

What's Wrong with the Unions? A Syndicalist Answer

By Tom Brown

Published in 1955 by Syndicalist Workers Federation

Topics: [France](#), [transportation and warehousing](#), [manufacturing](#), [craft and industrial unionism](#), [UK](#), [boycott](#), [Italy](#), [history](#), [strike tactics and analysis](#), [structure](#), [intro](#)

There are several ways of beginning a book or pamphlet on a labour question. One may start, as many pundits do, with Adam and Eve and work on through history until one has reached the Tolpuddle martyrs on the second last page. Or one might begin, continue, and end by quoting the writings of bearded gentlemen who lived a hundred years ago. This method saves writing half of the book if sufficient quotations are made — and it saves all the ideas. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the scissors beat both of them!

There is a third method ... to begin with the subject at its place and in its time. This I would do. I will take as my starting point a discussion I had with my workmates a few days ago. This discussion is woven, in my remembrance, into many other discussions, for they have had the same theme and have ended without solution. And the subject has probably often been discussed by you and your mates, be you miner, clerk, bus driver, or machinist. “What’s wrong with the unions?”

Midwives and Gravediggers

Perhaps the most talked about union at the moment is the Transport & General Workers’ Union — that big, ungainly, and redoubtable animal. All seem to agree that it’s far too big and too undemocratic. Some would destroy it at once, others would reform it, and a few rejoice at its dismemberment into more homely portions.

But many older members of the union, remembering past labour struggles, hesitate to attack its fabric. The oldest dockers, for example, remember the days when their calling was the most depressed of any, when wages were very low, work casual and always uncertain; when men were often, in their hunger, forced to fight like animals for a day’s work, and when the pub-owning stevedore robbed them of half their miserable wage.

They contrast those days with their later position, especially after 1920, when wages rose above those of many skilled men, the “slave” market was curtailed, and most of the old abuses abolished. These men say: “Without our union this could not be. As clumsy as it is, we don’t want to wreck it.” Certainly, without the struggle, the solidarity, and the discipline of the dockers’ organisation, these fruits would not have been gathered.

A similar, though less dramatic story is told of the London busmen, the unskilled factory labourers, women industrial workers, and others. Organisation and strike action have raised their living standard and their position in society.

But these replies, sincere as they are, do not meet the main objection. The T. & G.W.U. is a huge union, formed by amalgamation and a policy of recruiting “everybody from midwives to gravediggers,” and the brightest battle honours on the union’s flag belong to pre-amalgamation days. The dockers’ greatest victories, for example, were achieved by the old Dockers’ Union, before it was swallowed by the T. & G.W.U.

Now this union is a colossus which strides the country. It is big, unwieldy, unresponsive to the changing needs of its members, undemocratic, with appointed organisers, and irritatingly clumsy and slow.

The Outcasts Rise!

But these faults are not held alone by the Transport Union. Other unions are similarly clumsy and huge, and the reason for these things may be found in the earlier development of labour unionism in Britain. The present trade union movement (I leave out the earlier, abortive attempts to form unions) was in its initial stages limited to the miners and the skilled craftsmen. The others were ignored for years. So trade unionism became, except for the miners, craft unionism.

Then came the organisation of dockers, tramwaymen, lorry drivers, and general labourers. Organised at first in particular unions, such as the dockers, and in amorphous collections of unskilled labourers, they tended to amalgamate without any defined boundaries, such as are natural to a mining community or a strictly sectarian craft.

In some cases the new labourers' unions organised definite groups of workers, such as the tramwaymen and dockers, but soon most of their membership was spread throughout all industries — engineering, farming, milk distribution, and a hundred others. Because the craft unions in these industries refused to organise unskilled labour, there was no choice for the lowest paid workers but to join a general labourers' union.

Having demonstrated that “unity is strength,” it seemed right and proper to these new unionists to amalgamate the several general unions into larger and ever more general organisations, until two unions, the Transport & General Workers' Union and the National Union of General & Municipal Workers numbered most of the unskilled, and even some skilled, unionists on their books. The result was the overgrown, unwieldy, undemocratic, and shapeless crowds which these unions now are.

But these unions did, nevertheless, raise the wages and the social standing of their members, especially in relation to the skilled craftsmen. For example, in 1914 a skilled worker in engineering or shipbuilding in such towns as Glasgow or Newcastle received 37 shillings without providing his own tools; his mate or labourer received 18 shillings. In 1924 the skilled rate in such towns for these industries was 1 shilling 2 1/2 pence an hour, but unskilled dockers received 1 shilling and sixpence an hour. Of course, there was a social tendency in that direction, but union organisation was needed to exploit and complete that tendency.

Having completed its historic task of raising the unskilled worker, the general union has now reached a dead end. With its present basis, no further development seems possible. Its members are either apathetic or discontented, there is a constant conflict between officials and members, and breakaways are ever more frequently threatened.

The Craft Unions

The position of the craft union is scarcely better. It seeks to justify itself by organising men on a social basis which is mediaeval rather than twentieth century. Its basis is not the factory or industry a man works in, or the commodity he helps to produce, but the tools he uses — and even, in some cases, the tools he once used. This had some meaning a few hundred years ago, for men in one small workshop, using a kit of tools, might produce one complete commodity, as did the coachbuilders, coopers, or shipwrights.

It was natural, then, to organise men according to the tools they used ... carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, cutters, goldsmiths. But now many tools and crafts are needed to produce even one commodity. For one engineering product, the work of moulders, fitters, machinists, electricians, and a score of others comes into play. And not only tradesmen, but semi-skilled and unskilled labour (if we may use these rapidly fading definitions) and office labour too (draughtsmen and book-keepers).

Yet the old union demarcations persist — like the Lord Mayor's Show, a relic of another age. In an engineering shop where a few hundred or few thousand workers produce but one commodity, 40 or 50 unions may claim to organise the workers. Not only the craft unions, but the general unions, lapping like the sea over broken dykes, claiming a large slice of union membership behind their banners: “We organise everybody from midwives to gravediggers.” Yet all claim that this mess is organisation and shout: “Unity is strength.”

The simple truth is that the craft union was formed to fight a war on two fronts — against the employer and against other workers. It bargained with the employer to get the highest price for its labour. To increase its bargaining power, it sought to curtail the supply of the commodity it was selling by restrictions, such as a long and low-paid apprenticeship. It kept out the worker who had not “served his time” and fought other crafts to maintain its monopoly of certain processes and even sought to nibble at the preserves of other unions. Thus, in a situation which demanded the highest degree of class solidarity and consciousness, the skilled unions have been little more than limited liability companies selling labour power.

More conservative than the Tories, the craft unions tried to hold on to their exclusive and sectarian positions in a changing economy which fast made them obsolete. Machinery has broken down many craft barriers, two

world wars have opened the gates to a flood of unapprenticed labour, and social and political development has swept away social differences of skilled and unskilled. Yet most craft unions go on clinging to a fast diminishing tradition. Like the Bourbons, they forget nothing and learn nothing.

Sect or Industry?

What is the alternative to craft unionism and crowd unionism? Let us take a walk through a factory — say an engineering shop producing locomotives. We start in the drawing office, go on through the pattern shop, then the foundry, on to the machine shop, visit stores and minor workshops, finally passing through the fitting and erecting shops. How true must seem our earlier statement that all of these, say, 2,000 workers are united in producing one single commodity. Each is necessary to the other; a single process operates from gate to gate.

Yet in this one factory, in the jackets hanging behind bench and machine, are the membership cards of 20 to 40 different unions — all probably bearing such inscriptions as: “United we stand, divided we fall,” or “Unity is strength”! Some may even carry a picture of a small boy watching his grandfather vainly trying to break a bundle of firewood, and its companion picture showing the old man, who has now tumbled to the trick, breaking them one by one, much to the child’s relief.

Unfortunate men! They are united in their work and divided in their unions.

Now it must seem obvious that all men and women in this one factory should belong to one union, whatever their craft, whether they be skilled or unskilled, male or female. The clerical and drawing office staff, too, should be organised in this one engineering workers’ union.

The industry, the commodity produced, gives a good, easy basis of union organisation. A worker going from one engineering factory to another finds himself on familiar ground within a few hours and usually understands the problems of other workers like himself fairly easily. The limits of the industry, then, should generally be the limits of the unions. It would obviously be foolish to suggest that the engineering union should organise farm labourers or miners or midwives into its ranks. Yet some unions spread themselves over even more diverse occupations than these.

False Industrial Unions

The syndicalist propaganda for industrial unionism has, in some industries, been met by the transformation of some craft unions into false industrial unions. Most prominent of these is the Amalgamated Engineering Union, which opened its doors first to the semi-skilled, then the unskilled and, a few years ago, the women workers.

But the A.E.U. is not an industrial union. It has not succeeded in amalgamating the many craft unions in the engineering trade, yet it seeks to organise sections of workers in almost every industry — building, electricity, milk processing, chemicals, and many others, even where a union claiming to be industrial is organising most of the workers. For some years the A.E.U. has been in dispute with the miners’ union, because the latter claims all workers in the mining industry.

There are other unions, such as the Electrical Trades Union, which have a similar double basis — to seek to organise a large slice of one industry and fragments of all the rest.

The Syndicalist conception of industrial unionism is certainly not that of the A.E.U., E.T.U., or other so-called industrial unions. We believe in one union only for one industry. But revolutionary industrial unionism means more than that — it has its beginning, its foundation, in industry. Most unions — the miners’ is an exception — are organised on a doss-house basis. A doss-house is not concerned about where a man works, but only where he sleeps, and most trade unions organise their members according to their place of residence. If a London A.E.U. member works in a factory at Acton, but lives in Willesden, he will usually join a Willesden branch of the A.E.U. His fellow workers in the Acton shop will, similarly, be organised by branches in the localities where they sleep — perhaps a hundred branches in 30 or 40 places, often 20 miles apart.

One result of this seemingly convenient arrangement is the unsuitability of the branch meeting as a means of discussing workshop problems, for our member may, when he goes to his branch at Willesden or Poplar,

be in the company of men who work in scores of different factories or even industries, and are unwilling to devote the whole of an evening to discussing his particular place of work. One may see the result of this in the dull, lifeless business routine of trade union branch meetings and in the irrelevant matters they discuss.

The place to start the industrial union branch is industry — the factory, mill, mine, shop, or office. Every worker in the factory should be a member of the one branch, or sub branch where the factory is very large. The branch should meet at, or near, the factory, and the secretary, treasurer, and shop stewards be elected from the factory. In such a branch, all matters relating to the particular factory could be discussed in an atmosphere of understanding and interest.

District Federation

But a worker's problems are not limited to the place where he works, I can hear someone say. That is true, and the factory branch is only the beginning of Syndicalism. In all things which are particular to our factory, the branch has autonomy, but there are other problems which may concern, say, similar factories in the same district. This presents no difficulty, however, for the industrial branch will be federated to the district federation of engineers — or miners — or railwaymen.

It is surprising how, on reflection, we find certain industries fall into fairly distinct districts ... Lancashire cotton, West Riding wool, London transport, Durham coal, and so on. Here the superiority of Syndicalist over territorial organisation will be seen, for a district of one industry in, say, the West of Scotland, will overlap and underlap that of other industries. The organisational basis of Syndicalism is adaptable to this, but the territorial method, such as that of parliamentary groupings, has to squeeze, lop off, and fill up to make its rigid pattern on the political map.

Look at any population map. You will see how, while people live together in moderately defined regions, their work districts overlap each other.

Now, while the district federation of the industry deals with things which are peculiar to the industry of its district, and not the special concern of one particular factory, there are problems which can be solved only on a national or country-wide basis. Just as the branch has autonomy over its own affairs, but federates to the district to tackle more general questions, so the district federation of each industry is federated to its national federation of engineers — or textile workers — or chemical workers.

Up to now we have thirty or so industrial unions or federations and I can hear some of our critics crying that we have left labour still divided, but again the Syndicalist principle of federation goes to work. The industrial federations deal with those questions that are peculiar to each of their industries, but some problems may concern more than one industry — such as a strike of railwaymen directly concerning busmen, and there are questions which affect all workers, whatever their industry. So there comes about the federation of all industrial unions on a national scale — the National Federation of Labour.

National Federation of Labour

The National Federation is a gathering of all the strength and counsel of the industrial federations, covering every industry and service — mines, factories, power stations, offices, schools, hospitals, railways, shipping.... It is able to swing its forces from one front to another, to aid any one section of labour by the solidarity of whatever other sections are needed.

Such a federation is quite different to the present Trades Union Congress, which has rarely been more than an annual consultative meeting and has long since degenerated into a political debating society.

As well as federation on a national scale, some form of general local organisation is necessary. Quite simply, the industrial branches of each union join together in a local federation in each city, town, or farming district. While this may seem somewhat akin to the existing trades councils, there is an important distinction. Trades councils are, in the main, rather loose federations of trade union branches formed on a residential basis and, in any case, are usually confused as to their exact function, become bogged down in local politics, and can rarely distinguish themselves from the local Labour Party and its functions.

The Syndicalist local federation, on the other hand, is largely a body of delegates from factories and other places of work in or about the town and is concerned with truly labour problems, rather than who shall wear the mayor's brass chain next year or who shall be nominated as the town's dog-catcher.

Delegates

While Syndicalists look to the elemental mass meeting of the workers at their place of work as the foundation of organisation and the greatest source of labour's strength, there are, nevertheless, certain functions which cannot be carried out by a mass meeting — certain details and arrangements where delegation of function is necessary. So the meeting elects delegates to carry out its wishes and general resolutions.

But these men and women are nothing *but* delegates. They are elected for certain limited functions, to carry out certain general instructions, and always subject to recall. The right of recall is fundamental to Syndicalism, though it is somewhat strange to the orthodox labour movement and completely foreign to the Communist belief.

It is the simple principle that whoever elects may recall, whoever gives may take away. A delegate is elected to carry out a certain function or policy; if he disregards the wishes of his fellow workers, then they may at once recall him. How the trade-union movement has suffered from neglect of this principle, which trade-union leaders and would-be bosses have always disliked.

The nearest the trade unions have come to it is in the shop steward movement, but for years the Communists — often with considerable success — have fought fiercely against this principle, seeking to make each Communist shop steward a *papier-maché* Stalin and even denying the workers the right to make strike decisions.

But the Syndicalist stands firmly by these things — the mass meeting, delegates not bosses, the right of recall. Here, indeed, is the hallmark of Syndicalism.

It is now evident that Syndicalism is organised from the bottom upwards — the factory, the mass meeting, the delegate — and that all power comes from below and is controlled from below. This is a revolutionary principle, one of the few truly revolutionary principles advocated in the twentieth century. In all other movements, government, regulation, is from above downwards. The capitalist, the dictator, the leader, the hereditary boss tells his flock what they must do — strictly in their own interests, of course! But he decides what is good and what is evil. All movements so based, even if claiming to be revolutionary, are founded upon the concept of slave and master — though maybe a self-styled kind master. Only Syndicalism is based on free men.

All parties, capitalist or "labour", and all social relationships except Syndicalism, are at one in opposing the principle of control from below. All are willing to fight to the last ditch to preserve the principle of control from above, the relation of master and servant. Communism, Conservatism, Labourism, capitalism, business (big or small) — all are bound and rooted in the master principle, as were the previous systems of feudalism and chattel slavery.

The Syndicalist principle of control from below, then, is truly revolutionary and, as such, is repulsive to the political parties and excites the anger of groups and individuals who wish to appear revolutionary while, at the same time, they retain the principles of a conservative society.

Control from below runs through all Syndicalist manifestations — its organisation, its activity, and its idea of a future society.

The Right To Strike

In our strike activity, we find ourselves at once in conflict with the Communist Party, which denies the right of the worker to make his own decisions. To us, the decision to strike or not to strike belongs, as a group agreement, to the workers concerned in a dispute. It is for them, as a collective body, to decide when to strike and when to return.

To this principle, the Communist official will bow only when he is forced, or — as most often happens — when, having made a fiasco of a strike he has called, he is anxious to get the strikers back to work before his

ill-judged and mismanaged skirmish collapses. Then he will call on the workers to vote, “to make their own decision,” knowing full well that only one decision is possible in the circumstances he has created.

In unions over which the Communists have gained control, the officials have taken from the members the right to strike and vested it in themselves, so that the workers are like cannon-fodder at the disposal of generals.

A worker who has not the right to strike is less than a man, he is a slave. Only this right raises him above the beasts of burden.

Knowing this, Syndicalists have always fought in its defence. In the unions, in capitalist society, in Franco Spain as in Fascist Italy and Bolshevik Russia, they have defended the right to strike.

The strike, the withdrawal of labour power in varied ways, is not the only weapon of working-class struggle, but it is the chief one — and the basis of others. By striking, however, we do not necessarily mean the conventional method of long negotiation, several months’ notice, and then a withdrawal of labour into the streets, to await the result of a long, drawn-out struggle in ever-increasing poverty.

Certainly, such a struggle may have to be faced, but other methods, quicker and not so painful, are quite often open to the workers. Such ways have been thought out, used, and developed by Syndicalists of many countries, with great success. The lightning strike, “work to rule,” the “strike at work,” the boycott, the sympathetic strike, the guerrilla and the stay-in strike are Syndicalist weapons, which even trade unionists have learned to use with excellent results, Syndicalist propaganda having made them familiar to thousands.

Let us consider, briefly, the nature of some of the Syndicalist strike tactics. The lightning strike, not alone because of its speed, but also as a result of the time and place of its blow, is usually more effective than the orthodox, long drawn-out affair, played according to a set of rules almost as traditional as those of chess. It is particularly effective on a small scale, as in a single factory or group of factories. Here again, the right of the workers to decide is important, for the worker on the spot usually knows better than any remote official when is the right time, where is the right place to use the lightning strike. Only he knows all the many, often minute conditions which will determine its success or failure.

The practice of guerrilla strikes has been tried in England by one orthodox trade union, with some success, but this experiment was but a pale imitation of the red-blooded Syndicalist method. The guerrilla strike is particularly well suited to certain industries, such as engineering, which are of a diverse character. Even in the pre-war days of slump, some sections of engineering were quite prosperous — aircraft, for instance — while other sections, such as shipbuilding, were in the lowest depths of industrial misery.

Yet wages for the whole industry were based on its most depressed section. Obviously, here was a case for obtaining better conditions as time, place, and circumstance allowed, winning a pound in this town or ten shillings in that factory. Certainly this was tried, with some success, but in every case the workers concerned found themselves in conflict with their unions, who had all made agreements fixing national wage scales and outlawing guerrilla strikes.

One of the foundation principles of Syndicalism is the sympathetic strike, but for a hundred years this principle has had but a flickering life in Britain. How many times have we seen strikers defeated, not by the employers, but by their organised trade-union brethren, who blacklegged against them? Busmen against railmen; London tube men against London busmen working for the same company; ship repair workers on strike and members of the dockers’ union and the National Union of Seamen taking the ships to be repaired in France or Holland; iron moulders on strike, while machinists and fitters worked scab castings.

So the unhappy tale might go on. Only recently have we seen the faint beginning of the sympathetic strike in England. A lot more Syndicalist propaganda is needed to bring it to fruit, and a Syndicalist form of federal organisation is needed to make it work effectively. Then we shall realise the strength of the historic slogan of the **I.W.W.**: “An injury to one is the concern of all.”¹

The Boycott

Akin to the sympathetic strike is the boycott, little used by unions — apart from the strong Syndicalist organisations of Spain and Sweden. It is worthwhile recalling the origins of the term boycott.

In the fight of the Irish peasants against the landlords, the tenant farmers formed the Irish Land League. The landlords were evicting tenants who could not pay their increased rents, and replacing them with new tenants. The League forbade farmers to occupy the farms of evicted peasants, but some farmers defied this order.

Then the League used its greatest weapon, against which the landlords, the magistrates, and the military were helpless — the “boycott”. Farm labourers and house servants left these farms, the cows went unmilked, and the crops rotted in the fields. The carter, the grocer, the butcher, even the doctor and the undertaker refused their services to the boycotted farmers.

Successful as it was in early 19th century Ireland, how much more victorious can this weapon be in our modern, complex society. The boycott can be used by certain sections of industrial workers, in particular transport men, to support other striking groups, but it can also be used in a general-public way to aid strikers in public service by blacklisting the disputed concern’s goods and services. Newspapers, shops, cinemas, theatres, laundries, coal merchants, and life insurance are examples which spring quickly to mind.

Many ingenious strike tactics have been invented by the French Syndicalists. Of these, the work-to-rule strike of the railmen is, perhaps, best known. When, under nationalisation, French rail strikes were forbidden, their Syndicalist fellow workers were delighted to urge the railmen to carry out the strict letter of the law. Now French railways, like those of most other countries, are governed by thousands of laws, most of them unused and ignored, their place being taken by commonsense and experience.

But the French railmen worked to the rule-book. The railway laws were carried out just as the government said they ought to be.

One French law tells the engine-driver to make sure of the safety of any bridge over which his train must pass. If, after personal examination, he is still doubtful, then he must consult the other members of the train’s crew. Of course, trains ran late!

Another law for which French railmen developed a sudden passion related to the ticket collectors. All tickets had to be examined thoroughly on both sides. The law said nothing of city rush hours. The results of working to rule were to tie up the railways, make the law look an ass, and win the railmen’s cause.

It is interesting here to recall that groups of English Syndicalist workers on the old North Eastern Railway carried out this tactic about 35 years ago with complete success.

More recently, largely as a result of Syndicalist propaganda, London busmen have, with great success, tried this method.

Good Work Strike

A similar Syndicalist strike tactic is the good work strike. Workers, particularly in Spain, who were building cheap working-class houses, put best workmanship into even shoddy materials. Doors hung straight, windows opened and shut, roofs were waterproof, and walls perpendicular.

The most amusing case of this form of strike action comes from the U.S.A. and concerns an accusation made against the militant union, the I.W.W. In a canning factory, the labels for the tins are said to have been mixed, so that poor people buying what they thought was cheap pink salmon, were delighted to get sock-eye steaks. From the poor districts came orders for more of “that salmon”, while from better-off districts came bitter rebukes and insults.

Many other examples of Syndicalist strike strategy might be given, had we the space, but enough has been said to show that Syndicalists are not committed to only one strike method, but adapt their tactics to the time and place, so that the greatest victory may be won by the least amount of human suffering.

But all such ways of striking are skirmishes before the real battle, training for the most powerful of Syndicalist weapons — the stay-in strike.

Stay-in Strike

The workers, instead of walking out and leaving the factory or other plant in the hands of the employer, stay in and lock out the boss. This at once prevents the factory being used for blacklegging and protects the strikers.

This method was tried by the automobile workers of Detroit and other parts of the United States in 1937. There, strikers had suffered defeat by using the conventional strike method, principally because their picket lines had been battered by the police and by employers' gangs. But in 1937, by "seizing" the car factories, they at once made the strike blackleg-proof. They were no longer assaulted by the police, for now they were barricaded in the factories. The strike was completely successful in a few weeks.

But Spain, France, and Italy, with their strong Syndicalist traditions, give us the best-known examples of the widespread stay-in strike. In France, the last occasion of its use on a nation-wide scale was June, 1936. To combat falling wages, the engineering workers declared a strike and seized the factories. They were quickly followed by millions of others, even by saleswomen in the fashionable shops.

The stay-in strike action — swift, widespread, and determined — at once arrested the downward trend of wages and gained solid increases on previous rates. It also gained for most workers the forty-hour week, holidays with pay, and other improvements. Shortly after this sweeping victory by workers' direct action, there came into being the notorious "People's Front" Government of Liberals, Communists, and Socialists. Abroad, this government was given the credit for the workers' gains of 1936 by lying Popular Front propaganda, although the "People's" Government was elected *after* the event.

This government, as must be expected of any such reactionary combination, at once began to gnaw away at the workers' gains by acts of legislation, until most of them had been lost and the way prepared, first for industrial conscription, then for the Vichy government. Remember, the Vichy fascist government of 1940 was built on the foundations laid by the reactionary "People's" Government, after the French workers had relinquished the proven weapon of direct action for the paper sword of political action.

An Italian Lesson

Italy in 1920 gives us another example of large-scale stay-in strike action. This, too, began in the engineering factories. The Italian engineering employers had demanded a substantial reduction of wages and, meeting refusal, decided on a lock-out. The engineering workers, with a strong Syndicalist minority, decided to use the chief Syndicalist weapon. Telephone and telegraph wires hummed, couriers and motor-cyclists sped through the night, and, in one swift, co-ordinated action, the metal factories were seized by the workers.

Other industries at once responded. Railwaymen and road transport men moved supplies. Food was provided by the workers in bakeries and flour mills, by the co-operatives and by the peasant organisations. Post office and telephone workers maintained communications among the many factories "on strike".

But what of the government, the army, and the police? Railwaymen were willing to refuse to move any soldiers under arms or any military supplies. The police were helpless, for the strikers were barricaded in the factories, surrounded by barbed wire and electrified steel fences.

At that time in Italy there was a strong, well-armed Fascist military organisation, but it was helpless against the stay-in strike. The workers had the means to arm themselves in defence against the Blackshirts — steel, forges, and machines. Mussolini looked on, powerless to intervene.

George Seldes, in his best-selling biography of Mussolini, *Sawdust Caesar*, writes of this strike:

Not a safe was cracked. Nor a skull. [...] Commotion everywhere except in Italy. It is true that day by day more and more factories were being occupied by the workers. Soon 500,000 "strikers" were at work building automobiles, steamships, forging tools, manufacturing a thousand useful things, but there was not a shop or factory owner there to boss them or to dictate letters in the vacant offices. Peace reigned.²

The Italian workers were victorious. The employers withdrew their demands for wage cuts and, instead, offered increases and other concessions. Unfortunately, the workers accepted these offers and, against the

advice of the Syndicalist minority, handed back the factories. They enjoyed their gains for a little while, then reaction began nibbling at the gains of 1920, until, two years later, the workers — weak without their factory fortresses and their direct action spirit, and debilitated by political propaganda — were defeated.

Again the political fabulists click their typewriters, falsifying history, and political speakers, by malice and by ignorance, propagate falsehood, declaring that the Blackshirts expelled the strikers from the factories and instituted the Fascist State from that action.

In truth, Mussolini, who at the beginning of the strike loudly opposed it, soon fell silent and took no action against it, mute and awed as he was by the mighty force of workers, conscious for a brief hour of their great strength. The stay-in strike was in 1920; the Fascists gained power in 1922, after the Italian workers had relied on political action for their defence. Two years of history are thus neatly clipped out by the scissors of “progressive” political propagandists, in their attempts to discredit the stay-in strike.

Of course the workers were wrong in the limited use they made of this strike weapon. They ought to have retained the factories and extended the strike to all industries, using it as the basis of a new society.

Blind-alley Unionism

The greatest weakness of the trade union movement is its lack of an ultimate aim. Created to secure a higher wage and a shorter working day, it achieved its aims and now finds itself at the blind end of a limited path. Its own members are becoming dissatisfied with such a circumscribed social function. In any case, the usefulness of wage advances in conditions of inflation is increasingly questioned, yet, at the same time, the permanence of the capitalist system is accepted.

Wage increases and rising prices make the trade union movement look like a dog chasing its own tail. The constant scrabble for paper pennies has even led to the abandonment of the shorter working week and the eight-hour day ideal of 70 years ago. True, on paper we have a 44-hour week — *on paper*, but systematic overtime is becoming almost universal and is even established in some trade union agreements. It is often said that some people were in favour of the 44-hour week only because their overtime would start sooner.

Here is the end of trade union thought. It can no more think itself into a further stage of social development than a man can lift himself by his own shoestrings.

The trade union is designed to function only in a commodity society, where everyone is selling something, and in which the worker has only his labour power to sell. The price of commodities rises and falls with changes in supply and demand and the price of the commodity, labour power — wages — also rises with an increase in the demand for labour, as we see at the present time. But, with an increase of the labour supply beyond the needs of the market, wages fall. British labour’s wages, however, are not governed alone by national conditions, but, more than most countries, by international factors. Changes in India, Japan, the U.S., and Australia are, almost at once, felt in Britain.

It is in this world market society that trade unions function and beyond which they have no hope or knowledge. It is true that many unions have in their rule-books a preamble in favour of the nationalisation, or even socialisation, of the means of production and distribution, but such declarations have no more significance than the dubious Latin inscriptions on coats of arms.

The trade union is not designed or organised for any higher function than selling labour power in a labour market.

A New Society

Any major advance by labour can be achieved only by escaping from the bonds of the wages system, and that means a radical change in the social order — a change from private to social ownership and the designing of production for men’s needs, instead of for their fluctuating purchasing power.

But it is just here, in the contemplation of an alternative to capitalism, that the trade union stops dead. Negotiate an extra threepence an hour or question the redundancy of some machinists, yes ... but a new society? That is like asking a fish to move on dry land.

A society such as we desire, based on the economic and emotional needs of all, and not of a ruling class, must have an economic and not a political foundation. As Jim Connolly so often quoted:

There is not a socialist in the world to-day who can indicate with any degree of clearness how we can bring about the co-operative commonwealth except along the lines suggested by industrial organisation of the workers.

Political institutions are not adapted to the administration of the co-operative commonwealth that we are working for. Only the industrial form of organisation offers us even a theoretical constructive socialist programme. There is no constructive socialism except on the industrial field.

Syndicalism, distinct from orthodox trades unionism, regards wage struggles not as principle ends, but as secondary aims and means to a greater end — the abolition of the wages system and the creation of a new society. The organisation of Syndicalism, in industrial unions, is in harmony with this end. The strike strategy of Syndicalism, leading to the social stay-in strike, is true to the ideal of a society of free men.

While its aim in every wage struggle is to win that limited fight, at the same time it uses the struggle to enlighten and raise the confidence and fighting ability of the workers for the greatest struggle of all, when we shall demand, not the half-loaf which is said to be better than no bread, but the whole bakehouse.

So long as labour is a commodity — something for sale on a labour market — subject to a variable economic climate, the worker will remain a slave. Not a slave serving one particular master, but the slave of a master class. At the best of times his living will be determined by his commodity basis and limited by the “cost of living.” At the worst, it will sink, in times of economic depression, to starvation and misery, even in a world of plenty. Atomic power and space travel will still find him trudging the streets seeking work, or sitting by a fireless grate. The worker can become master of his fate only when he has become master of the machine.

But it is obvious that private ownership of the means of production cannot be spread over millions of persons. Private ownership of factories, mines, and modern transport systems is possible only for the few. When the many control the means whereby they live, they will do so by abolishing private ownership and establishing common ownership of the means of production, with workers’ control of industry.

This is not to be confused with nationalisation and state control, which has been well described as “the government of the people, by the Civil Service, for the Civil Service.”

Where ownership is, in theory, said to be vested in the people, but control is in the hands of a small class of bureaucrats, then common ownership does not exist, but the labour market and wage labour go on, the worker remaining a wage slave to State capitalism.

Common ownership demands common control. This is possible only in a condition of industrial democracy by workers’ control.

The framework of the Syndicalist organisations of struggle is easily adaptable to the supreme task of taking over industry, and can evolve into the complex and refined system of control necessary for modern industry.

Miners would control the mines on behalf of society as a whole, textile workers the mills, railmen the railways. The factory would control affairs proper to the factory; the district of each industry the affairs of that industry in its own area.

What had been the National Federation of Labour, the grand army of workers welded together in the struggle against capitalism, would become the Economic Council of Labour — a delegate body to co-ordinate the work of the various economic syndicates.

Production would be for human needs and not for the profit of a few. The wage system would be abolished and, with a rise in techniques, there would come, not the present fear of redundancy and starvation, but a full and free life, such as we wage slaves have dreamed about but never yet tasted.

Endnotes

1. Interestingly, this incorrect phrasing reveals the historical ancestor of the IWW’s famous slogan (“an injury to one is an injury to all”), which is often overlooked. It was the Knights of Labor — founded about 35 years before the IWW — that was known for the motto, “an injury to one is the concern of all”. —Syndicalism.org eds.

2. The passage as quoted by Brown was slightly incorrect; we corrected it. See the book at the [Internet Archive](#) (p. 87). —Syndicalism.org eds.

Additional Information

This is pamphlet #1 in the SWF’s series “Direct Action Pamphlets”. Text taken from [Kate Sharpley Library](#) and proofed against pdf of the pamphlet at [The Sparrows’ Nest Library and Archive](#).