

School for Syndicalism

Tom Brown

August 1964

One's first day at work is an important day. In my case it was also a very long day. Hurrying along the damp, dark streets at 5.30 on a winters morning, with a tin tea can and a parcel of bread (there were few canteens at that time), I felt like a workman, though a very small one. The first world war was still raging and my first inside view of the factory was of rows of 60-pounder and 18-pounder field guns, anti-aircraft and mountain guns, tanks and anti-sub artillery, then lines of machines turning gun barrels or milling breech blocks.

It was noisy, bewildering and rather threatening, but youth is buoyant and I soon adapted myself to my new environment. I soon learned that some persons were jolly, some indifferent and some aggressive. Many of the latter wore bowler hats and thick watch chains, one was known as Simon Legree¹. The jolly men taught me that when you are pushed, you push back. I was an apt pupil. I was too small to do any actual heaving, but, like most of the lads, developed a form of public relations which appeared to be based on ju-jitsu.

But it wasn't always like that. There was one foreman who claimed he remembered the days when his like were allowed to strike apprentices. One day he found six of his boys warming themselves in the smithy. Taking a hazel rod from a pickle tank, the proverbial "rod in pickle", he crept up behind the boys and lashed out at them. Though taken by surprise, they quickly recovered and four of them held him down while two lashed him with the hazels, to the sound of his yells and the laughter of the smiths.

I soon realised that the new life I had entered was a kind of social war, the scene suitably furnished by the ever-present artillery. On the one side were the overseers, the lowest agents of the invisible but powerful enemy, the informers, the anti-unionists, the few who hankered after being scabs and who whispered, "Don't trust unions and such like, keep your nose clean and you'll get on", and the management. Facing them, bold and contemptuous, were our people. I was learning sociology without books.

I soon went on to learn that there were issues in this conflict that a man or a small group could not win by themselves and men turned to "the Union." This I thought I understood. I had seen the pictorial banners of Northumberland and Durham miners, the favourite picture showing a boy trying in vain to break a bundle of about a score of sticks and an old man breaking his sticks one at a time. The slogan beneath proclaimed "United we stand, divided we fall", or "Unity is Strength".

¹ the name of a cruel slave driver in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

But while we had one enemy, the employer, backed by “the authorities”, and we were one in circumstance and purpose, “the Union” was really many unions. The craftsmen had their own unions, each craft at least one separate union, the engineers several unions for one craft, and the “semi-skilled” machinists their union. The “unskilled”, after generations of being shut out, were now in several general unions. But women, now nearly 50 per cent of the labour force, were not allowed to join any union and had to form one for themselves. Only some of the draughtsmen were members of a union and the clerks disdained to be organised, accepting a lower wage in return for an intangible “dignity”.

Even worse, the machinery of the trade unions, like the Labour Party, had become part of the war machine, giving away all hard-won rights. My school-bred and newspaper-fed patriotism was cracking at the edges, for the class enemy had not suspended his predation. What had happened to the banner and slogans of unity?

But “Union” was more than officers and organisation, it was an idea. Almost within living memory, men and women had died on the scaffold for that idea and still men knew that Union meant bread, human dignity and the hope of liberty. War or no war, the social struggle went on. I learnt two new terms, Syndicalism and Revolutionary Industrial Unionism. Soon they seemed to mean the same thing, though I was some time in understanding them. The first had a 1789 sound, I thought, like the Committee of Public Safety, but the latter seemed apt to engineering.

Later, when I became involved, I found that the new ideas stemmed from European Syndicalism and the IWW², the latter having small groups in Britain and support from Wobbly seamen from the US and Australia. The Socialist Labour Party also advocated industrial Industrial Unionism, having been affiliated to the IWW, which they left after having disagreed with the “without affiliation to a political party” clause. The Syndicalist, like the IWW groups, were small but the influence of all these groupings was enormously greater than their numbers would seem to justify. Little wonder that the Government and the employers imagined a vast and wealthy organisation, plotting against the powers that be. But a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

I recently read in *Anarchy* the pontifical statement, “it seems to me that Malatesta’s main contentions still hold good that those anarchists who are prepared to act in the industrial sphere should work within the existing unions rather than propagate the idea of a new union movement.” (*Anarchy* 40, p. 173)³. Unfortunately, while many of us know of Tom Mann, James Connolly and Larkin, no one knew about Malatesta and his alleged advice. A man without a pope is apt to be a pragmatist, so these grimy workers just did the best they knew – and very effective it was.

Firstly, the trade unions, through their officials, had gone over completely to the side of the State at war, and were as much a part of the war machine as were the Brigade of Guards or the Royal Navy. With a stroke of the pen, *all* the rights won by a century of hard fighting were signed away. While rents and prices soared, there was to be no wage increase. Safety measures were swept away, a working week of more than 66½ hours was compulsory, industrial conscription was agreed to by the unions, with penal measures against the rebellious or weary. Military conscription reinforced this dictatorship. Even the Webbs had to admit, “the individual workman realised that the penalty for any failure of implicit obedience to the foreman might be instant relegation to the trenches”. (*History of Trade Unionism*, p. 639).

² Industrial Workers of the World: members are known as ‘Wobblies’

³ ‘Anarchism and Trade Unionism’ by Gaston Gerard. See: libcom.org and libcom.org

In return, the employers' war profits were to be limited (to a certain, highly inflated, standard), but this "Munitions Levy" was never enforced and within a year was formally abolished. On the Clyde, factory committees of syndicalist and IWW form were created and, because their ideas suited the needs of the hour, spread with rapidity to Tyneside, the Mersey, the Midlands and throughout the land. Life would not wait until the paralytic unions resumed business, "after the war".

The "new union movement" overcame at one bound the hundredfold divisions of the workers. All crafts, the semi-skilled and unskilled, the boys and the women, were drawn together in frequent mass meetings. They elected and withdrew their delegates, now known as shop stewards, whenever necessary. They acted as one force. In the factory in which I worked were number of Belgian workers; they, too, joined in, as did a body of soldiers who, because of their skill, had been drafted to the works.

We were now powerful. We struck work, we demonstrated, we hoisted our wages and curbed the overseers. State and employers consulted our delegates, after threats of prison had failed. The impetus of this movement has lasted until this day. Now every worker knows the value of a workshop organisation to his daily bread. It remains for us to broaden the ideas of this valuable experience. Our factory movement may not have been pure enough for coffee-bar revolutionaries, but we answered the plain man's question: "Does it work?"

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