

studies in language & capitalism

Workers' Life: The Worker Correspondent (UK, 1928)¹

I. Importance of Worker Correspondents

Worker correspondents are much more than news writers. They are the nerves of the working-class movement. They not only send news of local happenings to be published in the workers' press; their reports serve as a guide and check in shaping the day-to-day policy of a workers' party.

When, for instance, the Communist Party organises a campaign over the country — an anti-war campaign, a Lenin week campaign, a textile campaign — the worker correspondents send news to the Communist press of how the campaign is going to their localities, and from their accounts one is able to tell how strongly the workers feel upon these things. Similarly, with the activities of other bodies — an industrial peace campaign by the T.U.C., a new Unemployment Act which puts heavier burdens on the unemployed workers, an Old Age Pensions Act — the flow of reports from all over the country enables us to gauge the attitude of the workers as a whole.

As far as the workers' press is concerned, without worker correspondents there can be no workers' press. The more worker correspondents, the better the press. Wherever two or three or more workers are gathered together there is room for a worker correspondent. In every mine, mill, factory, depot, workshop, village, T.U. branch, and Communist Party group there should be a worker who will write to the workers' press about everything that crops up.

II. The Workers' Press

The workers' press is a mirror reflecting the life and struggle of the workers in their fight to overthrow capitalism; it is the worker correspondents who throw the image on to the mirror.

The capitalist press gives news — but it gives it from the capitalist, the employers' point of view. The workers' press gives news — but it gives it from the workers' point of view. That is a very great difference. It is not the only difference, however.

The capitalist press “dopes” its news — suppresses important facts, twists remarks to mean something they do not mean, inserts misleading headings, says such and such a thing is

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true when the press simply hopes it is true. This habit of “doping” is so ingrained that it is not confined to stories about the working-class movement. Any worker who has witnessed an unusual incident and then seen a report of it in the capitalist press will realise this.

The workers’ press does not need to use these methods. The truth is good enough, and sometimes much more startling than “doped” stories.

A third difference between the workers’ press and the capitalist press is in the kind of news presented. The workers’ press gives news of the workers’ struggle; the capitalist press gives any “news” that will draw the attention of the workers away from the struggle. While *Workers’ Life* for instance, will give as its main item an impending attack on railway workers, the capitalist press will devote its columns to a murder in a railway carriage. Where *Workers’ Life* has a paragraph about some piece of tyranny in a textile mill, the capitalist press will have a paragraph about some royal visit to Bradford.

There are thus three main lines of difference:

1. The point of view (working-class viewpoint against capitalist-class viewpoint).
2. The method of treatment (straightforward news against “doped” news).
3. The kind of news (working-class struggle against anything but working-class struggle).

III. What to Write About

The kind of news that the workers’ press needs from its worker correspondents is any news having a bearing on the working-class struggle. Nothing that happens to the worker is unimportant. An accident in a factory, a local election, a sweating employer, a witty remark during a discussion, activities in the local Labour movement, a victimisation, an unemployed demonstration or a Board of Guardians scandal, a propaganda campaign, a wage reduction threat, bad conditions at a local workshop, as well as strikes and lockouts, present and impending; all these, however unimportant they may seem, are of interest to other workers fighting against the same things in other places.

If there can be one kind of news more important than another, it is news from the factory, mill, depot, mine, workshop and field. It is there, where the workers earns wages for himself and profits for his employer, that the robbery of the working class takes place; it is there that the class struggle is sharpest; and it is there that the most vital and valuable news will be obtained.

IV. Getting The News

The worker correspondent needs no special attribute or apparatus. He is an ordinary worker, going about his work in the usual way. He requires to do only this: to keep his eyes and ears wide open, to ask himself of anything he sees or hears, "Will it be useful for other workers to know about this?" And if he thinks it will be useful, he should jot it down and send it along to the workers' press.

The worker correspondent attending a branch or group or any other meeting may hear somebody casually remark, "So-and-So has got the sack." He will promptly see the possibility of an item in this, and will ask, "Why did he get the sack?" Suppose the answer is, "For checking the foreman." He will then follow up with, "Why did he cheek the foreman?" "What sort of a foreman was he?" "What do the other chaps say about it?" It might be necessary to go and have a talk with somebody else who was on the job at the time, in order to get the full facts, for the full facts are essential.

Having got his story the worker correspondent will take pen and paper and, just as if he were talking to his mates or writing a letter to his brother, he will write a letter to the workers' press.

V. The Regular Worker Correspondent

Some worker correspondents will like to extend their activities, to be a sort of local reporter for the workers' press, to become known as one who will "get things in the paper". They will find that not only is this work interesting, but they will get to know a tremendous amount about what is going on, They will find that instead of having to chase after an item of news, the news will come to them. They will find dozens and dozens of items that need publicity, but which have not received publicity because the workers concerned have not had the self-confidence to write, or do not know where to write, or cannot undertake what is to them the laborious task of writing things down. Often people prefer to make a long journey rather than write. On a recent afternoon a worker came to the *Workers' Life* office to tell of a very bad case of victimisation. He was provided at the office with pen and paper, and asked to write his story down. This request brought to his face an expression of pained surprise. "But I've walked all the way from Romford because I couldn't write it down", he said. Had this worker known of a worker correspondent at Romford he would have saved himself a long journey.

Often someone buying the *Workers' Life* will begin teffing the seller of a grievance he knows about or mention an affair that needs exposing; but because neither buyer nor seller feels competent to write (a pure delusion by the way, which will be dealt with later) nothing is

done. Now, if the seller of the paper were able to refer the buyer to the local worker correspondent and fix up for the two to have a talk, the difficulty would be removed.

In many cases, of course, it would not be advisable for a particular comrade to let himself become known as the one who sends local news to the *Workers' Life*, but it can nearly always be fixed so that everybody knows that there is someone who does this, though they cannot exactly say who out of a dozen or so might be responsible. In other cases it might be an advantage to insert the name of the local worker correspondent in *Workers' Life* in, say, the local notices place. This applies, of course, to comrades who are very active in getting and sending reports to *Workers' Life*.

At the same time it might be emphasised that even if you only write once or twice a year about things in which you are directly concerned, you are still a worker correspondent.

VI. What Happens to Worker Correspondents' Letters

It may be of use to worker correspondents to know what happens to their letters when they reach the offices of *Workers' Life*. All the letters that come by post are sorted into different trays. There are circulars from various societies and organisations, some of which are written up into paragraphs, and others left alone. There are letters asking for advice or information; these are put into the "reply" basket to be dealt with later. There are abusive letters and post-cards (invariably anonymous), and harmless epistles of which neither head nor tail can be made; these are put into a large basket under the table. Finally, and most important, there are the letters from worker correspondents; these are sorted under various heads: Party Life, Workers' Letters, Industrial News, Labour Party News, and Mining News.

First the Party Life and Workers' Letters are taken and sub-edited and sent to the printers. This is done on Monday. Letters have to be carefully scrutinised for inaccuracies and exaggerations (which are usually apparent in a careful reading of the letter), as well as for "fake" letters. In many letters also a vital fact is omitted—the name of a trade union involved, the name of a place, the date and so on. Usually these letters have to be put aside for further enquiry, and sometimes they cannot be used at all. If the story is important a wire is sent to the worker correspondent asking for further information.

After the Party News and Workers' Letters have been dealt with, the Industrial and Miners' news items are taken in hand and dealt with in the same way.

By Monday night there is usually enough material from worker correspondents to fill the space available. But on Tuesday comes a further series of letters; everything has to be gone

over again, cut down to a shorter length, and those items in Tuesday's post that can possibly afford to wait are put into the "Next Week" basket.

By Tuesday night the "copy", as it is called, has been set into type by the printers, proofs are sent to the editorial department, and the different items are arranged in the various columns and under their appropriate sections. Sometimes the items for a particular column are a little too long to fit, so they have to be cut, and one or two may have to be left out altogether. So each page is "made up", and as important late news comes in, less important items have to be cut down or held over to make room. By Wednesday noon the paper is finished.

VII. How to Write

The biggest mistake a worker can make is to imagine that there is an art in writing. You do not need either a "flair" for writing or a training. It is simply a matter of talking with your pen instead of with your tongue. Write as you would speak to a group of workers. If you feel like being humorous, be humorous. Write whichever way comes easiest to you. You will find short sentences the best. Don't worry about spelling.

Every news letter should answer six questions: *What, where, when, who, why, how*. If you cannot write a connected letter just set down the above six questions and answer them. For example:

What? Strike.

Where? Maitland's cotton mill, Blackburn.

When? Saturday.

Who? Weavers

Why? Victimisation of a member of mill committee for refusing to pay a fine.

How? Rest of mill committee went to see manager. He refused to take back victimised weaver. All weavers in the shed immediately stopped work, went to other sheds and brought out weavers. Strike expected to extend through whole mill.

Having managed that it will be easy to fill in further details.

As long as you answer these questions, whether it is in a hundred words or a thousand words, you have a complete story, and the hundred-word story will almost invariably be

better than the thousand-word story. Be brief. The shorter, the sharper. The longer, the duller.

Consider: there are thirty columns in the ordinary issue of *Workers' Life* of which, on an average, ten are available for letters from worker correspondents. There are 800 words to a column, which means that worker correspondents all over the country can between them occupy 8,000 words per week. Since *Workers' Life* receives each week at least 50 workers' letters which are "good" for publication, it means that to get them all in each letter should average about 160 words. Up to 400 words is a good length; 250 words is the best. And it is not often that the six questions — what, where, when, who, why, how — cannot be answered in 2 words.

Compare the story as you wrote it with the story as it appears in *Workers' Life*, and see how it has been "pruned". If you think it has been badly pruned, write and say so. You will usually find that the chief pruning occurs in the comments. It is a sound principle to let the news point its own moral. If it does not, one or two short phrases here and there or at the end, will serve to drive the lesson home. Don't let comment clutter up a news story.

Technical Points

- Write on one side of the paper only.
- Where a typewriter is used, triple spacing is best.
- If stories are written in longhand, leave a space between each line.
- Leave an inch margin.
- Number each page.
- Make your paragraphs as short as possible.
- Write two or three lines of heading to show what the story is about.
- See that your story reaches *Workers' Life* by Monday morning. If the matter is important, Tuesday morning will do.
- Where something happens too late for *Workers' Life* to receive it on Tuesday morning send a press telegram—60 or 80 words (according to the time of day) can be sent for it. Press telegrams should be addressed simply to "*Workers' Life*, London". *Workers' Life* cannot guarantee to refund the cost of a press telegram in every case, but will do so whenever a telegram is justified.
- News letters can be sent in a halfpenny stamped envelope as long as it is news for publication and contains no other message to the editor. The envelope should not be stuck down, and should have News for Press written in the top left-hand corner.

- There is no need to send full name and address after the first few occasions, provided a pen-name is used that will serve for identification.
- Having written a news letter to *Workers' Life*, see that the paper is distributed among the workers concerned.

VIII. Worker Correspondents as Propagandists

A worker correspondent's task is not simply to write plain news. His news should be presented in such a way that its wider bearing on the class struggle is apparent. He should help the workers to understand the political moral of the incidents about which he writes.

To do this effectively is one of the hardest things the worker correspondent must undertake. Inevitably, in drawing the moral, one tends to break out into a sermon. That tendency must be suppressed. One, two or three crisp, pointed phrases should be sufficient to link up the local item with the wider aspects of the case. Unfortunately many writers bury their news in a longer, rambling article.

On the other hand, there is the danger that a worker correspondent may lose himself entirely in the details of his news item and forget to fit it into the background of the general struggle.

It is necessary, especially in Great Britain, to break down the parochialism of the workers. Tradition — and the capitalist press — still makes the majority of workers think that what happens in other countries or even in other parts of their own country, is little concern of theirs. Many Scottish miners, for instance, do not realise that the operation of a wage cut in Durham vitally affects them. They do not understand that the closing of pits in Scotland, and subsequently a demand for lower wages from the Scottish owners, is due to competition in Durham, where production costs have been lowered by lowering wages.

In the same way few cotton textile workers in Lancashire realise that when the Bombay or Shanghai cotton mill owners force lower wages or longer hours on Indian or Chinese cotton workers, it is so much the worse for Lancashire workers, who will be asked, on the plea of competition for India and China, to accept wage-cuts or work longer hours.

It is in order to break down this narrow, self-centred outlook that *Workers' Life* devotes each week considerable space to news items from abroad.

Worker correspondents can themselves assist greatly in this task by drawing attention to these wider issues. For instance, in writing of a “cut” in Poor Relief in a particular locality, the worker correspondent would, if it is applicable, point out that it is a result of the Blanesburgh Act, an Act facilitated by the signatures of three “Labour representatives” to the Blanesburgh Report. Or in another case, the unemployed story might be given as an illustration of how the T.U.C. General Council’s attack on the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement reacts on the workers. Similarly with other stories—from the factory, workshop, local Labour movement, and so on — a timely reference to the national situation or to conditions in other countries serves to drive home the identity of interests.

IX. International Correspondence

One very important side of the worker correspondents’ job is writing to workers in other countries. This is different from writing to the workers’ press, since it is a correspondence between groups of workers in different countries who are interested in the same problems. The miners of a pit in Great Britain will be interested to correspond with the miners of a pit in the Don Basin, or in Silesia, or the Saar, Colorado, Broken Hill and so on. It will be the same with railwaymen, engineers, shipbuilders, textile workers, builders, agricultural workers and road transport workers. The letters will not always be for publication, though, where there are factory papers or wall newspapers, extracts at least will be published.

The letters should not be between individual workers, but between groups of workers; if possible, all the workers in a particular trade union branch, factory, shop, mine or depot should take part. The letters, translated if necessary will be passed round between the workers, who will send a collective reply. It is the job of the worker correspondent to gather up the ideas and suggestions of the other workers and combine them into a letter.

The contents of the letter should largely be guided by what the workers in the factory themselves want to say. A useful idea of what other workers want to know can be gauged from the results of a questionnaire sent round to all the worker correspondents in a big province of the U.S.S.R.

- (1) The life and customs of the workers. The general living conditions, wages, hours, cost of living and prices. Conditions of work, safety appliances or lack of them, holidays, unemployment, unemployment benefits, poor relief.
- (2) Activities of the trade unions. How are the unions organised? How many are there? Are there many unorganised workers, and why? How do the unions defend the interests of the Workers? Are strikes frequent in any particular industry? The attitude

of union officials to strikes. Are there many women in the unions? Are the militant members of the union being persecuted (either by the boss or by trade union officials)?

- (3) Women. The general conditions of life and work of women. Whether they have the same rights as men. The attitude of the Government towards mothers and children. Are women active in the unions? Are there kindergartens for children? How are the children brought up? Do the workers' wives support their husbands in strikes, lock-outs, and in their militant work, or do they try to stop them?
- (4) Youth. Hours and wages. Age limits. Safety appliances and health safeguards. Night work. Youth organisations.
- (5) The condition of industry and agriculture, especially technical development. Whether the industry is in a good or bad state.
- (6) The Army, Navy and Air Force. Conditions of work, pay, discipline. Are the Services allowed to take part in politics?
- (7) Religion. What kinds of churches are there? And how much influence have they upon the workers?

Here there are enough questions in answer to which several books might be written. No worker correspondent need suck his pen, thinking of something to say when the ideas of other workers have run dry.

Letters should be addressed to "Intercorr," *Workers' Life*, 29 Euston Road, London, N.W. 1, and there should be a covering letter saying to what country and to what kind of workers the letter is intended to be sent.

Workers Life will arrange for the letters to be translated where necessary, and for replies to be forwarded to the group of workers via the worker correspondent.

The organisation of international worker correspondence is one of the finest methods of creating mutual interest and fraternal relations between the workers of different countries, and so helping to secure international working-class unity.

Notes

1. This text was published as a pocket-sized pamphlet by *Workers' Life* (London 1928) and republished in Mattelart & Siegelau (eds) (1979) *Communication and Class Struggle Volume 1: Capitalism, Imperialism*, Bagnole, France: International Media Research Centre.