

Some Considerations on the Union Question

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We are going to briefly explain our point of view on the union issue, following some discussions we have had on the subject.

1) Starting from the *Communist Manifesto*, we can identify a fundamental position that will help us better understand the union problem: the statement that " **every class struggle is a political struggle** " (Marx-Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, éditions Science Marxiste , p. 29, Paris, 1999) This nodal statement means that the most basic of the so-called "economic" resistance is already substantially a political struggle. In other words, the dichotomy between economic and political struggles is erroneous and must be combated virulently and permanently. In fact, it is a serious obstacle to the self-emancipation of workers, because it attempts to **contain** and **confine** proletarian struggles only to the economic framework, that is, within the limits of the capitalist system.

"For several years, the English labour movement has been agitating without interruption in the narrow circle of strikes for higher wages and shorter days, not as a means of fighting against misery nor as a means of propaganda and organisation, but as an objective final. Furthermore, the unions even exclude on principle, in their statutes, all political action and, consequently, prohibit themselves from participating in any general activity of the working class as a class."¹

2) The limitation of workers' struggles to the economic sphere derives from the fact that one of the functions that gave rise to unions was to act as commercial representatives/sellers of labour-power as a commodity. As sellers, unions attempt to negotiate and bargain as best they can for the sale of the merchandise of which they claim to be privileged, if not monopolistic, sellers. This "commercial" function also explains why, from the beginning, unions have frequently given priority to defending the prices (wages) of the trades of which they were the emanation.

For this reason, the first unions corresponded to trades that required a high level of qualification (and long training) and, therefore, higher prices, such as cabinetmakers, shoemakers, typographers, goldsmiths, etc. Also for this reason, from the beginning, unionism was also marked by **corporatism** and competition between workers from different trades, and each organisation gave priority to defending the interests of its members and their professional knowledge. Even when the unions made it possible to temporarily resist intrusions and the degradation of the workers' condition, it was always a matter of preserving the good performance of their goods in relation to the market price of labour-power.

Thus, the very nature of the union is intrinsically linked to the defence and perpetuation of the social wage relationship. Contrary to what Marx thought, instead of the

¹ Engels to Sorge, 10/03/1872, in: Marx-Engels: *Le syndicalisme* T.1, presented by R. Dangeville, p.214, Maspero, Paris, 1972

conservative slogan "A fair wage for a fair day's work", the unions will never be able to put into practice the revolutionary slogan "Abolition of wage labour" (K. Marx in *Révolution et socialisme. Pages choisies* by M. Rubel, pages 92-93, éditions Payot, Paris 2008). And for good reason: the abolition of wage labour means, as a *sine qua non*, the abolition of unions and trade unionism.

3) However, at the origins of the labour movement, in the phase of the formal subsumption of labour to capital, characterised mainly by the extortion of absolute surplus value, many revolutionaries, including Marx-Engels, considered unions as "schools of socialism" that played the role of "bulwark against the power of capital" (K. Marx in *Sociologie critique. Pages choisies* by M. Rubel, p. 66, éditions Payot, Paris, 2008). But not everyone had that position.

This is the case with the well-known controversy between the revolutionary syndicalist Pierre Monatte and the famous anarchist Errico Malatesta² on this question: «Trade unionism, despite all the declarations of its most ardent supporters, contains within itself, by the very nature of its functions, all the elements of degeneration that have corrupted labour movements in the past. Indeed, being a movement that aims to defend the current interests of workers, it must necessarily adapt to existing conditions and take into consideration the interests that prevail in society as it exists today" (Errico Malatesta: *Anarchisme et syndicalisme*, 1907, in *Articles politiques*, p. 156, 10/18, Paris, 1979).

We must thus confirm that more than a century after this dazzling analysis, capitalist reality has completely confirmed it. Thousands of tragic examples are known, from the massive participation of unions in the first world capitalist massacre to their full and complete integration into the capitalist State as an essential pillar of social democracy and fascism.

4) In their time Marx-Engels expressed at different times their fears and misgivings about the real capacity of the unions to unify the proletariat for its emancipatory struggle. That is why the First International (International Workingmen's Association: 1864-1872) was not constituted in any way as a "union", but as a revolutionary organisation, in continuity with the League of Communists of 1847, destined to organise the entire world proletariat not for the defence of immediate and contingent interests, but to fight for their total and definitive emancipation. "The emancipation of workers must be the work of the workers themselves."

The IWA was a **political** organisation that carried out its own work of clarification and polemic against the sects and false consciousnesses of the time: Proudhonists, Bakuninists, trade unionists, Blanquists and others.

"That the economic emancipation of the working class is, consequently, the great objective to which all political movements must subordinate themselves as a means;

² We quote this working-class fighter with undisguised pleasure, in the face of those for whom nothing can exist outside of their self-proclaimed sect. The weapon of criticism is also, first of all, that of self-criticism. For more information about P. Monatte, see <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article24500>

That all the efforts made until now have failed due to a lack of solidarity between the workers of the different professions of each country and a fraternal union between the working classes of the different countries.”³

It was with the Second International (1889) when the tragic separation between socialist political organisations was confirmed, which were soon corrupted by reformism and parliamentarism, and trade union organisations, which were limited to the sphere of economic demands. This split gave rise to social democratic deviations, both political and union, although formally separate and distinct. As a reaction to this legalisation of the working class as variable capital, “revolutionary syndicalist” organisations were born with the aim of returning to the workers’ struggle a political, unitary and emancipatory perspective, in accordance with the tradition of the First International. This was the case, for example, of the anarcho-syndicalism of the CNT in Spain (1910) or, more significantly, of the “industrial unionism” of the IWW⁴ in the USA (1905-23). But the trajectory, political heterogeneity and repression suffered by these organisations destroyed them in the face of the evolution of mature capitalism.

5) The phase of real subsumption of labour to capital, characterised by the increase in relative surplus value, would deepen and develop throughout the 20th century, causing great transformations in the technical composition of the working class, in the organisation of work and in the very structure of capitalist society. The same can be said of the progressive integration of unions into capitalist state apparatuses. Through the various joint agreements and their co-option at all levels of capitalist management (including membership in the Regency Council of the National Bank of Belgium), they were recognized as the collective, legal and designated managers and representatives of variable capital. This new and important reinforcement of the domination of capital over the whole of society was perceived by various fractions—although very minority—of the working class. Thus, starting in the 1920s, some political minorities of different origins perceived and underlined this substantial change in the nature of unionism due to its full integration into the capitalist State.

“For the proletariat, as a class, the union movement is a dead end in the current state of capitalism. While in the last century unions represented the organs of unification of the proletariat to resist the fall in wages, today they represent organizations through which inequality of conditions and situations is introduced in the proletarian class. For many they are a useless instrument, for others a means of accumulating privileges and safeguarding them through class commitments.”⁵

And also:

“The unions have reached the end of their independent evolution and since 1914 they have entered a new period, that of their integration into the capitalist State. They had been tending towards this for a long time, but it took the war of 1914 and the

³ “Provisional rules of the International Workingmen’s Association” in Matthieu Léonard: *The emancipation of workers. A History of the First International* , p. 365, La factory éditions, Paris, 2011.

⁴ For a more detailed study of the context and birth of the IWW we refer our readers to our analysis La soumission du procès de travail au procès de valorisation au travers de l'exemple du mouvement ouvrier américain (1887 – 1920) available at <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/archives>

⁵ *L’Ouvrier Communiste* , n°4/5, November 1929, in <https://archivesAutonomies.org/spip.php?article943>

services they then provided to capitalism in the Sacred Union for the State to grant them positions on its councils. In this way they demonstrated their power over the working class and thus became invaluable auxiliaries of capitalism.”⁶

But this same type of criticism had already appeared much earlier, especially during the aborted revolution in Germany in the early 1920s, with the emergence of the KAPD: the Communist Workers' Party of Germany⁷.

“The counterrevolutionary nature of union organizations is so well known that many employers in Germany only employ workers who belong to a union group. This reveals to the entire world that the union bureaucracy will play an active role in the future maintenance of the capitalist system, which is bursting at all its seams. The unions are thus, along with the bourgeois foundations, one of the main pillars of the capitalist State. The union history of the last 18 months has amply demonstrated that this counterrevolutionary formation cannot be transformed from within. The revolutionization of the unions is not an individual matter: the counterrevolutionary character of these organizations is found in their structure and in their own specific system. Only the very destruction of the unions can clear the way for social revolution in Germany. Socialist construction needs something more than these fossil organizations.”⁸

This controversy resurfaced in a very violent way at the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, which saw the *de facto* exclusion of the KAPD and the victory of the opportunist line of “entryism” into the unions, even in those that were openly counterrevolutionary. A few years later, Anton Pannekoek would return to this question in his most important book, *The Workers' Councils* :

“Unions are now giant bodies whose place in society is well recognized. Their position is regulated by law, and the agreements they reach have legal force for an entire industrial sector. Its leaders aspire to be part of the power that determines working conditions. They form the apparatus through which monopoly capitalism imposes its conditions on the entire working class. [...] Thus, the conditions that prevail today have meant that, more than ever, unions have become the organ of domination of monopoly capitalism over the working class.”⁹

6) Beyond these few reminders of the historical criticism of the revolutionaries regarding what the unions were and what they have become, we still have some balloons to deflate. Now, in light of more than a century of entryism within unions to supposedly change their nature or direction, we have all the hindsight we need to see the utter futility of such a position. Not only has no union changed its nature, but, on the contrary, all have become

⁶ Benjamin Péret and G. Munis: *The unions against the revolution* , p. 41, 1960, Éric Losfeld/Le terrain vague, Paris, 1968, available in castellano in

<https://barbaria.net/2023/02/05/cuaderno-g-munis-los-sindicatos-contra-la-revolucion>

⁷ To better understand this important current, we refer to the work of Dennis Authier and Jean Barrot: *The Communist Left in Germany (1918-1921)* , Zero Zyx, 1978

⁸ “KAPD Program”, May 1920, p. 8-9 in Denis Authier: *The German Left (Texts)* , supplement to n°2 of *Invariance* , 1973

⁹ A. Pannekoek: *The workers' councils* , “Syndicalism”, capítulo escrito entre 1942/43, p. 149/150, published by Bélibaste, Paris, 1974

increasingly integrated with the State, sometimes to the point of structurally replacing it, as happened in Poland¹⁰, to guarantee the perpetuation of capitalist social peace.

The innumerable desertions of their members and the fact that they have become, in their own words, “service unions,” like insurance companies, mutual societies and other consumer associations, has caused the unions to lose their small spectacular conflict that the State needed to justify a strong and not too openly complicit opposition. They thus represent one of the weak links in the crisis of democratic representation. Unlike the interchangeable and openly corrupt parties, the unions could have played the “independent” or “combative” card. However, its structural links with political parties, employers' associations, governments, municipalities, inter-municipal organisations, etc. at all levels of the State, make them no longer credible “counterpowers” in any way.

Today «the unionisation rate in France in 2016 was 19.1% in the public service, while it was 8.4% in the private sector. The unionisation rate in France as a whole, including the public and private sectors, was 11% in 2016, slightly lower than the 11.2% in 2013, the last figure published, according to Labor Ministry statistics published on Tuesday. There is a marked disparity between the public and private sectors, with a rate of 19.1% in the public service (19.8% in 2013) and 8.4% (8.7%) in the private sector, according to the statistics department of the Ministry”.¹¹

This ridiculously low rate of unionisation has to be lowered even further by the thousands of Stalinist, leftist, Trotskyist, Maoist and anarchist militants who, for generations, have been the only ones to give a “second life” to the decomposing union corpses. . By dint of wanting to reform the union apparatus and assume responsibilities within it, almost all of them have become the new bosses; the very incarnation of the union bureaucracy that they said they wanted to fight.

The paradox of entryism has been taken to the extreme of its counterrevolutionary depravity, since it has effectively managed to take over the leadership of the unions on many occasions, only to perpetuate it under a somewhat more radical veneer, supported by the same commercial logic of sellers and managers. of the workforce. Obviously, this logic implies intrigue, betrayal and corruption, as well as the permanent control of its members in the strict application of their spectacular and cathartic rituals (Saturday or Sunday carnival parades). In other countries, the unionisation rate is much higher, but this is not due to a desire to fight or change the world. On the contrary, these are countries in which union services are so well integrated that membership is self-evident as a form of insurance-like protection, or even as a contractual obligation in some trades.

What's more, the workers' confederations of the main unions have become a minority compared to those of the "salaried middle classes." In Belgium, for example, it is the unions that are responsible for controlling and paying unemployment benefits. In addition,

¹⁰ Lech Wałęsa, president of the Republic from 1990 to 1995 and charismatic leader of the Solidarność union, made the democratic transition possible by preventing any too radical movement and the return to capitalist and Catholic normality

¹¹<https://www.europe1.fr/societe/aujourd'hui-le-taux-de-syndicalisation-en-france-est-de-11-3775085#:~:text=Aujourd'hui%2C%20le%20taux%20de.en%20France%20est%20de%2011%20>

each year the employer pays union members a “union premium” corresponding to a portion of their contributions.

“The unionisation rate in Belgium was 53% during the period 2010-2016, which represents a slight decrease of 0.7 percentage points compared to the period 2000-2009. Only the Scandinavian countries have a higher unionisation rate than Belgium. The high number of union members and the high level of unionisation in Belgium is due, in particular, to the fact that unions participate in the payment of unemployment benefits, but it is not the only reason.”¹²

Through their strict commitment not to call any strike without prior notice, unions manage in many collective agreements to recover a part of the fall in real wages or some other “advantage” in working conditions. The legal strike with a ban on pickets and blockades has become a drill.

For some time now, the main functions of unions have not been the struggle for demands, but rather “union participation in the management bodies of social security; practices inherited from the past (payment of unemployment benefits by unions in Belgium); the provision of social protection services (for example, in the United States); the offer of services as diverse as legal assistance in disputes relating to individual labor relations; the organization of tourist or leisure activities”.

7) One of the main arguments used by all the “Leninists” to justify the policy of union entryism, apart from the fact of being in contact with the “working masses”, today totally absent from the union sections, is that of the mythical opposition between the “good base” and the “bureaucrats, careerists and maneuverers.” The foundation of this question lies in the process of bureaucratization more or less inherent to every organization, which leads it to become not a means, but an end in itself. We do not want to enter here into a detailed criticism of the concept of bureaucracy widely used by a “semi-Trotskyist” group such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*¹³ to explain the enigma that the nature of the USSR represents for them. First of all, we want to point out that it is a particular process of organization, of autonomization of certain intermediate functions, most of the time administrative, that give their possessor a portion of the power of the dominant class organized in the State and push their possessor to preserve and increase their status. Thus, there is a state bureaucracy that can be broken down into an industrial bureaucracy, a party bureaucracy... and, of course, a union bureaucracy.

“The bureaucratic spirit is fundamentally Jesuitical and theological. The bureaucrats are State Jesuits and State theologians. [...] Since bureaucracy is, in essence, “the State as a formalism”, it is also the State in terms of its purpose. The true purpose of the State thus appears to the bureaucracy as a purpose contrary to the State. The spirit of bureaucracy is “the formal spirit of the State.” [...] As for the individual

¹² Cf.

https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20190516_01335892/en-belgique-la-popularite-des-syndicats-ne-faiblit-pas

¹³On the position of SoB, see Claude Lefort: *Éléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1979

bureaucrat, he makes the end of the State his private end: it is the **curse of high positions, careerism.**"¹⁴

The union bureaucracy is one that, by rubbing shoulders with the boss, identifies with him to the point of considering itself a better manager than him due to the fact that it represents the entire "work community." For those who have had the painful experience of having a former "left" union member as their boss, there is no worse ordeal, because he is the thief turned police officer. The union is a fully formed and structured company from top to bottom.

To become permanent, grassroots delegates must demonstrate, as in any company, their efficiency, effectiveness and **ideological commitment**. What's more, they have to be registered on union lists before they can run (and be protected) for any representative position. Even "in secret," some leftists have attempted to become union leaders, and their attempt involves such attachment to the structure and such participation in its depravities that they become inexorably assimilated into it. The same goes for any police officer who infiltrates the mafia; it is always totally compromised and corrupted.

Unions are probably one of the companies that most despise their employees, because in addition to "factory patriotism", they can always touch the old "militant" chord to make them work harder, that is, so that those who still think they can be defended by this alienated and alienating structure, they swallow - as a lesser evil - all the capitalist toads. There are no unions without bureaucracy (and it is not the anarchist CNT that can contradict us), in the same way that there is no bureaucracy without the capitalist organisation of work.

The method of the union bureaucracy does not differ from that of the employers. It consists above all in dividing. Distrust and suspicion are sown among the workers: "you will go on strike, but the others will not follow you, even if they pretend to do so. They will abandon you in the middle of the movement. An attempt is made to discredit the most combative ones. "You are in favour of the strike because you don't have children to feed." Those who want to stop are criticised for not having done so in previous movements. They seek to discredit those who are in favour of the strike with political arguments. False information is given about the situation in other sectors to make people believe that the rest of the workers do not agree."¹⁵

8) It remains to consider the attitude to adopt in the event of a fight against unions and co-workers, whether unionised or not. A strike is prepared and generally triggered by a minority of workers who, through discussions, pamphlets, strikes, sabotage, small internal demonstrations in the factory, assemblies or a strike committee, provide the spark that

¹⁴ K. Marx: "Critique of the political philosophy of Hegel" (1843), p. 921,922, *Works Philosophy* , Bibliothèque de la Pléiade Gallimard, Paris, 1982

¹⁵ D. Mothé in Corale: *Capitalisme-Syndicalisme: Même combat* , p.29, Spartacus, Paris, 1974. Daniel Mothé was a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* , where he wrote many columns about the working class, since he himself was a worker milling machine at the Renault factory for many years. He later became a sociologist and great defender of self-management.

Cf. <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article139883>

triggers the conflict. Therefore, this minority is organised in advance according to the objectives and methods to be used.

There can be no strike without organisation. This necessarily involves economic, political, strategic and tactical expressions. It is the workers who initiate the conflict who undertake, regardless of their beliefs or affiliations, to lead the struggle and, to this end, to extend it to other workshops, subcontractors and other factories, in order to impose a balance of power that allows continuing the fight under the strict control of those involved. It is the **needs of the workers** that must guide the struggle and give rise to unlimited creativity in its implementation.

But what the most radicalised elements have lacked so far is the ability to take the step, to go from challenging the unions to organising combative workers on their own, whether unionised or not.¹⁶

From the beginning, the union apparatuses intervene to prevent or monitor the movement, to divert it towards a legalistic formalism or to “popularize” it by drowning it in an artificial “solidarity” of citizens, mayors or other political representatives. The media theater and its designated intermediaries then take over to stifle the struggle, even through spectacular generalization, thus dispossessing the workers of their voice and their actions until completely demoralizing them. There are many variants of this scheme, and there are no miraculous formulas, except for the permanent demand to maintain an autonomous workers' organization, controlled and directed by those who are the main actors in the struggle and its beginning.

Delegation, voting, representativeness, revocability and other formal devices are never guarantees in themselves; They even function more as a means to democratically break the strike. And then there is usually the first-class burial under the pretext of victories, very partial victories, and a return to salary prison. As the *Manifesto* tells us : «Sometimes workers triumph, but it is an ephemeral triumph. The true result of their struggles is not so much immediate success as the growing unity of the workers» (Marx-Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Science Marxiste editions, p. 29, Paris, 1999).

But when this growing unity does not exist or dissolves, it is better to recognize defeat and learn from it, rather than console oneself with false illusions or pyrrhic victories. It is more appropriate and operational to be **outside** the structures, to gain the height and independence necessary to produce a relevant critique that is not imbued with a subjectivity too marked by partial and contingent experiences. To paraphrase Lenin, "nothing is better than nothing."

9) In the current situation of crisis of representative democracy and return of “populism” mixed with neofascism, the loss of the role of unions is one of the most problematic elements for capital. Without them and without their generalised co-management, the State increasingly finds itself without intermediate structures, without social buffers

¹⁶ *Union Ouvrière, for the abolition of wage slavery* , n° 3, 1975. For an interesting reading of this group's diary, see <https://archivesAutonomies.org/IMG/pdf/gauchecommuniste/gauchescommunistes-ap1952/unionouviere/UO-n03.pdf>

capable of playing the game of “opposition to His Majesty” or even, in certain circumstances, of opposing with greater virulence a certain reform. In such a political configuration, it is even more futile and illusory to believe in the “recreation” of a “combat unionism”, often described as “red”. The resurgence of workers' autonomy, which necessarily includes a critique of work, will necessarily imply and take shape in other forms of organisation that inextricably unite economic and political struggles and use the historical methods of “direct action.” The destruction of the old unions will be a necessity in what will once again be a confrontation of class against class.

“It is the organisational form itself that makes the masses more or less impotent and prevents them from making the union the instrument of their will. The revolution can only triumph by destroying this organism, that is, by tearing down this organizational form from top to bottom so that something completely different emerges from it.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Herman Gorter: *Reply to Lenin* , p. 28, 1920, Workers' bookstore, Paris, 1930