

Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)

The Special Nature of British Trade Unions

Issued: Speech given by Reg Birch in 1982

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The Special Nature of British Trade Unions

EROL Note: this speech, given by Reg Birch in 1982, expands upon the Party's analysis of the history and purpose of these organisations created by the working class. It outlines the history of trade unions – tracing them back to at least the 14th century – and to analyse their development as peculiar to Britain.



Birch argues that in Britain, the trade unions were created, uniquely, as "weapons of a working class". They were an "organic coming together of a class out of the conflict of class relationship" – a necessary tool for survival, built for defence not attack, against the employer in an economic system based on class exploitation.

Published in Will Podmore's 2004 biography of "[Reg Birch: engineer, trade unionist, communist](#)", **The Special Nature of British Trade Unions** was reprinted as a pamphlet in 2008 as part of the CPB(ML)'s 40th anniversary celebrations because "The CPBM-L is re-issuing the text of this important speech by its founding Chairman, not as an academic exercise or a historic curiosity, but because Reg Birch's analysis raised important questions for us today."

Appendix 5

The Special Nature of British Trade Unions

A speech by Reg Birch, 1982

Mr Chairman, to say that the special nature of trade unionism in Britain is a declaration – it's more than that – because nowhere else in the world is there the conception of trade unionism as exists in Britain. Now we should put it in its size and in its perspective. There is not anywhere else in the world in terms of my understanding of trade unionism with all its primitive base. The trade unions in Britain are extremely primitive organs and very elementary, their nature defensive and not attacking, weapons of a working class. That's how they're born and that's how they began.

Furthermore from time to time, according to the struggle, they are perforce forced into an attacking posture. This they do very reluctantly – they, the membership, the workers – because that's not its concept. So you should eschew any thoughts that this organic coming together of a class out of the conflict of class relationship of itself is a political act which will destroy the opposite class. That's not what trade unions in Britain are about, and less still anywhere else in the world. Everywhere else they are but very poor images with all their quality of understanding of that which has been born only here, out of an historical need because of an industrial revolution.

Of course you can go back long before the industrial revolution in terms of the idea of people, property-less, having only labour power to sell, coming together however small and however in few number. There is in about the 12th century a question of some shoemakers meeting just outside of Wisbech. And

they said, some twelve shoemakers, they said, none of us come unto the town except we shall be paid half as much again to cobble. If any of our number shall betray this pledge then we will cut out his bowels.

Wycliffe¹ bemoaning the cost of building York Minster refers to trade unionism and he says, 'The masons (not freemasons, stonemasons) are a dreadful band of people, they hold us to ransom and we shall never build York Minster, because they will dress the stone and they will size it and then they say we will not lift it, that after all that's not our work, but on the contrary there shall be a lifter upper.' And so that was the beginning of these things that they used to bang about in shipyards – demarcation questions you remember and restrictive practices.

So first of all you have a concept that this country developed – nothing to do with the prowess of anybody born there – nothing to do with being English, Welsh or anything, but out of geography, out of history – and no one even knows why the industrial revolution took place in Britain, by the way, first before elsewhere, but that's not the question under discussion. Out of a long period of time the trade unions were here first. In Tudor times there were factories of more than 100 people – so you don't just deal with trade unionism in this country on the basis that you deal with the Webbs and new unionism and all those other things, it began long before.

Some historians have tried to relate it to the guild and the crafts and all those things. There is a link there – to do with artisans. There were the apprentices of London and their militant postures and the rest at certain times, but really they were very much a rump in a Cromwell army too – the only revolution we have ever had – we have to repeat that some time, and not just cut off a king's head but a lot of other heads too.

But it's a long history and it has nothing to do with chauvinism. It's just that you are pushed – or humanity is pushed, into a position that it must take a stand. And so there is so much to know about the history of the working class in Britain, both organised and in the process of being organised. Now our subject is the special nature. It's not unique, it's as I said very primitive, it's a division of them and us. Before Marx had his discussion with Weston about the size of the soup bowl and the spoon, this was already the subject of conflict between employer and employee or worker.

We are first of all the first proletariat out of the land. Before the enclosure acts, agricultural labourer was a proletarian. Now we're not discussing whether

they organised or whether they didn't, but they were organised in their separate parts and in an incipient way long before the Tolpuddle Martyrs. But the origins of the trade unions in Britain in terms of it having any cache any-place relates to the industrial revolution – that's when it began to take shape.

And no union, no combination of workers ever began nationally. It all began in parish, in village, in town, according to the history of mineral exploitation. It all began in relation to the development of industry, if we can jump the period about agricultural workers. And so first of all the trade unions of Britain in their origin are especially unique because they are a combination of those people according to a locality and a historical development. And they all of them when they gathered together were workmen or workwomen for that matter. And they all combined, and the history of the trade union in Britain is one of suspicion of those who do not work both out of their ranks. That's the enemy, the employer – and many of those in those days did work – the ironmaster etc. But above all, those whom they might in terms of growth come to employ in their unions or appoint or elect.

Now there's an interminable argument goes on around the world about the question of what's best about unions. Craft unions or industrial unions, that's a sophism an absolute sophism. The history of the unions is to do with the development of trade, that's all, one's ability to ply one's trade. And the earliest example of that capacity is the designation journeyman, that meant someone who moved from place to place and carried a bag with his tools. And it's a prefix that means they had some modicum of skill and were sought after. And so it's an idle debate in this land whether it's desirable to have industrial unions or whether it's desirable to have craft unions. Both in their essence are outmoded. The question is only shall workers combine against the employers – is it just a simple question of them and us?

So that if one examines the unions in Britain in their history of necessity, their origins are based in some modicum of skill. And therefore we are lampooned from time to time as that the unions are in origin the aristocrats of labour. Lenin said and Engels said it – they didn't know – quite wrong. The fact of the matter is that the first combination of workers was based on their capacity to fight, that's all. And if you were so naked as not to argue to bargain at all you were in a greater disadvantage than those who could do so. Just as I described the mason who said 'I will not pick up the stone, I am very skilled, I have dressed it but now my mate who's in the same club shall pick it

up.' And we don't have to have great big theories about it and interminable debates about it, what's progressive and what's reactionary. *We* have to understand the question of development, that's all.

If we start on the basis then that the unions never did develop nationally but parochially and according to the geography whether it be to do with water power if one relates to the textile industry or anywhere else, water being the first industry and so forth. One then comes back to the people involved, that is all. And if we just take the second question of names, personal names, person names – a wright – a man named wright – could be a wheelwright or a wainwright or anything, that's its origin. A smith, well everybody knows – a whitesmith, blacksmith, help yourself. Tanner, what's a tanner? To do with leather.

Now the earliest designation of craft skills in terms of unions was a millwright – to do with water power and wind. And today in craft unions especially our own which is ostensibly craft and industrial, because we're somewhat ashamed of saying our origins are craft because we have been indoctrinated and subjected to these kinds of pressures that we feel obliged to prove ourselves. I've never understood that. We have wheelwrights, fitters, turners and the like. It's all to do with only the development of the capacity to use some labour power that is all.

If one looks at the unions external to Britain then there is a different feature. First they are, of historical necessity, copies at best. They are lifts of what has happened in Britain. They are imposed in many ways and their characteristics are the very opposite of that which is the growth of unions in Britain. The unions in Britain were born in conspiracy, they took on all kinds of characteristics and all kinds of pseudonyms and names – there were clubs, there were societies, there were friendly societies, funeral societies, glee clubs and the rest because they would not say they were combined together to oppose the employer. Whereas in terms of other nations, however general it may sound – I'm ready to discuss this at great length but it can't be done this evening – they are imposed organs.

If one considers the USA, of the unions extant they are of themselves part and parcel of the system and they do not oppose it at all. They are either, if one examines how they conduct themselves, in favour of the Democrats or the Republicans, which is the same thing. And they give funds or they don't give funds, and if your name's Beck or Hoffa and Nixon is your friend you can be

released or if it's a Democrat then you will remain in prison and so forth.

Now that's not the origin of the US struggle of the working class at all. The distinction that I'm drawing is that the unions there have enslaved generally the workers in this form of pseudo-organisation. One has only to remember Knights of Labor in the US, the Brotherhood of Railways, their origin has now changed and now very reactionary, the IWW and Eugene Debs² and the rest. They started out with very different motives but now they are not the same.

Of the unions in the US by the way, and they all style themselves international – no doubt because they intrude into Canada to make that vassal – probably the union with the most prowess in terms of the ordinary economic struggle which is the origin of their purpose, is the machinists' union, which nobody ever hears about – the international machinists. The United Automobile Workers by the way have less to show in terms of its gain in plain vulgar economic return to the worker than almost any other union existing in the US. Of course I don't ask you to believe everything I say, I'm just saying what I know about that and you can dispute it.

If one goes to a place like France, in spite of the valiance of the working class (but we're not in a question of who is a better worker – is a French worker better than a Welsh worker? – that's not what it's all about, we're talking about historical development), if one goes to France, you find a fragmentation of organisation in terms of combination. What a mouthful that sounds. You've got a situation where the unions with the greatest prowess and the most power – I bet you didn't know – are company unions, they're company unions, not unions at all. You had originally three federations; they're still existing. Force Ouvrière after the war, with Force Ouvrière you've got the CFDT and CGT. And they're slowly, not the Force Ouvrière by the way, because every time I go to a meeting where they are they'll always object to the CGT and CFDT being sat down with them. But they are slowly coming together. But their greatest problem is company unions – and I'm talking about the motor industry even Chrysler and the rest there, Simca and so on. So it shows a question of very, very latent, very much backward development apropos a place like this place where we are.

If you take the question of the Italians. They had to struggle very valiantly since the war to try to secure some sort of unity amongst themselves and they started out with three federations, they've now got two and they sleep in each other's bed but they can't make up their mind whether they'll be married yet.

And so from time to time they come to meetings but equally they do not of themselves decide that unity must be an absolute. That's of course a bureaucracy structure – it is nothing to do with the workers. But if you take a survey of the USA, of the French working class, of the Italian working class, the terrifying thing is that though we have little to boast about and much to regret, in those nations their recruitment in terms of the proletariat is much more abysmal than our own. And we have to understand those kinds of things.

Now, in terms of the British unions, whether people accept it or not, they have a craft origin. And the coming together of the different strengths led slowly only to the erosion of one kind of trade to another. And out of necessity, because one becomes partly an anachronism then they begin to join together. So that at one stage for example the vehicle builders whose trade is very old – ever since wheels – coachbuilders' union found themselves in great difficulty because it wasn't wood any more and became to be part of metal and they then found that it was necessary to involve themselves with other unions such as metal.

Now of course you've got the situation where they are in demise and have joined the T&G or amalgamated therein. When anybody takes a measure of the trade unions in Britain, first start with the concept that it was a product of the workers involved alone. It has nothing to do with the TUC, a junta. It has nothing to do with this title General Workers, nothing at all. And there never was a national union in origin.

Now where a national union has happened in terms of from this day to the next, then it's an artificial growth. It springs from perhaps some do-goodism, some desire to do good or it even springs in some cases from sinister reason. You take the Grand Consolidated Union which to some extent is like a brain-child of Owen³ the Cooperative man, who was nowt else but a Bible-punching do-gooder anyway. It was a beautiful union, it grew very rapidly – some people say it was half a million in a year or a million – it was a phenomenal growth and it terminated in that time. Now that's sad, there's no pleasure about that – but you can't impose that development on a working class, they have to grow organically to it.

Because trade unionism means struggle, that's all it means. You never join a trade union as though it be a goose club and that at Christmas maybe you'll win the goose because you paid your contribution. On the contrary, you do pay a contribution, sometimes you could ask why, in terms of results too, that you

just don't join to take out but only to put in – that's a class understanding of something – that a person alone is vulnerable but altogether we could smash almost anything and everybody who opposes us, because they must be a minority if one considers the whole class relationship.

So if we come back to the point that they are not in origin national, then we have to accept that they have a beginning based on some reasons. The most articulate coming together would be those who were most able to argue, most able to demand something for their labour or labour power if you want to say it like Marx, one has got to be able to say it. In which case you must inevitably turn to those most developed and therefore they would be the first to do this joining together whether they be the masons of Wycliffe or not. There's just an ordinary development and we mustn't invent all kinds of special theories about it. It descends and comes solely from a class relationship question. There's no particular prowess that people belonging to a union as opposed to those that don't except that it means that those who first began it and those who belong are the most advanced and understand the relationship best. And it's very, very important to accept that kind of a position.

Now when you get an imposed development of general unions then you get a perversion of the question. I don't know if it's generally known but the origin of the general unions whether you talk of Municipal and General or more properly General and Municipal – originally M & G – did you know why they changed that? Do you not know? Well, m.u.g. means mug. No, no it's true. Don't you know about the brass and metal mechanics society? And then somebody said who belonged, that isn't brass a metal. So now they call it the metal mechanics society. You see that's a question of somebody thinking and becoming articulate and saying well, whether it's ferrous or non-ferrous, it's still a metal so why do we say brass and metal? And so in the Municipal and General which is in origin the gasworkers – Will Thorn. Don't let's call it m.u.g., let's call it G & M, because all them craft bastard aristocrats keep calling us the mugs. And then the other one was the tugs, t.u.g., Transport and General. So, that's a kind of an epithet which is not kind, and we deserve a place in the scheme of things, so let's not have Municipal and General let's have General and Municipal.

Now these unions have a very artificial origin. They came about out of the cowardice of those who'd already begun to walk, that's like the craft origin of unions, and who decided that, well since we can do that it would be too bad

if everyone could do the same. Because how can we have any prowess if everyone else walks like us. So they would not organise anyone else or go and proselyte the idea that what's good for me is good for you too. And so they shrouded themselves in all kinds of concepts and built a wall based on craft, which is the argument politically used against craft unions. But it has no base, it's just a question of dispelling ignorance, that's all. They built themselves a kind of shroud that's all. You can't belong unless you are time served etc, etc. And they didn't have the understanding that if you build a wall to keep people out, you also keep yourself in. And it took them a long while to understand that part of the process.

But among them were some who think they were very advanced whether their name be Tom Mann or Ben Tillet or John Burns. And they went to this 'unwashed mass' who worked in gas or in the docks, the casual worker actually if you understand the history of London industry. And they said – I may sound very cynical, but I am very angry about what happened there – 'well, we've come to save you from yourselves. We will have a union and we will organise you all into a union' where instead of permitting the people to work it out for themselves; and when you examine the general unions and the national unions which have developed in this way you will find a frightening characteristic.

A lack of control of those who belong to it; if you analyse the unions which are general you will find if they have elections at all for anyone to serve in it then perhaps it's only the general secretary and it's for all time. If they have an executive – well, as long as he lives. You know they could assassinate him, but ... If they have an executive, it's a lay executive, because that's more democratic than any other kind and you can change them and really after all since the general sec. is there every day he must know much more – he doesn't even need to tell the executive very much either. So they will have to agree with him or else defy him (be fired?) These unions are an artificial growth which will yet have to be changed and they are in the process of change.

You come to the original unions whether they be the boilermakers, the sheetmetal workers, the vehicle builders, the coach builders, the textile workers, the loom and shuttle and the wift and waft unions and the rest, you'll find that it's the very opposite. First of all they had no grandiose notion at all. They didn't even call themselves national. They call themselves the steam

engine makers. Now that shows how many of them were, because that union goes back to about 1774. Everybody says, well, who discovered steam? Watt.⁴ It's not true if you look at history. What he did is found out, him and his mate, about a condenser. We don't want to go into that but there were a lot of steam engines long before Watt.

But the steam engine makers was a very, very small secular society based in two parts of this country. And they all worked at the trade, and when they got big enough, they said, well we can't keep counting up the contributions and looking after them and we must have a secretary or whatever. And the condition of the growth of these unions is an absolute suspicion of anyone who doesn't make steam engines and go to work every day. That's the origins of those unions, which in the continent and elsewhere they constantly want to deride as craft unions. The fact that they are in the process of change and are being corrupted is to do with the lack of the exercise of democracy of a mass who belong, that is all.

If you examine the ASE, the Associated Society of Engineers, which is an amalgam of an awful lot of unions coming out of the industrial revolution that is after 1800 in the 19th century and thereafter, as an amalgam of unions, you'll find that running through all their approaches is that only those who work shall control. This is carried forward into the question, for example, of the AEU which is now changed again but that's not important. And it's true of the boilermakers which is now an amalgam of all manner of crafts – shipwrights, wainwrights and the rest. And other unions like the sheetmetal workers which is now an awful name – it's the sheetmetal heating and domestic coppersmiths and I forget now – no one ever knows how to say that.

You take the electrical union, the sad thing about the electrical union is to do with the ignorance of the craftsman. When electricity came to be in commercial use – you know, not invented but discovered then applied, those people involved were just basically ordinary people. In such a union as the AEU, at the time ASE. And they came to the engineers' union of the time and said, let us join. Now the craftsmen of that time were still busy building their little wall and keeping everybody away – in spite of the fact that it isn't going to be steam it's going to be electricity – perhaps they were afraid and said you can't belong to us, and so they started their own union.

Now when you come to the question of the national versus the craft, you must look at the various constitutions of these unions, and you will see that in

all the craft unions however they are denigrated as reactionary the first question is, who controls? Who runs the union? If you take a union like the AEU if I can use that, you have a situation that in origins changing but in every branch. First, you can't join the union unless you're working at the trade, can't join if unemployed. You've got to have a job. That's the first question. The reason why you then join is that you'll do some good about recruiting someone else. Secondly, in the branch which is the base, no one can go and no one can be an officer except they work at the trade, that's the phrase, working at the trade.

Then they have what they call the district committee. Now the district committee is an amalgam according to the parish, the village, its town, district being a district of course according to the district. All those branches and all those factories and all those places of work and all the members therein. No one can be on that body except that they work in that district, work meaning you're actually in some kind of factory there. And your job is to review the wages and working conditions of that area. And you instruct this full time official who is elected in this AEU. For example no officer is other than elected and periodically elected. No appointment. You tell him or them what's right to be done and what shall not be accepted.

Furthermore you can't take a decision all the district we'll all have a strike except you're involved because you work in that district. In other words you can't work in Bolton and belong to the Accrington district committee and tell all the poor bastards in Accrington they've all got to stop work but you can go tomorrow morning and work in Bolton making a spindle or something for some textile machine. You personally have to act in that decision. That's the question.

Now, in the same structure you have what's called a national committee. Now that's like the last word, that's the policy making body. In this case it's 52 people drawn from everywhere in the country. They come from Aberdeen and they come from London or they come from Plymouth. And they're elected through a kind of collegiate process from the district to the division to the national, 52 only. Their qualification is they are working at the trade. And they say to the executive of which there only seven, you are instructed. They don't ask them whether they want to be, they say, you are instructed to go and get £10 a week increase or whatever. They have to accept.

Equally the decision is not only binding and must apply – the question of

if you get the £10 or not is another question – but you've got to report back and say, we could only get 4 but that's another question. It's binding on the EC but binding on all members too. That's why you've got the situation where that body had said, we're against the Industrial Relations Act and therefore when the EC said all members without exception shall stop work, that was operating that policy and it was binding on all and no one could say, well, I don't really agree I'm in favour of the Industrial Relations Act.

Now, they've also got another body, the final appeals court. And that body is made up of eleven which elected, must work at the trade. They don't half give themselves airs sometimes – they really think they're judges sometimes – I think they should wear wigs, I used to sit on that body. But, they will say, was the decision of the Executive Council correct or incorrect when a member feels grieved. Now they're so democratic mad, and I had to say this in a Glasgow court, Monday, that it says in the book, any member feeling aggrieved, any person on behalf of any member feeling aggrieved, or any person feeling aggrieved shall appeal to that final court whose decision shall be final and binding.

Now none of that's got any particular virtues, it's egalitarianism gone mad. But it also works and it's a great protection against bureaucracy. What I'm trying to say is that because of the organic growth from small place, it says we all know each other, we all work together, we can trust each other, but soever we will elect anyone or appoint anyone we don't know it shall be done under the maximum suspicion and overall control. That anybody who don't belong must be a rat unless we keep them in line, is a very fine ethic you know.

Now, you don't find that abroad or in this national structure you know which is imposed. And so the unions in Britain are very specially unique. Now I remember at some kind of international automobile conference, the international metalworkers something or other, and the Yank unions were there see, and they were discussing the harmonisation – I always thought that was to do with music actually – that the harmonisation of contract dates – in England we never talk about contract by the way, we have agreements – but they said the harmonisation of contract dates, and Walter Reuther's concept was that if only we could get every Ford establishment throughout the world all terminating and commencing a contract on that date, couldn't we give Ford a hiding. Because it all finished on March 31st – they do stop on that day, don't they? – and on April 1st we're all going to make a new contract or we won't and

then we'll stop the whole lot. An absolute negation of struggle because after all a bloke could know that would happen.

It might be better that he'd never know when you're at work and when you're not at work, that's the English way, and the British way. So he's talking about harmonisation and I said, 'well, it wouldn't be so bad if you got the English disease, where an agreement is but an armistice and we have a war the following day.' And he said, 'anyone could have a strike, anyone can have a strike. All you have to do is wave your arms.' Now I've never heard of anyone having a strike by waving their arms!

The undemocratic thing about it by the way is you don't get the wives and kids there to discuss it as well. That's the fascist male. When it's men, because he goes home afterwards and says I'm on strike, but he never asks her or the children. But this approach of a Yank – all you have to do is wave your hands – think about that in the question of unique character of one union as against another. That the working class in some places are autonomous – that we shall make a contract be it for a year or be it for three years and we solemnly swear to Henry Ford, Chryslers, General Motors, you take your help, Gompers or who you like. We shall agree we shall work for four dollars an hour or one dollar an hour for three years – this is our contract.

What does it make a union when the worker in that place, just one, or maybe the whole toolroom or all the labourers – they call them janitors when they clean lavatories in the Yank – they say we want ten cents more – you already signed a contract so you now got to go as a union and hit them on the head and say you mustn't have that ten cent, because we have signed a contract for three years? You never see that in this country.

Now no matter how much a Jack Jones or a Basnett and all them other people, we are trying to say it will never work in our place. We will always say we want more. But understand this, it's not a boast, it's one of the saddest things in our country that our people economically can have such skills and be so advanced and they have never yet come to the understanding that it's not another rouble at all.

It's nothing at all to do with fighting for two rolls of bread instead of one. We have got to take the bakery. And in that respect until we properly put this in their elementary position, then there will not be an advance. On the contrary, William Morris⁵ wrote if you remember, something about revolution and reformism: 'one would need to ask the question to the extent of the

ability and the prowess of workers gathered together in combination in unions in behalf of reform and improvement to what extent they are holding back the basic task of taking the whole altogether. ...

We're all workers, so quoting from a book and incidentally I've got the best book in terms of structure of the trade unions you'll ever read, it's pre-Lenin, it's the AEU rule book. And if the people who belong to it would apply we'd take this country over, not only the union. But I don't want to weary you with that. But to quote from a book and argue so – trade unions are not even defensive, I don't accept that. It depends who you are and why you belong. After all, you want a job and the condition of employment like in Fleet Street is you got to belong to a union. You go and see your cousin or uncle in some cases and say will you put my name down in their graphical engraving society, and it's a kind of family thing, a bit of nepotism.

But the struggle of print workers is a most heroic struggle. Now, having won it, a lot of people would like to work in print, that's all that proves, and that they weren't defensive they were aggressive. But they weren't aggressive enough. They never said, we won't have any press barons, we'll run our own paper. Even though once in 1926 they said we won't print those lies and precipitated in the *Mail* a showdown in a General Strike.

But if you say they're not even defensive I don't quite know – it's just a polemical question. Now perhaps it's a retort when I say they're not revolutionary. But I tried to sketch their organic development, that they were defensive. If you say that some unions, or rather not the membership but some persons within it who claim an authority which the mass permit them to take – it's their fault, by the way, the members want not to fight – well that's obvious but I don't quite know what you'd be proving – only that the people who belong to the union there want their brains testing, and it's about time they kicked the bloke out, whoever it is.

And having said that it's a fault, where does it leave you? You've got to go back to the people who are there and say there's nothing right about that. But of course the thought is that what we ought to do is not have any trade unions because they are in fact reactionary – that's just nonsense. What's the alternative? Non-unionism's progressive? Well I've never heard such rubbish. So that most workers have learned that it's better to belong than to be alone. And what they're really saying is, I'm not very big – and I'm not personally physically – it's much better to belong to an outfit where you've got some big

blokes around you, so that's why they joined. Now, if you say that's a rather non-altruistic device, well, who said we're all Jesus Christ? I'm not so that doesn't get us very far!

If you say, so muddled is the political understanding of our working class which should be the most advanced and the most erudite out of history, because they're the first, to be able to read and write, by the way. So whatever lies they believe it's because they basically accept that they can find the contradiction in another place another book then there's a question which has got to be discussed. Why, for example, would workers in mass say passively, in passivity that a clot like Len Murray or Scanlon or Gill or whoever you like can get up there and say, 'we won't oppose the Social Contract' because they say secretly 'oh, it's alright for you but not for me and when I go back to work I'm going to change it' which they proceed to do whether it's Fords or somewhere else. It's intellectual cheating, intellectual dishonesty, that is not a political position. And what they are discussing is that they are not political because they are in a union. Well who's ramming who here? I never said they were, did I?

If you want to discuss that it's said, Mao says that the proletariat are the liberating force, who's arguing with who here? We never said they weren't. Our problem here is that they don't want to liberate their bloody selves yet and we all agree it's about time they started to do it. I think that's what we agree. If we say that they're only part of the international proletariat, what kind of a profundity is that? Who said that there's only one kind of working class, some bloke who lives in London? We know there's a Bombay and a Bangkok and a Singapore and all those other places and that there are proletarians there. So we don't have any disagreement at all.

Then if we come to the question of why no revolution in Britain, if only I could answer that! ... If only we could change this intellectual understanding, because there's certainly a revolutionary situation in this country – in paradox and contradiction that the only thing that's lacking is the understanding of the working class that that's what it is. If they knew, if they would only work it out, if they would listen to Marxism-Leninism, if they would only be Marxist-Leninists, not in mass but the most advanced, then they would change it tomorrow, everybody knows.

This bourgeoisie is in the biggest pickle it's ever been in. And what it wants to do is have you in the mustard jar, and in which case that's why there ain't a revolution. And it's nothing to do with whether Mao says you're a liberating

force – if you don't want to liberate you ain't a force. And it's nothing at all to do with Marx saying unless you liberate the colonial people you can't liberate yourselves. First of all it's both a truism and it's about the most acme of patronage I've ever heard in my damn life. First of all the colonial workers have got to liberate their damn selves.

Our problem is to liberate us and if we'll do that maybe we will remove the restraints on a lot of others which were imposed out of our passivity in such places as the so-called colonies, one thing about internationalism is that the best contribution you can make is to struggle where you live and overthrow that ruling class which in fact perpetuates colonialism both upon you if you want to call yourself a colonialist ... or a national or indigenous or some other thing. Now that's not to dodge the question that there's a solidarity and an international understanding among a proletariat and that therefore we must join together in all our struggles. But you don't substitute one's conscience in a place of work which makes you a wage slave and sweatshop worker by saying well I'll go on that demo about some worker in Bangladesh if you work in London. What you better do is do something about burning that factory where you're a sweatshop worker. And then after you've got it well alight you can go up at night and go on the demo about the people in Bangladesh.

So don't evade your responsibility where you are and don't think by seeming revolutionary phrases it avoids you from the normal arduous of the class war wherever you are and wherever you work. I've never thought anybody was very revolutionary who's much better than I am at quoting Lenin but ain't in a union and don't fight the boss where they work. So that doesn't really advance much. I don't accept the phrase 'impotence' of the British worker. I think they're far from impotent, I just wish they wouldn't keep using contraceptives when they want to procreate. And they then produce their revolution.

As for Marx and the question of the liberation of the colonies which I already dealt with – well after all Marx was writing in his period, Marx even said that Germany would be the first to have a revolution, this doesn't mean that Marx and his science was wrong. It really means we should be a little bit careful about saying what someone else is going to do other than what you're going to do yourself, that's all it means. And that, although dialectically that was on the cards it didn't work out that way.

After all Marx didn't know much about Noske⁶ and Scheidemann⁷ that was after him. He didn't know about the Freikorps – he didn't know that they were

going to chuck Rosa Luxemburg⁸ and Liebknecht⁹ in the bloody canal did he. But that wasn't the reason why they didn't have a revolution and if anybody believes it's a blueprint and a calendar and all you have to do is say on what day will the people get mad enough to cut the head off capitalism then I think they're daft.

It's a question of a development and a struggle and once it starts we we're never too sure of the zigzags that are involved and the success. What we have to do is be sure there is nowhere else to go and there is no retreat. If we wanted to acknowledge Marx and give him honour, he described the question of the Paris Commune and he was talking about it and he said, 'well, an uprising is a very, very responsible act, since they've begun we've all got to belong.' Now that's one question you all should think about rather than thinking it's like the ten commandments – some of you sound to me like Christians, thou shalt not kill and so on. It's not like that at all and you can't have a bible about it. What you've got to do is get on with it.

If we would consider the position of the British working class there is no excuse whatsoever for the backwardness of the British proletariat, none at all – except they have not accepted – on the contrary, they intellectually and consciously reject the path of revolution – they reject Marxism-Leninism. Now there are millions of historical reasons why they have taken to that confusion, but also they have consciously done it, and our job is to have that intellectual dialogue with them that will change that rejection. And you won't do that by quoting clichés, lifting extracts and saying this is it. You can only do it by being of them, working with them, struggling with them and making everybody understand there's no prospect in reformism whatsoever, only in revolution.

Now, so we don't in the rest of the meeting hurl at each other various quotes about what somebody says, let us discuss Britain. And the nature of this debate was the peculiar, the singular, the odd, the special nature of British trade unionism. It wasn't to do with what Mao said anyhow. I don't mind having a discussion about what Mao says but let's have a meeting with Mao. ...

Let's take the question about the Labour Party. The most heinous thing that the trade unions and that's the false thing they made it up, the workers, that they ever did was to form the Labour Party. That was the worst thing they ever did and that was a conscious decision not to go for revolution – took a parliamentary road. There are reasons and are historical reasons of their development in accepting it. You remember the 55 that got elected on the

Labour Representation Committee were Whigs and Tories – liberal and conservative if you like. And so after that, after that bloke went with his cloth cap – you remember Keir Hardie¹⁰ – then they had a Labour Party.

But that's one of the worst features – it was the turning away from the fact that in almost every union, craft ones I'm talking about, the beginnings rather than national, but even in the national if you took in the municipal union and even the T&G – I don't know if Jack Jones has rewritten it now – you'll see that it has some avowed socialist aim. For example in this one it says the control of industry in the interests of the community, which is about the softest footest way anyone could ever have spelled out snatching the means of production and keeping it for yourself. But they said in the interests of the community and I'm not quite sure who that was, but incidentally that was written by Hughes¹¹ who wrote *Tom Brown's School Days* – you see this shows you how the intellectuals helped the proletariat from time to time.

But the question of the Labour Party is nothing in terms of the trade unions inventing it, creating it, is nothing but a dead weight on the working class. And it wouldn't survive a day if the trade unions would withdraw its finances which is approximately 92%, maybe more of the finances. Wilson would have to roll fags instead of smoking a pipe.

As for the TUC, there's a lot of confusion about the origin of the TUC. And if you talk to a bloke from Manchester he'll almost have a fight with you, because the first meeting which promulgated the idea was in Manchester. And if the Manchester working class want to stick out their chest and say 'we created the TUC' that's about the last recommendation I could ever have for talking to a bloke from Manchester. But in point of fact it wasn't anything of the sort, it was started in London by a junta, cockneys are always the biggest bastards you know – no they really are – they're the sharpest chickens, even though they're provincials who came down to learn my dialect. Allan and Newton and a lot of others got together and they said, 'well it has been developed historically. Wouldn't it be a good idea if we all sat together and confabulated with each other. I mean who can oppose such a unity?' That really wasn't why they did it!

The origin of it was that these different outfits are getting a bit out of hand. They're all following their separate guerrilla ways and their piratical behaviours and the only way to keep them in hand and discipline them is to have another conference and we'll set up what is called the TUC. They didn't

do it like that. What they did is to set up a junta to develop the notion of a TUC which they then held – a kind of provisional meeting in Manchester. In terms of what they've ever done, they did what they do because we're so idle. They are nothing to do with the working class, and not very much to do with the unions. The unions ostensibly do elect the General Council gathered there. It's a club like whether you're in the junior Carlton or the Carlton, you know you could be in the Athenaeum. And so they gather there and they elect that General Council and over a passage of time they have come to be that voice of organised working class that the government will deign to speak to.

So they have a cachet, they have an importance out of all relation to anything they can or cannot do. Since they never want to do anything it doesn't matter very much, except it's a great danger because they have this artificial authority. And if you look at the constitution, they have no authority at all. Every union, and there's a union in there which has fifty members by the way, that doesn't mean you should take a rise out of it you know, that means it's irrelevant that's all. In the TUC there's a union of only fifty members and they're affiliated. I think that's how they like to fill in the year.

Now, every union's autonomous, and no congress and no TUC and no Len Murray – it seems they drag them out of the wainscot – can tell them what shall be done. But the rub of it is that those coming from the unions, whether they be the presidents or general secretaries and the like, whether their name's Basnett, Scanlon, Jones, help yourself, Deakin, Bevin, that's a bit before your time, huh, and the rest. Thomas, you remember Thomas, J. H. Thomas – he found out about the budget box and leaked it.

All those people sit there and say such and such and such shall be or not be, and they talk to cabinet ministers and the like, and then when their members say, 'how did you come to that this day?' they say, 'but I'm there in my own right, I ain't there as a rep of the AEU, I'm not there as a rep of the NUR.' Jack Tanner used to say that or Carron if you remember. So, but that's not the point. The point is he's elected. Now the answer isn't of course that you just go and say, 'smash down the TUC.' What you've got to have is a congress, a soviet, a gathering, a constituent assembly of those people who are part of the whole and have the authority enough to say. ...

Supposing you withdraw your labour when the bloke says I'm going to shut it. What's the point of that? What you've got to do is stay inside and say, 'you ain't going to shut it.' Wouldn't be the first time you have the debate whether

you're going to go on strike because he wants to declare a department redundant and there's more to come, or whether you're going to say, 'No one's going to be sacked and we claim the right to work.' All those are reformist skirmishes, but they all have a political content. People get confused and say we must put the politics in, that's a very patronising kind of thing. You must convert the economic into explaining the class relationship in order to advance through political action. You must expose the role of the state, you must exploit the role of capitalism in the whole rather than in part alone.

And these are the things that have got to be done and can only be done by an organised party which says it is for revolution. It doesn't then content itself with crawling along behind some struggles of the workers and saying hooray or even printing leaflets for them. So that maybe the workers can say, 'well those there communists aren't bad people after all, they did help us when we were in the rain, they even stood on the picket with us.' That's nonsense. What has got to be done is to explain that all struggles are very, very arduous for the working class. And fundamentally it's not much harder to take the whole than ask for a pound. Because the employer will never give you a pound easily. He will make all the people who demand it make the greatest sacrifice to get it for him.

Now of course, revolution demands more than that, it demands such conviction that you not only know what it is that you are fighting for but you are even ready, some of you, to die for it. And there has never been a revolution where that didn't demand that. Of course in terms of analyzing revolution, historians from time to time have explained what an awful bloodbath it was. But very few historians explain that the bloodbath before by the bourgeoisie, and the counterrevolutionary bloodbath when the revolutionaries have lost, has been much greater than anything revolutionaries ever did in that violent struggle.

So you must accept the idea that there is no morality of bourgeois in such a struggle – it's violent and we must win. And it's no good saying, 'I didn't really mean to hit you.' You've got to hit very hard and make sure they go down instead of you. Now this is an ideological thing, because fundamentally almost all people in society are essentially peaceful. If you are running for the train in the tube and someone stands on your corn, almost involuntarily you will say, 'I'm sorry'. Now that's a kind of a social more. Actually we have got to learn not only to stand on their foot, but chop their foot off and not say 'I'm

sorry', but say, 'put out the other one and I'll chop that off too.' Now this is a question of understanding relationships. I know I'm making a kind of a joke about it. But it's very important that we know that sort of thing.

Now if you say, being Britain it will be the first revolutionary, if it will be it will be the first revolution in an industrial capital country because there hasn't been one yet. If we analyse where revolutions have taken place, they have not taken place in highly developed bourgeois power structures at all. And there are many reasons why some factors have come to operate which have accelerated the contradictions – such as war, occupation and the rest, even geography as well – so for us to say what will happen in Britain, as a matter of fact if you think about the prospects it's both very, very positive but also quite terrifying, because here in Britain this is really you know not much of a country, it's really practically an aircraft carrier of counter revolution of the world capitalist society.

So once you begin there will be no drawing back you know – otherwise we're all going to be killed. See we must take a stand. And we mustn't think the rest of the workers are all stupid and they don't know or you can keep coddling – all you got to do boys is burn down Buckingham Palace and we won't have a monarchy, and we'll have smuggled in revolution under the door. And then we can say we now declare the dictatorship of the proletariat but you didn't know that's what we were about. It won't be a conspiracy of the workers – they must be the people who will do it.

And this is the problem because the fact of the matter is that they have consciously decided at this time it's easier not to do that. And our function intellectually is to explain that it's not so. Those who live for peace today will have a bigger war tomorrow to face. The moderate of today is the person who creates the reaction of tomorrow always. You put off a problem which you can't deal with, or you're afraid to – it's worse the next day, always worse. The essence of a Bolshevik is to act first – then you legislate afterwards, and this we have to say to our own mates because they're not stupid. What they're really saying is we accept it, but it's not for me – you can do it. Well we cannot do it just ourselves – and they want to know if we'll work properly and that's why you must have a party which is revolutionary.

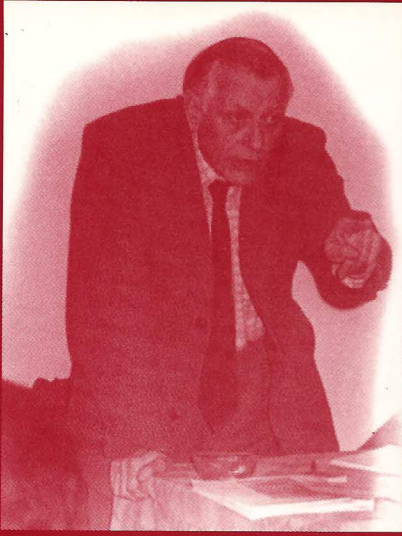
If you talk about the CPGB, first of all its origins are somewhat artificial. Secondly it was like so many other things born out of the general social structure of this country including social democracy. It felt so alone, so afraid,

from its very beginning it constantly wooed this big battalion, the social democratic party. ... It said, 'can we be affiliated?' – even got to be, and got expelled. And so that shows a rejection of a revolutionary road – and it's a very long history about this. That is not to say that from time to time in the history of that struggle that were many class conscious workers who struggled very hard and very heroically, but it was no way and no answer.

In which case we have got to accept first of all that the trade unions have a use and they ARE an organic growth of a class. There are trade unions because there's a working class, there's only a working class because there's a capitalist class. And you don't have to have great big theories about it. It's ordinary and it happens. Secondly it has nothing to do with the conquest of power. It accepts the situation and says, 'let us see how we can defend ourselves.' Thirdly the way to change it is to say we're opposed to that opposite class, we shall destroy it and we will create the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Notes

1. John Wycliffe (1329-84), scholar and reformer.
2. Eugene Debs (1855-1926), US socialist, President of the American Railway Union 1893-97.
3. Robert Owen (1771-1858), businessman and philanthropist.
4. James Watt (1736-1819), engineer. 'In 1765 he constructed the first steam engine to have a separate condenser.' The new illustrated everyman's encyclopaedia, Dent, 1985, page 1673.
5. William Morris (1834-96), artist, poet and member of the Socialist League 1884-90.
6. Gustav Noske (1868-1946), German Social Democrat Party member of the Reichstag 1906-20, military governor of Berlin 1918-19, recruited the Freikorps to crush the Spartacists.
7. Phillip Scheidemann (1865-1939), German Social Democrat Party member of the Reichstag 1903-19, government minister 1918-19.
8. Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919), German revolutionary.
9. Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919), German revolutionary.
10. Keir Hardie (1856-1915), first chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party.
11. Thomas Hughes (1822-96), novelist, author of Tom Brown's school days (1857), MP 1865-74.



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