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REVOLUTIONARY TRADE-UNIONISM TODAY



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INTRODUCTION

The bankruptcy of TUC style trade unionism must be glaringly obvious to workers in Britain today. Especially since the miners' strike, dispute after dispute has been stabbed in the back by union bosses and sacrificed to safeguard their bureaucratic or financial interests.

No amount of political scheming, tinkering with reforms or soft selling basic principles will end the passivity of ordinary trade union members and build the solidarity that we need. However, very few trade unionists are willing to admit that the whole TUC establishment is fundamentally rotten. The usual solution put forward is to have faith in 'change at the top' or get 'our people' into power as union full-timers.

Syndicalists reject this strategy. We believe that a renewal of the labour movement will need very different forms of organisation - ones which strive to keep control in the hands of the people who know best, the rank-and-file.

This means genuine, direct democracy, where the people concerned make their own decisions collectively, rather than direction coming from a top heavy, privileged bureaucracy. Also, we must put independent working class organisation back on the agenda, rather than seeing trade unions as appendages to a political party.

There have been some promising, if indecisive, steps in this direction. Most impressive was the self-organisation of whole communities during the pits strike; during the printers' strike at Wapping rank-and-file workers produced their own bulletins in opposition to the union bureaucracy; recently a number of strike committees and local support groups got together to co-ordinate their own solidarity campaigns and share lessons from their struggles.

Hopefully more people will start to look for alternatives to the present set up which has failed them so badly.

It is for this reason that we have produced this short pamphlet describing the organisation and activities of the rank-and-file workers' movement in Spain.

Over the past decade this movement has re-established itself - through varying fortunes - as a living force in Spanish working class politics. We do not claim that the organisations we describe offer a ready made model for a new labour movement in our country - they have a history, culture (and dilemmas) of their own. However they do show that self-management can be made a reality in modern trade unions.

SPAIN'S MAIN CITIES:



SPAIN SINCE FRANCO

Two points are central to understanding trade unionism in Spain these days. One is that there are several trade union federations, each associated with a different party or political philosophy. The other is that Franco's death in '75 set off what was virtually a revolutionary upheaval.

Although now, twelve years later, the country is into its second term of government by a 'socialist' party, the PSOE (which even the Guardian had described as more Thatcherite than the woman herself in terms of economic policies) it was by no means certain at the time that Franco's death would lead to a transition from dictatorship to parliamentary 'democracy'. The first half of the '70s saw a steady growth of industrial unrest and protests by students as Spain's strong man lost his grip. The only organisation the workers could legally use was the state controlled sham union, the CNS, so they obviously had to create something different, which turned out to be the COCO, or Workers' Commissions. Although the COCO was eventually taken over by the Communist Party (and is now a bureaucratic, reformist union under their control) it started off as a co-ordination (co-ordinadora) of workers' assemblies, open to the many radical tendencies at work in those years. The most important of these tendencies, and the largest by far, has been labelled 'assemblyist' - the mass of ordinary workers who did not look to vanguard Leninist parties or parliamentary reform to sort things out for them, but saw the genuine, direct democracy practiced in their assemblies, which were open to everyone, as the model for a future society. Although few of these assemblyists had detailed ideas beyond a basic faith in the possibilities for real participation that they were experiencing day to day, their militancy posed a definite threat to the interests of Capitalism in Spain. The bosses were hoping that a stable right-wing parliament would replace the blatant oppression and restrictive



structures of Franco's regime, bringing the country into line with the EEC and its 'flexible' workforce. This is more or less what they got from the PSOE, but with the added bonus that it was elected by working class votes because of empty promises to carry out socialist policies. As every year takes Spain further from the heady days of the '70s

the assemblyist tendency grows weaker, but on the other hand a growing disillusionment with the PSOE may be revitalising it.

Anyone in this country who is basing their hopes on getting a Labour government elected could learn a lot from what's happening in Spain, where one popular working class slogan would translate into the British context as 'Kinnock, Hattersley - what a pair of bastards!'

Many of those workers who were inspired by their experiences in open assemblies found a natural vehicle for their aspirations in the CNT - an anarchist/syndicalist trade union (ie one based on direct democracy and anti-authoritarian principles) which attracted 150 thousand people to its first open air rally after Franco's death, held in Barcelona in 1976. The CNT (or National Confederation of Labour) was founded in 1910 and grew to be the country's largest union by 1936, when Franco's coup d'etat began a civil war which he won two years later with assistance from Nazi Germany. The other major union in the '30s, the UGT, was twinned with the PSOE (both more genuinely socialist in those days) but the CNT remained independent of any political party, so that it was controlled by its members in open assemblies, not manipulated by the requirements of a party trying to win votes.

The CNT had an enormous prestige with workers looking for a way to achieve genuine democracy because of its achievements during the civil war (when most factories, farms and amenities - from dams to tramways - were freely collectivised with its assistance and modelled on the forms of organisation it had been working with for over 20 years). Still some assemblyists felt it was not for them.



Certain groups preferred a 'one industry union' which would have a more obvious appeal to the ordinary workers' immediate interests. The most successful of these have been the dockers and agricultural labourers, who will be considered later - both have close relations with the CNT.

Some people felt that the CNT's anarchist principles were being applied too dogmatically, mainly by an older generation of militants who had gone into exile after Franco's victory and were now felt to be out of touch. Others felt the opposite, that in trying to establish permanent structures which would survive beyond the 'hot' periods of struggles in specific workplaces or industries the CNT was becoming opportunistic, ie that it was too willing to accommodate itself to structures set up by the state and bosses.

These tensions finally led to a split in the CNT between those who thought it necessary to seek election to the Workplace Committees (Comites de Empresa, CEs) - a sort of state sponsored mini-parliament in each workplace - and those who boycotted them as a matter of principle. The former group, the CNT-U, say that the information and influence they can gain from getting members elected will give them a relevance to ordinary workers, increase their membership and so make them strong enough to finally brake with the CEs, which everyone admits are breeding grounds for bureaucrats and generalised passivity amongst the workforce. The other group (the CNT-AIT) believes that only by clearly dissociating itself from the CEs can it appeal to workers disillusioned by the bureaucracy of other unions.

The split itself greatly weakened the CNT, though their combined membership is still in excess of 20,000, spread over most of the countries industries and geographical regions. Some reconciliation has already taken place, but a complete reunion may take several years yet.

The other 'multi industrial' unions with a national presence in Spain are the UGT and CCOO (associated with the socialist and communist parties, respectively). Their paper membership is in the millions, though it is debatable how long they'd last without the massive state subsidies they've received in return for signing a series of 'social contracts' which both CNT rejected. This money enables them to rent offices and pay staff to keep them open, so they can carry out their role as advice bureau and insurance company for their largely passive membership. In contrast neither CNT gets financial aid for it's operations, though members of the CNT-U on the CE's are given time off from work - on a part time basis - to do union work.

The points raised in this introduction will perhaps be best clarified by a look at how the CNT, the dock workers (CEEP) and farm workers (SOC) have got on so far. This is the next part of the the pamphlet.



As our information is largely restricted to the CNT-U we will mainly be dealing with this organisation, rather than the CNT-AIT. Where the text just uses 'CNT' this means that what is said applies to both groups. Generally, both have a virtually identical internal structure.

THE C.N.T.

One important principle of the CNT has always been industrial unionism. This means that unions are organised in terms of industries, not by crafts, so that, for example, anyone who works in a hospital (from the cleaners to white collar workers and surgeons) would be in the same union. Similarly, the CNT has a metal workers' union, rather than splitting the workforce in a particular factory into fitters, electricians, clerical workers, etc.

The major advantages of this kind of structure are that it encourages solidarity and makes industrial action much more effective. All the workforce in any particular factory or office can be easily brought together and take decisions as a whole, rather than having effective, unified action hampered by a minefield of rivalries and misunderstandings between different craft unions.

Even more important than this national industrial structure is the local and regional co-ordination of all members irrespective of what work they do. For example, it is as members of the local federation rather than an industrial union that members of the CNT participate in the union's congresses. The local federations are able to be part of the life of a city, town or neighbourhood in a way in which a purely industrial union could not. Traditionally this involvement was largely through 'ateneos' or community centres. In the '30s these 'ateneos' even set up libertarian schools to fight illiteracy and people's restricted access to knowledge. Nowadays there are fewer ateneos and they tend to be run by groups of 'progressives' who, as individuals, belong to various organisations, or none. The CNT still works closely with the ateneos in terms of cultural weeks, night classes, videos, etc. It also takes part in broad based extra-parliamentary campaigns with other groups concerning women's rights, ecology, nuclear power, against Spain's membership of NATO, for gay and lesbian rights, in support of migrant workers, against police brutality, etc.

There is a certain tension between the regional and industrial structures of the CNT and in practice it has always been more effective as a regional organisation, mainly because national organisation cannot be carried out so much on a face-to-face basis and so tends to be avoided by a lot of people who don't want to get involved in 'bureaucracy'. However, both forms continue to exist as without an industrial dimension the CNT could end up being a psuedo political party, and without a local, broad based side it could become just another union with a

negotiating role within the capitalist scheme of things. These regional structures also increase decentralisation and in this way provide an example for the kind of society that CNT is working towards.

Given the weakness of CNT's industrial organisation (and its reduced membership) it mainly tends to get involved in struggles with individual employers or specific companies, rather than being able to initiate industry wide strikes.

Organising Michelin

A good example of what CNT-U can achieve is the Michelin tyre factory in Vitoria (Capital city of the Basque country, and therefore not really part of Spain for a lot of people.)

Michelin is the city's biggest employer, with the CNT-U the biggest union in their factory. The role of 'company union' (like the EETPU in Britain) is played by the CCOO - though on a national level it is normally not as bad as the UGT - and they have set their face against the CNT-U's policy of transferring power from the CEs to general assemblies of all the workforce (unionised or not). The final aim of the CNT-U is for the CEs to be reduced to just a co-ordinating body for the various unions with all decisions taken by the assembly. The CNT-U's central tactic is to use the CEs as of way to get information which it can pass on to the assembly so that the whole workforce is in a position to be actively involved in negotiations, rather than these going on behind people's backs

If the CNT takes a different attitude to that of the majority in an assembly it accepts whatever is decided at the end of the day but continues to argue against it, hoping with time to change people's minds. One example where this happened was following Michelin's decision to impose a new system where holidays had to be taken in blocks; when it suited the company.

The CCOO did nothing effective against the company's campaign of misinformation and buckled under when the bosses began to dictate terms instead of negotiating. Eventually the new conditions were accepted by a slim majority in an assembly where many of those present only turned up to vote, without attending the discussions as well. However, now that people are starting to realise that they will have to take their annual holidays in January, etc, they are coming to understand why the CNT-U opposed this agreement and has refused to sign it.

One expression of how seriously the State feels threatened by the CNT-U in Vitoria was the frame-up it launched against six of its members when, following their arrest and torture in November '84, they were accused of carrying out hold-ups to finance a

terrorist group which attempted to assassinate a director at Michelin in 1980. As we go to press (November '87) the six are in the process of finally being tried, even though the only evidence is their 'confessions' and 75% of the original charges have been dropped. Even if they are found not guilty, the state will still have managed to brand the CNT as terrorists in many people's eyes rather than revolutionary trade unionists.

Gaining influence.

A typical example of how the CNT is slowly gaining influence was the Barcelona postal strike of 1985. When the employers refused to improve conditions for the workforce (specifically the large percentage of part time, temporary workers) the UGT and CCOO (the two unions with the most members - on paper at least) accepted this, but the workers themselves did not. They began an unofficial strike controlled by daily assemblies open to all employees. As the CNT-U, which has about 100 members who are postal workers in Barcelona, had proposed this course of action all along it gained a lot of support in comparison to the UGT which never attended the assemblies and the CCOO which did tag along once they were set up, but quickly negotiated a sell-out deal behind the workers' backs which was used to make the strike illegal and so, eventually, undermine it.

One area where the CNT-U has made a lot of growth is in organising jobs which are not normally unionised (such as motorbike despatch riders, private cleaning companies, etc) and in white collar work, such as banking. By far their best showing in the 1986 elections to the CEs was in banking where they got about 7% of all votes on a national level.



This figure compares with a national average of only 1% largely as a result of the vast amounts of money the two main unions could spend on adverts. This probably means that, although the election of CNT-U members on to the CEs may prove useful in giving them access to information which they can pass on to the assemblies, it is unlikely to ever give them the kind of influence that they enjoy in Michelin on a national scale

Where the CNT-U has 10% or more of the members on the CE at a certain workplace it has a legal right to be involved in negotiations. At times, if the level of militancy is strong enough, it can ignore these legal niceties and simply demand recognition on the basis that it has the support of a large number of the workers (This happened in 1986 when they gained entrance to a meeting of employers and unions in the banking sector for Sevilla and refused to leave.) The CNT's basic objection to the system of elections for the CEs is that, like those for parliament, they only occur once every 4 years and they create a fixed body of representatives who can't be removed until the next elections come round. This sort of system automatically creates all the distortions of electioneering - empty slogans, even emptier promises and slick advertising campaigns for those who can get the money to finance them.

The CNT's aims go beyond just trying to improve things in the here and now, with workers' involvement in these bread-and-butter kind of campaigns hopefully giving them a taste for self-organisation and, as a result, an interest in the longer term goal of libertarian revolution. For this reason, means are as important as ends, because if people participate in running their union they will get the practice they need to be able to run society as a whole if they are given a chance - as happened in '36 with the start of the Civil War. Negotiations are therefore backed up, where needed, by 'direct action' - actions which have a practical rather than symbolic effect, eg a strike, slow-down, or occupation. etc, rather than a petition to parliament.

Strikes can be made more effective by other forms of direct action as well, such as happened in the Bibao rubbish collectors strike in '87 which was brought to the attention of the local council by emptying dustbins on the lawns outside the town hall. At the same time, a dispute with the Sabaco chain of super markets was being backed up by a picket to get customers to boycott their shops.



The sabotage of machinery and destruction of stock is not ruled out in principle as forms of direct action, although the CNT-U tends to avoid this sort of thing as, without obvious and massive support from the workers who are involved,, it can be labelled by the media as mindless violence or terrorism, rather than one aspect of the constructive struggle to build a better society.

Another expression of the CNT's wider aims is the independent womens' organisation, Mujeres Libres (Liberated Women), which aims to highlight the specific demands of female members of the union. This too is not as strong as it was in the 30's, but still has groups in several cities, the most important being Zaragoza and Granada.

Transforming society

In theory the CNT could become the same as the assembly (if it got 100% membership), but this is not its goal, which is one of the things which makes it different from a vanguardist political party aiming to gain power for itself. The CNT need only be a stimulus and model for new structures in society - not a new set of rulers in embryonic form.

This leads us on to the question of how the CNT is structured to achieve these ends.

Like all other unions, the CNT has numerous meetings, most of them pretty mundane. One very important difference is that any committee meetings are open to ordinary members who can turn up as observers. Equally, the representatives are (as far as possible) given instructions on what the ordinary members want, rather than just being able to decide whatever they like, and can be immediately removed from office by an assembly of the membership.

This principle of openness which comes as a result of the freedom of ordinary members to attend as observers is also central to the CNT's congresses, which are held every two years.



The national committee sends out an agenda which it sees as representing the topics of most importance for the union at the time. Any local federations (LFs) can suggest alterations, on the basis of which a revised agenda is drawn up. Each LF then sends in a statement of its attitudes concerning each point on the agenda (where these differ from those of the national committee.) The role of delegates who go to the Congress is not to discuss these statements, as they are not there to express their personal opinions. Given that the congress is called to draw up statements on each point so as to arrive at a synthesis of all the different views within the organisation, delegates are only there to carry out this practical task and oversee the process to ensure that it is done fairly.

How this works out in practical terms is that committees are formed to synthesise the different statements on a certain topic into one, with each region being able to put one of its delegates on each committee. When this has been done (including a note of any large dissenting minorities) the whole congress must vote to say if it accepts this synthesis before it can become the new outline of the union's policies. Congresses also elect a new national committee, without any electioneering from the candidates involved.

Congresses of the CNT are always lively events - the sign of a healthy organisation - with the opinions of the out going national committee by no means certain of acceptance. At the 10th congress of the CNT-U in '87, for example, they were totally rejected in favour of a more radical stance.



THE DOCKERS

Spain's dockers are a shining example to trade unionists all round the world. Their union (The CEEP - better known as 'La Coordinadora') has a membership which embraces 80% of all the countries dockers, a very high level of participation (in practice as well as in theory) and has won a series of head on confrontations with the country's governments over the last 15 years.

The present organisation broke the grip of Franco's sham union, the CNS, in 1976, after an illegal 21 day strike, which forced the government to recognise them as a negotiating body for the workforce. In 1980-81 an eighteen month strike against the UCD (a centre-right government that initially took over from Franco) forced them to shelve plans to privatise the docks, but in April 1986 the 'socialist' party in government (the PSOE) announced a new decree to do exactly this.

A caste system

If successful, the privatisation will make a third of the countries 13,500 dockers redundant, and create a virtual caste system among the workforce. At present all dock workers are skilled professionals who have a secure job and a system which rotates the available work amongst them. This would be replaced by a situation where a class of 'casual dockers' who can be hired and fired when needed, or even people from INEM (Spain's equivalent of MSC schemes), are used to undermine full time dockers. Even these full-timers would be divided between those working for private dock companies and those who are needed for the less profitable ports which would remain in government hands. Obviously this is an attempt at divide-and-rule, using a desperate and disorganised pool of temporary, low payed workers to undermine the conditions of permanent dockers and scab on any strikes, etc.

So far the government has been anything but successful. The decree of privatisation was passed in parliament on May 23rd, 1986, and met by a ten day national dock strike. A docks strike in Spain is usually very effective for two reasons. Firstly the PSOE's puppet union, the UGT, has very few members in the docks. This meant that their attempts to sell out the dispute - such as signing an agreement to accept privatisation on November 3rd, despite the fact that 7 of their 8 requests for modifications had been refused by the bosses - were simply ignored by the dockers themselves. Secondly, as 94% of Spain's exports

go through the docks any industrial action soon starts to hurt the national economy. The government's tactics originally centred round a Spanish company called 'Contenemar' which they could pressurise into implementing the effects of privatisation because it owes them the equivalent of £35 million in social security payments. An all out strike against Contenemar was called in October '86, backed up by a bitter campaign of direct actions, such as road blocks and sabotage.

On February 29th, 1987, Contenemar caved in and signed an agreement to say it would stop working with non-registered dockers, ie that it had stopped trying to implement the privatisation decree. However, the government has not given up yet.

They are now trying to push ahead with the dissolution of the OTP (the nationalised dock company - similar to British Coal, etc) so they can replace it by 7 separate councils meant to administer those dockers who will remain on the government's books after privatisation.



This is yet another attempt at divide and rule, as each council would be negotiating different agreements with its workforce. Whether this tactic will be any more successful than past attempts to undermine the dockers remains to be seen.

How does it work?

Beyond the two external factors already mentioned, the open nature of the co-ordinadora has been critical in their successes. Each port has a general assembly open to all dockers and pensioners every two months. Extra assemblies can be called by 10% of the membership or one of the delegates elected at the start of the year to fill positions on committees which cover subjects from culture to safety at work. In Barcelona (where the co-ordinadora began and is still at its strongest) there is a total of 25 delegates on 8 committees, all of whom are subject to instant dismissal by the general assembly and whose meetings are open to all dockers as observers. Regular national and regional conferences are held, with delegates being mandated at open assemblies, and the Co-ordinadora has recently begun to make international links with other dockers, including the National Dock Shop Stewards Committee in Britain.

The atmosphere at an assembly of dockers is as important as the structures themselves. Generally people would not accept being fobbed off when they ask a question, know what they're talking about and are supportive of people who have not had much experience of addressing a public meeting. These qualities, in combination with their ability to laugh at themselves, makes the assemblies something people can look forward to rather than a chore to be avoided or suffered in boredom.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE 'CO-ORDINADORA', SPAIN'S DOCKERS' UNION, IN IT'S OWN WORDS: (Translated from the statutes of the Barcelona branch, by BM BLOB).

UNITARY: because it tends to unite all dockers independent of their political, religious and cultural opinions, etc.

CLASS BASED: because all its members have to be wage earners and for this reason to belong to the working class and consequently antagonistic to capital. Their demands won't remain restricted to the economic level but will also be social in the widest sense, right up to the elimination of exploitation of man by man (sic) and the alienation of work for capital.

AUTONOMOUS: because it will be the workers themselves who will decide on the aims to be pursued which means giving consideration to and employing whatever methods are necessary to regain control over their lives.

INDEPENDENT: because it is not nor will it ever be subordinated to any political party, nor to any union, ecclesiastical organisation, nor to any other organisation such as the State or civil service. It will be permitted to contact union bodies that are representative of the working class, always given that they show respect for our principles of autonomy, etc.

DEMOCRATICALLY SELF ORGANISED: because it will be the workers themselves who determine the organisation and what bodies it requires. In the same way their representatives will be elected from amongst and by its members. These necessarily will be dockers, who will also be freely recalled whenever a majority of those they represent consider it necessary. In accordance with what has been said above, we will take care to avoid bureaucracy by not allowing anyone who holds a bureaucratic position in the docks to vote on any question, problem or issue.

THE S.O.C.

Another large union based on assemblies is the SOC - The Agricultural Workers' Union, of Andalusia, southern Spain, which has about 20,000 members, all of them landless labourers without fixed contracts. It's main decision making body is the open village assembly which are announced by someone going round in advance on a moped with a megaphone. Andalusia is a largely agricultural region with 25% unemployment, mainly because land owners have replaced labour intensive crops, like olives, with cereals on which they can use more machinery. Until this process of mechanisation, and the benefits from it, can be controlled by the workers, the SOC is calling for the continuation of crops which provide more work. Such labour intensive methods and others of the SOC's demands, such as re-forestation of mountains, would lead to an environmental improvement as well. They also want plots of over about 100 acres (many of them under used by absentee landlords) turned over to collective cultivation.

To achieve these ends they have been engaging in occupations of land which have met with fierce resistance from the forces of law and order and courts, as controlled by the PSOE.

On the 27th of August '86, twenty town halls throughout Andalusia were occupied to protest at a jail sentence given to the SOC's general secretary for being involved in a land occupation which demanded more labour intensive crops be grown. As a result his prison sentence was quashed.

Unfortunately the position of women in the SOC tends to reflect their position in Andalusian society, ie they remain at home and look after the children. However, women members of the SOC do regularly hold their own separate meetings before general assemblies to decide what demands they want to put forward, and the union has organised strikes (such as one in the village of Osuna) to demand equal pay for women doing the same work as men on the olive harvests.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Culture.

No description of Spain's rank-and-file controlled trade unions would be complete without looking at the culture, the basic attitudes and unspoken codes, without which they would be inconceivable, or at least very different.

One thing which immediately strikes any British person is the very different atmosphere compared to a British union building which is all locked rooms and empty corridors, with paid secretaries perhaps the only people you see. Whereas most British union buildings are dead after 5 o'clock this is when the Spanish rank-and-file unions are just starting, and until around 8 they will be full of life with members arriving after a days work to sort out the organisation's affairs. As well as a generally much higher level of involvement these unions also have a different attitude to private space and status. For example, if you are talking to someone about a certain document another person might wander in to the room, pick it up and give it a brief read, before wandering out again. This has certain drawbacks - documents tend to get lost, etc, - but it is one way to ensure a more egalitarian and open organisation where people are less likely to be treated as anything special because they're sat behind a certain desk.

This sort of thing could never be decided by resolutions to conference, or be put into a constitution. For example it would be futile making a rule to say that people should think of groups as real collectives rather than trying to promote charismatic figureheads, but unless people have adopted this kind of attitude no amount of formal structures are going to ensure real democracy.

Before leaving the subject of organising on the basis of unpaid work by volunteer members of the union, as opposed to paid officials, it's worth pointing out that this too can have problems. Although it gives ordinary members far more control of their union there is a tendency for only those who have the energy and lack of family commitments to get involved (usually men with a wife stuck at home looking after the kids, etc.) One partial solution to this might be to have some part time paid officials who would be able to maintain their contact with the ordinary workers by still being employed in the factory or office concerned, but for less than 40 hours a week.

Political Tightropes.

There are no simple solutions when it comes to creating a trade union which is both a mass organisation and a radical one too.



You are faced with a set of conflicting options which need to be resolved in the best possible way, rather than a simple set of formula for success which can be applied dogmatically in any situation. Also, the way options are balanced against each other in this way must vary as the circumstances change. On the other hand no organisation can allow itself to be pulled around willy-nilly by factors outside its control without losing all credibility.

Certain guidelines can be drawn. For example, there's a real difference between meeting bosses to collaborate with them on joint projects and meeting them to make known our demands. Similarly a voluntary decision to work within the state's guidelines is different from being forced to do so because of the threat of prosecution. But there will always be grey areas. If offering life insurance and legal advice is a way to help people and give them an initial reason to become involved in the union, then why not? On the other hand, this willingness to fill whatever space is provided for trade unions within the existing order of things, rather than make our own space, on our own terms, can quickly lead to the organisation becoming cautious, smug and lethargic.

The problems arise from a central contradiction within radical trade unionism. Unions such as the CNT see the organisation they are building up within the present system as both a model for a different society and a way to interest the vast majority of workers in getting to it. Without this mass, self-organised activity a genuinely democratic revolution is impossible. However, the only way most people will become interested in the union is if it offers them a way to do something to improve things in the here-and-now. This means being able to negotiate with the bosses, and negotiation means compromise. If not the unions would just deliver their demands and go on strike until the bosses informed them they were willing to give in. From the

daily habit of meeting the bosses with a view to reaching some kind of compromise, the union's delegates could become absorbed into the system and end up being just another cog in the machinery - one which ensures grievances are deflected into channels which the system is able to satisfy and which generally puts a damper on grassroots militancy in the name of realism.

This is why the CNT etc place so much emphasis on rotation of delegates, no full time officials (in fact most union work gets done voluntarily, after work hours) and the mass assembly as the place where decisions are made. From this we come to another question: What makes a mass assembly the genuine voice of the workers involved, rather than a flock of sheep manipulated by people with the gift-of-the-gab or by what they read in the papers/see on TV? Certain structures can help (a roaming microphone for comments from the floor, strict limits on the length of time delegates can speak for - ie no long, boring speeches, etc) but in the end culture, people's attitudes, is crucial. For example their isn't a better antidote to somebody trying to hector a meeting than for them to be met by derisive laughter.

It is too easy to fall into the idea that organisations should only be thrown up at times of struggle, when the mass of workers are actively involved, then allowed to die, rather than become fossilised bureaucracys when things cool down again. In fact, we need to continually have experiences which give us more confidence and practical skills, thus producing a widespread revolutionary culture, before we'll be in a position to fully take control of our lives. Only a permanent and large scale organisation can build this new world in the shell of the old one that we live in.

It is difficult for such a trade union to avoid the dangers of either being absorbed into the existing order or else finding that they have been totally marginalised from mainstream society. However, the successes of the dock workers in particular is proof that it can be done - not perfectly perhaps, but still a very useful example which those of us who live in Britain can learn a lot from.

