

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Anarchism and the trade unions

be active — be involved

Gregor Kerr

Gregor Kerr  
Anarchism and the trade unions  
be active — be involved  
1997

Retrieved on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2021 from [struggle.ws](http://struggle.ws)  
This article was originally published in *Red & Black Revolution* no.  
3.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

1997



## Contents

Collective Oppression . . . . .	6
Collective Power . . . . .	8
The bureaucracy . . . . .	9
How to respond . . . . .	11
Anarcho-syndicalism . . . . .	13
Political levy . . . . .	14
Building opposition . . . . .	15

memory for the movement (i.e., learning from and being able to explain the lessons of past struggles), to challenge the politics of reformism and Leninism within the movement and to explain and popularise anarcho-communist ideas. In addition, we extend solidarity to groups of workers in struggles, at all times encouraging self-activity and helping to develop workers' confidence in their own abilities. In short, our role is that of a 'leadership of ideas', as opposed to a leadership of elite individuals.

Members who are elected as shop stewards view that role as that of delegate rather than 'representative' and would look for a mandate from the members on all issues.

Within the current structure of the trade union movement, the most effective way of building an effective opposition to the bureaucrats is through the building of a rank-and-file movement — a movement within the unions of militant workers who are prepared to fight independently of the bureaucracy and against it if necessary. Such a movement cannot however be willed into existence. If it could be so, or if ritualistic calls for its creation were sufficient, a rank-and-file movement capable of taking on the bureaucracy would surely exist in Ireland. Practically all groups/parties on the left have at one time or another issued strident calls for the creation of a rank-and-file movement. However, particularly at times such as this when the level of rank-and-file activity is probably at an all-time low, there is a need to do more than simply issue calls for its creation.

What is needed in the here-and-now is the building of a solidarity network, in essence the laying of the foundation for a rank-and-file movement. A political reality which is often ignored is the fact that a rank-and-file movement — one with real bite and a genuine base — only comes about as a result of rank-and-file activity and confidence, not the other way around.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, trade unions are not and were never set up to be revolutionary organisations. However, from within trade union struggle will arise the embryo of the workers' councils of the future. Towards this end we push all the time for rank-and-file independence from the bureaucracy.

We see our role in trade union struggle as being working for the unification of the different sectional struggles into an awareness of the overall class struggle. Further tasks are to act as a collective

---

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller analysis of our position on this, see "Trade Union Fightback — the lessons to be learned", in "Red and Black Revolution 1"

**Anarchists are anarchists because we want to bring about a wholesale change in the way society is administered. For us, therefore, a crucial question is "How can such a change be brought about?" or — to put it more pertinently — "Who can change society?" This question must be posed in a historical context and the lessons of that history transferred to present times.**

At every single stage in the development of society — from ancient times through feudalism up to the present day — society has comprised two distinct groups : an oppressed class and a ruling class. These two classes have been allotted very specific roles. The oppressed class has been the one whose labour has created the wealth of society, the ruling class has controlled and exploited that wealth. This social division has not always been readily accepted. At almost every stage in society's development, the oppressed class (or sections of it) have fought back. Examples include the slave revolts of ancient Greece and Rome, the peasant uprisings of the Middle Ages and the social revolutions of the 1600s and 1700s.

These struggles have all been different in nature but they have always had one thing in common. They ended with one set of rulers being replaced by another set of equally parasitic rulers. Whilst a slight realignment in society's make-up often occurred, there was no fundamental change. The new society which emerged was divided along the old familiar lines — rulers and oppressed.

The failure of the oppressed classes to maintain control of the revolutions they fought in can be explained by two principal factors — the generally low level of wealth in society and the fact that the everyday lives of the people did not prepare them to run society. The majority were illiterate peasants who had no idea what life was like outside their own locality. Their everyday lives divided them from each other. Each peasant had to worry about his own plot of land, hoping to enlarge it. Each craftsman had to worry about his own business. To varying degrees each peasant and craftsman was

in competition with his fellows, not united with them. There was no thought of “class unity”.

## **Collective Oppression**

The emergence of capitalism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century changed this. Firstly, under capitalism, the workers began to create enough wealth to feed and clothe the world and still have plenty left for science, culture, leisure activities, etc. Secondly — and more importantly — the everyday lives of the oppressed class under capitalism prepares them to take over the running of society.

Capitalism brings workers together in large workplaces and into large towns and cities — it makes us co-operate every day at work. On the factory floor each person has to do his/her bit so that the person at the next stage of production can continue the process. The services sector requires similar levels of co-operation. From office to hospital to school to fast-food outlet, workers must co-operate with each other to get the job done. This level of co-operation and mutual dependency makes it possible to envisage a revolution which will involve the oppressed class taking over the entire running of society. Workers’ many talents will then be used to develop new societal structures which will do away with the need for rulers.

Those who administer and benefit from the capitalist system are only too well aware of this fact. That is why we are told again and again that such co-operation and mutual dependency is not possible. From an early age we are led to believe that the way in which society is currently structured is the only one possible. The need for rulers and ruled goes unquestioned. The fact that people die of hunger in one part of the world while, in another part, farmers are actually paid grants not to produce food; the fact that some people are forced to live in cardboard boxes while others live in mansions; the fact that governments can spend billions of dollars on weapons

issues outside the workplace on the grounds that ‘that is what the Labour Party is for’.

The concept, however, of a political levy is not one with which we would disagree. However, instead of being paid into the coffers of a political party which does nothing to advance the interests of the working class, the money raised by this levy should remain under the control of the rank-and file to be used to fund direct action on political issues. We seek at all times to mobilise the strength of the trade union movement on such issues. This involves the raising of political issues at section and branch level through arguing for sponsorship of/support for specific demonstrations. It also means proposing resolutions on issues such as repressive legislation/Travellers’ rights/gay rights, etc. This has the dual effect of raising issues, thus confronting some of those misconceptions/conservative ideas which many trade union members might have on some of these issues, and also raising the profile of particular campaigns. It might prove easier to build support for a particular demonstration/picket, for example, if it has the formal backing of a local Trades Council. It is important however that the raising of such issues does not become a ritualistic game between competing left groups each trying to ‘out-radical’ the other. Such resolutions should be linked to some action, no matter how minimal it may be.

## **Building opposition**

As I have said earlier in the article, WSM members see trade union activity as one of our most important ongoing activities. Our perspectives for activity within the unions are centred on encouraging workers to take up the fight against the bosses, against state interference and against the trade union bureaucracy. Therefore the most important area of our activity is at rank-and-file level. No member of the WSM would, for example, accept any unelected position which would entail having power over the membership.

times. In France, for example, the syndicalist CNT-F witnessed a rapid growth in membership following the December '95 strike.

It is as a form of political organisation that syndicalism fails the acid test. Syndicalism creates industrial unions – not revolutionary organisations. The anarcho-syndicalist union organises all workers regardless of their politics. This obviously leaves open the possibility of the appearance of reformist tendencies within the ranks of the organisation. The weaknesses which anarchist-communists see in syndicalism have been dealt with in detail on many occasions<sup>10</sup> and it is not proposed to outline them again in this article. We do, however, recognise that the syndicalist unions, where they exist, are far more progressive than any other union. Not only do they create democratic unions and establish an atmosphere where anarchist ideas are listened to with respect but they also organise and fight in a way that breaks down the divisions into leaders and led, doers and watchers.

## Political levy

In Ireland – and indeed in many other countries – the trade unions have formal links with social democratic parties. The largest general unions in Ireland are affiliated to the Labour Party. In truth however the Labour Party has never enjoyed the electoral support of the majority of trade unionists. Properly speaking it is the party not of trade unionists but of the trade union bureaucracy.

Such political affiliation usually has the effect of aiding and abetting passivity, with the union leaderships unwilling to take action against a government such as the current coalition because of the Labour Party's position in government. During times when the Labour Party is in opposition they can argue against taking up is-

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "Syndicalism – its strengths and weaknesses" in "Red and Black Revolution 1" (October '94)

of mass destruction while at the same time cutting back spending on health, education and welfare..... These are all passed off as natural phenomena. The possibility that the working class would have the wish never mind the ability to run society in all our interests is never considered. This is hardly surprising given that the media – which essentially controls the majority of political debate – is owned and controlled by either governments or big business. It certainly would not be in the interests of either Rupert Murdoch or Tony O'Reilly to question the basis of the society which sees them sitting on top of the pile. Neither are we likely to see Dick Spring, Tony Blair or any other of our wannabe 'leaders' quoting from Proudhon's 1849 writings when he said – among other things

"When left to their own instincts the people almost always see better than when guided by the policy of leaders."<sup>1</sup>

Individuals who might feel that a 'fairer' or 'more just' system would be desirable (doesn't practically everyone you know?) are overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. They feel isolated and powerless. This sense of powerlessness can however be turned on its head. When the co-operation or collective power described above which is used to run the factories, shops, schools, offices etc. is used to stop them from functioning, small glimpses of the potential emerge. Workers involved in strikes, whether they involve small numbers (eg, the Early Learning Centre strike in Cork last year), or larger numbers of workers (as in the Liverpool Dockers' strike, or – even more so – the wave of strikes in France in December 1995, for example), get a glimpse of the potential of their own power, their own ability to decide how things should be and to fight for that vision. Similarly the tens of thousands of people who refused to pay the Poll Tax in Britain and who fought the successful battle against service charges in Ireland saw that solidarity is indeed strength.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Anarchism" by Daniel Guerin, P.34

## Collective Power

While both the anti-Poll Tax and anti-service charge campaigns succeeded — for the most part — despite rather than because of the trade union leaderships (an honourable exception being the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union in Dublin), it is fair to say that it is through their trade union that most workers get their first glimpse of collective power in action. From their early beginnings, nearly 300 years ago, one thing is clear — for a worker to join a trade union is a recognition, to some degree at least, that he/she has different interests to the boss. The very survival of trade unions over the centuries is testament to the reality that there are different class interests in a capitalist society. Yes, conservatism, bureaucracy and backwardness are often — in fact nearly always — the hallmark of modern trade unions at their leadership level but even this cannot hide the essential fact that workers understand that to promote their own interests they have to organise along class lines.

This is not to suggest that trade unions are in any sense revolutionary organisations. They may go through periods of intense militancy from time to time (eg, 1913 in Dublin) but at the end of the day trade unions were formed to defend and improve the lot of workers under capitalism, not to challenge the existence of capitalism itself.

Nevertheless, for anarchists, trade union campaigns and activity are extremely important. We view our work within our unions not just as another sphere of activity, but as an absolute necessity. In the course of workplace struggle — whether to improve pay and conditions or to defend existing conditions — workers may begin to identify their potential power. Such struggles also open up the possibility of further radicalisation and the potential for bringing those involved into the revolutionary movement.

After all, when we get down to basics, what is anarchism other than workers, acting collectively, running a free society? What is

merged to form SIPTU<sup>8</sup> — and the NBRU<sup>9</sup> were all born as ‘left breakaway’ unions. Ultimately, of course, it is the workers themselves who have the right to make the decision on such an issue, but without a radical overhaul of the structures the breakaway will soon become a smaller mirror image of its parent.

## Anarcho-syndicalism

Syndicalism, and especially anarcho-syndicalism, has been and remains an important current within the trade union movement, particularly in Southern Europe and Latin America. The basic ideas of syndicalism revolve around the organisation of all workers into ‘one big union’, the maintenance of control in the hands of the rank-and-file and opposition to all attempts to create a bureaucracy of unaccountable full-timers. The principal difference between anarcho-syndicalist unions and other trade unions is their belief that the union can be used not only to win reforms from the bosses, but also to overthrow the capitalist system. They further believe that the principal reason why most workers are not revolutionaries is because the structures of their unions take the initiative away from the rank-and-file. The alternative, as they see it, is to organise all workers in one big union in preparation for the revolutionary general strike. The biggest problem — according to this analysis — is the structure of the existing unions.

As unions, syndicalist organisations have certainly proved effective. This is why people join them. They have proved themselves to be democratic, radical and combative. In fact there has been a considerable growth in membership of syndicalist unions in recent

---

<sup>8</sup> SIPTU is the most bureaucratic and least democratic union in Ireland, its formation in 1990 was a model in how it should be done — from the bureaucrats’ point of view!

<sup>9</sup> NBRU = National Bus and Railworkers Union



degrees by almost all of the ‘left’ — from social democrats to Stalinists to Trotskyists. According to this theory what we have to do is to elect and/or appoint ‘better’ officials. They see the problem primarily in terms of the individuals who hold the posts. This view of the situation stems directly from their conception of socialism. They see socialism as some sort of giant state enterprise bureaucracy where things are done ‘for the workers’. They see the role of socialists/socialist organisations as being to organise a revolution/change of society on behalf of the working class. Workers’ self-activity occupies no leading role in their scheme of things, just as real workers’ control is not part of their plan for a ‘socialist’ society. According to this theory, if the officials were more ‘left-wing’ they would be more willing to fight for the demands of their members. The theory ignores however the fundamental core of the problem — it is not the individuals but the structures which are at fault.

Another view which is sometimes put forward is that new ‘left-wing’ unions should be formed by breakaway groups of radical workers. The principal effect of this, however, would usually be to take the minority of combative/radical workers out of the old union leaving it totally at the mercy of the bureaucrats whose antics had initially provoked the split. Such radical workers would use their energies much more effectively by staying within the union and fighting to win over the broader membership to their radical ideas. At any rate, breakaway unions offer little alternative in the long run with the problems which led to their formation soon appearing in the new union. There are numerous examples of this in Ireland’s labour history. The ITGWU<sup>6</sup>, the FWUI<sup>7</sup> — both of which

---

<sup>6</sup> ITGWU = Irish Transport and General Workers Union

<sup>7</sup> FWUI = Federated Workers Union of Ireland which split from the ITGWU in 1922. The ITGWU and the FWUI merged to form SIPTU in 1990

a strike other than workers acting collectively towards a common goal? This is not to suggest that strikers set out with anarchist goals or even anarchist tactics in mind. They don’t. But collective action is indeed the only weapon with which a strike can be successful so the logic of the workers’ position — collective action in production, collective action in struggle does lead in an anarchist direction. And once in struggle, the potential for people’s ideas to change is enormous. Workers involved in a strike gain confidence in their own abilities, they are also exposed to the naked face of capitalism in action. In many instances, for example, workers going on strike believe in the ‘impartiality’ of the police force, the judiciary and other arms of the state apparatus only to have this ‘impartiality’ exposed to them in a brutal manner (eg, the British miners’ strike in the 1980s).

Central to anarchist politics is the contention of our forerunners in the First International that “The emancipation of the working class can only be brought about by the working class themselves”. It is only the self-activity of the mass of workers that is capable of mounting an effective challenge to the bosses and their State. The trade union movement is the most important mass movement the working class has built. For anarchists, activity within the unions should be one of the most important ongoing activities.

## The bureaucracy

As all trade union activists know, the unions are dominated by an all-embracing bureaucracy. This is a collection of (usually unelected) full-time officials with too much power and undue influence. They are only responsible to the members in the most formal sense. They may — when it suits them — take the side of the members, but they do not have to. They are not under the control of the members, they earn much more than those they ‘represent’ (Billy

Attley, general president of SIPTU<sup>2</sup> earns £85,000 per annum, while a SIPTU member in the catering industry can earn as little as £3.50 an hour). Or they may sit alongside the bosses and the government on commissions and on the boards of semi-state companies (Philip Flynn, former general secretary of Impact<sup>3</sup>, has been appointed by the government as chairman of the state-owned ICC Bank; David Begg, general secretary of the CWU<sup>4</sup>, is a member of the board of directors of the Central Bank). In short, they enjoy a lifestyle quite different to that of the people they are supposed to be working for.

More and more, the job of a trade union official is seen as a career, with many of the newer officials having come through college with a degree in 'industrial relations' and never having worked in an ordinary job. More than a few of them change sides during their careers, taking jobs with employers' or state organisations. For example, the chief executive of the Labour Relations Commission, Kieran Mulvey, is a former general secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI). These officials – especially now in the context of 'social partnership' – see their role as that of conciliator, "fixer", negotiator – the term representative does not seem to appear in the job description. Peter Cassells, ICTU general secretary, is regularly called in to disputes to force a settlement on workers. This was most clearly seen in the TEAM Aer Lingus dispute in 1994.

Members of the bureaucracy rarely lead or initiate strikes but are more often found pulling out all the stops to avoid any action. They will drag groups of workers back and forth to the Labour Court, the Employer-Labour Conference, the Labour Relations Commission, Rights Commissioners and every other talking shop they can find. They will negotiate forever in the hope of finding a 'reasonable' solution. Striking, in their book, is very much a last resort. Indeed Joe

---

<sup>2</sup> SIPTU = Services Industrial Professional Technical Union, Ireland's largest trade union

<sup>3</sup> Impact = Ireland's largest public sector trade union

<sup>4</sup> CWU = Communications Workers Union

O'Toole, general secretary of the INTO<sup>5</sup>, is on record as saying that he views it as a defeat to have to resort to the strike weapon. And, of course, unofficial action – action which has not been sanctioned by them – will be condemned out of hand by all bureaucrats.

It is not that the current crop of officials are a nasty bunch of individuals. Rather the old adage comes into play: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". The structure of the unions gives far too much power to the bureaucrats and it is inevitable that no matter how radical or left-wing they might be when they get the job their role sucks them into the business of conciliation. After all, the officials must be able to prove that they control their members – in other words, stop them fighting the bosses – if they are to have anything to sell at the negotiating table. If such control cannot be promised, why should an employer bother to negotiate?

As a whole, the bureaucracy swings between the position of mediator and that of defender of the status quo. As a grouping they can't obviously go over completely to defending the bosses' interests. To at least some degree they have to respond to the members' demands because they are after all employed by workers' organisations. Likewise, they cannot become totally responsive to their members' demands because that would see the end of their role, their power and their careers. There may be a few individual exceptions to this rule but, as a collective grouping, this remains the case. By its very nature, the bureaucracy has to be opposed to workers' self-activity on most occasions. It is without doubt authoritarian in its very structures.

## How to respond

Several different solutions/responses to the problem of bureaucratic strangulation of the trade union movement have been put forward. The most often heard of these is propagated to varying

---

<sup>5</sup> INTO = Irish National Teachers Organisation