

Trade Unions and the 'broad left'

Past and present

This essay discusses the way in which Marxists operate within the trade union movement and in particular focuses on the idea of 'broad left' organising. The essay looks at the conditions within which Marxists were able to exert considerable influence using the broad left approach during the 1960s and 70s and asks whether this is still an appropriate way for Marxists to operate in today's union movement.

Introduction

The essential character of broad left work was developed by the Communist Party during the period after the Second World War and it was based on Marx and Engels and Lenin's arguments that unions are both fundamentally limited by their origin and function within capitalism and at the same time, constitute vital mass organisations in which working people are 'schooled' in how to combine, organise and struggle together. Just as the centralisation of capital and the creation of large scale industrial units taught workers how to manage and run their enterprises, so trade union struggles in unions taught them how to fight against exploitation, how to win advances and raised the possibility of a qualitative leap in consciousness that would enable a challenge to capitalism as a whole. Wherever workers were organised, Marxists had to be active in developing their capacity for struggle. While this meant taking workers 'as they are' not as Marxists might wish them to be, it also meant keeping in mind Lenin's warning that left to their own devices, without coming into the orbit of a Marxist political party, workers would not fundamentally challenge the social order. They might engage in trade union struggles, they would even develop trade union politics, but they would remain trapped within the limits of trade union struggle and would never begin to question the dictatorship of capital over labour.

The formation of 'broad left' organisations was a response by Marxists in the Communist Party of Great Britain to the need to engage with workers where they were and maximise the opportunities to bring spontaneous workers' struggles into a dynamic relationship with the revolutionary strategic perspective of Marxism.

In the post-war period and especially under the industrial leadership of Bert Ramelson, the Communist Party in Britain made a concerted attempt to maximise the impact of Marxists within the trade unions by developing 'broad left' organisations and alliances. These were built not as fronts, or opportunistic means with which to position the party at the head of the movement but as a way of the party exercising a leadership role alongside allies that would move the unions into greater independent mass struggles. Many Communists, Marxists and trade unionists on the left still operate within, or aspire to operate within broad left organisations, partly as a consequence of their remarkable success during the 1970s. But is this still an appropriate vehicle for organising within trade unions? And if so, what might need to be different in the way that broad lefts operate now? This essay will make some suggestions for discussion and debate.

The broad left in the post-war period – form and content

Broad left organisational work rested on a dialectical and dynamic understanding of how unions and mass organisations developed their fighting potential. As Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley show in their recent study, under Ramelson's direction in particular, this entailed Marxists and their allies combining rank and file organisation that could put pressure on officials with attempts to win elections and key positions within the official structures themselves. This in turn was used to enable the greater development of rank and file structures and fighting capacity. Success in each side of the union developed the fighting capacity of the other. This approach is sharply contrasted to the Trotskyist-influenced 'rank and file' movements that emerged during the 1970s. These rested on a rigid and fundamentally non-Marxist understanding of the revolutionary potential of workers and their unions. For these organisations, workers, straining at the leash to overthrow a decadent and exhausted capitalism, were locked in a perpetual struggle against the stifling influence of the official bureaucracy. The CP's approach, by contrast saw broad left organisation as a way of actively developing the capacity for struggle on the widest possible basis, involving the maximum possible numbers of people and bringing them into contact in the process of struggle with an analysis that was fundamentally Marxist and would build the potential for the development of revolutionary consciousness.

If the form of the 'broad lefts', was shaped by a Marxist understanding of unions' roles in capitalism, the same was no less true of their content. So, what was it that the broad lefts that emerged in the 1960s and 70s did? What were they struggling for? The struggles of the time were based on the Communist Party and its allies understanding that British capitalism was entering a period of crisis and that workers and their families were going to be expected to pay for it. The particular character of this crisis was shaped by the peculiarities of British capitalism in the period.

Marxists in and around the Communist Party argued that the post-war period had seen the development of a new phase of capitalist development which they described as State Monopoly Capitalism. In this phase not only had monopolistic companies emerged, amplifying capitalism's crisis tendencies on a bigger scale, but the state had emerged as a crucial political and economic agent. From being the guarantor of private property and the engine of class oppression in the general interests of the bourgeoisie, the state had become vital to the reproduction of the capitalist economy. It created money via central banks, enabled the economic and social reproduction of workers through healthcare and education systems funded from taxation and provided military and economic assistance to monopoly companies in their struggle to develop new markets. But by the late 1960s, particularly in Britain, state monopoly capitalism was creating economic stagnation. British

2 Trade Unions and the 'broad left'

manufacturing was losing competitive advantage against US and European companies, while inflation began to eat into the value of wages and profits.

Trade union membership was high and collective bargaining coverage of the workforce was good. At the same time, national collective bargaining structures had begun to break down in favour of plant and company level collective bargaining conducted by shop stewards. Workers responded to attempts to speed up labour or cut wages through industrial action and it was natural that British monopoly capital turned to the state to impose national level wage restraint.

In this context, the Communist Party's strategy was geared towards developing the capacity for independent mass action mobilised around the basic issues of economic importance to workers, most obviously the wages struggle. The aim was to win these economic battles and get workers a bigger share of the nation's wealth (or at least defend their existing share) but this was not as an end in itself. It couldn't be because Communist analysis rests on the Leninist view that without developing a revolutionary perspective that could only be provided by sustained contact with an organised revolutionary political party, workers in trade unions will necessarily confine themselves to trade union forms of struggle that accept the dominant relations of production. Consequently, anything won through economic struggles by trade unions could be and would be taken away again without a more profound systemic change. As indeed, it later was.

It was also argued that the emergence and development of the close relationship between the state and monopoly capitalist companies would itself assist in the task of educating workers in the need for a more profound revolutionary struggle. Because of its extensive role in the economy, the state would seek to intervene in any economic struggles on the side of monopoly capital, pushing mobilised workers toward a higher political understanding of the need to combine their workplace struggles with fighting for control of the economy. Economic struggles were vital because they built fighting confidence and ability but they would necessarily raise political questions in the course of their development. This is what explains the broad left emphasis on protecting free collective bargaining and on defending shop stewards from nationally imposed wage restraint, whether self-imposed through the TUC or via the government and state. It also explains the emphasis in Communist Party pamphlets and policies of the time on coupling the defence of unions' ability to wage independent economic struggles at whatever level with an increasing emphasis on the need for an Alternative Economic and Political Strategy that would involve public ownership of industries and planning agreements, implemented by a radical Labour government and supported by an active extra-parliamentary struggle. Economic struggles that became increasingly politicised would raise questions that could only be solved by a radical political strategy. They would also build mass support and mass extra-parliamentary struggles which would in turn qualitatively develop the political struggle, raising it above a mere electoral strategy for securing a Labour government into an escalating challenge to the domination of state power by monopoly capital.

To a degree, this is what happened briefly in the 1960s and 70s. Broad left leaderships in the NUM, the AEU and the T&G, combined with rank and file broad left organisations at plant level and national level rank and file organisations such as the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions were able to fight a series of set piece battles that were rooted in economic struggles but which assumed an increasingly political character. The battles to defeat incomes policies under successive Tory and Labour governments, the battle to defend union freedom against the Industrial Relations Act, the UCS work-in and the 1972 Miners' Strike all became questions of who ran Britain and for a time, arguably,

Much of this section draws on Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley's *Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2013) and Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley, 'Communists and the trade union left revisited: the case of the UK 1964–79', *World Review of Political Economy*. See also, *The British Road to Socialism* (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1968) as well as Ramelson's pamphlets, such as *Productivity Agreements: An exposure of the latest and greatest swindle on the wages front* (Communist Party, 1970) *Bury the Social Contract* (Communist Party, 1977).

posed a real threat to British capitalism. A level of mass support developed for a radical Labour manifesto that embodied key parts of the AEPS. Why and how this challenge was defeated is another, albeit vital but the key thing is that the successes that were won in the case of the Pentonville Five, the UCS work-in, the miners' strike and so on, were based on a decade or so of patient organisation and leadership. This leadership was able to develop spontaneously arising economic struggles so that they built a large measure of fighting confidence and commitment, together with a rising level of political consciousness, among shop stewards, rank and file and the official structures alike.

What can we learn from this episode in our recent history today? In its subject matter and some of its forms, this can seem a world away from our situation today, when the Marxist prediction that everything that was won in the post-war period could be and would be rolled back by monopoly capitalism has proved only too accurate. Yet if we apply the essence of the Marxist approach to our contemporary situation, we can see some possible ways in which we can learn from the way in which Marxists organised in the 1960s and 70s. What happens if we apply the approach of alliance building, the determination to start with workers 'as they are', the conviction that mass fighting potential must be built on basic economic struggles, coupled with the need to bring political and state power into view, the rigorous analysis of the concrete reality of British capitalism at a given point in time, and the understanding of how developing mass economic and political struggles can reinforce and transform each other? Here are a few suggestions starting from a brief analysis of British capitalism today:

British capitalism and the labour movement today:

British state monopoly capitalism remains unchanged in its political essence. In some important ways, however, it has significantly developed. During the 1980s and 90s, the British state was increasingly captured by a narrow section of the ruling class rooted in an increasingly US-dominated finance capital which oversaw the destruction of the British manufacturing base. Successive waves of privatisation have destroyed the publicly owned industries. Accordingly, the state's role has shifted away from a limited concern to reproduce industrial workers for publicly and privately owned manufacturing companies. Instead the British state now plays a critical role in directly redistributing value gathered from workers via taxation to transnational services companies and finance capital via public subsidies. The state acts as a guarantor and lender of last resort for the banking sector, while simultaneously feeding the City and its investment vehicles with new assets to trade with by privatising public assets and services. Far from 'shrinking' or 'retreating', the state has re-gearred its operations around the needs of the City of London, itself increasingly an outpost of US banking capital and offshore financial interests: hedge funds, private equity funds and other investment vehicles. The state has also actively worked to reinforce a massive redistribution of income from labour to capital, by a variety of means: weakening the legal position of unions, by destroying or fragmenting public collective bargaining structures, by shifting the tax base more firmly onto workers' incomes and then directing public revenues toward parasitic service industry companies and their finance capital backers and so on. Yet at the same time, the capture of the state by finance capital is bringing a wider range of struggles to a new pitch.

There is the struggle over work and the provision of jobs, rooted ultimately in finance capital's weakening of British manufacturing and the growth of employment in sectors dominated by finance capital-gearred service companies. The widely recognised short-termism of British-based finance capital has fostered a situation where the little heavy manufacturing which still exists is largely externally owned and highly dependent on

4 Trade Unions and the 'broad left'

transnationally based companies like Tata Steel. Now, of course, it faces potential asset stripping by short-termist Anglo-US asset management funds. At the same time, extended supply chains in transnationally organised companies do create vulnerabilities that could be exploited strategically by organised labour, while the fact that the very existence of employment in many areas is highly dependent on the activities of transnational companies raises the question of control of investment in strategically important industries like steel or in 'foundational' high employment food manufacturing.

Similarly, privatisation is intensifying and deskilling work in previously professionalised sections of public services, while creating a large layer of low paid, casualised workers in outsourced service companies and the retail industry. Not just the availability of work but the nature of that work is becoming an issue faced by workers across all sections of the labour market.

Beyond the production process, the development of Britain's political economy is throwing up a range of struggles over collective consumption and the reproduction of social life. The privatisation of collective, often formerly public, consumption is creating struggles over access to healthcare, education, welfare, public services, transport, energy and so on. The privatisation and indeed the financialisation of these services offers the possibility of developing these struggles to address deeper issues of the systems of production and distribution of collective consumption goods. The question 'Who owns it?' is spontaneously arising from these struggles and exposing the role of finance capital.

The argument being suggested here is that even in the context of an objectively organisationally weakened working class and a shrunken labour movement, the material basis is emerging for possible advances, based on developing strategic alliances between sections of the working class engaged in struggles at the point of production and those involved in struggles over the reproduction of social life.

This sketch of our current period suggests a few urgent tasks for Marxists in the labour movement looking to develop a renewed broad left in the unions. In the following sections, I will pull together and offer some suggestions for key issues that need to be addressed.

Where to organise for maximum impact?

One major danger of the current period is that a defeatist and practically right wing tendency becomes ascendant within and increasingly insular trade union movement which simply attempts to ride out the crisis and find new ways to survive by providing more services to members or serving a narrow institutional interest by poaching off other unions. Equally futile are crude invocations to embrace an organising culture as though a pure act of culture change and collective willpower alone can throw complex processes into reverse.

The brute fact is that the British trade union movement is too rooted in a public sector that is being fragmented, dismantled and privatised. A revitalised broad left will need to help unions to face outwards strategically, identifying not only where are the great injustices of the current workplace but where these are combined with the potential for creating disproportionate industrial leverage. Put simply, where can organising effort be put in to create the maximum disruption and demonstrate to the unorganised that unions can be effective agents? Some private sector unions have grasped this in the form of attention toward supply chain organising. But the deeper and more difficult problem is to

See Mary Davis, *Comrade and Brother: The history of the British Labour movement 1789-1951* (Pluto, 2009) Seifert and Sibley, *Revolutionary Communist at Work* and also the discussion of the 1968-74 strike wave in John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (Verso, 1988), pp. 108-114. These struggle are also illuminatingly recalled by Kevin Halpin in *Memoirs of a Militant* (Praxis 2012).

identify which industries or sectors offer the best prospect of strategic interventions within which it is possible to build viable union organisations and which simultaneously offer some strategic leverage in the economy.

What issues can the broad left mobilise struggles around?

Widening inequality and the historic shift of wealth from wages to profits are widely recognised and felt, but weakened union power and coverage, coupled with low inflation levels and low interest rates that keep credit cheap are, for the time being at least, muting the effects of the loss of spending power. With the prospect of interest rates rises and more turbulence in the global economy, wages may become a big issue again sooner rather than later. When that happens, it will be important for the labour movement to reclaim the issue of the Living Wage and couple it to struggles to improve the nature of work.

In the meantime, one issue that resonates within all unions and across the economy is the nature of work. The low-productivity labour market has recomposed around endemic under-employment, insecurity and precarious part-time working, while British workers work longer hours than their European counterparts to sustain their consumption on low wages. If the union left is looking for a basic issue to organise and mobilise members around, the fight for better jobs is there to be fought and indeed, many unions are already fighting this battle in various forms.

With the neoliberal assault on public services and welfare systems and their greater financialisation, there is a spontaneous development of struggles around what is often called the 'social wage' embodied in the provision of collective consumption goods. As these struggle develop in communities and through social movements, the potential emerges to develop these into more profound challenges to private property in large areas of social reproduction. In spite of a few examples, unions on the whole have arguably not done enough to forge strategic alliances with these struggles. Yet the possibilities are great. If unions are able to build effective alliances with those mobilised in struggles over social reproduction they stand to gain not only increased leverage in the immediate term but also the opportunity to develop spontaneous struggles over 'consumption' issues into a more systemic challenge to existing property relations in whole areas of our society and economy.

What tactics should be used?

With confidence and levels of organisation low and with a punitive, rampant state now looking to close down industrial action, the union left needs to be imaginative in how it looks to organise and fight. As John Kelly has argued, the vulnerability of long transnational supply chains has been picked up by some unions organising in transport and distribution. Linking struggles over collective bargaining objectives with campaigns and struggles over consumption issues that draw in the wider working class outside of unions is also vital. As suggested above, not only does it offer the prospect of increasing immediate leverage in collective workplace disputes, but it is also vital for building alliances that can develop both industrial and consumption struggles into contests over the control and ownership of production and distribution. The way that global union federations IndustriALL and UNI Global worked together to support each others tactics and strategic objectives in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster is instructive in how unions can benefit from working hard at such strategic alliances. Unite's leverage campaigns and Community branches have attempted to achieve similar objectives in a different way. As

For the importance of supply chain organising, see John Kelly, 'Do unions still have power?' on this site. On unions and Social Movement, see Marj Mayo, 'Unions and Social Movements' also on this site.

Marj Mayo has argued on this site, this requires Marxists looking to play a leading role to have a clear understanding of the different objectives, forms, structures and practices of unions, social movements and community organisations.

But for all the work to develop leverage outside the workplace in support of industrial objectives, it remains vital for Marxists to build the fighting confidence to withdraw labour and disrupt production among a generation of workers for whom this is literally alien practice. Doing this in the context of draconian Trade Union legislation aimed at preventing just this presents major challenges. Marxists looking to develop and coordinate independent mass struggle within unions might be better served looking to build a growing mass of smaller-scale guerrilla style actions, combining official and unofficial, legal and illegal industrial action and drawing on external support from strategic allies to begin to establish victories that build up fighting confidence.

This is not to surrender the battle for coordinated action. Indeed, this would arguably call for more coordination rather than less. Neither is it to argue against creating single-event mass industrial action where appropriate and possible. But it is to argue for moving beyond the fetish for the big-bang public sector general strike as the only model in town. It's worth recalling, for example, that Rosa Luxemburg's own discussion of the 'mass strike' that bears the potential for politicisation included sustained outbreaks of smaller-scale strikes over periods of years.

What kind of organisations will be necessary?

A revitalised broad left in the unions can't be built out of shallow electoral machines. Neither can it be built out of narrow rank and file organisations that serve as political fronts aimed simply at generating general strike demands. Today, as before, broad left organisations will need to combine rank and file and official structures, working across as well as within unions (rather in the manner of the LCDTU). But they will also need to be able to build and sustain national and local alliances with bodies outside the labour movement: community organisations, social movements, NGOs. There are plenty of precedents for this. As John Foster has argued, the success of the UCS work-in was built not only on shop steward strength but on the creation of dynamic alliances with employers and others in the regional economy against the Tory government. Similarly, as Marj Mayo has noted on this site, under broad left leadership, London dock union organisations were able to build alliances with local community organisations which were able to navigate tensions in aims and objectives with some success.

Even more than this, simply to start the work of rebuilding, the union left must root itself in new networks of workplace activists who must themselves be encouraged to build networks of activists outside of their workplaces in communities and allied social movements. And with the legal restrictions on unions as tight as they are, broad left organisations could perhaps consider building shadow unregistered union organisations, technically outside of the union but closely allied. These might offer ways of building rudimentary union organisation and experience of collective action that could create incentives for employers to offer formal union recognition. These informal union organisations could either substitute for formal union structures wherever they pose a real impediment to working class organisation and trade union struggle or alternatively could be absorbed into formal union structures as conditions determined. Models for this kind of union organising do currently exist but for obvious reasons tend to be dominated by anarcho-syndicalist currents that pitch themselves in crude opposition to 'official' unions on the assumption that they are dominated by bureaucratic machines. Marxist leadership

articulated through a broad left could offer a different way of viewing this, seeing these informal union organisations as one 'moment' in the process of building fighting collective organisation among working people.

How to develop economic struggles into support for an alternative strategy?

During the 1970s, the Communist Party's argument within the broad left for the need for an alternative economic and political strategy was premised on an understanding that workers involved in a multitude of active struggles were more likely to be brought to an understanding of the need to assert greater control over the commanding heights of the economy and would be more open to progressive ideas. It was also premised on the correlative understanding that any government introducing the alternative economic struggle would need to be able to count on the mobilised extra-parliamentary power of workers involved in active struggles.

This and the below sections draw on arguments that are developed in Jonathan White (ed.) *Building an Economy for the People: An alternative economic and political strategy for 21st century Britain* (Manifesto Press, 2012) and set out with great force and clarity in John Foster, *The Politics of Britain's Economic Crisis* (Communist Party, 2009), pp. 12-32.

The political arguments around the need for an alternative economic and political strategy have begun once again within the movement, drawing arguably on the TUC and People's Assembly's mobilisations against austerity policies. But there is no doubt that the broad left within and beyond the unions needs to work to develop extra-parliamentary action and ideas that can link the heightened struggles over social reproduction and consumption with attempts to rebuild working class collective action at the point of production. Both need to be organisationally and ideologically linked and developed into popular challenges to the ownership of entire systems of production and distribution in our economy and society.

The financialisation of production, public services, and everyday social reproduction brings the power of financial capital embedded in the City into sharp focus and makes it possible to identify an enemy against whom broad social alliances can be constructed. There is, arguably already an emerging common-sense understanding of the power of finance capital in the discourse around bankers, hedge funds, speculators and other obviously parasitic interests. Arguments for an alternative economic strategy could easily point to the baneful influence of finance capital over the little remaining industry and manufacturing, over state macro-economic policy and its increasingly parasitic rentier relationships with privatised public services.

These same interests also underpin Britain's disastrous treaty entanglements with NATO and the EU. The real beneficiaries of these relations are Anglo-American finance capital and a handful of British monopoly transnationals like BAe Systems and BP. These interests have helped to forge - and have materially benefited from - the drive by the US and Britain to create open financial markets and dominate, economically and militarily, mineral and gas resources in the Middle East, the Gulf and many of the former Soviet republics. Underpinned by these interests, our 'special relationship' with the US has dragged Britain into a succession of catastrophic foreign interventions. Equally, whatever their tactical differences in relation to the forthcoming referendum, left trade unionists in Britain are increasingly aware that the entrenched neoliberalism of the EU, impervious as it is to democratic pressures, poses major problems for British workers. By mobilising trade unionists behind the peace movement and projecting a new internationalist vision for Britain, broad lefts can play a key role in detaching Britain from its current subservience to US economic and foreign policy.

The final obvious political area for the broad left work on is building popular understanding of the nature of the state, its capture by finance capital and the need for

democratisation to build and enable popular pressure on the state and the extra-parliamentary power of finance capital. The profoundly anti-democratic policies of the current government, the growing anti-democratic power of the EU present workers involved in any form of struggles, whether industrial or over consumption issues with the need for control over the state machinery. Equally the extra-parliamentary power of finance capital in creating hostile atmospheres for policy debate and holding governments and political parties to ransom makes clear the need to mobilise and develop popular forces to create extra-parliamentary force for workers.

Tackling the power of finance capital and a handful of transnational companies over the British economy and politics would be vital to the success of any alternative strategy but it also has the potential to be easily popularised. A broad left able to build organisations and fighting consciousness that can rebuild some level of workplace struggle, link it with growing consumption struggles and at the same time popularise within these struggles the need to take greater control of industries, services and the state might begin to develop forces for a more profound challenge to British capitalism.

Risks and the need for Marxist party organisation:

A cautionary note to end on. It is the argument of this essay that broad left organisation is still the best vehicle with which Marxists can exercise any meaningful leadership within the working class. However, what this essay has not examined hitherto is the attendant risk that without strong Marxist organisations at their heart, broad lefts can move into reverse gear. Instead of developing revolutionary dynamics and raising political consciousness through struggle, they can act as conveyor belts for genuinely reformist consciousness, empty of progressive political content. The divisions within the broad left during the Labour administration of 1974-79 are arguably a case in point. Divisions within the broad left opened up over the Labour government's Social Contract which were even reflected to some extent within the Communist Party. The broad left proved vulnerable to ideas that effectively attempted to demobilise unions in the interests of pursuing short-term accommodations with a Labour government that was itself falling into position of endorsing wage restraint and privileging the battle against inflation. The emergence of ideological disagreement within the Communist Party, combined with its numerical weakness, arguably allowed the spread of reformism throughout the labour movement, in spite of the militancy that broke wage restraint in the late 70s.

The material basis of reformist ideas within the labour movement is a crucial issue that needs an essay of its own, but at the level of ideas and organisation, it is a reminder that broad lefts only make sense as a vehicle for developing struggle, not as an end in themselves. For this reason, it is still vital that Marxists operating in a broad way in the movement are also organised in a united revolutionary party. The party must be able to operate and fight on issues of immediate importance to workers, build working class unity and help to advance and develop struggle on the broadest possible basis, while maintaining an independent and united revolutionary strategic outlook based on a Marxist understanding.

