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On the trade unions and “boring from within”

Phil Dickens

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I’ve written a number of pieces now on anarchist activity within the trade union movement. In particular, I’d point to Trade unions, worker militancy, and communism from below, What is anarcho-syndicalism: revolutionary unionism, Anarcho-syndicalism and the limits of trade unionism, and my most recent post on Building the rank-and-file. However, these have all focused primarily on the difference between bottom-up and top-down workers organisation. Here, I’d like to look at differences in approach between those who advocate mass-led organisation – in particular the notion of “boring-from-within.”

I was inspired to write on this subject by a conversation with another rep within my workplace. They aren’t, or certainly don’t identify as, an anarchist. However, they have agreed with a lot of the ideas that I have articulated on workplace organisation – in particular the need to build from the ground so that workers as a mass can take control of their own struggles from the union bureaucracy. Where the differences came was in the attitude to the existing bureaucracy. In particular,

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to the executive committees which make decisions on the direction of the union and its response to decisions made by the bosses, largely in isolation from the will of the rank-and-file. Agreeing with me that simply putting different faces into the existing structure was useless, he asked why we couldn't put people into positions with the specific aim of using them to i][change[/i] the structure.

As I have already alluded, this idea within the libertarian movement is called boring-from-within, an idea articulated by the now-defunct Workers Solidarity Federation of South Africa in Unions and Revolution;

We must do two things if we want the unions to play a revolutionary role. First, get rid of the union bureaucracy and make sure that the unions are controlled by the membership. Second, win the union membership over to Anarchist- Syndicalist ideas.

We must work within the existing unions to achieve these goals. All unions are workers combat units. Leaving the mainstream unions to form new "pure" revolutionary unions has serious consequences. It withdraws militants from the unions, leaving them at the mercy of bureaucrats and reformists. It isolates militants in tiny splinter unions because the masses prefer to join large, established unions. Small groups of revolutionaries working inside established unions can achieve impressive results. For example, the main French (CGT) and Argentinean (FORA) union federations were won over to Anarchist-Syndicalism in this way in the early twentieth century.

At this point, the idea isn't distinct from that prevailing within the Solidarity Federation in Britain, whose industrial

strategy argues that “workers will still be likely to hold union cards here to avoid splits in the workplace between union members and non-union members.”

However, it is beyond this point where the two strategies differ. Whilst Solfed argue for building up “an alternative structure to official union structures that are dominated by full-time bureaucrats,” the boring-from-within approach involved attempting to directly *transform* the existing structures in order to democratise and de-bureaucratise the union.

In its position paper on trade unions, the Irish Workers Solidarity Movement lays out the strategy for transformation in some detail;

7.3 No WSM member will accept any unelected position that entails having power over the membership.

7.4 Members elected as shop stewards consider their position as that of a delegate rather than that of a ‘representative’ who can act over the heads of the members.

7.5 When going forward for elective positions we make it clear that we are not accepting the structure as it now exists. We will fight for more accountability, mandation, information for members, etc.

...

7.6.5 UNION DEMOCRACY

(a) We fight to change the role of the full-time officials – not to change the individuals who occupy the positions. Their decision-making powers have to be removed and returned to the rank & file membership. They should be elected and paid no more than the average wage of the people they represent. They should only serve for a fixed period of no more than five years after

which they return to ordinary work. The unions will have to win the demand for jobs to be kept open in order for this to be realistic.

(b) All officials to be subject to mandation and recall.

(c) We are totally opposed to the ICTU “two tier” picket.

(d) For regular branch and workplace meetings, in working hours where this is possible.

(e) For direct elections to all committees, conference delegations and national officerships, subject to mandation and recall.

(f) All strikes to be automatically made official as long as they do not contradict trade union principles.

(g) Support for all disputes, official or unofficial, in pursuit of higher wages, better conditions, jobs, trade union principles or any issue in the interest of the class.

(h) For the publication of minutes of all union meetings.

(i) Where revolutionaries can gain enough support to win election to national officerships in large unions, or indeed small ones, this support should not be used to merely elect a candidate. Instead it should be used to fundamentally change the structure of the union in such a way as to return power to the membership and turn the officers into administrators and resource people rather than decision makers.

This relates to the strategy argued for by my fellow rep at work. Yes, we should be organising at a rank-and-file, building mass participation and forcing a culture shift when it came to decision-making and to taking action. But why could we

More pressingly, if a rank-and-file movement has enough influence as to sway the election of officers to an executive, why do they need to seize power of the executive at all?

If there has been a steady effort at organising workplace committees based on mass participation and direct action, and you have lay reps taking up the role of delegates, you have already dismantled the existing power structure at a local level. If this is spread across enough of a cross section of any given trade union that you can be the major voice in elections, it is a safe bet that you have already laid the foundations for building a national federal structure.

Thus, to alter the structure of the union, you simply have to circumvent it. Rather than wasting the effort of taking over the existing leadership in parallel with rank-and-file organisation, the rank-and-file can establish an entirely different structure and vote en masse to disaffiliate from the reformist union whilst establishing a revolutionary one. I have over-simplified the idea somewhat, as this is not a quick process and there would be a significant battle of ideas to be won, but fundamentally that is the essence of the thing. The bureaucracy has essentially been jettisoned and the bosses are forced to deal with a militant rank-and-file rather than officials who will meet them halfway.

There is a clear precedent for attempts to transform the fundamental nature of a trade union being akin to alchemy. Down that path, we repeat mistakes already made and become what we were fighting against. In order to build a revolutionary union movement which is genuinely led from below by the rank-and-file, what we need is to build the new structure within the shell of the old.

not compliment that by trying to put people into place on the Group and National Executive Committees who would support this and could help remove any potential barriers that might arise?

On the face of it, this is a compelling argument. Building from the ground, almost from scratch, is not an easy task to contemplate. Surely, there's no harm in using the existing structures where you can, and making sure that you have people within them who are willing to step back from them when the time is ripe to put the new structures into practice?

However, the question here is – if such a thing is possible – then why does it not follow that you can simply replace the existing leadership with a more militant and “left” one, and see things change that way?

The answer, as those who argue for the above strategy would broadly agree, is the fundamental nature of the trade union bureaucracy. As the WSM themselves state, “no matter how radical or left-wing [the leadership] are at the beginning, their role sucks them into the business of conciliation.” More explicitly, “if they are to have anything to bargain with at the negotiation table,” then “the union official has to sell the employer labour discipline and freedom from unofficial strikes as part of its side of the bargain.” Hence their role as “keepers of industrial peace.”

Does this change if you enter the role with the specific aim of supporting rank-and-file organisation and transforming a trade union into a revolutionary one? To a degree, perhaps. After all, you will be far more conscious of the pressures that the role will place on you and arguably better equipped to address them.

However, in practice we see that this awareness doesn't help you to fare any better. As Joseph Kay wrote in *Thinking about unions: association and representation*, “the problem is highlighted by the number of modern day bureaucratic unions with radical syndicalist origins (of which the French CGT, founded

under large anarchist influence is the most obvious example).” It was Buenaventura Durruti who rebuked the CNT during the civil war for seeking to “get the CNT legalised and alleviate the repression,” because “bureaucratisation and subsequent mediation was a *result* of taking on a representative role.”

JK cites the Direct Action Movement pamphlet *Winning the class war*;

Of all the areas that the unions seek to have influence in by far the most important is its dealing with management, for it is from this area that all their power flows. They must retain the right to negotiate wages and conditions with management. It is by having the power to negotiate on behalf of workers that they retain their influence within the workplace and ultimately attract and retain members. In turn it is having that control and influence in the workplace that they are of use to the boss class. The unions offer stability in the workplace, they channel workers anger, shape and influence their demands and, if need be, act to police the workforce.

It is for this reason that the CNT now consciously spurn representative functions, arguing against “giv[ing] your ‘representatives’ the power to sign and negotiate for you” as “you and only you, are representative. When you take in your hands your problems, you gain representation.”

It is not difficult to see how this works in practice.

If you are a delegate, directly accountable to the membership, it is very difficult indeed to stray. You are there to voice the demands of the workers, and their response to offers made, with no capacity for independent decision making. If you violate that mandate, you can be instantly recalled.

By contrast, a representative has been mandated by their election with decision-making power, and is part of a key body

with responsibility for negotiation in the manner described above. Even if they are put forward as a candidate by a group to whom they consider themselves answerable, they cannot be recalled from their seat if they betray that trust, as such a mechanism doesn’t at present exist. Thus, the accountability rendered by direct democracy almost completely dissipates when it is used to “bore-from-within” a system of representative democracy.

It could be argued that, in building up the strength of the rank-and-file at the same time, you create a situation whereby even if instant recall cannot be enacted the recall will still occur the next time elections come around. But there are numerous flaws in this logic.

In the first instance, there is the problem of numbers. Even with the straightforward objective of switching the leadership in PCS, the Left Unity faction which currently dominates had to build for many years in order to have the strength to put forward a full slate of candidates. Within the current structure, a single voice or even a minority voice is not significant enough to influence the direction of the union – as in PCS the rival 4th members and Independent Left factions currently experience.

Thus, in order to “change the role of the full-time officials” and make other fundamental changes in how the union is run at the top, you essentially have to take over the leadership. Not only does this require an immense amount of time, energy and resources better spent on rank-and-file organising, but it then puts you in the same position as any other broad left takeover. It is now you “at the negotiation table” with responsibility to “sell the employer labour discipline” in negotiations. The fundamental nature of power structures means that they do not allow for their own dissolution, and there is little reason to expect that we will witness anything other than rank-and-file militants falling prey to bureaucratisation.