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Perhaps the most well-known characteristic of the Socialist Workers Party within the British labour movement has been its advocacy of a national rank-and-file movement. Indeed, our reformist critics have often belaboured us for having our own special deviation, 'rank and filism'. We have, rightly, been proud of this label, because it reflects our basic orientation on the self-activity of the working class, on socialism from below, rather than the socialism from above of the Labour MPs and trade union leaders. At the same time, in developing our rank-and-file strategy we have set ourselves within a tradition, that of the Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement of the First World War, and the ensuing attempt by the early Communist Party to build a National Minority Movement within the trade unions.

The time has come to re-examine this rank-and-file strategy. It rested upon certain assumptions about the strength of existing rank-and-file organizations that no longer hold. Once we abandon these assumptions, as we must, the strategy of building a national rank-and-file movement is no longer appropriate, and the attempt to stick with it in defiance of reality is likely to lead to serious political mistakes. As we shall see, the SWP did

commit such mistakes in the late 1970s, before we realized that the objective situation had radically changed since the early 1970s when we adopted the rank-and-file strategy. [1] Really all this article proposes is that we should draw the logical consequences for our trade-union work of our reappraisal of the balance of class forces in Britain today.

Before going on to the substance of my argument I should make a couple of things clear. First, it may seem that some of this article is too concerned with the recent history of the SWP. Isn't this out of proportion with the importance of its object? I think not. Ours has been the only serious attempt since the 1920s to build a national rank-and-file movement in Britain (perhaps in the world). There are important lessons to be drawn from its failure. One test of revolutionaries is their ability to learn from their mistakes. Secondly, if some of my criticisms of what the SWP has done seem excessively harsh, I do not exempt myself from responsibility for the decisions taken, having supported most of them, and participated in making some of them.

Trade unionism and rank-and-file organization

Building a national rank-and-file movement in the trade unions is by no means essential to revolutionary strategy. The Bolsheviks got by quite happily without one. What is essential can be stated very briefly as four propositions. First, the emancipation of the working class can only be the act of the working class. Second, this emancipation can occur only through socialist revolution, in which the working class destroys the capitalist state, replacing it with one of their own based on workers' councils. Third, the unevenness of workers' consciousness means that a revolutionary party is needed to give the struggle for power a coherence and direction it would otherwise lack. Fourth, the consciousness of the masses can be

transformed only in the course of the class struggle, and therefore the party must be built through its participation in the life and day-to-day battles of the proletariat. Precisely how these general propositions are translated into the details of revolutionary activity depends on the concrete circumstances of this activity – the nature and level of development of the social formation, the international context, the internal balance of class forces, the specific form of state, the scope for legal activity, the size of the revolutionary organization and so on. One major source of error among revolutionaries lies in transferring tactics appropriate to one situation to another, quite different environment, as is illustrated by the various sects which use Lenin's (entirely correct) criticisms of 'economism' in quasi-absolutist tsarist Russia as a justification for ignoring the trade unions in contemporary Britain.

A strategy of building a national rank-and-file movement within the trade unions is only a means of widening support for revolutionary politics in the context of bourgeois democracy. By 'bourgeois democracy' I mean, as well as the institutions of universal suffrage, regular elections, and the associated rights of free speech, association, etc., the existence of a mass, legal trade union movement. Trade unionism provides the political forms of bourgeois democracy with their economic and social substance, as I shall try to show.

The very nature of capitalist production, Marx argues, leads to the progressive centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour. Because this takes place within the framework of exploitative relations of production it encourages the collective organization of workers in order to combat their exploitation. There thus 'grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'. [2] Trade unions are a product of this revolt: based on the collective organization of the working class, they act, in Marx's words as 'centres of resistance against the

encroachments of capital'. [3] However, they do so within the framework of capitalist relations of production. They seek, for example, higher wages, rather than striving for the abolition of the wage system itself, even though the latter is essential to the extraction of surplus value from workers. The trade union struggle, in other words, is concerned with improving the terms on which labour power is exploited, not with ending that exploitation. None of this is intended to devalue the heroism and self-sacrifice which built the trade unions, and which is displayed in every strike. It is merely to say that trade unions are profoundly contradictory social forms, since they combat capitalist exploitation within the terms set by capitalism, as Marx put it, 'fighting with effects, but not with the causes of these effects'. [4] It follows that trade unions flourish in conditions where there is a sharp separation between economic and political struggles, so that fights for higher wages do not directly challenge the class domination of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, the development of trade unions encourages this separation, which achieves its clearest expression with the attainment of bourgeois democracy. This is not simply because, historically, the labour movement has been the most determined advocate of bourgeois democratic demands such as universal suffrage. Parliamentary democracy, by treating everyone as citizens with equal rights irrespective of the real differences between their wealth and power, serves to insulate working-class organization and struggle from political questions. The challenge of the organised working class is defused by treating the class struggle as a non-political, economic and social issue that can be resolved by negotiation and administrative reforms rather than through the revolutionary transformation of society. Trade unions, bourgeois democracy, and the separation of economic and political struggles thus mutually reinforce each other.

This pattern depends on two very important conditions. First, the capitalist economy must be sufficiently prosperous to provide scope for increases in working class living standards. If

the trade-union struggle is unable to deliver higher real wages, then support for attempts to improve workers' conditions within the limits of capitalism will be undermined. That is why bourgeois democracy tends to flourish only in imperialist countries. Secondly, a social layer must exist in the workers' movement with an interest in confining the class struggle to the improvement of the proletariat's position within the capitalist relations of production. Already at the turn of the century non-marxist commentators observed the formation of a trade union bureaucracy within two very different working-class movements. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, writing in 1894, noted how the previous half century had seen important changes within the predominantly craft unions in Britain: 'during these years we watch a shifting of the leadership in the trade union world from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officers expressly chosen out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity'. [5] Some fifteen years later, Robert Michels observed the emergence of a conservative layer of full-time officials within the avowedly Marxist German Social Democratic Party and its affiliated trade unions. [6]

The 1920s saw the consolidation of the trade union bureaucracy in Britain, a process promoted by the rapid expansion of union membership (2.6 million in 1910, 8.3 million in 1920), the series of amalgamations which led to the formation of such giant general unions as the TGWU and the NUGMW, and the progress of national collective bargaining as opposed to the pattern of district settlements which had prevailed before 1914. [7] The commitment of the TUC General Council to class collaboration was demonstrated by the Mond-Turner talks which followed the defeat of the General Strike in 1926, although they had to wait till 1940, and the inclusion of Ernest Bevin as Minister of Labour and National Service in the Churchill coalition for the incorporation of the trade union bureaucracy into the state machine to be formalized. The pattern set in the

war years, of close consultation between the government of the day, whether Tory or Labour, and of the trade union leaders prevailed until the election of May 1979, and may even survive that blow to class collaboration. [8]

The formation of a conservative labour bureaucracy, however much it may be encouraged by developments of the sort I have just described, is inherent in the very nature of trade unionism. Confining the class struggle to the improvement of workers' material conditions within the limits of capitalism presumes that the interests of capital and labour can be reconciled – that higher wages can be won without undermining profitability. The compromises which are forced on workers when the balance of forces is not in their favour are inevitable so long as the trade union struggle is concerned to combat the effects of capitalist exploitation, rather than to eradicate it. Someone has to negotiate those compromises. A division of labour naturally and spontaneously emerges between the mass of workers and their representatives, whose time is increasingly spent in bargaining with employers. Some of these representatives sooner or later will become full-time workers for the union, paid out of members' subscriptions. The effect, whatever the political beliefs of the official, is to isolate him from those he represents. He is removed from the discipline of the shop floor, from its dirt and dangers, from the immediate conflicts with foreman and manager, from the fellowship of his workmates, to the very different environment of an office. Even if he is not paid more than his members, his earnings no longer depend on the ups and downs of capitalist production – they no longer involve working overtime, nor are they vulnerable to short-time or lay-offs. If a plant is closed, the official who negotiates the redundancies will not get the sack. Constantly closeted with management, he comes to see negotiation, compromise, the reconciliation of capital and labour as the very stuff of trade unionism. Struggle appears as a disruption of the bargaining process, a nuisance and an inconvenience, which may threaten the accumulated funds of

the union. Organization becomes an end in itself, threatening even the limited goal of improving the terms on which the worker is exploited.

Rosa Luxemburg well described the political effects of 'the introduction of a regular trade union officialdom' in Germany after 1890:

> *The specialization of professional activity as trade union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook. Both, however, express themselves in a whole series of tendencies which may be fateful in the highest degree for the future of the trade-union movement. There is first of all the overvaluation of the organization, which from being a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated. From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace which shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade unions, and the overvaluation of the trade union method of struggle, its prospects and its successes.*

Luxemburg goes on to show how the German trade union leaders greatly overstated the gains they had won, and sought to replace Marxism with 'a theory which would open up an illimitable vista of economic progress to the trade union struggle within the capitalist system.' She also noted how this was accompanied by 'a revolution in the relations of leaders and rank and file', so that 'the initiative and power of making decisions... devolve upon trade union specialists ... and the more passive virtue of discipline upon the mass of members,' finally, the trade union leaders began to assert their political independence of the SPD, from which the unions had sprung in the first place. [9]

In Britain, of course, it was the trade unions who set up the Labour Party, rather than vice versa. But the basic process was the same in all the advanced capitalist countries – the emergence of a distinctive social layer of full-time officials with interests at variance with those of the trade-union rank and file, committed

to the improvement of workers' conditions within the limits of capitalist relations of production, and reluctant to use even the weapons of the economic class struggle for fear of disrupting their relations with the employers, and endangering the stability and resources of their organizations. The close relationship between this layer and reformist politics was already noted by Luxemburg and Michels at the turn of the nineteenth century [10] and has become even clearer in the ensuing 75 years, from the alacrity with which European trade union leaders supported a 'class truce' with the employers during the First World War, to the decisive role played by the 'left' on the TUC General Council, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, in strangling the wave of rank-and-file militancy which gripped Britain after the fall of the Heath government on February 1974.

It is the existence of this reformist bureaucracy that gives rise to rank-and-file organizations. The distance of trade-union officials from their members – their distinctive interests as a layer committed to the pursuit of class compromise – inevitably brings them into conflict with the mass of trade unionists. The bureaucrats' betrayals of specific struggles make the rank and file aware of the conflict of interests between themselves and their 'representatives', and therefore of the need for forms of organization which are more responsive to their needs and wishes. Moreover, the centralized structure of trade union officialdom, its isolation from the shop-floor, encourages the growth of structures able to react immediately to the everyday conflicts in the workplace. Situations where a significant portion of workers' earnings are fixed by local plant or shop bargaining will also encourage the emergence of these structures.

Rank-and-file organizations, then, are bodies of workplace delegates subject to direct election and recall by the workers they represent. Both their workplace basis, and the direct control of delegates by the rank and file distinguish these forms of organization from official trade union structures. The latter are very often organized on geographical rather than workplace

lines, and are in any case highly centralized; the officials, even where they are elected, often hold office for life. Rank-and-file organizations, on the other hand, arise directly and spontaneously from the daily struggle on the shop-floor, and often in conflict with the trade union officials. Usually no-one plans their formation in advance.

The best example that we have of rank-and-file organizations in Britain are the shop stewards. James Hinton shows how they first emerged in the engineering industry in 1892 as agents of the District Committees of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), doing jobs like dues collecting and signing on new members. However,

> shop stewards did not confine themselves to supplying information and undertaking organizational work on behalf of the District Committees. The tradition of workshop delegates serving on deputations to their employers continued, and the workshop deputation was a recognized part of the collective bargaining procedures of the industry [after the imposition of national negotiations by the engineering employers] in 1898. To an increasing extent before 1914 the ad hoc workshop deputation crystallized into a shop stewards' committee engaged in regular negotiations. This was especially so where piece work was practised since prices, negotiated job by job, could not be brought under any centralized procedure. [11]

The significance of rank-and-file organizations lies ultimately in the fact that they can in certain circumstances become organs of workers' power. The Bolsheviks stressed that Soviets, workers' councils, develop out of the struggle at the point of production around partial economic demands. The St Petersburg soviet emerged in 1905 out of a strike by typesetters who wanted to be paid for punctuation marks. Lenin wrote of the Soviets after 1917: 'That new apparatus is not anybody's invention. It grows out of the proletarian class struggle as that struggle becomes more widespread and intense. That new apparatus of state power, the new type of state power, is *Soviet Power*.' [12] Trotsky made the same point more explicitly:

> *The soviet appears most often and primarily in connection with strike struggles that have the perspective of revolutionary development, but are in the given moment limited merely to economic demands... Soviets [are] that broad and flexible organizational form that is accessible to the masses who have just awakened at the very first stage of their revolutionary upsurge; and which is capable of uniting the working class in its entirety, independent of the size of that section which, in the given phase, has already matured to the point of understanding the task of the seizure of power.* [13]

It was, however, Gramsci who saw that rank-and-file organizations could become organs of workers' power. He did so on the basis of the experience of Italy between 1918 and 1920, the *biennio rosso*, when the metal workers of Turin turned their version of shop stewards' committees, the internal commissions, from bodies devoted to defending the privileged status of skilled craftsmen into committees of factory delegates uniting skilled and unskilled workers alike that increasingly sought to assert their control over production.

Gramsci argued that 'the socialist state exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class.' More specifically,

> *... the internal commissions are organs of workers' democracy which must be freed from the limitations imposed upon them by the entrepreneurs and infused with new life and energy. Today the internal commissions limit the power of the capitalist in the factory and perform functions of arbitration and discipline. Tomorrow, developed and enriched, they must be organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration.* [14]

However, if, as Gramsci argued, rank-and-file organizations may become organs of workers' power, they are in no sense a necessary condition of the formation of Soviets. Rank-and-file organizations, bodies of workplace delegates operating independently of and in conflict with the trade union bureaucracy, are only likely to emerge in the bourgeois

democracies of advanced capitalism, where a legal and bureaucratized labour movement exists. In conditions of illegality, even the economic class struggle becomes highly politicized, and trade unions are both much more unstable, and more responsive to rank-and-file pressures (which is not to say that tendencies to bureaucratization do not exist even here, as the recent experience of the independent trade unions in South Africa suggests). The Bolsheviks did not have a rank-and-file strategy because there were no rank-and-file organizations for them to relate to. Instead, they carried out elementary trade union activity, and socialist agitation behind such legal fronts as the social insurance funds. [15]

Moreover, even in bourgeois democracies where mass trade unions controlled by a conservative bureaucracy flourish, it has only been under certain, very specific conditions that revolutionaries have pursued a rank-and-file strategy. The politics of rank-and-file organizations is usually reformist and sectionalist – inevitably so, since they seek to win material improvements for particular groups of workers within the framework of capitalism. It is only in periods of economic and social crisis, when the employers and the state are forced to attack these organizations, that workers involved in them are led to generalize, and to think in class rather than sectional terms. It is in such circumstances that there emerge rank-and-file *movements*, concerned to fight on the general class front, and to link together workers in different localities and industries. Such movements are usually led by revolutionaries, because it is only they who can give rank-and-file organizations the necessary political independence, of both the ruling class and the bureaucracy. Let us now consider these points in detail by looking at the first shop stewards' movement, and at the two main attempts to build national rank-and-file movements in Britain, by the Communist Party in the 1920s and the SWP in the 1970s.

The Shop Stewards and the Workers' Committee Movement

As Table 1 suggests, the period 1910–21 saw a sharp escalation of the economic class struggle in Britain. [16]

Table 1
BRITISH STRIKE STATISTICS: ANNUAL AVERAGES 1900–79

	Number of strikes	Workers involved (000s)	Strike-days (000s)
1900–1910	529	240	4,576
1911–13	1,074	1,034	20,908
1914–18	844	632	5,292
1919–21	1,241	2,108	49,053
1922–25	629	503	11,968
1926	323	2,734	162,233
1927–32	379	344	4,740
1933–39	735	295	1,694
1940–44	1,491	499	1,816
1945–54	1,791	545	2,073
1955–64	2,521	1,116	3,889
1965–69	2,380	1,208	3,951
1970	3,906	1,793	10,980

1971	2,228	1,171	13,551
1972	2,497	1,722	23,909
1973	2,873	1,513	7,197
1974	2,922	1,622	14,750
1975	2,282	789	6,012
1976	2,016	670	3,284
1977	2,703	1,155	10,142
1978	2,471	1,003	9,381
1979	2,080	4,583	29,474

Sources: R. Hyman, **Strikes** (London 1977) and **Department of Employment Gazettes**.

Already before the First World War, British capitalism, under severe competitive pressure from such newer industrial powers as Germany and the United States, underwent considerable rationalization. In industries such as mining and engineering this involved a formidable offensive against the gains made by the craft unions in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which stimulated the growth of shop stewards' organization. The result was the 'Labour Unrest' of 1910–1914, when a series of ferocious struggles involving miners, dockers, and railwaymen brought rank-and-file militants into conflict with the employers, the state apparatus, and the trade union bureaucracy.

Some of those involved in these battles were already members of, or were drawn towards, the revolutionary left. [17] The main Marxist organization in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), regarded trade-union work with contempt, and concentrated on making socialist propaganda and standing in elections. Some militants, therefore, were attracted to the

Socialist Labour Party, which combined a highly sectarian version of the SDF's propagandism with the syndicalist belief that socialism could be attained by building industrial unions which would assume control of the economy. Others, embittered by the treachery of the trade union leaders, and alienated by the sterility and dogmatism of the revolutionary sects, denied the need for political organization and leadership, and joined the Industrial Syndicalist Education League, which enjoyed considerable support during the pre-war 'Labour Unrest'. [18] Politics was thus conceived by pre-war Marxists as a set of ideas existing in abstraction from the daily battle against capitalist exploitation. An orientation on the industrial struggle such as that adopted by the syndicalists was seen as involving a rejection of politics. Above all, there was no attempt to connect the mass strikes of 1910–1914, and the rank-and-file organizations they threw up, with the necessary political struggle to overthrow the capitalist state.

This situation began to change only as a result of the First World War and the October revolution. Although there was a sharp fall in strikes during the war (see Table 1), a number of major industrial centres, most notably Glasgow and Sheffield, saw bitter struggles in the engineering industry which gave birth to the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement. The leaders of this first national rank-and-file movement were, in the main, revolutionaries of one variety or another, men like J.T. Murphy and Willie Gallagher who were later to play a leading role in the Communist Party. Their supporters, however, were mostly skilled engineering workers concerned to resist the erosion of craft privilege resulting from the wartime policies of 'dilution' imposed by the government with the support of the trade-union leaders. The largest the strikes led by the SS & WCM, those of May 1917, involving 200,000 engineering workers in 48 towns, were a successful attempt to prevent the extension of dilution to work on private contracts. However, in

early 1918, the attempt by the leaders of the movement to call a national anti-war strike collapsed ignominiously.

Nevertheless, the wartime shop-stewards movement represented an extremely important step forward in two respects. [19] First, the revolutionary stewards developed the theory of independent rank-and-file organization within the unions. Before the war, there had been two attitudes towards the trade unions by those revolutionaries prepared to engage in industrial work. The SLP denounced the existing unions as bankrupt, and advocated the formation of revolutionary industrial unions. The revolutionary syndicalists, on the other hand, believed that the unions were the embryo of a socialist state, and therefore sought to transform them into industrial unions. The practical realities of building the wartime rank-and-file movement led the stewards to reject both 'dual unionism' and 'amalgamation'. Instead of seeking either to reform or replace the existing unions, they concentrated on developing, within the official structure, rank-and-file organizations capable of fighting independently of the bureaucracy. Their models of organization were the Workers' Committees created on the Clyde, in Sheffield and elsewhere to bring together shop-floor representatives from many different unions and industries.

The revolutionary stewards' attitude to the trade union bureaucracy was succinctly expressed in the Clyde Workers Committee's first leaflet, in November 1915:

> We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule of law, we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file.

The historian of the SS & WCM comments:

> Not the suppression of sectionalist and collaborationist trade unionism, but the establishment of a situation of 'dual power' between trade-union officialdom and independently organized

militant sections of the rank-and-file – this was the essence of the wartime practice of the shop stewards' movement. [20]

Secondly, after the October revolution, the leaders of the shop stewards' movement began to see the Workers' Committees as embryonic Soviets. Their paper argued in February 1919 that 'the Soviet Government of Russia sprung from the Workers' Committees, from the unofficial rank-and-file movement of the Russian people. The shop stewards are the first stage in the Soviet development.' [21] Theodore Rothstein, one of the first supporters of the Bolsheviks in Britain, argued that 'we must propagate the idea of the rank-and-file organizations... because they will prove a fit instrument of the Revolution, and because they are, in type, much akin to the Soviets which we are advocating on other grounds. ' [22]

The Shop Stewards and Workers' Control Movement represented, therefore, a significant break with the propagandist and syndicalist traditions of the pre-war revolutionary left, and the beginnings of a serious socialist strategy for work in the trade unions. However, the break was not fully accomplished. As Tony Cliff points out:

> *October was not the only victory for the Soviets, but also a victory for the Bolshevik Party. Alas, the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, including its best leaders, did not grasp the Bolshevik doctrine of the Party. They were far too imbued with syndicalism, whose emphasis was on the spontaneous, economically based organization of the masses, to the exclusion of the political role of the vanguard organised in a party ... The crucial role of the party in generalizing workers' struggle, in overcoming the unevenness in the consciousness of the proletariat, was not at all clear to the shop stewards' leaders.* [23]

The Communist Party and the National Minority Movement

The stewards were not alone in their error. Gramsci, the most brilliant Marxist to have emerged in these years, also believed that the workers could take control of production through factory councils *before* overthrowing the capitalist state. It was not only the defeat of the factory occupations in September 1920 which led Gramsci to grasp the critical role played by the revolutionary party. It required the intervention of the Bolsheviks, through the Communist International, to turn revolutionaries in western Europe towards the construction of mass parties. Thus, Lenin and the Comintern were instrumental in bringing together the various fractions of the British revolutionary left, and the leaders of the SS & WCM to form the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. The Bolsheviks' conception of the party was quite different from the essentially propagandist character of the SDF and the SLP. As the 'Theses on Tactics' adopted by the Comintern in 1921 put it:

> *Communist Parties should not restrict themselves to mere propaganda and agitation. They must form the spearhead of all proletarian mass organizations showing the backward and vacillating masses, by putting forward practical proposals for struggle, by urging on the struggle for all the daily needs of the proletariat, how the struggle should be waged, and thus exposing to the masses the treacherous character of all non-communist parties.* [24]

It took several years to transform the CPGB into a combat organization oriented on struggle. First, the Comintern leadership had to wage an ideological struggle against ultra-left objections to participation in the trade unions, parliamentary elections, and the Labour Party. The most important breakthrough came with the adoption in October 1922 of the *Organization Report* prepared by Palme Dutt, Harry Pollit and Harry Inkpin, which proposed replacing a structure based on geographical branches and a federal executive and with one more suited to intervention in the class struggle, involving factory cells, district committees, and a centralized political leadership. These changes were closely associated with the

adoption of a strategy of building rank-and-file organizations which led to the formation of the National Minority Movement (NMM) in 1924.

Before discussing the CPGB's rank-and-file strategy, we must take some account of the context in which it was formulated and applied. As Table 1 shows, the immediate post-war period saw a sharp rise in the level of the economic class struggle. Both revolutionary and reformist commentators have argued that 1919 was the year in which capitalist power in Britain was most threatened. [25] At the beginning of the year a strike for the 40 hour week by engineers on the Clyde spread to Belfast, Barrow and London. Soldiers and seamen mutinied and the police and railwaymen went on strike. Yet the ruling class, under the skilful and ruthless leadership of Lloyd George, was able to weather the storm. By the time the CP was formed in 1920, the initiative had passed to the employers:

> *From the end of 1920 the depression threw the trade union movement as a whole on to the defensive. A brief post-war boom collapsed suddenly at the end of 1920 and official returns showed 17.8 per cent of insured workers out of work by the summer of 1921. For the remainder of the 1920s the figure rarely fell below 10 per cent; while the crisis of the early 1930s raised the number of unemployed to three million, or 23 per cent. Wage rates were slashed – though this was to some extent offset by falling prices – and working conditions in many industries were under repeated attack. In such circumstances, trade union membership took an almost inevitable tumble: numbers slipped from 8.3 million in 1920 to 5.6 million two years later, and by 1933 reached a low of 3.3 million.* [26]

The struggles of this period were essentially defensive – most notably in the mining industry, culminating in the six-month lockout of 1926, but also in other sectors, for example, the engineering lock-out of 1922, the textile strikes of 1929–33. In most cases, the employers were victorious, and the shift of the balance of class forces in their favour was crystallized by the defeat of the General Strike in May 1926. [27]

The effect of these defeats on rank-and-file organization can be imagined. The SS & WCM, from being a movement which could draw hundreds of thousands of workers into action, dwindled into a rump of revolutionaries, many of whom were soon victimized during the post-war depression and ended up as activists in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In June 1922 the National Administrative Council of the SS & WCM merged with the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), the industrial wing of the Comintern. Later that same year J.T. Murphy described the impact of mass unemployment on shop-floor organization to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern:

> *In England we have had a powerful shop stewards' movement. But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions. The necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist. How can you build factory organizations when you have 1,750,000 workers walking the streets? You cannot build factory organizations in empty and depleted workshops, while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers.* [28]

The postwar SS & WCM was forced to abandon its orientation on rank-and-file organizations, and to concentrate instead on the trade union branch and the trades council. The British Bureau of RILU's first campaign was around the essentially defensive slogan of 'Back to the Unions', an attempt to counter the collapse of trade union membership. Similarly, the shop-floor base of the Minority Movement was comparatively weak: the delegates to its conferences came primarily from branches, district committees, and trades councils rather than from workplaces.

It was in this rather unpromising situation that the National Minority Movement was launched in 1924. It was seen as the application to Britain of the united-front tactics espoused by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. The Communist parties, Lenin and Trotsky argued at this Congress, could only win the support of a majority of the working class through their

involvement in trade-union struggles around partial economic demands. They should seek united fronts with reformist workers in support of these demands, with the objective of proving in practice the superiority of Communist to Social-Democratic politics. As the RILU leader Lozovsky put it to the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922:

> As far as Britain is concerned we see clearly that it would be disastrous if the party were content to organize its forces only within its little party nuclei. The aim here must be to create a more numerous opposition trade union movement. Our aim must be that our communist groups should act as a point of crystallization round which the opposition elements will concentrate. The aim must be to create, to marshal, to integrate the opposition forces, and the Communist Party it will itself grow concurrently with the growth of the opposition. [29]

This policy was to be pursued, not primarily by seeking unity with the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy, but by building rank-and-file organizations – 'minority movements' – capable of fighting independently of the officials. 'It would be a suicidal policy', wrote J.R. Campbell in October 1924, 'for the Communist Party and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on what we have called the official left wing ... the revolutionary workers must never forget that their main activity must be devoted to capturing the masses.' [30] With that in view, the inaugural conference of the NMM in August of that year adopted as one of its aims the construction of Factory and Workshop Committees along the lines of the wartime shop stewards' movement. This strategy did not involve a reversion to pre-war syndicalism. On the contrary, the Sixth Congress of the CPGB (May 1924) insisted on the increasingly political character of the economic class struggle: 'In the actual fight to achieve their immediate demands the workers will be brought up against the whole organised power of capitalism. Therefore, ... the opposition movements can only go forward under the leadership of a powerful Communist Party.' [31]

Historians of the early Communist Party of both Marxist and bourgeois persuasions have argued that once the climax of 1919 had been passed this sort of rank-and-file strategy, whose objective was the creation of a mass revolutionary party, was simply Utopian, given the mass unemployment of the 1920s and the consequent collapse of shop-floor organization and union membership. [32] This argument ignores the revival of working-class combativity which began in 1924 with the miners' success in winning a ten per cent wage increase. Economic recovery in 1923–24 and the consequent tall in unemployment gave workers greater confidence to take on the employers. That the outcome of the postwar confrontations between capital and labour in Britain still lay open in the mid-1920s is shown by both 'Red Friday' in July 1925, when the government and the mine owners withdrew their attempt to cut miners' wages in the face of a threatened general strike, and by the degree of rank-and-file solidarity shown when the General Strike actually came in May 1926. Everything was still to play for that May – the British labour movement had not yet been decisively defeated.

This change in mood was reflected by the emergence on the TUC General Council of an articulate, and verbally very militant left wing – notably Alonzo Swales, A.A. Purcell, and George Hicks –whose revolutionary rhetoric dominated the Trade Union Congresses of 1924 and 1925. The influence of the NMM grew rapidly during this period, especially in engineering and mining. 271 organizations were represented at its first conference in August 1924, 443 a year later, and a peak of 547 in March 1926. The number of trade unionists these delegates claimed to represent rose from 200,000 in 1924 to nearly a million in 1926. The left-wing mood, and Communist influence, led to the participation by the TUC in an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee set up in the spring of 1925. The NMM sought, as Lozovsky had argued, to crystallize the trade-union left around an action programme of concrete demands, notably a £4 minimum wage and a 40 hour week. As it became clear that a

confrontation between the employers, intent on rationalization and wage-cuts in order to restore the competitiveness of British capitalism and fully backed by the state, and the trade unions was inevitable, the NMM advocated an Industrial Alliance embracing the miners, engineers, railwaymen and transport workers operating at both the official and the rank-and-file level. In line with this strategy, the CPGB called a series of Unity of Action Conferences whose aim was to set up local Councils of Action that would co-ordinate activity in the event of a General Strike.

This is not the place to examine yet again the reasons why the General Strike was defeated nor whether a revolutionary situation existed in May 1926. [33] What is clear is that the CPGB and the NMM played a comparatively minor role in the strike, despite the tremendous work done by Communists in the local Councils of Action that were set up. One factor contributing to this failure was the tendency for the CP, especially after Red Friday, to place their trust in the left of the General Council. Thus J.T. Murphy, two days before the General Strike, described Swales & Co as 'good trade union leaders who have sufficient character to stand firm on the demands of the miners'. [34] Two weeks later these 'good trade union leaders' sold the miners down the river as readily as Ernest Bevin, J.H. Thomas or any of the other right-wing members of the TUC leadership. This trusting faith in the trade union lefts was also expressed in Murphy's earlier opposition to the establishment of Councils of Action independently of the official leadership. 'We should avoid rivalry and recognize the General Council as the General Staff directing the unions in the struggle.' [35] This line, quite inconsistent with the strategy which led to the formation of the NMM in the first place, made it very difficult for the CPGB to take an independent stance during the General Strike. The sources of this confused approach seem to lie both in the theoretical and political inadequacies of the Communist Party itself, and in the attitude taken by Stalin, Zinoviev and the other

leaders of the Comintern, who were reluctant to antagonize their allies on the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, and therefore did nothing to correct the CPGB's errors.

Whatever the causes of the 1926 defeat, its effect was catastrophic on both the labour movement and the Communist Party. The NMM found itself increasingly isolated, and forced on to the defensive, deserted by its erstwhile friends on the trade union left, and denounced as a Communist front. This situation proved fertile ground for the ultra-left line imposed by Moscow in 1927–29, with the entry of the Comintern into its 'third period'. Reformists were now denounced as 'social-fascists' with whom no truck could be had, and Communists were instructed to build new revolutionary trade unions. As a result, the NMM, as a broad rank-and-file movement operating within the existing unions, was effectively liquidated. Thereafter, the CPGB never again sought to build such a national rank-and-file movement. The adoption of a Popular Front strategy in the mid-1930 led the CP to seek alliances with the left wing of the bureaucracy, not to organize independently of it. [36]

The SWP and the National Rank-and-File Movement

The 1930s saw a shift in the pattern of the economic class struggle which was to prevail until the late 1960s. As Table 1 shows, the number of strikes rose to historically very high levels. However, the number of workers involved in an 'average strike' in the 1960s was 600, less than half that in the 1920s, and the length of strikes fell sharply, from several weeks before the 1930s to less than a week thereafter. [37] These changes reflected the emergence of strong shop stewards' organizations able to use relatively informal plant bargaining procedures to push up real wages. The new rank-and-file organizations began to develop in the 1930s, in some of those new industries such as

vehicles, electrical engineering chemicals, and artificial fibres whose growth during the inter-war period reflected a reorganization of British capitalism away from such old staple industries as coal and textiles. [38] But it was full employment, achieved in the early 1940s and only seriously threatened again in the late 1960s, which gave workers the bargaining power in which shop stewards organizations grew and flourished. By the early 1970s there were 200,000 shop stewards, a third of them in engineering. [39] This concentration in engineering reflected workers' ability in this sector to exploit the conditions of full employment and win a steady rise in their living standards. These were the years of wage drift, when national agreements between the employers and the union leaders merely fixed a minimum, which was then topped up by plant bargaining around piece-rates, bonuses, etc. Settlements by particularly strong groups would then set a benchmark for the increases sought by other workers inside and outside the industry. The shift of power from the trade union bureaucracy to the shop-floor was reflected in the fact that most strikes were unofficial. Attendance at union branch meetings was low, but workplace organization enjoyed a high degree of rank-and-file participation and support. [40]

The attempts by the government and employers to break, or at least to control the shop stewards led in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the biggest class confrontations for half a century. Under increasing pressure from foreign competitors, British capitalism no longer had the room to manoeuvre which would permit further increases in real wages; instead, living standards had to be forced down if the decline in the rate of profit was to be halted. The succession of crises which afflicted the world economy from the late 1960s onwards reduced the scope for concessions even further. [41] The first assault on shop-floor organization came under the Labour government of 1964–70, which imposed wage controls, sought unsuccessfully to pass legislation aimed at 'unconstitutional' strikes, and promoted large scale industrial rationalization involving a series of

company mergers and productivity deals. However, Labour's incomes policy eventually succumbed to a wave of public-sector strikes in 1969–70, and it was left to Edward Heath's Conservative administration to resume the offensive. The Heath government's Industrial Relations Act and its succession of incomes policies provoked the largest and most political strikes since 1926. A series of stoppages, most of them national and official, tore Heath's policies to shreds, till the miners delivered the coup de grace in February 1974.

One labour historian, not noted for his revolutionary enthusiasms, called the struggles under Heath 'the most extraordinary triumph of trade unionism in its long conflict with government':

The Labour Unrest of 1970–1974 was far more massive and incomparably more successful than its predecessor of 1910–1914. Millions of workers became involved in campaigns of civil disobedience arising out of resistance to the Government's Industrial Relations Act and, to a lesser extent, its Housing Finance Act. Over 200 occupations of factories, offices, workshops and shipyards occurred between 1972 and 1974 alone and many of them attained some or all of their objectives. Strikes in the public services became more frequent and prolonged. Some of them began to exhibit an ominous concern with the conditions of distribution as well as production.

(Thus, some health service employees refused to supply privileges for private patients in public hospitals.) But it was the coal miners, through their victories in the two Februaries of 1972 and 1974 who gave to this Labour Unrest a structure, a final roundness and completeness which their contribution of 1912 had failed to supply to the earlier experience. First they blew the Government 'off course'; then they landed it on the rocks. First, they compelled the Prime Minister to receive them in 10 Downing Street – which he had sworn he would never do – and forced him to concede more in 24 hours than had been conceded in the last 24 years. Then two years later their strike led him to introduce the three-day week – a novel

system of government by catastrophe – for which he was rewarded with defeat at the General Election. Nothing like this had ever been heard of before! [42]

It was in this, apparently very favourable climate, that the International Socialists (as the SWP was then known) launched a strategy of building a national rank-and-file movement. Already in 1966 Tony Cliff and Colin Barker described the shop stewards as 'the potential builders of the mightiest socialist movement yet in the history of Britain'. [43] This prognosis rested on a careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses. Cliff and Barker noted, for example, that 'the shop stewards' organizations are largely restricted to the narrow horizon of economic, trade union demands. They are, largely speaking, apathetic.' [44] However, the shop stewards' reformism was very different from the traditional 'reformism from above' of the Labour Party, which told workers to rely on their MPs and union leaders to achieve change. Labour's decline electorally and as a mass membership organization, and the class collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy were counter-weighed by workers' ability, in conditions of full employment, to wrest improvements in their living standards through their workplace organizations. This 'do-it-yourself reformism' opened up: '... the possibility of the rebirth of a revolutionary working-class movement. For wherever workers are fighting for themselves, fighting for better wages, fighting in defence of their shop stewards and fighting for their right to control the conditions of their work, wherever they are doing things for themselves and not leaving it to their leaders, they are growing in self-confidence and growing in their ability to run things for themselves.' [45]

For this possibility to be realized, the shop stewards would have to overcome their other main weakness, the fragmentation of workplace organization. The fact that workers were able to win gains in small groups – in an individual shop or factory – meant that these victories were not seen as ones for the class as a whole, and that solidarity between different sections of workers

was weak. This helped to explain, for example, the strength of racism among workers. [46] However, Cliff and Barker argued, the effect of the employers' offensive would increasingly be to force workers to generalize, and to link together their struggles.

This analysis was broadly confirmed by the events of 1970–74. Saltley Gates and the freeing of the Pentonville Five showed that solidarity was not a thing of the past for British workers, but a living reality. However, another lesson of 1974 was that the traditions of fragmented workplace organization was no longer appropriate to conditions of economic crisis and ruling class assaults on trade unionism. 'All these developments raise the question of national struggle and national organization', wrote Andreas Nagliatti, IS industrial organizer, at the beginning of 1974, adding, 'but if workers cannot any longer rely upon their old, fragmented forms of struggle, they cannot rely upon the official national leaderships of the unions either.' [47] The vacillations of the trade union leadership, both left and right, were diagnosed by Cliff in these terms:

> *The union bureaucracy is both reformist and cowardly. Hence its ridiculously impotent and wretched position. It dreams of reforms but fears to settle accounts in real earnest with the state (which not only refuses to grant reforms but even withdraws those already granted) and it also fears the rank-and-file struggle which alone can deliver reforms. The union bureaucrats are afraid of losing their own privileges vis-a-vis the rank-and-file. Their fear of the mass struggle is much greater than their abhorrence of state control of the unions. At all decisive moments the union bureaucracy is bound to side with the state, but in the meantime it vacillates.* [48]

Hence there arose the need for a national rank-and-file movement grouping together what Nagliatti called 'the substantial and growing militant minority which is capable of giving the lead to important sections of the class at key point,' [49], a movement which could take the initiative independently of the trade-union officials. However, IS did not base its rank-and-file strategy on the abstract need for such a movement.

There were two crucial pre-conditions for the IS initiative. The first was the role of the Communist Party. The CP's relationship to shop stewards' organization was an ambivalent one. On the one hand, many leading stewards were party members, and the CP and its Broad Left caucuses in many unions and localities acted as a network linking together the best militants. On the other hand, the Party never pursued a serious rank-and-file strategy after 1928. The period of its most rapid growth was during the Second World War, basking in the reflected glory of the Red Army, at a time when the CP's industrial policy was one of support for the war effort. Thereafter, in line with the reformist **British Road to Socialism**, Communist strategy was one of winning official positions in the unions in co-operation with left-wing members of the Labour Party. [50] In the early 1970s the CP found itself virtually paralysed by the increasingly glaring contradictions between the trade union bureaucracy and the rank-and-file which ran through its own ranks. Thus, while its industrial front, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) led two large unofficial stoppages against the Wilson government's anti-union proposals in 1969, followed by two others in 1970–71, it made no effort to link together rank-and-file militants during the much greater struggle which followed.

A second factor in the decision by IS to launch a national rank-and-file movement was its own implantation in the workplaces. Between 1971 and 1974 IS was transformed from being a predominantly student to a predominantly working-class organization. Crucial in this process was the decision by the IS conference of May 1973 to build factory branches. By the next conference, in September 1974, IS had nearly 4,000 members and some forty factory branches. At the same time, IS members in various industries and unions had launched rank-and-file papers whose aim was to group around them militants who did not fully share their ideas but who were prepared to work with them around concrete issues such as higher wages. As Table 2

shows, these papers had by 1973 achieved a small, but nonetheless significant circulation. These developments are worth stressing for two reasons. First, just as in the 1920s, the transformation of the CPGB into an organization based on factory cells was part of the same strategy as the launching of the Minority Movement, so IS's success in setting up workplace branches was closely linked to its attempt to build up a national rank-and-file movement. The basis of both party and movement was to lie in strong workplace organization. [51]

Table 2
RANK & FILE PAPERS, MARCH 1973

	No. of Issues	Print Order	% of Bill Paid
Carworker	9	6,000	45%
Collier	6	5,000	33%
Hospital Worker	7	6,000	60%
Platform (Busworkers)	3	3,000	50%
Textile Worker	1	1,500	nil
Case Con (Social Workers)	4	5,000	95%
Journalists Charter	4	2,000	60%
NALGO Action News	8	6,000	98%
Rank and File Teacher	13	10,000	42%
Redder Tape	4	3,000	57%
Scots Rank and File	3	2,000	15%

Tech Teacher	4	2,000	30%
Dock Worker	12	5,000	99%
GEC Rank and File	5	8,000	60%
Building Worker	6	2,000	27%
Electricians Special	3	2,000	15%

Secondly, the success of individual rank-and-file papers was bound up with the existence or appearance of rank-and-file organizations in the industries within they worked. **Carworker**, for example, oriented on the strong shop-floor organizations built up in the motor industry during the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. **Hospital Worker**, on the other hand, flourished at a time when a previously weak sector was experiencing a rapid growth in union membership, accompanied by the creation of shop stewards' organization where none had existed before.

In the light of the LCDTU's paralysis and its own growing workplace base, IS took the first step towards building a national rank-and-file movement by calling a delegate conference to discuss the prospects of such a movement on 30 March 1974. 500 delegates representing 270 trade-union bodies attended, and set up the National Rank and File Organizing Committee (NRFOC). A second conference in November of the same year attracted delegates from a larger number of bodies, including 49 shop stewards' committees, despite CP attempts at a witch-hunt. A new, albeit small movement had, it seemed, been born.

Since I shall argue in the next section that the NRFM was stillborn, it would be as well to consider some of the objections made to the IS strategy at the time by others on the left. The crudest criticism, and one that the CP was not averse to putting around, was that the strategy was 'anti-union'. The falsity of this claim can be seen by this passage from a resolution adopted by

the first NRFM conference: 'This Conference of duly delegated representatives of official trade-union bodies declares that its aim is not to split the official movement in any way, but to strengthen it in this period of acute crisis for the movement.' [52] Like the shop stewards' movement during the First World War and the Minority Movement in the 1920s, the NRFM sought not to split the unions, but to bring together rank-and-file organizations operating within the official structures. Its attitude to the trade union bureaucracy was the same as the Clyde Workers Committee: 'We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them.'

A more sophisticated criticism made by the CP was that the rank-and-file strategy was based on a 'sociological' analysis of the trade-union movement, which failed to grasp that the fundamental division was not that between rank and file and bureaucracy, but that between left and right. [53] The pejorative adjective 'sociological' presumably related to IS's attempt to account for the generally reformist and treacherous conduct of the trade-union leaders in terms of their common material interests as a specific social layer. If explaining ideological and political conduct by its material roots is an error, it is one we are quite happy to share with Marx. It is perhaps significant that the most coherent attempt to develop this criticism was made by a member of the CP's Eurocommunist right wing, whose general tendency is to detach ideology and politics from the forces and relations of production. The underlying unity of the trade-union bureaucracy, despite its internal divisions, has been shown on numerous occasions, but three examples will do: the TUC General Council's betrayal of the miners in May 1926, the decisive role played by their trade-union 'lefts' Jones and Scanlon in imposing the Social Contract on the unions in the summer of 1975, and the effective sabotage of the 1980 steel strike both by right wingers like Frank Chapple of the EETPU and left wingers like Moss Evans of the TGWU.

A criticism of essentially similar character was made of the SWP's 'rank-and-filism' by those supposedly to the CP's left. [54] The NRFM represented, it was claimed, an ultra-left strategy of building an 'united front from below', by-passing rather than seeking to unite with the left wing of the trade-union bureaucracy. Comparisons were made with the CP's third period policy of building separate 'red' trade unions. It is very difficult to take this argument seriously. The rank-and-file strategy was intended precisely as a way of achieving unity in action with militants who were not prepared to accept IS's revolutionary programme, but who would fight around specific trade-union questions. Nagliati wrote in support of the NRFM:

> *The beginnings of such a defensive organization exist in the various networks of militants in each industry, union and locality. Some of these militants hold CP cards, others are on the left of the Labour Party, a few are revolutionaries. What can bind them together is a programme for fighting around certain minimal demands – against wage freeze and incomes policy, for an end to the Industrial Relations Act and laws against picketing, for democratization of the unions, for fighting policy on wages. In this lies the rationale for the rank-and-file organisation.* [55]

In line with this approach IS/SWP sought united action with left officials. The initiative of the NRFOC and the Right to Work Campaign were invariably taken with the support of Tribunite MPs, and innumerable approaches were made to the Communist Party and the LDCTU for joint action, only to be spurned. Duncan Hallas summed up the SWP's attitude: 'We are for unity in action with all those in the working-class movement who are willing to fight, even when the agreement about objectives is only partial and temporary. This includes, of course unity with whatever sections of the 'official leaderships' can be induced to collaborate in particular actions. Contrary to the CP claim, we are not ultra-lefts ... However to *co-operate* with left-wing union leaders – and indeed with right-wing ones where possible – *for particular ends* is by no means the same as relying on them. Still less is it the same as believing that 'progressive officials' can

ever be a substitute for organised rank-and-file activity'. [56] The pursuits of united fronts in the absence of rank-and-file organizations able to act independently of the bureaucracy could only lead to a policy of tailing left reformism. 1926 had shown that.

One final criticism of the NRFM, which was raised even inside IS, was that it was only an IS front. The reply was that while a rank-and-file organization does not need revolutionaries to build it, a *national movement* is likely to come about only as the result of their initiative. As Nagliati put it, 'in most past rank-and-file movements revolutionary socialists have had to play the major part of carrying the burden of organizing the movement. The reason is simple enough. Any organizing on a national scale demands the sort of high level of personal commitment that usually comes from a thorough-going socialist standpoint. Non-revolutionaries may support the movement and welcome its activities, but the responsibility for initiating those activities usually ends up with committed revolutionaries.' [57]

Moreover, the IS leadership argued, rank-and-file organizations could never be general political and ideological alignments of capitalist society – they were never 'above' politics. To believe otherwise would be to fall into syndicalist illusions. As we have seen, the politics of shop stewards organisation tended to be sectionalist and reformist. National rank-and-file movements were subject to constant pressure to attach themselves to the trade union left – the fate of the NMM in 1926, for example. Political independence from the trade-union bureaucracy, and, a fortiori, the ruling class, more than from democratic internal structures. It could only be obtained under revolutionary leadership. Therefore, while the NFRM, to achieve its purpose, should be committed to a non-revolutionary programme of partial demands, and should be organizationally independent of IS, it could only flourish while led by revolutionaries.

Underlying most of the objections to the rank-and-file strategy was a basic propagandism, which conceived the transformation of workers' consciousness as essentially a matter of spreading socialist ideas Such a view was involved, for example, in the frequent claims that IS's approach was 'economistic', since it related to workers' existing predominantly trade-union consciousness, failing to challenge the reactionary and reformist ideas it contained. The most sophisticated version of this argument was made recently by Richard Hvman in the pages of this journal, who asked: 'is there not a material connection between sectionalism, reformism and the practice of (even militant) trade-union representation and bargaining?' [58] The answer is that indeed there is such a connection, as I have sought to argue in the opening section of this article. IS was perfectly aware of the sectionalism and reformism of shop stewards organizations – the quotations by Cliff and Barker's 1966 pamphlet above make this amply plain. The real question is how one begins to break down this sectionalism and reformism. It has always been one of the Marxist traditions' most basic propositions that consciousness is changed, not by preaching the socialist programme, but through workers' involvement in *struggle*. [59] In Britain at any rate the main framework through which workers have organized against their exploitation has been the trade unions, and within them shop-floor organization. Any strategy that does not *start* from this fact is doomed to failure. The British revolutionary left has been bedevilled throughout its existence by a propensity to denounce the trade unions as reactionary, and to take up preaching instead. The Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement and then the Minority Movement represented a rejection of this sterile propagandism, and an orientation instead on the struggles through which workers can be opened up to socialist ideas. The IS/SWP tradition has sought, correctly, to continue this approach. Those who have criticized its 'economism' have yet to

come up with a serious alternative.

The failure of the NRFM

The NRFM's first year of existence could be accounted a modest success, with two delegate conferences winning quite respectable support. Writing after the second conference, Steve Jefferys, Nagliati's successor as IS industrial organizer, reaffirmed the strategy: 'Our main priority over the coming year (1975) must be to nourish the various fragile roots of rank-and-file organisation while erecting between and over them the patchwork umbrella of a national movement.' [60] After that, the NRFM vanished from sight. The reasons for this abrupt collapse lay not in any sudden change of line on the part of the IS leadership, but in the objective situation. The rank-and-file strategy was adopted as a means of relating to the wave of militancy generated by Heath's attack on workers' organizations and living standards. But even before the first Rank-and-File Conference met in March 1974, the Tory government had been tipped out of office by the miners, and replaced by Harold Wilson's third administration. Although Heath's fall gave rise to an upsurge of wage-struggles, culminating in a wave of unofficial strikes which virtually paralysed Scotland in the winter of 1974–5, Labour's victory had taken the political edge off industrial militancy. The Wilson government first acquiesced in the pay explosion rendered inevitable by the collapse of Heath's income policy, and then, with the support of Jones, Scanlon and the rest of the trade union left, imposed wage controls which were to survive in some form until the winter of discontent of 1978–9, and which brought about the biggest fall in real wages for over a century. In the wake of the Social Contract, industrial militancy collapsed – the number of working-days lost due to strikes in 1976 was the lowest since the

1950s. At the same time, the world recession caused unemployment to soar, climbing above 1.5 million in 1977.

This was not the environment in which the NRFM could flourish. The NRFOC found itself at the beginning of 1975 'isolated and left on the shelf, the SWP Central Committee acknowledged some two years later: 'In an attempt to keep the Organizing Committee's presence felt various initiatives were taken: Chile solidarity work, a series of health and safety schools. Small positive results were obtained, but the central tasks – organizing solidarity, developing real rank-and-file networks – could not be carried out.' [61] The new, and unfavourable situation led to a reassessment of IS strategy in the course of 1975. Previously it had been believed that the Labour government would enjoy a brief 'honeymoon' with workers, after which the pattern of confrontation would be resumed. As it became clear that this prediction was false, it was acknowledged that we had 'telescoped the perspective'. Workers' loyalties to Labour had proved more enduring than had previously anticipated, and it would take longer than expected for them to wear down. In the meantime, IS should 'steer left', avoiding the pressures to move right generated by Scanlon and Jones' support for Labour's wage-controls, and offering a focus for the militant minorities who were willing to fight. The vacuum left by the NRFM was filled by the National Right to Work Campaign (RTWC), launched by the NRFOC as the end of 1975, which soon established IS/SWP as the only force on the left willing to organize against unemployment. To quote from the Central committee document already cited:

That campaign was a success and greatly added to our credibility in the movement. But the child swallowed the parent. The NRFOC disappeared into the RTWC. It was not that we had 'dropped the rank-and-file perspective' as various people inside IS (SWP) and outside argued. It was the pressure of circumstances – the NRFOC was impotent and the RTWC was viable. [62]

The general approach adopted by IS in late 1975 which led to the emergence of the Right to Work Campaign was essentially correct, despite the criticisms of it as 'ultra-left'. While the rest of the far left were pulled to the right by their orientation on the Labour Party, and while many children of 1968 collapsed into the passivity that was to make them so receptive to **Beyond the Fragments** a few years later, IS maintained an independent revolutionary stance which led to a significant increase in membership and influence in 1976–7. However, the analysis on which this approach was based was a short-term one, according to which the Social Contract was merely an interlude in the class confrontations which began in the late 1960s and escalated so dramatically under Heath. What this analysis did not take into account was the existence of a number of long-term tendencies whose effect was to undermine the strong workplace organization built up during the long boom. I do not wish to spend too much time on a theme which has been explored in much detail in this journa, [63], but the essential features of this process must be noted.

In the first place, a number of developments over the past 15 years have succeeded in weakening shop stewards' organization, especially in those industries – engineering, shipyards, mining, docks, and vehicles – where it had been strongest. The widespread replacement of piecework by national or plant agreements based on some form of measured day work has taken away the steward's most basic function, that of negotiating the rate for the job. At the same time, the number of full-time convenors and senior stewards has increased rapidly, until by the late 1970s there were over 7,000 of them, two or three times the number of full-time officials. The effect has been to extend the trade-union bureaucracy down into the workplace, creating within shop-floor organisation a layer of stewards isolated from the workers they represent. Secondly, Jones and Scanlon's betrayals represented the collapse of the strategy of creating Broad Left alliances to win control of the official machine in

which most politically conscious militants had placed their hopes in the 1960s and early 1970s. The rightward drift of the Communist Party, and the accompanying erosion of its working-class base, deprived these militants of the main organizational framework they had previously possessed. Finally, the shop stewards' politics were, at best, militant reformism. The acute economic crisis of the 1970s meant that this would no longer do: screwing material improvements out of the bosses, or, more often, defending those gains already made increasingly meant being prepared to challenge the system politically. Workers' interests now clashed with many of the notions they had hitherto accepted – for example, that their own prosperity depended on the existence of profits: in the absence of a coherent and credible alternative, they usually went along with the prevailing ideology.

This threefold crisis in the labour movement – of organisation, leadership and ideology – has led to a marked shift of the balance of forces in the ruling class's favour since 1974. These tendencies were already evident before the Tory election victory of May 1979 – indeed they help to explain it, but the rise in the level of unemployment to three million, and the unprecedented punishment suffered by manufacturing industry has made the process evident for all to see. IS/SWP, however, failed to take serious note of these changes in the four years following Heath's defeat in February 1974 [64], even though the erosion of shop stewards' organisation, especially in the car industry, led to the collapse of most of the factory branches so painfully built up under Heath. The effect of this failure was, when membership began to pick up in 1976–7 to lead to a serious error of analysis, namely the prediction that Labour's hold was weakening among significant numbers of workers, who would now begin to look leftwards. This belief led the SWP (as IS was renamed at the end of 1976) to stand a number of candidates in parliamentary by-elections, with derisory results. More relevant from the point of view of this article, was the decision to relaunch the NRFM,

which took the SWP dangerously close to ultra-leftism and substitutionism.

The context of this move was the false dawn of 1977, when it appeared that workers were about to shake off the straitjacket imposed on them by the Social Contract. [65] The sharp fall in real wages over the previous two years triggered a rank-and-file rebellion against pay restraint which led to a number of important unofficial disputes – by BL toolroom workers, Heathrow engineers, and Port Talbot electricians – and even caused the TGWU conference to defy Jack Jones and throw out the Social Contract. Once again it was the trade union left- Jones and Scanlon's valedictory service to the movement – who were in the front line of the TUC leadership's efforts to crush the revolt against pay restraint. They were largely successful. The dam did not break in 1977. In particular, traditionally strong and militant sections held back – moves for an all-out strike at BL Longbridge, where the revolt began, fizzled out, the dockers backed away from a national strike, and the NUM leadership succeeded in imposing a pit incentive scheme thrown out by national ballot. The winter of 1977–8 saw the bitter and protracted firemen's strike, crushed by the Callaghan government with the full support of the TUC General Council.

The explosion of early 1977 led the SWP leadership to believe that the tide had finally turned. After the Leyland, Heathrow and Port Talbot strikes they declared that:

> *These conditions – a rising rank-and-file movement coming up against an increasingly inactive or police-style trade union bureaucracy – are exactly the circumstances in which it is both possible and necessary to turn towards re-invigorating the Rank-and-File organisations and to attempt the rebuilding of a National Rank-and-File Movement.*

The most important practical proposal flowing from this analysis was that 'a national delegate conference will be organized for early November aimed at relaunching the NRFOC and pulling together as many of the disputes which take place between now

and then as possible'. [66] By then it was hoped that the pay explosion, would be in full spate. As November got closer, and the explosion did not materialize, the temptation for the party to substitute itself for a non-existent rank-and-file movement became greater. Thus, it was argued at the August 1977 meeting of the SWP National Advisory Committee that the conference would act as the launching pad for a 'New Year Offensive' against the employers. The turnout at the conference, held on 26 November in Manchester, was perfectly respectable – 522 delegates from 251 trade union bodies, showing the SWP's far from negligible industrial influence. Yet is was unable to translate this influence into action. The substitutionist tendencies already noted reached their height at the conference, leading to a call for a day of action in solidarity with the firemen on 7 December. This attempt to assume the role played by the LCDTU in the late 1960s and early 1970s had a humiliating outcome – the strike call had virtually no support. The rank-and-file strategy was, however, pursued for the duration of the fireman's strike. A daily Rank-and-File Fireman strike bulletin was produced and distributed at the cost of enormous effort by the party centre, branches and districts, and unsuccessful attempts were made to build local fireman's support committees which could act as the nuclei of permanent rank-and-file committees.

The attempt to build the NRFM in defiance of a reality whose hostility was becoming more and more obvious was merely one example of the triumphalism which began to grip the SWP in the course of 1977, and which reached its high point after the party's highly successful role in stopping a Nazi march through Lewisham in August. The failure of the rank-and-file strategy brought people down to earth with a thud. To some at least it became clear that the developments which I have already alluded to – above all, the decline of workplace organization in previously strong industries -were having significant, long term effects on the class struggle in Britain. The result was a lengthy,

and often bitterly contested reappraisal of the SWP's political perspectives, involving discussion of issues other than the state of the labour movement in Britain – for example, sexual and racial oppression. Much of this discussion has taken place in the pages of this journal, and I shall say no more of them here. However, the debates on these questions have meant that the question of the rank-and-file strategy have come to be shoved to one side. *In practice* it was abandoned, but this move was rarely explicitly acknowledged, and the logical conclusions have yet to be drawn from it. It is to these questions to which I wish to turn in my concluding section.

Rank-and-file organisation today

Let us first be clear as to why the attempt to build the NRFM failed. It was an attempt to give a class-wide perspective and a national structure and leadership to rank-and-file organizations which had been built up gradually between the 1930s and the 1960s, and which were now coming into increasing conflict with the employers, the trade union bureaucracy and the state. Out of this conflict would come, so it was argued, an increasing potentiality for the economic class struggle to assume a directly political character. Revolutionaries, by relating to workers in struggle, and seeking to weld them together into a class-wide movement, could win mass support for their politics. This analysis was essentially correct. The early 1970s did see national, increasingly politicized disputes in which different sections displayed considerable solidarity towards each other. However, workers were able to blunt, and eventually to defeat the Tory offensive without breaking with their predominantly reformist politics. The 1974–9 Labour government, in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, was able, by stealth, to regain much of the ground Heath had lost in open battle. Other factors – mass unemployment, the spread of full time convenors and

productivity bargaining – weakened workplace organization and encouraged workers to seek sectional solutions to their problems. In this very different climate, which has, of course, become much worse since May 1979, it is simply inappropriate to talk about linking together rank-and-file organisations, and giving them a general perspective, the present situation demands much more modest tasks – drumming up support for the tough, long-drawn out, defensive battles that do take place, seeking to prevent the collapse of shop-floor organization within particular workplaces, making what often can only be propaganda for solidarity, and for defiance of the government's anti-union legislation.

Several points need to be emphasized here. First, it would be foolish to write off rank-and-file organization in Britain. Its erosion in some areas has been counterpointed by growth in other sectors. One observer, commenting on the lorry drivers' strike of 1978–9, described the emergence of the drivers' rank-and-file organization, and their highly effective use of picketing tactics as 'one of the most important developments inside the working class in the past ten years'. [67] Similarly, the 1980 steel strike was remarkable for the militant tactics used by a previously 'moderate' workforce, and the support they received from other sections despite the sabotage of their own and other union leaders. [68]There is no doubt of workers' capacity to recover from the defeats they have suffered, and to rebuild shopfloor organization where it has been undermined. [69]

Secondly, Richard Hyman is mistaken when he argues that what he calls 'the bureaucratization of the rank-and-file' means that the distinction between rank and file and bureaucracy is 'absurdly over-simplified' and 'cannot serve as a basis for revolutionary strategy today'. [70] It is perfectly true that shop stewards cannot escape from the general contradiction involved in trade unionism – that of seeking to organize resistance to exploitation with the limits of capitalism, from which arises the liability of even the most militant workers to sectionalism and

reformism. It is also true that, as the academic studies Hyman cites show, shop stewards have always been subject to pressures to discipline their own members, and have often been reactionaries and time-servers. There have always been plenty of stewards like the one at an ICI plant described in one study chosen by a foreman whom he often stood in for, and, too old and ill for his job grade, only remaining in it thanks to management's benevolence. [71] Nevertheless, despite the emergence of the full-time convenors, shop stewards' organization remains qualitatively different from official union structures in its potential responsiveness to rank-and-file pressure. Not only are even full-time stewards normally subject to election and re-election, they are liable to victimization by management- as the Derek Robinson case showed – and will lose their jobs if their plants are closed. All this sets them apart from union officials. Even the most corrupt and decayed workplace organization can be recaptured by the rank and file with comparative ease. Equally, the trade union bureaucracy has become, if possible, more ineffectual in its attitude to the government and the employers, and more hostile to initiatives from below since the Tories came to office. The TGWU's antics during the steel strike, the cynical blacklegging organized by the EETPU and AUEW at the Isle of Grain, and the pathetic response to Norman Tebbit's new Employment Bill all show this.

It does not follow, however, that it would make any sense to try and build a national-rank-and-file movement now. The trade union leaders are not holding back a tide of shopfloor militancy seeking expression in action to which a rank-and-file movement could relate. If this is so, a further problem arises. As I noted earlier, IS established, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of rank-and-file groups in different unions and industries. Some of these have survived both abortive attempts to build the NRFM. What implications should the abandonment of the rank-and-file strategy for the present have for them?

Table 3
RANK-AND-FILE PAPERS, JANUARY 1982*

	Print Order
Nalgo Action News	2500 (18/12/81)
Redder Tape	1000 (4/12/82)
Rank and File Teacher	3000 (19/11/81)
Hospital Worker	2000 (4/ 1/82)
Collier	1600 (24/11/81)
College Rank and File	1200 (22/10/81)

* The figures given are those of the latest available print orders; the date of each order is given in brackets. The orders may have been a little depressed because of Christmas, but the decline in both the number of the papers and their circulation, compared to March 1973 (see Table 2), is still evident.

Table 3 gives the most recent figures for the circulation of these surviving rank-and-file papers. Not only has their number shrunk, but so has that of their readers. Moreover, by contrast with 1973 (see Table 2) the remaining rank-and-file groups are largely concentrated in the white-collar unions. These are the sectors where workplace organization is weak, and where trade unionism, even of the militant variety, has tended to be dominated not by the mass of low-paid, mainly female clerical workers, but by members of the 'new middle-class' – a heterogenous group of white-collar workers, to a large extent recruited from graduates, and occupying positions of authority

over other workers. [72] There is some evidence that people of such a background have tended to dominate the white-collar rank-and-file groups.

Certainly there has been a tendency for the rank-and-file groups to become substitutes for an orientation on rank-and-file activity. This tendency has been encouraged by some formulations used to characterize the groups. For example, Steve Jefferys, the chief architect of the second attempt to build the NRFM, attacked the notion of Teachers Rank and File as 'a caucus' as 'very narrow': 'We want all who are ready to fight consistently over a wide range of issues to join us in Rank and File'. He then went on to describe the group as *both* 'the organisation of the SWP members in a particular union or industry' *and* 'made up of all consistent fighters among the rank-and-file'. [73] This sort of confused reasoning, which treated an 'organisation of SWP members' as 'all consistent fighters among the rank-and-file' could only encourage the groups to substitute themselves for the rank-and-file. Whereas in 1977 this sort of approach led the SWP dangerously close to ultra-leftism, in the very grim climate of more recent years it has promoted an accommodation by the groups to the trade-union bureaucracy.

Lindsey Greig recently described this process, drawing on his experience in Manchester:

> *This has not been a conscious process for the most part but rather a gradual accommodation to the external situation. Numbers of our members active over many years in their own workplace and union have established a certain credibility and frequently have found themselves in positions of union responsibility as branch secretaries, delegates to stewards' committees and higher union bodies. The Rank and File groups initially built for example in the hospitals, at a time of struggle with the employers, have found themselves increasingly orientating on the union bureaucracy and the details of union business.*
>
> > *Victories and defeats are no longer counted in terms of struggle with employer but rather with the right-wing union bureaucracy – success becomes a resolution passed or a*

member elected to a position. The actual composition of the Rank and File groups have (sic) become stabilized around a handful of long-serving Rank and File members. The Rank and File groups, far from a body leading struggles, become a meeting place for often tired 'socialists' of frequently questionable hue – acting at times as little more than the left wing of the lower levels of union bureaucracy. Our comrades are finding themselves high and dry with whoever else happens to be washed up on the beach. The fact is that many of our Rank and File groups bear very little relation to our basic conception of a rank-and-file network. Indeed in some cases, they are a barrier to the very existence of such a network. Political questions are not raised at the meetings – one reason being quite simply that everyone has known each other for years, and have developed a relationship where political differences have been institutionalized into the background. [74]*

It is important to stress that this process does not arise from the subjective fault of those involved. *Hospital Worker*, for example, emerged out of the struggles of the early 1970s, when shop-floor organization was built, very rapidly, almost from scratch. These gains have largely been clawed back by the hospital authorities since 197.7 [75] It has simply been impossible for rank-and-file groups to flourish in the period since 1974. Their transformation has, however, had dire effects. The rank-and-file groups, whose aim was to bring revolutionary politics to a wider audience, have now become de-politicized, as Lindsey Greig argues. Moreover, the groups are often a barrier to action. For example, during the recent NALGO strike in Islington, the local NALGO Action Group voted against all-out action, and so the SWP members effectively withdrew from the group, and operated openly under the **Socialist Worker** banner.

Two factors have been especially important in this process of degeneration. The first is the collapse of the NRFM itself. This deprived the rank-and-file groups of a national perspective. Instead, the focus of their activity became problems specific to their own unions and industries. The inevitable result was the

emergence of tendencies towards sectionalism in the groups, encouraged also by the general climate within the labour movement, at a time when workers have largely pursued sectional solutions to the problems created by economic recession and mass unemployment. Focussing upon sectional issues has in turn helped to immunize the groups from general problems of the class. The temptation towards substitutionism – towards treating quite narrow caucuses of revolutionaries, ex-revolutionaries, and their hangers-on as rank-and-file *organizations* – has consequently been very great.

All this has been made that much easier by the second factor which needs stressing here – namely the fact that rank-and-file organization has always been weak in the white collar sector, and that therefore the contrast between before and after 1974 was much less sharp than among manual workers. In industries such as engineering and the docks where the framework of militant activity had been shop stewards' organization, it was impossible to ignore the down turn. Hence the collapse of almost all the manual rank-and-file papers, although the decline took place at different rates. **GEC Rank and File** had emerged as part of an attempt to build a strong GEC Combine Committee: when the attempt collapsed after the victimisation of a number of leading militants, so did the rank-and-file groups. On the other hand, **Carworker** seems for a time to have provided IS members in an industry where militants had suffered a hammering even before the fall of Heath – for example, at Chrysler's Coventry plants – with something of a soft option after many of their factory branches had fallen apart. In the white collar unions, in contrast, the tendency for militants to orient on the official union structure had always been considerable and was greatly strengthened after 1974. This again encouraged SWP members in the white collar sector to treat their caucuses as a substitute for genuine rank-and-file organization based on workplace delegates.

In the past four or five years, the SWP has in practice shifted away from the rank-and-file perspective. There has been an increasing tendency for party industrial work to take place outside the rank-and-file framework. After the debacle of the firemen's strike, during the next major dispute, the 1978 Ford strike, the SWP intervention managed to get the worst of all possible worlds, operating through the Ford Workers Combine, an unhappy compromise between a rank-and-file group and an *ad hoc* committee of different far left organizations. One very important initiative, the Defend Our Unions conference of June 1979, attracted widespread support winning 1,100 trade-union delegates, but its aim was not that of reviving the NRFM, but the much more modest one of launching a propaganda campaign against Labour and Tory attacks on the unions. In the steel strike, the SWP operated through its previously established **Real Steel News** bulletin, and was able to attract a number of the most militant strikers around it. One of the strengths of this approach was that it made no unrealistic claims about possessing a rank-and-file organisation capable of delivering action, while providing a vehicle through which revolutionary ideas could reach a wider audience. [76]

It is time now to make the lessons of this experience explicit. Obviously an article of this nature cannot make any detailed organizational proposals. It is intended rather to introduce a discussion on how revolutionary work in the trade unions can be conducted in the present very difficult period. For, of course, it is, even today, the economic class struggle which provides the best opportunity for transforming workers' consciousness in a revolutionary direction. Indeed the struggles that do take place tend to be long, bitter, defensive battles in which the the issue of solidarity is vital to achieving victory (or, more usually, to avoiding defeat). This is quite likely to make strikers receptive to socialist politics. The industrial struggle must remain the focus of our activity.

Equally the argument of this article does not of course amount to a rejection of the SWP's traditional orientation on the rank-and-file, nor its commitment to the self-emancipation of the working class. The idea of socialism from below, of workers freeing themselves through their own self activity is at the heart of Marxism. However, while this principle is non-negotiable, the particular organizational forms through which we seek its realization vary according to the circumstances. For most of their existence in the page 1950s, 1960s, and even early 1970s, the SWP's predecessors – the Socialist Review group and IS – did not seek to build a rank-and-file movement, however much they aspired to it. It was only when certain conditions were met – the confrontations between workers and the Heath government, the inaction of the LCDTU, IS's transformation into a working-class organization – that the attempt was made to translate this aspiration into reality. During the long years which preceded this move, IS did not orient itself upon rank-and-file workers and seek to support their struggles against the bosses and the bureaucrats any less than it did once the rank-and-file strategy was adopted.

Finally, the rank-and-file strategy is essentially correct – in the appropriate conditions, which have not existed since 1974. But there have been enough victories even in these grim years – at Gardner's, for example, and in the mines over pit closures – to show that the shift in the balance of class forces since 1974 is not irreversible. No decisive defeat has been inflicted on the workers' movement in Britain. Any economic revival is likely to push workers and the ruling class into confrontation with the employers. Then a national rank-and-file movement may again become both necessary and possible. Just as in the mid-1920s there is everything still to play for. We must make sure we do better next time.

Notes

I am very grateful to Peter Binns, Peter Clark, Tony Cliff, and John Deason for the help and advice they have given me in writing this article.

1. See T. Cliff, *The Balance of Class Forces in Britain Today*, **IS 2:6**, Autumn 1979.

2. K. Marx, **Capital I** (Harmondsworth 1976), p. 929.

3. K. Marx and F. Engels, **Selected Works** (Moscow 1968), p. 229.

4. **Ibid.**, p. 228.

5. S. and B. Webb, **The History of Trade Unionism 1666–1920** (Edinburgh 1919), p. 204.

6. R. Michels, **Political Parties** (Glencoe, Ill. 1949).

7. See J. Hinton and R. Hyman, **Trade Unions and Revolution** (London 1975), pp. 18*ff.*

8. On the wartime watershed, see P. Addison, **The Road to 1945** (London 1977).

9. **Rosa Luxemburg Speaks** (New York 1970), pp. 214–17.

10. Henri Weber argues convincingly that Luxemburg and Michels' analyses of the incipient bureaucratism of the German labour movement are clearly superior in explaining reformism to Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy as a stratum of the working class bought off with imperialist super-profits – see **Marxism et conscience de classe** (Paris 1975), and also T. Cliff, *The Economic Roots of Reformism*, in **Neither Washington nor Moscow** (London 1982).

11. J. Hinton, **The First Shop Stewards Movement** (London 1973), p. 80.

12. V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works** (Moscow 1974), p. 264.

13. **Leon Trotsky on China** (New York 1976), pp. 319–20.

14. A. Gramsci, **Selections from Political Writings 1910–1920** (London 1977), pp. 65, 66.

15. See T. Cliff, **Lenin I** (London 1975).

16. For general discussions of the period discussed in this and the following section, see Hinton and Hyman, *passim*, Hinton, *passim*, M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, **Essays in the History of Communism in Britain** (London 1975).

17. See W. Kendall, **The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900–21** (London 1969), R. Challinor, **The Origins of British Bolshevism** (London 1977), T. Cliff, **Lenin IV** (London 1979), pp. 78–79, S. Macintyre, **A Proletarian Science** (Cambridge 1980).

18. See B. Holton, **Syndicalism in Britain, 1900–14** (London 1976).

19. I am following the analysis in Hinton, Part Three.

20. **Ibid.**, p. 296.

21. Quoted, **ibid.**, p. 308.

22. Quoted, **ibid.**, p. 305.

23. Cliff, **op. cit.**,pp 89–90.

24. J. Degras, *ed.*, **The Communist International 1919–43 Documents**, I (London 1956), p. 248.

25. Cliff, **op. cit.**, and Kendall, *passim*.

26. Hinton and Hyman, pp. 14–15.

27. See D. Hallas and C. Harman, **Days of Hope** (London 1981).

28. Quoted, Hinton and Hyman, p. 14.

29. Quoted, R. Martin, **Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924–1933** (Oxford 1969), p. 28.

30. Quoted, Woodhouse and Pearce, p. 82.

31. Quoted, **ibid.**, p. 81.

32. See Hinton and Hyman, *passim*, and L.J. Macfarlane, **The British Communist Party** (London 1966).

33. See Hallas and Harman.

34. Quoted, Hinton and Hyman, p. 34.

35. Quoted, **loc. cit.**

36. See S. Jefferys, *The Communist Party and the Rank and File*, **IS 2:10**, Winter 1980–1.

37. R. Hyman, **Strikes** (London 1977), pp. 26-7.

38. See B.W.E. Alford, **Depression and Recovery?** (London 1972).

39. Hyman, p. 45.

40. See T. Cliff and C. Barker, **Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards** (London 1966).

41. For general background, see C. Harman, *State Capitalism, armaments and the general form of the current crisis*, **IS 2:16**, Spring 1982.

42. R. Harrison, editor's *Introduction* to **The Independent Collier** (Hassocks 1978), pp. 2, 1.

43. Cliff and Barker, p. 136.

44. **Ibid.**, p. 105.

45. **Ibid.**, p. 135.

46. **Ibid.**, pp. 96–106, 132–5. I have emphasized Cliff and Barker's appreciation of both the strengths and weaknesses of shop-floor organization because we are sometimes accused of having 'a romanticized view of shop steward activity', (R. Hyman, *British Trade Unionism: Post-War Trends and Future Prospects*, **IS 2:8**, Spring 1980, p. 74.)

47. A. Nagliati, *Towards a National Rank-and-File Movement*, **IS 66**, February 1974, p. 7.

48. T. Cliff, *On Perspectives*, **IS 36**, April-May 1969. This passage does not appear in the version reprinted in **Neither Washington nor Moscow**.

49. Nagliati, p. 10.

50. See Jefferys, *passim*.

51. T. Cliff, **Factory Branches** (London n.d. [1973]).

52. Quoted in S. Jefferys, *The Challenge of the Rank and File*, **IS 76**, March 1975, p. 4.

53. See, for example, G. Roberts, *The Strategy of Rank and Filism*, **Marxism Today**, December 1976. See, in reply, D. Hallas, *The CP, the SWP and the Rank-and-File Movement*, **IS 95**, February 1977.

54. See innumerable articles in the Fourth International's successive avatars in Britain – **Red Mole**, **Red Weekly**, and **Socialist Challenge**.

55. Nagliati, p. 3.

56. Hallas, p. 10.

57. Nagliati, **loc. cit.**

58. Hyman, *British Trade Unionism*, p. 75. See also D. Hallas, *Trade Unionists and Revolution – A Response to Richard Hyman*, in the same

issue.

59. For an extended critique of propagandism, see A. Callinicos, *Politics or Abstract Propagandism*, **IS 2:11**, Winter 1981.

60. Jefferys, *Challenge*, p. 15.

61. *Rebuilding the National Rank-and-File Movement*, **SWP Internal Bulletin**, May 1977, p. 3.

62. **Loc. cit.**

63. Cliff, *Balance of Class Forces*, *passim*.

64. A series of editorials and articles published in this journal in 1977–8 drew attention to the erosion of shopfloor organization, but failed to make the necessary conclusions. It was left to Tony Cliff to do so at a meeting of the SWP National Advisory Committee in February 1978. See T. Cliff, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, **Socialist Review**, No. 1, April 1978.

65. See A. Callinicos, *The Fire This Time*, **IS 104**, January 1978.

66. *Rebuilding the National Rank-and-File Movement*, pp. 3, 5.

67. D. Field, in **Socialist Review**, No. 9, February 1979.

68. See the *Inquest on the Steel Strike*, **Socialist Review**, 20 April–17 May 1980.

69. See D. Beecham, *Updating the Downturn; the Class Struggle under the Tories*, **IS 2:14**, Autumn 1981.

70. Hyman, *British Trade Unionism*, p. 74.

71. T. Nichols and P. Armstrong, **Workers Divided** (London 1976), pp. 98–110.

72. See E.O. Wright, **Class, Crisis and the State** (London 1978) for the most developed analysis of these strata. See also P. Walker, *ed.*, **Between Labour and Capital** (Hassocks 1979), and Chris Harman's review of this book in **Socialist Review**, 13 July–13 August 1981. I hope to return to this subject in a future article.

73. S. Jefferys, *A Note on the NUT Article*, **SWP Internal Bulletin**, May 1977, p. 11.

74. L. Greig, unpublished document.

75. Cliff, *Balance of Class Forces*, pp. 10–11.

76. See C. Sparks, *The SWP and the Steel Strike*, **Socialist Review**, 20 April–17 May 1980.

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