

Britain's pseudo-left groups mount phoney “rank-and-file” initiatives in defence of trade union bureaucracy

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The strike wave that first broke out in the UK last summer has now been going on for almost a year, impacting the rail network, Royal Mail, the National Health Service (NHS), the education sectors, local authorities and the civil service.

Provoked by the worst cost-of-living crisis in living memory, fuelled by a combination of massive state subventions to big business during the COVID pandemic, the impact of Brexit and the massive costs associated with NATO's war in Ukraine, it is part of a broader struggle by workers across Europe—including the largest strikes and protests movement in France since May-June 1968.

Initially, a group of “left” trade union leaders claimed to be leading a fightback—Sharon Graham of Unite, Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Jo Grady of the University and College Union (UCU). Lynch and Ward even fronted a new campaign group, Enough is Enough, speaking at rallies across the UK, receiving enthusiastic backing from pseudo-left groups including the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, portraying Lynch and his fellow officials as leading a rebirth of militant trade unionism.

But by the end of last year, cracks had begun to appear. Lynch, Ward and others held back strikes by millions, sat on strike mandates, blocked united action, and limited workers to ineffective one-day stoppages while entering backroom talks with the government and employers. A series of union-negotiated below-inflation agreements against 40,000 BT workers (CWU, 20,000 members at Network Rail (RMT) and against NHS workers, sacrificed pay, terms and conditions.

This provoked an angry response, with nurses demanding a vote of no confidence in Royal College of Nursing (RCN) General Secretary Pat Cullen, and university and college lecturers in the UCU moving a vote of no-confidence in Grady. Ward and his deputy Andy Furey have become hate figures as they have now tried to foist a sell-out agreement on postal workers three times.

This sent a collective shudder through the bureaucracy, including its nominal “left” flank, where pseudo-left groups make up a significant faction of the trade union leadership at national, regional and branch level and have spent years calling on workers to “turn out”, “escalate the action” and vote for their candidates in various “Broad Left” slates. Of particular concern is the response won by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee at Royal Mail. Formed on April 2, with the assistance of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, the PWRFC has won support from all those seeking to break the bureaucracy's stranglehold of the year-long dispute and place rank-and-file workers in charge, with articles read over a quarter of a million times.

This has prompted various calls in pseudo-left circles for the building of a new “rank-and-file movement”, with an “organising conference” held

by the Counterfire group on June 10, headlined, “How We Fight, How We Win.”

The conference was the opposite of a genuinely rank-and-file initiative. Its purpose and that of similar initiatives by groups such as the Socialist Workers Party is to police rising discontent among union members, ensuring it remains under the domination of the trade union bureaucracy.

The conference was called with an appeal for “grassroots members” to “hold union leaderships to account and to fight for an effective strategy.” But a model resolution published March 21 makes no criticism of the union bureaucracy whatsoever, appealing only for the strike movement “to be widened and deepened” and for “more discussion and organisation amongst rank-and-file workers across the trade union movement.” A June 4 article in advance of the conference consisted largely of comments by “Veteran PCS general secretary, Mark Serwotka” on the civil servants’ strike, Sharon Graham on the Heathrow security guards’ strike, and other union bureaucrats.

What this amounts to is a revamped version of the tired old argument of placing “pressure” on the union leaderships, when the lesson of the last year is that they are impervious, or more correctly hostile, to the opinion of the rank and file.

The “How We Fight, How We Win” conference

This bankrupt perspective attracted around 150-200 people, including representatives of a few union branches and trades councils either run or influenced by the pseudo-left groups, or Corbynite Labour “lefts”—a section of the very same bureaucracy that a rank-and-file movement would have to oppose—and campaign groups including Strike Map, Tunnel Vision, the Stalinist-dominated People’s Assembly, NHS Workers Say No, NHS Staff Voices, and Keep Left (Aslef).

The featured speaker was Jeremy Corbyn, a man ideally placed to affirm the non-threatening character of the event as far as the Labour and trade union bureaucracy was concerned. He spent almost five years as leader of the Labour Party opposing any struggle against the Blairite right-wing before meekly handing over the reins to Sir Keir Starmer—who has since then expelled Corbyn, denounced strikes, supported austerity, and christened Labour “the party of NATO” while demanding stepped-up military action against Russia.

Actual criticism of the trade union bureaucracy was almost wholly absent from the numerous anodyne speeches delivered. Indeed, among the speakers were Martin Cavanagh, Public and Commercial Services Union Deputy President; Alex Kenny, an executive member of the National

Education Union; the now retired Pat Sikorski, a Pabloite who was once the RMT's assistant general secretary; and Glen Hart, the RMT Relief Organiser for the Southern Region.

Sikorski's contribution was to urge that the trade unions "need refurbishment", but only while taking into account their "very long-time histories" and by making "incremental steps in order to check the situation." Hart even felt moved to reassure the audience that he was from the rank-and-file and would not get mistaken for a national official. "I'm one of you," he said.

Counterfire leader Lindsey German said strikes were "at a point where they're not really going forward in the way that we'd like them to do," but offered nothing other than a call for more action and more cooperation between the different strikers that would prevent action from being "deflected by the trade union leaders and by the Labour leaders."

Counterfire's John Rees then moved a statement which Kenny had already said was not subject to amendment, which featured a pledge of loyalty to the trade union bureaucracy, promising, "We have, and will continue, to support our union leaders when they lead strikes." If not, then "rank-and-file trade unionists," more truthfully second-ranking bureaucrats and pseudo-left political activists, would "resists deals" and "all attempts to conclude deals which fall short of protecting our wages, conditions, and services."

Corbyn himself was entirely comfortable with such mealy-mouthed proclamations, speaking in conclusion of an "amazing series of strikes" that were "now in that actually quite difficult period where the unions are obviously involved in negotiation with the government or directly with the employers."

He specifically referenced just one dispute: "In the case of the postal workers, it's yes about wages and conditions and defeating the gig economy proposals of Royal Mail. It is also about protecting those representatives, shop stewards, that have been sacked or suspended by Royal Mail, to make sure they get their jobs back with full compensation."

This demand is taken almost word-for-word from the statements published by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, such as an April 16 resolution opposing the deal cooked up between the CWU's negotiators and Royal Mail which insisted, "The CWU leadership have thrown our colleagues to the wolves, agreeing to a toothless review headed by an appointee of the graveyard of strikes, the arbitration service ACAS. There must be no settlement before all victimised postal workers are reinstated and compensated for all loss of income."

The origins of Counterfire and the Socialist Workers Party

Counterfire emerged in 2010 in a split from the SWP by leading figures including German and Rees, based on complaints that pointless bickering with other groups "on the left" was an obstacle to what was termed "United Front" work—a series of opportunist alliances with various Stalinists and Labourites in groups such as the People's Assembly and the Stop the War Coalition. But nothing fundamental separates Counterfire from its SWP parent, or numerous similar formations—all of which are in the gravitational orbit of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy.

The origins of the SWP lie in a right-wing break from the Fourth International, based on an impressionistic response to the stabilisation of capitalism following World War Two. This stabilisation depended on the betrayal of revolutionary movements in Europe and internationally by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which provided US imperialism with the basis for employing its vast economic resources to rescue its rivals in Europe and Japan while ensuring its own global hegemony.

The SWP's leader, Tony Cliff, responded to the formation of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe by declaring them to be a form of state capitalism and extending the same designation to the Soviet Union itself. This represented a political repudiation of Leon Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state, in which the Stalinist apparatus represented a bureaucratic caste that had usurped control of the socialised property established by the October revolution. The bureaucracy must therefore, Trotsky argued, be overthrown in a political, rather than a social, revolution and the gains of the revolution defended as part of the worldwide struggle against imperialism by the working class.

The SWP's assessment of the bureaucracy as a new class conferred on Stalinism a historical legitimacy as the representative of a new economic order, rather than it being a parasitic excrescence. It was bound up with a wholesale adaptation to imperialism itself and to its bureaucratic agencies in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Cliff's supporters were expelled from the British section of the Fourth International for refusing to defend North Korea during the war waged by the United States, based on their insistence that this was a conflict between rival imperialist powers, Washington and Moscow.

The SWP's adaptation to the anti-communism propagated by the bourgeoisie and its media was integral to its building relations with sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Repudiating any struggle to build a revolutionary leadership, the state capitalists declared the trade unions to be the essential organisations of the working class and the reformist leadership of the Labour Party representative of the reformist character of the working class itself. The bureaucracy could therefore be pushed to the left and Labour challenged through street protest and single-issue campaigns, but nothing more.

This reflected definite social interests within a party that drew its cadre primarily from a petty-bourgeois layer that had benefited from the social concessions won by the working class and embodied in the welfare state, and whose leading members came to occupy prominent positions within academia, local government and especially within the trade union apparatuses.

What does a "rank-and-file movement" really mean?

The concept of "rank-and-file" action promoted by Counterfire and similar pseudo-left formations centres on the claim that trade union leaders act as a mediator between "the union", i.e., its members, and the employers, but tend to become a conservative brake, divorced from workers' interests because of their privileged position. This can be countered, they argue, by making them subject to pressure from below and advancing calls to limit their wages and to make them more democratically accountable.

This deliberately ignores a decades-long degeneration of the trade unions that has seen the integration of the bureaucratic apparatus into the structures of management and the capitalist state, based on their defence of capitalism and espousal of nationalism.

Trotsky analysed this phenomenon in "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay," written in 1940, explaining how:

"Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command. The capitalist cliques at the head of mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, etcetera, view economic life from the very same heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter. In their turn the trade unions in the most

important branches of industry find themselves deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises. They have to confront a centralized capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. Hence flows the need of the trade unions – insofar as they remain on reformist positions, i.e., on positions of adapting themselves to private property – to adapt themselves to the capitalist state and to contend for its cooperation.... This position is in complete harmony with the social position of the labor aristocracy and the labor bureaucracy, who fight for a crumb in the share of superprofits of imperialist capitalism.”

In the decades since Trotsky wrote this appraisal, the corporatist degeneration of the trade unions was escalated by economic globalisation, with production organised across national boundaries that set a new international benchmark for the exploitation of the working class. As the bureaucracy's corporate partners demanded ever more brutal speed-ups, rationalisations, wage cuts and job losses in the name of global competitiveness, the role of the bureaucratic apparatuses in every country was transformed from pressuring the employers and the state for concessions to the workers, to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers.

The problem with the trade unions is not that bad leaders have somehow come to the head of otherwise representative organisations. The SWP's implicit argument is that the rotten record of the unions is the result of the inactivity of the membership in holding these leaders to account.

In fact, the very structures of these organisations work to prevent genuine accountability and rank-and-file oversight of the conduct of industrial disputes. They are an apparatus for the control of the membership by a narrow, insulated layer. Within these organisations, a caste of bureaucrats sharing the same corporatist mindset has become entrenched, using its control of the union's structures to ensure that only people of the same ilk attain any lasting position in office.

This layer actively resists any attempt to change the policy of the unions, and its resistance *grows* the more pressure is placed on it by the rank-and-file because its existence is incompatible with workers' genuinely democratic organisation and pursuit of the class struggle.

The result has been a decades-long series of sell-outs and betrayals that has left millions of workers in acute distress and the trade unions losing millions of members, even as the bureaucracy has seen its own income and privileges vastly increase. Today the union bureaucracy confronts the working class as a wholly unaccountable caste, which responds to “pressure from below” by closing-down all avenues of popular accountability and by waging war against their own members.

For the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!

Trotsky insisted that the fight by the working class against the corporations and the state was also a fight “against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime,” demanding the creation “in all possible instances of independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”

Every major struggle waged by the working class in Britain and internationally has already developed as a rebellion against the long-term

suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions. But the fight between the bureaucracy and the working class must find organisational and political expression. Rank-and-file committees must be built, creating the basis for genuine democratic discussion between workers, unionised and non-unionised, so that common action can be organised among the broadest sections of the working class to achieve what workers need, not what shareholders, investors and management demand.

In the world of globalized production and of economic life dominated by giant transnational corporations, moreover, the class struggle must also be international, in form as well as content, or the working class will be defeated.

That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It provides the framework for developing new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organisations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale, to unify workers worldwide in opposition to the imposition of austerity, the continued threat from COVID, the whipping up of nationalism and trade war, the escalation of war against Russia and the threat of war against China. At its heart is the necessity for the construction of a new revolutionary leadership, the Socialist Equality Party, British section of the ICFI, through which the working class can take forward a struggle for power.



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