

Communism and the Communist Trade Unions

Arthur Rosenberg

This article was originally published as “Kommunismus und kommunistische Gewerkschaften”, in *Internationales Handwörterbuch des Gewerkschaftswesen*, Berlin, 1932, pp.979-84. We are obliged to Mike Jones for the translation, which has been amended and slightly shortened.

The author had been a leading member of the ultra-left opposition within the German Communist Party in the 1920s, and his analysis of the Communist International's policy towards the trade unions, in the editor's opinion, is coloured by his earlier sectarian politics. One consequence of this is his inability to deal adequately with the Comintern's “left” turn in the late 1920s, when it adopted what was, essentially, the same approach to the unions that Rosenberg and his co-thinkers had previously advocated. However, Rosenberg makes some astute points about the contradictions in the early Comintern's trade union strategy and the mistaken perspectives on which it was based.

Introduction

The theory and practice of the Third International has changed extraordinarily often since its foundation. In no area have the shifts been so conspicuous and frequent as in the trade union field. Therefore it is very difficult to present the nature of Communist trade union policy in an unambiguous form.

The history of the Communist International can be divided into three periods. The first stretches from the foundation of the Communist International in 1919 until its Third World Congress in 1921. The second period is represented by the time from 1921 until 1927. And the third from 1927 until today.

The first period was characterised by “War Communism” in the Soviet Union itself and by the sharp struggle against so-called opportunism and centrism within the international labour movement. The second period was characterised by the so-called “New Economic Policy” (NEP) in the Soviet Union and by the united front tactic in the International. The third period delivers the new radicalising of the Communist movement inside and outside the Soviet Union, distancing from the NEP and the united front, five-year plan in the Soviet Union, etc.

It will be appropriate to also structure Communist trade union policy on the basis of those three periods.

The Foundation of the Communist International and the RILU (1919-1921)

The Bolshevik faction of the Russian social democracy conquered state power in Russia in 1917. Its leader was Lenin. He had spent the earlier years of the world war as an emigrant in Switzerland. Since 1914 he had asserted the view that the world war implied the end of the Second Socialist International. It was now the task of the revolutionary workers to found a new International. This had to turn the world war into a world revolution, abolish the capitalist order of society and replace it with the socialist order.

Lenin recommended to the workers' parties which sympathised with his ideas that they replace the description “social democrats”, which had been discredited by opportunism in 1914, with the description “Communists”. Marx and Engels had originally called their organisation by this name. In accordance with this, the Bolshevik faction of Russian social democracy (Bolshevik means an adherent of the party majority, as opposed to Mensheviks, that is, the adherents of the party minority) turned itself into the Communist Party of Russia, and in 1919 the new revolutionary Marxist workers' organisation took as its name the Communist International.

On the foundation of the Third International, Lenin himself wrote on 15 April 1919: “The Third International actually emerged in 1918, when the

long years of struggle against opportunism and social-chauvinism, especially during the war, led to the formation of Communist Parties in a number of countries. Officially, the Third International was founded at its First Congress, in March 1919, in Moscow. And the most characteristic feature of this International, its mission of fulfilling, of implementing the precepts of Marxism, and of achieving the age-old ideals of socialism and the working class movement – this most characteristic feature of the Third International has manifested itself immediately in the fact that the new, third, ‘International Working Men’s Association’ *has already begun to develop*, to a certain extent, into a *union of Soviet Socialist Republics*.

“The First International laid the foundation of the proletarian, international struggle for socialism. The Second international marked a period of in which the soil was prepared for the broad, mass spread of the movement in a number of countries. The Third International has gathered the fruits of the work of the Second International, discarded its opportunist, social-chauvinist, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois dross, and *has begun to implement* the dictatorship of the proletariat.

“The international alliance of the parties which are leading the most revolutionary movement in the world, the movement of the proletariat for the overthrow of the yoke of capital, now rests on an unprecedentedly firm base, in the shape of several *Soviet republics*, which are implementing the dictatorship of the proletariat and are the embodiment of victory over capitalism on an international scale” (emphases by Lenin).¹

When Lenin wrote his article, the soviet republics in Hungary and Bavaria existed as well as that in Russia. At that time, Lenin was of the opinion that, very quickly, the workers in all important capitalist countries would violently gain power.

He regarded the social democrats as groups among the workers who lacked the correct recognition of the historical moment, or even fought on the side of the bourgeoisie against the workers’ revolution. At that time, Lenin had not for one moment entertained the thought that the splitting of the socialist labour movement would be a permanent condition. He believed that, once the old “opportunist” and “petty bourgeois” leadership had been separated out, the unity of the working class under Communist leadership would shortly follow in the course of the revolutionary process. In the soviet or council system, Lenin saw the form of the revolutionary, proletarian seizure of power and the subsequent proletarian class-government, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat. For him, the council system and parliamentary democracy were in no way just two different forms of popular representation; on the contrary, the one is the

condition before the proletarian revolution, the other the condition afterwards.

The original Communist trade union tactic is also explained by Lenin’s conception that Bolshevism would soon be able to win over the worker-masses. He regarded the trades unions, founded by the social democrats in Europe, as important class organisations for the proletariat. He was convinced that, together with the whole mass of workers, the trades unions also would end up in the hands of the Communists. In that spirit, he recommended that his adherents should remain in the trades unions in all countries, dislodge the “opportunist” leaders and seize the leadership themselves (the so-called Communist cell tactic).

The Second World Congress of the Communist International, which met in Moscow in the summer of 1920, treated the trade union problem in the same spirit. From the famous 21 conditions for adherence to the Communist International, the ninth is as follows:

“Every party that wishes to belong to the Communist International must systematically and persistently develop Communist activities within the trade unions, workers’ and works councils, the consumer co-operatives and other mass workers’ organisations. Within these organisations it is necessary to organise Communist cells the aim of which is to win the trade unions, etc. for the cause of Communism by incessant and persistent work. In their daily work the cells have the obligation to expose everywhere the treachery of the social patriots and the vacillations of the ‘centrists’. The Communist cells must be completely subordinated to the Party as a whole.”²

In the theses for work in the trade union movement adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International, it says: “Large numbers of workers are pouring into the trade unions, and the economic struggle which the unions are waging against the wishes of the bureaucracy is assuming a revolutionary character. The Communists in all countries must join the unions in order to develop them into bodies consciously struggling for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of Communism. They must take the initiative in creating trade unions where none exists. Voluntary withdrawals from the union movement ... represent a great danger to the Communist movement.”³

However, the splitting of the trade unions, under certain conditions, was also declared necessary by the Second Congress. Communists should not fear to split, if avoiding it signified abandonment of revolutionary work in the trade unions. Where a split becomes necessary though, the Communists must always attentively investigate whether such a split will not risk isolating them from the working masses.⁴

The Second Congress assigned the

Communists a special task in the situations where, besides the great socialist trade unions, radical special organisations still exist, such as the syndicalists in the different Romance countries, the Industrial Workers of the World in the USA, etc. The Communists must make efforts to also win the leadership in these revolutionary unions. But “support for revolutionary trade unions must not lead Communists to leave opportunist unions which are in a state of ferment and moving towards class struggle”.⁵

In spite of the reservations mentioned concerning the permissibility of splitting, Lenin and the Second Congress recommended that their adherents remain inside the existing socialist trade unions, in order to win them from within. This official Communist theory met, however, with strong resistance from certain radical groupings of workers – anarchists, syndicalists and Left Communists – for example, in Germany, from the groups which split from the Spartakusbund and became the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD). These left-radical currents declared any continuation of work inside the old “opportunist” trade unions absurd and counter-revolutionary. Lenin countered these left-radicals in a vigorous way. He saw in their tactic a renunciation of the ideological conquest of the working masses and thereby a renunciation of the coming revolution.

In his pamphlet *“Left-wing” Communism – An Infantile Disorder*, in 1920, Lenin wrote the following: “... we must withdraw from the trade unions, refuse to work in them, and create new and *artificial* forms of labour organisation! This is so unpardonable a blunder that it is tantamount to the greatest service Communists could render the bourgeoisie.” And later: “This ridiculous ‘theory’ that Communists should not work in reactionary trade unions reveals with the utmost clarity the frivolous attitude of the ‘Left’ Communists towards the question of influencing the ‘masses’ ... you ... must absolutely *work wherever the masses are to be found*”. And: “We must be able ... even – if need be – to resort to various stratagems, artifices and illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges, as long as we get into the trade unions, remain in them, and carry on Communist work within them at all costs” (Lenin’s emphases).⁶

No matter how resolute and unambiguous the Communist trade union policy appears in the years 1919-20, in the above-quoted and similar statements, it did however contain a fateful contradiction from the start. The prohibition regarding Communists leaving the trade unions only concerned the individual unions of the said countries, whereas the splitting of the trade union International was an aim from the start. If the Communists should succeed in conquering the whole trade union centre of a country, then the centre of this country should quickly leave the old trade union International, the so-called

“Amsterdam International”.

In accordance with this, the tenth of the 21 conditions says: “Every party belonging to the Communist International has the obligation to wage a stubborn struggle against the Amsterdam ‘International’ of scab trade union organisations. It must expound as forcefully as possible among trade unionists the idea of the necessity of the break with the scab Amsterdam International. It must support the International Association of Red Trades Unions affiliated to the Communist International, at present in the process of formation, with every means at its disposal.”⁷

In the same summer of 1920, while the Third International’s Second Congress deliberated in Moscow, a series of talks between the top trade union leaders of the Soviet state and like-minded foreign counterparts took place. At that time, the still united Italian Socialist Party belonged to the Third International. Thus, the leadership of the Italian trade union centre had accepted the invitation to Moscow. Representatives of the South Slav and Bulgarian trade unions, and the syndicalists and other radical groupings, had also arrived in Moscow. On 15 July a resolution was adopted which among other things says:

“Whereas the conditions of proletarians in all countries resulting from the imperialist war demand with every day a clearer and more energetic class struggle to put a definitive end to capitalist exploitation and to establish a communist system; ... Whereas the Amsterdam International Federation of Trade Unions is incapable in its program and its tactics of achieving the triumph of these principles and ensuring the victory of the proletarian masses in all countries”, the undersigned trade unions have decided to “... organize a militant international committee for the rebuilding of the trade union movement along these lines. This committee functions as an International Council of Trade and Industrial Unions, working in accord with the Executive Committee of the Third International under conditions to be determined by congresses. All trade and industrial workers’ organizations that join the council must be represented in it. One representative of the International Council of Trade Unions must be included on the Executive Committee of the Third International, and vice versa.”⁸

This declaration was signed by the trade union centres of Russia, Italy, Bulgaria and the South Slavs and by the “revolutionary syndicalists” of France. Thus, the Red International of Labour Unions (with the Russian abbreviation: Profintern) became a reality.⁹ From this point, an alarming duality was introduced into the Communist watchword about the unity, and conquest, of the trade unions, as now the two competing trade union Internationals, Amsterdam and Moscow, faced each other in intense struggle. Inasmuch as

radical trade union organisations sympathised with Communism they immediately joined the Red International of Labour Unions. The Communist opposition within the national union centres affiliated to the Amsterdam International, such as the General German Trade Union Centre in Germany, also felt themselves at least ideally a part of the Red International. From the start this duality confused those workers in the trade unions with Communist sympathies.

The period of the united front (1921-27)
From 1921, Lenin and the leading people in the Russian Communist Party recognised that a rapid spreading of workers' revolutions throughout central and western Europe could no longer be counted on. The soviet republics in Hungary and Bavaria had collapsed. The Red Army's march on Warsaw had been unsuccessful. In Germany, with the Kapp Putsch, the bourgeois republic had quite clearly been able to defend itself, but without any shift of power to the advantage of the proletariat. Similarly, the so-called March Action by the German Communists in 1921 ended with a great defeat. And in Italy the great labour movement which had led the factory occupations stagnated, and the rise of fascism forced the socialist workers onto the defensive.

Apparently, a new period of calm for European capitalism was opening up. With that, the general preconditions under which Lenin had founded the Third International, and likewise the Red International of Labour Unions, had ceased to exist.

In Moscow there was no longer any belief in either a rapid conquest of the European working masses for Communism, or in the attainment of political power in the countries outside Soviet Russia. Thus, in 1921, the first signs of a liquidationary atmosphere in the Communist International can be perceived – the first doubt over whether the separate existence of the Communist movement parallel with that of social democracy, at least outside the Soviet Union, could be justified. First and foremost this attitude was expressed in the theory and tactic of the proletarian united front.

The Third Congress of the Communist International, which took place in 1921 in Moscow, insisted above all that the period of revolutionary offensive was over. The Communist groups in Germany, Italy and other countries, who wanted to continue following the slogans of 1919 and 1920, would be sharply characterised as “putschist adventurers”. And this Communist turnaround was justified with great decisiveness by precisely Lenin and Trotsky.

Simultaneously, in the Soviet Union itself, there was the beginning of significant concessions to the peasantry, to free trade and private property, which is summed up under the description “New

Economic Policy”.

The united front tactic was proclaimed by Moscow shortly after the Third World Congress. From now on, all the Communist Parties were to make efforts to carry out the day-to-day struggles of the proletariat together with the social democrats and the trade unions dominated by them. In that regard, precautions were taken, so as to pacify one's own radical adherents: by these common actions the social democrats will be exposed as being unable to seriously struggle against the bourgeoisie; through the common mass movements the Communists will be able to get the leadership, etc. But it was now a fact that the Communists were demanding help from the social democrats in order to attain their immediate day-to-day tasks. And this could not avoid sowing significant doubt over the legitimacy of separate Communist organisations. What Lenin's real motives were from 1921, one cannot establish for sure. Lenin never expressed himself clearly about his real intentions. It is quite possible that he would have developed the united front tactic to also contain an organisational rapprochement with the social democratic parties and trade unions. But after the proclamation of the united front tactic Lenin had to give up leading the Communist International owing to illness. His successors above all continued the course laid down in 1921, although fluctuating and without the authority with which Lenin was able to carry out far-reaching turns.

In the period of the united front tactic a splitting of the old trade unions by the Communists was really an absurdity, and the existence of the “Red International of Labour Unions” seemed itself to be counterposed to the basic principles of the new Communist tactic. The president of the red union International (Profintern), the very adroit speaker and writer, the Russian trade unionist A. Lozovsky, at the foundation of the new organisation, had put together some very optimistic figures. Already in the summer of 1920, he calculated with 9 million adherents of the Profintern, and his statistics were as follows: Soviet trade unions, 5,200,000 members; the Italian trade union centre, 2,000,000; the Spanish syndicalists, 800,000; the revolutionary syndicalists of France, 700,000; the South Slav unions, 150,000; the Bulgarian trade union centre, 90,000.

However, the development of the Profintern from 1921 never measured up to the hopes placed in it at its foundation. The affiliation of the Italian union centre turned out to be a great misunderstanding. Under sharp confrontations, the great majority of Italian socialists, and their union centre with them, broke from the Third International. Thereafter, the victory of fascism made any independent socialist or Communist movement in Italy an impossibility.

In the same way, the Spanish syndicalists and like-minded groupings in Holland and the USA and elsewhere soon entered into conflict with Moscow. The syndicalists would not accept that their unions should be subordinated to a Communist political party. In the Balkan countries, especially in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, the existence of Communist trade unions had been made impossible by the repressive measures enacted by the governments. In France and Czechoslovakia, it resulted in the trade unions splitting, and while a sector of unions remained with Amsterdam, rival organisations adhered to Moscow.

In Germany, huge confrontations took place within the General German Trade Union Centre, during which Moscow's supporters battled against the Amsterdam-oriented leadership. It resulted, however, in relatively few disaffiliations, among them building workers and railway workers. Among the old independent trade union organisations in Germany, the syndicalists and the General Workers Union, which was close to the KAPD, rejected subordinating themselves to Moscow – although another union, namely the Union of Workers by Hand and Brain, did affiliate to the Profintern. All these groupings standing outside the free trade unions, however, only organised a small portion of Germany's socialist workers. The main portion of adherents of the Profintern remained as oppositions inside the large Amsterdam unions. Especially important and numerous was the Communist opposition within the German metalworkers' union.

In Britain, prominent leaders of the old trade unions sympathised with Moscow during this period. The peculiar Anglo-Soviet united front on the trade union question developed out of this. And because of that the splits from the old trade unions in Britain were of no significance.

The Third World Congress had stressed quite specifically the importance of Communist trade union work. In its decisions it said, among other things: "The principal task of all Communists over the next period, is to wage a firm and vigorous struggle to win the majority of the workers organised in the trade unions. The Communists must not be discouraged by the present reactionary mood of the labour unions, but must try to overcome all resistance and by actively participating in their day-to-day struggle, win the unions to Communism. The true measure of the strength of a Communist Party is the influence it has on the mass of trade unionists. *The Party must learn to how to influence the unions without being tempted to put itself forward as their guardian.* Only the Communist cells of the union are subject to Party control; the union as such is independent of any control" (emphasis in original text).¹⁰

The World Congress expressed itself especially on German conditions: "In Germany, the Party is

on the right road to winning over the trade unions gradually. On no account should concessions be made to those who advocate withdrawal from the trade unions. This would play into the hands of the social-patriots. All attempts to exclude Communists from the unions must be stubbornly resisted, and every effort must be made to win the majority of the organised workers."¹¹

Thus, the Communist International obliged its members to remain in the social democratic unions. And it even conceded the unions a certain independence in relation to the Communist Party. In spite of that, efforts were also made in the years 1922-23 to cultivate links with the independent unions. And this dualist tactic had to constantly lead to problems and lack of clarity in the daily activity. For example, was it permissible for such a special union organisation that sympathised with the Communists to recruit new members? Usually, this was dealt with in practice in such a way that such an organisation was allowed to recruit new, unorganised members, but was refused the right to attract members from the big social democratic unions. One can imagine how much wrangling resulted from such prescriptions in practice. In Germany, inflation, especially in 1923, had shaken the financial strength and organisational effectivity of the old large trade unions very deeply, and once again made the slogan of withdrawal from the trade unions an actual one among the radical layers of workers.

In 1924, a sharp change of course was introduced in Moscow. The sympathetic tolerance towards the independent unions ended. It was demanded of them, above all in Germany, that they either returned to the old social democratic unions or renounced their own adherence to the Third International. The leaders of that type of independent union and other separate organisations, who resisted returning to the old unions, were expelled from the Communist Party. The leadership of the Third International prepared thereby a new united front initiative: the slogan for the unity of the world trade union movement was launched. Thus, it declared its readiness to give up the independent existence of the Red International of Labour Unions. A world trade union congress was to establish both the unification of the Moscow and Amsterdam organisations and also the complete unification of all social democrats and Communists in the trade union sphere.

Without a doubt, this proposal contained a tendency towards liquidating, not just Communism as a trade union entity, but also Communism in politics. If a successful and solemn unification congress between Moscow and Amsterdam had taken place on this plane, then it would have been difficult to maintain the political split between the Second and Third Internationals

as well.

It can be claimed that this proposal for trade union unity was only a tactical manoeuvre by Moscow. But the leaders in Moscow have themselves very strenuously denied that. In 1925, Lozovsky, in his pamphlet *The Struggle for Unity in the World Trade Union Movement*, wrote the following:

“However, there are also comrades who believe that our unity slogan is quite simply a manoeuvre. They are of the opinion that the Communist International is not at all interested in unity, as if it only concerns simulating efforts towards unity, at the same time that one, in reality, ought to struggle against its realisation. This is a thoroughly false viewpoint, which must be combated vigorously. The Communist International wants a genuine unity, as it begins from the absolutely real consideration that a strengthening of the working class and increase in its ability to struggle is thereby attained. No, it is in no way a manoeuvre, but an urgent and sincere wish to recreate unity in the divided trade union movement. Therefore, the Communist International is decisively opposed to the struggle for unity only being a pretence. We demand a serious struggle for unity, without ulterior motives; every Communist, every party member, should be aware of this once and for all.”

The Soviet unity slogan received an especially friendly reception among the leaders of the British trade union movement. Therefore, in the years 1925-26, a close relationship between the Soviet and British trade union movements developed. The leading spokesman for the unity idea in the Communist camp at that time was the General Secretary of the CPSU, Joseph Stalin. It is possible that Joseph Stalin and his associates had a plan to attain the international unification of the workers by utilising the British, and thereby win the leadership of the world socialist movement for the Russian government.

During those years, Communist propaganda had made considerable progress among the people of Asia. The fledgling trade unions in China, Japan, Dutch Indies and British India sympathised with the Profintern. Above all, it seemed as if the close union between the Soviet Union and the victorious Chinese revolutionary party, the Guomindang, contained significant possibilities for development. The Soviet Union has never had a stronger position in the world than during those years, when Moscow was allied on one side with the British working class and on the other with the Chinese revolution. It is characteristic that neither the trade unionists nor the Guomindang people belonged to the Third International.

The period of new radicalisation from 1927. The united front movement was broken off in 1927, not so much because the suspicion of the social

democratic organisations towards Moscow led it to gradually fade away, but more because of the fundamental internal convulsions within the Soviet Union itself. The Soviet government's united front tactic abroad ran parallel with the policy of concessions internally (NEP). The more the ruling Communist Party in the Soviet Union was ready to oblige the peasantry and private property in its own country, the stronger became the stress on unity and liquidationist ideas in the international working class policies.

At the end of the '20s, Stalin and his group changed course in internal Soviet policy. Once again the abolition of the property rights of the peasants and the bourgeoisie in the spirit of a radical working class policy was begun. And in parallel with it, the international policy of the Communists had to change. Unity relations were suddenly dissolved; there was a break with the British trade union movement and with the party of the Chinese revolution. And the necessity of independent Communist organisations, and likewise opposition to the social democrats, was stressed more strongly than previously. The phraseology and entire behaviour of the Communist Parties once again had to take on a revolutionary character, though Moscow could hardly be other than wholly clear about the absence of objectively revolutionary possibilities abroad.

The sharpened struggle of the Communists against the social democratic trade union leaders arose from this. In Germany, the “Red Trade Union Opposition” (RGO), tried to lead large trade union actions – for example, the Berlin metalworkers' strike at the end of 1930, and the strike in the Ruhr region at the start of 1931. There was no longer any hesitation over splitting the old trade unions. By 1932, this latest shift in Communist politics and trade union tactics, as much in Germany as in other countries, has still not had any apparent success at all.

Editorial Notes

1. Lenin, “The Third International and its Place in History”, *Collected Works*, Vol.29, 1965, pp.306-7.
2. A. Adler, ed., *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, 1983, p.95.
3. *Ibid.*, p.108.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.108-9.
5. *Ibid.*, p.109.
6. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.31, 1966, pp.52, 53, 55.
7. *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos ...*, p.95.
8. J. Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress*, Vol.2, 1991, pp.935-6.
9. The RILU founding congress took place in 1921.
10. *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos ...*, pp.265-6.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.267-8.