

A Brief History of Rank and File Movements

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Contemporary Marxists justify their continuing advocacy of independent rank and file movements in trade unions by over-optimistic readings of history. The past, it is commonly concluded, reveals a prefigurative model which suitably finessed can serve as the basis for future endeavour. Historical excavation raises doubts about this approach and discloses that the concept of a revolutionary rank and file movement, and how it should operate in practice, are problematic. The rationale for these movements rests on the unverified assertion of a fundamental structural antagonism between the trade union bureaucracy and an artificially homogenized membership. There were significant differences between the philosophy, politics and organisation of the Shop Stewards' Movement of the Great War, the National Minority Movement of the 1920s and subsequent rank and file initiatives from the 1930s to the 1970s. Taken together, they do not constitute a unified composite, still less a blueprint for any future movement. Each was flawed, particularly by adaptation to trade unionism and Russian policy. All were less successful than is sometimes assumed. Members' dissatisfaction and periodic rebellion were recurring features of British trade unionism. However, support for rank and file movements was sporadic, uneven and temporary. Sustained organisation was typically motivated, moulded and controlled by the Communist Party. Its hegemony was far from benign and remained at some distance from Marxist ideas of revolutionary practice. The lessons are often negative. Any future project will require rupture with the past rather than its renewal.

Keywords: Rank and File Movements; Trade Unions; Shop Stewards; Communist Party; Comintern; National Minority Movement; Marxism; Economism.

The question of whether trade unionism can be convincingly characterised as fissured by an embedded conflict of interest between the bureaucracy and the 'rank and file' has stimulated extensive debate.¹ Rank and file movements based on that conception have attracted less frequent examination, although for much of the last century they were an aspect of industrial struggle in Britain and a weapon in the armoury of socialist trade unionists. The idea endures. Discussing a possible revival of trade unionism, one Marxist argued in 2014, '...we would ideally like to see a militant national rank and file movement able to act independently of the

¹ For the arguments and the literature, see John McIlroy, 'Marxism and the Trade Unions: The Bureaucracy versus the Rank and File Debate Revisited', *Critique*, 42: 4 (2014), pp. 497-526.

union bureaucracy...'² A hospital nurse, criticising the devastation of the NHS, '...urged workers to join a union and build a rank and file movement.'³

By the 1970s, a small literature had emerged. It included monographs on the National Minority Movement (MM) of the 1920s, written from a reformist standpoint, and the Shop Stewards' Movement (SSWCM) of the Great War, informed by a Marxist perspective.⁴ Pearce's pioneering essay remained the solitary overview of developments between 1900 and 1940.⁵ The historiography was augmented in the 1980s.⁶ Little substantial has appeared since, indeed the last 30 years have seen inadequate reconsideration of the literature.

Attention to the subject has typically turned on historical allusion or selective accounts which freight assumptions that the past contains a model which can and should be emulated in the future.⁷ This article seeks to revive more critical analysis. My argument is that interrogation of the history of rank and file movements discloses diversity, qualifies belief in a prototype,

² Ralph Darlington, 'The Rank and File and the Trade Union Bureaucracy', *International Socialism*, 142 (2014), p. 58. C.f. '...it is still both possible and necessary to agitate for, and to take the first steps towards, an independent rank and file movement.' www.fifthinternational.org/content/rank-and-file-movements-great-debate (Jeremy Dewar)

³ *Morning Star*, 27 July 2015.

⁴ Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933: A Study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). See also Branko Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959); Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1969). In contrast with Martin's politically-orthodox study, James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975) contributed an innovative Marxist analysis of the MM.

⁵ Brian Pearce, 'Some Past Rank and File Movements' in Michael Woodhouse and Brian Pearce, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain* (London: New Park, 1975 [1959]), pp. 105-135.

⁶ Van Gore, 'Rank and File Dissent' in C. J. Wrigley, ed, *A History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 47-73; Richard Hyman, 'Rank and File Movements and Workplace Organisation 1914-39' in C. J. Wrigley, ed, *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1914-1939* (Brighton Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 128-158; Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *Marxism and Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926* (London: Bookmarks, 1986).

⁷ See, for example, Martin Smith, 'The Return of the Rank and File?' *International Socialism*, 94 (2002), pp.64-70; Cathy Nugent, 'The Rank and File Movement We Need', <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/239/17>; Darlington, pp. 66-67, 75-77; Mark O'Brien, 'The Problem of the One Day Strike', *International Socialism*, 142 (2014), pp. 169-171. Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) offers a more detailed account of the SSWCM in a similar vein.

provokes doubts about their achievement, and exposes a number of issues, particularly questions about the programme, democracy and relationship to the party of these movements, which have received insufficient attention. My survey begins by discussing the concept and some of the difficulties with it. It suggests that the ideas of the early Comintern provided a starting point. They were open to interpretation, the test of practice, and the temptations of economism; they were flawed by restricted understanding of the class struggle in Britain and undermined by increasing subordination of the Comintern to the policies of the Russian state. In that light, the paper proceeds to examine the record of the SSWCM, MM and the rank and file movements of the 1930s and beyond in order to explore what they tell us about these problems. The article closes with tentative reflections on the experience in relation to Marxist approaches to trade unionism.

Some Problems of Rank and File Movements

The term ‘rank and file’ derives from the ‘ranks’ of soldiers arrayed side-by-side and the ‘files’ ranged one behind the other in military formation. It was applied to ‘the common soldiery’ including non-commissioned officers but excluding officers who received their commission from the state. It was extended metaphorically to ‘the following in a movement, as distinct from its leaders...ordinary people, those in an organisation not involved in its management.’⁸ When the pioneers of the labour movement appropriated the military image, they imported a vision of order, unity, purpose, discipline and power. They also annexed conceptions of hierarchy and potential conflict between a privileged ‘officer class’, and a ‘rank and file’, excluded from decision-making. Socialists prefixed the appellation to oppositional movements, asserting their legitimacy and implying they represented or epitomised majority interests. Experience demonstrated that the epithet elided the

⁸ *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 17th edition (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005); *Chambers’ Dictionary*, 9th ed, (London: Chambers, 2003).

heterogeneity of the working class and masked segmentation based on skill, occupation, income, geography, gender, religion, politics, and consciousness.⁹ Downplaying differentiation could impede confronting and resolving difficulties in mobilising discrepant groups.

Practice contradicted rhetoric. Rank and file movements appealed to militants, socialists, organisers, leaders, crucial to engaging wider groups. The Webbs highlighted the importance of ‘...the most active soldiers and non-commissioned officers who constitute the most vital element of the trade union army.’¹⁰ Historians stressed the significance of what has sometimes been seen as ‘the real rank and file’, branch committee members, shop stewards, trades council representatives, a layer which ‘...stands at a strategic point within the working class. It transmits the impulses that come through the movement from its leadership and from society as a whole... it absorbs the influences that alter the outlook of working people and reflects their changing moods and aspirations.’¹¹ Rank and file movements have hinged on such people. By 1914, there was recognition they had to initially enrol ‘the militant minority’ who possessed the ability to activate and enlist ‘the timid majority.’¹² Nonetheless, the terminology continued to constitute a partial and partisan classification. It excluded, for example, union rebellions and independent workers’ self-activity which sometimes resulted in breakaway unions but could not be comfortably pressed into a militant or leftwing mould.¹³ The designation was reserved for independent organisation from below, typically

⁹ Gore, pp. 50-60; McIlroy, ‘Marxism’, pp. 515-516.

¹⁰ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans Green, 1894), p. 476.

¹¹ Alan Clinton, *The Trade Union Rank and File: Trades Councils in Britain, 1900-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 1-2.

¹² Geoff Brown, *Sabotage* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1977), p. 28.

¹³ In 2014, for example, the Revenue and Customs Trade Union seceded from the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), claiming it was too militant and left wing: *Labour Research*, April 2015. For the historical experience, see, Shirley Lerner, *Breakaway Unions and the Small Trade Union* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961); Tony Lane and Ken Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons* (London: Fontana, 1971).

inspired or led by socialists, which challenged officialdom in order to engineer radical left-wing innovation within existing unions.

Rank and file movements emerged as a response to changes in industrial relations and society, to the increased size, centralisation and bureaucratisation of unions; national collective bargaining challenging local and workplace autonomy; incipient links with the state; and sharpening discontent with officials.¹⁴ ‘The Great Unrest’ of 1910-1914 generated organisations in a syndicalist mode.¹⁵ The *Miners’ Next Step*, the manifesto of the South Wales Miners’ Reform Committee, was infused with syndicalist suspicions of leadership and insistence on rank and file initiative. It emphasised economic demands intended to ‘ginger up’ the union leaders, and a democratised national miners’ union. An industrial union would expropriate the coalowners, introduce workers’ control and pioneer self-management across industry, coordinated by a Central Production Board.¹⁶ The Amalgamation Committees, largely limited to engineering, were described by G.D.H. Cole as ‘...for the most part a “rank and file” movement of a left-wing character, keenly critical of the attitude and conduct of the permanent trade union officials.’¹⁷ Mergers would unite workers in industrial unions and a general strike would secure possession of the means of production, distribution and exchange.¹⁸ The SSWCM leadership, in contrast, began to transcend syndicalism. The Bolsheviks welcomed the movement: ‘Lenin saw in the shop stewards the leaders who

¹⁴ Keith Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Pearce, pp. 105-113.; Gore, pp. 66-70.

¹⁵ Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900-1914* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Darlington, *Syndicalism*, pp. 223-226.

¹⁶ The South Wales Miners’ Unofficial Reform Committee, *The Miners’ Next Step* (London: Pluto Press, 1973 [1912]).

¹⁷ G. D. H. Cole, *Workshop Organisation* (London: Hutchinson, 1973 [1923]), p. 17.

¹⁸ Pribicevic, pp. 65-82.

represented the authentic voice of working class revolt in Britain.¹⁹ Rank and filism commenced to penetrate the Marxist mainstream:

That the rank and file of the workers, in spite of the long traditions of trade unionism, are gradually becoming aware of the inadequacies of their trade unions in modern class warfare, is clear from the rise and spread of the shop stewards' and workers' committee movement. It should be our business to encourage and foster this movement... We must propagate the idea of the rank and file organisations.²⁰

Syndicalism emphasised officials' estrangement from members' aspirations and the transformation of a restructured, member-controlled trade unionism into the primary engine of class advance. SSWCM leaders contributed a sharper analysis of internal conflict and its resolution.²¹ From 1917, they identified workers' committees, pursuing workers' control, with soviets, recognised revolution required social rupture, rather than organic transition through radically reformed unions, and acknowledged the indispensability of a proletarian party.²² Syndicalism left a lasting mark; but leading stewards' adhesion to the Communist Party (CPGB) ensured revolutionary rank and filism would take root in Britain.²³ Animated generally by the Leninist conception of a fundamental conflict of interest between the union bureaucracy, an integral component of the labour aristocracy, and a militant rank and file, more specifically by the turn from the 1919 – 1921 assumption of imminent revolution to the united front, the Comintern's ideas were crystalised in the MM.

Frequently regarded as the 'ideal type' of a rank and file movement, the MM attempted to infuse the experience of the shop stewards with Bolshevik politics, bringing together

¹⁹ Kendall, p. 143.

²⁰ *The Call*, 12 June 1919, quoted in Hinton, p. 305.

²¹ J. T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee* (London: Pluto Press, 1972 [1917]), pp. 14-15.

²² William Gallacher and J. R. Campbell, *Direct Action* (London: Pluto Press, 1972 [1919]); Pribicevic, pp. 133-146; Hinton, pp. 298-329.

²³ Jane Degras, *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents vol I, 1919-1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp.148, 245.

Communists and militants in an anti-capitalist coalition, independent of the bureaucracy, with its own democracy and programme of minimum trade union and maximum socialist demands. It liaised with the CPGB, campaigned to move union policy left and provided a forum in which Communists attempted to win their collaborators to Marxism. These are essential concomitants of a revolutionary rank and file movement and the MM undoubtedly represented a further step forward. Progress was constrained by economic downturn, union defeat and political problems. The Comintern had retreated from assertions that British unions could be rapidly and directly revolutionised. It remained handicapped by limited insight into the particularities of British liberal democracy and never elaborated a coherent theory of trade unionism. Moscow demonstrated superficial understanding of the existing consciousness of British workers, the entrenched hegemony of reformism and the complex ways in which consciousness interacted with history, changes in political economy and the balance of forces. Too often, rhetoric and voluntarism replaced analysis, strategy and careful appraisal of the factors necessary to the development of a revolutionary situation.

Opportunities to construct a stronger revolutionary presence were confused with opportunities to make a revolution, as in 1926 and 1929-1931. Moreover, the united front was accompanied by enhanced emphasis on the problems of the Soviet state.

All this militated against a long-term, strategic conception of a rank and file movement operating in a non-revolutionary conjuncture. There was ambiguity and imprecision – about the extent to which the MM should operate as a ‘ginger group’ on union leaders or act independently; the weight to be accorded immediate demands and their relation to socialist objectives; and its autonomy from the party. Impatience and over-optimism impeded confronting obstacles to advance. From 1925, decisively from 1929, the Comintern reflected the policies of the Stalin faction. From its inception, directives, filtered through a weak,

theoretically impoverished CPGB, provided a halting guide to practice. Rank and filism was increasingly fashioned by the pressures of trade unionism and the shifting, self-interested strategies and elastic politics of Russia's rulers.²⁴

The idea turns on 'movement' as well as 'rank and file'. Unions, it is commonly observed, constitute a combination of *movement* and *organisation*.²⁵ In stylised histories early unions depended on 'spontaneity', direct action, primitive democracy, shared values, and flexible links between local bodies. Despite bureaucratisation, officialdom needed to preserve an element of movement: organisational maintenance depends ultimately on activism and mobilisation, solidarity and democracy.²⁶ At a high level of abstraction, rank and file movements within capitalism may be categorised as social movements which express these tensions: in socialist narratives they assert the relevance of a past in which unions were democratic, fighting movements, rather than bureaucratic vested interests. Social movement theory distinguishes 'transformative movements' aspiring to fundamentally reorder society from 'reformative movements' with more limited objectives.²⁷ Revolutionary rank and filism

²⁴ Hinton and Hyman, pp. 12-26. The best Bolshevik analysis, notably *Trotsky's Writings on Britain vol 2* (London: New Park, 1974), was perceptive but sometimes impressionistic and over-optimistic. Party leaders' restricted grasp of Marxism and susceptibility to trade unionism were apparent. J. T. Murphy remembered: '...we were ardent trade unionists. That was our strength...but the theoretical equipment of the leadership as a whole was not of a high standard...The CPGB was supposed to be a Marxist party but there were few in it who had more than a nodding acquaintance with the writings of Marx.' Quoted, Woodhouse and Pearce, p. 73; J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London: The Bodley Head, 1941), p. 281. Zinoviev's Comintern was staffed by second level Bolsheviks such as Manuilsky, Piatnitsky and Safarov and increasingly demonstrated authoritarian attitudes. It intermittently recommended conciliation of union leaders and wavered between viewing the MM as cajoling them, and criticising them – see, for example, L. J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), p. 142. For some of the background see Branko Lazitch and Milorad Drachkovitch, *Lenin and the Comintern* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972); Cliff and Gluckstein, pp. 42-56; John Riddell, *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Idem, *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

²⁵ Allan Flanders, 'What are Unions For?' in Idem, *Management and Unions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 43-44. The term 'rank and file movement' seems to have emerged after the Great War – see, for example, Cole, *Workshop Organisation*, p.17; *The Worker*, 29 September 1923 (William Gallacher).

²⁶ Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 73-93.

²⁷ Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (New York: Free Press 1963); Charles Tilly, *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978). The utility of social movement theory to the subject is limited: the category is elastic and embraces a bewildering constellation of very different groups. Most rank and file

may similarly be contrasted with reform movements based on electing militant, competent leaders or deepening democracy. We can also differentiate sectional movements, representing one industry or particular unions, from national movements integrating industrial sections, which function as a national rank and file centre. Such distinctions are occasionally blurred, for example, in radical circles in the USA, where the rank and file rubric is sometimes indiscriminately applied to union reform caucuses and revolutionary movements led by Communists.²⁸

Further confusion arises when the term is assigned to trade union organisation. Fords, we are told, ‘...faced a rank and file movement in their plants which in the 1950s was probably the most advanced in the country.’²⁹ The reference is to shop stewards’ committees in car factories in the 1950s and 1960s. Built from below, they achieved a measure of autonomy from the external union. They developed informal controls and workplace bargaining which challenged wider agreements and stimulated official hostility. There were attempts to link plants in company combine committees and connect combines in national conferences.³⁰ Captured in phrases such as ‘the real union’ and ‘a union within a union’, workplace struggle and the frictions it engendered provided opportunities for Marxists. The key word, however, is ‘union’. Stewards were credentialed by trade unions, reported to union committees and represented all union members – not simply militants and socialists. The politics of the majority were reformist. Despite its militancy, multi-union basis, and dysfunctionality to

movements have quickly transcended ‘spontaneity’ and have represented a mixture of movement and organisation – with the latter dominant. The SSWCM was a loose organisation – the MM more complex and hierarchical. For recent analysis, see, Colin Barker et al, eds, *Marxism and Social Movements* (Leiden: Brill 2013).

²⁸ See, for example, Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner and Cal Wilmslow, eds, *Rebel Rank and File* (London: Verso, 2010).

²⁹ Henry Friedman and Sander Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), p. 58.

³⁰ H. A. Turner, Garfield Clack and Geoffrey Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967); Michael Terry, ‘Shop Steward Development and Managerial Strategies’ in George Bain, ed, *Industrial Relations in Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 67-91.

existing arrangements, steward organisation and plant bargaining remained within the realm of trade unionism.

Cole argued in 1939:

There is, indeed, a fundamental antagonism between orthodox Trade Unionism as it has developed in Great Britain and workshop organisation. Official Trade Union policy aims at centralisation – at the making of collective agreements covering the widest possible area and laying down standard rates and conditions... Workshop organisation, on the other hand, tends to emphasise the grievances which are most felt in particular establishments and to be more immediately responsive to waves of feeling among the rank and file. It also tends to foster the desire for ‘the control of industry’ by putting it into a form in which it is directly related to the actual working conditions in each particular establishment.³¹

In the light of a further 75 years evidence, these conclusions apply, at best, and episodically, to specific periods and particular industries. At times, 1914-1919, 1937-1945, latterly from the 1950s into the 1970s, antagonism pertained between workplace organisation and orthodox trade unionism. Outside wartime it was substantially restricted to the Cold War - Keynesian boom.³² In industries – vehicles, engineering, in a different way, construction and the docks – in which it existed, it was rarely fundamental.³³ Orthodox trade unionism has indubitably demonstrated powerful tendencies to centralisation. Experience confirms centralisation does not exclude workplace organisation. In some form, the latter is indispensable to the efficient functioning of orthodox trade unionism, contributing recruitment, the processing of grievances and the policing of agreements. Unions participate in the management of labour

³¹ G. D. H. Cole, *British Trade Unionism Today* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939), pp. 169-170. However, in 1923 Cole believed that steward organisation, then qualitatively reduced by unemployment, would reappear, be recognised by union leaders and ‘...remain permanently as an integral part of the machinery of trade unionism’. *Idem*, *Workplace Organisation*, p. 75.

³² For a searching examination of the literature, see Eric Batstone, *Working Order* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1984).

³³ The docks was a partial exception. In the big ports a powerful, particularistic, militant, but rarely politically radical, collectivism emerged, antagonistic to the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU). It produced Portworkers’ Committees independent of the unions and recurring impulses and occasional resort, to breakaway unions. See, for example, Bill Hunter, *They Knew Why They Fought: Unofficial Struggles and Leadership on the Docks, 1945-1989* (London: Index Books, 1996); John McIlroy, ‘“The First Great Battle in the March to Socialism”: Dockers, Stalinists and Trotskyists in 1945’, *Revolutionary History*, 6:2/3 (1996), pp. 105-159; Jim Phillips, ‘Inter-Union Conflict in the Docks, 1954-1955’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 1 (1996), pp. 107-130.

and shop stewards may facilitate this. In some cases employer sponsorship influenced steward organisation: at the extreme, it functioned as company unionism. When intra-union conflicts became marked, the state, capital and officialdom inspired and backed integrationist initiatives from Whitleyism to the 1968 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations. Economic downturns in the 1920s and 1980s played their part in undermining workplace strength.³⁴

The essence of centralisation is coordination: reconciling competing bargaining demands, meshing together conflicting sites of regulation, imposing imperfect unity on sectionalism. As such, union bureaucrats have proved capable of responding to challenges from below and assimilating workplace organisation to orthodox trade unionism. Finally, while Cole's comment on workers' control is pertinent, transition from workplace controls to demanding control of industry has been problematic; it requires a step change, sometimes embodied in the transition from trade union workplace organisation to rank and file movements.

These points have been elaborated because it is important to distinguish between the two – and some do not. Establishing workplace trade unionism constituted an achievement, although it should be remembered that from the 1960s, steward systems were developed from above by public sector union leaders.³⁵ Taken in historical sweep, workplace organisation represented the completion of trade unionism, not a break with it. Stewards' committees expressed and reinforced 'factory consciousness', trade union consciousness centred on

³⁴ The process is surveyed in Chris Howell, *Trade Unions and the State. The Construction of Industrial Relations in Britain, 1890-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also Terry, pp. 67-91.

³⁵ Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, *Getting Organised* (London: Pan Books, 1981), p. 74.

workplace struggle rather than wider sectional concerns.³⁶ Regulation of the sale of labour power may be conducted by lay representatives as well as by full time functionaries.

Workplace organisation is part of trade unionism. The same goes for combine committees: they propose policy for sectional regulation of wages and remain in the orbit of economism. Both may provide building blocks for rank and file movements. Nonetheless, Marxist theory and the conception of rank and file movements expounded by the early Comintern provide the basis for a distinction between *trade union rank and file organisations* which represent all workers, are centrally concerned with negotiating the wage-effort bargain and which are not programmatically opposed to the bureaucracy; and *rank and file movements*, based on militants active in the former bodies but which assert their organisational, ideological and programmatic independence of the constitutional machinery of unions and the official leadership. They neither aspire to regulate the sale of labour power nor extend trade union consciousness but to surmount economism and sectionalism, not adapt to them.³⁷

This judgement is generally valid during conditions of routinized and institutionalized conflict, even in periods of accelerating militancy. Where the situation opens up revolutionary possibilities then within the Marxist problematic things change. Workplace organisation may drive towards broadening control over production and dual power. It may radiate outwards, intervene in and intensify wider social struggles, merge with existing rank and file movements and come to constitute one component of workers' councils or, soviets.

³⁶ Huw Beynon, *Working For Ford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 99-100; Tony Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong* (London: Arrow Books, 1974), pp. 181-184.

³⁷ John McLroy, 'The Revival and Decline of Rank and File Movements in Britain During the 1930s', *Labor History*, 57: 3 (2016), forthcoming. Steve Jefferys, 'The Communist Party and the Rank and File', *International Socialism* 10 (1981), pp. 21-23, distinguishes stewards' committees, combine committees and rank and file movements which have no 'specific bargaining base'. However, he brackets all three together as 'rank and file organisations' in conflict with the union bureaucracy and able to independently '...extend trade union consciousness beyond the "natural" pattern of the workplace walls...'. The aim of rank and file movements is to transform factory consciousness into trade union consciousness. They, thus remain within an economic paradigm.

Progress in normal times provides the foundations for success in extraordinary times, and the possibility of insurgent rank and filism becoming a social movement in the full sense of the term.³⁸

A final distinction lies between oppositional movements emphasising ‘the rank and file’, and basing themselves on lay representatives, workplace struggle and socialist goals; and organisations which do not exclude stewards or militant action but *prioritise* officials, focus their main attention on winning full-time posts, on electoralism and penetration of the apparatus, reject in practice a conflictual axis between bureaucracy and rank and file, and substantially confine themselves to economism. The latter strategy stemmed from the CPGB’s abandonment of its historic position on rank and filism during the popular front period which I address below. The longer term consequence was the flourishing of Broad Left organisation in trade unions during the 1960s and 1970s. From the 1980s, depleted workplace organisation saw some Trotskyist groups practice variants of this approach.³⁹

Theorising Rank and File Movements

The literature reveals few recent attempts to historicize and theorize rank and file movements.⁴⁰ The best known summation of their provenance is that of Pearce from the 1950s:

The source of rank and file movements is the conflict between the struggle of the working class for better conditions and a new social order, and the increasing reconciliation between the leaders of the trade unions and the

³⁸ Hinton, pp. 333-335; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 98-113, 194-196, 265-268.

³⁹ John McIlroy, ‘Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics’ in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell, eds, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). The Unite Left, essentially a support group for the union leadership, bears the marks of CPGB Broad Leftism. Left Unity in the Public and Commercial Services Union and the Socialist Teachers’ Alliance have been the most successful organisations with a Trotskyist pedigree.

⁴⁰ For example, the wide-ranging historiography of British Communism published since the CPGB’s collapse says little of significance about the issue.

capitalist state, their growing integration into the upper reaches of bourgeois society.⁴¹

Pearce admired the MM and envisaged a national movement which even in conditions of relative capitalist stability would be led by revolutionaries and promote revolutionary politics. Its *raison d'être* is the conflict between bureaucracy and rank and file and capital's assimilation of union leaders. But economic struggle for 'better conditions' melds unproblematically into political struggle for 'a new social order' so that a revolutionary mission is ascribed to these movements without agency, argument or explanation. Moreover, Pearce's essay assumes incorporation of the bureaucracy ensures that oppositional movements are always on the agenda. There is little discussion of changes in industrial relations and trade unionism, of conjunctural factors and developments in the class struggle which stifle or stimulate their formation.

One of the few expositions of their origins and trajectory from a participant was written in the 1930s. Sheehan argued:

...created by revolutionaries, they come into being when the workers' militancy cannot find its true expression through the bureaucratic constitution of the official trade union...rank and file movements are often generated around a particular question and are led by the most active and loyal members of the union [they] are the result of the inability or unwillingness of the official trade union machine to provide leadership in the day to day struggle so that an alternative leadership is created...committees elected by the rank and file to break the resistance of both employers and union officialdom. So the trade unions can again become the most powerful weapons in the class struggle led by the most able fighters for the working class who will lead the workers, not only to partial victory over the employer but to become the owners of the means of production.⁴²

Officialdom and 'the bureaucratic constitution' of unions, permanently obstruct struggle and members are unable to successfully progress their demands through existing structures.

⁴¹ Pearce, p.1.

⁴² E. D. Sheehan, 'Why Rank and File Movements?' *Labour Monthly*, December 1935, pp. 747-749. Sheehan was active in the London Busmen's Rank and File Movement and attempted to extend it to his fellow tramworkers.

Embedded in this timeless discourse, which again disregards conjunctural developments in capitalism, is faith in members' innate militancy and radicalism and the conviction that removing bureaucratic blockages will liberate it and restore unions' original socialist mission to combat capitalism and direct its destruction. This judgement is inflected with 'golden age' mythology, dashed with economism. Moreover, one-sided emphasis on the democratic deficit – important as that is – may distract from the equally significant question of conquering workers' consciousness. Sheehan does not address the necessity for conflict to move from the economic to the political plane; or the programme oppositional organisations should pursue, a question central to that process.

Later commentators similarly relied on the antagonism between bureaucracy and rank and file to explain and justify these movements while devoting more attention to industrial relations and workplace trade unionism. In contrast with Pearce and Sheehan, some saw their creation as specific to periods of accelerating industrial struggle, militant workplace organisation and confrontations arising from state attacks on trade unionism. These factors presented authentic opportunities to mobilise revolutionaries, and attract dissident Communists and Labour lefts to a movement based on shop stewards' committees. Applying this to the early 1970s, Callinicos claimed:

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 generally led by revolutionaries because it is they who can give rank and file organisations the necessary political independence of both the ruling class and the bureaucracy.⁴³

It is evident from his discussion that terms such as 'fighting on the general class front' and 'political independence' are employed loosely. In Callinicos's estimation rank and file movements unite shop stewards, *lay union officials*, and prosecute broader economic warfare.

⁴³ Alex Callinicos, 'The Rank and File Movement Today', *International Socialism*, 17 (1982), p. 9.

Revolutionaries provide their organisational stimulus and resources; they do not argue for adoption of a socialist programme in non-revolutionary periods as a goal informing immediate demands. On the contrary:

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 and a fighting policy on wages. In this lies the rationale for the rank and file organisation.⁴⁴

Callinicos characterises such oppositional formations as broader than the party, narrower than unions. More contentious is his advocacy of a platform substantially similar to that pursued in the 1970s by left-wing trade unions – although these movements are initiated by revolutionaries and some of their adherents are socialists. From this perspective, a national rank and file movement should bring together shop stewards whose politics are sectional and reformist on a programme aimed at transcending workplace sectionalism but affirming reformism. The premise seems to be: extend militancy and socialist awareness will follow. As Lenin might have put it: rank and file movements fight to generalise economism, they do not fight for class politics. Pursuing a trade union programme entails subordination to ruling class ideas – not ‘political independence’ of them.

Class politics unites the economic and the political dissolved in capitalism. There is a danger that the division between rank and file movement and revolutionary party may reinforce that fracture. At the inception of the MM, Willie Allan remembered Communists complaining ‘...there was no room for a movement dealing with immediate and “narrow” economic issues, that it was a reformist conception, and that such an organisation would...hide the face of the

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 23, favourably quoting Andreas Nagliatti, ‘Towards a National Rank and File Movement’, *International Socialism*, 66 (1974), p. 3. Callinicos followed other commentators who pronounced the early 1970s ‘ripe’ for the establishment of a national rank and file movement. See, for example, Ken Appleby, ‘The Rank and File Movement, Yesterday and Today’, *International Socialism*, 83 (1975), <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/is183>.

Party.⁴⁵ The problem may be minimised if party members participate on the basis of the party's programme and politics. Rank and file movements have conventionally been defined as industrial movements and, as such, must consciously and consistently combat economism. But it is worth recalling: 'The Minority Movement was first conceived not as a purely trade union and industrial organisation. It was, rather, intended to be a broad workers' movement that would unite all left elements including trade unionists and Labour Party members.'⁴⁶ Problems of 'narrowness' and economism may arguably be mitigated if Marxists organise on a complementary basis within the Labour Party, the unions' umbilically-linked political counterpart, as the CPGB did. A degree of specialisation is inevitable: its detrimental effects may be diminished by rotation of roles.⁴⁷ The problem may be compounded if Marxists equip the movement with a trade union programme; or if formal socialist objectives find little place in its operational policy and day-to-day practice. It is questionable whether revolutionaries can justify restricting themselves to reformism in building rank and file movements. We also need to inquire more precisely about their relationship to the party and how decisions concerning the role and politics of such movements are reached: are they independent of, or subordinate to, the party?

Taking the MM as exemplar, Higgins described rank and file movements as an attempt:

...to bridge the gap between the revolutionary organisation and the much wider layer of militants who actually lead workers on a day-to-day basis... It is about how we develop the transition from trade union militancy to a working class realisation that significant socialist practical advance is impossible given the capitalist system. That is what a rank and file movement is about.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ William Allan, 'The Party and the Minority Movement', *Communist Review*, October 1932, p. 472.

⁴⁶ Tom Bell, *The British Communist Party: A Short History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), p. 85.

⁴⁷ The National Left Wing Movement, for example, was formed in 1926 as a bridge between the CPGB and the Labour left: Macfarlane, pp. 189, 191-192, 210-214, 226-229.

⁴⁸ Jim Higgins, 'The Minority Movement', *International Socialism*, 45 (1970), p. 29.

This is helpful in classifying these movements as intermediaries between revolutionaries and militants and asserting that unity in action improves the prospects of developing socialist consciousness. But what kind of intermediaries and how do militants move towards revolutionary awareness? Writing in 1970, Higgins assumed the conditions for a national movement did not exist. Three years later, Cliff claimed intensifying industrial conflict necessitated its establishment. He adopted images from Lenin-describing the dictatorship of the proletariat – and Trotsky – more appropriately evoking revolutionary mobilisation: the party is too small to move the mass of trade unionists or even stewards, so a cogwheel connecting them is required. Like Callinicos, Cliff considered rank and file a necessary response by a small socialist group to a powerful bureaucracy which thwarted militancy. Like Callinicos, but unlike Pearce, he characterised rank and file movements as economic movements. Their purpose was to influence union leaders and extend trade union struggle beyond the workplace, ‘...but not going as far as to aim at the complete emancipation of the working class by the overthrow of the capitalist system.’⁴⁹ Cliff’s answer to the problem of how militants become revolutionaries seemed to be – at least for the immediate future – through more and bigger strikes. He overestimated the socialist potential of stewards and rank and file trade union organisation, and the transformative power of economic struggle, rather than social struggle fused with revolutionary politics, programme and party: ‘...the rising conflict will disclose to workers the magnitude of the struggle, will widen their horizons and will help to clarify their ideas.’⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Tony Cliff, *A World to Win* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), p. 109; Cliff and Gluckstein, pp. 27-32 and passim.

⁵⁰ Cliff, p. 109. See, John McIlroy, ‘Strikes and Class Consciousness in the Early Work of Richard Hyman’, *Capital and Class*, 36: 1 (2012), pp. 53-75. Regarding sectional rank and file bodies, Cliff remarked: ‘The aim of these is to influence the policies of the trade unions’. –ibid. Appleby argued, in confused but essentially economic vein, that the movement should be organised around stewards committees, but ‘...break their inherent sectionalism by winning the political argument for a national movement’. The ‘political’ argument was that the national movement should be furnished with an economic programme. Appleby seems to suggest that the movement’s job is to transcend factory consciousness and create a broader, solidaristic consciousness which stops short of socialist consciousness. Workers would be won over to this ‘if revolutionaries played a leading part and ‘demonstrate our politics in action’.

To sum up: the early literature takes us only a little beyond the conflictual bureaucracy – rank and file couplet, invocation of the MM, and the importance of a revolutionary party – or groups aspiring to that status – engaging with militants in intermediary formations. Later writing acknowledges the relevance of the state of struggle; but it does not integrate analysis of the flexibility and differentiation pertaining within the bureaucracy which may also influence the necessity for and the possibility of, rank and file movements. Discussion of the democracy and autonomy of the movement, its relationship to the party and the balance between pressurising union leaders through official structures and acting independently of them, remains vague. Some accounts, moreover, diverge from the ideas adumbrated by the early Comintern. The latter was setting the bar high in Britain where conditions for realisation were unfavourable through the inter-war years and where trade unionism's proven ability to neuter revolutionary politics required sustained struggle against the pressures economism exercised in the world's oldest capitalist society with the world's oldest trade unionism. However, some theorising exaggerates the possibilities of radicalisation inherent in shop steward activity, *adapts* to trade unionism and poses rank and file movements as essentially economic organisations which purvey a reformist programme.

Before assessing these ideas further I want to consider in greater detail the crucial question of how they were embodied in practice. I proceed to explore and critically evaluate attempts to build rank and file movements through the twentieth century.

The Shop Stewards' Movement, 1915-1920

The SSWCM has had a good press from Marxists. Lenin believed, '...we are dealing with a profoundly proletarian and mass movement which in the main stands practically on the basis of the fundamental principles of the Communist International.'⁵¹ Later writers characterized it as '...militant in its method, revolutionary in its goals.?'; '...a classic example of rank and file organisation...'; and one of '...the key movements of the past...among the few models we have of a serious alternative to the role of trade union officials.'⁵² Scrutiny reveals a more nuanced picture.

The wartime conditions which prompted the SSWCM's creation were preceded by 'the Great Unrest', acceleration in strikes and union membership, disillusion with labour leaders, and rejection of parliamentary socialism in favour of direct action.⁵³ The negative side was the marginality of Marxism. The leadership of the British Socialist Party (BSP) opposed syndicalism and strikes, discounted trade unionism as an instrument of advance, and mounted no organised intervention in the industrial struggle. The tiny Socialist Labour Party (SLP) was ambivalent about political action, focussed on industry and attempted to develop dual unionism.⁵⁴ War, chauvinism and an authoritarian state failed to contain militancy. Co-option of union leaders; prohibition of strikes; dilution, (substitution of skilled by unskilled labour); speed-up; inflation; labour shortages; and conscription, ignited shop floor discontent and, in engineering, provoked the emergence of the SSWCM.⁵⁵ Shop stewards had figured in the rules of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) since the 1890s. Deputations to

⁵¹ V. I. Lenin, *British Labour and British Imperialism*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p. 220.

⁵² Hinton and Hyman, p.13; Darlington, 'The Rank and File', p. 66; Smith, p. 66.

⁵³ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Serif Books, 1997 [1935]); James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1953), pp. 83-95.

⁵⁴ Kendall, pp. 46-76; Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 107-122.

⁵⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *Trade Unionism and Munitions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1923); Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War: England, 1914-18* (Oxford: Berg, 1983).

enforce agreements and customary practice were longstanding, but the growth of payment by results after 1898 stimulated bargaining between stewards and managers. Other unions introduced stewards, while the war effort transformed their role in negotiating rates, overtime, machine-manning, dilution and general problem-solving and encouraged unofficial organisation.⁵⁶

The Clyde Workers' Committee filled the gap vacated by union officials. A delegate body, rooted in the workshops, it combatted dilution and conscription, and demanded state control of munitions production. It benefitted from the socialist culture of Glasgow and the presence in workplaces of SLP and BSP stewards who became influential in its leadership. It led strikes but failed to oppose the war. It was confined to the armaments sector which employed a fifth of Glasgow's skilled engineering workers. The single centre in England which maintained a delegate-based workers' committee for any significant period was Sheffield; in contrast with Clydeside's independence, it worked with the ASE district committee.⁵⁷ One historian noted: 'Outside Glasgow, Sheffield and, for a short period, Manchester, fully fledged workers' committees representative of workshop organisation and capable of leading mass strike action in defiance of the trade union officials were never to emerge.'⁵⁸ We are dealing with localised movements which only occasionally exploded into action and exhibited limited unity: the deportation of the Clyde leaders in 1915 evoked no sympathy

⁵⁶ H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, vol II 1911-1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 82-85.

⁵⁷ Kendall, pp. 105-141; Hinton, *First Shop Stewards' Movement*, pp. 103-161. The debate about 'Red Clydeside' is reviewed by Terry Brotherstone, 'Does Red Clydeside Really Matter Any More?' in Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor, eds, *Militant Workers: Labour and Class Conflict on the Clyde, 1900-1950* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992), pp. 52-80. The argument here is that while a minority of shop stewards were or became revolutionaries, the bulk of their members remained militant craftsmen and events strengthened labourist rather than revolutionary consciousness: *ibid*, pp. 64-5.

⁵⁸ Hinton, *First Shop Stewards' Movement*, p. 242.

strikes; the November 1916 stoppage against the conscription of a Sheffield engineer provoked no solidarity action beyond Barrow.⁵⁹

Syndicalist distrust of leadership was sustained. The first national conference in November 1916 was attended by representatives from Glasgow, Barrow, Birkenhead, Manchester and London but few were delegates from workers' committees. Nonetheless, the conference adopted the Clyde axiom: 'We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them'; and it proclaimed its objective as, '...the furtherance of the interests of working class organisations as a partisan effort to improve the position of labour in the present and to ultimately assist in the abolition of the wages system.'⁶⁰ These declarations, insisting on the need for independent action and linking amelioration of conditions to the supersession of capitalism, were important – but imprecise. One of its leaders, J. T. Murphy, recollected that the movement '...had no programme apart from these brief statements of a general character. It did not define its attitude to political parties.'⁶¹

The Russian revolutions of 1917 provided a fillip. Although the March stoppage in Barrow failed to spark solidarity, the May strikes in Lancashire over dilution produced action across England, although not on Clydeside: 200,000 workers struck and 1.5 million workdays were lost. The August conference attracted representatives from 23 areas, although few spoke for workers' committees. The SSWCM became a permanent body; its syndicalist ethos and fragility as a mobilising agent were affirmed in the election of a National Administrative Council (NAC) denied executive authority.⁶² Moreover, the SSWCM failed to extend its

⁵⁹ Kendall, pp. 154-155.

⁶⁰ J. T. Murphy, *Preparing for Power* (London: Pluto Press, 1972 [1934]) pp. 145-146.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 146.

⁶² Hinton, *First Shop Stewards' Movement*, pp. 180-181.

reach. It absorbed the Amalgamation Movement but overtures to the miners' reform committees and the vigilance committees, which worked with district committees to pressurise union executives on the railways, were frustrated. They believed they could achieve their goals by organising within official structures.⁶³ The movement climaxed in early 1918. Confronted with extension of conscription, a conference advised demanding the government accept Russian offers to discuss peace but left representatives to consult their members. Opinion was divided but strikes against the war failed to materialise. Combined with inability to secure solidarity action over Murphy's victimisation, and the Midlands strikes around this time, the episode underlined the SSWCM's limitations.⁶⁴

It was led by revolutionaries. They did not impress their beliefs on it while it remained an active force. Stressing the impetus towards control in the workshops which began to push beyond militant trade unionism, Cole reflected: '...this is not to suggest that the great mass of the shop stewards ever became revolutionaries or even Socialists in any theoretical sense. The greater part of the time occupied by their duties was spent in dealing with comparatively detailed points of workshop adjustment which afforded little scope for the introduction of revolutionary ideas.'⁶⁵ It is possible, schematically, to discern three elements: a small number of leaders, informed by syndicalist and socialist ideas, who attempted to impart an element of cohesion and direction; the majority of stewards, more intermittently engaged and reflecting diverse views, whose centre of gravity was craft militancy; and a membership which responded defensively to threats to their conditions and status.

⁶³ Murphy, *Preparing for Power*, pp. 155-157.

⁶⁴ Hinton, *First Shop Stewards' Movement*, pp. 255-267.

⁶⁵ Cole, *Workshop Organisation*, p. 54.

What committees there were, dwindled into insignificance through 1918. In 1919, the highpoint of revolutionary feeling, the SSWCM played a negligible role. It was only as it parted company with most stewards that the NAC fully embraced revolutionary rank and filism and merged, in 1921, with the committees in the mines and on the railways in the vestige of a movement.⁶⁶ Between 1915 and 1918 the SSWCM had constituted a marriage between revolutionaries and craftsmen. The latter now returned to trade unionism. The unions and the Engineering Employers Federation negotiated agreements which formalised the steward's role in procedure. They made recognition mandatory and works committees optional – an integrative concordat rendered nugatory by recession and dismissal of stewards from 1921.⁶⁷ But the experience had radicalised a minority and the NAC gravitated towards the CPGB and a revolutionary programme:

The function of the SSWCM is to provide the machinery to enable the workers to effectively wage the class struggle; to provide the necessary organisation whereby the final overthrow of capitalism can be accomplished; to take its share in the task of maintaining the revolution throughout the transition period from capitalism to complete communism; and to be capable of adaptation for the purpose of administering the industrial affairs of the communist society.⁶⁸

The workers' committees would develop the struggle within capitalism and emerge from it as embryonic soviets. The difficulty was that there was neither a revolutionary situation nor workers' committees. Nevertheless, 'complete subordination' to the CPGB had momentous long-term consequences. A joint statement defined the hierarchical relationship between party and movement:

...the need for a national unofficial movement is urgent ... every effort should be made to secure that the control of this movement should be in the hands of members of the Communist Party...the CPGB must control directly the activities of the eleven members of the party taking part in this national movement...it is the duty of all members to work within the movement under the direction of the executive committee of the party...It is the business of the

⁶⁶ Martin, p. 19. 'As an independent industrial force, the shop stewards' movement ceased to exist by 1920': Challinor, p. 211.

⁶⁷ Arthur Marsh, *Industrial Relations in Engineering* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965), p. 76.

⁶⁸ Quoted, Martin, p. 17.

CP to secure that all key positions are held by Communists and for all Communists working within the industrial movement to endeavour to secure the conversion of the rank and file to Communism and the complete subordination of the industrial movement to the CPGB.⁶⁹

On any balanced assessment, the SSWCM had not functioned as a revolutionary movement: it restricted itself to trade union struggle when social and political issues were forcing their way to the surface. Lenin's remarks confused the NAC of 1919-1920 with the SSWCM of 1915-1918. The latter's designation as a 'classic rank and file movement' is questionable. It was a sectional movement, covering incompletely one sector of one industry. Even within munitions factories it was substantially confined to skilled workers. Attempts to involve miners and railway workers proved abortive. The workplace committees fell short of a model realised only in Glasgow and Sheffield. Strikes frequently failed to stimulate solidarity. The SSWCM was essentially a network which mobilised on defensive issues. Its programme was anti-capitalist but vague, and hardly informed its activities. Yet the context was favourable: some judged that by 1919 '...there seems to have emerged an overwhelming sense that things could and must change.'⁷⁰ What stands out is the failure to take a political stand or pass the litmus test of opposing the war. The SSWCM differed fundamentally from later movements as it engaged peripherally with struggle inside the unions and had no direct relationship with a revolutionary party.

Affiliation to the CPGB ensured rank and file movements would be subject to the Comintern's monolithic organisational credo and unfolding policy. While the SSWCM rejected the necessity for coordination, it expressed a healthy concern for democracy and cogent objections to hierarchy and the concentration of expertise, initiative and power in an 'advanced' elite. Murphy argued: 'Real democratic practice demands that every member of

⁶⁹ Quoted Macfarlane, pp. 110-111. Challinor, p. 270, remarked of the SSWCM, '...the flesh had dropped off, leaving a skeleton – and the Communist Party manipulated the bones.'

⁷⁰ James Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (London: Batsford, 1984), p. 24.

an organisation shall participate actively... We desire the mass of men and women to think for themselves and until they do this no real progress is made, democracy becomes a farce.’⁷¹

Such sentiments may be considered over-optimistic in capitalist societies. Yet they embody a necessary socialist aspiration to extend leadership as widely as possible, so that a significant section of workers develop the understanding and skills required for working class advance.

Commending ‘centralised organisation’ or ‘the leading role of a revolutionary party’, without explaining what this would mean in practice, risks counterposing the Comintern’s militaristic conception of leadership to the SSWCM’s, which had proved equally one-sided. Both are fragments of what should constitute a dialectical unity between centralism and democracy.

Translating the shop stewards’ syndicalist notion of ‘the conscious minority’, Lenin told them: ‘If this minority is truly class conscious, if it is able to lead the masses... then in substance it is a party... actually speaking that minority is nothing more or less than a party.’⁷² This evaded exactly what form the party would take, how it would unite democracy and centralism and how it would relate to rank and file movements.

The Minority Movement, 1924-1932

Modern champions of rank and fileism have insisted: ‘...in developing our rank and file strategy we have set ourselves within a tradition, that of the Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement... and the ensuing attempt by the early Communist Party to build a National Minority Movement...’⁷³ Continuity is invoked: ‘The model for the MM was that of the factory committees that had been built during the war by the SSWCM in the engineering plants...’⁷⁴ Other advocates are sceptical: ‘...the National Minority Movement

⁷¹ Murphy, *Workers’ Committee*, pp. 14-15.

⁷² Lenin, p. 264.

⁷³ Callinicos, p. 1. Pearce, pp. 119-125 and Higgins, *passim*, also treated the MM as a rank and file movement.

⁷⁴ O’Brien, p. 169.

established in 1924 was *not* a rank and file movement... This contradicts a commonly accepted view on the left...⁷⁵ (original emphasis). On similar grounds, the MM has been termed a ‘hybrid’ organisation which ‘...pulled together militant activists and leading labour movement figures.’⁷⁶

There *was* an element of continuity with the remnant of the SSWCM that became the British Bureau of the Red International of Trade Unions (RILU) in 1922, and was replaced in 1924 by the MM. They were very different organisations operating in very different contexts. The MM was a child of recession, wage reductions and union decline. Redundancy and victimisation undermined workplace organisation and reinvigorated official authority. Militancy endured, nourished by the brief recovery, 1924-1926, but manifested in defensive official strikes. The movement was fostered by a weak party: in 1924, the CPGB had 3,500 members, compared with 5,000 in 1921 – with a tenuous foothold on Marxist theory and the factories. For the Comintern, it remained an epoch of war and revolutions; but temporary capitalist stabilisation demanded united fronts with reformist organisations on specific issues, while retaining the right to criticise them.⁷⁷

The MM reflected innovative thinking: the Bolsheviks had relied on party cells and fractions in factories and unions. In Britain, the Comintern concluded, a supplementary organisation was required to advance the united front and remedy the CPGB’s marginality. Unlike the SSWCM, the MM aspired to organise across industry, in workplace *and* union, root itself among activists but try to attract officials.⁷⁸ J. R. Campbell subsequently reflected:

⁷⁵ Cliff and Gluckstein, p. 115.

⁷⁶ Darlington, ‘The Rank and File’, p. 75.

⁷⁷ See note 24 above; Hinton and Hyman, pp. 12-26; Riddell, *op. cit.*, 2012, 2015.

⁷⁸ Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Moscow (RGASPI), 495/100/154, Report on the Work of the Sixth CPGB Congress May 1924.

The Minority Movement was formed as a movement of Left wing workers and militant trade union organisations under the Communist influence, to pursue a militant policy in the trade union movement, to enable the Party to make contact with a wide mass of the workers, thereby developing its mass influence and advancing towards a mass Communist Party... 'it is necessary to build up a body of non-party militants around the Party, a mass workers' organisation to serve as the channel of the Party's influence... as a bridge between the Party and the mass and as a training ground for class struggles...'⁷⁹

The MM became the British section of the RILU which was itself subordinate to the Comintern. The movement was bound by RILU decisions; reported to its Moscow headquarters; liaised with its Central European Bureau in Berlin; and sent delegates to RILU congresses. It '...was financed from Moscow and policy was controlled by the RILU. It was supervised, down to scrutiny of platform speeches and performance of the chairman, by the CP Political Bureau. The PB insisted its decisions should not be varied by the party fraction in the MM...'⁸⁰ Each industrial section elected an executive and attempted to develop district organisation. The conference also voted in a national executive. A secretariat, consisting of CPGB full-timers, exercised day-to-day control. Successive general secretaries, Harry Pollitt, Arthur Horner, Willie Allan, were party members. Allan pondered the prevalence of 'Russian methods', recalling 'very many instances...where members of the MM have been treated as inferior beings and made to swallow "the line" without discussion.'⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, the MM never enrolled a significant section of non-CPGB members on an active basis and by 1930 consisted mainly of party activists.

The economic demands sections adopted were generalised in a political programme. The MM's ultimate aim was:

...to organise the working masses of Great Britain for the overthrow of capitalism, the emancipation of the workers...and the establishment of a Socialist

⁷⁹ RGASPI, 495/38/21, The Communist Party and the Minority Movement: Memorandum by J. R. Campbell n.d. July 1930, quoting from December 1929 CPGB Congress.

⁸⁰ John McIlroy, 'Revolutionaries' in Idem, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart, eds, *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity* (2nd edition, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 273.

⁸¹ Allan, p. 473.

Commonwealth; to carry on a wide agitation and propaganda for the principles of the revolutionary class struggle...and against the present tendency towards social peace and class collaboration and the delusion of the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism; to unite the workers in their everyday struggle... to maintain the closest relations with the RILU.⁸²

In addition, it campaigned for industrial unions; a stronger TUC general council; the extension of trades councils; and the merger of RILU with the reformist Amsterdam trade union international. In sharp contrast with the SSWCM, the emphasis was on union agitation, on ‘...bringing pressure to bear on the bureaucrats and making them fight for such a programme...to secure a change in the trade union leadership through the capture of trade union posts by more militant elements [and] to take up those immediate trade union questions with the leading political questions confronting the British workers.’⁸³ There was an attempt to integrate minimum and maximum demands but before 1929 practice generally fell within the framework of trade unionism. Despite its socialist programme, the inaugural conference urged: ‘Bread and butter problems first, high politics later, is the method to adopt.’⁸⁴ As one historian argued: ‘...the CPGB exhibited a markedly economist attitude to the problem of class consciousness. The party repeatedly claimed that experience alone would impel workers to revolutionary conclusions.’⁸⁵ Theoretical and practical confusion ensured independent pressure sometimes dissolved into exaggeration of the left wing credentials of union bureaucrats, reliance on their leadership, and restraint in criticism. At other times, the focus *was* on arming union members but in the crisis of 1925-1926 the former attitude dominated.⁸⁶

⁸² Quoted, Martin, p. 37.

⁸³ The Communist Party and the Minority Movement.

⁸⁴ Quoted, Martin, p. 37.

⁸⁵ Stuart McIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 214.

⁸⁶ Hinton and Hyman, pp. 32-35.

Its leaders asserted: ‘The MM is the natural development of the old Shop Steward and Vigilance movements.’⁸⁷ They campaigned for factory committees but with negligible success. The movement was inadequately anchored in the factories and unable to mobilise the grassroots. It was based on caucuses in union branches, trade councils, the unemployed and individuals. The number of delegates to conferences, still less the number of workers they formally represented, provided a dubious index of strength: ‘...individual membership was always slight and at its highest point was never more than 2,000...At the highest point not more than 300 organisations were affiliated...out of at least 10,000 trade union branches existing in Great Britain...there was constant fluctuation among the affiliated branches, few of them remaining affiliated for more than one year.’⁸⁸

The MM was relatively unsuccessful in attracting reformist activists or leading officials. The TUC lefts – Hicks, Bromley, Purcell and Swales – kept their distance. A. J. Cook was the only leader of importance identified with it. Tom Mann, its president, was a well-known figure but no longer held union office. Otherwise it received support from officials of the South Wales Miners’ Federation (SWMF), and small unions, the Furniture Trade Workers, the French Polishers, the Package Case Workers, and the Jewish Bakers. Its backbone was party activists, such as Allan, the Moffat brothers and Horner in the coalminers’ unions in Scotland and South Wales; Percy Glading, J. D. Lawrence and Bill Ward among the engineers; Jim Figgins and Bill Loeber among railworkers; and a number of fellow travellers, notably Jack Tanner.⁸⁹ Respected militants, they reached wider layers. Before 1928, the MM

⁸⁷ National Minority Movement, *Pollitt’s Reply to Citrine* (London, NMM, 1928). Pollitt was endeavouring to deny TUC general secretary, Walter Citrine’s accusations of Russian influence and finance. In contrast, Gallacher claimed the MM was ‘...not a rank and file movement, but rather one that reaches through every strata of the trade unions’: quoted, Cliff and Gluckstein, p. 115.

⁸⁸ The Communist Party and the Minority Movement.

⁸⁹ McIlroy, ‘Revolutionaries’, pp. 272-273.

exercised a diffuse influence – but slender purchase on the policy of major unions and the TUC.

Changes in the Comintern line ensured MM history consisted of three phases and arguably two organisations. The first stage, 1924-1926, saw the movement operate with some success as a propaganda group. The founding conference was attended by 271 organisations, representing 200,000 workers, the 1926 conference, by 547 organisations representing 457,000 workers.⁹⁰ The record of the TUC lefts suggested they were not consistent militants, let alone centrists or proto-revolutionaries. Their involvement in the Anglo –Soviet Trade Union Committee – viewed as presaging fusion of RILU and the Amsterdam International – combined with CPGB leaders’ political limitations to foster illusions the united front entailed an armistice with left reformists. The party omitted to warn workers of their likely capitulation when tested. ‘All Power to the General Council’ was foregrounded; orienting to the grassroots was subsidiary.⁹¹ During the General Strike, its members stiffened resistance but: ‘The MM was unable to play any individual role...the Minority Movement did not function as an organised body at all.’⁹²

An interim phase, 1926-1928, witnessed intensified hostility from officialdom as the party applied Comintern directives to criticise leaders right and left. An influx of recruits after the strike ensured that measured by conference attendances in 1927 and 1928, there was little decline in support.⁹³ But, the movement was increasingly an auxiliary of the party and the harder line gave way to the Third Period as the Comintern perceived renewed crisis and the

⁹⁰ Martin, p. 57. People’s History Museum Manchester, Communist Party Archive, (CPA), CP/Ind/Dutt/06/01, Pollitt to Dutt 1 September 1925. The major success, Cook’s election as secretary of the Miners Federation, came on the cusp of the MM’s inception.

⁹¹ Hinton and Hyman, pp. 32-41, correctly stressing that the CPGB deviated to the right of the Comintern line.

⁹² The Communist Party and the Minority Movement.

⁹³ Ibid.

‘consolidated bureaucracy’ became ‘social fascist’ agents of capital and the state.⁹⁴ A different MM now emerged as the avatar of ‘independent leadership’, applying ‘the united front from below’ to assemble militants around it in a Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition. As mass struggle developed, the MM would establish revolutionary unions.⁹⁵ Pollitt insisted:

The Minority Movement is now the alternative leading national centre for the industrial movement of the British workers. Those who want Mondism, class collaboration, company unionism can get it from the General Council of the TUC. Those who want a policy based solely on the interests of the working class, a policy of militant trade unionism, look to the MM for their leadership.⁹⁶

For the MM mark two, rank and filism was the midwife of nascent revolutionary trade unionism. The all-inclusive philosophy, structural stability, and entrenched economism of British trade unionism – as well as the contradiction of revolutionary trade unions outside a revolutionary situation – ensured the adventure achieved little. Ensuing withdrawal from work in the reformist unions presaged terminal decline. By 1930, the MM mustered 300 members. By December 1931, when the Comintern formulated plans for its liquidation, it represented scattered clusters of Communists whose activities were minimally coordinated by an embattled leadership in London.⁹⁷

The MM was, albeit imperfectly, a revolutionary movement but one which veered from subordination to trade unionism to ultra-leftism and achieved scant success in revolutionising the consciousness of significant sections of militants. It never functioned as a piston pushing workers into action. In its early years it acted substantially as a support group for leftwing officials. Thereafter it exiled itself to the fringes of the unions. By 1929, the Comintern had

⁹⁴ John Mcllroy, ‘British Communists and the 1932 Turn to the Trade Unions’, *Labor History*, 56: 5 (2015), pp. 541-565.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Quoted, Martin, p. 116.

⁹⁷ Mcllroy, ‘British Communists’; The two ‘red’ unions, the United Clothing Workers and the United Mineworkers of Scotland, were dissolved in the turn to the popular front: Lerner, pp. 85-143; Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939 vol 2 Trade Unions and Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 269-367.

embraced Stalinism and instilled a lasting conception of how a party and movement should interact. Moscow's dissemination of the military, *étatiste* model of political organisation adopted by the Bolsheviks as a besieged ruling party in 1920-1921 ensured the CPGB, and MM, developed in bureaucratic centralist mould.⁹⁸ Party activists within the MM possessed little purchase on its policy, non-CPGB activists less: key decisions were arrived at beyond their gaze and grasp. Until 1928, there was life in the movement, some space for meaningful discussion and initiative in workplaces and districts. Thereafter, breadth and independence evaporated. Supporters voted with their feet against policies they had no voice in determining. It was a rank and file movement in a restricted sense - not fundamentally because it refused to exclude officials - but because, instead of empowering workers, it treated them as malleable human *materiel*, in a way previously condemned by SSWCM leaders. It was not a self-governing, dialogical organisation, training workers to take power. Short of wrenching them from their essential context, it is difficult to create a composite of a rank and file movement from the distinctive experiences of the MM and SSWCM. It is even more problematic – unless we suppress differences in initiation, organisation, programme, politics and practice – to employ such an amalgam as a blue print for the 21st century.

The 1930s and Beyond

The new decade ushered in a plethora of movements restricted to particular unions and industries. Many were ephemeral: the Builders' Forward Movement; the Boilermakers' Reorganisation Committee; the Cotton Workers' Solidarity Movement; the Portworkers' Unity Movement; the Tinsplate Workers' Unofficial Committee; and groups around the papers, *Print Worker* and *Light and Liberty* in the electricians' union. A handful, the London

⁹⁸ For Lenin's ideas on the party before 1917 see, Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), pp. 111-141. See also, Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993).

Busmen's Rank and File Movement, the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement and the South Wales Miners Movement proved more enduring, while the Members' Right Committees in engineering achieved fleeting success.⁹⁹ A number of points stand out. First, despite Comintern insistence on the proximity of a revolutionary situation, circumstances were adverse: depression, union retreat and muted militancy characterised the years before 1934. There remained tendencies to challenge officials' conservatism. Second, MM cadres were central to harnessing this impetus, consolidating organisation and eliciting non-party support. Their original purpose was to exploit these movements to revitalise the MM. Third, the Comintern revised this approach. Rather than incorporating new movements into the MM, Communists would expand them as discrete organisations. Politicised and augmented they would constitute sections of a new, national Trade Union Militant League. The MM was no longer fit for purpose: the League would replace it. Fourth, this project was devised within the parameters of Third Period policy: Communists would revitalise their union activity by extending these movements as instruments of independent leadership.¹⁰⁰ The Comintern resolved:

Whatever opposition movements of the workers in the reformist unions exist must be utilised to create and strengthen the revolutionary trade union opposition. Such movements include the Builders' Forward Movement, Members' Rights Committees, Rank and File Committees [and] must be utilised for exposing the reformists. All such opposition movements must be led by the fractions of the revolutionary trade union opposition... Only as the mass movement develops and the mass basis of the revolutionary trade union opposition is extended, will it be possible to transform these looser organisational forms and to organise the revolutionary trade union opposition on a direct and national scale.¹⁰¹

Sectional movements, Pollitt emphasised, '...shall be unified under such a name as the Trade Union Militant League which would be for Britain, the Revolutionary Trade Union

⁹⁹ McIlroy, 'Revival and Decline.'

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ CPGB, 'Immediate Tasks Before the Party and the Working Class: Resolution of the Central Committee January 1932', *Communist Review*, June-July 1931, p. 61; CPA Reel 25, Executive Committee of the Communist International, Presidium 29 December 1931.

Opposition. That is the perspective...¹⁰² Progress was slow. Based on Transport and General Workers Union garage branches, but with its own committee, funds, officials and paper, the London Busmen's Movement enjoyed the greatest success. It led strikes, restored wage reductions and challenged speed-up. It achieved control of the constitutional body, the Central Bus Council; elected delegates to TGWU conferences; secured a seat on the union's executive; and fended-off official hostility personified by general secretary, Ernest Bevin. Adopting a platform of trade union demands, *Busman's Punch* blended industrial matters with Communist politics but the movement experienced the pull of economism and its leaders came under fire for restraining strikes. A joint enterprise with non-party militants, it benefitted from assistance from CPGB full-timers, Emile Burns and George Renshaw, and the Communist-controlled Labour Research Department (LRD). Its strength was that it represented a homogenous group, limited to one locality with a common employer and workplace branches. A correlative weakness was that it never embraced London tramwaymen, tube workers, or passenger transport workers outside the metropolis. It was a fractional sectional movement.¹⁰³

The Vigilance Movement, in contrast, enrolled railworkers nationally. It concentrated on organisation in the depots, national conferences and a regular paper, the *Railway Vigilant*, which focussed on industrial matters but purveyed the Communist line. Like the busmen's committee, the movement was based on economic demands: it engaged Labour and ILP supporters but was serviced by Renshaw and the LRD. It proved unable to lead strikes and evolved as a 'ginger group'. It represented a fraction of the industry's 600,000 workers and 1,000 union branches. At its zenith, its 1934 conference attracted 55 delegates from the

¹⁰² Harry Pollitt, *The Road to Victory* (London: CPGB, 1932), pp. 47-48.

¹⁰³ The best account remains Ken Fuller, *Radical Aristocrats: London Busworkers From the 1880s to the 1980s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 101-159.

National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and 26 from branches of ASLEF the drivers' union, with 63 delegates from the depots. Nonetheless, it played some part in pushing officials towards a firmer stance which by mid-decade yielded restoration of the wage cuts.¹⁰⁴

The grouping around the *South Wales Miner*, edited by Arthur Horner, was formed after pressure from the CPGB Political Bureau (PB). It confined itself largely to economic demands, influenced the drive against company unionism and took a leading role in boosting union membership, democratising the union and electing Horner president.¹⁰⁵ The CPGB controlled the United Mineworkers of Scotland; otherwise rank and file was absent from Britain's coalfields. The Engineers' Rank and File Movement, launched in 1931, remained a paper organisation. When its founders were expelled from their unions they animated the Members' Rights Committees which secured reinstatement. Attempts to establish a broader campaign faltered, and in 1933 the committees collapsed.¹⁰⁶ PB endeavours to foster a movement encompassing engineering proved unfruitful. Cadres were daunted by the task, in a disparate sector which employed up to 1.5 million workers; some perceived inner-union activity as more rewarding. The only progress came in aircraft production. By 1935 an Aircraft Shop Stewards National Council (ASSNC) had been created, together with a paper, *New Propellor*, an initiative indebted to CPGB full-timer, Peter Zinkin.¹⁰⁷

These bodies were inaugurated and dominated by the CPGB and monitored by the Comintern.¹⁰⁸ Until 1934, the perspective continued to be that which had driven the establishment of the MM: rank and file organisations '...cannot realise their full power so

¹⁰⁴ Philip Bagwell, *The Railwaymen* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), pp. 522-523.

¹⁰⁵ Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp. 190-191, 280; CPA, Reel 14, Political Bureau (PB) 6 April 1933.

¹⁰⁶ Edmund and Ruth Frow, *Engineering Struggles* (Manchester: Working Class Movement Library, 1982), pp. 92-94; PB 4 February 1933; CPA, Reel 15, PB 8 March 1934.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War 1939-1945* (London: Merlin Press, 1982), pp. 34-72.

¹⁰⁸ McIlroy, 'Revival and Decline'.

long as they remain sectional, separate and limited in their scope and character.’¹⁰⁹ Pollitt stressed: ‘We cannot have the perspective that year after year these movements can go on without being coordinated, without being unified.’¹¹⁰ From Spring 1933, the *Militant Trade Unionist* was published to pave the way for the Trade Union Militant League. Edited by Mann, the paper had ‘...the central political objective of developing the rank and file movements and working for their combination into a revolutionary trade union opposition.’¹¹¹ Like the MM, it would be dedicated to the destruction of capitalism.¹¹² Succeeding months saw efforts to launch movements in engineering and coal as a prelude to their national integration. By July 1934, failure was on the cards and the *Militant Trade Unionist* folded. By December, Moscow was pronouncing:

...it is necessary to give up at present the idea of development on a national scale of the Trade Union Militant League. Such an organisation, such a project at present would act as a barrier to the work in the reformist unions... We proposed to create a Trade Union Militant League at the last Congress. Today it would be a mistake to bring it forward as a means to coordinate the militant organisations... we have no basis in the unions for this.¹¹³

The Comintern guillotined revolutionary rank and filism. Organisation would continue in fragmented fashion, not as a national movement, striving to connect immediate demands to the ultimate goal of revolution. The causes were twofold. The environment remained recalcitrant. Developing rank and filism was a formidable, enterprise for a fragile party with 5,500 members. Ironically, the depression and union membership bottomed in 1932-1933 and the balance of forces after 1934 became more favourable.¹¹⁴ Yet the departure in Russian foreign policy was the decisive factor: Hitler’s assumption of power motivated a return to the united front. This was followed through 1935 by moves towards a popular front with the

¹⁰⁹ Sixth Congress of the CPGB, (Gallacher).

¹¹⁰ Pollitt, pp. 47-48.

¹¹¹ CPA, Reel 4, Central Committee (CC) 18February 1933.

¹¹² *Militant Trade Unionist*, 1 May 1933.

¹¹³ RGASPI, 495/100/943, Bob McIlhorne to CPGB 19.12.1934, Dear Friend...31.12.1934.

¹¹⁴ Clegg, pp. 543-565; H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, vol III 1934-1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 1-93.

anti-fascist bourgeoisie, franked at the Seventh Comintern Congress. The new politics corroded Communist conceptions of rank and file and by 1935, required rupture with the past. Social fascist leaders metamorphosed into potential allies. Rank and file movements, certainly on a national scale, became potential impediments to their cultivation. Popular frontism exploited fatigue with toil outside union legality and the allure of work in official structures, capturing, rather than outflanking, the apparatus.¹¹⁵

The *South Wales Miner* was jettisoned in the run-up to Horner's elevation to the presidency and the movement faded away. The reformed SWMF, it was claimed, was itself a rank and file movement and Communist ascendancy rendered oppositional organisation redundant.¹¹⁶

The *Railway Vigilant* suspended publication at the end of 1935 and the movement disintegrated as CPGB activists campaigned for official posts in the NUR and ASLEF.¹¹⁷

The absence of any general prohibition was signalled by the growth of the ASSNC. But it emphasised its economic platform and agency in building trade unionism and conciliated union leaders over a threatened national strike of aircraft workers. The expansion of the sector and its economic and political importance encouraged militancy and maintained Comintern interest. *The New Propellor* combined industrial coverage with popular front politics and adulation of Russia. But the ASSNC was a combine committee seeking to develop union workplace organisation, not a revolutionary rank and file movement. In engineering generally, the emphasis turned towards winning official positions with the focus on the AEU.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ McIlroy, 'Revival and Decline'.

¹¹⁶ *South Wales Miner*, February 1935; Lew Thomas, 'Rank and File Movements', *Discussion*, July 1936.

¹¹⁷ CPA, Reel 16, PB 25 March 1937; David Howell, *Respectable Radicals* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 340-341.

¹¹⁸ RGASPI, 495/100/1040, Party Organisation n.d. 1939.

Popular frontism stimulated stabs at theorising practice: unofficial organisation disrupted ‘unity’ – when party objectives could be achieved constitutionally. The busmen’s movement was essentially ‘a conference of branch officials’ and, thus, ‘an official movement.’¹¹⁹

Ahistorical casuistry sanctioned selective maintenance of sectional movements, augmented from 1935 by organisation around the *New Builders Leader*.¹²⁰ Reality intruded: in the aftermath of the 1937 ‘Coronation Strike’, Bevin attacked the busmen’s movement. Its leaders, Bill Jones and Bert Papworth, were expelled from the TGWU and others barred from office. The PB’s response distilled the new approach: ‘we recommend the Rank and File Movement should be liquidated and that very careful consideration should be given as to whether the Busman’s Punch is produced in the future so as to avoid an extension of the policy of expulsion.’¹²¹

The 1930s represented a watershed. Rank and file movements started from, and remained circumscribed by, the contours of capital, and functioned as pressure groups on officialdom. Remaining ‘sectional, separate and limited in scope and character’, beginning and ending with militant trade unionism, they were ‘unable to exercise their full power.’¹²² That demanded a democratic, national movement with a programme which endeavoured to transform trade union consciousness into class consciousness. Imperfectly expressed in the MM, that conception was lost in the popular front turn to reformist trade unionism. An approbatory account concludes: ‘History never repeats itself but these unofficial movements

¹¹⁹ PJ, ‘Why We Don’t Want Rank and File Movements’, *Discussion*, January 1936. But see Sheehan, ‘Why Rank and File Movements’.

¹²⁰ *New Builders’ Leader*, October 1935.

¹²¹ PB 15 July 1937; PB 10 June 1937.

¹²² See note 109. CPGB membership increased to over 17,000 by 1939. There were 98 Communists in the busmen’s movement in 1937 and 230 in aircraft in 1939: McIlroy, ‘Revival and Decline.’ But this represented recruitment to a Stalinist party moving towards reformism.

are still relevant today.¹²³ Concurrence requires a caveat: the lessons are only positive if judged by trade union rather than socialist criteria.

Subsequent history underlines the point. During the CPGB's 'imperialist war' interregnum between 1939 and 1941, the ASSNC mutated into the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards' National Council (EATSSNC) and mirrored party policy. After Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the EATSSNC discouraged strikes, convened conferences on production 'to assist the officials' and backed the war effort, championing steward organisation as an instrument of progressive managerialism. In the post-war years the *New Propellor* became the *Metal Worker*. The EATSSNC campaigned for improved conditions and endorsed strikes while eschewing independent initiatives. It was phased out from 1959, when activists attracted antagonism from union leaders, and the paper expired in 1963.¹²⁴ Directed by CPGB stalwarts, the EATSSNC possessed neither democratic machinery nor local organisation; it was the shadow of a rank and file movement and had little to do with revolution. The same went for the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) initiated in the late 1960s. It disavowed rank and filism and functioned as an adjunct of the party, executing its Broad Left policy. It was controlled by a committee which worked with the CPGB industrial department and drafted declarations put to sporadic conferences for acceptance or rejection. From 1969 to 1973, the LCDTU enjoyed success in mobilising militants and stimulating strikes against anti-union legislation but thereafter exercised negligible influence.¹²⁵

¹²³ Smith, p. 66.

¹²⁴ Croucher, pp. 113, 152-153; 279-280; Jefferys, pp. 14-21; Frow and Frow, pp. 220-262.

¹²⁵ John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Organising the Militants: The Liaison Committee For The Defence of Trade Unions 1966-1979', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 37:1 (1999), pp. 1-31.

Communist abandonment of revolutionary politics encouraged the Trotskyists to fill the gap. In 1943, the Workers International League (WIL) took advantage of a weak revival of the Clyde Workers' Committee to set up the Militant Workers' Federation (MWF) on a programme of economic demands and workers' control of industry. The WIL had around 150 members. Despite collaboration with ILP activists, recruitment in armaments factories and engagement with strikes, usually from the outside, the MWF failed to profit from Stalinist enthusiasm for the war.¹²⁶ In the late 1950s, the group that became the Socialist Labour League convened a National Rank and File Conference. The League subsequently changed tack and proclaimed the All Trade Union Alliance as '...the political arm of the League in the trade unions...a training ground and preparation for League membership.'¹²⁷ A final abortive attempt to form a National Rank and File Movement (NRFM) came from the International Socialists (IS) in 1974. This group had created a network of rank and file papers, in one or two cases with sizeable supporting caucuses. But IS had only 3,000 members, slender purchase in factories and unions, and little organic relationship with the working class. The Organising Committee was created and dominated by IS members: they insisted on a programme of economic demands and opposed committing the embryonic movement to nationalisation of industry under workers control as inappropriately political. Its official obituarist concluded: '...the NRFM was still born.'¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Croucher, pp. 228-230; Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *War and the International: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937-1949* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), pp. 70-71, 77-78, 109, 187.

¹²⁷ John McIlroy, "'Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned": The Trotskyists and the Trade Unions', in McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell, p. 264; *The Newsletter Conference and the Communist Party* (London: Newsletter Pamphlet, 1958). Historians record few rank and file movements in the immediate post war years. A notable exception was organisation in the South Wales coalfield directed primarily against the failings of the CPGB union leaders: Francis and Smith, pp. 442-445.

¹²⁸ Callinicos, p. 22; McIlroy, 'Always Outnumbered', pp. 273-283.

Reflections

A socialist historian summarized the early 1920s: ‘... there was very considerable discontent, at times even hatred, of union officials and union policy. The problem was that the passionate outbursts were prone to be transitory. Disgruntled workers after making a protest would sink back into apathy. It became exceedingly difficult to sustain a rank and file organisation, particularly with a shortage of finance and facilities.’¹²⁹ This is a reasonable assessment of the inter-war years as a whole. In most cases, rebellion rapidly subsided. In some instances, the CPGB supplied the resources for enduring organisation. Unsurprisingly, it reflected the party’s changing ideas and shifts in policy dictated diversity. Rank and file demanded mobilisation to impel the bureaucracy to lead and, if this proved unforthcoming, independent action. Different movements practised this in different ways. The SSWCM acted as an economistic network: based in the workplace, independent of the apparatus, the accent was on outflanking officialdom. The MM was part of a hierarchical, international organisation, a section of RILU with a stronger socialist programme. It was autonomous of the union bureaucracy but not the bureaucratic centralist party. The MM oscillated between pressurising the apparatus and rejecting pressure as reformist, between economism and ultra-leftism. It was unsuccessful in galvanising officials or mobilising independently. The 1930s movements were sectional pressure groups. Subsequent initiatives were party fronts. Trotskyist incursions achieved little. None of this provides an unproblematic conception of a rank and file movement and it is difficult to portray as a success. The dependence of the interwar movements on what became a Stalinist party indicated the brittleness of workers’

¹²⁹ Challinor, pp. 259-260.

aspirations to rank and file organisation.¹³⁰ These bodies led few struggles after 1918 and failed to turn reformists into revolutionaries in significant numbers.

Yet faith in rank and file movements remained resilient. Pearce concluded his 1959 survey by endorsing their current relevance. During the ‘Keynesian boom’, socialists dreamt of ‘...the formation of a “National Minority Movement.”’¹³¹ 21st century Marxists detected revival: ‘In the post, health and rail, the embryos of a new rank and file movement are beginning to develop’.¹³² Others maintained: ‘The best example in history of a rank and file organisation is the Minority Movement...It was formed in a period similar to today...The same thing could be done today.’¹³³ These statements neglect proper appraisal of past and present. They are based on exaggeration and decontextualisation, peeling away the CPGB from movements it moulded, adding caveats about Stalinism – and pronouncing the result an essentially healthy endeavour, worthy of emulation. Despite the difficulties revolutionaries confronted, the MM was part of a novel, confident, global project in what Marxists considered an epoch of war and revolutions, with the working class moving towards socialism. That no longer applies. Decades of defeat have seen transformations within capitalism; the collapse of the Soviet Union; the decline of social democracy; a working class restructured by economic, technological and cultural innovation; erosion of trade unionism, socialist ideas, and revolutionary agency. Positive lessons relevant to the contemporary world cannot be culled from the 1920s in such a simplistic manner.

¹³⁰ A reservation is necessary. Accounts of the SSWCM depend largely on recuperation of evidence from its leaders – not its ranks. Later movements have been, perforce, largely reconstructed from Communist sources. The voices of non-CPGB participants – still less the perceptions of ‘ordinary’ workers – are rarely heard.

¹³¹ Pearce, p. 135; Robert Emmett, ‘Socialists and the Labour Movement’ in *A Socialist Review* (London: International Socialism, 1965 [1958]), p. 162. The writer continued ‘...what are these “rank and file movements” that are advocated as a “pep pill” to cure all trade union ills? Here, it seems that if a dozen dockers, busmen, meat porters and building workers can be persuaded to get together, the new revolutionary movement will be well on its way...’ – *ibid*.

¹³² Smith, p. 70.

¹³³ Nugent, ‘The Rank and File Movement’.

If ‘...ransacking the early history of the Communist Party for precedents’¹³⁴ is misguided, probing the past may stimulate critical thinking. A fundamental question is whether rank and file movements remain relevant. No national movement has proved viable since the MM. The last attempt, essayed in the 1970s in what its promoters judged more favourable conditions than those prevailing in the 1920s, never got off the ground. Historians cannot anticipate how the 21st century will unfold. However, as a Marxist scholar recently observed: ‘...one need not be a prophet to foresee that the need for the revolutionary salvation of the world will arise again.’¹³⁵ More immediately, and despite the persistent tribulations of capitalism, forces capable of driving a revival of trade unionism are far from apparent. In the longer term, the waning of traditional forms of collective organisation may liberate space for insurgent movements in the workplace and beyond. In that light, and in the interests of enriching the political memory of the working class embodied in its activists, a few tentative observations may be hazarded.

It seems reasonable to conclude that resort to rank and file movements should be contingent on the condition of union democracy and the state of the class struggle. Elsewhere, I have discussed in detail the inability of theories of a conservative bureaucracy containing a militant rank and file to satisfactorily explain problems rooted in trade unionism itself.¹³⁶ An erroneous theory underpins erroneous assumptions that rank and file movements are a necessity or typically desirable, rather than a conjunctural, tactical issue. The evidence suggests that when socialists are strong, they can build at the base, penetrate the union machine, and influence policy. Failure has owed as much to the left’s political weakness as

¹³⁴ Hinton and Hyman, p. 74.

¹³⁵ Krausz, p. 364.

¹³⁶ McIlroy, ‘Marxism and the Trade Unions’.

to bureaucratic manipulation. Too ready a recourse to rank and file organisation can constitute an over-reaction. It is not an end in itself. Official structures remain the primary arena - a view to be reconsidered when distortions of democracy impede all efforts. The democratic deficit varies from period to period and union to union. Independent initiatives may be imperative in the face of bureaucratic blockages, corruption, bans and proscriptions; such factors are less relevant at other times. There is a danger that when most workers reserve legitimacy for trade unions, rank and file movements, particularly of a semi-permanent nature, segregate revolutionaries, isolate them from mainstream activity and diminish support.

The judgement that such movements are only realisable when capital and the state confront militant workplace trade unionism is not definitive. Other situations may arise – where the working class is in retreat and resistance is stifled by restrictions on democracy. The modest upsurge of the early 1930s was noted earlier. What seems essential is that they emerge from mass struggle; not from proclamations, based on magnification, which announce the birth of paper organisations and invite non-party activists to join them. Substitutionism is a perennial problem: a significant corpus of militants willing to collaborate with revolutionaries is indispensable. Its absence portends a party front. A revolutionary presence incarnated in a party with real influence in the unions, the working class, and society generally, is equally necessary – as the frustrated projects of marginal groups affirm. The dictum ‘it is never too soon to start’ has bred impatience and limited achievement. Like other Marxist thinkers, Trotsky was an advocate of establishing ‘...in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle’, and refusing to await

ideal conditions.¹³⁷ The history of rank and filism - and Trotskyism - suggest some sense of proportion is required. It is important to distinguish organisations which relate peripherally to the working class from those which relate to it organically, having assembled a meaningful social base and strategic political programme so that they possess the potential to develop into a mass party.¹³⁸

The united front was fundamental to the theory of rank and file movements. The tactic prescribed agreements with reformist leaders: the MM was not the united front, simply a step towards it. The purpose was to strengthen mass action, while simultaneously seeking to persuade militants of the validity and viability of the party's programme. It is difficult to envisage this being achieved if revolutionaries invert Marxism, restrict themselves to reformist demands and insist rank and file movements fight the effects of the system, rather than trying to change it. The problem is not resolved by relying on struggle over immediate demands to transform trade union consciousness. This is not to diminish the role economic struggle can play. Strikes provide favourable conditions for learning: for most workers they teach the need for strong trade unionism. Nor is it intended to devalue their importance in organising workers, constructing solidarity, building power and providing openings for socialists. It is simply to reflect that political conversion is rarely accomplished without sustained political argument and education conducted by a strong party.¹³⁹ Fusion of action and ideological struggle requires that dialogue and debate are embedded in the movement's DNA. Both action and political engagement necessitate the fullest democracy. These are the

¹³⁷ L. D. Trotsky, 'The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Working Class' in *Documents of the Fourth International* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973 [1938]), p. 187. 'Propagation of the factory committee idea' could be 'premature' or 'artificial' outside a context of workers' advance: *ibid*, p. 188.

¹³⁸ Krausz, p. 118.

¹³⁹ McIlroy, 'Strikes and Class Consciousness', pp. 67-71.

mechanisms through which a Marxist party confronts reformism and conducts its business in a rank and file movement.

Alliances of reformists and revolutionaries for mutually agreed ends, rank and file movements should logically be independent of both reformist and revolutionary parties. Beyond mavericks, it is difficult to see why centrists and reformists who are unprepared to join a revolutionary party should *ab initio* embrace its policies on any significant scale. It is equally difficult to comprehend why revolutionaries who understand the process of political transformation should seek to pre-empt and potentially endanger it by foisting their programme on a joint enterprise at its inauguration. The movement should be autonomous: it should develop its own programme and its own democratic integrity but remain a site of political contention in which party members take a leading role, through political persuasion, not through imposition and administrative methods. The unity between this approach and the struggle to transcend trade union consciousness and convince reformists of the salience of a socialist programme will be apparent.

The aspiration is a mission statement which inserts immediate demands in an itinerary which culminates in a political destination. The MM platform provides a starting point: it enshrined the overthrow of capitalism and a socialist system as the ultimate goal but referred more specifically to ‘revolutionary class struggle’ and ‘the delusion of peaceful transition.’¹⁴⁰ Allowing for different conditions, it seems reasonable that revolutionaries should advocate something similar but the problem of realisability cannot be avoided. Joint ventures require negotiation and sometimes compromise. It is impossible to be overly prescriptive here: leadership entails judgement in specific circumstances on how far to diverge from the ideal to

¹⁴⁰ Martin, p. 37.

ensure practical progress. But even in propitious conditions there should be no question of subordinating the movement organisationally to the party, or dictating a particular programme – as distinct from campaigning for it. Outcomes cannot be guaranteed. What appears clear is that a movement limited to trade union horizons will reinforce trade unionism. Programmes, of course, remain academic if uninformed by a political strategy which grasps the movement of capitalist economy and the trajectory of the bourgeoisie and the working class. The history of the Comintern provides a cautionary tale.

Organisation on these lines largely dissolves disputation about the involvement of left officials. Those who refuse to endorse and act on these principles will enjoy ephemeral tenure as members. The critique of Broad Leftism relates to its one-sided approach. The problem is not so much electoralism as short-cut, opportunist conceptions of electoralism. Pursuit of union positions is pertinent when articulated with wider strategy based on a socialist platform, answerable to a significant base, and guided by a healthy party. These conditions cannot be conjured up from above. In specific situations Broad Left caucuses may offer a forum in which to develop political argument and assert the importance of grassroots organisation. The question of ‘alliances’ with officials who are not prepared to openly support rank and file movements also demands attention. From the TUC lefts of the 1920s to leaders such as Jones and Scanlon in the 1970s, CPGB history was studded with diplomatic ‘alliances’. They were, at best, one-sided and typically conducted on union leaders’ terms. The CPGB contributed electoral mobilisation, legitimisation and suppression or dilution of criticism – garnering goodwill but minimal political reciprocation. There were no formal compacts or understandings of any precision. This approach proved unproductive and

inimical to building a strong movement.¹⁴¹ Finally, if significant anti-capitalist mobilisations do emerge, they are likely to develop across society, in the Labour Party as well as the trade unions – to which it is inextricably linked. This suggests the importance of a revolutionary current inside the Labour Party co-ordinated with organisation in industry.

What should be integral aspects of rank and filism were marginalised and distorted in what some consider its heroic age. Bureaucratic centralism and Stalinism circumscribed politics and practice. Few would disagree with Pearce's diagnosis of '...the fatal consequences of allowing the Communist Party to get control of such movements.'¹⁴² Yet some of the weaknesses the CPGB contributed linger today in the *commandiste* organisation, opportunist politics and cultic practice of groups which presently espouse rank and filism. There is a contradiction between an undemocratic regime and economistic practice, and rank and file movements conceived and constructed as participatory democratic organisations which transcend trade unionism. A range of Marxists have remarked on the continuing relevance of Lenin's devastating anatomisation of economism to Britain.¹⁴³ Yet the approach Lenin excoriated so convincingly continues to thrive. Post, for example, commends Meiksins Wood's affirmation of the socialist potential of *all* labour struggles:

...it is profoundly misleading to impose a rigid discontinuity between the 'lesser forms of 'merely' economic struggle and more directly political assaults on the capitalist order, not only because the larger struggles have always grown organically out of the smaller oppositions, but more fundamentally because both are rooted in the essential antagonism of interest between capital and labour. There is, in other words,

¹⁴¹ U.S. miners' leader, John L. Lewis, who used then discarded the Communists in the 1930s, realistically remarked: 'Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?' – Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 97.

¹⁴² Pearce, p. 135.

¹⁴³ For contrasting examples, see, Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 154; and Chris Harman, 'Lenin Rediscovered?' *Historical Materialism*, 18:3 (2010), pp. 68-69.

no clean caesura, either historically or structurally, between these forms of opposition.¹⁴⁴

The assertion is supported by examples of frustrated economic struggles leading, not to revolutionary politics, but to reformism; and the injunction that ‘...we should not underestimate the number of instances in which the capitalist order as a whole has been powerfully challenged by workers’ movements, even if the challenge has ultimately failed – as in Italy and Germany after the First World War.’¹⁴⁵ Conflating different forms of struggle, listing cases which confirm the limits of economism, and citing unsuccessful revolutionary challenges hardly makes a convincing case. Few would deny that under specific conditions trade union struggle may develop into political struggle; or that ‘lesser’ and ‘larger’ struggles are both rooted in ‘antagonism of interest between capital and labour’. The point, surely, is that ‘lesser’ economic struggles against capital only become ‘larger’ political struggles against capitalism when workers’ perceptions of what ‘antagonism of interest’ means qualitatively shift. This entails going beyond belief that ‘my employer is my enemy’ to conviction that ‘my employer is part of an antagonistic class’ and further, grasping that a different society is desirable and possible but can only be attained through organised revolutionary struggle. That is the difference between ‘lesser’ and ‘larger’ struggles. There *is* discontinuity between reformist and revolutionary consciousness and action. There *is* disjuncture. That is not only the conclusion of the classical Marxists but the verdict of history.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 185, quoted in Charles Post, ‘Exploring Working Class Consciousness: A Critique of the Theory of the “Labour Aristocracy”’, *Historical Materialism*, 18:4 (2010), p. 32.

¹⁴⁵ Meiksins Wood, p. 184.

¹⁴⁶ As early as 1899, when translating the Webbs – whose ideas strongly influenced his conception of trade unionism – Lenin polemicized against economism as a strain of Russian Bernsteinism. He distinguished between ‘petty struggles’, in the sense of ‘lesser forms’ of economic struggle against capital, and class struggle: ‘only when the individual worker realises that he is a member of the entire working class, only when he recognises the fact that his petty day-to-day struggle against individual employers and individual government officials is a struggle against the entire bourgeoisie and the entire government, does his struggle become a

The legacy of Marx, Engels and Lenin turns on the necessity of class politics; it has found inadequate resonance in the theory and practice of rank and file movements.¹⁴⁷ They will only play a future role if their programme and practice combines appreciation that trade union struggle is essential but insufficient. Without conscious political intervention it will fail to develop working class commitment to the revolutionary imperative. The early CPGB grasped this, although it did not always act on its implications: ‘The Communist Party has on all occasions assisted in the development of the movement and will continue to do so...at the same time it warns those active workers who participate that only a revolutionary communist struggle can serve to achieve the objectives they have in view.’¹⁴⁸

class struggle.’ ‘Our Immediate Task’ in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works vol 4* (Moscow: Foreign Publishing House, 1960), pp. 215-216.

¹⁴⁷See, for example, Karl Marx, *Wages, Price and Profit* in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works: One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1966), pp. 185-226; Marx to F. Bolte, November 23 1871, *ibid*, pp. 671-674; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ‘Resolution of the London Conference on Working Class Political Action’ in Karl Marx, *The First International and After* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

¹⁴⁸Sixth Congress of the CPGB, p. 34.