



THE RANK AND FILE'S NEXT STEP

a **Workers Power** pamphlet by **Jeremy Dewar**

The Rank and File's Next Step

From Trade Dispute to Class Struggle

**workers
power**

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An Appeal to Activists

THE STRIKE wave of 2022–23, caused by the cost of living crisis and 12 years of stagnant or declining wage, combined with the failures of union leaderships to mobilise the escalating and coordinated action they promised, has alerted rank and file activists to the need for self-organisation.

For the first time in years, it is possible to talk realistically about the rank and file trade union activists organising independently of the official leadership, whenever they try to sell the membership short or sell them out altogether.

In such times, too, the top leaders, left wingers as well as right wingers, constitute a blinkered sectional bureaucracy, with no recognition of the class-wide and political issues that must be addressed in order to win in today's difficult conditions.

The new layer of militants drawn into the recent battles can and must be brought together and organised, within each union and across the unions. Already a number of conferences and initiatives

have been taken, with the 29 July Troublemakers at Work conference in Manchester attracting widespread support.

We in *Workers Power* believe the time is ripe to bring militants together from across the unions and sectors, alongside those who have mobilised support for the strikes. We believe this could succeed in transforming the landscape of the trade union movement.

In fact if you look at the strike figures alone, we have not faced such an opportunity since the 1980s. Over the past 12 months the strike wave is not only unprecedented in its number and the endurance of the strikers, but also in the betrayals and failings of the official leaders and the spontaneous rebuttals of their manoeuvres. When it comes to settling against the wishes of the members, the lack of democracy in our unions is starkly revealed.

Crisis of leadership

Of course there have been some significant gains and even victories, especially among those workers who have previously been thought of as ‘unorganisable’, like the Amazon workers. The fact that the RCN was forced to call strike action is itself a great step forward.

However, a year into the great pay revolt the weaknesses of the strategy decided by the leaders, left and right, are plain.

First is the stop-start nature of the strikes, with ever longer periods of inactivity between them for secret negotiations to take place. This has only resulted in offers of real-term pay cuts, often tied to job losses and the worsening of conditions.

Second, even where there have been all-out strikes, supported by strike pay, these have been left isolated and run as local disputes, even where they have been fighting the same company, like Stagecoach. The union leaders, not the strikers, have been allowed to pull the plug on these disputes when it suits them.

Finally despite a great fanfare for the 15 February coordinated strike, there has been almost no real joined up action between

unions, with even the RMT and Aslef incapable of walking out on the same day. This has left the government unshaken, despite the fact that the Tories themselves have been fighting each other like cats in a sack. The unions—and the Labour Party they pay a small fortune to—have allowed the new Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill passage through parliament virtually unchallenged.

Green shoots...

Almost from a standing start many groups of union activists have responded magnificently to these sellouts. NHS Workers Say NO succeeded in rejecting the RCN leadership's recommendation of a two-year pay cut. Activists in the CWU and PCS have followed their example.

The NEU strike committees have drawn in and organised hundreds of new teacher activists to demand more coordination and longer strikes. In the UCU the elected higher education executive fought a running battle against their general secretary and got the strikes put back on.

But these green shoots of rank and file activism are in danger of withering. Demoralisation among nurses, facing the prospect of more of the same strike tactics, has led to the RCN missing the threshold for legal strike action. Posties and civil servants could meet the same fate in their ongoing ballots.

The NEU conference overwhelmingly threw out a motion to extend the strikes, leaving the officials firmly in control of their slow-motion dispute. And those UCU branches, like Leeds University, that have used the marking boycott to deepen their action have been punished and their local strikes defeated.

Seize the moment

All this shows that relying on spontaneous and isolated resistance is dangerous. What is needed is an initiative—an organisation or

network—to link these groups of activists together and unite them into a common struggle.

Counterfire last month, Troublemakers this month and the Workers Summit in September show that when a conference for union activists is called it can generate enthusiasm and widespread participation. They need to combine their forces in a non-sectarian and democratic way to launch an independent rank and file organisation.

This is not the time to repackage and relaunch so-called ‘broad lefts’ that focus exclusively on campaigning to elect left wing candidates to top union posts. All too often we have seen the results: ‘lefts’ who turn out to be almost identical in their actions to the rights they replaced.

And not because they are bad people or even just because they are paid fat salaries (though, indeed, they should be paid the average wage of their members) but because of the negotiating function they perform, uncontrolled at critical moments by the membership, but with all the pressure of the rest of the union bureaucracy, the media, the government as well as the employers bearing down on them.

Of course, we should replace the sellout merchants with fighting leaders drawn from the rank and file, but they should be pledged to democratic reforms that ensure the members are in control of all disputes at every stage. For this reason, our focus should be on workplace democracy as the starting point.

We need to:

- Reject deals that do not defend our wages and conditions—fight for coordinated and escalating strikes!
- Build a rank and file organisation independent of all wings of the bureaucracy!
- Campaign for action—with the leaders where possible, without them where necessary!
- Defy the anti-union laws and fight for their abolition!

- Organise in the workplace and across the unions for control of all disputes by electing strike committees that can challenge the bureaucrats' stranglehold!
- Organise the unorganised—rebuild a powerful shop stewards committee in every major workplace!

**ON
STRIKE
FOR
FAIR PAY**

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RISING**

**ON
STRIKE
TO WIN
BACK MY
PENSION**

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The Pay Revolt

FROM JUNE 2022 through to June 2023, as we write this pamphlet, the trade unions have been constantly in the headlines. Nearly four million working days were lost due to strike action, making it the most disrupted 12-month period since 1989, when Margaret Thatcher was still in office.

‘The working class is back!’ as Mick Lynch, general secretary of the RMT railworkers’ union said on more than one occasion. It certainly felt like it on the countless, upbeat and at times almost celebratory picket lines, as well as the numerous demos and rallies, where strikers are joined by thousands of working class supporters.

The signs of this significant upturn in industrial struggle were there for those who were not blinded by the neoliberal messaging from the Tories and Labour alike. For decades mainstream politicians were telling us that the unions had been tamed and strikes were for the history books. Keir Starmer even sacked shadow ministers for joining picket lines, so confident was he that this elemental working class resistance was a flash in the pan.

But even during the covid pandemic workers were involved in strikes and walkouts to protect their lives and families from unsafe working

conditions. These were followed by disputes over the disgusting practice of fire-and-rehire, which demanded workers compete with each other to retain their jobs under worse conditions, culminating in the disgraceful summary sacking of 786 P&O ferry workers in March 2022.

Finally, the rotten fruits of Brexit hit us in the face as up to a million workers left these islands, creating a skills shortage. Some were able to take advantage of this, HGV drivers were in the forefront, demanding—and in large part getting—20–30% pay increases. Factory workers and bus drivers soon took their cue and joined the fray.

But the strike wave, starting in the summer and escalating over the autumn into winter, changed the game completely. Here it was not the case of one or a few groups of workers fighting over this or that, but an army of strikers demanding one and the same thing: pay rises above the rate of inflation. This, every worker in the land, be they on a zero-hours contract, Universal Benefit or a traditional job, could relate to.

The cost of living crisis generalised the trade union struggle. Faced with month after month of double-digit inflation, peaking at 14%, everyone knew that a significant victory even by one of these groups of workers would be a victory for all, paving the way for inflation-plus pay deals and/or curbs on the prices of elementary goods, like energy, housing and food.

The various groups of strikers—railworkers, tube workers and bus drivers; nurses, paramedics and doctors; posties and telecoms workers; civil servants; university lecturers and school teachers; oil workers and dockers; Amazon and a host of gig economy workers—started to clamour for coordinated action and longer strikes, in effect a general strike from below. Dave Ward, general secretary of the CWU post and telecoms union, launched Enough Is Enough, supposedly as a community and rank and file based social movement.

Sellouts and fightbacks

Even before 15 February and 15 March 2023, the only two serious

attempts to coordinate the strikes (and even they were only patchily applied), the disputes seemed to enter a black hole. The general secretaries and their coterie of professional negotiators began to cancel strike dates, declaring that a period of “intense talks” with the bosses was under way; strikes during such periods might frighten away the tender souls of the employers.

Of course, none of the “new” offers following these periods of purdah came close to the unions’ demands. Typically they offered 4-6% to cover 2022–23 when inflation was 10-14%, followed by the same for 2023–24, when inflation is set to still be around 8-9% on average. Desultory one-off, unconsolidated bonuses were designed to entice the less active strikers to call it a day and count their losses.

The right wing general secretaries, like the nurses’ RCN leader Pat Cullen and the general union Unison leader Christine McAnea, touted these deals as “the best that could be achieved”, while the more wily “lefts”, like Mick Lynch and Kevin Courtney of the NEU teachers union, simply put them to a vote. Dave Ward and the CWU leadership used every trick in the book, from priming workplace reps to (twice) postponing the vote and even cancelling their annual conference, in an attempt to get the vote over the line.

The nurses were the first out of the blocks to reject these deals. NHS Workers Say NO, a rank and file cross-union grouping that originated before the dispute, began leafleting hospitals, assisted by solidarity groups in their area. Their hard work resulted in a 52% rejection of the offer; Cullen and co. had no alternative but to restart the strikes. Posties started to copy their tactic, many forming the Postal Workers Say Vote No campaign.

But rejecting the rotten deals is only the start of a protest against the unions’ misleaders. On their own, if they do not lead to a change of direction at the top of the unions, they will only lead to a continuation of the stop-start protest strikes... and eventually to a new, slightly improved or repackaged below-inflation deal. How can workers move

from a position of vetoing the sell-outs to restarting the strikes on a completely new footing: sharply escalating strikes, moving swiftly to all-out action, in coordination with all the other unions?

Nature of trade unions

What has been revealed to tens of thousands of active trade unionists over the course of this strike wave is the contradictory character of the unions themselves. On the one hand, generally at the start of disputes, they articulate the genuine needs of the workers, giving them confidence to fight for their just cause, authorising strike action and encouraging loud and combative picket lines. On the other hand, they provide the mechanism to curtail workers' action and coax them back into the workplace before even half their demands have been met and in many cases, the post for example, with workplace leaders left outside the door. How can this be?

The immediate answer lies in the politics of the trade union leaders. Whether they stand on the left wing of the spectrum of union officials or the right wing, they share in common the goal of reforming capitalism, not overthrowing it. They are reformists. This is why almost all of them, whether they are members of the Labour Party or not, whether their particular union is affiliated to the party or not, have the strategic goal of electing a Labour government.

This has a decisive influence over how they conduct disputes. At the end of the day they want to contain their disputes within the confines of an individual conflict with an individual employer. They fear like the plague a dispute getting out of control and developing into a wider class struggle, because they aim to reach a compromise with that employer, one that delivers to them a means of continuing to make profits and to the workers one that means they can continue to live above the means of subsistence.

So short protest strikes, lasting one day or a few days at a time are followed by long periods of inaction, while they engage with the

bosses on the terms for ending the dispute. Their negotiations are held in secret, so the workers cannot see what is being negotiated away behind their backs. Their disputes are kept strictly separate from each other, so a deal which leaves other unions still fighting can be reached and they can break ranks when their particular aims are met.

For them, any deal, which keeps the bosses still obliged to consult and talk to them, while at the same time leaves most workers still paying subs into the union, is a good deal. Most of these officials are paid considerably more than the workers they claim to represent and none of them have to work in the conditions they negotiate. Very few of them are elected or recallable by their members. Even the lower down officials get some of these benefits and a career path opens up to them if they play by the bureaucratic rules. This is why you almost never see or hear union officials denouncing one another in public.

The union members on the other hand have different aims, in fact conflicting and opposite aims. They want their union to fight for and secure a deal that protects their wages against inflation, that gives them job security, that allows them a degree of control over how their labour is used—working conditions, staffing levels, health and safety and the like.

Transforming the unions

In a serious capitalist crisis, like the one we are living in today, this gap between what the bosses want and what the workers need can become unbridgeable—at least by “normal” means. Yesterday’s articulate and erudite leaders, like Pat Cullen or Dave Ward, start to look like figures of fun, as they run backwards and forwards desperate for a deal they can sell to their members.

But there is an alternative. It means transforming the unions from being primarily regulators of the price of labour (our wages) and its use (our conditions) and the occasional mobilisers of workers into being consistent fighters for workers rights and needs and vigilant

against the bosses' counterattacks.

We need to kick out the bureaucrats and replace them with elected leaders, directly connected to their workplaces and immediately recallable by their workmates. They should be paid the average wage of their members to remind them of where they came from.

Such a leadership could immediately respond to—and indeed agitate for—extensive, all-out strike action, coordinated not just from above with other unions but from below as well, through joint strike committees and councils of action. Solidarity would be key, as it has been over the past year, but it would be forthcoming, as it has over the past year. In return the unions should raise demands for the unemployed and unorganised, like benefit uplifts, price controls and decent jobs for all.

This is what we mean by turning trade disputes into class struggles. If Royal Mail say they're nearly bankrupt, we say, open the books to workers' inspection and, if true, renationalise it. If the government says it cannot afford the funds, we say, "tax the rich". And if the bureaucracy say, "Wait for Labour!" we should reply, "Fight for a Workers' Government!"

Leadership

None of this could be achieved overnight; that is clear. But it would be wrong to dismiss the goal of trade unions that don't needlessly sell out or remain undemocratic. The idea of limiting ourselves to piecemeal reforms or electing left leaders, though necessary, would eventually revert to the rule of the bureaucracy, as we have seen.

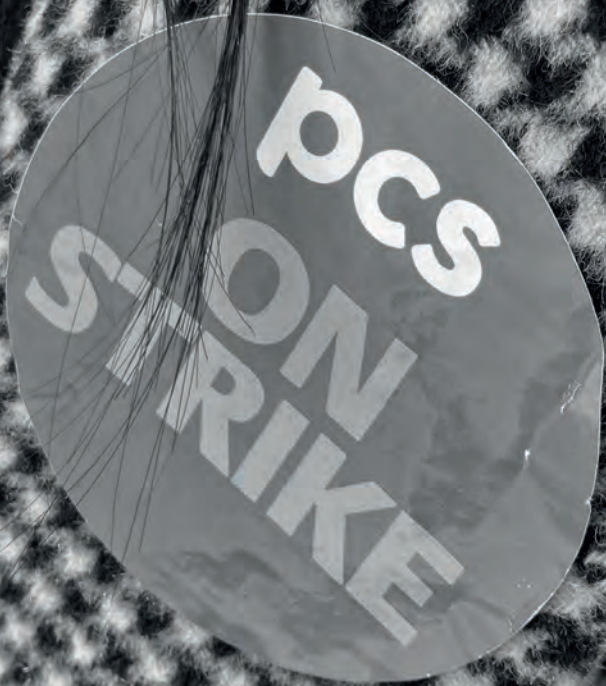
Equally, the idea that workers through self-organisation and militant action alone can organically or spontaneously transform their unions into vehicles for socialism is flawed. This requires leadership.

In an important sense that leadership already exists, at least in part. The importance of the strike wave is that in the over past year a worker took strike action on four million days! That has raised class

consciousness generally, even among those not directly involved, but it has also thrown up new leaders, who scrutinise the officials' moves, agitate for more action and see themselves as part of a wider, cross-union movement.

But in another equally important sense this new leadership does not yet exist. It's not a question of numbers; they exist in thousands. Again it is a question of politics. If we are to aim for class struggle trade unions, then we should take seriously Karl Marx's adage that 'the class struggle is a political struggle.'

Workers Power offers this pamphlet as a guide to how to transform the unions. It is openly revolutionary socialist in its outlook but we hope that many of the ideas contained here will offer the reader an outline of a clear path towards that aim. If you agree with them, then join us!



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STON
STRIKE

Marxism and the Trade Unions

MARXISTS HAVE always taken a great interest in the trade unions and their fortunes. From Karl Marx, who worked closely with the British trade union leaders in the First International (1864–76), through to Frederick Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, VI Lenin and Leon Trotsky, their insights and advice retain their value for socialists today to guide their work in the unions.

Of course, much has changed in the world of work since then and unions have also evolved. Nonetheless, we believe their fundamental approach remains a necessary guide to anyone who wishes to transform the unions into real class struggle organisations.

Wages, exploitation and profit

Trade unions are essentially organisations for workers to combine their forces to fight for higher wages and to improve the conditions under which the employer uses their labour. Workers have to do this because individually they are no match for the capitalist, who owns

the buildings, the raw materials and the final product, in short capital. They, on the other hand, own next to nothing within the process of production except their ability to work.

Unions can do this because labour power, our ability to work, is a commodity which, like any other on the market, is sold by its owner, the worker, to the buyer, the capitalist, for a certain duration, a day, week or month, etc. The price of this labour power, our wages, is negotiated.

In one respect, however, labour power is unlike any other commodity. It is unique in that it adds value in the course of production. When a capitalist sets production in motion, our labour power not only produces enough value to pay for our wages but also a surplus, when the product is sold, that surplus becomes the profit which is taken by the boss. So the two, wages and profit, are related. Lower wages mean higher profit margins and vice versa. Marxists call this process of surplus value extraction, exploitation.

Capitalists are in cut-throat competition with one another, from different companies, different sectors, different countries. They fear being undercut by their rivals, even being put out of business by them, so they are driven to constantly attack their workers' wages, to make them work harder for longer and to replace them with machines that can reduce the number of necessary workers. Workers who do not resist this will ultimately become no more than slaves.

When capitalism is doing well the bosses can afford higher wages and better conditions, so long as they can increase sales and keep profits rising. In times of crisis, however, this is no longer an option for them. Then, their attacks increase and they use the fact that more workers are unemployed or on reduced hours to threaten workers with being replaced by cheaper labour, either here or abroad. Marxists call the ranks of the unemployed the 'reserve army of labour' and urge the trade unions to organise them alongside the employed workers if they are not to be used as strike breakers.

Trade unionism

Trade unions are therefore the first step towards uniting workers against their exploiter, the capitalist. From experience, groups of workers came to see that this unity was all the stronger if it extended beyond a particular workplace or skill and sought solidarity with other workers, moving towards class consciousness.

However, the capitalists did not sit back and watch this solidarity spread, they intervened to obstruct it with anti-union laws, by exploiting every potential division amongst workers such as nationalism, racism, skills and craft differentials. Such divisions are constantly re-created and therefore socialists have always to wage a constant battle against them to strengthen class unity and class consciousness.

By withdrawing their labour, calling strikes, the unions can stop the flow of profits, threatening capitalists with losing their markets, even bankruptcy. This is a partial struggle in two ways: the showdown is still only against an individual employer or group of capitalists; and it is still only conducted within the framework of the wages system, capitalism, not against that system.

As Marx observed, 'trade unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system.'

In the same vein, Engels called unions 'schools of war' since they trained workers in the fight against the capitalist. The war itself, however, required the realisation that the enemy was not simply this or that employer but employers as a class. More than that, the state, although it claimed to represent the nation as a whole, was in fact their class state. To end capitalist exploitation means a war with their state, that is, a political struggle for control of society and its wealth.

Rosa Luxemburg likened the trade union struggle to the ‘labour of Sisyphus’, the Greek mythological character who was condemned to rolling a rock up a hill, only to see it roll down the other side and his work begin all over again. In other words even the most successful strikes under capitalism leave the capital-labour relation intact, forcing the bosses to relaunch their attacks at a later stage to claw back what they have conceded and force the workers to restart their strikes to stop them.

Like Marx and Engels, Lenin recognised that trade union action was a step towards class consciousness, but on its own it remained trapped in a capitalist or bourgeois way of thinking. That is why he referred to an exclusive concentration on the economic struggle as ‘only trade unionism’. Consistent socialists, that is, revolutionaries, had to intervene to win the unions to socialism, otherwise the unions would evolve into pillars of capitalism, defenders of the bourgeois order.

Some people misrepresent this as if Lenin were saying that socialist consciousness is some sort of alien product, imposed on the working class by intellectuals. In fact, he held that it was a logical and conscious development of workers’ solidarity because, ‘socialist theory reveals the cause of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, provided, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity.’

Lenin was arguing against Russian socialists (the Economists) who believed that, if workers engaged in trade union (economic) struggle, they would spontaneously develop socialist ideas, without the aid of socialists, failing to observe that bourgeois society does all it can to impose pro-capitalist ideas, “market values” into trade unionism.

A good example of this tendency within the trade unions can be seen in the recent struggle between the CWU and Royal Mail. As soon as the company threatened to put itself into administration, the union leaders agreed to cuts to real pay, conditions and (voluntary)

job cuts. Dave Ward and co. abandoned union policy to fight for above inflation pay rises, a 35 hour week and renationalisation, insisting the company's profitable future was paramount.

Lenin, however, remained optimistic about the unions' future because he saw that rank and file workers would always need the unions to fight for them, especially in periods of deep crisis and would develop new ways to force the unions into battle, inside and outside the official structures.

He would have applauded NHS Workers Say NO's magnificent struggle to reject the government's offer which amounted to a pay cut, back in the spring of 2023, even though they failed to win the argument for longer, all-out strike action, for linking up with the doctors and other workers on strike, for a fully funded, fully nationalised health service. In the end, without a sufficient socialist force agitating among the nurses, enough of them grew despondent to effectively accept the 'only trade unionist' offer on the table.

In their role as negotiators for better wages and conditions within capitalism, this tendency to compromise is always present in the unions. But on its own it cannot fully explain why the unions fail to deliver real change time and time again.

Labour aristocracy...

Trotsky once wrote, 'the history of trade union movement in every country is not only the history of strikes and in general of mass movements; it is also the history of the formation of the trade union bureaucracy.'

He was following in the footsteps of Luxemburg, who was the first to analyse this phenomenon. She earned the enmity of the German trade union leaders of her day when she observed that, 'the specialisation of professional activity as trade union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, among

trade union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook.’

This powerful indictment, however, does not explain how these officials maintain their grip on the unions even in severe crises and when strikes themselves become generalised. Why is it so difficult for workers to take control of their unions and reform them into class struggle organisations?

The answer lies in the development, within the working class of richer nations, of a privileged layer of skilled, better paid and more secure workers. Engels was the first to draw attention to the way Britain, with its huge colonial empire, had been able to concede a higher standard of living to its skilled, and better organised, workers, calling them an ‘aristocracy of labour.’ He anticipated that, as Britain lost its monopoly position to Germany, France, USA, there would again be a socialist labour movement in Britain.

In fact, as those other powers grew they reproduced much the same changes in their own working classes. When the First World War broke out and the labour movements of all the great powers at war sided with their own capitalists, Lenin concluded that this aristocracy and a trade union bureaucracy resting on it, was a key feature of the imperialist epoch. The most powerful advanced countries systematically robbed the rest of the world of their resources and then used part of these super-profits to buy off sections of their own working classes. This was why reformism, the belief that capitalism could be made to work in favour of working people, was so strong in the labour movements of the imperialist countries.

While the great mass of workers enjoyed some of this booty—the creation of the NHS and the welfare state in general, for example—skilled workers took the most. For them, imperialism seemed a good thing as it seemed to make them feel part of the “ruling nation”. Look how the GMB ‘welcomed’ the building of nuclear submarines for Australia because it provided skilled jobs for years to come, ignoring

the fact that this was part of a drive to war with China.

As these workers have specialised skills, they are not easy to replace. Their strikes can have a devastating and almost immediate effect on the company or the services they provide. So the trade unions tend to focus on this layer of workers. They provide a high level of subs, are easy to organise and do not make difficult political demands, like residency status for migrant workers.

Of course, the part of the workforce dubbed “unskilled,” or “manual or blue collar”, is now a much smaller and the sheer number of qualified workers means most are far from highly paid. Today two-thirds of trade union members have a degree or equivalent qualification; three-quarters are aged over 35; half have been with their current employer for more than 10 years. While the unions have been “feminised” by the recruitment of women and Black and Asian workers are fairly well represented, they rarely recruit those on precarious, low-paid contracts (zero-hours, minimum wage, etc). They often negotiate deals that leave a two-tier workforce, with newer recruits on worse pay and conditions.

Marxists counter this tendency by demanding the unions organise the whole of the working class, especially the most exploited and worst off parts. We call on them to take up the demands of these sections of our class: open the borders to all migrant workers; raise the minimum wage, benefits and pensions; for a programme of public works to clean up the environment and expand public services.

We support industrial unions against craft unions, that is, unions that recruit all grades of workers within an industry or sector, rather than just those with recognised skills and secure employment contracts. While some of today’s general unions, the GMB and Unite, for example, started off like this, now they too are a barrier to organising every worker in a sector into one industrial union. The NHS is a prime example of this, with the big three unions vying with each other for recruits, while none of them lifted a finger to stop the erosion and

part-privatisation of the service as a whole.

... and bureaucracy

The absence of a revolutionary party has allowed the bureaucracy, resting primarily on the labour aristocracy, to amass millions in assets and pay hundreds of thousands each year to themselves. In total the unions own around £2.5bn worth of assets.

In 2021, Unison, the largest union with 1.3 million members, spent £73.9 million in wages for its officers and staff, with a cool £225,000 going to its general secretary, Christine McAnea. Meanwhile, expenditure from its industrial action fund, that is, money spent on strikes, stood at just £80,000.

Not surprisingly this has led to a form of caste spirit among union officials, who see themselves as the guardians (and beneficiaries) of enormous financial and physical assets. Anything that jeopardises this large amount of capital, like defying the anti-union laws, is to be avoided like the plague. Likewise, anything that endangers their individual role in this, like union democracy and accountability, is to be fought off.

How far removed these monstrous organisations are from the first unions, which were essentially little more than strike funds! But the union bureaucracy is far more than being simply a cancerous growth on the workers' organisations. It performs an essential role in capitalist society. As Trotsky noted, 'the bureaucracy is not a technical but a social category... It regulates the social antagonisms in the interests of the privileged classes or layers, and exacts an enormous tribute for this from the toilers.'

This is partly achieved by tying the unions as a whole to the reformist Labour Party. While hundreds of thousands of union members prevented most of the unions from openly confronting Jeremy Corbyn, the bureaucrats are now enthusiastic supporters of Keir Starmer and cheer on his dumping of radical policies in favour of Tory-lite pledges.

Meanwhile, anyone proposing socialist policies, let alone a break with Labour, is denounced as an “outside influence” with “their own agenda” or expelled on trumped up charges that would make the most brazen capitalist blush. Keeping politics out of the unions is only a dictum for the rank and file, not the bureaucracy, many of whom hope to end up rewarded with a safe Labour seat or a place in the House of Lords.

But it is in times of great social upheaval or inter-imperialist war that the unions are called upon, even by the most right wing governments, to fulfil their duty. In both world wars, the union general secretaries called a social truce, denounced strikes (though that never stopped the bosses from profiteering) and entered wartime governments. They stopped being negotiators over the price of labour and became recruiting sergeants for imperialist war machines.

Transformation of the unions

Marx called on the unions to, ‘act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interests of its emancipation... as the champions and representatives of the whole working class.’ He urged them to ‘look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades [and] far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.’

To achieve this they have to break with the bourgeoisie politically, be that the Democrats in the USA or the European bourgeois workers’ parties like Labour or the nationalist parties in the oppressed semi-colonies. But “non-political” trade unions are not the answer because, as we have seen, they function as the collective negotiator for the price of labour (‘a fair day’s pay’) within the framework of capitalism. Even without a bloated bureaucracy, this leads them to gravitate towards liberal (or nationalist) bourgeois parties.

It is the duty of communists to divert the trade unions in this development and openly win the leadership of the unions by convincing

the best and most far-sighted class fighters that the trade union struggle can only be finally won if they ally their cause to revolutionary socialism. Indeed, in a country like Britain, where the unions play such an important and prestigious role, even now after many decades of decline, they must also play a leading role in forming a party that can lead a revolution.

It was Luxemburg who appealed to the rank and file to win the unions to the socialist party, denouncing those who attempted to achieve this through deals with the bureaucracy. This could only result in reformist compromises.

Instead, she called on the socialists to build a bridge not 'where the distance is greatest and the crossing most difficult' but from "below, among the organised masses.' But, she warned, this would 'inevitably call forth a vigorous opposition from a part of the union leadership.'

Luxemburg anticipated that the most powerful weapon at the trade unions' disposal, the mass (general) strike, would also prove to be the point where the rank and file could challenge the rule of the bureaucracy, indeed they would be forced to. By bringing millions of previously non-class conscious workers into battle, including those excluded from the unions through no fault of their own, the rank and file could turn a series of unrelated trade disputes into a class struggle for power.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks were active in the Russian trades unions in both legal and illegal conditions, stressing the need for revolutionary socialist leadership and drawing lessons from the experience of the mass trades unions in other countries, especially Germany.

In 1917, unions were fully legalised after the February Revolution but the depth of the social crisis posed questions that went beyond the "normal" limits of trade unionism. In the factories, directly elected committees led struggles not only over pay and conditions but over production itself, supervising supplies of materials, food rations and eventually the arming of workers' militia.

Beyond the workplace, elected and recallable delegates were sent to the workers' councils (soviets, in Russian) which also drew in delegates from district organisations, trades unions and, in Petrograd, from soldiers' and sailors' councils. The soviets were a practical recognition that working class interests could not be defended within the capitalist system, leading the Bolsheviks to raise the slogan, 'All Power to the Soviets!'

After the October Revolution and the formation of the Soviet government, the role of trades unions changed dramatically as they were drawn into the management and direction of industries in the context of invasion and civil war. However, in other countries, their contradictory character continued as they tried to combine defence of workers' interests with the maintenance of the existing political and economic system.

In the 1920s both Lenin and Trotsky took a great interest in the western trade unions and the reformist parties to which many were organically linked. Avoiding sectarianism, they called on communists to join the mass unions and form party cells within them. They formed the Red International of Labour Unions with those unions that supported the Bolshevik revolution. At the same time, they began to codify the lessons of their own experience and that of other socialist currents such as the syndicalists into a coherent revolutionary strategy for trade unionists.

Trotsky in particular sought to build alliances with organisations of rank and file opponents of the powerful union leaderships. One of the most successful of these was the National Minority Movement, formed in 1924 by the small, young, but still revolutionary Communist Party of Great Britain. It was an excellent example of the united front, where the communists safeguarded their right to independent criticism and action, but committed them to unity in action with rank and file militants against the bosses and the Labour government.

This movement immediately involved itself in the unions as they

existed, but demanded vital reforms. They called for the opening up of trades councils to other working class social and political organisations, so they could act as local coordinating centres for the whole working class.

They called on the TUC general council to be transformed into a 'general staff' of the labour movement, by rewriting its constitution to allow only rank and file workers directly elected from the workplaces onto the council. The Minority Movement warned that the bureaucracy would only get more reactionary as the crisis grew and had to be ousted.

Crowning their action programme was the aim of a workers' government, resting on the organised working class. It called on the unions to demand that Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government rescind all reactionary laws and place itself 'under the control and responsible to the organised working class movement, and the trade unions must see that this is done, for only then will it be possible to force the government to act in the interests of the working class as a whole.'

However, against Trotsky's advice, the young CP soon started to blurt, then silence, criticism of the left bureaucrats. This became fatal as the general strike of 1926 approached. Believing the left leaders would come over to the side of the rank and file, they stopped fighting for a new leadership from below and lionised the 'lefts'... who duly sold out the general strike.

Rank and file today

Here we have all the lessons from the great Marxists of the past for the tasks of revolutionaries and the union rank and file today.

The trades unions have a dual character. They act first and foremost as defenders of working class interests in the production process against the constant attacks from the owners of capital. But they do this within the framework of capitalism; in this sense, they act as a

pillar of capitalism, regulating the price and use of labour.

The super-profits gained by the imperialist powers through their subjugation of the rest of the world provide the basis not only for giant monopolies to roam the world, supported by one or other of the Great Powers, but also enough small change to bribe a section of the working class, which seeks to safeguard its social status at the expense of the rest of the working class, nationally and globally.

This is the material basis for reformism and the bloated trade union bureaucracy, who guard their privileges through a denial of democracy and overruling of workers even when, or especially when, in struggle. This calls forth spontaneous rank and file oppositionist movements, which can be won to the goals of revolution and socialism if communists intervene to guide them.

The rank and file's ultimate power rests in the workplace, where they can mobilise their fellow workers against the bosses and the bureaucrats whenever they stand in their way. By organising the oppressed, the low paid and precarious workers in their ranks or alongside them, the rank and file can transform the unions into schools for socialism. This will involve a struggle eventually to dissolve the bureaucracy and introduce the most far-reaching democracy to elect new, accountable, fighting leaders.

The unions, important as they are, do not, and cannot, encompass the whole of the working class. They cannot lead the revolution that is necessary to destroy the wages system, capitalism, once and for all. The unions must also be won to revolutionary socialism, a workers' government, in deeds as well as words. That is a political struggle. That is why revolutionary Marxists call on rank and file trade union militants to help us forge a new, revolutionary party and International.



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Univ

Problems Facing the Unions

JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2023, the biggest strike wave for 35 years-mounts as new unions join the fray. On 15 February the strikes begin to be co-ordinated and Sunak's ministers show signs the government may be forced into making concessions.

But in March, the tempo of strike days begins to slow, many are called off for 'intense negotiations', leaders claim a 'period of calm' is necessary. As details emerge, new 'final' offers from the employers look remarkably similar to those rejected by union members months before.

Unconsolidated bonuses for nurses mean gains won't carry on into future years; 9% over two years for railworkers hides a double-digit real pay cut after inflation; a plan to 'save' Royal Mail by raising workloads and devastating working conditions for posties; virtually no improvement for university lecturers.

Naturally union activists, who had campaigned in the ballots and staffed the picket lines, were furious. But as they fought to reject the

deals and restart the strikes, they encountered huge obstacles within their own unions. Their general secretaries, it seemed, had the power to push these deals through by e-plebiscites without discussion in the workplace or elected executive bodies—Jo Grady infamously and unilaterally suspended the UCU’s strike campaign via her Twitter account.

Finally in June it was carefully leaked that the Pay Review Bodies, which recommend pay deals every year for large parts of the public sector, were going to propose offers of around 6.5% for 2023–24. This was plainly designed to lower members’ expectations.

But when Sunak indicated the Tories would refuse to honour these awards, the union leaders immediately cried foul and demanded their implementation in full. So all the prime minister had to do was to accept the PRBs’ below-inflation offers and the union leaders were in his pocket, recommending to their members that 6.5%, another pay cut, was some kind of victory.

This describes a full cycle of trade union struggle: anger, mobilisation, action, vacillation, compromise, revolt, settlement. Of course there were many variations of this and there remain some unions, notably UCU and the BMA, who have not completed the cycle. But the moment for a general pay revolt across many sectors had, for the time being, passed.

What was revealed was that the union leaders had no spirit for a fight with Sunak, and no plans for co-ordination of the different struggles. Also link between activists in the different unions were at best rudimentary. Nevertheless, over a million workers struck together on 15 February. Unfortunately, that was the pinnacle of joined-up action, not the start. Worse, the unions could not agree to synchronise their claims, so those that settled early, like ScotRail and Arriva South London, got 3% rather than the 6–7% for those who struck later.

There was even less coordination of the strikers from below. RCN leader Pat Cullen denounced even the idea that there was a unity of

purpose between nurses and ambulance paramedics, declaring she had no interest in presenting a united front to the government.

While Dave Ward and Mick Lynch talked of working class unity, of co-ordination and even a social movement to link trade unionists with community activists, their own project, Enough Is Enough, was still-born. Thousand-strong rallies in station forecourts and night-clubs came and went but the local Town Hall meetings and action committees never emerged. A database of half a million enthusiastic activists gathered mothballs, never to be used.

Nevertheless, important elements of rank and file resistance did emerge. The UCU Left and NHS Workers Say NO convened meetings and leafleted workplaces. The left in the NEU built strike committees. Some local solidarity groups—even a few Enough is Enough groups—helped but these were few and far between, and not co-ordinated nationally.

But the question posed by these events is, how are these highly paid general secretaries and unelected officials able to obstruct the will of the members who are losing pay through strike action, and whose future pay depends on their winning? The answer lies in how they have been running—or running down—the unions for decades.

State of the unions

There are 6.5 million trade unionists in Britain today, about half the figure in 1980. Since then, we witnessed not only a series of great union battles, not least the Great Miners' Strike, but also, in the wake of their defeat, the steepest decline of union membership as heavily unionised industries collapsed. This was not inevitable but the result of a thoroughly conservative and cautious layer of officials who presided over this decline.

Led by John Edmonds of the GMB, Tony Blair's favourite Sir Ken Jackson and TUC chief John Monks, the union leaders, who had not lifted a finger in solidarity with the miners, preached that their heroic

defeat proved militant trade unionism no longer worked. Instead of strikes, they promoted the unions as sources of credit and cheap dentistry. They called it 'New Realism' and the rotten creed has remained the main bureaucratic ideology for 30 years.

Meanwhile, manufacturing and extractive industries have been decimated. The NHS has been cut, its services and infrastructure outsourced to profit making companies and driven into debt and crisis. Schools, colleges and universities have been turned into academies and corporations, privately run, competing exam machines. Zero hours contracts and bogus self-employment have seen millions lose their employment rights. Not a single union campaign has been seriously mounted to stop the destruction of these working class gains, made under post-war Labour governments.

Strikes became rare in these years. In 2017 only 33,000 workers took industrial action, the lowest figure since 1893. This was not because everyone was being well paid; indeed the 17-year pay squeeze up to that point was the longest since Napoleonic times.

One of the reasons was that most public sector unions had in effect given up their right to collective bargaining over pay by meekly accepting the imposition of government appointed Pay Review Bodies, whose awards were non-negotiable and final.

When the union leaders were last forced to put up a national fight, in November 2011 over the Great Pensions Robbery, immediately after 2 million-strong day of strike action (N30) they pulled the plug in return for negotiations which ended in a rotten compromise, that saw most public sector members work years longer, pay more in contributions and get less in retirement. The tens years of declining real wages that many public sector workers give as the reason they must have a pay rise was a product of this sell out. And the danger is that the union leaders—leftwingers as well as rightwingers—are doing the same again.

Their ability to do this is the result of decades of neglect at branch

and workplace level and the failure to recruit new members in new industries to unions that fight. Branches, which should be the bedrock of union organisation, have been left to shrink and wither.

An important minority have kept membership numbers up by campaigning over terms and conditions, mounting effective strikes or recruiting contracted out sections, but even here the majority of their time is spent on individual grievances and disciplinaries, not collectively taking on the bosses.

But over large sectors, the NHS for example, branch organisation and members' engagement became virtually non-existent: meetings rare and attendance even lower. Union elections for executive committees and general secretaries achieve on average barely a 15% turnout. Yes, working from home during Covid and privatisation have made workplace organisation harder but the unions' failure to overcome these obstacles has made branch activists' jobs even more difficult.

With the lack of democracy also came corruption. The GMB introduced a system of "managed democracy", where reps were "elected" for life. In a number of unions branch officials were rewarded with 100% facility time and 'honoraria', payments on top of their wages. They spent ever more time with management. This welded them to the union machine and they became the bureaucracy's first line of defence against the membership.

Occasionally unions have had to rein in some of the most heinous behaviour of branch officers. In one south London hospital trust, Unite expelled local officials who had embezzled union funds, but they simply jumped ship to Unison and continued their nefarious activities from there.

But the union bureaucrats invariably keep their most poisonous arrows for those activists and reps who stand up for the members and challenge the top officials. In one notorious case Unison expelled four activists who leafleted a conference, depicting do-nothing officials as the three wise monkeys who 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil',

claiming their motives were racist! More recently the same union bureaucracy connived with management to get the union's first left wing president, Paul Holmes, sacked.

Although there are officially 200,000 branch officials and workplace reps (the nearest thing to shop stewards)—nominally one for every 30 members—many are reduced to putting up posters, handing out national leaflets and calling on members to vote in elections, others are controlled by local and regional officials, receiving a few material benefits to make them willing to do the leadership's bidding.

Probably only a minority are able to function as the old 300,000 shop stewards of the 1970s and 80s did, not least because they are hamstrung from calling direct action to counter managements abuses, by the anti-union laws, yes, but policed by their own unions. Freeing workers shopfloor representatives should become a number one priority

A similar if not even starker picture emerges when it comes to the so-called self-organised groups—women, black, LGBT+, disabled and youth. Although women and black workers are 7% more likely to join a union, the women and black members' groups too often struggle to make their voices heard and their conferences are carefully managed by the officials.

As for the young workers: 41% of trade unionists are over 50, while only 4.3% are under 25. This speaks volumes about the official trade union leadership's failure to incorporate and represent the most downtrodden sectors of Britain's workforce.

They have effectively outsourced the job of organising the low-paid, migrant and super-exploited layers of our class to the independent unions, which, however brave and daring, lack the resources to make serious breakthroughs.

This long decline has not affected all parts of the unions equally. For the members it has meant 13 years of declining real pay, the rise of in-work poverty and an equal increase in insecurity, workload and

stress.

For the top officials, on the other hand, their pay has been maintained or grown, and the officialdom increased with an army of organisers. But most of all they have taken a stranglehold on all forms of industrial action. And the key way they have done this is by demanding absolute obedience to the anti-union laws.

Anti-union laws

When Thatcher, from 1980 onwards, made unofficial strike action illegal and the union responsible for any business losses incurred by such action and liable to fines, this turned the top layer of officials into police officers against independent rank and file action.

Of course these laws hit the official union leaders too: archaic postal ballots' undemocratic thresholds, notice periods before strikes, outlawing of solidarity and political strikes, time limits for ballots. These reduced the leverage of the officials in negotiations with the employers or the government.

The more left wing officials rail against these shackles but when it comes to putting words into deeds they invariably prove unwilling to risk a clash with the law by defying injunctions and risking fines or disqualification. This is not, by and large, the result of personal cowardice, but down to the knowledge that to win they would have to rally the membership behind the workplace militants in the face of police violence. And what this would mean for the power of the privileged layer of officials, left as well as right, they dare not contemplate.

Yet each new anti-union law is more vicious than the last. The latest, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, would allow government ministers to demand the unions deliver public services during strike days to whatever level they deem necessary—even higher in some cases than is possible on normal days due to staff shortages. The services named—health, transport, education, etc—are those at the centre of the 2022–23 strike movement.

Managers could name individual workers in ‘work notices’, which if not obeyed could lead to instant dismissal and the unions forced to police such notices on pain of fines up to £1 million. Effectively the right to strike is directly threatened.

But despite threats of taking the government to court, refusing to pay fines and to fight the Bill in the workplaces... the TUC and the unions in the firing line have done next to nothing to prevent the new law coming in or prepare for mass action to kill it off should it pass. Like the other anti-union legislation, it is an inconvenience for the top brass, rather than a threat to their everyday practice or their livelihoods.

For the rank and file it is the other way round. These draconian laws are a denial of our right to strike and therefore a threat to our livelihoods and working conditions. We need to force the union leaders to fight anti-union legislation before and after they have become law by pledging to defy them and when necessary breaking them. Should any union or member be prosecuted, we should demand a general strike and try to deliver one from below.

That’s what happened in response to the jailing of the Pentonville Five. It can and must happen again.

Strikes

Of course unions do call strikes. They have to, both in response to the bosses’ attacks and because of rank and file pressure on them to put up a fight. A union that never strikes is not a real union and its members would have to overthrow its leaders or leave the union.

But if the officials are obliged to let the reps and show stewards off the leash to get a ballot result and organise pickets, they jealously guard their control of when and how often the strikes as called, over all negotiations and above all the decision to accept (or recommend) a deal.

This is most obvious in national disputes, where strikes are called

weeks or even months apart and only last for a day or occasionally a few more. In between, the members are expected to carry on working, sometimes under management provocation or outright victimisation, while secret talks take place, deadlines are extended and planned walkouts are cancelled.

Local strikes inevitably offer greater opportunity for rank and file members to get involved, discussing the claim, strike dates and duration, even participating in negotiating meetings. Unite, using Sharon Graham's leverage method, has signed off indefinite all out strikes in limited circumstances, some of which have been spectacularly effective.

But beware the limitations of this strategy. If the bureaucracy wants to end the dispute, they will revert to bureaucratic methods, like they did at Abellio in south London, where the bus drivers were tricked by a 'survey' into accepting a sub-inflationary deal, days after an official ballot confirmed strikers wanted to fight on.

Each of the bus strikes, even when ranged against the same parent company, like Stagecoach, is kept separate. Graham promised to organise combines where stewards and branch officers from across a sector could meet but they have played no role in coordinating disputes or setting common pay claims across garages and companies. We should demand they are convened and the rank and file set the agenda and make democratic decisions—with the officials' support but not under their control.

A more radical version of the strategy Graham espouses comes from across the pond, the USA, where there has also been an ongoing revival of trade union militancy. Jane McAlevey has been influential among a layer of union organisers, the ones in daily contact with reps and branch officers. She advocates recruiting new members and finding new workplace leaders in the course of building strike campaigns.

McAlevey writes from experience and says that unions should be built as community as well as workplace organisations, so when they

strike they have a groundswell of support and in return they support community demands for resources, social issues, etc. Active members should discuss their demands and forms of action so ‘super-majorities’ for strikes can be won.

A lot of this would be welcome step forward, though it has made little impact to date in British trade unions. But it still represents a bureaucratic strategy, albeit a left one. Although McAlevey affords the members the right to choose their battleground, officials get to choose most the rest.

In particular they get to choose the ‘leaders’, whom they expect to be moderate and pliable in return. We should take what is good from this model and demand the election of our own leaders, so the rank and file can control of all aspects of the strike.

The problem with left wing bureaucrats is that, while they feel the pressure from below, from workers and activists, more than the right, so long as they don’t break with the bureaucratic model, they will end up asserting bureaucratic privilege: the right to decide.

So it is not surprising that bureaucrats hate combining strikes against a common enemy. This is why despite the rallies in the autumn when leaders like Mick Lynch proclaimed to wild cheers that ‘the working class is back’ and called for ‘coordinated and escalating action’, he hastily added, ‘what does working together mean? It doesn’t mean any one union telling any other union what to do... each union must determine its own tactics.’

Even co-ordinated strikes often result in separate demos and rarely leads to sustained unity, especially at local or workplace level. The reason is that joint action, just like “walk out, stay out” strikes, raises workers’ political consciousness, as they see that in the former it is not just one employer but a class that is exploiting them, and in the latter they feel the iron fist of the capitalist state intervening through the bosses’ media, courts and police. Only when strikes reach such a highpoint, like they nearly did in early 2023 will we be able to say and

mean that the working class is back.

Caste mentality

The real problem is that trade union bureaucrats don't see themselves as leaders of a class struggle. Instead they act as go-betweens, brokering deals with the bosses over the price and exploitation of "their" workers' labour power. They accept the capitalist framework of wage labour, where not only must the workers receive a living wage but also that the capitalists must make a profit out of our labour. Hence Dave Ward's plea to 'save Royal Mail'.

And it is just the same when it comes to politics too. Some socialists refer to Labour as the party of the working class or the party of the trade unions. But more accurately it should be referred to as the party of the trade union bureaucracy, though even then it is not a perfect reflection of its needs.

It, like them, accepts the capitalist framework—private ownership of most of industry, commerce and communications; the capitalist state and parliament as the arena for "reforms", like the minimum wage, investment in the welfare state, and trade union legality.

'Wait for Labour' is its political answer to any crisis, when the bosses use their government and their courts to thwart workers vital needs. And they do this no matter how often Labour in government betrays because any real alternative means a struggle for political power.

The trade unions founded the Labour Party in 1901. Although the relationship has changed over the years, in essence it has remained the same. Today only 11 unions are formally affiliated to the party but many others donate huge sums to Labour, including the RMT, which was expelled in 2004.

The rate at which this money keeps pouring into the party bears little relation to its leadership or policies. The unions paid Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party just over £5 million to fight the 2019 election when the party's manifesto was packed with pro-union policies, but

more than £20 million have been handed over to Keir Starmer in the three years he has been in the top job, even though he has sacked shadow ministers for appearing on picket lines.

The bureaucracy can get away with this because it rests predominantly on the better paid layers of the working class, what Marxists call the 'labour aristocracy'. Those with rare skills, job security and higher wages are inevitably over-represented in the unions because they can achieve more in negotiations and strikes. This is obvious when you look at unions like Aslef, but is even true of the general unions, who do next to nothing for contract workers and casualised labour.

Without this organised pressure from below, local officials are pulled even more into the union bureaucracy, helped along by a few material benefits that grow as you move up the hierarchy until you get to the £100k a year that general secretaries of most major unions earn.

These material privileges, tied to their position as negotiators rather than exploited workers, provide the basis for the union bureaucracy, both its right and left wings. The bureaucracy, materially comfortable and shielded from day to day exploitation, has made its peace with capitalism.


This makes the officials a caste, whose aims and needs certainly clash with the bosses from time to time, but always diverge from those of the working class as a whole whenever it becomes a life or death struggle. The internal loyalty of this caste is revealed by the fact that they rarely, if ever, criticise one another and those who do are rapidly ostracised, and rank-and-filers who do are disowned.

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The Rank and File Today

TENS OF thousands of union activists, strikers and their supporters have seen first hand how treacherously the bureaucratic leaders can behave—and invariably at decisive moments. So why not just change the leaders?

This is often the first response of new militants and we agree that we must change leaders and try to tie new leaders down to concrete action: throwing out below inflation deals, escalating strikes and full coordination with other unions for a start.

But we warn in advance that changing the faces at the top of our unions—without imposing democratic control over them by the rank and file—will not change their behaviour.

Mark Serwotka, Matt Wrack, Jo Grady, and most recently Daniel Kebede were all elected with support from the left and hopes for radical change. Most of them started out by promising and to an extent delivering more democracy and more strikes. But none have brought in the structural reforms that would transform the unions:

- The election and recallability of all officials
- All officials to be paid a worker's wage
- Sovereign union conferences, autonomy of branches
- Workers' control of disputes
- Recruiting the most vulnerable and exploited workers.

These are the tasks of an independent rank & file movement, which we will return to later.

This does not mean workers should not try to replace leaders who have proved their unfitness and unwillingness to fight for their members. But it cannot be a strategy, ie the final goal of rank and file organisation after which it becomes merely a support machine for them, electing their candidates but not going any further than these 'lefts' will support. Our aim must be to place demands on the new leaders, both democratic ones aiming at full accountability and industrial plus political ones. Marxists call this, putting the lefts to the test of office.

But for some on the left, notably but not exclusively the Communist Party of Britain (*Morning Star*), the Socialist Party, and *Socialist Appeal* it is a strategy: Broad Leftism.

Broad Lefts

The broad left is one of the oldest forms of union opposition and is still prevalent today. The Communist Party (CPGB) founded the first broad lefts in the late 1960s, using its base in the shop stewards' movement to encourage left Labour allies to put joint slates in union elections and win them to more radical policies. And they were successful too, most notably in the two biggest industrial unions of the day the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the Transport and General (T&GWU). Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones, with the support of the Communist Party and the *Tribune* Labour left certainly supported shop stewards in a way their right wing predecessors had not, but under Labour from 1974 they backed the Social Contract that

demobilised and demoralised the militancy of the preceding years.

Today there are a number of such broad lefts, like the United Left (Unite), Time for Real Change (Unison) and the UCU Left. They all follow a similar strategy. Form an agreement between left officials and rank and file activists on a minimal programme to increase union combativity; gain a majority in elections for union positions; gradually increase the tempo and duration of strikes.

Their aim is to solve the problem of accountability or the lack of it. To aid this many would draw up a manifesto for election campaigns, though this is not so typical nowadays. Instead broad left campaigns mainly consist of rallies and branch meetings, leaflets and a 250 word election statement.

The problem is twofold. First it leaves the rank and file as passive onlookers, whose only role is to get the vote out for the left candidates. Second it leaves the undemocratic structures of the unions untouched and the new left leaders unaccountable. The question of independent workplace organisation does not figure.

This gives all the broad left leaders a similar trajectory. Initially they feel like a breath of fresh air after the stultifying right wing is ousted. But sooner or later the lefts start to hesitate for fear of “running too far ahead” of the membership, then betray.

Tony Woodley and Len McCluskey, two former Unite general secretaries, both stood as candidates of the broad left. Together they led the union into a series of damaging defeats at Gate Gourmet, Grangemouth and British Airways. Eventually the rank and file grew tired of their antics and voted out the United Left in favour of Sharon Graham who promised greater focus of the workplace.

Another is Mark Serwotka, voted in as PCS general secretary in 2000, who has failed to win any significant improvements for the members. This saw the broad left turn against itself, splintering into at least three rival factions, Left Unity, Broad Left Network and Independent Left. Sadly none of these have put forward a truly rank and file perspective.

Daniel Kebede was elected as the NEU left's candidate in April 2023. By July he had reneged on the teachers' demand for a fully funded above inflation pay rise and signed a joint letter with Rishi Sunak recommending acceptance of a partially funded below inflation offer. This when he was still only general secretary elect, not even in post!

The bitter truth is that, because the broad lefts are focused almost exclusively on elections, they are not strong enough to hold the new leaders to account. Of course many of their members do lead strikes and battle against the bureaucracy, but this is not linked to building the broad left as an independent organisation of the rank and file, able to fight treachery from the left as well as the right. The 10–15% turnout for union elections shows just how far removed this limited democracy is from the day-to-day interests of most members.

Of all the broad lefts only the UCU Left launched a real fight against Jo Grady's backsliding and kept their 'four fights' campaign alive. But even they were not strong enough on the ground to win over the branch delegates meeting to its position for an all-out strike. In the end the bureaucracy was able to wear down the members, lower their horizons and regain control of the dispute and with that the union as a whole.

Time For Real Change in Unison was more typical. As workplace and branch activists were struggling (mostly in vain) to get out the strike vote, TFRC was emailing its members with instructions to nominate left candidates for the Unison Labour Link national committee. Talk about irrelevant!

While it may be necessary, as we have said, to vote for broad left candidates and join them insofar as they have any meaningful internal life, the broad left is not a necessary step on the path to a rank and file movement. It is a divergence. Because they are essentially election machines, they rarely grow beyond the ranks of seasoned activists and socialists. Therefore there is a tendency for them to shrink and then split, usually not over any real political issue but over who the

candidate should be. Competing left groups and candidates may offer variations in policy but all mimic, though now on a smaller scale, the broad lefts they broke away from.

The same can be said of the attempts to build umbrella organisations for the broad lefts. The Liaison Committee for Trade Unions in the 1970s, Organising for Fighting Unions in the 2000s and the National Shop Stewards Network today are all examples of socialist organisations (the CP, SWP and SP respectively) declaring that their “brand” of broad leftism is superior.

But these brands offer as little variety as the ones in the supermarket. Not only that, they obstruct real unity, not just in elections but on the ground, where it really matters. In order to boost their credentials, they all too often end up lionising some left bureaucrats over others. These left leaders agree to speak on their platforms on the proviso that they are neither criticised nor pressured to do anything that contradicts their own policies.

Unity between these different brands of broad leftism is unthinkable for those at the centre of them. First it would reveal to their supporters that their claims to provide better answers to the crisis of leadership are in fact barely distinguishable from the others. Second it would disrupt what becomes increasingly their aim: to form the basis for recruitment to their ‘mother’ organisations, rather than to embolden the fight.

Groups outside the TUC

Over the last decade some small ‘independent’ or ‘rank and file’ unions in UK, notably the IWGB and the UVW, have been organising: precarious workers, the bogus ‘self-employed’, migrant labour and the low-paid. Starting off with migrant cleaners and security guards, the independents are now established at Uber, Deliveroo, major universities and hospitals, even sex workers.

They mix workplace organisation with social centres and networks,

language courses and migrant rights advice. Their picket lines are renown for their colour, dancing and noise. Flashmobs and lightening strikes are among their most powerful weapons but they have also won several high-profile lawsuits. As Petros Elia, general secretary of UVW, puts it, 'We tell workers that they need to take action, serious action, protracted action until they win. The demands we make are non-negotiable. We want everything we ask for.'

Recently these unions have started collaborating with the mainstream unions, like PCS in the Royal Parks, and the GMB, which has successfully launched strikes at Amazon. But they remain small and are prone to splits. The App Drivers and Couriers Union split from the IWGB, preferring a narrower focus, and the UVW recently faced a rank and file revolt when the union attempted to branch out into the tech industries.

Militant methods and social aspects to organising are good additions but the big unions have the muscle and resources to complete the task of organising huge number of unorganised workers in Britain. Rank and file militants of the major unions should deepen their already considerable ties with the independents to force the mainstream union leaders into this battle.

A very different matter is the Socialist Equality Party (wsws.org) who counterpose what they call 'rank and file committees' to the fight to force the unions to adopt militant policies and to organise democratic control over the strikes. Seemingly they stand poles apart from the broad lefts and are unsparing in their attacks on the bureaucracy, which in their eyes can never deliver a victory for the workers. This can lead to them even denouncing double-digit pay increases as a 'sell out'.

Worse, they refuse any united front with other anti-bureaucratic trends on the basis that they are merely the 'left wing of the bureaucracy'. For them the unions are virtually irreformable and those trying to do so are just collaborators with the bureaucracy. This is contrary to the Marxist tradition of independent organisation of the

rank and file and fighting ‘with the leaders where possible and against them where necessary.’

The SEP practice is closer to the ‘red unionism’ of the Third Period Stalinism—a united front only from below but in their case it is only a unity with themselves. Even if their rank and file committees really existed, they would still leave the overwhelming bulk of the organised working class in the reformist unions at the mercy of the treacherous bureaucracy.

Green shoots

However, we have witnessed in the past year unofficial strike action among members of the mainstream unions. One of the most successful was organised by North Sea oilrig workers in May and September. Tied into a union agreement with the bosses that limited pay rises to no more than 4%, no matter how high inflation or Big Oil’s profits were, the workers revolted.

In an open letter the strike committee wrote, ‘the wildcat strikes that are being talked about and planned are a result of years of inaction from the unions and our employers. They have made us feel like we can only get things done by taking things into our own hands... we are being led down the garden path.’

In the end the strikers forced their unions, Unite, GMB and RMT, to launch official action. They won deals worth up to 20%.

Similarly, Liverpool and Southampton dockers refused to handle cargo diverted from strike-bound Felixstowe ports. This not only helped Felixstowe win a double-digit pay increase but formed the basis for their own successful pay claims later in the year.

There are other examples of unofficial strike action in the public sector, where teaching assistants in Unison or the GMB have refused to cross teachers’ picket lines and RMT and Aslef members honouring each other’s strikes despite their leaders failing to call strikes on the same day as each other.

Quite a few nurses, who had joined TUC unions because they behaved more like real unions, quickly joined the RCN when they saw that it was leading the fight against deteriorating pay and conditions. ‘Dual carding’ is not uncommon.

We should add to these green shoots of rank and file recovery the rejectionist movements in the RCN, CWU, PCS and NEU. NHS Workers Say No had existed since the mid-2010s but mushroomed when it started campaigning against the proposed sell-out deal that the leadership was recommending. Initially these movements met with some success. NHS Workers Say No overturned the bureaucracy and got the strikes called back on. But they were not strong enough to raise the morale of the wider membership and the subsequent rebalot fell just short of the required 50% turnout.

Postal Workers Say Vote No, which Workers Power members help set up, was part of a rejectionist tide that twice panicked Dave Ward into delaying the ballot—and cancelling the CWU’s conference! But with the aid of a £900 bribe from Royal Mail, the bureaucracy eventually won out. As with the RCN, the union machine succeeded in the end.

The question for the thousands of activists involved in these rank and file rebellions is, where next? The last significant rank and file revolt, the National Construction Rank and File Committee, aka the Sparks, which reached its height in 2011–12, was eventually re-absorbed into the bureaucracy. Others have petered out. None as yet has gone on to build a permanent rank and file organisation.

Rank and file movement

Only a rank and file movement, rooted in the workplace, organised within each union and across all of them, can mount a real challenge to the bureaucrats and wrest our unions from their death-like grasp. That is the task we face today.

How such a movement will come about, what its specific demands are and how it organises itself cannot be told in advance. That is a

question of struggle. All we can say is that the current strike wave and in particular the actions of the rank and file in response to their leaders' moves to sell their struggles out are an ideal starting point.

We believe the time is ripe for calling an open conference to discuss and set in motion the building of a rank and file organisation, independent of all wings of the bureaucracy, with the twin aim of reforming the unions so that all officials are elected by and accountable to the members and of organising for a united defence of our pay, terms and conditions at least to the level of 2008, ie before the Great Recession.

Workers Power has written and circulated such an appeal. But we do not intend such a gathering to be *our* rank and file conference. So-called movements, which are branded at birth as the property of one or other socialist propaganda group, will be bound to fail. There is no 'party' strong enough to carry out this task on its own.

Nor should we limit the appeal to those who have already achieved some kind of breakthrough. All rank and file members, union branches, oppositional groupings and even broad lefts that want to break with their past strategy should attend. Far from locking out socialist organisations—the far left—they should be encouraged to attend and contribute.

But while we welcome any step forward in this direction, we do not come without a road map. We will argue within any rank and file network or federation for an action programme, summing up the lessons of the last period and setting out a way forward from here. This is elaborated in the next chapter but the essential points are as follows.

The unions must confront the bosses' offensive with the greatest resistance possible: no cuts to pay, jobs or conditions at work. Instead of one or two-day strikes, we need to escalate our action as quickly as possible to all-out indefinite strikes. Let the bosses and government know that we are not coming back to work until we have won significant gains.

Every dispute must be under the democratic control of the workers

involved, from the formulation of their demands to the setting of strike dates, from the negotiations to the final settlement.

Workplace mass meetings should elect from their ranks strike committees composed of the most active and militant workers and hold them to account, replacing them if they fail to represent them properly. From workplace strike committees, representatives should be sent to national strike committees with full control of the dispute.

To achieve this we need to fight for thoroughgoing democracy. All union officials should be elected and subject to immediate recall. They should be paid no more than the average wage of the workers they represent. There is no need for all-powerful general secretaries. Instead they should be subject to the decisions of national executive committees of ordinary workers.

No to any bans on political debates, strikes and organisations, end the monopoly of the Labour Party as the only party representing the working class. The class struggle is in the final analysis a political struggle for the overthrow of the bosses' system, capitalism. Ultimately this means breaking with 'pure trade unionism', the restriction of our struggles to what is achievable under the profit system, and winning them to the revolutionary struggle for socialism.

These are big tasks, historic tasks even. It may take several rounds of trade union battles to achieve them. But if we start today, in the next round it will be harder for the bureaucrats to control and derail the movement. We will be better prepared and be able to forewarn and forearm the workers against sell-outs and betrayals.

In the end the bureaucracy's power rests on the passivity of the union members. But, as Trotsky said, 'when this passivity is broken... the magnificence of the bureaucracy comes to an end. Its intelligence and skill are transformed into stupidity and impotence.' Our task is to raise the trade union activity to the level that we can overthrow the bureaucracy and connect the unions to the goal of emancipating the working class as a whole.



A Programme to Transform the Unions

WE ARE Living through a new period of capitalist crisis, similar in scale to that in the 1970s and 80s, and in terms of the Ukraine War and the China rivalry, even comparable to the years preceding World Wars One and Two. It carries with it both great dangers for the working class and great opportunities.

The Great Recession that gripped the world following the 2008 banking crisis led seamlessly on to a decade of Tory austerity, cutting social services, replacing relatively secure jobs with the gig economy and relentlessly eroding workers' pay.

Brexit took another great bite out of the economy, engendering skills shortages in logistics, the NHS and other sectors. The covid pandemic exposed the crisis of the health service, as well as the inequalities within society. Making ever more schools into academies increased inequalities and potential pickings for the privatisers. The inflation that resulted from this mess has now impoverished millions.

Though Britain may be one of the worst hit among the rich

countries, this is an international crisis. Europe and the US are also staring at a prolonged period of stagflation—low or no growth, coupled with persistently high inflation. AI threatens the jobs of millions of workers in the administrative and creatives industries. In the semi-colonial world, from Sri Lanka to Sudan and Argentina, the suffering from this crisis is already far more severe. Even China, which pulled the world out of the last recession, cannot provide the same stimulus this time round.

The era of globalisation, where supply chains and trade criss-crossed the world, has run out of steam. In its place rival imperialist power blocs are ratcheting up military expenditure and imposing sanctions and tariffs on each other, in preparation for war. Russia is just the latest to launch an invasion of conquest. Meanwhile the world's poor face starvation and the planet burns.

Transform the unions

Trade unions are the front line defence for workers facing these threats. All this makes the crisis in the trade unions one of the most pressing questions for socialists and all working class militants. It is fundamentally a crisis of leadership. We urgently need a rank and file movement in every union and across the unions to break the stranglehold of the bureaucrats and deliver action that can win our demands.

Unlike the existing broad lefts, such a movement would be rooted in the workplace, where it can challenge management's decisions and mobilise workers to take direct action—strikes, occupations, etc—to combat pay cuts, job losses and worsening conditions. Our watchword should be: action with the union officials where possible, without them where necessary.

While a rank and file movement may utilise union elections to raise support for its demands, successes in this field cannot on their own transform the unions. History shows that even the sincerest left

wingers elected into the office find themselves in a straightjacket of union rules and anti-union legal limits, plus a culture of loyalty to the existing officials and union lawyers. They will obstruct any moves that threaten their privileges, unless a bigger army, composed of rank and file members, controls them and supports them breaking with this system.

To mount a real challenge to the hold of the union bureaucracy, a national rank and file movement is needed. It must openly fight the leaders and replace them with truly accountable class fighters at all levels of the unions. A national rank and file movement in Britain today should start the fight for the transformation of the unions by campaigning on the following platform.

Democratise the unions

Make the unions democratic through the annual election of all officials. Elections should be preceded by workplace and mass meetings where the relevant issues are debated in front of the members. Union leaders should be subject to recall if they betray their pledges or act against the interests of the rank and file.

Unions should have websites, bulletins and papers which are open, democratic and campaigning organs of the membership, not photo opportunities for the bureaucracy.

National conferences, TUC and Labour Party delegations must be made up of rank and file delegates, elected directly from workplaces and branches. All officials and NECs must be bound by conference policy. Branches and combines should be autonomous, so the decision to take action is devolved to the members and seized from the hands of lawyers and officials.

End bureaucratic privileges

All officials should be paid the average wage of the workers they represent. All officials to donate their wages to strike funds during

disputes and draw only strike pay and expenses necessary for the prosecution of the dispute.

The assets of the union must be put at the service of the members through fighting funds to finance strikes, support campaigns and help with organizing drives.

All the unions should print monthly accounts of their financial income and outgoings. The rank and file should control expenditure and elect an audit committee to check the accounts. No perks, only necessary expenses, should be granted to officials for union business. Bureaucratic privilege must be rooted out at every level of the unions.

For direct action

We need action that can win. We need all-out indefinite strikes against every job loss announcement, linked to occupations of threatened workplaces which can hold the employers' property and equipment to ransom until the closure threats are withdrawn. These methods, not just protest action and selective strikes, should be used against each attack by the government and employers on pay, jobs, conditions and services. Return to the basic principles of trade union solidarity: not crossing picket lines, not handling scab products or delivering to scab workplaces. We must defend the public sector even if this means an all out struggle against Labour councils who are carrying through Tory cuts.

Fight the anti-union laws

The anti-union laws should be actively defied as a step towards smashing them. For the immediate recognition by the unions of all unofficial strikes. Establish rank and file apparatuses to make defiance of the laws possible: dispersal of funds amongst trusted members, organized defence of pickets and suppression of scabs, secret strike committees to prevent militants being singled out by the courts (except elected negotiators). The unions should reject their acceptance of the

Thatcher-era anti-union laws: any Labour government must scrap every single piece of Tory legislation on employment and the unions.

Build workplace organisation

Fight to unionise every worker—agency, precarious, migrant, auxiliary, etc—and win 100% union membership in every workplace. New workers can and must be won to fighting unions on the basis of campaigns to win immediate demands by militant action. An elected and recallable shop steward in every workplace or section/shift in large workplaces: we must re-establish the workplace as the base unit of the union. To effectively take up grievances and defend members, stewards must fight for the right to call industrial action. All action to be subject to or ratified by votes at democratic mass meetings. Strike committees to be elected from and accountable to mass meetings. Strike committees should have chosen representatives at all negotiations, or, where there is no strike, delegates elected by mass meetings should be involved, so as to break the monopoly of regional and national officials on information and negotiations.

For industrial unionism

General trade unionism, represented by Unison, Unite and the GMB, offers only a mirage of workers' unity. In practice the Big Three are more likely to sabotage united action, as can be seen by their disgraceful decision to persecute and fine the NEU £153,000 for recruiting 'their' grades during a strike campaign. These unions need to be broken up and merged on an industrial basis. We need to create combine committees to organise all workplaces in a particular sector and joint union committees where more than one union operates in a sector or industry, with delegates elected and mandated by mass meetings. Starting with campaigning for all workers not to cross picket lines, we can begin the process of incorporating all grades into one union for each sector.

No to class collaboration

No cooperation with all workplace class collaboration schemes. Break union involvement in joint committees with bosses, other than those that enable us to negotiate from an independent position. Fight all single-union sweetheart deals and no-strike deals agreed by the bureaucrats.

Combat social oppression

Women, black and ethnic minority workers, LGBT+, the disabled and youth not only face systematic discrimination by the employers but also are under-represented in the structures of the unions and their issues side-lined. The unions need to fight for equality for all workers and take up their issues—for workplace crèche facilities, against deportation raids, etc—in every campaign and instance.

Sexist, racist and homophobic attitudes and assaults pervade the unions just as much, sadly, as they do the bosses' organisations, the TSSA just as much as the CBI. Even where there are Black and Women's Sections in the unions, they are often inactive or under the control of the bureaucracy.

We demand the right to caucus for all oppressed groups of workers at every level from the workplace to the national sphere. Here oppressed workers can discuss their issues without fear from their oppressors, and bring their problems and campaigns to the attention of the wider union membership for resolution.

The workers' struggle is political

Workers don't just live for work; their lives are rooted in their communities, where the class struggle also needs to be waged. The bureaucracy largely ignores these struggles, except for conference resolutions that are soon forgotten. The unions must take up these broader social issues, defending the most vulnerable sections of our class from governmental and municipal attacks as well as racists and sexists. The

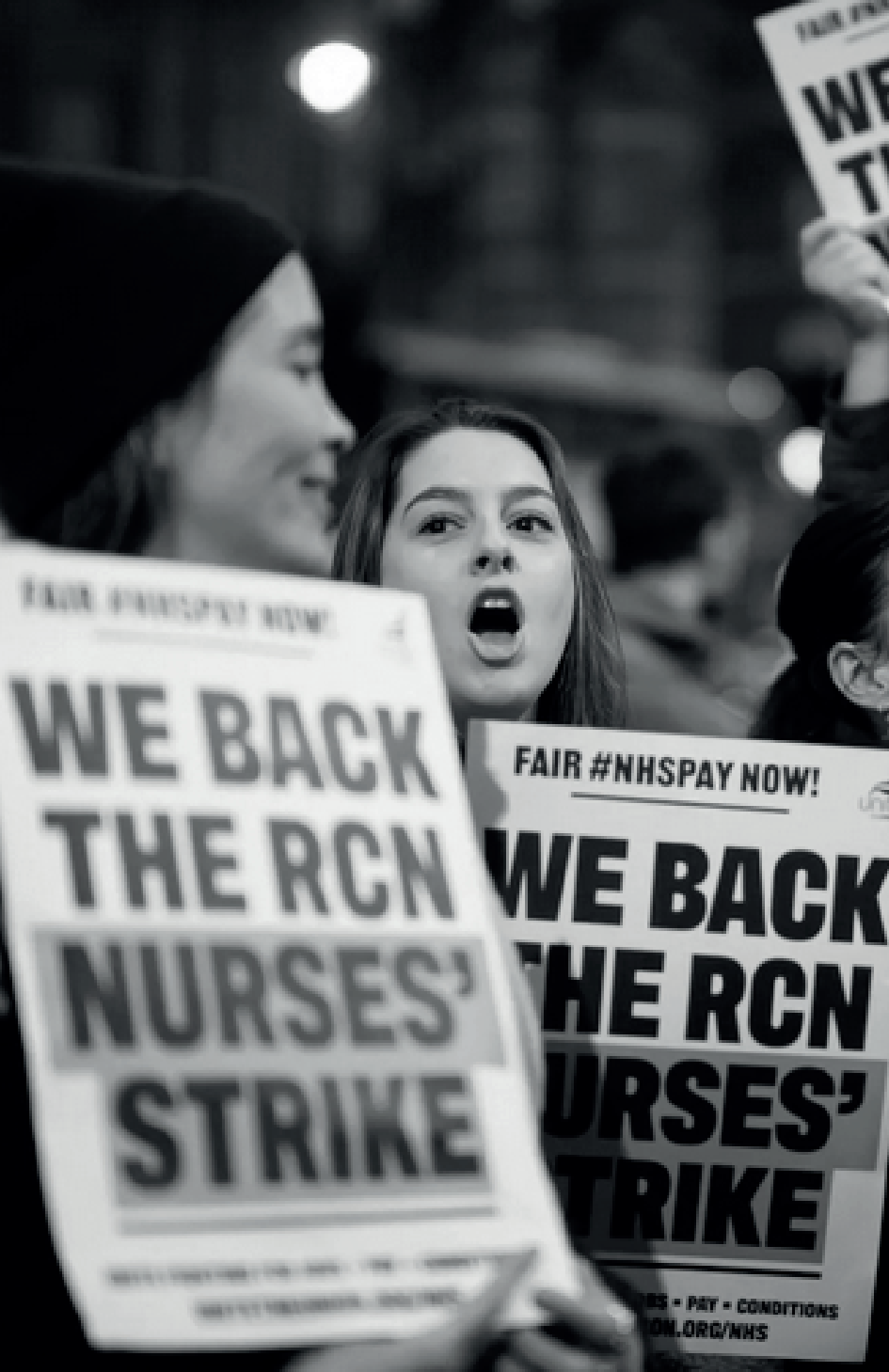
unions must launch campaigns in the workplace and in the community for the rights of benefit claimants, migrant workers and those super-exploited as precarious workers—up to and including taking political strike action. Unions should take action in solidarity not just with trade union struggles, but with all the struggles of working people, and victims of the bosses' oppression in Britain and abroad. In particular, the unions should campaign widely against war and nationalism. Against “British jobs for British workers”, all migrant and refugee workers welcome—and into the unions!

Build a revolutionary party

A rank and file movement built on such a basis could unite militants, whether they were Labour supporters, members of left wing organisations or not politically aligned, in the fight to take back the unions from the bureaucrats.

But revolutionary communists do not see this struggle as an end in itself. Important as fighting, democratic unions are, they will face an endless guerilla war with the bosses unless they take their place in the fight to destroy capitalism altogether. For this to happen, we need not only to build a rank and file movement, but a revolutionary communist leadership of that movement, of the unions themselves, and of the whole working class.

We need a political party, with its own cells and fractions in the unions, which would take its place in the rank and file movement and stand in the front ranks of every struggle, no matter how minor, that the workers undertake.



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**WE BACK
THE RCN
NURSES'
STRIKE**

WE'VE GOT YOUR BACKS. WE'VE GOT YOUR BACKS. WE'VE GOT YOUR BACKS.
WE'VE GOT YOUR BACKS. WE'VE GOT YOUR BACKS.

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The Unions and Socialism

AS WE discussed in chapter two, the unions under capitalism have a dual character. Under their current leadership and in their bureaucratic form, they act as one of the central pillars of the capitalist order. Just as they operate on a day-to-day basis within the framework of capitalism, so in any crisis they will use their power to sabotage a fightback and curtail workers' action.

They do this in a number of ways. Economically, they demand members accept wage cuts and job losses to protect profits or the national economy, UK plc. Politically, they declare parliament, the law and private property sacrosanct. Militarily, union leaders support armament programmes, troop deployments and war cabinets, which they eagerly hope to join.

On the other hand, the unions are the bedrock defence organisations of the working class, formed wherever capitalism exists so workers can combine their strength to resist the constant encroaches by the capitalists on the wages, jobs and conditions. Workers join unions

to fight back. This gives them a potentially anti-capitalist character.

But the unions must be won to the goal of socialism, not just in words, as it states in many a union constitution, but in their actions. Their role as the organised section of workers at the point of production gives them the power to stop the flow of surplus value, the source of all profit. In the fight for workers' control, the unions can help start to learn how to plan the future society and build socialism.

Break with Labour

Lenin called the Labour Party a bourgeois workers' party: pro-capitalist in its policies and leadership; working class only in the sense that it rests on their support in elections and financial maintenance. The crucial link between the pro-capitalist centre and the working class is the trade union bureaucracy, which funnels workers' demands into reforms (usually very mild ones!) from parliament.

In return, the bureaucrats wish to use the Labour Party not only, or even primarily, to improve conditions for their members, but to fuse with the capitalist state, by sponsoring or even becoming MPs and through numerous backdoor channels, what in the past were known as 'beer and sandwiches at Number 10'.

Just as union officials eagerly snap up any chance to sit on boards or joint committees with the employers, so their dream is to hobnob with ministers and bankers. Of course, their role is only ever a junior one and predicated on them transmitting what British capital needs into the working population; but eager fools they are prepared to be.

At each stage of the electoral cycle, the bureaucracy calls on workers to subordinate their needs to those of the party. In the run up to elections—the 'election year'—they agree to restrict strikes to the absolute minimum, as they preach that we must 'wait for Labour.' When Labour is in opposition, the bureaucrats swallow the ditching of the more radical policies as necessary to placate the bosses and win over middle class voters. When in office, the union tops accept that reforms

must depend on ‘what the economy (ie capitalism) can afford’.

Labour is not reformable. If the Corbyn experiment proved nothing else, it is this. We must break the unions from Labour if they are to take up their role in the struggle for socialism. We can begin this struggle today by:

- Refusing to hold back our struggles in order “not to embarrass” Labour.
- Demanding Labour acts in the workers’ interests, not the capitalists’.
- Calling on Labour to abolish all the anti-union laws and draw up the right to strike.

We say this not only to force Labour to tack to the left but to expose them in the eyes of the workers and to draw the unions into active opposition to their capitalist agenda. Our aim is to win the unions to break with Labour and form a new workers’ party, a revolutionary party.

Revolution

Why do we say this? Because even a radical government, one made up of 650 Jeremy Corbyns and prepared to take the measures outlined in our action programme, would immediately face sabotage from the capitalist class: its media, its judges, its banks and its police and armed forces. Let’s not forget that one army general threatened a mutiny if Corbyn were elected!

In order to defend our gains and our actions, the workers will need to organise self-defence, starting with stewards on picket lines and demonstrations and building up to a workers’ militia. These are already needed against police attacks on our communities, our protests and our strikes. As the struggle broadens out to include all sections of our class, we will need to fraternise with soldiers and draw them onto our side.

We will need revolutionary trade unions, controlled democratically by the rank and file. Only the fight for workers’ control, first in a few

workplaces, then across a whole sector and finally the entire economy, can make the gains of the revolution permanent. Only the mobilisation of the base of the trade unions can deliver an indefinite general strike to paralyse society and prevent a capitalist counter-revolution.

Finally, in order to mount and maintain this level of resistance, the unions—or rank and file organisations breaking free of the bureaucratised unions—must play a key role in forming councils of action in every locality. Such councils will have to draw in delegates from every section of the working class, the unemployed, women, youth, etc.

Like the soviets in 1917, workers' councils are not only necessary to organise the revolutionary struggle, but also to run society without the need for bosses or bureaucrats. Only a government based on the direct democracy of such organisations can be called a real workers' government, that is, the rule of the working class—what Marx and Engels called the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Party

None of this can be achieved by the spontaneous actions of trade unions alone, even revolutionary unions under the democratic control of the rank and file. First, they are too narrow organisations and divided even among themselves by trade, sector or industry. The great majority—including the poorest sections—remain outside the unions.

Second, they are reactive by nature, defensive organisations, liable to being pressured to accept partial solutions, based on their role in the economy. They cannot organically on their own produce a revolutionary leadership that is universal in its appeal and authority and places the interests of the class as a whole first and foremost in every situation.

This is the role of a party, but a completely new kind of party, one that unites all workers, the oppressed and radical intellectuals on the basis of a programme that informs their everyday activity.

Revolutionary ideas have to be brought into and fused with the workers' movement though the politically conscious rank and file.

A revolutionary minority of workers is essential at every stage of the process of transforming the unions. They are needed to organise strikes and the struggle against the bureaucracy. They have always been central to the formation of rank and file movements. And they will be at the forefront of the future battles we face, as the capitalists try to offload their crisis onto our shoulders and workers seek society-wide answers.

Communist workers seek to solve the crisis of our movement by openly struggling for its leadership by means of workers' democracy. While we are not casual visitors to the unions, neither should we flinch from breaking with the bureaucrats who run them and advocating new unions or workplace committees when the struggle demands it, or the workers abandon the reformist unions.

Internationalism

The transformation of the unions is not just a task in one country but an international one, in unity with workers from across the world. Capitalism is a worldwide system and relies on dividing us from each other in national rivalry and eventually in war. It is no good winning improved conditions for privileged workers in the West, if our sisters and brothers are suffering from "our" bosses' exploitation and oppression in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, ends this historic document with the call—'proletarians of all countries, unite!' Sixteen years later he ended the Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association, the First International, with the very same words. The most important British trade unions of the day were affiliated to the IWMA. Indeed, since then, workers' organisations around the world have inscribed these words on their banners.

Internationalism has its roots in the trade unions, too. During

many long and bitter trade union struggles—like the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984–5—appeals have been made and answered for solidarity from workers in other countries in terms both of collections and industrial action (blocking strike-breaking actions by employers).

British unions have also taken protest strike action and mobilised support for workers under attack from dictatorial regimes in other countries. This indicates that there is a spontaneous, natural if you like, tendency within trade unionism, especially when it attains a class viewpoint, to recognise other countries’ workers as their sisters and brothers.

But another quote from the *Manifesto* is far more contentious. This says, ‘the workers have no country and one cannot take from them what they do not have’. This has always proved a ‘scandal and an offence’ to Labour politicians, union officials and even some supposed Marxists. They, like Keir Starmer today, wrap themselves in the Union Jack and dispute with the Tories as to who are the greater patriots. Wars, no matter how rapacious and undemocratic, have always seen the TUC and the Labour Party rally to the colours.

But, like the development of class consciousness in the domestic class struggle, the ruling class and its agents within our movements, trade union and political, do not stand aside from the development of internationalism but work tirelessly to prevent it.

Marx did not imagine that workers were immune from national feelings or prejudices. Nationalism is the central and specific ideology promoted in a thousand ways, by the bourgeoisie, by education, the media, sport, culture. He said:

‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, ie the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are

subject to it.’

However, just like the dominant ideas in the sphere of economics that proclaim the naturalness of capitalist exploitation, those that proclaim nations the common patrimony of all citizens are false and challenged by the glaring inequality and the powerlessness of the individual citizen. Many experiences show the working class that it does not possess the country in which its lives. Therefore, this false consciousness can be transcended, providing it is challenged by an organisation conscious of its task and intervening in the daily struggles that workers wage.

Just as the struggle in every country requires a party uniting all sections of the working class and the oppressed and dedicated to ending capitalists’ exploitation and their political rule, so it needs an international organisation to coordinate and lead the different national struggles, to defend victorious revolutions against the counterrevolution mobilised by the international capitalist class.

There have been four Internationals, created and destroyed during high periods of the class struggle and wars. We need another today, a Fifth International to end capitalist exploitation and all forms of social oppression once and for all.

Unions, transformed to pursue the class struggle by fostering working class solidarity across frontiers, can help lay the foundations of such a new International.

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How the revolution was won: key lessons of tactics and strategy from the Bolshevik experience

About us

CAPITALISM IS in crisis. Inflation, pandemic, climate change and war are the symptoms of a capitalism system in decline. They are prompting resistance everywhere. The leaders of the Labour Party and trade unions have no alternative. Their solutions are not put forward in the interest of what workers need—but in the interest of rescuing this bankrupt system. WORKERS POWER believes there are two key tasks facing revolutionary socialists:

- Put the labour movement on a fighting footing: The pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy—left and right—has made its peace with capitalism. The trade unions should be instruments for class war, not class collaboration. This means the dissolution of the bureaucracy with all Labour and trade union officials subject to regular re-election, the right of recall, and paid the average of those they represent. We advocate workers' control over all strikes and negotiations. In the workplace we fight for factory committees and industrial unions linked to the fight for workers' control of production. To unite working class resistance and lay the basis for workers' democracy, we stand for building of fighting organisations of the working class—councils of action and workers' defence organisations.

- Build a revolutionary communist party and International: The struggle for socialism requires not a reformist Labour party committed to elections but a party of a new type—a combat party of dedicated activists based on a strategy which links today's struggles to the fight for workers' power. It would not only unite the most committed youth and worker militants in Britain but communists across the world in a new International party of world socialist revolution—a Fifth International.

WORKERS POWER is an organisation of revolutionary militants fighting on the basis of a Marxist programme to revolutionise the labour movement and win the best fighters from the anti-racist, women's and environmental movements to the goal of workers' power and international socialism.

The fundamental principles of our programme are:

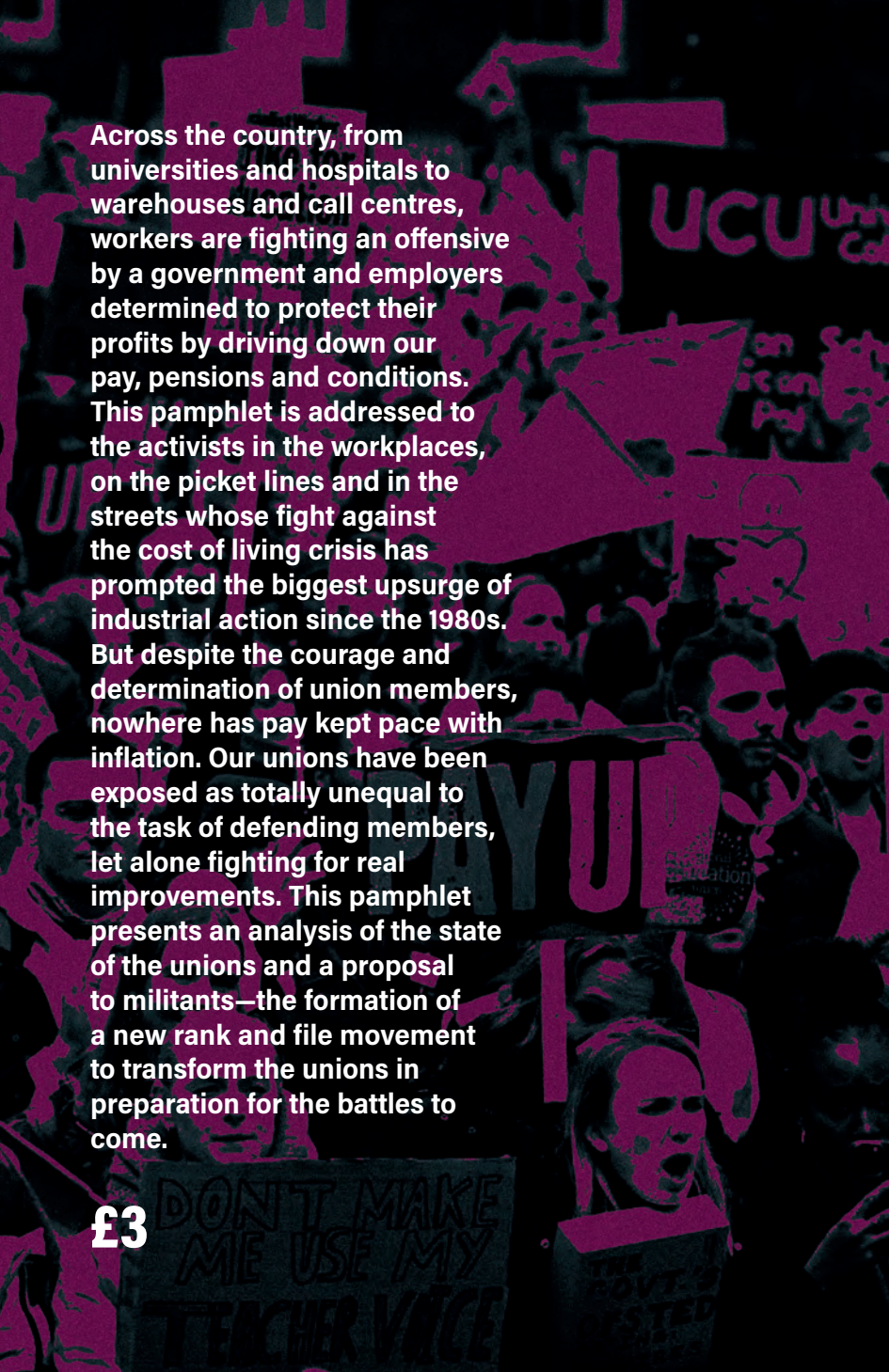
SOCIALISM: Behind the Tories and their billionaire backers lies the capitalist system. It is a system that puts millions on the dole, drives down wages and destroys the environment. We want to destroy that system and replace it with one where production is guided by the needs of the many, not the profits of the few. That means taking the wealth of society; the banks and the major firms, into the hands of the working class and drawing up a democratic plan of production under workers' control.

LIBERATION: Social oppression is an integral feature of class society, systematically oppressing people on the basis of race, age, sex, sexual orientation or disability. Socialism can only be achieved by fusing the workers' struggle against the profit system, with the struggle for liberation by other oppressed layers of society.

INTERNATIONALISM: Imperialism is the most developed stage of capitalism, in which a handful of great powers and their corporations exploit billions and crush all states and peoples who resist them. Imperialism is a world system—the Stalinist idea of 'socialism in one country' is a reactionary utopia which seeks coexistence with imperialism, not its overthrow. A world market creates world politics: that means forging international working class unity in response. No nation which oppresses another can ever be free. That's why we say—British troops out of Ireland and the UK out of Nato. We unconditionally support the right of peoples to resist imperialism, while fighting for revolutionary communist of those struggles.

REVOLUTION: Capitalism cannot be reformed through parliament; it must be overthrown by force. Parliament is the façade which hides the unelected power of the bosses' state—the courts, police, army, and civil service. Faced with a mortal threat to their profits and privileges, the ruling class will use this state to restore their order. To fight for workers' power and a democratically planned economy means revolution: the forcible dispossession of the ruling class through direct action from below, breaking up their apparatus of coercion, taking power into the hands of workers' councils, defended by a workers' militia.

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Across the country, from universities and hospitals to warehouses and call centres, workers are fighting an offensive by a government and employers determined to protect their profits by driving down our pay, pensions and conditions. This pamphlet is addressed to the activists in the workplaces, on the picket lines and in the streets whose fight against the cost of living crisis has prompted the biggest upsurge of industrial action since the 1980s. But despite the courage and determination of union members, nowhere has pay kept pace with inflation. Our unions have been exposed as totally unequal to the task of defending members, let alone fighting for real improvements. This pamphlet presents an analysis of the state of the unions and a proposal to militants—the formation of a new rank and file movement to transform the unions in preparation for the battles to come.

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