

The dockers' breakaway

"The sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions."

If it be criminal to turn one's back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian factions, it is no less so passively to tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative ('progressive') cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution".

Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme*.

At its 1988 Congress the TUC expelled the scab-led EETPU. The creation of a breakaway electricians' union, the EPIU, which is seeking TUC sponsorship, has brought the question of 'breakaway unionism' back into the labour movement as an immediate and burning issue.

The general principles of socialists on this question were distilled by Trotsky in 1938 from the entire history of the workers' movement up to then — from both the many examples of sectarian breakaway unions, and the times when promising working-class movements had been destroyed because their leaders feared to break with the incumbent bureaucrats.

The most important breakaway union movement in the history of British labour was the breakaway of 16,000 dockers, in Manchester, Liverpool and Hull, from the TGWU in the mid-'50s. This article by Bill Hunter, written in 1958, tells the story.

The breakaway 'Blue' union survived into the 1980s and then, a much depleted force, merged with the TGWU. Bill Hunter is a long-time member of the Socialist Labour League/Workers' Revolutionary Party who is now a supporter of the Morenist current. The article first appeared in *Labour Review*, January-February 1958.

Between September 1954 and May 1955 ten thousand men left the Transport and General Workers' Union and joined the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers. This 'walk-out' involved approximately 40 per cent of the dock workers in Liverpool, Birkenhead, Manchester and Hull.

The scale of this union transfer proved that here was no artificial and isolated

The story of how 10,000 dockers broke away from the then right-wing TGWU in 1954-5.



Arthur Deakin: ruled the TGWU with an iron fist.

adventure by a handful of men acting on impulse. It came about in conditions which have made the post-war history of the British dockers more stormy than that of any other section of the working class.

During the ten years preceding this large-scale recruitment to the 'blue union' there were at least six major dock strikes. In these struggles pressure was building up inside the TGWU, to which the overwhelming majority of dockers belonged, and the 1954-55 break with this union has to be seen in the context of these strikes and of daily life on the docks.

It is well known that dockers' wages and conditions have improved somewhat since the great strike for the 'Dockers' Tanner' at the end of the nineteenth century and the organisation of portworkers which won that victory. Again, since the second world war the dockers have been better off in many respects than in the pre-war days of casual labour and unemployment. The Dock Labour Scheme¹ abolished some of the worst features of casual labouring on the docks.

Nevertheless, the dock worker is by no means living in a workers' paradise. The

dockers' millennium has not yet arrived. Government officials, trade union leaders, learned sociologists, all those gentlemen who have put the dock workers under the microscope (in the years since the war the dockers have been subjected to more 'learned' inquiries than any other section of the British working class) have all tended to assume that the Dock Labour Scheme has raised the status of the dockers from the most depressed industrial workers to the most privileged, well-paid and even coddled of trades. But it is necessary to brush away the slush and to assess the Dock Labour Scheme in its true light and examine closely the real conditions in the trade which have existed since the end of the war. We must examine the real relations between the employers and the dock workers.

With the post-war expansion of trade and almost negligible unemployment in the country as a whole, the docker was in a much stronger position than before the war to press home his demands for an improvement in pay and conditions. During the war it had been found necessary to abolish the system of casual hiring of dock labour and it would certainly not have been possible to return to casual labour after the war. 'Fall-back' pay and its accompanying indirect control of labour under the Dock Labour Scheme was a price the employers had to pay for preventing the full realisation of the dockers' aims.

Thus the Dock Labour Board's disciplinary powers have been used to compel workers to do particular jobs and to accept conditions of work which were formerly accepted only under the threat of unemployment. Compulsory overtime, for example, is a burning, unresolved issue on the docks and has been sustained only through the threat of suspension and other penalties which the employers are empowered to impose under the scheme. However it would not be true to say that the dockers oppose the Dock Labour Scheme. Dock workers are most resolute in the maintenance of 'decasualisation' and often their demands have been concentrated on improving the scheme. On Merseyside, for instance, the dockers have complained that employers have in many cases broken the provisions of the scheme in employing non-registered workers.

Nevertheless, seen in relation to the power which the dockers have had since the end of the war, the scheme has helped the employers to maintain 'discipline', to maintain their grip on labour during a period of trade expansion.

Most important in any study of conditions which gave rise to the 'blue union' movement in the northern ports is a consideration of the position occupied by the Transport and General Workers' Union in the scheme. Already before the war, a gulf existed between the bureaucracy which

ran the TGWU and the rank and file of the union. In the Dock Section of the union, the power of the bureaucrats was strengthened through the Dock Labour Scheme, for under it TGWU officials sat on boards which disciplined the men. Militant trade unionists who kicked against working conditions quickly found that they had to fight not only the employers but also their own union representatives. Union officials thus had almost complete power inside the union and now had the power to deprive men of their livelihood. The worker who was active in opposing the bureaucratic policies inside the union now had other official powers ranged against him.

The union bureaucracy was also strengthened by the way in which the scheme was used to guarantee contributions to the TGWU. On Merseyside and in Manchester registration books (without which no docker can be accepted for work) were issued only on production of a clear TGWU card. Thus the union was guaranteed its members no matter how little activity was carried on in their interests. The vast majority of dockers in these two cities stamped up their union cards only at the six-monthly intervals when the registration books were issued. They looked on the union not as an organisation for the defence and betterment of their conditions but as an 'overhead charge' for the maintenance of their job. The official could ignore the worker's dissatisfaction with the way the union was behaving, secure in the knowledge that union dues would still be paid each April and October.

The TGWU official machine was quite generally detested by the dockers. Officials made agreements with the employers behind the backs of the men. Men were disciplined with the consent of union officials and often saved only by 'unofficial' strike action.

A group of students who investigated conditions on Manchester docks in 1950-51 reported: "There is no doubt that there is widespread dissatisfaction with their union among dock workers in Manchester. Relations with the union were criticised more than any other aspect of employment."² In their interviews these investigators heard repeated a story which summed up the attitude of the full-time union officials, who, of course, are not elected by union members but appointed by the union leadership. One official, it seems, informed the dockers at a branch meeting that he did not care what they thought about him. He had himself and his job to think of first and if he had to choose between being popular with them or standing in well with the high officials, he would not hesitate to choose the latter.

Most of the leaders of the mass resignations from the TGWU to join the 'blue union' had been members of the TGWU for many years. There were ex-branch committee men and ex-lay officers among them, and all had put up a prolonged fight inside the union against the officials. But, secure in their appointments, the officials could afford to ignore the demands of the

rank-and-file members, to ignore votes of censure and votes of no confidence. Thus rank-and-file dockers who sought to further the interests of the men with traditional militancy and solidarity continually collided with the bureaucratic apparatus of the TGWU. The desire for a national, democratic portworkers' union in these conditions inevitably grew and matured.

Ever since the war real working-class leadership on the docks has been in the hands of unofficial committees which sprang up in every dispute. In every major strike, too, one section of the workers had proposed a break from the TGWU. But always the leaders of the unofficial committees put forward the alternative of transforming relations inside the TGWU and wresting democratic rights from the entrenched union apparatus. Finally however in 1954, in the words of one rank-and-file leader, the bankruptcy of this policy of staying in the TGWU became clear and led to the 'biggest prison break in all history'.

The 'prison break' first began in Hull, at the end of August 1954. Four thousand Hull dockers had come out on strike on August 16 against an antiquated and dangerous method of unloading grain known as 'hand-scuttling'. Men had to stand up to their waists and deeper in loose grain in the hold of a ship and shovel grain into sacks with big metal scoops. Even the secretary of the National Dock Group of the TGWU described hand-scuttling as 'a rotten, dirty, underpaid job that should have died with Queen Victoria'.

To be sure, his statement was made after the strike had been on for six days and after his union's attempt to break the strike had signally failed. The TGWU had actually tolerated hand-scuttling for years. But, significantly enough, what the TGWU had tolerated the militant but unofficial action of Hull dockers abolished. This strike however had much wider repercussions. All the frustration and seething discontent felt by these docker members of the Transport and General Workers' Union at the set-up in their union came suddenly to a head. A mass meeting of striking dockers on August 22 decided almost unanimously to apply for membership of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers. A few days later a leaflet was issued by their strike committee and sent across to Merseyside. It summed up their feelings in this way:

"For many years we dockers of Hull have resented the way the Transport and General Workers' Union has handled our disputes. Time after time we have reported our grievances to the TGWU only to receive the reply: there is nothing we can do, our hands are tied.

We of Hull believe the time has come to do some untying: that is, to untie ourselves from the TGWU and enter the blue union. We also believe that the experiences of the Merseyside dockers in the TGWU are the same as ours in Hull.

We therefore call upon you to defend your interests by joining with us and supporting us in our attempt to achieve the unity of dockers within the democratic structure of the blue

union."

Four weeks after the Hull meeting a thousand Birkenhead dockers packed themselves into Birkenhead Town Hall and enthusiastically agreed to follow Hull's example. All but a tiny handful of Birkenhead's 2,000 dockers subsequently applied to join the NASD. Manchester followed soon after and by the end of the year dockers were flocking into the 'blue union' from every group of docks on the Mersey waterfront.

This was not the first time that a great body of dockers had broken with the TGWU. The Scottish Transport and General Workers' Union exists today as a result of a breakaway in 1932 embracing all the dockers in the ports of Glasgow and Campbeltown. They broke from the TGWU on whether their branch had the right to elect its eight full-time officials annually or whether they were to be appointed by the union's official leadership. The branch won a judgment in the courts confirming its right to elect its officials. Ernest Bevin, general secretary of the TGWU, promptly changed the rules of the union. In response, the dockers of Glasgow formed their own union.

The Dockers' Section of the NASD was itself formed by a break from the TGWU. In June 1923 40,000 dockers came out on strike against an agreement signed between the TGWU leaders and the port employers accepting a reduction of wages. As a result of this sell-out by Bevin and his colleagues, thousands of London dockers and lightermen left the TGWU and joined with the Stevedores' Protection Society (a union of long standing which did not join in the amalgamation of dockers' and other unions which led to the formation of the TGWU in 1922) to form the National Amalgamated Stevedores, Lightermen, Watermen and Dockers' Union.

The new union was expelled from the TUC, since the trade union leaders were anxious, as ever, to protect the growing power of the TGWU bureaucracy. In 1927 the new union divided to form two separate organisations, the Watermen, Lightermen, Tugmen and Bargemen's Union and the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers.

It was the latter union, by now a member of the TUC, that the northern dockers joined when in 1954-55 they marched out of the TGWU like a previous generation of dockers thirty years before. At the time of the Hull strike the NASD had 7,000 members — 3,000 in the Dockers' Section and 4,000 in the Stevedores' Section. It operated only in London. The militant and democratic traditions of the 'blue union' attracted the northern men. Traditionally, in the NASD all major issues were referred back to the rank and file for final decisions. So it was necessary for the applications to join the union from the dockers of Merseyside, Manchester and Hull to be discussed by the rank-and-file members. The London meetings of the NASD came out overwhelmingly in favour of accepting these applications. The 'blue union' began to enrol the new members.

As in 1923, the General Council of the TUC immediately gave its support to the bureaucrats of the TGWU and the NASD was suspended from the TUC for 'poaching'. But the 'blue union' continued to expand in the North. Offices were set up in Hull, Birkenhead, Manchester and, finally, Liverpool. The TGWU leaders threatened dockers with loss of jobs if they joined the 'blue union'. In September 1954 the Birkenhead branch of the TGWU posted notices inviting 1,000 men to register at once to fill their waiting list for jobs on the dock and thus to replace dockers who wanted to join the NASD.

But in April 1955, when the dockers in Merseyside and Manchester applied for their new registration books, the threat to deprive 'blue union' members of their livelihood was decisively defeated. When 'blue union' men were refused registration books because they could not produce a TGWU clearance card, the men of the Manchester and Birkenhead docks struck, together with 13,000 of Liverpool's 17,000 dockers, completely paralysing the three

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ports. After a two-day strike the Manchester Dock Labour Board capitulated and the Merseyside Board followed suit. The first attempt to bludgeon men back into the TGWU had failed — miserably.

In the early months of 1955 large mass meetings of dockers were held in Hull, Manchester and Liverpool. Branches and regional committees of the NASD were rapidly set up. By March 1955 there were five branches in Birkenhead, twelve in Liverpool, two in Manchester and seven in Hull. Full-time officers were operating in all these northern ports. The popular nature of the movement was shown in the large attendances at branch meetings. Hundreds of dockers were swept into trade union branch activity for the first time in their lives. Many, acting as branch officers and committee members, gained their first experience of organising, administration and meeting procedures.

That first great organising of the dock labourers sixty years before must have resembled, in many ways, these virile, raw but energetic forces which thronged the union meeting rooms. What a startling contrast to the tiny branch meetings of the TGWU! Apathy disappeared. In its place came enthusiasm. Dockers felt not just that they 'belonged' to the union. The union belonged to them.

Meanwhile opinion was hardening that it was time to begin negotiations for the recognition of the NASD by the

employers in the northern ports. Finally a delegate meeting in London at the beginning of May 1955 resolved to propose strike action as from May 23 if recognition was not granted. The recommendation went before mass meetings in London, Hull, Manchester and Merseyside. In Hull only twenty-two men, in a meeting of 1,500, voted against the strike ultimatum. It was the same in all the ports. Everywhere the recommendation was endorsed by absolutely decisive majorities.

Over 20,000 dockers stopped work on the Monday the ultimatum expired. Several thousand TGWU men came out in sympathy with the 'blue union'. Surveying the beginning of that strike now, it is clearer than ever that there was every chance of victory. The strike had solid support in the ranks of the NASD.

The employers placed the onus for non-recognition on an 'inter-union struggle', stating that recognition was a matter for the unions to settle among themselves. In this way the employers left themselves a way of retreating. There was also a great measure of public opinion behind the 'blue union' dockers on the issue of their fight to belong to a union of their choice. This feeling was reflected in a sympathetic editorial in the *Manchester Guardian*.

Sympathetic action by dockers in other ports could have been developed. The TGWU leadership was desperately afraid of the spread of the strike. Mr A.E. Tiffin, general secretary of the TGWU, was later to reveal how near they felt the NASD came to success: Speaking to a Docks National Committee in August 1955, and dealing with the resistance of his union to the demand of the 'blue union' for recognition, he declared: "That battle could have been lost. In his opinion it was one of the greatest crises we have had to face for a long period of time". A statement issued by the TGWU on the eve of the strike testified to a state of near-panic. It called on its docker members to remain at work, and declared that only 'a reign of anarchy and terror' could result from the 'blue union's' action.

The TUC condemned the strike and demanded that the 'blue union' should hand back the northern men to the TGWU. What the 10,000 workers concerned thought about it was apparently felt to be unimportant in Smith Square. Then, as now, the matter was for the TUC leaders merely a question of making 'suitable' arrangements at the top. The ranks could be herded around and bartered.

When the strike started, leaders of the TGWU declared that they were willing to spend £9 million to break it. Such prodigality with the union funds was unheard of when it was a matter of a wages application being rejected by the employers. Here it was a matter of defending the power of the union apparatus. There were no barriers now to releasing the full financial resources of the union and the energy of officials, all of which had usually remained securely under lock and key in fights against the employers.

The campaign the TGWU launched failed — at least so far as the rank and file

were concerned. Officials in Manchester, who boasted they would lead the men back to work, waited at the dock gates — alone. When national officers of the union called their members to a meeting in Liverpool 3,000 dockers gave them such a rough handling that they had to call in a police escort before they could leave. As they left they were pelted with crusts of bread — a reply to an earlier threat of one official that the strikers would be forced to eat crusts.

The strike lasted six weeks. The men received no strike pay and suffered very real hardship. But in the end it was not a break in the militancy of the rank and file which prevented victory. If the outcome had rested solely on that there is no doubt that the 'blue union' would have won. Success can never be absolutely guaranteed in any working-class struggle. There were, however, many essential ingredients for success present at the beginning of the recognition strike. Why then did it fail? The answer lies partly in the lamentable weakness which quickly showed itself among a section of the London leadership of the NASD. They had welcomed the northern men into the union. They ended, not only by letting down the men in the north, but also by flouting the whole democratic tradition of the 'blue union'.

But lack of firmness, of understanding, of loyalty to the ranks on the part of individual leaders is not the whole answer. For that we need to consider the part played by the leaders of the Communist Party. In the months before the strike for recognition, Communist Party leaders opposed the development of the 'blue union' in the provincial ports. When Hull dockers joined, Harry Pollitt attacked their action and called for 'unity in the fight to democratise the Transport and General Workers' Union'. In fact however the Stalinist policy aimed only to secure by any means (and certainly not by principled methods) the lifting of the ban on communists' occupying official positions in the TGWU.

The official line of the Communist Party towards the 'blue union' movement was not accepted by its own dock members without many misgivings and much opposition. Nevertheless in the days before the Khrushchev speech this did not prevent the 'line' from being carried through. As a result, not only did the Communist Party help to defeat the recognition strike, but in the process its own influence and membership on the docks were almost completely destroyed.

On December 31, 1954, an article by Vic Marney, a well-known docker member of the Communist Party, appeared in *Tribune*. *Tribune*, incidentally, gave a sympathetic treatment to the 'blue union'. Marney, at this time, was secretary of the 'Liaison Committee', an unofficial committee of TGWU members, influenced by the Communist Party. He declared in his *Tribune* article that the Liaison Committee had decided "under no circumstances will they be involved in any struggle for the recognition of the NASD in the outer ports". This was clear

notice of an intention to blackleg. But when the strike began docker members of the Communist Party refused to become blacklegs. Unfortunately the Communist Party undermined the strike more effectively than if its members had openly crossed the picket-line.

The strike had not been on more than a few days when the Liaison Committee, together with the executive of the lightermen's union, met the London executive committee of the NASD and demanded they call the strike off. The pressure which they continued till the end of the strike on the London leadership of the NASD was supplemented by the *Daily Worker* whose reports played down the numbers on strike and the possibility of support in other ports. The paper continually gave the impression that the strike was about to be called off.

A fortnight after the strike began the London executive of the 'blue union' pushed the Liaison Committee's recommendation through at a conference between the executive and delegates from the northern ports. To achieve this the chairman, an officer of the union who had recruited men in the North and who, a year or so later, was to join the TGWU, used both his ordinary vote and a casting vote. The recommendation was carried against the united opposition of the northern representatives. Members of the London executive were not so desperate as to break with the democratic practices of the NASD and they did put their recommendation before the rank and file. Mass meetings in London and the North rejected the proposal. They gave similar treatment to another recommendation for a return to work a fortnight later.

But the damage was being done. However near the employers came to giving way in face of the determination of the rank and file, they still held back in the hope that the opponents of the strike inside the trade union movement would succeed in their efforts to break it. The national delegate conference was forced to spend hour after hour, day after day, discussing formulas for capitulation, when a vigorous campaign to win support for recognition of the 'blue union' had every chance of a quick and overwhelming victory. The closing stage was reached when the delegate conference agreed to go before a disputes commission set up by the TUC. At the disputes commission the NASD was represented by the chairman, and two national officers — both of whom were leaving their jobs at the end of the month.

Then came the last act, a betrayal of the democratic traditions of the 'blue union', of the loyalty of the men in the North, and of the London rank and file.

The TUC disputes commission demanded the expulsion of the northern men from the 'blue union'. In return, the suspension of the NASD from the TUC was to be lifted. Excluding northern representatives from the vote, the London executive met on Friday, July 1, and carried a resolution moved by a Communist Party member to accept the demand and to instruct the strikers to return to work

the following Monday. This action was directly contrary to the procedure which had always been operated in the union. Previously rank-and-file meetings had always had the final word in beginning or ending strike action. The following weekend meetings called by northern leaders were held in the northern ports. Rank-and-file leaders called a meeting in London.

Despite the defections amongst the London leaders, morale remained high in the ranks. But the northern committeemen had to take into consideration the length of the strike, the necessity to preserve forces and the added strain, after the repudiation of the North by the London executive, on the TGWU members who had supported the strike. They therefore recommended a return to work — but as members of the 'blue'. Six thousand dockers meeting in Liverpool reiterated their intention of remaining in the 'blue union'. They announced that, while returning to work, they would carry on the fight for recognition as a united force with their brothers in other ports and would continue the struggle against "all those who opposed and undermined our fight for recognition". In Birkenhead a great number voted against a return to work. A picture of the spirit of the men in the North was given by the *Manchester Guardian* reporter who attended the Manchester meeting:

"As in Merseyside (and, it seems, in accordance with the new general policy of the 'Blue Union' in the Northern ports) the retreat was made in good order and the language was as firm and militant as it has been at any time in the last six weeks. No one, from the cheerfulness of the crowd, would have guessed that it was the end of a six week strike".

In Hull the strikers marched back to work, as they had marched through the city several times while the strike was on.

In the following week the secretaries of 'blue union' branches in the North received letters from the acting general secretary of the NASD coldly informing them that they were excluded from the union as from July 6. It was in this way that a majority of the union's members were expelled.

But, absolutely amazingly — or so it must have appeared to Transport House and Smith Square — the 'blue union' organisation in the North refused to be killed. The northern men continued to pay their subscriptions, to maintain their branches, their committees, and their full-time officials. They kept up the offices in Liverpool, Birkenhead, Manchester and Hull, which remain there today. They decided to fight their expulsion in the courts.

The six-weeks recognition strike demanded great sacrifices from these dockers. Since its betrayal they have fought a war of attrition which has imposed even greater strains on them. Legal proceedings dragged on for nine months. On the docks 'blue union' militants were disciplined for the smallest offence. Recognition was still denied. But the movement remained and was capable from time to time of showing its teeth. In October 1955 10,000 Merseyside dockers

responded to a call for a one-day stoppage and won the reinstatement of two 'blue union' members sacked after an allegation that at a bus stop they called another docker a 'scab'.

In March 1956 their 'test case', Spring versus National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, came before the Liverpool court. The courtroom was crowded with dockers. A few days later judgment was given. Spring was declared wrongfully expelled. The northern men were back in the NASD.

Undoubtedly the 'blue union' movement in the northern ports was a progressive development. Perhaps the biggest task in the trade union movement today is the reassertion of rank-and-file control. It is foolish to think that this can come about without shake-ups in trade union structure and without explosive movements. For in the heavily bureaucratized, and often corrupt, unions of Britain today rank-and-file 'democracy', like democracy in the capitalist society in which they exist, is often just an expensive farce. Democracy is not simply a question of balloting, resolutions and waiting for enlightenment and a change of heart among the leaders.

If the bureaucratic apparatus ceases to be a servant of the members, if it preserves itself as master over the ranks, to perpetuate itself by a system of 'appointments' rather than elections, if it constantly beats down militant workers and groups, then expulsions are inevitable. So, too, struggles in which the workers have to fight against both the employers and the trade union leadership are inevitable. Moreover, given the right circumstances, large groups of trade union members will seek to break out of what has for them become a union 'prison house' in which all workers' initiative, all attempts to express their own ideas on the defence of their interests, remain caged, canalised or simply suppressed.

Trade unions are essentially instruments of the working class. The value of their organisational structure can be measured only in relation to how that structure serves the interests of the working class. Of course no serious trade union militant will lightly propose a break with even the most bureaucratic workers' organisation. He will seriously consider the worker's traditional loyalty to his union and the extreme difficulty of setting up new trade union organisations. But the mass walk-out of the 'blue union' cannot be regarded as in any sense artificial. It corresponded to long-acting processes deep within the TGWU. In 1954-55 these long-active forces burst out, an explosion of working-class struggle parallel to the explosion of the Hungarian worker's against 'their' bureaucracy.

1. Dock Workers' (Regulation of Employment) Scheme, 1947. The scheme is administered by a National Dock Labour Board and local boards consisting of equal numbers of 'persons representing dock workers in the port and of persons representing the employers of such dock workers'. The boards are responsible for keeping registers of employers and men; as agents of the employers they pay wages due and are responsible for disciplining workers. Dock employers pay a levy to cover the cost of operating the scheme.

2. The Dock Worker. An analysis of conditions in the Port of Manchester. (University of Liverpool Department of Social Science, 1954).