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Outside and Against the Unions

Wildcat

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A communist response to Dave Douglass' text "Refracted
Perspective"

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Introduction

This pamphlet is written in response to the pamphlet “Refracted Perspective” (available from: 121 Bookshop, 121 Railton Road, Brixton, London SE24). As you may have guessed, this is mostly a flimsy excuse to make a general critique of the trade unions — something we in Wildcat haven’t done for quite a while. It focuses on the situation in Britain in recent years, particularly the 1984–85 miners’ strike. This is not because of some nationalistic obsession with what goes on in these islands but because we want to make our analysis as concrete as possible — this means writing about things we know from reliable sources or were actually involved in. We also want to refute Mr. Douglass’ arguments as thoroughly as possible so we can’t avoid talking about particular things done by the NUM.

A detailed article on the origins of modern trade unionism in Britain, focusing on the crucial year of 1842 when the Miners’ Federation was founded, can be found in Wildcat No. 16.

In the British Isles and North America at the present time (late 1992) the trade union question may seem a bit irrelevant given the low level of workplace class struggle. Since 1979 membership of TUC-affiliated unions in Britain has declined from 12 million to 8 million. We can be sure, though, that once workplace struggle starts to pick up again trade unionism will once again rear its ugly head and wherever workers are struggling as **workers**, be it Germany, South Africa or South Korea, the issue is as important as ever.

That Speech

The purpose of Douglass’ speech at the Class War international conference (the text of which was published as “Refracted Perspective”) was quite clear. It was to stifle criticism of trade unionism in and around the anarchist movement. Before getting stuck into some serious criticism of what he said we should point out that he

was not just expressing his opinion but defending his role in society. He is not, as he likes to describe himself, a “Yorkshire miner” but a full-time NUM delegate.

The main way he attacks criticism is by means of the classic Stalinist “amalgam technique”. This means deliberately mixing up two or more very different political positions which you don’t like in order to create confusion and uncritical support for your point of view. For example during the Second World War the Communist Parties referred to “Trotsky-Fascism”.

Similarly, Mr Douglass tries to amalgamate idiotic lefties like the Workers’ Revolutionary Party with people he calls “Situationists” – this is obviously a code word for class struggle militants who are against the unions from a communist point of view. I assume he calls us Situationists because he wants to give the impression we’re a bunch of misfit art students. This is not what the Situationists were but its a popular stereotype of their **followers**, which has some truth in it.

The amalgam technique at its crudest is shown when he claims that the Socialist Workers’ Party are “venomously anti-union”. Since when? The SWP don’t just **support** unions, often it’s SWupPies who keep union branches going. The same goes for his “The Leninist with his [sic] vision of the trade union as an obstacle to the struggle...” comment. Most Leninists stare at you in amazement if you suggest that the unions are anti-working class. Try it sometime. You might even say that “The Leninist intellectuals of and by themselves can only achieve a trade union consciousness”.

To be fair though, a lot of what he says about lefties and the 1984–85 miners’ strike is true. For example, the SWP believes that the only thing wrong with the mass picket at the Orgreave depot in S. Yorkshire was that it wasn’t big enough. This view is still supported by SWupPies to this very day. His description of some icepick head selling “Workers’ Power” in the middle of a riot is both amusing and familiar.

Glossary of British Trade Unions mentioned above:

COHSE: Confederation of Health Service Employees

workers disorganised: hospital ancillary workers, some nurses

EETPU: Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union

workers disorganised: electricians, printers, building workers

NALGO: National and Local Government Officers Association

workers disorganised: Local govt. office employees

NUM: National Union of Mine Workers

workers disorganised: miners

NUPE: National Union of Public Employees

workers disorganised: hospital ancillary, some nurses

RCN: Royal College of Nurses

workers disorganised: nurses

TGWU(T&G): Transport and General Workers’ Union

workers disorganised: transport/doctors but mostly general unskilled

UCATT: Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians

workers disorganised: building workers

in unions despite the high level of union control over hiring. From around the world we can think of far more dramatic examples: of mass strikes which have had nothing to do with union organisation at all – from the 10 million workers who went on strike in May '68 in France completely against the wishes of the 'Communist' Party controlled unions (to which most of them belonged) to the Iranian oil workers on strike in 1979 who stayed out despite being offered pay rises of hundreds of percent (they wanted to bring down the Shah's regime not just win a pay rise!).

But What's the Alternative...?

This is the question lefties and trade unionist always ask of us weirdoes who are for workers' struggles but against the unions. The short answer is: we're not proposing an "alternative to the unions". If you want to negotiate the rate of exploitation and reinforce working class corporatism the unions are an excellent way of doing it. Just like the cops, union hacks are doing a difficult job and doing it very well under the circumstances. That's why we hate them.

A more relevant question is: "How should we organise in workplaces to fight for our immediate needs and undermine capitalism?". The short answer to this is: the same way we organise anywhere else. We are not interested in representing anybody but in building up groups and networks of activists who want to escalate the class war by whatever means are necessary. The links we develop between class struggle militants **now** will be useful when mass struggles do break out, in terms of spreading and coordinating struggles, circulating information, seizing resources and so on. It should be clear from what we've said so far that this process can only take place **outside and against the unions**. How many more times do union officials have to promise to grass up workers involved in sabotage to the police before this becomes obvious to every class struggle militant?

Anarcho-Leninism

Dave Douglass attacks the lefties for arrogantly telling the workers what to do and for seeing workers' struggles as just a means of spreading their politics. But what he's really slagging them off for is for being too honest – they **openly** try to push their ideology and present themselves as leaders. Dave Douglass would like to see Class War do it more subtly. That his perspective is not much different from the Leninists is shown by his attitude toward Orgreave. He gives a really good account of what's wrong with trench warfare against pigs on a terrain they have chosen. BUT he publicly supported it (and therefore encouraged participation in this defeat at the hands of the pigs). This is not much different from those lefties who encourage workers to do things that they know are a load of crap – like voting Labour and calling on the TUC to call a general strike.

No doubt those of us who said at the time that Orgreave was a waste of time were just "vanguards" who were "telling ordinary workers what to do".

His attitude is further revealed in the last paragraph of his Really Fucked Perspective when he defends the classic Leninist separation between the masses and the Party – "THEY ARE NOT WAITING FOR US". Who are "THEY"? Who are "US"? "We should assist them in the way THEY wish to be assisted" – This is patronising drivel. What if "THEY" want us to help "them" lobby the Labour Party conference? We would tell them this was a stupid thing to do. If this makes us "vanguardists" then, Yes, it's a fair cop, guv.

Why should one section of the working class put itself "at the disposal" of another? If our comrades in struggle makes mistakes we have to criticise them and sometimes even physically stop them from doing what they want to do. The reason for this is simple: if they fuck up it fucks up things for all of us. There can be no question of "self-determination" for any section of the class: we're all in this

together. If this approach means we don't sell as many papers as we'd like, that's too bad.

The Unions

What Douglass doesn't talk about at all in his reminiscences of the 1984–85 Great Strike is the antagonism that existed between the union apparatus and the unofficial actions of the miners and others in the mining communities which he thinks were just extensions of the unions.

Let's start with an example from before the strike. In mid-1983 Arthur Scargill, NUM President, was about to meet then Coal Board Chairman Derek Ezra in Pontypridd. Some Welsh miners on wildcat strike against pit closures occupied the regional NCB office. Scargill came along in person to order an end to the occupation. Later in the day, though, he did maintain his reputation as a militant by "storming out" of the meeting with Ezra, revealing the Board's hit-list of threatened pits.

Obvious examples from the strike were:

1. Anyone seriously involved in the miners' strike who didn't live in a mining area very quickly worked out (sometimes from bitter experience) that the only way to get money to where it was needed was to give it directly to the strikers and their families. Money given to the union bureaucrats generally never reached strikers at all and certainly didn't reach those known to be trouble makers.
2. The union threatened to discipline and fire miners who threw bricks at the police at Gascoigne Wood.
3. Throughout the strike McGahey and his cronies issued orders forbidding mass pickets in Scotland.

Since its formation on January 1 1945 the NUM (just like its predecessor the Miners' Federation) has always played an indispensable role in managing capitalist exploitation. After nationalisation in 1947 the National Executive of the NUM pledged itself to "do everything possible to promote and maintain a spirit of self-discipline ... and a readiness to carry out all reasonable orders given by management". In this period there were numerous wildcat strikes opposed by the NUM. When, seven months after nationalisation, a strike which began at Grimethorpe spread to 38 pits the Yorkshire Area General Secretary said that the men must choose "between industrial democracy and anarchy". Another union bureaucrat, Will Lawther, said that the NCB should prosecute the strikers "even if there are 50,000 or 100,000 of them".

A major factor in miners' militancy is that mining is about the only industry left (just about) where workers still live in a community which exists almost entirely to serve that industry. This means that links of solidarity are forged not just at work but in the street and the Miners' Welfare Club as well. The involvement of the union in the community means that it is much more a part of daily life than elsewhere. This makes it much harder for miners to even think about acting independently of the union. Contrast this with the situation for most workers, where "the union" consists of a membership card, cheap insurance deals and a group of hacks who attend an inquisitorial branch meeting every month.

This makes it easier for the NUM leaders to put across the classic lie that "we can't fight without our union". That this is a lie is shown by the history of workers' struggles. As we've seen, many of the important strikes in the coal industry have been unofficial, or at least started off that way. An even better example is the dockers in Britain before "decasualisation" (casual labourers being given permanent jobs) in 1967 who were a notoriously stropky group of workers. After World War II the T&G (the main union on the docks) didn't make any strike official until 1961 despite over a dozen major stoppages. In the mid-60's a third of Liverpool dockers weren't even

The NUM

It's true that during the 1984–85 strike the behaviour of the NUM posed real problems for revolutionaries. It didn't **seem** to fit preconceived notions of how unions are supposed to behave. Outside one or two traditional industries (what's left of mining, what's left of craft unionism in the print industry ...) the working class experience of unions in Britain is pretty straightforward. They almost always oppose **any** strike until they realise they can stop it or it's been balloted to death. The anti-strike (so-called "anti-union") legislation passed under the Thatcher governments has made them sabotage workers' struggles even more blatantly than they used to. In short, The NUM is not the T&G. It is a radical, left wing union. The main reason for this is simple — the existence of a militant rank and file. An area official in the NUM who tried to behave like his counterpart in NUPE or NALGO would simply lose control. This doesn't in any way alter the fundamental nature of the NUM.

The militancy of the miners has been a real obstruction to capital accumulation — a blockage which could only be removed by closing the pits. Miners' militancy goes back a long way. In the 1930's the number of days "lost" (to the bosses) in strikes by miners equalled the number lost in the whole of the rest of British industry. After nationalisation in 1947 they were still accounting for a third of the days lost. It has not been an unbroken tradition though. Throughout the sixties hundreds of pits were closed and many miners left the industry. In other words, full employment **at first** enabled the economy to be peacefully restructured; mining was no exception, by 1970 the workforce was 47% of what it was in 1960. But full employment and the central importance of coal mining in providing energy for a still-expanding economy created the conditions for a massive upswing in militancy in the '60's and early '70's. The example of the miners undoubtedly inspired many millions of workers to confront the bosses.

4. At the beginning of 1985 the Yorkshire Area NUM took its minibuses away from the Fitzwilliam miners to stop them indulging in aggressive flying picketing.
5. In March 1984 in Ollerton, Notts. a picket was killed by a scab lorry. Scargill stood on top of a car and called for two minutes silence in order to stop the strikers from taking revenge against the cops and scabs.

I could go on...

It should be obvious from these examples that his metaphor about the workers driving the union bus as far as it will go is rather misleading. It's not just a case of the bureaucrats applying the breaks — more a case of them turning the bus around and using it to run over the workers!

In fact when he's writing about "the union" he conveniently forgets (most of the time) that there is a union apparatus at all. He talks as if the union was just a collection of autonomous union branches. This makes it much easier for him to repeat the classic lie of every left-wing union hack — "It's your union, you can do what you like with it. It's a democratic organisation and if you've got enough support from the membership you can give it any policies you want".

The lie that the union is its members is continually exposed in practice. The NUM is no exception. The 1977 productivity deal initiated by Tony Benn, which did so much to divide miners between regions, was forced through by the NUM executive despite a National Ballot rejecting it. In 1983 NUM leaders ignored an 80% strike vote in South Wales. In April 1984 the leaders of Lancashire NUM held an area delegate meeting to try to find a way to send the Lancs. miners back to work. Thirty of the miners who had been lobbying the meeting organised an occupation of the NUM headquarters in Bolton. They wanted to prevent further meetings, saying "you don't need a meeting to run the strike -only to call it off".

What Are Unions?

Dave Douglass would have us believe that unions are workers' self defence organisations. This is the traditional lefty view which you can read in every Trot paper ever written. It's also believed by millions of workers but not by us.

If unions don't defend workers' interests (even badly), what do they do? The answer is that they negotiate with the bosses. They negotiate the rate of exploitation.

We're not taking a moralistic "Death before negotiation" stance here. As long as wage labour exists workers will be forced to negotiate with employees from time to time, particularly when struggles are defeated. Most workers negotiate with their bosses individually in one way or another ("I'll let you go home early if you get this finished").

Negotiations, though, always involve an agreement to play by the rules of the game, for example by agreeing to honour productivity deals. It is a form of class collaboration. As the institutionalisation of the negotiating process unions must inevitably hold back workers' struggles. It is no surprise that unions have almost always condemned forms of struggle which are difficult to negotiate, such as theft and sabotage. This is **not** a recent phenomenon. In 1889 Tom Mann, the famous leader of the London based Dockers' Union, signed several appeals for the men to work more enthusiastically. They were trying to force the bosses to increase manning levels and were making wide-spread use of "ca'canny" (going slow). In 1892 Tom Mann even suggested to the Royal Commission on Labour (of which he was a member) that piece rates be brought in!

Negotiation is not just an economic activity, it is a political one as well. Negotiating with the bosses on behalf of workers is a form of political representation. Representing people is **not** about fighting for their interests. It is about maintaining the loyalty of a passive "constituency". This can clearly be seen from union recruitment policy which is to try to sell membership to anyone who will pay the

Closely related to these ideas is the commonly held view that there are "real unions" (such as UCATT and NUPE) and "scab unions" (such as EETPU and RCN) and that it's better to be in a real union than a scab union. This hardly stands up to the most superficial historical investigation. Every union has blatantly encouraged scabbing at some stage in its history. In the construction industry in Britain, for example, it's certainly true that EETPU members have crossed UCATT picket lines but it's also true that UCATT members have crossed EETPU picket lines — sometimes justified on the grounds that EETPU is a scab union so it's OK to scab on them!

Base Unionism

The particular brand of rank and file unionism put forward by DD isn't the usual Trot variety. He doesn't call on workers to lobby the union leaders. He even criticises Arthur Scargill at one point (a serious offence in the eyes of most lefties and militant miners!).

His view is that workers involved in subversive actions (hit squads, surprise pickets, organisation involving the whole of the working class not just miners ...) should still be encouraged to see themselves as part of the union and still try to act within the framework of the union. They should still be loyal to it even if they have their disagreements. So when Heathfield, the leader of the Yorkshire NUM, condemns them for defending themselves against the police, or the area NUM takes away the branch minibus, they should still respect the authority of these people.

Like many anarchists, DD has a lot of respect for "ordinary people". He wants them to stay ordinary, that is: submissive to capital. At one stage he asks "which has more loyalty FROM the class"? Unions or obscure lefty groups? The Royal Family have more loyalty than either.

Bureaucracy

Many people say that the trouble with the unions is that they are too hierarchical and bureaucratic. This misses the point. Unions don't serve the interests of capital because they are bureaucratic. They are bureaucratic because they serve the interests of capital. The very process of negotiation fosters specialists in the sale of labour power. It inevitably involves a small team of active negotiators and a lot of workers hanging around waiting for the result. The negotiators and bosses need to develop personal understandings, to trust each other. Usually this is all done by union bureaucrats but even where strikers elect their own representatives, these almost immediately start to fight the control and revocability exercised over them. They will want to assume the role of leaders on a basis of equality with their opposite numbers in negotiation, and will be supported by strikers themselves who will want to be led by people who reassure them that everything is going well. When a deal is finally done there will no doubt be those who cry "sell out!", but it is the workers who have sold themselves out by accepting the logic of negotiations.

Some people say that unions are infected with reactionary ideas, such as parliamentarism and statism (affiliation to the Labour Party in Britain for example). This also misses the point. It should come as no surprise that those who run capitalist institutions usually have shamelessly pro-capitalist ideas. But even where they don't the fact of running a union imposes its own logic. In the years before the First World War the syndicalist Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) in France had passed numerous motions at its congresses calling for a general strike in the event of war. It had even distributed handbooks informing its members of detailed practical steps to be taken to sabotage the war effort. But when war came the CGT rushed to join Poincare's union sacree. This was a popular front in support of the war.

membership dues, no matter how reactionary they may be, as long as they work in the right trade/industry. It should be obvious that no working class organisation could ever operate this way.

It is no coincidence that the democratic ideology is promoted more vigorously in the unions than anywhere else in society. Workers' own struggles, though, almost always begin with militant action by a minority. They make nonsense in practice of "majoritarianism" (the idea that nothing should take place unless a majority agrees) and the separation between decision-making and action that is enshrined in democracy. Democracy, with its fetish for the airing of opinions, and the moment of decision as a preliminary to acting, offers nothing to workers. It offers everything to those who would divert, institutionalise or block their struggles, whether it's the Right with their secret ballots or the Left with their delegate conferences and mass participatory democracy.

Corporatism

Corporatism is the identification of workers with their workplace or industry. It is not just an idea. It is a material force resulting from the absence of solidarity between workers in different sectors and between workplaces and other areas of society (particularly where proletarians live). Unions are **the** corporatist organisation *par excellence*. The attachment of the NUM to the "Plan for Coal" was just one expression of this.

Admittedly corporatism can't simply be blamed on the unions. When workers on a picket line express suspicion toward "outsiders" who come to show support it's not just because they believe in "the union" (although it's usually the shop steward who's the first to ask "What union are you in, then?") Nor, unfortunately, is it just because "they don't want to be told what to do by middle-class students" as many apologists for working class conservatism would have us believe.

Any workplace struggle can fall into the trap of corporatism as long as it remains just a workplace struggle. Against the work-erist lefties who claim that workers only have power at the point of production we would say that it is territorially based struggles which have the greatest subversive potential. This was undoubtedly one of the strengths of the anti-poll tax movement (despite the obvious problem of “localism” – usually involving sentimental notions about “our local community”). In the miners’ strike too the high points were when the whole of the working class in a particular area became involved – e.g. defence of pit villages against the police. “Territory” includes workplaces and it is often strategically very important to disrupt, seize and/or destroy them. Workplace occupations, for example, are an important opportunity for undermining the role of the workplace as an “enterprise” separate from the rest of society – by inviting other proletarians into the site besides those who normally work there, by reappropriating resources such as printing and communications, by giving away useful products stored at the site... Then there’s straightforward destruction – denying it to the enemy! The miners who responded to coal-faces collapsing during the Great Strike by saying “to hell with the pits!” were expressing a real break with NUM corporatism.

Degenerates

An organisation can start off defending workers’ interests and degenerate into a trade union. That is, it can start off organising and extending the struggle and end up negotiating it away. This has often been the fate of independent strike committees in France, Italy and Spain (in Britain they usually just end up integrated into the official unions).

The question of when to stop participating in such a committee and start denouncing it is always a tricky one but with officially recognised trade unions there is no such ambiguity.

Certainly unions have to be flexible to stay in business. Under rank and file pressure they will often adopt a militant stance and to some extent will even allow workers to use the local union apparatus to conduct struggles – e.g. branch meetings, strike funds, picket caravans. Trying to “take over” the apparatus, though, is a dead end. Even on an organisational level a union is simply not designed for advancing workers’ struggles. The most basic rules of branch procedure are designed to hinder them. In mid 1984 some striking miners from South Kirkby tried to organise a team of miners who could not easily go out picketing due to stringent bail conditions. They were to go out knocking on doors trying to convince passive strikers to become active pickets. They started doing it anyway but tried putting a resolution to the NUM branch. It was rejected by the branch committee. It could still go through as correspondence so they tried packing the meeting with their supporters. The branch committee ruled it out of order. One of the strikers concluded “I think that shows you we’ve got to know the rule book...”. This is rubbish. What it shows is the need to throw the rule book out the window and the authority of the branch committee with it.

Unions are certainly not designed for spreading strikes outside the industry or sector where they start. Quite the opposite. On many miners’ picket lines non-NUM members were regularly allowed to cross and in Lancashire there was no attempt to close down opencast pits in the area – these were not owned by the NCB and their workers were in the T&G not the NUM.

During the Great Strike NUM leaders (particularly Scargill) certainly made appeals to support from other groups of workers but this never went beyond meetings with other union leaders and televised public speeches. To have appealed directly to other workers would have breached the democratic etiquette between unions – one set of “laws” that the oh-so-radical Mr. Scargill has no intention of flouting.