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LECTURE NO. 10:

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WORKERS AND THEIR UNION:

This is the tenth and last lecture of the course. A number of points raised in this lecture may have been made in other lectures. It is important that students do not disregard these repetitions, under discussion the repeated points can be linked up with the previous items in which they were raised in relation to the present items. This will also give students an opportunity to review the previous lectures.

(1) ORGANISATION AT THE FACTORY: A great mistake made in the past by Union officials was that very little attention was paid to factory organisation. The workers were enrolled as members of the Union and a shepsteadward was elected to collect the subscriptions. The only time the workers of the factory were called together was when the Union concerned held a General Meeting.

In every factory there must be an elected committee. Such committees must meet regularly to discuss matters which affect the workers in their day to day problems in the factory; such problems must be linked up with issues outside the factory, e.g. bad transport interference by the police to and from work, etc. Union organisers and other officials must attend the factory committee meetings at least once a month, and thereby keep regular contact with the workers at each factory.

As long as the Union functions normally, the duties of the factory committees should be to organise and educate the workers. To deal with all local complaints in the factory, where possible outside complaints as well, e.g. approaching the local police station, location authority, the Mayor or Town Clerk and so on. The outside complaints should be taken up in conjunction with the local branches of the liberation movement.

It is important that the factory committees meet, at the Union office, other factory committees from the same industry, often. Common problems and experiences must be discussed - in this way much will be learnt and the Union will be strengthened.

Should the Government make it impossible for the Union to function normally, the factory committees must, at first, function in their own factories as the Branch Executive Committee. Then as soon as possible, other factory committees must be contacted with the view of getting a proper Branch Executive Committee functioning in the area. If there are regular meetings between the various committees then this should not be very difficult.

(2) Shop Stewards:

With the factory committees functioning, the old type of shop steward system falls away. The committee to a very large extent takes over the duties of a shop-steward.

However shop-stewards must still be elected. The duties of the shop-stewards are as follows:-

(a) To see that the committees function properly by meeting regularly:

1. Meeting regularly;
11. Organising and educating the workers in the factory.
111. Contacting other factory committees.
- 1V. Taking up complaints.

(b) Taking charge of the collection of subscriptions. It is very important that subscriptions be collected regularly, because:

1. The Union cannot do its work without money.
11. Funds must be accumulated for fines, bail, legal work,
111. When workers pay their subscriptions regularly it shows that they support the Union.

1V. Regular and efficient collections make the Union stronger.

(c) To study and see that the committee members and other workers do so as well.

(3) TAKING UP COMPLAINTS AT FACTORY POINT:

The taking up of complaints can be divided into three sections, a general nature; factories where the Union is established and recognised, factories where the workers are newly organised and the employers are hostile.

Regardless of what section the complaints fall under it is important that the workers and their committee have the fullest confidence in the Union Officials. The officials must be trusted implicitly. Nothing will kill an organisation - in its early stages - quicker than officials letting the rank and file down. With confidence in their leaders, the members will learn quickly how to do things for themselves, and not expect miracles from the top.

(a) General Complaints:

The factory committee must make itself familiar with the workers' rights, no matter how limited. Provisions of the Factories Act, Workmens' Compensation, any existing wage determination or Agreement. Where the workers/^{are}not vigilant, the employers - often with the connivance of government officials and corrupt trade union leaders, get away with giving the workers even these limited rights.

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In a great many instances accidents have not been reported and the injured workmen have received no compensation. The provisions of the Factories Act have not been carried out and agreements and wage determinations have been ignored.

The factory committee together with the workers must discuss their rights under these laws. Once they all knew which rights they are not getting, it is advisable for the factory committee together with an official from the Union approach the employer directly. If the employer does not rectify these breaches of the workers' rights then steps must be taken by the Union office to have him prosecuted. Once the employer is made to realise that the workers are vigilant and he can't get away with breaking the law the factory committee can then take up these matters with him directly.

Another type of complaint which a new factory committee can take up successfully is one of assaults on workers by foremen and other persons in charge. If and when a worker is assaulted the works committee together with the worker concerned must with the least possible delay go to the nearest police station and lay a charge. Should the police refuse to take the charge then with the assistance of the Union officials steps must be taken to have a private prosecution. If the workers stand firm in matters like this the assaults will soon stop. The works committee and the Union Officials will rapidly gain the confidence of the workers.

(b) Factories where the Union is established and recognised.

Complaints can be taken up directly by the factory committee with the employer. The workers must know that the employer is being approached and what the outcome of any interview with the employer is. This procedure must be followed in a way which will make the workers conscious of the importance of unity.

If the approach by the factory committee fails, the complaint can be referred to the Union officials and the Branch Executive Committee. In conjunction with the factory committee each complaint must be followed to a definite conclusion. At all times the workers must be kept informed of how the complaint is being handled. As many workers as possible must be drawn into the handling of the complaints.

Under no circumstances must a Union Official interview the employer on his own. He must make sure that the factory committee or some of its members are present whenever he sees the boss. Where the Union is recognised the boss often get innocent and unwitting officials to do his work for him. As an example, an employer is paying more than the agreement rate, perhaps as a result of the activities of the workers themselves, he tells an official that the production is low and if it is not increased he will have to decrease the wages. The officials in all sincerity, because he does not want to see wages decreased, may tell the workers that if their production is not increased their wages will be cut. An honest official may thereby lose the confidence of the workers at that factory. Had the official in the first place spoken to the boss together with the factory committee, it may have come out that production is low because the factory is run inefficiently, the production may not be low at all. It may have come out that if wages are reduced the workers could get more at another factory, or there may be a strike. There are many more examples and it must again be stressed that officials must not interview employers unless there are representatives of the workers present.

Officials must be prepared to stand by the workers, even when they are wrong, in any action they have taken. The rights and wrongs can be thrashed out after the event is over. If the workers want to take some sort of action and an official thinks that they are wrong he must

net, in a bureaucratic way put them off. The matter must be discussed and debated and when the decision is finally reached the official must stand with the workers whether he agrees with that decision or not.

To give another example. An employer wants to employ a foreman who is known to the workers in the industry as a harsh man and hostile to the Union. The workers approach the employer and say that they don't want this foreman. It is not the fault of the Union official to rebuke their action, even if he thinks that the employer has the right to employ whom he likes. The official must stand by the workers, they may not be successful in keeping the foreman out but they must try. On that basis negotiations start and the foreman may eventually be employed but with an agreement that if he is at any time harsh, unfair etc. the factory committee will bring the complaint to the boss where it will be discussed.

It must again be stressed that officials at all times must stand with the workers.

(c) Factories where the workers are newly organised and the employers hostile.

The handling of complaints at newly organised factories must be done with great care. A hasty judgement, a mistake can lead to a big set back and put the organisation at that factory back for a long time.

The workers confidence must be built up by taking up complaints and no action at all will discourage them. But this is no reason for hasty and ill considered moves.

The first thing to be done is to get the few contacts to form a basis for the future factory committee. These persons must start working discreetly, it is folly to expose themselves at the outset, among their fellow workers. They must talk about their rights, what provisions of the Factories Act are not being observed, Workmens Compensation and so on. As soon as the workers feel strong enough then they can tackle the employer on these elementary complaints. From there they can advance to bigger and more vital issues.

It is wrong to draw the attention of the complaints to the Labour Department. If the department rectify them without the workers playing a part then the foundations for a strong Union will not be laid.

(4) The workers are the Union - there is no union without them.

It has been clearly shown that the workers themselves are the Union. An office without a membership is like a leader without a following. It is only when the workers themselves participate in the Union's activities that they have a Union.

Besides taking an active interest in the affairs at the factory the workers must take an active interest in the affairs of the Union as a whole. They must be encouraged to come to meetings, take part in the discussions. Where necessary they must criticize the mistakes made by the officials and themselves. The tendency to criticize mistakes and solutions must be encouraged. They must watch the activities of their officials closely and see that the affairs of the Union are administered properly and they must take care that careerists and opportunists do not get into leading positions in the organisation.

(5) How to get good attendance at meetings.

A big problem which confronts Union officials is to get workers to attend meetings. Time and again officials complain that meetings are poorly attended.

To get members to attend meetings officials must endeavour to make the meeting of interest to them. There is nothing which keeps members away more, not even bad weather, than long boring meetings. It is wrong to have a long list of speakers on the platform and expect members to sit and listen to speech after speech. The meetings must be made lively,

most of the speaking must come from the floor. A man will always come to a meeting where he can have his say, where he can play a part in making policy and taking decision.

The most important item at an ordinary general meeting is the Secretary's or Branch Executive Committee's Report. The success of the meeting depends upon the report. The report may therefore be presented in such a way that it will be thoroughly discussed. It must be drawn up in such a way that it will draw the rank and file to the meeting.

The report should be drawn up some two weeks before the date of the general meeting. Besides dealing with the general affairs of the Union the report must deal with the problems of each factory in the industry, factory by factory. Several copies of the report must be given to each factory committee who must read and discuss it with the workers during the lunch hours.

On the day of the meeting having had an opportunity to see the report before hand the workers will turn up in conjunction with their comrades in the other factories and will discuss the report again. Experiences will be exchanged, a lot of discussion will take place from the floor, much will be learnt and most important of all the members themselves will take decisions which can and will be carried out.

It is important that the chairman or secretary do not take up the time of the meeting by reading the whole report word for word. The best system to adopt is that whoever gives the report gives a brief review of it. When the report is tabled for discussion let it be discussed item by item and factory by factory.

Run your meetings on this basis and it will be very seldom that you will have a poorly attended meeting.

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TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961

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