

Anarchist Political School

Anarchism and the trade unions



Solidarity, June 30, 1917. The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.

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Trade Unions

Capitalism brings workers together in large workplaces, towns and cities, and makes us co-operate every day at work. From hospitals to fast food outlets, production is broken down into processes involving tens, hundreds, or even thousands of different workers who each have to do their bit so that production can continue.

Individually, workers have very little power in the process of production. We find ourselves forced to do jobs that are low paid, dangerous, or demeaning. Workers who demand changes or refuse to do their job are easily sacked and replaced. But ever since capitalism first brought large numbers of workers together, workers have realised that collectively they have great power. A boss can sack and replace one worker, but they can rarely sack and replace all the workers. One worker refusing to do their job changes little, but all workers refusing to do their job can bring the economic system to its knees.

Trade unions are the organisations workers built in order to assert their class interests against those of the bosses. Historically, workers have organised in trade unions to fight for the 8 hour day, the weekend, higher wages, greater workplace safety, universal healthcare, and a host of other economic demands resisted by capitalists. Unions have also taken part in political campaigns of broader interest to the working class, fighting for civil rights, equal

pay for men and women, and against violent and repressive government policies.

Trade unions are organised at the point of production. That is, they are based in the workplace. Trade unions only have power in a workplace or industry when most of the workers in that workplace or industry are members of that trade union. They are strongest when all workers are united, irrespective of race, gender, sexuality, or other divisions.

Because the trade unions are based at the point of production, they can wield the strongest weapon that workers have under capitalism: the withdrawal of their labour. They allow workers to fight the bosses and the governments that serve them. They also give workers an idea of their potential power and ability to run their own lives. Militant and democratic trade unions are therefore one of the most powerful organs of class struggle and building them is a task of utmost importance for anarchist communists.

Discuss

What is special about the withdrawal of labour? How is it different from other courses of action available to workers to express their dissatisfaction?

The Bureaucracy and the State

Workers won the right to form and belong to unions through struggle. However, over the course of the past 150 years, most of the world's unions have been integrated into the legal and political systems of the capitalist state.

In Australia, the draconian legislative framework that regulates the unions today has essentially made all effective union action illegal. The right to strike has been stripped so far back and burdened with so many conditions that it is now close to impossible to exercise it both legally and effectively at the same time.

The actions of most unions within Australia are dominated by a bureaucracy of full time officials who are often unelected. Many officials enter trade unions straight out of university and have often never worked in the industry they represent. Many see climbing the ranks of a union as a stepping stone to leverage a future career in the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

The top officials who run unions preside over vast organisations. Many unions have upwards of 800 staff, over \$100 million in annual revenue, hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of property, salaries above \$200,000 for the leading officials and significant political influence. The officials therefore have every interest in maintaining the

institution—the union— to which they owe their position in society.

On the one hand, maintaining the union as an institution requires organising and mobilising workers and encouraging collective action, in order to both sign up members and to force employers to deal with the union. On the other hand, the union ultimately depends upon profitable companies and upon capitalism as a whole. Without profitable companies, there would be no unions.

The officials also have to exercise control over their members. Otherwise, employers would negotiate with members directly instead of going through the union bureaucracy. Above all else, the officials want to set up a stable bargaining relationship with employers, where they can be recognised as a legitimate partner by bosses and negotiate improvements for workers.

The officials will therefore encourage members to flex their industrial power to demonstrate to workers that there's value in being a member and to remind employers that it must be negotiated with. But ultimately, the officials don't want to do anything that really threatens the employer or their stable bargaining relationship with them.

They don't want a full-on conflict where the employer goes all out to destroy the union. And they don't want workers to go all out and destroy the employers and capitalism (and therefore the union). So they will encourage a level

of struggle and action, but will always seek to contain this within quite conservative limits.

Discuss

Should workers ever organise to try to replace conservative union bureaucrats with officials who will fight on the members' behalf?

The Labor Party and the ACTU

The peak body of the Australian trade union movement, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), gathers together the trade union officials from almost all unions in Australia. The ACTU acts as a means for the bureaucracy to pool together their resources to influence the Labor Party. Most unions are also directly affiliated with the ALP, bypassing the ACTU.

But the ACTU and the unions in general, are not just mere lobby groups that seek to pressure the ALP from the outside. Rather, trade union officials are involved within the ALP at every level of its operation. Leading trade union officials also move seamlessly between trade union positions and political positions in the ALP.

As such, the ALP represents the political arm of the trade union bureaucracy. But additionally, the ALP is also beholden to the interests of capitalists and must

consistently demonstrate its competence in managing Australian capitalism to them.

We can see how these two functions of the ALP play out in practice, through the example of the ALP-ACTU Accord.

To attempt to resolve an economic crisis in the late 1970s, the Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser attempted to impose a wage freeze on workers. The unions resisted with strikes, and the freeze was never successfully implemented.

But capitalists still needed a way to mitigate the crisis. Bob Hawke's ALP, which came into power in 1983, would provide the solution. Upon election, the ALP signed the Accord with the ACTU. The Accord narrowly confined what unions could (legally) fight for and it set an upper bound on how much unions could demand for pay rises. The right to strike was restricted accordingly. In exchange, the 'social wage' (i.e. the benefits Australian workers received from the state, like Medicare and superannuation) was expanded.

This agreement was a long-term disaster for Australian unions. From 1983, the Accord compelled the union bureaucracy to act as a police force over the rank and file. Any strikes or unions that failed to comply with the terms set out in the Accord were crushed with the full backing of the ACTU and the ALP. As such, the union bureaucracy

actively collaborated with the state to demobilise the movement it supposedly led. Whilst the bureaucracy enjoyed an exceptionally close relationship with the government, union membership collapsed.

Discuss

Why was Hawke in a better position to resolve the economic crisis compared to Fraser?

The Decline of Trade Unions in Australia

The long shadow of the Accord still haunts the Australian union movement today. With the union movement significantly weakened, both Labor and Liberal governments have been able to implement successive waves of anti-union legislation in the decades since 1983.

In 1976, nearly 50% of Australian workers (approximately 2.5 million people) were in a trade union. By 2016, only 14% of Australian workers (1.5 million people) were members of a trade union. In the 1970s, Australian capitalists 'lost' nearly 3.2 million worker-days to strike activity each year; the ABS records that in 2019, only 33,500 days were lost to strike activity. Over the same period, workers' wages have flatlined and then gradually eroded, whilst corporate profits have continued to soar.

To say that the Australian union movement is in crisis is old news. The union movement in Australia is in the midst

of its longest and deepest period of decline: the result of forty years of continuous defeat by capitalists and the state (see the graph on the next page). Despite forty years of defeat, the trade unions remain the largest organised segment within the Australian working class. If the power of the working class is to be rebuilt, the Australian union movement must be rebuilt.

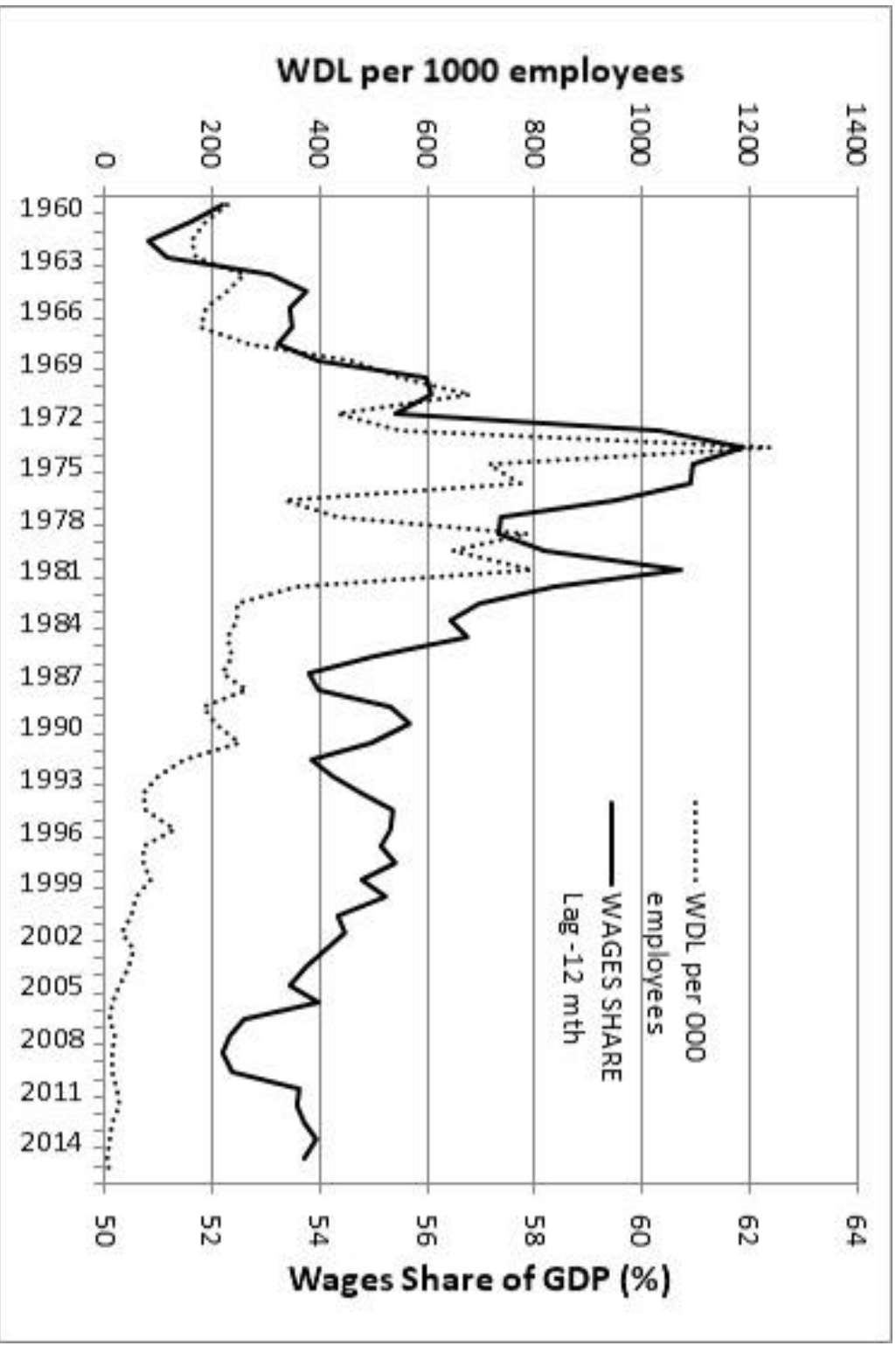
Discuss

If there is so much power in a union, why aren't all workers unionised?

Trade Unions and Anarchism

We believe that anarchists need to organise within the existing trade unions to fight for the daily demands of the working class, whilst winning as many people as possible to our politics. By demonstrating both the beauty and usefulness of liberty, equality, and solidarity in the course of our day-to-day struggles, we can convince workers these are also values which are worth building an entire society on.

We endorse a rank-and-file strategy of building workers' power at the base of the unions. Anarchists should be members of their union and must strive to be the best union activists within our workplaces. Where there are workplaces without unions, we have to build the unions.



Industrial action compared to wages share. WDL = working days lost.

Source: Our unions in crisis: how did it come to this? (Bramble, 2018)

Where there are un-unionised workplaces, we must organise workers into the union. Where there are unionised but pacified workplaces, we must inflame the base to build worker-led campaigns against the bosses.

Through the process of running campaigns from the base of the unions, anarchists will inevitably build up social relationships with their fellow union members. These relationships are the basis of rank-and-file networks of militant workers. Anarchists should embrace these networks and use them to build a rank-and-file movement that is independent of the union bureaucracy and able to fight against it when necessary.

A rank-and-file movement should centre itself on three key demands: strike action, union democracy, and working-class unity. Strikes are not only the most effective weapon union members have to win the reforms they desire, but they also draw attention to the power of a united working class. As workers withdraw their labour and disrupt production, they begin to realise that they are the ones that make society run, not the bosses. And as workers begin to organise democratically within the union, they also begin to imagine how society as a whole may be run democratically by workers, not the ruling class. A militant and democratically run union is therefore one of the best tools for pushing workers towards anarchist ideas.

Additionally, worker-led strikes and democratic structures within the union pull power away from the bureaucracy and put it back in the hands of the rank and file. Union officials can only defend their position as negotiators to the bosses if they are able to call strikes on and off at their will. If instead workers organise to strike on their own, the position of the officials is seriously undermined, as they can no longer act as the sole mediators between the workers and the bosses.

Democratic structures also chip away at the power of the bureaucracy by forcing the officials to be accountable to the rank and file, strengthening the power of the latter.

Discuss

Should rank-and-file networks attempt to work with the officials or should they stand in constant opposition to them?

The Potential for Trade Unions

Workplace struggle is difficult. You can't choose the people to struggle alongside. As a result, activists in Australia who consider themselves anarchists have often put the workplace in the 'too hard' basket and turned to other arenas of struggle, adapting their political theory to suit.

We thoroughly reject this approach. In fact, we place the gruelling work of building the trade unions at the very centre of our strategy. Why? Because capitalism's Achilles' heel is in the workplace.

Ultimately, the ruling class draws its power from control over property and the workplace. So it is in the workplace that the power of capital can be uprooted.

Today, the trade unions are one of the best tools the working class has for pursuing this goal. Organised workers can directly put a stop to harmful work (e.g. the transfer of weapons or environmentally destructive projects). Organised workers can repurpose their work to support social movements.

And given that the government has every interest in maintaining capitalism as a system, an organised working-class movement which can disrupt a national economy is also the most effective force for imposing political demands on the state. Time and time again, workers have organised across industries and walked off the job together to demand that repressive legislation be overturned.

Discuss

How can struggles outside the workplace complement the trade union movement?

From Trade Unionism to Revolution

When workers from multiple unions strike together, or when strikes spontaneously spread from industry to industry, they develop into **mass** or **general strikes**. These strikes, particularly when coordinated with each other, are the most powerful tool the working class has to advance its interests. It is rare for trade union leaders to risk such large and unwieldy challenges to the capitalist system. As such, mass strikes typically unfold organically as a process, driven by the rank and file.

The development of a mass strike wave into a coordinated general strike won't bring about the revolution by itself, but it creates the conditions for social revolution to be possible. Having brought an entire economy to a standstill, workers are faced with the choice of whether to return to normal, or to fundamentally transform society.

By taking control over production, we can begin to collectively self-manage our work in service of human needs, not profit. But the capitalists won't just lay down and accept this. The full power of the state will be directed towards crushing such a revolutionary movement. This forces another choice on the working class: will we defend ourselves by smashing the state? Or will we let the state crush the revolution?

Today, these questions can seem very far off. By the time they become immediately relevant, workers will need to

embrace revolutionary organisations which ensure rank-and-file control over the movement, like shop committees and workers' councils.

But for revolution to be anything more than just a dream, we need to develop class power now. It is with that hope in our hearts—of a strike wave turned revolution—that we commit ourselves today to rebuilding militant and democratic trade unions.

Discuss

How would workers' councils differ from trade unions?