

Dockers' struggles and oral history

By John McIlroy

I ENJOYED Sean Matgamna's review of Bill Hunter's *They knew why they fought: unofficial struggles and leadership on the docks 1945-1989* (*Workers' Liberty* 21). One small disappointment I experienced reading Bill Hunter's stimulating book was the lack of any comment on the role of the militants of the Revolutionary Communist Party in the struggles in the docks during the 1940s.

The breakthrough which secured the Trotskyists an influence in the struggles of the 1950s came in 1951 when, as Bill Hunter notes, Gerry Healy's 'club' was able to bring the dockers leaders, Harry Constable and Bert Aylward, in London, and Danny Brandon in Birkenhead into its orbit. This achievement was, however, preceded by several years of intensive work by the RCP. Confused and far from successful as it was, this requires acknowledgement. We need to develop our historical understanding of it and salute those who put their energies and imagination into it.

There is, for example, no mention in *They knew why they fought* of the role of the Trotskyists in the big strikes of 1945. Bornstein and Richardson provide a brief account of the stoppages of October-November 1945 in *War and the International* (p151-2). However, a serious orientation to work with the dockers was beginning to develop from 1944 when John Archer visited Liverpool in an attempt to create links with the Scottish ports.

By early 1945 the RCP in London had contacts in the Royal group of docks and had developed quite close relations with Powell, one of the dockers leaders. Powell was particularly important in liaising with the fighting elements in Liverpool in the strikes of July 1945 through the RCP militant, Charles Martinson, a link which went some way towards combating the disruptive role of the Communist Party.

Although the RCP possessed little influence on the summer strikes they were directly instrumental in the establishment of the first unofficial rank and file committee in Liverpool at a mass meeting at Coopers Hall on 2 August. Whilst Martinson was their only representative on it, the committee was caricatured as an RCP front by the CP and quickly collapsed.

As unrest continued amongst dockers the Trotskyists had advantages: the weakness of the TGWU bureaucracy and the unpopular anti-strike line of the CP. The major disadvantage was working from the outside. The Liverpool RCP's docks comrade Etherington had been victimised in early 1944 and the only RCP docks members — in Leith — were expelled in mid 1945. In Liverpool and nationally the nearest the Party had to a docker was 'Ma20'

Martinson, who worked on the gigboats loading timber, and a more forceful character, Alan Christianson, a veteran of the recognition struggles in the Midlands engineering industry before the war. Although he had been expelled from the RCP, Christianson, who worked at Vestey's cold storage, played a leading role in their work during the docks struggles. Nonetheless lack of implantation in an industry with a strong internal culture was a real handicap. Certainly in Liverpool where all too often, as one RCP activist put it, "...the dockers ask 'have you a card?' And if you haven't they just walk away."

Despite this the RCP were able to play a prominent part in the early stages of the Merseyside strikes with Tommy Birchall, a young veteran of Reg Groves' Marxist League, the Workers' International League and the RCP, who had a strong base as a shop steward in Harland and Wolffs, demonstrating powerful energy. The strike began in Birkenhead on 25 September over the discharge of pit props — hard, badly paid work. The RCP members immediately contacted the Birkenhead men, organised leafleting and meetings across the water.

They were directly involved in spreading the strike to Liverpool, escalating it nationally and consolidating it around the demand for a 25/- national minimum, a demand first raised in the summer stoppages. Within weeks of the collapse of the Merseyside rank and file committee a new body took its place.

Martinson shuttled between Liverpool and London and there was contact with Frank Ward and RCP industrial organiser Roy Tearse in Glasgow. In the early days of the strike Birchall and Christianson were able to address meetings from the RCP platform. The anti-strike role of the TGWU docks officials, Donovan and Mahon, and important CP rank and filers, such as Joe Burns, helped them. But the CP who had long wielded influence in the port through Creighton and Marshall were able to reorient. After the initial eruption the strike settled down. Overall the forces of the Trotskyists were weak and external to the main processes of struggle. Failure to penetrate these was facilitated by the approach of the Liverpool RCP which was, given their lack of any strong base, to a degree ultra-left, posing Trotskyist politics directly to the dockers rather than a rank and file programme and organisation. With the initial activist élan tumbling over into an overestimation of the general situation, they characterised their tasks as 'mass agitation.' Martinson quickly declared that '...the programme of the Trotskyists had sunk deeply into the minds of the dockers.' Docks leaflets urged 'the necessity to build a body of reliable docker supporters of the Trotskyists' and ended 'Support the RCP!' The tendency was to relate to the dockers *en*

masse, as if the RCP was a powerful lever, rather than a very small group which needed to find within its general agitation a path to the best militants. Of course the mistaken political perspective was one of 'Preparing for Power.'

The marginalisation of the RCP was probably helped along by the leftism which saw Martinson stand against the Labour candidate. TGWU official Simon Mahon, in the local elections in Bootle. He garnered only 148 votes and raised questions about the Party's position on other Labour candidates. By the time delegates from the Glasgow docks visited Merseyside — incidentally bringing with them arguments for a breakaway from the TGWU a decade before the Blue Union affair — they were required by the rank and file committee to take a solemn oath they did not belong to any subversive Revolutionary Communist Party... Likewise, as Bornstein and Richardson record, Powell regarded hitherto as sympathetic, also disavowed the RCP's role.

By the end of the strike the influence the RCP exercised on the London Progressive Committee — even though the faith in the Stalinists of key militants was shaken — was minimal. In Liverpool the RCP was in direct conflict with the port committee they had fought to create, complaining bitterly that the committee was willing to entertain Catholic priests and Bessie Bradock, but not the Trotskyists. The Party leadership's attempt to urge a more constructive approach to gain the confidence of the rank and file brought the countercharge that this was based on 'pandering to the anti-political tendencies of the London dockers' contacts.' An acrimonious internal dispute smouldered into 1946 with the Liverpool 'worker members' contrasting themselves with 'the apparatus men.' Of course all the comrades were still learning and coming to terms with the realities of the new post-war world. But all this brought comfort only to the Healy minority in the RCP which was very interested in getting into the docks work and who perhaps learned some lessons from it. In the changed conditions of the following decade Healy was able to address meetings from the dockers' platform. Despite continued emphasis on a Dockers' Charter and the need for national rank and file conferences, the RCP made little progress in London or the northern ports in the succeeding years.

That these and numerous other episodes which require interrogation in the interest of completeness remain largely hidden from history, or embodied only in myth, (there are some references to the Liverpool dock struggles in Taaffe and Mulhearn's *Liverpool, the city that dared to fight*) is perhaps relevant to Sean Matgamna's comments on the limitations of memory and oral history. A few small examples might be given. Less than a decade after the events just sketched, ▶

Alan Christianson, writing in a publication of CLR James' group stated with retrospective inflation that the Liverpool RCP had "included the most vigorous and respected dockers' leader." Despite Martinson's excellent record, his experience in fighting fascism in Spain and his courageous break from Stalinism, he was scarcely that. Again, in recent debate about his book in *Workers' Press* Bill Hunter comments that he has no recollection of the links between Constable and Aylward and the Oehlerite Socialist Workers' League in the 1940s. Yet, recourse to the correspondence of Millie Haston in this period demonstrates not only that the two dockers' leaders were close contacts of the RCP majority but that the RCP leadership was well aware, at least in Aylward's case, of the links with the SWL.

Another example of the fallibility of memory can be seen from Harry Ratner's *Reluctant Revolutionary*. Harry notes Jimmy Deane's expulsion from the 'club' in June 1950, citing John Callaghan's book *The Far Left in Britain* as a reference for it and remarking: "In Manchester we were relatively isolated from these developments in the higher reaches of the club in London." [p.145] However, the documents suggest that Harry was present at the NC meeting which accepted the EC recommendation on Deane's expulsion and voted for it.

I want to say firmly that this is not intended to score points, denigrate in any way the fine contributions of Bill Hunter and Harry Ratner or more generally the recent flowering of the history of the far left. It is intended only to underline the fact that this history will develop only through collective endeavour and vigorous debate, through correction and reconnection, a process which necessitates a *fusion of oral history and memory with the most rigorous study of the documentary archive*. Oral history *by itself*, a reliance on oral history... this is a dangerous *cul-de-sac*, leading to at best partial history, at worst, apologetics. But oral history deployed in conjunction with the documentary sources... that is a very different story.

Oral history in this sense can be a vital and essential weapon for adding to what the documents tell us, illuminating them, breathing 'the structure of feeling' of the period into them, telling us what the actors were really like, making the dry leaves *live*. It can help us understand what the documents leave out, personal motivations, informal agendas, hidden links, the 'private' sphere. Oral history can recapture in important, vivid detail the quality of life amongst the political rank and file and establish how political positions were taken into the wider movement and how politics was or was not an organic part of the life of the militants. It must always be measured against the documents.

(A valuable recent paper which should be of interest to all concerned with these questions is Alan Johnson, *Beyond the Smallness of Self — Oral History and British Trotskyism*.)

The road to something more democratic than Parliament

By Alan Johnson

I AGREE with much of Martin Thomas' latest response in our ongoing debate (*Workers' Liberty* 18) about the attitude of Marxists to Parliament in the transition to socialism. I argued (SO 619) that "the fight to deepen and defend parliamentary democracy, and to merge the power of a transformed parliament with the nascent power of popular local councils, born of and sustained by struggle, runs with the grain of complex advanced capitalist democracies and is a necessary development of the classical Leninist model of the transition [to socialism] in countries like Britain." Martin replied (WL 18) that, while local workers' councils might well emerge in defence of a left-wing government which was beleaguered by ruling class opposition and prevented from implementing its programme, "that is not the end of the story. If the workers' councils developed beyond a certain level, the leftish Labour government which the ruling class initially wanted to sack would probably become its best defence!" and, therefore, the popular movement outside Parliament would indeed have to "counterpose a new workers' power, based on workers' councils, to the old parliamentary regime." To argue for merging the power of parliament and councils, as I had done, would only be "disorientating."

However, I think we are both in danger of presenting one particular 'scenario' as pretty much inevitable while in fact either of those 'scenarios', and others besides, are possible, depending on a wide range of factors which cannot be known in advance of the struggle. What we can know, from the wide experience of the international working class in revolutionary situations is:

1. That nowhere has parliamentary democracy been rejected in favour of direct council democracy because of propaganda for it by socialists. The prerequisites for the workers' movement even entertaining the possibility of a transfer of loyalties are two-fold:

a profound social crisis which sees the emergence of local workers, consumers, and neighbourhood councils composed of recallable delegates *as organs of struggle*, and the undermining of the democratic credentials of Parliament by the ruling class itself as it thrashes about desperately in response to this social crisis. These two developments could result in a collapse of confidence in Parliament as an open democratic institution and a growing confidence in the new local councils as legitimate democratic bodies: a situation often described in shorthand as 'dual power.' The key question in this shift in workers' attitudes is the extent to which workers see their democratic rights and freedoms — of organisation, assembly, representation, expression, protest — as being best protected by the existing state institutions or by the new workers' councils.

2. It would be wrong to say definitively in advance what the precise relationship between Parliament and the new workers' councils will be as the social crisis unfolds. That will depend upon the political composition of the Parliament, the stage of the Parliament, the weight, character and leadership of the movement outside Parliament, and also the extent of something Martin seems to exclude altogether: the representation within Parliament of those political parties or movements which stand at the head of the extra-parliamentary revolt. The last is crucial for, as Lenin pointed out:

"the experience of many, if not all, revolutions, which shows the great usefulness, during a revolution, of a *combination* of mass action outside a reactionary parliament with a opposition sympathetic to (or better still directly supporting) the revolution within it." (*Left-wing communism: an infantile disorder*)

Such a body of what Lenin called 'communist parliamentarians' armed with a programme able to link the opposition within and beyond Parliament, is essential in the transition, as examples from Germany 1918 to France 1968 have shown that popular movements outside Parliament can be

* See also *Socialist Organiser* 616, 617, and 619