

## End wages

**Bread & Roses.** 20 pages; £1. From: 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 4WB.

This is the first issue of a new regular publication by the British section of the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World.

The ideal trade-union, from a socialist point of view, would be one that recognised the irreconcilable conflict of interest between workers and employers, that had no leaders but was organised democratically and controlled by its members, that sought to organise all workers irrespective of nationality, colour, religious or political views, first by industry then into One Big Union, and which struggled not just for higher wages but also for the abolition of the wages system.

The trouble is that this cannot become a full reality till large numbers of workers are socialists. In other words, you can't have a union organised on entirely socialist principles without a socialist membership. This was recognised in the big discussion on "the trade union question" that took place in the Socialist Party in Britain shortly after we were founded in 1904. The idea of forming a separate socialist union, as the SLP in America advocated and tried to organise, was rejected in favour of working within the existing unions and trying to get them to act on as sound lines as the consciousness of their membership permitted.

The logic behind this position was that, to be effective, a union has to organise as many workers as possible employed by the same employer or in the same industry, but a socialist union would not have many more members than there were members of a socialist party. In a non-revolutionary situation most union members would inevitably not be socialists but would not need to be. A union can be effective even without a socialist membership if it adheres to some at least of the features of the ideal socialist union outlined above, and will be the more effective the more of those principles it applies. This is why Socialist Party members in the existing unions have always insisted on recognition of the class struggle, democratic control by the membership and no affiliation to the Labour Party.

The one successful attempt in the English-speaking world to organise a union on the above lines was the IWW, founded in Chicago in 1905. Successful in the sense that it did manage to function as a union extracting concessions from employers for a period of ten or so years until it was crushed by the American State for trying to exploit the labour shortage caused by the First World War to push up wages.

To tell the truth, Socialists have always had a bit of a soft spot for the IWW. How could we not for a union whose constitution declared: "*The working class and the employing class have nothing in common . . . Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organise as a class, take possession of the means of production and abolish the wages system*"?

However in 1907 the IWW came to be controlled by doctrinaire anarcho-syndicalists who not only (rightly) rejected attempts by various political parties to take over the union (both the reformist SPA and the DeLeonist SLP had designs on it) but also rejected the need for workers to win control of political power in order to be in a

position to abolish the wages system. This latter was obviously a position we could not accept and we said so in debates with IWW propagandists in Britain where the IWW was never a proper union but only a propaganda group for the ideas of the North American IWW.

What had happened was that the IWW had been taken over by what amounted to a political group, which tried to impose its views as those of the organisation as a whole. This was in fact contrary to the IWW's declared principles which meant that it should have been neutral on the issue of whether or what sort of political action workers should take to end the wages system.

The IWW did manage to survive the US state's clampdown on it in WWI but more as a propagandist group than a union dealing with employers. It still survives and, though it does have negotiating rights in a few leftwing bookshops and vegetarian restaurants in America, is still essentially a propagandist group. That's not a criticism (we're one too) but it means that in practice the IWW now acts as a ginger group within the existing union movement, campaigning for the same sort of things (class struggle, democracy, no links with Labour) as our members have always done. That's not a criticism either; in fact some members of the Socialist Party are active in the IWW just as we are in other unions and groups within them.

*Bread & Roses* reads quite well, not unlike this journal; perhaps because half the articles have been written by Socialists.

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