

Strike Action, Political Action, or Power Action - WHICH?

Reprint of 1936 British Union of Fascists document on Trade Unionism



From the earliest beginnings of Fascism and National Socialism in this country our opponents have sought to discredit us in the eyes of organised workers by persistently repeating the lie that we-the British Union-are out to smash the Trade Union movement. This pamphlet is the reply to all such lying statements. We seek to strengthen, not to smash, the Trade Union movement, and a study of this pamphlet will, I am sure, prove to the real trade unionist that we make no idle boast when we say 'that industrial organisation has more to gain from National Socialism than from any other conception of civilisation.

Far from desiring to smash trade unions, we take pride in the past history of the unions; we appreciate the difficulties under which they operate; we intend to strengthen the unions (by legislation not by pious wishes and resolutions); we intend the unions, strengthened to 100 per cent. membership and built up to full industrial status, to play an important part in the government of the State.

Thus, you will see that we take a vital interest in the past, present and future of the trade unions in this country.

The role which the unions will fulfil under National Socialism in Britain is one for which they will be endowed with full statutory powers, hence we describe the exercise of these powers as "Power Action" in contradistinction to the "Strike Action" and "Political Action" which has previously marked the limits of trade union activity.

In the following pages we give our criticism of both strike action and political action. We then set forth the details of our new "Power Action," which we are convinced will meet with the approval of every sound trade unionist. Will you consider these proposals before you allow anybody to bluff you into the belief that the British Union. is anti-trade union?

THE MISSION OF TRADE UNIONS.

The early Trade Unions were formed in the teeth of an opposition as bitter and as vindictive as that which is brought to bear against National Socialism to-day. Its active spirits were victimised, imprisoned and persecuted. After a stern and bitter struggle, the Unions were given legal recognition. It was their mission to represent the collective interest of wage-workers in the newly industrialised state, a state in which inhuman conditions were the rule rather than the exception.

STRIKE ACTION.

The only weapon possessed by the workers in the early stages of their fight was the strike weapon-the ability to effect a bargain with their employers by withholding their labour. This was, at best, a poor weapon because it injured the workers themselves and meant starvation for them and their families. Moreover, whenever organised workers withheld their labour, black-leg labour was brought in to take the place of the workers on strike, leading to rioting and the use of troops to defeat the Unions in their fight. Many a page of English history was written in the blood of those early pioneers of the trade union movement with singularly little to show on the credit side of the workers against the price which they were called upon to pay for their right to organise and combine.

Although the methods of fighting have somewhat changed, the strike weapon, after a century of effort to

improve its efficacy is still a poor weapon which can be justified only by the assumption that there is nothing better to take its place.

It is my contention to-day, as it always has been my contention, that strikes are futile. The only time when a strike could be successful would be during a "boom" period when markets are rising. At such a time concessions are granted at the threat of a strike without the threat being carried into effect.

In modern times, however, the great majority of trade disputes are fights in defence of existing standards when, during periods of depression, those standards are threatened with reduction. In such conditions the strike is able to achieve little or nothing which will be of benefit to the workers concerned.

NO REAL BENEFITS.

At the worst a strike or lock-out in such circumstances benefits the employers by allowing them a period of time in which accumulated stocks may be cleared, during which period they are relieved from the necessity of paying wages and the workers are starved into submission. The miners' lock-out of 1926 is a classic instance of this process.

At the best the workers concerned win a partial victory amounting to a fraction of a penny per hour after forfeiting many weeks' wages whilst on strike and their losses are seldom completely recovered.

POLITICAL ACTION - ITS TEST AND FAILURE.

In consequence of a realisation of the inherent weaknesses of strike action, Keir Hardie and others associated with him set out at the latter end of the nineteenth century to forge the alternative weapon of political action for inclusion in the armoury of the Trade Unions. In 1900 the T.U.C. combined with the I.L.P., the Fabian Society and some smaller associations to form the Labour Party. In 1906 twenty-nine Labour M.P.s were returned and the second weapon became available.

SWING OF THE PENDULUM.

From that time onward there has been a constant swinging of the Trade Union pendulum from Strike Action to Political Action, and from Political Action back to Strike Action.

In the thirty years which have intervened there have been two Labour Governments, but the problems of adjustment between employers and employed have not been solved.

That whole period has been marked by alternating disillusionment. Strikes have been tried and they have failed. After every such failure has come a phase of political action which in turn has failed. Then has followed another phase of industrial action, and so the game has gone on. Small gains have been registered in each sphere, but the sum total of all the gains has not been commensurate with the progress of industrialism as a whole.

TOO MANY IRONS IN THE FIRE.

Political Labour (the Labour Party) has had too many irons in the fire to be able to look after the particular iron which it was their duty to forge.

As politicians they have ceased to represent the interests of Labour in the factories and workshops. Dabbling in Internationalism (the affairs of other nations) has occupied far more of their time than attention to Nationalism (the affairs of our own nation).

When these political leaders are sent to Parliament they are set in a new atmosphere entirely divorced from the atmosphere of the worker in the pit, the factory, the farm or the workshop. They join "the best Club in London" and behave as "club-men" rather than as workers. The problems which are of life-and-death seriousness to you become merely interesting subjects of debate for them. They feel no economic pressure. Their salaries are secure and adequate. By comparison with your wages, even their old salary of £400 per year was adequate, but they have been able to secure a £200-per-year increase in their own rate of remuneration by political action without a strike. How happy you would be if they would so well represent your interests as to obtain £200-per-year increase on your income of much less than £400 per year for you through political action which you have built up.

Your political leaders have graduated from the workshop to the talk shop. You are still living far below the conditions which should be available from the resources of modern technique in industry, although you have generously placed them in a position where they receive a standard of living which is the workers' just due. What are you going to do about it?

SACK THEM, AND THEN WHAT?

Of course, if you do what you should in your own interests, you will sack them for abusing your trust, but even then your problem remains. How are you to improve your conditions until they approximate to what they should be?

Sacking one set of leaders and replacing them by another set will not solve your problem if you leave undisturbed the conditions which have led to your betrayal. Your problem is not solved until you can devise machinery which you can operate for the solution of your problem.

Let me state your problem briefly. You know full well that of the wealth which you produce you do not receive your full share. You know, moreover, that you could produce far more wealth (that is to say "goods") than you do produce. You know that if you were allowed to produce all the wealth which you could produce and to receive your fair share of that wealth the menacing features would be forever removed from your life. Poverty, unemployment and insecurity would no longer have the power to haunt your waking hours and make nightmares of the hours which should be spent in sleep. The problem is twofold in nature. It is to (a) produce more, and (b) receive more of what you do produce.

WORKERS' CONTROL IN INDUSTRY.

We National Socialists contend that a measure of workers' control in industry is essential to the solution of that twofold problem. Workers' control can be exercised only through workers' organisation, therefore, it is frankly ridiculous to suggest that we desire to smash the unions. On the contrary we want to improve the unions to make them fitting instruments of control and then to invest them with the statutory authority which will enable them to exercise that control.

Let us consider in order of importance the improvements we have in mind. First of these is 100 per cent. Trade Unionism. At the present time, out of 18,873,000 insured workers, a little over 4,000,000 are members of Trade Unions, less than one-quarter of the total. Thus, in spite of all the best efforts of the Unions, for every worker who is a trade unionist there are three non-unionists.

HOW TO GET 100 PER CENT. TRADE UNIONISM.

There is only one satisfactory method of securing 100 per cent. Trade Unionism—that is, by State legislation. Every worker will be compelled by the law of the land to become a member of the trade or industrial union appropriate to his trade, profession or calling just as at present he is compelled by the law of the land to insure against sickness and unemployment. The compulsion in one case is no more an encroachment on the liberty of the individual than is the compulsion in the other case quoted. It follows quite naturally that if workers are to be compelled to join their appropriate unions, those unions must be National not sectional, industrial not political, in character.

The concern of the unions under National Socialism would be with industrial rather than Party political affairs. It would be obviously unfair with unions on their present basis to compel workers who are fundamentally opposed to the politics of the Labour Party to join a trade union which is controlled and used to the Party advantage of the Labour Party.

INDUSTRIAL CONCERNS OF THE TRADE UNIONS.

The industrial questions with which trade unions will be concerned will be 'those connected with and arising from their own industry, not the affairs and conditions of other industries. The scope of their considerations will be much wider than is at present the case and will cover not only wages and hours of employment, but every phase which may re-act on the well-being of the industry in which they, as workers, have invested their most valued possession—life itself.

These workers' organisations will be concerned with planning for the equitable distribution of the present product of industry with full authority to assert all just claims, but, in addition, they will also have the

authority to take their own decisions for increasing the total output of their industry and the equitable distribution of the increased output.

LEADERSHIP OF THE UNIONS.

The leadership of the unions would, of course, be based on the same industrial considerations, and party politics would play no part in their selection. They would be selected as leaders because of their knowledge of affairs and service in their own industry. The members of the union who elect them will elect them to attend to the affairs of their own, not some other industry, and the members will hold such leaders personally responsible for satisfactory progress and good conditions in their own industry.

CONTROL OF THE CORPORATIONS.

Under National Socialism every great industry will be controlled by a corporation, conferring upon that industry powers of economic self-government. In that corporation will be represented employees, employers, and consumers. Each group possesses equal power, and in the event of a deadlock between employees and employers, the Government will secure a fair deal for the workers by direct intervention.

The employees' representatives will be elected by all the workers engaged in the industry (exclusive of managers and high executives). These employees' representatives would be the "leaders" of the Unions and would be dependent on the vote of the employees concerned for their continued leadership.

POWER ACTION.

It is now made clear that the "Power Action" of National Socialism is something to be applied by the workers themselves through the Corporate Machinery of the organised state. They will not have to plead a case to the employers of their own industry, asking for charitable consideration which they know in advance will not be forthcoming. Neither will they have to "lobby" corrupt politicians who know little and care less about the problems of workers in this, that, or the other industry. They, as the workers in their own industry, will be given statutory powers of control, equal to those of the employers, which they can use to determine the conditions which shall obtain in their own industry.

They will be an integral part of the corporate machinery governing their own industry, and as such have "power" in their own hands which they can bring into action to secure for themselves progressively increasing standards of living and the general improvement in conditions which they require and which they know to be practicable.

THE SUPREMACY OF POWER ACTION.

This Power Action is constructive. It gives to those concerned in industry the power to increase the yield of wealth from their own industry; Power to direct the flow of this increased yield into the homes where it is needed; Power to overcome the technical difficulties at present standing in the way; Power to defeat the machinations of the vested interests of International Finance which, at present, bar the way to prosperity; Power, through the direct vote upon which the Government will depend, 'to change that Government if at any time it fails to carry out its duties effectively.

Compare the above with the futility of strikes or lock-outs and all the unnecessary suffering which they involve (strikes and lock-outs which are mutually destructive for employees, employers, and the whole community). Compare it, too, with the farce of present-day political action with glib-tongued politicians, Labour leaders in the political field roaring like lions when in opposition and braying like asses or bleating like sheep when power is placed in their hands.

YOU GET THE POWER.

They promise you the millenium when seeking office and give you 'the "bird" when they get there. We offer you the "power" to do for yourselves the things you want done. You, as the people vitally concerned in your industry, will have the power, through your industrial corporation to legislate conditions for that industry. You will no longer be compelled 'to await legislation from a Parliament which does not understand the requirements of your industry. You are the people who understand the needs of your industry-miners for mining, engineers for engineering, farmers and farm-workers for agriculture, spinners and weavers for the textile industries, etc. Why should you wait on the will of lawyers, financiers, and racketeers in Parliament for the essential requirements of your industry?

National Socialism will give to you and your industrial corporation the power to legislate your own industrial conditions.

The principles of organisation of the Trade Unions functioning within the corporate state of National Socialism may be briefly summarised as under:-

1. The respective unions must be on a basis of "one big union" for each industry.
2. Each union must comprise within its ranks 100 per cent. of the workers engaged in the particular industry.
3. Octopus unions which have sought to merge under one control members of different clearly defined industries must hand back to the union from which they have been "pirated" those sections of workers engaged in such industries.
4. Where members of a craft union are employed in a separate industry they must function as members of the industrial union concerned, but without prejudice to their right to membership in their craft union.
5. Reorganisation, where necessary, to meet these requirements, must be carried out from within the unions.
6. Where one industrial union comprises clearly defined groupings of workers engaged in widely different categories it should be organised on a basis of category unions within the industrial union.
7. The funds of each union will be reserved for the benefit of contributors.
8. The rights and responsibilities of the unions will be incorporated in a "Charter of Labour" drawn up by the unions and approved by the Government.

Now let us consider the National Socialist attitude to existing trade unions.

We view it as an obligation on all our members working in occupations covered by trade union organisation to join and to serve their appropriate unions.

They will work loyally within those unions for the attainment of our ideals. They will not "scab" or "blackleg" in the event of a dispute. We have a "fighting" reputation. That reputation will be fully justified by our members in any dispute. They are not "quitters" and you will find them standing loyally with you shoulder to shoulder in closed ranks in any dispute affecting their own industry and willing to give financial support to workers of any other British industry who may need such support to help them through a dispute.

They will not, however, advocate or accept any responsibility for a strike which has a political significance (i.e., any general strike which seeks the overthrow of an elected Government). There is, and can be, no justification for an effort on the part of any section of the people (however well organised such section may be) to seek to reverse a majority decision, recorded by ballot, of the whole of the people.

READ "ACTION" - THE PATRIOTIC WORKERS' PAPER FOR REAL TRADE UNION ARTICLES