



Rank and File movements: the great debate

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There is renewed debate about rank and file trade unionism among sections of the far left at the moment. Here we publish a guest article by Tim Nelson and a reply by Andrew Bebbington, both members of the International Socialist Network (ISN). Last in the series is a reply from Jeremy Dewar of Workers Power giving our thoughts on the issues raised and analysis of meaning of the rank and file movement.

Broad Lefts or Rank and File

Tim Nelson

There is currently a debate within the socialist movement about the trade union bureaucracy. The recent defeat at Grangemouth and the subsequent capitulation by several union leaders in calling off strike action are just the latest in a series of examples of trade union leaderships putting the brakes on any fightback against the bosses and their austerity programme.

These defeats have also called into question the strategy of much of the left. Many on the left have, for a long period, pursued a strategy of aligning themselves with the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy in the hope of pulling them towards more militant action. I would argue that the past two years of retreats have proved this strategy to be a failure, and that the revolutionary left needs to make a dramatic shift in orientation towards rank and file members of the unions.

We need to concentrate, wherever we can, on rebuilding workplace organisation and networks of rank and file activists, in the hope of building a movement from below which will have the potential for the militant activity necessary to fight and win.

The defeat at Grangemouth was a stunning blow for the trade union movement. Grangemouth Oil Refinery is one of the best organised workplaces in the country. Unite, which organises its workforce, is the largest union in Britain, led by General Secretary Len McCluskey, a left-wing former official.

McCluskey's supporters argue that the Grangemouth deal was the best available under the circumstances, and congratulate Unite for stopping the closure of the plant. Others accept that it was a defeat, but maintain that it was down to the lack of a 'mood to fight' among rank and file workers at Grangemouth, and that while criticisms of the Unite bureaucracy may be valid, they do not answer the question why a supposedly significant and highly organised workplace capitulated.

I would argue that the very nature of the relationship between the union bureaucracy and the rank and file is what brought about this defeat, and it is an example of the role the bureaucracy is currently playing throughout the movement. The only solution to this state of affairs is the rebuilding of a rank and file movement through workplace organisation, irrespective of how difficult this task may seem.

Communist Party

This is the latest stage in a long running debate about the nature of the unions, and the strategy that socialists should employ within them. It can be traced, like most debates on the left, back to the Communist Party of Great Britain. A

revolutionary party founded in 1920, by 1926 the Communist Party had roughly 5,000 members, and asserted great influence within the unions, particularly through the National Minority Movement, which aimed to organise the militant minority within the movement, and which involved a number of key officials and leaders.

The role of the Communist Party would be put to the test by the 1926 General Strike. This was without doubt the greatest event of British trade union and working class militancy in the last century. From 3 to 13 May 1926, 1.7 million workers were out on strike in support of the Miners' Federation. Despite high levels of support and militancy, after those ten days the TUC leadership called off the strike and capitulated to the government, leaving the miners to fight alone.

Leon Trotsky criticised the line taken by the Communist Party at this time. Their aim was to use the Minority Movement to relate to and influence the left wing union leaders in order to pull the movement towards more militant action. Trotsky argued that while the split between left- and right-wing bureaucrats was real, the main division in the workers' movement was between the bureaucracy and the rank and file. The left of the bureaucracy was no more capable of leading the strike to victory than the right:

?In the British labour movement, international questions have always been the line of least resistance to the leaders. Regarding international matters as a kind of safety-valve for the radical moods of the masses, these esteemed leaders are prepared to a certain extent even to bow to a revolution (elsewhere) so that they can take still more revenge on questions of the internal class struggle. The left faction of the General Council is distinguished by its complete ideological shapelessness and is therefore incapable of organisationally assuming the leadership of the trade union movement.?

Union bureaucrats are privileged compared to their members. They owe their position to the workers, whose membership and activity maintain the union apparatus, but are also put at risk by increased militancy. The bureaucracy's role is to mediate between the workers and the bosses.

When workers engage in direct conflict with the bosses, they undermine this role. Their increased militancy leads them to organise themselves and generate their own leaderships and organisation, which threaten the bureaucracy's position. Bureaucrats also fear that increased militancy could lead to the smashing of the union apparatus.

These social factors override any division there may be between the left and right of the bureaucracy; even the most left wing official relies on the passivity of the working class for their position. Trotsky's position was proven correct when the TUC called off the General Strike. Not only did the right wing of the bureaucracy sell out the strike, but they also took the left wing with them, leaving the miners to fight on.

Broad lefts

The experience of the 1926 General Strike and Trotsky's arguments have had a major influence on the perspectives of the far left ever since. As the Soviet Union degenerated, the Communist Parties pursued an increasingly bureaucratised approach to the trade union movement. The aim was to build 'broad lefts' with the left of the bureaucracy, with an eye to capturing positions in the union apparatus and influencing leaders.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the International Socialists rejected this approach. They argued that rather than orientate towards the bureaucracy through broad lefts, revolutionary socialists should concentrate on building organisations among the rank and file, and that the main focus of activity should be the workplace.

As Marxists we argue that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself, and therefore our main focus should be on encouraging its self-activity. Broad left blocs, orientating towards the bureaucracy and concentrating on winning positions within the unions substitute the activity of the few for that of the working class.

In recent years we have seen some on the far left shift away from the focus on the rank and file towards a 'broad left' approach. In some unions, such as the PCS, UCU, NUT and Unite, 'united left' formations have in fact become the

dominant forces, taking control of the leadership.

While left-wing leaderships are of course preferable to right-wing ones, these leaderships have recently proven that they are just as willing to hold back struggle as the right. Following the massive public sector pensions strikes on 30 November 2011 the union bureaucracy put a halt to any further action, including the left wing leaderships of the civil service and education unions.

The capitulation of the Unite leadership over Grangemouth further proved the limitations of left wing union leaders, as did the surrender of the CWU over the privatisation of Royal Mail. After the defeats of the 1980s and the subsequent twenty years of low-level struggle, the bureaucracy has come to dominate the trade union movement.

Rank and file participation in the unions is low, and action independent of the bureaucracy is rare. These objective factors mean that the revolutionary left seeking to initiate a new rank and file movement has only small forces available to it at the moment.

We cannot, however, continue with the strategy of tying ourselves to the bureaucracy through the united lefts, and relying on them to take the struggle forward. There are signs of embryonic rank and file organisations being formed.

In the Unite general secretary election, Jerry Hicks won 80,000 votes as a rank and file candidate, and a new campaign, Unite Grassroots Rank and File, has been launched. The Sparks won a stunning victory in 2012, and, despite recent setbacks, postal workers continue to prove that they are capable of wildcat strikes independent of the CWU bureaucracy.

The role of revolutionaries should be to concentrate on encouraging such developments, and initiating them where we can. Members of Workers Power, the IS Network and other revolutionary organisations need to work together to maximise the opportunities to do so.

Bureaucrats, resistance networks and struggle in post-industrial capitalism: a further comment on 'rank and file' strategies

Andrew Bebbington

Tim Nelson's piece, 'Broad Lefts or Rank and File',¹ presents an excellent case against the all-too-common practice of treating the election of left-wing union officials as the main aim of socialist workplace militancy. The defeats since 2011 and the crisis in the SWP have given many cause to reconsider the alternatives to that, and to look towards new strategies for 'trade unionism from below'. Nonetheless, it may be that we are as far away as ever from that revolutionary Philosopher's Stone: an insurgent rank and file workers' movement.

The use of the term 'rank and file' itself raises the risk of starting from where we want the working class to be, and disregarding where it is now. The sparks' and Unite successes that Tim highlights are real, but aside from these and a few other isolated bright spots, workers as a whole are in a state even more 'disorganised and disarticulated' than at the time of Gregor Gall's gloomy diagnosis (2005).² For present purposes Julian Alford's survey of the continuing decline of shop stewardism³ raises an especially sharp question of whether the organisational basis for widespread rank and file militancy exists in contemporary Britain. So, what can socialists be doing to re-create the kinds of resilient networks that make possible actions independent of the bureaucracy? And can working with and within the bureaucracy play a part of this?

Post-Fordism and class de-composition/recomposition

Capitalism, famously, creates its own gravediggers. But it doesn't make them just as we please. This is captured in the important, dynamic operaist concept of class composition --> decomposition --> recomposition.⁴ In the classic industrial 'Fordist' period up to the 1970s, well-organised (and usually, though not always, male) workers could bring production to a grinding halt, at enormous cost to capitalist profitability. This type of militant class solidarity has been progressively eroded since then by capital's reduced reliance on a mass industrial, surplus-value producing workforce in Britain. Instead, the majority of workers that British socialists are likely to have contact with play the role of either

reproducing the system, or circulating commodities,⁵ in activity such as health, education, retail store work and social care. To compound matters the much-discussed mobility of industrial capital isn't just an ideological tool to demoralise workers (though it is that too, and highly effective with it); it is an effective feature of the financial and transportational technologies available to the bosses in post-Fordist capitalism. The terms of struggle within national borders are consequently altered substantially, against labour.

Whether or not system-reproductive/commodity-circulatory labour is undertaken directly for profit or by a partially decommodified welfare state matters enormously to the creators and users of the services but less so for assessing union strategies. The key aspect, as far as contestation activity goes, is that the costs to capital of a short-run strike in a small number of such workplaces are much lower. Factory workplace strikes generally cause disruption to the entire supply chain and force a major break in the surplus-value flow that capital needs for profit making.

Social work, school and housing management strikes, on the other hand, need to be at a vastly greater scale to have an equivalent disruptive effect, and furthermore create the possibility for intra-class antagonisms (as the use-values they normally produce are unavailable to workers ? even in the withdrawal of childcare functions played by schools, the difficulties are generally borne by employees rather than employers).

Similarly the vast network of outlets owned by the big supermarkets mean that action has to be huge to have an effect. The upshot of this rather schematic sketch, which covers a broad shift if not every single sectional case, is dramatic. The dynamic of struggle is much less explosive, because it is not possible to ?generalise the particular? in the hoped-for fashion; rather, success in both defence and offence depends on the action being more than ?particular? in the first place.

In spite of this unhappy analysis, I'm not in any way advocating a return to Marxism Today-style defeatist reliance on the great and good to hand down a few crumbs from the top table. But I don't think the pre-Thatcher concepts can guide our practice sufficiently on their own now ? if they ever could. Some important (and widespread) struggles have been under way in the US in recent years that illustrate the new possibilities for ?reorganising and rearticulating? the working class as it is currently constituted. Of course, there is a baleful tradition amongst Marxists of globe hopping around diverse forms of resistance that have little relevance to the matter at hand but lend a veneer of practical credibility to an argument. Hopefully, this isn't such a case: the US exhibits many comparable features to British capitalism as outlined above.

Social movement unionism

The most immediately impressive example of doing militancy in a different way is the inspirational, if partial, victories won by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) against a viciously neoliberalising city administration.⁶ The now iconic red T-shirts united teachers, paraprofessionals and parents in protests against attacks on jobs, conditions and quality of education.

Strikes (i.e. the ?war of manoeuvre?) were certainly an essential element in the struggle, but so was the prior organising work amongst parents and Chicago's working class communities that gave the strikes their impact (the ?war of position?). There was also an impressive movement against the long-term bureaucratic misleadership of the CTU, another necessary but not sufficient condition for what happened.

Fast food strikes Dec 2013 ⁷

Mobilisation in the historically poorly organised fast food and supermarket workforces represents another huge potential breakthrough in the US. Like the CTU action, it is often led by women and sometimes related explicitly to feminist struggles, an aspect whose implications are unfortunately beyond the present scope.⁸ There have not been any dramatic victories but instead steady progress which has so far culminated in huge strike-protests on the post-Thanksgiving annual extreme shopping event 'Black Friday'.⁹ These have been driven by community activist groups, even including some churches, and a powerful focus on the demand for a \$15 per hour minimum wage, alongside basic

workplace rights.

The strikes consequently have had a far greater discursive and counter-hegemonic impact to compensate for their reduced disruptive effect. What is especially interesting in this context is the contradictory, and not simply negative, role that the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) bureaucracy has played.¹⁰ SEIU officials have adopted a conscious strategy of radically extending the attempts to organise new workplaces. It seems that this has been applied at times in a top-down manner, which has hampered and derailed some of its own achievements. But without that bureaucratic initiative, the real gains made would have been impossible.

Smaller though significant victories have been won in London in recent years: many lessons remain to be learned on worker-community (or student and service user) interdependency of organisation from the Tower Hamlets ESOL strike¹¹ and the University of London cleaners? 3Cosas IWGB breakaway from a dreadful Unison branch.¹² All these examples cut across the rank and file/bureaucracy divide, but only in the IWGB case was it the predominant characteristic of the fight.¹³

Scale and labour geography

Much Marxist praxis on trade unionism has a tendency to flatten out and de-spatialise the struggles of labour against capital.

Disembodied workplaces and unions are analysed without integrating geography as a key dimension of struggle. From the neighbourhood organisation to international financial flows, scale makes a crucial difference to the kinds of strategies that socialists can expect to be effective.¹⁴ In many cases, workers find ourselves dependent on the union bureaucracies as we try and recompose the possibilities of struggle, and will not necessarily run up immediately against the limits of bureaucrats? integration into capitalism.¹⁵

This most certainly does not mean sitting tight in the comfortable ?broad left? routines and waiting for things to pick up. Sometimes it will mean leaving the whole union behind if it?s degenerated beyond use, as 3Cosas campaigners discovered. But at others it raises the possibility of trying to make use of ?broad left? structures to bring far wider forces into a class reconstruction project ? organising, expanding and strengthening networks on levels from the neighbourhood to international, to match capital?s multi-scalar assault. We need to build on the insights from the rank-and-fileist critique, and interrogate its shortcomings to develop new forms of practice from the lessons of the old.

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<http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/o...> [1]

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4 See e.g. Sergio Bologna, Review of 'Storming Heaven'

5 These two spheres have many differences but present similar disadvantages to industrial-style union strategies. It is true that UK car production is apparently approaching an all-time high, but with a far lower need for labour in the process. The Guardian, UK car production will surpass record 1970s level by 2017, says trade body

6 Monthly Review, Beating the Neoliberal Blame Game: Teacher and Parent Solidarity and the 2012 Chicago Teachers? Strike; Creating a New Model of a Social Union: CORE and the Chicago Teachers Union

7 International Business Times, Fast-Food Worker Strikes: These are the 100+ Cities Where Fast-Food Workers Will Walk Off the Job Today

8 The Nation, How the Rise of Women in Labor Could Save the Movement, has some interesting background on feminist trade unionism in the US and the CTU, although not Walmart/fast food.

9 Salon, Massive Black Friday strike and arrests planned, as workers defy Wal-Mart; Thousands Strike Fast Food, Picketing and Occupying

10 There is a particularly insightful exposition of this aspect in Arun Gupta's The Walmart Working Class, Socialist Register 2014, The Walmart working class

11 London School Students' Union Stunning victory for Tower Hamlets lecturers after a month's strike to save jobs

12 Harry Stopes, Not a Recognised Union

13 Sussex Uni, Global value chains, industrial change and regional development

14 See, for example, From a Geography of Labor to a Labor Geography: Labor's Spatial Fix and the Geography of Capitalism, Antipode Volume 29, Issue 1, pages 1-31, January 1997.

15 This is inevitable only at a very high level of abstraction, and too overdetermined to explain any conjuncture on its own. The creation and reproduction of a bureaucracy in workers' organisations is a fascinating question in its own right, in need of further exposition elsewhere.

In Workers Power 376, Tim Nelson of the International Socialist Network (ISN) wrote an article in favour of building a rank and file movement. Andrew Bebbington, also of the ISN, has provided a thought-provoking response. This is just the sort of debate on vital questions of revolutionary programme and tactics that we need. Jeremy Dewar takes up some of his points.

What do changes in working class composition mean for rank and file strategy?

Andrew Bebbington makes some very interesting points in his article, 'Bureaucrats, resistance networks and struggle in post-industrial capitalism: a further comment on 'rank and file' strategies'. While I would agree with a number of his positions, his overall conclusions are, in my view, flawed.

Working class today

Andrew characterises 21st century British capitalism as 'post-industrial', counterposing it to 'the classic industrial 'Fordist' period up to the 1970s [where] workers could bring production to a grinding halt, at enormous cost to capitalist profitability'. The key to their victories is said to have been 'a mass industrial, surplus-value producing workforce in Britain'.

By contrast, most workers in Britain today are either employed in 'reproducing the system' or in 'circulating commodities', in 'health, education, retail store work and social care'. An additional problem is the bosses' ability to export production to countries with cheaper labour.

These trends are, of course, real and have been analysed many times before. However, industrial workers have never formed a majority of the British working class. Their highpoint was at 38 per cent of the workforce in the 1850s and 1860s, and service workers have outnumbered them since the 1870s. What is incontestable is the decline of British manufacturing industry, which has steadily reduced the number of industrial workers by about 70 per cent since the 1960s to just one in ten workers today.

Other factors that compound these changes, not mentioned in Andrew's article, are the growth of part-time workers (up from 5.1 million to 6.7 million since 1992), temporary workers (up from 1.3 million to 1.6 million) and self-employed and in reality 'self-exploiting' workers (up from 3.5 million to 4.4 million). The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills estimates that about 2.3 million workers are in 'precarious employment', that is low-pay, low-status, low-security jobs, of which one million are on the infamous zero hours contracts.

Unionisation

Socialists and trade unionists need to turn to these workers if they are to revive the unions. But who will make this turn? Despite isolated examples of trade union officials (the 'bureaucracy') providing resources, like the fast food workers' campaigns underway in the USA and now here, it is rank and file trade unionists that staff the campaigns and take the risks.

The massive leap in trade union membership in Britain during the 1970s was not simply down to huge, set-piece strikes by miners, car workers and builders. It was also because these 'big battalions' inspired millions of unorganised workers to join unions and take action themselves. These were often women workers, often acting without regard to 'officialdom', and adopting the most militant tactics, like the flying picket, that they had seen their more male, more secure and better paid counterparts in more traditional industries use to good effect.

It was due also to an informal and only partly 'organised' shop stewards' movement, inspired by syndicalists and by members of the Communist Party, and also of the three or four main far left groups. This helped to spread the shop steward model, dominant amongst production line workers, to white collar and public sector workers - teachers, civil servants, health workers, town hall staff - in the process driving union membership up to over 13 million, twice its present level.

Thus the great union membership surge of that decade was not due to the 'left' union leaders, but primarily to what Labour leader Harold Wilson once infamously denounced as a 'tightly knit group of politically motivated men' (and women!). Analogous conditions explain other great 'forward marches by labour' in the 1890s, the 1910s and 1920s, etc.

Like so many tasks facing the working class in its historic struggle to overthrow capitalism, we face this one again and again. Should we cede leadership of it this time around to the well-paid and barely accountable officials of the Service Employees International Union in the USA, or Unite the Union in the UK? Or should we take it on ourselves, like our parents' and grandparents' generations before us?

The Justice for Janitors and Cleaners campaigns of the 2000s notoriously made a dramatic splash and then quickly withered, largely because the workers were organised bureaucratically and undemocratically, their demands ignored once they were paying union dues. That is what we must avoid this time around. Unionisation drives must go on to educate and organise the new sectors in rank and file trade unionism, in militant tactics and crucially, in the struggle for their independence from the bureaucracy.

Workers' strength

Andrew's article associates the decline of manufacturing with a diminution of the ability of strikes to hit the capitalists. He claims that, when it comes to service workers or the public sector, 'dynamic of struggle is much less explosive, because it is not possible to 'generalise the particular' in the hoped-for fashion'. Is this true though?

There may be fewer manufacturing and other 'productive' workers than before, but they still play a crucial role in generating profits for UK plc. Grangemouth's workers, for example, could have cut off the oil, gas and petrol supply for Scotland, the northeast of Ireland and northern England, even though there were only 1,370 of them (plus 2,000 contractors). That they didn't was because they were poorly led, not because they lacked the capacity.

There are still 2.6 million factory workers in the UK, about the same number as the precarious. To them we can add 2.1 million construction workers, 4.9 million in hotel, retail and repair, 1.5 million in transport and storage, 2 million in accommodation and food services, and 1.1 million in financial services (all figures from the Office for National Statistics).

And it is wrong to suggest that workers involved in the 'circulation of commodities' do not produce surplus value, let alone profit. To be realised as profit, surplus value must first be transferred from the sphere of production to that of exchange. How much would a pint of milk cost if you had to travel to a dairy farm in the country to buy it, instead of having an army of workers to deliver it to your high street? Capitalists derive a profit from this service; and interrupting this chain by withdrawing one's labour interrupts their profit making.

It is also mistake to downplay the effect on capital of strikes by teachers, hospital staff and transport workers. They are all essential to the reproduction of labour power, training future generations of workers, getting them to the workplace on time, ensuring they are healthy and educated enough to work. If they didn't perform a vital role, why would the

capitalists deduct so much from their profits through their state to keep them functioning? These workers too can force a 'break in the surplus-value flow that capital needs for profit-making' in a way comparable to the factory workers that Andrew agrees already do.

Public sector workers can also become a focal point for broader anticapitalist struggle. The fact that up to 2 million public service workers struck on 30 November 2011 should not be completely overshadowed by their leaders' dismal betrayals in the days, weeks and months that followed. Their strike was hugely popular and gave hope to millions beyond, linking up with the Sparks, students and the Occupy movement.

If this strike had been called on a more overtly political basis against austerity, poverty and job cuts, it could have mobilised far beyond its own ranks. If it had lasted more than a day, it could have slipped the control of the officials. In short, it could have brought down the government. The problem was not the nature of the striking workers' function within capitalism, but of their misleadership; of their leaders' failure to turn this enormous potential into actual strength in struggle.

This is not to say that a ready-made vanguard of trade union militants already exists, held back only by a thin layer of bureaucrats. The low level of union membership (26 per cent), especially in the private sector (14 per cent) is one reason, as is the low level of strikes (363,000 days lost last year, and just 198,000 in 2012). At least as important is the weakening of the trade unions inside the Labour Party, of the Labour Party as however limited a vehicle for working class political demands, and finally of the far left.

A vanguard has to be politically conscious of its role within the working class, not just of its industrial strength. To be victorious, it has to fuse its struggle with that of a revolutionary party. And as Andrew says, 'We are as far away as ever' from this. But if it would be wrong to equate the trade union militants with the political vanguard, equally we cannot get away from the fact that the 6.2 million union members in Britain today are a key starting point for that fusion 'and that the trade union bureaucracy is a major obstacle in our path.

The IS tradition

Andrew argues 'the pre-Thatcher concepts' of the rank and file movement cannot 'guide our practice sufficiently on their own now ' if they ever could'. He counterposes a mixture of Broad Leftism, a rank and file approach where appropriate, working with the officials where possible and 'social movement unionism'. That Andrew believes that this is an argument against the idea of a rank and file movement says much about the IS tradition's legacy in that sphere.

In the late 1970s, Tony Cliff's International Socialists (IS) took what Lenin would have called an economistic line when it came to work in the trade unions. They argued strongly against raising political slogans in the National Rank and File Movement, claiming that it would frighten off industrial militants. And this was despite all their banging on about building the revolutionary party, which in practice just meant joining IS and its successor, the Socialist Workers Party. The idea of involving the wider working class ('the community?') at the heart of a strike movement, in debating its direction and in prosecuting its actions, was anathema to Cliffism and the IS tradition.

But it was not anathema to the Marxist tradition. The National Minority Movement, which was born in a period of retreat in the early 1920s, prepared trade union militants for an explicitly political general strike, led by political bodies in the form of councils of action, and warned that the official leadership of the TUC would have to be removed to achieve victory.

What does this mean today? It means that even in a period of retreat, and especially when activists are questioning how we got into this state, it is still both possible and necessary to agitate for and to take the first steps towards an independent rank and file movement. Independence of the union bureaucracy, an agency of compromise with capitalism within the workers' movement, is essential to achieving class independence and fighting class unity. As such it can contribute mightily to solving the problem of the absence of a revolutionary party: that is, its emergence is one very important step towards one.

As with the young Communist Party of the 1920s, this will involve working with the officials wherever possible, and without them where necessary, but always warning that they have interests distinct from their members, and therefore that they will buckle at the vital moment.

Most importantly, the trade unions must be won to a political programme for the overthrow of the system, and not just for reforms. They must become fighting organisations for the whole class, not just of a section of workers. And for this reason the rank and file need to dissolve the bureaucracy and run the unions democratically, with no privileges for the officials.

First, let's deal with some misconceptions about or objections to the rank and file movement.

The rank and file movement stands aside from the struggle to get left-wing officials elected to replace right-wingers.

This is simply not true. The National Minority Movement recruited hundreds of militant miners in its campaign for the election of AJ Cook, for example. Jerry Hicks recently won 80,000 votes ? 36 per cent of the total cast ? when he stood on a rank and file ticket, making it clear that the real gain from his campaign would be the furthering of the cause of a rank and file movement. The difference between these campaigns and the Broad Lefts is that we do not see the election of lefts as an end in itself.

Rank and file movements do not work with officials.

Again, not true. The famous Clyde Workers Committee slogan starts, 'We will support the officials just so long as they represent the workers?'. Trotsky's own formulation, consciously echoing the Clyde shop stewards, was, 'With the masses ? always; with the vacillating leaders ? sometimes, but only so long as they stand at the head of the masses?'. Characteristically, perhaps, Trotsky includes the idea that the 'vacillators' may not always be 'at the head?'. .

The rank and file movement aims to split the unions.

The right wing and Stalinists have marshalled this argument ever since the rank and file has organised in any shape or form; and it is often used against the more active Broad Lefts. But it is not true; the rank and file movement seeks to transform the unions into class struggle bodies, committed to a socialist goal, by means of dissolving the union bureaucracy and instilling workers' democracy.

Trotsky supplements this with an important caveat that revolutionaries should 'create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and if necessary not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus?'. .

The key word here is the last one: 'apparatus?'. Trotsky is not talking about splitting the unions or breaking with the workers, but of a break with the bureaucracy.

In recent years, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW-UK) and the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB ? a split from the IWW-UK) have advocated that workers leave the mainstream unions because the bureaucracy is too powerful an obstacle to remove. They have enjoyed some minor successes, particularly among fast food workers, e.g. Pizza Hut, and cleaners in universities and hospitals.

Insofar as these workers have refused to be cowed by their bureaucratic leaders and have fought bravely against the bosses, this is excellent. But as a strategy for transforming the trade union movement, they are worse than useless; they are a distraction. Take, for example, the recruitment of Silverline bus drivers to the IWGB in northwest London.

They joined the independent union because Unite full-timer Wayne King delayed and blocked the holding of a ballot for strike action against new contracts. This isolated one of the more militant garages right at the moment when there was a campaign to force through the ballot and remove King from his post, i.e. it cut across and weakened a larger struggle for union democracy and militancy.

On a larger scale, the independent unions cannot realistically hope to simply 'go round' the bureaucracy. This classic

syndicalist fear of the bureaucracy cannot succeed. If the new unions remain small, then millions of workers will remain trapped in the mainstream unions ? this is of course by far the more likely scenario because the bureaucratic caste is far too wily to allow their position become superseded by refusing every significant demand for action.

However, should the independents grow, recruiting millions, then they too will develop a bureaucracy ? and with it the tendency towards compromise with capital ? just as the mass syndicalist unions of France and Spain in the early 20th Century did despite their militancy. As Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Programme:

?Sectarian attempts to build or preserve ?revolutionary? unions, as a second edition of the party, signify in actuality the renouncing of the struggle for leadership of the working class.?

Rank and file movements supposedly ignore the need to organise in the community.

Again this is a misunderstanding. Despite the tendency, particularly among economists and syndicalists to reduce the class struggle to the trade union struggle, a rank and file movement would in fact turn towards the wider community in support of their struggle against the bosses and the bureaucracy. A recent strike that has been often quoted in support of community unionism against a rank and file approach is the Chicago teachers? strike. But as Micah Uetricht points out in his excellent account of the dispute, ?Strike for America?, this went hand-in-hand with an organised struggle against the existing bureaucratic leadership of the union.

While communists advocate and support initiatives for community unionism, it is not an anti-bureaucratic phenomenon per se. One only has to look at Andy Stern?s Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to see how this bureaucratic leadership launched the Justice for Janitors campaign in the Latino community, recruited thousands of cleaners, only to dump them in huge, geographic branches, where they were denied any rights to make their own policies and take their own initiatives.

Predictably, this then became a revolving door, where many members left the union or their improved conditions were quickly undermined. In short, we support community unionism ? and try to raise it to the level of councils of action ? but it has to be accompanied with the building of a rank and file movement to achieve its full potential.

Finally, it is necessary to address the main argument of the far left groups:

Rank and file movements are where we want to get to, but the objective material, in the form of a shop stewards movement or a layer of activists involved in a series of strikes, is not there; we need to rebuild union and shopfloor strength first, then go onto building a rank and file movement.

This is the reasoning not just of the main far left groups, the SWP and SP, but also Socialist Resistance, British section of the Fourth international.

This is wrong on a number of levels. First, all rank and file movements have begun with a small nucleus of worker militants beginning to organise inside the unions, i.e. before the material basis for one is fully ripe. The CPGB began their campaign for a National Minority Movement in conditions of defeat and retreat, when union membership had suffered a swift haemorrhaging of millions of members after ?Black Friday?. Their slogan was ?Back to the unions ? stop the retreat?: a slogan that would fit today?s conditions perfectly. If they had not done so, it is likely that the 1926 General Strike might not have occurred and the rout of the unions would have been even quicker and more complete.

Second, a rank and file movement would hasten the rebuilding of shopfloor strength and union density, would speed up the recruitment of new members in non-unionised workplaces and sectors, not slow it down, as workers are attracted to fighting unions. Third, what else should militants who understand the need for an independent rank and file movement do instead? There is no answer to this except? to talk to the ones and twos about joining the party, propagandise about socialism in the abstract or win workers to supporting other campaigns, like Stop the War or Unite Against Fascism. This is in fact what the SWP?s current tactic for political trade unionism amounts to . It is a million miles away from the Marxist conception of winning the mass trade unions to revolutionary socialism and the party.

Fourth, also put forward as an objection by Callinicos, Davidson and co. is the notion that any attempt to build a rank and file movement today will result in it being still-born, which is held as being a worse fate than not having tried at all. Will a new campaign for a rank and file movement today succeed or fail? We honestly do not know ? nor can anyone. History is littered not only with failed attempts at worthy aims, but also shots in the dark that reached, even overreached their target.

To say beforehand that it is better not to try, as a methodology, would be the same as saying to the miners in 1984, your strike will fail because of the objective conditions, so do not go on strike. Unfortunately, this is effectively what the SWP did for the first six months of the strike: refuse to actively support the struggle because the ?downturn? meant it would go down to defeat. The miners didn?t listen to them; neither should we.

Finally, we should take seriously Lenin?s characterisation of imperialism as the epoch of wars and revolutions. Trotsky wrote, ?It is precisely in the present epoch? that revolutionary work in the trade unions, performed intelligently and systematically, may yield decisive results in a comparatively short time.? One doesn?t have to predict an economic catastrophe around the corner ? though that is not inconceivable ? to note that the current period is one in which there are sharp shocks in the system, which workers are forced to respond to. Then the task of building a rank and file movement may be ?too late? having only months before been ?too early?. A wise revolutionary policy surely is to agitate for a rank and file movement now ? precisely because thousands of activists have become disillusioned by the failure of the previous Broad Left strategy over the past four years.

Building a rank and file movement today

Like the uprisings and revolutions of the last five years, rank and file militants would use a combination of tactics using new and old technologies. The internet and social media have the advantage of preserving a degree of anonymity and clandestinity, vital for success, while old-fashioned mass meetings and visibility outside workplaces, on picket lines and demonstrations, with banners, placards and leaflets are indispensable for seeing where people stand.

The sparks, electricians on construction sites who organised outside of the official structures of the Unite the union to defend their conditions under attack from new contracts, have been one of the most successful attempts at building a rank and file movement in recent years. Their campaign started with a mass meeting of 500 militants in London. They placed a clear demand for a ballot for strike action and the withdrawal of the contracts, while starting a series of pickets to win others to their cause. Their energy, dedication and persistence paid off. They won.

However, their rank and file movement has not succeeded in generating contacts in other sectors, industries or unions, and they have recently fallen under the control of Unite full-timers. Setting such a goal is vital.

The campaign for the election of rank and file candidate Jerry Hicks to general secretary of Unite did set this goal, but has failed to move beyond its original tactic of standing for election. This has led to tension with those elements that see this as the final goal of the campaign. It needs to move now to intervening in strikes and disputes, while continuing to publicise instances of gross bureaucratic mishandling by the officials.

However, taken together, these two campaigns show that it is possible to establish the beginning of a rank and file movement today. The recent defeats suffered by left-wing official strategies, in the public and private sectors add thousands to the number who could respond positively to such a development.

We put forward the following programmatic points, by no means complete, for a rank and file movement across the unions.

? Strike committees elected by mass meetings of all members in dispute, regardless of their union to run every aspect of the strike

? For workers? control of the running of their own disputes: when to strike and when to call off action, what to demand in negotiations, open talks and no secret negotiations.

? Escalating strike action and all-out indefinite strikes as the surest way to force the maximum concessions from the bosses and to win the workers? full demands

? Maximum coordination of action across unions, sectors and industries up to and including the general strike.

? Defy the anti-union laws and call for their complete and immediate repeal. For the legal right to strike.

? Restore the best traditions of mass pickets, blockading of workplaces against scabs, occupations against closure and flying pickets.

? Councils of action based on workplace delegates. Whether these be organised through trades councils or ad hoc committees is secondary.

? Dissolve the bureaucracy ? for all officials to be elected and subject to immediate recall by those they are meant to serve; for all officials to be paid the average wage of workers in their industry, as a means to combat careerism.

? Reach outside for support: support committees, community direct action, and fundraising for hardship and strike funds.

? Unionise the unorganised: the precarious workers, temps, part-timers, agency workers, etc. Permanent, full-time contracts for all. Community branches to cater for those in workplaces without union recognition or with quick turnovers.

? Industrial unions ? one industry, one union. Open the ranks of the NUT, etc. to all workers in schools, etc.

? No to chauvinism, racism, sexism and homophobia. Denounce chauvinistic strikes, recruit migrant workers.

Source URL: <http://fifthinternational.org/content/rank-and-file-movements-great-debate>

Links:

[1] <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/organisation/party-and-class/unions/335-bureaucrats-resistance-networks-and-struggle-in-post-industrial-capitalism-a-further-comment-on-rank-and-file-strategies?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=>