

LECTURE NO. 2:RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKERS AND THEIR UNION.ORGANISATION AT THE FACTORY:

A Trade Union is an organisation of workers. Workers are found everywhere: on the farms, on the Mines, in the shops, in private houses, and above all in Factories. And the basis of the kind of Union we are speaking of is the factory. Here in the factory are the Trade Union members, and the potential members who have not yet been enlightened regarding Trade Unionism. Here the problems affecting the daily lives of workers are discussed: the injustices of the foreman, the harshness of the bosses, the curse of overtime, etc. The worker eats his lunch with the particular workers on his shift, leaves the factory in their company, plays sports with them: when he is in trouble, he discusses it with his particular friend at work. From among this group in the factory he has his friends, and also his enemies.

If the workers in a particular shift, or workroom can learn to work together, to defend each other, and to stand together over small issues, they will not find it difficult to stand together with workers from other factories, over big issues. In fact, it may be easier at a general meeting, for example, to support a resolution of solidarity with some workers in a foreign country, than to stand up for the worker on the next machine to yours, who may be no particular friend of yours, but because he has been unfairly treated, and an injury to one is an injury to all.

A really solid core of workers in a factory, no matter how small the number, can be the means of organising the whole factory, and one united factory can be the means of organising the whole industry. It is often said by workers; "The night shift or the packers, or some other named group of workers, are making a stand over piece work rates, or some other issue, why cannot we?" One group of organised workers can be the inspiration for the whole Union.

The unity of the Trade Union movement depends fundamentally upon the unity of the smallest groups, working together day by day as a unit. The unity of officials, of Executive members, of shop-stewards, even, cannot hold unless there is unity among those they represent.

SHOP-STEWARDS & COMPLAINTS TAKEN UP AT FACTORY LEVEL:

In some factories, where workers have no organisation, it is usual for the Management merely to inform the workers, either by notice on the board, or through the formeman, of some change of condition, or some new arrangement. For example, the Management may put up a notice stating that the firm will close for the annual leave on such and such a date. The workers may object, but if they are not organised, such objections will probably get no further. If they are organised, however, it is likely that they will hold a meeting to discuss the matter, and having expressed their grounds of objection, the next step will be to inform the Management about it. If they all go to the Management's office, it will probably be construed as a stoppage of work: a spokesman is needed to make representations. Where there is a Trade Union, the responsibility will fall on the shop-stewards. The shop-stewards will consult their members, and then get together and when unanimity is reached about the workers wishes, will inform the Management that they want in interview. From this process will emerge a Factory Committee,

composed of Union members which will be able to put forward the collective feelings of all the workers in all departments.

It is important for the shop-stewards to make it clear to the Management from the beginning, that they have not come as individuals, but as representatives of the workers, elected by them to speak for them. It does not matter how often this is impressed on the Management. The strength of the shop-stewards lies in the fact that they have the workers with them, and this fact, the Management is not to be allowed to forget.

Workers should see to it that they elect the shop-stewards. It is not for the boss or the foreman to appoint the workers' representatives, nor for the Management to approve or disapprove who the workers choose. It is for the workers to choose whom they want, and this is most important. To-day, in South Africa, when the majority of our workers are denied all democratic rights, the ideals of democracy must be kept alive in workers' organisations. And the first step in the democratic process of Trade Unionism, is the free election of the workers' representatives, including shop-stewards. The success of the shop-stewards' movement lies in the mutual confidence between him and his fellow-workers: the workers must know that the shop-steward will represent them honestly, and the shop-steward must be sure that he has the workers behind him. Who would have confidence in a boss' stooge?

If the Management now agrees with the workers' suggestions regarding the holiday period, as expressed through the shop-stewards or the factory committee, the matter is settled. If the Management does not concede, the shop-stewards should call a meeting of the workers to discuss what is to be done next. Where workers are strongly organised, the Management would probably not put up any notice about the holidays until they had called in the shop-stewards, or the factory committee, and asked them to sound out the workers' views on the matter. The workers may fail to get what they want the first year, but if this sort of matter is taken up each time, in the end the Management will be forced to consult them rather than have friction every time the annual leave comes round.

Now an individual worker may have a complaint about his pay. He may not have got his increase on due date. He reports it to the shop-steward who must first see the pay envelope and make quite sure that the complaint is genuine. He will consult his copy of the Agreement covering his factory to make sure that the increase does fall due on a certain date, and he may then simply report the omission to the pay clerk or the foreman, whichever is customary. If, however, the workers' complaint is that he has been sacked without a reason, and there is no protection against this in the agreement, the shop-stewards should ask them if they are prepared to stand by him in case of refusal to re-instate on the part of the Management. If they agree, he can go ahead, and lay the complaint, on behalf of the workers, who are not satisfied, to the Management. He will report back the result of the interview, and the workers collectively must decide what to do next.

The question as to whether to take up complaints of non-Union members has to be decided according to the circumstances and to the policy of the Union. Sometimes, when the Union is new, the complaint of a non-Union member is taken up, in an effort to persuade him and others to join: sometimes when it is a complaint which, if left unattended would affect detrimentally all the workers, it is advisable to show the Management that there is dissatisfaction. Moreover, not to take up a complaint of a non-Union member encourages the employers to have non-Union labour. But continually to take up complaints of non-Union

members gives them the protection of the Union without compelling them to join. Every effort should be made to get all workers into the organisation.

Complaints fall into two categories; there are infringements of the laws which protect workers, or of Agreements covering certain industries, and there are complaints against the actions of Managements which may be within the law, but which offend the sense of justice of the workers. To deal first with infringements of the law or agreement:

All workers are covered by the Factories Act, the Workmens' Compensation Act and some others. The Factories Act lays down a working week of 46 hours. Should a Management insist on a 48 hour week, without paying 2 hours overtime, the shop-steward can be sure of his ground in informing the Management that it is infringing the law. If the Management refuses to comply with the 46 hours laid down, the shop-steward should then report the matter to the Union's office. (If by any chance the Union is temporarily without a Secretary, the shop-steward should go direct to the labour Department). In the same way, many workers are covered by a Wage Agreement: if the Management does not comply with the conditions laid down, the shop-steward can again be confident of his case in complaining to the employer. But the shop-steward must be sure that he knows the legislation, and his particular agreement. The agreement does not have to be seen only in the Union's office: shop-stewards must see that they have copies always with them, and that they study them and know how to interpret them. The shop-steward must continually acquaint the workers with their rights in terms of the agreement. If the shop-steward is not sure of his facts, he may accuse the Management without justification, and lose the confidence of the workers.

The other type of complaint can only be settled by the workers themselves. If a machanic slaps a worker, if a worker is sacked for so-called "insolence", if some new regulation is introduced, such as identification discs, or searching the workers at leaving time, the only way of handling the workers' objections is to call a meeting of them and discuss the matter. The shop-stewards will then be asked to seek an interview with the Management to lay the views of the workers before it. The success or otherwise of settling the complaints depend only on the strength and organisation of the workers, not on any regulation or law, and not on the shop-steward as an individual. If the workers are well organised and determined, the Management will have to consider their point of view: if they are weakly organised and have no confidence in themselves, the employers will ignore their representations.

Shop-stewards are usually made, not born. They are only as successful as the strength of the workers behind them allows them to be. The shop-steward cannot be a leader unless the workers are prepared to follow. It takes courage to be a conscientious shop-steward and the workers must encourage him in this difficult task and must not expect him to perform miracles for them. The shop-steward no more than the Union Secretary is not the "Union". He is only the representative of the members, a member just like they are, representing the interests of the workers in the factory.

THE WORKERS ARE THE UNION - THERE IS NO UNION WITHOUT THEM:

It is a hard job to make workers understand that "they are THE UNION", and that the union is not an office or an individual.

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But this lesson has to be learned and it is the duty of officials and of anyone who gives leadership to the workers to explain this at every opportunity. A workers once remarked "Oh our Union is dead, we haven't seen the Secretary for months". The Union Secretary may die, but his doing so does not mean that the Union is dead. This worker was actually condemning his own inactivity as a member and the inactivity of the workers around him who had been neglecting their duties as members.

In this country, many workers have not had the opportunities of acquiring the education necessary to follow the intricacies of our industrial legislation, and to unwind the tangle of red tape before Conciliation Boards, etc., can be achieved, they look for an "educated" man to be their Secretary, and then leave him the job of running the Union. They think that "he get us more wages", etc., and this soon develops into the attitude that the Secretary is the Union.

Every effort must be made to teach the workers that they make up the organisation, and that they are capable of winning their own battles. Literacy is not a prerequisite of Good Trade Unionism. Any worker can organise other workers if he has the will to do so: every Trade Union member must become a Trade Union official. The members themselves can go to workers of other factories, enrol them, invite them to meetings, show them how to take up complaints with their bosses, etc. All that our workers need is confidence in themselves and in their futures, and the present leadership must inspire them with this. Since some experienced Trade Union officials have been banned from their organisations in the last two years, we have had proof that ordinary workers can and do come forward to learn the job of Trade Union leadership. It can be pointed out to workers that, should a factory burn down, as has happened, or close down altogether, the Secretary may be left without a job: but should the Secretary be forced to leave the Union, the Union will still carry on without him. The Secretary is not the Union, nor is the Union an office. The Union is the sum-total of all its members, and former members, good and bad: and its functioning is in the collective action of all these members.

But although we can tell the workers again and again that they are the Union, they will really only learn this through their own actions: it is not something that can be learned by reading a book, although the experience of other workers who have learned it may help the present workers to realise its truth.

There were a handful of workers in a certain firm who had always refused to join the Union. They had been employed for many years and felt for some reason that they were privileged. Year after year they took the benefits gained by the Union for all the workers in that factory without making any contribution themselves to its strength. Persuasion had not prevailed to make them join. Year after year the Secretary was instructed to ask the Management for a "closed shop", because about 90% of the workers were Union members. Year after year the Management refused. One day the workers decided on their own that they would not tolerate the position any longer. There was a collective feeling that action was necessary, and that the matter was going to be decided once and for all. An ultimatum was sent through the shop-stewards to the Management: either these few workers join the Union, or the Union membership would refuse to work with them within four days their application forms were in. Now it was not a miracle which won this victory: it was not the Secretary who "got it for them". It was the result of years of day to day struggle, of countless deputations, many of which appeared to fail, of never letting an injustice go by without a protest, of approaching every new worker upon his arrival to join the Union, of consistent hard work in building up their strength: and when at last they put their ultimatum to the Management, the Management knew that it

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they meant what they said. The older workers were nicely told that it would be worth their while to join the Union, and they did. Now the factory has a closed shop - not the kind of closed shop on paper negotiated by officials - but a real living closed shop enforced by the strength of the organisation the members had built up.

The urgent necessity for organisation within the factory cannot be emphasised too strongly. The Trade Unions are being attacked on all sides, and weakened by the removal of their leaders. But what has been built up by the members themselves, in the factory, will stand.

Instead of "running to the Union office" with a complaint, collect your fellow workers around you and face the bosses yourselves, not once, but consistently, and in the end the bosses will be forced to respect your strength and unity and you will gain your ends.

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TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961

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