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LECTURE 4:

TRADE UNIONS AS A WEAPON
IN THE STRUGGLE OF THE
WORKERS.

We have seen from previous lectures that the idea of class struggle was not invented by some clever man. It is something which goes on in our society all the time. In the same way, the idea that trade unions are a weapon of the workers in that struggle is not something thought up by some socialist or leftist writer.

Trade unions as a weapon were created by the workers themselves in the course of their struggles. The trade unions did not start those struggles. The workers from their own experiences found, all over the world, that the trade union is an essential form of organisation in carrying on the struggle. Trade unions are a product of the struggle.

"REACTIONARY" TRADE UNIONS.

People sometimes look at the trade union movement, and because it may be weak, and its leadership in the pockets of the bosses, they deny that the trade unions are a weapon of militant struggle. But exactly because trade unions are such^a/good weapon, the capitalist class try to take it from the hands of the workers and to turn it into a harmless armament. They try to do this by bribing leaders and sections of workers with official positions and with special sops and concessions.

The best example of this today is Great Britain. The trade union leadership there is practically part of the Tory Government. But what do we find? So-called unofficial strikes with genuine leadership coming from the ranks of the workers themselves.

The London 'Times', mouthpiece of the British capitalist class, proves this point for us. 'Writing about strikes it

says:

"The miners... are now among the few unions which have abandoned the strike weapon by accepting conciliation machinery which provides for binding arbitration. It is an interesting commentary on the value of such rules that the miners, who have renounced the strike weapon, have far more strikes than any other union.

("The Times", June 21, 1955.)

Large masses of workers are rarely really reactionary. 1
It is we who fail to be among them to provide a correct leadership.

NOT STRIKES ALL THE TIME:

It must also be stressed at the outset, that the notion of struggle does not mean that we must have strikes all the time, on the smallest excuse. A militant union will try to establish certain rights for its members, that enable disputes to be settled to the workers' advantage, retaining the strike weapon as a last resort. Also, before going on strike, other forms of activity must be used to bring pressure on the employers. Strike action is a serious matter, which requires much thought and planning before it is undertaken.

PEOPLE DECIDE:

We think of struggles as engaging large masses of people. We think of trade unions as organisations represented by this or that official. But if we are to have trade unions which are weapons in the workers' struggle, we must never forget the individual worker. The union, the masses of workers, consist of men and women, with homes and children and problems. Their association in the struggle is not because of our cleverness in leadership. It is an expression of their striving for a better and freer life. When we negotiate an agreement, we talk about the food people will be able to buy, the clothes they dress their children in. When we fight for a dismissed worker, we are the shield between him and possible near-starvation; in these days of influx control, we may be

the means of keeping his family united. Never be a civil servant or a welfare worker; a worker is a living being, not a "case" come to trouble our busy lives.

All workers are brothers. "All workers are my brothers". That is what we say when we sign our letters, "Yours fraternally" then ACT accordingly.

Especially must we be close to workers who are victimised or arrested in the course of the struggle. We must see that they get helped, bailed out, defended, and that their families do not go neglected and in want.

THE BEGINNING OF THE STRUGGLE IS THE
INDIVIDUAL MAN OR WOMAN.

THE FACTORY: THE INDUSTRY:

The first level at which workers carry on their struggle is in the factory or other work place. No law can stop these struggles. They went on before trade unions existed and they are in fact the fountain from which trade unionism sprang. From united struggles in a single factory sprang united struggle of all factories within one industry, within whole regions. Here the battle is fought over ill-treatment, unjust dismissals, wages, overtime, piece rates.

No trade union can live, never mind be a weapon without giving its whole-hearted attention to these struggles. As leaders we must not wait on the workers, but we must point out grievances to them, present demands to remedy these grievances, and draw the workers into activity to back up their demands. How often do we hear trade union officials say: "At such-and-such a factory the workers are satisfied, they have no grievances". But talk to the workers for five minutes, and you find out that they have a long list of complaints. Then, when the workers suddenly come out on strike because they cannot stand it any longer, Mr. Official is very cross with them, because they are "unreasonable".

THE MOST IMPORTANT LEVEL OF STRUGGLE IS THE WORK-PLACE AND INDUSTRY LEVEL. IF WORKERS DO NOT FIGHT FOR THEMSELVES ON THAT LEVEL, ACTIVITY ON HIGHER LEVELS WILL BE POOR AND FRUITLESS.

WORKERS' RIGHTS.

No sooner do the workers fight for better conditions in their factory, than the question of their democratic rights arises. The right to organise, to assemble, to speak, to strike, to picket, to bargain collectively; the right not to be victimised - all these rights are, at first, denied to the workers, and never fully granted to the workers anywhere in the capitalist world. To African workers, most of these rights are totally, or in some degree denied.

TO WIN BETTER CONDITIONS OF WORK AND LIFE FOR THEMSELVES, WORKERS MUST ALL ALSO WIN THE RIGHT TO ALL THE MEANS FOR CARRYING ON THE STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE THESE THINGS.

The moment we touch on the question of rights, the struggle spreads out beyond one industry, beyond one factory. Here is a problem which affects ALL workers. The struggle becomes a country-wide one.

INDUSTRIAL LEGISLATION.

Closely linked with the question of rights is that of Industrial legislation - laws which deal with collective bargaining, wage fixing, Factories Acts, Workmens Compensation Acts, Unemployment Insurance Acts. Whether these laws deal with minimum wages and maximum hours, or whether they deal with the workers' democratic rights, they affect ALL workers.

THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE.

As soon as we touch on these things, we enter upon the matter of law and the making of law. We have entered into, and we cannot help to enter into, the political struggle. From the workers in the factory against their boss, the trade union of one industry against their bosses' association, the struggle becomes one of workers against bosses, of working class against the ruling capitalist class.

HOW TO CARRY ON THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE.

The individual worker fights for the right to eat, not
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for the right to organise. WE MUST SHOW HIM THAT THE RIGHT TO EAT IN THE END DEPENDS UPON THE RIGHT TO ORGANISE. Rights are not pictures that you get to hang on the wall. Rights are won to be used to gain a better life. The time to explain this, is the time when workers are fighting for immediate demands.

Carrying on a political struggle, and fighting to get an unjustly sacked worker re-instated, ARE NOT TWO DIFFERENT THINGS. They are the same thing. We must not keep one for the trade union office and the other for the public platform. NOW, when the problem is pressing upon the worker, is the moment to draw the two things together for him.

There is another way in which the political struggle is closely bound up with work-place struggles.

ALL THINGS CAN BE CHANGED.

Believe it or not, the following is a true story. The workers at a factory told a trade union organiser that their hours of work had been increased from 44 to 46 per week. The organiser said to the workers, 'I am sorry, there is nothing to be done, because the Factories Act lays down 46 hours per week'

All the faults of the bad trade unionist are brought out in the example given above - the acceptance of things as they are, the refusal to lead, the implication that the boss is a little god.

What do we do when we have struggles in factories? We change conditions. Just as we can change conditions in one factory by unity and struggle, so can we change laws by the same means, if we unite workers all over the country. AFTER EVERY SUCCESSFUL FIGHT IN A FACTORY OR INDUSTRY, THIS LESSON MUST BE SHARPLY DRAWN FOR THE WORKERS. Those workers must be pulled into the larger fight, for rights, for minimum conditions laid down by law; they must be drawn into the political struggle.

Nor should we abide by the idea that the only politics that concern the workers are so-called bread and butter matters. The events of the past few years have shown that a free trade

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union movement cannot exist while rights are denied to large sections of the people. Trade Unions must be in the forefront of the struggle against all attempts to deny democracy.

FORMS OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE.

Outwardly, the political struggle is carried on by activity at election times, by meetings and rallies, petitions and deputations, demonstrations and strikes.

At the root of it all is the healthy trade union, with a wide-awake and conscious leadership, with its roots deep among the rank-and-file in the factories.

In the end we always come back to men and women.

"THE WORKERS ARE THE FUTURE"

The aim of all the political activities of the capitalist class is political power. The purpose of that political power is to continue making profit by exploiting the workers. The workers' share of the wealth that they produce is always getting less and less. Poverty, fear, lack of freedom abound in all capitalist countries. Yet a great future of plenty and freedom is possible for mankind today.

This can only be won if the workers themselves win political power and end the system of their exploitation for profit. That alone is the end of the struggle in which all workers, consciously or unwittingly, take part. For victory in this struggle, the workers must emerge as an independent force. And what organisations are there that embrace all workers if not the trade unions? Not only that, but from the nature of their work, as a result of the experience of their trade union struggles, workers come to understand the true meaning of the system of wage labour and capital. They also learn their power to change conditions in their factory and industry as well as politically. Then why not socially?

"The workers need not fear the future, they are the future". A great British workers' leader has said. To bring home an understanding of this fact, to bring this fact to realisation, that is the ultimate task of all who understand the role of trade unions as a weapon in the struggle of the workers.

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WORKERS' SOLIDARITY.

Workers solidarity is the heart and core of the Trade Union movement. "Unity is strength" is a proverb in all languages and is especially applicable to the organisation of the workers. Individually the worker can do little or nothing in defence of his rights or for improvements to his standards and he has learned to unite into trade unions by dint of experience often after many trials and failures, before a union is successfully launched.

But the Trade Unions which are organised cannot stand in isolation of each other. There must be co-ordination of effort just as the employers have learned in a class society to unite in employers federations or organisations, such as the chamber of mines, the chamber of commerce, chamber of industries, etc. So, too, the trade unions have learned that it is necessary to co-ordinate their efforts for the following reasons:-

- (1) To assist workers out on strike or other struggles against employers who refuse to accede to the demands of the workers.
- (2) To assist unorganised workers to organise.
- (3) To oppose bad legislation; and to promote good legislation.
- (4) To exchange experiences and to frame policies of a co-ordinated nature at conference and meetings which will result in common efforts to obtain improvements in working conditions.
- (5) To fight for free trade unions for all and oppose any anti-democratic moves and for the rights of the workers.

HOW IS CO-ORDINATION ACHIEVED:

Individual trade unions soon learn that it is impossible, for example, to regulate hours of work or general factory conditions by individual trade union action. National policy usually enters into the picture, hence this calls for national action and so the trade unions learn to come together. The Trade Unions come together by means of a national conference at which they elect a national executive committee and adopt a constitution. They discuss resolutions and frame a policy which, though not binding on individual unions, is supposed to act as a guide to the policy of the unions affiliated to the national trade union centre. The body is kept in being by means of activities centered around its work and financially, by affiliation fees

paid by the unions which have joined it. Affiliated unions have the right to appeal for help when faced with difficulties such as wage negotiations, strikes, etc. The co-ordinating body may decide to oppose proposed laws and launches a campaign against them. It does the day to day work as well taking up all issues brought to its attention.

This, in theory, is how co-ordinated bodies are presumed to function, but we find in practice that very often differences have arisen which have led to the formation of more than one co-ordinating body in a country. For example, in the U.S.A. there are the C.I.O. and the A.F.L., with differences based on methods of organising (craft versus industrial form of organisation). In France there are three, the C.G.T., the Force Ouvriere and the Christian Trade Unions. The C.G.T. is the main body taking in all unions irrespective of politics or religion. The Force Ouvriere bans communists. The Christian trade union has a religious base, Catholics. But in many countries there is only one National Trade Union centre, which greatly increases the strength and power of the trade unions by this factor e.g. the British T.U.C., The Council of the U.S.S.R. Trade Unions, etc. etc.

In South Africa, there has been ever since co-ordinating bodies of trade unions came into existence, the cardinal issue of whether African Trade Unions should be accepted or Africans organised at all. Thus the issue of Unity between white and black workers has always been the main issue in all co-ordinating movements of importance in South Africa.

The issue was raised in the S.A. Federations of Trades, and when the S.A. Trades & Labour Council was formed in 1928 it was decided, not without strong opposition, that it would allow all trade unions, registered as well as unregistered that is white and black trade unions to affiliate. The S.A. Trades & Labour Council during its existence contributed usefully to the development of the trade union movement in South Africa, but it did not attract the African workers as it should have done. The reasons for this were that the white trade unions who were the mainstay of the S.A.T.L.C. did not encourage such affiliation, and also that the African Trade Unions had in some instances separatist views, hence the formation of Non-European Trades Councils (this attitude was encouraged by the attitude of the White Trade unions) Hence when the Nationalist Government launched its anti-trade union attack, the S.A.T.L.C. was greatly weakened by the hiving off of unions which formed bodies like the Ko-ordinerede Raad (a colour-bar pro Nat centre mainly working in Pretoria) then the S.A. Federation of Trade Unions which specifically excluded African Trade Unions. Eventually, the S.A. Trades

& Labour Council was dissolved and most of the Unions still left in it joined hands with with the majority of Unions in the S.A. Federation to set up a new co-ordinating movement entitled the S.A. Council of Trade Unions with about 150,000 affiliated members in unions which have joined it. This new body denies the right of African Trade Unions to affiliate to it. At the same time the other two co-ordinating bodies are still in existence. As a result of the going out of existence of the S.A. Trades & Labour Council a new organisation was born, the S.A. Congress of Trade Unions, which aims to unite and co-ordinate the Trade Unions of South Africa irrespective of race or colour and which aims specifically to unite the white and black working class of South Africa into one solid national centre.

The task of the South African Congress of Trade Unions is indeed a mighty one, for it is committed to organise the vast army of workers in South Africa the majority of whom are as yet unorganised into trade unions.

The South African Congress of Trade Unions came into being as a result of a prolonged and bitter struggle between various Trade Unions affiliated to late S.A.T. & L.C., recognising the need for unity between Black and White workers progressives within the S.A.T. & L.C. continuously advocated a policy of encouraging African Trade Unions to aff. to it as well as of organising the unorganised workers.

As a result of the policy of opportunism which was permitted to dominate the S.A.T. & L.C., those elements who followed a policy of appeasement to the Government succeeded in dissolving the Council in September 1954.

With the dissolution of the S.A.T. & L.C. and the formation of the S.A.T.U.C. which debarred African Trade Unions from membership to it a new home, free from the manoeuvrings of hostile elements had to be found. The need for a new militant non colour bar trade union centre capable of correctly leading the working class was of major importance.

This requirement was given expression to on March 5th, 1955, when 35 Trade Unions representing 41,000 workers met to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions and adopted a constitution.

Embodying a declaration of principles which clearly stated that the interests of all workers are alike, whether they be European or Non-European, African, Coloured, Indian, English, Afrikaans or Jewish, and that the S.A.C.T.U. shall strive to unite all workers in its ranks, without discrimination and without prejudice determinedly seeking to further and protect the interests of all workers with the universal guiding motto of working class solidarity.

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