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In Place of Compromise

Why we need a Rank and File Movement

Anarchist Workers Group

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Why we need a Rank and File Movement
October 1988

Retrieved on 15th October 2021 from zabalazabooks.net
*First published by the Anarchist Workers Group, October 1988,
Huddersfield, England. Outdated contact details have been removed.*

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“The workers’ power rests upon the circumstance that it is they who keep the wheels of industry turning round... It is by organising the workers’ power of numbers, in the place where that power can be applied most successfully, namely in industry, that we will be able to break the power of the employers and their puppet government.”

W. Gallagher
Direct Action

By direct action we also mean workers running their own struggles themselves rather than relying on the mediation of state-sponsored arbitration bodies, the courts, parliament, or indeed the professional negotiators of the TUC. For us, direct action is the only means consistent with the self-emancipation of the working class.

Every struggle has the potential for workers to rediscover and exercise their collective power to affect social change. Today the back-peddling of the union leaders in the face of the Tory offensive means that the rank and file will have to fight tooth and nail to realise this potential. For anarchists today, just as for the rank and file fighters of the past, winning control over their own struggles is just the beginning for workers:

“Every fight for, and victory won... will... assist them to see that so long as shareholders are permitted to continue their ownership, or the state administers on behalf of the shareholders, slavery and oppression are bound to be the rule in industry. And with this realisation, the age-long oppression of Labour will draw to its end.”

The Miners Next Step

The TUC’s response to the economic crisis, the Tory’s anti-union laws, and a succession of defeats for the Labour Movement (the Miner’s Great Strike and Wapping among them) has been to reject the ‘out-dated notion’ of the class war between workers and employers, and embrace New Realism as the way forward.

The regeneration of British Capitalism is seen as a precondition for any future working class gains: the interests of the workers are linked with those of the bosses. This inevitably leads to endless compromise and sell outs.

This is nothing new. The militant Syndicalist miners in their 1912 pamphlet ‘The Miners Next step’ urged that:

“The old policy of identity of interests between employers and ourselves be abolished and a policy of open hostility be installed”.

But the TUC leadership will not do this for us. We must do it for ourselves. This pamphlet outlines how.

Introduction

On Thursday May 12th, 1988 the leaders of the National Union of Seafarers (NUS) called off all solidarity action with the P&O strikers at Dover, thus leaving them to fight on alone. At one point, the NUS executive had locked ballot papers for a national strike in a safe after the courts had declared the ballot illegal. The majority in favour of a national strike is believed to have been 2:1. The only alternative the union’s leaders could come up with was to look to the bosses of another company for a solution to the strike – SEALINK, the company that took the union to court in the first place! From TUC boss Norman Willis down to members of the Dover port committee, the union officials took up the slogan ‘Sail Safe, Sail Sealink!’.

Within weeks a fire on board the Sealink vessel 'Seafreight Free-way' which killed one engineer made a mockery of their words.

This debacle is just one more episode in a series of capitulations by the trade union bureaucracies, which have left the workers' movement severely weakened, and apparently more than ever at mercy of the boss class and their Tory government.

The most striking feature of recent industrial struggles has been the way in which the ruling class has attempted, and largely succeeded, in using the power of the bureaucracies within the trade unions to its own advantage. Gone is the 'Social Contract' of the 1974-79 Labour government, which fell to pieces in the 1978-79 'Winter of Discontent'. That surge of resistance on the part of the working class was to end in setback. The lack of a viable alternative to the class-collaborationism of the official labour movement led to the coming to power of the most reactionary Tory government since the Second World War.

The strategy of this government has been to use the law to force the union bureaucracies into policing their members. Full-time officials, afraid of seeing the funds which pay their wages sequestered by the state, have not only refused to mobilise solidarity with other sections of workers, but have repeatedly stabbed their own members in the back. Yet in 1972, Heath's anti-union laws were broken by a wave of strikes and the threat of a general strike to free the jailed dockers in Pentonville.

In this pamphlet we concentrate on three of the major struggles that have taken place under Thatcher: at Warrington; during the 1984/5 Miners' Strike; and at Wapping. In so doing, we explain why they failed, and what is necessary to turn the tide - demonstrating the difference between bureaucratic methods which led to defeat, and the rank and file strategy that was needed to win. In the main part of the pamphlet, we look at the major rank and file movements that have existed previously in this country [Britain], asserting the need for a similar kind of movement to be built today.

We see rank and file control and working class independence as a vital preparation for the task of bringing about this new social order.

Anarchist ideas gained mass working class influence in the syndicalist movement during the early part of this century. By the 1920's, however, the shock waves that shook Europe in the wake of the Russian Revolution ensured that Leninism became the dominant ideology on the British radical left.

Central to anarchism are certain principle ideas such as anti-statism, direct action and workers self-management, ideas which are disposable in the Leninist tradition. If these principles were deeply implanted in the labour movement they would provide a strong source of resistance to the opportunism and electoralism which the Bolshevik parties are prone to. The substitution of bureaucratic manoeuvring in Labour Party wards and union executives for the self-activity of workers in the workplace characterises much of the British left. This tendency away from the rank and file has led to Stalinists in top union positions behaving no differently to right-wingers. It has led to Militant supporters who have controlled Liverpool City Council and intermittently the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) going to the capitalist courts to defend the interests of the workers. (Note: Militant councillors took the Labour Party to court to prevent suspension of the Liverpool Party, and John McCreadie, CPSA Deputy General Secretary, took his own union to court after the right-wing had forced a re-run of the General Secretary election which McCreadie originally won. Although McCreadie lost the re-run, his attempt to get an interest-free loan from the CPSA to meet his legal fees only served to discredit the left.) Anarchism is by definition anti-state and thus understands that the state machine is not neutral and cannot be used to defend working class interests. Anarchists have always instead argued for workers direct action. As Willie Gallagher, one-time Clyde Workers Committee leader, and later CP member, explained:

campaign (1987 Civil Servants' pay dispute) and all other forms of corporatist propaganda. The starting point for a rank and file movement is what the working class needs: not 'a fair day's wage for a fair day's work' or a bigger share of the profits, but the wages workers need to live on; not 'last in, first out' or better redundancy agreements, but 'no redundancies', or as the National Unemployed Workers Movement used to demand 'Work or Full Maintenance!' (Note: See Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles 1919–1936*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1977.)

The New Realist union leaders who have remained strictly within the law have increasingly opted for campaigns to win public sympathy rather than effective industrial action. These have usually involved moralistic appeals to pity, charity or else the 'national interest'. The slogans 'They Shall Not Starve' and 'Coal: the Nation's Energy Future' which the NUM used in 1984–5 are good examples of the failure to win support on the basis of common class interests. The idea that the Government can be swayed by public opinion rests on an assumption that workers and bosses have something in common. In contrast we stand in the tradition of the syndicalist miners who produced the *Miners Next Step* pamphlet in 1912. They argued for the reconstruction of their union along fighting lines where:

“The old policy of identity of interests between employers and ourselves be abolished and a policy of open hostility be installed.”

The Anarchist Workers Group is therefore committed to creating a political pole of attraction which can tackle the ruling class offensive ideologically. We see the building of a national rank and file movement as inseparable from that of building a strong anarchist workers current in the labour movement. Anarchists want to bring about a society where the working class is itself in control, and where production is managed by councils of workers delegates.

Warrington – the Watershed

At its special Wembly conference in 1982 the TUC committed itself to a position of open defiance of the Tory anti-union laws, promising full support for any union breaking them in the course of a dispute. The test was not long in coming.

At Warrington in 1983 the print union, the National Graphical Association (NGA), came into conflict with aspiring Tory hard man Eddie Shah, owner of the local freesheet the 'Stockport Messenger'. The dispute centred around the introduction of new technology which threatened traditional printing skills. Shah found in the closed shop an obstacle he was determined to smash, and in the Tory employment laws the weapon with which he hoped to do it. When the NGA proposed that a planned new office in Bury should not pay lower rates than Fineward in Stockport, Shah decided to bypass the union. Telling the NGA that the Bury office plan had been shelved, Shah recruited non-union workers willing to scab on an NGA strike.

While the NGA negotiated with Shah, he set up two non-union companies – one to typeset and produce artwork in Bury, the other to print in Warrington. Once they were operating Shah delivered an ultimatum to NGA members in Stockport: they must handle work from the new non-union office in Bury or face the sack.

While the bureaucrats allowed negotiations to drag on, Shah made sure the Warrington press could take over printing all the Messenger titles. By June 1983 he felt secure enough to advertise the Fineward workers' jobs. By July they were on strike, and six pickets stood outside the offices for three months waiting to see what their leaders could come up with. Shah was able to produce his newspapers from scab offices, even though his NUJ journalists refused to hand copy to non-union members. When the journalists stepped up their action Shah issued an injunction against the NUJ.

When further injunctions were issued against the NGA, mass pickets were organised outside the Warrington printworks. Fol-

lowing a 500 strong one day demonstration Shah announced his intention to seek the sequestration of the NGA's assets for contempt of his injunction. This led to a £50,000 fine for contempt. When the intensification of the struggle through further mass picketing, heavier policing and a weekend stoppage of Fleet Street resulted in a £100,000 fine and seizure of the NGA's assets, the TUC dug its heels in and refused to mobilise support.

On November 29th, 4,000 pickets gathered at Warrington, to be dispersed by police using riot control tactics as yet unseen in an industrial dispute. But rather than build on the mass pickets and the discontent in Fleet Street, the NGA bureaucrats suspended the picket. Shah returned to court and secured fines totalling £525,000 for two contempt's of the injunctions.

The NGA responded with a plan for a one-day national print strike, but called it off when the TUC again refused its support. The need for the rank and file to take control and escalate the action unofficially was posed more sharply than ever. But here the NGA came up against the contradictions of its own sectional nature. Organised in a highly successful closed shop, NGA members had no experience or tradition of appealing to other workers independently of the bureaucracy. Now that the closed shop was under threat, and the bureaucrats were backing down from a fight with the law, the absence of a strong rank and file made itself felt. The only strategy that had any chance of winning was for rank and file printers to appeal directly to those on Fleet Street and to other groups of workers for solidarity action. Instead, in the new year, the NGA leaders got away with purging their contempt, leaving six members standing outside Shah's Stockport office for another four months.

Despite the TUC's inaction ensuring the printers lost the first round in the working class's battle against the anti-union laws, another group of workers was to take up the fight in a way that exposed more vividly than ever the bankruptcy of the trade union bureaucracy.

Towards Ideological Independence

Mass unemployment has been allowed to return to Britain in part because the leaders of the workers' movement have accepted the need for British Capitalism to be regenerated. The Tory anti-union laws have significantly altered the terms of the class struggle in the eighties. Today the successful prosecution of any major economic struggle requires the politicisation of that struggle. Firstly workers need to challenge the state apparatus itself by breaking the anti-union laws which prevent effective picketing and solidarity action.

The failure of the Labour Movement to mount such a challenge represents not just a crisis of leadership or organisation but a deeply rooted political crisis. For us the traditional left-wing model of a revolutionary working class held back by reformist leaders is inadequate. The 'do-it-yourself reformism' (Callinicos p. 19) of the 60's shop stewards movement may indeed have been militant and unofficial but was still fundamentally reformist and therefore dependent on capitalist expansion. It is clear that the shop stewards, whose power was based primarily on the bargaining ability of skilled workers in manufacturing, proved politically ill-equipped to defend jobs, wages and conditions during the recession.

It is therefore necessary that the political outlook of the rank and file becomes independent of the reformist and labourist traditions. The situation where workers elect revolutionary shop stewards but vote Labour at General Elections is indicative of the split between political and economic struggles which effectively ensures that reformism remains the dominant ideology in the labour movement.

The rank and file movement we want to see must contest with the union leadership over the political content of their arguments. Fighting for this 'ideological independence' must mean rejecting the nationalist rhetoric of opposition to 'foreign' takeover bids for British owned companies. It means throwing out the 'Plan for Coal', the 'Sail Safe, Sail Sealink' slogan, the 'Better Civil Service'

The holding of secret and postal ballots is one example. These ballots must be held four weeks before any action can take place. Any action is dependent on a majority. Conditions are also imposed on the wording of the ballot papers. Another is that a 'health warning' must be given, advising workers that they risk breach of their employment contracts (the '82 Act gives employers the right to sack workers with four days' notice).

As can be seen, such measures give employers four weeks' notice of industrial action and, perhaps most effectively of all, force officials to put the brakes on fast effective action for fear of losing union immunity and the prospect of a one-sided battle in the courts.

But most important of all they wish to undermine the participatory democracy of mass meetings, workplace branches and the like. The Tories aim to create a union movement which fits in with their vision of wider society: a parliamentary system of isolated union members voting in the privacy of their own homes, free from the manipulation of open debate with their workmates. Under the guidance of carefully worded and legally vetted advice from realistic and forward looking leaders they can, independent from the influence of militants, make reasonable and responsible choices. If they don't like certain decisions they can refuse to abide by them knowing that police and judge alike will back up their right to choose.

Socialists recognise the strength of our class lies in mass collective action at the point of production. We recognise that vital to that action and at the root of workers' democracy lies the sovereignty of the workers' assembly. Whilst having no illusions whatsoever with the top-heavy, bureaucratised and social democratic nature of the trade union movement, socialists must fight all attempts by the state to exert its control over working class organisation.

The Great Miners' Strike

In March 1984, the threatened closure of Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire led to the walkout that was to become a national miners' strike - the longest mass strike in British labour history. A year later the members of the NUM marched back to work, defeated but with their union intact.

The defeat of the strike (which was to prove a massive setback for the whole of the working class) lay as surely as ever with the bureaucratic methods that from the very beginning refused to hand over control of the struggle to the rank and file. The most militant British trade union, headed by the most left-wing trade union leader, was not able to act in a way that was qualitatively different to any other trade union.

A prime example of this centred around the issue of the national ballot. The 'national ballot' was a trick, a device by the ruling class to attempt to isolate miners in one pit from those in another; to lay them open to all the insidious influences of the bourgeois media. Yet the NUM executive's reluctance to call the ballot resulted as much from their own lack of confidence in their membership, as from a desire to combat bourgeois forms of 'democracy'.

This concern to exert control over a mass of the membership can be seen from the tactic used to try to get the Notts coalfield out. In the early days of the strike, flying pickets from Yorkshire had stopped thousands of Notts miners from going to work by arguing with them face to face at the pit gates. When it came to the question of the ballot, rather than rely on those rank and file methods to win over the Notts miners, the national executive did a deal with the Notts area executive: the pickets would be withdrawn if the area executive campaigned for a 'yes' vote in a Notts ballot. They did no such thing and the vote was lost.

The national executive's lack of confidence in the rank and file was to be displayed time and time again throughout the next year. Instead of developing the kind of rank and file activity that had won

the 1972 and 1974 strikes, control was kept tightly in the hands of the area executives, and through them, the national executive. In the militant area of Yorkshire, officials denied miners money for petrol to go picketing. They persuaded successful mass pickets to disperse and the strikers to dismantle barricades. They refused to involve the majority of active strikers in a co-ordinated campaign of picketing to systematically hit the most strategic targets. And they appealed to other trade union bureaucrats for solidarity action, rather than to the rank and file of other unions.

The potential for widespread solidarity action was demonstrated by the massive support given to the miners throughout the country (and in some cases in other countries). It is estimated that one million workers directly supported the miners in one way or another during the strike. Yet instead of being translated into effective solidarity action, this support remained largely passive.

Prime opportunities were missed with the dockers and the railway workers. Whilst the latter were sold an improved pay offer by their leadership, thus leaving the miners isolated, the dockers' leaders were twice to call on their members for action, only to bottle out when it looked as if they might win. What is more, strike action would have freed from work large numbers of workers able to more effectively build mass pickets. There is no reason why Orgreave should not have been a Saltley Gate, despite the increased forces at the disposal of the police. At Saltley Gate coke depot, during the 1912 strike, delegations of miners won support from thousands of Birmingham engineering workers who walked out to join the picket. At Orgreave the miners had no such support and the police ran riot.

Meanwhile, the left was paralysed. No alternative strategy was put forward. Whilst the left looked to Scargill, Scargill looked to the TUC and the NEC's of other unions. While Scargill never flinched before the barrage of propaganda from the capitalist press, he attempted to embarrass the union bureaucracy into solidarity

When the upturn comes the SWP will undoubtedly swing leftwards. However we are not going to wait for the SWP to return to rank and file militancy. Since by their own admission they misread the political climate in the period 1975 to 1979 they may well be slow to respond to a rebirth of rank and file militancy and may become a fetter to its development. Their antecedents, the Bolsheviks, were unable to keep pace with the class struggle after February 1911 and to paraphrase Marx 'history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.'

We cannot allow history to repeat itself which is why we argue for what is necessary - a rank and file movement firstly as a political counterpoint to reformists and secondly as the organisational means to independent action.

Whose Democracy?

Time and time again the media and politicians have fed us with the myth of mass manipulation and ballot-rigging in unions. Piously intoning against the lack of democracy in the trade union movement, they call for something to be done. Despite the constant rubbishing of these tales by independent studies into alleged malpractice such stories will surface again and again. For not surprisingly such media campaigns are a part of a carefully orchestrated attack on the right of working class organisations to govern themselves.

As well as wishing to impose a legal straightjacket on industrial action, the bosses also wish to disrupt and erode the base for that action when it first takes place.

The combined Acts of 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1988 have attempted to do this by making lawful action conditional by limiting it, by enabling a minority to defy and disrupt it, and by placing rigid procedural obligations upon unions.

Union Bureaucracies, Trades Councils'. Indeed, the left-wing activists prop-up many of these organisations.

The SWP, whose strategy is tied to recruiting from these groups, has ended up tailing them politically and making concessions to their reformism. The call for a Scottish Assembly, the 'Vote Labour but build a fighting socialist alternative' election campaign, the virtually uncritical campaign for Arthur Scargill, their inability to call for free abortion on demand within the Fight Alton's Bill campaign are all recent indications of a group incapable of promoting the needs of the working class.

The Tories' attacks on the working class will intensify, creating the possibilities for a generalised class response but more importantly pointing to the need for such a response. When Callinicos glibly concludes:

*"Any economic revival is likely to push workers and the ruling class into confrontation. Then a national rank and file movement may again become both necessary and possible..."*¹⁸

We are left wondering how are workers to fight in the meantime? The SWP's conclusion is to leave defeat in the hands of the union leaders and build the party.

The recent mini-boom in manufacturing which has given car workers some industrial muscle has shown how economic recovery can make a difference to class confidence but we cannot rely on a complete regeneration of British capitalism. The stirrings of militancy during 1987 and 1988 amongst health workers, civil servants and postal workers has showed how workers will also fight when they are under attack. The catalogue of sell outs by union leaders in strike after strike and the cancerous influence of new realism highlights the need for rank and file workers to act independently in order to win.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 36.

action, rather than appeal directly to rank and file workers. Alas, the TUC General Council proved to have no shame.

Rank and File Movement

A rank and file movement operating within the NUM could have organised the kind of activity the bureaucracy refused to. Rather than constantly hindering the success of the strike by attempting to contain rank and file militancy, it could have provided not only the organisational framework through which to channel this militancy, but the political strategy that was necessary to win. For the most debilitating phenomenon of the strike on the part of the trade union bureaucracies was the fear of sequestration, and their consequent inability to openly confront the anti-trade union laws.

What was ultimately necessary were openly political strikes on the part of other sectors of workers in defence of the NUM. When the Tory receiver Herbert Brewer announced "I am the NUM," thus threatening the independence of the entire trade union movement, the silence from the TUC was deafening. This itself followed in the wake of the trade union ban at government intelligence [sic.] HQ Cheltenham, where the bureaucrats had refused to mount any kind of resistance. Not surprisingly, the government was unmoved by this display of 'realism'.

The kind of rank and file militancy necessary to win the strike, however, had always been there to be built on. The tragedy of the famous noose slowly descending upon Norman Willis was that there was no sufficiently well organised movement to give a direction to the anger that was being felt by thousands of strikers. The audacious militancy of a core of strikers was testified to by the emergence of self-organised 'hit squads'. Tragically, these militants were allowed to increasingly fall back on an essentially rear-guard strategy, rather than being bound into a body capable of demonstrating through practice the strategy needed to win.

The immediate response of the left bureaucrats to the defeat of the strike were defensive rule changes designed to preserve their power base within the union. This tightening up of the union, taking control away from the areas in response to the Notts break-away, placed that control instead in the hands of the central bureaucracy. What was actually needed was for the militants within the union to build up a rank and file structure from below. Central to this would have been the demand that funds be controlled at a local level, thus preventing future bureaucratic control over picketing money etc.

Throughout the dispute the NUM leaders argued the miners' case on the basis of the 'Plan for Coal'. This Social Contract document was drawn up in 1974 by the NUM, the Coal Board, and the Labour Government. Not only did it commit the NUM to making the industry profitable but it directly gave rise to the divisive area-by-area pit incentive schemes. Although rank and file miners voted to reject these productivity deals, the right-wing NUM leadership ignored the vote and gave the Coal Board the green light to strike individual deals with the area unions. In 1984 the corporate 'Plan for Coal' was no basis around which to unite mineworkers who had seen pits close under Labour. A rank and file movement could have tapped the anger and combativity of miners who daily confronted the police, the courts and the anti-union laws of the capitalist state and more explicitly challenged the capitalist profit system.

The National Rank and File Miners Movement that did emerge out of the defeat of the strike was largely comprised of sacked miners and their wives. It did little more than engage in an amnesty campaign rather than take on the bureaucracy politically. The NUM leaders for their part resisted even the token proposal of associate membership for the women of the mining communities despite praising their 'supporting' role in the strike kitchens. The opening up of the NUM's ranks to women, and unwaged miners

reaucracy must not be left until the eve of the revolution. Callinicos is not entirely honest when he says:

*"Building a national rank and file movement in the trade unions is by no means essential to revolutionary strategy. The Bolsheviks got by quite happily without one."*¹⁷

The Russian trade unions were small and weak after the February revolution following years of repression and semi-legality. Thus a permanent bureaucratic caste of trade union leaders could not emerge. Britain is not comparable.

We advocate rank and file groups primarily as ideological propaganda groups in the present period. We too have no illusions that these groups are anything other than political caucuses of revolutionary and militant workers. Nor, unlike the recent 'Support' and 'Solidarity' conferences which sought to establish permanent strike support networks, do we locate the problem in the lack of 'support'. For us the problem is the political role of the trade union bureaucracy which allows disputes to remain isolated and sectional and fails to challenge the Tory employment laws.

Even relatively small propaganda groups can conduct a political challenge to the union bureaucrats and broad lefts. Through the establishment of rank and file bulletins these groups can reach an audience much wider than their tiny base of activists. There are thousands of socialists in this country, many who have considerable industrial experience and influence. Their ability to mobilise was amply demonstrated in the miners' strike. The problem is not so much a lack of numbers but the ideological degeneracy of the organisations they belong to. The CP, Militant [Tendency, a Trotskyist party] and the Labour hard-left carry out much of their activity away from the workplace trying to capture the political institutions of the labour movement 'Labour Party wards, Trade

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 2.

rank and file committees”¹⁶ the SWP was extremely slow to respond to the growth of grass roots miners’ support groups.

Again in the 1986/87 News International dispute the SWP pulled out of the mass pickets and the local printers’ support groups in the summer of 1986 sensing that the dispute was over while the printers fought on for months. Furthermore, faced with the treacherous role of the print union leaders and the Stalinist controlled London District Committee of SOGAT in failing to escalate the dispute to the rest of Fleet Street, the SWP did not call for the formation of a rank and file controlled strike committee to take the running of the dispute into its own hands.

In the downturn the trade union bureaucrats will inevitably sell disputes out, refuse to generalise struggles or politicise them by mounting a challenge to the anti-union laws. However slim the possibilities, rank and file control of struggles and their generalisation remains the only way to win disputes. The rank and file content of the SWP’s propaganda has shifted away from arguing what is needed to win to arguing what they believe is possible.

Why we need a Rank and File Movement

The ideological grip of Labourism [social democracy] and reformism over the working class remains strong. This is partly due to the fact that British capitalism has been able to concede considerable reforms especially during the post-war boom.

In the sixties it was possible for unofficial rank and file disputes to push up workers’ wages without having to confront the system politically. Consequently, despite the recession, union density is still the highest in Western Europe with 9.2 million TUC affiliates prior to its 1988 Conference.

The relevance of a rank and file strategy still holds despite the lack of a generalised rank and file revolt. The trade union bureaucracy still maintains an ideological hegemony over the working class which is why open ideological contestation against the bu-

¹⁶ Callinicos, op. cit. p. 29.

could have begun to break down the sectional nature of traditional trade unionism.

Finally, a rank and-file movement would be a movement of the whole working-class. It would welcome into its ranks the women of the mining communities who organised themselves and fought as determinedly [sic.] as did the miners themselves. It would incorporate within it the most militant unemployed workers, such as the sacked miners who the NCB refused to re-employ. As such it would fight for the entire class, cutting across the sectional boundaries of the trade unions.

Attacking the Unions

A major part of the Tory offensive has been attacks on the rights of trade unions and their members. As with other attacks these have been carefully staged and orchestrated, presented as progressive reforms ostensibly designed to:

- Defend the nation from being held to ransom by unreasonable and extremist elements – ‘The Enemy Within’.
- To promote and extend democracy to the manipulated, disenfranchised and ‘sensible’ membership.
- To preserve the inalienable rights of the individual against totalitarian union barons.

Over the last decade a package of measures have been introduced – the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts, the 1984 Trade Union Act, and most recently the 1988 Employment Act. The combined result is:

- A legal framework making effective action (i.e. mass picketing and secondary strike action) unlawful, with heavy financial penalties for unions whose members are found to be in breach of the law.
- Trade union immunity being conditional on fulfilling certain obligations designed to delay, defuse and undermine industrial action.
- To impose Tory style democracy on the unions through the use of sequestration and large fines.
- A scabs' charter in the finest spirit of Thatcherite individualism. A green light to avengers of democracy such as the extreme right-wing Freedom Association.

It is vital for all socialists to recognise the effects this legislation has and will have on a predominantly social democratic labour movement. Such laws are explicitly anti-working class and show that obedience to the rule of law and workers' interests are in no way compatible. We must expose and challenge those officials who line themselves up behind the bosses by following the letter of the law.

A Year of Struggle: the Lessons of Wapping

When the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the general print union SOGAT '82 decided on February 5th, 1987 to withdraw all support for the year long struggle at Wapping for jobs and union recognition, it took only a day for the NGA to follow suit. The leaders of the NGA, who had allowed the SOGAT bureaucrats to do the dirty work for them throughout the dispute, thus

The SWP argued that their rank and file groups were not proper delegate bodies but "narrow caucuses of revolutionaries, ex-revolutionaries and their hangers-on."¹³ Again this is partially correct but does not necessarily entail abandoning these groups. In a period of low class activity rank and file organisations will tend to be reduced to only the most committed revolutionaries but this does not justify the SWP's opportunist strategy of working within the Broad Left groups, especially when the SWP Central Committee also saw that these groups "are usually composed of a fairly narrow layer of activists."¹⁴ The SWP argues that it is 'substitutionist' to prop up a rank and file movement but not always substitutionist to prop up electoral Broad Left groups:

*"So we should be clear what involvement in the Broad Left means: involvement nationally and locally in activities, but beware of trying to uphold the structures of Broad Left groups."*¹⁵

So what is the difference? The rank and file groups have the right arguments, but while the broad lefts have serious illusions in left reformism they have potential recruits. The SWP has tried to adopt the strategy of propagandising for 'rank and file involvement' whilst in practice refusing to organise any initiatives in the direction of rank and file control. The net effect of this strategy has been the debilitating ideology of down-turnism. This ideology is capable of becoming a negative factor in the class struggle as the 1984/5 miners' strike showed.

Possibly stung by its tactics in the 1977-78 firemen's strike in which "unsuccessful attempts were made to build local firemen's support committees which could act as the nuclei of permanent

¹³ Ibid. p. 34.

¹⁴ "The Way Ahead", Central Committee document reprinted in *Socialist Worker Review*, No. 97, (April 1987) p. 16.

¹⁵ Ibid.

cluded, to contain and derail working class militancy was once again demonstrated.

The NRFOC never really took off during this period. It organised health and safety schools and carried out some Chile Solidarity work but in 1975 it was effectively replaced by the IS initiated National Right to Work Campaign. An attempt to relaunch the Rank and File Movement in 1977 was no more successful. In that year the IS changed its name to the Socialist Workers Party and in 1978 changed its policy once more. Now it concentrated on the Defend Our Unions organisation which was aimed at upstaging the LCDTU and was conceived of as no more than a 'propaganda campaign'.¹²

In 1982 the SWP abandoned its rank and file strategy at its annual conference.

Why did the SWP Ditch the Rank and File Strategy?

The major reason for the SWP's change of strategy was its analysis of the downturn – a long term period of decline in the class struggle which had set in since 1975. This had its external causes in the effects of the world recession on Britain, the decline in manufacturing industry and the growth of mass unemployment. SWP theorist Alex Callinicos also identified internal causes in what he called 'the threefold crisis of the labour movement of organisation, leadership and ideology.'

Whilst this analysis is partially correct the tactical conclusions the SWP draw are faulty. The working class of 1982, just like the working class of 1924, had not been 'decisively defeated'. Trade union organisation to this day remains remarkably strong and since coming to power the Tories have been forced to advance slowly with their plans to restructure the economy, taking on sections of the working class one at a time.

¹² Callinicos, A., "The Rank and File Movement Today", *International Socialist*, Vol. 2, No. 17, p. 35.

maintaining a degree of credibility for themselves, now argued that they could not continue the strike alone.

Newspaper boss Rupert Murdoch had built the Wapping 'fortress', with its barbed wire and closed circuit T.V. cameras, from the profits reaped from his international media empire News International. Ditching the pretext that he was to bring out a new London paper from the premises, he had moved his News Group papers ('The Times', 'Sunday Times', 'Sun', and 'News of the World') from Fleet Street in one foul swoop. A completely independent distribution network was created through Murdoch's controlling interest in the courier firm TNT. The union leaders, who had wilfully ignored his obvious intentions, were presented with a list of demands which tore away in one go all the union rights that had been won in the preceding years. The resulting strike in fact became a lockout, with Murdoch recruiting an entire scab workforce through the services of the Southampton office of the right-wing electricians' union, the EETPU.

From the start it was clear that:

1. Only solidarity action by other workers could win the dispute.
2. Thatcher's anti-union laws would have to be confronted and broken.

Solidarity would have to take two forms. Firstly, a regular and massive picket of the Wapping plant to stop the trucks bringing out the papers, or at least to delay them if this was not possible. Secondly, action at other workplaces in the form of blacking News International, and ultimately the closing down of other Fleet Street newspapers in support of the Wapping struggle and in defence of their own working conditions which were coming under vicious attack at that time.

Wapping was not an isolated case; it was merely the most clear cut representation of what had been happening across the whole

of Fleet Street and the print industry nationally. The background to this offensive by the bosses had been a sickening lack of will to fight on the part of the trade union bureaucracies. The test had come at Warrington in 1983, and was compounded by a pathetic capitulation by the SOGAT NEC, which saw general secretary Brenda Dean boasting on television that she had already negotiated away thousands of jobs on Fleet Street, so why was Mr. Murdoch being so unreasonable?

The only strategy the NEC put forward was the highly expensive but largely ineffective consumer boycott campaign, whilst the Stalinist dominated London District Committee (LDC) who had real control of the strike refused to call for Fleet Street to come out. They argued that with Fleet Street at a standstill Murdoch would be better off, as he would be in control of the only national newspapers being produced and distributed. But a united struggle against the newspaper barons would have freed enough printers from work to shut down Wapping by sheer weight of numbers and would have placed immense pressure to settle on Murdoch from the other paper bosses.

What was necessary was for the rank and file to take control of the dispute through regular mass meetings with a strike committee elected by and accountable to these meetings. At the high point of the strike Dean was booed off stage by a mass meeting of 4,000 printworkers, yet the opportunity was not seized to organise a rank and file alternative.

The only focus for these ideas was the Fleet Street Support Unit (FSSU), a tiny rank and file propaganda group. No rank and file group had been built within the printing industry up to this point; the FSSU had been thrown up by the struggle itself. Consequently, its small size and lack of influence meant that it was unable to turn its demands into reality.

This meant there was no organised expression of the strikers' militancy which had the authority and the guts to put pickets on Fleet Street. The strikers often had control at street level (despite

NMM became isolated and declined in influence. In 1928 the Comintern adopted its Third Period 'left' turn of advocating breakaway red unions and the NMM played no further part in building rank and file organisations. Indeed such rank and file initiatives as the London Busman's Rank and File Movement developed more or less independently of the CP and the NMM. Following a brief swing to the policy of a 'united front from below' the CP made no further attempts to launch a national rank and file organisation. The next significant attempt at such a national movement was launched by the SWP's forerunners, the International Socialists, in 1974 and met with the hostility of the CP.

The SWP and the National Rank and File Movement

The period 1968 to 1974 was one of increasing industrial militancy characterised by the growth of strong shop stewards organisations and a very high level of unofficial disputes. It was against this background that the International Socialists initiated the National Rank and File Organising Committee (NRFOC) at a delegate conference in 1974. The first conference was well attended with 500 delegates from 270 trade union bodies.

Significant in their absence were the CP dominated papers *Flashlight* (electricians) and *Building Workers Charter*. The CP, by now an unashamedly reformist organisation, had its own industrial front the Liaison Committee For The Defence Of Trade Unions (LCDTU) which operated within the Broad Left electoral machines. (Note: In the early sixties the CP made a turn from operating under the CP banner to the tactic of Broad Left electoral alliances.)

When the Labour Party came to power on the crest of the 1974 miners' strike the IS believed that Labour would soon attack workers who would break from reformism. However, the TUC was able to impose wage controls on the working class until 1979 when the 'Winter of Discontent' destroyed the Social Contract. The power of the union bureaucrats, left officials like Scanlon and Jones in-

Yet the General Council had made no contingency plans for winning a General Strike, having hoped all along for a compromise based on the Samuel Report. At the earliest possible opportunity the General Council accepted a compromise proposal in a memorandum from Samuel himself. This despite the fact that Baldwin did not even recognise Samuel as an official negotiator and subsequently rejected the Samuel memorandum anyway. The CP's confused approach to the left wing of the TUC disarmed the NMM politically and organisationally when independent action was most needed.

Labour historians James Hinton and Richard Hyman have made a strong case that the CP's opportunism towards left officials was a native tendency and not the result of the rightward pull of the Stalinist-controlled Comintern as the orthodox Trotskyist version of history reads. Indeed, even after the treachery of May the NMM Executive Committee called on its members at its August conference to restrain from criticising the TUC Lefts in case it should:

*"...militate against the possibilities of bringing the Miners' Strike to a successful conclusion or operate against the future welfare of Anglo-Russian unity,"*¹⁰

The Comintern had to force the NMM to withdraw this statement and the NMM paper *The Worker* printed the corrective:

*"...merciless criticism and exposure of the manoeuvres of the now consolidated trade union bureaucracy is one of the foremost tasks in the struggle for the revolutionising of the British Trade Union Movement."*¹¹

After the miners' lockout ended and despite its success in creating Councils of Action in towns and cities across the country, the

¹⁰ Martin, op. cit.

¹¹ *The Worker*, 19.11.26, quoted *ibid.*

the machinations of those who wished to put a brake on effective picketing), but this largely spontaneous and ad-hoc activity took no coherent form.

A turning point in the dispute came at the SOGAT biennial delegate conference where the NEC, supported unconditionally by the LDC, succeeded in getting a motion passed committing the union to stay within the law in order to avoid having its funds being sequestered for a second time. SOGAT had already had its funds sequestered once because it had not balloted its members in the provincial wholesale trade before asking them to black News International titles. The result of this passive attitude towards the courts was that all blacking was called off and the mass pickets of Wapping became token demonstrations, allowing the trucks to leave on time. Any SOGAT member breaking the injunction was informed that s/he would be disciplined. Hence the union put itself in the position of policing its own members.

Whilst the NEC caved in to the courts, the rank and file turned to more militant forms of action – secret flying pickets aimed at exacting high damage levels on the regional depots, ambushing the trucks as they left the area around Wapping, and 'spontaneous' stormings of the main gate in the early hours of the morning. Whilst this was the most effective form of action in the circumstances, it represented a retreat. The failure to see this activity as a rearguard strategy, whilst building for wider solidarity, resulted in the isolation of the dispute. The LDC for its part was prepared to turn a blind eye to what was happening as it did not threaten its political control of the strike.

On the anniversary of the strike, 25,000 workers besieged the plant and directed their anger at the police. Whilst an attempt to close off all the exits would have been tactically more constructive, the battle that ensued represented a year of frustration with the uniformed scabs who had protected Murdoch from day one.

From that day also, the SOGAT NEC had been looking for a chance to ditch the dispute. But twice the strikers had rejected

compromise deals, the second time by an increased majority. However, the second round of court applications from News International which coincided with the anniversary provided the excuse the bureaucrats had been looking for. Seizing upon the conference decision to stay within the law they argued that they could not risk sequestration a second time through ‘mass and intimidatory’ picketing. Quoting solicitors’ advice that the court action would leave them bankrupt, SOGAT pulled out, with the NGA running behind them. No mass meeting of the strikers was called, and through their individual chapels they voted to end the dispute.

The lesson of a year of struggle is clear – only direct rank and file control can provide the vehicle to mobilise the solidarity needed to beat the bosses.

Rule of Law or Workers Action?

In 1979 Trade Union membership stood at 13,289,000. This accounted for 57.5% of the British workforce, the highest percentage in the industrially developed world.

With long term aims of driving down wages and conditions, regenerating competitive (low cost) British capitalism, it is not surprising that, foremost on the Tories’ agenda was the erosion of working class organisation, through the use of both the rule of law and unemployment.

In 1980 they got off to a quick start with the 1980 Employment Act, shortly followed by another in 1982. It was the success of this legislation that opened the door for future acts.

It is worth noting that the three Tory employment acts – 1980, 1982 and 1988 dealt with all aspects of employment – job security, training etc. – all of which were attacked. It is important that these

the 1920 Emergency Powers Act, the Cabinet’s Supply and Transport Committee as well as the unofficial ‘Organisation of Maintenance and Supplies’ which was openly encouraged by Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks. Emergent fascist groups also ‘offered to organise troops of special constables for use under their own officers’.⁸ The Government, however, felt confident enough not to make use of fascist strike-breakers.

In November 1925 the Tories issued a circular to local authorities detailing their emergency preparations and requesting their co-operation. The CP correctly anticipated the conflict that would occur once the coal subsidy ran out at the end of April 1926. In March of that year the NMM held a Special National Conference of Action to prepare for a general strike. The conference called for the formation of local Councils of Action, workshop committees, workers’ defence corps and the drawing up of plans for the carrying out of essential services in the event of such a strike.

Sure enough the miners and coal owners could find no common ground over the Samuel Report which advocated wage cuts and an end to the subsidy. The miners were locked out and the TUC called a General Strike. What the CP and the NMM were utterly unprepared for was the complete capitulation of the TUC, lefts included, who called the strike off after only 9 days despite its growing support. The CP paper *Workers Weekly* could only express bewilderment:

“We had men at the head of the General Council who were even more afraid of winning than of losing... But why did the better and more virile members of the General Council – those we have called the ‘Left-Wing’ – allow themselves to become involved in their panic?”⁹

⁸ Morris, M., *The General Strike*, (1976) p. 161.

⁹ Hinton, op. cit. p. 65.

Socialists should not under-estimate the future consequences of this legislation. As can clearly be seen, invariably right-wing backed trade unions will have a power, and thus influence, far beyond their tiny numbers. It counterposes the bourgeois 'freedom' of the individual to open any collective action of the majority. It gives, through tribunal and judge, yet another opening for the state's attack on organised workers.

The NMM's attitude towards left bureaucrats was partly a result of the Comintern's application of the United Front tactic. This attempt to unite reformist and revolutionary workers around a fighting programme of transitional demands was also accompanied with the tactic of trying to forge unity between trade union bureaucrats.

The Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee was set up as the TUC appeared to swing leftwards in 1924 after leading TUC right-wingers resigned to join the Labour Government. Increasingly the Comintern came to see this Committee as vital in preventing Britain from declaring war on the Soviet Union. The NMM was thereby hampered from being able to criticise or act independently of the left bureaucrats in case this damaged Anglo-Russian unity.

During 1923 and 1924 there was a minor economic recovery partly aided by the French occupation of the Ruhr, Germany's primary coal-producing region. By 1925 when the Government returned to the Gold Standard the occupation had ended. Facing stiff competition on the export market the coal owners demanded wage cuts and longer hours. Prime Minister Baldwin only averted a major confrontation by conceding a 9 month coal subsidy and a Royal Commission headed by Sir Herbert Samuel.

Although union leaders heralded this as 'Red Friday' the Government used the time they had bought to mobilise their already extensive strikebreaking preparations. The Tories had at their disposal

be seen in the context of recession, mass unemployment, defeat and a general onslaught on conditions.

Main Points Concerning Workers' Action:

- Picketing restricted to place of work. Secondary picketing unlawful.
- Secondary industrial action which is not directed at the employer in the dispute is unlawful.
- Trade unions are liable to court action and fines if they organise unlawful action.
- Lawful action made dependent on the disruptive, divisive and delaying ballot procedure.
- Lawful disputes are only disputes with strikers' own employer about such things as pay, conditions and jobs. Political strikes outlawed.
- Action which pressurizes employers to black union busting firms in awarding or fulfilling contracts is unlawful. This is particularly relevant to the public sector putting legal checks on struggles over tendering-out and privatisation. In 1988 industrial action to enforce union membership became unlawful and the closed shop lost legal protection.
- Strengthens the right of employers to sack strikers as long as four days notice is given.

It is immediately obvious that legislation of this kind is meant to radically curb the generalisation of disputes. It makes effective action unlawful enabling capitalist courts to fine unions and sequester their assets for that most basic tenet of socialism – solidarity. The legislation has played a major role in the ideology of New Realism – a justification for the reactionary behaviour of the

bureaucracy. Future legislation, the 1984 Trade Union Act and the 1988 Employment Act, builds on the base of 1980/82 by placing further and wider limitations on lawful action and by sharpening the state's cutting edge against unlawful action.

The capitalist state has moved the goalposts; generalised working class action now means openly challenging the rule of law – police, judiciary, the whole repressive apparatus of the state.

Why we need a Rank and File Movement

We have argued in the first part of this pamphlet of the need for a rank and file movement. Here we explain why revolutionaries in Britain have at certain times this century adopted the rank and file strategy and argue why to occupy the political terrain of 'rank and filism' in the present period is not hopelessly utopian. In doing so we examine the arguments of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP [a neo-Trotskyist party]) who claim this tradition as theirs but insist that the rank and file strategy is not at present appropriate in Britain.

The Nature of Trade Unionism in Britain

The tactics which revolutionaries in Britain adopt are dictated largely by the specific nature of British trade unionism. Britain was the first industrial nation and until this century the leading imperialist nation. Consequently trade unions developed over a long and relatively stable period of capitalist expansion during the late 19th century. As a result there developed a permanent layer of union officials who saw themselves as professional negotiators in a permanent relationship between capital and labour. Trade unions exist to negotiate the price of labour within capitalism and the union leaders came to see their interests depend on the prosperity of their employers.

Scabs Charter

As well as facing outside attacks, legislation contained in the 1988 Employment Act now means that unions face the prospect of attack from within. Reactionary trade unionists, out and out scabs, will now not just have backing from the media and shadowy right wing pressure groups but from the state itself.

A 'Bill of Rights' has been drawn up with an overseeing Tory-appointed commissioner to provide 'assistance' with advice and legal costs. The legal framework outlined below is an invitation to litigation for the Silver Birches and George Wards of the future.

- Individual members have the right to take their unions to court or a tribunal.
- An individual cannot be 'unjustifiably' disciplined, discipline being an all-embracing definition from union expulsion to the ultimately vague subjection to 'detriment'. The Act then goes on to specify (unjustifiable) reasons for discipline.
- Members cannot be disciplined for either indicating opposition to, not supporting or not participating in a strike or any other industrial action. This is the case even if a properly conducted ballot has taken place.
- Members cannot be disciplined for initiating, encouraging other members to scab, or encouraging or engaging others in court or other actions against union representatives or officials.
- Members cannot be disciplined for refusal to breach a contract of employment, like a no strike clause. Contracts of employment have a status above collective union decisions.

militant groupings or ‘minority movements’ were able to develop in a number of industries, notably in mining, engineering, transport and building.

The National Minority Movement (NMM) advocated a programme of transitional demands ‘minimum wage, 44 hour week’ around which to unite workers. To achieve this it encouraged the formation of factory committees to combat sectionalism, the transformation of Trades Councils into representative local working class centres affiliated to the TUC, the amalgamation of existing unions into industrial unions, the creation of international trade union unity and the transformation of the TUC General Council into a general staff with executive powers such as the authority to call a general strike.

This final aim became quickly transformed into the call for all power to the General Council and proved to be the fatal weakness of the NMM. In practice it led to opportunist and uncritical support for left wing TUC leaders like A.A. Purcell, Alonzo Swales and George Hicks. The pamphlet ‘What The Minority Movement Stands For’ argued that the General Council should operate like an army general staff:

“The work of intelligently re-organising and truly disciplining the trade union movement is the task that requires the assistance of such a body as the General Council, with power to carry through its decisions.”

J.T. Murphy, by now a CP leader, had, back in 1919, warned of the dangers of this tactic:

“The General Staff of officialdom is to be a dam to the surging tide of independent working class aspirations and not a directing agency towards the overthrow of capitalism...”⁷

⁷ Hinton, op.cit. pp. 310–311.

The contradiction between workers’ and bosses’ interests has been able to survive periods of mass struggle and economic crisis in Britain because, in the first part, of the capacity of British imperialism to concede [sic.] relatively high wages to important sections of the working class. This has meant that, unlike in Spain, Russia, or Germany, the British ruling class has never been forced to resort to outright political repression against workers’ organisations. Secondly, and more crucially in terms of our analysis, the treachery and class collaboration of trade union bureaucrats has been able to diffuse and contain workers’ struggles when the ruling class was in its most acute crises: in 1919 and 1921 when Triple Alliance leaders (miners, railwaymen and transport workers) called off threatened strike action; in 1926 when the TUC General Council called off the 9 day old General Strike; and from 1975–79 when the TUC imposed the wage controls of the Social Contract.

Throughout the century unions have been incorporated into the state apparatus. Union officials have served on Royal Commissions, Whitley Councils, numerous quangoes and tribunals and during the Second World War union leaders were co-opted onto the Cabinet itself. The working class in Britain is in desperate need of ideological and organisational independence from the state and from the corporatism of the TUC, something which we as anarchists aim to rectify.

Why Trade Union Leaders Sell Out

Crucial to our political strategy is our analysis of bureaucracy as applied to the trade unions. Unlike some socialists we do not believe that trade union leaders sell out simply because they are traitors who should be replaced by better leaders. Trade union officials – usually full-time, salaried and in many unions appointed, not elected, are inevitably out of touch with the day-to-day struggles on the shopfloor.

More crucially, their job or livelihood is not at stake when negotiating a wage claim or redundancies. Because their job is to sell labour to capital they depend on capitalist prosperity and

consequently see no contradiction in accepting the bosses' arguments when negotiating redundancies, wage cuts, or productivity increases in times of crisis.

At the turn of the century unions were already amassing buildings and assets which union leaders saw as more valuable than the class interests of their members. For union leaders industrial action outside their control not only disrupted the smooth process of national collective bargaining but threatened their own role as mediators in the bargaining process. Leaders of individual unions also tended to see their own members' interests as coming before the interests of all other workers.

The rivalry between different craft and trade unions has always been a divisive [sic.] and weakening feature of the British labour movement. This sectionalism is one of the major reasons revolutionaries at the turn of the century advocated industrial unions which would organise workers across sectional and craft divisions in a particular industry. These syndicalists advocated either the amalgamation of existing unions or the formation of breakaway revolutionary unions ('dual unionism'), and reached the peak of their influence during the intense period of mass struggle between 1910 and 1914.

Amalgamation committees were established in many unions but the amalgamationists under-estimated the ability of union bureaucrats to accommodate to amalgamation where it could increase their bargaining power.

The dual unionists, strongly influenced by the IWW in America, argued that the existing unions could not be revolutionised but under-estimated the strength of British trade unions and were unable to organise any successful breakaway. Union membership was considerably higher in Britain than in any other country and there existed a number of general unions such as the Workers' Union that were prepared to organise unskilled and semi-skilled workers thereby shutting out the dual unionists.

The National Minority Movement

In early 1919 Clydeside engineers and shipbuilders struck for a 40-hour week. There were mass demonstrations in Glasgow and rioting broke out. The Government had to send troops and tanks in to restore order. Following this the 40 hours agitation petered out and the shop stewards movement effectively collapsed. By 1921 the post-war boom was over and mass unemployment had returned. When the leaders of the rail and transport workers abandoned the striking miners to fight alone on 'Black Friday', April 15th 1921, the Triple Alliance fell apart and the balance of class forces shifted to the employers. As a result one group of workers after another suffered wage cuts and redundancies. As Jack Murphy the major theorist of the shop stewards movement reported to the 4th Congress of the Comintern:

*"In England we have had a powerful shop stewards movement. But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions. The necessary conditions at the moment do not exist... you cannot build factory organisations in empty and depleted workshops, while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers."*⁶

It was during this period that the Communist Party was formed and it included leading figures from the Shop Stewards Movement which itself had become a shell affiliated to the Comintern's Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). It was the CP [Communist Party of Great Britain, formed in 1920, attracting many erstwhile syndicalists] that launched the next national rank and file initiative, the National Minority Movement in 1924.

After 1921 the level of struggle had declined and the number of strike days lost fell from its 1919–21 peak of about 50,000 per year to about 12,000 a year between 1922 and 1925. Nonetheless the working class had not been decisively defeated and a number of

⁶ Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924–1953*, (1969) p. 23.

“that they were not the body to deal with technical grievances arising out of the cancellation of occupational exemptions but that such grievances be dealt with by the union executives.”⁴

The decisive moment had passed.

But although the Shop Stewards Movement was never able to realise its revolutionary potential it provided important lessons for British revolutionaries. Firstly the tactic of rank and file organisation, of ‘dual power within the unions’, overcame the problems of pre-war syndicalism which saw either amalgamation or dual unionism as the two stark choices. The Shop Stewards Movement pointed to an organisational form which addressed both the problem of sectionalism and that of the trade union bureaucracy. The Clyde Workers Committee in particular showed how a rank and file body could become an alternative centre of power not only to the union bureaucracy but also to the state itself. The committee forced Lloyd George⁵ to negotiate directly with them and the state had to jail and deport its leaders to smash the committee. As such it showed how such a body could become an embryonic soviet.

The second major lesson is the need for the organised intervention of conscious revolutionaries to draw out the political lessons from the struggle. The shop stewards’ leaders were mainly from the various left-wing organisations that preceded the Communist Party. However these parties such as the De Leonist Socialist Labour Party and the British Socialist Party were part of a propagandist strain of British socialism and they never grasped theoretically the significance of the movement. As a result the political activities of most shop stewards remained separate from their trade union activity, and while British workers fought against war-time policies they never consciously fought against the war.

⁴ Ibid. p. 263.

⁵ Lloyd George was Minister of Munitions at the time.

What was needed was a strategy for syndicalists to pursue within the existing unions which united them with reformist workers in combat, yet mounted a challenge to the reactionary trade union leaders. This rank and file strategy, which saw the interests of the rank and file as conflicting with those of the bureaucrats, came close to realisation in the war-time shop stewards movement.

The Nature of the Shop Stewards Movement

The shop stewards were workshop delegates whose original role was to collect dues, recruit members and negotiate piece rates. In the engineering industry national wage rates negotiated by the full-time officials were topped up by piece rate negotiation by stewards. This crucial function allowed the stewards to play a vital role in the struggles of skilled engineering workers during the First World War. Due to arms production the industry expanded rapidly resulting in a shortage of skilled labour which gave engineering shop stewards immense bargaining power.

Initially the disputes were sectional and defensive. The fight over DILUTION where unskilled and semi-skilled workers, often women, were employed in jobs once reserved for skilled craftsmen brought workers into conflict with the Munitions Act which outlawed strikes on war work and led to the deportation from Glasgow of the leaders of the Clyde Workers Committee. The struggle against the Military Service Bill’s proposed withdrawal of the Trade Card Scheme which exempted craft union members on munitions work from military service led to a general struggle against conscription.

Inevitably, strikes came up against the Munitions Act and the Defence of the Realm Act. The trade union leaders supported the war and the ‘industrial truce’ which left a vacuum in which the shop stewards led strikes against war policies and potentially therefore the war itself.

“Nearly a third of all wartime strike activity occurred in the engineering and shipbuilding industries. Most of these strikes were repudiated by the trade unions and most of them were illegal. The shop stewards movement stood in the forefront of the battle to resist industrial conscription... leading such a struggle against the authority of the state in wartime must of necessity involve the movement in a political as well as purely economic understanding of its own functions and goals.”¹

Whilst district union officials were usually elected from geographically based and consequently poorly attended and unrepresentative union branch meetings, the stewards were directly elected from the workplace and in the major engineering centres such as Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester, Coventry etc., they formed inter-union strike committees. These became permanent rank and file organisations more dynamic than the unions and capable of bypassing the bureaucracy if and when necessary. The first Clyde Workers Committee leaflet in November 1915 articulated this rank and file ideology perfectly:

“We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by the obsolete rule of law we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers.”²

As shop stewards committees were formed throughout Britain so too came the need for national organisation. In August 1917 a National Administrative Council (NAC) was formed.

The Significance of the Movement and its Failure

¹ Hinton, J., *The First Shop Stewards Movement*, (1973) p. 55.

² Ibid. p. 119.

Towards the end of the war food shortages, war weariness and the attempts to conscript skilled workers combined to create an explosive situation. This highlighted briefly the potentiality for independent rank and file organisations based on workplace delegates to be transformed into organs of workers' power.

In the revolutionary wave that swept across the capitalist heartlands after the Russian Revolution there were parallel developments in other industrial centres of Europe. From the factory committees in Petrograd and Moscow to the factory councils in Germany and the internal commissions in the Turin metal industry organisations were created which directly contested control over production and in some cases class power.

All these rank and file bodies first developed amongst the skilled metalworkers in imperialist countries which tends to conflict with the theory that these illiterate, better-paid craftworkers were some kind of 'labour aristocracy'. Their initially conservative struggles to defend craft privileges [sic] developed into generalised class battles because they came into conflict with the rationale of the imperialist war itself.

In Britain however the shop stewards leaders failed to transform the sectional struggles of the engineering workers into a conscious political strike against the war. In early 1918 the struggle against conscription came to a head. On January 5th and 6th the national shop stewards committees conference voted to recommend strike action to prevent the passing of the Military Service Bill and:

“demand that the Government shall at once accept the invitation of the Russian Government to consider peace terms.”³

However, on January 25th the NAC was split over whether to press ahead with the strike call and abdicated their responsibility by deciding:

³ Ibid. p. 256.