



RANK AND FILE MOVEMENTS: 1. THE BUILDING INDUSTRY

JOHN BELL is one of the leading activists in the group that produces the paper *Building Worker*.

He was a member of the International Socialists (now SWP), serving on their National Committee, until he left in 1976. He is now a member of the Labour Party.

Mick O'Sullivan, a UCATT shop steward in Haringey direct works, talked to John Bell about the history of rank-and-file groupings in the building industry.

WHILE IT is true to say that the Communist Party have played a major role in the rank-and-file building groups, they have not totally dominated them, at least not since the 1960s.

We don't know much about the grouping which started in the '30s and was disbanded by the CP in 1955, the New Builders' Leader. The CP have for some reason refused to publish the book about it by Frank Jackson, a lifelong CP member (he died two years ago) and building worker militant. So the history of the New Builders' Leader remains obscure. All I know about it is that one of the major planks of the paper was for union amalgamation. Many of the present-day bureaucracy left the CP at the time the paper was wound up.

The paper Rank and File developed in the mid-'60s. To my knowledge, the paper grew out of a number of unofficial rank and file bodies around the Manchester area. It campaigned against right wing domination, particularly in the craft unions, and was sustained by a number of big and protracted disputes both in the North and in London. Horseferry Rd and the Barbican were examples.

Politically the paper was an amalgam of different forces, from the CP through the SWP/IS to libertarians and anarchists. The Party pulled out and it ground to a halt. As far as I know there was no reason given for this, but certainly I think the credibility IS was getting through the paper determined the pull-out.

The Charter did not develop directly from Rank and File. It was started in 1970 from the Joint Sites Committees, which

were groups of stewards and rank and file members who met to coordinate strikes and disputes. It reactivated the base which Rank and File had organised. Coordination was particularly important given that there were four main unions organising in the building industry.

One of the main cutting edges of the Charter was the struggle for union democracy.

The Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW) under George Smith held a ballot in 1970 to introduce the check-off system and the appointment of regional officials. Smith lost.

When the leadership saw the vote had gone against them, they called for another ballot, to include the Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators (ASPD), who were at that time in the process of amalgamating with the ASW to form UCATT, the Union of Construction and Allied Trades Technicians. ASPD had a long history of banning CP members from office and of craft elitism. The second vote went with the bureaucracy.

The struggle to reverse this decision was to be a focus for the Charter. It culminated in the UCATT rules revision conference of 1975, which saw a major defeat for the bureaucracy. Conference voted for election of full-time officials, though check-off was maintained. The Charter had played the role of organiser of the rank and file. It reflected the strength of the CP at the base of the union, and had taken the struggle into the branches.

IS also played a part in this struggle. Many of the leading activists in the Charter were IS members, though of course the CP had far greater numbers.

THE NATIONAL strike of 1972, over the annual pay claim, was the first, and to date the last, national strike of UCATT. Its most important feature was that it was run by the rank and file through local coordinating committees. To a certain extent the bureaucracy lost control to these committees, and we saw the deve-

lopment of the flying pickets adapted from the miners' strike earlier that year.

However, the Charter did not appear. The CP said that the people who produced it were too busy running the strike. I think the real reason was that they were trying to gain favour with the bureaucracy.

At that time George Smith, the general secretary of UCATT, was writing regularly for the Star. If the Charter had appeared, then he would not have touched it with a barge-pole. For King St, a general secretary writing in the Star is a lot more important. It gives them far more credibility, in their opinion, than a rank and file paper.

The IS, in the absence of the Charter, brought out a number of Socialist Worker building workers' specials, which sold very well.

The main thing that came out of the strike was the Shrewsbury 24 case, when 24 North Wales building workers were prosecuted on charges including conspiracy, based on alleged damage caused by flying pickets during the strike.

The Tories wanted a weak industry to have a go at, and they picked on building. The CP at first refused to do anything about it on the grounds that they were criminal charges. So did the bureaucracy. It was Workers' Fight who first took the issue up, and then it gained support from all the left groups. The CP were forced to act because of this initial pressure and the outrage from their own base. Then the Charter began to move on the issue, and after that the union bureaucracy took it up.

Had the union leadership been prepared to take on the Tories in the first instance over the 24, then I think the Government would have backed down. After all, they were treading on dangerous ground. The Pentonville Five were fresh in everyone's memory.

The CP at that time had enough clout to have forced the bureaucracy into action. But they failed to do it. As in so many other cases, they let the leadership off