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**ARCHIVES IN  
TRADE UNION  
HISTORY AND THEORY**

**Democracy or Disruption**  
Tom Mann

Series 2 No. 7

OCTOBER BOOKS  
4B TEMPLE COURT  
LIVERPOOL 2  
A C.P.B.M.L. BOOKSHOP

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## INTRODUCTION

Following the defeat of the General strike of 1926, Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary that this would mark

"The death gasp of that pernicious doctrine of 'workers' control' . . . introduced into British working-class life by Tom Mann." (1)

Before the Strike, the General Council of the TUC had written, on November 25, 1925, to all trades councils, informing them that the Council

"could not approve of affiliation with the National Minority Movement." (2)

This movement had been established in August 1924, under Tom Mann's presidency, on the initiative of the Communist Party. In his speech to the founding conference, Harry Pollitt declared

"we are not out to disrupt the unions, or to encourage any new unions. Our sole object is to unite the workers in the factories by encouraging the formation of factory committees; to work for the promotion of one union for each industry; to strengthen the local trades councils . . . We stand for a General Council that shall have the power to direct, unite and co-ordinate . . . in order to secure, not only our immediate demands, but to win complete workers' control of industry." (3)

The new movement was able to obtain a considerable initial success. It rallied not only the communists, but the remnants of the wartime Workers' Committee Movement in the engineering industry, and spread its influence among mineworkers as well. 200,000 workers had been represented at the 1924 Conference. By March 1926 the Movement's conference drew delegates representing nearly a million. On the General Council, Hicks, Swales, Purcell and Cook gave tacit support right up to the time of the Strike. But Cook alone maintained a friendly position after the 1926 defeat. (4)

In January 1927, the General Council toughened its stance. In March it sent a second instruction to Trades Councils, withdrawing recognition from any which remained affiliated. (5)

At Congress, V. Beacham of the House and Ship Painters moved reference back. He was supported by W. Allan of the Miners' Federation, who was subsequently repudiated from the rostrum by Herbert Smith, the miners' President. (Smith later secured a delay in the taking of the card vote in order to poll his delegation, and was able to carry it for the point of view of the platform).

Wright of the NUGMW, Citrine, Walker of the Iron and Steel Trades, and J.H. Thomas of the NUR were among those who upheld the General Council's report, while Pollitt, representing the Boiler-makers, and Clark of the AEU, spoke in favour of rejecting it.

The outcome was a very large card vote for the General Council's view: 148,000 for the reference back, 3,746,000 against. (6)

In spite of this, the minority movement was anything but smashed by the decision to proscribe it. "The movement was smashed from inside" (7) writes Roderick Martin. Brian Pearce and others have documented the effects of the vicissitudes of communist policy in the late 'twenties on both the Minority Movement itself and the parallel National Left-Wing movement in the Labour Party. (8)

The fact that the movement did not crumble upon receiving the formal interdiction of the TUC is well-attested by the subsequent polemics which broke out. In December 1927, Walter Citrine, the TUC General Secretary, began a series of articles entitled *Democracy or Disruption*, directed against the Minority Movement.

Tom Mann replied to the first of these in the *Sunday Worker* of December 11, 1927. His reply is interesting, not only because it shows that Beatrice Webb was a little premature in announcing a funeral: but also because of the nuances in his argument. "We aim" he writes "at applying the princi-

*ple of Workers' Control in the shops, factories, mills, mines, ships and railroads until we get complete control."* (emphasis in the original).

This formula is rather different from Harry Pollitt's speech to the founding conference of the Movement three years earlier, which speaks of a struggle to secure "not only our immediate demands, but to win complete workers' control of industry." The disjunction is an interesting one: there are immediate demands, and there is an ultimate goal. In Mann's view, however, the immediate demands are linked with the goal, whose principles will be "applied" up to the point where the goal itself can be attained.

The Minority Movement fell apart in a series of convulsive arguments which did not relate to this central problem of the advance to workers' control. It is a pity that these nuances were never argued out more explicitly, and understood more widely, at the time.

Perhaps, who knows, such an argument might have helped the Movement to keep its eye on the ball?

Ken Coates

- (1) "Beatrice Webb's Diaries" 1924 - 32 edited by M. Cole, Longmans, pp 92 - 3
- (2) "TUC Report", 1927, p 151
- (3) cf Alan Hutt "The Postwar History of the British Working Class", Gollancz, 1937, pp 93 - 4.
- (4) "The National Minority Movement": Proceedings of the Society for the Study of Labour History, May 1968: "Bulletin" of the Society, 1968.
- (5) "TUC Report", p 151
- (6) Ibid pp 318 - 331, p 336
- (7) Roderick Martin, lecture to Labour History Society, cf note 4 above.
- (8) "The Communist Party & The Labour Left", Reasoner Pamphlets, Halifax 1957. "Some Rank-&-File Movements", Labour Review, 1957.

## " DEMOCRACY OR DISRUPTION "

-- A REPLY

Mr. Citrine's Attack on Minority Movement - What Militants Really Stand For

By TOM MANN

Mr. Walter Citrine, Secretary of the T. U. C. General Council, commences in this month's "Labour Magazine" a series of articles under the title "Democracy or Disruption" in which he states:- "The organisation which has been most noticeably active in spreading Communist propaganda within the Trade Unions and of exerting a disruptive influence is the National Minority Movement."

Mr. Citrine admits that the N. M. M. is regarded by some of the best Trade Unionists as "the embodiment of the spontaneous and praiseworthy activity of earnest and militant Trade Unionists," and quotes myself as saying at the M. M. Conference in 1925: "This is not an anti-Trade Unionist Movement, and we are not disruptionists."

"But, says the critic, "there is another conception which views the Minority Movement as an agency for organised misrepresentation and distortion of the true aims and objects of the Trade Unions, and as one which trades on the enthusiasm and keenness of many active workers, and exploits unceasingly legitimate economic discontent."

And Citrine says he believes the latter is the correct view. He says an attempt has been made by the M. M. to claim that it is the natural outcome and development of previous movements, such as shop stewards, shop committees, and amalgamation movements, but the critic promises to show that this is not so.

We have stated in the plainest of language, and on many occasions, what we stand for, but it is well to do it again. We know and declare that the ever-improving methods of work results in increased unemployment and the lowering of the workers' standards, so to meet this tentatively we demand reduced working hours and higher wages.

We aim at applying the principle of Workers' Control in the shops, factories, mills, mines, ships, and railroads until we get complete control.

As machinery with which to accomplish this we are thorough believers in the Trade Unions, and we hold that every worker ought to be in a union; therefore we stimulated the agitation, and still do so, for One Hundred Per Cent. Trade Unionism.

We have always held and advocated that, although the Unions at present have very grave faults, they are Working Class organisations, and can be made, and must be made, thoroughly efficient.

We are painfully aware of the weakness of Trade Unions because the multiplicity of sectional Unions makes solidarity impossible.

Therefore we are heartily in favour of the amalgamation of all the sectional Unions in an industry, believing in the urgent necessity for industrial unionism. Instead of over 1, 100 Unions which we now have, we contend that thirty - one for each industry - would be ample.

We do not believe in the principle of collaboration and negotiation with the employers to perpetuate the capitalist system. We are perfectly sure that the capitalist system is decadent, and the sooner it is dead the better, so we will do nothing to stabilise it, and we hold that those who do are consciously or unconsciously the enemies of the Workers.

This it is that brings us in sharp contrast and opposition to those Trade Union officials that do acquiesce in the proposals of capitalist employers whose basis for negotiation always will be the perpetuation of the profit-making system.

Well-informed Trade Unionists know that the movements for reduced working hours, increased wages, abolition of overtime, and the periodic struggles in the Unions for improved conditions have

been made possible by the special activities of minorities who have tackled the work, carried on the agitation, and pioneered the movement to success.

These minorities have been known by various names: Vigilant societies, unofficial committees, rank and file movements, and so on. And it only requires a glance at the names of active members of the M. M. to see that many of those who have been active in the past are still carrying on the pioneer work.

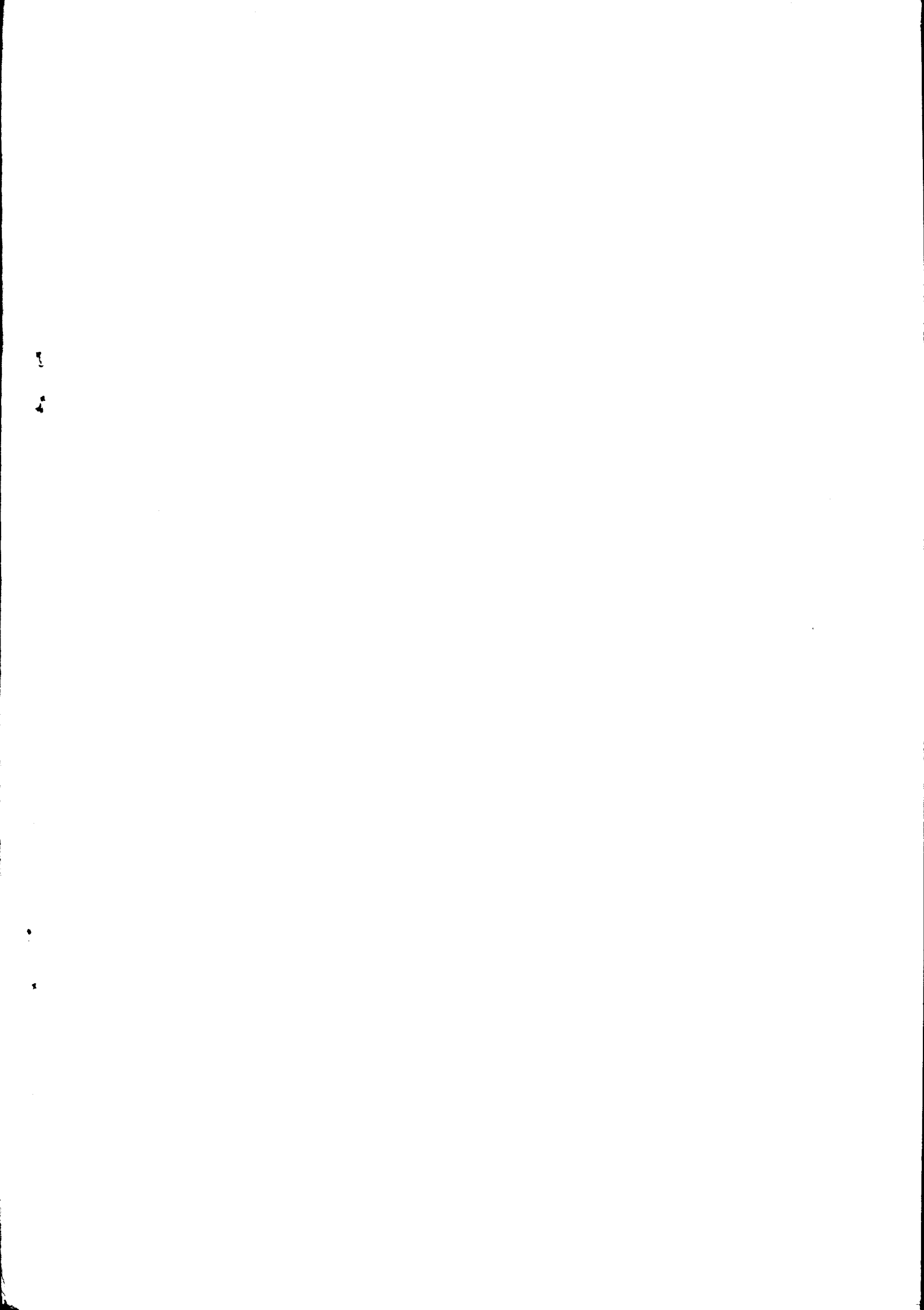
In 1900, preceeding the exceptional Union activities of 1911, there was a considerable agitation carried on by a minority under the name of the Industrial Syndicalists. A. A. Purcell was closely identified with that movement, and presided at a successful conference in Manchester in December of that year. A series of pamphlets were published that stimulated the activity which resulted in the successful transport struggle of 1911.

For myself, my work in the Left Wing phase of the Movement began well over forty years ago, and in 1889-90 we had an unprecedented movement among dockers, gasworkers, and unskilled men generally, which raised the standard of all.

The orthodox officials of that time denounced us, and Mr. George Shipton, of the London Trades Council, wrote an abusive article in "Murray's Magazine," to which Ben Tillett and I replied in pamphlet form.

From that time on I have ever been working in association with men who aimed definitely at making the Trade Union Movement the great Working Class agency through which we shall not only combat the capitalists by checking their attempts to lower the Workers' standard of life, but by which we shall ultimately achieve our complete economic emancipation.

In our efforts to force the Unions to fill their proper role we are often confronted with the hostility of reactionary officials, and we hold it to be our duty to help the rank and file overcome their policy. But we gladly support all officials who honestly help on the class struggle on behalf of the Workers. Those officials who now feel the draught should mend their ways, and we shall gladly support and back them.



**Published by The Institute for Workers' Control, Bertrand Russell House,  
45 Gamble Street, Forest Road West, Nottingham NG7 4ET.  
Telephone 0602/74504**

**Subscription only – £1 for eight numbers.**

**Printed by The Partisan Press Ltd., T.U., U.K.**