A Circular Letter On Union Problems

As a long time since I have written anything on the problems of my union, which means having to repeat the same thing to 5 or 6 friends, hence this circular letter. Should this text be of any interest whatever, I have no objections (indeed on the contrary) to your using it in part or in entirety. An anonymous source; I claim no authorship rights.

It seems quite likely that this year will see the disappearance of the ITU (International Typographical Union) as an independent union (1) affiliated to the AFL-CIO. In May, the ITU will have to decide by referendum on whether to amalgamate with the I.B.T. (Teamsters' Union). If this plan, which the ITU management is against, gets rejected, then sooner or later amalgamation or merging with some other union will be on the cards.

Founded in 1852 (the oldest American Union) the ITU (2) is different in its structures and methods from most other American unions. Subscriptions have always been high. In addition, heavy and frequent strike levies have in the past allowed the types (typos) successfully to engage in endless strike actions. In the past (till the beginning of the 70's), the ITU had a pension scheme provided by a 2½% tax on gross salaries. This pension was abolished when the number of working typos declined in proportion to the growing number of pensioners, a huge loss for those older members of the union. But the ITU has long maintained a retirement home for aged typos, assures decent incoemnities, and has for a long time maintained an excellent professional training centre. The entire life of the ITU, from the functioning of its Executive Council down to the duties of its most humble "chapel" (workshop organisation) is regulated by the most detailed statutes and by a democratic mechanism which, albeit somewhat weighty, remains unique and exemplary in the world of American trade unionism.
At its peak, in 1968, the ITU comprised 114,000 members, including pensioners. In 1983 it totaled 75,000 members, 46,000 of whom are active. Since 1978 the ITU lost 10,000 active members. How had we reached this state of affairs?

Retrospective wisdom would make interesting but idle criticism of the ITU's attitudes to "new methods" in the graphic arts industry. At first, a fairly arbitrarily arrived at twenty years ago, the ITU often combined resistance with adaptation to the new methods, and with a certain amount of luck. But technological advance has accelerated, and eventually the dam broke.

LABOUR. Apart from the 'normal' labour losses due to the intensive introduction of the offset, of photo-composition, one can mention the fall in costs of materials, the introduction of electronic stencils, perfected copy-machines, etc., which allowed for the proliferation of small enterprises successfully competing with concerns employing union personal. The introduction of computers in printworks, printing the annual telephone directories for example, eliminated hundreds of jobs in that field. The computerised information provided by people working with telephones directly supplied the photo-compositors. And finally, the unfavorable social climate of the past decade has seen the exodus of many enterprises to areas where the unions are either weak or nonexistent.

NEWSPAPERS. In 1970, a special act of Congress allowed newspapers which evoked the need for it, to combine their technical and commercial operations, thereby legalising the "technical mergers" which had already existed for several years, and encouraging further ones. As well as these "consolidations", a certain number of publications have quite purely and simply disappeared, particularly amongst evening papers, victims of television. But the final blow has been the introduction of computers. When, after a trial of strength in New York in 1974, the ITU had to accept the fact that newspapers can prepare their pages without typographers, it negotiated a series of agreements which – with local variations – gave the employers wide latitude to use the new methods in exchange for guarantees of already existing jobs. These agreements, often sealed with substantial bonuses, ensured from the outset the survival of the typographers at the cost of a slow but inexorable reduction in the workforce. A rapid examination of the situation in San Francisco, California, will serve to illustrate.

The town had four daily paper in 1958. By 1964, there remained only three, of which two belonged to the Hearst chain. Hearst went into liquidation with his weakest daily and achieved a "technical" merger of the "SF Examiner" with the "SF Chronicle", which belonged to a local dynasty. Their editorships re-

MAIN SCRUPULOUSLY SEPARATE, BUT ALL OTHER operations are run by a company created from the capital of both of the partners. Their respective workforces are merged and work in the same shop. For all practical purposes the personnel works for the morning and evening editions. Advertising is exchanged between one paper and the other, an enormous saving for the bosses because advertising accounts for at least one half of the newspaper.

The deadweight has long since been eliminated, and several generations of computers, photo-compositors and other equipment ready relegated to the museums. News is conveyed directly to the compositor (via the computer) by journalists. The same goes for Stock Exchange quotations transmitted directly from New York, as for small-scale adverts prepared by office staff. What work that's left over for the types is limited to:

1. The putting together of adverts (by use of terminals) and then the assembling and pasting-up of these adverts. Work which is increasingly being reduced by the amount of advertising which arrives completely prepared for insertion, made up by shops working directly for the advertising agencies.

2. Page-setting, which continues to become an even more rapid process as the constant improvements in computer-programming mean that often the types have little more to do than paste the text to the designed space.

The future belongs to screened page-setting connected with computerised photo-compositors. This procedure is already in use in certain newspapers, and the ITU has already been involved in trying to save what it can out of certain contracts, retaining some crumbs to throw to the types in the event of this method being introduced. But the present is already equally amazing. In 1964, the entire workforce comprised about 800 members (a somewhat positive figure). By 1964 the workforce had fallen to 213 operatives which the bosses hope to bring down to 100, which is the minimum number the union will accept. This is for the publication of two daily papers of around 60 pages, six days a week, plus voluminous multi-sectioned Sunday paper, each one the responsibility of its own particular editorship.

Apart from Canada, the ITU operates over a vast territory: 50 American states and 10 Canadian provinces. The costs of administration, travel, negotiation, arbitration, conciliation, etc., are enormous, and the survival of the organisation, with a workforce undergoing constant reduction, becomes problematical.

Very late in the day, the ITU has acceded the need to contemplate merger with another union, and an agreement was reach-
ad in principle in 1983 with the Newspaper Guild, a small union (35,000 members) comprising journalists and newspaper employees. This merger project caused profound divisions in the ITU: with president Bingel and the majority of the Executive Council advocating it and vice-president McMichen and the secretary-treasurer rejecting it. Although extremely desirable, the merger was rejected by the ITU Congress of August '83 because of disagreement between typos and Guild members over access to the computers, the ITU considering it not in the interest of typos. The merger project provided for an extremely top-heavy, transitory administration designed in effect to preserve the permanent jobs, and establishing different subscription rates for typos and Guild members, and absurdity which says a lot about the sincerity of one or both of the partners in the affair.

First sensational bit of drama: who should turn up unexpectedly at the Congress but Jackie Presser, teamsters president, inviting the ITU to join his organization as an autonomous section so as to profit from the help and experience of the world's largest union. Seeking solace from its ruptured Detroit to the Guild, the Congress welcomed Presser's offer favourably: it will be examined by the ITU management along with whatever other propositions that may arise.

The second dramatic sensation came when in November '83, discredited by the ill-fated merger-plan with the Guild, president Bingel was defeated at the election for presidency by vice-president McMichen by more than 5,000 votes. With no precedent in the annals of the ITU-history, Bingel contested the results under fallacious pretexts, and obtained the annulment of the election by the Minister of Labour, who will make the decision as to when and how any new election will take place. Bingel is still in office, and employing all the resources of the presidency to promote a merger with...the Teamsters. One agreement has already been thrown together, and a referendum is due to be held at the end of May. McMichen is now out of work. He has refused an offer by Bingel to cede him the presidency in return for his support for the merger with the Teamsters. It's unnecessary to add that the controversy around the merger with the Guild is as a ripple on a pond compared to the storm raised by the annulment of the election and the arranged marriage with the Teamsters.

THE TEAMSTERS. At the beginning of the century a teamster was a gentleman who drove a pair (or more) of horses. The animals have gone, but the old name is still used for members of the truckdrivers and chauffeurs' union. The operatives are mobile but in contact with 2 million people distributed amongst 11 di-
campaigning for the merger. It appears that most of the "mailers" (of note) are in favour of the merger, as are several of the ITU's large local branches. Against the merger, McMicken fights on, with encouragement from the AFL-CIO and supported by some of the local branches like New York, Washington perhaps San Francisco and the majority of the Canadian ones. The opposition's strategy is to stop the merger, if possible, by calling for the need to proceed first of all with a new election within the centre of the ITU itself. They recommend the formation of only one large graphic arts union, through a merger with the GCIU (Graphic Communications International Union) which itself the fruit of several mergers, represents photo-engravers, lithographers, binders, and the majority of the printers.

One thing which seems not certain, then extremely likely, is the fragmentation of the ITU whatever the outcome of the vote. Part of the ITU's membership could rejoin the Teamsters and others seek some other affiliation. This could create a number of problems, one, for example, being the administration of pension funds at present managed by the ITU and the employers.

NOTES

(1) Most American Trade Union federations are "international" as they have branches in Canada.

(2) Apart from the typos, the ITU includes a number of syndicates of "mailers", workers who deal with dispatch of newspapers from the presses, with inserting, with parcels, etc.

(3) In effect, relatively few Teamsters have been convicted on very serious charges. An American jury doesn't convict in cases of simple suspicion... and the criminals amongst the Teamsters have the means to procure for themselves and efficient defence.

(4) Hoffa's body was never found. A very detailed FBI enquiry cast serious suspicion on the activities of certain Teamsters with Mafia connections, but was never able to provide any evidence which would satisfy a tribunal.

(5) It is noteworthy that a courageous body of Teamsters has been able, despite all sorts of pressures, to keep alive a small, very minority, group, Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

(6) The teamsters have offered some extremely attractive conditons to ITU permanent officials in the event of a merger. This obviously doesn't explain all. But: apart from any real and imagined benefits in the interest of the typos risingout of a merger with the Teamsters (or any other federation), the real problem remains that of the survival of a
the dockers union of Rotterdam is an indispensable institution.

On the other hand, Martin Spaniers also asked: "How can a union keep up with the process of technological restructuring, of development or decline of productive sectors, adapt to the transformation of functions and to the internal organisation of factories?" What he meant was actually: How can unions keep up with these transformations without being rejected by workers and how can they still perform their function? This is indeed the central problem around which everything will happen and that to clear if we consider what happened in 1984 in the port of Rotterdam.

In practical terms, for twenty years since the big port strikes of 1945-1946, bosses in the port of Rotterdam have followed the politics of divide and rule. Systematically the port has been divided into different specialised sectors: containers, cereals, coal, oil and all other goods. Everyone of these three sectors has a different collective agreement. Wage and working conditions are not the same for all dockers and consequently their unity, i.e. the feeling of sharing the same fate, was under strong pressure. In September '79, a wildcat strike in the non-containerised goods sector broke out because a collective agreement was needed for renewal. The consequences of boss politics were then made clearer as the two other sectors did not support the strike.

For 4 weeks in '79, these dockers fought bosses, unions, town council and the State. All along they were united. Since then, all the bosses' answer was a kind of recuperation. New techniques were introduced and made restructuring the work process.

In a very interesting essay on work in Rotterdam port, we can read: "The work process is not something neutral, it is not a purely technical thing, not a thing having to take on transform. The work process must be developed to an as efficient form as possible and for the managers that means that workers must not have the power to decide or to control the pace and the development of this process; on the contrary they have to be dominated by the process, exactly like a part of the completely automated machines used for loading or unloading. The author, Yvonne Mayeela, adds something else, that "the new techniques are an answer to the international development in world transportation and the merchant navy, but that this answer takes the form of a large scale attack against any unity and the power the workers have got in the goods sector in 1979".

So that this sector has lost its importance more and more, due to this automation. There are fewer and fewer ships built for this use. They have been replaced by multipur-
successively, they have agreed with changes which have every-
time meant harder conditions of work. What is the actual mean-
ing of this recent dockers action under the control of the uni-
on? Why this support for a strike after a period in which wor-
ers demands were ignored? In 1979, '80, '81 and '82, when
wildcat strikes broke out the union never took such a position.
There is only one answer: the transport union can't adapt such
an attitude in 1984. Otherwise it will lose all its influence.
Because the union's function is to rule the labour force, it
has to fulfill it completely in a period of technical transfor-
mations when bosses and workers are more and more opposed.
A union has to pretend to be opposing bosses but because of its
function such an attitude is almost unbelievable. It is then
constantly under pressure, either from the workers or from the
bosses. This pretended fight against the bosses can only reach
an end with a compromise in which workers demands will be al-
most forgotten. All these facts determine the strategy and tac-
tics of the unions. The end of the strike showed that very

When the negotiations ended, there were four parties:
- the firms of the port;
- the unions;
- the directors of Rotterdam Port;
- the national government, which, considering the
place of Rotterdam in the Dutch economy, has an
evident interest in this affair.

Bosses and unions stayed "steady" on their positions pres-
sely because it was a faked fight. They played a kind of com-
ya for their respective members. The directors of the port tried
to conciliate them. But finally, because things had l
ned too long, a minister proposed a compromise agreed by the
union. But the bosses refused it. They didn't agree with the
principle that every worker sacked from a firm of the port had
to be re-engaged by another firm of the port. They pretended
that such a decision would limit their freedom and their rights
as managers of their firms. Nevertheless, 48 hours after that,
they signed a compromise which contained exactly the same thing,
though pretending there were differences. Unions claimed a
victory: 151 workers of Rotterdam Terminal were dispersed into
other firms. It was exactly the flexy work that the bosses had
wanted to put into practice for years.
C.B. (October 1984)

FRANCE
Festival Against Union Repression.
Organised by SDG, SLT, SAT, CMT (see
further on for the meaning of these
abbreviations). It was the name given to a meeting held in Pa-
ris on the 15th of September by these small parallel unions
with some other groups recently expelled from official unions;
part of the local CFDT-Air Inter, union militants from the wor-
center of Créteil and some individuals.' About 150. The
meeting could give a too short view on the present struggle, on
the unions and bosses attempts to eliminate these groups and on
their history.

Their aim was not clearly settled and particularly not dis-
cussed - by lack of time (will it be in another meeting): they
apparently think to build an exchange center between the differ-
ent independent unions or struggle committees existing at places
of work.

S.D.B.: Democratic Union of the Bank, created in Nov. '78 when
some hundreds of CFDT militants were expelled from the
Bank Union after struggles disapproved of by this union.
Since 1981 this union has fought participation of the unions to the management and consequently is badly re-
pressed by the managers helped by the unions (mainly
the CFDT).

This fight concerns mainly bank restructuring. A union stri-
ke in 1974 aimed at breaking the rank-and-file movement. Now it
is the beginning of a general restructuring to get rid of 60,000
workers at the end (6,000 at the BNP where the SDG is more
involved). The big bank centers (centers of struggle as well)
will be divided in small centers transferred in country towns.

S.T.: Self managed union at Lyons sorting office, created in
October '78 after the expelling of the CFDT Union of the
Lyons Sorting Office branch. They have formed a new
union because they think it is the most relevant form
to fight restructuring. The union decisions are taken
in general assembly of the workers. They are fought by
the CGT and CFDT; they published a bulletin distributed
and well welcomed in the sorting offices all over Fran-
ce.

The great 1974 strikes have been followed by the dismant-
ling of the big sorting offices. Since 1981 a lot of strikes
happened at Lyons sorting office. (on the working time - 1981
again in 1982 - against the big change of the shifts time table
- Dauzet plan in 1983) - almost 100 days of strike in this year
1983.
Workers Fighting Union - Usinor-Dunkerque (steel) built in March 1981 when the CFDT branch had been suppressed by the CFDT metal union. There are constant struggles by the CFDT metal union. The restructuring (thousands of workers made redundant). The structuring had to be almost underground because of union structure had to be almost underground because of constant hard repression.

The Steel Plan has chosen to close all steel industry. Lorraine and to keep only open Dunkerque and Fos. Since 1979 the union position has moved: in 1979 they called for direct action, in 1983 they have signed the worst industrial agreement. They are more integrated to the State and the restructuring has obliged them to change their own structure.

Sorting Office - Créteil (Paris suburbs):

After the 1983 strike the union delegates were badly rep ressed: transferred in other centers, downgraded, isolated. This repression had the approval of the union and local political bureaucracy. Even if the 1983 strike failed, the importance contributed to regroup workers and to give them consciousness of their strength. This center succeeds during the strike to build a permanent phone coordination for some times.

Autonomous Union - Air-Inter:

Expelled from the CFDT - 1983-84 - The difficulties with this union rose in 1981 when the branch tried to fight for demands: five militants are still to be sentenced for having stopped the planes departure. They have built a union as most convenient way to keep in contact. 809 of the former CFDT branch are in the new autonomous union. The most important issues are: the participation of the Social Democrats, supported by the French Communist Party, in the social capital in France is not something new. The party have explained it by having "exceptional circumstances" to overcome through "national unity", i.e. the cooperation of all political organisations in order to rescue capital. Every party then has the task of carrying and imposing such exceptional measures on the social classes it was supposed to "represent" politically. The history of the past century yields a lot of examples of such a situation, to begin with the World Wars; it is not by chance that presently from time to time this political option is being presented again in the fear that a deepening of the crisis will exacerbate social tensions. Nevertheless some things would have to be quite different from the previous political and national unity for the protection of national capital: the Common Market and integration into Europe exclude the traditional economic solution which lay within national
in showing the real character of the 39 hour week: management wants nothing more than to get a total labour flexibility. That means breaking the legal rules of working time becoming too expensive in this period of crisis and restructuring, i.e. to completely dispose workers from any decision concerning their time.

This break is somewhat masked (for a short time) by the regularization of some out of date conditions concerning the union management of labour. In some places (Peugeot, Citroën) where both unions dominated, some violent conflicts brought about the traditional union: this union 'victory' was no more than a rationalisation of labour management; the workers involved would experience that very quickly.

Also this short and somewhat confusing period during 1981, capitalist imperatives pressed on another step. The pressure on workers increased everywhere in order to increase profits still under the 'socialist' mask and union support aimed at breaking all resistance:

- As unemployment increased, benefits decreased: in two years the number of unemployed jumped up to 2 million (in 1984 the unrecognized i.e. unpaid unemployed numbered an estimated one million).
- A denial of wages: 0.3% in 1983 against an increase of 3% in 1982.
- Pressures on the form and context of work.
- Big restructuring plans in traditional sectors (mines, steel, car,...) or new ones (chemical, telephone, electronics,...). Everywhere the real meaning of rationalisation suddenly became apparent.

The actual consequence of this overall attack was immediate: company profits increased by 17% in '83 allowing them to raise the self financing rate to 70% (50% in '82, 37% in '81). But these results can not hide the fact that productivity in 1983 put France 15th in the world league. The graph shows that the decline in output and imported goods has stopped but that profits ratios and rate of return on capital are still very low. These last points are essential ones for capital and that explains why the government has not to urgently and persistently look for 'solutions'.

The same crisis does have the same effects in every branch of industry. So the strategy and the workers resistance are different: the ups and downs in the steel industry, the dismantling of Creusot Loire, the shock restructuring at Talbot and Citroën, the flexy restructuring of Renault are at the same time done to prevent any workers
opposition or to break it and to elude a possible unification of struggle? In fact, most of the workers' response will stay scattered and isolated because of particularism and resignation, and restructuring will go ahead without major problems. But this lack of unity and opposition against union imposed 'solutions' does mask the rise of the movement we described when the 39 hour week was implemented. The importance of this movement can be seen in three strikes whose common characteristic is a defined opposition to previous boss-union agreements on restructuring: the creeping movement in the postal services in 1983, the strike at Talbot-Poissy in the winter of '83-'84 and the wildcat strikes in railways in Spring '84. The postal strike was described in Echanges; one article will try to explain what the complex Talbot strike was; we gave references to a pamphlet on the struggles against restructuring in the educational system. The wildcat strike in the railways is about the 35 hour week organized in shifts according to an agreement by unions and management: the workers' reactions were very brief, scattered but well selected to have the maximum effect in rush hours; they stayed localized from the moment it was decided to discuss the matter locally; they never united; their difference from union actions was their immediate effectiveness which prompted solutions. This characteristic is the link with the other conflicts (Post and Talbot). Another common characteristic is the fact that these conflicts will stay at a local level: one factory of the group at Talbot or Citroën, local discussions and actions in the Post of Railways. In these two branches, some attempts to build direct conjointal links could be observed and the local discussions were the tactical answer cutting the road to unification, which seemed the normal way for a common reaction to a unique project. These strikes were limited but spectacular: they will reveal the level of the balance of struggle and the potential strength of a resistance of restructuring.

All the managers of the labour force will draw the lessons of a situation that could escape their control by moving towards a dangerous unification. The break with the social democratic government is the lesson drawn by the Communist Party and the union it controls - the CGT. Nevertheless, this break has a dialectical function: on one side, it is an attempt to reconquer a support withdrawn by the workers through these three years of collaborating with the government; on the other side, they were more useful to capital as an opposition force able to channel the resistance movements. The situation was such that...
the government could have the use of the unions at both ends: the CFDT to play resistance to restructuring.

The CFDT goes even further ahead in what is called a "modernization of industrial relationship": the CGT pays lip service to the defence of the national industry at the same time as defending its own position in these basic branches and building a tight control on inefficient actions.

Even before breaking with the government, the CGT tried to wipe out its failure at Talbot: it formally opposed the redundancy plan at Citroën, organizing token strikes at Citroën factories around Paris, finishing up by agreeing to a plan which opened the doors to redundancies and flexibility, a kind of model for further restructuring.

This position of the CGT is even more clear in the Renault strikes in September - October 1984. It seems that the strikes spread from the Le Mans factory and was directed against a yearly bonus and redundancy. Apparently the spreading was very patchy but actually very well orchestrated by the CGT and never overcome. Thema is glorified as a victory by the CGT ("paradoxal and bitter victory", says the paper Le Monde 4-11-84): it is an "industrial plan" for restructuring which gently performs the sacking of 20,000 workers. The dismantling of the engineering group Creusot-Loire is another good example: a socialist M.P. could say in September 1984 that the town of Le Creusot was on the verge of complete rioting; in the CGT ranks, through various both tiring and inefficient actions, all the workers had to agree to a complete liquidation of this firm: the consequences for the workers are not known but we can foresee what they will be, even if some sporadic resistance is raised.

All these peculiar situations were only examples of the contractual politics followed since 1981: only a safety value been added. The success of these restructurings allowed bosses and unions to try to jump another step. At the end of December a lot of discussions were on the point of finishing with an agreement on a complete transformation of conditions of work (time and wages). The proposed agreement gave the bosses complete control of the workers' time: inside a fixed yearly time, the management would have the almost absolute right to decide when and how long a worker will have to work - for the same wage - all throughout the year. This reform called 'flexibility of work time' failed narrowly because of the reaction of union bureaucracy, anticipating and fearing a tidal wave of protests when it came to be implemented.

(To be continued.)