

# **F** *THROUGH CLASS UNITY AND RESISTANCE* **r e e d o m**



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

## *Democracy for our Unions* *An Anarchist view*

### **Do we just want to change the people at the top of our unions or do we want to change our unions?**

Many union militants see their main task as getting more radical and more militant people elected as General Secretaries, Presidents and Executive Committee members. Rarely do they ask if the membership can exercise effective control over people in these positions. Rarely do they ask how we can get the ordinary membership more involved. This lack of involvement is often not even regarded as a big problem.

It is true that most workers only attend union meetings and take part in activities when a dispute is about to break out. It is also true that almost a decade of 'partnership' deals has strengthened a feeling of passivity. After all, your basic pay increase arrives after behind closed doors talks; you may get to vote yes or no - but that's the limit to your participation.

We want a situation where the national bodies of the unions see their role change from one of 'leadership'/order-giving to one of co-ordination and providing resources to the membership. We want those people effected by decisions having the right to make them. This means devolving more power to branch and section/workplace level.

### **What follows is the text of a leaflet distributed at 'Rank and File Conference - Social partnership: Claiming Back Our Unions', Sat. 10th Feb. 2001, Teachers' Club in Dublin**

Big changes in our unions will probably only come during big struggles, when a lot of members see the need for their unions and see the need to make them more democratic. Today, we can start arguing for a democratic agenda. We can ask our branches to put motions to conferences, we can start the debate among the activists.

Within our unions we should be trying to win rule changes that increase democracy and membership participation. As union rules differ, it is up to activists in each union to prioritise particular changes they want to achieve, but a few suggestions for kicking off the process are...

- a ballot of the members on every wage deal, and on any revised terms which may be proposed at a later stage.
- equal space in union publications for both sides of the debate before any ballot on a national pay deal.
- for elected lay editorial committees to oversee union journals and publications, and ensure that all views within the union are given space.
- more regular branch general meetings
- allow sections and branches to retain a proportion of members' subscriptions. Such cash to be spent at the discretion of the section/branch. Full accounts of expenditure to be submitted to their annual general meeting.
- for representative voting at conferences. Where a branch general meeting (or branch committee where appropriate) votes on a specific motion going to conference, and - for instance - passes a motion by 55% to 45% their delegates should register that same percentage vote. An end to the winner takes all form of voting. Alternatively, a branch may decide to leave it to their delegates to decide how to vote after hearing all the arguments from the conference floor. The decision should lie with the people giving a mandate to their delegates.
- a maximum term of office for all full-time elected union positions. No more elections to lifetime positions.
- no full-time union official to earn more than the average wage of the members of his/her union.
- the right of branches to directly propose rule changes to conference

This is not a complete programme, but merely some proposals to start the process of claiming back our unions.

Sometimes work in the unions can be extremely boring and seem to be almost a waste of time. But if we manage to wrest control from the bureaucrats currently strangling them, they will prove to be one of our best weapons in



furthering the battle for a free and equal society. One element of this struggle is kicking off the fight for more democracy. After all, they are supposed to be our organisations.

### **Opposing 'social partnership' or just opposing the pay terms?**

Opposition to 'social partnership' is what has brought many activists from different unions together over the last decade. We oppose these agreements because we reject the idea that there can be an ongoing and mutually beneficial deal between workers and bosses. This implies combating the very concept of 'partnership'.

The answer to "what happens if we win a no vote" should never be that the negotiators are sent back in to seek better terms for a partnership agreement. Indeed, we should be discussing how to deal with the increasing incorporation of the formal union structures into partnership bodies such as NEDLAC (including the often forgotten local partnership bodies, which usually draw upon activists rather than the bureaucracy).

## **This is taken from one of the earliest 'rank & file' pamphlets: *The Miners Next Step*, published by the *South Wales Unofficial Reform Committee* in 1912**

### **THE GOOD SIDE OF LEADERSHIP**

#### **1. Leadership tends to efficiency**

One decided man, who knows his own mind is stronger than a hesitating crowd. It takes time for a number of people to agree upon a given policy. One man soon makes up his mind.

#### **2. He takes all responsibility**

As a responsible leader, he knows that his advice is almost equivalent to a command, and this ensures that his advice will have been carefully and gravely considered before being tendered.

#### **3. He stands for Order and System**

All too frequently, 'What is everybody's business is nobody's business', and if no one stands in a position to ensure order and system, many things are omitted which will cause the men's interest to suffer.

#### **4. He affords a standard of goodness and ability**

In the sphere of public usefulness there is a great field of emulation. The good wishes of the masses can only be obtained by new aspirants for office showing a higher status of ability than the then existing leaders. This tends to his continued efficiency or elimination.

#### **5. His faithfulness and honesty are guarded**

Hero worship has great attractions for the hero, and a leader has great inducements on this side, apart from pecuniary considerations, to remain faithful and honest.

### **THE BAD SIDE OF LEADERSHIP**

#### **1. Leadership implies power**

Leadership implies power held by the leader. Without power the leader is inept. The possession of power inevitably leads to corruption. All leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions. No man was ever good enough, or strong enough, to have such power at his disposal, as real leadership implies.

#### **2. Consider what it means**

This power of initiative, this sense of responsibility, the self-respect which comes from expressed manhood, is taken from the men, and consolidated in the leader. The sum of their initiative, their responsibility, their self-respect becomes his.

#### **3. The order and system**

The order and system he maintains is based upon the suppression of the men, from being independent thinkers into being 'the men' or 'the mob'. Every argument which could be advanced to justify leadership on this score would apply equally well to the Czar of all the Russias and his policy of repression. In order to be effective, the leader must keep the men in order, or he forfeits the respect of the employers and 'the public', and thus becomes ineffective as a leader.

#### **4. He corrupts the aspirants to public usefulness**

He is compelled, in order to maintain his power, to see to it that only those who are willing to act as his drill sergeants or coercive agents shall enjoy his patronage. In a word, he is compelled to become an autocrat and a foe to democracy.

#### **5. He prevents solidarity**

Sheep cannot be said to have solidarity. In obedience to a shepherd they will go up or down, backwards or forwards as they are driven by him and his dogs. But they have no solidarity, for that means unity and loyalty. Unity and loyalty, not to an individual, or the policy of an individual, but to an interest and a policy which is understood and worked for by all.

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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.

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