5 The Role of the Trade Unions

Joseph Godson

The communist view, as enunciated by Lenin and his successors, of the nature of trade unions and their relation to the state changes radically once a communist regime comes into power. Prior to a take-over, communists inside the trade union movement strive unceasingly and by all means available to generate hostility to the capitalist state. Once in power, with the state now supposedly on the side of the workers, the relationship is totally changed. This apparently signifies the trade unions’ almost total surrender of their position as independent institutions to promote and defend the workers’ interests and welfare.

Indeed, the concept of trade unions as an independent organisation permanently dedicated to protecting its members’ welfare and suspicious of state or management paternalism, is alien to theorists of trade union activity in the Soviet Union or, for that matter, in any other communist country.

The functions attributed in communist countries to trade union organisations are so different from those in the West as to raise the question, whether they may, in the words of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, be properly described as ‘trade unions’. These bodies, according to the ICFTU,

...do not perform the main function of trade unions in the accepted sense of the word – defence of the rights, the standard of living and the working conditions of the workers. Instead, they are used by the state machinery as yet another organ of labour supervision, of enforcement of labour discipline and, above all, of driving the worker relentlessly to greater and greater exertions.

The justification for this changed role of unions in a communist state...
The Role of the Trade Unions

is relatively straightforward. According to T. Nikolayeva, a Secretary of the Soviet All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), 1 when the working class took power, there appeared a qualitatively new content of trade union activities, a cardinal change in their tasks, their role and place in the State system, in their functions and forms of work. It is also argued officially that 'The position of the trade unions changes basically with the victory of the Socialist revolution. From an organisation of an oppressed class they turn into an organisation of the ruling class and become one of the major institutions of Socialist democracy.'

In theory, then, since the trade unions represent the working class, and since the working class is said to hold state power and owns the means of production and means of exchange, any trade union criticism of, or opposition, to the state or management would be tantamount to the working class fighting against itself. Unions in a communist state are thus asked to view any type of disruptive industrial action such as strikes or work stoppages not only as harmful to the national interest, but also as totally illogical and therefore intolerable.

Consequently, while the communist approach to trade union activities in non-communist countries subordinates the defence of workers' interests to the political struggle against the state system, the approach to unionism in communist countries demands 'responsible' conduct, making the rights of members and unions subordinate to the development of industrial production and maintenance of the state system. The definition of a trade union most frequently cited in communist countries in this connection is the one by Lenin that it is 'a school of administration, a school of economic management, a school of communism'. Leonid Brezhnev added to this doctrinal corpus, in his address to the 16th Congress of the Soviet Union on 21 March 1977, as follows:

The Soviet trade unions have been, and remain, a school of communism in which people learn to live and work in communist style. A new spiritual type of man is moulded in this school. It cultivates the lofty qualities of worker-internationalists. It cultivates loyalty to the unfolding slogan, 'Workers of all countries, unite.' As time passes and the situation changes, new tasks are always arising, but the road indicated by Lenin remains the only true and correct one.

This was reiterated by the party's Central Committee in its list of slogans for 1 May 1979. Slogan 17 reads: