

Trade Unionism

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How must the working class fight capitalism in order to win? This is the all important question facing the workers every day. What efficient means of action, what tactics can they use to conquer power and defeat the enemy? No science, no theory, could tell them exactly what to do. But spontaneously and instinctively, by feeling out, by sensing the possibilities, they found their ways of action. And as capitalism grew and conquered the earth and increased its power, the power of the workers also increased. New modes of action, wider and more efficient, came up beside the old ones. It is evident that with changing conditions, the forms of action, the tactics of the class struggle have to change also. Trade unionism is the primary form of labour movement in fixed capitalism. The isolated worker is powerless against the capitalistic employer. To overcome this handicap, the workers organise into unions. The union binds the workers together into common action, with the strike as their weapon. Then the balance of power is relatively equal, or is sometimes even heaviest on the side of the workers, so that the isolated small employer is weak against the mighty union. Hence in developed capitalism trade unions and employers' unions (Associations, Trusts, Corporations, etc.), stand as fighting powers against each other.

Trade unionism first arose in England, where industrial capitalism first developed. Afterward it spread to other countries, as a natural companion of capitalist industry. In the United States there were very special conditions. In the beginning, the abundance of free unoccupied land, open to settlers, made for a shortage of workers in the towns and relatively high wages and good conditions. The American Federation of Labour became a power in the country, and generally was able to uphold a relatively high standard of living for the workers who were organised in its unions.

It is clear that under such conditions the idea of overthrowing capitalism could not for a moment arise in the minds of the workers. Capitalism offered them a sufficient and fairly secure living. They did not feel themselves a separate class whose interests were hostile to the existing order; they were part of it; they were conscious of partaking in all the possibilities of an ascending capitalism in a new continent. There was room for millions of people, coming mostly from Europe. For these increasing millions of farmers, a rapidly increasing industry was necessary, where, with energy and good luck, workmen could rise to become free artisans, small business men, even rich capitalists. It is natural that here a true capitalist spirit prevailed in the working class.

The same was the case in England. Here it was due to England's monopoly of world commerce and big industry, to the lack of competitors on the foreign markets, and to the possession of rich colonies, which brought enormous wealth to England. The capitalist class had no need to fight for its profits and could allow the workers a reasonable living. Of course, at first, fighting was necessary to urge this truth upon them; but then they could allow unions and grant wages in exchange for industrial peace. So here also the working class was imbued with the capitalist spirit.

Now this is entirely in harmony with the innermost character of trade unionism. Trade unionism is an action of the workers, which does not go beyond the limit of capitalism. Its aim is not to replace capitalism by another form of production, but to secure good living conditions within capitalism. Its character is not revolutionary, but conservative.

Certainly, trade union action is class struggle. There is a class antagonism in capitalism -- capitalists and workers have opposing interests. Not only on the question of conservation of capitalism, but also within capitalism itself, with regard to the division of the total product. The capitalists attempt to increase their profits, the surplus value, as much as possible, by cutting down wages and increasing the hours or the intensity of labour. On the other hand, the workers attempt to increase their wages and to shorten their hours of work.

The price of labour power is not a fixed quantity, though it must exceed a certain hunger minimum; and it is not paid by the capitalists of their own free will. Thus this antagonism becomes the object of a contest, the real class struggle. It is the task, the function of the trade unions to carry on this fight.

Trade unionism was the first training school in proletarian virtue, in solidarity as the spirit of organised fighting. It embodied the first form of proletarian organised power. In the early English and American trade unions this virtue often petrified and degenerated into a narrow craft-corporation, a true capitalistic state of mind. It was different, however, where the workers had to fight for their very existence, where the utmost efforts of their unions could hardly uphold their standard of living, where the full force of an energetic, fighting, and expanding capitalism attacked them. There they had to learn the wisdom that only the revolution could definitely save them.

So there comes a disparity between the working class and trade unionism. The working class has to look beyond capitalism. Trade unionism lives entirely within capitalism and cannot look beyond it. Trade unionism can only represent a part, a necessary but narrow part, in the class struggle. And it develops aspects which bring it into conflict with the greater aims of the working class.

With the growth of capitalism and big industry the unions too must grow. They become big corporations with thousands of members, extending over the whole country, with sections in every town and every factory. Officials must be appointed: presidents, secretaries, treasurers, to conduct the affairs, to manage the finances, locally and centrally. They are the leaders, who negotiate with the capitalists and who by this practice have acquired a special skill. The president of a union is a big shot, as big as the capitalist employer himself, and he discusses with him, on equal terms, the interests of his members. The officials are specialists in trade union work, which the members, entirely occupied by their factory work, cannot judge or direct themselves.

So large a corporation as a union is not simply an assembly of single workers; it becomes an organised body, like a living organism, with its own policy, its own character, its own mentality, its own traditions, its own functions. It is a body with its own interests, which are separate from the interests of the working class. It has a will to live and to fight for its existence. If it should come to pass that unions were no longer necessary for the workers, then they would not simply disappear. Their funds, their members, and their officials: all of these are realities that will not disappear at once, but continue their existence as elements of the organisation.

The union officials, the labour leaders, are the bearers of the special union interests. Originally workmen from the shop, they acquire, by long practice at the head of the organisation, a new social character. In each social group, once it is big enough to form a special group, the nature of its work moulds and determines its social character, its mode of thinking and acting. The officials' function is entirely different from that of the workers. They do not work in factories, they are not exploited by capitalists, their existence is not threatened continually by unemployment. They sit in offices, in fairly secure positions. They have to manage corporation affairs and to speak at workers meetings and discuss with employers. Of course, they have to stand for the workers, and to defend their interests and wishes against the capitalists. This is, however, not very different from the position of the lawyer who, appointed secretary of an organisation, will stand for its members and defend their interests to the full of his capacity.

However, there is a difference. Because many of the labour leaders came from the ranks of workers, they have experienced for themselves what wage slavery and exploitation means. They feel as members of the working class and the proletarian spirit often acts as a strong tradition in them. But the new reality of their life continually tends to weaken this tradition. Economically they are not proletarians any more. They sit in conferences with the capitalists, bargaining over wages and hours, pitting interests against interests, just as the opposing interests of the capitalist corporations are weighed one against another. They learn to understand the capitalist's position just as well as the worker's position; they have an eye for "the needs of industry"; they try to mediate. Personal exceptions occur, of course, but as a rule they cannot have that elementary class feeling of the workers, who do not understand and weigh capitalist interests against their own, but will fight for their proper interests. Thus they get into conflict with the workers.

The labour leaders in advanced capitalism are numerous enough to form a special group or class with a special class character and interests. As representatives and leaders of the unions they embody the character and the interests of the unions. The unions are necessary elements of capitalism, so the leaders feel necessary too, as useful citizens in capitalist society. The capitalist function of unions is to regulate class conflicts and to secure industrial peace. So labour leaders see it as their duty as citizens to work for industrial peace and mediate in conflicts. The test of the union lies entirely within capitalism; so labour leaders do not look beyond it. The instinct of self-preservation, the will of the unions to live and to fight for existence, is embodied in the will of the labour leaders to fight for the existence of the unions. Their own existence is indissolubly connected with the existence of the unions. This is not meant in a petty sense, that they only think of their personal jobs when fighting for the unions. It means that primary necessities of life and social functions determine opinions. Their whole life is concentrated in the unions, only here have they a task. So the most necessary organ of society, the only source of security and power is to them the unions; hence they must be preserved and defended by all possible means, even when the realities of capitalist society undermine this position. This happens when capitalism's expansion class conflicts become sharper.

The concentration of capital in powerful concerns and their connection with big finance renders the position of the capitalist employers much stronger than the workers'. Powerful industrial magnates reign as monarchs over large masses of workers; they keep them in absolute subjection and do not allow "their" men to go into unions. Now and then the heavily exploited wage slaves break out in revolt, in a big strike. They hope to enforce better terms, shorter hours, more humane conditions, the right to organise. Union organisers come to aid them. But then the capitalist masters use their social and political power. The strikers are driven from their homes; they are shot by militia or hired thugs; their spokesmen are railroaded into jail; their relief actions are prohibited by court injunctions. The capitalist press denounces their cause as disorder, murder and revolution; public opinion is aroused against them. Then, after months of standing firm and of heroic suffering, exhausted by misery and disappointment, unable to make a dent on the ironclad capitalist structure, they have to submit and to postpone their claims to more opportune times.

In the trades where unions exist as mighty organisations, their position is weakened by this same concentration of capital. The large funds they had collected for strike support are insignificant in comparison to the money power of their adversaries. A couple of lock-outs may completely drain them. No matter how hard the capitalist employer presses upon the worker by cutting wages and intensifying their hours of labour, the union cannot wage a fight. When contracts have to be renewed, the union feels itself the weaker party. It has to accept the bad terms the capitalists offer; no skill in bargaining avails. But now the trouble with the rank and file

members begins. The men want to fight; they will not submit before they have fought; and they have not much to lose by fighting. The leaders, however, have much to lose -- the financial power of the union, perhaps its existence. They try to avoid the fight, which they consider hopeless. They have to convince the men that it is better to come to terms. So, in the final analysis, they must act as spokesmen of the employers to force the capitalists' terms upon the workers. It is even worse when the workers insist on fighting in opposition to the decision of the unions. Then the union's power must be used as a weapon to subdue the workers.

So the labour leader has become the slave of his capitalistic task of securing industrial peace -- now at the cost of the workers, though he meant to serve them as best he could. He cannot look beyond capitalism, and within the horizon of capitalism with a capitalist outlook, he is right when he thinks that fighting is of no use. To criticise him can only mean that trade unionism stands here at the limit of its power.

Is there another way out then? Could the workers win anything by fighting? Probably they will lose the immediate issue of the fight; but they will gain something else. By not submitting without having fought, they rouse the spirit of revolt against capitalism. They proclaim a new issue. But here the whole working class must join in. To the whole class, to all their fellow workers, they must show that in capitalism there is no future for them, and that only by fighting, not as a trade union, but as a united class, they can win. This means the beginning of a revolutionary struggle. And when their fellow workers understand this lesson, when simultaneous strikes break out in other trades, when a wave of rebellion goes over the country, then in the arrogant hearts of the capitalists there may appear some doubt as to their omnipotence and some willingness to make concessions.

The trade union leader does not understand this point of view, because trade unionism cannot reach beyond capitalism. He opposes this kind of fight. Fighting capitalism in this way means at the same time rebellion against the trade unions. The labor leader stands beside the capitalist in their common fear of the workers' rebellion.

When the trade unions fought against the capitalist class for better working conditions, the capitalist class hated them, but it had not the power to destroy them completely. If the trade unions would try to raise all the forces of the working class in their fight, the capitalist class would persecute them with all its means. They may see their actions repressed as rebellion, their offices destroyed by militia, their leaders thrown in jail and fined, their funds confiscated. On the other hand, if they keep their members from fighting, the capitalist class may consider them as valuable institutions, to be preserved and protected, and their leaders as deserving citizens. So the trade unions find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea; on the one side persecution, which is a tough thing to bear for people who meant to be peaceful citizens; on the other side, the rebellion of the members, which may undermine the unions. The capitalist class, if it is wise, will recognize that a bit of sham fighting must be allowed to uphold the influence of the labor leaders over the members.

The conflicts arising here are not anyone's fault; they are an inevitable consequence of capitalist development. Capitalism exists, but it is at the same time on the way to ruin. It must be fought as a living thing, and at the same time, as a transitory thing. The workers must wage a steady fight for wages and working conditions, while at the same time communistic ideas, more or less clear and conscious, awaken in their minds. They cling to the unions, feeling that these are still necessary, trying now and then to transform them into better fighting institutions. But the spirit of trade unionism, which is in its pure form a capitalist spirit, is not in the workers. The divergence between these two tendencies in capitalism and in the class struggle appears now as a rift between the trade union spirit, mainly embodied in their leaders, and the growing revolutionary feeling of the members. This rift becomes apparent in the opposite positions they take on various important social and political questions.

Trade unionism is bound to capitalism; it has its best chances to obtain good wages when capitalism flourishes. So in times of depression it must hope that prosperity will be restored, and it must try to further it. To the workers as a class, the prosperity of capitalism is not at all important. When it is weakened by crisis or depression, they have the best chance to attack it, to strengthen the forces of the revolution, and to take the first steps towards freedom.

Capitalism extends its dominion over foreign continents, seizing their natural treasures in order to make big profits. It conquers colonies, subjugates the primitive population and exploits them, often with horrible cruelties. The working class denounces colonial exploitation and opposes it, but trade unionism often supports colonial politics as a way to capitalist prosperity.

With the enormous increases of capital in modern times, colonies and foreign countries are being used as places in which to invest large sums of capital. They become valuable possessions as markets for big industry and as producers of raw materials. A race for getting colonies, a fierce conflict of interests over the dividing up of the world arises between the great capitalist states. In these politics of imperialism the middle classes are whirled along in a common exaltation of national greatness. Then the trade unions side with the master class, because they consider the prosperity of their own national capitalism to be dependent on its success in the imperialist struggle. For the working class, imperialism means increasing power and brutality of their exploiters.

These conflicts of interests between the national capitalisms explode into wars. World war is the crowning of the policy of imperialism. For the workers, war is not only the destruction of all their feelings of international brotherhood, it also means the most violent exploitation of their class for capitalist profit. The working class, as the most numerous and the most oppressed class of society, has to bear all the horrors of war. The workers have to give not only their labour power, but also their health and their lives.

Trade unions, however, in war must stand upon the side of the capitalist. Its interests are bound up with national capitalism, the victory of which it must wish with all its heart. Hence it assists in arousing strong national feelings and national hatred. It helps the capitalist class to drive the workers into war and to beat down all opposition.

Trade unionism abhors communism. Communism takes away the very basis of its existence. In communism, in the absence of capitalist employers, there is no room for the trade union and labour leaders. It is true that in countries with a strong socialist movement, where the bulk of the workers are socialists, the labour leaders must be socialists too, by origin as well as by environment. But then they are right-wing socialists; and their socialism is restricted to the idea of a commonwealth where instead of greedy capitalists honest labour leaders will manage industrial production.

Trade unionism hates revolution. Revolution upsets all the ordinary relations between capitalists and workers. In its violent clashings, all those careful tariff regulations are swept away; in the strife of its gigantic forces the modest skill of the bargaining labour leaders loses its value. With all its power, trade unionism opposes the ideas of revolution and communism.

This opposition is not without significance. Trade unionism is a power in itself. It has considerable funds at its disposal, as material element of power. It has its spiritual influence, upheld and propagated by its periodical papers as mental element of power. It is a power in the hands of leaders, who make use of it wherever the special interests of trade unions come into conflict with the revolutionary interests of the working class. Trade unionism, though built up by the workers and consisting of workers, has turned into a power over and above the workers, just as government is a power over and above the people.

The forms of trade unionism are different for different countries, owing to the different forms of development in capitalism. Nor do they always remain the same in every country. When they seem to be slowly dying away, the fighting spirit of the workers is sometimes able to transform them, or to build up new types of unionism. Thus in England, in the years 1880-90, the "new unionism" sprang up from the masses of poor dockers and the other badly paid, unskilled workers, bringing a new spirit into the old craft unions. It is a consequence of capitalist development, that in founding new industries and in replacing skilled labour by machine power, it accumulates large bodies of unskilled workers, living in the worst of conditions. Forced at last into a wave of rebellion, into big strikes, they find the way to unity and class consciousness. They mould unionism into a new form, adapted to a more highly developed capitalism. Of course, when afterwards capitalism grows to still mightier forms, the new unionism cannot escape the fate of all unionism, and then it produces the same inner contradictions.

The most notable form sprang up in America, in the "Industrial Workers of the World." The I.W.W. originated from two forms of capitalist expansion. In the enormous forests and plains of the West, capitalism reaped the natural riches by Wild West methods of fierce and brutal exploitation; and the worker-adventurers responded with as wild and jealous a defence. And in the eastern states new industries were founded upon the exploitation of millions of poor immigrants, coming from countries with a low standard of living and now subjected to sweatshop labour or other most miserable working conditions.

Against the narrow craft spirit of the old unionism, of the A.F. of L., which divided the workers of one industrial plant into a number of separate unions, the I.W.W. put the principle: all workers of one factory, as comrades against one master, must form one union, to act as a strong unity against the employer. Against the multitude of often jealous and bickering trade unions, the I.W.W. raised the slogan: one big union for all the workers. The fight of one group is the cause of all. Solidarity extends over the entire class. Contrary to the haughty disdain of the well-paid old American skilled labour towards the unorganised immigrants, it was these worst-paid proletarians that the I.W.W. led into the fight. They were too poor to pay high fees and build up ordinary trade unions. But when they broke out and revolted in big strikes, it was the I.W.W. who taught them how to fight, who raised relief funds all over the country, and who defended their cause in its papers and before the courts. By a glorious series of big battles it infused the spirit of organisation and self-reliance into the hearts of these masses. Contrary to the trust in the big funds of the old unions, the Industrial Workers put their confidence in the living solidarity and the force of endurance, upheld by a burning enthusiasm. Instead of the heavy stone-masoned buildings of the old unions, they represented the principle of flexible construction, with a fluctuating membership, contracting in time of peace, swelling and growing in the fight itself. Contrary to the conservative capitalist spirit of trade unionism, the Industrial Workers were anti-capitalist and stood for Revolution. Therefore they were persecuted with intense hatred by the whole capitalist world. They were thrown into jail and tortured on false accusations; a new crime was even invented on their behalf: that of "criminal syndicalism."

Industrial unionism alone as a method of fighting the capitalist class is not sufficient to overthrow capitalist society and to conquer the world for the working class. It fights the capitalists as employers on the economic field of production, but it has not the means to overthrow their political stronghold, the state power. Nevertheless, the I.W.W. so far has been the most revolutionary organisation in America. More than any other it contributed to rouse class consciousness and insight, solidarity and unity in the working class, to turn its eyes toward communism, and to prepare its fighting power.

The lesson of all these fights is that against big capitalism, trade unionism cannot win. And if at times it wins, such victories give only temporary relief. And yet, these fights are necessary and must be fought. To the bitter end? -- no, to the better end.

The reason is obvious. An isolated group of workers might be equal to a fight against an isolated capitalist employer. But an isolated group of workers against an employer backed by the whole capitalist class is powerless. And such is the case here: the state power, the money power of capitalism, public opinion of the middle class, excited by the capitalist press, all attack the group of fighting workers.

But does the working class back the strikers? The millions of other workers do not consider this fight as their own cause. Certainly they sympathise, and may often collect money for the strikers, and this may give some relief, provided its distribution is not forbidden by a judge's injunction. But this easygoing sympathy leaves the real fight to the striking group alone. The millions stand aloof, passive. So the fight cannot be won (except in some special cases, when the capitalists, for business reasons, prefer to grant concessions), because the working class does not fight as one undivided unit.

The matter will be different, of course, when the mass of the workers really consider such a contest as directly concerning them; when they find that their own future is at stake. If they go into the fight themselves and extend the strike to other factories, to ever more branches of industry, then the state power, the capitalist power, has to be divided and cannot be used entirely against the separate group of workers. It has to face the collective power of the working class.

Extension of the strike, ever more widely, into, finally, a general strike, has often been advised as a means to avert defeat. But to be sure, this is not to be taken as a truly expedient pattern, accidentally hit upon, and ensuring victory. If such were the case, trade unions certainly would have made use of it repeatedly as regular tactics. It cannot be proclaimed at will by union leaders, as a simple tactical measure. It must come forth from the deepest feelings of the masses, as the expression of their spontaneous initiative, and this is aroused only when the issue of the fight is or grows larger than a simple wage contest of one group. Only then will the workers put all their force, their enthusiasm, their solidarity, their power of endurance into it.

And all these forces they will need. For capitalism also will bring into the field stronger forces than before. It may have been defeated and taken by surprise by the unexpected exhibition of proletarian force and thus have made concessions. But then, afterwards, it will gather new forces out of the deepest roots of its power and proceed to win back its position. So the victory of the workers is neither lasting nor certain. There is no clear and open road to victory; the road itself must be hewn and built through the capitalist jungle at the cost of immense efforts.

But even so, it will mean great progress. A wave of solidarity has gone through the masses, they have felt the immense power of class unity, their self-confidence is raised, they have shaken off the narrow group egotism. Through their own deeds they have acquired new wisdom: what capitalism means and how they stand as a class against the capitalist class. They have seen a glimpse of their way to freedom.

Thus the narrow field of trade union struggle widens into the broad field of class struggle. But now the workers themselves must change. They have to take a wider view of the world. From their trade, from their work within the factory walls, their mind must widen to encompass society as a whole. Their spirit must rise above the petty things around them. They have to face the state; they enter the realm of politics. The problems of revolution must be dealt with.