The pandemic has clearly been used as an opportunity by the employing class, with estimates that 10% of workers in Britain have been threatened with being fired and rehired (a means to undermine working conditions). Whoever governs them, states simply prop up the capitalist system. Huge strikes of nurses and oil workers are ongoing in New Zealand and Iran, and in July riots erupted in Cuba and Eswatini. But here in Liverpool and the rest of the UK there has been no mass resistance, despite the added threat of a draconian crime bill and now a further £33 million cut to the Council budget. However, a few workers are fighting back.

Throughout August, RMT members at East Midlands Trains (who run services from Liverpool to Sheffield and Nottingham) are striking every Sunday. The same is happening in Hull and Scotland. On the railway, nationalisation is being used as an opportunity to threaten jobs (in the same way that any re-organisation, privatisation or outsourcing is used to attack workers), so expect to see more actions as the year continues.

The University of Liverpool dispute continues, with UCU members striking from the 4th to the 14th of August, which targets results day. Why not pop down to a picket line to show your support? The strikes have been effective, with compulsory redundancies currently down from 47 to 2.

Self-organised Deliveroo riders also staged a one-hour wildcat (unofficial) strike on Bold Street on the 26th of July, and are looking to take further action in the future.

Brief symbolic actions, following a stifling official process, letting bureaucrats manage our struggles, will only get us so far. But these strikers are leading by example, and struggles have the potential to spread, to become militant, and to be controlled by the workers themselves. Then, when we see how ordinary people can manage their own affairs, we will discover that we don’t need rulers. But all of this starts in the present, with me and you, with supporting and talking to those in struggle, and looking for ways to take direct action in our own lives.

### The 1951 Dockers Strike

In 1951 the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), now Unite, signed off a weekly two shilling pay rise. In Birkenhead the unofficial Port Workers’ Committee (PWC) saw the increase as inadequate and called a mass meeting, which then voted for strike action. When 2,000 men walked out on the 2nd of February, their union the TWGU denounced them. Nonetheless within a few days the strike spread to Liverpool and Manchester, and in less than a week 12,000 had joined (including 450 sympathisers in London). On the 6th a representative of the Manchester Canal Company stated that all work was at a standstill, despite 23 ships being in port. This shows how effective the wildcat strike was; however, it failed to spread nationally.

On February 9th, Special Branch disrupted a
PWC meeting in East London and arrested seven men (4 from London, 2 from Birkenhead and 1 from Liverpool) stating that “under Order 1305, strikes and lockouts are illegal”. This law had been introduced during WWII under the promise that it would be removed afterwards, something which the Labour Party never did. That evening over 6,000 dockers in London, alongside 11,000 in Merseyside, walked out in protest. Later the workers decided to return to work but to do 24-hour solidarity strikes every time the seven appeared at court.

At the Old Bailey, Labour MP Hartley Shawcross of St Helens led the prosecution. The TGWU gave evidence against the strikers, with the Liverpool District Secretary being a chief witness. Evidence also came from police officers, one plainclothes detective stated he hadn’t missed a portworkers’ meeting since 1945! However, the dockers weren’t prepared to sit by while their fellow workers were victimised. Seven solidarity strikes took place under the slogan: “When they’re in the Dock, we’re out of the Dock”. Thousands, such as the anarcho-syndicalist Albert Grace, demonstrated loudly outside of the court during proceedings. The London PWC also raised money for their legal defence, which argued that there was not a “trade dispute” since the dockers were in a dispute with their union not management.

On April 17th as 8,000 dockers waited outside to hear the verdict, the jury announced it could not agree on whether there was a “trade dispute” and so the Labour Party, facing the threat of further strikes, dropped their charges and let the seven free. The crowd carried them triumphantly on their shoulders, only to be charged by mounted police. The three from Merseyside were met with a similarly warm welcome from dockers at Lime Street station. In the end the Labour government and TGWU were made to look cruel, stupid and unprincipled, and on August 14th Order 1305 was withdrawn.

One docker, John Magginnis, recounted how the TGWU treated its members in Liverpool at the time: “All strikes, large or small, and there were some very large ones at the end of the war and after, were unofficial. They were led by port workers’ committees, members elected at the dock gates. Trade union officials, from the highest to the lowest, were hated. We worked in dirty, unhealthy, dangerous conditions. But, if the men had a grievance and sent for the delegate (trade union official) he would walk round the sheds, straight into the office, come out, walk past the men without saying a word and you would find out later from the employer’s representative that nothing had changed. The favourite phrase of delegates was: “My hands are tied, what can I do?”

The TGWU had no shop stewards, its paid officials were appointed not elected and it sought a partnership with management; in the words of another Liverpool docker they had “become our masters instead of our servants.”

In contrast local PWCs were elected from mass meetings, and subject to immediate recall. Their role was to regularly report back to and organise mass meetings, which would then decide the next course of action. Some went further, Birkenhead PWC had its own paper, The Portworkers’ Clarion, with a circulation of 1,500 and even affiliated to a Trotskyist international!

Birkenhead PWC, hoping to escape the issues found in the TGWU, helped to organise a mass defection to another union in the mid-1950s. However, this union acted in a similar manner, with paid officials, regardless of their past militancy, being more interested in legalities and a cosy relationship with the bosses than direct action. Others attempted to reform the TGWU from within, but Unite suffers from many similar issues to this day. Rank-and-file organising continued but was hindered by constant conflict with officials and an inability to access strike funds. If the PWCs were capable of causing mass defections, then they could have consolidated their own system of mass meetings and recallable delegates into a union. If they avoided structural issues such as developing a paid bureaucracy, then they might have maintained a members led union based on direct action (what we would call syndicalism). •
NO PRIDE IN THE BBC

Liverpool Pride normally takes place on the 31st of July. The queer anarchist group 'Louder than Proud' typically hold an “anti-capitalist dance riot” on the side of their route, to drown out the bigots protesting the parade, while also taking a stand against the corporate nature of Pride itself.

With Pride cancelled this year and Louder than Proud defunct, Liverpool Solidarity Federation decided to continue the tradition. Around 25 people gathered outside of BBC Merseyside to protest transphobia in the media. In general the BBC insists on inviting transphobes to debate trans people, in the name of “balance”. If this is unacceptable for racism or sexism, why should transphobia be any different? Their director general, Tim Davie, also banned staff from attending Trans Pride marches. Transphobia is all over the pages of our papers, from the Guardian to the Daily Mail, and this fuels the discrimination that contributes to disproportionately high rates of homelessness, unemployment and even the recent spate of street violence in Liverpool.

Unfortunately, two Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) insisted on intimidating a woman for having a sign which read “fuck transphobia”. But she bravely stood her ground and they couldn’t do anything. However, if the crime bill comes into law, carrying this sign could actually be a criminal offence - so much for free speech! PLOs can be identified by their blue bibs, and they come across as friendly, but their role is to gather information to undermine protestors. The Green & Black Cross recommend that people “ignore them, walk away if approached and never take pieces of paper from them”.

The protest was warmly received, with music catching the attention of passers-by. The only issue was that the BBC building itself was shut! Nonetheless it was good to have a visible and political event for Pride.

THE UNION: PART I

The class struggle is a means by which we can not only fight for improvements in our daily lives, but also confront the systems of domination and exploitation that shape our society. Isolated, powerless, and competing for survival as individual workers, we can build collective strength and bonds of solidarity in a union. Yet the trade unions today come across as little more than insurance schemes, giant bureaucratic institutions that are thoroughly integrated into the capitalist economy.

We can define a union as a structured association of workers, organised to further their interests. The reformist union adds to this foundation of collective organisation the role of representing workers to their masters. Paid officials negotiate with bosses and lobby politicians on behalf of their members, offering in return guarantees of an orderly and productive workforce. They therefore mediate between the two classes and their opposing interests.

Membership must be driven up in order to give legitimacy to the representative role of the union in the eyes of the bosses, to gain influence within the labour movement, and to pay for the salaries of various officials, executives, and lawyers.

To reach a deal with management, the union must be able to promise industrial peace, which means that it must have the capacity to control and discipline its members. Sometimes the union will behave militantly and push for confrontation so as to attract new members and gain a reputation, but a point is always reached at which the struggle must be restrained or suppressed altogether because it is no longer in the interests of the union bureaucracy.

Elections and ballots add a democratic element to such unions, but they are essentially a top-down
affair, a hierarchy with a few powerful people at the top, and an ordered mass membership at the bottom. Having a seat at the table of class collaboration and earning an attractive salary with good career prospects, union bureaucrats have institutional interests separate from the workers they represent, and a stake in the status quo. No doubt many workers with ideals and integrity begin climbing this ladder, but they will quickly be integrated into, or neutered by, the bureaucracy. At the level of the unionised workplace it is possible to act independently of official control to some extent if the workers are militant enough, and shop-stewards remain workers among workers, but it is an uphill battle.

From the strike to the go-slow, there are many tactics available, and the strength of any union lies in the direct action of its members. But the energy and initiative of workers is quickly dissipated into bureaucratic and legalistic procedures. Managed by officials and restricted by the law, action becomes regimented and less effective. Struggles are kept isolated (i.e. under control) in a particular workplace or sector, and contained within the union, which will only coordinate with other unions if a position of weakness forces it to. This fragments the working class and prevents these struggles from escalating and spreading.

Centralism and hierarchy produce passivity, and vice versa. Most members will participate little in their union beyond paying dues. The best that such a union can offer its members is a sense of security, but at worst it will simply reinforce resignation and disillusionment. Politics are exported to the Labour Party, to which the union owes allegiance (and funding) and to which the ordinary worker is a mere pawn. Out of such an experience there is no potential for personal or social transformation. The union of this kind is reformist in the sense that it does not oppose the capitalist system - with its division of classes based on property and exploitation - but merely seeks to defend the economic conditions of a section of workers within it.

Workers have continually found ways to circumvent many of the obstacles described above, such as rank-and-file associations at the shop floor level, and wildcat strikes in defiance of all due process. As anarchists we seek to support other workers wherever and whenever they confront their exploiters and oppressors, regardless of union membership, but also to encourage them to push beyond the limits that bind them. Ultimately, however, we must find a different route to express the revolutionary potential of class struggle. The anarcho-syndicalist union offers one such alternative, and will be explored in part two.

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The Liverpool Anarchist is written by individual members of the Solidarity Federation, an anarcho-syndicalist union. We aim to publish monthly and welcome all contributions in accord with our basic ideas. We advocate working class direct action to improve our lives here and now while building a revolutionary movement to do away with capitalism, the state, and all other hierarchies.

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