THE history of Soviet trade unions has not yet been written but this serious monograph fills a greatly felt need until a more definitive and comparably objective work comes to the fore.

Despite their divergent approaches to unionism in both the capitalist bloc and the USSR, there are common denominators stemming directly from the nature of our industrial complex — work methods, systems of remuneration, financial inducements for new inventions and the system of productivity. Yet these similarities must not be over stressed since the STUs have been conditioned and their direction determined by the exigencies of a planned economic and socialist order.

The evolution of the STUs (Soviet Trade Unions) is inseparable from the legacy of Czarism. The take-off occurred late; and the fortunes of the trade union movement were indissolubly linked to cyclical forces and the rapacity of police crackdowns. More crucial was that the leaders of the movement saw the impasse into which Czarism had run, and the bulk of its militant leadership departing from the canons of German revisionism, British Fabianism and American Gompersism glimpsed no alternative to a further consolid­ated advance of the working class other than by the overthrow of the Romanov autocracy. Political demands partnered economic demands.

Background of Revolution

The Soviet economy is an integrally planned one — industry and agriculture — and although there may be minor administrative differences between the various republics, the same fundamental socialist objectives are pursued in every nook and cranny of the Union. Hence the all-Union uniformity of the trade union structure.

It is precisely this revolutionary trade union spirit and unity of purpose before October 1917 that constitutes the essential background for understanding the shifts and strategies after that historic landmark. It moulded the character of the unions, for it was this vigorous and politically conscious elite in the trade union leadership that ultimately gave political leadership; and this also accounts for the close relationship between the Communist Party and the trade unions. The authors note: “Consultation and co-ordination of policy are facilitated by the interlocking memberships which exist in the organs of Government, the Party and the trade unions. There are former trade union leaders who occupy positions in the Council of Ministers or in the State Commissars of this Council,... Some of the prominent positions in the trade union movement are held by leading members of the Communist Party,... Whatever positions these leaders occupy they will always be concerned in establishing and promoting policies which will be carried out by the Government, the Party and the trade unions for the same common ends.”

In his pamphlet What Is to be Done (1902) Lenin had blueprinted the functions of trade unionism in the new society, but the aftermath of October engendered a rich crop of con­flicting doctrinal views. Unfortunately the doctrinal debates between the various factions of the trade union movement are inadequately treated. These debates possess great historic value to the less developed countries where the trade union movement is called upon to be a powerful and mobilising social force. The reader will find a more adequate treatment of these theoretical debates in the monumental work of E H Carr. In the trade union movement, the doctrine that the unions should, in Lenin’s phrase, be “a school of communism” triumphed over the Trotskyite thesis of the militarization of the trade unions.

Role of the Party

The directional flow of the STUs has not been as unruffled, as the authors would like us to believe. And it is inaccurate to assert that “from 1930 onwards there was no fundamental disagreement concerning the respective roles of the Party and the unions.” Several trade union leaders were imprisoned, others executed. Economic ascendency in that decisive first decade of Soviet growth witnessed the eclipse in practice, though not in theory, of the STUs. They were not consulted in matters of planning and in specific cases where they were consulted, consultation was of a perfunctory nature. Their attributes had ceased to be creative in the Leninist sense of the term.

Affiliated to a Central Body

It is interesting to speculate whether it would have been possible to achieve that breakneck speed of development that ultimately beat back the Fascist onslaught without the constraints of Stalinism. We need no reminder that Stalinism, both in its larger setting and in its effects on the STUs, was a product of certain specific historical forces and not inherent within a socialist order. The authors note that the USSR and its institutions are rapidly evolving. In summarizing these changes they declare:

“The mission had long and searching discussions with factory and trade union officials. It was struck by their knowledge and ability and it noted their confidence in the future of their country. It learned that the aim of equalling the production of the United States is not merely a Moscow slogan but is regarded as a realistic programme upon which the whole people is confidently engaged.”

A unifying factor is that the STUs are industry-wide and affiliated to a single central body. This conjuncture has been generated by historical forces rather than by dic-
tation from above. Indeed, the Mensheviks were inclined toward craft unionism, the Bolsheviks towards industrial unionism in order to mobilise trade union strength for revolutionary aims and hence were led to centralise and unify control over the movement.

**Strike Can Yet Be Effective**

Central to the STUs is their interdependence with the Communist Party of the USSR. The Preamble to the Rules of the Trade Unions 'tale: 'The Soviet trade unions, which are mass non-party public organisations unite, on a voluntary basta, workers and other employees of all occupations, irrespective of race, nationality, sex or religious beliefs. The Soviet trade unions conduct all their activities under the guidance of the CP USSR. The trade unions of the USSR rally the masses around the Party and mobilise them for the struggle in the building of a communist society."

The classic Soviet retort to the denial of the right to strike is that there is no contradiction between the State and the workers and that the productive class relations are in harmony. This statement though logical within a socialist framework ignores the conditions under which a strike can be an effective counter-force against bureaucratic torpor as the 1056 Polish strikes dramatized. Of more recent vintage has been the vast unpublicized (but successful) strike of the Komsomols against intolerable working conditions in the virgin lands: these are indicators that even within a socialist society the strike weapon can be a cuttingly effective and creative force.

In discussing the right to strike it should be remembered that in Czarist Russia the trade union move-ment was largely illegal, its activities clandestine and with the advent of October 1917, more specifically after the first five year plan, new tasks were posed — tasks which had no precedent in history. Several agonising years were to pass before a well-structured organisation was created to meet the claims of a new order.

The present STU formation is the outcome of years of experimentation — and equally a direct reflection of the changes within Soviet society since 1956. Today there are 22 trade union, organisations with a membership of 53 million and this is the largest mass organisation. The STUs are constructed on two fundamental principles:

**A. That all persons employed in any one factory, state farm or other institution belong to the same union.**

**B. That each union embraces the employees of one segment of the national economy.** The upshot of this is that the STU possesses a cohesiveness which is remarkable for a multi-national state like the USSR. Besides the vertical structure which remains the dominant feature, trade union activity is also co-ordinated horizontally at the republican, territorial, regional and city levels via corresponding inter-union organisations.

**Phenomenal Growth of Unions**

The quantitative growth of the STUs is nothing short of staggering. From 1,450 in 1917, the total number of trade unions in Russia rose to 16,995 in 1928, 25,000 in 1940 and 52,780 in 1959. A significant characteristic, of trade union membership is the high percentage of students (4 million) belonging to higher and vocational schools. The report notes that the high percentage of membership in the STUs cannot be ascribed to the use of pressure, because membership carries with it certain benefits. And it is reported that there are a "number of trade union prerogatives such as the allotment of new apartments, allocation of places in rest homes and sanatoria, and grants in case of emergency; even though non-members are not excluded from consideration in these matters it is doubtful whether they would receive indenical treatment."

Yet those who are still outside the scope of the trade union movement are enormous: the bulk of collective farmers (save those workers in the maintenance and repair stations, and technicians of the former MTS'L members of the armed forces and priests. Under present Soviet legislation collective farmers are members of co-operatives (as distinct from operatives on State farms) and hence are part-owners of a farm and are not hired workers.

Another differentiating factor underlined by the Report between the STUs and their counterparts in capitalist countries is that there are no weak links in the trade union movement. Racial discrimination does not exist; and there is no discrimination on the basis of sex where the principle of equal pay for equal work is applicable. Women constitute 45 per cent of the labour force in the USSR. Further, the alienation of the white collar worker is not in evidence. Trade union membership of 'workers' in educational establishments are higher than the average and 97 per cent of them are unionised.

Accounting also for the high membership is that craft unionism does not exist with its conflicting claims and differing jurisdictional affiliations. Another feature of the STUs is that 'management' does not stand opposed to them, and several of the STU functions may be regarded in non-socialist countries as managerial prerogatives.

The fact is that management are also members of unions. This paradox, however, vanishes when the aims of the movement are seen in perspective. For indeed it is precisely with the director of the plant - who is the head of the plant hierarchy — that the local trade union negotiates. Both 'management' and the trade unions focus their attention on raising production and hence conflicts which arise are considered non-antagonistic.

**The Rules of Trade Unions**

Various levels of trade union structure are governed by The Rules of the Trade Unions' based on the principle of democratic centralism. According to Article 13 of the Rules, we note that:

a) All trade union bodies from the bottom up are elected by the membership and are accountable to them;

b) Trade union organisations decide all matters of union activity in conformity with the Rules of the Trade Unions of the USSR and the decisions of higher union bodies;

c) Trade union organisations pass their decisions by a majority vote of the membership; and

d) Lower trade union bodies are subordinate to higher ones.

The post-Stalin period has witnessed a tremendous encroachment
on managerial prerogatives by the STUs. This participation, however, did not have its historical roots in the period of war communism when several factories were taken over and managed by the workers themselves. This close linkage makes it possible, as stressed by the Central Committee of the (P in 1957, to "combine observance of the principle that management must remain in the hands of a single chief with effective supervision of management by the personnel."

The Mission dismisses the view widely held in the West, viz. that the STUs are not trade union in the proper sense of the word. They do not defend the interests of the workers of the USSR. The truth is that the STUs perform a wide range of functions and are not mere transmission belts of State power) cooperating with state bodies as well as performing functions which in other capitalist countries are governmental prerogatives.

On the strike question, the Mission reported that "provision is made for the unions to be associated with management in the running of the plants, in solving the problems of production and in ensuring that due attention is paid to the welfare of the workers. Provision is also made for the unions and the management to be continually in touch with each other, to have every opportunity of discussing points of disagreement and to appeal, if necessary, to higher authorities."

In Post-Stalin Era

What of the social significance of trade union ascendancy since the end of the Stalin era? It is apparent that the STUs have increased their power tremendously and that they are now associated with "planning activities in the individual plants, at the republic level and through the State Planning Commission." In an economy operating at open throttle the unions are now "being consulted on matters affecting production and labour protection and are being given greater responsibility for the provision and administration of the services necessary for the workers' welfare. Within the trade unions increasing use is being made of the practices of consultation, discussion and election."

As to whether this recent conspicuous process of integration between the organs of State power and the trade unions will lead to the disappearance of the unions at a higher stage of Soviet economic evolution, the authors objectively note that this is an issue "on which the reader must form his own judgement. They hasten to add, however, that "while the trade unions carry out their function in regard to the planning and organising of production, and while continuing their efforts for the protection and welfare of the workers, the unions remain one of the pillars of the Soviet system."

It is unfortunate that this monograph does not contain organisational charts of the STUs; and the absence of a bibliography and an index are serious lacunae. Nonetheless, this short work is a pioneer contribution and indispensable reading for the labour economist and trade unionist.