

CHAPTER 12
Revolutionary Unionism?

In this chapter I wish to examine the arguments normally put forward by socialist theorists who claim that trade unions by their very nature can never be revolutionary organisations. The leading proponent of this "pessimistic" view is considered to be Lenin and hence most subscribers to this line of thought believe it is a "Leninist" theory.

But Lenin does not argue that trade unions can never become revolutionary. He simply describes those factors which in the past had always inhibited the growth of revolutionary consciousness in trade unions. His ideas on the subject also underwent considerable change after the 1905 revolution;¹ and as most of what socialists believe to be the "Leninist" theory of trade unionism comes from What Is To Be Done? which was written in 1901-1902, they hardly have a complete account of Lenin's views. The point is that, like Marx, Lenin had an ambivalent attitude towards trade unions.

Marx continually emphasised the fact that trade unions were valuable training grounds for class struggle. In The Poverty of Philosophy Marx refers to trade unions as "ramparts for the workers in their struggle with the employers"² and the Communist Manifesto proclaims that "every class struggle is a political struggle".³ However it is in Wages, Price and Profit that Marx puts the view that it is an injudicious use of trade union power rather than an intrinsic lack of revolutionary potential which limits trade unions to a non-revolutionary standpoint.

Trades Unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class...⁴

Of the conservatising factors mentioned in "Leninist" theory, I consider, within the Australian context,⁵ the most important to be the

1 See Thomas Taylor Hammond, Lenin on Trade Unions and Revolution 1893-1917.

2 Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, p.149.

3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Manifesto of the Communist Party, p.54

4 Karl Marx, Wages, Price and Profit, p.55.

5 P.A. Riach and W.A. Howard, (Productivity Agreements and Australian Wage Determination, p.85) argue that the Arbitration system promotes centralism in unions and a tendency to rely on specialist advocates or outside experts to negotiate wage agreements.

problems of bureaucratisation and oligarchic practices in trade unions. It was in this area that the N.S.W. B.L.F. developed innovative procedures worthy of mention.

In any discussion of democracy in trade unions, W.A. Howard's comment on the "liturgy of unionism" is an appropriate beginning:

A conversation with any union leader will elicit two items of information: that he [sic] has never lost touch with the rank and file, and that he runs a democratic union.⁶

Most academic commentators have concentrated on the social constraints which thwart democratic aspirations within trade union structures - and indeed these are many - but it is important not to lose sight of those constraints which enable democratic aspirations to be realised. The B.L.F. experience with democratic decision-making processes convinces me that pro-democratic forces within trade unionism can become more than "random occurrences, mere historic butterflies which flit through events with only ephemeral beauty"⁷ as Gouldner puts it.

The major structural changes⁸ initiated by the Union were the introduction of limited tenure of office for union officials; the use of temporary organisers;⁹ the emphasis on job-site autonomy; the opening of Executive Meetings to all members; the frequent use of mass stop-work meetings; the tying of officials wages to the B.L.F. Award; and the non-payment of officials during industry strikes.

On the less structured level, the Union encouraged members to "drop in" to the Union office and to participate in informal discussion on Union matters with officials. It changed Mass Meeting procedure so that members queued at microphones and spoke in turn rather than having to depend on catching the chairman's eye.¹⁰

6 W.A. Howard, "Democracy in Trade Unions", in J.E. Isaac and G.W. Ford (eds), Australian Labour Relations, p.264.

7 Alvin W. Gouldner, "Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy", American Political Science Review, No. 49, 1955, p.500.

8 For discussion of the major structural factors involved in internal union democracy see Richard Fletcher, "Trade Union Democracy - Structural Factors", Trade Union Register 1970, pp.73-85.

9 Between 1973 and 1974, "39 organisers have come on and gone back to the job". Bob Pringle and Joe Owens, Rank and File Decision-making in the Builders' Labourers, n.d. (1974), 3pp. roneod.

10 A procedure most people would not consider to be particularly important unless they had experienced the difficulty of speaking in a large meeting.

However the most important aspect of the Union's changes was the leadership's accessibility. As Alice Cook has observed one cannot automatically equate participation with democracy.¹¹

It is not the formal constraints which most inhibit genuine participation and hence democracy in union decision-making.¹² Every member has a vote; it is the importance of his or her input which is most significant. The informal "structures" described by Joreen¹³ are often the real decision making apparatuses. Coleman refers to the notion of "responsive leadership"¹⁴ to describe this distinction between formal and informal aspects of democratic decision-making. Votes taken at policy making meetings were not simply ignored as occurs so frequently in other unions. Like the A.M.W.S.U., the N.S.W. B.L.F. had a policy on "almost everything from Aboriginal land rights to the undesirability of plastic containers!"¹⁵ But unlike the A.M.W.S.U. the B.L.F. actively enforced members' decisions.

The leadership avoided the isolating effect of higher salaries which Lipset, Trow and Coleman identified: "As union leaders secure higher financial rewards for their jobs their sense of identification with the men and the urgency of their problems must inevitably suffer".¹⁶ Nor did they seek the higher social status which C. Wright Mills regards as an integral part of the incorporation process.¹⁷ Finally their

- 11 Alice H. Cook, Union Democracy: Practice and Ideal, p.209. It would have been valuable to investigate migrant participation in decision-making. A suggestion made by June M. Hearn ("Migrant Participation in Trade Union Leadership", Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 18, No. 2, May 1976, p.117) for "alteration of the traditional format for meetings to allow for less formality" was already Union practice. The less formal meeting structures certainly encouraged migrants to participate. They spoke often at union meetings, sometimes with interpreters and sometimes without.
- 12 A thesis on this subject which would have been interesting is M. Dickenson, Membership Participation and Control in Trade Unions, Ph.D., R.S.S.S., Australian National University, 1980, but it is not yet available.
- 13 Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", The Second Wave, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1972).
- 14 John R. Coleman, "The Compulsive Pressures of Democracy in Unionism", The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. LXI, No. 6, May 1956, p.520.
- 15 Edward Davis, "Decision-making in the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights' Union", Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 19, No. 4, December 1977, p.353.
- 16 Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow and James Coleman, Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union, p.410.
- 17 C. Wright Mills, "The Labor Leaders and the Power Elite" in Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur M. Ross (eds), Industrial Conflict, p.146. In American building unions the organisers are called "business agents"! George Strauss, "Control by the Membership in Building Trades Unions", American Journal of Sociology, 1956, pp.527-535.

decision to limit their own term in office was a structural negation of the "iron law of oligarchy". As Howard points out, it is impossible to settle how democratic Australian unions are in practice without personal experience inside all the unions;¹⁸ but a leadership which voluntarily "releases power" is a good indication of democratic practice.

Another important conservatising pressure which the leadership avoided was that of sectionalism. The N.S.W. B.L.F. vigorously opposed demarcation disputes as a matter of principle. They did not believe in union fighting union. Their backdown during the A.W.U. Concrete dispute in 1971 was a good example of their views on the matter. Their differences with the B.W.I.U. were ideological, not sectional.

Another point made by "pessimists" is that of the inability of unions to raise the political consciousness of their members on issues other than those relating to their own employment - that is, to formulate a comprehensive revolutionary strategy. As argued in chapter 11, B.L.F. ideology was both comprehensive and revolutionary. The green bans in themselves were an act of revolutionary confrontation.

Finally I would like to contest the "pessimists" argument about "existing social patterns".

One of the common assumptions among revolutionary theorists has been that trade unions can never be revolutionary organisations because, among other reasons, they conform to the general pattern of social organisation in capitalist society. I argue that it is precisely because of this characteristic that trade unions can succeed in revolutionary activity where vanguard parties possibly could not. I believe that the N.S.W. B.L.F. was capable of inspiring mass revolutionary action that would not have been possible if it had not been part of the established union tradition.

Perry Anderson best summarises the "Leninist" view of trade unionism in "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action". He believes:

As institutions, trade unions do not challenge the existence of society based on a division of classes, they merely express it. Thus trade unions can never be viable vehicles of advance towards socialism in themselves; by their nature they are tied to capitalism. They can bargain within the society but not transform it.

In contrast to the conformity of trade unions, he sees political parties as "a rupture with the natural environment of civil society, a

¹⁸ W.A. Howard, "Democracy in Trade Unions", in J.E. Isaac and G.W. Ford (eds), Australian Labour Relations, p.271.

voluntarist contractual collectivity, which restructures social contours". In addition, a revolutionary party, which includes intellectual and middle class elements which are not bound by inevitable ties to the workers' movement, gains the allegiance of these elements "against the grain of the social structure". He concludes: "Thus the political party alone can incarnate a true negation of existing society and a project to overthrow it. It alone is negativity in history".¹⁹

Although Anderson believes that Gramsci also considered trade unions to be inherently non-revolutionary he fails to tie Gramsci convincingly to his "grain of society" argument. In fact there is good evidence that Gramsci approved of organisations fashioned along the lines of existing social practice. In writing about the Factory Councils which were created during the occupation of the factories in Turin in 1920-21, he noted admiringly:

The Council realizes the unity of the working class, gives the masses a cohesion and form of the same nature as the cohesion and form the masses assume in the general organisation of society.²⁰

Even Trotsky, who on the whole supported Lenin's views on unionism, continually emphasised the fact that trade unions were where militant workers were channeling their activity, and argued that any revolutionary strategy had to encompass this fact:

...they [the trade unions] still embrace millions of workers... Is it not possible to bypass the trade unions? Is it not possible to replace them by some sort of fresh, uncorrupted organisation...? It is not enough to offer the masses a new address. It is necessary to seek out the masses where they are and to lead them.²¹

Historically, Trotsky's belief in the importance of trade unions within working class struggle is incontrovertible. Time and again syndicalists captured militant working-class opinion which "the socialist movement was utterly failing to channel".²²

Perhaps it could be argued that, on the one hand, Socialism, or Socialist Parties with much of their membership derived from the middle class and the intelligentsia, may have correct revolutionary ideology but little chance of transferring it to that section of society that is meant to put it into practice; and that trade unionism, on the other

19 Perry Anderson, "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action" in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn (eds), The Incompatibles, pp.264-265.

20 Antonio Gramsci, "Soviets in Italy", New Left Review, No. 51, p.37.

21 Leon Trotsky, "The Unions in Britain" (1933) in Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions, New York, 1969, pp.54-55.

22 Gwynn A. Williams, Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Italian Communism 1911-1921, London 1975, p.195.

hand, mainly bound by reformist ideology has greater mass working class support. Within Western capitalist society, the synthesis of mass action within the unions and "correct" revolutionary ideology has rarely been achieved. I maintain that for a brief period the B.L.F. achieved this synthesis. A truly revolutionary consciousness emerged from within the Union and took the form of previous social patterns. There were no new "factory councils", "workers' soviets" or "revolutionary committees". There was merely the Rank and File Committee which had arisen out of the struggle against the gangsters in the fifties. Mass meetings were still held on strike days, albeit more democratically organised. Dues were demanded, scabs abused, amenities improved, wet weather money won; in fact conventional union activity continued uninterrupted. The fact that the B.L.F. was the union - a member of Labor Council with offices in Trades Hall and so on, was extremely important. Much that would have appeared strange and unconventional, was accepted with equanimity amongst the traditional and ongoing union activity.

The fact that the B.L.F. leadership remained mostly unaffected by their position of power and public pre-eminence was another important factor. Just as the I.W.W. demanded "as leaders men who have been and are living the life of the working class..."²³ the B.L.F. officials believed that any deviation from their previous life-style would be frowned upon by the rank and file and they would be quickly "pulled into line".²⁴ When Munday appeared in the Sussex Hotel one afternoon during the height of his media exposure and frequent public speaking engagements, comments from his B.L.F. colleagues centred upon the fact that he was wearing a leather jacket and floral shirt ("become a trendy have you?") and the fact that he had recently spoken at Sydney University ("What are you doing down here, slumming it with us, why aren't you up there with the uni students?").²⁵ Incidents such as this were treated with respect by the leadership, and serious talks took place about whether any of them should speak at Universities and similar elite institutions. Although the officials eventually made the decision that public exposure of the B.L.F. position was most important and therefore such speaking engagements would continue,²⁶ it is significant that the leadership saw the problems involved and seriously

23 B.H. Williams, Eleven Blind Leaders, Introduction (pamphlet), n.d.

24 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

25 Personal observation, November 1973.

26 Interview: Bob Pringle, 8 March 1978.

considered breaking off their continually strengthening relations with the radical intelligentsia rather than lose their working class image (and essence).

Thus the I.W.W. belief that it was not just a working class standard of living but the fact that their leaders were subject to the discipline of a revolutionary organisation became increasingly important within the B.L.F. The ordinary rank and file member felt able to criticise and advise the leadership in a way unusual in Australian trade unionism.²⁷ The way in which the leadership conformed to working class norms was not planned but arose ad hoc out of their own ideology and out of situations involving the rank and file such as the hotel incident just described.

Just as much of B.L.F. policy arose, seemingly unstructured, out of an understanding about what was "the right thing" to do in any given situation, the leadership response to their own class position was unstated but nevertheless definite. Their lifestyle changed not at all. They remained drinking in the same places, with the same people. They did not change their places of residence, or their eating or dressing habits.

Both Holton and Trotsky stress the importance of the "naturalness" of revolutionary movements. Holton writes of British syndicalism that it "was no alien import but a highly relevant and natural response to British conditions".²⁸ Trotsky advises revolutionaries that "it is necessary to adapt ourselves to the concrete conditions existing in the trade unions of every given country in order to mobilise the masses..."²⁹

This insistence on working within the given social patterns to bring about revolutionary change is characteristic of syndicalism worldwide. Suspicion of revolutionary parties among the working class is not a purely Australian phenomenon although Australian workers have been particularly loath to support communist or socialist parties electorally.

This suspicion of the C.P.A. from the Australian working class was to some extent an inheritance from the C.P.A.'s earlier period of strict adherence to Comintern policy. The continual tension within the C.P.A. between those advocating an "Australian style" and those opposed

27 Interview: Carol Kalafates, 25 January 1978. All the secretarial staff who had worked in other union offices remarked upon this fact.

28 Bob Holton, British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities, London, 1976, p.27.

29 Leon Trotsky, Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions, p.70.

to the trend towards national traditions was never really clarified until 1968 and the eventual split with the pro-Russian S.P.A. grouping. It is important that, in the early seventies, at a time when the C.P.A. was espousing an "Australian solution" to socialism's problems, the B.L.F. was the most significant union over which it had influence.

Those C.P.A. members active within the B.L.F. had always been believers in the "Australian path to socialism" but the C.P.A.'s previous Russian periods remained as legacies in workers' memories. The Union on the other hand was felt to be untainted by any alien or un-Australian tradition³⁰ and the B.L.F. leadership, although many of them were in the C.P.A., were also untainted by alien ideology as far as the B.L.F. rank and file were concerned. Munday's insistence that he did not "worship at the altar of either Peking or Moscow" (an oft-repeated phrase) was important, both as an indication of the new way in which he was viewing the earth's problems (i.e. on an ecological level) and also to reassure the Australian working class that his ideology was not foreign or "learnt from outside" but had grown organically from within the trade union struggle.

Just as the I.W.W. insisted on its existence as "part of the class" and saw revolutionary parties as "distinct entities divorced from the class"³¹ so did the B.L.F. see its own revolutionary struggle as arising directly out of Australian conditions and as a response to Australian problems. The green bans and the concept of the social responsibility of labour were entirely home-grown contributions that Australia made to revolutionary ideology and history.

The way in which the C.P.A. and the B.L.F. managed to co-exist and interact was a delicate balancing of forces. Whilst some of the B.L.F. rank and file held traditionally hostile or suspicious attitudes towards the C.P.A.,³² there were also many within the C.P.A. who held what can only be described as a syndicalist viewpoint.³³

30 Unionism is particularly integral to the Australian workers' existing social patterns because of the Arbitration system and resulting high level of unionisation.

31 Verity Burgmann, "Directing the Action: The Politics of the I.W.W. in Australia", International Socialist, No. 9, p.12.

32 Interviews: Dean Barber, 18 December 1976; Ian Makin, 14 December 1977; Roy Bishop, 10 March 1977.

33 For instance, Mick Ross, a very long-time C.P.A. member, when asked about political parties replied that "unions would have more chance of changing society than any other group of people".

Hostility from Australian workers towards Communism is not unique to the Australian experience. Trotsky writing of British Communism comments:

The revolutionary road is seriously compromised in the eyes of the left wing of the workers by the zigzags and adventures of official communism. The workers say to themselves: The trade unions are bad but without them it might be even worse.³⁴

The French workers' experience was one where the socialist parties regarded the trade unions merely as recruiting schools for their political objectives. The constant dissensions among the various socialist factions was naturally carried over into the unions and "this untenable situation gradually opened the eyes of the workers".³⁵

The Wobblies' insistence that they were part of the class, not distinct from it, was not idle sloganising. In the same way the B.L.F. rank and filers believed proudly that the B.L.F. was "their union", Wobblies inspired the same fervour amongst their own adherents. Political philosophy which comes from amongst your own, from out of the ranks so to speak, may be theoretically incorrect or objectionable but it is not alien, nor does it produce isolation for those who proclaim it. Munday himself agrees that the B.L.F. "message" would not have "got across", if it had been put forward by a distant organisation.

Perhaps the Wobblies greatest problem in convincing the class that they were of it and indeed its vanguard, was their policy of dual unionism. Although this policy was propagated rather than practised, the fact that this policy distanced the I.W.W. from the mainstream of unionism was a major reason for its eventual demise. Of course it can be argued that the capturing of the traditional union apparatus by the B.L.F. leadership was not enough to save them either, but it certainly delayed the final hour and garnered much support that would not have been forthcoming if they had not been "the democratically elected leadership"³⁶ of an everyday, commonplace union. Indeed, the Labor Council of N.S.W., hardly a hotbed of revolutionary fervour, continued to recognise the Munday-Owens leadership as the true representatives of the State's builders labourers long after the actuality of that position had ceased to exist. The Labor Council hierarchy may not have lifted a finger to

³⁴ Leon Trotsky, "The Unions in Britain" (1933), Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions, p.54.

³⁵ Rudolf Rocker, Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism, London, 1973, p.29.

³⁶ A phrase often used during Intervention, especially featured in wall posters and pamphlets by the State branch.

aid the B.L.F. in its struggle against intervention but neither did it move to eliminate the elected leadership. The precedent would have proved too alarming.

However, the Wobblies were not the only revolutionary group to struggle with, and fail to solve, what Rosa Luxemburg calls "the pedantic social-democratic separation of politics and labour".³⁷ In Spain, when the Anarchists became convinced that it was impossible to organise revolutionaries along the pattern of labour organisations and that trade unions would never become revolutionary even if led by anarchists, the militants withdrew from the unions. This led, according to Maura, to a state of isolation: "Their publications were little read and their revolutionary preachings went unheeded".³⁸ The synthesis of revolutionary ideology and mass activity had once again broken down. The B.L.F. leadership certainly knew nothing about these historical experiences, but they sensed that their position within the entrenched labour movement was an important asset. Their relationship with conservative union officials outside the Building Trades Group was jocular rather than aggressive. It was particularly important that the B.L.F.'s relationship with the trade union mainstream remained as "correct" as conditions allowed. An A.W.U. official, reminiscing about previous "blues" in the building industry, concluded that "the Munday group always did the right thing by us and we always did the right thing by them. We never scabbed and we never body-snatched".³⁹

Several observers believe that the B.L.F. leadership were severely hampered in their efforts to remain within the mainstream union movement by the simple, but significant fact that, because of a series of incidents, they were barred from those hotels that other trade unions officials frequented.⁴⁰ This social isolation certainly reinforced their eventual political isolation.

It is important to note Hyman's observations on the historical evidence of "the volatility of working-class consciousness and the transient nature of overtly revolutionary trade unionism". It is true that the B.L.F.'s experience of revolutionary trade unionism was brief; but that in no way detracts from the fact that they were revolutionary.

37 Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike: The Political Party and the Trade Unions, p.31.

38 Maura, op.cit., p.69.

39 Interview: Digby Young, 17 May 1979.

40 The Star, The Trades Hall Hotel, and the Criterion.

Marx's description of how revolutionary trade unions should carry out their mission could easily be a description of the N.S.W. B.L.F.:

[Trade unions] must now learn how to act consciously as focal points for organising the working class in the greater interests of its complete emancipation. They must support every social and political movement directed towards this aim...They must convince the whole world that their efforts are far from narrow and egoistic, but on the contrary, are directed towards the emancipation of the downtrodden masses.⁴¹

⁴¹ Karl Marx, Resolution of the I.W.A. on Trade Unions, Geneva, 1866, cited in A. Lozovsky, Marx and the Trade Unions, pp.16-18.