

Red flags torn: a brief sketch of some problems with unions

The '80s have been back in fashion for a while now. It started ironically: a stonewashed denim jacket at a fancy dress party, a "Frankie Says Relax" t-shirt. But like all ironic jokes, it's been taken too far.

As if getting an economy to match our shoes, we now have rising unemployment, attacks on benefits, and public sector pay cuts. And as it obviously didn't matter who got in, we thought a Tory government would complete the look with the Labour Party back as the defenders of the poor, even using phrases like "working class" again.

We all know that any fightback will not come from the Labour Party (or any other party); it'll be from workers, public service users, parents, pensioners, students, the unemployed. If we see a mass working class fightback, we can expect the trade union leaders to be there, at the rallies and demonstrations, urging us forward.

But looking at the struggles of the past few years, should this fill us with confidence? Are these union leaders behind us?

Some recent defeats and 'almonds'

In 2009, Visteon factories in London and Belfast were occupied. After dragging its heels and giving poor legal advice, Unite encouraged workers to leave the occupied factories.

Eventually a deal was done behind closed doors and the union recommended acceptance of a partial offer that left the crucial issue of pensions untouched.

In 2008, strikes were prepared across the public sector. Workers in Unison, NUT and PCS all took action against the government's 2% pay-cap, sometimes even on the same day.

After only two days of strike action Unison, the biggest of the three unions, took its dispute to ACAS. The arbitrating body's decision being legally binding, this effectively removed its members from the dispute. The other unions soon followed suit.

In 2007, as the government threatened 40,000 job cuts at Royal Mail and attacked pay and pensions, wildcat strikes spread across Britain with postal workers refusing to cross each others' picket lines.

The CWU soon called off all action to enter 'meaningful negotiations' which lasted weeks and came to no firm conclusion.

Demoralised and demobilised posties accepted an agreement basically unchanged from the first one.

But the CWU declared victory: they were guaranteed a 'consultation' role in the cuts.

These are just some examples; you can pick many more from recent and not-so-recent history. And they all raise the question: why are our unions so bad at what we expect them to do? Not being a force for revolution or anything, but bog-standard, Ronseal-advert, doing-what-it-says-on-the-tin, fighting for their members' interests.

Union troubles, outside and in..

Trade union officials will blame the membership, saying they don't want to fight. This might be true sometimes but didn't the wildcatting posties want to fight? The Visteon workers, after occupying their factories, didn't want to fight? There's more going on than just the 'workers aren't up for it'...

It's not all the unions' fault. Since the Thatcher years we've seen so many new laws restricting strike action that British industrial relations legislation is amongst the most anti-worker in the developed world.

Where once wildcat strikes and secondary picketing were common, now they are a rarity. Even things like forcing ballots to be done in secret, posted from home, where workers can't sense the solidarity of their workmates, is

intended to discourage militant action.

But there's a problem with this argument too. These laws were pushed through as a result of working class defeat, a defeat that the unions were complicit in. Unions had been disciplining their members for decades before these laws were even a twinkle in Thatcher's eye.

Whether it be NUM official Will Lawther's 1947 call to prosecute wildcatting miners "even if there are 50,000 or 100,000 of them" or the UPW slapping members with fines totalling £1,000 and threatening expulsion from the union (thus losing their jobs, as it was a closed shop) for refusing to handle post during the 1977 Grunwick strike, one thing seen time and again is union leaders moving against the militant action of their members. Putting it down to legislation passed in the last 20-30 years does nothing to explain such actions before then.

Bureaucrats

So the problems aren't just external: we can't just act like proud parents and say they fell in with a bad crowd.

The fact is the unions have come to resemble the companies we expect them to fight with highly paid executive decision makers, a downward chain-of-command and a career ladder that goes beyond the union and into the halls of social democratic governing institutions (think-tanks, Labour Party etc). Such a structure needs people to fill it: bureaucrats, who by definition are separate from the lives of the workers they represent. This is true even of former shopfloor militants.

Having left the workplace, their everyday experiences are not the same as those they used to work alongside. Their priorities and, more importantly, their material interests are not the same.

A victory for a worker means an improvement in working conditions; a victory for a bureaucrat means a seat at the negotiating table. But this seat for the bureaucrat doesn't necessarily mean any improvement for the worker, as the CWU's consultation 'victory' proves.

To say union bureaucrats have different priorities and interests is not just spite. It's to underline that it's not about them being "baddies." Many committed militants become union officials because they want to be employed spreading struggle rather than just working for some arsehole boss. But the trouble is that 'struggle' and 'the union' are not the same thing and spreading the latter does not mean encouraging the former.

This has always been the case. The contradiction between workers and union bureaucrats has been going on in the UK for over a century. One such example was with the anarchist John Turner, an unpaid leader of the United Shop Assistants Union for seven years who in 1898 became a paid national organiser, travelling up and down the country recruiting to the union.

Though it grew massively, Turner had also started to change his approach. As conflicts flared up so would branches of the union; but as conflicts died down so did the branches. To keep a stable membership, he introduced sickness and unemployment benefits as perks of union membership.

The plan worked. A stable membership was established and by 1910 the Shop Assistants Union was the biggest in the London area. But the nature of the union had changed.

And even if Turner couldn't see it, the workers could. The union bureaucracy became seen by many as an interference with local initiative and in 1909 Turner was accused of playing the "role of one of the most blatant reactionaries with which the Trades Union movement was ever cursed".

The tragedy of John Turner¹ is not as simple as him 'selling out'; he remained an anarchist to

the day he died. But as a full-time organiser paid by the union his priority began to be perpetuating the union rather than organising conflicts and soon his union was no different from the other unions.

This is because in the eyes of a trade union official, the union is not just the means to encourage struggle but the means through which struggle itself happens. Building the union is top priority and stopping things which get the union in trouble (like unofficial action) take on the utmost importance; after all, if the workers get the union into too much trouble, how will struggle happen?

Of course, an individual can take on a full-time union job and concentrate on organising conflicts rather than just recruitment.

But full-timers aren't freelancers, their bosses (the union they work for), like any other boss, needs to see results. And 'results' doesn't mean class conflict, it means membership recruitment and retention. Because without members, official trade unionism can't do what it most needs to.

Meeting employers half-way

Criticisms of the bureaucratic nature of the trade unions are not uncommon on the far-left. Many conclude that we need to democratise or 'reclaim' the existing unions, while others more radically conclude that we need new unions, controlled by the rank and file.

However, this misses the point about what bureaucracies are and why they happen. Unions don't play this role because they're bureaucratic, they're bureaucratic because of the role they play. That is, they try to mediate the conflict between workers and their bosses. The primary way this happens is through monopolising the right to negotiate conditions on behalf of the workforce.

What is crucial when trying to do this is maintaining as high a membership as possible, regardless of how detached from the workplace such a union becomes. As union density drops generally, unions solve this problem with endless mergers as high membership figures help maintain their influence with management (not to mention the TUC and the Labour Party).

If a union is to secure its place as the negotiator in the workplace, it not only has to win the support of its members but also show bosses that they can get the workforce back to work once an agreement is reached.

By having membership figures which they can point at to make sure management recognise them as the body able to negotiate wages and conditions, unions are also able to use this position to retain and attract members.

Equally, this influence with the workforce is what's useful to management. Union bureaucrats offer stability in the workplace, diverting workers' anger into a complex world of employment law, grievance procedures and casework forms.

As Buzz Hargrove, leader of the militant Canadian Auto Workers union, wrote in his autobiography: "Good unions work to defuse [workers'] anger – and they do it effectively. Without unions, there would be anarchy in the workplace. Strikes would be commonplace, and confrontation and violence would increase. Poor-quality workmanship, low productivity, increased sick time, and absenteeism would be the preferred form of worker protest.

"By and large, unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of worker resistance. If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that union leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes."

The legal restrictions on unions mentioned earlier are often called "anti-union" laws. However when looked at like this, it becomes apparent that these laws are not so much anti-union as anti-worker.

If anything, it strengthens the union's hand by giving it a total monopoly on all legally recognised (and therefore protected) forms of action.

The same laws which help employers maintain order in the workplace can also be seen helping the union maintain its half of the bargain with the employers.

As a result, pro-union radicals often propose the 'wink and nod' strategy: that is, the union officially saying "come on, back to work, the union doesn't condone this..." while giving a sly little wink while the boss isn't looking.

But if bosses don't think a union can keep up its end of the bargain then they won't recognise them as negotiating "partners." Why would they? Why would anyone repeatedly reach an agreement with someone else if they knew that person wouldn't uphold their side of the bargain?

In order to function as representatives of the workforce, unions have to play by the rules including, where necessary, policing the workforce and directing militancy into the "proper channels." The anti-strike laws reinforce this pressure by threatening unions with financial ruin if they don't rein in legally unprotected actions.

This is where the pressure to discipline members comes from. It's not a question of the right leaders with the right politics or of having the right principles written down in a constitution. It's not about individuals, it's about how structures work to fulfil their needs.

From John Turner through to today via the French CGT, American CIO, Polish Solidarnosc and countless others, unions have turned, through their role as mediators, away from their origins as expressions of class anger and into organisations disciplining the working class against its own interests.

Notably, the unions that avoided this fate are those that adopted explicitly revolutionary perspectives and consciously refused to play a mediating role, such as the Spanish CNT's refusal to participate in works councils and union elections².

So what then?

This article is just the start of a wider criticism of unions. But where unions seek to act as mediators and representatives they necessitate the creation of bureaucracies to take on this task and bureaucrats, separated as they are from workers' lives, have different interests from them. They need primarily to maintain their seat at the negotiating table.

Therefore it's no surprise that where gains have been made (even within a union framework) it has been through the threat or actuality of unmediated direct action: from the Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes to the wildcat-prone refuse workers of Brighton to the solidarity of truck drivers not crossing Shell truckers' picket lines.

These strikes, which ended in unqualified victories for the workers, pushed the boundaries of trade union action, breaking anti-strike laws and taking place outside the official union structures (even if organised by lay-reps at local union level).

Our task is to encourage this sort of independent activity, to encourage the control of struggles through workplace meetings of all workers affected (regardless of union affiliation) and to encourage the use of direct action to get results.

These should be the guiding principles for us in workplace organising. Leave 'reclaiming the unions' to the Trots, they can build career ladders for bureaucrats. If union density is what creates militancy then the UK (at 27%) would be far more militant than France (8%). Clearly this is not the case.

We're done building new bureaucracies; we need to take action without them.

1. More on John Turner can be found in *The slow burning fuse - the last history of the British anarchists* by John Quail, some of which is online on libcom.org

2. There is of course much to be said about the representative role which the leadership of the CNT took in the Spanish Civil War and the negative effects which this had

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