

TOWARDS A BETTER UNION



A BLEAK FUTURE

The trade union movement has been extremely important in furthering the desires of workers and improving our living conditions. This movement was vital in raising many workers out of the gruelling fourteen hour days, unsafe working conditions, poverty pay, and general degradation of the industrial revolution.

However, the modern trade union movement seems unable to extend or defend those gains. For many workers, the next decade looks like it will be bleaker than the last, and in the long term we may be slowly sliding back to the soul crushing working conditions of the 19th century. In the face of this, modern unions often seem to lack the ability to effectively stand up for their members. They are also often wracked with problems of internal abuse and a lack of accountability to their membership.

This pamphlet will argue that this failure is inherent to the way that modern unions are structured, and that in order to defend the interests of the working class we need to build a better kind of union with a radically different structure. However, before that, we will explore why the trade union movement developed in the first place and what the purpose of those early unions was.

CAPITALISM

Trade unions developed as a reaction to the growth of capitalism. Before capitalism, most families were broadly self-sufficient, either working the land as peasant farmers or creating things for sale with their own tools as craftspeople. These farmers and craftspeople were not free from exploitation, often owing a portion of their produce to an aristocrat, the church, or a craft guild, but they were often capable of providing for themselves as individuals, families, or communities without the aid of their exploiters.

Capitalism changed this. As technology developed and production became more and more dependent on expensive machinery, it became harder and harder to produce anything efficiently without access to that machinery. In this situation the vast majority of people could no longer be self-sufficient and provide for themselves with the tools they owned, and they had to sell their labour to those rich enough to own the buildings, machines, and other means necessary to produce.

Society became divided between workers in need of employment, and capitalists in need of employees. A worker who could not find an employer faced poverty and starvation, but a capitalist who could not find workers could sell their capital and live off the proceeds, giving capitalists the advantage. The capitalist also had an incentive to use this advantage to exploit workers, as capitalists are only in business to make a profit, and paying lower wages and demanding more work increases profits. This is the basis for the name capitalism; a society in which those who own capital hold power and run the economy in the pursuit of profit.

This was not just a quirk of technological development. The developing nation state also often forced poverty and dependence on many of its subjects; stripping peasants of land

and giving it to the developing capitalist class, suppressing small craft production by law, and policing the developing working class. A population dependent on their masters to survive did not just enable exploitation by capitalists, but also enabled tighter control by governments.

UNIONS

With a capitalist class driven to exploit the workers, and the state siding with capitalists over the working class, workers needed their own organisations to fight for their interests. And while an individual worker might be replaceable, any workplace could be ground to a halt if workers resisted collectively. This gave rise to the first unions and the use of strikes as methods to fight for workers' interests against a ruling class that saw them only as tools.

As unions grew, they also realised that what was true of the workplace was also true of the economy more broadly; one worker or workplace may be expendable within the economy, but a united working class could bring the entire economy to a halt, and not only put pressure on individual capitalists, but on the capitalist class as a whole and even the nation state.

This was the basis of trade union movement; the use of the collective economic power of the working class to fight for better lives for workers regardless of what capitalists or politicians wanted. However, the modern trade union movement has drifted far from this idea.

INDEPENDENCE

The original unions were not legally recognised. While this caused many problems for them, it also meant that they were independent from both the state and capitalism, relying on their working class membership for their power. They had to serve working class interests or they would lose their only base of support.

This is not the case for the modern trade union movement. Unions have become legal entities, and with this legal recognition the union movement has integrated itself into the state and social democratic political parties like Labour. However, that state has never reliably been on the side of the working class and even left wing governments often suppress strikes, as working class radicalism is as much a threat to state power as it is to capitalist profits.

This has put unions in an awkward position where they must serve two masters. Some of their power comes from the support of the workers, but some of it comes from recognition by the state. Many of the most disruptive tactics that a union might use to win disputes are currently illegal, and unions will be held liable if their members use those tactics. A legally recognised union must then police the militancy of its own members in order to maintain itself, even if this is against the interests of its membership. Unions have become an enforcer of government policy instead of an instrument of working class interests.

HIERARCHY

Trade unions could make such compromises with the state because their internal structure never really represented all of their membership. While most unions make a show of being democratic, that democracy means that, at best, a union can only ever represent a majority of its membership and can ignore the desires of minorities within the union.

Modern trade unions are also universally run from the top down, even if those at the top are elected. This means that the membership only has limited control over the leadership. Workers may elect them, but outside of elections the union leadership can do whatever it wants, and the membership has a little to no ability to veto the decisions of their leaders.

This leads to a situation in which trade unions do not represent their membership, but instead recreate the relationship between workers and bosses in a workplace hierarchy where the boss has the last say. The workers within a trade union do not collectively decide how to use their collective power in pursuit of their shared interests, but give up that power to union leaders who often use it to serve their own interests.

VISION

The development of a reliance on state recognition and an internal hierarchy means that the modern trade union movement does not reliably serve working class interests. Often unions suppress militancy and initiative amongst their own membership, allow people higher up in the union hierarchy to abuse their position, negotiate compromises with employers without a mandate from the workers they claim to represent, and act to preserve their relationship with the state and the stability of their internal hierarchy over taking action to improve the lives of workers.

But this failure has far wider consequences beyond practical day to day struggle. It also makes the trade union movement incapable of developing a consistent and useful vision of what a better society for workers might look like, as it cannot fully embrace the interests of the working class. When the state cares about its own power and the profits of capitalists over the needs of workers, which is the normal state of affairs even under left wing governments, the trade union movement suffers from conflicting loyalties, both between its members and the state, and between its rank and file membership and its internal hierarchy.

Mainstream unions may have been able to balance these competing interests when the system of state and capital was stable and growing and could afford to pay off the unions and the working class while maintaining profits. But, as that system starts to fail and become unstable, those old compromises fail with it, and unions are so firmly integrated into that system that they cannot advocate for anything that might destabilise it, no matter how much harm this failure causes the working class. Conflicting loyalties have left unions paralysed.

Compared to the early unions, which were often hotbeds of working class intellectual development and critique of state and capital, and helped develop radical ideas like socialism and communism, the modern union movement is in a sorry state. Modern trade unions are often deeply conservative organisations, incapable to radical change even when a radically changing world demands it.

BEYOND THE WORKPLACE

This lack of a broader vision has also isolated most unions from other social movements. Early unions were not only integrated into a broader working class movement of mutual aid, education, self-help, and struggles by renters and the unemployed, but also attempted to coordinate internationally in response to the increasingly global nature of capitalism.

The core insight that led workers to form unions, that workers had strength together and that solidarity was our best weapon against capitalism, has been lost. Most unions do not attempt to build networks or alliances with other workers' movements or even other unions. Partly this is because the legal framework they have accepted often prevents things like solidarity strikes in support of other organisations, and partly this is because the union hierarchy is more interested in its own power within the union than building the collective power of the working class in the global economy.

The result of all this is that most modern trade unions are more like insurance companies than grass roots workers' organisations. They often have very little rank and file involvement

and treat rank and file initiative as a threat to the internal hierarchy. They have no coherent strategy to advance working class interests and they have no theory that might provide a basis for such a strategy. They are often more interested in controlling and suppressing any militant impulses among workers than helping us to fight for what we want. The trade union movement has failed as an engine of working class interests, and that failure is based in their adoption of internal hierarchy and their abandonment of independence.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

None of this criticism is a rejection of the idea that workers should organise amongst ourselves in order to further our own interests. However, such organisation needs to be completely independent of the state or any other institution which might have conflicting interests with the working class. Our unions must serve our collective interests as workers first and foremost, otherwise they become a mechanism for controlling us.

We also need to avoid creating a hierarchy in which some people sit at the top the organisation and dictate to everyone else what to do. We need to build new unions on mutual agreement and mutual consensus so that no one can be ignored. We need to build them from the bottom up, with each local branch running its own affairs on the basis of the ideas and desires of its rank and file, instead of just empowering a new class of bosses over the rank and file.

However, we also need to look beyond the local branch and the individual workplace. We need to develop solidarity not just in the workplace, but between workplaces, and between workplace struggles and broader social struggles. The working class is strongest when we act together, and that principle applies from the individual workplace all the way up to the global economy.

We must also not be scared of the implications of our own power as the working class. The capitalist class and the state do whatever they can get away with, while we often tie one hand behind our backs and seek some kind of mythical “fair compromise”. The working class, if united and organised, could run the entire economy in our own interests without capitalists or politicians. This would be a genuine worker revolution instead of simply changing one set of bosses for another. Any organisation that genuinely represents working class interests should constantly push towards a worker controlled society, and develop the collective power of the working class until such a society can be achieved.

This approach to unions has a name. Because it is critical of hierarchies and all other forms of rulership and seeks to organise without resorting to that rulership, it is anarchist, which literally means without (an) rulers (archy). Because it seeks to build working class power through organisations in the workplace and the community, it is syndicalist, which comes from the French word for a workers’ union. Together, these two ideas form Anarcho-Syndicalism.



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