

Britain: Once again on the role of the “left” within the trade unions

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The *Socialist*, newspaper of the Socialist Party—formerly the Militant group—recently published a revealing exchange in which one of its leading industrial organisers ticked off a member for suggesting that the “left” in the trade unions should be fighting to throw out the bureaucracy and build genuine rank-and-file organisations.

The exchange was provoked by the editorial in issue 509 of the *Socialist*, “Build the left in the public-sector trade unions.” It sketched out how the union leaders have done everything to demobilise a fight back across the public sector against the Labour government’s imposition of a pay freeze on some 6 million workers. From health to the civil service, the union bureaucracy had either ignored demands for industrial action, or curtailed it, in order to push members into a series of consultative ballots with the aim of sabotaging any resistance to what is effectively a wage cut.

The *Socialist* wrote that workers’ “desire to oppose the government comes up against the attitude of many of the union leaders, who cosy up to the Labour government which is calling the shots and initiating the attacks on their members’ living standards...”

“The right-wing union leaders have acted in no small way as what American socialist Daniel de Leon called the ‘labour lieutenants of capital.’ If they were to mobilise their members on the wage front they would be attacking one of the central policies of the Labour government. For them, this is a step too far, so they have acted as fire hoses on the wage demands of their members.”

The “important lesson,” the *Socialist* continued, “is that many of the left organisations and individuals in most of the public-sector unions have been too timid or have not seriously organised to challenge the right wing.”

This is in fact a damning indictment of the left, which, for a socialist movement worthy of the name, should form the starting point of any appraisal of the situation within the trade unions. But this one line was the only reference in the editorial to the role of the lefts within the public sector unions, which concluded somewhat lamely, “The idea of a united public-sector union struggle will once again come to the fore; its time has yet to come.”

At least one member, Tom Lloyd, was dissatisfied with the *Socialist*’s appraisal. In a letter published in issue 511, Lloyd complained that history had proven that “the trade union bureaucracy time after time eventually sells the workers down the river.”

He cited Trotsky’s writings on the betrayal of the British General Strike in 1926 at the hands of the Trade Union Congress (TUC), stating that, “The trade union bureaucracy is the chief instrument for your oppression by the bourgeois state...the trade union bureaucracy must be overthrown.”

The conclusion, Lloyd suggested, was that the left in the trade

unions must be restricted to “rank and file members only” and that it must be “prepared to defy the full-time officials.”

Lloyd’s suggestion brought down the wrath of the SP. Writing in issue 513, industrial co-organiser Jane James responded on behalf of the party leadership.

In an extended political apology for the union bureaucracy, James argued that in contrast to Lloyd’s assertion of inevitable betrayal by the union tops, “there are many examples in the past of right-wing union leaders having to respond to pressure from below...leaders can be pushed further than they want to go. It was not ruled out in recent months that right-wing led public-sector unions could have been forced to call strike action if there was the necessary pressure from below.”

While it is true that the union bureaucracy works to preserve its positions and power by “undercutting demands for struggle” and “bringing in rules and regulations to keep members in check,” the “overriding factor in union leaderships not leading their members in struggle is a right-wing political outlook.”

“Right-wing union leaders go the furthest in bowing down to the constraints of capitalist society,” James continued. “Without a socialist outlook, their expectations are limited to what capitalism ‘can afford.’ ”

The supposed focus of the *Socialist* editorial and Lloyd’s letter in response, however, was not the political machinations of the right wing, but the attitude to be taken to this by the “left.” The editorial, after all, was ostensibly aimed at outlining why it was necessary to build the left in the public sector unions.

James chastised Lloyd for implying “that union leaders and officials should always be opposed, questioning the need for them...for a trade union to function, leaders and staff are necessary as are a layer of workplace reps and stewards, with facility time if possible. The important issue is to ensure that union leaders and officials are accountable to the union membership.”

This is nothing but the most craven worshipping of the accomplished fact. By the same criteria, it could be argued that it is irresponsible to argue for workers’ control of the means of production, as managers and specialists are necessary to ensure the smooth running of industry.

As to 1926, James argued that “Trotsky was writing a few years after the general strike and the betrayal of courageous workers by the right and left on the TUC general council. It was correct after those events to call for the bureaucracy to be overthrown and for the building of a revolutionary party equipped to remove capitalism.”

But, she continued, “this does not mean that, today, we should not struggle within the unions to ensure fighting leaderships dedicated to

defending and improving workers' pay, conditions and rights as well as building rank and file bodies."

It is not possible in the space available here to detail the numerous distortions contained in James's assertions. Suffice it to say that Trotsky's prognosis on the trade union bureaucracy was not a tactical proscriptio, nor was it confined to the outcome of the 1926 General Strike. It was bound up with the political principle at the centre of genuine Marxism and the understanding that the fundamental interests of the working class cannot be reconciled with capitalism—the fight to establish the political independence of the working class through the building of its own revolutionary party.

Trotsky approached the trade union bureaucracy as a social layer. Bitter experience, not least the First World War, had graphically exposed how, with the advent of imperialism and the super-exploitation of the colonial masses, the bourgeoisie had been able to buy off a section of the labour aristocracy, which functioned as "the backbone of British imperialism."

"In England, more than anywhere else," Trotsky explained, "the state rests upon the backs of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism is such that the bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state indirectly, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy."

This included the so-called "left" wing of the trade unions, upon which the capitalist state was most dependent to maintain *political* control over the working class.

The guiding principle of revolutionaries within the trade unions was to "aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class struggle of these politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses, and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power."

To this end, its attitude to the bureaucracy must be "to unmask the traitors before the masses as traitors, in order to discredit them on the basis of the experience of the masses, to isolate them, to deprive them of the confidence they enjoy, and in the end, to help the masses run them out."

Trotsky wrote scathingly of the policy pursued by the Communist International under Stalin whereby, supposedly in order to defend the Soviet Union, the young British Communist Party had been subordinated to the "left" trade union leaders via the Anglo-Russian Committee, on the grounds that such influential and powerful people could be won over.

Those left trade union leaders, such as the miners' leader A. J. Cook, made far greater claims to be the advocates of socialism and even revolution than the likes of the current-day so-called "awkward squad"—whose policies can not even be considered "left reformist" or militant in any meaningful sense.

Nonetheless, the refusal of the British Communist Party to come into conflict with the trade union "left" and its own subordination to them graphically underscored the opportunist degeneration suffered by the parties of the Third International under the leadership of Stalin.

Some 80 years on, in response to the globalisation of production that has destroyed the old national reformist consensus, the trade union bureaucracy has been fully integrated into the capitalist state and is an integral mechanism through which the bourgeoisie seek to impose the diktats of finance capital against working people.

The completion of the tendencies identified by Trotsky means that the insistence on the necessity for independent working class politics and organisation is more relevant, not less.

The SP is hostile to a political rebellion against the bureaucracy. Its arguments are not simply a political defence of the some vague "left" leaders. The *Socialist's* initial editorial, with its references to the left being "too timid or have not seriously organised to challenge the right wing," was a coded reference to the SP's own role within the trade unions, and especially on the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

Across the unions, the right wing lacks any base of support. The elemental hostility of millions of working people to the attacks on their jobs, working conditions and pension rights has been manifested in numerous votes for supposedly "left-wing" figures to the leadership of the trade unions, many of whom are members of groups such as the SP and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

The *World Socialist Web Site* has written previously on the role played by the SWP in enabling the leadership of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) to demobilise and isolate the recent postal workers' dispute. We drew attention to the fact that SWP member and CWU President Jane Loftus, despite having apparently voted against the sell-out deal, did nothing to campaign or break ranks publicly with the executive, while the *Socialist Worker* passed over this without comment.

We noted that this was not confined to the CWU, nor to the SWP. In 2005, the PCS SWP members Sue Bond and Martin John had voted in favour of a deal raising the pension age of new employees in the civil service to 65 and that the PCS betrayal had been defended by the Socialist Party.

The PCS executive is dominated by the Left Unity Group, made up of the SWP and the SP, the latter being in the majority. Led by General Secretary Mark Serwotka, a former member of the *Socialist Organiser* group and supporter of the SWP-led Respect organisation, Assistant General Secretary Chris Baugh is a Socialist Party member as is PCS President Janice Godrich.

It is a matter of record that, with the "left" dominant in the PCS, some 50,000 civil service workers have lost their jobs, while wages and conditions have been greatly undermined. In the face of significant support for industrial action against the government pay freeze, the PCS executive continually delayed any strikes until after the postal workers' dispute had been sold out. Having staged a token protest, the executive has agreed to suspend all industrial action while it enters into further negotiations with the government.

When James wrote in her reply, "Even good lefts with a background of struggle can be elected as leaders or full-time officials only to succumb to the pressures of running the union. Usually receiving a higher income than those they represent and without day-to-day contact with ordinary workers, their lifestyles and views are divorced from those of their members," she knew exactly of whom she was speaking. Her polemic was a tacit acknowledgment of the fact that the SP makes up a politically significant component of the trade union bureaucracy and that any genuine rank-and-file movement would inevitably threaten its own privileged position.



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