



## Socialists in the unions

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When last year management locked out the 39 SIPTU members in Ryanair, other workers in the airport showed tremendous solidarity when they walked off the job in support of the baggage handlers. Chefs, waiters, loaders, clerks, firefighters, computer operators, even the airport police struck in solidarity.

But the SIPTU leadership threw it all away. Keeping the airport closed for a day or two would have seen such pressure put on Ryanair that they would have had to recognise the union. It would also have made a huge dent in the Industrial Relations Act – which makes sympathy action illegal. And most importantly, it would have demonstrated very graphically that we have great power if we stick together and rely on our collective strength instead of putting our faith in the pleadings of union leaders. It would have shown the real fighting alternative to the class collaboration that in Ireland is called ‘social partnership’.

That scared the bureaucrats who occupy the top floor of Liberty Hall. Social partnership is the idea that workers, the bosses and the government can sit down as equals and make the best decisions to help the ‘national interest’. It’s a very noble sounding idea, until you consider that there is no ‘national interest’. Workers and bosses have opposing interests. If they didn’t, we wouldn’t need unions! ‘Partnership’ sells us wage restraint and no-strike deals, gives the bosses industrial peace and bigger profits, and is used to make us think we have more in common with our employers than we do with workers in other countries.

Cynicism and demoralisation are found among trade unionists in almost every job and trade union branch. Everyone knows that big changes are needed in our unions. There is a great potential power in the trade union movement. About half of all workers in Ireland are union members. This means that throughout the public sector, and in a lot of private sector employments which are not just small family businesses, the majority of workers are in a union. But this potential is not being used.

Joining a trade union implies, although it is not always clearly thought out, that we have different interests to those of the boss. It further recognises that to look after our own interests we have to get together with other workers. This is the beginning of class consciousness, an understanding that our interests are different to those of the employers.

Anarchists and other revolutionary socialists have always said that workers organised on the job have tremendous power. This is a power that can and should be used to win day-to-day improvements. It is also the power that can overthrow capitalism, replacing it with genuine socialism and liberty. We have also said that even a small amount of direct action is better than a lot of conciliation, arbitration and mediation. This is action that is taken collectively by workers and which remains under their direct control. It is no exaggeration to say that there is a grave shortage of direct action at the moment!

Trade unions were set up to defend workers under capitalism, to stop the bosses having a completely free hand in setting wages and conditions. They organise workers to get the best possible deal (at least that’s the idea) under the present system. Their goal is to get the best price for their members’ ability to work, the highest possible wages. It is not to get rid of exploitation and the wages system. Their preferred method is negotiation rather than struggle. This is not to say that trade unionists are naturally conservative or meek. It merely shows how the ideas of capitalism are reflected inside our unions. Part of this is that there must be a division into leaders and led, order-givers and order-takers.

The initiative is very much with the full-time officials, many of whom are not even

elected but enjoy considerable power and influence. Most of these have jobs for life and see their union work as a career rather than a commitment. The vast majority are unresponsive to the needs of their members. They live a different lifestyle, often being found alongside employers and senior civil servants on commissions and the boards of semi-state companies. Quite a number have never even had an ordinary job in a factory, office or hospital. No matter what ideas they have at the beginning, they quickly have to accept that their career is that of an arbitrator, a smart talker, a fixer. What is important to them is proving their skill as smart negotiators, not helping their members to *fight* for their demands.

These people rarely lead strikes. Instead they will have you 'making submissions' to the Labour Relations Commission, to 'impartial mediators', and to every other talking shop they can find. They seem to thrive on almost endless negotiation, aimed at finding a 'reasonable settlement'. Some negotiations go on, literally, for years. They see taking any form of industrial action as very much a last resort, and are very quick to condemn unofficial action (i.e. action that hasn't been sanctioned by them). The 'correct procedures' and negotiation machinery are vitally important to them. Confidence among the members at workplace level rarely merits a second thought. The official believes that it is his or her negotiating skill that wins concessions from the boss. The activity of the rank and file is seen, at best, as secondary.

Once a deal has been struck, the official has to see that the members stick to it. The continued existence of the negotiation machinery depends on an element of trust. If the employer can't be sure that the union official can ensure that the members adhere to the deal, why should any boss enter negotiations? The union official's career depends on being able to make the members comply with agreements. The result is a cautious, conservative bureaucracy at the top of the unions that seeks more and more control over the members, and opposes any independent organisation among the rank and file.

This does not mean that these people will never support struggles. While they don't exactly make a habit of it, they are capable of leading and supporting strikes, especially when the negotiating machinery is brought into question. And even where they shy away from striking, they still take recognition disputes very seriously. This is why, for instance, SIPTU's leaders were prepared to spend a small fortune explaining the case of the Ryanair workers.

However, in many strikes verbal support is slow in coming, if it comes at all. With the idea of 'social partnership' and the anti-strike provisions of the 1990 Industrial Relations Act (which was agreed as part of the first partnership agreement, the 1987 Programme for National Recovery, and hailed by ICTU's Kevin Duffy as leaving us "better off") we are seeing even less support for strikers. Much sympathy but little active support – as we saw at Nolan's Transport in New Ross, Pat the Baker in Cherry Orchard, the Three Lakes Hotel in Killarney, and too many others.

In our own jobs there are things we can all do right now. Things like turning our shop stewards into delegates who take instruction from their workmates, instead of representatives who are elected once a year and then left to get on with it. Things like strengthening class consciousness by publicising disputes, taking up collections for strikers, sending delegations to show support. None of this is easy. But it can be done, and is being done. It is one small, but concrete and necessary, step towards popularising the ideas of solidarity, direct action and direct democracy.

Beyond this, how can activists inside the unions organise to combat the authority of the officials and bring together workers who take their trade unionism seriously? Three options can be put forward.

*The first is the Broad Left strategy.* This is about building groups within individual unions whose main purpose is to elect a 'left wing' leadership, though as part of this they will also

try to generate support for workers in struggle. Sometimes they also argue that officials should get no more than the average wage of their members and should have to stand for regular re-election.

It is correct to raise demands like these and to support candidates who are more responsive to the needs of the membership. A problem arises, however, when electing leaders becomes more important than winning support for rule changes which would allow for more participation and democracy, than organising at the grassroots and offering solidarity to workers when it is denied by the leadership.

As the Broad Left idea concentrates on leadership, we must start off by asking if leaders are a good thing, and if they are necessary. These are not two separate questions, since if leaders are necessary they must also be good. Here we are not talking of a 'leadership of ideas', of those whose ideas are accepted because they make sense to the rest of us. We are talking about the leadership which divides us into leaders and led, the leader being the man or woman who—as a representative—has acquired combined administrative and decision-making powers.

As such, he or she sees no need for much debate or activity among the rank and file. Indeed, from the point of view of the average official, such thought and action—by encouraging questioning and criticism—is an obstacle to 'normal' trade unionism. Leadership implies almost absolute power held by the leader. All leaders become corrupt to some degree, despite their own good intentions. Nobody was ever good enough, brave enough or strong enough to have such power as real leadership implies.

The power of initiative, the sense of collective responsibility, the self-respect that comes from making decisions is taken away from the members and given to the leader. Most of the members are reduced to inactivity and passivity. Attendance at meetings, participation in internal union life, and even basic identification with the union declines as power shifts away from the workplace and the branch.

Of course not all advocates of the Broad Left strategy see things this way. Though constantly proclaiming the need for a 'fighting leadership', they also look for more internal democracy and activity. In reality, however, the main task is still seen as getting Broad Left supporters elected to positions of influence. The rank and file are to elect a new leadership who will then bring about change from the top.

*The second option is building a Rank and File Movement.* This is a strategy for organising within the union to win more democracy, more struggle against the bosses and more involvement by the membership. Its attitude is best summed up by the slogan "With the officials when possible, without them when necessary". Where there have been large rank and file movements, they have always been based on combative workers who find the union bureaucracy is an obstacle in their way. They are then forced to ignore the instructions of the bureaucracy and disobey them if their struggle is to be won.

This can start with being denied official sanction for a strike, or encountering obstruction from the bureaucracy when you need to spread your strike, or just refusing to get sucked into endless rounds of mediation. The point is that large rank and file groupings are created when workers are fighting the bosses, are confident, and then find the union officials are trying to sabotage their struggle. The need for independent organisation within the union is then posed. Struggle creates genuine rank and file movements, not the other way round.

At a time when most workers are on the defensive and lacking in confidence, any attempt to create such groups will attract only small numbers of activists. This is not to decry such attempts where they arise from a genuine desire to take on the bosses and bureaucrats, but to warn against setting any unrealistic goals at this time.

*The third option is building a Solidarity Network.* We have to face the fact that years of centralised wage bargaining have left many good union activists demoralised. They are

doubtful about the possibility of fighting back against the employers and even the union leaders.

But all is not doom and gloom. There are militants who want to fight back. The one third of union members who have consistently voted against the partnership agreements are one good sign of this. The illegal and successful strikes organised against sub-contracting by the 'Building Workers Against the Black Economy' group are another. Within SIPTU I would also point to the high votes secured in national ballots by a self-described revolutionary socialist, Carolann Duggan. The vast majority of the people who voted for her were not voting for revolutionary socialism—they were voting against 'social partnership' and for militant trade unionism. We need some sort of structure to bring these people together, a visible network that can attract other activists.

We need to break down the isolation that makes us weak, to combat 'social partnership' deals, to support all resistance to job losses and cutbacks, to fight for more democracy in our unions, and to organise solidarity with workers in struggle. A solidarity network could, if it gets enough support, produce magazines with factual information on disputes, wage deals, the behaviour of union leaders. It could also be a forum for debating different ideas for changing our unions. *SIPTU Fightback* is a bulletin produced by a small group of members from varying left wing traditions, which goes out to about 500 shop stewards and activists. It is one contribution to this process.

Such a network will certainly be militant on the 'bread and butter' issues, but it must also be political. This does not mean linking up with any particular party or organisation: it does mean taking up questions like racism as well as pay, promotions and union democracy. Anarchists and socialists want to win as many people as possible to our ideas. However, we should not make co-operation with other militant workers conditional on them agreeing with all our politics.

A solidarity network such as this would allow us to pool our efforts while at the same time discussing the different strategies for putting union power back where it should be—back in the workplace. It is a moderate proposal, but one which could provide a springboard for real rank and file organisation, and now is as good a time as any to start making preparations.

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