britain, pp 148, 201.
- 35 Ibid, pp 29, 73-4.
- 36 John Mahon, Trade Unionism (1938) p 53.
- 37 J. T. Murphy, Labour's Big Three (1948), p. 137. The national executive committee of the movement reported to the fifth annual conference, in 1928, that 'it has become increasingly clear that we made a grave mistake last year in recommending the trades councils to withdraw their affiliation from the Minority Movement'.
- 38 For some account of the ultra-Left phase of Stalinism in Britain at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, see 'Joseph Redman', The Communist Party and the Labour Left, 1925-29 (Reasoner pamphlet, Hull, 1957), and Henry Pelling, The British Communist Party (1958).
- 39 Quoted in Communist Review, April, 1931.
- 40 See articles in Daily Worker, May 26, 1932, and Communist International, August 15, 1932.
- 41 To correct any anti-trade-union tendency in their ranks, the British Left Oppositionists published in their paper the Communist, September 1932, part of a reply written by Trotsky in the previous year to a letter from British friends. The latter had expressed the view that the trade unions were falling to pieces. Trotsky sharply disagreed and went on to demand: 'How can the revolutionising of the working class take place outside of the trade unions, without changing their physiognomy and failing to call forth a selection of new leaders?'
- 42 Communist International, February 5, 1935.
- 43 Weekly Worker, October 22, 1932; Communist International, October 1, 1932.
- 44 Daily Worker, October, 20, 1932; Weekly Worker, November, 19, 1932.
- 45 For a detailed account of the history of the London Busman's Rank-and-File Movement, see H. A. Clegg, Labour Relations in London Transport, (1950).
- 46 It was in the 1935 Birthday Honours that Pugh, of the Steelworkers, and Citrine, general secretary of the TUC received knighthoods. They were not the first trade-union knights, but what was new was that they were knighted specifically for their trade union work, that Citrine had many years of such work ahead of him, and that the honours were bestowed by an anti-labour government. Indicative of the strong position which the communists had built up between 1933 and 1935 was the narrowness of the General Council's majority when the Black Circulars came up for approval at the TUC in September 1935: voting was 1,869,000 to 1,274,000. Peter Kerrigan could correctly claim, at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, that 'the change in our trade union work . . . has entirely altered the attitude of the majority of trade unionists to the party.'

- 47 Cole, op. cit. p. 445. Cf. Arthur Horner, Trade Unions and Unity (April 1937): 'The trade union movement is in the throes of a great revival. Tens of thousands of workers are joining the unions every week. Branch meetings were never better attended. There is hardly a section of organised workers which has not received some slight increase in wages, and most sections are beginning to ask for more . . . The workers feel that they have a golden opportunity in the next two years and they intend to use it.'
- 48 Pollitt had pointed out so far back as 1933, in an article in the Communist International of November 1 of that year, that the Achilles' heel of the London busmen's movement was that it was confined to busmen and to London, and indicated the need to extend it to other passenger-transport workers in London and to the provinces.
- 49 E.g., J. R. Campbell, 'The Future of Rank and File Movements'. Labour Monthly, March 1933, and Pollitt in Communist International, January 15, 1933 and December 5, 1934.