

Strike wave faces defeat: leaders to blame

How to rebuild union power



Martin Mayer/reportdigital.co.uk



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Left: Show of union power secured release of imprisoned Pentonville Five dockers, 1972. Right: Mass picket of striking miners confronts scabs and cops in Nottinghamshire, 1984. Betrayals by reformist leaders in recent decades have hollowed out trade unions.

It is obvious to everyone with eyes to see that the strike wave of public sector unions is facing defeat. Mick Lynch, widely hailed by the left as the “hero” of the strike wave, has pushed a below-inflation pay deal on the RMT Network Rail membership. The CWU’s Dave Ward, another darling of the left not long ago, is crawling to Royal Mail, endorsing a deal which would mean a massive pay cut and attacks on posties’ working conditions. The RCN, PCS, UCU and NEU are still without an agreement and have been offered crumbs, while their leaders have no strategy to go forward. They have rejected insulting offers, but without a fundamental change in strategy and leadership, or a fundamental change in the situation of the country, these strikes will face defeat.

On the other side, the Tory government has gathered strength and credibility. Early in the strike wave, the Tories were at their weakest, but the trade union leaders did

nothing to capitalise on the situation. They gave Rishi Sunak the necessary breathing room to reposition himself and neutralise factions in the Tory party with the new EU deal over Northern Ireland and the reactionary anti-migrant bill, letting him restore government stability. The Tories have since taken back the initiative. The cost-of-living crisis and the collapse of public services are still raging, but it is law and order and anti-immigrant poison which dominate public debate.

The trade unions have lost round one. On one side of the ring, the government started weak, unstable and discredited, and while it has not yet delivered any serious blow to the unions, it finished the round strong. It is going back to its corner in control and emboldened for what’s next. On our side, trade union leaders spent their time dancing around and throwing timid punches in the form of one-day strikes every month which

did not even bruise their frail adversary. As a result, we go back to our corner tired and in a weakened position. The time now must be spent to understand what went wrong. If something fundamental does not change in the unions’ strategy and leadership, round two will be a catastrophe.

How did we get here?

The entire problem boils down to a question of *leadership*. The strike wave was fuelled by the destruction of workers’ standard of living, propelling broad layers in the trade unions to action, often for the first time in their lives. It is this powerful force at the base which lifted the trade union leaders to the top of the wave. But what leaders? These were no working-class veterans steeled in the class struggle but a part of the union bureaucracy which has led the labour movement to defeat after defeat over the last decades. At every step, they

have acted as a brake on the class struggle.

Union leaders launched the battle unprepared, often without strike funds. Throughout the conflicts, they have refused to build real picket lines that shut down workplaces, rendering strikes ineffective and easy to scab on. This is not out of ignorance of militant tactics but because of their utter respect for the rules set by the capitalist class and their opposition to a real confrontation with the government. They have refused to co-ordinate strikes and go beyond one-day actions not because they don’t know how to do this but because they are opposed to causing a crisis for the capitalist class.

The cancelling of strikes when the Queen died was not a mere tactical mistake, as many on the left claimed, but indisputable proof that the trade union leaders had not the slightest intention of stepping on the establishment’s toes. They have refused to kick

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Union power...

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the Tories out not because the Tories were too strong — quite the opposite, in fact. For months the government was barely hanging on and a little kick was all it needed to fall. But union leaders were dead set against doing this because of their reverence for the ruling-class Parliament and their view that the working class has no business imposing its will on it. And now they are accepting rotten deals, because rotten deals are what you get when you play by the bosses' rules.

This whole bankrupt strategy is now coming to fruition. Those union leaders who have not yet surrendered are continuing to play the same losing game, dragging out conflicts that they themselves do not want. As a result, broad layers of the union membership which had been drawn into struggle, pushing the union tops into action, are increasingly becoming apathetic and demoralised.

As union leaders killed the strikes' momentum, and with growing fatigue and declining participation in strike actions, the bosses smell weakness and are going for blood. The CWU has seen hundreds of its best militants suspended or sacked by Royal Mail, which has recruited an army of scabs and put the union up against the wall. This happened because Royal Mail took advantage of the CWU's weakness. The union leadership constantly bent over backwards to accommodate the company, cancelling strikes and undermining the union's strength and credibility. Against RCN nurses, the government recently used anti-union laws to stop one of their strike days. UCU members at multiple universities are being targeted by management, their pay massively docked for taking part in union actions. The leadership's losing strategy has opened these and other unions to devastating attacks.

The trade union leaders certainly lack militancy and constantly make poor tactical choices. But these are just symptoms of their fundamental problem, which is their unwavering support to the capitalist system. That is why they have been sabotaging the strikes at every turn, restraining workers' anger and channelling it into a losing strategy based on making the strikes compatible with the stability of British capitalism. The overriding lesson of the strike wave is that the trade unions are crippled by leaders who support capitalism, and no amount of "pressure from below" will make them change their stripes.

The laws of boxing are strikingly similar to the laws of the class struggle. To win a match, a boxer must be well prepared physically and mentally, know his adversary and adapt his technique accordingly. But

above all, in the ring the boxer must *aim for a knockout!* The fight might not always end that way, but victory is possible only if that's what you want. Precisely because the union leaders support the whole system, they enter the ring determined *not* to inflict a KO. They fight to lose!

The left's criminal role

The British labour movement crawls with people claiming to be against capitalism and for socialism. Groups like the Communist Party of Britain/Young Communist League,



NEU teachers have struck for decent pay and funding, but union leadership sabotages this struggle at every turn.

the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Appeal, the Socialist Party and others have a small yet non-negligible influence in the trade unions. So what have they been doing?

For nine months, they have *refused to oppose* the union bureaucrats. Instead, they have offered them their services, hailing them in their newspapers, praising Mick Lynch alongside Marx and Engels and shielding them from the criticisms of revolutionaries. Insofar as they were critical, it was to raise tactical disagreements — when to strike, how to organise this or that demonstration etc. Their whole orientation has been a repudiation of socialism, leaving leadership of the working class in the hands of treacherous bureaucrats who are opposed to socialism (see graphic on page 3).

Now that it is becoming as clear as day that the union leaders are sinking the strikes, the honest thing these groups should do is to admit that they were wrong, that they built the authority of traitors and that unity with Sharon Graham, Mick Lynch & Co must be broken. But we have yet to see such a display of revolutionary honesty. Instead, they are doubling down on their course, performing a careful balancing act between appearing more critical of the union tops while still refusing to break with them. This routine takes the form of seeking to escalate the strikes

through "pressure" on the bureaucracy:

- "Even the most conservative leaders can be forced to go further than they want to" (*The Socialist*, 19 April).
- "We need strike committees to build the pickets, widen participation and to act as a focus for resistance to the union leaders when they fail" (*Socialist Worker*, 25 April).
- "If NHS union leaders prove unwilling to continue and unite these disputes from the top — or worse, to make dodgy backroom deals with the Tories — then members

must respond with unity, mobilisation, and coordination from below" (*Socialist Appeal*, 14 April).

All this leaves in place the same treacherous leaders who are cooking up the rotten deals and whose whole strategy is the reason the strike wave faces defeat. Even when the bureaucrats are pressured to go further than they want, they do everything in their power to restrain and sabotage these struggles.

A strategy based on "keeping the leaders in check" rests on pure faith in the bureaucracy. It relies on the unlikely possibility that, for a minute maybe, they could be persuaded to stop betraying. But they work for the other side! Pressuring them without exposing their fundamentally *reactionary* role, without stressing the need to *break* with them and without putting forward a programme for a new, *revolutionary* leadership only lends the authority of socialists to these traitors — whatever "criticisms" they might have. Now the working class is reaping the results of this disastrous course.

Where do these left groups think rotten deals come from? Nothing in the way the strikes were organised has forced the Tories to offer anything more than crumbs. And the union leaders take the crumbs because their strategy is precisely not to defeat the Tories. To say that the problem is a matter of "deals that fall short", and that what's needed is to vote them down and demand an escalation of the *same* strategy by the *same* leadership which has misled the strikes from the get-go, is to deceive workers and cover for the bureaucrats.

The left cannot bring themselves to admit this because that would mean repudiating their course of the last year. This is why they can only conceive of escalating the losing strategy which led us here in the first place. Einstein supposedly said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Well, this sounds a lot like what the left is doing right now.

Of course, rotten deals need to be rejected. But the way to fight for better

deals is to halt the current course, regroup and prepare the next battle. With the strikes defeated or in deadlock, with momentum lost and with the government stronger, to push for an escalation is both criminal and a capitulation to the union bureaucracy. It can only deepen the defeat and further weaken the trade unions.

Indeed, this course of action has a suicidal quality to it. To call for an escalation when the mass of union members is becoming more disillusioned and pulling away from the struggle means that strikes rely on the small minority of the most militant and committed workers to keep going. This would serve to increase their isolation from the rest of the union membership and set them up for repression. In turn, it would sabotage the possibility of a fightback in the near future and open up the trade unions to retaliation.

This is essentially what has happened in the CWU. The Socialist Party calls for the sell-out CWU leaders to be "preparing again for a major campaign of serious escalating strike action" (*The Socialist*, 26 April). The CWU is being choked by Royal Mail and its members demoralised precisely *because* of the strategy of its leadership. Now, the SP is demanding that these proven traitors prepare a "major campaign" of strikes "again". As the CWU's car is heading for a wall, the SP proposes to press the accelerator.

Leftists who think that the working class should always be on the offensive are not Marxists but juvenile adventurists. Revolutionaries do not play with the class struggle. Our task is to guide the working class, in periods of both ebb and flow, with the goal of socialist revolution. Only revolutionary Marxists have such a compass because we approach each individual battle between workers and bosses as part of the general *class war* between labour and capital. We understand that the two sides have irreconcilable interests and that one side — the workers — must decisively crush the other — the capitalists. When the enemy is weak, workers should strike as hard as possible. But when the enemy is strong and workers are weak, it's time to retreat to safeguard our forces.

This is not how the British "socialists" view the class struggle. For them, it is an incremental process which can only go up. This is the view behind the widely shared illusion that a few more strike days will necessarily translate into a few more percentage points on pay offers.

This is the British form of reformism, called "gradualism", which is in fact totally utopian. British capitalism is sinking. The only way for the ruling class to remain afloat — that is, to merely slow its terminal decline — is to further squeeze the workers at home and the neocolonies abroad.

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WORKERS HAMMER

Marxist newspaper of the Spartacist League/Britain
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For a voluntary federation of workers republics in the British Isles!
For a Socialist United States of Europe, united on a voluntary basis!

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Strike wave and the left: A clash of two programmes

“Summer of discontent”

WORKERS HAMMER 

“The situation in Britain does urgently cry out for a general strike! The first step to prepare such a strike is to break with the TUC-begging, [Mick] Lynch-tailing socialists who are busy building those very leaderships that stand as obstacles to victory. To advance the cause for socialism there needs to be a fight throughout the labour movement for a new leadership that is committed to the working class taking power.”

—“Workers must run the country!”, *WH* no 248, Autumn 2022



“A leader like Mick Lynch...is a politically advanced member of the working-class, who actually has a vision for a materially, qualitatively different society that offers prosperity for working people, not billionaires....”

“Imagine where our class will be with so many leaders like Mick Lynch.”

—Young Communist League, *Challenge*, 28 June 2022

Enough is Enough campaign

WORKERS HAMMER 

“EiE is designed to be nothing but a toothless public opinion campaign. It is not a step in the right direction as most on the left argue but an obstacle to mounting a fight for real change....”

“Socialists must fight against workers and youth being led by non-socialist movements like EiE. If they do not do this, they are not socialists but left cheerleaders for a reformist movement.”

—“Workers must run the country!”, *WH* no 248, Autumn 2022

Socialist Worker

“Enough is Enough is an important moment to rally big numbers of people who feel lifted by the strikes and want to hit back effectively at the Tories.”

—Socialist Workers Party, *Socialist Worker*, 20 August 2022

Queen croaks

WORKERS HAMMER 

“The reactions to her death show all that is rotten about the leadership of the working class in this country. Before her body was cold, Mick Lynch of the RMT and Dave Ward of the CWU—the ‘heroes’ of the so-called ‘summer of discontent’—cancelled strikes in order to join the orgy of patriotism and national unity.... As the highest representative of class privilege dies, these traitors are telling workers that fighting against their own starvation must wait, out of reverence to the monarch. These are no working class leaders but lackeys of the ruling class.”

—“Queen croaks, Labourites crawl”, *WH* leaflet, 9 September 2022

Socialism TODAY

“For a moment the rising tide of class struggle in Britain was interrupted by the period of mourning following the death of Queen Elizabeth....”

“It was clearly valid for the leadership of the RMT and CWU to postpone the strikes by a couple of weeks, given that they were one or two-day strikes which would not be made less effective by a short delay.”

—Socialist Party, *Socialism Today*, 4 October 2022

Strike wave stagnates

WORKERS HAMMER 

“The number of strikes shows that workers are ready to fight. The government is weak, divided and discredited. A little kick is all this anti-working-class cartel needs to fall. A bold offensive against the government would be the best way to ensure the maximum concessions **now**....”

“What is preventing this is precisely the current leadership of the trade unions, which is terrified of doing anything that could further destabilise the already shaky situation. In a nutshell, the union tops’ impotent methods flow from their **refusal** to challenge British capitalism.”

—“Tories on life support...union tops won’t pull the plug”, *WH* no 249, Spring 2023

the Socialist

“The trade union leaderships can make a massive difference now with the Tories in disarray. The determination and sacrifice of ambulance workers and other NHS staff, and all other workers fighting for decent terms and conditions, must be built on. Striking together with other workers on a day of further coordinated action would be a big show of strength. Union leaders, including the tops of the TUC, must take steps now to prepare for it.”

—Socialist Party, *The Socialist*, 25 January

MAKE PICKET LINES REAL AGAIN!

The following is based on an 18 March presentation by Workers Hammer editor Vincent David in London. The talk, which was part of a Spartacist League public meeting titled “To save the NHS—Fight for women’s liberation!”, has been slightly expanded for production in this issue.

“Never cross a picket line!” Those familiar with the Spartacist League will know that this has been one of the important angles of our intervention into the current strike wave. For the last month, we have been campaigning quite intensively for individuals and organisations to fight for the three demands laid out in our leaflet:

- 1) Build picket lines, don’t cross them!
- 2) Enough of unions scabbing on each other’s strikes!
- 3) Defend all those who refuse to cross picket lines!

We have widely distributed this leaflet at demonstrations and on picket lines and have sent it to various working-class organisations around the country, from trade unions to socialist groups.

Why are we campaigning around these demands? Before answering this question, I would first like to answer: what is a picket line? The purpose of a picket line is to shut down a workplace on strike. In the struggle against the bosses over wages, working conditions and jobs, stopping the flow of profit and the functioning of a workplace is the only weapon the working class has. The picket line’s purpose is to implement this by keeping the workplace shut. Anyone who crosses it or finds a way around it, and anyone who crosses any picket (not just of their own union but of any union)



London, 15 March: Spartacist contingent at demonstration of striking public sector unions.

is a strikebreaker—a scab. It is the worst sort of crime because it sabotages workers struggle and helps the bosses by keeping the facility running. The picket line is the front line of the battle between workers and capital, the spearhead of any successful strike.

But to anyone who has been on strike in recent months it should be obvious that the basic definition of the picket line I just laid out is totally alien to how things are today. When RMT rail workers go on strike, ASLEF train drivers go to work, and vice versa. When junior doctors or ambulance drivers are out, nurses are expected to cross their pickets. When NEU teachers are on strike, all the other unions in educa-

tion are instructed to go to work and keep the schools running. Many unions often explicitly instruct their members to cross picket lines. Union members crossing their own picket line is a widespread practice, which the union tops do not even pretend to seriously combat. For those who have been on strike, how many times have you seen your union rep or other officials being chummy with scabs, shaking their hands, while they cross your picket to go to work? This is outrageous.

As a result, the strikes are isolated from one another, with widespread scabbing. They have not achieved anything and have had minimal impact on the bosses and their government. “Never cross a picket line” used to be a basic rule of the class struggle. But today it is rejected by the entire leadership of the trade union movement—from the right-wing Pat Cullen, who leads the RCN nurses union, to the so-called “militant” Mick Lynch of the RMT. Building picket lines that no one crosses plays no role in their strategy.

Why? Because union leaders are refusing to engage in a real confrontation with the bosses and the government. The only way to win a strike is to make the other side capitulate, and picket lines are workers’ most crucial tool to achieve this. But the trade union leaders do not have such a strategy. Instead, they organise the struggle through one-day strikes causing minimal disruption, thinking that the Tories can be made to care for workers through PR campaigns and by playing by the bosses’ rules. This can only lead to capitulation and defeat, as the recent deals reached by the RMT, the NHS unions and others show.

It is against this that we have launched our campaign. Our aim is to bring this basic rule of the class struggle back into the trade union movement as part of the fight for a new, socialist leadership. We certainly seek to convince individuals not to cross picket lines. But crucially, we seek to initiate and cohere a struggle inside the

workers movement against the treacherous and scab-herding policies of the current trade union leaders. Those three demands: we want the unions to fight for them. In this way, we want to make workers realise the crucial importance of picket lines, but also that it is precisely the leaders of the trade unions who stand as obstacles to advancing the interests of the working class.

What reception have we got?

We have called on all workers organisations, from unions to socialist groups, to unite with us in fighting for these demands. Whatever political differences individuals and other groups might have with the Spartacist League, the demands should be readily acceptable for anyone wanting to fight for the working class.

Despite our demands being quite basic, the reaction from trade union leaders and socialist groups has varied from trying to ignore us to outright hostility. Groups like the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal have refused to respond to our messages. We have tried to speak to their members in demonstrations, and they have given us the silent treatment or denounced our campaign outright with the worst sorts of slanders.

Some have been more diplomatic in their equally negative response. Individuals in Workers Fight and the Revolutionary Communist Group (which publishes *Fight racism, fight imperialism!*) have told us something along the lines of: “We agree with these demands, but this is not a priority for us now.” After months of a strike wave whose problem has precisely been massive scabbing and a lack of class unity—both of which point to the need to organise a struggle against the current leaders—we wonder, what other more pressing priority do they have on their agenda?

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has responded in different ways. Their older leaders mostly rage against us. To give an example, when I proposed to some of them that we work together on the basis of these demands, I was denounced as a sectarian ultraleftist. Total nonsense. But other SWP members have argued that “they are already doing this” with their “rank and file committees” and therefore there is no need for such a united-front campaign.

Let’s see. If you search the SWP website, you’ll see that they push to build strike committees, one benefit being, according to them, that they help rally union members to picket lines. Alright. But the point is not merely to rally more people to picket lines. The point is to fight for a change in the trade unions, so that the three demands we have put forward become union policy. That is not the purpose of the SWP committees. Instead, they seek to build strikes inside the framework imposed by the existing bureaucracy. Their committees are limited to applying more pressure on union leaders, leaving intact their scab-herding policies and strategy.

Support Amazon workers



Workers at Amazon’s Coventry warehouse, organised by the GMB, have carried out a series of strikes since January in a fight for better pay and conditions as well as union recognition. The battle to organise this warehouse, and the whole of Amazon’s operations, is in the interests of the entire working class. The Partisan Defence Committee, a legal and social defence organisation associated with the Spartacist League, has donated to the workers’ strike fund and urges others to do the same. Donations can be made at crowdfunder.co.uk/p/gmb-are-standing-with-amazon-workers.

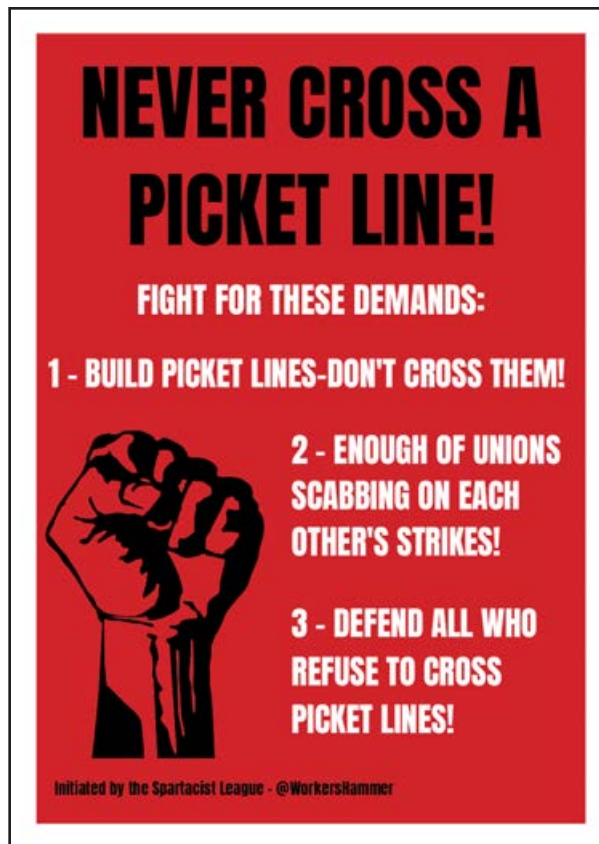
Now they've published an article titled "Why our power is on the picket lines" (*Socialist Worker*, 22 April). After opposing our campaign, they finally realised this is an important issue. What do they argue? "It's because good picket lines make strikes effective that the bosses and the Tories hate them and legislate against them—and why we have to make them as strong and militant as possible." This is total hypocrisy because the main obstacle to building "strong and militant" picket lines is the trade union bureaucracy, about which the article does not say a word! The goal of our campaign was to build picket lines in explicit opposition to the bureaucracy's whole strategy. To talk about building picket lines without attacking the main obstacle to doing that makes the SWP just lackeys of the bureaucrats.

What the SWP and the rest of the left refuse to do in the current context is to clearly say *never cross a picket line* and fight for the unions to *act* upon this principle.

Another, grosser type of refusal we've encountered came from Steve Hedley. Hedley is a former RMT bureaucrat, pushed aside when Mick Lynch and his clique took over. We met him on a UCU lecturers picket line, joined by a supporter of ours who is from another union and proudly carried a sign calling to never cross a picket line. When we launched our campaign, Hedley was happy to publicly endorse it. But suddenly he messaged us, saying he did not want to take part in it—or any other campaign of ours—because we oppose laws banning consensual sex based on an arbitrary age limit.

So Hedley did not want to fight in the workers movement to build picket lines because we oppose sexual repression and the policing of teenage sex. That is ridiculous and frankly disgusting. As we explained in our statement responding to him (see below), what Hedley did is a classic example of how the morality of the bourgeoisie on sexual questions is used against the struggles of the working class and oppressed for their emancipation.

After a month of campaigning we must



conclude that so far, the leaders of trade unions and socialist groups have decided they do not want anything to do with our campaign and with seriously fighting for real picket lines. On the other hand, we have also got many positive reactions from individual workers, and even some low-level union officials, who understand the importance of our demands and the need for unions to fight for them.

Several members of NEU, Unite etc have expressed willingness to fight for our demands and have taken our leaflets, sometimes stacks of them, to distribute. A supporter of the Amazon workers brought one of our placards from London back home to Coventry, where the battle to organise a union is raging first and foremost on the picket line. As the strike wave is stagnating, we are meeting workers who are fed up with losing strategies. These are the

advanced elements who will be key in the coming battles to rebuild union power in this country.

What has our campaign revealed?

We have been told many times that our demands would go against the anti-union laws and therefore cannot be fought for. That's the argument always used by union leaders. You want to build real picket lines that stop scabs? "That's against the law." A solid strike? "Also against the law." Solidarity actions? "Sorry, illegal." "Have you tried writing to your MP?..."

The anti-union laws are indeed very draconian. But the fundamental problem is that the trade union leaders have completely accepted them. They have no intention of seriously challenging them or even testing their limits and exploiting their loopholes.

latest among countless other instances of labour leaders capitulating before the spectre of sexual "deviance": from the "Black Diaries" campaign against Roger Casement to the trumped-up rape charges against Julian Assange.

We communists are adamant that the state has no more place in the bedroom than in the union movement. The laws regimenting sexuality according to age have the same moral basis as the laws regimenting homosexuality or gender. Today, opposition to trans rights is the rallying cry of reaction, including against Scotland's national rights. The fight for the social and economic emancipation of the working class must march hand in hand with the fight for sexual freedom against religious obscurantism. Hedley has provided a pathetic but instructive lesson proving this point.

Hedley capitulated to this, pulling back from a just fight in order to look respectable in the eyes of those in the labour movement who lawyer for scabs.

This only highlights the importance for revolutionaries of opposing the moral code of the ruling class. Sexual morality, racial prejudice, patriotism, reverence for the monarchy and the "United Kingdom" are all used to whip up reaction against the workers movement and the oppressed. Any concession to these reactionary morals can only divide and weaken the working class. Trade unionism is defenceless against such attacks because it wages the class struggle without breaking the rules set by the ruling class. Hedley took a stand with us against the monarchy when the Queen died and for picket lines but dropped all of this because we cross the line set by Christian morality. His sad case is only the

A proposal for co-ordinated action

Everyone is fighting the same inflation and the same Tory government. Each workplace is fighting the same employer—but the unions stand divided. When the RMT strikes, ASLEF members go to work; when the RCN strikes, GMB and Unison go to work, and on and on to defeat. Crossing picket lines has been normalised. Something must be done! Picket lines used to mean something. Think of the heroic miners strike of 1984-85. The labour movement must return to that tradition.

Let's unite the broadest possible forces to fight for:

- **Build picket lines—Don't cross them!**
Convince all your co-workers of this principle.
- **Enough of unions scabbing on each other's strikes!**
Reverse the policy of unions instructing their members to cross picket lines.
- **Defend all who refuse to cross picket lines!**
Against reprisals, the labour movement must have their backs.

We call on all trade unionists and socialists to fight for these demands inside the unions, the left and the entire labour movement.

To make this campaign real, we need to co-ordinate actions. We might disagree on many questions, but it is urgent to unite to defend the basic principle that picket lines mean don't cross! To work with us towards organising this, contact us.

— 14 February 2023

Endorsed by Richard Hall, veteran of 1984-85 NUM strike, Warsop Main Colliery

In fact, they use these laws as a convenient excuse to do nothing. Moreover, multiple union leaders have imposed measures which even go further than what these laws demand to police their membership. For example, on UCU picket lines we've seen union officials preventing members from convincing workers not to cross, even though this is legal under the draconian laws!

Here's the thing about anti-union laws. The power of the capitalists lies in their state: the courts, police, prisons and ultimately the armed forces. The arsenal of the working class is its collective force: picket lines, solidarity strikes, secondary boycotts. So, yes, the logical thing for the capitalists to do is to make these illegal.

There is an old saying in the workers movement: the only illegal strike is one that loses. And that is true. At the end of the day, any real step forward for the workers movement will have to be taken in defiance of these laws, whose sole purpose is to keep the working class crushed. The laws will be repealed not by begging Labour Party MPs but by making them null! This requires organising a real confrontation between the working class and the capitalists running this country. And yes, that means running the risk that some union leader might be thrown in jail...for a solid strike that has shut down a whole industry and won.

Working-class fighters being thrown in jail has always been part of the price to pay to at least maintain some sort of balance between the workers and the ruling class. But in the past several decades, union leaders have taken beating after beating, on their knees, and will tell you that nothing else can be done because it's the law. Well, we say that organising a trade union also used to be illegal, until it wasn't.

To understand why trade union leaders refuse to lead a fight for these basic union principles, you must understand what sort of people they are. The current crop was trained in the last 30 years, a period of constant retreat and defeats for the working class. They live in the shadow of the defeat of the 1984-85 miners strike. They've built their entire careers on explicit rejection of the need to lead any sort of hard

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Steve Hedley chooses puritanism over picket lines

The following statement by the Spartacist League Central Committee was issued as a Workers Hammer supplement dated 7 March.

Steve Hedley, a former leader of the RMT, no longer wants to work with the Spartacist League in its campaign to defend picket lines—an urgent and crucial task for the workers movement. Why? Because we oppose laws that make consensual sex illegal based on an arbitrary age limit. A fine demonstration of how bourgeois morality is used to attack the workers movement.

The reformist left and trade union bureaucracy are clear that they want nothing to do with the principle of "never cross a picket line". Instead of openly stating that they oppose the fight initiated by the SL on this question, they attack us on other grounds, in this case appealing to puritanical moral values.

Open letter to Socialist Appeal

Sharon Graham or Lenin? You can't have both

20 May 2023

Dear comrades,

Your recent article “May Day and the need for Marxist leadership” (*Socialist Appeal*, 27 April) sparked our interest. In it, you explain how “the key question confronting the working class in this epoch” is “the absence of a revolutionary leadership, capable of seeing the struggle through to the end”. You also explain that the problem with the UCU and CWU “flows from the reformist outlook of the union leaders” who “believe in the potential for class peace and compromise between the bosses and workers”. You note that in the history of workers’ struggles, “what they have consistently lacked, with the exception of Russian workers in October 1917, is a revolutionary leadership at their head” and that such a leadership “must be constructed in advance of the titanic events that impend”. We could not agree more.

What sparked our interest is not so much the validity of these words but how much they stand in total contradiction with the orientation and practice of Socialist Appeal in the trade unions. In particular, the work of Arsalan Ghani and your other supporters in Unite consists of uncritically campaigning for Sharon Graham. They run on her slate and defend her leadership, with Ghani going so far as to declare: “We need to ensure that we build on our wins and grow our union by electing an EC that shares Sharon’s vision for Unite” (*Socialist Appeal*, 11 January). This is completely opportunist and a betrayal of Marxist principles.

Sharon Graham is a product and integral part of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy. Like all the other bureaucrats, she cancelled strikes when the Queen died, in reverence to Her Majesty. Unite might have called on NHS staff to reject the rotten pay offer in March accepted by other unions, but throughout the strike wave Graham has conducted strikes with the same methods, the same losing strategy and the same pro-capitalist programme as the rest of the union bureaucrats.

Your main argument to defend your campaign for Graham has been that she is a step to the left compared to the former McCluskey bureaucratic clique. You even declare that McCluskey’s United Left faction represented “the past period of class conciliation in the union” (*Socialist Appeal*, 30 March), ie, Graham supposedly represents a break from class conciliation. This is a total whitewash. Graham is a reformist trade unionist, a fact your own members do not even dispute. This means that she, too, believes in class conciliation and leads the class struggle accordingly —

just like the UCU and CWU leaders.

By presenting McCluskey and his followers as the sole representatives of class conciliation, you are simply fuelling the illusion that Graham’s “militant” reformist trade unionism defends the interests of the working class. Class conciliation and reformism are inseparable. If reformists

refusing to unload a tanker transporting Russian oil, in a move to force the Tories to impose tougher sanctions on Russia. A few days later, Unite published a statement calling for “effective and immediate sanctions to be placed on the Russian economy” (“Statement on Ukraine crisis”, 10 March 2022, unitetheunion.org). We

22 March) hails a below-inflation pay deal as a “victory” and attributes this in part to the “militant, class-based language by our general secretary, Mick Lynch”! This is nothing but crawling in front of the RMT bureaucrats.

The task of revolutionaries in the trade unions is to fight for a communist leadership *against* all wings of the trade union bureaucracy. In Unite, this means combating the old bureaucracy *and* Sharon Graham, by revealing to workers how her reformist and pro-imperialist programme is in contradiction with their interests and showing them that *only* a revolutionary programme and leadership can advance their interests. But instead, Socialist Appeal is playing the role of lackey for Graham, building a reformist obstacle to cohering a Marxist leadership.

During World War I, Lenin waged a struggle to the death against those “Marxists” like Karl Kautsky who, while preaching the virtues of socialism and Marxist leadership, maintained unity with the openly pro-imperialist social-chauvinists. He wrote: “Unity with the social-chauvinists means unity with one’s ‘own’ national bourgeoisie, which exploits other nations; it means splitting the international proletariat” (“Opportunism and the collapse of the Second International”, January 1916, translated from German). These words aptly describe the reactionary content of Socialist Appeal’s bloc with Sharon Graham: 21st century Kautskyism.

Lenin continued:

“This does not mean that a break with the opportunists is immediately possible everywhere; it means only that historically this break is imminent; that it is necessary and inevitable for the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat; that history, which has led us from ‘peaceful’ capitalism to imperialist capitalism, has paved the way for this break.”

The building of a revolutionary leadership of the proletariat can only come about through a *break* with the social-chauvinist, reformist and centrist misleaders of the working class. This split might not always be immediately possible, as Lenin notes, but the actions of the vanguard are revolutionary *only insofar as* they advance such a split. Socialist Appeal, by building unity with pro-imperialist and reformist bureaucrats and propping up their authority in the workers movement, is working against this break, repudiating Leninism and playing a treacherous role.

So we say to Socialist Appeal: you can either be Leninist or maintain unity with Sharon Graham, but you cannot do both.

Comradely,
Workers Hammer



could reject class conciliation, then workers would have no need for Marxist leadership. Thus, your view that revolutionaries must support Graham because she is a step to the left is based on a repudiation of the need for communist leadership of the proletariat.

In fact, there is no qualitative difference between Graham and McCluskey. Graham’s more militant rhetoric and increased strike actions are not the result of any sort of political break from the old bureaucracy but a reflection of the discontent at the base of Unite. Instead of using this discontent to expose how all variants of reformism are a dead end in the fight for “jobs, pay and conditions”, Socialist Appeal simply lends its support to one clique of reformist bureaucrats against the other.

There is one important difference between Sharon Graham and other “left” union bureaucrats: Graham does not bother with the traditional left Labourite pacifism and is an unashamed supporter of British imperialism. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Graham mobilised Unite dock workers at Ellesmere Port in

have not seen a single word on this in the pages of *Socialist Appeal*. Furthermore, at the last TUC Congress, Unite supported a motion proposed by the GMB calling on the British government to increase its defence spending, invoking the need to militarily support Ukraine against Russia.

Because Socialist Appeal campaigns for one of the most pro-imperialist trade union bureaucrats in Britain, all your claims to be against arms shipments to Ukraine, against sanctions on Russia, against NATO and against imperialism are *empty words*. You hail Sharon’s “vision” for Unite and support “the transformation of the union that has taken place under Sharon Graham” (*Socialist Appeal*, 30 March). That “transformation” includes her efforts to align Unite behind the interests of British imperialism and her mobilisation of workers for this reactionary aim. In fact, you are only providing a “Marxist” cover for this social-chauvinism.

Supporting “left” bureaucrats seems to be your *modus operandi*. Your article titled “RMT Network Rail workers win—but the struggle continues” (*Socialist Appeal*,

Leninist leadership and the class struggle

Printed below are excerpts from the “Theses on tactics and strategy” adopted by the Third Congress of the Comintern, which met in Moscow in June-July 1921. The excerpts are taken from To the masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921 (John Riddell, ed; Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

The most important task of the Communist International at present is to gain decisive influence over the majority of the working class and to lead its decisive sectors into struggle. The economic and political situation is objectively revolutionary, and can give rise to an acute revolutionary crisis at any moment—be it a mass strike, a colonial uprising, a new war, or even a major parliamentary crisis. However, the majority of the working class is not yet subject to Communist influence. This is especially true in countries where the strength of finance capital makes possible the existence of significant layers of workers corrupted by imperialism (Britain and the United States, for example), and where genuinely revolutionary mass propaganda has hardly begun.

The Communist International does not aim to form small Communist sects seeking to exert influence on the working masses through propaganda and agitation. *Rather, from the earliest days after its formation, it has clearly and unambiguously pursued the goal of taking part in the struggles of the working masses, leading these struggles in a Communist direction, and, through the struggle, forming large, tested, mass revolutionary Communist parties.*

From the very first years of its existence, the Communist International rejected sectarian tendencies by calling on its affiliated parties—no matter how small—to participate in the trade unions, in order to defeat the reactionary bureaucracy from within and to transform the unions into revolutionary mass organisations of the proletariat and agencies for its struggle. Already in its first year of existence, the Communist International called on Communist parties not to close themselves off as propaganda circles but to utilise every opportunity that the bourgeois state is compelled to provide, as a weapon, a platform, a point of assembly for communism....

The experiences of two years of struggle have fully confirmed the correctness of the Communist International’s point of view. The policies of the Communist International have brought about, in a number of countries, the *separation of the revolutionary workers not only from the open reformists but also from the centrists.* The Centrists have formed the Two-and-a-Half International, which joins publicly with the Scheidemanns, the Jouhauxs, and the Hendersons within the Amsterdam trade-



AI Savelyev

Moscow, 1921: VI Lenin addressing Communist International’s Third Congress.

Communist International Theses on tactics and strategy

Communist parties must be a vanguard that, by pressing for struggle for all the proletariat’s vital necessities, demonstrates how the struggle should be carried out, thus exposing the traitorous character of the non-Communist parties.

union International. This clarifies the field of battle for the proletarian masses, which can only facilitate the coming struggles....

The Communist parties can develop only through struggle. Even the smallest Communist parties cannot limit themselves to mere propaganda and agitation. In all the proletariat’s mass organisations they must be a vanguard that, by pressing for struggle for all the proletariat’s vital necessities, demonstrates how the struggle should be carried out, thus exposing the traitorous character of the non-Communist parties. Only if the Communists are able to take the lead in and promote all the proletariat’s practical struggles will they be able to actually win broad masses of the proletariat for a struggle for its dictatorship.

All the Communist parties’ agitation and propaganda, indeed all their work must be imbued with the consciousness that no enduring improvement in the conditions of the masses is possible in a capitalist framework. Steps to improve working-class con-

ditions and to reconstruct an economy devastated by capitalism can be taken only by overthrowing the bourgeoisie and smashing the capitalist state. *But this insight must not lead to any postponement of the struggle for the proletariat’s immediate and urgent necessities of life until the time when it is capable of erecting its dictatorship.*

The present period is one of capitalist decay and collapse, a time when capitalism is no longer capable of assuring workers of even the life of a well-fed slave. Social Democracy advances the old Social-Democratic programme of peaceful reforms, carried out on the basis and in the framework of bankrupt capitalism, through peaceful means. This is conscious deception of the working masses. Not only is decaying capitalism incapable of providing the workers with relatively humane living conditions, but the Social Democrats and reformists show every day, in every country, that they do not intend to conduct any type of struggle for even the most modest

reforms contained in their programme. The demand for socialisation or nationalisation of the most important industries, advanced by the centrist parties, is equally deceptive. The centrists mislead the masses by seeking to convince them that all the most important branches of industry can be torn out of the grip of capitalism without the defeat of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, they seek to divert the workers from the real, living struggle for their immediate needs through hope that branches of industry can be taken over, one after another, ultimately creating the basis for “planned” economic construction.

In this fashion, they go back to the Social-Democratic minimum programme for reforming capitalism, which has been transformed into an obvious counter-revolutionary fraud. Some of the centrists advance a programme to nationalise the coal industry, for example, in part as an expression of Lassalle’s concept that all the proletariat’s energies should be focused on a single demand, in order to convert it into a lever for revolutionary action, whose progress would lead to a struggle for power. What we have here is empty schematism. The working class in all the capitalist states suffers today from so many and such terrible scourges that it is impossible to concentrate the struggle against all these oppressive burdens that weigh it down by focusing on some formula dreamed up in doctrinaire fashion.

The task, by contrast, is to take all the masses’ interests as the starting point for revolutionary struggles that only in their unity form the mighty river of revolution. The Communist parties do not propose a minimum programme for these struggles, one designed to reinforce and improve the rickety structure of capitalism. Instead, destruction of this structure remains their guiding goal and their immediate task. But to achieve this task, the Communist parties have to advance demands whose achievement meets an immediate, urgent need of the working class, and fight for these demands regardless of whether they are compatible with the capitalist profit system.

Communist parties direct their concern not to the viability and competitiveness of capitalist industry or the resilience of capitalist finance but to the dimensions of a deprivation that the proletariat cannot bear and should not have to bear. Demands should express the needs experienced by broad proletarian masses, such that they are convinced they cannot survive unless these demands are achieved. If that is the case, the struggles for these demands will become starting points for the struggle for power.

In place of the minimum programme of the centrists and reformists, the Communist International offers a struggle for

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Union power...

(continued from page 2)

It is pure fantasy to think that isolated and partial struggles can provide a significant increase in the standard of living for working people. In what we call the age of imperialist decay, gradualism is impossible.

The only path to substantially increasing workers' standard of living lies in the expropriation of the entire capitalist class and the establishment of a socialist planned economy. And it is only by marching on *that* path that the working class can wrest significant concessions from the ruling class, as reforms are always the by-product of revolutionary struggle. The "socialist" left's view of the strike wave as an incremental line of success and its advocacy of constant escalation through means of pressure on rotten bureaucrats is simply an expression of their gradualist and reformist attitude towards the class struggle.

The tasks of revolutionaries

With the strike wave receding, two interconnected tasks fall upon revolutionaries in the trade unions. The first speaks to the main pressure acting on militant workers today, which is the growing mood of demoralisation and apathy. This often comes out in the form of union members saying they can't afford to go on strike anymore. Usually this reflects a deeper distrust in the strategy of the union leadership. The first duty of class-conscious militants is to fight so that *no union members abandon their posts*. The treacherous strategy of the current union leadership is *not* an excuse to abandon picket lines, or worse, to cross them!

Most of the left seeks to combat demoralisation by writing countless articles about how great the strikes are and how militant the mood is on picket lines. Telling lies and painting rosy pictures does not combat demoralisation but in fact deepens it while covering for the bureaucracy. The truth is that the strike wave is receding, the situation is tough, and it will get tougher. But if picket lines become sparse and union members scab, that would send a strong signal to the bosses. Without a doubt, they would exploit this weakness to come down on the union involved, diminishing its fighting capacity, making the bosses more powerful in the workplace, driving down everyone's conditions



John Harris/reportdigital.co.uk

South Yorkshire miners picket, 1984. Strategy of current union leaders means unions will be defeated, members will starve, scabbing will continue.

and further weakening the position of the working class. Elementary defence of the trade unions is what's posed now.

The second task is to combat the strategy of the trade union tops, as well as their lawyers on the left, by fighting for an *orderly and limited retreat*. The aim must be to regroup the forces of the vanguard, rebuilding the power of the unions and preparing the next battle.

To do this, revolutionaries must build socialist caucuses in the trade unions in opposition to the bureaucracy and all its lawyers, with the purpose of *ousting* the bureaucrats and *taking over* the leadership. The platform of such caucuses must guide militants in rebuilding trade union strength and laying the basis for an offensive against the Tories later this year. Here is what's needed:

Build strike funds! Many union leaders launched strikes without strike funds. This is criminal. Trade unions will never go on a winning offensive if their members can't eat. Some unions have set up "hardship funds", often in a hurry, but these are too meagre and are run like means-tested benefits. A strike fund should be simple:

if you are on strike, that is, if you join the picket line (not if you stay home), you receive your share.

The central purpose of union dues is supposed to be for amassing strike and defence funds. We need aggressive fund-raising campaigns involving as many union members as possible. No more six-figure salaries for bureaucrats and millions in donations to the Labour Party, which denounces strikes anyway and stands against the interests of the working class.

One workplace, one union! In unionised workplaces, various trade unions compete against each other, steal each other's members, negotiate separately, go on strike on different days and scab on each other's strikes. This is entirely due to rivalry between cliques of bureaucrats, it only helps the bosses, and it must stop. The bosses stand as one; the workers must, too.

Bosses out of the unions! This should be basic. There is no place for management and its running dogs in the trade unions. Many unions, like the NEU, allow bosses to attend union meetings and accept their diktats on how unions should function, while also seeing bosses' unions as allies. These policies only weaken the unions. Trade unions are there to fight the bosses, not to collaborate with them.

Recruit! The current trade union leaders do barely anything to recruit new members. If some unions got an influx of new members recently, it usually had nothing to do with the leadership's efforts. Massive recruitment drives must be launched in non-union as well as organised workplaces. The best way to recruit is for the unions to fight to win!

An injury to one is an injury to all! Unions must defend all workers victimised by the bosses. A worker being victimised is an attack not just on your workmate but on the whole labour movement. This task is particularly urgent in the CWU, where defence of the hundreds of sacked and suspended workers is a vital duty for all workers. Solidarity is not sending a few quid and a valentine. It means action. "One in the dock! All out the

docks!" This was the rallying cry dock workers raised in 1972 to free their Pentonville Five shop stewards. And that's the spirit we need in the unions today.

Build support for the class struggle! There is much debate about how to gather support from the public for strikes. The union tops believe that the less disruptive a strike, the more support it will gain. No! People do not respect weak unions that get bullied. The more determined the unions are, the bolder their fight, the more support they will generate. What will mobilise parents behind the NEU is not hesitation, bowing and scraping but an all-out fight for quality public education. What will gather support for nurses is not crawling to the Tories but a determined struggle to save the NHS.

Picket lines mean don't cross! One of the central problems of the strike wave has been the union leaders' refusal to build real picket lines and their tolerance and sometimes open encouragement of scabbing (see article on page 4). As a result, scabbing has been normalised and strikers often feel ashamed to even confront scabs. To win the coming battles, we must turn the tide! The British labour movement must return to its age-old traditions. Scabs break strikes, spit on everyone else's sacrifices and help the bosses and government. Scabbing must be stopped! Enough of unions condoning scabbing on each other!

All the above measures are basic but vital to rebuilding union power and winning the next round. We have not invented them. They have been in the tradition of the international workers movement, and in the experience of the British trade union movement going back some 200 years. But the strike wave has revealed that every single one of them is betrayed by the existing leaders, and self-styled "socialist" groups in this country simply cover for them. Thus, any step towards rebuilding union power must be made in total opposition to these forces. **Oust the rotten bureaucrats! For class-struggle leadership of the unions!**

The British workers movement has only just awakened from a long sleep. Now, union militants must take up their brooms and do some spring cleaning. **Let's put our house in order!** ■

Archives...

(continued from page 7)

the specific demands of the proletariat, as part of a system of demands that, in their totality, undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat, and mark out the different stages of the struggle for proletarian dictatorship. Each of these demands gives expression to the needs of the broad masses, even when they do not yet consciously take a stand for proletarian dictatorship.

The struggle for these demands to meet the masses' essentials of life needs to embrace and mobilise broader and broader numbers. It must be counterposed to defence of the essentials of life for capitalist society. To the extent that this is done, the working class will become aware that for it to live, capitalism must die. This awareness provides the basis for a determination to struggle for [proletarian] dictatorship. Communist parties have the task of broadening, deepening, and unifying the struggles that develop around such specific demands.

Every partial action undertaken by the working masses in order to achieve a partial demand, every significant economic strike, also mobilises the entire bourgeoisie, which comes down as a class on the side of the threatened group of employers, aiming to render impossible even a limited victory by the proletariat ("Emergency Technical Assistance" [German strikebreaking organisation], bourgeois strikebreakers in the British railway workers' strike, Fascists). The bourgeoisie mobilises the entire state apparatus for the struggle against the workers (militarisation of the workers in France and Poland, state of emergency during the miners' strike in Britain). The workers who are struggling for partial demands will be automatically forced into a struggle against the bourgeoisie as a whole and its state apparatus.

To the extent that struggles for partial demands and partial struggles by specific groups of workers broaden into an overall working-class struggle against capitalism, the Communist Party must escalate its slogans and generalise them to the point of calling for the enemy's immediate overthrow. ■

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Picket lines...

(continued from page 5)

confrontation with the government or any sort of real struggle against scabs on picket lines. This is why they set up symbolic picket lines, which are toothless photo ops.

The current union leaders value their respectable credentials in the upper layers of the Labour Party much more highly than their reputation among working-class people. They are tied by a thousand threads to the ruling class, in their ambitions, ideologies and worldview. And financially too, since many of them make six-figure salaries. They have literally nothing to gain from shaking up the status quo. When they are forced to organise a strike, it is in reaction to anger from their membership. Even then they do it in the most half-hearted manner, hampering the struggle at every turn with the aim of selling out at the first opportunity.

All this explains their rejection of the methods of the class struggle and why strikes are being sold out left and right. And this is why no union leader will touch our campaign with a ten-foot pole. We call these people the trade union bureaucracy: a parasite that sits on top of the workers movement and must be removed if unions are to become tools for real struggle.

What about the myriad of socialist groups in this country that all refused to join our campaign? Why? The reason is not really that they disagree with these demands—although we know for a fact that many of them do cross picket lines and do lawyer for scabs. The real reason is that it is impossible to fight for these demands without entering into open struggle against the trade union leaders. That is the problem for all the other socialist groups. Since the beginning of the strike wave, they have

been in an open bloc with those leaders, openly campaigning for them, lauding them, giving them a left cover and justifying their betrayals. To sign up for our campaign means breaking this bloc—which is also one of our aims. The campaign poses the need to fight for a different leadership of the working class, a leadership based on the principles of the class struggle.

Groups like the Communist Party (CPB),

Go to the Islington branch of the NEU, the teachers union, to give a local example, and you will quickly realise that it is run in large part by leading SWP cadre. Are the schools in Islington shut on strike days? No. Scabbing is widespread and condoned by the union, just like elsewhere.

The Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal: one of their main fields of activity is to campaign for Sharon Graham, the leader

outcasts in the eyes of the bureaucrats they support.

For communist leadership!

There is another point our campaign has highlighted, and I'll conclude on this. It is the dire state of the trade unions. Our campaign to build real picket lines really poses the need to rebuild the power of the unions, which have been dangerously hollowed out in recent decades. Engaging with workers and talking about our campaign showed even more clearly how the ABCs of trade union building are constantly violated and betrayed.

What is posed is to rebuild union power (see article, page 1). This task will face powerful obstacles: the bourgeoisie with its state, its newspapers, its mouthpieces and its army of strikebreakers. But it will also face tremendous enemies inside the workers movement: the Labourites who pretend to be “friends” of the workers but who are in fact agents of the capitalists; the trade union bureaucracy, which will combat to the death any threat to its hold on the unions; and the so-called “socialists” who lawyer for them.

Here is the fundamental point I want to make about our campaign. You do not need to be a communist to build picket lines and build strikes. But only communists can consistently fight to rebuild union power. Only the programme and leadership of communists can provide a consistent guide for the struggle and the necessary foresight and resoluteness for the working class to prevail in its battle against the capitalists. What distinguishes us from all other tendencies in the workers movement is that we seek to organise every fight, as small and minimal as it may be, as part of the general struggle to replace capitalist slavery with the rule of the working class. That is how workers will win. ■



Simon Lamrock

RMT's Mick Lynch outside London's Euston Station during June 2022 strike. Building picket lines as toothless photo ops, RMT and ASLEF leaderships scab on each other's strikes, undermining both unions.

Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party etc have spent years cultivating good relations with the union bureaucrats who are disorganising the strikes, and sometimes are themselves union bureaucrats. The Communist Party has members on the RMT executive committee and all over the upper echelons of the union. When the RMT cancels strikes for the Queen, or more recently to make workers accept a below-inflation pay rise, who helps Mick Lynch sell this to the workers? The CPBers!

of Unite. They run their members on her ticket. Graham talks left, but she is no different than any other bureaucrat, except that she supports NATO and British imperialism more openly than the pacifists. These groups might claim to be for “socialism”, but they've spent the last few months building the authority of the very leaders who are now selling out the strikes! They will not commit to fighting inside the unions to build real picket lines because that would transform them instantly into

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UPGRADE THE PROLETARIAN STRIKE THE STRIKE

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Editorial
SL/U.S. National Conference: Return to Road of Lenin and Trotsky!

ICL rearms!

Programmatic rearming in fight for revolutionary leadership today. ICL press clockwise from left: *Spartacist* (English edition no 67, August 2022) and German-language edition no 33 (May 2023) with lead article, “The crisis of the liberal order—the communist answer”; first issue of *El Antiimperialista*, newspaper of refounded Grupo Espartaquista de México, headlined: “For workers and national emancipation! Trotskyism vs. populism”; *O Bolsevikos* supplement (March 2023) published by Trotskyist Group of Greece calls for KKE/PAME workers government and demands: Cancel the debt! Throw out the austerity packages! Out of the EU and NATO! *Workers Vanguard* nos 1178 (5 May) and 1177 (17 March), with documents from SL/US conference breaking with previous opportunist course.

Available on the ICL website: spartacist.org

BLM...

(continued from page 12)

to the concrete tasks for Marxists toward a movement whose main objective is police reform. Advocating police reform is not simply a faulty view stemming from a misunderstanding of the capitalist state. It is a deadly program used to rope black people behind the Democratic Party.

The point we started to develop in our letter to the SL/U.S. is that the program of police reform is inherently class-collaborationist. Unlike the fight for reforms, such as better housing or better wages, whose achievement will benefit the working class and the oppressed, police reform can only serve to further tie the oppressed to the capitalist parties and their state. It means directly involving minorities and the working class in the management of the capitalist forces of repression, whether it is through civilian review boards, municipal budgets, legislation in Congress, or the selection of the police commissioner.

The point is that you can't fight for police reform independently from the capitalists; it is an inherently popular-frontist demand. A BLM group that opposes the Democrats but still supports police reform is *still* in the popular front. It is not enough to explain that police reform is impossible and that the future revolution will solve everything; it is necessary to expose how today this program is used to bind the oppressed to their oppressors. The program of police reform *must* be rejected as a *precondition* for advancing the struggle for black liberation. This is precisely what the IG and SL/U.S. have not done.

It is also necessary to put forward a concrete counterposed alternative for right now. The gunning down of ten black people in a Buffalo grocery store shows once more the constant fascist threat that black people face. BLM and other leftist demonstrations are also in the crosshairs of fascists. To turn the tide of class struggle in this country, labor will need powerful, militant picket lines. Instead of putting faith in the cops and fostering illusions in cop reform, it is necessary to organize black and working-class power independently of the capitalist state. *For labor/black defense committees, for the right of armed self-defense!*

2. Integration

The only way to achieve black liberation is through the full integration of black people into American society. BLM mostly does not claim to be for integration, but plenty of liberals in and around the move-



ment do call for various forms of integration in schools, housing, jobs, etc. The problem is that it is impossible to achieve any real integration without confronting deeply rooted capitalist interests, and thus it is impossible to achieve while staying in the good graces of the liberal establishment. For example, integrating New York City will require going against the real estate parasites, Wall Street and the Democratic Party. When Martin Luther King left the South, where the struggle was centered on formal legal equality, for the North, where the question was *social* equality and integration, he rapidly lost the backing of Democratic Party liberals and was forced to back down with his tail between his legs.

Liberal integrationism can offer only legal or parliamentary reforms through pressuring the Democratic Party. It necessarily betrays the struggle for integration because it can only push for it insofar as it is acceptable to the ruling class. And as I explained before, real integration is not and cannot be acceptable to the ruling class. Thus, to fight for real integration, it is necessary to break with liberalization.

The left, including the SL/U.S., has mirrored BLM in totally ignoring the fight for integration. Focusing solely on police brutality and cop reform is a way of keeping the movement on its liberal tracks. A concrete way to break the black masses from liberalism is to advocate and push the struggle for integration which will rapidly collide with the limits of liberal integrationism.

In contrast, all BLM articles in *WV* barely mention segregation, and revolutionary integrationism was nothing more than

a meaningless jingle. Here is an example from the article "Class-Struggle Road to Black Freedom, Part One" (*WV* No. 1073, 4 September 2015):

"We fight for black freedom on the program of revolutionary integration including mobilizing the working class against every manifestation of racial oppression. This approach is counterposed to liberal integration, which is premised on the utopian notion that equality for black people can be attained within the confines of this class society founded on black oppression."

In no way is it clear why revolutionary and liberal integration are counterposed. Liberal integration is presented as simply "utopian," not as a program that fundamentally restricts and hampers the struggle for black liberation. The only way to advance black liberation is to win the black masses to the understanding that integration can only be achieved in struggle against all wings of the bourgeoisie, including its liberal wing. This is the premise for fighting for *integrated affordable housing; free, quality health care; free, integrated schooling from preschool to university.*

3. Overcoming the racial divide

The dominant pressure in the United States is to look at society through the prism of race instead of class. The white ruling class spreads racial prejudice against black people in order to keep the oppressed divided and at each other's throats. In response to this, black nationalism and liberal identity politics present all black or non-white people as having a commonality of interests against the dominant white population. Despite being generally espoused in reaction to brutal discrimination and oppression, these programs are fundamentally false and are obstacles to black liberation.

All black people in the U.S. are oppressed due to the color of their skin, but they do not all share a common interest. The black cultural and business elite draws a large part of its success from the maintenance of segregated communities. Lacking the resources to compete with the white elites who dominate the U.S. economy and cultural institutions, among the segregated black population they can find a captive and receptive market in which they can have disproportionate influence. While buying black, guilt-tripping Hollywood into hiring more black actors and electing more black politicians is good for the careers of the black petty bourgeoisie, it does nothing for the black masses and, in fact, subordinates

their needs to the distinctly pro-capitalist ambitions of this layer.

WV had two answers to overcome racial polarization. The first was using Lenin's call for a party that is a tribune of the people, which we distorted into some do-good liberal formula (more on this later). The second is the classic social-democratic program of unity around economic class struggle. Part Two of the article quoted earlier makes a long list of demands which "benefit the class as a whole." The article goes on to say that: "Under revolutionary leadership, struggles for these and similar demands would serve not only to win immediate gains but also to weld the class together and advance its consciousness, pointing toward the need to overthrow the capitalist system."

Fine words, but the whole presentation promotes the illusion that such demands can be fought for without a revolutionary leadership in the working class. So, why do you need revolutionary leadership to overcome the racial division in the United States? Comrades in the SL/U.S. are wedded to the idea that all you need to do is raise good demands and the racial divide will be overcome. This is wrong. Revolutionary leadership is key. There has been plenty of economic struggle by the American working class, and while it can temporarily bridge the racial divide, that divide cannot be overcome on the basis of trade-union struggle. Increasing the size of the economic pie given to workers without addressing the fact that blacks are at the bottom and receive a proportionally smaller portion will maintain the basis for racial antagonisms.

Trade-union economism, which ignores the specific needs of black workers, will generate resentment and distrust and can only fuel black nationalism. In turn, black nationalism proposes to redress the condition of black people through separation and measures taken at the expense of white workers. In this way, black rights become associated with attacks on white workers, who are themselves oppressed by the ruling class. This, and the liberal moralizing that blames all white people for black oppression, can only consolidate the hold of anti-black racism. This reactionary cycle is constantly fueled by the ruling class to maintain its domination.

Demands that will unite the interests of the entire working class, and specifically address the oppression of black people, will not be acceptable to the bosses. The most basic measures will require momentous battles that confront the capitalist class and the state. Such battles cannot be won while the working class is blindfolded by trade unionism. It's *not* just about having a bunch of demands; they are useless without a leadership that can fight for and win them.

The unity of the working class can be achieved only through white workers understanding that it is in their own class interests not only to temporarily unite in struggle against the common enemy but also to champion the struggle for full black equality, which itself cannot be achieved within the bounds of capitalism. The working class can be united only around a program that combines revolution and integration. Trade unionism does not do this, and is, in fact, a total obstacle to this program.

4. Workers movement

BLM has mainly been a petty-bourgeois movement which has not intersected much working-class struggle. The main

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call raised by Left Voice, the IG and the SL/U.S. has been for the working class to fight in defense of black people. Here's Left Voice's version (leftvoice.org, 25 May 2022):

“SEIU [service employees] called for a Strike for Black Lives in coordination of the ILWU [dockers] West Coast port shutdown, although few SEIU work stoppages actually occurred. Yet it showed a glimpse of what could be and what will need to happen in order to defend Black lives and end police brutality—coordinated strikes against police killings.”

You will find pretty much the same thing as this throughout *WV* and the [IG's] *Internationalist*. The propaganda by the left simply presents strikes and working-class demonstrations as inherently progressive. The ILWU Juneteenth [anniversary of 19 June 1865 proclamation of freedom for slaves in Texas] “strike” was not a show of labor power against the capitalist class, but a rally behind liberal Democratic Party politics. To call for working-class action in the context of BLM, without it being based on a clear programmatic counterposition to liberalism and the Democratic Party, is simply building an alliance between the workers and the liberal wing of their exploiters. This is what the left, including the SL, has been doing. Workers must be mobilized in defense of black people, but *not* on the basis of BLM's program. For the working class to advance its own interests and to champion the needs of the black masses, the precondition is to break with its political subordination to the Democratic Party.

5. Breaking with the Democrats

It is pretty common for pseudo-Marxists to call for breaking with the Democrats, especially these days. Recently, the main argument raised in the SL/U.S. against BLM is that it is organically tied to the Democrats. “Break with the Democrats” is, of course, a necessary and principled call. However, raising this call does not automatically draw a class line. For example, as the previous example shows, it is entirely possible to call to break with the Democrats and the bureaucrats while supporting the working class being mobilized on the political basis of BLM's liberal program for police reform. Presenting the call to break with the Democrats as a sufficient condition for black liberation is simply a way to conciliate the left-wing elements of BLM that are critical of



Workers Vanguard

1974 Boston busing crisis: Against the liberals, Spartacists raised communist programme to smash segregation. Inset: 1963 Revolutionary Tendency document combated American SWP's refusal to fight for Trotskyist leadership of black struggle.

the Democrats but who cling to liberal or black nationalist politics.

On characterizing the left's intervention in BLM, the IG comes closest to the truth:

“Opportunist leftists see the present politically liberal protests through rose-colored glasses because they place themselves on a continuum, just a step to the left of the liberals. Today even many liberals understand that the institution of the police, ‘as we know it,’ is inherently racist. But the reformists and centrists obscure the class line, and with their ‘fight the right’ politics they constantly cross that line seeking political alliances with bourgeois liberal forces.”

—internationalist.org, 10 July 2020

But the IG notes this truth only to better reject the crucial question: BLM is itself a bourgeois liberal force! The task of revolutionaries is not to merely observe the existence of the class line, but to clearly draw it in the course of struggle. In the case of BLM, that means fighting to break its militants from the liberal politics of BLM.

To the openly liberal slogan of BLM, the IG responds with its more “militant, class-struggle slogans.” But this is utterly meaningless because the IG's propaganda is focused on liberal outrage and expositional journalism, entirely compatible and acceptable to the liberal politics of BLM. The class line can only be drawn by showing how BLM liberalism betrays black liberation, and counterposing to it a revolutionary program for black liberation that

explicitly goes beyond what is acceptable to liberals. The IG (as well as our press in the past) talks about class independence from the Democrats, talks about revolution as the solution, but *does not* conclude from this that the task of communists is not to build the BLM movement, but to build a counterposed revolutionary pole for black liberation and socialism. This is the fundamental capitulation.

6. The revolutionary party

Throughout *WV* articles on BLM—and in most of its articles dealing with special oppression—we claim we want to build a revolutionary party and refer to Lenin's conception of the party as a “tribune of the people.” In fact, the SL/U.S.'s program has been much closer to that of the Economist Martynov than Lenin's.

Just like the SL/U.S., Martynov justified dumbing down the tasks of the party with the argument that current consciousness isn't revolutionary. From this, he drew the conclusion:

“Since in ordinary times various social strata inevitably march separately, ‘it is, therefore, clear that we Social-Democrats cannot simultaneously guide the activities of various opposition strata, we cannot dictate to them a positive programme of action, we cannot point out to them in what manner they should wage a day-to-day struggle for their interests.... The liberal strata will themselves take care of the active struggle for their immedi-

ate interests, the struggle that will bring them face to face with our political regime’.”

—V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902)

To put this in the context of the black question, we, just like the Economists of Lenin's time, did not put forward a positive program of action, did not point out how to wage the day-to-day struggle and abandoned the struggle for black liberation to the leadership of the liberals.

Lenin also quotes Martynov arguing that the party should function “*merely in the negative*” role of exposers of abuses... we can *only* dissipate their hopes in various government commissions.” Sounds just like the *Internationalist* and *WV*, which *merely* write long turgid expositions of the abuses against black people while dissipating hopes in police reform. Blacks don't need *WV* and the *Internationalist* to tell them how brutal police are. As Lenin responded to Martynov, they will find out directly from the police. Simply writing about different forms of specific oppression is totally compatible with today's economism. In contradistinction to *WV*, which uses the tribune of the people point to justify liberal moping about capitalism, Lenin insists on the need to give the struggle of the various oppressed groups a *revolutionary content and leadership*.

Toward the groups oppressed by tsarism, Lenin explained:

“We must take upon ourselves the task of organising an all-round political struggle under the leadership of *our* Party in such a manner as to make it possible for all oppositional strata to render their fullest support to the struggle and to our Party. We must train our Social-Democratic practical workers to become political leaders, able to guide all the manifestations of this all-round struggle, able at the right time to ‘dictate a positive programme of action’ for the aroused students, the discontented Zemstvo [provincial council] people, the incensed religious sects, the offended elementary schoolteachers, etc., etc.”

Lenin's whole point is that against the economists who restrict working-class struggle to economic struggle and abandon other opponents of tsarism to liberal leadership, a vanguard party must elevate consciousness and unite all opponents of tsarism behind its own banner in the struggle to overthrow the regime. At bottom, the question facing the SL/U.S. boils down to the same conflict: an economist program for the working class, leaving the black struggle under a liberal leadership, versus unity of the black and working-class struggle behind a revolutionary party. ■

For Black Trotskyism

—AGAINST THE P.C. DRAFT
“FREEDOM NOW”
—IN DEFENSE OF PROGRAMMATIC
FUNDAMENTALS
—FOR BUILDING A BLACK
TROTSKYIST CADRE

by James Robertson and Shirley Stants

“It is happens that we in the SWP are not able to find the road to this strata (the Negroes). Then we are not worthy of it. The proletarian revolution and all the rest would be only a lie.”

—V.I. Lenin, quoted in the
1974-1975 Negro Revolution

Leon Trotsky

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Negro Question has been posed before the party for widespread consideration and with increasing urgency as the gap has widened over the past few years between the rising level of Negro struggle and the continuing qualitatively low level of support from the SWP.

I. Basic Theory: National or Race-Caste Issue?

Bretman vs. Kirk, 1956-57

To our understanding, what was involved then was a matter of theoretical difference. Bretman saw the Negro people as the embryo of a nation based upon the right of self-determination, and acknowledged that not just, at least, materialistic. Kirk interpreted the Negro question as a race issue which, under conditions of historic caste-fetters (i.e., Jackson's slaveholders) could be broken only with a national question. Hence he argued that the Negro struggle should be based upon a requirement of self-determination of the Negro people as a nation, and not upon the struggle for the Negro people as a race.

Lenin's position on the Negro Question (SWP Discussion Bulletin No. 20, August 1952). We cannot say that the Negro people are a nation, but we can say that they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making.

The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making. The Negro people are a nation in the making because they are a nation in the making.

—Reprinted from SWP Discussion Bulletin Vol. 21, No. 30, July 1963

Key documents in the fight for black Trotskyism

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MAY-JUNE 1967

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I. INTRODUCTION

The struggle of the Negro people for freedom and equality has been the most dramatic struggle going on in the United States in the past ten years. It has taken place in the streets of all major cities and has been conducted by the organized forces of the Negro people in the form of their military, political, economic, and cultural organizations. It has been a struggle of the Negro people for freedom and equality, and it has been a struggle of the Negro people for freedom and equality.

Yet since a decision by the U.S. ruling class for another massive invasion of Cuba, the Negro people have been forced to turn their backs on the United States. The Negro people have been forced to turn their backs on the United States. The Negro people have been forced to turn their backs on the United States. The Negro people have been forced to turn their backs on the United States.

Leninist Principles
As present U.S. conditions are deteriorating to a point where the Negro people are being driven to the streets, the Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets.

The Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets. The Negro people are being driven to the streets.

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Which way forward for black liberation?

BLM liberalism vs Trotskyism

The following presentation by G Perrault, secretary of the ICL's International Secretariat, was given in New York City last summer as part of the fight in the Spartacist League/US to rearm with a revolutionary programme. It was first printed in *Workers Vanguard* no 1177 (17 March).

There have been two main waves of BLM protests in the U.S. At their peak in 2020, millions of people were in the streets. What have the results been? Well, Biden is in the White House, and Derek Chauvin [Minneapolis cop who killed George Floyd] is in jail. But when it comes to the conditions of black people in the U.S., they have only gotten worse. Blacks are gunned down as always, and the living conditions that are dreadful in normal times are getting ever more wretched due to rising inflation and other consequences of the pandemic.

That BLM has not led to any significant progress for black people is pretty obvious and uncontroversial. The real question is: *why?*

Black people are segregated at the bottom of American society. Any significant progress toward social integration and equality—whether it is ending police brutality, integrated housing, high-quality health care, free, integrated education—requires confronting the fundamental interests of the American capitalist class. You cannot resolve a single one of these questions while staying within the confines of capitalist America.

BLM, on the other hand, is a liberal movement for police reform. You just have to look at its main slogan—“black lives matter”—to see that it is not a call for freedom, for power, but an appeal to the ruling class to “care” about black people. The movement is based on a coalition going from liberal capitalists to unions to pseudo-Marxists. It is a classic popular-frontist movement whose entire political program and composition guarantee from the outset that it will not pose any challenge to capitalist interests. And since black liberation

“That BLM has not led to any significant progress for black people is pretty obvious and uncontroversial. The real question is: *why?*”



Black Lives Matter protest in Manchester, 6 June 2020.

Gary Roberts/Alamy

cannot make a single step forward without taking on these interests, a liberal movement like BLM necessarily means betraying the struggle for black liberation. Therefore, the subordination of the black struggle to liberalism and to the black petty bourgeoisie is the central reason for the movement's current paralysis and impotence.

These liberal shackles must be broken—not as in the '60s by black nationalism, which is just another dead end, but by a revolutionary working-class program. This raises two interrelated tasks for revolutionaries: first, to fight for a left-wing working-class break with liberalism; and

second, to win activists involved in the BLM movement to Trotskyism, the only program which can bring about black liberation.

But where have the so-called revolutionaries been? They have been supporting different versions of BLM's liberal politics. Whether it is in our own press, the Internationalist Group's (IG) or that of *Left Voice*, the purpose has been to push the movement to the left, winning the more radical elements to a halfway house between the Democratic Party and revolutionary politics (which really means the Democratic Party). This is an utter

betrayal of the struggle for black liberation and an utter betrayal of the struggle for workers revolution. It accepts that young black militants and others outraged by the realities of black life in America will remain tied to capitalist politics, which necessarily leads only to defeat and demoralization. While the pseudo-Marxist left is tiny and not very influential in the U.S., it nonetheless represents the main political obstacle stopping left-wing BLM activists from breaking from liberalism and finding their way to revolutionary socialism.

So far, our internal discussion has established well how the SL/U.S.'s intervention toward BLM was totally capitulatory. But this isn't enough. It is necessary to concretely motivate revolutionary integrationism against BLM's liberalism and the left's tailism.

With the black movement clearly at an impasse, there is an urgent need for answers. Only Trotskyists can explain why BLM was such a failure and what needs to be done to go forward. In the rest of my presentation, I want to outline six key questions on which we have so far failed to draw a Marxist line against the politics of BLM and the left.

1. Police reform

The main political demand by BLM is for police reform. There are a bunch of schemes—some utopian, some useless, some reactionary—all of them total dead ends.

The main response from the SL/U.S. and IG to the program of police reform has been to say that it is impossible and that only revolution can end police oppression of black people. This is as true as it is sterile. We learnedly explain that: “This system cannot be fixed by tweaking laws or cleaning out corruption, which is the content of the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement” (WV No. 1064, 20 March 2015). And then go on about the nature of the state and the need for revolution. No political conclusions are drawn as

continued on page 10