

WHY A RANK AND FILE

workers' fight

FREE SUPPLEMENT TO WORKERS' FIGHT NO.49.

MOVEMENT

The working class came into existence side by side with capitalism, the system which imprisons it. It did not take long for the working class, destined to overthrow that system, to organise itself in unions representing the interests of operatives in a particular trade, craft or industry.

At first these organisations were illegal. Later they became legal though still very much restricted by the ruling class's laws. But with greater freedom of action came also a strength-sapping search for respectability. In time, the unions expanded and came to embrace broader and broader layers of workers — not just skilled workers, but semi-skilled and unskilled workers and also white collar and managerial workers. However, to this day, the trade union movement organises no more than a third of insured workers in Britain.

Supported by the development of a layer of privileged workers within the working class, the maintenance of relative prosperity in Britain and the establishment of a high degree of bourgeois democracy — all bought with the fruits of colonial pillage — trade unions developed whose upper layers, the bureaucracy, grew into a definite social grouping balancing between the pressures of the working class and the ruling class.

Despite its origins within the working class and its dependence on a working class base, this trade union (and Labour Party) bureaucracy is entirely imbued with middle class ideas. Thus it plays the role of a lightning conductor of capitalist interests within the working class movement. The existence of this bureaucracy as a socially distinct layer is the biggest obstacle to the independence of the trade unions from the capitalist state.

Unions and the State

From time to time — as under fascism — the capitalists attempt to smash the trade unions together with this bureaucratic layer, and then rebuild them as a department of the state machine. This is the worst possible prison-house for labour. Most of the time, however, the situation is as at present in Britain. That is, capitalism in its imperialist phase increasingly attempts to incorporate the unions in the state by binding them to capitalist interests, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy. Trade unionists should reject any kind of deal that limits free collective bargaining and the fighting power of the working class, or trades off any of our hard won rights and standards. It doesn't matter from this point of view whether it is a Labour or a Tory government that the deal is made with, or whether the aim is a voluntary "social contract" or a "fair statutory policy".

The trade unions are the largest and broadest organisations of the working class and an indispensable instrument for defence and attack. We must build the unions so that they include vastly more people than the relatively skilled, stably employed, better paid elements within the white male workers. We realise however, that the more oppressed majority of the working class is only drawn into the struggle from time to time during periods of exceptional upsurges in class struggle. It is also a fact that certain extremely militant sections, like black workers, are viciously discriminated against within the trade unions and therefore, understandably, often exist outside the trade union movement.

In relation to the first point, we must therefore understand that during such moments of upheaval it is necessary to create organisations ad hoc, embracing as far as possible the whole fighting mass: solidarity committees, enlarged strike committees, councils of action, trades councils transformed by the broadest representation, control and distribution committees and, at the highest point, soviets.

The struggle to bring into the trade union movement these as yet unorganised workers will be doomed to failure or political backwardness unless it is accompanied by a struggle against the divisions that exist within our class and that weaken it — divisions on the basis of sex, race, nationality, religion, skill, age or social status. Militant workers have to be in the forefront particularly of the struggle against racism and male chauvinism.

It is at the point of production that the most comprehensive organisation of our class can take place. There we must struggle simultaneously for the greatest degree of sucking up, as in shop stewards committees, combine committees etc., and the greatest responsiveness to the shop floor, developing in the direction of an effective counter-administration which can exercise workers' control over different aspects of production.

Our guiding principles must be the unity of the organised and unorganised workers, particularly the employed and the unemployed.

Breakaways

From time to time unity has been broken by those calling themselves revolutionaries, where they have attempted to set up politically sectarian "revolutionary" unions which were nothing more than a second edition of the 'revolutionary party' itself. We are utterly opposed to this. It is a retreat from the vital struggle for mass influence and organisation. It simply means leaving the biggest organised arena of our class to the unopposed influence of the capitalists, via the trade union bureaucracy.

But there are times when a direct break with the conservative bureaucracy is unavoidable, in cases where refusing to do so would be tantamount to putting a brake on mass radical action and making it easier for a hardened and immovable bureaucracy to assert its control. Neither do we oppose voluntary rank and file associations within the unions where groups of the super-oppressed develop their own demands and leadership (eg black or women's causes etc).

We struggle to replace reactionary members of the trade union apparatus with new militant leaders, where possible on our own programme, but in all cases measured against this programme. At the same time we strive to submit these and other leaders to the most direct accountability to their members by promoting the greatest possible democracy within the unions. This democracy serves a dual function. It is the only effective vehicle for the creative initiative of the rank and file and its willingness to fight. And it is the best hope the members have of controlling their union officials, and at the same time the surest obstacle to the bonds that develop between those officials and the bosses' state. We see this democracy as a forerunner of the workers' democracy essential to a healthy workers' state, where the workers, collectively owning the means of life, submit the resources under their control to a democratic and rational plan.

Great upsurge

The appearance recently of great actions of working class initiative (occupations, flying pickets, moves toward a general strike) taken together with the fact that a great number of industry-wide strikes have been official (docks, building industry, mines, hospitals, post office and engineering) shows both the immense upsurge of working class militancy and the continued ability of the trade union bureaucracy for the most part to act as a brake on it, sometimes to defeat it, and in general to ride it out.

The simultaneous appearance of enlarged, better equipped and specialised bodies of the state aimed at strike-breaking and picket busting have a double significance. They express on the one hand the ruling class's lack of confidence in the ability of their agents in the trade union hierarchy to control the ever more militant membership, and also its willingness if necessary to bypass the hierarchy and act directly, armed to the teeth and backed up by redefined and revamped legal machinery.

Our struggle must be fought on a clear understanding of the character of the trade union movement and its relation to the rest of the working class. Failure to do so will mean a re-enactment of the past mistakes, either in the form of kow-towing to the bureaucracy and under-estimating the power of the rank and file, or on the other hand of failing to become relevant to the ordinary worker. Such mistakes led in the past to tragedies, and will lead to nothing but a shameful farce if they are repeated in the future.



Mass pickets at Saltley Coke depot. Union leaders strive to dampen such actions

Photo Sid West

WE FIGHT FOR THE UNITY OF THE WORKING CLASS

- a) 100% trade unionism.
- b) For links across unions for the development of industry-wide organisations representing the broadest sections of the working class, e.g. trades councils with representation from the unemployed, tenants and students, but most important, direct representation of factory committees and other shop floor organisations

For unity in the struggle for better wages and conditions

- c) For priority to flat-rate increases giving an adequate basic rate which will make overtime and bonuses unnecessary.
- d) Against all productivity deals, job evaluation, work study, and all techniques aimed at strengthening the employers' power. Against any 'selling' of jobs or conditions in return for wage increases. We are certainly not opposed to technological progress: but we demand that it be used to improve workers' conditions, not to bring redundancies and speed-up or other intensification of work.

For the unity of the employed and unemployed

- e) Work or full pay.
- f) Unionisation of the unemployed, and their representation on Trades Councils and in the TUC.
- g) Unemployed members keeping union cards to be given full rights within that union.
- h) Decasualisation — guaranteed minimum earnings for every job for every week of the year at no less than the minimum wage; against lump labour.



End isolation of the unemployed!

For the unity of the organised and unorganised

- i) National basic minimum wage of £30 per week.
- j) A 30-hour week, four weeks' paid holidays, voluntary retirement at 60 with full pension.
- k) A rising scale of wages to be related to the cost of living index as computed by committees of workers and housewives
- l) For a substantial increase in state benefits (old age pensions, unemployment benefit, family allowances, student grants etc) and for these additionally to rise with any rise in the cost of living.
- m) No redundancies: cut the hours, not the jobs, with no loss of pay.
- n) For the rights of all workers to unionise and engage in strike action.
- o) For democratic rights within the armed forces and the police, realising the class nature of these bodies.

For international workers' unity

- p) For international links and co-operation between unions, irrespective of political affiliation, but excluding racist unions such as the TUC of South Africa and fascist unions.

What w

fight A PROGRAMME THE RANK

Parts of this 'Programme for the Rank and File Delegate Conference (Birmingham M... the Organising Committee's resolution. V... those amendments. The Programme be... WORKERS FIGHT supporters from differ... our contribution to the discussions at th...

THIS CONFERENCE sets as its aim to assist in organising the working class of Britain for the defence and advancement of its interests. To the extent that the official leadership of the labour movement takes a positive lead in that fight, we will support them. Wherever they fail, hold back or betray, then the rank and file must lead.

We struggle to replace reactionary union

- q) For the establishment of effective Joint Shop Stewards' Committees, on a plant, combine and international basis.
- r) For the support of oppressed peoples fighting imperialism by any means necessary. For self-determination for Ireland and the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland unconditionally.

We fight to drive fascists out of the working class movement altogether, being prepared to engage in a physical struggle against fascism.

WE FIGHT FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS

- a) Against the Industrial Relations Act. Against prices and incomes policies under capitalism. Against any restriction on the right to organise, take industrial action, and picket.
- b) Against any 'social contract' or voluntary wage curbs under capitalism.

WE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE UNIONS

- a) All officials should be elected and subject to constant recall.
- b) All full time officials should be paid the average wage in their industry.
- c) Union policy-making bodies should be comprised of elected lay-officers only.
- d) Election addresses to be circulated unaltered for candidates for all elected positions in the unions.
- e) Any educational qualifications for union office should be abolished.
- f) No member to be disqualified from holding office on political grounds.
- g) Full minutes and voting records of policy-making bodies should be circulated.
- h) No political censorship of the union journal.

National Conference

- i) National delegate conferences should be held annually.
- j) Standing Orders committees should comprise of elected lay members.
- k) No branch block voting.

Appeals Court

Appeals Committees should be comprised of elected lay members only.

Negotiations

- l) No secret negotiations.
- m) Every stage of negotiation should be subject to rank and file ratification at mass meetings.
- n) Mass meetings should never be presented with package deals unless each part of the deal has been voted on separately by the meeting beforehand.

Strikes

- o) 'All strikes in support of trade union principle, work conditions or wages to be made official.
- p) Dispute benefit to be raised by levy of the entire membership when necessary.

Closed Shop

- q) Support of the right of trade unionists to enforce closed shops.

- r) Opposition to the check-off system.
- s) Opposition to employer-policed 'agency shops'.

t) Support of the right for trade unionists to discipline fellow workers who flout democratic decisions.

u) Access to job waiting lists by shop stewards committees. Waiting lists to be on the basis, first applied first employed.

Shop stewards

- v) Opposition to any 'managerial policing' by shop stewards. No participation in management committees intended to keep shop stewards off the shop floor for long periods.
- w) Shop stewards to hold regular report-back meetings. insistence on allocated time for such meetings, especially where there is shift working.

Individual rights

- A) Right of members to criticise union policy.
- B) Right of members to meet unofficially and visit other branches.
- C) Right of members to communicate with the press.
- D) Right of members to write, circularise and/or sell political literature.
- E) Right of appeal direct to Appeals Court.



Art Castings strikers — another struggle by militant immigrants cold shouldered by union officialdom

Photo Sid West

We must fight for

PROGRAMME FOR RANK AND FILE

have been submitted to the First Rank and (30th 1974) in the form of amendments to ask delegates to the Conference to vote for. This programme sums up the ideas and discussions of the rank and file of industries and unions, and is produced as a rank and file programme.

officials with new militant leaders, where possible on our programme. At the same time we strive to submit these and other proposals to the most direct accountability to their members.

We fight to strengthen the circulation and influence of the sponsoring rank and file papers, and to build a strong movement based on militant policies.

FOR A CHARTER OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS, including:

- a) Full trade union equality for women. Equal contributions and equal benefits.
- b) Full equality of pay, conditions, status, grading, training, further education, access to skilled jobs and promotion opportunities.
- c) Equal state benefits.
- d) Abolition of the separate category of women's jobs.
- e) Time allowances for those (usually women) with family responsibilities. Paid leave for women during pregnancy.
- f) Special medical and hygiene facilities where appropriate.
- g) 24-hour free state-run nurseries. Free abortion on demand and free contraception.
- h) To offset the insecurity of seasonal, term-time and other casual and semi-casual employment we demand work or full pay with a guarantee of re-employment.

□□
□□
Opposition to discrimination against homosexuals.

□□
□□

WE FIGHT AGAINST RACIALISM AND RELIGIOUS SECTARIANISM

- a) No discrimination at work or within the unions (including social clubs).
- b) Campaigns to recruit immigrant workers to trade unions (using leaflets in the immigrants' own languages).
- c) Full equality in pay, conditions, status, grading, training and further education, access to skilled jobs and promotion opportunities.
- d) Support for any demands which black or immigrant workers make for educational and special religious rights



(holy day paid leave, religious dress, the wearing of turbans etc).

- e) Support for black caucuses within unions and factories (recognising particularly the importance of the specially close relationship between black and immigrant workers and their communities).
- f) Against all immigration laws and controls or discriminatory legislation.
- g) Opposition to the offshoots of such laws — the contract labour system, voucher system and deportation.
- h) For the physical defence of black workers under attack.
- i) For automatic endorsement of industrial action by black and immigrant workers whether they are in the majority or not.
- j) For an end to the tacit sectarianism which cripples the trade unions in the north of Ireland as organs of the working class. For an end to job allocation on the basis of religious affiliation and at the expense of the oppressed Catholic workers of Northern Ireland. For an end to trade union collusion in this criminal game of dividing our class in Northern Ireland. For a break with organised sectarian bodies like the Loyalist Association of Workers and the Unionist Workers Council. For a trade union campaign against sectarianism in the Northern Ireland trade union movement.

FOR A CHARTER FOR YOUTH, including

- a) An end to the use of apprentices as cheap labour. Forbidding all work for apprentices not connected with the apprenticeship; reduced periods of apprenticeship.
- b) Full trade union rights for young

WORKERS' CONTROL AND NATIONALISATION

Recognising that every factory occupation raises in a practical way the question of who is boss of the factory — capitalist or workers? — and that every militant picket line raises the question of whose law and order shall prevail — capitalists' or workers' — we fight for workers' control.

- a) For the right of effective picketing, including mobile pickets. For the right of workers' self-defence, recognising the class nature of the police and armed forces as a weapon of the capitalists.
- b) For the abolition of business secrecy, giving workers the right to investigate and expose publicly the operations of the capitalists, not just in one branch of industry or firm, but in all their financial

and state connections. To the demand for parliamentary, employers' or 'independent' inquiries into proposals for factory closures, we counterpose the demand for a workers' inquiry.

Further, where hoarding, speculation and crass profiteering drive up prices, we advocate inspection committees which take on powers, based on rank and file action and demanding full legal authority, to regulate distribution in conjunction with price committees and drawing in (and where possible based on) groups of housewives.

- c) For workers' factory inspectorates with full legal powers and full training paid for by the state.
- d) For workers' control over work conditions, over hiring and firing, over the actual aims of production and distribution.
- e) Against all schemes of participation where workers take responsibility for maintaining profitability and capitalist conditions of production.
- f) Recognising that workers' control cannot exist on a serious and stable level while profit remains the chief regulator of the economy, we fight for the nationalisation without compensation of the key branches of industry, finance, transport, distribution and land. This programme should in no case hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the nationalisation of this or that individual enterprise or group of enterprises.

□□
□□
workers, including the right to strike.

- c) Full facilities for young workers to obtain full or part-time education.
- d) The right for young workers unemployed since leaving school to join trade unions and to receive unemployment benefit at the adult rate.

□□
□□

LESSONS WE NEED TO LEARN

THE FIRST World War broke out at a time when the labour movement was making bold steps forward against the employers. Having shaken off the sense of defeat of the first years of the century workers now enlarged their mass organisations, secured many important reforms and, finally, founded the Labour Party — whatever its shortcomings.

Unofficial organisations were strong too. In South Wales the miners' unofficial Reform Committee struggled to reshape the miners' unions. In Sheffield the engineers struggled against conscription and on the Clyde a major struggle by engineers for higher wages was led by an unofficial committee.

For all their great strength these movements also had dangerous weaknesses: a syndicalist prejudice against any and all leaders grew up in response to the prophets of "social peace" and the traitors to the trade union cause who were also its leaders. And there was a strong tendency to localism.

Despite the class-collaborationist war production councils and Whitley committees, the post-war period burned with the fire of class struggle. "Red Clyde", the development of the Shop Stewards' Movement — these were only some of the most important landmarks.



A J Cook, miners' leader

In this post war period there was, despite a continuation of the earlier syndicalism, the localism was giving way to a growing move towards nationwide organisation, both officially and unofficially. The increasingly serious economic situation for capitalism in the first years of the 1920s brought about increased unity on each side of the class divide. The working class's unity found its highest point within the official movement in the Triple Alliance of miners, transport workers and railwaymen.

At this very time, though, a massive 'shakeout' was going on which led by 1921 to unemployment figures of two and a half millions. Because the TUC refused to organise or in any other way relate to these workers, this introduced a dangerous division into the movement.

Triple Alliance

In that year, 1921, the growing unity of the working class received another major setback when the promises and pledges that underlay the Triple Alliance proved to be the usual bureaucratic hot air. But it was not just the miners — who were being threatened by a cut in wages — who were left in the lurch by the railmen's leaders and the transport workers' leaders. It was the whole rank and file of all these sections.

The defeat of the engineers in the lockout of 1922 further set the movement back.

The feeling of defeat even had its effect within the ranks of the young Communist Party. But, shaking off defeatism, it vigorously set about the task of constructing revolutionary minority groups in all sections of industry. Willie Gallacher, a one-time Clydeside shop steward, was charged with the responsibility of forging of these separate minority groups a single national movement.

Minority Movement

The first fruits of these efforts were a Miners' Minority Conference in January 1924 and two metal workers' conferences a little later, one in Manchester and one in Edinburgh. In August 1924 the founding conference of the National Minority Movement itself took place, with 270 delegates representing 200,000 workers.

The timing of the conference was particularly apt — and one hardly needs to draw the parallel with today! — as Labour's first minority government had not long been in power. This conference focussed much of its attention on the battle for rank and file control over the union leaderships in general and the TUC in particular. "The reactionaries desire a General Council which will check and dissipate all advances by the workers", the Conference stated "We of the Minority Movement desire a General Council which will bring into being a bold and audacious General Staff of the trade union movement. ... We

can guard against the General Council becoming a machine of the capitalist... by, in the first place and fundamentally, developing a revolutionary class consciousness among the trade union membership and, in the second place, by so altering the constitution of the General Council as to ensure that those elected thereon have the closest contact with the workers."

The movement's development was somewhat aided by the temporary economic upswing of that and the next year. By March 1926 the Minority Movement had organised some 957,000 members in a variety of different industrial sections each publishing its own newspaper. Most impressive was the number of miners' lodges that were affiliated and the strength of the movement in the furniture and garment trades, particularly among the Jewish immigrant workers in the East End of London.

At this time, however, a right turn in the policies of the Soviet Union and the Communist International became reflected in the positions of the NMM. The Anglo-Russian Committee was used by the left-talking trade union leaders like Hicks, Swales and Purcell as a cover. But the CP was under orders not to offend these leaders as they were performing a function useful to the Soviet Union.



Tanks in London during 1926 General Strike

This opportunist line led directly to the defeat of the General Strike in 1926. The logic of the cover-up for the left fakers was to call for "All Power to the General Council of the TUC", a direct retreat from the previous slogans like "If the leaders won't lead, the rank and file must."

Not long after the General Strike the Minority Movement committee virtual suicide. Once again reflecting, via the Communist International, internal disputes within the Soviet Union, the Communist Party misdirected the Minority Movement. But this time it was fatal. "The Third Period" as this period was called by Stalin, was characterised by the most excessive and criminal sectarianism. Communists left the unions to set up "red" trade unions embracing the Party members and... hardly anyone else. They called for an immediate taking of power by striking workers, who had not even managed to organise proper strike committees.

Although the NMM didn't collapse immediately, it was immediately transformed into a second edition of the Party itself. It distanced itself from the organised working class and retreated into the purely propagandist existence of the pre-1923

period. One of the last statements in the mould of the ideas that had founded the NMM is this from the Docks section: "The Minority Movement is an organisation of militant trade unionists who, realising the extent to which the present leadership have committed themselves and the unions unreservedly to class collaboration, have banded themselves together to restore the original purpose and fighting spirit on which the trade unions were founded, to secure a new leadership with a policy based upon a realisation of the class struggle, and a complete reorganisation of the trade unions on lines that will admit of this policy being given effect to."

Since the decline of the National Minority Movement there have been various attempts to set up rank and file movements on a national level — though in every case without learning the lessons of its predecessor.

ATUA — exclusive brethren

In the late Sixties the Socialist Labour League (today called the Workers Revolutionary Party) announced the formation of the All Trades Union Alliance (ATUA). Refusing to learn from even their own more successful attempts at the end of the Fifties, let alone from the Minority Movement itself, the SLL billed the ATUA as "the industrial wing of the Socialist Labour League".

This was the proud boast of one of its organisers and a justification, as he thought, for the exclusion of workers belonging to any organisation but the League. This was confirmed by the fact that one article in the "statutes" of the ATUA called for support for the Workers Press, the SLL's newspaper. Obviously if you were a member of some other organisation you couldn't agree to that and so... you were out.

LCDTU — nobody move!

The Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) was a different kettle of fish. This time nobody was defined out of the organisation by any statute. Everybody was welcome. Welcome to listen, that is. Welcome to listen, sit still, keep their mouths shut and vote for the resolution. The whole affair had arisen out of the contradiction between the pressure from sections of the Communist Party's industrial base and the fact that the CP is tied to the trade union bureaucracy both practically and ideologically.

At a time when a real national coordination of the rank and file could have been achieved — at the time of the jailing of the dockers in July 1972 — the LCDTU was abjectly silent.



Ricky Tomlinson and Des Warren
LCDTU took months to move

The LCDTU refused to establish any local bases, publish any papers or form anything more than "broad left" election caucuses within the unions. Everything was reduced to the most useless token. It took months and months, for instance, before the question of the Shrewsbury 24 was even taken up by the LCDTU — verbally. It took it up when it felt that the instinct for struggle of the rank and file could be kept in check.

The lessons of the National Minority Movement and these failures are quite simple. We must be prepared to campaign on 'bread and butter' issues. At the same time we must not restrict our idea of policies either to these issues or to ones immediately arising from them. The Minority Movement certainly didn't. "Hands off Russia" was a major issue of that day, and the Minority Movement also made quite plain its support for anti-colonial struggle. In the fifties and early sixties the unilateral disarmament question was made into a key question for the labour movement. The last AUEW Conference pledged the union to a policy of favouring nationalisation with compensation. In fact most union conferences include resolutions on a wide range of political questions.

We can hardly claim to be militants and at the same time fall short of these standards.

We must be wary of any tendency to convert a rank and file movement into the sectarian backyard of a political party, either by "statute" or by bureaucratic manoeuvre.

Lastly we must fight to become not the "minority" but the majority — by sticking to our guns, not deserting them. We could be a majority now if we had no principles, and we could easily become a majority if we guaranteed that our principles weren't going to be taken seriously.

We have to fight to grow on the basis of our principles. There is no other way.

Phoenix pamphlets

THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT AND THE FIGHT FOR A GENERAL STRIKE

11 important articles from Workers Fight, with introduction and appendix. They form an invaluable collection on the history, experience and theory of the General Strike.
29p plus postage (5p) from 98 Gifford Street, London N.1

RACIALISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

Produced to help in the campaign against racism, this 20 page pamphlet takes up the 'reasonable sounding' racist arguments and traces the history of working class racism.
Single copies 10p & postage;
Bulk: 50p for 6, 80p for 12.

WORKERS FIGHT AND THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

Report of the Special Conference on the 4th International held in January 1973.
10p plus 5p postage from W.F., 98 Gifford Street, London N.1

SUBSCRIBE!

- 35 issues, post paid £2
- 17 issues, post paid £1

WORKERS' FIGHT 98 GIFFORD ST, LONDON N.1.