

How much change can we achieve within the unions

... how can we do it?

Workers Solidarity Movement

1993

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STRONG workforces like Aer Lingus stand to be decimated. Strong unions like SIPTU are humbled by a minor union busting boss like Pat the Baker. Job losses mount while top union officials earn top salaries. Cynicism and demoralisation are found among trade unionists in almost every job and union branch. Everyone knows that big changes are needed in our unions, but what changes?

There is a great potential power in the trade union movement. According to the Department of Industrial Relations in University College Dublin (DUES Data Series on Trade Unions in Ireland) 54.6% of employees in Ireland are trade union members. This means that throughout the public sector and in most private sector employments which are not just small family businesses most workers are in a union. Of course this potential is not being used.

US AND THEM

To join a trade union implies, although it may not be clearly thought out, that we have different interests to those of the boss. It further recognises that to look after our own interests we have to get together with other workers. This is the beginning of class consciousness, an understanding that our interests are different to those of our employers.

In 1990 over 350 shop stewards and union Activists sponsored the unofficial Trade Unionists & Unemployed Against the Programme grouping which campaigned for a NO vote to the PESP. Over 100 regularly attended TUUAP meetings in the main towns and cities. Many of these had long records as militants fighting against centralised bargaining, for more democracy in our unions and for solidarity with workers in struggle.

Given the small numbers involved in taking the anti-PESP arguments into jobs where there was no TUUAP contact, leafleting, postering and organising public meetings, TUUAP did very well. Where there were TUUAP contacts explaining the case against the PESP the vote almost inevitably went against it.

Even in SIPTU 33,244 'NO' votes were won against the 57,103 in favour. Unions that turned in majority 'NO' votes included the ATGWU, MSF, IDATU, IMETU (now part of IMPACT) and the FUGE. While TUUAP can not claim the credit for all of this, it is indisputable that it made a significant contribution.

'TRADE UNION FIGHTBACK'

After the ballot TUUAP became a lot less visible but did not disappear. It had organised almost solely on the single issue of the PESP. Once the vote was in most supporters did not much point in going to meetings. With another PESP-type deal being put forward TUUAP has relaunched itself as Trade Union Fightback. It is continuing to make the case against 'social partnership' between government, employers and unions.

It is also taking up the issue of the lack of democracy and membership involvement in our unions, and is hoping to be able to do a lot more solidarity work with workers who are in struggle. Although the number of activists in most unions is declining, due to most decisions being taken at a national level and a bureaucratic control that takes the initiative away from the rank & file, there is still a layer of people who are prepared to fight against both the bosses and bureaucracy.

The question is how do we organise? What are we up against in our unions and what can we do about it?

Anarchists have always said that workers organised on the job have tremendous power. This is a power that can and should be used to win day-to-day improvements. It is also the power that can overthrow capitalism, replacing it with genuine socialism and liberty.

DIRECT ACTION

Anarchists have also said that even a small amount of direct action is better than a lot of conciliation, arbitration and mediation. This is action that is taken collectively by workers and which remains under their direct control. It is no exaggeration to say that there is a grave shortage of direct action at the moment!

Trade unions were set up to defend workers under capitalism, to stop the bosses having a completely free hand in setting wages and conditions. They organise workers to get the best possible deal (at least that's the idea) under the present system. Their goal is to get the best price for their members' ability to work, the highest possible wages. It is not to get rid of exploitation and the wages system.

Their preferred method is negotiation rather than struggle. This is not to say that trade unionists are naturally conservative or meek. It merely shows how the ideas of capitalism are reflected inside our unions. Part of this is that there must be a division into leaders and led, order-givers and order-takers.

The initiative is very much with the full-time officials, many of whom are not even elected but enjoy considerable power and influence. Most of these see their union work as a career.

IT'S A DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE

Most of them have jobs for life. They are paid more than people they are supposed to represent. SIPTU's Billy Atley gets about £90,000 per year in salary and expenses, the exact figure is kept a secret from the members. The vast majority are unresponsive to the needs of their members.

They live a different lifestyle, often being found alongside employers and senior civil servants on commissions and the boards of semi-state companies. Quite a number never even had an ordinary job but came straight from student politics.

A few worth mentioning are Kieran Mulvey, ex-General Secretary of ASTI and now head of the Labour Relations Commission; Pat Rabbitte and Eamonn Gilmore, ex-SIPTU officials now Democratic Left TDs. Another is SIPTU's National Nursing Officer, Pat Brady. All of these went straight from the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) to full-time jobs as union officials. A problem with this is that they have no direct experience of the daily realities experienced by their members.

No matter what ideas they have at the beginning they quickly have to accept that their career is that of an arbitrator, a smart talker, a fixer. What is important to them is proving their skill as smart negotiators, not helping their members to fight for their demands.

IT'S NOT OUR PICKET!

They have narrow sectoral interests, only looking after their own sector regardless of the general interests of workers. That is why we saw SIPTU officials telling their members to pass the NBRU pickets in the rail strike last April

These people rarely lead strikes. Instead they will have you 'making submissions' to the Labour Relations Commission, to 'impartial mediators', and to every other other talking shop they can find. They seem thrive on almost endless negotiation, aimed at finding a 'reasonable settlement. Some negotiations go on, literally, for years.

They see taking any form of industrial action as very much a last resort and are very quick to condemn unofficial action (i.e. action that hasn't been sanctioned by them). The 'correct procedures' and negotiation machinery are vitally important to them. Confidence among the members at workplace level rarely merits even a second thought. The official believes it is his or her negotiation skill that wins concessions from the boss. The activity of the rank & file is seen, at best, as secondary.

MAKING THE MEMBERS OBEY

Once a deal has been struck the official has to see that the members stick to it. The continued existence of the negotiation machinery depend on an element of trust. If the employer can't be sure that the union official can ensure that the members adhere to the deal, why should any boss enter negotiations? The union official's career depends on being able to make the members comply with agreements.

The result is a cautious, conservative bureaucracy at the top of the unions that seeks more and more control over the members, and opposes any independent organisation among the rank & file. This does not mean that these people will never give a lot of support to struggles. While they don't exactly make a habit of it they are capable of leading and supporting strikes when the negotiation machinery is brought into question. This is why, for instance, SIPTU's leaders were prepared to spend a small fortune explaining the case of the "Pat the Baker" strikers who very bravely fought for union recognition.

However, in many strikes even verbal support is slow in coming, if it comes at all. With the PESP and the anti-strike provisions of the 1990 Industrial Relations Act (which was agreed as part of the PNR and hailed by ICTU's Kevin Duffy as leaving us "better off") we are seeing even less support for strikers.

WHAT WAY FORWARD?

So, how can activists inside the unions organise to combat the authority of the officials and bring together workers who take their trade unionism seriously? Three options can be put forward. Let's take a look at them.

1. Building Broad Lefts. These are groups within individual unions whose main purpose is to elect a "left wing" leadership, though as part of this they will also try to generate support for workers in struggle. Sometimes they also argue for officials to get no more than the average wage of their members and to have to stand for regular re-election.

It is correct to raise demands like these and it can be useful to support candidates who are more responsive to the needs of the membership. In circumstances where we feel there is a value in this anarchists can and do support such candidates. A problem arises, however, when electing leaders becomes more important than winning support for rule changes which would allow for more participation and democracy.

WHO NEEDS LEADERS?

As the Broad Left idea concentrates on leadership we must start off by asking if leaders are a good thing, and are they necessary. These are not two separate questions since if leaders are necessary they must also be good. Here we are not talking of a 'leadership of ideas', of those whose ideas are accepted because they make sense to the rest of us. We are talking about the leadership which divides us into leaders and led, the leader being the man or woman who – as a representative – has acquired combined administrative and decision making powers.

As such he or she sees no need for any high level of debate or activity among the rank & file. Indeed, from the point of view of the average official, such thought and action – by encouraging questioning and criticism – is an obstacle to 'normal' trade unionism. Leadership implies almost absolute power held by the leader. All leaders become corrupt to some degree despite their own good intentions. Nobody was ever good enough, brave enough or strong enough to have such power as real leadership implies.

The power of initiative, the sense of collective responsibility, the self-respect that comes from making decisions is taken from the members and given to the leader. Most of the members are reduced to inactivity and passivity. Attendance at meetings, participation in internal union life, and even basic identification with the union, declines as power shifts from the workplace and the branch.

Of course not all advocates of the Broad Left strategy see things this way. Though constantly proclaiming the need for a "fighting leadership" they also look for more internal democracy and activity. In reality, however, the main task is still seen as getting Broad Left supporters elected to positions of influence. The rank & file are to elect a new leadership who will then bring about change from the top. That's the theory anyway.

RANK & FILE

2. The Rank & File Movement. This is a strategy for organising within the union to win more democracy, more struggle against the bosses and more involvement by the membership. Its attitude is best summed up by the slogan "with the officials when possible, without them when necessary". Where there have been large rank & file movements they have always been based on combative workers who find the union bureaucracy is an obstacle in their way. They are then forced to ignore the instructions of the bureaucracy and disobey them if their struggle is to be won.

This can start with problems about spreading strikes, refusing to get sucked into endless rounds of mediation, or being denied official sanction for a strike. The point is that large rank & file groupings are created when workers are fighting the bosses, are confident, and then find the union officials are trying to sabotage their struggle. The need for independent organisation

within the union is then posed. Struggle creates genuine rank & file movements, not the other way around.

At a time when most workers are on the defensive and lacking in confidence, any attempt to create such groups will attract only small numbers of activists. This is not to decry such attempts (where they arise from a genuine desire to take on the bosses and bureaucrats) but to warn against setting any unrealistic goals at this time.

GETTING TOGETHER

3. Building a Solidarity Network. We have to face the fact that mass unemployment, growing poverty and two decades of centralised wage bargaining have left many good union activists demoralised. They are doubtful about the possibility of fighting back against the Larry Goodmans and Billy Atleys. Another PESP certainly won't improve matters.

But all is not doom and gloom. They are militants who want to fight back. The 1990 TUUAP campaign and, more recently, the support for the "Pat the Baker" and Nolans strikers are signs of this. There is a need for a structure to bring these people together, a visible network that can attract other activists. Trade Union Fightback, which is not under the control of any political party, could become this.

It wants to break down the isolation that makes us weak, to combat 'social partnership' deals, to support all resistance to job losses and cutbacks, to fight for more democracy in our unions, and to organise solidarity with workers in struggle. It could, if it gets enough support, produce a magazine with factual information on disputes, wage deals, the behaviour of union leaders. It could also be a forum for debating different ideas for changing our unions.

A network such as this would allow us to pool our efforts while at the same time discussing the different strategies for putting trade union power where it should be — in the workplace. It is a moderate proposal but one which could provide a springboard for real rank & file organisation. The conditions for it will reappear, now is as good a time as any to start making preparations.

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