

Death to rank and filism!

Communication Worker's Group

1990

Contents

The Union	3
Rank and Filism	4
Communication Worker Group	4
Don't be a Shop Steward!	6
CWG Dissolved	7
The Postal Worker's Coordination Committee	7
The Action Group for Worker's Unity	7
The Working Class is not Revolutionary all the Time	8
Revolutionaries	9
The Revolutionary Workplace Group	9

This is a contribution to the debate about the role revolutionaries should play in the workplace. Parts of it have appeared in the ACF journal, 'Organise!' This is an important and difficult debate, one that all revolutionaries need to come to grips with. We must stop repeating our mistakes, and understand the lure of reformism, and collaborationism with our enemies and the State.

Below is a section from "Industrial Relations," 1987, a handbook for managers produced by The Industrial Society:

"Two Sides?

Are there two sides of industry? This is an old chestnut and it is as well to get it out of the way.

"In the sense that they have different roles to play and different functions to perform management and unions do form two sides. In the sense that they have a common interest in the prosperity of the industry, there are not two sides. Although it is in the interests of both management and unions that industry should grow, when it comes to deciding how the benefits of growth and development should be shared, their interests are not the same, nor will they necessarily agree about the best method of promoting growth and prosperity. Essentially the role of the unions is to look after the interests of their members (in the long-term as well as the short term), while management has to judge what is in the best interest of shareholders and customers as well as employees. The fact that their interests are bound to clash when it comes to deciding who gets what share of the cake, all too often obscures the point that management and unions need to cooperate together to increase the total size of the cake and must cooperate if the economic objectives of the company and all the people in it are to be achieved."

The Union

The traditional form of workplace organisation is the union. Unions evolved in order to defend workers' interests in the here and now. All unions aspire to legality, or recognition, because this makes their day-to-day job possible.

Unions die if they are not accepted to a certain extent by the bosses and the State. If they don't disappear they tend to turn into political organisations. Recognition is accepted by the bosses when the workforce becomes too unmanageable without it.

The union must fulfil a management role by its very nature and at all levels. The bosses will only negotiate with a union if they are pretty sure the membership will follow the union. That is, the union has to be able to control the membership in order to make deals with management. Having accepted the 'legality' of capitalism (in return for capitalism's recognition of their legality) the union largely helps keep workers in line and basically argues for a 'better' management of the workforce. Differences of opinion between management and union over work practices will usually end up in terms of efficiency. The union will argue that management has its sums wrong, is forgetting larger issues, or eventually if they carry on in such a manner then the discontent they'll face will make their plans unviable anyway. (This discontent would be hard for the union to control, and the union will use this fact as another bargaining tool with management.)

The unions' only purpose on a day-to-day basis (apart from legal aid, insurance, etc) is as negotiators between workers and managements; their long term aim may be to prove that they are better managers of the economy than the old bosses. In both instances the whole existence of the union depends on the existence of a capitalist economy.

Unions have never tended to become revolutionary; they have always gone the other way – incorporation into the State. This goes for all unions, even anarcho-syndicalist ones. Unions become part of the array of ideological forces used by the State against workers. Unions in any circumstances would rather see struggles lost than for them to get beyond the control of the unions. For all the above reasons, unions can never support the destruction of capitalism.

Rank and Filism

Revolutionaries must abandon once and for all their misty-eyed view of the potential of union organisation and the part unions have had to play in working class history. This also means abandoning rank and filism.

Rank and file groups, or movements, aim to create radical organisations which may or may not be revolutionary. For the 'revolutionary,' rank and filism in practice means one or more of the following things: putting pressure on the union; linking up the rank and file of all unions; 'democratising' the unions; and turning the unions, or resulting new unions, into 'vehicles for revolutionary change'. The rank and file group may claim only to want to put a certain politics on the agenda amongst the membership, but what this means in practice is trying to seize key union posts, if not the leadership itself.

Without a clear awareness of the reformist nature of all permanent economic (economic struggles) workplace organisation (i.e. union) revolutionaries will inevitably find themselves up the non-revolutionary alley of rank and filism (i.e., unionism).

(Note: Despite being anti-union for revolutionary reasons it is probably advisable to join a union if there is one at your place of work. Being in the union enables you to attend union meetings, where you can put your point of view across and keep up with what is going on elsewhere in the union. Not joining the union straight off can also cause difficulties with your relationship with other workers; often there is an unofficial closed shop, or you may get taken for some extreme right-winger. It's also probably not advisable to get into an argument with people on the first day because you aren't going to join. Another reason is that you can get things like legal expenses. Of course, these are not hard and fast principles and different situations may require different responses. What is important is that we take no hand in the setting up of unions, for whatever reason and in whatever circumstances. We can do better than that.)

Communication Worker Group

CWG was set up by members of the Direct Action Movement (DAM) and was a rank and file postal workers group. The DAM promotes anarcho-syndicalism as a means of working class organisation. Anarcho-syndicalists want to organise unions democratically and imbue them with anarchist politics. Such unions, imbued with anarchist methods and ideals, anarcho-syndicalists argue, will be revolutionary.

The CWG never got to the stage where the DAM members pushed for it to become a union. CWG, through its bulletin *Communication Worker (CW)*, aimed to inform and radicalise postal workers, to give them more confidence in struggle and to emphasise that active solidarity across trade, industry and union divides was essential if victories were to be won. In the tradition of rank and file groups CWG was open to all militant workers, including low-level union officials, i.e., shop stewards.

For most of the time CWG worked on the basis of an agreement between the various political tendencies. These ranged from anarchist communist to anti-state communist to trotskyist, as well as the original anarcho-syndicalist. As time went by these divisions became more pronounced. Eventually we had to re-emphasise the group's broader rank and file nature by drawing up a basic aims and principles. Due to the variance of views within the organisation these common denominators had to be very low; thus the aims and principles were virtually meaningless as soon as we had written them.

Obviously, this compromise could not last long. Some of us felt we needed to make deeper and clearer criticisms of unions and rank and fileism (i.e., reformism at the workplace). We all saw the potential for a groups like CWG to eventually replace the union – in small ways, over certain areas, or totally. To some this was highly desirable of course, but others had misgivings. We realised that we could only replace the existing postal worker's union (UCW) with another union, and if CWG expanded and became more successful this is eventually what the groups would become.

The questions became: how to work in a rank and file workers group, clearly and consistently attacking the union, without letting the group turn itself into a reformist organisation or union. We liked to see ourselves as a revolutionary group, but what would happen if we were flooded with militant, but reformist-minded workers?; what if these workers wanted the group to articulate reformist demands?; what if we gained more support in a workplace than the existing union, would we then participate in a day to day dialogue with the employers, would we help to make deals, would we accept the 'legality' of exploitation as long as it was a 'fairer' exploitation – i.e., one we had actively agreed to? Would we behave in just the same way as the old union once we had become the worker's organisation?

The first problem we tried to tackle was the old one about being swamped by different-minded individuals.

There was no formal way of preventing people from entering the group, we just hoped that if we didn't like someone's politics then the rest of the group would agree and that person wouldn't be let in. Obviously this was not very satisfactory. Some thought we shouldn't let SWP members in, for example, because they were actively pro-statist/authoritarian and they might try to hijack the group. Others thought we should let them in as long as they didn't stray out of line too much or try to push their politics down our throats, thus causing interminable political arguments. Others thought we should let them in since they were militant workers. (None of us considered the politics of the SWP to be revolutionary, by-the-way.)

This problem was never satisfactorily resolved; the reason being that it lies at the crux of the argument over whether a rank and file group can be revolutionary. That is, whether a group that attracts an increasing number of non-revolutionaries (i.e., reformist-minded workers) can remain revolutionary in all its publications and interventions.

Our temporary resolution of the problem was to print our basic aims and principles in the bulletin and hope the 'wrong sort' of people wouldn't want to join anyway!

It has been argued by revolutionaries that we should set up groups, encourage people to join and hopefully their experience and learning in the group will turn them into revolutionaries. This might be alright if you have a hierarchical Party of thousands and are recruiting one or two people a month. But if a drastically smaller group (a few people), with egalitarian methods, recruited that many people as members each month then they would soon find themselves outweighed by the new recruits and unable to brainwash them fast enough to keep the group on its original lines!

We have enough reformist organisations around already; we don't want to inadvertently create any more.

However, CWG did not need to recruit many more members for it to fall apart over its own internal contradictions. Fortunately, the trotskyst tendency went first, and the group retained its fragile stability for a while.

We already had UCW shop stewards in our group, this irked the anti-union tendency of course, but we thought we could work with them, as long as they realised the dangers of their position. However, it meant having disagreements, for example, over who we should target with our propaganda. For instance, there was a plan to leaflet a UCW Conference and make interventions at meetings. I argued that it was pointless to argue with the UCW when the ordinary membership weren't there to hear us. Also, I didn't want to recruit any more shop stewards into the group. I lost the argument, but no one went in the end anyway. The question never arose at subsequent Conference times.

Don't be a Shop Steward!

Many radicals see the post of shop steward as a key one for gaining influence over their fellow workers and the working class in general. They see the steward as being too low in the union hierarchy to be overly 'corrupted' by it, and it is a post by which people can wield an 'official' influence over fellow workers. It is also a post from which you can influence other stewards and union officials, at Conferences for example. People who advocate becoming shop stewards for 'revolutionary' purposes obviously believe the lie that the union organisation can, if managed correctly, work in favour of a revolutionary working class.

Shop stewards are negotiators, and in spite of their best instincts have to play a similar role, albeit on a much lower key, as top union officials. The philosophy of unionism is one that accepts capitalism; accepts the justice of there being workers and bosses and even at its most extreme only argues for a left-wing implementation of capitalism. A shop steward has to actively work within this philosophy. If not at the instruction of the union and the bosses then at the behest of the members.

A steward who goes wild in the manager's office, threatening to slit their throats every time they act 'unfairly' is no use to the people s/he is representing on the shop floor. Management will only listen to a steward if they think s/he can rely on the back-up of the workforce. A shopfloor will only want a steward who they think can defend them in everyday injustices.

A steward who is a revolutionary cannot last, either they will be drawn into the union apparatus through the day-to-day accommodation with management that they have to negotiate for – or they will 'go too far' for the members and lose the ability to do a good job as a steward.

CWG Dissolved

Gradually the anti-union tendency realised the impossibility of keeping, or rather making, this rank and file group revolutionary. By no means did this mean we had fully developed our ideas but we did know that we no longer wanted to make the compromises towards unionism that were necessary in working with anarcho-syndicalists. As it happens, the anarcho-syndicalists in the group were thinking that we should go our separate ways also.

The CW bulletin had been very popular among postal workers and had a big print run each issue; during the national strike in 1988 we even had our logo stolen by the Broad Left (a Militant front) and used on their own pathetic leaflets. Anyway, it transpired that CWG dissolved itself one Sunday lunchtime in a pub in central London. Later there was some confusion as to whether the anarcho-syndicalists would carry on producing the bulletins under the banner Communication Worker, but nothing ever came of it and no more CWs were produced.

The Postal Worker's Coordination Committee

The anti-union tendency regrouped with the aim of setting up a non-rank and file revolutionary postal worker's group. We gave ourselves the cumbersome title of Postal Workers Coordination Committee (PWCC). Our first, and only, leaflet made obvious that this new group had not, in fact, managed to break out of rank and file. It aimed to set up a permanent economic workplace group that aimed for rapid growth and it encouraged shop stewards to join. Basically it recreated the old rank and file group, but this time without the anarcho-syndicalists.

We had all rushed to set up the group without enough thought. Anyway, the group did not survive long. Some people, including myself, left the Post Office. In the ashes of the PWCC, Class War Postal Workers emerged. At the time of writing this [1990] the group still exists. The bulletin is very 'Class-War-ish' and it is hard to tell if it has made any steps forward organisationally or politically.

The Action Group for Worker's Unity

While the splits in CWG were widening another influence made itself felt in the group. We had contact with the Action Group for Worker's Unity (AGWU). This was essentially a front for the dogmatic Marxist International Communist Current (ICC). The ICC use the label 'counter-revolutionary' for working class activists more freely than air. They are a slanderous bunch.

Despite this they are fairly good on the role of the unions in the present day, which is why they began to make contact with us.

However, their theory is based on the idea that the unions turned against the working class in 1914, up until the first world war, they argue, 'unions were genuine working class organisations which expressed and fought for the interests of the class'. The ICC fail to examine the actual nature of unionism in its original state: a negotiation for a fairer form of exploitation. Unions (permanent economic workplace organisations) were destined from the start to act against a more radical or revolutionary working class – there are many instances of this to be found before 1914, in Britain and elsewhere. The ICC have merely come up with another 'clever' Marxist

theory based on 'ascendant and decadent capitalism', which, in reality, bears no resemblance to working class experience.

The ICC/AGWU considered the anarcho-syndicalists in our group to be out-and-out counter-revolutionaries, but they saw potential in the rest of us. An honour indeed! (In their paper they claimed to be instrumental in the split and dissolution of CWG, but this was just bollocks.)

Anyway, we did have a dialogue with them and the main bone of contention between us was over the question of 'sectoralism' (or sectionalism): trade, skill, industry and union divisions within the working class. They argued that it was counter-revolutionary to be involved in a plain postal worker's group, as it was 'sectoral' and excluded the rest of the militant working class.

We argued that it was not necessary that a specific postal worker's group was sectoral. Indeed CWG had consistently argued that solidarity across trade and union divisions was essential to victories. We regularly highlighted other struggles in our bulletins and showed why they needed to spread. The fact that we were postal workers aiming to recruit postal workers, who spoke the same 'language' as postal workers, contributed to our popularity. Nothing would be more sure to turn ordinary militant workers off coming to meetings than endless political diatribes by the ICC or anyone else. The AGWU was, in a way, a recreation of the London Worker's Group which had also tried to draw workers together from different industries. The LWG had fallen apart because it aimed to do too much at too early a stage and because there was too much talking. In the end it was composed only of the hardened politicians. The potential for a postal worker's group to grow, initially fighting against union stitch-ups and sectoralism, was more modest but infinitely more practical. And there was no reason why similar groups in other industries could not work together in some way eventually.

More important than these arguments about how to fight sectoralism was the fact that both CWG and the AGWU were rank and filist. Anti-sectoralism itself does not make one a revolutionary, first of all we had to make sure that what we were doing was not re-treading the path of reformism, and both these groups were doing just that.

The Working Class is not Revolutionary all the Time

Reformism used to be regarded as steps towards 'socialism', now it tends to be associated with the left-wing of Capital. Reformism is everywhere, it keeps working class activists very busy, and it is fixed like a bumper around our brain, dulling our perception of the real world. There are plenty of reformist workers around, ready to demand a wage rise or abortion rights, without going further. Some revolutionaries think we have to formulate demands for workers to take up because otherwise they wouldn't think of any themselves. This is patronising rubbish, workers are constantly making demands. For us to take a lead in putting forward demands would be merely to lapse into reformism as we gave the impression that a few more crumbs off our masters' tables would appease our real class interests. Our message must be revolutionary, not reformist. We support reformist demands because they create a situation where people can begin to understand better how society operates, where the strength of the working class lies, and who its enemies are. When there is a pay dispute we try to show the way to win it but also why pay rises will never be enough. When we go back to work, whether we have won the dispute or not, it is not the revolutionaries that should negotiate with the bosses, others should do this. Some

might say that it seems a bit 'purist' to not negotiate with the bosses oneself, if we agree that, in the circumstances, such negotiation is inevitable.

Well, we may win the odd battle in the class war but the working class is always in defeat while there is wage-slavery – so revolutionaries should never lead workers back to work. To do such a thing is to help the bosses manage our long-term oppression – which is what reformism is all about. If we have to go back to work we go as proletarians, not as 'managers'.

Revolutionaries

As revolutionaries our influence lies in our message, whether it be printed or by personal intervention, and our actions. This message must be clear and honest. We want to put a revolutionary message across, and to do this we can't risk mixing it up with reformist messages.

We may support reformist demands (a wage rise, free abortions, etc) but we argue for autonomous and effective methods of struggle, and we always argue that it is not enough; that it is always only a temporary and partial gain if we win. Reforms are illusory, just as is the lie that the working class no longer exists in Britain.

There will always be discontent while capitalism, or any form of exploitation, lasts. It is our duty to clearly identify that discontent and help turn it into a desire for revolution. Therefore we must know who and what our enemies are. And we must be implacable...

The bosses do not work with their implacable enemies and we do not work with the bosses, helping them to manage their workforces, wage slavery, and society in general. As workers, of course, we are constantly having to carry out their orders and instructions – but we mustn't try to help them manage us. Our humanity exists in large part in our refusing to make things easier for the bosses. Our humanity diminishes the more we accept their inhuman, alienating regime. Resistance to all forms of slavery and alienation (not slipping into the apathetic collaborationism of bourgeois individualism) is the key to a free mind and a humane life.

The Revolutionary Workplace Group

A permanent economistic workplace group must always be reformist because it has to operate under the rules laid down by Capital. The rules may change slightly, we may force them to accept secondary picketing, for example, or they may make such action unlawful, but capitalism remains.

What we want throughout workplaces are groups of people who do not accept capitalism and will not negotiate with it. This means not trying to form a union! These groups will try to show the true nature of capitalism and the choices that face the working class. While portraying a life without wage-slavery and alienation they will help show how we can take control of our struggles now.

Since we don't want our message to be diluted by reformism we must not simply open the doors to as many militant workers as we can. Our leaflets and interventions, individually or as a group, must be revolutionary. This does not mean letting people participate in the group but denying them any part in the decision-making process or somehow forcing them to do things for which the meaning is not clear to them or they are misled as to the meaning of their actions.

This would definitely be a counter-revolutionary thing to do! And is, not surprisingly, the way many left-wing parties operate, such as the SWP, RCP and Labour Party.

Like CWG the AGWU suffered from this dilemma. It aspired to go beyond the unions, but its programme was only to bring workers together, in permanent groups, on the basis of an anti-sectoral militancy. Although it set out to be revolutionary, in the end the group could only be rank and filist because if it grew as it was intended to, it would soon have more people in it who were reformist-minded, people who, although they disagreed with sectoralism, did see unionism as potentially progressive.

For this reason, if it had been successful, the AGWU would probably have laid the basis for a syndicalist union.

Only revolutionaries can be in a revolutionary group. In revolutionary times this group will swell, at other times it will remain small.

This group does not have to be a formal group with a flash name and distinctive Letraset [font for printing], but the people who make it up must work and grow together during the non-revolutionary times –and must operate with a common mind in a revolutionary situation.

As revolutionaries we have tried to learn certain truths and during hectic times we must impart our knowledge all the more forcefully. We will understand the manoeuvring of the Left and Right and we will fight against the replacement of the old bosses with new ones.

Our workplace groups will try to expose Capital and the unions; they will inform workers of the state of struggle elsewhere in the class; they will make tangible interventions during struggle, for example, organising flying picketing, sabotage, unofficial mass assemblies, arguing for the dispute to go beyond the control of the union (in fact nearly all strikes are unofficial to begin with, the union makes them official in order to control them).

If, for example, we find ourselves on an unofficial strike committee we will give up the post as soon as the struggle is over or the committee starts to try to hold back the workers or make deals with the bosses. (This may, of course, happen from the start, in which case we turn against it at that moment.) Better than forming unofficial strike committees we will form ourselves into groups to carry out specific tasks – e.g., secondary picketing, leafleting, sabotage. Here also, we must be careful not to carry on these groups after the struggle as rank and file alternatives to the union; if fellow workers want to do this then we must argue against it and have no part in it. It may carry on as an informal struggle-type group but we don't try to lead it as a permanent workplace group. This may be difficult of course! But it must be done to preserve our identity as revolutionaries and our ability to tell the truth.

The experience of CWG has taught us that reformism is a many-headed monster and that one of its heads is rank and filism. It is the most important task revolutionaries have to face and they have had to face it all this century. It is the drawing of the line between reformism and revolution. This essay is only a small contribution to that process.

[pre-Proletarian Gob 1990]

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The text below appeared in a short-lived project and one-off journal, entitled 'Anti-Exchange and Mart', produced in London in 1990. The article has been 'lost' until just recently. The article was written by a member of the Communication Worker's Group (CWG), a rank and file postal workers organisation. It is a detailed examination of the challenges that faced, or perhaps, issues that beset, the group, written very shortly after the dissolution of the group. The text here is exactly as it appeared in 1990. It is written from the perspective of those – termed the 'anti-union tendency' in the article – in the group who had a particularly fundamental critique of the role of workplace unions. The experience of the CWG informed the politics of at least two of its members in a very significant way. The Libcom poster, Devrim Valerian, and I (Proletarian Gob/Monsieur Dupont/Le Garçon Dupont/lines) became ideologically very close during the course of our involvement in CWG. We learned a lot from the whole experience and it was to form the basis of my later political development (nihilist communism), which has been largely grounded in the experience of working class people as workers and as members of a class society in which different types of work facilitate different societal functions, for example, production and social control, to be performed. So, as the article is the work of only one participant in the CWG it is not the definitive account of that experience, however, on reading this text again, it does seem that is an account that resonates with temporal accuracy (written at the time) and referential logic (the conclusions it draws). The observations we made and lessons we drew from our experience of rank and filism are still, naturally, after twenty-odd years, extremely useful to anyone who seeks to understand the mechanisms of this society, not least because they were formed in an instance of actual practice. *MD, December 2012*

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