Marxism and the trade unions Part 1
Marx, Engels, Lenin
and the British working class

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1 Marx and Engels on Trade Unions

Trade unionism as we understand it today really begins to develop with the industrial revolution in Britain and the growth of the industrial working class at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. At this time it was illegal under 1799 Combination Acts. In 1834 the utopian socialist, Robert Owen, initiated the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, but it discouraged strikes in favour of forming cooperatives and never really took off. Also in 1834 came the famous case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, agricultural labourers, who were sentenced to transportation for the crime of forming a union.

When Marx and Engels arrived on the scene as communists in the 1840s they found that most radicals, socialists and would be revolutionaries were actually opposed to trade unionism. Looking back in 1869, Marx noted, ‘in 1847 when all the political economists and all the socialists concurred on one single point – the condemnation of trade unions – I demonstrated their necessity’ and Engels concurred ‘Marx’s assertion is true of all socialists, with the exception of us two’ (In point of fact it was Engels in The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844 who first took first took up the cudgels on behalf of unions calling them, ‘the military school of the working-men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided...And as schools of war the Unions are unexcelled’ Marx followed suit, making the question of ‘strikes and combinations’ a major issue in The Poverty of Philosophy (1847), his polemic against
Proudhon (then the leading French ‘socialist’ who was anti-union):

‘In England, they have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, trades unions, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the employers. The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations...

Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance – combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist.... In this struggle – a veritable civil war – all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop.”

After 1850 and the onset of a period of reaction Marx largely withdrew from active politics in order to write Capital in the library of the British Museum but in 1864 he attended the founding meeting of the International Working Men’s Association in London. ‘I knew’, he wrote, ‘that this time “real powers” were involved both on the London and Paris sides and therefore decided to waive my usual standing rule to decline any such invitations.’. The real powers were the French and British trade unions.

In the course of his work with the International Marx frequently defended the crucial importance of the trade union struggle. For example, in 1866, writing on ‘Trades’ unions: Their past, present and future’ he argued:

“Trades’ Unions originally sprang up from the spontaneous attempts of workmen at removing or at least checking that competition, in order to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. The immediate object of Trades’ Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediencies for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity of the Trades’ Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts.”

However, he also injected a note of caution, warning the working class against relying on trade unionism alone and warning the unions against focussing only on the immediate economic struggle.

At the same time, and quite apart from the general servitude involved in the wages system, the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady.

And he sounded the same note at the end of Wages, Price and Profit (1865)

Trades Unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the
final emancipation of the working class that is to say the ultimate abolition of the wages system. In 1875 both Marx and Engels sharply criticised the German Social Democrats for failing to deal with the role of unions in their political programme (the so-called Gotha Programme).

“...there is absolutely no mention of the organisation of the working class as a class through the medium of trade unions. And that is a point of the utmost importance, this being the proletariat’s true class organisation in which it fights its daily battles with capital, in which it trains itself and which nowadays can no longer simply be smashed, even with reaction at its worst (as presently in Paris)”

As the nineteenth century wore on the British working class movement, on its journey from Chartism to Labourism, became more and more reformist and respectable and this led Marx and Engels to grow more critical of corrupt trade union leaders.

Put simply, how do we explain the fact the labour movement, appeared for at least twenty years to be content to exclude from its ranks the majority of workers (women, the lesser skilled and the lower paid), and to find for itself a niche within the capitalist system, the very system which had been the object of such hatred hitherto? Part of the explanation is to be found in analysis of the decline of Chartism, which was greatly affected by the spectacular growth of the economy in the boom years. But this, while it might help to explain the initial shift in orientation and ideology, cannot explain its long term success or the mechanism for achieving it.

2 The labour movement and the labour aristocracy

The great prosperity of the mid Victorian period touched even the ‘lower orders’- but not all of them. Had capitalism been able to accomplish such a miracle, poverty, unemployment and homelessness would have all been eradicated. In fact for the vast majority of the working population conditions remained almost as bleak as ever, except perhaps that there was more regularity of employment. However a section of the working class experienced an appreciable change in terms of considerable rise in real wages and a vast improvement in living and often also in working conditions. Contemporaries like the trade unionist George Potter used the term ‘aristocracy’ to describe this group of workers who could be easily distinguished in habits of dress, manners and lifestyle from labourers. Tom Mann in his Memoirs, describes his comrade John Burns thus, “He always wore a serge suit, a white shirt, a black tie, and a bowler hat. He looked the engineer all over."

The general use, then and now, of the term ‘labour aristocracy’ as a description of the better-off section of the working class is uncontroversial, although there are differences as to who the term could be justifiably applied. This aside, the real controversy lies in the theory which makes use of such a category of workers to explain the move away from the more revolutionary traditions of the labour movement associated with the previous period.

So, who were the labour aristocrats? A combination of factors separately or together determined the prosperity of this group of workers. Of overriding importance was the profitability of the particular industry in which they were employed. The most prosperous undertakings were the staple industries (coal, iron and steel and cotton) together with the building industry which experienced boom conditions in this period. But that did not mean that all workers in these industries were labour aristocrats. In some cases (e.g. engineering), higher pay was determined by skill (usually achieved after serving an
apprenticeship). However, in industries like coal mining and cotton manufacture apprenticeships were rare, but nonetheless there existed discernible groups of higher paid workers. In mining the hewers were the best paid and in cotton it was the adult male spinners. There is no particularly good reason for this other than custom, practice and prejudice within the industries themselves. (Prejudice because it will be remembered that the first cotton spinners in the industrialised mills were women, and very poorly paid.) If we are to find any logic in such payment systems it is probably better explained by the employers' desire for social control achieved through creating a divided and hierarchical workforce. Given the immense prosperity of these industries in this period, it was now possible to create such hierarchies much more consistently than hitherto through pay differentials. Finally, higher paid workers could be found in industries which were unmechanised and still depended in part on artisan skill. Masons and joiners in the building trade fitted into this category as did printers. The skilled craftsmen in the luxury or bespoke trades (eg tailoring, shoemaking, jewellery) could also be counted in this group. Underlying all this is the stark fact of a blatant sexual division of labour which automatically excluded women workers from the higher earnings league.

Given the absence of a white collar managerial strata and also the small scale nature of many industrial undertakings, it is hardly surprising that groups of privileged workers were receptive to the self improvement ideas of the Samuel Smiles type. Social advancement, even to the point of becoming a small master seemed well within the grasp of any hard working and thrifty man, provided his passions were not roused by drink or 'dangerous' politics. Thus it was that the economic and social boundaries between the labour aristocrats and their 'betters' were seen by the former as more blurred, with the inevitable consequence that gulf between the aristocrats and the rest of the working class widened.

It's not possible to say what those who were left behind thought of the new situation, but it was quite clear that the boom years having created for the first time the promise (maybe just the dream) of upward social mobility, had a profound impact on the thinking and the life style of the group of favoured workers. In one sense there is nothing particularly remarkable about this- ingrained habits of subservience and deference have always meant that the 'lower orders' tend to ape their betters. The remarkable (though controversial) aspect is the extent to which such attitudes and ideas penetrated the labour movement. This is not to deny their force earlier - it was not the case that one day in 1850 the working class awoke to find that it had become a reactionary mass, whereas the day before it had been revolutionary. However, after 1850, the 'defence not defiance' philosophy was the dominant trend for the simple reason that it made real sense to those who advocated it.

Given the coincidence of the labour aristocracy and the organised labour movement, it would be hard to deny the ideological influence of the former on the latter. Of course there were periods of militancy during these twenty or so years, just as there were quiet years in the preceding turbulent period. But it is also true that the dominant characteristic of each period was markedly different, despite obvious continuities. It stands to reason that those groups who dominate the movement also dominate its ideas and orientation, and it was undoubtedly the case that labour aristocracy dominated almost exclusively.
Although trade unionism revived after the demise of Chartism, it was clear from the start that in important respects it was very different from the trade unionism of the earlier period. Most notably the earlier experiments in general unionism were discontinued as was its general outlook as expressed in the objective of the GNCTU - “bringing about a different order of things, in which the really useful and intelligent part of society only shall have the direction of its affairs”. That said, most of the so-called new model unions were re-formations of already existing (usually) craft organisations. For example the most famous, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (1851) was a grouping of smaller societies around the largest of the engineering unions, the Journeymen Steam-Engine, Machine Makers and Millwrights Friendly Society, formed in 1826. Many of these older (and now amalgamated or revitalised) unions were already craft dominated and fairly cautious in that they concentrated more on friendly society benefits than class confrontation. So are the Webbs’ correct in their description of the unions formed between 1850 and 1870 as ‘new model’?

The ‘newness’ of trade unionism in this period resides in their contrast with the older societies from which they developed. These were usually smaller, more local and often impermanent. The new formations were nationally based, highly centralised and much stronger. Their high membership subscription made them richer too, and hence more able to continue the already established trend of employing full time officials and offering improved benefits. To this extent, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers did form a model national organisation on which many others were based (for example, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners).

The other new feature was linked to the more favourable economic circumstances which permitted those more favourably placed workers to engage more productively, through their unions in forms of collective bargaining which were very rare in the earlier years of industrial capitalism. Negotiation and arbitration gradually came to be accepted practices, and were a much more common means of securing improvements in wages and conditions than strike action. The first conciliation and arbitration board, consisting of equal numbers of employers and workers, was established in 1860 for the Nottingham Hosiery trade. This found imitators in many other industries and regions. Not that strikes did not take place (for example the engineers’ strike of 1852 and the protracted London builders’ strike of 1859-60), but caution was to be exercised in the use of the “double edged (strike) weapon” (Applegarth, secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners). William Allen, secretary of the ASE informed the 1867 Royal Commission on Trade Unions that in his union “The Executive Council and the members, generally speaking, are averse to strikes. They think that matters out to be settled in a different way than coming to strikes or lock-outs”

Whilst the economy was buoyant and expanding and the provision of key labour (often skilled) was in short supply (owing to union control), a “different way”, in the form of collective bargaining, could be used and yielded rich rewards. The prosperity of the individual enterprise thus came to be seen as important to the worker as to the employer. When trade was good and profits high, the well placed worker expected to share the good fortune.

Of course this meant the jettisoning of the notions of class consciousness in favour of a more sectional and exclusive trade (or at best trade union) consciousness. The former appearing as old fashioned rhetoric, whereas the latter could, literally and figuratively, deliver the goods.
Finally, the other new feature of trade unionism was that fact that apart from the co-operative movement, it was virtually the only form of working class organisation. Gone therefore was the independent political dimension of the labour movement which had so characterised it in its formative years. Apart from some smaller less centralised, and often more militant unions in the North of England, this was the only form of trade unionism, whereas in the past it had existed as but one tendency among others. The smaller craft unions, like those of the tailors and shoemakers whilst not ‘new model’ in their organisational form, shared a similar ideology. George Potter, editor of the trade union paper 'The Beehive' was the spokesman for these and the northern unions. So, although we know that new model unionism was symbolised by its exclusiveness, being the organisations of the labour aristocracy, the fact is that trade unionism in general did not exist for the vast mass of British workers. Hence it was exclusive in itself and by virtue of its dominance. It was nonetheless very successful in its own terms. In 1850 there were roughly 100,000 trade union members. By 1874 this figure had risen to over a million. Thereafter there was a sharp decline in membership, reflecting the strong associations of this type of trade unionism with Britain’s economic fortunes.

Despite the decline in the years of the depression, most of the unions established in this period remained intact. Indeed many of the craft based unions in existence today can trace their history back to the 1850’s. Other organisations like the Trades Councils and the Trade Union Congress itself were also established at this time. The TUC itself had very inauspicious beginnings and its first meeting in 1868, whilst having an historical significance, passed by virtually unnoticed at the time. Convened by the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, the presumption was that the annual congress should be little more than a debating society dealing with the ‘merits and demerits’ of ‘papers, previously carefully prepared’ on a 12 point list of subjects broadly connected with labour and trade union interests. Other than agreeing to meet annually, no permanent structure or organisation was established after the first congress. A greater cohesion and immediacy was given to these leisurely and somewhat scholarly proceedings by the fear that the government’s sudden interest in trade unionism in the 1870’s might produce hostile legislation.

4 Women and Trade Unionism

What happened to the vast mass of workers who were excluded from the unions of the labour aristocracy? Why did not those workers, the low paid and lesser skilled who gained little or nothing from Britain’s prosperity, organise themselves? They, the most exploited, were only divided by a generation from the revolutionary traditions of Chartism, Owenism and early trade unionism. Other than the evidence we have of their misery, through contemporary novels and social surveys, we know next to nothing about this majority group. There were some tentative attempts to organise unskilled labour including agricultural workers, in the 1870’s in the wake of the strike wave inspired by the engineers fight for a 9 hour day in the north east. Despite the efforts of the Labour Protection League the only survival of this was the Stevedores Union (which later played a key role in the London dock strike of 1889).

Women workers were a special case. The dominant sexist ideology, punctured slightly in the previous period, now permeated fully the more class collaborationist mood of the labour movement. Women workers suffered a great defeat. The only trade in which they still remained organised in any numbers was that of weaving. The aim of trade unionism,
according to Henry Broadhurst, secretary of the TUC, speaking in 1875,

"...to bring about a condition...where wives and daughters would be in their proper
sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great
and strong men of the world." ¹

From this kind of thinking sprang the widespread acceptance of the notion of the ‘family
wage’ to be won by the male breadwinner. Hence not only was unequal pay accepted as a
norm, but women’s work was only tolerated if not threatening to the man. In any case it
was seen as a mark of shame if a man permitted his wife to work, hence the widespread
practice, hardly contested by the unions until the twentieth century, of barring married
women from employment altogether. Such attitudes and practices help to explain
women’s increasing job segregation and the fact that so much female labour was literally
hidden. It is not surprising therefore that the unions of this period demonstrated a studied
indifference if not downright hostility to women workers. Any attempts to organise
women in this period came from outside the labour movement, often through the work of
philanthropic women. The most notable example is the formation in 1874 of the Women’s
Protective and Provident League (later the Women’s Trade Union League). Apart from the
still topical debate on this question, the lasting achievement of the League was to get the
first women delegates to the TUC.

Near the end of his life Engels was greatly cheered by the strike wave and rise of New
Unionism (representing unskilled workers) in the East End of London, in which Eleanor
Marx and other avowed socialists played an important role. But even here he was forced
to note ominous signs of the new union leaders like John Burns becoming incorporated by
the bourgeoisie.

Thus, although the emphasis shifts depending on the changing situation, we find that
from 1844 to the end of their lives, Marx and Engels always defended trade unions as an
absolutely necessary element in the class struggle but at the same time never gave them
uncritical support or regarded them as sufficient in themselves.

¹ TUC Congress Report 1875 p.14

### 5 Lenin and the Comintern

Tsarist repression made the normal development of trade unionism in Russia impossible
and there were no real trade unions before the 1905 Revolution. The building of the
Comintern in its early years involved political battles on two fronts: in the first place
against reformism and centrism (centrism referred to the Kautskyite ‘centre’ of German
social democracy and the international co-thinkers, formally Marxist but in practice
reformist); in the second place against immature ultra-leftism, which became a significant
force in many European countries during the revolutionary wave that followed the First
World War. On both fronts the question of the trade unions played an important role.

In the struggle against centrism the Comintern bitterly denounced the leaders of the so-
called Amsterdam Trade Union International (such as Carl Legien, Arthur Henderson and
Leon Jouhaux) and sought to persuade unions to affiliate instead to the Red International
of Labour Unions based in Moscow.
In the struggle against ultra-leftism, which became particularly urgent in 1920 as the post-war revolutionary wave receded, Lenin wrote one of his most important works, ‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder, in preparation for the Third Congress of the Comintern. In it Lenin dealt with a number of issues – strategy and tactics, party and class, the policy of ‘no compromise’, the necessity of participating in bourgeois parliaments – but on the question ‘should revolutionaries work in reactionary trade unions? ’ he was especially trenchant:

“"The German "Lefts" consider that, as far as they are concerned, the reply to this question is an unqualified negative. However firmly the German "Lefts" may be convinced of the revolutionism of such tactics, the latter are in fact fundamentally wrong, and contain nothing but empty phrases. We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense disquisitions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions, that it is permissible to turn down such work, that it is necessary to withdraw from the trade unions and create a brand-new and immaculate "Workers' Union" invented by very pleasant (and, probably, for the most part very youthful) Communists."

The trade unions were a tremendous step forward for the working class in the early days of capitalist development, inasmuch as they marked a transition from the workers’ disunity and helplessness to the rudiments of class organisation... the development of the proletariat did not, and could not, proceed anywhere in the world otherwise than through the trade unions, through reciprocal action between them and the party of the working class...We are waging a struggle against the "labour aristocracy" in the name of the masses of the workers and in order to win them over to our side; we are waging the struggle against the opportunist and social-chauvinist leaders in order to win the working class over to our side. It would be absurd to forget this most elementary and most self-evident truth. Yet it is this very absurdity that the German "Left" Communists perpetrate when, because of the reactionary and counter-revolutionary character of the trade union top leadership, they jump to the conclusion that...we must withdraw from the trade unions, refuse to work in them, and create new and artificial forms of labour organisation! This is so unpardonable a blunder that it is tantamount to the greatest service Communists could render the bourgeoisie.... To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats.'

Lenin's polemic was very powerful – there is much more in the same vein as the above – but the basic idea is very simple: there are millions of workers in trade unions and, regardless of their leadership, they are the fundamental mass organisations of the working class; revolutionaries, therefore, are absolutely obliged to work in these unions so as to reach, influence and lead the mass of the working class. Lenin's position carried the day in the Communist International and subsequently has been the starting point in relation to trade unionism for all serious socialists, that is, those socialists who base themselves on the working class.