

# Syndicalism and Shop Stewards

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Syndicalists are often accused of wanting to form new industrial unions out of turn, and even of wishing to wait until that event occurs before taking any action. A reading of British labour history during the past 70 years, by almost any author, will prove how false is this charge. We claim, certainly, that Syndicalist industrial unions offer a form of organisation superior to trades unionism and, when trade union branches are addressed on the subject, approval is almost unanimous. But when the workers, through lack of propaganda, do not understand or desire Syndicalism, it would serve them ill to form small, weak breakaway unions, where the existing unions or their members comprise the only defence of the working class, however inadequate that defence might be. Our watchword has always been Solidarity.

In fact, the only organisation ever to adopt a policy of forming micro-unions by artificial insemination is the Communist Party. During the late twenties and thirties this policy was forced on the C.P. in Britain by Moscow, despite the doubts of Pollitt and others. In 1929, the United Garment Workers' Union was formed as a breakaway from the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union. The new union soon faded out.

Among seamen, the Minority Movement (a Communist front organisation) was making some progress, led by Fred Thompson, ex-dockers; organiser of the T.& GWU. In this case something could be said for a new union, as the Seamen's Union, under Havelock Wilson's rule, was little more than a company union. But the C.P. took control from the M.M. and on Tyneside, where the feeling against Wilson was most promising, declared a strike among Arab seamen in the most confused and clownish fashion, causing a riot between Whites and Asiatics and ensuring the stillbirth of the well-planned Red Seamen's Union.

Mining in Scotland held out the best chance for the C.P. to form a red union, and a breakaway from the Lanark and Fife Miners' Unions was started under the title of the United Mineworkers' of Scotland (all breakaways are called "United"). Within a few years the total income of the red union was insufficient to pay the wages of the officials, as Willie Gallagher (later Communist MP for the district) wrote, and the union quietly died. Nothing but ill came from these attempts of the politicians to form unions of their own. When new unions are needed, it must be the workers of the industry concerned who themselves form them.

Syndicalism however, has had a great influence on the development of trade unionism. It is well, before going further, to point out that what historians call "the Syndicalist tendency", as distinct from the formal Syndicalist organisation, should include the old Socialist Labour Party, especially in Scotland, who preached a revolutionary industrial unionism which I have never been able to distinguish from Syndicalism, also the I.W.W. in Britain.<sup>1</sup>

Men inspired by Syndicalist thought were constantly calling for one union for each industry, instead of the thousand-odd which existed 40 years ago. It is generally agreed that it was this propaganda which made possible most of the amalgamations on industrial lines for the greater cooperation of men of different unions in one factory or industry. This may seem natural and commonplace now, but 50 years ago it seemed impossible in the face of sectional prejudice.

The strike methods peculiar to Syndicalism, many originated by the once-Syndicalist C.G.T., have been used by trade unionists, as well as Syndicalists, in this country, usually with great success. When writing the pamphlet "[Trade Unionism or Syndicalism?](#)" in 1941, I included a short list of Syndicalist strike weapons, none of which had been used in this country, except by Syndicalists. Now, many are commonplace. The E.T.U. has tried them with success; busmen and railmen have since the war used the work-to-rule strike, previously used in Britain only by Syndicalist railmen in the North-East 40 years ago.

The practice of sympathetic industrial action, too, originated in Syndicalist propaganda. All this and much more is testified by writers of labour history of many shades of thought — capitalist, Socialist, and even

communist. But perhaps the greatest fruit of this revolutionary tendency has been the shop steward and works committee movement.

The shop steward movement, as we know it, did not exist until shortly before the 1914 war. Shop stewards existed before that, but they were little more than card inspectors. It was the men of the syndicalist tendency who changed that. Something to span the scores of unions in the engineering industry was needed and the new conception of a shop steward, and the works committee which soon followed, did just that, being a primary form of syndicate, embracing all sections, formed at the point of production and ready to combat the employing class on the spot.

With the outbreak of war the movement developed rapidly. Cloaked by patriotism the cost of living soared, wages were pegged, hours ranged from 60 to 80 a week. Soon unofficial strikes broke out in the big industrial centres, principally the Clyde and the Tyne.

Alarmed, the Government called the union leaders to a conference in February, 1915, where all parties, except the miners, agreed to the abolition of the right to strike, to the dilution of skilled labour, to State fixing of wages and to "leaving certificates." Generally, in fact, to what the Webbs termed "virtually industrial conscription." With military conscription from 18 to 21 years, the effect was "the individual workman realised that the penalty for failure of implied obedience to the foreman might be instant relegation to the trenches" (Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*). Said the Herald (later the Daily Herald) of July 17, 1915: "The trade union lamb has laid down with the capitalist lion."

To this State slavery there could be but one defence — rapid extension of the shop steward and shop committee movement, for the trade unions were completely on the employers' side. Strikes and the threat of strikes followed, winning wage increases, especially piece work rates, and controlling workshop conditions. The Government, faced by threats, introduced food control and, forced by the Clyde factory committees, controlled house rents, which were soaring.

After the war the movement was there to stay, but was confused and bedevilled by the development of the Russian Revolution, the formation of the Communist Party and the vast funds it obtained from abroad. The union bureaucrats, too, saw that the shop steward was not going to vanish, so they tried to control him. They are still trying. The employers, after a long resistance in some cases, accepted his presence in the factory and, in very many cases, tried to corrupt him.

Neither of these, however, were worse than the activity of the Communists, concerned not with the winning of a straightforward class battle of the worker, but with the interest solely of "The Party" and with carrying out the latest twist or tum of the Comintern.

Granting the premise that a class workshop organisation is necessary for the protection and extension of the workers' livelihood, it follows that a party concerned only with the welfare of "The Party" and its conquest of power can only do harm to the workers' cause. Its measure of success is its measure of mischief.

The record of the C.P. since its entry into industry is proof enough of this thesis — its thirst for power, its splitting of the workers' ranks, its slander of honest militants, the eagerness of its members to become foremen with the necessary double-dealing that goes with that ambition, the calling of "political prestige strikes" and the calling of them off, the twists and turns of Holy Mother Russia's policy now "down with the boss and strike everywhere" and next day "collaborate, form joint production committees, the striker is a traitor." All this had driven into apathy tens of thousands of good militants and confused and disillusioned millions.

It is true that there have been many Communist shop stewards who tried to be honest stewards and good party members at the same time, but these men are usually sorry creatures, trying to be two opposites at once and unhappy with both. A practising bigamist leads a simpler life. To add to their split personality agonies, "The Party" is likely to court martial them or expel them. The men at Comintern headquarters had a proverb about the C.P.G.B.: "The good Communists are bad trade unionists and the good trade unionists are bad Communists."

A good, honest-to-goodness shop steward is worth his weight in gold to the workers' movement — literally if we were still paid in sovereigns — but his is just about the most difficult of all jobs, even without the extra snags thrown in his path by the bosses, the union officials, and the politicians.

Yet the stewards suffer from one more difficulty. The present movement lacks the revolutionary thought, doctrine, and training of the first wave. The present-day shop steward, when he tries to be consistent, feels very much alone. Ideas are social products, movements are social movements, and men will seek to identify themselves with people of like tendency. Now where can our sincere steward look? Leaving out the movement of which I have written, there is nothing for him. Little wonder, then, that so many are fooled by the politicians, grow tired, or, in the case of the weaker brethren, are tempted by the boss.

The originals had the benefit of a revolutionary idea and fire, they had training to hand, speaking, industrial history, and the study of such works as Mary Marcy's "Shop Talks on Economics." This training made them superior to most of their opponents on the other side of the boss's desk.

They had a social aim, too, making them a movement in their own right, not an appendage of another movement. The Clyde Workers' Committee, the strongest union force in the country at that time, proclaimed this among its objects:

[...] to obtain an ever-increasing control over workshop conditions, to regulate the terms upon which workers shall be employed, and to organise the workers upon a class basis and to maintain the class struggle until the overthrow of the wages system, the freedom of the workers and the establishment of industrial democracy have been attained.

In the wilder parts of the Lone Star State, Texans used to tell me that when they said "a man" they meant a man and his horse, for a man without a horse was only half a man. A shop steward without a social philosophy in tune with his workshop is only half a steward.

That brings me to what Allan Flanders of Oxford University terms "the popular Syndicalist slogan 'Workers' Control!'" The desire to alter the Labour Party's "Clause 4" was based on an estimate of the discontent with nationalisation. The rebound which put it back is a sign that social ownership is looked on as a solution of the social problem. But socialisation cannot be reconciled to State control. If the sincere rank and file of the Labour Party and trade unions would look back to the early shop stewards movement, then look forward, their honesty and idealism would find a practical mechanism in workers' control, for the realisation of the social ownership and democratic control of the means of production. They would see, too, that the fashioning of the mechanism begins now, at the coalface, the bench, and the lathe.

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## Endnotes

1. It's likely that Brown meant "in the United States" here, though the IWW **did have a presence in Britain in the early 20th century** (as it also does **today**). —Syndicalism.org eds.

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## Additional Information

Taken from Kate Sharpley Library's "**British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History**" (1994) by Tom Brown.