

THROUGH CLASS UNITY AND RESISTANCE

Freedom

Zabalaza books *Bulletin #3 - Free or Donation*



**Freedom without Socialism is Privilege, Injustice
Socialism without Freedom is Slavery, Brutality - BAKUNIN**

What's wrong with the unions?

"The Union Makes Us Strong" is a statement most people would agree with, but if you look at the unions closely, doubts begin to appear.

The union structure exists mostly outside the workplace, with officials totally divorced from the reality of the factory or shop floor struggle. From our own experience we know that the workplace is where our power lies. Let us look at the basic structure of any union – the branch. The first thing we see is that almost all branches exist and function away from the point of struggle, the workplace. The only contact with the workplace the branch has, and therefore the union, is through the workplace activists who attend and the workers who bring problems they have at work to the branch to solve. This doesn't happen very often and a lot of workers attend branch meetings only a handful of times throughout their working lives, if at all.



Union meetings are dominated by internal union business and not workplace matters. Most of these meetings are about the letters received, various motions and the countless elections and nominations to the various committees, conferences and union positions. This might be fine if the positions were elected by the whole union – but they are not! They are the views of the tiny number of activists. What happens at union meetings is that you have tens of people acting for hundreds and sometimes hundreds acting for thousands. The end of this joke is that you have union leaders getting up at various conferences casting votes on behalf of hundreds of thousands of members on policies and for people that most of the members will never have heard of let alone voted for.

We must also end the idea that all branch activists are also involved in the workplace struggle against the bosses. For a start, in many unions branch secretaries are full-time so never see the workplace. And even when they are not officially full-time they can become so through the back door

method, by sitting on so many committees and holding so many positions they do not have the time to do something as ordinary as work. Then there are those who are active in the union but have no base in the workplace. These people will argue for all sorts of motions to be passed but will do little to organise in the workplace and would not dream of organising strike action in defence of basic rights since it would threaten their middle class positions. We can even say that the unions act against militancy even at branch level. How often do angry workers turn to the branch for support and advice over incidents that have happened at work only to have all that anger channeled away from taking effective action by branch officials promising to 'get something done' by contacting head office or bringing in the Full-timer. Branch meetings are not full of activity where the mass of the workers meet, argue and exchange ideas. However, it can be said that they do at least have some links with the mass membership.

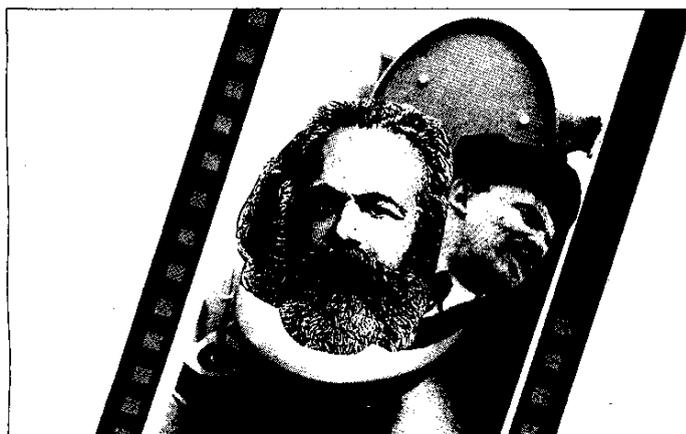
This is more than can be said for most union bodies above branch level. We now enter the strange world of the full-time union official whose working life is full of endless meetings with other union officials, management and union activists. The only time these people come across ordinary union members is when they are called in, often by management to 'resolve' a problem. The higher up the

union structure the more remote they become, ending with union leaders who only come across working class people on a day-to-day basis when they have a friendly chat with their domestic worker, gardener or the office cleaner.

The unions offer stability in the workplace, they channel our anger, shape and influence our demands and, if need be, act to police us as well. Perhaps this is best summed up by a quote from the boss class themselves: a manager when asked by a reporter why his multi-national had recognised unions is South Africa replied: "have you ever tried negotiating with a football field full of militant angry workers?" And it is this threat of an uncontrollable militant, if not revolutionary workforce, that first persuaded the capitalist of the need to accept reformist unions, seeing them as a way to control the workforce.

Marxism, Russia and the Unions

In Russia at the time of the Russian Revolution, when the organised working class fought not only the State but also the union bureaucracy, there emerged the concept of 'Factory Committees'. In Russia, the practical demonstration was crushed by the Bolsheviks (a Marxist organisation led by Lenin, Trotsky and others) in their bid for power. Their aim had no place for an independent working class. The idea of Factory Committees was an Anarchist one and as such was opposed by the -power-hungry of all kinds who instinctively rejected a system that opposed the idea of leader and led and would thus not allow them any power. All of a sudden the wage slaves were moving and not just asking for more money, but were wanting to control the environment they lived and worked in and ultimately their own lives. In Russia, the Anarchists disappeared into exile or jail, were tortured and even killed because they challenged the new found power of the Bolsheviks.



The Marxists see the workers not only as recruits but also as a way of increasing their influence in the unions. This is part of their political theory, that the unions are the place where workers organise at an economic level, while the 'more advanced' (i.e. not stupid) will wish to organise on a political level and join their organisation. With this outlook the Marxists deliberately set out to limit us to the basic day-to-day economic struggle. Though not all Marxist groups are the same, most make vague references to nationalisation of industry. However, nationalisation is based on just changing one boss for another. You also won't find any attempt to link the day-to-day struggles with the need to transform society. They not only offer false hope but channel energy and discontent away from the real problem – the nature of reformist unions but many of their activists are also too busy trying to build "the Party" to build a revolutionary working class organisation.

This lovely message was bought to you by Zabalaza Books, an Anarchist publication and mail-order book service. What is Anarchism you ask? Well, basically, an Anarchist society is a voluntary, non-hierarchical Society in which the political and social structures are organised so that all people have free and equal access to the wealth and decision making power of that Society.

You can contact us for more information at

Post: Postnet Suite 244, Private Bag X10, Musgrave,
4062

E-mail: zabalaza@ananzi.co.za

Phone (Leave Message): 0731674581

