

The Trade Unions of Albania by Bill Bland

Even before the advent of the developed capitalist economy which exists in Britain today, individual workers were finding their ability to defend and improve their wages and working conditions extremely limited.

Thus, trade unions came into existence as collective organisations of workers, as essentially organs of working-class struggle against the employing class - a struggle which, from time to time, breaks out into the open battles of the strike and the lockout.

Albania in the 1930s was rather similar to Britain in the 15th century. Its society was semi-feudal. There were many small workshops, but no large factories. The working class was tiny. Under the Zog dictatorship (1924-39) and the occupation of the fascist powers (1939-44), trade unions were banned. Consequently, workers' organisations were either local and clandestine, or were disguised as "friendly societies". Strikes, of course, were also illegal, although there were some notable examples - such as the oil-workers' strike in Kuçova (now Stalin Town) in 1935.

Then came the War of National Liberation, led by the Communist Party of Albania, founded in 1941; during its course, this became transformed from a national struggle into a socialist revolution.

Thus, Liberation in November 1944 not only freed Albania from foreign occupation, but also established a new society in which political power lay in the hands of the working class. Then, still under the leadership of the Communist Party (now the Party of Labour), the working people proceeded to abolish the undeveloped capitalist society and to construct a planned socialist economy.

As part of this process, trade unions came into existence in Albania for the first time on January 11th, 1945. From the outset these naturally had a somewhat different role to play from the trade Unions in a capitalist country. For here the working people owned the factories, mines, etc. through the medium of a state which they controlled. There was no employing class, living on the unpaid labour of the workers and against which they had to struggle for a more favourable division of the value they produced, for better wages and conditions. With the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, workers in Socialist Albania receive the full value of the labour they perform - either directly in wages, or indirectly in social services. Thus, were the oil-workers, for example, to go on strike for higher wages, this demand could only be met by raising the incomes of the oil-workers above the full value of their labour and reducing those of other sections of the working class below the full value of their labour. In other words, the oil-workers would be exploiting their fellow workers. Nevertheless, in Socialist Albania the primary function of the trade unions remains to defend and improve the wages and working conditions of their members.

The difference lies in how this function is carried out. In a genuine socialist society, the only way in which the standard of life of the working people as a whole can be improved is by the advance of social production, by the improvement of labour productivity, by the introduction of new techniques and inventions.

Only rarely does this involve struggle against management and this occurs only when a management has become bureaucratic and is holding back the development of production - and so of the standard of life of the workers. It does, however, involve raising the socialist political consciousness of the workers and this under the leadership of the Party of Labour - is a very important function of the Albanian trade unions. They are, in Lenin's words:

" . . 'transmission belts' from the vanguard to the masses of the advanced class . . a school of communism".

But the changed role of the trade unions in Socialist Albania in no way signifies that they are impotent or under state control. On the contrary, they are extremely powerful - a factory trade union branch, for example, has the power to remove the factory director in a case such as that touched upon in the last paragraph.

Each factory trade union branch signs an annual collective agreement with management specifying wages and working conditions in detail for each grade of worker; it is responsible for supervising the application of the safety regulations applicable to the plant; it runs the factory canteen and health centre, and its sports centre; it must approve any disciplinary measure proposed by the management against a worker (for such things as persistent lateness, absenteeism, damage to equipment resulting from negligence, etc.); it elects representatives to the local council committees concerned with schools, health centres, housing allocation, etc., relevant to its members and their families.

All draft legislation relating to work must be approved by the trade unions before being placed before the People's Assembly. They participate in the drawing up of production plans at all levels - including the national Five-Year Plans. They organise competitions between different factories and districts to stimulate invention and productivity (a process known as socialist emulation). And they run holiday hotels for their members in the countryside, in the mountains and by the sea, at which a fortnight's holiday costs about two day's pay.

Organisation

Until 1957 separate trade unions existed for the principal branches of industry. It was found, however, that in the conditions of Socialist Albania this brought about unnecessary duplication of staff, buildings, etc. In this year, therefore, the trade unions were amalgamated into a single organisation - the Trade Unions of Albania (TUA). This now has 610,000 members - almost 100% of the working class. Members earning less than 450 leks a month pay dues of 1 lek per month in dues, those earning between 450 and 700 leks pay 2 leks, and those earning over 700 leks pay 3 leks.

The TUA holds a congress every four years - the last (the 9th.) having been held in June 1982. It was attended by 2,000 delegates, of whom 37% were women. The congress elects a managing body called the General Council, composed of 151 members, and the General Council in turn elects a Presidium of 21 members and four committees for various sections of workers:

- 1) for industrial, mining and power workers;
- 2) for agricultural;
- 3) for building; and
- 4) for workers in distribution and culture.

Today, forty years after the socialist revolution, Albania has been transformed from the most backward country in Europe into what is socially the most advanced country in the world. It is at present the only country in the world to have a fully centrally planned socialist economy. This has brought about an increase in industrial production in these forty years of 151 times, in agricultural production of 5 times.

Unemployment, like illiteracy, has been eliminated, and the right to work and to choose one's occupation is written into the Constitution.

In place of world-wide inflation, as production rises the prices of consumer goods constantly falling, while wage levels rise. To avoid the possibility of the creation of any privileged stratum, income differentials are limited to 2:1 (in contrast to more than 6,000:1 in Britain).

There is a completely free and non-contributory health service.

Pensions too are non-contributory, and retirement pensions (fixed at 70% of last wages) are payable as young as 50 in some occupations. Women have been to a great extent socially liberated, and now form 47% of the work force). There is, of course, equal pay for equal work. A constantly expanding network of restaurants, laundries and schools is freeing both men and women from many of the household nursery tasks which interfere with the living of a full social life.

And in all these developments, the Trade Unions of Albania have played no insignificant role.