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REFRACTED PERSPECTIVE

*The Left, Working Class
Trade Unionism and the Miners*

DON'T YOU KNOW
THE EMANCIPATION
OF THE WORKING
CLASSES CAN ONLY
BE ACHIEVED BY
THE WORKING CLASSES
THEMSELVES?



NO, BUT IF YOU HUM
A FEW BARS I'LL
TRY AND FAKE IT



Dave Douglass, Yorkshire Miner



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FIRST OF ALL, WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

- The departees from Trotskyism, the "Schachtmanites" - the SWP, and their offspring - the RCP, Workers Power, the American variant, the Spartacists, (the last 2 now back in the swamp of orthodox Trotskyism) - The majority of Trotskyist groups per se;

but also:
- elements of the situationists.

I want to stress that I'm talking about the attitudes, and behaviour of these groups, rather than the analysis or ideologies they purport to advocate.

Basically I've dubbed them collectively the 'substitutionist left' - the bodies that substitute themselves for the working class and address us as though they are the working class, or even our leaders.

A REFRACTED PERSPECTIVE

The Left, Working Class Trade Unionism and the Experience of the Miners.

The problem for the Left is their eternal dilemma, to make reality fit their preconceived theory of reality. So it is that real situations in which ordinary people are involved become shoehorned into or abstracted out of "the real situation" in order that the lefty theory might fit. How ordinary folk see the struggle for themselves, what are their objectives, what are their inherited, adopted or developed means by which these objectives are pursued; - in almost all cases such things are brushed aside, yes, by the Leninist left, but also by situationists and some anarchists. Brushed aside in order that "the real Lessons", "the real Goals" are followed. By and large, the Left appears not only with a different agenda, or certainly a larger agenda, than the one being debated by folk in struggle, but also comes amongst us "as it were afire" with the prescriptions of how to achieve their agenda.

I remember quite vividly a scene at the Durham Miners Gala, as an elderly pitman listened patiently as a very young member of the Workers Revolutionary Party explained: "Now here's why you lost the 1926 Strike..." Of course the point of the lesson, like all the other lessons, is that they lost because the WRPer and his party wasn't around to tell the stupid miners where they were going wrong!

But the vanguards are selfless! Should the struggle break from the factory or pit, should it crash kicking and fighting into the street, they're straight there, lad, flooding in with an armful of papers to explain to us, us, the people in struggle, whose struggle it is in the first place, JUST WHERE WE'RE GOING WRONG! Now frequently not only are our methods wrong, doomed, reformist, or else ultra-leftist, economist, or adventurist, individual terrorist even; we also often take part in the WRONG struggle anyway, we shouldn't be doing what we're doing, we've got it all wrong and we should be doing something entirely different. There is never any significance to the struggles of the workers themselves, until the Leninist/Situationist/Trotskyist Moses comes along and tells what it is. Its like Billy Connolly's sarcastic vision of the primitive jungle tribe standing around saying,

"I wish an explorer would come and tell us where we are."

So the workers generally bumble through history saying,

"I wish the revolutionary leadership would turn up and tell us what we're doing!"

And yet such theories of organisation and practice are generally cobbled together in somebody's backyard and then wheeled onto the street and sold to the working class as "their organisation", despite the fact that the working class has not previously seen it and certainly played no part in its construction.

Can you wonder that industrial and unionised workers identify more with their Trade Union branch, lodge, shop stewards committee or whatever, than they do with the revolutionary donkey constructed out of somebody's Book of Revolutionary Organisation. This is not so much "blind faith in reformist organisation" as identification with organisations that have been built by the workers themselves, and although deformed to a greater or lesser extent by bureaucracy and treachery, are still the front line defence of the workers, who will use them and test them to breaking point far more efficiently than the home grown do-it-yourself variety constructed by the SWP or the RCP, for example.

To contrast, for example, the National Union of Mineworkers, or its forbears, the Miners Federation of Great Britain & Ireland, and the Miners Union...the best part of 180 years of unbroken class struggle trade unionism...with the will o the wisp nature of most left groups seems an uneven contest...which has greater utility to the class, which has more loyalty FROM the class.

One could go further and point to specific areas of the miners unions' history where it has been a class leader and a catalyst in revolutionary upsurges...the 1830s, through to the 1860s as part of the Swing revolts, as cornerstones of the Chartist Movement...1912 and the industrial General Strike wave...1926...1972/74 and of course the Strike of 1984/85.

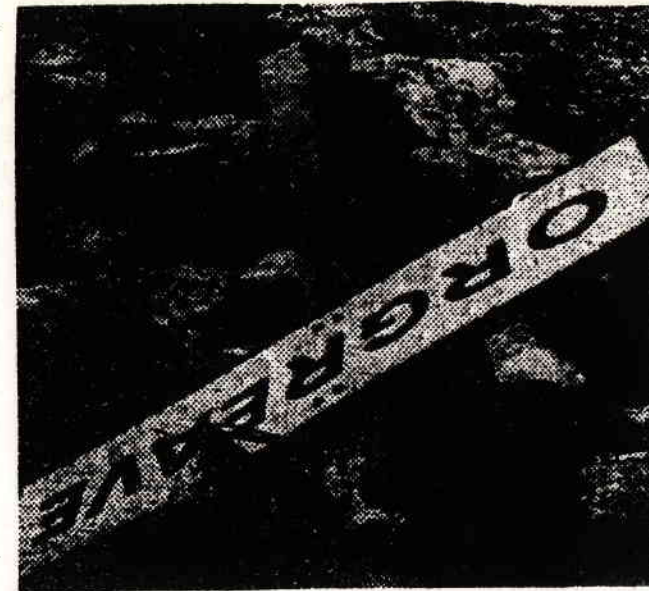
Despite this when we launched our defensive assault against the full weight of the State, as a community and an industrial union, the left came, not to fall in behind, nor yet to assist when we needed them...they came to lead us and tell us what we should do. What were their credentials for telling us what to do? Despite the bureaucracy (albeit a left one) and despite certain privileged sections of the union structure, what made their so-called

revolutionary organisations more revolutionary than our Trade Union in practice? We are still waiting to be convinced.

The Socialist Workers Party, despite a venomously anti-union verbiage, strangely shares the same bureaucratic lack of vision and faith in the workers as do the NUM bureaucrats. To this day they don't really understand the tactics employed in the '84/85 strike and never really grasped the pickets' perspective of the struggle. Instead they basked in the reflected glow of Arthur Scargill's General Custer impersonation - Never Mind the Tactics, Charge! - whilst they were determined to fight to the last drop of our blood, we wished to shed that blood less freely, more wisely, not less revolutionary, certainly no less violently if it meant retaliating against the police (or retaliating first against the police!); just more tactically. If the different perspectives can be summed up in military terms, Arthur and the SWP saw themselves as the van of the class army lined up against the ruling class enemy in a do-or-die battle at Orgreave...we saw ourselves as a guerilla force of rarely more than 20,000 pickets nationally, fighting a massive deployment of police with the full range of computer and surveillance equipment. Standing toe to toe we would always be battered, so we used guerilla tactics; blocking the M1, hit squad raids on scab pits or police bases, blocking the Humber Bridge; ruse tactics to draw the mass of police off somewhere else while our main force deployed to some least-expected power station, wharf or scab pit. Because of the absolute need for secrecy only the elected picket co-ordinators knew the plan, village pubs had posters on the walls : "Keep Picket Targets Secret! The Walls Have Ears!"

These targets drove the SWP to distraction, because they didn't know where the action was until after we'd been and gone and done it! This is very troubling if you're a vanguard! Arthur was similarly distressed but he also had no control or say over the direction of our targets or the manner with which we conducted these attacks. We also differed on perceptions of the struggle. Arthur saw Orgreave as a Saltley Gate, a rally point for the whole Trade Union movement and the left.; mass enough of our class together and we could swamp them. This strategy was fatally flawed, not least because we'd tried it at Grunwick and despite far more support than the miners got, had still lost, we'd tried it at Warrington and got battered to Hell. For things had changed since Saltley, not simply the responses or lack of them from Union bureaucracies and often from union members, but also the degree to which the police had been given their head and told not to back off. Even had

we been prepared to bleed long enough we would always ultimately lose that kind of head to head battle, at least so long as we remained unarmed...and even then I wouldn't imagine us marching with flags flying and bayonets fixed to a field of battle which had been previously marked out and set up by an even more substantially armed police force. It shouldn't need arguing that our tactics were wiser, more radical, and more daring...they were also more FUN. "Everyone to Orgreave" was not a tactic; it was an act of faith or at best a case of misjudgment. What it also was was the restoration of a tactic in which the self-designated leaders could start playing vanguard again.



Of course once Arthur had "had the vision", and the Great Plan formed in his head, he announced off his own bat on every TV channel in the land that everyone worth their salt should go to Orgreave.

We went.

Why?

I remember one Mayday in Glasgow debating with fellow republicans how best to take the cause of Ireland onto the Mayday march and onto those streets of mixed traditions. We agreed that by confining the question to Troops Out and Self Determination for the Irish People, we would outflank the Trades Council bureaucracy and the heavy Stickie presence. But one of our number, despite our logic, our tactics or our majority, said he would raise the Irish Tricolour, emblazoned with the Phoenix of the Provisional IRA. Of course we knew once we did that he would be attacked by the

Orangies, the Stalinists, the Trades Council bureaucrats and we would have no choice but to defend him, and the flag, against them.

The same principled obligation was placed on us by Arthur's "Horatio on the Bridge" stance. Ditch warfare, the replay of World War 1, had started at Orgreave, the fight was happening, and we had no choice but to join it. Fiercely and unrestrained, publically uncritical, but we knew it to be foolish in the extreme. The left viewed it like the Charge of the Light Brigade - bloody but magnificent.

Not that, once they got there, they actually DID anything! Did this revolutionary left that had shouted "Orgreave!" on our marches actually have a plan once we got there...? Oh no...off you chaps go and do the fighting as best you can and we'll sell papers telling you how well or how bad you've done.

To my dying day I'll never forget the scene, as Hatfield and Armthorpe miners, the then storm troops of the pickets, launched a fearful physical assault, semi-naked and unarmed, against the massed ranks of riot shields...despite the police armoury the sheer weight, determination and boisterousness of the pickets knocked line upon line of police shields over...then the whistle blew, the shields stood to the side, and a mounted cavalry of nightstick wielding armoured thugs rode forth...we retreated up the road ... and as we did so we passed a lone man trying to sell us Workers Power. "Workers Power!" he cried, as we ran past, bleeding, sweating and laughing. Then the cavalry rode past him, to the left and right as bombards of bricks hit them from all sides...We retreated into the trees and waited till they rode back, bloody and hot. Then we crept out to dare again...and found the man still unmoved in his central position. "Workers Power!" he cried...The class war literally took place all around him; he was like a program seller at a concert, not part of the band, nor yet part of the audience, he was estranged from both; just a seller of a version of events of which he was not a part. Fine...I was a 60s product, if that's your thing, man; but does he really think either we, or the cops for that matter, needed to read the paper? Though I'm not sure if he did try to sell the cavalry a copy. Maybe for a front page photo of the charge, I mean the cops probably thought they looked magnificent. They certainly thought Workers Power were insignificant. So did we.

The Workers Revolutionary Party operated in the revolutionary Hall of Mirrors which decrees that all workers struggles are doomed without they are led by the REVOLUTIONARY PARTY, namely themselves. So it then follows that anything the working class do is doomed, a blind alley, because it hasn't been led by them. For people like myself, field officers of the struggle, it was automatic that we would wish to BETRAY the struggle, because we weren't part of the revolutionary party...mass picketing, hit squads, anti-scab, anti-police assaults were ALL a dead end, they said. Instead they offered us a real solution: THE MINERS SHOULD CALL ON THE TUC GENERAL COUNCIL TO LEAD A GENERAL STRIKE!

We replied... woah, woah, we're the MINERS! Don't you know ANYTHING AT ALL about our history?...The TUC? A General Strike? Are they stupid? No, stupidity is their public face. In private they'll tell you they KNOW the TUC will never organise a general strike and if they did they'd only betray it as they did in 1926...so why call for it?

Because us dumbchucks, the rank and file pitmen and our families, and the workers at large need to be shown that the existing Trade union structure is no good for this sort of battle and it should be left to the REVOLUTIONARY PARTY.

Get it? Urge us into a defeat, we get smashed, then pick up the pieces to build your own outfit by blaming it on the old outfit...nice. Trouble with this theory is, we'd already been there in 1926. Miners children are WEANED on the story of that betrayal of the miners by the TUC. We GREW UP knowing the limitations of the TUC General Council and that's why we would never accept that stupid slogan of the WRP. If this this was a sample of their organisational worth over the NUM...is it any wonder the NUM continued the struggle with fire and pride whilst the WRP stood under umbrellas for fear of the rain and tried pathetically to sell us wet papers you couldn't even light the fire with!

So what is the point or relevance of all this?

Simply that the NUM, as a tried and tested organ of the miners for generations, despite its designation as a TRADE UNION, is not simply a trade union and need not remain so if the members of that organisation wish to extend it to wider and more political fields. This can be done formally through the changing of rules and organs; more usually it is done by building (constitutionally) unofficial committees, councils joint branch panels, assemblies etc. This is not done in opposition to the NUM, which we hold as

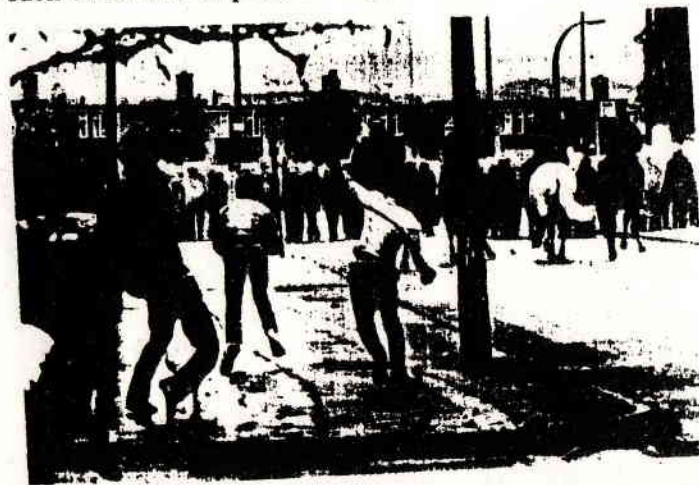
our organisation, but in extension of it. It is because the trade union form has limitations, not least from dire anti-union laws, that we recognise in many cases what functions are best served through other forms, which although not part of the structure of the NUM overlap or criss-cross it. Thus despite the existence of formal union committees, nearly every pit had a Strike Committee, formed of strike activists; often these included representatives of the womens support groups, sections of the unemployed etc. It is these who plan the implementation picket tactics, and the "extra-curricular" activity which nobody claims yet is still organised in and around the committees and the union. Unofficial gatherings of local branches or panels elect strike co-ordinators who will, quite outside the formal union structure draw up targets and plans of attack and initiatives. And yet at the same time this is a strike of the NUM, and every man and woman proudly proclaims their loyalty to its form... Their direct organisation, their fuller participation, their community based, activist oriented extensions of the formal union were not and are not contradictory. At least we understand them. The Leninist with his vision of the trade union as an obstacle to the struggle cannot be that flexible.

Take for example a recent struggle in the Yorkshire coalfield; Frickley Colliery on strike over a dismissed comrade. The strike must spread, but anti-union laws hamstring the formal union apparatus. How does the rank and file member of the union view the situation? He is both loyal to the NUM and yet because of the restrictions placed upon its formal structures by the law, is inhibited from its use. He declares, send unofficial pickets, and we will not pass them. The branch cannot formally sanction this legally, but branch officials declare union policy of not crossing picket lines. They say, it's my formal duty to tell you that such action is secondary picketing and unlawful, the men say, OK, then go home, and the branch officials go with them. The SWP on the other hand demand, MAKE THE LEADERS ACT, they call for us to send formal resolutions to the official NUM Council Meeting, knowing full well the Area Officials will rule them Out of Order, for if they didn't the whole organisation would be smashed in the courts. Both we and the Area officials, on a nod and wink, say get on with the strike by other means and ignore the formal structure. All of us involved understand that this is a pantomime intended to let us do what we want to do anyway... the SWP sees it as some serious Shakespearean drama, and assumes the idea is to confront the union apparatus. It isn't, it's to confront British Coal's apparatus, stick 2 fingers up at the law and fight for the reinstatement of the sacked Frickley comrade.

We have need of the formal structure of the NUM for welfare benefits, for countless legal injury and death cases. So we maintain it, at the same time going around it, over it or underneath it to do what we want to. We see this as no contradiction. The SWP thinks we have it wrong, because frankly they don't understand our relationship with official and unofficial aspects of our organisation. But as a matter of fact, why should they?

As things turned out, the Frickley strike was derailed, largely because the unofficial flying pickets WEREN'T deployed, and a different device aimed at using the law while breaking it failed. In all, we, the members, kept the official union out of it, because they couldn't assist us. The SWP blamed the collapse of the strike on the FAILURE OF THE LEADERS TO ACT...

We pass each other like ships in the night.



Not that such blinkered vision is confined to Leninists. Cajo Brendel, in "Autonomous Class Struggle in Britain 1945-77", what I suppose is a Situationist work [in fact Cajo Brendel is not a situationist, but a veteran Dutch council communist- editor's note], misses the relationship of the worker to the trade union, in a period of mass Trade Union upsurge, sees all struggle as anti-union and non-struggle as trade unionism. He repeats the dogma that unions can only RESTRICT the struggle of the class and NEVER, not EVER, have been used by the class as a combative force, despite bureaucratic restrictions and outright betrayals. He is confident enough to write an extensive thesis without ONCE referring to any of the workers involved in the struggles he cites. The struggle is an abstract, it

doesn't involve real people with their own views on things and their own ways of changing things.

And herein lies the rub.

Organisations are composed of individuals. These individuals are involved in **ACTUAL CLASS WAR**, not for some theoretical reason, or some moral reason, but in order to meet the needs of **SOCIAL SURVIVAL**, and in order to resist the exploitation placed on them by capitalist society. These people acting as a class have built self-defence organisations, trade unions for example. Over the years, and in some cases from the very start, these organisations have become bureaucratic, conservative and obstructive...this has not stopped workers using them, **MAKING** them fight, and literally picking them up kicking and screaming and forcing them to act...Often they have built unofficial sections, semi-official sections, sometimes they work within or without the organisation, sometimes they use the organisation as a jumping-off board for activities far beyond the normal perception of what a trade union does. Dropping concrete on blackleg buses for example, or burning them, launching petrol bomb attacks on police stations...in 1984. Or derailing the Flying Scotsman in 1926...although **THAT** was after a formal resolution to that effect was accepted by the Chopwell Lodge! Workers will make these organisations do what they wish, or fight to make them do what they wish...They will drive the Trade union bus in whatever direction they want to go, no matter what it says on the front. And while it wasn't constructed for, say, charging police roadblocks, from time to time it is the nearest thing to hand and will do until something stronger comes along. This bus may not take us as far as we want to go...but in many cases we can take it as far as it will go, at which point we'll adapt it or change it for something else.

PEOPLE make history, PEOPLE make the means of class war and are far more versatile and inspirational than the Leninist or Situationist who sees all forms carved in tablets of stone, unchanging, fixed, regardless of circumstances. This determinism would well please a Jehovah's Witness. We say, the future is unwritten, this is true, but the means by which we write it, draw it, shape it, or spell it will be determined as we go. Also if the future is unwritten, the means we write it with is also not predetermined.

For us as revolutionaries, we should intervene in the struggles the workers

are themselves engaged in, we should assist them in the way **THEY** wish to be assisted. We should put our determination, skill, constructive and destructive abilities at their disposal, and ask, How can we assist you? How are we better placed to do some of the things you want doing but can't do yourselves?...We must fundamentally recognise that the working class was engaged in struggle before any of us organisationally or individually came along. They are engaged in struggle **NOW**, with us or without us, **THEY ARE NOT WAITING FOR US**. If we wish to assist the struggle we should join it...We should fight where they are fighting, if necessary in the unions they are fighting in, or the tenants' committee they are fighting in, or the anti-pollution campaign they are fighting in, or the anti-motorway group they are fighting in. We will be of relevance so long as we intervene, without pre-conditions, without delusions of vanguardism, into the actual struggles of the working class, not standing outside the class mocking the crude attempts at combat organisations the workers have built, but alongside them...as part of them.

In the words of the "Internationale":

"No saviours from on high deliver..."

*The chains **OUR OWN** right hands shall sever."*

