Marxism and the trade unions

Sun, 15/10/1978 - 12:34

The nature and limits of trade union consciousness

The Marxist understanding of the role and nature of Trade Unionism proceeds from the analysis of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production itself. Capitalism creates the proletariat by freeing the serf both from feudal rights and duties and from the ownership of any means of production. The proletariat, as a result can only acquire the necessities of life by selling its ability to work, its labour power.

The value of labour power, like that of any commodity, is determined by the amount of labour necessary to create it. In effect this means that the price of labour power (wages) tends always to equal the cost of sustaining the labourer, i.e. the cost of the means of subsistence. Marx's concept of 'subsistence', it must be stressed, was not one of a bare physical minimum. Marx noted of the proletarian, the number and extent of his so called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history and depend, therefore, to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country, in particular they depend on the conditions in which, and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed.1

Thus, unlike other commodities, the value of labour power contains a, 'historical and moral element' in its determination. In addition, 'subsistence' must be taken to include the means necessary for the recreation of the labourer, the raising and training of children.

The capitalist is driven, by competition from other capitalists, to minimise the price he pays for labour power to its minimum or even below it. To reduce it below its minimum means to physically 'wear out' the working class more quickly than it can reproduce itself. Such a process occurred, as far as the majority of the working class was concerned, in the early period of capitalist production, and has recurred since, under Hitler or Pinochet, for example.

Capitalism, as a crisis ridden system, is incapable of involving the whole of the potential workforce in production on a continuous basis. As a result it creates, what Engels called in 1843; 'a reserve army of labour' the unemployed. This reserve army shrinks and swells with capitalism's booms and slumps, providing a source of blacklegs, and thus a further pressure on the wages of the employed proletariat. Marx further observed that the formal equality that existed between capitalist and individual worker was entirely bogus, concealing as it did capital's monopoly of the means of production and, therefore, of subsistence. Capital is a compact social force against which the individual labourer is powerless.

The working class, an objective class (a class in itself) of capitalism, is impelled by the circumstances of its existence to resist the strength of capital through combinations. As long as the ruling class has the power and the politico economic motivation to deny them legality, such combinations attain only an episodic mass existence and normally take the form of a conspiracy. In these circumstances terror is a weapon of the economic struggle, for example the 'outrages' of nineteenth century trade unionism directed against blacklegs, and various other forms of economic sabotage.

The conquest of legality is a vital condition for the establishment of permanent organs of economic struggle for trade unions proper. Marx and Engels regarded trade unions as a vital first step for the working class in becoming not merely a class in itself but a class for itself, conscious of its needs and aims. Engels in, 'The Condition of the Working Class in England' coined the phrase which communists have, ever since, applied to the unions, '...as schools of war, the unions are unexcelled?. Strikes he referred to as, 'the military school of the working men?.'2
Trade unions then, represent the first, most direct attempt by workers to negate the attacks of capital on their most immediate interests. Their essence, combination and solidarity, is the beginning of class consciousness. Nonetheless they are only a partial or one sided attempt to negate the tendency of capital to impoverish and atomise the working class. Here a dialectical understanding of the nature of trade unionism is necessary for an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the unions and their necessary course of development. This was expressed most clearly by Marx in Value, Price and Profit:

"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 guerilla war against the effect of the existing 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."

Richard Hyman, in his booklet, "The Sociology of Trade Unions?, places Marxists in two categories vis a vis the trade unions; Optimists and Pessimists. Marx and Engels, it appears, were Optimists whilst Lenin and Trotsky were Pessimists. This facile approach, collecting together positive remarks from the former as against negative evaluations from the latter, serves only to obscure the guide to action which the work of Marx and Engels, and its consistent and coherent development by Lenin and Trotsky, represents. That this is so can be seen, from the most mature formulation of Marx's position, the material he drew up for the First International and the commentary on the union movement in letters after that time.

Marx summed up his perspectives for, and analysis of, the trade unions in his, "Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council? which was read as the official report of that body to the First Congress of the First International, held in Geneva in September 1866. In the first section of the document, Marx sums up the limitations of the unions. Capital is a "concentrated social force? whereas the only social force of the workers is their numbers, a force weakened by their, "unavoidable competition amongst themselves". Marx pointed out that, the contract between capital and labour can, therefore, never be struck on equitable terms.

Rosa Luxemburg was simply restating the position of Marx and Engels on the essential but limited effectiveness of trade union action when she wrote in Reform and Revolution "the objective conditions of capitalist society transform the economic functions of the trade unions into a sort of labour of Sisyphus, which is, nevertheless, indispensable."

Likewise, Lenin?is pre 1905 polemic with the Russian economists stood to a large extent as a restatement of Marx?is position on the limits of trade unions. It is absolutely erroneous to regard Lenin?is pre 1905 writings as "original? or in contradiction to the "optimistic? views of the founders of scientific socialism.

A serious reading of What is to be Done? would convince anyone of the idiocy of Hyman?is attempt to paint Lenin as a "pessimist?. In 1903, Lenin drafted a resolution for the Second (London) Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, that indicated a "classic? Marxist position on the unions: "The congress deems it absolutely essential in all cases to support and develop in every way the economic struggle of the workers and their trade, unions (principally the All Russian unions) and from the very outset to ensure that the economic struggle and the trade union movement in Russia has a Social Democratic character.? Lenin, arguing against the economists, stressed the integrationist tendencies in unions where the Marxists abandoned any attempt to give their struggle a, "Social Democratic character?. "Pure trade unionism?, not won to Marxist politics might be nominally "apolitical? or "neutral? but would inevitably adopt bourgeois politics. The experience of British and American trade unionism in the nineteenth century confirmed Lenin?is view.

No less than the economists of the early 1900s, the economists of today are incapable of understanding the role and nature of trade unions dialectically. For Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party there is supposedly a flat contradiction between Lenin?is 1902 position that, "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness."(What is to be Done?) and his position of 1905, "The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic."(On the Reorganisation of the
Cliff cannot have read seriously either of the works on which he bases his paradox. In What is to be Done? Lenin makes it perfectly clear that he is not denying the fact that the working class is spontaneously receptive to Marxism as a scientific formulation of its world view as a class, or that in periods of crisis and upheaval the working class does not spontaneously take up revolutionary struggle. It is often said that the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that 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, provided it subordinates spontaneity to itself. Indeed, Lenin’s criticism of the Economists is that in their passive tailing of the elemental economic struggle, they are prone to fall behind the working class when great events (wars, crises, etc.) move the class to spontaneously revolutionary actions. Lenin was as aware of this in 1902 as he was in the high tide of the 1905 revolution. That he did not forget, even during that high tide, the importance of the conscious intervention of revolutionaries, can be shown by citing in full the quotation which purportedly reveals Lenin’s change of line: “The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic; and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.” The truncated first half of the sentence appears in Cliff’s “Lenin” Volume 1 (p.176) as evidence that in this article, Lenin, formulated his conclusion in terms which were the exact opposite of those of What is to be Done? Cliff does this in order to downgrade the specific duty of revolutionaries to transform spontaneity into consciousness, and to substitute for it the old economist position of, “lending the economic struggle itself a political character.” Now, even Cliff is aware that the workers are not spontaneously revolutionary all the time and so he resorts to a vulgar empiricist notion of period. Put baldly it reduces itself to the view that in periods of capitalist crisis the workers are spontaneously revolutionary because their thirst for reforms is blocked. In periods of boom, however, the capitalist’s can simply buy them off. This theory neatly absolves revolutionaries from the struggle to build a party even in periods of stability and is totally incapable of explaining why, in periods of deepening crisis reformist leadership is still so difficult to defeat. As we shall see it is completely incapable of analysing the roots of reformism and this inability lies in its failure to understand the limits of “pure” trade unionism and the economic struggle. Lenin’s restatement of Marx and Engels’ position (including the vital distinction between trade union politics and Social Democratic politics) on the other hand was capable of application and development. On its basis Lenin was able to come to a full understanding of the development of bourgeois politics in the workers’ movement and their catastrophic momentary triumph in August 1914.

The labour aristocracy and the trade union bureaucracy

The history of the 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. The full development of the views of Marx and Engels on the trade unions took place during and after their period of work alongside the English union leaders in the International Working Men’s Association. These leaders played an important part in the formation of the International. The early 1860s saw a powerful revival of working class activity in Britain. Strikes by the Staffordshire miners, the South Yorkshire Ironworkers and the Midlands builders bore witness to a new militancy. Trades Councils came into existence in London, Birmingham, Glasgow and many other cities. The trade union leaders, full time secretaries of associations of skilled or semiskilled workers, made important moves, including the formation of the Trades Union Congress, to centralise the unions as a national movement. A labour press came into existence on a national and local level. An increased political awareness manifested itself in wide trade union support for the Italian Unification struggle Garibaldi was given a tumultuous reception in London and in widespread union support and active solidarity with the Union in the American Civil War. Renewed activity around the fight for Manhood Suffrage and against the still severe legal sanctions of the Master and Servant laws brought a temporary radicalisation to these unions of the skilled labour aristocracy. Royden Harrison, in his work on the mid nineteenth century labour movement, has noted that, “The founding of the International coincided with the most creative and ambitious phase of the development of this privileged stratum. Some of its successes were of value to the entire proletariat and indicated new lines of advance.”
What was this labour aristocracy? E.J. Hobsbawm assesses that in the second half of the last century it made up something between 10% and 20% of the working class as a whole. Its wages averaged double that of unskilled workers although, in some industries, they might reach three or four times the rate for labourers. With the partial exception of the textile workers and the miners, it was this privileged stratum of respectable artisans which participated in the First International. Harrison has observed that, ?With respect to England, the central paradox of the International was that it expressed the standpoint of the working class as a whole, whilst relying on the organisational support of the Labour Aristocracy. ?12

The strength of the labour aristocracy in Britain, the increasing incorporation of the unions based on this distinct stratum of workers into bourgeois politics, forced Marx and Engels to analyse this phenomenon. In so doing they laid the essential groundwork for Lenin?s and Trotsky?s later work on the position and social roots of the labour aristocracy. They started this during a period of considerable change in the position of the union leaders and the labour aristocracy upon whom they rested.

The 1867 Reform Act, although it excluded most male workers, and all women from the body politic, gave the vote to the upper layers of the working class. In addition the Trade Union Act of 1871 gave their unions a wide measure of legal recognition. The two Acts were enough to mollify them and to tie them to the Liberals. In addition, 1873 saw the beginning of a long slump and period of economic stagnation, as unemployment rose the chances of success for the movement to unionise the unskilled, fell. As a result, organised labour remained the sole preserve of the pro Liberal labour aristocrats. In 1869, the Labour Representation League, a direct expression of this Lib-Labism, was formed. It set itself the task of, ?avoiding Utopian theories and illusory phantoms and of bringing the interests of the working men into harmony with those of the whole of society.?

Even during the lifetime of the International. Marx and Engels were well aware of the political backwardness of the Labour movement in England. Engels noted, after the first elections under the extended franchise. ?The proletariat has discredited itself terribly" 13 and he saw the failure to break with the Liberals as, ?a disastrous certificate of poverty for the English proletariat? 14

Marx saw a vital rot of this political poverty in the British oppression of Ireland. This, coupled with fear of competition from immigrant Irish workers, bolstered a chauvinism in the English worker, who, Marx noted, ?feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself ?.15 So, continued Marx, ?This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite their organisation.? 16

By the later years of the International, Marx was openly denouncing the class collaboration of the trade union leaders. He considered that before any progress was made towards the creation of a workers? party in Britain, ?the industrial workers have first of all to get rid of their present leaders?. 17

Between the late 1870s and late 1880s, Lib-Labism and a servile craft unionism held complete sway in the British labour movement. Engels developed a definite characterisation of its causes. As early as 1858 he had noted a tendency towards embourgeoisement in the English workers? movement and remarked on its inevitability, ?for a nation which exploits the whole world?. 18 At the same time he observed that the ?English proletarian movement, in. its old traditional Chartist form, must perish before it can develop in a new and viable form? 19 Now, in 1882, he wrote that the English workers, ?gaily share in the feast of England?s monopoly of the world market and the colonies?. 20 Writing to August Bebel the following year he argued that, ?Participation in the domination of the world market was, and is, the economic basis for the political nullity of the English workers. ?21 At the same time Engels recognised that the effect of this world domination was not uniform throughout the working class.

Writing in William Morris? journal ?Commonweal?, Engels reviewed developments during the period of revolutionary Chartism and in the long period of embourgeoisement thereafter. He pointed out, in particular, that the condition of the skilled workers in the large trade unions had ?remarkably improved since 1848,? and continued, ?the best proof of this is the fact that for more than fifteen years not only have their employers been with them, but they with their employers,
upon exceedingly good terms. They form an aristocracy among the working class; they have succeeded in enforcing for
themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final. ?22 He goes on to root this in the past period of
England?s development, ?The truth is this: during the period of England?s industrial monopoly the English working
class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of this monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out
amongst them: the privileged minority pocket most, but even the great mass had at least a temporary share now and
then. And that is the reason why, since the dying out of Owenism, there has been no socialism in England. . With the
breakdown of the monopoly the English working class, will lose that privileged position; it will find itself generally, the
privileged and leading minority not excepted, on a level with its fellow workers abroad. And that is the reason why
there will be socialism again in England. ?23

Within the state of chronic stagnation after 1876, a period which produced neither a full crash nor a return to prosperity,
Engels saw the seeds of a new period of capitalism. He expected this to be characterised by the clash of several
industrial powers: Britain, Germany, France and America, in which Britain would lose her stranglehold of the world
market. Whilst he could not be expected to theoretically anticipate the Imperialist epoch, Engels certainly accurately
identified most of its salient features, in particular the new role of the leaders of the labour movement. It was these
leaders who prevented the extension of union organisation through their exclusiveness and craftism. This attitude not
only prevented the growth of the unions but positively threatened those already organised by creating blackleg. At the
same time their status was greatly enhanced after the 1867 Reform Act created, for the first time, a sizeable working
class electorate. Recognising this, the bourgeoisie altered its strategy. From open hostility and legal coercion, it turned
to using the leaders of the unions to tie the working class to itself, at first through the auspices of the radical wing of the
Liberal Party.

Engels noted the lavish attention paid to the union leaders by ?Members of Parliament, by Lords and other well born
rabble? 24 and he also noted the desire of these leaders to get into Parliament, not as open representatives of their class,
not on the basis of the consistent democratic demands of the Chartists but by doing a deal with the Liberals to gain
votes and money. It was clear to Engels that as a result, ?they ceased to be workers? candidates and turned themselves
into bourgeois candidates?.25 In other words they became an agency of the bourgeoisie within the working class. The
class nature of their politics was clearly shown in their preparations for the 1874 elections. Meeting under the
chairmanship of Morley, a leading liberal manufacturer, trade union leaders and labour journalists, in Engels words,
?drew up a ?labour programme? to which any bourgeois could subscribe, and which was to form the foundation of a
mighty movement to chain the workers politically still more firmly to the bourgeoisie Engels was clear that the
passivity of the working class in England could not be wholly explained by the bourgeoisification of the labour
aristocracy and its corruption through the incorporative policy of the bourgeoisie. In addition the very structure of the
unions and the banning of politics (that is working class politics) within them, resulted in excluding the mass of
workers and lowering the horizons of the organised minority. Within the unions, it was necessary to change workers?
understanding of trade unionism and to win them to the struggle for the emancipation of the working class as a whole.
Equally important, however, was the need to organise the unskilled, the vast bulk of the working class. The
conservative structure of existing craft unionism had to be broken up and new unions built. Only in this way could a
new socialist leadership of the working class be developed to replace the bourgeois leaders and, create a working class
party - a revolutionary party.

Marx and Engels, through their active involvement in the British labour movement, developed the fundamental
elements of a coherent position on the nature and role of the trade unions. In addition they analysed the causes and
features of the incorporation of the unions into capitalism. Towards the end of his life, as we shall see, Engels was able
to begin the task of elaborating the methods of struggle to be used against bourgeois labour leaders. The completion of
this task, on the basis of a developed theory of the nature and basis of the stratum of trade union bureaucrats, fell to the
next generation of Marxists - to Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky.

In the period between the death of Engels and the foundation of the Communist International, the question of the
relationship between trade union action and the struggle for socialism was centred in the two countries which
developed mass trade union organisations, Germany and Britain. In both countries a powerful trade union bureaucracy
developed. In Germany it was able to release itself from the dominance of Marxism and even to overthrow Marxist influence in the Social Democratic Party. In Britain it was able to isolate the revolutionary Marxists and to turn the pressure of the workers for a class party into the ?safe? form of a class collaborationist Labour Party. In the countries with a newer or belated capitalist development: the U.S.A., Italy, France, Spain, for example, revolutionary syndicalism, a hybrid of Marxism and anarchism, held sway until 1914. Under the impact of the First Imperialist war this split into a reformist wing which affected a rapprochement with the Social Democratic and Labourist bureaucrats, and a revolutionary wing which rallied to the banner of the Comintern and the Red International of Labour Unions.

The most profound analysis of these trends came from the pens of the pre War left wing of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. This was consolidated by the early Comintern and the RILU before the disastrous degeneration of these bodies under Bukharinist and Stalinist leadership. It was then restated and reformulated in the work of Leon Trotsky from the late Twenties until his death in 1940.

The initial focus for the elaboration and development of the Marxist analysis of the trade union bureaucracy was the struggle of the Left in German Social Democracy against the hold of the conservative trade union leaders on the practice and tactics of the Party.

**Trade unionism and the second international**

Until the 1890s, Britain was the only major country with a well developed trade union movement. From this period on, however, the union movement grew rapidly in other countries. In Germany, Italy and France the growth of unionism in the last years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries made the trade union question a central topic for discussion and debate for Marxists.

This was particularly true in Germany where, after the repeal of the Anti Socialist laws in 1890, trade unionism grew very rapidly under the direct influence of the German Social Democracy. Membership rose from 237,000 in 1892 to 680,000 in 1900, 1.8 million in 1908 and 2.6 million in 1912. Organised in the General Committee of Trade Unions under the chairmanship of Karl Legien (1861.1920) six major industrial unions metal, building, manufacturing, wood, textiles and transport, dominated the German trade union movement. This powerful movement was instrumental in forcing the extremely autocratic German capitalists, who had, moreover, the Prussian autocratic state at their disposal, to recognise the unions and conclude collective agreements with their workers at least on a plant by plant basis.

Kautsky, then the leading Marxist of the Second International could remark with pride, ?The German unions were founded and led by the Socialists, who were guided by the fruitful theory of Marxism. Thanks to this fact the German unions were able to adopt, from the beginning, a much more effective form. In the place of the local and occupational divisions of the English unions, they substituted the great centralised industrial organisations. They were able thereby to avoid the jurisdictional disputes as well as the guild like ossification and aristocratic exclusiveness of the English unions. Far more than the English, the German unionists feel themselves the representatives of the whole proletariat and not simply of the organised membership of their own trade.? 27

Germany?s modern trade unions were, in part, the product of her modern industrial development, a confirmation of the law of uneven and combined development whereby later developers do not merely copy the stages of their predecessors but base themselves on the most advanced techniques of production and organisation of labour available. The German working class, unhampered by craft union organisation, and concentrated in huge industrial enterprises already well on the way to monopoly, found in Marxism the political and organisational weaponry with which to combat their ?captains of industry?. This was not, however, the only factor that strengthened the hold of Social Democratic Marxism. The Party gained from both the imposition and the lifting of the Anti Socialist Laws and from the political shackles imposed by Bismarckian and Willhelmine Bonapartism. In addition Marxism benefited from the relative shallowness of the social roots of opportunism. In the early years of the Imperialist epoch, Germany, with only limited colonial expansion and therefore super profits, could only maintain a small Labour Aristocracy. As a result the opponents of Marxism within the union leaderships had to be more cautious and circumspect than their brazenly class collaborationist brethren in Britain. Nonetheless, this stratum, so important to the strengthening of reformism had been created, as Jurgen Kuczynski observed, ?... in spite of the fact that the extra profits from foreign investments gained by the German
ruling class were relatively small as compared with those of Britain's ruling class, it was possible for them to make sufficient extra profits partly from foreign investments and partly through the exploitation of cheap foreign labour within Germany (Russians and Italians mainly) to create a small labour aristocracy ready to play its role when monopoly capitalism came to full power in the twentieth century. 28

Parallel to the growth of this significant privileged stratum of workers went a dramatic growth in the full time apparatus of the trade unions. In 1898, the Free Trade Unions had only 104 salaried officials, six years later and with a slightly more than doubled membership the number was up to 677. Ten years later when the membership had just trebled the number of fulltimers was 2,867. 29

The funds at the disposal of these officials were considerable. In 1907 for example, trade union funds stood at some 33 million marks as compared to the 1.3 million of the SPD itself. 30 Thus a powerful bureaucracy was crystallising within the German unions, one that was to come into increasing conflict with the forces of revolutionary Marxism.

The first seeds of this conflict can be seen at the time of the Erfurt synthesis the adoption of a formal Marxist programme disconnected from any attempt to develop revolutionary tactics, An ?Appeal to Union Members? from that year (1891) stated a dichotomy between political party and trade unions, ?The difference between the political activity carried out by the Workers ?Party and the tasks of the unions rests on the fact that the former seeks to transform the organisation of existing society, while the efforts of the latter, being circumscribed by law, are anchored in present day bourgeois society.? 31

For the trade union leaders Rosa Luxemburg, who had talked of trade unionism as a ?labour of Sisyphus? became, ?the most hated and repeatedly reviled, ?enemy of the trade unions?.? 32 The nascent trade union bureaucracy picked their enemy well, for it was indeed Luxemburg who was first to turn the spotlight of Marxist analysis on them. Moreover it was her struggle that was to alert Lenin to this new development which was to prove of cardinal significance for the labour movement.

Luxemburg?s clash with the German trade union bureaucracy was first provoked by the Left?s attempts, in co operation with Kautsky?s ?Marxist Centre? to raise the tactical lessons flowing from the Belgian General Strike of 1902 and the Russian Revolution of 1905. Against the background of a rising tempo of class struggle on an international scale including a massive strike of the Ruhr miners the trade union leaders moved dramatically to forestall all attempts by the Party to refine and develop the general strike tactic. In May 1905, the Cologne Congress of the Trade Unions adopted, a resolution condemning even discussion of the mass strike as ?a dangerous playing with fire?.33 The union bureaucrats were prepared t go even further. Bringmann introduced a resolution describing the unions as the only means for the improving of working class conditions and at a private meeting of union leaders he described Marxism as the disease from which the German labour movement suffered. The trade unions, he said, should replace it with an ideology of their own. 34

In the autumn of 1905 the Congress of the SPD met at Jena against a background of the greatest industrial unrest ever seen. The Party was forced to consider the General Strike. It was in that debate that Luxemburg was forced not only to examine and develop the General Strike as a central weapon in the armoury of revolutionary Marxists but, crucially, to develop an analysis of the malaise in the German trade union movement. This analysis is to be found in her pamphlet, ?The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions?. In it she observed, ?an antagonism between Social Democracy and a certain part of the trade union officials, which is however, at the same time an antagonism within the trade unions between this part of the trade union leaders and the proletarian mass organised in the trade unions? 35

Luxemburg further analysed the sociological and ideological roots of the trade union officialdom?s hostility to socialism. Observing its growth in the previous fifteen years she went on, ?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.? 36 The result of this, Luxemburg argued, was that the leaders arrogate to themselves all the initiative, leaving to the members, ?the more passive virtue of discipline?. She called for a ?rejoining of the trade unions to Social
Democracy? not by means of agreements and treaties between the Party and trade union leaderships which would be to desire to build a bridge at the very spot where the distance is greatest and the crossing most difficult? 37 The refusion had to take place, ?below, amongst the organised proletarian masses?. Luxemburg predicted that the fight for this refusion would, ?inevitably call forth a vigorous opposition from a part of the trade union leadership. Luxemburg?s work contains a series of powerful observations of the bureaucrat?s mentality and world outlook. In this sense it is a work of considerable insight. However, having said that we must note that Luxemburg?s analysis did not locate the social roots of the conservative trade union bureaucracy. As we have seen she explained the malaise of the German trade unions in terms of the functions of officialdom in a period of capitalist stability. This position runs the danger of suggesting that organisation, in and of itself, is inherently conservative a position no doubt related to Luxemburg?s weakness on the organisation question. Marx and Engels had worked with the explanation of the labour bureaucracy as rooted in the privileged labour aristocracy. They had linked the stability of this stratum to the dominance of Britain and America on the world market which had laid the basis for the unimpeded development of bourgeois democracy. Luxemburg offered no social explanation for the existence of bureaucratism and official narrow minded conservatism in the leadership of the trade unions before 1914. It was left to Lenin to systematically develop an explanation and analysis of the bureaucracy in the period of capitalist development after the death of Engels.

Observing the bourgeois influence in the trade union movements of the Anglo Saxon countries (US, UK and Australia) and the mounting opportunism of the German trade unions, Lenin turned to the analysis made by the founders of scientific socialism of the British union movement. Here, Lenin rediscovered their work on the bourgeoisification of a labour movement and the socio economic roots of this development.

As early as 1912, Lenin had grasped the importance of this analysis, ?The state of affairs in the American labour movement shows us, as it does in Britain, the remarkably clear cut division between purely trade unionist and socialist strivings, the split between bourgeois labour policy and socialist labour policy, if it forgets about its emancipatory aims, puts up with wage slavery and confines itself to seeking alliances, now with one bourgeois party, now with another, for the sake of imaginary ?improvements ?in its indentured condition.? 39

Lenin understood the root of this bourgeoisification to lie in the particular situation of American and British capitalism whose uninterrupted development and world dominance had ?... tended to produce within the working class an aristocracy that has trailed behind the bourgeoisie, betraying its own class.? 40 However, up to 1914, Lenin thought this situation was on the wane, owing to the development of other major capitalist states who were putting the squeeze on the particularly high profits of British capital. Because it had been these super profits that had been the basis of the corruption of the labour aristocracy, Lenin expected their shrinking to limit the continuation of that corruption. Thus, at the time of ?the great unrest?, the massive strike wave that rocked Britain in 1913, Lenin could write, ?The masses of the British workers are slowly but surely taking a new path they are abandoning the defence of the petty privileges of the labour aristocracy for their own great heroic struggle for a new system of society.? 41

Lenin was acutely aware of the fact that while the position of the labour aristocracy was under attack in Britain and America, all was not we in the German trade union movement. The opportunism of the German union leaders was becoming more self conscious and brazen. In April 1914, Lenin noted a grossly opportunist speech made by Karl Legien while on a speaking tour of America at the expense of the American Congress. Lenin also noted that Legien was not, ?just somebody?, but a representative of the ?officers? corps? of the German trade unions, that not only were his views a ?servile renunciation of socialism? but that they corresponded to those of at least half the representatives of German socialism. Lenin further pointed to the hopeless ?official optimism? of the German Party in turning a blind eye to opportunism, concluding, ?We must not try to play down the disease which the German Party is undoubtedly suffering from.? 42

Four months were to provide shattering testimony to the depth of this disease. The war, the open defection of the overwhelming bulk of the parliamentary and trade union leaders of the class to their respective warlords, and the temporary support they gained in this from many workers, drove Lenin all the more thoroughly to re examine the whole epoch of capitalist development and its effects on the political and trade union leadership of the class.
Lenin’s new development of Marx’s theory is to be found in “Imperialism and the split in socialism” written in October 1916. We have discussed this article in Workers’ Power number six. Lenin noted that Marx and Engels traced two trends, “one might even say two parties” in the English labour movement from 1858-92. The existence of a bourgeois labour movement was, to Marx and Engels, due to the exceptional features and primacy of British capitalism. The super profits of British capitalism had made it possible that, “The capitalists can devote a part (and not a small one at that!) of these superprofits to bribe their own workers, to create something like an alliance (recall the celebrated ‘alliances described the Webbs of English trade unions and employers) between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists against the other countries.” 43 The epoch of world imperialism, Lenin argued, meant that Britain was no longer an exception, “The bourgeoisie of all imperialist?Great Powers?can economically bribe the upper strata of ?its? workers by spending on this a hundred million francs or so a year...? 44

The transition to a new, Imperialist era meant that a bourgeois Labour Party was not the feature of one power capable of monopolising the world market and, therefore, of bribing a stratum of the working class it was the feature of several, “though very few? Great Powers; ?Now a bourgeois labour party is inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries.” 45

For Lenin the conservatism and opportunism of the trade union leaders was not rooted in officialdom as such. It was a result of capitalism’s stage of development. Imperialism had laid the basis for a privileged stratum in the working class upon which the trade union bureaucrats rested and whose outlook they represented, “On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism press, parliament, associations, congresses etc, have created political privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops.” 46

Lenin’s theory links the labour aristocracy to a general epoch of imperialism. It locates the political corruption and involvement with the state of the bureaucratic caste, noted so vividly by Luxemburg, in this feature of capitalist development. It is for this reason that we can speak of it as a new development of Marx’s theory.

Leon Trotsky was to formulate the Leninist body of analysis more clearly still in, “The New Constitution of the USSR?” as a result of analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy. Starting from the Marxist axiom that “the bureaucracy is not a technical but a social category 47 Trotsky argued that, “every single bureaucracy originates in, and manifests itself upon, the heterogeneous nature of society, upon the antagonism of interests and the internal struggle. It regulates the social antagonisms in the interests of the privileged classes or layers, and exacts an enormous tribute for this from the toilers.” 48 This was no less true of the trade union bureaucracy than of the Soviet bureaucracy. Conditions of capitalist expansion had laid the basis for the creation of a distinct labour aristocratic stratum with the conditions of life of comfortable petit bourgeois. The trade union bureaucracy, “leans on”, is “bound up with” with this stratum. It has solved its own social question, has been integrated into bourgeois society and the bourgeois state through perks and posts. The mass of workers clearly are neither labour aristocrats nor integrated bureaucratic functionaries. However, in the absence of a revolutionary party, Trotsky argued, they will fall under the leadership of the labour aristocrats the backbone of pure trade unionism. The Marxist tradition, therefore, through the works of Lenin and Trotsky, was able to locate the social base of the distinct body of opportunist trade union functionaries. The functionaries were rooted in the essence of limited, “pure trade unionism”, itself the horizon of the labour aristocrats. The trade union bureaucrats have a distinct caste spirit talking of the French trade union bureaucracy under Jouhaux, Trotsky declared, “...there is not a day, not an hour, when his entire apparatus does not struggle obstinately for its existence, does not collectively select the best methods for that struggle, does not think for Jouhaux and does not inspire him with the necessary decisions.” 49 However, a decisive change in the balance of class forces to fascism or towards revolution renders them impotent. Their omnipotence depends on class compromise and peace, “having risen above the masses, and then having resolved its own ?social question? (an assured existence, influence, respect etc.) the bureaucracy tends? increasingly to keep the masses immobile. Why take risks? It has something to lose. The supreme expansion of the influence and well being of the reformist bureaucracy takes place in an epoch of capitalist progress and of relative passivity of the working masses.” 50 There is nothing eternal or everlasting about the authority of the trade union bureaucrats, however, “when this passivity is broken on the right or the left, the magnificence of the bureaucracy comes to an end. Its
intelligence and skill are transformed into stupidity and impotence.?

As stated before, Marxism proceeds from a dialectical understanding of the trade unions of the limits of "pure trade unionism", of their ability to organise the energies and dynamism of the class. The trade union bureaucracy, and the labour aristocracy upon which it rests, are features of capitalist expansion. In periods of prolonged capitalist crisis the conditions of the labour aristocracy will inevitably deteriorate. Restiveness and militancy among the labour aristocracy, among the skilled and craft workers, will inevitably disrupt the dominance of the trade union bureaucrats. It is this situation which opens up possibilities for communists to link the struggles of the labour aristocrats to those of the mass of the workers. That is to say, the possibility of taking the unions out of the hands of the bureaucrats, transforming and broadening the unions themselves. It is this potential for transforming the unions for galvanising the mass of workers against the conservative bureaucracy that lies at the heart of the Marxist programme for work in the unions.

It is the development of that position, the development of programme and strategy for the transformation of the unions that we now turn.

**Marxism and the transformation of the unions**

Marx recognised that the unions would either remain tied to bargaining within the capitalist system or would have to become agencies for superseding capitalism itself. If we return to the "Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council?", we find that in the last two sections of that document, Marx laid out the basic programme for transforming the unions into agencies for superseding capitalism.

Whilst welcoming the moves they had made towards the International, he pointed out that the unions had a tendency to keep themselves "too much aloof from general and political movements." Pointing to their future role, Marx summed up in a few sentences the general principles for the communist transformation of the unions principles which have not lost their validity to this day, "Apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interests of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves, and acting as, the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the down trodden millions." 53

In this passage Marx aimed every sentence against the tendency of the unions to restrict themselves to protecting the immediate economic interests of a minority of skilled workers. Instead he emphasised that the unions had to put to the fore the interests of the, "down, trodden millions", opening their doors wide to all who could be organised. Integral to these perspectives, which would have utterly transformed the "new model unions" of the time, was the call that they break from their "apolitical" stance (a position which, in reality, meant acceptance of the politics of the Liberal Bourgeoisie). The history of the International is also the history of Marx?s struggle to bring these reticent and conservative craft organisations into the key political struggles of the day. Between 1867 and 1870, Marx kept up a ceaseless pressure, via the General Council, to involve the English Trade Unions in the "Irish Question". He urged agitation, demonstrations etc in support not only of the Irish right to separation but directly and openly in support of the Fenians, "a violent and ... an anti English movement" (Engels). This agitation met with a considerable response and helped to overcome the virulent hostility existing between English and Irish proletarians in England.

On the question of women workers, Marx remained intransigently opposed to the prejudices of the craft unions who tried to exclude women from industry. For Marx the presence of women in industry, and in the ranks of the organised workers, was vital. At the same time he argued for the unions to take up the struggle for protective legislation to defend women against super exploitation, for shorter working hours and against night work. In September 1871, Marx proposed the founding of special Women?s Sections of the International.
Marx strove to make the unions aware of the political machinations of ?their own?, and other bourgeoisies, in the words of the Inaugural Address they had to, ?master themselves the mysteries of international politics, to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments, to counteract them, if necessary, by all the means in their power.? 54 This work came to a head in the great work of the International in solidarity with the Paris Commune. The recognition, by the International, of the Commune as the Dictatorship of the Proletariat the working class holding political power for the first time, and the publication of Marx?s ?The Civil War in France?, led to a split in the English section. Benjamin Lucraft and George Odger (Secretary of the London Trades Council) withdrew from the General Council and publicly attacked the ideas contained in ?The Civil War in France?. On the other hand, Robert Applegarth (General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. 186147 1) wrote to Marx, whilst the storm of vilification was at its height, giving permission for his name to be included as a signatory to the Address of the General Council on the Civil War in France (in the event Applegarth?s signature was not included).

For Marx and Engels, the prospect for transforming the unions depended on a political break with the bourgeoisie, and with a fundamental change in the relation between the unions and the masses of the workers. Not only did the unions have to break with the bourgeois parties, they had to cease to be the closely guarded property of a distinct and privileged stratum of workers.

The last period of Engels? involvement in the English labour movement saw an explosion of unionisation amongst the unskilled which changed the face of the English trade unionism. At the same time there was a revival of socialism and of the socialist press. Within the pages of the ?Labour Standard? a paper edited by the Secretary of the London Trade Council, Engels attempted to influence the new unions. In a series of articles he explained the Marxist programme, simply and intelligibly, by patiently criticising the old trade union maxim, ?a fair day?s work for a fair day?s pay?. At the same time he laid heavy stress on the role that the trade unions could play, for good or ill, in the workers? movement their inherent limitations, their recent, lamentable record when they, ?forgot their duty as the advanced guard of the working class?, and the imperative necessity facing them of helping in the creation of a ?Workingmen?s Party?.

Engels welcomed the great strikes of the ?new unions?, the Match Girls, the Dockers and the Gasworkers not only as blows against capital but equally as blows against the old, skilled unions who, ?treated with contempt? these ?sections of the proletariat. In addition he saw the success of the new unions as a great step in rescuing a whole section of the working class from domination by the lumpenproletariat and the criminal elements. What Engels particularly welcomed was the will and effort of the new unions to organise all workers, ?... these unskilled are very different fellows from the fossilised brothers of the old trade unions; not a trace of the old formalist spirit, of the craft exclusiveness of the engineers for example, on the contrary, a general call for the organisation of all Trade Unions in one fraternity and for a direct struggle against Capital. 55

These ?New Unionists? were not, of course, socialists, but they had not made their peace with capitalism. They regarded their immediate demands as provisional, and if they did not yet clearly understand the final aim, they chose as their leaders ?only avowed socialists?. Lastly, these new unions represented a basis for transforming the labour movement from below, for ousting the old leaders. Engels foresaw that this would not be easy, that on the political front, ??it is the trade union that will enter Parliament. It is the branch of industry and not the class that demands representation. Still it is a step forward. Let us first smash the enslavement of the workers to the two big bourgeois parties; let us have textile workers in Parliament just as we already have miners there.? 56

The reawakening of that section of workers, the overwhelming majority, who had not been bribed by capitalism was central to any strategy for taking the unions out of the hands of the labour aristocracy and the bureaucracy which rested upon it. Talking of the ?New Unions? in 1889/90, Engels saw as one of the most vital factors that distinguished them from the old craft unions, the fact that they were, ?essentially, and the gas workers exclusively, strike unions and strike funds...? 57 and that they organised every worker to do battle with the capitalists. It was because of this that Engels could write with confidence and enthusiasm of the British proletariat, ?Its long slumber a result? on the one hand, of the failure of the Chartist movement of 1836-50 and, on the other hand, of the colossal industrial upswing of 1848-80, is
finally broken. The grandchildren of the old Chartists are stepping into the line of battle.?

Towards the very end of his life, Engels was seriously addressing the problem of developing methods of struggle to break the hold of the conservative union leaders. That task and work was continued by the Left in German Social Democracy.

It was precisely on the question of the involvement of the mass of the workers in struggle, of developing tactics and strategy to organise the masses to transcend narrow trade unionism and confront capitalism itself, that the revolutionary Left in German Social Democracy conducted their sharpest battle with the burgeoning German trade union apparatus.

The argument centred on the role and potential of the General Strike weapon. We have discussed this debate in previous articles. The Party majority supported the view of Bebel that the general strike was a useful weapon to be used as a defence should the democratic rights of the workers? movement come under attack. For Luxemburg and the party?s left the mass strike, as witnessed in Russia and Belgium, grew out of the exacerbation of class contradictions. It was not simply a defensive response, nor could it be ?organised? or contained as a single act to win an extension of the suffrage. It had to relate to the spontaneous combative and willingness of the mass of the class (and that meant the unorganised majority as well as the union members) to take action for economic as well as political goals. Luxemburg saw the mass strike as mass direct action, having its roots in the multitude of defensive struggles but focussing them into a mighty political offensive.

At the Party?s Jena Congress, Luxemburg and the Lefts had intended to, ?put up a fight against it during the discussion so that we could champion the mass strike, not as a mechanical? recipe for a defensive political position, but as an elementary form of revolutionary action. ?60 In fact, for fear of giving an opening to the right, they decided against this. They voted with? Bebel?s formula that recognised the utility of the general strike, albeit as a limited and defensive tactic, ?The Party Congress considers the broadest utilisation of the mass work stoppage under certain circumstances one of the most effective weapons to defend itself against such a criminal political act against the working class, or to acquire an important basic right for its liberation.? 61

The rotten nature of this compromise formula soon became clear, Luxemburg herself called it, ?one sided and flat". 62

As news of this agreement leaked out, and in preparation for the Party Congress at Mannheim in the autumn, Luxemburg penned her most brilliant defence of the tactics she had been advocating, ?The Mass Strike, the Political Party and thee Trade Unions?. In it she emphasised again the limits of ?pure trade union? tactics and organisation. She pointed out the importance of the ?backward?, unorganised sections of workers, textile workers, electricity workers, homeworkers, agricultural labourers and railway and post office employees, for whom ?there exist Russian conditions in the midst of the parliamentary constitutional state of Germany?.62 She maintained that it was typical trade union pedantry to hold that these sections had to gain the legal right to strike and be organised by peaceful, gradual means. A powerful mass strike movement could win these demands providing it included in its demands the eight hour day, the struggle for the introduction of workers? committees in all factories, the abolition of piecework and homework, a compulsory Sunday rest and the recognition of the right of combination.

In the footsteps of Engels, Luxemburg developed key elements of the Marxist strategy for the transformation of the unions. Drawing in the mass of workers for direct political action, challenging craft and trade divisions, challenging the stranglehold of the union bureaucrats, these were the central elements of the developing Marxist programme for transforming the unions.

Lenin?s consistent struggle to maintain the positions of ?What is to be Done?? brought him sharply into conflict with the Mensheviks, anxious to revise Marxism and proclaim the ?neutrality? of the trade unions. The struggle within the Russian party over this question related to the same issue raging in the German Social Democracy and, within the
Second International, it aligned Lenin with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky. In 1907 and 1908, Lenin supported them in their struggle against the German trade union leaders, aided as the latter were by the compromise that the party leaders, under Bebel had made. Lenin, of course, had enormous respect for German Social Democracy and August Bebel, nonetheless he could write, ?We must criticise the mistakes of the German leaders fearlessly and openly if we wish to be true to the spirit of Marx and help the Russian Socialists to be equal to the present day tasks of the workers 'movement'.

In the Russian Social Democracy, newly united by the 1906 Stockholm Congress, a serious struggle soon erupted between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks over the issue of trade union ?neutrality?. Lenin had always been in favour of broad trade unions, with their own unfettered democracy, not party bodies masquerading as unions. The great value of unions was that they organised hitherto non class conscious workers, educated them in the elementary stages of class struggle solidarity, hostility to the employer etc. His view was that Marxists worked within these organisations to imbue them with the Social Democratic spirit and to win the leadership of them. The upsurge of 1905-6 which radicalised the whole van guard of the Russian working class and awoke millions to class consciousness, creating a truly mass labour movement, presented new problems to Russian Marxists. The Mensheviks, centrists as they were, stampeded to accommodate their politics and programme to this mass movement, and as the revolution ebbed and the level of mass consciousness fell, were impelled to hurl overboard as useless ballast more and more of the strategy and tactics developed by the Iskra group before 1902. Plekhanov became a vociferous advocate of trade union neutrality and Axelrod, influenced by Western European Syndicalism, became the advocate of a broad Labour Congress, within which the Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries (Populists) should restrict themselves to acting as propaganda societies. The struggles with the Mensheviks, at the London Congress of the Russian Party (May 1907) and at the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International (August 1907) convinced Lenin thoroughly that, ?The only correct principle is the closest possible alignment of the unions with the party. Our policy must be to bring the unions closer to the party and link them with it." 64

What is more Lenin convinced the party and, as part of a bloc consisting of Rosa Luxemburg, Kautsky and others, helped to win the International to a rejection of neutralism. In this they succeeded even against the veteran Bebel who defended the ?two pillars? agreement struck with the union leaders. Lenin remained vigorously opposed to ?sticking on labels? or ?mere recognition? of socialism with regard to the unions. He held that, ?the partisanship of the trade unions must be achieved exclusively by Social Democratic work within the unions... the Social Democratic must form party cells in the unions" 65 and in this way win them to socialism. This was a position the Bolsheviks vigorously defended after the definitive split of 1912. Thereafter the Bolsheviks found themselves opposing a hostile bloc of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in the trade unions. This bloc, whilst loudly proclaiming the need to keep the unions neutral, to keep them, ?out of politics? was not above ?sticking on a label? in unions where they obtained a temporary majority and forthwith expelling their opponents. When this happened in the Metalworkers Union, Lenin noted that, "only feeble groups with no principles lose their heads at the first ?victory? and behave in this fashion". He continued, "Marxists are not stray visitors in the working class movement. They know that sooner or later all the unions will take their stand on the basis of Marxism. They are convinced that the future belongs to their ideas, and, therefore, they do not force events, do not goad unions on, and do not stick labels on them or spilt them." 66

In fact, the Marxist Party?s open and honest avowal of its principles, programme and tactics, its organisation of cells to fight for them, is indissolubly linked to its unswerving defence of the internal democracy, unity and opening of the unions to workers of various parties or no party. The Marxists struggle openly and honestly to influence the workers to socialism and to win the leadership democratically. In the fight for leadership, and when it has been won, they declare openly that they will align the unions with the central task of the party the struggle for working class power.

This method was systematised and concretised by the work of the Communist International. Drawing on the experience of the pre War Social Democratic Lefts, the syndicalists who had been won to Communism after 1917 and the Bolsheviks, the Comintern first discussed trade union tactics and strategy at the Second Congress in 1920.

As we have seen, Lenin and Trotsky did not consider a privileged labour aristocracy to be a permanent feature of
Periodic crises would inevitably challenge the viability of 'pure trade unionism', drawing whole new sections of workers into struggle. The Comintern described this process in the following way in 1920, "for the success of their economic struggle the wider masses of the workers, who until now have stood apart from the labour unions, are now flowing into their ranks in a powerful stream. These masses strive to make them their weapons of battle. The sharpening of class antagonisms compels the trade unions to lead strikes, which flow in a broad wave over the entire capitalist world, constantly interrupting the process of capitalist production and exchange." 67 In this situation the trade unions, in the hands of the masses, against the inevitable resistance of the trade union bureaucracy become, "organs for the annihilation of capitalism." 68

Trade unions as, "organisations for the annihilation of capitalism" must, necessarily, place as their central objective, the struggle for control against the employers. Hence the programme for transformation advanced by the Comintern a break with all craft and trade divisions, the building of industrial unions, factory and shop committees organised for the battle for workers' control, the democratisation of the union apparatus directly under the control of the rank and file of the unions. The objective of Communists was to struggle for that transformation, without which the trade unions would increasingly prove incapable of defending the living standards and cultural level of the working class.

Such a transformation could not take place gradually and peacefully. As Communists developed their influence and leadership over the broad masses of workers, as the broad masses of workers learnt through victories and defeats that, "in fact it is already impossible to obtain human conditions of life on the basis of capitalist methods of management, so it would be possible to remove the opportunist from office, to "...remove the old bureaucracy separated from the masses and replace it by the apparatus of factory representatives, leaving only the most necessary functions to the centre." 70

In the face of capitalist crisis, the broadening of the unions and the pressure of the masses, it was inevitable that the trade union bureaucracy would be wracked with contradictions. This fact was elaborated and discussed most systematically by Trotsky in his short but vital works on trade unionism. The Right wing will cling openly to the capitalist state, prepared to become the economic police of capital; J. H. Thomas was an excellent example. This is further underlined by the grovelling of the German trade union leaders before Hitler, the ADGB (German TUC) paper hailed Hitler's victory as, "Our victory as well" one day before the SS and SA occupied all trade union offices and began the mass arrest of all trade union leaders. The 'Lefts' however, will offer to lead struggles under the pressure of the mass of workers. While agreement between Communists and the trade union 'Lefts?', "on the basis of the partial tasks of the trade union movement were, of course, quite possible and in certain cases, essential." 71 Nonetheless the 'Lefts' would inevitably betray and mislead the struggle, 72 hence Trotsky's permanent insistence on the condition for such agreements, "the Communist Party had to preserve its complete independence, even within the trade unions, act in its own name in all questions of principle, criticise its 'Left' allies whenever necessary, and in this way win the confidence of the masses step by step." 73

The writings of Trotsky on the trade union question represent the culmination and crystallisation of nearly one hundred years of Communist intervention in the trade unions. Imperialist decay and crisis undermined the basis for 'pure trade unionism' except during exceptional periods of capitalist stability and growth, "...all the efforts of the labour aristocracy in the service of Imperialism cannot, in the long run, save them from destruction." 74 The trade union bureaucracy was firmly entrenched, had transformed itself into, "the economic police of capital." 75 In this situation, Marxism's dialectical grasp of the contradictions of trade unionism served to make all the more necessary communist intervention in the unions, precisely in the face of the bureaucracy's incorporation, "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." 76

Talking of a temptation, voiced by the syndicalists in the early Comintern debates, to turn away from the unions because of the role of the bureaucracy, Trotsky had this to say, "The fundamental mistake of such attempts lies in that they reduce to organisational experiments, the great political problem of how to free the masses from the influence of the trade union bureaucracy. 1,77 From the time the bureaucracy had turned the accumulated authority of the trade
unions against the socialist revolution, "the most important task of the revolutionary party became the liberation of the workers from the reactionary influence of the trade union bureaucracy." 78 For Trotsky, therefore, building within the traditions of revolutionary Marxism, the struggle to build "independent militant organisations corresponding more clearly to the tasks of mass struggles against bourgeois society..." was a central task of all sections of the Fourth International.

The trade unions can either prove instruments for the subordination of the working class to capital, or in the hands of the masses and under the leadership of a revolutionary communist party, crucial weapons in the battle to overthrow capitalism. The programme for the transformation of the unions, consistently developed and elaborated in the communist movement since the work of Marx and Engels proceeded from this central tenet of revolutionary Marxism.

1. Capital, (Fowkes translation) p.275
2. F. Engels, Condition of the Working Class, in Marx and Engels on Britain, Moscow 1962, p.260
3. Marx, Value, Price and Profit, Allen and Unwin, pp.93/4
4. Marx, First International and After, Penguin, p.91
5. ibid.
6. Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, p.71
8. Lenin, What is to be Done?, CW 5, p.386
9. Lenin, On the Reorganisation of the Party, CW 10, p.32
10. Trotsky, Writings 35 6 p.173/4
11. Royden Harrison, Labour before the Socialists
12. ibid.
13. Engels to Marx, On Britain p.545
14. ibid p.546
15. ibid. Marx to Meyer and Vogt p.551/2
16. ibid. p.552
17. ibid. Marx to Kugelmann, p.554
18. ibid. Engels to Marx, p.538
19. ibid. p.537
20. ibid. Engels to Kautsky, p.560
21. ibid. Engels to Bebel, p.562
23. ibid. p.34
24. ibid., Engels, The English Elections, p.369
25. ibid. p.370
26. ibid.
27. K. Kautsky, The Road to Power, p.84
29. cited in R. Schlesinger, Central European Democracy and its Background, p.70 i.
30. cited in H. Grabbing, The History of the German Labour Movement, p.69
31. ibid. p.68
32. P. Frolich, Rosa Luxemburg, pp.59/60
33. cited in R. Schlesinger, op.cit. p.67
34. ibid.
35. Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, p.214
36. ibid. p.215
37. ibid. p.217
38. ibid. p.218
39. Lenin, CW 36 pp.214/5
40. ibid.
41. Lenin, CW 19 p.36
42. Lenin, CW 20 p.256
43. Lenin, On the Trade Unions, (Moscow comp. p.293
44. ibid.
45. ibid. p.295
46. ibid. p.296
47. Trotsky, Writings 1935/6 p.309
48. ibid
49. ibid. p.173
50. ibid.
51. ibid.
52. Marx, First International and After, p.91
53. ibid. p.92
54. ibid. p.81
55. Engels to Schuter, On Britain, p.569
56. ibid. Engels to Plekhanov, p.583
57. ibid. p.522
58. ibid.11.527
60. Quoted in Schorske, German Social Democracy, 1905 17
61. ibid. p.43
62. letter to Roland Hoist, quoted in Frolich, op.cit. p.132
63. Lenin, CW 13 p.165
64. Lenin, CW 13. p.108
65. ibid. p.460
66. Lenin, On Trade Unions, p.271
68. ibid.
69. ibid. p.280
70. ibid.
71. Trotsky, On Trade Unions, p.36
72. For this argument in more depth see S. King?s article on the
Minority Movement.
73. Trotsky, op.cit. p.36
74. ibid. p.72
75. ibid. p.55
76. ibid.
77. ibid.
78. ibid. p.54

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/marxism-and-trade-unions-0