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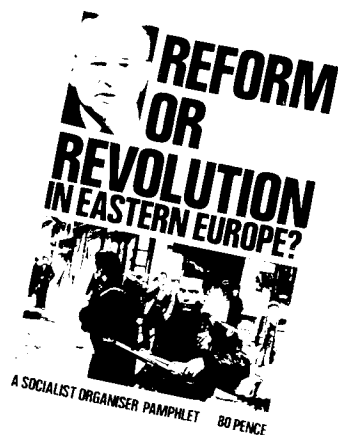
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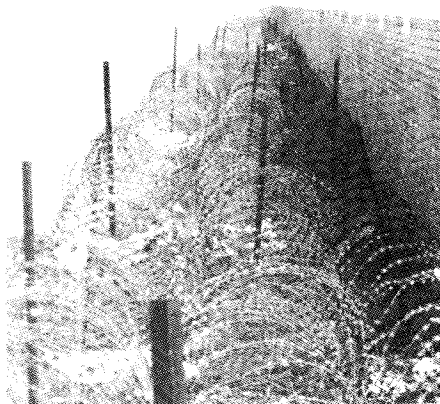


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All writers in a personal capacity. Socialist Organiser no 421-3, 11 November 1989. Published by J O'Mahony, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA, and printed by Press Link International (TU).





During the tube strike. Photo: Pam Isherwood, Format.

The road to recovery

By John O'Mahony

Margaret Thatcher came to power in June 1979, and immediately set about using the state power to cripple the labour movement.

A whole range of anti-trade-union laws have been put on the statute book, giving Britain the most illiberal labour laws this side of Stalinist Europe.

At the same time Thatcher set about demolishing large parts of British industry — steel, coal, shipbuilding. Britain was spiralling into slump. Thatcher and her

friends determined to sweat it out, letting unemployment rise higher and higher and using it to help depress, demoralise, and control the working class.

A full-scale Tory counter-revolution was launched, aimed at cutting social benefits, selling off nationalised industry to profiteers, and decimating the Health Service.

A decade later, Britain has been transformed into a happy hunting ground for the spivs and speculators, and a truly wretched place for many millions of working-class people. Thousands of homeless people throng the streets of Thatcher's capital city, many of them young people at the start of their adult lives who, thanks

to Tory policies, can get neither jobs nor any welfare benefits.

The unions are legally hamstrung and reduced to their lowest level of effectiveness for 50 or 60 years. The welfare state has been battered so that it is now a half-derelict slum.

Now Thatcherism has begun to crumble. There is huge dissatisfaction with the Tories, and a good chance that they can be driven from office. But ten years of Thatcherism have convinced large parts of the labour movement, Labour Party and trade unions alike, that the only realistic goal we can set ourselves now is a new right-wing Labour government — a government which will not even undo all the legal shackles that Thatcher has placed on the unions.

It could have been different — so different! When Thatcher came to power, the working-class movement was still immensely strong, and undefeated.

Five years earlier, in 1974, the miners had driven the Tory Government of Edward Heath from office. We could have done that to Thatcher. Mass unemployment had not yet sapped the strength and confidence of the movement.

What did the working class need in response to the slump and the prolonged crisis of capitalism which Thatcher, after 1979, set out to resolve for the bosses by

beating down the working class?

We needed socialism: the socialist revolution!

Now it was unlikely that a socialist revolution would be the first response of the British working class to Thatcherism and the slump.

What was immediately possible was an explosive rejection of the Tory Government's programme of making the working class pay, an explosive refusal by the workers who had been so militant in the previous period to let themselves be driven out of the factories on to the streets and the dole queues.

What was possible also was for the working class to impose a radical Labour government which was held accountable to the interests of the working class, and which depended for its ability to act on working-class mobilisation.

We didn't get that. What we got was a second and a third Tory election victory. We got a TUC veering to the right, unable even to be decent trade unionists.

Worse than the collapse at the top was the collapse of rank and file militancy. For two and a half decades the rank and file had been able largely to ignore the top union bureaucrats and to defy and even defeat governments. That rank and file militancy collapsed just when it was most needed.

There have been some industrial victories; but all in all industrial militancy has been at a low ebb.

There is reason to be depressed — but no reason to give in to the cosmic gloom and despondency which has overwhelmed sections of the left, and even of the "super-revolutionary" left around the SWP.

The sun rises and sets, and short of nuclear annihilation it is equally certain that the class struggle will revive. Even devastation like that inflicted on the Chilean workers in 1973 — and we are still far short of that — could not indefinitely prevent a revival of the class struggle there.

Despite the murderously unfavourable conditions, we have had some big trade union struggles in the '80s. The great miners' strike of 1984-5 was one of the epic struggles of the world labour movement. Even as late as that, we could have won, and crippled the Tories, if the miners had got the solidarity of other key sections of workers.

On two occasions during the miners' strike the dockers were briefly on national strike. Dockers and miners together could have beaten Thatcher. With competent leadership, the dockers would have served both their own immediate interests, and those of the working class in general, by raising the demand for the extension of the Dock Labour Scheme to the unregistered ports and joining the miners in an onslaught on Thatcher.

But it was not to be. The dockers settled for small compromises; the miners went down to defeat; and the Tories targeted the dockers. In 1989 the dockers had their hard-won rights brutally trampled on, the Dock Labour Scheme abolished, and their union hamstrung by the courts.

While miners and (briefly) dockers were striking in the summer of 1984, the Labour left held power in local government in a number of key cities. The Tories were closing in on them, pressing them to pass on cuts, blocking their option of raising rates, getting ready to abolish the Greater London Council and the metropolitan authorities.



The miners' strike: defeated for lack of solidarity

The local government left could have mobilised their communities against the Tories, opening up another front in a coordinated offensive. What happened? They muddled through and left the miners in the lurch.

In Liverpool, where the self-proclaimed Marxists of *Militant* had local government power, the month of May 1984 saw the 'Marxists' demobilising their campaign against the Tories and going for a deal with the government.

Deputy council leader Derek Hatton called that deal, announced in July, a "95 per cent victory". In his memoirs he has revealed that the Tory minister told him that he was throwing sops to Liverpool because the government wanted its hands free to 'deal with' Scargill and the miners. They would get Liverpool later, he promised. The Tories kept that promise.

The tantalising near-combination of miners', dockers', and local government struggles in the summer of 1984 illustrates

the tragic consequences of the lack of a labour movement centre able to integrate and coordinate the different fronts of the class struggle. In 1984 we could have done to Thatcher what we did to Heath a decade earlier. Instead we fought separately and were defeated separately.

Most important, and decisive for the future, is to learn the lessons.

We often talk about the class struggle in military language. Frederick Engels long ago defined the class struggle as a war on three fronts, the industrial, the political, and the ideological. We have had defeats and setbacks on all three fronts. Why?

The visible and obvious reason was the slump, which undermined the strength of the labour movement through mass unemployment. But even at the worst of the slump, the working class still had great potential power. Slumps produce varying effects. After the initial shock was over, the slump in the US in the 1930s spurred

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the workers to create mass industrial unions for the first time.

The reason why the slump of the early '80s had such a bad effect on the British labour movement is to be found in what went before. The Labour government's betrayals in office opened up workers to despair and disillusionment.

In 1973-4, tremendous industrial militancy had pushed out the Tories and led to the Wilson-Callaghan government — the only thing the labour movement had to put in place of the Tories. Labour won the election on a promise of "an irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power towards working people". And the result was attacks on the working class and a decline of real wages! In 1976 Dennis Healey and Harold Wilson obeyed the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and started a series of savage cuts in public spending, the beginning of the policies that were later, in their full-blown form, to become known as Thatcherism.

Disappointments sapped the morale of the labour movement.

Those setbacks, in turn, have to be understood in the perspective of the 25 years that had gone before. The rank and file militancy of the '50s, '60s and '70s was tremendously effective on wages and conditions. But its strength and success there was also the root of its political weakness.

It did not have to concern itself very much with the problems of the official leadership structures of the unions, or with the political wing of the labour movement, the Labour Party.

The labour movement was sectionalised and chopped up into segments. Workers on the shop floor, led by their shop stewards, got on with bettering wages and conditions; the politicians did their thing; and nobody except for a few Marxists on one side and Tory strategists on the other bothered too much about the ideas department.

The labour movement provided the rank and file with no socialist perspective into which to fit its militant activity. In the 1920s the shop stewards' movement had seen itself as the industrial wing of a revolutionary socialist movement, clearly linked to a political wing in the Communist Party and the left of the Labour Party. The then-revolutionary Communist Party integrated the three fronts of the class struggle into a coherent strategy. Nothing similar existed in the '60s and '70s in Britain.

Our movement was a series of badly-coordinated prodding and jabbing fingers, which dissipated the strength they could have had if bunched into a good proletarian fist.

When the shop stewards' movement and the rank and file militancy were at their peak, what was going on in the Labour Party? Very little. In the mid and late '60s, the best of the left just walked out — as many leftists are walking out now — leaving the shell of the Labour Party to the right wing and to the sectarians around *Militant*, who controlled the youth movement and concentrated on building up their own organisation in devout seclusion while the class struggle and the struggle against the Vietnam war were raging outside, on the streets and in the factories.

By the time the struggle for internal democracy started shaking the Labour Party after 1979, the slump was already dragging down rank and file industrial militancy. And it was in the trade unions

that the left-wing offensive to renovate and reshape the Labour Party met with defeat. In the symbolic contest between left and right over the deputy leadership of the Labour Party in 1981, Tony Benn got 83 per cent of the constituency votes, but the right wing carried most of the unions.

The Labour Party struggle for democracy was itself, of course, a result of the experience of Labour in government in the '70s and the industrial struggles. Yet the two currents, the industrial militancy in the trade unions and the movement within the Labour Party, never properly cohered. They never united their strengths.

The left has had setbacks in the Labour Party because it has failed to win in the unions, not because the Labour Party is the bad side of the labour movement and the unions the good side, as some of the addle-headed sectarians say. By standing outside the Labour Party during the great left-right battles of the 1980s, calling from the sidelines for fainthearts to drop out and retire to the comforts of simple industrial militancy and socialist propaganda, those sectarians, in their own way, have contributed to the setbacks.

The central problem has been our failure to integrate the different strands of labour militancy into a coherent strategy. That's why we could not handle or control the Labour government which rode to power on a wave of industrial militancy in 1974. That's why the movement has reacted as it has to the slump and Thatcher's exploitation of the slump.

The official leaders have always played a bad role. The slump, the entrenched leadership, but above all the disappointments and limitations of what the movement was and did in the period of its greatest power and strength — those were the reasons for the downturn.

The limitations of the rank and file movement, in turn, are to be traced back

to the limitations of the Left — its confusion, its divisions, and, in the case of the Marxist left, its small numbers.

Throughout the '60s and '70s the mainstream broad Labour Left was ideologically bankrupt. Many of them, like Michael Foot, supported Wilson, with criticisms of course.

Their allegedly socialist answer to the problems of British capitalism amounted to the idea of bringing back a version of the controlled siege economy of the Second World War. Many of them managed to be simultaneously soft on Stalinism and blinkered little-Englanders. They responded to the EEC not by trying to build links between British and European workers, but with a benighted little-England campaign to keep Britain out.

The decisive defeat for the broad Labour Left which crushed its resistance to Wilson and Callaghan during the 1974-9 Labour Government was a futile and unnecessary one — its defeat in the June 1975 referendum on whether Britain should withdraw from the Common Market.

The Marxist left was numerically feeble, and often (as on the EEC) much of it was tainted by the same confusion as the mainstream left.

Those who do not learn from history often wind up repeating it. Groups of Marxist socialists are the memory of the working class. We must preserve the memory of these defeats so that we can analyse and learn from them. The class struggle has begun to revive. Our job is to be ready for the bigger upsurges that will come.

There is still tremendous strength in the labour movement. If we learn from the lessons of our defeats we can change the whole industrial and political situation, perhaps very quickly.

What do we need to do now?

1. Repair the ravages to shop floor organisation, only this time on a higher

Where now on the docks?

Billy Jenks, a Liverpool docks steward, analyses the dockers' defeat.

The biggest mistake we made in organising to defend the National Dock Labour Scheme was the amount of faith we placed in our General Secretary Ron Todd, and the General Executive Council.

We did a lot of work preparing for the Tories' attempt to abolish the Dock Labour Board. We organised numerous national shop stewards' meetings, two national docks conferences, and we got commitments of international support from other dockers with representatives of the German and Spanish dockers attending our conferences.

But having all our members ready wasn't enough. When the National Docks and Waterways Committee took our resolution for an all-out strike to maintain the scheme to Ron Todd and the Executive they rejected it in favour of following the law to the letter and attempting to avoid what they thought might be embarrassing to Labour's leadership.

The second problem we had was when we took action we didn't get supporting action from other docks and workplaces.

The financial support was good especially locally, but secondary action was held back by the fear of the union leadership losing their funds through sequestration.

There is no doubt that we have to be prepared to break the law if we are going

to win when we take action, whether or not we get official backing.

Workers have got to keep fighting back and supporting others who fight back. The activists and the socialists in the trade union movement have got to find some way of working together and ending the divisions.

During the strike I went to a lot of different meetings and saw that the divisions between socialists often mean that despite us having the same end aim action is less effective because of those obvious divisions. The Tory government is having its worst time since 1979 and now is the time for us to go on the offensive.

We have got to be pushing in our unions, pushing our councillors and MPs to make sure that we get the Tories out and replace them with a Labour government that represents us and not one which does the Tories' job for them.

It doesn't look likely from the present leadership. Michael Meacher is a classic example of what's in store for us. I heard him at one of our conferences before the strike and what he and Labour weren't going to do to protect the National Dock Labour Scheme was nobody's business.

What happened during the strike and what's happened after? The silence is deafening. There is no talk of re-instating the Dock Labour Scheme and he's even talking of keeping many of the anti-union laws.

We want a Labour government committed to repealing all the anti-trade-union legislation.

The anti-union laws

Laws against strikes and picketing in Britain are now harsher than anywhere else in Western Europe.

A report from the International Labour Office, a joint body of trade unions and governments, says that Britain's laws suppress what it considers to be minimum democratic rights for workers in eight different ways.

The Tories did not introduce these anti-union laws all at once, and they were very careful about it when they did introduce them.

The Industrial Relations Act in the early 'seventies provoked widespread opposition from trade unionists, building up to a big strike wave in July 1972 when five dockers were jailed. The strikes made the Act almost unworkable, and eventually the 1974 Labour Government repealed it.

The Tories were anxious not to create a similar situation this time round. And the almost complete inaction of the trade union leaders — especially the central TUC leadership — has helped them enormously.

There are four anti-union laws: the Employment Acts 1980, 1982 and 1988, and the 1984 Trade Union Act.

The 1980 and 1982 Acts made it possible for unions to be taken to court for a large number of reasons. Individual employers or individual scabs take the initiative to prosecute, so shifting the target for opposition away from the government itself.

Those two Acts made industrial action unlawful unless:

- It is between workers and their employer.
- It relates wholly or mainly to pay and conditions, dismissal, jobs, discipline, union membership or a similar issue.
- It is to do with a dispute in the UK.

In other words, industrial action is unlawful if it is:

- It is in support of other workers.
- It is political; or
- It is to do with a dispute outside the UK (e.g. solidarity with workers who are employed by the same multinational company, perhaps in South Africa).

Solidarity action is unlawful under almost all circumstances. Picketing is severely restricted. A Code of Practice, not strictly part of the law but supposed to guide the courts, limits pickets to six.

The 1980 Act also severely restricted the closed shop. Closed shop agreements had to be approved by 85% majorities. Since most workplaces managed to win those 85% majorities, the 1988 Act has now made closed shops completely unworkable, by making it unlawful to enforce them.

The 1982 Act also banned 'union labour only' contracts, or industrial action in support of them.

The 1982 Act reversed British law since 1906 by making unions liable for damages. That means fines of up to £250,000 for big unions.

If those fines are not paid, all union funds can be seized ('sequestered').

At first, bosses were cautious about using these laws. Two climbdowns by trade union leaders after the Tories' second election victory in 1983 gave them the green light.

First, a High Court judge ruled that the action by the Post Office Engineering Union (now National Communications Union) against Mercury telephones was political (opposition to privatisation of telecommunications), and therefore

unlawful. The judge, it turned out, had shares in Mercury. But the left-led union executive called off the action.

Second, Eddie Shah won his battle to establish a non-union printshop in Warrington for his Stockport Messenger newspaper. The print union NGA organised mass pickets and called on the TUC for support. The TUC abandoned the NGA, which lost a lot of money, at one point having all its assets seized. The NGA had to pay Shah £250,000 in damages.

The 1984-5 miners' strike also saw a lot of legal action. Although most of it was under laws much older than the Tories' recent legislation, it proved to union leaders the dangers of 'unlawful action', and to the bosses the benefits of going to court.

In 1984, a new Act became law. The Trade Union Act 1984 made it illegal to strike without first holding a secret ballot of all the workers involved in the action and winning a majority. The wording in the ballot must require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, and must specifically ask if you are prepared to go on strike in breach of contract.

Another bit of the Trade Union Act 1984 failed. All unions had to hold ballots on the 'political levy', which pays for trade union affiliations to the Labour Party and for unions' political campaigning. The Tories hoped to cripple both the unions and the Labour Party in one fell swoop. But it backfired.

Every ballot on an existing political fund was won, and a number of unions won ballots to set up new political funds.

The 1984 Act also required ballots for union executives.

The Employment Act 1988, as well as effectively outlawing the closed shop, also laid down that ballots for union executives must be by post. (Strike ballots can still be held at workplaces). The 1988 Act also made it unlawful for unions to expel or penalise strikebreakers, even if the strike is entirely lawful.

A big increase in the number of court cases (70 by August 1985) scared off trade union leaders. Unions gradually incorporated secret balloting into their constitutions. And in more and more disputes, the laws become an apparently insuperable obstacle. Big recent examples were the seafarers' dispute with P&O and the dockers' dispute over the Dock Labour Scheme.

But in many cases — like the postal strike, or the health service dispute — the Tories felt unable to use the laws.

Rank-and-file activists and some national officials were coming to look to unofficial action as a way around the law. This was the case in the recent London Underground strikes.

The inevitable next phase in the Tory anti-union legislation, therefore, is to hit at 'wildcat' strike organisers. The Green Paper recently published was expected also to outlaw certain strikes — in transport for example — but they have retreated on this. But it does propose to force unions to distance themselves completely from 'wildcat' action, and to give employers the right to sack 'troublemakers' without redress.

The laws can and should be fought, although TUC timidity in the early '80s makes resistance harder now. The way to beat them is to build solidarity within and across the unions to campaign for the next Labour government to scrap all the anti-union laws.

political basis. The shop stewards' movement must be equipped with socialist perspectives and a programme for trade union democracy which also concerns itself with the broader labour movement.

Is it whistling in the dark to talk like this when the movement is only just beginning to pick itself up? Remember how the Minority Movement, the most effective, integrated, and comprehensive rank and file movement ever, started! It was launched amidst the collapse of militancy in the early '20s, and was effective thanks to a strong political backbone.

2. Continue the fight in the Labour Party. The Labour Party is still the political arm of the labour movement. There is no serious alternative to continuing this fight. Kinnock has control for now, but he has no answers.

3. The entire labour movement must be regenerated and renewed, and given the objective of taking power, in place of its old, merely reformist, objectives.

4. The struggles in the Labour Party and in the trade unions, the struggle of sections like blacks and women, must be linked together and integrated into a movement with a coherent strategy not only against the Tories but against capitalism itself.

One of the lessons of the miners' strike is the great need for a national network of rank and file militants, linking up across the unions and capable of delivering the solidarity denied by the union leaders. Right now, militants should work within the existing Broad Lefts, inadequate and bureaucratic though they are, but with the perspective of creating a genuine broad democratic rank and file movement on the model of the Minority Movement. The next step must be an attempt to link up the existing Broad Lefts.

6. We must organise and regroup the revolutionary socialists in the labour movement. This is the precondition for everything else.

'Build the revolutionary party' has become one of the most discredited of the sectarian catch-cries. Those who counterpose this slogan to the existing labour movement, and to the task of changing it, deserve to be discredited.

But still: the Labour Party is a 'broad church', the trade unions are vast and politically heterogeneous organisations. The only agency that can overcome the fragmentation and political incoherence of the working class movement and the movements of the oppressed in an organisation of socialists with a clear-cut, comprehensive strategy.

Socialist Organiser has made some impact in the labour movement. If we had been better organised, we could have made a bigger impact. To prepare for a new upsurge of working-class struggle, we need to build and strengthen *Socialist Organiser*.

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Ebbs and flows of struggle

1954. September: Thousands of dockers in the Northern ports break away from the very right-wing and bureaucratic TGWU.

1955. May-June: Dockers strike for recognition of their breakaway union.

1956. January: Left-winger Frank Cousins becomes general secretary of the TGWU after the sudden death of the previous right-wing secretary. Cousins' appointment is confirmed in an election in May.

1958. May-June: Seven-week London busworkers' strike over pay.

1960. July: Productivity deal signed at Esso Oil Refinery at Fawley, near Southampton. These deals will become a very common bosses' stratagem in the late '60s, in their efforts to curb shop stewards' power.

1961. June: Court appoints right-wingers to take over electricians' union after previous Communist Party leadership is found guilty of ballot-rigging.

July: Tory Government announces a 'pay pause', as part of its move towards 'economic planning', also represented by the setting-up of such joint government/business/union bodies as the National Economic Development Council.

All this does very little to stem growing shop-floor confidence and militancy.

1964. October: Labour government elected.

1965. Manufacturing employment in the UK reaches its highest-ever level and starts to decline.

Business, media and politicians (both Tory and right-wing Labour) agitate about strikes and shop steward power wrecking Britain's

economy.

In a less-noticed development, white-collar unions are beginning to affiliate to the TUC and organise industrial action.

February: Labour Government sets up the Donovan Commission to investigate trade unions, and the Prices and Incomes Board to control wages (and, supposedly, prices).

1966. March: New general election.

Labour wins increased majority.

May-July: Seafarers' strike. Labour prime minister Harold Wilson denounces it as being led by "a tightly-knit group of politically-motivated men".

July: Labour government tightens its wage controls with a six-month wage freeze.

1967. Almost whole year: a building workers' strike at the giant Barbican site in London.

September-November: Unofficial dockers' strikes against the Devlin report, which aims to reform the Dock Labour Scheme.

November: Labour government devalues the pound. Harold Wilson makes his ill-fated claim that "the pound in your pocket has not been devalued".

Left-winger Hugh Scanlon elected president of the AEU.

1968. May: Near-revolutionary general strike in France.

June: Donovan Commission reports.

1969. January: Labour Government announces plans for anti-union laws ('In Place of Strife'). **June:** TUC rejects these plans, and government withdraws them.

September: Jack Jones elected general secretary of the TGWU. He

encourages shop steward organisation in the union. Bosses and press become frantic about the presence of two left-wingers, Scanlon and Jones, at the head of Britain's biggest unions.

October: Yorkshire miners' strike (the first big miners' strike since 1926).

1970. June: Tory Government elected. **December:** power workers' work-to-rule causes power cuts but ends in defeat.

1971. January-March: Postal workers' which ends in heavy defeat.

February: 140,000 on TUC demonstration against Tories' proposed anti-union law (Industrial Relations Bill).

July: Workers at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders start 'work-in' against closure of the yard. Work-ins and sit-in strikes will become common in the '70s.

1972. January-February: Miners' pay strike, ending in substantial victory. Flying pickets at coal depots and power stations.

July: Five dockers jailed under the Industrial Relations Act for picketing container depots. 250,000 workers strike in protest; TUC calls one-day general strike; government backs down and gets the dockers freed.

July-September: Building workers' pay strike, with flying pickets.

November: Tory Government, which has previously rejected wage controls on free-market principles, introduces them. Successive 'phases' of wage control will continue throughout the rest of this government's life.

1973. February: Gas workers' pay strike.

March: 24 building workers arrested and charged for their activities on flying pickets during the 1972 strike. Two of them will eventually receive long jail sentences.

December: With an oil crisis and the miners applying an overtime ban, the Tory Government declares a three-day week for industry.

1974. February-March: Miners strike.

February: Labour Party announces 'Social Contract' with trade unions, prepared in discussions over 1973, and forms minority government after general election. A big wave of pay strikes follows.

July: Industry minister Tony Benn offers government support to worker cooperatives at the Meriden motorcycle factory and the Scottish Daily News. Such worker cooperatives will become a popular answer to the threat of closures, but all the larger ones fail.

October: Labour wins absolute majority in a new general election.

1975. July: Labour Government, with TUC agreement, imposes a £6 limit on wage rises. Jack Jones, the union leader who used to terrify the bosses, is the main architect of this formula. Strike rate drops sharply, and real wages will fall 10 per cent in the next two years, but unemployment continues to rise (to one and a half million by 1979).

1976. January: Labour Government applies to IMF for a loan. February: it announces a programme of cuts.

January: 'Rescue plan' for Chrysler, involving the Labour Government's only 'planning agreement', which turns out to be so much waste paper.

1977. January: Bullock report on industrial democracy. Also waste paper.

March: Labour Government, having lost its majority, forms pact with Liberals. Meanwhile strike action against government's wage controls begins to revive.

Summer: Mass pickets battle with police at Grunwicks in North London, where mainly Asian women workers are striking for union recognition. Solidarity action by post workers is ruled illegal by courts. Grunwick workers are eventually defeated.

September: Ex-leftist Hugh Scanlon

defies his union's mandate to cast AEU vote for wage controls at the TUC.

November-January 1978: Firefighters strike. Troops used as scabs.

1978. February: Michael Edwardes, new boss of the nationalised British Leyland car firm, announces a plan including 12,500 job cuts. Little union resistance. Over the next few years Edwardes will decimate jobs, conditions, and union agreements in BL.

May: Right wing takes control of the AEU, with Terry Duffy elected to succeed Hugh Scanlon. Scanlon goes to the House of Lords.

September/October: TUC and Labour Party conferences oppose further wage controls. Ford workers strike for, and win, pay increases above the government limits. A 'winter of discontent' follows, with strikes by lorry drivers, ambulance workers, water workers, dustmen, and other public service workers.

November: *Times* locks out its workers and suspends publication for several months in an unsuccessful attempt to break the unions.

1979. 'Winter of discontent' continues. Trade union membership reaches its highest-ever level.

May: Tories win general election. Rapid decline in unofficial strikes and in battles against closures and job cuts.

1980. January-April: Steelworkers' strike over pay. Under very right-wing leadership, it ends with only marginal gains, and is quickly followed by huge job cuts in the steel industry.

Industry is slumping, as the Tories apply rigid monetarist policies, and unemployment rises rapidly, to over three million by early 1982.

May: TUC day of action against the Tories. Quite successful, but the TUC soon decides against any repeats.

August: The Tories' first anti-union law (James Prior's Employ-

ment Act 1980) comes into force.

1981. February: Unofficial miners' strike forces Tories to back down on plans for pit closures.

December: Arthur Scargill elected president of the NUM.

1982. April-December: campaign of industrial action by National Health Service unions, with well-supported TUC day of action in solidarity in September.

1983. January: Water workers' strike. February/March: Unsuccessful attempt by South Wales miners to get national miners' strike against closure of Lewis Merthyr colliery.

December: TUC abandons the print union NGA, facing seizure of its funds because of its picketing of Eddie Shah's non-union printworkers in Warrington, and NGA has to concede defeat. This is a turning point for the Tories' anti-union laws; previously cautious employers start using them more and more.

1984. January: Tories ban unions at GCHQ in Cheltenham.

March: Miners start national strike against pit closures, which will continue until March 1985. Most unions promise solidarity to the miners, but fail to deliver.

July and August: National docks strikes against threats to the Dock Labour Scheme.

1985. March: Miners' strike ends in defeat.

March/April: Most of the left-wing Labour councils which have said they will fight rate-capping collapse and capitulate.

September to February 1986: Liverpool, the last Labour council standing out against the government, collapses after its leadership (influenced by *Militant*) sends out redundancy notices to the entire workforce.

October: Breakaway miners' union, UDM, formed, based on the miners who had scabbed on the 1984-5 strike.

1986. January: Rupert Murdoch provokes a strike, sacks all his printworkers, and moves his newspapers to a new site at Wapping, where they are produced by a scab workforce recruited through the EETPU.

February: Courts seize assets of the print union SOGAT because of its action against Murdoch.

1987. February: Print unions' campaign against Murdoch ends in defeat.

1988. January-February: First signs of recovery. Ford pay strike. Ends in victory. Two-year deal means at least 7% in second year. This fuels a wave of pay action. Nurses strike in defence of NHS.

July: TUC suspends EETPU for signing single-union deals to the disadvantage of other unions.

September: Postal workers' strike.

1989. April: Government announces abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme.

July: Dockers' strike, demanding employers negotiate conditions equivalent to the Dock Labour Scheme, ends in defeat. Docks workforce and union organisation decimated.

Successful pay strikes, however, by Town Hall workers, rail workers, and Tube workers.

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Organise the rank and file!

Paul Whetton (Manton NUM) draws some lessons



What are the lessons of the early '70s, when trade unionism was on a high and we kicked the Tories and their Industrial Relations Act into touch, and the miners won two great (1972 and 1974) strikes.

Everybody remembers '72 and '74, but nobody remembers '73. That was the year that we accepted the Coal Board's offer "in the national interest". That led to '74.

And when in 1972 the police had to pack up and march away from Saltley Gate they learned their lesson, and they went away and did their homework, and they vowed and declared that that would never happen again. Nevertheless we won again in 1974. But they continued their preparations so that one day they would repay the miners, and repay trade unionism in general. Because — and the cops knew it well — Saltley Gate was as much a victory for the engineers as it was

a victory for the miners.

So they plotted and learned their lessons, and they built up their forces and rehearsed them. And in 1981 they went for the South Wales miners, and when the South Wales miners reacted the Tories backed off. They still didn't feel ready for a showdown. But they continued to get ready.

Then came Warrington, where police thuggery won a victory over the printers for Eddie Shah and the union busters. They had flexed their muscles, and now they felt they were ready for the mineworkers.

And so they deliberately provoked a strike. We could have walked away from that strike. We could have refused to be drawn into it. But then they would have gone ahead and shut down the pits anyway. **We had to fight.**

And we fought as many others have had to fight — in isolation. Although we got magnificent support in finance and food, that was not enough. It is not enough to give sympathetic solidarity. It needs to be the kind of solidarity that means coming out on strike and standing alongside other workers in struggle. **That's the only solidarity that will beat the Tories.**

The miners were allowed to go under. We warned other workers: "if the miners go under, then you're next". And lo and behold, many trade unions have been "next", and each battle has once again been fought in isolation.

We look at Silentnight. We look at the seafarers. We look at the Fleet Street printers, we look at the dockers and we see each one in its turn fighting in some instances a magnificent battle, but still going down to defeat.

The message that has got to be built on is this: the rank and file must organise and unite across industry, linking miners and

hospital workers and teachers and engineers, linking the whole of the organised working class and in every strike action be prepared to go out and demand class solidarity for workers in struggle — for all workers in struggle.

A rank and file movement which says "to hell with the Tory anti-union laws!" An unofficial movement which can say that without immediately falling victim to the union-busting fines which Mrs Thatcher's skinhead judges itch to inflict.

Out and out solidarity — that's got to be the message. The trade union rank and file must organise for it. The rank and file must be prepared to both demand it and give it. That is the only think that is going to beat the Tories and beat employers who use Tory legislation in order to defeat the organised working class.

I think the main reason for the lack of effective solidarity in the struggles I've listed was fear.

First of all the fear of the dole queue. And every worker has been living in an atmosphere of fear that if they stick their head up above the parapet they will get it shot off.

Of course, it was magnificent what the railway workers did during the miners' strike. And many of them have paid the penalty, or are still paying the penalty.

I know that if enough workers had really come together and shown adequate solidarity that in itself would have been a defence against any workers getting picked off as some workers were picked off when they did risk it.

If there had been an overall response from all the trade unions in the struggles I listed above, then the Tories and the bosses couldn't have done it. They can't imprison 11 million workers! It is when only a few brave souls are prepared to stand up that they can make an example of them, to put the fear of god into others.

When we all come together and we all rise at the same time, then we are unstoppable, and untouchable.

A central lesson, the lesson of lessons, if you like, is this: the rank and file must never trust the trade union leaders, or the leaders of the Labour Party.

We have to use them but then especially we must keep a watchful suspicious eye on them. We miners were in an unusual position — we had a leadership we could trust. But such leaderships are very, very few and far between, and that is why so much depends on the rank and file being organised and ready. Then if it looks like being a sell-out, the rank and file itself can carry on the fight without the leadership and against them where necessary.

Remember that the leadership is nothing without the rank and file. Many of them have climbed the ladder of success and pulled the ladder up behind them. We have seen many excellent left-wing rank and filers go up that ladder and then they change, as if they have climbed into a different world. The truth is that it is a different world, the world of the trade union leaders, with their management-level salaries, expensive union cars, lots of perks, and so on and so on.

If the rank and file itself is prepared to organise and carry on the battle then the official leaderships can be pushed into some useful actions and, at the same time, the rank and file is organised and prepared, armed with their eternal vigilance which is the prize of a health labour movement, to carry the battle forward — with or without the leadership.

The unions and the local government left

By Mick O'Sullivan,
Haringey UCATT and
former Chair of London
Bridge stewards' committee

For most of the post-war period local government was something of a 'backwater' in the trade union movement.

Yet the workforce rose from 1,422,000 in 1950 to 2,993,000 in 1975 and NALGO membership increased from 247,000 in 1960 to 625,000 in 1975.

Militancy emerged in the late '60s and early '70s. A strike by London dustmen started in one borough, rapidly spread to other London boroughs through the use of flying pickets, and was soon made official. London teachers and NALGO members struck over London weighting. Previously quiet sections of the working class were following the example of manufacturing industry.

In 1970 NUPE officially recognised shop stewards. The other manual unions followed and from the mid-1970s the major white collar union, NALGO, also tentatively supported stewards. Sectional and localised strikes became more common.

The government was attempting to change working methods — to make workers work harder. But workers were able to turn local negotiations around such issues as productivity to their own advantage. It was estimated in 1979 that 90% of productivity deals had had the main effect of increasing the earnings of low paid workers.

Major cuts in council expenditure began in 1975. But at this stage their direct effect on workers was minimal. Union branches worked out policies to counter them, for example no cover for vacant posts.

Many of the militants engaged in building branches and stewards' committees looked to manufacturing industry as a guide for creating independent trade unionism. However, it soon became apparent that the tasks facing them were very different. For example a manual workers' branch in education would organise four of five different groups of workers. The full-time male caretakers would be a small minority alongside the majority of part-time women workers, cleaners, dinner ladies, etc. It was difficult to see how the part-time cleaners, for example, could develop economic leverage at the workplace. Trade unionism in local government would have to link the workplace to the local branch or stewards' committee and take up issues such as child care and full-time rights for part-time workers.

The 'dirty jobs strike' in 1979 was part of a wider wages explosion against the Callaghan government's pay restraints. The advances made in organisation by

local government workers were shown by their ability to sustain a strike for six weeks, not only by the most organised group, the dustmen, but also by many other sections.

Such national action by manual workers split into many different occupations and boroughs demanded either an extremely powerful rank and file body — which did not exist — or a committed national leadership. At the time the NUPE leaders were on the extreme left wing of the trade union bureaucracy. They had led the fight against the Labour government cuts, and they actively argued for the strike, giving a clear and unequivocal lead and drawing in behind them the other unions, the G&M and T&G. By then shop stewards had become almost universal. The most militant organisation was generally in the urban areas which had a tradition of industrial employment and were more than likely to have a Labour council. Yet amongst manual workers there was very little evidence of rank and file groupings which attempted to exercise control over the leadership. In branch-building and

“There are two key lessons...fight to democratise and take control of the trade union structure...confront politics”

sectional strikes the national union bureaucracies were not an obstacle: indeed NUPE in particular was actively encouraging shop floor and workplace organisation. So the union machinery was left in the hands of the trade union bureaucracy, albeit at the time a left-wing bureaucracy.

In NALGO there was 'NALGO Action', a group including members of the SWP (then called IS) and, for a time, of the CP. It made propaganda for socialist ideas and provided a forum for the radicals in the professional services such as social workers. The CP left it once they had a foothold in the bureaucracy, and then in the late '70s the SWP abandoned rank and file organisation in favour of 'building the party'. The activists turned to building in their individual branches.

The election of Thatcher in 1979 reopened the issues of trade unionism and politics in local government with a vengeance.

The lack of any rank and file grouping in the unions that could even begin to assert control over the leadership was cruelly felt. The NUPE leaders moved sharply to the right, and there was no force to stop them.

Within two months of Thatcher's election victory, the leading left-wing Labour

council of the day — Ted Knight's Lambeth — was proposing cuts. Strong pressure from Labour Party activists and trade unionists forced Knight to climb down and begin a vigorous campaign against the government. But at budget time in Spring 1980 that campaign faded away. The council 'bought time' with a 49 per cent rate rise.

The policy of rate rises to 'buy time' and avoid cuts became the orthodoxy of the Labour local government left. By allying with the rate-raisers, local government trade unionists effectively ceded the task of protecting jobs to the councils. Individuals or small groups in the union branches supported the 'three nos' — no rate rises, no rent increases, no cuts — but an alliance with the council leaders against ratepayers and tenants, through rate rises to protect jobs, made sense in narrow trade union terms.

Most of the forces of the left were grievously split. *Labour Briefing*, then an influential force through its links with Ken Livingstone and the London Labour left, called for a fight but failed to organise it, acting instead as ideological rationalisers for the rate-raising councillors. The SWP, by standing outside the Labour Party, effectively abstained from this political struggle. *Militant*, though inside the Labour Party, also largely abstained at this crucial stage. The only organised force arguing for a fighting strategy was the relatively small group round *Socialist Organiser*.

Any study of the turmoil in the boroughs over the rates issue will show that it was far from a foregone conclusion what policy the Labour Parties would take over the cuts. Many of the activists and trade unionists were undecided. But the left was unable to create a political climate in which workers and trade unionists could see that 'these people meant business'.

An inkling of what might have been possible was shown in Liverpool during 1984, when the *Militant*-influenced Labour council had a mass mobilisation of workers in support of its policy of no cuts and rate rises only in line with inflation. Once the local elections of May 1984 were over *Militant* changed tack, demobilising the workers, fixing a compromise deal with the government, and then stumbling into a fiasco in 1985. But the positive work they did in early 1984 showed the power of a united trade union and Labour left. Similar things could have been done elsewhere, but they weren't.

Mostly the local government unions collapsed into piecemeal branch activity. The period had many similarities to the attempts to 'institutionalise' the shop floor movement in industry, but there was one major difference. In industry the development went hand in hand with attacks on the shop floor to get the unions to police and regulate the members. In local government the councils, because they were able to bankroll their policy through

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Manchester housing workers strike — against union-busting by a left Labour council. Photo: Paul Herrmann, Profile

the rates, did not by and large directly attack working practices.

The time that had been 'bought' turned out to be time for demoralisation to grow among local government workers and for the chance to be lost to link a fight back in local government with the steelworkers, the miners, or the NHS workers. In 1981 Lambeth council turned to ten per cent cuts — though with a bigger impact on services than jobs. Other left-wing councils followed. And there was little fight back by the unions.

The division between politics and trade unionism in local government seemed to be coming to an abrupt end with rate-capping in 1985. The Tory government legislated to put an end to the rate-rise policy by limiting the councils' power to raise rates. Left-wing Labour councils vowed to fight the Tories. They would refuse to set a rate and go 'right up to the brink' in confronting the government. The council leaders made garish warnings about huge job losses if rate-capping were imposed, and trade unionists organised to play their part in the campaign. But then the council leaders collapsed, one by one.

What is remembered about rate-capping is that the councils led the workers up the hill and down again, several times. What is forgotten about rate-capping is that once it was pushed through council workers were materially in no different situation than they had been prior to it. Indeed, many found themselves better off as councils moved towards 'creative accounting' to bankroll the maintenance of the workforce, avoiding cuts by financial tricks which postponed the bills to future years.

The election of Thatcher for a third term in 1987 called time on the councils. Cuts began to affect the workforce directly, and the Tories imposed legal obligations for compulsory tendering. Councils had to allow private contractors to bid to undertake various services. The existing workforce could keep their jobs only by offering a lower price than the private contractors. The impact of this is being felt in job losses and changes in working

practices.

By this time eight years and more of defeats had pushed the whole labour movement substantially to the right. A united front of trade union leaders, Labour councils and Labour Party leaders pushed through support for making services 'viable' and profitable. The left could organise only individual issue-by-issue resistance by individual branches, against the full weight of the trade union and Labour Party leadership.

There are two key lessons from this experience. However strong and militant an individual branch or workplace may be, that local strength is insufficient to tackle the problems which confront workers. We must also fight to democratise and take control of the trade union structure.

And once you move beyond basic workplace organisation the unions are

confronted very directly with politics. The experience of local government simply adds to the whole experience of the trade union movement over the last two decades. Inability to break out of a traditional Labourist framework has led to terrible defeats.

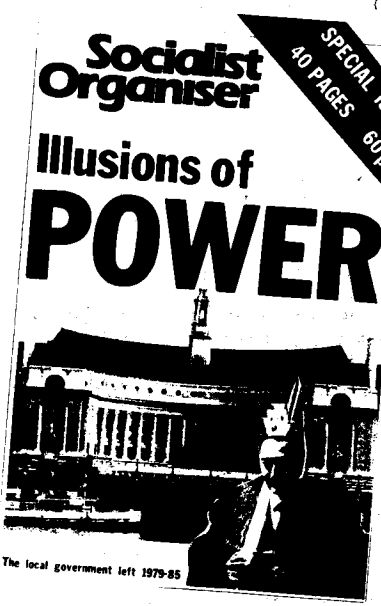
The special tragedy this time round was that the political opposition which could have offered a different alternative was there: forces to the left of the Communist Party were strong enough to affect the outcome, and they were found wanting.

The battle continues. A step forward has been taken by the newly-formed NALGO Action group, which links over 20 branches. As well as organising in the unions, we must link up with the struggle inside the existing political labour movement, that is the Labour Party.

More on the left and the Labour councils

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What the NHS White Paper means and how to fight it

By Max Gordon

The government's plans for the NHS, outlined in its White Paper, will seriously undermine patient care and replace it with profit as the main object of 'British Health PLC'.

Larger GP medical practices will be able to apply for their own budgets — buying drugs and hospital care for their patients from the cheapest source, public or private. Half of any 'surplus' or profit left over can be kept.

This will be an incentive not to treat 'expensive' patients such as the disabled, the chronically ill, and the elderly. All of these kinds of patients usually need more drugs and medical attention than others, and this will eat into the budget surplus. Thus the most vulnerable in our society are the most likely to be penalised, having to tout themselves from one surgery to another hoping to find a GP that will take them on.

300 British hospitals with 250-plus beds will be able to apply for self-government within the NHS. Their money will come from borrowing (from government and the private sector) and from selling their services to GPs,

the health authorities, and other hospitals, public or private. They can also buy services from these sources and must provide certain 'core' services such as Accident and Emergency facilities.

The effect on NHS staff will be dramatic. These hospitals are to be run by a 'trust' governed by a board of 'Executive Directors' who must be able to demonstrate 'strong and effective leadership' and 'financial expertise'. These are obviously code words for union-busting and making cuts. Staffing levels, pay and conditions for all staff are to be settled locally. National negotiations and settlements would go out of the window.

For patients these changes would have an equally large impact. Apart from the 'core' services, the large hospitals are free to market whatever services they like. It stands to reason that they are going to opt for the most profitable and marketable sectors of health care. Expensive long-term care is out: high patient turnover and fast profits are in. (Sponsorship hasn't been ruled out — the age of the Benson and Hedges lung cancer clinic perhaps?)

Also in is the prospect of having to travel long distances for treatment because your local hospital had decided it doesn't get a sufficient rate of return by treating your ail-

ment. The least able and those most in need of care will again be the hardest hit.

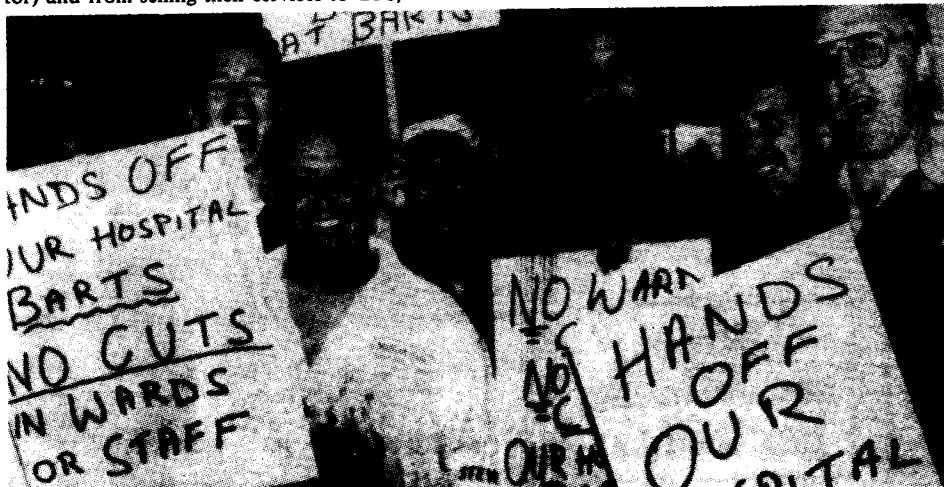
On the other hand 'optional extras' such as a choice of meals or a single room can be yours — provided you pay for them.

'Medical audit' will be used to police GPs and hospital consultants. In itself medical audit is no bad thing — it consists of analysing the use of resources, type of treatment and outcome for the patient to measure the quality of medical care. In the hands of our 'Executive Directors' and the new, restructured Family Practitioners Committees, however, it is likely to become a rod for the back of medical staff. It can be used to ensure a high turnover of patients in those all-important profitable areas of treatment at the expense of the downright unprofitable.

A 'review' of 'merit awards' — separate payments currently made to consultants with particular skills — will ensure they fall into line. In future, to get a merit award, they will have to 'demonstrate their commitment to the management and development of the service' and all awards will be reviewable every five years.

Finally there is a small concession to the loony right. They wanted the wholesale scrapping of the NHS in one go — instead they've got a halfway house and the introduction of tax cuts for elderly people with private medical insurance. The White Paper also outlines an expanded role for the private sector in the new set-up, but in competition with new cost-cutting hospital managements the private sector is not likely to fare very well, as the history of competitive tendering has shown.

The basis is here for a concerted fight against these proposals organised on the broadest possible basis. NHS trade unions and local Labour Parties, along with other trade unions and community groups, should come together to set up such a campaign locally and nationally. The potential exists to harness the widespread public feeling of support for a socialist system of medicine and to get the White Paper scrapped.



Smithfield meat porters strike against health cuts

Strike with emergency cover!

But how should NHS workers strikes be organised?

The health service unions' policy is for emergency cover during all strikes. Sometimes militants get impatient with this policy but the policy is right.

The aim of strikes is to hit the NHS management and the government, not patients. If, through exasperation or through bravado, strikers do not organise emergency cover, then that has bad effects in one of two ways.

Usually emergency cover is provided by non-unionists, and the strikers do not make any serious effort to picket them out. This means a licence for scabbing.

If a policy of no emergency cover were enforced seriously, then patients would suffer seriously or die.

Don't think that this would somehow stir the government's conscience and make it give in. NHS workers care much more about patients than the government does. If patients suffered seriously or died because of NHS strike, it would shock and demoralise the strikers, and ruin the strike. The media would seize on the chance to denounce the strikers.

Emergency cover is difficult to organise under trade union control. But it is possible at least for short periods. Sometimes management is obstructive. But then the union should do all it can to show that it is willing to organise emergency cover and the obstacle is management.

The fact that some officials will try and use emergency cover as a way of sabotaging action should not lead us to reject it.

Does emergency cover make a strike weaker? Not in real terms, because a strike without emergency cover either assumes a lot of scabbing or would ruin itself. What makes strikes in the NHS weaker than strikes in some other sectors is that they do not hit profits and removing emergency cover does nothing to get round that problem.

The only way round it is for other workers who do produce profits to strike in solidarity with the health workers. That is possible. Dockers, miners and other workers have struck to support NHS disputes. But proper organisation of emergency cover is essential if that solidarity is to be won.

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THE WORKING CLASS TODAY



Taking stock

By Tom Rigby

Until the summer — when the rail, tube, docks, Town Hall and other strikes intervened — it had become increasingly fashionable, even on the left, to talk of the irreversible historic decline of the unions and of the working class itself.

Norman Willis had spoken of the trade unions facing “a serious crisis... challenges more profound than at any time in the movement’s long history”.

Since 1979 the unions have lost over 3 million members, with a decline in TUC membership from 12,172,000 in 1979 to 8,700,000 in 1987.

Before we panic we should see this decline in perspective.

Firstly, almost every slump cuts union membership. Vast membership losses much bigger than the present one have been caused by slumps, then made good in subsequent booms. The current decline has been less serious, in some ways, than past decline. There is little evidence of already organised workers quitting the unions today because of their ineffectiveness. But that happened on a big scale in the depth of the inter-war recession.

The changes in union membership between the wars were on a vast scale, far more traumatic than today.

Between 1920 and 1928, the unions lost

42% of their membership. By 1933 — in the depth of the depression — union density was, at 22.6%, less than half its level of the start of the twenties and much less than half of union density today. But by 1939 the unions were recovering — union density rose to 30% in just 6 years.

The decline in union density between 1979 and '88 — from 58% to 51% — was much less drastic than the decline in membership.

And the fall in membership has not been even across all unions. The T&G lost 33% of its membership between 1979 and '86. The Town Hall union NALGO lost only 0.4% and the telecom union NCU increased its membership by 16% (partly thanks to a merger with the CPSA P&T section).

The overall picture is a decline in union membership due to drastic job losses in some sectors of industry which has not been compensated for by unionisation of workers in new expanding sectors.

Why? Not because it is impossible to organise these new sectors. Look at history.

Industries like cars, which formed the backbone of workers’ organisation in the years of the post-war boom, were once unorganised.

Unionisation in new sectors will not be automatic. No inevitable ‘automatic process’ organised the mass production industries in the 1930s and '40s, people did it, in real struggles. And the unionisation of new sectors today, too, depends on the struggles of the labour movement.

The evidence so far this year suggests that strikes and industrial action do more to win members for the unions, by delivering real gains to workers than any amount of financial services and legal aid schemes (desirable though those things may be).

NALGO has built itself through this year’s pay action, and the TV union BETA reports a gain of up to 3,000 members during its dispute with the BBC.

At workplace level the number of shop stewards actually increased by 6% in the early 1980’s from 317,000 in 1980 to about 335,000 in 1984.

But this rise was uneven. In manufacturing the number of stewards fell by 27%. In private services it rose by 18%, in the public sector 31%.

Even in manufacturing the number of stewards declined less proportionately than the number of workers. The number of joint stewards committees and combines appears stable.

The most comprehensive study of the closed shop in the eighties has shown that the fall in the number of workers covered in such a way from 5.2 million in '79 to 4.9 million in '82, mirrors roughly the fall in employment.

The survival of organisation is one thing of course, but it’s effectiveness is another.

As McIlroy reports, “One important change since 1979 seems to be a substantial decline in joint regulation of non-wage issues in the workplace. In 1980, 54% of managers reported negotiations at establishment level over redeployment of labour, whilst 4 years later the figure fell to 29%. There were similar declines in negotiations over physical working conditions, staffing levels and recruitment (Millward and Stevens, 1986, 248).

These developments, which apply to both manual and non-manual groups, added to changes in flexibility, could mean that workplace representatives have ceded a measure of the control over work organisation which was regarded as an important achievement of shop stewards in the last 3 decades. They provide some evidence that, if the institutions of workplace organisation are the same as a decade ago, some of the outcomes are different.

Shop stewards’ power in the past was not simply based on their ability to increase members’ pay — many plants, for example, lacked piecework systems — but on mutuality, their ability to negotiate over staffing, redeployment of labour, speed of work and overtime. The picture emerging of union co-operation in changing the organisation of work could represent a process, already well-developed, of management regaining control by paying for it. Other evidence, such as the increased contact between steward and union officer, could also be interpreted in terms of workplace organisation losing an element of independence (Millward and Stevens, 1986, 127).

The CBI’s view is that extensive changes in the organisation of work are occurring, that pay is a crucial lever in securing change and that workplace organisation is “able to secure only minor modifications in the changes required” (CBI, 1987). The point is reinforced by case studies of management attempts to re-establish control over work which

argue that, on a range of issues including wages, the process of bargaining is increasingly ritualistic, with the outcomes decided in advance by management, who, nevertheless, want to see that 'things are done properly' and maintain the influence of workplace organisation (Chadwick, 1983).

This is related to the argument that recent developments disclose a growing potential for 'enterprise trade unionism'. Shop stewards, it is claimed, are becoming detached from the wider union and integrated more with the employer.

"This does not necessarily mean that they necessarily become more docile but that they identify their interests more with the success of the enterprise and less with the job controls, employment anxieties and concern for the poorly organised of the wider union. The structure of trade unionism originally developed for the strategies of the employee solidarity is increasingly being shaped to the needs of the employers." (Brown, 1986, 165).

The resilience of shop steward organisation is striking. Whether workplace organisation has grown less powerful is difficult to estimate within any framework, but our estimations will be influenced by our conceptions of trade union purpose.

If we place importance on employee solidarity, the idea of a wider movement, the workplace organisation as an instrument for workers' control, then we will view these tendencies as weakening trade unionism. If we focus only, or primarily on money, we may view matters differently."

The unions are weaker. But they have not been crushed; and with fighting policies the lost ground can be regained.

Remember: after 10 years of Tory government attacks and the five years of wage-cutting Labour governments before that, organisationally the unions are far stronger today than before the last great employer's offensive, the attacks that began in 1920 and led up to decisive defeat in the General Strike of 1926.

The unions also cover a far wider range of workers, with far superior organisation and a far greater potential stranglehold over production and the whole functioning of society than they did then.

Many of the figures in this article are taken from 'Trade unions in Britain Today' by John McLroy, Manchester University Press.

Smaller workplaces, weaker unions?

Many writers have pointed to a link between workplace size and union density with worrying implications.

The smaller the workplace, the less likely it is to be unionised. 72 per cent of workers in large enterprises employing more than 1,000 workers are unionised, but only 26% of workers in small workshops with between 25 and 49 workers. Marxists used to think that workplaces would always, on average, get bigger and bigger; but, since the '70s at least, in manufacturing the average workplace has been getting smaller.

Does this doom trade unionism? No.

In the USA the long-term trend towards smaller manufacturing workplaces goes back to the 1930s — to precisely the same time as the US industrial unions began to expand enormously and break down old craft unionism.

Year	No. of stoppages	Workers involved (000)	Working days lost (000)
1974	2,946	1,625	14,750
1975	2,332	809	6,012
1976	2,034	668	3,284
1977	2,737	1,166	10,142
1978	2,498	1,041	9,405
1979	2,125	4,608	29,474
1980	1,348	834	11,964
1981	1,344	1,513	4,266
1982	1,538	2,103	5,313
1983	1,364	574	3,754
1984	1,221	1,464	27,135
1985	903	791	6,402
1986	1,704	720	1,920
1987	1,016	887	3,546
1988	781	790	3,702

(Source: Department of Employment Gazette).

Strikes aren't out of date

By John Bloxam

Working class combativity, strength and organisation can be very crudely measured by the strike rate.

The stronger the class, the more strikes there are. This is a crude measure, sometimes well-organised workers win with small, localised and short actions that never show up in the statistics. On the other hand, long set piece battles do show up on the statistics and can often be evidence of the working class movement on the run.

Nevertheless strike statistics do tell us something.

John McLroy in his book 'Trade Unions in Britain Today' has summed up the underlying pattern that these figures illustrate.

Secondly, even if average size in manufacturing is falling, the new factories that are being built are hardly too small to unionise. 500 workers is smaller than 5,000, but quite big enough for strong union organisation. Indeed, many workers who work mostly on their own, such as telecom engineers, are heavily unionised.

Small workplace size doesn't mean non-unionism in the strongly organised print industry where 96% of enterprises employ less than 100 people.

And if manufacturing workplace size is falling, in other sectors, like retailing, the average size is on the increase. For instance, the average size of Sainsbury's establishments is over 200 workers: two-thirds of Tesco's stores employ more than 100 and a third more than 200. As John McLroy puts it: "many supermarkets are, in reality, small factories".

"There has been a downward trend in strike activity since 1979, if we exclude the miners' strike, which accounted for 83% of working days lost in 1984.

There is a clear distinction between the aggressive militancy of the 1960s and 1970s and the years of Thatcherism. In 1974 there were nearly 3,000 stoppages. During the 1970s there were never less than 2,000 annually. In 1985 and 1986, there were just under and just above 1,000 and only in 1982 did the figure reach 1,500. The figure of 1.9 million days lost in 1986 was the lowest since 1963.

And since 1979 almost all the big battles have resulted in defeat for the unions.

These statistics underestimate the number of small stoppages. There has undoubtedly been a growth of forms of industrial action short of a strike. The 1980s figures reflect a declining work-force. But there can be little doubt that they reflect first and foremost the influence of economic recession and the political force of a government willing to face down the unions and determined to see out strikes even, if, as in the case of the miners, it takes almost 12 months."

McLroy comments:

"If these figures appear to illustrate a loss in union confidence and an ebbing of power, they should also direct us to the limits of this process. Whilst the unions have suffered important reverses compared with the previous two decades, we are still witnessing national industrial action — absent in the dog-days of the twenties and thirties."

In fact, the level of industrial resistance in the Thatcher decade especially when the level of unemployment is taken into account had been much higher than many defeatists are prepared to admit.

McLroy also commented in Socialist Organiser:

"Despite its eventual failure, the [1982] NHS dispute illustrated the deep reservoir of anger and aggression that exists amongst workers new to trade unionism and inexperienced in large scale industrial

struggle. It also preached solidarity action unparalleled since 1926, overshadowing in the depths of recession the action against the Industrial Relations Act in 1972".

It is clear from looking at the statistics that the defeat of the miners in 1984-'85 accelerated the downward trend in strike levels. But that downward trend levelled out and then went into reverse a lot quicker than many professional pundits expected.

This is in part a product of the underlying position of union organisation; a tightening labour market, especially for skilled workers; and now in 1989 the increase in the inflation rate.

But there is an important political factor involved as well. The defeat of the miners was the best kind of defeat to suffer. It was a defeat after a hard and seriously fought battle, not the kind of numbing surrender without a serious fight represented in its classic form by the betrayal of the 1926 General Strike.

In the expanding sectors like telecom, where the number of workers and unionisation is on the increase, even serious defeats like the 1983 Mercury battle do not lead to a prolonged collapse, as witnessed by the strength of the national dispute in 1987.

Today there are clearly grounds for guarded optimism. The 1989 strike total is bound to exceed the 1988 figure. The NALGO strike alone amounted to the same number of strike days as last year's total.

The Tories' unofficial 7% pay norm has been torn to pieces and many attempts at strings defeated for now. A breakthrough in the ambulance dispute would spur on other NHS workers. And the Confed's 35 hour week campaign could just escalate out of the control of Bros Jordan and Laird in an ironic replay of the '79 dispute which found the equally right wing Duffy and Boyd leading a fight they didn't quite expect.

This revival in combativity and confidence can only be welcomed by socialists. The other side know full well the conclusions workers are drawing. As the Financial Times put it:

"Taken together, the settlement [of this summer's strike] are likely to encourage a growing confidence amongst British workers that carefully planned industrial action can achieve results".



The working class in the 1990s

Martin Thomas looks at a debate which is of more than just academic interest

The trade union movement has taken a battering over the last ten years. The debate about 'post-Fordism', in essence, is a debate about whether or not that battering has been an inevitable result of modern technology.

According to the magazine *Marxism Today*, "At the heart of New Times is the shift from the old mass-production Fordist economy to a new, more flexible, post-Fordist order based on computers, information technology and robotics." New methods of production, and new sales methods, based on diverse products for diverse "niches" in the market, break up working class identity and organisation so, "although some of the features of [class] struggle remain, they are now overlain by a variety of alternative bases of organisation, of new social movements."

The language of *Marxism Today* is often baffling and obscure, but the gist is fairly clear. Class struggle is out. Diverse citizens' protest groups are in.

The trade unions must adapt, "marketing" themselves to different groups in the same way that clothes retailers target varieties of customers, and scrapping appeals to old-style class solidarity. They must adapt or die.

A few facts give some shine of plausibility to these ideas. Trade union strength has declined in the '80s in many advanced capitalist economies, and in some, like France and the USA, much worse than in Britain.

Electoral scores of Labour, Social-Democratic and Communist Parties have also generally declined, though much less markedly and uniformly. And, quite markedly and uniformly, the core support for the traditional ideologies of those parties — nationalisation and heavy state control of the economy — has declined more drastically.

Major industries from the 1950s and 1960s, which were at the core of trade unionism and of state sectors, have dwindled — coal, steel, shipbuilding, cars. The new-technology industries generally have a low level of union organisation.

But closer analysis demolishes the idea that these facts can be strung together into a scenario of technology dispersing class struggle.

Neither the diversities of consumer society nor the technology of microelectronics dispel class struggle.

The writers of *Marxism Today* often seem to have a patronising idea of the working class of yesterday as a uniform grey mass, all wearing cloth caps, eating fish and chips, watching football on Saturdays, and joining trade unions and going on strike as a natural extension of that grey uniformity.

But then as now, some workers were old, some were young; some were black, some were white; some were religious, others atheist, and so on. They had diverse interests, habits, hobbies and customs. None of that stopped them being aware of their common interests as workers.

In South Africa and Brazil in the 1980s, mass militant trade union movements have emerged from working classes of a cultural diversity far outstripping anything all the niche retailers in the business can generate in Britain.

Labour movements do not emerge from a sense of grey uniformity and sameness. They emerge from workers asserting themselves as individuals, demanding their rights, and becoming aware that they must act together with their fellow workers to stop the bosses reducing us to grey uniformity.

And 'high-tech' workplaces are not inherently more difficult to unionise than

"Neither the diversities of consumer society nor the technology of microelectronics dispel class struggle"

any others. Sweden, with a relatively high level of technology, has maintained union organisation better than more backward Britain.

New workplaces, on green-field sites, are often hard to organise. But the car factories, now declining traditional bastions of trade unionism, were once hard-to-organise new workplaces. It took decades of hard struggle to unionise them. It may take a long time to organise new microelectronic factories, too, but they can be made bastions just as the car factories were.

A clear warning against over-generalising from the trends of the last few years, and imagining that they represent the unalterable shape of the future, is given by the history of the ideas of 'Fordism' and 'post-Fordism'.

The idea that 'Fordism' (based on the assembly-line technology pioneered by Henry Ford) is being replaced by a new era dates back at least to the mid-'70s. The French economist Michel Aglietta, writing then, had much the same idea about the technology of 'post-Fordism' or 'neo-Fordism' as *Marxism Today* now. Only he argued that the change in technology would transform capitalism towards a more unified working class, more intense class struggle, and more state control!

Aglietta was generalising too glibly from the trends visible in the mid-'70s. And *Marxism Today* generalises too glibly from the trends visible in the late '80s.

The whole argument about a new 'post-Fordist' era in technology is in any case too simplistic. 'High-technology'

workplaces, microelectronics factories and the like, are still a tiny proportion of total employment. Much bigger shifts in employment are from manufacturing to services, and from blue-collar to white-collar.

The shift from manufacturing to services is more complicated, too. Employment in consumer and distributive services has increased slowly, or decreased. Producer services (telecommunications, accountancy, banking, etc.) have increased their share of total employment; but some of this is a matter of the same work being contracted out, and thus appearing in the statistics under 'services' rather than 'manufacturing', not the work changing.

The biggest increase over a long period has been in social services — health education, etc. The Tories' cuts have stalled this increase for now, but it is likely to continue in future.

The shift from blue-collar work to white-collar has been much more drastic and unambiguous. In 1911, only 19 per cent of workers were white-collar. By 1971, it was 43 per cent; by 1985, 55 per cent.

And these growing sectors of the working class are being 'Fordised', pushed towards factory production-lines methods of working, rather than 'post-Fordised'. Whatever is happening in manufacturing, the trend in hospitals, colleges, social security offices and telephone exchanges is towards more concentration and centralisation.

Trade unionism is growing fast in those sectors. It has not been growing fast enough to make up for the terrible losses suffered by trade unionism in its traditional bastions in heavy industry, but it has been growing.

Twenty years ago, workers in health, education, social security and so on had no shop stewards and never struck. Now they are sometimes among the best-organised and most radical sections of the working class.

This shift raises strategic problems for the labour movement. Many of these public service workers produce no profits directly (though the Tories' policies of privatisation will begin to change that), and it is difficult for them to work out methods of industrial action which hit the bosses hard while minimising the effects on patients, students, or claimants. Difficult — but not impossible.

Certainly the trade union movement has suffered defeats in the 1980s — as it suffered defeats in most advanced capitalist countries in the 1920s, and again in the late '40s and early '50s. But defeats do not abolish the working class or the class struggle.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the great post-war expansion of capitalism faltered and lurched into slump. The first result was a tremendous explosion of industrial militancy.

Soon, the left had a chance to impose its political answers. After twenty years of uninterrupted Christian Democrat rule in West Germany, the Social Democrats became the leading party of government from 1969 to 1982. Labour took office in Britain after the miners had defeated the Tories in 1974. The Socialist Party quickly became Spain's leading party after the fall of the fascist regime in 1976. France's Socialists and Communists won power in 1981.

And everywhere the left failed. Its old Keynesian policies neither replaced

capitalism by something better, nor made it work.

The left became demoralised; the right seized the initiative, sometimes even winning the soul of parties like Spain's Socialists for ruthless free-trade policies; and the trade unions wilted under the im-

pect of mass unemployment, huge structural change, and lack of visible political alternatives.

The working class is still groping for new political answers. Finding them will not be easy. But that is what is needed, not surrender to the status quo.

Pulling together the wages fight

The rise in inflation which makes inflation-proofing of wages so 'disruptive' for the bosses also makes it more important for the unions. The fact that price rises could continue high for some time or even accelerate, underlines both these messages. Since the stock market crash of October 1987, the risk has been clear of a drastic new slump, which could swiftly wipe out all the limited gains that some sections of workers have made in the last few years.

'Escalator clauses', of a 'sliding scale' — committing bosses to pay rises, preferably monthly, in line with the cost of living — are an old trade union demand. It's time to give them more prominence and more urgent consideration.

A sliding scale cannot replace the fight for a real increase. London Underground workers are fighting for catch-up rises to make good the whittling-away of their real wage levels over recent years; the sliding scale is not a substitute for that fight either. But it can very well be fought for, and even won, alongside those demands.

Many countries — from Italy to the United States, from Australia to Belgium — had forms of sliding scale for many years, covering major industries or even all workers.

The sliding scale is most relevant today in countries like Poland, where rapid inflation is pushing the working class into desperate poverty. It was a major issue in the early-'89 talks between the Stalinist government and Solidarnosc.

In the end the Solidarnosc leaders agreed to 'pay for' the government's limited liberalisation by limiting sliding scale pay rises to only 80 per cent of the price rise. Militants in Solidarnosc have protested strongly.

Even where it is not such an urgent and central issue, however, the sliding scale can be important because it is a unifying factor in wage struggles. It is a demand that can be raised by and for all workers.

The essential idea is that workers should assert some conscious control over our standard of living rather than being the helpless victims of market forces which allow us some gains in booms and then throw us down again in slumps. Control is also important over the calculation of the cost of living index. Official government figures can grossly underestimate the real inflation rate for most workers. Sliding scale agreements should be linked to

inflation indexes worked out by the labour movement.

The sliding scale can and should be raised not just as an element for trade union claims, but as a demand for legislation by a future Labour government.

Instead of blathering about how a Labour government "won't be a soft touch for the unions", Labour leaders should be committing themselves to safeguard working class living standards by a sliding scale which underpins all wage agreements and also safeguards state benefits against inflation.

Sometimes the sliding scale demand is not very useful. Obviously it has little bite when inflation is low.

In 1972-3 a sort of half-sliding scale — threshold agreements — was pushed by the Tory government. The Tories imposed wage controls, and tried to ease them in by saying that workers would get increases above the decreed maximum at the rate of one per cent for each one per cent the inflation rate rose above a 'threshold'.

The idea of threshold agreements was launched not by the Tories but by the TUC in early 1972; but the Tories then used the formula to try to tie the unions into wage controls.

The Tories were trying to damp down, obstruct, diffuse and divert a great wave of industrial militancy which had already broken their previous efforts at wage controls and made their Industrial Relations Act unworkable. To agitate for a full sliding scale in place of their half sliding scale, instead of opposing the whole affair, would have played into their hands.

Times are different today. In fact the threshold agreements of 1972-3 rebounded nastily on the bosses, producing big wage rises in 1974 as inflation rose to levels that no-one had expected.

Since then bosses have been much more wary about anything like a sliding scale; and its value for workers has been much clearer. Over the years since the runaway inflation of 1974-5 and 1979-80, bosses in many countries have fought hard to get rid of sliding scale agreements dating from the '50s or the '60s.

Working class confidence is reviving today; but we do not have anything like the great industrial offensives of the early '70s. Demands which can begin to knit together unity and map out a solid defensive position are at a premium. The sliding scale is one of those.

Unite for 35 hours

At present the UK has the highest average weekly working hours for men in the EC. The figure stands at 42.4 hours per week.

A cut in the average working week to 35 hours would quickly cut unemployment.

But the bosses don't like it. Reduced working hours would mean reduced profits for the bosses — unless they could cut pay drastically at the same time.

The TUC should take up this initiative of

the engineers and campaign for a 35 hour week and an end to overtime working, linked to a serious fight for a minimum wage of at least two-thirds of the average manual worker's wage.

At the moment the engineers are in the front line of the battle for a shorter working week. The labour movement as a whole should take up this cause and make it central to a crusade against the Tories.



Flexibility: what's in a word?

By Martin Thomas

Bosses talk a lot about flexibility these days. It all sounds very go-ahead. Who wants to be rigid and hidebound when you could be flexible and adaptable?

The real issues are more complex. When the demands of profit point one way, and workers' interests another, the question is not flexibility or no, but **who** will be flexible.

The bosses want workers to be flexible to fit in with the rhythms and tempos of Capital. Those rhythms and tempos should be the fixed, rigid factor, and workers should adapt.

The bosses want workers to be flexible about our job security, our living standards, and our health and safety, to fit in with the ups and downs of the market and the urgent demand of new, expensive machinery to have workers operating for as many hours as possible in the week.

The bosses' flexibility is about capital and machinery using workers as a means to make profit, rather workers using machinery as a means to make useful things.

That is how capitalism works. The bosses buy workers' labour-power by paying wages just sufficient to sustain the workers and their families at the socially-established minimum standard of living.

Then they strive to use the labour-power to create the maximum possible amount of new value-added. The difference between that value-added and the wages yields profit, dividends, interest and rent.

The purpose of labour, under capitalism, is to feed capital's drive for self-expansion.

But labour is also human beings deploying their skills, their talents, their intelligence and their creativity. The two aspects of labour — service to capital and human activity — are at war with each other under capitalism. Truce lines shift constantly.

Capitalists accept some human 'rigidities' because they know they need human skills to do business. But they accept them only provisionally. When competition sharpens and technology changes rapidly, as in the '80s, they try to shift the truce line.

In his book *Trade Unions in Britain Today* John McIlroy tabulates the four main fronts of the drive for flexibility.

Functional flexibility means removing job demarcations and being able to move workers from job to job. British Leyland cars brought in a major functional flexibility package in 1980, and similar packages followed in steel, cars, engineering, oil refining and shipbuilding after 1982.

Numerical flexibility means dividing the workforce into **core** workers, with core skills and some job security, and **peripheral** workers, who are part-time,

temporary, self-employed, employed by sub-contractors, homeworkers, or on government 'training' schemes.

The peripheral workforce can be boosted or cut at short notice as the market fluctuates, while the company maintains continuity with its core workforce.

Japanese industry has long used this system. British government estimates for 1985 showed that part-timers, temporary workers, homeworkers, and the self-employed were 34 per cent of the entire workforce — an increase from 30 per cent in 1981. The government is trying to expand this sort of flexibility in public services by introducing agencies in the civil service and forcing local authorities to put up jobs to competitive tender.

Flexibility of time means new shift patterns (like flexible rostering on the rail), flexitime (workers being able to start and finish when they like, as long as they turn up for certain 'core' hours and do a fixed amount of work in a month or a year) and job-sharing.

Financial flexibility means pay being related more closely to work performance. In the United States, though not yet commonly in Britain, some employers have also established different (lower) rates of pay for newly-recruited workers, even when they are doing the same jobs as established workers.

The unions' response to flexibility cannot be simply to oppose it all, across the board. Dogmatic defence of agreements and demarcations linked to outdated technology is futile and doomed to defeat.

Functional flexibility can allow workers to learn new skills and have more interesting jobs; and it can cut away harmful divisions between different grades of workers.

Trade unions should demand:

- Consultation with the union over workers being moved from job to job. Otherwise flexibility can be used to break up organised groups of workers and to victimise militants.

- Proper training for any new jobs that workers take on.

- Guarantees against flexibility being used to cut employment.

- Extra pay for new jobs and responsibilities.

Flexibility of time can give workers, as well as bosses, more flexibility.

Many workers who look after children, especially women, need flexible hours. And 'flexible retirement' schemes, which already exist in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France and Spain, allowing older workers to mix part-time work with pension income, are certainly much better than throwing such workers onto the scrapheap when they want to continue working.

But trade unions should demand:

- Full-time rights (on unfair dismissal, sick leave, holidays, parental leave, and so on) for part-time workers.

- No shift patterns which damage health, endanger safety at work by imposing excessively long shifts, destroy workers' family and social life, or make workers' free time unusable (with gaps between shifts which are too short for them to go home).

- Flexitime not to be used as a substitute for parents' rights to time off to

look after children when they are sick.

- Flexitime not to be used to get time worked at standard rates when it was previously worked at overtime rates; or, if it is so used, standard rates should be raised to compensate.

- Provision for union meetings to be held in 'core' working time when all workers can attend.

Financial flexibility should generally be opposed. It sets worker against worker, gives scope for favouritism, and makes workers' incomes insecure. If a battle to defeat it outright cannot be won, trade unions should at least demand:

- All performance-related elements in pay to be decided by objective criteria, open to trade union monitoring and negotiation, not by managers' whims.

- Basic rates of pay sufficient for a decent standard of living even without any

"Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual workers; all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working time."

Karl Marx

performance-related addition.

Numerical flexibility should also be opposed, with the demand to bring as many jobs as possible 'in-house', under a uniform union agreement.

If the battle cannot be won outright, unions should demand:

- Full-time rights for part-time workers.
- 'Peripheral' workers to have the same conditions and rates of pay as 'core' workers doing comparable jobs. 'Top-up' money to bring workers on government training schemes up to trade union rates.

- All 'peripheral' workers, including those working for sub-contractors, to be unionised, preferably in the same union as the 'core' workers.

- Offers of full-time jobs at the end of their contracts for all government-scheme trainees and temporary workers.



Print workers against Murdoch

Who gains from new technology?

By Bruce Robinson

Computer technology has had an impact on all types of work, from supermarket check-out operators through assembly line workers to doctors, and journalists.

Since the development of micro processors in the early 1970s, it has been possible to include the capacities of a computer in almost any tool used in production and to develop many new tools such as industrial robots, computer-aided design systems and word processors.

And computer technology has different capacities from all previous forms of technology. It can mechanise mental work as well as manual or physical work, and put 'intelligence' into all sorts of products. It can monitor its own, and its operator's, actions and use this information to trigger other activities. It can provide and transfer information as well as controlling devices to transform inputs into finished products.

Computer technology could be used to reduce radically the amount of time humans have to work. It could increase the flow of useful goods and services, and reduce drudgery.

At present, however, it is being introduced to further the aims of a capitalist economy in a period of deep crisis. New technology is used as a way of restructuring capital, both to increase its profitability and to shift the balance of power further away from the workforce.

This is not an inevitable result of the technology itself, though applications are often designed with these ends in mind. How successful the employers are depends on the response of trade unionists and their power to enforce certain choices about how new technology is designed and implemented.

Although very high levels of automation in manufacture are still rare in Britain, computer technology is widespread. One third of manual workers and two thirds of office workers in 2000 establishments surveyed in 1987 were using new technology introduced, and the proportions are still increasing fast.

The content and effects of new

technology vary across different sectors of the economy, though there are some general trends such as a polarisation of skill levels and a trend towards a more flexible workforce.

In manufacturing industry, there were over 2,000 programmable robots by 1985, mainly in jobs such as welding and paint-spraying. Other parts of production can also use computer technology: computer-aided design (CAD) is increasingly replacing traditional draughtsmanship; and computer numerically-controlled machine tools (CNC) can be programmed to produce a range of components.

Increasingly the aim is to integrate these processes and add other features such as stock control and order processing to bring the whole of production under the control of a single computerised system.

Such systems are rare at the moment, both because the vast cost of such systems means there must be a huge market for the products and because there have been some very expensive failures. In these systems the trend is for the worker to take on a number of functions: maintenance, supervision of the process and controlling parts or all of the process through computerised mechanisms. This overall control is traditionally a manager's function.

More common is partial computerisation of production, as on the BL Metro line. Here CAD, CNC for engine production, robotic welding for car assembly and automated pressing of bodies were introduced without full computer control. Even that level of computerisation is still rare in British manufacturing, though new plants tend to use similar advanced manufacturing technology.

Computerisation tends to be far more advanced in process control industries such as chemicals where there has been a high degree of automation for some time.

In retailing, computer technology has made work increasingly like work on an assembly line. Computer systems are tied to tills to provide records of what is sold and this is used for stock control. Bar codes allow items to go on the shelf without pricing. Workers on the tills may be expected to work at a particular rate, which can be monitored by the computer. Warehousing is also increasingly automated. Computerisation allows the

number of sales assistants to be cut, and the big firms to cut their overheads and compete on smaller margins.

Office work has also been radically transformed by new technology. The word processor (WP) is only one of a series of technologies that have increased the speed of producing a document by 50%. The development of electronic communications has led to talk of 'the paperless office', though, in fact, the effect of introducing word processors has often been to produce more paper and even to require more workers.

All the evidence shows that there is little general opposition of office workers to new technology. After all, a word processor makes the job of typing and editing documents less irritating than a typewriter. Workers have, however, objected to side-effects of the way word processing has been introduced.

The way jobs are redefined can lead to a new division of labour in which the unskilled operator is given a monotonous job, typing with little human contact, while the skills of traditional secretarial work are hived off to 'personal assistants'. Computers can also be used to monitor the workers' speed here.

Much traditional record-keeping work can also be computerised, and the number of jobs in this field will decline drastically. An example of this is the DHSS, where the government want to centralise and computerise benefit payments at the cost of 15,000 jobs and a worse service to claimants. The DHSS wants both to cut costs and undermine a traditionally militant group of trade unionists.

Similar computerisation can take place in all areas involving records and transfer of information or money, such as banking and finance. The number of local banks has declined, and the Midland is now offering a computerised telephone-only banking service.

Employers can have a number of motives for introducing new technology. The most common is to become more competitive by cutting costs. This can take place through jobs cuts, by reorganisation of the work, or by cutting overheads (eg. the need to keep stocks).

Another element can be the wish to reduce the level of skill required to do the job, either because (as in the print before Wapping) the old technology gives the workers a degree of control, or because new technology allows costs to be cut, and skill shortages to be overcome.

The use of CNC machines, for example, removes control of setting the machine from the worker on the line to the programmer of the machine. In the mines, new technology has been used directly to increase management control.

The deskilling effect of new technology is, however, neither as inevitable nor as entirely beneficial to management as it is often presented. New technology can often be made to adapt to the workers' skills and needs rather than the other way round. This means that the design and content of the technology must become part of the unions' bargaining agenda, though this is not easy to achieve. In 1983 only 7% of agreements on technological change involved the unions at the stage of planning the system. Trade unionists often lack the technical skills required to negotiate effectively on these issues.

The use of computer technology often creates new skills, usually of a different type from the old skills — more conceptual or logical than based on making or

doing something. It is up to the unions to ensure that those skills are made available as widely as possible and that retraining is provided for existing workers.

However, it is a matter of dispute whether a computer system can ever totally replace successfully 'making and doing' knowledge of skilled workers, and computerisation that does not provide for using those human skills may fail. For example, in chemical processes workers may develop knowledge based on the appearance, and or feel of, a substance that cannot be reproduced on a VDU.

There are other risks in computerisation for the employers. First, a system that doesn't take account of how workers do a job may not be accepted by them. It may not work. In the Passport Office dispute workers refused to use a system which aimed to cut jobs, but made issuing a passport take 15% longer. It has subse-

“There are always choices about how new technology is implemented. Trade unionists must ensure it serves workers' interests”

quently been scrapped. The workers often know best how to do a job, but have not been given decision-making power, or even consulted, in the design of the system.

Computerisation can also give a considerable amount of power to a small number of key workers, who keep vital computer systems going. The recent NALGO strike showed the power of such workers to hit their employers hard, as did the strike at DHSS Central Office a few years ago, which cost the government millions of pounds.

How should the unions deal with new technology? Many of the workers most affected are in sectors where traditionally organisation is difficult and unionisation is low — for example, office work (outside the public sector), finance and retailing. In addition, many firms where high technology is produced, or implemented, are on greenfield sites, where unions are either banned or have low membership. For example, in 'Silicon Glen' in Scotland, even unions such as the EETPU have to bring people in from elsewhere to recruit members by leafletting outside the gates at some of the electronics plants.

Some firms such as IBM or Nissan try to buy out the need for unions, either by offering lots of bonuses and perks subject to individual assessment or by using consultation mechanisms to give the appearance of an identity of interests between the workers and management.

Before the unions can take on the issues of new technology in these areas, they need to recruit heavily. Gimmicks like the EETPU's offer of BUPA schemes are unlikely to attract either highly skilled workers in greenfield sites or low-paid workers in offices or retailing. They need to be convinced that joining a union will make a real difference to their working conditions which in turn requires a fighting rank and file policy.

Secondly, the unions need to develop a policy on new technology itself. Two strategies should be avoided: outright rejection of new technology on principle and 'business as usual' shopfloor militancy.

The first can rarely be successful in the long run; the second doesn't realise that the introduction of new technology can radically alter the balance of power on the shopfloor, undermining the existing bases of union power. Both leave the context and method of implementing new technology to the employer.

Instead trade unionists should not see new technology as something given to be accepted or rejected as a whole, but as a focus for struggle. A starting point must be that any changes in job content or introduction of new technology must be notified to the union beforehand and negotiated. Such negotiations should be on the basis of no job loss and retraining of existing workers.

There should also be moves towards cutting working hours where new technology is introduced to ensure that its benefits do not all go to the employer and that the policy of no job loss can become a reality.

If trade unionists are to maintain or extend control over their jobs, they must be involved in the design of and decision-making about new systems.

Two researchers, Hugo Levie and Robin Williams, explain why: "By the time the technology is being implemented, many characteristics of the system will have been fixed and the scope for negotiating over the impacts may be reduced...the union is left with a reactive role. Influence of this sort is unreliable, especially in the not infrequent situation where new technology is designed to undermine such job control."

They also stress problems with this approach. One is not having the technical knowledge to challenge management and thus running the risk of being co-opted, and supporting proposals because we have no alternative. "A major problem confronting this strategy is the way given policies of new technology and associated systems are presented as the only possibility..."

Apart from the accountability of the negotiators, they see a solution in the "development of an independent trade union perspective on characteristics required of new technology, to help the representatives avoid identifying themselves unreservedly with the systems being proposed."

This would also require access to full information and training.

Given the relative weakness of shopfloor organisation and control after ten years of Thatcher, it may be unlikely that such a policy could be won at company or shopfloor level. We may also need to campaign for legislation along the lines of that in Sweden and Norway, where employers are forced to negotiate the introduction of new technology.

A 'Charter for New Technology' could take its place alongside the 'Charter for Workers' Rights' as part of a strategy to force a Labour government to redefine the balance of employment law in favour of the unions.

The watchword of trade unionists' attitude to new technology should be "It can be done differently". There are always choices about how new technology is implemented. Trade unionists must ensure it serves workers' interests.

Pete Keenlyside, Manchester Amalgamated Branch, UCW

Up to the mid-1970s, the Post Office operated as a service and lost money. Now it operates as a business and makes millions. How that change came about sums up the attacks the working class has faced over the last 22 years.

The old-style Post Office was characterised by two main features; the low level of mechanisation and the ability of staff to control the job. The two went hand in hand. Manual sorting meant you could control the pace of the work and disappear for a 'smoke' every now and again without anyone noticing. Added to that, the then UPW (now UCW) had, over the years, built up a considerable control over work practices. Each person's duty was rigidly defined and could not be changed without union agreement.

The drive for profits had to start by changing all that. The first stage was mechanisation. In 1972 the Post Office planned to replace manual sorting in the main offices by machines. Instead of people, ALFs, SEGs and code-sort machines would stack the sorting office flow.

The union membership blocked these plans for four years in an attempt to get an agreement on new technology that would include the shorter working week. In the end the UCW Executive succeeded in getting the block lifted for a pittance, and in came the machines, to be followed by even faster ones such as OCRs (Optical Character Recognition) which can even read handwritten script.

Now few workers sort more letters at a pace dictated by the machines and ruthlessly enforced. Marx's description of a worker being a mere extension of a machine is living reality in the Post Office today. No wonder they have difficulty getting people to work there.

With mechanisation came increased discipline. Once upon a time the only way you could get the sack was to be caught stealing or hit a gaffer. Now people are being disciplined for going to the toilet too often and for talking on the floor. The high levels of unemployment have also allowed management to crack down on sickness. In some cases new entrants have been sacked for having as little as four days off in their first year.

The second stage was a massive increase in productivity. The Post Office used to have a national productivity scheme where we got a lump sum every now and again if by any chance savings were made. That was replaced by IWM (Improved Working Methods). This broke the workforce down into often tiny units. In the Manchester area, for example, there were over 40 different IWM units.

To qualify for payments either the same number of staff had to do more work or, more usually, fewer staff the same work. This led to the giving up of duties and the selling-off of tea breaks, all for an extra few bob. Delivery staff were finding it impossible to finish their walks on time. Even management recognised the problems IWM created and it has now been scrapped.

This hasn't, however, stopped the Post Office from bringing in son of IWM —



In search of profits

RRP (Revised Revision Procedure). This is a supposedly scientific procedure using 'industrial engineers' (work-study to you and me). It was resisted at first, and nearly caused a national strike, but now it's in operation throughout the country. This has led to further reductions in staff in the major sorting offices. To add insult to injury, staff no longer get the payments they used to under IWM. The new payments scheme, RULC (Real Unit Labour Cost) hasn't earned anyone a penny since it was introduced and in fact in many areas staff theoretically owe the Post Office money.

The third stage was to try and remove the control the union and its members had over the job. This has been a long process with the management using several tactics. One was the introduction of team talks. This is where staff and management are supposed to get together to sort out the problems that arise. Management saw it as a way of trying to get to the members over the head of the union and at one stage this led to a boycott by the union.

The boycott was declared illegal by a High Court judge and so union members now have to attend. Such is the suspicion of management, however, that the team talks now have little effect.

The usual management tactic is to implement the measures they want by 'executive action', that is, without negotiation. The bulk of the disputes in the Post Office are caused by this and often the measures have to be withdrawn. Nevertheless, union control over the jobs has been considerably weakened over the last few years.

Despite the adverse effects they've had on the members, most of the changes have come in either with little opposition from the UCW leadership or with their active assistance. IWM was actively dreamed up by a member of the Executive, the now disgraced and retired John Taylor. It may have suited his members in East London who had all sorts of non-existent duties to sell, but it proved a curse for the rest of the country. And with IWM came a dramatic increase in part-time labour, denied shift and overtime payments, and casuals.

Taken together with the explosion in the volume of junk mail, the position of postal workers has changed dramatically since the early 1970s. Then we were doing a useful job for the public. Now we are mere units on a balance sheet to be pushed around, split up and privatised at the whim of accountants, ambitious managers and governments.

But every cloud has a silver lining. If the job has changed then so have the people who do it. Gone is the passivity that followed the 1971 strike. In 1987 a fifth of all disputes were in the Post Office. Last year's strike helped to end the image of the working class as helpless under Thatcher's boot. The rash of unofficial action that has now become a feature of the Post Office continues at the rate of two or three walkouts every week. Large battles loom over Sunday collections and the 1989 pay claim. The will to fight is there among the rank and file. The job of socialists in the Post Office remains that of providing it with organisation and leadership.

How to deal with 'Japanese' work methods

Kenny Murphy, a senior shop steward at General Motors' Vauxhall Ellesmere Port car factory, discusses the bosses' drive for 'Japanese' working methods like Quality Circles and team work

A lot of American companies have had success with what they call QWL, Quality of Working Life. It is a brainstorming cum brainwashing technique, but it only works if workers are willing to participate.

For General Motors, the jewel in the crown was the New United Motor Manufacturing Incorporated project, a joint venture with Toyota to produce cars in Fremont. They closed the Fremont plant down, laid everyone off, and then selectively re-employed. Productivity rocketed, and quality did as well.

It worked because people actually got something out of it. The average person on the shopfloor got easily sucked into it because in a boring, repetitive job, QWL gave you a little bit of kudos and a little bit of initiative, you haven't really but you feel you have a say in what goes on.

Around 1984 they tried to introduce the same approach in Britain. They decided they couldn't get anywhere by jackboot methods any more.

In the 1984 pay deal our grading structure was altered so that people could do work that they didn't normally do. For example, a lot of quality inspection has been given to people already on the track.

We have quite a lot of people doing that in our plant. In Luton they've got hardly anybody. It was negotiated. The dispute we had in 1984 was over the company trying to bring in merit money. We had a short dispute, and they said merit money was off the table. Merit money meant that the foreman would assess each person and say which should get extra money.

We got that thrown out, but we accepted the rest; and there's no doubt about it, it's worked in that people are building better quality cars.

Some things which we signed for in the deal never happened, mainly due to the ineptitude of the management. Then they brought in a new bloke called Angel Perversi. Sweeping changes were made in management from 1986.

In 1987 they introduced 'versatility', but we got paid for being versatile. They changed the 'C' grade — which is the production operators, where I work — to what they called CTC production. They also said there'd be no forced redundancies during the lifetime of the agreement.

They introduced three shift maintenance work for the skilled people.

They tried to get us to do double days but we stopped that one.

The whole strategy is one of piecemeal change in different places and different workforces, depending on how organised you are.

In the paintshop at Luton, for example, they have it all going, teamwork, the lot. At Luton they've also got the IBC, the Isuzu Bedford van Company on the same site as Vauxhall. At IBC they do everything. They've got no measured day work, no time study, nothing like that; instead it's all team work and Quality Circles. And it's worth a few bob to anyone who's on it.

When they took over the IBC, they consolidated all the bonus into basic pay. They must be among the best hourly paid production workers in Britain, with the bonus consolidated into the hourly rate. But they lost a lot of jobs, and their

"It's buttering people up. At the end of the day it's all geared to one thing...more cars with less people"

union-company agreement is the worst in the industry. It's even worse than Nissan.

At Ellesmere Port we got a bloke over from America and educated the stewards about Quality Circles. We didn't just give them the T&G booklets, which aren't really that good, we went through the whole history of Quality Circles.

We explained how QCs can mean losing jobs and the pace of the track increasing.

But they've increased the suggestions scheme. For the first time ever they have made it worthwhile to put suggestions in. People are getting thousands of pounds now where they used to get £20 or £30. The top pay out now is about £8,000.

It's part of the company's plans. It's called continuous improvement. You don't have time study or anything like that — when someone puts in a suggestion on a job, it gets carried out regardless of measured day work. You just do it.

It's buttering people up. At the end of the day it's all geared to one thing, and that's to do more cars with less people. Trade union activists know that but the average worker doesn't know.

They want team work, too. I've heard people say we could gain control through team work, but it doesn't work like that.

I'm a steward for 32 men. That would be four groups. How can there be a steward for four different groups of people? It doesn't work.

If we do accept team work, we'll have to insist on four stewards. If you're split and you have one steward looking after four groups of men, you can't possibly have control.

Our strategy with these new working methods ever since 1984 has been to negotiate through them, placing demands and conditions rather than trying to just keep knocking them back. We're lucky that we've had a boom while we've been negotiating our way through it. If there was a recession in the industry, we'd have problems, because then they'd be able to come in with anything they wanted. But luckily, up to now, we've been able to negotiate our way through.

In this next pay deal, this 'Meeting the Challenge' package, the company wants to do away with time study and measured day work altogether. We've got them to back off on that.

The company's been clever too. Where they've had a problem with a job, they've robotised it, mechanised it, or altered the whole set up so it's got to be re-timed. They are now aiming to do this without re-timing.

The international GM combine committee meets once a year now. But there isn't anyone in the world who has successfully resisted the changes they are looking for.

And when our people go to international conferences, the other people, except the Brazilians, seem to be in the opposition camp. The union leaders in the plants are all up to their bollocks in employee involvement, QWL, and the rest of it.

I believe we've got to change our union structure if we are going to have anything to do with team work. If they then offer the people on the shopfloor enough money, we're going to have it, so I believe we've got to alter our structure in work to cope with it, to keep intact the union's integrity.

They are going to break people into small groups of 8, 10, or 12, each group will have a team leader and the team leader will be totally responsible for that group.

Our attitude has always been that if the company want to talk quality, we'll talk quality, but we're not talking Quality Circles. It's taken a long time but the people we work with are coming round to that now.

If they'd come at us in 1984 and said take all this or we'll close you down, we'd have been beaten. But we had five years to prepare.

It's hard to fight an invisible enemy. The company keeps changing the goalposts. You have a vision of what's going on, and all of a sudden they change. You win on one issue, then they come back again with another plan to do what they wanted in the first place.

The workers can run industry!

In every modern workers' revolution, workers fight to control production and distribution.

In Poland's second city, Lodz, the workers' movement Solidarnosc won control over the distribution of food in summer 1981. Meanwhile there was a strong movement in the factories for workers' control over production. In September 1981, 90 per cent of the 24,000 workers at the Lenin steelworks voted for "the workers' council running the enterprise" and "choosing and recalling the manager".

In Portugal, in 1975, workers' commissions were the major power in many factories and banks, often the decisive voice in getting the enterprise nationalised.

In France in 1968, distribution of food, petrol and electricity in the city of Nantes

was controlled for a period by the workers' Central Strike Committee. In Spain in 1936-7, at the beginning of the Civil War, many factories, around Barcelona especially, were controlled by workers' committees.

In the USSR in 1917-18, factory councils monitored everything the manager did.

But is workers' control sustainable as more than a short experiment? None of the revolutionary experiments in workers' control lasted long. Even in the USSR,

where the workers took state power, control by the factory councils collapsed under the pressure of the Civil War and the catastrophic dislocation of industry during it.

The workers' cooperatives set up in several workplaces threatened with closure in Britain in the 1970s all collapsed. In Yugoslavia, each workplace is formally under the democratic control of its workers, but the economy combines most of the vices of the free market with most of the vices of bureaucratic planning.

All these experiences prove that workers' control in single workplaces can only be a brief experiment or a bureaucratic caricature as long as the economic environment — trade, banking, the State — is controlled by market forces or by privileged classes. But there is every reason to believe that workers' control could work very well under democratic planning and a workers' state.

Neither the Bolsheviks in 1917-18, nor most other groups of workers trying to introduce workers' control, wanted to get rid of all the old managers. On the contrary, they wanted to keep them, use their skills, learn from them.

Trade unionists in Britain today often

"Workers' control means putting the workers' wide-ranging knowledge about efficiency, safety and social need as the guiding intelligence in place of the shareholders' narrow knowledge of the bottom line."

have more technical skills and more knowledge of how their workplaces are run than Russian workers had in 1917-18. In the late '70s, workers in Lucas, Vickers and other firms drafted detailed "workers' plans" for alternative patterns of production for their enterprises.

We would, however, still need to use and learn from the skills of the managers, accountants, and production planners. Many of these people are, indeed, workers themselves, only higher-paid.

To make sure that democratic accountability worked properly, and to stop the managers becoming a closed-off elite, workers' control would also include training lots of workers in managerial and accounting skills.

At present, managers are hired and fired by big shareholders, who judge them by their ability to produce profits. Under workers' control, they would be hired and fired by workers' committees, who would judge them by their ability to produce for social need and ensure good working conditions.

Big shareholders know about profits. The workforce of any enterprise has a huge fund of knowledge about how the job can be done efficiently, safely and well. Workers' control means putting the workers' wide-ranging knowledge in place of the shareholders' narrow knowledge of the bottom line as the guiding intelligence.

It can work. It will work.

'Agencies' in the civil service

By Mark Serwotka,
Branches Against Agencies
Campaign (personal
capacity)

The government wants to break up and privatise the Civil Service. It wants to erode the national terms and conditions fought for by the Civil Service unions over the years. In 1988 report was written by Sir Robin Ibbs entitled 'Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps'. It proposed re-organising the Civil Service into separate management units or 'Executive Agencies'.

The 'Next Steps' report is a political compromise between the hard-line Thatcherites in the Cabinet who favour the creation of Agencies as a stepping stone to full-scale privatisation, and the Treasury who resist losing control of the purse strings. However, one of the Department of Social Security computer centres at Livingstone has already been privatised and it is clear that the Tories won't stop there.

Agency status will give management greater flexibility in personal and financial terms. Most government departments have been told they will become Agencies — some have already started the process.

Agency status will mean the break up of national pay bargaining and devolve disciplinary action down to local management. For example, at Companies House in Cardiff, one of the first Agencies, a long-standing member of staff has recently been sacked for a minor disciplinary matter. We have a lot to lose and very little to gain with Agency status.

What have the unions done?

Next to nothing. The largest Civil Service union, the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) has a leadership which makes Eric Hammond look radical. They have welcomed Agency Status falsely

believing it will halt privatisation.

John Ellis, the CPSA General Secretary, wrote to a local Branch Secretary: "You will be interested to know, I am sure, that DSS computer centres would have been privatised had the Agency option not been around". This was written five days after the announcement that Livingstone computer centre had been sold off to Electronic Data Systems, a non-union subsidiary of General Motors.

The second largest union in the Civil Service, the National Union of Civil and Public Servants (NUCPS) have made more noise about Agencies, but failed to organise any action against it.

The need for a fightback

A CPSA branch, DSS Merthyr Tydfil, wrote to every CPSA branch in June 1989 urging branches to come together to fight Agencies. It initiated a campaign, now called 'Branches Against Agencies', which has begun to raise the issue among CPSA branches. It has urged branches to demand a recall CPSA conference (under union rule 7.2, 25% of branches can call a conference) but the National Executive Committee has totally ignored the policy.

The campaign, sponsored by over 40 branches, has also laid plans for an unofficial conference next February should the NEC fail to organise a recall conference.

The conference will put the campaign on a firm footing to increase the pressure on the CPSA leadership to start recognising the danger of Agencies and also to increase the confidence of the rank and file branch delegates to mount an independent campaign if necessary to defeat the government's plans.

The Branches Against Agencies campaign has come under enormous pressure from the CPSA bureaucracy to halt its campaign, including threats of disciplinary action, but the campaign is refusing to back down because if Agencies aren't stopped then the whole future of the union would be in jeopardy.

LABOUR AND THE UNIONS



Miners join health workers' pickets, 1982. Photo: John Harris

When the government abolished the Dock Labour Scheme dockers could not strike against the decision because that would be 'political'.

They voted to strike instead for the demand that the port employers negotiate a national deal guaranteeing the same conditions as the Dock Labour Scheme. The employers got a court injunction to stop the strike.

They claimed that a previously unnoticed clause in the law setting up the Dock Labour Scheme had made dock strikes unlawful since 1947! The judge said he didn't know about that, but since the harm to the employers of a strike seemed more grievous to him than the harm to the workers of not striking, he would ban the strike.

By the time that a full court hearing decided that the Dock Labour Scheme did not, after all, ban strikes, the legal life of the dockers' original vote had expired, and they had to ballot again.

Even then, the union had to be careful to call for action only in the ports registered under the Dock Labour Scheme. Any action in other ports, or any picketing of those ports by registered dockers, would be unlawful 'secondary' action.

The railworkers also had to ballot twice over the same industrial action in 1989. The judge decided that their first ballot paper was badly worded.

In October 1989, manual workers at three big engineering factories voted clearly for strikes to win a 35-hour week, and their unions called them out.

British Aerospace first tried to get the courts to stop the strikes altogether on the grounds that the ballot had not produced a two-thirds majority in all seven plants

Will Labour outlaw solidarity?

By Liz Williams, Wallasey Labour Party

where it was held (although it had produced a simple majority); and then succeeded for a few days in getting an injunction against MSF manual workers at Preston striking on the ground that although they had a majority for striking, the whole MSF membership there, white-collar included, had not.

New proof comes in almost every week that the Tory union laws are not really about democracy for trade union members. **They are about preventing effective industrial action.**

Any action at all is unlawful unless it is against your own employer at your own place of work. That means that if your employer does what Rupert Murdoch did to his printworkers — provoke a strike, sack them, and re-open business elsewhere — there is **nothing** you can do lawfully against him. If your boss artificially divides his business into separate units, you can only take action unit by unit.

Even within those limits, you cannot strike unless you have first balloted — and balloted in a way that a crusty old High Court judge finds satisfactory. The number of things they can find wrong with ballots is increasing all the time!

Then you cannot have more than six pickets, and you can't expel strikebreakers from your union or

penalise them.

If you strike unlawfully, your union leaders have to do more than just abstain from supporting you. As the National Union of Seamen found out in the Dover P&O Ferries dispute, they have to act effectively to wreck your strike. Otherwise the union's entire funds will be seized.

And the Tories are planning even more restrictions, including bans on strikes in 'essential services'.

The first duty of a Labour government should be to restore workers' legal right to take effective action for wages and conditions against the bosses. But the Policy Review falls far short of that.

It promises to repeal the "more objectionable" bits of Tory law, but it also says it will keep other bits. "Union members should have the right to a secret ballot on...strikes.

"Although in the nature of industrial disputes there will continue to be occasions on which walk-outs take place and strike action occurs before any ballot can be arranged, a ballot should subsequently be held. Any union member should be able to appeal to an independent tribunal if a ballot has not been held."

The problem here is not whether strike ballots are desirable. Often they are, so long as they are **workplace** ballots, held **after collective discussion**. The problem is whether a judge, or a supposedly 'independent' tribunal, should have the power to decide when and how a ballot

should be called, and whether the ballot is a satisfactory one.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to picture how judges could use such powers to call ballots at critical moments during strike action, timed to suit the bosses.

They should not have that power. Trade union democracy should be regulated by trade union members, not by the State.

The Policy Review goes on to say that unions' funds being seized ('sequestered') by courts "is completely unacceptable", though it does not say what penalties it will propose for unions which call strikes which are still unlawful. And it promises that it will stop injunctions being granted to stop strikes without the union's case first being heard by the judge.

Whether the judge takes any notice is, of course, another matter. And the Policy Review indicates that Labour should keep many of the Tories' restrictions on political and 'secondary' strikes, loosening them only where "workers have a genuine interest in the outcome of a dispute".

Just how narrowly that line will be drawn was made brutally clear by front-bencher Michael Meacher in *The Independent* on 9 October. "Would it be lawful for workers to refuse to handle imports from South Africa?" Answer, no. 'Would meat porters be allowed to take action in support of nurses?' Answer, no."

In other words, working class solidarity would be unlawful. Meat porters would not be considered to have "a genuine interest" in saving the National Health Service, nor shopworkers "a genuine interest" in ending apartheid.

Moreover, "we would retain the current Code of Practice on peaceful picketing which limits the number of pickets [to six]."

Labour's policy can and must be changed on trade union rights. A resolution calling for Labour to commit itself to a comprehensive Workers' Charter got two and a quarter million votes at the Brighton Labour Party conference in October 1989, including the votes of the TGWU and the National Union of Mineworkers. The delegation of the building workers' union UCATT had a public row on the floor of conference before its General Secretary cast its vote against the motion.

A systematic campaign through the Labour Parties and trade unions can and must win majority support for it.



Firefighters battling the last Labour government's disastrous incomes policy, in 1977

No return to incomes policy!

By Lol Duffy, Wallasey Labour Party

The most difficult nettle a future Labour government would have to grasp", according to economic journalist William Keegan, "is the one marked 'wage inflation'.

"Mrs Thatcher... will never concede the need for some kind of incomes policy, yet that is what is required. It will fall to Labour to have to admit this, however unpopular the concept is with trade unions".

Keegan's article appeared in the October 1989 *AEU Journal*. It directly contradicts the Labour Party's *Policy Review*, which declares: "We reject a pay policy or any form of pay norm as being unhelpful and unworkable."

Yet Labour's manifesto in 1974 was no less forthright in supporting 'free collective bargaining' and rejecting "the authoritarian and bureaucratic system of wage control imposed by the Heath (Tory) government". And only 16 months later

the Labour government was imposing just such "authoritarian and bureaucratic" controls.

Labour's victory in February 1974 was followed by a wave of industrial militancy. By November 1974 average earnings were 26 per cent higher than a year previously, and were increasing twice as fast as retail prices. With a world slump beginning, the economy was shakey. Profits slumped to almost nothing.

The Labour government responded, not by moving to replace capitalism, but by trying to patch it up. And that could only be done at the expense of the working class. The Labour government demanded wage controls: TGWU leader Jack Jones and the rest of the TUC chiefs provided the formula, a £6 limit on wage rises.

After that, one set of wage limits followed another until the government's ignominious defeat in May 1979. Real wages were cut by ten per cent, the biggest loss since the 1850s. We had been told that wage restraint would save jobs and avoid cuts; but unemployment nearly trebled, from 600,000 in 1974 to over 1.5 million in 1978, hospital building was cut by a third, and school building was cut by over 60 per cent.

It could all happen again. There is nothing in the economic programme of Labour's new *Policy Review* to equip a Labour government with any other answer to economic difficulties than squeezing the working class.

The main idea of the *Policy Review* is that "Government has to invest in education, training and science, modernise transport and telecommunications..." So far so good. And the *Policy Review* does promise investment in a national broad band fibre optic cable network, which will allow, for example, individual dialling to video libraries for individually transmitted films.

But beyond that the programme dissolves into vague good intentions. A Labour government will "encourage in-

A Workers' Charter

- The right to belong to a trade union for all employees including those employed at GCHQ, the police, and the armed services.
- A legally recognised right to strike, to picket effectively and in whatever numbers is chosen, and to take other forms of industrial action.
- The right to strike for all trade unionists, including secondary or solidarity action, without fear of dismissal, fines, or sequestration of union assets.
- Legally enforceable rights for unions to gain access to workplaces to organise, for workers to join unions, and for unions to gain recognition.
- The right for unions to determine their own constitutions and rule books in accordance with their own democratic procedures, free from any interference by the

State.

- The right to stop work whenever health and safety are threatened.
- The right of workers and their unions to be fully consulted and informed by employers on all decisions relating to working conditions, job prospects, strategic investments and mergers/takeovers.
- The right to employment free from discrimination on grounds of gender, race, age, religion, sexual orientation or political persuasion.
- Full-time rights for part-time workers.
- Rights for short-term contract workers.
- Inclusion of homeworkers in employment protection legislation and financial sanctions on those who illegally exploit them.
- The right of trade unions to take political action and collect a political levy.

dustry to organise itself so that it becomes a more viable partner to government". It will change the tax system and accounting rules to nudge companies into spending more on research and development.

It will "persuade companies to train their employees by financial incentives rather than by legislation". Its policy for job creation will be to "encourage local authorities to invite local consortiums — consisting of local government, private enterprise and trade unions and community organisations — to develop a network of job-generation projects..."

There is some talk of investment and training projects directly undertaken by the government, but very little; and even less about how and from where the government will get the resources for these projects.

Renationalisation will be confined to the major utilities (gas, water, electricity, rail, post, telecom). Even here it will not be rapid; and "there will be no question of paying other than a fair market price" for shares (ie rip-off profiteers' gains will be guaranteed).

Only enough shares will be brought back to bring the government stake up to 51 per cent; and Neil Kinnock has insisted that the usual dividends will be paid on the other 49 per cent. In other words, even the renationalised enterprises will have to be run in such a way as to keep the shareholders happy — on orthodox capitalist lines.

"The market will not — left to itself — produce adequate investment in education and training, in science and technology, in new products and new capacity", says the *Policy Review*. But its programme would give a Labour government no real grip against market forces. Words of encouragement, efforts at persuasion, will not move hard-bitten capitalists!

And what about inflation? The *Policy Review*'s section on inflation is among its woolliest. "Inflation is a complex phenomenon", it sagely comments, "whose causes will vary from one situation to the next...There is [no] all-embracing solution".

The nearest the document comes to a policy is this: "We shall make it clear throughout the economy that our emphasis is on investment rather than consumption, and that money spent too generously on consumption today could prejudice jobs and services tomorrow".

"Throughout the economy"? So we'll have Labour ministers turning up at the single mother's council flat and at the bankers' dinner alike to warn that too many baked beans or too much caviar today could mean ruin tomorrow?

The Labour government would probably try credit controls. These would hit working class people trying to buy houses, but probably have no effect on the rich, who in today's fast-and-furious financial markets would surely find ways round them. Probably they would have little effect on inflation; and then the Labour government would be back to its traditional method of stopping money being "spent too generously on consumption", namely wage controls.

No socialist economic policy is possible without taking control of the vast financial system in the City and of the main productive enterprises, so that the economy can be planned internationally if possible. Without that, a Labour government will end up ruining itself by attacking the workers on whom it has to depend for support.

Democratising the block vote

By Rob Dawber

Block vote" are the dirtiest words in the dictionary to many socialists by the end of a Labour Party annual conference.

In debate after debate we hear strong and persuasive speeches for a left-wing motion, with the feeblest opposition. Then the General Secretaries get out their voting cards and the motion is crushed.

Now John Edmonds, General Secretary of the GMB, says that the block vote must be abolished. Neil Kinnock clearly agrees, though how fast he will go along that road remains to be seen.

Should we support Edmonds and Kinnock? No, for three reasons.

ONE. The way the block vote operates today should not be idealised, but it should not be caricatured either.

Not even the most bureaucratic General

'The block vote is no more democratic than the unions are generally, but no less so either'.

Secretary can do what he or she likes with the block vote. They are bound by their union's conference decisions and by the majority of their union delegation. The last general secretary to try to buck those rules was Sid Weighell of the NUR, in the early 1980s, and he was forced out of his job as a result.

The block vote is no more democratic than the unions are generally, but no less so either. The way to make it more democratic is to make the unions more democratic — a task which is necessary anyway.

TWO. The trade unions are not perfect organisations, but they are the mass organisations of the working class. Without the working class there can be no struggle for socialism; and without its organisations the working class is not a force to change society, but only a collection of victims of exploitation.

That the Labour Party rests on workers' organisations rather than just an aggregate of individual members is a strength, not a weakness.

If the Labour Party broke its links with the unions, it would transform itself into nothing better than a second-rate Liberal Party. In fact John Edmonds doesn't want that. He wants to retain the trade unions' influence in the Labour Party. Only he wants that influence to be exercised more bureaucratically!

The block vote is embarrassingly public, and therefore open to accountability. John Edmonds wants everything

stitched up behind closed doors in cabals of union leaders and Labour front-benchers called "policy commissions".

THREE. "One member, one vote", Edmonds' alternative to the block vote, is not as democratic as it sounds.

Firstly, all Labour Party members do have a vote now — which they can cast at a meeting. Secondly, Edmonds clearly means "one member, one postal vote".

Democracy is more than just about voting. Look at America. There is more voting there than anywhere else in the world. Thousands of public officials, from local dog-catchers to the President, are directly elected, and even the main candidates for President are chosen by popular vote through the "primary" system.

Undoubtedly it's better than the pre-Gorbachev USSR, with its compulsory 99.9% "votes" for bureaucratically-appointed rulers. But it's a very pale, corrupt form of democracy.

Politics is just a branch of show business. It has very little to do with informed debate on issues. Political campaigns consist mostly of spending millions of dollars on TV advertising about your opponent's alleged sexual, medical, psychiatric, or financial flaws.

The American people are not more gullible, or less educated, than people elsewhere. Most of them are disgusted with the way that politics works in the



It's right that unions should have a collective voice. Photo: John Harris

USA, and around 50 per cent of them don't bother to vote.

But elections don't decide political issues in the USA. They just give some individuals a four-year lease to take part in the complex haggling among the powers-that-be (many of them, like big business bosses and Pentagon chiefs, unelected) which does decide. The people get a yes-or-no vote on those individuals, that's all.

Parliamentary democracy in Western Europe is also limited. We too have our unelected powers-that-be in the boardrooms, the banks, and the State machine. But there is more substance to West European democracy because of the existence of proper organised political parties (the US Democrats and Republicans can't really count as such), and in particular of parties based on the organised labour movement.

People vote mostly for parties rather than individuals. And those parties have meetings, committees, delegates, conferences — imperfect but nonetheless real processes of collective debate, working out policies which cannot be discarded overnight without a kickback.

"There is no such thing as society," declares Margaret Thatcher. "There are only individuals and their families". And indeed, capitalism in the raw is like that. It reduces us to a mass of isolated individuals, each pursuing our own advantage in the market economy, relating to others only through the "cash nexus" — and, politically, utterly vulnerable to manipulation by what used to be called Society with a capital S, the closely-knit top layers of the wealthy classes.

Collective working class political organisation — of which the block vote is one expression — is the product of many decades of workers' struggles against the atomisation which the private-profit economy tries to impose on us. It has become bureaucratised. But the answer is to democratise it, not to dissolve it back into a scattering of isolated individuals connected to politics only by the television screen and the ballot box.

The meetings, committees, mandates and so on of which the block vote is one expression are a beachhead of informed, participatory democracy in a terrain of manipulated, formal democracy. We should not let them be overwhelmed.

"One member one vote" in the Labour Party would mean policies decided by stitched-up, unelected, elite "policy commissions", and the members having a vote only to endorse the media-backed leaders.

The main reform needed in the block vote is not a reform in its formalities and mechanics, but a comprehensive drive for democracy in the trade unions on which it is based. And the labour movement will never be ready to fight for socialism until it has carried through that drive.

There are secondary reforms which we should support. Although it is right that the collective voice of the trade unions should dominate at Labour Party conference, its present 90% to 10% outweighing of the more activist minority in the Constituency Labour Parties is excessive. Something like 60% to 40% would be more balanced.

And if, on certain major issues, unions' block votes could be divided to allow representation for minorities within the unions, that would make the system less clumsy and heavy-handed.

The main job, though, must be a comprehensive fight for democracy within the trade unions.

Rooting labour in the workplace

By Nik Barstow, Islington North CLP

Labour Party conference in 1982 voted to set up workplace branches. A few had already been set up informally, and by late 1983 there were 50-odd.

Where were they? Factories — Timex Dundee, Jaguar Coventry, Dista Merseyside; shipyards — Cammell Laird Birkenhead; post offices — Basingstoke, Coventry and Liverpool; among council workers — in Haringey, in Islington, and at London's County Hall. In all these places, workplace branches showed their value as a way of drawing new groups of workers into politics.

But the number never rose above 50-odd. The movement soon began to decline. The great miners' strike of 1984-5 drew attention away towards organising miners' support groups, and in the wake of the miners' defeat the Labour Party workplace branches withered away like much else in the labour movement.

Many workplace branches faced practical problems. When and where could they meet? The workforce was often scattered over a variety of sites and shift patterns. Bosses would generally bar them from meeting at the workplace.

What they said

"We find that young people will come along. If you're 18 or 19, and you go along to the union meeting, you're likely to find someone saying, 'Well, we've met at COPOU level today, and the Central Committee is meeting tomorrow, and they'll report back, and we don't know what we'll do about these 552s, but we might be in an overspend position.'"

"What's the average young person going to make of that? The workplace branch creates a political beachhead. It encourages people to come along to meetings. It gives them the confidence to start."

"Our workplace is about 2000 people. We've got about 70 Labour Party members, though I was surprised to find it was so many. The workplace branches creates a network of contacts that you didn't even know existed..."

Billy Hayes, Liverpool Postal Workers branch

"We had tried to develop a Broad Left at Lairds. It fell down mainly because it was going to be based on the shop stewards and the craft consciousness is so bad that the craft workers won't even meet with the general workers' union. So we tried a Labour Party workplace branch. We got a response from 40 or so people. About three of them were shop stewards, the rest were just from the shop floor..."

Lol Duffy, Cammell Lairds shipyard branch

The workplace union leadership was often hostile too. Probably the decisive force in stifling the workplace branches movement, however, was Labour Party officialdom.

To set up a workplace branch in the first place you had to get the regional Labour Party official to your meeting. Then all new Labour Party members you recruited had to be processed through their ward branches rather than directly through the workplace branch.

Despite the conference decision, most regional Labour Party officials were suspicious of workplace branches, knowing that they would be set up mostly by activists, left-wingers and socialists. If workplace branches had become an important force in the Labour Party, imagine what they would have had to say about this year's conference debate on trade union rights!

Nevertheless, the 1982 conference decision to set up workplace branches still stands. We can't expect the Labour Party's official machinery to carry it out — despite all the ballyhoo and bluster about a national membership drive — but the mood of reviving confidence amongst workers, and the growing discredit of the Tories, may soon recreate conditions enabling local activists to relaunch workplace branches.

"We've got 14 members in the branch. That might not sound a lot, but if you get 14 people who are aware of the political fight it can have a big effect. By giving our membership the opportunity of becoming political activists, the workplace branch has opened up a whole new door for them."

Alan Fraser, Basingstoke Postal Workers branch

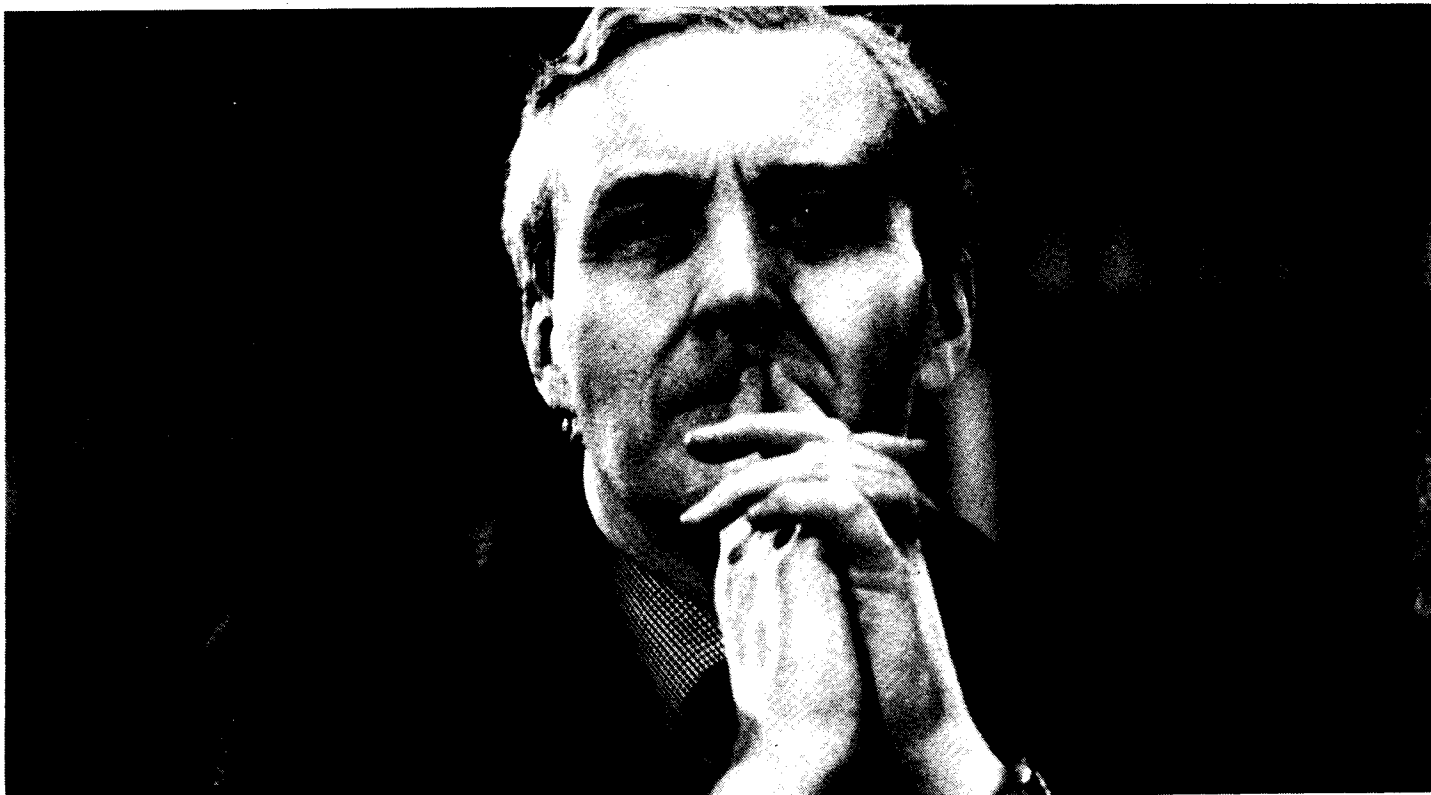
"One of the problems at Dista is that there is no joint stewards' committee. The workplace Labour Party covers most of the unions and the officers are treasurer — ASTMS, secretary — USDAW, and chair — craft. The branch is attempting to bridge the gap in the union relations on the shop floor."

John Ledgerton, Dista (Merseyside) factory branch

"The workplace branch is important because it gives people a way to get into politics. [Most] Labour Party meetings would be discussing the broken paving slabs down such and such a street or something that was going on in some committee or other in the council house. With the workplace branch we can relate directly to what people want to talk about. At our first meeting one of the women said it was one of the nicest Labour Party meetings she had been to for years."

Jean Lane, Coventry Post Office branch

(All these excerpts are from a broadsheet, 'Rooting politics in the workplaces', published by Socialist Organiser in 1983.



Benn: we must link the left in the Labour Party and the unions

Linking the left in Labour and the unions

When industrial militancy and rank and file organisation in the trade unions were at their height, in 1972-5, there was no corresponding rank and file movement in the Labour Party.

The industrial upsurge brought down the Tories — and led to a Labour government which, within two years, was curbing wages and carrying through cuts.

When the Rank and File Mobilising Committee was waging its greatest battle for democracy in the Labour Party in 1979-81, very little was done to organise a parallel battle for democracy in the trade unions. From the Bishops Stortford conclave in 1982, the trade union barons were able to check and neutralise the fight to transform the Labour Party.

Lack of organised coordination between left-wing movements in the trade unions and in the Labour Party has restricted the possibilities of both. Yet that lack is not inevitable. There was a short period, in the mid-1920s, when a strong Minority Movement in the trade unions and a sizeable National Left Wing Movement in the Labour Party worked hand in hand, both heavily influenced by the then-revolutionary Communist Party.

The Communist Party was formed in 1920 by the amalgamation of many small socialist groups, brought

together by the common inspiration of the Russian Revolution. The biggest of those groups, the British Socialist Party, had been affiliated to the Labour Party in the same way as the Fabian Society, but the dominant mood of the new Communist Party was impatient of any dealings at all with the Labour Party.

It took much argument by Lenin and other leaders of the Communist International to persuade the Communist Party to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party. The application was done clumsily, and rejected.

Through all this, despite the doctrinal arguments, many Communists had been active in local Labour Parties as individuals or as trade union delegates. Two Communists had been elected as Labour MPs.

It was about the same time as the Labour Party leaders were moving decisively against the Communist influence that the Communist Party finally got itself into shape for a coherent policy towards the Labour Party. Even at that late stage, they were able to achieve a great deal in the few years before the experiment was snuffed out by Stalin.

The story is told in the following excerpts from Brian Pearce's article, 'The Communist Party and the Labour left 1925-1929'.

Down to the Liverpool Conference of the Labour Party in 1925, Communists could be individual members of the Labour Party. A resolution adopted at that conference excluded them from such membership, beginning the final drive by the right-wing leaders to ban Communists from any kind of participation in Labour Party affairs.

A strong minority in the Labour Party indignantly opposed this drive. In December 1925, following meetings in London and Birmingham, a National Left-Wing Conference was held, under the aegis of prominent personalities such as Tom Mann, Councillor Joe Vaughan (formerly Mayor of Bethnal Green, and member of the London Labour Party Executive), Joseph Southall (ILP), Alex Gossip of the furniture workers and William Paul, the Communist editor of the *Sunday Worker*, a newspaper of left-wing sympathies, founded earlier in the same year, which claimed a circulation approaching 100,000 (Communist Party membership was then about 5,000).

The aim of the Left-Wing Movement was proclaimed to be "not to supersede the Labour Party, but to 're-mould it nearer to the heart's desire' of the rank and file."

It was reported at the Conference that

nearly a hundred divisional and borough Labour Parties had suspended operation of the Liverpool decision. About fifty of these Labour Parties associated themselves with the National Left-Wing Movement, and Left-Wing groups were organised in many others. When Labour Party headquarters began disaffiliating Labour organisations which refused to operate the ban on Communists, this only intensified the conviction of the members affected that something like the National Left-Wing Movement was needed.

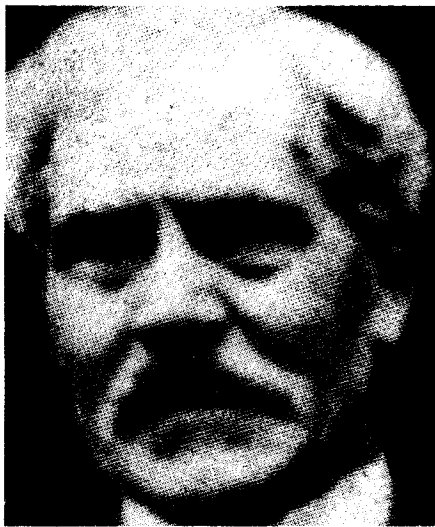
The betrayal of the General Strike in May 1926 gave a further fillip to the new trend, and in September of that year a well-attended conference of the National Left-Wing Movement was held at Poplar, with Joe Vaughan in the chair. The keynote of this meeting was sounded in his call to "cleanse the Labour Party of the agents of capitalism".

At this time the Communist-led National Minority Movement in the trade unions commanded the support of nearly a million workers, a quarter of the total trade union membership, and was steadily growing. It was possible to look forward to the winning of both local Labour Parties and trade unions for the left-wing cause of a militant socialist policy in the Labour Party.

During 1927, the National Left-Wing assumed increasingly organised form, with a leading committee, chairman and secretary. The *Sunday Worker* became virtually the organ of the new movement, regularly allotting space to reports of the organising of Left-Wing groups up and down the country, and to expositions of its programme.

A certain amount of trade union support for the movement's aims began to be recorded; in May, for example, the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation declared for the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party.

When the National Left-Wing Movement held its Second Annual Conference, in September 1927, fifty-four local Labour parties and many other groups were represented, aggregating, it was



Ramsey MacDonald

claimed, about 150,000 individual members.

Membership of the Communist Party at this time stood at about 7,500. There were large numbers of Labour Party supporters who were becoming disgusted with the policy of their leaders and who were desirous of changing both policy and leaders in the direction of militancy and a socialist programme but who, although friendly to the Communists and in favour of their enjoying equal rights in the Party as individuals, as before 1925, nevertheless did not themselves agree with all the Communist Party's ideas (especially on the then much-discussed question of 'heavy civil war') and they did not want to join its ranks.

The National Left-Wing Movement served as a bridge between the Communist Party and wide leftward-moving sections of the working class.

To some leading members of the Communist Party it seemed, however, that it was not so much a bridge as a barrier. The leftward-moving masses would find their way into the ranks of the Communist Party, they felt; if the National Left-Wing were not there to intercept them.

Moreover, the prospect of transforming the Labour Party was no longer a real one, they considered, and only harm was done by keeping the idea of it alive: a thorough-going re-adjustment of Communist policy was needed. RP Dutt and Harry Pollitt, who held these views, found themselves in a minority in the Party's leading circles.

The Executive Committee of the Communist International decided, in the main,

"The National Left Wing Movement served as a bridge between the Communist Party and wide leftwards-moving sections of the working class. To some leading members of the Communist Party it seemed, however, that this was not so much a bridge as a barrier"

in favour of the views upheld by the minority. The Labour Party, it considered, was already well on the way to becoming a unitary Social-Democratic Party like those on the Continent, and this development must be accepted as irreversible.

It no longer made any sense to call for a second Labour government, with no matter what qualification or condition; the Communist Party's slogan should now be: 'For a revolutionary Workers' Government'. Candidates should be put up to fight Labour in as many places as possible. The questions of what was to be done about the Left-Wing Movement, and what the Communist Party should advise workers to do in places where there was a Labour candidate and no Communist candidate, were left without any clear-cut answer at this stage.

There now began a period covering nearly two years during which confusion frew within the Communist Party as to the implications of the 'New Line'.

At the same time, the National Left-Wing Movement continued to develop, and under Communist guidance concentrated on struggle in the localities to replace right-wing Labourites by left-wingers as Parliamentary candidates.

The reviving militancy of the working class, after the period of depression following the defeat of the General Strike, expressed itself in a new way in the launching of a manifesto for a socialist policy in the Labour Party by the miners' leader, AJ Cook, and James Maxton of the ILP, backed by John Wheatley, the most left of the Labour Party's leaders. The National Left-Wing Movement officially greeted its appearance.

The circulation of the *Sunday Worker* rose steadily and some 10,000 people turned out for the Left-Wing May Day demonstration of 1928. At the annual conference of the Left Wing Movement in September 1928, between 75 and 80 local Labour Party Left-Wing groups were represented and the provincial representation in particular was better than it had been in either of the previous conferences.

This promising development collapsed as a result of intensified attacks by the right-wing together with hesitation and something more than that on the part of the Communist Party. In the *Workers' Life* an extremely guarded welcome was given to the Cook-Maxton affair from the first, and this rapidly changed into sharp denunciation of it as 'cant' and 'fooling', bound to 'fizzle out'.

As Party membership fell to 3,000, then to 2,500, the voice of fanatical sectarianism grew proportionately louder in its counsels. At the Tenth Congress a resolution that Party members should leave the National Left-Wing Movement was passed, against the opposition of the Central Committee, by 55 votes to 52. Shortly afterwards, the National Committee of the movement, on which Communists predominated, decided by a majority vote to dissolve it and advise supporters to join the Communist Party.

In Moscow at this time Stalin had recently ousted Bukharin and was waging war on 'the Rights'. Instructions conveyed to the British Communist leaders at a meeting in Berlin immediately following the 1929 election included:

"In our general campaign against the Labour Party we should emphasise that it is a crime equivalent to blacklegging for any worker to belong to the Labour Party." (My italics — BP)

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A charter for the unemployed

This Charter has been published by the National Combine of Unemployed Centres. They believe it can provide the basis for unity of employed and unemployed workers. Discuss it in your Labour Party or trade union branch and send responses to: Merseyside TUCURC, 24 Hardman St, Liverpool L1 9AX.

A political commitment to full employment

Large scale unemployment is not inevitable but results from political choices about the economy, the structure of the labour market, education and training standards and the nature of work. An institutionalised commitment to full employment should include:

- A programme of public sector led investment in inner cities and rundown rural areas, meeting criteria of job creation and social need.

Research shows that local authorities could create 300,000 jobs directly within expanded service provision, generating another 42,000 jobs in the private sector. These jobs would be part of a wider investment programme, encompassing not only housing, schools, social services, education and training, but also hospitals and general infrastructure.

- A 35-hour working week and an end to systematic overtime.

For the week ended 15 October 1988, 15.46 million hours of overtime were worked by operatives in manufacturing industries.

Dividing the hours overtime by 35 hours gives an estimate of the possibility of job creation to be approximately 442,000 jobs. The issue of overtime, of course, cannot be separated from the issue of low pay and the above calculation is only a crude indicator. However, some 6,101,000 (29%) of employees regularly work overtime and 2,841,000 (13.5%) regularly work unpaid overtime.

Equal opportunities for all — an end to discrimination

• A strategy for creating full employment must recognise that alongside job creation there has to be support programmes and legislation to combat the widespread discrimination existing in the labour market.

One in three employers still actively discriminate against job applicants from Afro Caribbean and Asian backgrounds. 23% of people with disabilities were

unemployed compared with the national average of 10% unemployment rate.

Many employers will not even consider the long-term unemployed and older workers.

Part-time workers, mainly women, should have the same legal protection, conditions and rights as full-time workers.

Full maintenance for the unemployed and underemployed

"But the greatest single factor in removing many sources of poverty was and is, the ability to maintain full employment". (G Chandler, *History of Liverpool*).

This Charter calls for:

- A non-discriminatory, non-means tested benefit payable to all including 16 and 17 year olds.

Such a system of 'social insurance' would be payable to all who are unemployed and also end the discrimination against women's rights to independence.

- A doubling of child benefit.

It is still predominately women and not men who withdraw from the labour market to care for children. Even in 1985 child benefit would have needed to be £19.25 per week per child, in order to maintain its equivalent 1946 Beveridge recommended level.

- All housing costs to be met, coupled with the adequate provision of low cost housing.

Rent arrears due to cutbacks in housing benefits and rate arrears due to the requirements to pay 20% of rates and water rates, are pushing more unemployed people further into debt and poverty. Good quality housing benefit and a house building programme must reflect this need and right, and also end the increasing incidence of mortgage re-possession.

Full rights for the unemployed and underemployed.

- The right of all to join and participate in a trade union.

The right to join a trade union without fear and the ability of a trade union to act on behalf of its members becomes more important as Europe moves towards a single capital, goods and labour market. The theoretical justification of the government's trade union laws, linking unionisation and lower productivity is now shown to be seriously flawed. Trade unions give benefits and protection to individual members and make a positive contribution to the smooth running of many industries. Without the protection and organisation

of the trade union movement, unemployed workers are left in isolation. They are open to exploitation, often being pressurised into low paid jobs. This weakens and undermines the strength of organised labour and is a recipe of forcing down wages and also a deterioration in employment conditions and protection.

The unemployed need to be organised alongside those in work and be able to play a full role at all levels of their trade union.

No work conscription

An end to work for benefit schemes — Workfare.

Many trade unions and local authorities are boycotting the Employment Training Scheme as it involves unemployed people working for their benefit, plus £10 per week with:

- no guarantee of quality training;
- inadequate funding;
- no link to employment;
- no link to skill shortages.

The Charter is campaigning on five key needs in training:

- participants are offered a quality training;
- pay the rate for the job;
- are completely voluntary;
- participants have employee status;
- approval from trade unions.

Guaranteed access to quality training and retraining

"The labour market remains the glaringly weak link in the British economy, in large part because of the inadequacy of the training system". (C Leadbetter, *Financial Times*, December 5 1988).

- Guaranteed access to quality training.

In areas of high unemployment any training can be undermined by there being no jobs at the end of the training period. As well as linking closely with labour market and skill needs, any training structure also needs to link in with employment planning. This is the key issue for trade unions when training is part of their collective bargaining procedures.

Guaranteed access to quality retraining.

Four reasons for retraining are:

- new technology or product;
- multi-skilling;
- skill shortages;
- alternative to redundancy.

Britain remains near the bottom of the international training league table with 50% of all employees receiving no training in 1986/7 and 33% never receiving any training.

Adequate provision of care for all dependants

- The provision of nursery and creche facilities to meet the needs of all those with childcare responsibilities.

An expansion of childcare provision will create many jobs and open up opportunities for work for those with children. The allowance brought in by the West German government to make it easier for one parent to take parental leave in the first years of a child's life will provide up to 300,000 jobs, filling in for parents taking such leave. While in the UK:

- having children can cost a woman up to half her potential lifetime's earnings;
- public provision in nurseries for under-fives is only available for 1% of the children who may require it;
- almost half of all employed women who are pregnant do not qualify for a statutory right to return to work following the birth of their child;
- over two-thirds of all child care arrangements made by working women for their pre-school children is on an informal basis only;
- no statutory entitlement relevant to family needs, paternity, flexible working, workplace childcare facilities, parents and family leave are available.

DONT SCAB THIS IS YOUR FIGHT



The fight against racism

By Dion D'Silva

Unity is strength! That is a basic trade union slogan which adorns many a union banner. Racism is a poisonous tool that has divided and continues to divide the union movement.

The British economy of the 1950s needed labour urgently, so the government turned to the West Indies. But the new black immigrants found that the 'mother country' was not what they had been promised. The available jobs were low paid, 'dirty' jobs that no-one else wanted to do. Landlords put notices in the windows: 'No coloureds here', and blacks were kept out of many pubs, clubs and dance-halls.

Governments were quite happy to use 'divide and rule' tactics. The trade union response was equally disgusting. In fact many trade unions tacitly operated their own 'colour bar' in the factories.

In April 1962 the Tory Immigration Act was introduced. Underlying this legislation was the idea that too many blacks 'caused' unemployment, overcrowding, etc. The Labour Party opposed that Act, but neither Labour nor the trade unions ever seriously countered these arguments.

They never argued that the system of profit means workers, irrespective of colour and national origins, are made redundant in a slump, as millions were in the 1930s when there was practically no immigration. They never campaigned around the idea that building workers could be employed to build more and better housing. And they never campaigned to educate white workers to an understanding that immigration controls actually increase racism.

Black community organisations, such as the Indian Workers Association, which

were set up in the early '60s, began to campaign, with the help of the left, against racist laws. While at first the Labour leadership came out against immigration controls, as the economy worsened the 1964-70 Labour government added more controls!

Labour had opposed the 1961 Tory Immigration Act on the grounds of loyalty to the Commonwealth, from which the Tories were turning away and trying to get into the Common Market. By the mid-'60s Labour too had abandoned the Commonwealth and opted to try for EEC

*"Labour cannot emancipate itself
in the white skin where in the
black it is branded"*

Karl Marx

membership instead. The Labour leaders behaved even worse than the Tories. When, in 1968, the Asian population of Kenya, who had been given British passports a few years earlier when Kenya got independence, were expelled from Kenya and wanted to come to Britain, Labour Home Secretary James Callaghan slammed the door in their faces, invalidating their British passports. (By contrast, when the British passport-holding Asians of Uganda were expelled in 1972, the Tory government let them in, despite a tremendous right-wing outcry.)

What people remember from those days is Enoch Powell's notorious speech predicting that the streets of Britain would foam with "rivers of blood" if black immigration were not dropped. They forget that the vile racist deed was done by Callaghan and that Powell then put the

unashamed racist rhetoric to it.

After Enoch Powell's 1968 "rivers of blood" speech, 1500 London dockers marched to Parliament in his support. The following day, meat porters from Smithfield joined the protest.

The trade union movement of the late '60s, based on the strength of the rank and file and their shop stewards, was strong enough to fight off the threatened shackles of Labour's proposed 1969 anti-union laws, 'In Place of Strife'. The Tories succeeded in putting anti-union laws on the statute books in 1972, but they were never strong enough to use them effectively, and the labour movement was strong enough to kick out the Tories in early 1974. Yet the union movement never fought seriously the racism within itself, which weakened the movement.

Nevertheless, black workers still demonstrated their loyalty to the trade unions and Labour Party, even if they had to fight against it. In the mid-'70s in the Mansfield Hosiery strike at Loughborough, 400 Asians fought for an end to discrimination in promotion. It was soon made apparent that the union had for some time agreed to the reservation of certain positions for whites! Indeed, the union organised the recruitment of scabs during the dispute!

Similarly, the 1974 strike at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester demanded equal opportunities for training and promotion. The white workers and racist union officials opposed the strike and scabbed. As a result the strikers turned to their own communities for the support which was sadly lacking from the trade unions.

Shamefully, some of the left, the misnamed 'Militant', actually blamed the strikers for not having convinced their fellow white workers! This after they had appealed (and failed) for support from the union bureaucrats...It was the sort of attitude which was to lead Militant when it

took control of Liverpool Council in the '80s to continue to run the Council employment system as what the Americans call a "lily-white job trust", spectacularly trampling on the black community.

In the worldwide economic slump the Labour government of 1974-79 again clamped down on the working class. With a spiralling increase in unemployment, the fascists grew stronger and more confident. The number of racist attacks grew alarmingly. Black organisations began to organise defence of their own communities. It was the black youth and the revolutionary left who beat the National Front off the streets in Lewisham in 1977, and then went on to found the Anti-Nazi League.

But many of the left's policies are deeply embedded in nationalism and that has hindered our fight against the chauvinists and racists. For example, the proposals for import controls and the 'siege economy' cut across international working class unity and fascist divisions. Yet these have been fundamental to mainstream 'left' policies for decades.

In the early 1970s, when the EEC was a very big issue in Britain, the left did not call for greater European working class cooperation, but argued for opposition to the EEC. It was in such an atmosphere that the anti-black, anti-semitic National Front could try to merge with what appeared a left wing, militant working class protest. Many trade unionists were confused, and no wonder.

The black community, from many different backgrounds, united in their fight against racism. Because of the existence of black self-defence groups and black caucuses in the unions, the union leadership was eventually forced to take racism seriously. Thus self-organisation doesn't automatically lead to separatism. Indeed, the opposite can be true. It is racism that divides our class and a fight against it is one that makes us all stronger.

Black workers are more likely to be in a union, with over 50% of them organised. Over 80% of the black community vote Labour. Black trade union members are just as likely to be active in the union, yet only 4% have been elected to trade union posts compared to 11% of white workers.

There has been a change in attitude in the unions, in no small measure due to the actions of groups like Black Workers in NALGO. More and more local councils and trade unions have equal opportunity policies. Many now use recruitment material aimed specifically at ethnic minority workers, printed in various languages.

Black Workers in NALGO, in particular, have campaigned vociferously against proposed deportations of NALGO members. The union leadership has taken on board these campaigns and have got results, for example in the Marion Gaima case.

In 1976/7 Yorkshire miners linked together with postalworkers and dockers to show their support in mass pickets for mainly Asian women workers fighting for recognition at the Grunwick factory. Workers in the Longbridge car plant in 1984 came out on strike in support of Zedekiah Mills, a black worker who hit a racist foreman after prolonged racist abuse.

In recent years London teachers have taken a day of action to protest at racial attacks of students. Civil servants in London went on strike to get rid of fascists in

Lowest of the low

Payman Rezai looks at a book on racism that caused a major stir when it was released in Germany

Gunter Walraff's book, 'Lowest of the Low', paints a grim but realistic picture of the position of Turkish immigrants in West Germany.

Walraff, a 42 year old investigative journalist, created a new identity for himself, Ali Srnirlioglu, 'borrowing' the name from a Turkish friend.

In order to pass himself off convincingly as a Turkish worker in his 20s, Walraff trained to become physically fit. For his outward appearance only a couple of changes were necessary — a pair of dark contact lenses and a dark hair piece which he knotted into his hair.

Walraff used a more limited vocabulary, spoke slowly and switched the order of his sentences round.

Although any serious attention to Ali's speech would have exposed Walraff as a fraud, these changes were enough to have him accepted as 'the lowest of the low'.

To get work reserved for Turks (and other immigrants) Ali placed the following ad in several papers:

"Foreigner, strong, seeks work of any kind. Including heavy and dirty jobs. Even for little money."

Ali's first experience of working 'black' is for a building sub-contractor, GBI of Dusseldorf. He is promised 10DM/hour (the exchange rate at the time was 3.75DM=£1) for 10-hour shifts, working on the lump on a high-rise in Cologne. Ali and his gang of six co-workers are sub-contracted to another firm, WTB. WTB are Germany's sixth largest building firm.

Ali soon finds out that only half of GBI's several hundred workers are ever registered. If an accident happens, the worker is registered with health insurance retroactively. WTB pays its sub-contractor illegally, without declaring it for tax purposes, to a private individual's bank account, who seemingly has no link with the sub-contractors.

Although contract work by the hour is meant to be illegal in Germany, everyone in the industry knows it happens and turns a blind eye. Wages per hour are easily concealed by converting them to sham quantities of contracted supplies (eg. cubic metres of concrete). Officially, the contracted workers do not exist.

Ali's position is made clear to him straight away. His first job is to unblock the workers' toilets, which have been blocked for over a week. He has to work ankle-deep in piss. Plainly the job is given to him to humiliate him. Other German workers find a ready made 'dirty' target to throw racist abuse at.

The foreman picks on Ali continuously, giving him the most physically exhausting work. When a small amount of money goes missing from a German worker's locker, Ali is

automatically blamed. But this time a German worker stands up for Ali.

Once, when there's a small fire and the police turn up on the scene, they ignore the blatant presence of illegal workers. After six weeks of this work Ali and his mates are told that they're no longer needed.

Ali later manages to get in touch with another sub-contractor who's recruiting workers for the Thyssen steel mill in Duisburg. Having sacked 17,000 regular workers since 1974, Thyssen management gave more work out on contract: 400 firms sub-contract for Thyssen. Ali was hired by Adler who in turn hired workers to a largish sub-contractor, Remmert.

Thyssen's payments vary between 35-80DM/hour depending on the job. This shrinks to 5-10DM by the time it reaches the workers. Without any training or documents Ali finds that he has no trouble being taken on.

To protect his cover from other Turkish workers Ali pretends that he's half Turkish but actually grew up in Greece. When pressed by Turkish workmates to speak some Greek Ali is saved by resorting to his schoolboy Ancient Greek!

Ali's team are constantly kept on the move doing different jobs, in different parts of the huge plant. Without masks, working underground with pneumatic blasters, the workers breathe and swallow coke dust. The dizzying smell of coke gas is no excuse to stop working. Warning equipment flashes 'Gas hazard!' and 'Breathing masks must be worn'.

A company engineer gets very angry when he can't 'fix' a safety device which continuously gives warning signals. When pressed by Ali as to whether it's dangerous, he claims that the device is defective. He assures Ali that any gas would get blown away by wind!

Ali has to scavenge for worn out work gloves abandoned by the regular workers, as he's not given any gloves, work boots or helmet. Ali's personal hard hat is taken away by the sheriff when a German worker approaches who has not got a hat.

Walraff continuously digs up more abuses: the workers are forced to do compulsory double-shifts and overtime, and time off for any reason is not allowed. Later Walraff discovers that the contract system extends even to nuclear plants. Immigrant workers are used as temporary cleaning staff, breaching every regulation and confirming that the workers' radiation intake is disregarded — they are disposable.

What's true in Germany is true in every other capitalist country: immigrant workers are used and abused as a battering ram, to get the hardest, dirtiest jobs done cheaply and to get round trade union agreements and labour protection laws. British trade unions need to do a similar investigation of the exploitation of immigrant workers in Britain, and launch a serious campaign against that exploitation.

their union. But often the support from the union leadership has been lacking.

NALGO black workers are particularly well-organised, especially at annual conference. NALGO has members on many different pay scales. Consequently promotion chances is a hot issue for the Black Workers Group. There is still an ongoing debate over the structure of black self-organisation in the union.

It is true that many of the black workers groups have been very strong in demanding better representation and less so in fighting the cuts consistently. This has been used by management quite cynically. For instance, Nottingham Social Services used to have 25 secondment places, ie. paid leave to get better qualifications. Now there are only 3, but two are reserved for black staff. However, these failings are failings of the left in general.

There is still a lot of black workers who are over twice as likely to be unemployed, have too little connection with the labour movement.

A start could be a black workers' charter, including demands such as:

- The right to union recognition.
- Encourage recruitment of black members through publicity in the black media.
- Unions to campaign to organise low-paid and unemployed.
- Support and provide resources for black groups in the unions.
- Greater representation on union executives, branches, etc., with all full-time officials on a workers' wage.
- Treat acts of deliberate racism and discrimination as disciplinary offences.

No fascists in the unions!

- Oppose all forms of racism, discrimination and prejudice at the workplace and in the wider community.
- Unions to affiliate and join local anti-racist and anti-fascist groups. To campaign actively against immigration controls and deportations.
- Unions to oppose rent rises, the poll tax and cuts in jobs and services by local councils.

Right from the birth of the labour movement, from the Chartists to the present day, blacks have played an important part in working class struggles.

The trade union bureaucrats' ostrich-like response to racism can go on no longer. The working class is made rich by the many groups and struggles within it.

United we can fight to replace this wage-slave society by one based on people's needs.

Lesbian and gay rights at work

By Clive Bradley

Lesbians and gay men are a lot less invisible than they used to be. It is now more common than it used to be for lesbian and gay rights to be discussed in trade unions.

A lot of trade unions now have policies defending the rights of their lesbian and gay members, and some have lesbian and gay groups functioning within them.

But still, often, the policies remain largely paper commitments, and have little direct effect at the workplace level.

Like many minorities, lesbians and gay men are not liked by this government. The most dramatic example of this was the notorious Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities, particularly as a 'pretended family relationship'.

Although explicitly concerned with local government (ie. 'loony left' Labour councils), Section 28 inevitably had the effect of creating a climate, more generally, which was hostile to lesbians and gay men. It is a fact that recorded attacks on people, for example leaving pubs and clubs at night, increased as publicity about Section (formerly Clause) 28 spread.

Section 28 has had direct effects: Tory-run Kensington and Chelsea council wants to withhold funds from a lesbian and gay youth group under the terms of the Act. But it also has immeasurable indirect effects. The 'promotion' of homosexuality is a meaningless concept. Of course, if society recognises no stigma attached to homosexuality, there will be more open homosexuals; possibly more people will be open to themselves, and become aware of their suppressed selves, as well. But if council policy, or a school teacher's lesson, can 'make homosexuals', they could probably just as well make Nobel Prize winning scientists.

What they can do is fight bigotry.

But in opposing the idea that homosexuality should be treated as a valid form of sexual expression, Section 28 defines homosexual desire as somehow less than human. So why not beat a few queers senseless?

In some workplaces — schools, public libraries — all these have been live issues. In others, less so or not at all. What does a



Photo: Paul Herrmann

Clause 28 Protest

lesbian or gay worker experience?

Legal discrimination is considerable. There is no law preventing employers from sacking workers simply for their sexuality. And there are many cases in which this has happened, especially in jobs connected with children, as prejudice has it either that homosexual desire is uncontrollable, or presumably that the mere presence of someone who sleeps with their own sex can corrupt a child permanently, whatever that may mean.

But there are more subtle forms of oppression in the workplace, in the first instance coming from fellow workers.

Everyone knows that sex is an extremely popular topic of conversation, especially among members of the same sex. But for a gay man or lesbian who is not 'out' with their workmates, such conversations can be a form of daily agony. Men especially have to pretend to agree that the girl on page 3 has "amazing tits" (and find it much harder to confront this sort of sexism than a straight man who opposes sexism, because of the inevitable questions that will be asked, that they then have to decide how to answer).

Gay men and lesbians face the choice, often, of inventing imaginary relationships, keeping quiet, or 'coming out', which although it is frequently for the best, can be an immensely stressful experience.

Traumatic periods in their private lives, like the breakdown of a relationship or the death of a lover can be made worse. They will be unlikely to be entitled to compassionate leave, for example. Maybe

they simply can't tell anyone at work about it. Or even if they can, straight people often behave as if it isn't really as important as similar crises for them.

If lesbian and gay workers do decide to come out, it can sometimes lead to terrible harassment from their fellow workers or their boss, ranging from routine abuse to violent attacks.

Over the last twenty years, more and more lesbians and gay men have come out of the closet, determined not to be treated like sub-humans. And this determination has made itself felt within the trade union movement. In addition to various groups within unions there have been attempts to build links between working class struggles and the fight for lesbian and gay rights.

The best known example of this was the work done by Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners in 1984-5, building solidarity with the miners' strike among lesbians and gay men, and in return winning support from mining communities. The 1985 Lesbian and Gay Pride March was led by a miners' contingent.

That work was continued by Lesbians and Gays Support the Printworkers and Trade Unionists Against the Section. These kinds of groups are important, both to make the presence of militant workers who are homosexual known, and to win support amongst the lesbian and gay communities for trade union struggles.

This is an issue of democratic rights which trade unionists should take seriously.

By Pat Markey

Since the late '70s, the bosses of the European Community have had a concerted, Europe-wide plan for cutting jobs in the steel industry.

Yet the fight back has been piecemeal. British steelworkers' resistance to huge job cuts was defeated in the early '80s. Italian steelworkers were complacent in the early '80s, but fighting desperately in 1989. When French steelworkers were fighting job cuts, in the mid-'80s, they overturned rail wagons of steel made by German workers as part of their protest.

Belgium workers, exceptionally, organised some protests directly against the European Commission. But even they did not link up successfully with steel workers in other countries.

It's the same story on the docks. By the time the British dockers faced the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme, in 1989, Italian dockers had just lost their regulated-labour system, and Spanish dockers were already being hired by the day.

Meanwhile French port employers were talking openly about their plans to do the same thing in France. German and Dutch dockers, who feel more secure now, will have their turn later.

Without question the port employers coordinate their plans internationally. The bosses fight in an organised, coordinated way. The workers fight in a dispersed, divided way.

We need international labour organisation. And we'll need it even more after 1992.

After 1992, goods, capital and labour will be able to move freely round the Common Market. Not just laws will be changed. Rail and road links within the Common Market are being rapidly improved.

The Tories' ineptness and doctrinaire refusal to invest public money may insulate Britain for a while by blocking the rail link to the Channel Tunnel, but the overwhelming trend is for it to be quicker, easier and cheaper to move goods within

1992 and the labour movement

Western Europe.

Bosses will be able to plan production, distribution and sales on a European scale; and indeed, increasingly, they will have toplan on a European scale or be crushed in competition. They will have to look for the cheapest places to produce.

Unless trade unions are prepared to organise, to bargain, and to take action on a European scale, our wages and conditions will be destroyed by a sort of Dutch auction, with all existing national wages and conditions being ratcheted down to the level of the lowest-cost producers.

There are international trade union federations. There is a European TUC. There are a few international shop stewards' committees in the car industry. But this international organisation is far weaker than it needs to be. The European TUC has a long-standing campaign for a 35 hour week. How many trade unionists in Britain have even heard of it, let alone been mobilised by it?

Part of the reason for the weakness, and especially for the weakness of British unions on international links, has been the trade union movement's confused attitude to the Common Market itself.

Between 1971-2, when the Tory government took Britain into the Common Market, and 1975, when the Labour government held a referendum on withdrawal, the Common Market almost seemed to be the major dividing line between left and right in British politics.

The Tories, the Liberals, and the Labour right were solidly for the Common Market. The Labour left and the trade unions were solidly against. The heavy defeat for withdrawal in the June 1975 referendum was the blow which broke the spirit of the Labour left during

the 1974-9 Labour government.

But a few voices on the left — mainly the forerunners of *Socialist Organiser* — had said throughout that support for national capitalism against internationalised capitalism was a dead-end for the labour movement. And the left's anti-Common-Market campaign amounted to no more than that.

The real motive behind it was that the trade union bureaucrats valued their position in the corridors of power of the nation-state, their seats on quangos, their boardroom places in nationalised industries, and feared that the bogeymen bureaucrats of Brussels would shut them out.

Ten years of Thatcherism have changed that. Now the trade union bureaucrats see more hope in the corridors of Brussels than those of Whitehall.

This year, 1989, the TGWU conference dropped the call for British withdrawal from the Common Market. Many other sections of the labour movement dropped it long ago. Nobody protests, not even on the scale of articles in the left press.

The only new policy that has come forward to take the place of the discredited campaign for withdrawal is support for the European Community's Social Charter. Margaret Thatcher reckons that this Charter is "socialism by the back door". It is nothing of the sort. It is a recital of vague good intentions which would only cause the Tories marginal embarrassment if they agreed to it.

Clutching at the Social Charter is no adequate policy for the trade union movement, no adequate response to the feverish preparations which the bosses are making for 1992. Instead of relying on the Social Charter, we need our own European Workers' Charter.

A policy for European workers' unity

- The labour movement should come out as the boldest campaigner for a united Europe. Leave 'little England' and 'national sovereignty' to the Tories!

- A united Europe means west and east. Solidarity with Solidarnosc and all real workers' movements in Eastern Europe; break links with the Stalinist state 'unions'. A united Europe will be created only by the overthrow of both capitalism in the west and the bureaucracies in the east.

- Immediately, our united Europe can only be a united European workers' movement to fight both the bosses' EEC and the bosses' national governments.

- Workers' unity for:

- A 35 hour week throughout Europe
- 'Levelling up' to generalise throughout the EEC the best wages, conditions, services and rights won by workers in individual EEC countries. Europe-wide agreements with multinationals on wages and conditions.

- Work-sharing at full pay, to create jobs for all.

- A clause in all wage agreements to guarantee monthly pay rises in line with a working class price index.

- Defend all jobs. Open the books of all the EEC wide operations of the multinationals.

The trade unions in cars, steel and other industries should prepare for a European workers' government by working out their plans to develop and reorganise their industries throughout Europe. Fight for workers' control and for EEC-level public ownership, without compensation, of the main multinationals and monopolies.

- We should base our policies on the reality of international capitalist integration, rather than trying to turn the clock back. That does not mean approving the existing EEC institutions; on the contrary, we must put the fight against them on a proper footing.

- Immediately — full sovereign powers for the EEC Parliament over the bureaucratic machinery of the EEC, annual elections.

- Replacement of the existing capitalist Common Agricultural Policy by a plan drawn up by workers' and small farmers at

the expense of the bankers and the bosses.

- European labour movement support for anti-imperialist and national liberation movements in Central America and elsewhere; opposition to overseas intervention by the armed forces of the EEC capitalist states.

- A socialist Europe should hand over the property in the Third World of EEC multinationals to the people of those countries, cancel the Third World debts to EEC banks, and plan together with the workers of the Third World countries for a massive programme of reparations and aid.

- Expel US bases, remove all nuclear weapons from Western Europe.
- End all immigration controls. Full voting rights for migrant workers throughout the EEC.

- For a European workers' government. No working class policy today can be a solution to the problems of any single European nation if it does not pose the working class reorganisation of the European economy (at least) and build European working class unity to achieve it.

The Eastern bloc: which side are you on?

By Cheung Siu Ming and
Emma Colyer

This summer we saw the Chinese working class begin to move into action as an independent force against the murderous ruling bureaucrats.

A working class that had been terrorised and kept down by China's totalitarian state for decades reappeared — full of force and fighting vigour. Together with the magnificent students, the Chinese workers marched and sang the *Internationale*, the anthem of international labour.

They organised an independent trade union in Beijing. Workers and students seized control of the centre of the capital from the hands of the murdering old men who run China.

Workers and students alike were massacred in Tienanmen Square on 4 June 1989 — but it is as certain as anything can be in politics that the workers and students continue to organise underground. One day, and perhaps soon, they will settle accounts with the Stalinist butchers who rule China.

All across the Eastern Bloc, the old Stalinist regimes are rotting and splintering, and workers are seizing the chance to organise. As this pamphlet goes to press, miners are on strike again in the USSR, complaining that the government had not kept promises made in order to settle their earlier dispute in July 1989.

Solidarnosc has been made legal again in Poland, and holds leading positions in the government, even though the Stalinist party retains control of key jobs in the army, the police, and the state administration.

Hungary has several independent trade unions, small so far.

In October 1989, East German workers created the first trade union free of state control to exist in their country since 1933, when Hitler came to power.

The Soviet miners have been discussing the formation of a free trade union. In the meantime, they are maintaining their strike committees. In the strikes of July 1989, the official trade union leaders took part in negotiations on the management side.

As the workers recover their confidence after decades of Stalinist stifling, their natural method of self-assertion is the mass strike. In Poland, a mass strike movement in 1980 established Solidarnosc and made it legal for the first time; another two mass strike waves in 1988 forced Jaruzelski to retreat from his drive to crush the independent trade union and to legalise it again.

In China, spontaneous mass strikes supported the democracy movement and then protested against its suppression after 4 June. In the USSR, mass strikes

have been used both by the miners and by groups of workers pursuing nationalist grievances.

In systems where the state is the only major employer and where state tyranny in society and economic exploitation in the workplaces are closely woven together, the mass strike is the natural, spontaneous act of self-assertion by workers who refuse any longer to be beasts of burden for the ruling bureaucrats.

Some of the recent strikes in the Eastern Bloc, like the Azerbaijani strikes against the ceding of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, or the Serbian strikes in Yugoslavia against autonomy for the Albanian-populated region of Kosovo, have been manipulated by local bureaucrats with an ugly chauvinist direction.

But that is not what complicates the response of British trade unionists to the workers' struggles in the Eastern Bloc. That nationalism can sometimes mobilise workers for reactionary aims is something we know from all-too-broad experience. We also know, or should know, how to distinguish such reactionary nationalist movements, seeking privileges or the suppression of a rival nationality, from progressive struggles seeking the liberation of oppressed nationalities.

For the Eastern Bloc, however, the response from British trade unionists is often uncertain and unclear even when the issues are ones that would be crystal-clear elsewhere: battles by workers to improve wages and conditions or to assert the right to organise independently and to strike.

At Labour Party Conference in October 1989, Arthur Scargill refused to sign a Chinese Solidarity Campaign petition demanding the release of trade unionists and student unionists jailed in China. Ken Gill of MSF would not sign either, saying that he wanted to 'think about it'.

If the petition had been about Chile, South Africa, Turkey, or anywhere outside the Eastern Bloc, Scargill and Gill would have signed without hesitation. So would almost any trade unionist. But the Eastern Bloc is different.

In the same months, October 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev proposed a complete ban on strikes in the USSR, and actually got a wide-ranging limitation on strikes in 'essential' sectors through the Soviet Parliament. Imagine the outcry we would make — and rightly so — if such a ban were legislated in a Western country. Not even Thatcher's Tories have dared attempt so sweeping a ban on strikes. Yet most of the left responded to Gorbachev's move with mild, dispassionate comment.

Opinion in the British labour movement has undoubtedly become more anti-Stalinist since 1980, when Solidarnosc first emerged from a mass strike wave.

Then, throughout the bitter and dangerous struggle of the Polish workers



Some on the left even failed to side with the Chinese students against the murderous regime

to win the right to have free and self-governing trade unions, the British TUC maintained friendly contact and co-operation with the strike-breaking government unions. Even when millions of Polish workers had repudiated them, the TUC continued to recognise the police-state 'unions' as genuine labour organisations. In the middle of the strike movement the TUC stubbornly refused to call off the scheduled visit of its delegates to the battlefield as guests of the scab 'unions' which were doing their best to help the Government beat down the insurgent workers. In the event the visit was called off by the Poles.

During the August 1980 strike movement, the then Chairman of Poland's official unions, Jan Sydlak, was one of the most outspoken and vicious of the bureaucrats in threatening the strikers and their helpers with tanks and slaughter. He called publicly for them to be 'taught a lesson they would never forget'. Yet our TUC leaders maintained friendly links with him.

And to this day they maintain friendly links with the government 'unions' in the USSR, the same unions which appeared on the bosses' side in negotiations during the July 1989 miners' strike.

They maintain the pretence that the official 'trade unions' in the Stalinist states are real working class organisations — when in fact that they are part of a police-state 'Labour Front' apparatus for controlling and policing the working class and for preventing real trade unions and an independent working class movement developing.

The British trade union movement still hesitates to give solidarity to workers in the Eastern Bloc — and even worse, those who hesitate most are often those who are quickest and most generous in organising solidarity for workers anywhere else, people like Arthur Scargill.



workers and

quivocally with Solidarnosc against the Polish exploiters because by doing so we seem to praise by implication the regime which our movement exists to fight — that of 'liberal' capitalism. There is probably a subconscious reluctance to face the facts about the Stalinist regimes, and their implications, because those regimes are so terrible compared with the political regimes in the historically privileged advanced capitalist countries that the latter seem almost good by comparison. And of course, horror at the reality of the Stalinist regimes has, in the last five decades led many one-time revolutionary socialists to reconciliation with 'liberal' capitalism.

But the choice is not confined to either Thatcher and Bush or Deng and Gorbachev: there is also the possibility of a working class socialist democracy.

Capitalism periodically ravages the lives of working class people with slumps and wars, and it is now ravaging the lives of over two million working class families in Britain alone.

In many areas of the world it imposes its own forms of dictatorship. In social crises like Britain's present crisis it has time and again resorted to savage repression. It is now attempting, as yet in a limited way, to tie our own unions to the state. Now less than ever before is there a basis for any labour movement reconciliation with capitalism or its advocates.

In fact, irreconcilable working class and socialist opposition to our main enemy at home cannot be stable or coherent if it is based on anything other than a clear and independent working class view of the world, and on the experience of all the struggles of the working class throughout the world.

Therefore we must not block out of our consciousness a real awareness of what our class faces under the Stalinist regimes. We must not mollify or console ourselves with half-conscious assumptions that the totalitarian Stalinist regimes are really not so bad; that they are really rather benevolent and paternalistic to those they deprive of civil rights and personal and group autonomy. We must stop pretending that their hands are not really dripping with the blood of workers who have dared to stand out against them.

Their hands do really drip with workers' blood.

Yes, things have loosened up a great deal in the USSR in the last year or so. That is good. It means that the USSR might now allow its citizens the sort of rights they have in such capitalist hell-holes as Turkey or South Africa, a limited right to strike for example. It is not enough. It is nowhere near enough.

And the loosening-up is not secure, either. Gorbachev, or some other entrenched bureaucrat, still has the power to turn around and shoot down the people, as Deng, the 'great reformer' of China, did last June.

Those in our movement who 'forget' how undemocratic the Soviet regime still is in order to praise Gorbachev should be ashamed of themselves.

We must actively support the workers in China, in the USSR, and in the other Eastern Bloc states in every way we can.

That means rousing the anger, the hatred, and the active hostility of the labour movement against their oppressors.

It is, to repeat, as basic as not crossing a picket line. And as basic as the attitude one takes to those who do.

The trade union leaders who talk about solidarity with workers in the Eastern Bloc are hypocrites like Eric Hammond, who could not know an act of solidarity if it happened them in the face.

Why is this? For decades, both the leaders of the Stalinist states and our own leaders have told us that Stalinism is socialism. Today the capitalist media are fully proclaiming that the decay of Stalinism means the collapse of socialism and the triumph of capitalism.

Leftists and trade unionists feel uncomfortable about unequivocal solidarity with the workers in the Eastern Bloc because it seems to mean saying something like what Margaret Thatcher and Eric Hammond say. This is understandable, but it is a really trivial consideration in a situation where the workers of the Stalinist states need our moral and practical support. We have a duty as basic as not crossing a picket line to give it to them.

To allow the noise made by the Hammonds and Thatchers to force us into inaction on the struggle of a big part of the world's working class is to sink into a darker national narrowmindedness.

As people who believe, with Marx and Engels, that the emancipation of the working class can only be achieved by the working class itself, we would be obliged to support any independent workers' movement against the police state even if we considered its politics to be seriously mistaken and wrong.

That a real labour movement should exist is much more important than how much industry is nationalised.

The discomfort we feel about denouncing systems which our exploiters also denounce, and call socialist, is doubled by the fact that, in the last few years, the Polish workers' movement Solidarnosc has come out officially and explicitly in favour of private-profit, free-market economics.

This policy shift is tragic. It has already

led the Solidarnosc leaders into coalition with the Stalinists who imposed martial law. It is likely to lead Walesa, Kuron and Mazowiecki into outright attacks on the jobs, security and living standards of the Polish workers, and outright confrontation with the Solidarnosc militants who will fight to defend working-class interests.

Western socialists should do all we can to help the socialists in Solidarnosc fighting against Walesa's free-market policies, groups like the PPS-RD. But we can't help them effectively unless we also support all the Polish workers' struggles, whatever the illusions of their leaders.

In the West we support trade union struggles led by Stalinists (in France or Portugal, say), by Catholic trade-union groups (in Italy, France etc.), by demagogic nationalists (Argentina and other countries) and by outright supporters of capitalism and imperialism (in the USA for example). We should have the same standard, the same attitude of unconditional solidarity with workers against their exploiters, for the Eastern Bloc — not a double standard.

Some trade unionists who hate Stalinism and believe that it was never socialism, are still reluctant to give full support to workers' struggles in the USSR because they value the changes being made by Gorbachev and fear that workers' struggles could upset the delicate process of gradual reform. But this is just another form of double standard. In Turkey, in Chile, or in Brazil, would we advise trade unionists to bow their heads because struggles might disrupt liberalisation from above? Would we condone legal bans on strikes and trade union action?

In the USSR as in Western dictatorships, the best guarantee of reform is a free, active, combative workers' movement, not the promises of a reforming ruler.

Many feel reluctant to side une-

Organising women workers

By Ruth Cockroft

Whenever there is a shortage in labour, for instance during war, women become the pool of unused labour from which the capitalists draw their reserves.

Suddenly women become the driving force behind a war economy. They work long hours in munitions factories, in heavy industry and in agriculture. Women weld warships and rivet essential machinery. In other words, women become a part of what has traditionally been the male labour force.

On the business pages of the press today we read more and more about "the demographic time bomb", "the expected decrease in the youth labour market" and, as a result of this, "the possibility of workplace nurseries." The financial experts are pondering over the problem presented to industry by the fall in the birthrate in the 1970s, and fewer and fewer school leavers entering the workforce as the years roll by.

The shift is not as drastic as those brought on by war, but nevertheless, the fact that women are a growing part of the labour market and of the shopfloor is undeniable. Nine million women in Britain are now in some form of paid employment. Women are 45% of the workforce, and the fastest growing area of employment is women's part-time work.

These trends are likely to increase. They mark a change in the make-up of the working class and a corresponding need of the labour movement to begin the organisation of women workers as a priority in order to ensure its own survival.

Although women are now more likely to be in waged work, they continue to bear the burden of family life. A great deal of women's work is part-time precisely because the responsibility of childcare still falls on them.

The Tory attacks on public spending and the welfare state have compounded the situation by cutting state provision for care for the elderly or young children. Thatcher's government has accelerated the trend of women into paid work, but forced women to combine childcare and housework with waged work.

A recent report by the Equal Opportunities Commission has pointed to this double burden with evidence that the majority of childcare undertaken for women in work is done by their own mothers. Women's role in the domestic sphere is still very much as carers and nurturers.

The Tories have also tried to use women workers as a tool towards the goal of the free market economy. Women workers are looked upon as a flexible, unorganised army of cheap labour. Women workers have been at the sharp end of attacks on wages councils, work conditions and health and safety regulators.

Many of these attacks have occurred because of the inability of the trade union movement to organise the female workshop. The sexism of individual male trade unionists is a big enough barrier to the involvement of women, and in addition there is the very real problem of right-

wing, bureaucratic union structures which reproduce the problem of the male-dominated branch meeting. The lack of thought about childcare provision, the glaring lack of demands for creches, for a minimum wage and equal pay. In its drive to recruit more women members the trade union movement has got to look at its own structures, promote women positively into its ranks and fight for demands relevant to women.

Many trade unions have begun tackling the problem of the decline in membership by relating more positively to women workers as well as looking at the problems of unionising youth on schemes and the part-time flexible workforce. Initiatives such as the TGWU's 'Link Up' campaign, which aim to reach out to such workers, must be welcomed. However, the reality is that these campaigns are inadequate to deal with the tough reality of ensuring

"A rigorous and militant campaign committed to a working women's charter would provide a framework for unionising women"

women are protected in the workplace.

A rigorous and militant campaign, committed to some sort of women workers' charter, would provide a framework for unionising women. Such a charter would include demands for full-time rights for part-time workers (such as maternity leave, sick and holiday pay), workplace nurseries, procedures to deal with sexual harassment, positive discrimination to ensure women's involvement at all levels of the union, childcare provision at union meetings, health care that is relevant to women's needs, a commitment to equal pay and a minimum wage.

The problem of the inertia of some trade unions in organising women is a problem of right-wing domination of the union movement. However, some feminists argue that it is a problem of gender polarisation in the workforce. Male workers are supposed to greedily defend the status quo because low paid women secure their own highly paid jobs.

Marxism Today and some in the Labour Party have talked of the need for a "feminist incomes policy".

The real aim behind such proposals is an attack on the income of male wage earners and on the better organised sections of the labour movement. It would be suicidal and divisive to accept policies designed to redistribute wealth within the working class rather than between classes.

The notion of a 'female' approach rather than a specifically working-class approach to union organisation has other

reactionary implications. Bea Campbell of *Marxism Today* denounces the most militant methods of class struggle as macho and essentially anti-women. Picket lines, spontaneous rank and file movements and organised defence are all lumped together as male methods of struggle.

This flies in the face of the experience of many women workers who have, over the years, been involved in some of the bloodiest battles of the labour movement. Most recently women in the Health Service have organised rank and file action, pickets and mass meetings. Bea Campbell's argument can only place these struggles firmly outside the feminist or, as she sees it, the socialist project.

Unfortunately ideas like these are commonplace and fuelled by a new 'radical' politics which was firmly placed on the British political agenda by the Greater London Council. The GLC, after retreating from a fight with central government over implementing cuts and raising rates, turned instead to 'empowering' disadvantaged groups. Much of what the GLC did was positive, but as the cuts began to bite a version of feminism was used to cloak the anti-working class nature of the council's politics. Increasingly the GLC maintained funding to select women's groups while doing nothing to back the struggles of ordinary women workers.

At the same time as these terrible hypocritical policies took their toll, women workers in the GLC typing pool still had to raise their hand to ask permission to go to the toilet!

Some councils following the GLC's example have carried through redundancies by dividing the council workers into layers of specially oppressed groups: white heterosexual men were the first to go, black workers could keep their jobs. A racist backlash was inevitable, but any attempt to fight the redundancies could also be labelled as sexist, racist or homophobic.

The problem of the whole 'Local Government Left' experiment was the way in which it broke down the working class into specially oppressed groups, an idea belonging less to socialists than to radical liberals in America. The notion of the working class as the liberators of the whole of society is submerged into the idea of a coalition, a 'rainbow alliance' of specially oppressed groups, in which the working class is seen as a small, fragmented part. Each group fights for what it sees as its own particular interests, rather than seeing itself as part of the generalised whole, as part of a united working class movement. The problems of the oppressed are seen as the fault of 'bad' ideas rather than the economic entrenchment of oppression. The enlightened local authority sits above the fragments, correcting 'bad' ideas, distributing bits of 'empowering' (or money) to the various oppressed groups, and supposedly linking all the fragments into a coherent battle for liberation.

In terms of the real effect made upon women's lives, the attempt made by the GLC to 'empower' women pales into insignificance compared to the organised strength of a working class women's movement such as Women Against Pit Closures. In 1920 Alexandra Kollontai

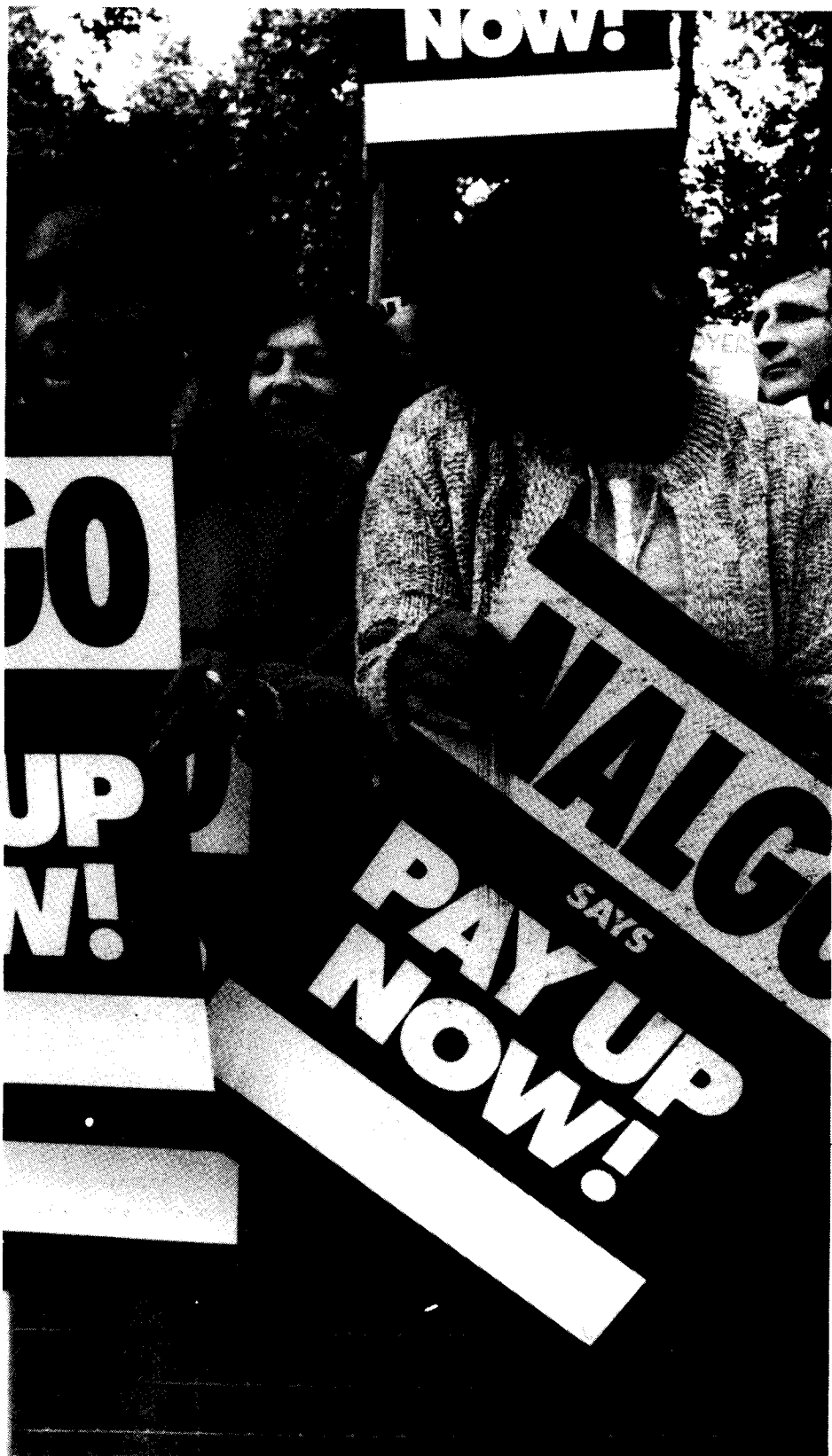


Photo: John Harris

wrote that "participation in the workers' movement brings the woman worker towards her liberation, not only as a seller of labour power but also as a woman, a wife, a mother, a housekeeper."

Her point was illustrated in the miners' strike of 1984-5. The spontaneous organisation of women in mining communities into an autonomous movement which combined working class militancy with demands for women's liberation and organisation which socialised cooking and a great deal of childcare. Women emerged from the narrow, isolated domestic world to address political meetings, organise money and food distribution and fight the

police on picket lines.

The experience of Women Against Pit Closures and the prospect of millions of women becoming part of the organised labour movement provides socialists with the hope of a mass working women's movement coming into existence.

But it is not inevitable. The organisation of women workers depends on the structures and the politics of the trade union movement. Making the union movement respond to women's needs and demands will take a long and bitter fight, but fight we must if we are not to waste the opportunity of unionising a whole layer of unorganised labour.

Women in the workforce and the unions

By Jean Lane

About 45 per cent of wage-workers in the UK today are women. In 1951 it was only 31 per cent. The proportion continues to increase, with part-time women workers by far the fastest-growing section of the workforce.

Half of all women wage-workers are part-timers. It is becoming more and more common for women who look after children also to have jobs. In 1911, only one in ten married women had a job; in 1985, 55 per cent.

Nevertheless, local authorities provide nursery places for only one per cent of under-fives. The total number of places with nurseries and child-minders covers eight per cent of under-fives. Most women workers with small children rely on their mothers or other female members of their families to help out.

The Sex Discrimination Act 1976 should ensure equal opportunities. It brought some improvement for a small minority of better-off women. Between 1971 and 1981 women increased their share of judges' and barristers' jobs from 4% to 15%, of accountants' and valuers' jobs from 4% to 10%, and of managers' jobs from 18% to 25%.

But most women are still concentrated in 'women's jobs'. Discrimination continues in the form of worse pay and conditions for those jobs and for part-time workers.

When the Equal Pay Act 1975 came into force, women's average hourly earnings were 72% of men's. By 1986 they were...74 per cent.

Since 1984 changes in the law have made it possible to insist on equal pay not just for the same work but for 'work of equal value'. This has produced some, but very slow, progress.

Up to June 1989, unions had made 128 applications for 'equal pay for work of equal value'. 20 had been upheld by tribunals and 24 rejected. 43 had been withdrawn or settled before getting to the tribunals, 5 were on appeal, and 36 were outstanding.

About one-third of trade union members are women. All unions are now committed on paper to equal opportunities. Many have equal rights courses, equal opportunities officers, and reserved women's seats on their executive committees. But here too progress is slow.

Although women are the majority in the membership of six big unions — NUPE, NALGO, USDAW, CoHSE, NUT and CPSA — only one sizeable union is headed by a woman (Brenda Dean, in the print union, SOGAT).

The proportion of women on the union executives has risen in the '80s, though nowhere does it match the proportion of women in the membership. NUPE (66 per cent women members) has a 50% female executive; NALGO (52% women members) has a 36% female executive; the TGWU (17% women members) has a 5% female executive; and the CPSA (71% women members) has a 44% female executive.

Full-time officials are still almost all male. The health workers' union CoHSE is the one exception. 50 per cent of its national officials are women. But only 9% of NUPE's national officials, 20% of NALGO's, 0% of the TGWU's, and 18% of the CPSA's are women.

* Figures from Labour Research Bargaining Report, June 1989, and (for the unions) Labour Research March 1988.



The EETPU's strategy and how to fight it

By Alan Fraser

The EETPU is a pioneer of business unionism. In industrial relations courses at its two training centres it tries, with some degree of success, to indoctrinate convenors and shop stewards away from militancy and towards collaboration with the employers and particularly Japanese hi-tech multinationals.

The EETPU's new electronics training college was opened by Norman Tebbit and was funded with bosses' money and public grants from the Tory government.

The EETPU leaders have a distinct philosophy. They believe that thriving capitalism — high profits — equals high wages.

Their strategy is based on offering employers something new in return for job security, improved conditions, good wages and fringe benefits for their members. And what could be better than a no-strike agreement, pendulum arbitration, greater use of part-time workers, variations of hours, mobility of labour, demarcation lines removed — and "no problems" in collective bargaining.

Eric Hammond puts it like this: "Of course there are people, sects and nuts, who actually believe that in being involved in strikes workers find out how to struggle and this leads them on for the revolution. My view is that the trade union function is to deal with matters in a way which doesn't involve workers in industrial action."

In other words, according to the EETPU leaders we become one big happy family with harmonious relations in industry. Good profits make good wages. But in fact Hammond and other EETPU leaders could not be further from the truth.

At the point of production, the single union, no strike agreements effectively destroy the independent role of shop stewards' committees in relation to the rank and file. This is one of the central goals, of course.

Unilateral EETPU deals with Japanese

electronic giants like Toshiba, Hitachi and Sanyo not only outlaw strike action but place unique emphasis on the idea of a common interest between labour and management, between the exploiters and those they exploit.

The most typical example of such ideological mobilisation is the "three P" system — productivity, participation, prosperity. The central feature is the setting up of joint union-management quality control committees. At Toshiba these meetings are held at four levels:

1. A twice-yearly central liaison meeting to discuss long-term company plans.
2. A plant meeting, also twice a year, between company executives, EETPU national officials, and plant convenors on issues related to efficient operation of the company.
3. A plant liaison meeting held once a month between management, local officials and convenors to decide production schedules for the month.
4. A further monthly plant-wide briefing on how best to attain production schedules.

It is significant that decision on matters such as size of workforce, labour efficiency and pay and job conditions are made behind closed doors in secret negotiations between top union officers and management. At no stage are such negotiations subject to rank and file ratification at

EETPU's recruitment drive

Over the last decade EETPU membership has fallen from 430,000 down to 380,000, a drop of 12%.

This decline was mostly amongst skilled workers. To try to stem the losses, in January 1988 the EETPU launched a national campaign to recruit 100,000 new members into the union within four years.

This recruitment drive, initially aimed at skilled workers and non-unionised hi-tech electronics industries, was later extended to cover white collar workers employed by both foreign and British

mass meetings.

Shop stewards are not subject to immediate recall and thus it will be difficult for workers to use the shop stewards as a focus for opposition to what is decided at the top. This system operates to make it difficult to organise unofficial strikes for trade union principles, work conditions or wages.

It is estimated that no more than 10,000 to 20,000 workers are covered by these agreements. However the signs are ominous. Many cowed union leaders, desperate to replace lost membership and lost funds may very well seek to sign such deals.

Where the EETPU and AEU have broken ranks with the rest of the TUC 'new realists' is in explicitly renouncing the strike weapon and substituting binding 'pendulum' arbitration in their agreements. This means that production must continue through all stages of the disputes procedure, and if no settlement can be reached 'in company', leads to binding arbitration as the final stage.

At this last stage of the procedure, an 'independent' arbitrator (usually from ACAS) is brought in to choose between the final positions of the employer and the union. The arbitrator must opt 100% for the union's position or 100% for the boss's, not for anything in between — hence the 'pendulum' tag.

So the fight against the new business unionism will be hard and long, and not just a matter of dealing with Eric Hammond and his cronies.

The fact is, though, that Hammond's ideology just does not square with reality. In January 1986, the workers at Bowman Webber, a firm making mirrors in Harlow, struck for two weeks over the sacking of three workers, one of whom had been elected an EETPU shop steward the night before.

What was unusual about this action was that it took place in a company that was covered by a no-strike deal with the EETPU. The sacked workers were reinstated, but the story has an interesting postscript: shortly after the strike, pendulum arbitration (the EETPU's favoured form of 'strike substitute') was used to resolve another dispute over pay for double-shift working, and it came down in favour of the workforce for once.

Even the *Guardian* commented that, "whatever deals are made between unions and management, workers are still going to find that collectively withdrawing their labour will from time to time be necessary."

companies.

The specific targets in this category included professional engineers and technical managers who were offered dual membership with EESA — the Electrical Engineering Staff Association.

New plans exist for a similar recruitment campaign aimed at skilled and general labour in privatised primary industries, ie. energy, mining and cars.

In each field EETPU leaders have offered their prototype policy of no-strike deals plus sole union recognition as an inducement to employers. It is this type of workplace deal that resulted in the EETPU's expulsion from the TUC.

Business unionism goes bust

By Colin Foster

The terrible decline of trade unionism in the USA since the 1940s and especially since the 1980s has some sobering lessons for British trade unionists.

One thing we can certainly learn from Kim Moody's book* on that decline is that British trade union leaders who look to American 'business unionism' as the answer to their problems are heading for disaster.

Between 1953 and 1985, unionisation in the US in manufacturing fell from 42 per cent to 25 per cent; in transport, from 80 per cent to 37 per cent; in construction, from 84 per cent to 22 per cent; and in mining, from 65 per cent to 15 per cent.

The shift in employment from manufacturing to services does not explain the decline; unionisation has weakened in almost every sector, with government service workers being an area of relative success.

Real wages have been declining in the US since the early '70s, and differentials between unionised and non-union workers has been declining too. Poverty and insecurity have increased, and the trade unions have done nothing effective to resist.

Kim Moody argues that the unions' ineffectiveness results from the basic philosophy of their leaders. He quotes Lane Kirkland, leader of the American equivalent of the TUC, to illustrate the utter lack of working class consciousness among American trade union leaders. Kirkland sees trade unions as representing a class — but the *middle class*! "Trade unions", he declares, "are nothing more and nothing less — than the American middle class and those who aspire to it".

In the 1930s and '40s, when mass trade

unionism first emerged in the USA, the trade unions were not socialist, nor did they form their own political party, though the idea was much discussed.

Yet the main trade union leaders did have some concept of 'social unionism' which enabled them to respond militantly, creatively and as a movement.

In the early '50s the frail philosophy of 'social unionism' was swept away by the Cold War witch-hunt and the boom which started with the Korean War. The union leaders switched to running the union strictly as **businesses**. Their job was not to change society or even to advance the immediate interests of workers as a class, but to get enough dues income to sustain the union machine and negotiate enough gains for the members to get that dues income.

The 'pattern bargaining' which had been one of the main gains of the great struggles of the 1940s, negotiating common wages and conditions for workers across whole industries, was allowed to decay through short-sightedness. When American capitalism lost its position of world domination and ran into hard times in the 1970s, the union leaders had no answers.

They ran increasingly desperately after Democratic Party politicians, hoping for some crumbs from the government's tables. They tried to negotiate 'realistically' when businesses threatened to shut down or sack workers. Increasingly that meant negotiating 'give-backs', cuts in wages and loss of conditions and benefits. What was left of pattern bargaining disintegrated and was replaced by whipsaw patterns, where give-backs in one company would become the basis for other companies to demand similar concessions.

The union leaders tried to preserve their position, not by any effective campaign to organise and mobilise more workers, but mainly by merging with smaller unions and trying to pick up easily organised groups of new workers, especially public service workers. What were relatively coherent industrial unions are increasingly becoming ragbag general unions.

"The more disparate and dispersed the separate pieces, the more uncontrollable becomes the full-time officialdom and its full-time staff, which remains the only coherent centralising force in a sprawling institution... Random organising promises to improve the workers' situation for the moment, but offers no guidance for achieving further advances or even for holding on to past gains... It is a nickel-and-dime business unionism which sees unions as service organisations and bargaining 'strength' as a question of internal organisation resources".

But there is more to the US unions than their leaders. Moody also describes the rank-and-file struggles in the 1980s which have begun to point the way for a new revival of trade unionism.

* Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism*, Verso 1988.



Eric Hammond

How Hammond keeps control

In trade union politics the EETPU is a right-wing bastion, and it has been ever since Cannon, Byrne and Chapple took control in 1961 as the union's top three Executive Committee men.

Significantly, not one EETPU member voted for this triad because no election actually took place. They were simply installed by the High Court, at the end of an unprecedented media campaign that purged the old ballot-rigging Communist Party leadership of the union without a single vote being cast.

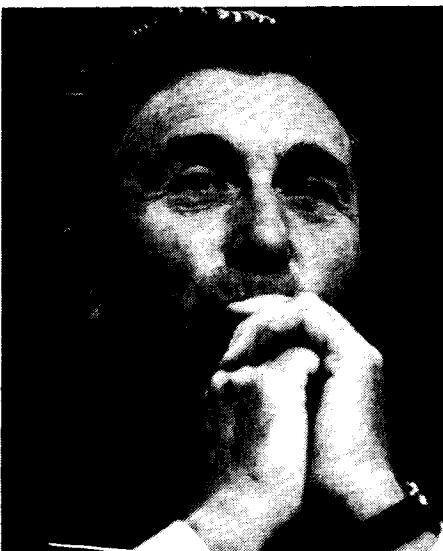
For two decades Frank Chapple, a former Communist and electrician shop steward, was the key functionary in a complex umbrella that organised workers in energy supply, contracting, shipbuilding, telecommunications and electronics.

The union's elected lay Executive Committee was abolished and replaced by a full-time body which almost immediately suppressed all membership elections for national and local officers, opting instead for appointing loyal EC careerists. The elected rank and file Appeal Committee was abolished too.

Three years ago the EETPU spent £4.6 million (49% of its total income) on its salaried staff of 15 EC members and 151 national and local officers. That's an average of £28,000 each. A further 25 researchers and general administration cost another £1.7 million.

Not one of these officers is elected by members. All of them are appointed by a shadowy sub-committee of the EC, yet union policy-making committees are dominated by this EC network of selected functionaries.

Left-wing branches and activists are routinely suspended. Cardiff, Birmingham, Glasgow and London Central branches have been closed and reorganised because of rank and file opposition to the EC. Many militants blacklisted by employers also claim the EC is keeping dossiers on them.



Frank Chapple

Breakaway unions: right or wrong?

Socialist Organiser has opposed the creation of the EPIU a small left-wing electricians' union formed by a breakaway from the right-wing EEPTU. We have argued that this breakaway takes militants away from a fight among rank-and-file electricians which is still possible and still necessary.

But should socialists always oppose breakaway unions? John O'Mahony looks at the history.

Are we for or against breakaway unions? In general, we're against: but the issue can't be dealt with abstractly.

Trade unionism is about unity. We are in favour of the maximum unity. We want to overcome sectionalism and parochialism, to unify the workers for a serious fight to defend themselves.

That's why we're against breakaways. But it is only one side of the question.

In reality trade unions don't unite all workers not even in a country like Britain. And the modern unions are not just straight workers' organisations. They are bureaucratized.

A layer of people — officials of the union — become abstracted from the workplace struggles of workers. They become specialists in bargaining. Their conditions of life are separated from the workers they represent. Their wages and conditions are not at all linked to their success or failure as representatives of the workers' interest. Over a period of time they develop all kinds of links with the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois state.

There are many different sorts of trade unions and trade union bureaucracies — straightforward business unionism, European Catholic unionism, and many others.

The unions are thus not mere reflections of the needs of the workers. Very often they act as an agency controlling the workers or as a conduit for bourgeois ideas. The union bureaucracy acts as a highly developed ideological agency for the bourgeoisie and for Stalinists, or sometimes by way of the Stalinists for the bourgeoisie.

We have workers' organisations that stifle their members to one degree, or another.

That's why we can't simply say that trade unionism is about uniting workers, that getting the maximum number of trade unionists in a union is what we go for and that nothing else matters.

Lots of other things matter. Trade union unity can sometimes be a fetter on the workers.

Let's take the clearest example — the USA in the 1930s.

The workers had been organised in a broad trade union — the Knights of Labour — in the latter half of the 19th century, but that had been smashed and destroyed. It was replaced by the American Federation of Labour, a business-type trade union movement. The AFL was very conservative, concerned with craft unionism, very racist and very sexist.

In the 1930s there was a great wave of militancy with sit-down strikes. The workers wanted to organise.

They were stopped by the AFL. It was a block in their way. Sections of the AFL in the first place the miners' union began to reflect the drive of the workers. They wanted to organise industrial unions. So there was a split in the AFL.

The miners' leader John L Lewis — who was a gangster, scoundrel and dirty bureaucrat — walked up to a prominent representative of the craft unionists and hit him on the jaw. It was the signal for a break in the AFL.

"Unity is a good thing — but not the unity of the graveyard and of the apparatchik. We have to analyse each situation concretely"

It was a constructive break. It allowed the workers to create the Congress of Industrial Organisations, CIO, which became the most powerful section of the US labour movement. The split lasted to 1955.

For a long time many militants believed that 'one big union' was an answer to all the problems. That was the basic idea of the syndicalists in the years around the First World War. They helped to create big unions like the TGWU and Connolly's and Larkin's Irish TGWU. But nevertheless the reality of bureaucratisation overtook these unions as well. The TGWU became a great block on workers' militancy.

In the Transitional Programme of 1938. Trotsky argued that we should be against breakaway unions of a sectarian type that pull away from the broad mass of workers in a particular industry. On the other hand, we are against capitulation to the trade union bureaucracy.

In a highly bureaucratized trade union the logic of development of a powerful rank and file movement may lead to a complete clash with the bureaucracy. It may lead to a situation where the rank and file movement is faced with an ultimatum from the bureaucrats to surrender or to break away. In that situation it would be to create a fetish to say that industrial unionism and unity is the main thing. Such an approach would leave the workers no option but to bow down before the incumbent bureaucrats — and the bourgeoisie.

So we are against sectarian breakaways

— and we are also against making a fetish of unity.

In 1928, Stalin declared that the so-called Third Period of capitalism had started — the system was collapsing everywhere, and revolution was round the corner. Stalin's sidekicks worked out all sorts of daft theories. The main enemies were not fascists, or capitalist, or monarchists but the social democrats.

In Germany the Communist Party united with anyone against the Social Democracy, even sometimes with the Nazis.

The Stalinists also tried to organise their own trade unions. In some countries, like France, that didn't matter a great deal. The unions had already been split by the reformists after World War 1. Elsewhere there was a tradition of political parties having their own unions. But in countries like Germany and Britain it was disastrous.

In Britain in the '20s the CP led a powerful rank and file movement — the Minority Movement — with a paper membership of about one million, in a trade union movement of about four million members.

The CP tried to form breakaway unions out of the Minority Movement. This utterly smashed the Minority Movement.

They created a small miners' breakaway union in Fife and a clothing workers' union in East London and Leeds — mainly of Jewish workers — but that was the extent of their ability to create independent unions.

That sort of politics is utterly and absolutely destructive. It very quickly gave way a few years later (1934-6) to the CP forgetting all about fighting the bureaucrats and adopting a policy — which they still maintain — of burrowing within the bureaucracy.

That is one type of experience. But there are many other examples of the opposite happening — of people being frightened to break with the existing machinery of the union and then blocking the class struggle.

The best illustration is the British docks in the '50s.

The TGWU was the great hope of the amalgamaters — those who wanted to build one big union in and around the time of the First World War. It became highly bureaucratized very early. It became involved in deals with the capitalists in the mid to late '20s.

It was involved in full scale collaboration with the government and with the state in World War 2.

In 1947 the National Dock Labour Board was set-up. It was an agency to employ dockers. Dockers were employed directly by the Board which then hired them out on a half day basis to the employers who would put them to work. If there were no employer the Board would be responsible for paying a minimum wage to the docker provided he turned up and got his book stamped.

The Dock Labour Board was 50% employers, 50% union representatives.

The TGWU had a closed shop and it was a half-share employer of the workers it was supposed to be representing. Highly bureaucratized, it took on the job of policing the dockers.

It did the sort of job that maybe the Histadrut does in Israel, or the Stalinist bureaucrats who took over Eastern Europe after the war (except the TGWU didn't have a police state)!

There were never official strikes. The



Arthur Deakin

officials would organise to break strikes. Union leaders could threaten militants who wouldn't toe the line with the sack.

For example, the entire committee of the Manchester TGWU Docks branch were summoned to London to meet general secretary Arthur Deakin and he said: 'Watch yourselves boys. If you don't toe the line I'll have you sacked'.

In 1954-55, some 16,000 dockers — beginning in Hull, then Liverpool, then Manchester — broke out of the T&G.

There had already been a breakaway in the '20s which had a base in London and was recognised by the employers there for negotiations, the Stevedores Union (NASD). The TGWU was known as the white union and the Stevedores as the blue union because of the colour of their cards.

The 16,000 dockers attempted to join the 'blue union'. They described this as 'The biggest prison break in history'. But they failed. They struck for recognition for six weeks.

On the docks you had to negotiate pay according to the condition of each job, from day to day. Recognition was crucial to the whole business. You couldn't have a union that wasn't recognised.

The Dock Labour Board stuck to its mates, the T&G, fought a bitter struggle against the breakaway and refused to recognise it.

The Communist Party after its turn away from being ultra-left in the '20s and '30s had begun to burrow into the union bureaucracy. The T&G in the late '40s had imposed a ban on the CP members holding positions, a ban which held in place until 1970. But in London the CP had the leadership of the dockers. Their policy was to work their way into the bureaucracy and win favour by being good supporters of the bureaucracy. So they scabbed on the recognition strike.

London didn't come out. The strike for recognition was defeated. The Blue Union then tried to expel the dockers who had joined it in the Northern ports. The dockers tried to stay in by taking the union to court. The blue union was ultimately expelled by the TUC in 1958.

Was the breakaway right or wrong? In retrospect it was a fiasco. It led to a split in the docks and even to a certain amount of non-unionism, though not enough to undermine militancy. Many Trotskyist

groups opposed the breakaway. The Grantites (now *Militant*) condemned it, the Cliffites (now the SWP) condemned it. The Healyites (later SLL-WRP) were central to the whole development. They acted as the link between various ports. They had some dockers in Liverpool who played a leading role in the breakaway. Bob Pennington, a Healyite, became a full-timer of the blue union in Liverpool.

I think the Healyites were right. That sort of prison break — a movement of militant workers which challenges the bureaucracy — is a good thing.

The movement was defeated. After a defeat it is easy to say that you shouldn't have fought. But then when would you ever fight? You never have a guarantee of victory — the dockers could not have known in advance that they would be defeated.

In any case it was not a full scale defeat. It liberated the militants and it helped change the TGWU. Arthur Deakin, the T&G autocratic right-wing General Secretary died in 1954. His right-wing successor, Tiffin, soon died too, and a left-wing Frank Cousins, became general

secretary.

Frank Cousins was shaped not just by the bureaucracy but also by the breakaway and by a big bus strike in the late '50s.

Unity is a good thing — but not the unity of the graveyard and of the apparatus-chicks. We have to analyse each situation concretely.

In any big struggle against the trade union bureaucracy there is a logic of split — just as in a big fight in the Labour Party. There is nothing that tells you that the anti-bureaucrats are going to get a majority, or that the union bureaucracy will be easily ousted. Faced with being defeated it can split the union. If that threat always makes us climb down and retreat, then we're paralysed.

As Rosa Luxemburg put it, the union doesn't create militancy, militancy creates the union. The union exists for the working class or it exists for nothing at all. We go by the interests of the working class, not by the interests of the union officials' shopkeeping.

From a speech at a recent Socialist Organiser industrial school.

Merger mania

These days the trade union movement almost outdoes the City in its enthusiasm for mergers.

NUPE, NALGO and CoHSE are talking about coming together to form a giant public-service union. The General and Municipal Workers have absorbed the Boilermakers and the APEX white-collar union.

SOGAT, having absorbed NATSOPA, and the NGA, having absorbed SLADE, are now talking about a fusion into a bigger print union. The NUJ had been talking about a merger with the NGA.

NUCPS has absorbed the Civil Service Union and is talking about merger with the clerical grades union CPSA. The TGWU, having absorbed the Vehicle Builders, Agricultural Workers, Dyers and Bleachers, and others, has been talking with the National Union of Mineworkers, though these talks seem to be in difficulties.

The National Union of Seamen is discussing merger with the National Union of Railwaymen. The building workers' union UCATT, itself a merger of a number of older building unions in 1970-1, is looking for a larger union to amalgamate with.

The EETPU has failed to pull off its merger with the AEU, but is energetically building links with smaller right-wing organisations. MSF is a merger of groups ranging from draughtsmen through scientists to sheet metal workers and tobacco workers.

This wave of mergers is different from the previous one, around the First World War, which established the T&GWU, the G&M and the AEU, and set the shape of British trade unionism for most of this century.

Then the mergers were driven by an attempt to build strong and effective units out of increasing trade union recruitment. Now many mergers are attempts to survive when membership is falling.

No-one can deny the good sense of pooling overhead costs. And socialists generally prefer big unions, uniting greater numbers of workers, to small ones.

But there are problems. Some of the mergers bring together workers in an industry by eliminating trade-union divisions which have hindered united action. Such industrial unionism is a step forward.

But other mergers link together scattered groups of workers across a range of industries, with no common factor

except that they are all sources of dues income for the trade union officials constructing the merger. The MSF merger is the most extreme example so far, but the GMBU and the EETPU would like to do the same if they could.

Such mergers rarely promote workers' unity in struggle or even in negotiations. And they often lead to very bureaucratic structures.

The members, scattered across different trade and industrial groups, find it difficult to combine at rank and file level. Any particular industrial group of members in dispute finds itself a small minority in the union. The majority of the union's members have no close interest in the dispute and it's hard to mobilise them against the union leaders if those leaders are selling out the dispute.

Even mergers with a good industrial logic sometimes need to be viewed with caution. West Germany's unions are organised on an industrial basis, with a neatness and rationality that cannot be faulted. Yet they are very bureaucratic and unresponsive.

A democratic union with a untidy industrial structure is better than a bureaucratic but industrially tidy one. Where the rank and file is militant and strong, competition of two or more unions in the same industry can limit the control of the union bureaucrats, and give more leverage to the rank and file.

Another problem with union mergers is only beginning to emerge. The merger activity of Ken Gill (MSF) on the one hand and of the GMB and EETPU on the other, have tried to bring together unions linked not so much by industrial logic as by political sympathy — creating a Stalinist bloc round the MSF and right-wing blocs round the GMB and EETPU.

This activity still has a long way to go before it brings the British trade union movement near the conditions of France, Italy, or Spain, where union groups of different political colours (Communist, Socialist, Christian) compete in each industry. But that is the direction in which it is going. It is a harmful direction, which should be resisted.

Socialists in the trade unions should generally support mergers, but raise questions about which mergers, under what conditions. We want mergers with an industrial logic, on the basis of democratic union constitutions.

Trotsky on boom, slump and revolution

Why did working class militancy collapse just when it was needed to stand up against the most savage ruling class onslaught for 40 years? This is one of the most important questions facing those whose hopes and struggle for socialism centre on the working class.

There had been no crushing demoralising defeat before the return of the Tory government in May 1979. Quite the opposite in fact — the movement had shown its mettle, and plenty of muscle, in the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978-9.

The explanation is to be sought in the complex interaction between the effects of the Tory victory, the deepening slump bringing mass unemployment and the economic devastation of whole areas, the bureaucratisation of the top layers of the shop stewards' movement, and the collaboration with the government of the national trade union leaders.

It is all the more difficult for the would-be Marxist left to come to terms with what has happened because 'primitive slumpism' — the belief and expectation that the inevitable economic crisis, when it came, would radicalise the working class — had been a very popular response during the boom years to the capitalist argument that prosperity had bourgeoisified the working class.

Having had one dogma exploded, some pundits are now putting forward another, pretending that a new economic upswing will inevitably, in and of itself, produce a new resurgence of industrial militancy.

In the following address to the Communist International, from 1921 — directed against those who refused to see that European capitalism had temporarily re-stabilised itself following the crisis that shook the world after the Russian revolution — Leon Trotsky shows that there is no mechanical or direct relationship between slump and working class radicalisation.

The reciprocal relation between boom and crisis in economy and the development of revolution is of great interest to us not only from the point of theory but above all practically.

Many of you will recall that Marx and Engels wrote in 1851 — when the boom was at its peak — that it was necessary at that time to recognise that the Revolution of 1848 had terminated or, at any rate, had been interrupted until the next crisis.

Engels wrote that while the crisis of 1847 was the mother of revolution, the boom of 1849-51 was the mother of triumphant counter-revolution. It would, however, be very one-sided and utterly false to interpret these judgements in the sense that a crisis invariably engenders revolutionary action while a boom, on the contrary, pacifies the working class.

The Revolution of 1848 was not born out of the crisis. The latter merely provided the last impetus. Essentially the revolution grew out of the contradictions bet-



ween the needs of capitalist development and the fetters of the semi-feudal social and state system. The irresolute and half-way Revolution of 1848 did, however, sweep away the remnants of the regime of guilds and serfdom and thereby extended the framework of capitalist development. Under these conditions and these conditions alone, the boom of 1851 marked the beginning of an entire epoch of capitalist prosperity which lasted till 1873.

In citing Engels it is very dangerous to overlook these basic facts. For it was precisely after 1850, when Marx and Engels made their observations, that there set in not a normal or regular situation, but an era of capitalist *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) for which the soil had been cleared by the Revolution of 1848. This is of decisive importance here. This storm-and-stress era, during which prosperity and the favourable conjuncture were very strong, while the crisis was merely superficial and short-lived — it was precisely this period that ended with revolution. At issue here is not whether and improvement in the conjuncture is possible, but whether the fluctuation of the conjuncture are proceeding along an ascending or descending curve. This is the most important aspect of the whole question.

Can we expect the same effects to follow the economic upswing of 1919-20? Under no circumstances. The extension of the framework of capitalist development was not even involved here. Does this mean that a new commercial-industrial upswing is excluded in the future, and even in the more or less near future? Not at all! I have already said that so long as capitalism remains alive it continues to inhale and exhale. But in the epoch which we have entered — the epoch of retribution for the drain and destruction of wartime, the epoch of levelling out *in reverse* — upswings can be only of a superficial and primarily speculative character, while the crises become more and more prolong-

ed and deeper-going.

Historical development has not led to the victorious proletarian dictatorship in Central and Western Europe. But it is the most stupid lie to attempt to conclude from this, as do the reformists, that the economic equilibrium of the capitalist world has been surreptitiously restored. This is not claimed even by the crassest reactionaries, who are really capable of thinking, for example, Professor Hoetzsch. In his review of the year this professor says in effect that the year 1920 did not bring victory to the revolution, but neither did it restore capitalist world economy...the curtailment of production continues...profound economic depression.

On the basis of this economic depression the bourgeoisie will be compelled to exert stronger and stronger pressure upon the working class. This is already to be seen in the cutting of wages which has started in the full-blooded capitalist countries: in America and in England, and then throughout all of Europe. This leads to great struggles over wages. Our task is to extend these struggles, by basing ourselves on a clear understanding of the economic situation. This is quite obvious.

It might be asked whether the great struggles over wages, a classic example of which is the miners' strike in England, will lead automatically to the world revolution, to the final civil war and the struggle for the conquest of political power. However, it is not Marxist to pose the question in such a way. We have no automatic guarantees of development. But when the crisis is replaced by a transitory favourable conjuncture, what will this signify for our development? Many comrades say that if an improvement takes place in this epoch it would be fatal for our revolution. No, under no circumstances. In general, there is no automatic dependence of the proletarian revolutionary movement upon a crisis. There is only a dialectical interaction. It is essential to understand this.

Let us look at the relations in Russia. The 1905 revolution was defeated. The workers bore great sacrifices. In 1906 and 1907 the last revolutionary flare-ups occurred and by the autumn of 1907 a great world crisis broke out. The signal for it was given by Wall Street's Black Friday. Throughout 1907 and 1908 and 1909 the most terrible crisis reigned in Russia too. It killed the movement completely, because the workers had suffered so greatly during the struggle that this depression could only act to dishearten them. There were many disputes among us over what would lead to the revolution: a crisis or a favourable conjuncture?

At that time many of us defended the viewpoint that the Russian revolutionary movement could be regenerated only by a favourable economic conjuncture. And that is what took place. In 1910, 1911 and 1912, there was an improvement in our economic situation and a favourable conjuncture which acted to reassemble the demoralised and devitalised workers who had lost their courage. They realised again

how important they were in production: and they passed over to an offensive, first in the economic field and later in the political field as well. On the eve of the war the working class had become so consolidated, thanks to this period of prosperity, that it was able to pass to a direct assault.

And should we today, in the period of the greatest exhaustion of the working class resulting from the crisis and the continual struggle, fail to gain victory, which is possible, then a change in the conjuncture and a rise in living standards would not have a harmful effect upon the revolution, but would be on the contrary highly propitious. Such a change could prove harmful only in the event that the favourable conjuncture marked the beginning of a long epoch of prosperity. But a long period of prosperity would signify than an expansion of the market had been attained, which is absolutely excluded. For after all, capitalist economy already embraces the terrestrial globe. Europe's impoverishment and America's sumptuous renaissance on the huge war market corroborate the conclusion that this prosperity cannot be restored through the capitalist development of China, Siberia, South America and other countries, where American capitalism is of course seeking and creating outlet markets but on a scale in no way commensurate to Europe. It follows that we are on the eve of a period of depression; and this is incontestable.

With such a perspective, a mitigation of the crisis would not signify a mortal blow to the evolution but would only enable the working class to gain a breathing spell during which it could undertake to reorganise its ranks in order subsequently to pass over to attack on a firmer basis. This is one of the possibilities. The content of the other possibility is this: that the crisis may turn from acute into chronic, become intensified and endure for many years. All this is not excluded. The possibility remains open in such a situation that the working class could gather its last forces and, having learned from experience, conquer state power in the most important capitalist countries. The only thing excluded is the automatic restoration of capitalist equilibrium on a new foundation and capitalist upswing in the next few years. This is absolutely impossible under the conditions of modern economic stagnation.

Here we approach the question of social equilibrium. After all, it is frequently said — and this is the guiding thought not only of a Cunow but also of Hilferding — that capitalism is being automatically restored on a new foundation. Faith in automatic evolution is the most important and most characteristic trait of opportunism.

If we grant — and let us grant it for the moment — that the working class fails to rise in revolutionary struggle, but allows the bourgeoisie the opportunity to rule the world's destiny for a long number of years, says, two or three decades, then assuredly some sort of new equilibrium will be established. Europe will be thrown violently into reverse gear. Millions of European workers will die from unemployment and malnutrition. The United States will be compelled to reorient itself on the world market, reconvert its industry, and suffer curtailment for a considerable period. Afterwards, after a new world division of labour is thus established in agony for 15 or 20 or 25 years, a new epoch of capitalist upswing might perhaps ensure...

In short, speaking theoretically and abstractly, the restoration of capitalist equilibrium is possible. But it does not take place in a social and political vacuum — it can take place only through the classes. Every step, no matter how tiny, toward the restoration of equilibrium in economic life is a blow to the unstable social equilibrium upon which the Messrs. Capitalists still continue to maintain themselves. And this is the most important thing.

A programme for union democracy

Union officials and Committees: All officials should be elected for definite terms (no more than two years) and subject to recall at any time. Full-time officials should be paid the average wage in their industry.

Union policy-making bodies should be made up of elected lay members only. The same should go for Standing Orders Committees and Appeals Committees.

Full minutes and voting records of policy-making bodies should be circulated.

National delegate conferences should have supreme policy-making power.

Elections: Voting should be at workplace meetings or by workplace ballot. It should not be by postal ballot. We want informed, collective working class decision-making, not ballots manipulated by Fleet Street lie-machines. Election addresses must be circulated unaltered, and candidates and their supporters must have unrestricted rights to circulate literature.

Strikes: Strikes should be automatically official until declared unofficial. All strikes for trade union principles, work conditions or wages should be made official. Strike committees must be elected from (and subject to recall by) mass meetings. Through mass meetings and strike bulletins, they must keep the membership fully informed throughout the strike.

There should be no secret negotiations. Every stage of negotiations should be subject to rank and file ratification at mass meetings. Mass meetings should never be presented with package deals unless each part of the deal has been voted on separately by the meeting beforehand.

Workplace Organisation: Shop stewards must be elected at mass meetings held in the workplace, in company time if possible. They should hold regular report-back meetings, also if possible in company time. Joint Shop Stewards' Committees should be set up on a plant, combine and international basis. Technical and clerical workers should also be represented on these committees.

Despite the general need for unity, there will be cases where shop stewards disagree strongly with the majority of the stewards' committee and want to put their minority views to the membership. They should have the right to do so, after notifying the committee of their intention, so long as they also make it clear to the membership what the stewards' majority view is.

Union branches should have the right to meet at the workplace and in work time if possible. If not, crech facilities must be provided to ensure women workers can attend. Labour Party workplace branches should be set up with all the rights of ordinary ward branches.

Closed Shop: We must campaign for 100% trade unionism; for the right of trade unionists to enforce closed shops; for the right of trade unionists to discipline fellow workers who scab or flout democratic decisions; against the check-off system; and against employer-policed 'agency shops'.

Women's Rights: Implement the TUC Charter for Women Within Trade Unions.

Proportional representation for women on national executives, conference delegations (including TUC and Labour Party conferences, regional, district and divisional, sectional or rules revision conferences) and, where applicable, local branch committees.

The right of all women's committees, caucuses and conferences to bring resolutions to the policy-making bodies of the union at that level.

Recognition that sexual harassment is a

trade union issue and that an offence against women is an offence against trade unionism.

Support for positive discrimination as a way of compensating for the extra barriers women face at work, in the trade unions and in politics. Broad Lefts should lead the way by practising it in their own structures.

Black and Immigrant Workers: No discrimination against black or immigrant workers in the unions (including in social clubs). Positive discrimination to ensure real equality. Support for the right to form black caucuses.

Campaigns to recruit immigrant workers to trade unions (using leaflets in the immigrants' own language).

A purge of open racists from all positions in the labour movement. Expulsion of fascist activists from the unions.

A vigorous and sustained trade union fight against racist and sexist job discrimination. Automatic endorsement of all strikes against discrimination.

Youth: Full trade union rights for young workers, including the right to strike. Formation of youth committees.

The Unemployed: Unionisation of the unemployed, with full rights within the unions.

Individual Rights: Right of members to criticise union policy; to meet unofficially and visit other branches; to write, circulate and/or sell political literature. Right of appeal direct to union Appeals Court.

All education or other special qualifications for union office to be abolished. No member to be disqualified from holding union office on political grounds, other than fascist or racist activity.

Rights of Branches and District Committees: Defend the rights of trade union branches and district committees against the central union bureaucracy. For the right of branches to take or approve industrial action.

Developing Solidarity: Develop links between unions. Expand trades councils to include representation from the unemployed, tenants and students, and, most important, direct representation from factory committees and other shop floor organisations.

Affiliate trade unions to the Labour Party and local union branches to the local CLPs. TUC and Labour Party conference delegations should be bound to follow union policy where it exists. There should be democratic control of the block vote cast at Labour Party conference: delegations should be elected and consist of lay members. Members of all working class parties and tendencies should be eligible for inclusion in the delegation.

Trade union branch delegates to Trades Councils and Labour Parties must report back regularly.

Breaking Collaboration: Trade unions should fight for full independence from the state. Total non co-operation with the Tebbit Law and the Employment Act: state money for postal ballots should be rejected.

The National Economic Development Council and all the other governmental and industrial 'participation' bodies should be opposed and boycotted. Trade unionists must be answerable to the membership, not to joint committees with the bosses.

No interference by the bosses' courts in the internal affairs of the labour movement. Even when an appeal to the courts is motivated by a desire to thwart the right wing bureaucrats, it runs counter to the principles of working class democracy.

Origins of the trade union bureaucracy

By Brian Pearce

The source of rank and file movements is the conflict between the struggle of the working class for better conditions and a new social order, and the increasing reconciliation between the leaders of the trade unions and the capitalist class, their growing integration into the upper reaches of bourgeois society.

In Great Britain we find the first appearance of such movements in the years shortly before the first world war, and it is significant that this phenomenon was preceded and accompanied by a good deal of comment on the declassing of trade union officials.

In 1892 the 'civil service' of British trade unionism numbered between 600 and 700. After the Reform Act of 1867 and the Ballot Act of 1872 had created an important working class electorate largely immune to older forms of pressure, the ruling class began to pay special attention to trade union leaders.

Engels observed in 1874 that "the chairmen and secretaries of trade unions ...had overnight become important people. They were visited by MPs, by lords and other well-born rabble, and sympathetic inquiry was suddenly made into the wishes and needs of the working class." On the advice of the Liberal politician Mundella, the Trades Union Congress held at Nottingham in 1872 was officially welcomed by the city corporation, the delegates were banqueted and invited to the homes of leading citizens, and so forth — the first time such things had happened.

Trade union leaders were pressed to accept seats on Royal Commissions, and in 1886 the general secretary of one of the most important unions stepped into a job in the Labour Bureau formed by Mundella as President of the Board of Trade, an organisation from which the Ministry of Labour later developed. During the 1880s outstanding trade union leaders were more than once entertained by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) at Sandringham. In 1890 Broadhurst, secretary to the Trades Union Congress, was exposed as having accepted a gift of shares from Brunner, the chemicals industrialist, in return for political support at an election.

The years of comparative industrial peace, between the 1850s and 1880s, had seen "a shifting of leadership in the trade union world," as the Webbs put it, "from the casual enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of permanent salaried officials expressly chosen from out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity."

To the epoch of "defence, not defiance", corresponded the emergence of a generation of trade union leaders of a different type from those who had laid the foundations in the bitter days of the Com-

bination Acts and Tolpuddle. It was between these "sober, business-like" men and sections of the capitalist class "that the political alliance was forged which, in different forms and phases, has been with us ever since — 'the bourgeoisie cannot rule alone'. The system which JH Thomas admired for 'making me what I am' was fairly launched."

These trade union leaders saw their task as essentially one of peaceful negotiation with the employers, and this gave rise to a whole network of social relations separating them off from their original class. Assured of a permanent position with a secure income, the trade union officials — "a closely combined and practically irresistible bureaucracy", as the Webbs called them in their book *Industrial Democracy* which Lenin translated while in exile in Siberia — soon found their different life-experience reflected in a different outlook on the class struggle. In the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism* the account of the career of a typical official

'Parallel with the rise of the coups of permanent officials was the weakening... in trade union democracy'.

given to the authors in 1893 by a member of one of the great craft unions is quoted:

"Whilst the points at issue no longer affect his own earnings or conditions of employment, any disputes between his members and their employers increase his work and add to his worry. The former vivid sense of the privations and subjection of the artisan's life gradually fades from his mind; and he begins more and more to regard all complaints as perverse and unreasonable. With this intellectual change may come a more invidious transformation. Nowadays the salaried officer of a great union is courted and flattered by the middle class [ie. in the language of those days, the capitalists]. He is asked to dine with them, and will admire their well-appointed houses, their fine carpets, the ease and luxury of their lives..."

"He goes to live in a little villa in a lower middle-class suburb. The move leads to dropping his workmen friends; and his wife changes her acquaintances. With the habits of his new neighbours he insensibly adopts more and more their ideas...His manners to his members ...undergoes a change...A great strike threatens to involve the Society in desperate war. Unconsciously biased by distaste for the hard and unthankful work which a strike entails, he finds himself in small sympathy with the men's demands and eventually arranges a compromise on terms distasteful to a large section of his members."

Brought constantly into friendly intercourse with well-to-do businessmen, civil servants and capitalist politicians, trade union leaders, the Webbs observed, were tempted to bring their spending power up

to the same level as that of their associates by making "unduly liberal charges" for their travelling expenses, and even "to accept from employers or from the government those hidden bribes that are decorously veiled as allowances for expenses or temporary salaries for special posts."

This situation, thus already recognisable in the 1890s, is still with us today.

Parallel with the rise of the corps of permanent officials was the weakening, during the years of "the servile generation", in trade union democracy. Such institutions as the referendum and the initiative "withered away". The shifting of the basis of the branch in many unions from the place of work to the place of residence helped to atomise the membership and increase their dependence on the officials. The Trades Union Congress of 1895 saw a conscious and open move by the officials to cut away a possible line of rank and file control over their doings, by excluding the representatives of the trades councils, the very bodies which, less than thirty years earlier, had summoned the TUC into existence.

"The trades councils were in fact shut out partly in order to exclude 'agitators' whom the trade union leaders regarded as irresponsible busybodies, and partly in pursuance of a definite policy of centralising industrial control in the hands of the national trade union executives. Obviously a Congress in which two or three million votes might have been cast by the delegates of local bodies would have been a great deal more difficult for the platform to manage than a Congress in which a very small number of national trade unions would cast, under a system of block voting, a majority of total votes. The TUC might have been a very different body if the trades councils had retained their original place in it. That, of course, is precisely why they were not allowed to retain it."

Just as the emergence of a caste of privileged officials, cosily coexisting with capitalism, was reaching completion, a new phase of history opened, that of imperialism, passing into that of the general crisis of capitalism. The conditions characteristic of the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century were swept away for ever, and the workers found themselves under steady and intense attack, at first especially by means of rising prices. Round about 1909, when EJB Allen published his pamphlet *Revolutionary Unionism*, wide sections of the workers became aware that the militant policy their new circumstances urgently demanded was being sabotaged by their officials. Allen listed a number of examples of what he called the "treachery of officials" in preventing necessary strikes on various pretexts. He wrote:

"This kind of business is notably on the increase, particularly since the workers have been fools enough to pay this kind of official £200 and more per year [1909 money!] to do nothing in Parliament except betray their interests and run around after different capitalist politicians...in order to be remembered when there are some government jobs going."

Fred Knee, of the London Society of Compositors, remarked bitterly in 1910 that, "there are some trade union leaders who are so prosperous that they at any rate have in their own persons achieved the harmony of the classes."

From 'Some past rank and file movements'

The history of the shop stewards movement

The number of shop stewards in Britain has kept stable, or even increased, in the last ten years; but the strength and confidence of stewards' organisations has declined dramatically. It needs to be rebuilt, learning from our past shortcomings and mistakes. John McIlroy reviews the history.

On July 22 1972 the National Industrial Relations Court ordered the imprisonment of five dockers for defying an injunction under Edward Heath's Industrial Relations Act.

It was the age of Gary Glitter and T Rex. Donny Osmond was number one with 'Puppy Love'. Leeds had beaten Arsenal in the FA Cup Final. Roberto had won the Derby and Muhammed Ali's comeback continued as he stopped Al 'Blue' Lewis in eleven rounds in Dublin.

It was also the finest hour of the modern shop stewards' movement. As the dockers were hauled off to Pen-

'In the hot summer of 1972 the British labour movement had what is most lacking in the unions today: a strong stewards movement'.

tonville Jail by the tipstaff, the cadre of working class rank and file leaders who had developed through the long boom went into action. Stewards committees, union branches and trades councils laid plans for emergency meetings.

Group after group of workers came out, not 'spontaneously', but because



Vic Turner, one of the dockers jailed under the Industrial Relations Act in July 1972, is carried in triumph from Pentonville jail.

they were given a lead by their stewards. The links were there, the wheels clicked into place.

With 250,000 workers out on strike and the numbers increasing every day, the TUC called a one-day General Strike. The government and judiciary caved in.

In the hot summer of 1972 the British labour movement had what is most lacking in the unions today: a strong stewards' organisation in the workplace, able to mobilise the membership independently of the top official leaders of the trade unions, able to push the union leaders into action by the very strength of that mobilisation and — this is the crucial point — able to mobilise their members, not only on the bread and butter sectional issues of wages and conditions, but on class-wide issues, in this case the use of state laws to fetter the unions.

The stewards organisations which had developed since the war were the crown jewel of British trade unionism and the hope of socialists.

Shop steward organisation had serious weaknesses and limited political horizons. 1972 was the high point, never attained again. It is only in the limited sense of a shared set of understandings, an awareness of the necessity for links with other workers, a striving to build those links, that we can talk of a *movement*.

Today we are faced with the need to reconstruct rank and file organisation within the workplaces and across industry. We need to start with the memory of Pentonville but to go far beyond it. We need to build on a new political basis. To do that we need to assess our experience of shop floor organisation in the past.

Engineering was the first heartland

Engineering was always the heartland of strong workplace organisation. The formal system in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was for the union *outside the workplace* to lay down rules and customs.

If employers did not accept the conditions the union laid down, society men shouldn't work there. But this system was always supplemented by informal bargaining within the shop. Given the control the craftsmen had over their job a whole range of custom and practice flourished and district committees began to appoint delegates within the workplace.

From the 1880s the development of new technology — the introduction of capstan and turret lathes, machine grinders, the radial arm drill, all capable of being operated by the semi-skilled — undermined the position of the time-served craft worker.

With increasing international competition from Germany and the USA in the period to 1914 the employers pressed for drastic changes in the organisation of work. They attempted to weaken the unions, the barrier to putting less skilled workers on the machines at lower rates and to introducing piecework.

Disputes over these issues gave stewards a greater bargaining role. Stewards received a further fillip from the 1897 agreement which broke the closed shop, lifted restrictions on overtime and the number of apprentices and brought in payment by results with job prices to be fixed in the shop. That was where the locus of activity shifted. The district committee could no longer uphold the craft rules. In strong workplaces the stewards could.

The introduction of new tools and the growth of management techniques led to numerous disputes over discipline. The piecework system provided a negotiating role over money for stewards. So in the years to 1914 the shop stewards system developed as a means of workplace negotiation and as the guardian of job controls.

These developments were not limited to the ASE. Tom Bell of the Scottish Ironmoulders recalled that in the West of Scotland in the early years of the century, "Every foundry had a shop steward. Within three hours of starting a job your card was collected."

Nor were stewards limited to the skilled unions. As early as 1872 the functions of stewards in the Tyneside and National Labourers Union were extended from recruitment and collection to negotiation. In the upsurge of the new unionism after 1889 the rules of the Gasworkers, the National Amalgamated Union of Labour specifically provided for stewards.

Tom Bell's judgement was true of many unions: "The shop steward was an integral part of the trade union machinery, especially to the engineers prior to the war. Most unions had their delegates on the job or in the shop for the collection of contributions checking up on defaulting members for reporting changes in the condition of work and as a link between the union branch and the work."

In engineering, stewards had a greater negotiating role. Committees were

established. GDH Cole describes stewards — all those years ago — being given an office, access to all departments and full facilities for negotiation with the rate fixers.

Not only was workers' organisation at the point of production a tremendous gain. It was soon asserting its independence from the bureaucratised full-time officials.

The years before 1914 saw a tremendous struggle in the ASE between a leadership attempting to impose central negotiating and the districts attempting to maintain local autonomy. This led in 1912 to a Delegate Conference which insisted on the resignation of the Executive. When they refused to go, the delegates tunneled their way into the union headquarters and physically turned them out.

The militancy of the 'Great Unrest' saw the establishment of rank and file vigilance committees in many unions. Many of the emerging shop stewards were

"Despite the socialism of the leadership they failed to put forward a class policy which could unite skilled and unskilled workers and point a way forward by arguing that the upgrading of the unskilled should be under the control of workplace committees and that all workers should receive the skilled rate"

attracted to the socialist organisations, the British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party.

The outbreak of war in 1914 intensified many of these tendencies. A conference of trade union executives agreed with the government that "there shall in no case be a stoppage of work upon munition and other work required for a satisfactory completion of the war". This Treasury agreement was given legal force by the passing of the Munitions Act which also provided for prosecution of workers.

With the union leaders now a part of the machinery of state, the rank and file filled the gap. With more time and full employment they possessed the capability to defend themselves independently of their leaders. New issues in the workshops — crucially the dilution of skilled trades by employment of less skilled workers — gave a further boost to the development of stewards on a basis which spread beyond the workshop.

The Clyde Workers Committee gave the first formal declaration of independence of the rank and file which was to be the first plank of the movement. "We will support the officials just as long as they rightly represent the workers. But we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them. Being composed of delegates from every shop and untrammelled by obsolete rule or law we claim to represent the true feeling of the workers. We can act immediately according to the merits of the case and the desire of the rank and file."

The constitution of the committee outlined its aims as:

(a) To obtain increasing control over workshop conditions;

(b) To regulate the terms upon which the workers shall be employed;

(c) To organise the workers upon a class basis and to maintain the class struggle until the overthrow of the wages system and the establishment of industrial democracy has been obtained."

250-300 delegates met each weekend. There were delegates from engineering, shipbuilding, the miners, railways and shops. But many represented militant minorities rather than fully fledged workplace organisation. The crunch came over the key issue of dilution. Despite the socialism of the leadership they failed to put forward a class policy which could unite skilled and unskilled workers and point a way forward by arguing that the upgrading of the unskilled should be under the control of workplace committees and that all workers should receive the skilled rate. Instead, they argued that they would only accept dilution if all industries and national resources were taken over by the government under a system of joint management with the unions. This was a pie in the sky "socialism now" approach.

The government realised the need to remove the committee and adopted a stick-and-carrot approach. Half a dozen plants were selected and dilution implemented in each. When the government could point out that it was in and working smoothly they moved to crack the tougher nuts.

Kirkwood, convenor of the Parkhead Forge, was forbidden to move to other sections in the workplace. The members struck. But they had been isolated. Kirkwood and eight other CWC leaders were arrested and deported from Clydeside, and opposition to dilution collapsed.

The Clydeside Committee had failed to build bridges to the rest of the industry — and to the unskilled.

The centre of the struggle shifted to Sheffield. Here the principle of dilution had been accepted, but negotiation over its implementation had stimulated workplace organisation. In Sheffield the majority of district committee members were stewards, there was greater co-ordination between craft organisations than on the Clyde and closer links with the unskilled.

In October 1916 Hargreaves — a local fitter, supposedly exempt — was conscripted. A mass meeting launched the Sheffield Workers Committee which gave seven days notice of strike action if Hargreaves was not released. 12,000 workers struck. A few hours later, Hargreaves was released. But the workers refused to return until he was presented to a mass meeting two days later. This success spurred further action.

The number of stewards in the Sheffield district rose from 60 to 300. The committee was expanded to include the unskilled. The idea was that the District Stewards Committee should stimulate workshop committees covering all grades, and a national committee.

A national stewards meeting was to be held at Easter 1917, but in March a strike broke out when a Rochdale firm sacked 500 engineers for refusing to train women transferred from shell production to commercial work. 200,000 workers struck in Lancashire, Sheffield and Coventry.

The government tried to crush the movement as it had on the Clyde by arresting eight of its leaders. In response, one hundred delegates from 34 different districts met for three days and set up a national shop stewards leadership. After negotiations the arrested men were freed pending trial and the strikes petered out.

Now the impact of the Russian Revolution, war-weariness, peace propaganda and severe food shortages all led to a growing working class opposition questioning the continuance of the war itself. This mood found a focus when, at the start of 1918, the government introduced the Military Service Bill to take men from the munitions factories to the trenches. The National Conference of the shop stewards movement, meeting on 5 and 6 January 1918, decided to sound out the feeling in the districts. The conference recommended strike action against the Bill and called on the government to consider peace terms.

Clyde, Barrow, Coventry and London supported the call, but crucial districts such as Sheffield and Manchester, who had tested workshop opinion, said: "They were opposed to strike action against the war." The movement drew back from a confrontation with the state into a sectional demand for exemption for the skilled.

Despite its involvement in the 40-hour strike on Clyde in 1919, the stewards movement never recovered the initiative and disintegrated with the collapse of war production and full employment.

The shop stewards movement contained two elements: a militancy by privileged workers to defend their threatened position and, within that, strains of opposition to the trade union tops, the war and the state. In the end, the former tendency won out.

Nonetheless, the movement was important in popularising and illustrating key ideas which were to remain vital as a be-

quest to future generations; the idea of a movement, of powerful organisation at the point of production where the workers are strongest; and, *going beyond this*, an organisation to link workplaces at local and national level and establish an independent bulwark *directly answerable to the workers against the official union leaders who tended to be incorporated by the employers and the state.*

Where they were weakest was in sometimes believing that a small but key section of workers could take successful action by themselves; in their neglect of work within the wider union; and in their lack of examination of wider political problems. They never solved the key problem of how socialists could establish a bridge, both organisationally and ideologically, between day-to-day militant trade unionism and the problem of removing the exploiting class from power.

The Communist Party and the rank and file

In a limited way, the British shop stewards had developed one essential of a socialist approach, the idea of workers councils. What they lacked was an understanding of the need for a political party which could mesh with and develop further the rank and file movement and prepare the way for the conquest of power.

Many of the leading shop stewards were now to take that struggle further by joining the new Communist Party.

At the workplace level itself, the wartime experience represented a development. As Cole points out: "While the number of stewards was thus rapidly increasing throughout practically the whole range of the munitions industries, their positions and duties were also rapidly transformed. The wartime steward became, to a large extent, a negotiator on workshop grievance, a representative of the workers by whom he was appointed in dealing with the foreman and with management over all manner of workshop problems..."

"More and more the stewards undertook these daily problems of workshop administration, calling in the union official only when they were unable to bring about a direct settlement by formal or informal negotiation...It became more and more necessary for all the stewards to act in regular cooperation and to devise a common organisation within each department and for each establishment as a whole.

"Consequently, shop stewards committees, workshop committees and works committees, all alike based on the shop steward system, began to develop on a considerable scale..."

"Usually the stewards in a particular shop appointed from their number a secretary or convenor who had power to call meetings of all the stewards...In the large establishment, consisting of a number of considerable shops or departments, an inclusive body was often constituted to represent the trade unionists in the works as a whole. Sometimes the convenors from each of the shops were appointed, usually by a meeting of all the stewards in the establishment to form a

works committee." (GDH Cole, *Workshop Organisation*)

In 1920 an agreement with the Engineering Employers Federation gave shop stewards formal recognition and a place in procedure. But this system, with its close parallels in present steward organisation, was short-lived as unemployment soared.

As the Sheffield stewards leader, JT Murphy, said in 1922: "In England we have had a powerful shop stewards movement. But it can and only does exist in given objective conditions. These necessary conditions at the moment in England do not exist. How can you build factory organisations in empty and depleted workshops while you have a great reservoir of unemployed workers?"

"From the beginning of the Minority Movement we can learn that it is possible to organise the hardest militants together even when the economic tide is firmly antagonistic"

Unemployment was 27% in engineering in 1921. After the employers' victorious lock-out in 1922 the AEU, as it now was, had lost a quarter of its 1920 membership.

In industry generally the erosion of shop floor strength led to dependence on national collective bargaining and the official union leaders were back in the saddle.

The shop stewards leaders were ruthlessly victimised. As early as 1920 Arthur Gleason wrote: "The unofficial shop stewards movement is at ebb tide because of the percentage of the unemployed in the metal trades. The man at the gate determines the status of the man at the bench."

It was precisely during this down-turn that Communist Party militants were able to take up and transform the earlier traditions of rank and fileism. They provided, in the Minority Movement, which they

sponsored, the clearest programme yet developed for an organisation within the unions which can act as a bridge from the trade union organisation of today to the working class organisation of tomorrow.

Founded in August 1924, the programme of the movement began with demands for improvements in hours and wages, the spread of trade unionism, the democratisation of the union and the building of factory committees. It then went on to place demands which would stem from struggle over these issues on the future Labour Government. It stated clearly the necessity for the removal of the capitalist system, constantly warning that the question of government was vital (a warning that might be observed by today's neo-syndicalists such as the SWP).

"This is not a question outside trade unionism but the central question for trade unionism. On every side it is realised that trade unionism is not enough and that only a workers' government can solve these problems." (Report of the First Minority Movement Conference)

The story of the Minority Movement is a big subject and deserves to be told in detail elsewhere. At its foundation it grouped together representatives of 200,000 workers. Nor did the Minority Movement concentrate purely on the 'little things', on factory issues alone, but on issues such as the democratisation of the unions and the TUC, and the forging of links with workers in other countries.

But the Minority Movement was soon derailed by the defeat in the General Strike and the degeneration of the Communist Party. For reasons of Russian foreign policy, the CP in the mid-'20s got too close to those who sold out the General Strike then, from 1928 to 1934 it tried to build its own sectarian trade unions, ducking out of the mass movement.

From the beginning of the Minority Movement we can learn that it is possible to organise the hardest militants together even when the economic tide is firmly antagonistic. That it is essential to do this on a firm political basis and that it is essential to give such a grouping a trade union-wide, class-wide and international perspectives.

Rebuilding in the Thirties

The re-emergence of shop steward organisation from the middle 'thirties as the economy picked up has grim lessons for Thatcher today.

Far from producing a lasting change in attitudes, the beating that they had taken produced in trade unionists a vociferous determination to take advantage of the new economic conditions. The story will put the present trials and tribulations of the shop stewards movement into its proper historical perspective.

From the mid-'thirties there was a renewal of shop steward activity. AEU districts showed a large increase in the number of accredited shop stewards from 1934.

But — and here is another vital lesson for us today — the real force for the renewal came from the ability to implant trade union organisation in the 'new' industries such as vehicles and aircraft production, and from the unskilled. These were often organised by the left, as in the strike which organised the Pressed Steel Fisher Oxford for the TGWU in 1934 (the AEU declared the strike unconstitutional). By 1938 there were 40 TGWU stewards in the factory and two and a half thousand members.

The roots of renewed confidence could also be seen in the other industries, in the London Busmen's rank and file movement, and in the Rank and File activity on the railways. In the forefront of the upturn were the engineering apprentices who were involved in two waves of strikes during 1937.

Richard Croucher shows the broadening out of shop stewards activity at the strongly organised factories: "...the main matters reported on were the employment of unskilled labour on toolroom machines, back pay for five workers on being reclassified as toolmakers, payment for a shop steward suspended from work, reinstatement of a girl sacked for fighting, and a wages dispute in the battery shop... Between 1935 and 1937, no doubt partly through publicising their successes in the pages of their lively journal, the stewards were able to develop membership to an exceptionally high level, approaching 100%...the questions they were able to take up in 1937 were wider also in terms of the numbers involved. The matters dealt with included an increase for capstan setters in one department, the provision of inadequate sanitation in another, a number of problems relating to the cable shop, the factory holiday rota, apprentices' wages, a wage increase in the milling shop and two sectional piecework disputes." (*Engineers at War*)

However, factories like this were the exception. Prior to the war, raising grievances remained a dangerous business. But there were major achievements in the '30s, such as the key strike at Hawkers Brockworth factory in 1935 which laid the 'basis' for a national aircraft shop stewards movement. This in turn established the Aircraft Shop Stewards National Council, with its own paper, *New Propellor*. The flames were rekindled. What was done in the '30s provided a platform for a new take-off when war commenced.

Once more the trade union leaders were restored to the corridors of power they had vacated in the '20s. With the trade unions' arch-bureaucrat, Ernest Bevin, at the Ministry for Labour for the Churchill/Attlee Coalition government, the trade union leaders were even more thoroughly integrated into the state in World War II than they had been between 1914 and 1918.

Anti-strike legislation (Order 1305) was introduced. Employers immediately took advantage of the situation to victimise

"The real force for the renewal came from the ability to implant trade union organisation in the 'new' industries...and the unskilled"

shop stewards, and there were numerous strikes over this issue. In 1941 the Essential Works Order gave some protection to jobs. Offensive strikes began.

The great majority of workers supported the war, but there was discontent with the way it was being run. Croucher quotes one observer: "Clydeside workers are also having a war of their own...they cannot forget the numerous battles of the last thirty years and cannot overcome the bitter memory of industrial insecurity in the past ten years, and their distrust of the motives of managers and employers."

The average number of strike days in 1939-45 was well above the level of the depression years of the '30s, although most strikes were short, sharp and successful.

The long boom

The war had ensured that shop stewards representing their members would be once more an essential feature of industrial relations.

But the influence of the CP made it probable that it would be on the basis of sectional organisation limited to industrial struggles and with powerful tendencies towards collaboration with the employers and government in the 'national interest'.

The long boom was now to turn that probability into reality. In the 20 years after the war, the number and organisation of shop stewards increased continuously. In 1947 the AEU recorded 19,000 stewards. By 1962 it was about 32,000. In 1961 the total number of stewards in the UK was estimated at 90,000. Research for the Donovan Commission seven years later put the figure at 175,000.

That research also recorded a spread of

The Aircraft Shop Stewards National Council now attempted to embrace all engineering workers, and renamed itself the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards National Council. Its April 1940 conference was attended by 238 stewards from 140 factories, and the sales of its newspaper expanded. The Communist Party, which initially opposed the war, was an important influence on this movement.

After the German invasion of Russia in June 1941 the Communist Party switched to supporting the war. It opposed strikes and backed productivity drives. This, together with the general anti-fascist sentiment which the ruling class exploited, ensured that no movement similar to that of the first war emerged.

In some situations the Joint Production Committees set up to draw the stewards into collaboration with management served to legitimise and strengthen the stewards' organisation, however. The stewards were involved more than ever before in the actual organisation and control of work. A major breakthrough compared with the first war was that most stewards' committees were joint committees on which the skilled sat with the unskilled.

Committees had their own libraries and published their own annual reports, although facilities on the whole remained poor. Shop meetings and report-backs were regular, and central to maintaining roots in the membership. Most stewards, given the personal and social as well as industrial nature of their members' problems during wartime, developed a close rapport with them.

Factory bulletins and newspapers had a tremendous flowering in this period. Combine committees provided organisation outside the plant in firms such as AV Roe, Daimler, Dunlop and Vickers Armstrong.

As the war ended, employers attempted to take back many of these gains. In many factories there were redundancies. Another parallel with today: some stewards committees attempted to respond to redundancies with plans for alternative production. The movement of 1918 had not been recaptured, still less the aspirations of the Minority Movement.

the shop steward from engineering into the distributive and service occupations. 45% of the stewards were still in the metal industries, but 36% were outside manufacturing, including 12% in transport and communications.

The shop steward in the early '60s was a representative identifying closely with his or her work group, and bargaining directly on their behalf. The steward bargained over a whole range of problems affecting the control of work — its organisation, the degree of effort, the level of overtime. S/he was particularly powerful where bargaining was over money, as, for example, with piecework systems.

In those circumstances, s/he was able to develop a whole range of custom-and-practice controls, which acted for the benefit of the work group and could be exploited on its behalf in the high-demand market conditions of the long boom.

Full employment swung the bargaining power to the shop floor. In short, sharp,



During the mass strike wave to free the Pentonville Five, 1972

unofficial strikes small groups could jack up their earnings. In what was called 'wage drift', increases at the local level outstripped the national agreements which continued in the post-war period.

Shop stewards gained some autonomy both from the union and from higher management. As national agreements were increasingly irrelevant, so was the outside structure of the union. Joint committees of stewards with strong support from the membership were able to establish their own funds, produce their own publicity, and link up across plants.

"Our evidence is that more than two-thirds of shop stewards have at their place of work a committee in which they meet with management to discuss and settle problems, and that two-thirds of these committees are multi-union. Where that is so, the committees are not easily made responsible to a trade union authority outside the factory." (Donovan report).

"In effect the shop steward organisation at Ford was thus involved in an attempt to establish standards for the rest of labour informally on a 'custom and practice' basis and in the face of disapproval of top management — even if it met with frequent concessions from lower level supervision." (Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*)

"In short, it appears to me in the light of the undisputed facts disclosed in this inquiry that there is a private union within a union enjoying immediate and continuous touch with the men in the shop, answerable to no superiors and in no way officially or constitutionally linked with the union hierarchy." (Report of court of inquiry into dispute at Briggs Motor Bodies Ltd, 1957)

Union officialdom, employers, and the state were alike hostile to strong *independent* workplace organisation. Lord Caron, president of the AEU, said of shop stewards in 1960: "These men are werewolves who are rushing madly towards industrial ruin and howling delightedly at the foam on their muzzles which they accept as their only guiding light."

A 1960 TUC report on shop stewards showed the same attitude less graphically. "Unions should be more vigilant, and if after a warning a steward repeats actions contrary to rules and agreements, his credentials (which are his opportunities to do good, or in a few cases to do harm) should be withdrawn."

In the same year, a TUC General Coun-

cil member denounced combine committees as "a challenge to established union arrangements", attempting "to usurp the policy-making functions of unions".

Sometimes — as at Ford in 1962 — management were able to push through a hard line and weaken shop floor organisation, demonstrating the inadequacies of sectionalism. More often they successfully accommodated the stewards' challenge.

By the mid-'60s, however, with the UK's economic situation getting worse, "disorder" in industrial relations was increasingly seen as a key obstacle to the preferred solution — wage-cutting through incomes policy. Attention focused on the steward, notably in the Donovan report. Donovan pointed out that "for the most part, the steward is viewed by others and views himself as an accepted, reasonable, and even moderating influence, more of a lubricant than an irritant."

Their strategy was to strengthen this side of the steward's role. Employers and unions should work together, the report argued, "to recognise, define and control the part played by shop stewards in our collective bargaining system."

Shop floor organisation was inevitable — and it could be helpful. The point was to control and influence it. The steward could be civilised and drawn away from his or her members by the creation of written agreements, to codify and pin down 'custom and practice', which the stewards would then have to enforce. The replacement of piecework by measured time systems, work study, and job evaluation, could undermine the power of the section steward and formalise and rationalise the link between work and payment.

Written procedures would legitimise management's decisions because they had been taken after discussion and negotiation. They would draw the steward into more 'rational' argument, and also pull bargaining up from the machine row to the committee room.

Formalised bargaining at plant or company level would lead to a centralisation of power at committee level and a loss of power at section level. The development of full-time stewards; the management-run closed shop with deduction of dues at source; the extension of facilities for stewards; time off for training in industrial relations — these would encourage more 'rational' behaviour, and distance the stewards from their membership.

The stewards in the Seventies

By the end of the '60s trade union leaders, too, had replaced their earlier hostility to workplace organisation by an attempt to incorporate it.

Jack Jones, on becoming TGWU general secretary, declared support for "a system where not a few trade union officials control the situation but a dedicated, well-trained and intelligent body of trade union members is represented by hundreds of thousands of lay representatives."

The election of Hugh Scanlon as president of the AUEW further symbolised a takeover by a generation who believed in the shop steward system, from those nurtured in pre-war defeats.

Even the GMWU leadership came to terms with decentralisation — shocked by its loss of members to the TGWU in Ford, and by the revolt of its members against the union in the 1970 Pilkington strike, when strikers tried to set up a breakaway union. National and regional industrial conferences to involve workplace representatives were introduced in 1969, and a majority of lay representation on the Executive provided for by 1975.

The union leaders were, of course, not trying to strengthen the stewards. They were trying to neuter and integrate them. A more controlled steward system means a less controlled, more powerful union leadership.

The shake-up in industrial relations, the 15 years of incomes policy under both Labour and Tory governments from 1964 to 1979, and the large-scale increases in union membership — all led to a further increase in the number of stewards, to their progress into new areas, and to changes in their organisation.

In 1973 the Commission on Industrial Relations claimed that "there were well in excess of 250,000 and perhaps approaching 300,000 shop stewards in 1971." One study in Sheffield found that the introduction of productivity bargaining in 1968-9 doubled the number of stewards on the Engineering District list.

But the main developments were in the public sector. In the late '60s authorities began introducing incentive schemes for manual workers in local government and hospitals. Agreements recognised stewards for the first time in local government in 1969 and in the Health Service in 1971. NUPE, the largest public sector union, recognised stewards for the first time in 1970, and by 1981 claimed 23,000. Steward systems were introduced on the docks, on ships, and in schools. Workplace representatives in textiles and shops began to call themselves stewards in 1977. NALGO introduced a shop steward system.

An increasing hierarchy and professionalism of stewards went along with this growth. Brown, Ebsworth and Terry estimated that in 1976 there were around 5,000 full-time stewards covering manual workers in manufacturing. Their study showed that in manufacturing, 62% of all workplaces employing more than 500

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By Jim Denham, victimised
T&G steward, BL
Longbridge

These days, talk of 'workers' control' in industry tends to sound like empty, ultra-left sloganising. Even the idea of a 'shop stewards' movement' wielding any real power seems like wishful thinking.

But throughout the 1970s, in a whole range of industries, shop stewards did exercise real power (up to and including a veto on management decisions — known as 'mutuality') that at times verged upon a limited, localised form of workers' control.

The best known and most powerful shop stewards' organisation in the 1970s was in British Leyland — the massive, nationalised car and truck manufacturer now carved up, privatised and re-named Austin Rover Group.

The story of the British Leyland shop stewards' movement contains valuable lessons for a generation of trade union activists who have known only the defeats and humiliations of the Thatcher years. In the event of Labour winning the next general election, and a return to 'consensus' politics and industrial 'partnership' between unions and management the lessons of the '70s and the whole 'BL experience' will need to be recalled with painful clarity.

The story of the rise and fall of the British Leyland shop stewards' movement very much parallels the story of the Communist Party's post-war industrial work.

The Communist Party was immensely powerful in British Leyland, and especially in the Longbridge plant which at its height in the early '70s was one of the biggest in Europe, employing well over 20,000 manual workers. The plant had been gradually unionised after World War II and CP members played a central role in this dangerous task, breaking the paternalistic grip of Herbert Austin.

The first convenor, Dick Ethridge, was a CP member and in those days it seemed a natural step for active, militant trade unionists in the plant to join the Party. By the 1960s, the Party had a factory branch numbering around 50, and sales of the *Daily Worker* (later *Morning Star*) inside the plant (not on the gates) were in the hundreds. Management once tried to prevent sales by seizing a bundle of *Workers*, and were forced to back down by immediate strike action.

The CP's influence went far beyond its formal membership and permeated the entire Joint Shop Stewards' Committee (JSSC), numbering around 500 stewards from the AEU, TGWU, Vehicle Builders, Electricians and the multitude of smaller white and blue collar manufacturing unions like the Sheet Metal Workers.

Apart from a few bastions of right-wing (or 'apolitical') trade unionism, the shop stewards' movement at Longbridge was dominated by the ideas of the CP, even though the Party never had a majority of card-carrying members on the JSSC.

When, in the late 1960s and early '70s, the old British Motor Corporation merged with Standard-Triumph and Leyland to form the giant British Leyland Motor Corporation, the influence of the Longbridge-based CP stewards spread throughout the whole combine. The only

Longbridge: end of the CP line



Socialist Organiser's front page when Jim Denham and five others were sacked in 1980

organised opposition was the much smaller number of Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist stewards grouped around the Socialist Labour League in the Cowley Morris plant.

When the big battles against PM Edward Heath and the Industrial Relations Act erupted in the early '70s, the Austin JSSC banner would be there on all the demos, and an impressive Longbridge turn-out could be guaranteed for the CP-inspired Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU).

By now, Ethridge had retired and handed the convenor's job to his protege, Derek Robinson. Ethridge is still remembered with affection by 'old hands' and even people with no political sympathy for the CP concede that he was a 'bloody good convenor', etc. Feelings about Robinson tend to be more mixed. The reason for this is that in Ethridge's day the CP's role was essentially to be the best and most conscientious union organisers at shop floor level — a task they combined with low-key Stalinist propaganda. When Robinson took over in the early '70s he was immediately faced with a series of crises that demanded political answers and exposed the underlying weaknesses of the CP's approach.

First, there was the whole question of the abolition of piece-work and the introduction of measured day work (MDW). The shop stewards' movement throughout the motor industry had been built around the piece-work system: stewards determined manning levels, arranged work patterns, negotiated the 'price for the job' and, ultimately, their effectiveness could be judged by the weekly wage packet.

Piece-work had many drawbacks from

a socialist point of view, but it did at least ensure that stewards were directly accountable to their members and it gave the union a central role in determining the link between work and payment.

Robinson and the CP supported the introduction of MDW, dismissing the widespread shop-floor opposition as 'short-sighted', 'money-militancy' and (the ultimate put-down in those days) the work of 'a bunch of Trots'. What Robinson and co. didn't understand was the vital part piece-work played in keeping the stewards' movement in touch with the membership.

This bureaucratic arrogance and high-handed dismissal of shop-floor opinion was to characterise the CP's approach throughout the '70s, and finally led to Robinson's downfall.

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that for a whole period of time (approximately between 1971 and 1978) it seemed that Robinson and the CP had been right — the workforce enjoyed the security that came with MDW whilst retaining the mutuality and shop-floor organisation that had been built up under piece-work. It seemed like the best of both worlds.

Meanwhile, a much bigger crisis was looming: the company was going onto the rocks as a result of years of under-investment and over-generous payments to shareholders.

The Wilson government decided to nationalise the firm, but the price for the workforce was to be acceptance of the Ryder Report. In essence, Ryder recommended bailing out the company but insisted upon far-reaching 'rationalisation' of work practices, with the aim of achieving speed-up of production and a 'slimming down' of the workforce, though this last point was not spelt out in any detail.

Ryder recognised that these proposals stood little chance of success without the cooperation of the shop stewards' movement — and thus was born 'participation'. This was a comprehensive scheme to involve stewards, convenors and officials in joint committees with management at almost every level of the company from the shop-floor to national level — except that Ryder made it clear that management would retain the final say and full decision-making power.

The shop-floor overwhelmingly saw 'participation' for what it was: a scheme designed to take stewards off the shop-floor and draw them into an unequal 'partnership' with management.

Robinson and the CP went for 'participation' in a big way. As with Measured Day Work, shop-floor opposition was dismissed as an unprincipled alliance of 'money-militants', right-wingers and the hated 'Trots'. Robinson (in an infamous pamphlet of 1975, written jointly with CP 'theoretician' Jon Bloomfield) went so far as to describe participation as "a step towards workers' control".

Now that the company had been nationalised, so the Robinson/CP line went, the workforce had a duty to pull their

weight and make a go of it. Robinson and the Longbridge Works Committee clamped down on unofficial strikes ('downers') and insisted that the disputes procedure was kept to at all times: 'Continuous production' became the gospel propounded by the CP and by Leyland management alike.

When, in 1977, toolmakers throughout Leyland struck for a wage claim that in practice challenged phase 2 of the Labour government's Social Contract, Robinson and the CP joined forces with the AUEW Executive and the bosses in denouncing the toolmakers and breaking their strike.

The behaviour of Robinson and the CP was not the result of individual treachery or corruption (though that was often how it was regarded on the shop-floor): it stemmed from a fundamentally bureaucratic political philosophy that equated nationalisation with socialism and regarded the spontaneous actions of the shop-floor with suspicion and hostility.

The result of all this for the shop stewards' movement throughout British Leyland (and in Longbridge especially) was nothing short of disastrous. Stewards were seen as little more than the bosses' policemen and an enormous gulf of distrust and cynicism opened up between the plant-based union organisation and the membership.

The rest of the story is tragic history: at the end of 1977 Labour appointed a nasty little union-basher called Michael Edwardes as chairman of British Leyland. Edwardes immediately announced a 'plan' that would involve 40,000 redundancies and the closure of 13 plants. Shop meetings throughout Longbridge voted to oppose the 'Edwardes plan' and yet at the official presentation of the plan, the Longbridge senior stewards (along with most other BL union representatives) gave Edwardes a **standing ovation!**

Edwardes must have realised then (if he didn't already know) that the majority of senior stewards in British Leyland were severely out of touch with their members. He dispensed with the soft-soap Ryder approach, drove a coach and horses through participation and, finally, thanked Derek Robinson for his past cooperation by sacking him on a trumped-up charge in 1979.

The Robinson sacking (in which the Duffy/Boyd leadership of the AEU played a disgraceful role) was a traumatic blow to union organisation in Longbridge and throughout British Leyland, from which it has only begun to recover in recent years.

But the virtual collapse of the British Leyland shop stewards' movement was not inevitable: it happened because the tremendous strength built up under piecework was frittered away in participation committees; because stewards lost their roots in the shop-floor and became petty bureaucrats; most of all, it happened because the dominant politics of the movement (ie. the CP) had no answer to the financial crisis of the company beyond giving full support to everything that flowed from the Ryder Report. In the mid-'70s they had the strength and (for a while) the shop-floor support to fight for real workers' control: what they lacked was a coherent political perspective.

That's why the good militants of the '50s and '60s turned into the bosses' policemen of the '70s. It's a tragic story, but one we can learn from. The future depends on us learning from it.

The stewards in the seventies

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workers had full-time convenors. In engineering the figure was 69%, and in the public sector 21%.

Clegg estimates that there were 10,000 full-time stewards in 1973.

Increasingly, decisions were taken not by the individual stewards and their members on a section, or by a group of stewards in a department, but by senior, often full-time stewards and the stewards' committee at the level of the workplace — or even of the company. Full-time stewards often held no sectional responsibilities, and no longer shared by the same degree the insecurities and work experience of their members.

Involvement in higher union bodies and participation schemes meant that life became one long round of meetings and courses, with perks attached. This was likely to estrange them from, and weaken, workplace organisation.

Some observers saw the success of Labour's Social Contract (1974-5), in its ability to secure growing control of the official unions over workplace organisation. While union leaders were involved in the Social Contract at the top, workplace leaders were incorporated at the bottom.

It was not as simple as that. The strategies of the state and the employers did have a tremendous degree of success. By 1980 much of the structure of workplace trade unionism was management-moulded, management-sponsored. The bosses had developed the understanding that the workplace organisation, just like the wider union, could be used against rather than for the worker — could be used by capital for its own purposes.

Donovan's insight into the ambivalence of the steward's role, and the strategy of the 1974 Labour government derived from it, yielded tremendous dividends to capital. This is central. But it has to be seen against the political background.

Strong roots in the membership had allowed the stewards to organise the early '70s wave of struggles. But, paradoxically, the favourable economic situation was both an aid and a hindrance. On the one hand it gave the workplace leaders the muscle to go forward. On the other hand, the ability to do so and to go round the union leaders (or force them reluctantly to trail behind) reinforced the limitations of the workplace leaders' political tradition, to ensure that no adequate alternative political leadership was thrown up. They never felt the need for it, and unlike the '20s there was no strong revolutionary party able to win the key layer of stewards to consistent revolutionary politics.

As issues arose, the activists turned not to trying to control the Labour Party, or to supporting a new party, but to industrial means, to direct action, alone. Despite the efforts of revolutionary groups, no viable, even embryonic, rank and file organisation, not even a small-scale pallid reflection of the Minority Movement, was established.

It was the ability of the state and the employers to use these crucial political weaknesses against the rank and file leaders which was in the end to undermine their basic strength.

By the late '70s, it had become clear that militancy within normal bounds, plus Labour voting according to tradition, could produce no more than Wilson at-

tacking the unions instead of Heath. As it became clear that the economic situation in the late '70s really was worse than that of the early '70s, then all the movement's limitations came to the surface.

The delusion that "industrial militancy is enough" was dispelled. Vast layers of the militant labour movement had always been vulnerable to appeals to support "the national interest" etc., and this now took its toll.

The 1972 upsurge halted when the dockers were released. The 1974 upsurge was halted by Wilson.

What was missing was a leadership which would have been able to take the movement forward, to bring down Heath in the first case, to hammer Wilson and establish a workers' government in the second.

Shop floor leaders had no answers to the arguments of Murray and Wilson that wages cause inflation, that this was the reason why the economy was in trouble, that an incomes policy could help, and so on. Leastwise, their arguments were not strong enough to carry their members with them and stop the official leadership going with Wilson.

The election of the Thatcher government opened up the use of mass unemployment to undermine shop floor strength. Building on the work of Wilson and Callaghan, the bosses have victimised steward after steward, pushed back or intimidated one workplace organisation after another.

We have to provide the answers. We have to provide them urgently.

We must base ourselves on, and learn the lessons from, the hopeful signs amid

"The ability...to go round the union leaders reinforced the limitations of the workplace leaders' political tradition, to ensure that no adequate alternative political leadership was thrown up"

the general retreat.

We have shop stewards in more workplaces than ever before. We have got to get them moving again — this time on a clear-cut basis of independence and socialist policies.

We have to build a movement that can do everything that the movement to free the Pentonville Five did — and more. We have to answer the central questions of viability, unemployment and union democracy.

We are in no position to declare a national rank and file movement now. But we have to do everything possible to develop existing groupings, which are the seeds of such a movement.

We have to do this with our feet firmly planted in the workplaces, and our heads working for a rethink and transformation in the wider labour movement. We have to make sure that this time, a militant upturn means more than just more militancy.

Dublin's labour war 1913

"They can only kill me, and there are thousands to come after". It is not often that a trade union leader says a thing like that, and less often still that he would mean it. But Jim Larkin, General Secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, said it during the Dublin general lock-out of 1913-14 — and he meant it too.

"They" had already killed two workers and were conducting a reign of terror against the workers of Dublin. "They" were the brutal Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police, bully-boys of the British government beating up workers on behalf of the Dublin capitalists. These bloodsuckers had declared war on the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, and had vowed to destroy it, refusing employment to any of its members.

The experience of Dublin's workers in 1913 offers some vital lessons for British workers today. Of course, no two situations are ever exactly the same. But what the miners and printers of the 1980s have in common with the Dublin workers of 70 years ago is that they too were faced with an attempt to use overwhelming police violence to beat them down and crush their resistance.

For 8 months Dublin was convulsed by a bitter 'labour war' in the course of which the workers successfully resisted the power of the state. In order to resist they had to develop a special force for self-defence — the Irish Citizen Army.

The story that Paddy Dollard briefly re-tells here is one of the great heroic episodes in international working class history.

The Irish economy at the turn of the century was a backward appendage of Britain's. The working class was unorganised and therefore savagely exploited.

The minimum working day was 12 days, wages from £1 to as low as 10 shillings. 20,000 families lived in one-room tenements. Of 5,000 tenement blocks, 1500 were officially condemned as unfit for human occupation. The death rate was higher than in disease-ridden Calcutta.

Into this situation Jim Larkin came. Sent by the Liverpool-based National Union of Dock Labourers to organise Belfast for that union, he eventually moved south, founding an Irish-based independent union. He set out to organise Dublin's workers.

And in a small number of years wonders had, truly, been worked in Dublin. In those days attempts at moving in organised groups of blacklegs, usually imported from another area, were very common. They relied on working class disunity and the sheer physical force of the police and, often, the army.

The Dublin 'unskilled', led by Larkin,

Saltley Gates, Birmingham, 1972

By Pete Radcliff

The picket of Saltley Gate in February of 1972 was an event of historical importance for the British trade union movement.

Like virtually all innovations of working class struggle, the flying mass pickets of the miners' strike, of which Saltley was the most dramatic, came from rank and file initiative.

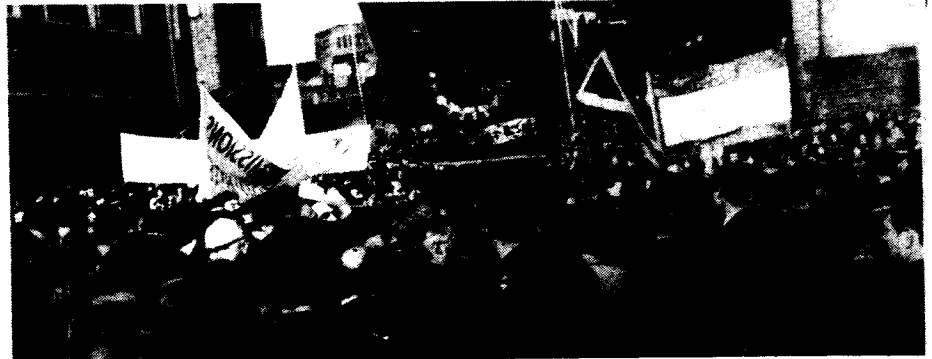
The major core of the pickets from the Yorkshire Area were under the leadership of Arthur Scargill, at that time a minor local leader.

The first few days brought small numbers of miners from other areas. The determination of the pickets, numbering a few hundred at that time, to stop the lorries taking coke out of the depot, soon captivated the imagination of both the miners and other trade unionists.

Generally, they were unsuccessful in physically preventing scab lorries getting across. But the demonstration of mass solidarity by the pickets and the implicit consequences for future picket line breakers, turned many away. The first days brought many frustrations. Messages of support from other areas of the NUM were received, but promises of more pickets never materialised. A trainload of Scots miners was reported to have been cancelled by their officials.

The Yorkshire pickets were billeted in Birmingham through local trade unionists and those unable to find a bed often slept on the floor of the university student unions.

Many meetings were organised at workplaces with shop stewards, where



rank and file miners explained the reasons and the need of their new tactic of the mass picket.

Talking with student revolutionaries of the post-'68 generation, the miners were warm in friendship but bemused at their refusal to unite inside the left of the Labour Party. Condescendingly the student revolutionaries explained the obsolescence of the Labour Party, and in more drunken moments some talked about guerrilla warfare to the further bemusement of the miners.

But after the first week of the mass picket, it was clear that the police were growing in confidence in dealing with the picket lines. In between the confrontations the police turned round and chatted to the pickets and offered them Polos.

The police on the lines were replaced at very frequent intervals so that the convivial atmosphere would not affect their determination. And it didn't stop the police laying into the pickets when the time came, arresting them by the dozen, and snatching their leaders.

If the miners were to be successful it was clear by the weekend that they needed drastic reinforcements. And it was to come in the following week, in an amazing wave

of solidarity.

Responding to the Birmingham East District Committee of the AEUW call for a strike, 40,000 downed tools on the Thursday. On that morning, the workers of Birmingham turned up in their thousands on the picket line. It was nothing less than a festival of solidarity.

The Chief Constable of Birmingham, seeing the situation was impossible, agreed to close the gates. A roar passed down the streets outside as they clanged shut.

And still the trade unionists poured in. Hundreds of workers from Fort Dunlop marched on the depot chanting 'Close the gates! Close the gates!' On hearing that the gates were closed they changed their chant to 'Open the gates! Open the gates!', wanting the moment of victory to be relived in their presence.

Arthur Scargill, addressing the assembled thousands from the roof of a dilapidated toilet outside the gates, claimed the Saltley Gate closure to be a major victory for the working class in this country. And despite TUC codes of conduct and declarations of abhorrence and intimidation of mass pickets by trade union and Labour leaders, flying pickets were firmly established at Saltley in the arsenal of the British working class movement.



1913 strike leader Jim Larkin

soon found an answer to this sort of thing — rigorous solidarity, blacking, and sympathetic action. The motto of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union was: "A blow against one is a blow against all". And they weren't empty or unheeded words.

When craftsmen, non-T&G, went on strike, the ITGWU stepped in, recruited their non-unionised labourers and put them on immediate strike pay (to which they weren't 'entitled') to prevent scabbing. Dublin dockers struck for the right of seamen to organise.

Slowly Dublin workers gained a view of themselves as a *class*, not a ramshackle collection of people doing different jobs. The wage rates were pushed up — 40% increase in a couple of years.

This was, frankly and openly, revolutionary trade unionism. When in 1911 the revolutionary socialist and Republican James Connolly began to work as an organiser for the ITGWU, he explained that he did so "having in mind that its mission is not to make slavery tolerable but to overthrow it, and replace it by a free and independent workers' republic".

The hatred for Larkin and 'Larkinism' felt by the Irish bosses was on the same scale as the achievements of the ITGWU — immense. By comparison, the gutter

Fleet Street press today is polite and respectful to the nearest approach the British labour movement has to a Larkin, Arthur Scargill.

The bosses used the power of the state against the union when they could and as much as they dared. In 1911 there was an attempt at a general lock-out in Wexford during which the police obligingly battered one man to death.

The showdown came in 1913. The dispatch workers at the *Irish Independent* newspaper were given an ultimatum by Murphy, its proprietor: "Leave the union if you want your jobs". Work for Murphy was immediately boycotted by the union. Murphy also owned the Dublin tramways: so on August 26, 700 T&G

tramway workers stepped onto the street, leaving the trams wherever they happened to be at that moment.

The employers had organised a federation in 1911, and had been preparing for the showdown. They decided that this was it. They would break Larkin and root out 'Larkinism'. On 3 September 1913, 400 bosses agreed to a lock-out of their workers, and each one deposited a sum of money as a surety that he would never make a separate peace until the union was smashed. Soon 25,000 workers were lock-

ed out.

The state moved to back up the bosses. The police in Ireland was not like the British police force then or — so far — now. Ireland was in fact a British colony, ruled often by brute force. The police force was also an army of occupation.

Its barracks, dotted round the country, were small occupation forts. It was an *armed* police force trained for systematic brutality and hardened to the use of force against its people. Constables were never allowed to police their native districts, lest any fellow feeling or sympathy should hold them back.

They were savage mercenaries unleashed against the strikers. James Connolly wrote: "The locked-out workers who attempted to speak to a scab in order to persuade him or her not to betray the class they belonged to, was mercilessly set upon by uniformed bullies, and hauled off to prison, until the prison was full to overflowing with helpless members of our class.

"Women and young girls by the score; good, virtuous, beautiful Irish girls and women were clubbed and insulted and thrown into prison by policeman and magistrates, not one of whom were fit enough to clean the shoes of the least of these, our sisters."

At the end of August, the police attacked a workers' meeting. "Our right of public meeting was ruthlessly suppressed in the streets of our city, the whole press of the country was shamelessly engaged in poisoning the minds of the people against us, every scoundrel who chose was armed to shoot and murder the workers who stood by their Union.

"Two men, James Nolan and John Byrne, were clubbed to death in the street" — and 400 were injured on this 'Bloody Sunday'.

To the economic blackmail of the bosses, trying to starve the workers of Dublin into submission, was now, clearly, to be added unrestrained use of police violence. But Dublin's workers had indeed, as Connolly put it, learned self-reliance in the great school of Larkin. They were not going to "crawl back into

Connolly on the ITGWU

James Connolly, who became an organiser for the ITGWU in 1911, explained the work of the union like this: "...it found a class in whom seven centuries of social outlawry had added fresh degradations upon the burden it bore as the members of a nation suffering from the cumulative effects of seven centuries of national bondage and out of this class, the degraded slaves of slaves more degraded still — for what degradation is more abysmal than that of those who prostitute their manhood on the altar of profit-mongering? — out of this class of slaves, the labourers of Dublin, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union has created an army of intelligent self-reliant men, abhorring the old arts of the toady, the lickspittle and the crawler, and trusting alone to the disciplined use of the power of labour or to withdraw their labour to assert and maintain their right as men."

our slums, abase our hearts, bow our knees, and crawl once more to lick the hand that would smite us”.

They organised a trade union militia to defend themselves. When the police had let it be known that they would smash the musical instruments of the band of the Aungier St ITGWU branch (which had dared to play a popular tune, 'The Peeler and the Goat', which mocked the Royal Irish Constabulary), the branch decided it

wasn't going to let them break their instruments.

Next time they paraded, the band was flanked by lines of pickets swinging hurleys — clubs somewhat like hockey sticks used in the Irish national sport. After Bloody Sunday the idea caught on and spread.

Here was a test for the union leadership. Were they going to continue to fight back, escalating the struggle and the means of struggle where necessary?

Larkin had meant it when he said that they could do no more than kill him — and if they did, others would replace him.

So in September 1913, the union formally organised its own militia, calling it 'The Irish Citizen Army'. It soon taught the police to respect the union's meetings and demonstrations. No longer faced with an unorganised crowd, the police were less anxious to break heads — because they weren't anxious to get their own heads broken.

The strike dragged on for many months of miserable starvation. These were also months of glorious heroism of the working class.

The great-hearted Dublin workers were as unwilling to be beaten down and cowed by the brute force of the bosses' police thugs as by the economic brute force of the Dublin bosses who had locked them out.

That great spirit allowed them to win incidental victories for the union. James Connolly, ITGWU Belfast organiser, was recalled to Dublin when Larkin was arrested. Arrested, and given three months in jail, he refused to recognise the court. As a British court, he said, it had no jurisdiction in Ireland. He went on hunger strike. After eight days he was released.

In October Larkin was jailed for seven months. A mass campaign, which was especially powerful in Britain, forced the government to release him after 17 days. Mass picketing on the quays stopped the importation of scabs.

But there was stalemate in Dublin. Only the industrial power of the British working class could tip the balance. Militants began to agitate in Britain for a general strike to support Dublin. But British union leaders refused to take action to defend the ITGWU. Many of them hated Larkin the way their present-day equivalents hate Arthur Scargill. They feared him too — as the TUC time-servers of today fear Scargill.

The TUC refused to take strike action in support of Dublin. Shiploads of food from British workers did sail up the Liffey to help the starving workers of Dublin. That helped them to survive. To win they needed industrial action.

Isolated now in their war of attrition with the Irish capitalists, the Dublin workers stuck it out grimly. Eventually the strike ended in a sort of 'draw' early in 1914. The union was not smashed. It survived. Without the Citizen Army it might have been crushed.

But its ability henceforth to use its full weight in solidarity action was markedly weakened.

And the Citizen Army? In those years the Orange Unionists in the North of Ireland and the Home Rule capitalists in the South (the leader of the Dublin bosses, Murphy, was a prominent nationalist) had their own armed and uniformed militias, the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers.

The Citizen Army, too, armed itself, and uniformed itself and was maintained after the strike ended. In 1916, under Connolly's leadership (Larkin was in the US), it formed about on quarter of the handful of men and women who rose in 'Rebellion' against British rule in Ireland. Connolly died before a British Army firing squad.

It did not thus cease to be a trade union militia. It acted from the conviction that it was in the interests of the working class of Ireland to overthrow British rule in Ireland. But that is another story.

A police outrage



By Carol Hall, SOGAT
London Clerical branch

What we saw at Wapping on Saturday 24 January 1987 was nothing short of state brutality of the highest order. I believe without a shadow of a doubt this vicious, unprovoked attack was premeditated.

It clearly illustrates the determination of the Thatcher government to intimidate the News International strikers and their supporters by the crudest methods available. Savage, staff-wielding thugs in blue, clubbing men, women and children, anything that gets in the way, creating panic and fear.

They are using the media to whip up mass hysteria in order to put pressure on the likes of Willis, Dean and Dubbins, to condemn those who tried to fight and getting Kinnock to disassociate even further from the strike. The statements of the union bureaucrats bear little resemblance to what really did occur.

Of course, the massive display of solidarity to the printworkers on their anniversary day must have shocked the TUC and Labour leadership. More than 25,000 trade unionists, socialists and supporters joined the demonstration at the Temple. The march to Wapping was good-humoured, with plenty of working class spirit and cheer. The police at Wapping decided that the carnival atmosphere was to end, and any attempt to have a peaceful mass picket.

Horses and police lined up across the road in the Highway just beyond the entrance to Virginia Street, which leads to the plant. With Wellclose Square full in no time, people jostled to get a close view of the plant. With that the first snatch squads appeared, revealing line upon line of riot police in Virginia Street. Behind them the cavalry, waiting to be brought into action.

The scene was horrendous. Sticks and stones are little use against these men and women, specially trained, with crash helmets, padding, shields and clubs, with a mandate to do what they will against unarmed, ordinary working class people, out only to fight for jobs, their heritage and trade union organisation.

Let me describe two scenes for Deputy Chief Inspector Wyn-Jones. The first a patrol leader of some 20 riot police thugs. After encouraging his men to lay into the crowd at random, clearing the path for

horses to gallop along the Highway and inflict more injuries, he put his helmet down in the middle of the road, beckoning people to him as if a prize fighter. Then down went his baton onto the ground, now calling out that we were cowards in the most obscene way possible. However, he was still surrounded by his troops ready to batter anybody foolish enough to venture forward.

The second, a railway worker was sneeringly told "No wonder the railways are in such a state, you wanker".

The words shouted out by the police thugs, provocative in the extreme, show the utter contempt, the open hostility, to the labour and trade union movement. However, Kinnock, Willis, Dean and company would never know, they never got near enough to the front line to hear inflammatory words or feel the pain of a truncheon over the head or body.

They never have to scatter and, hopefully, reach safety away from the marauding cavalry charges of so-called 'officers of law and order', ever ready to smash you to the ground with their thick sticks or to be trodden under foot by a horse. Instead of calling for an independent inquiry, wasting time blaming 'outsiders' for the few bricks that were thrown in defence, Dean and Dubbins would be better employed demanding the rest of the printing industry comes to our defence, closing down the national newspaper industry, the wholesale section, etc. This is the real way to answer the lies and distortion of the media; this is the proper response to the Tory government.

For the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, is using this police riot as a camouflage to give the state even greater powers to curb the rights of organisations to protest. The trade union leadership know this and stand back and do nothing. They can only wring their hands now their beloved alternative, 'to write to the Times', has been taken away from them.

This course of appeasement will lead to disaster.

Therefore, I ask that trade unionists, socialists, and supporters are not frightened by this disgusting and cowardly act by the police thugs, but come down to Wapping in their thousands in answer to Murdoch, Thatcher and Hammond and the weak Labour leadership, for we have far, far more courage and tenacity than to give in to state thuggery and intimidation.

From Socialist Organiser, January 1987.



The Minority Movement

In a workplace we may find one in a hundred (at present) who will accept completely the need for a socialist revolution and are prepared to devote a large part of their life to working for it. That's an important beginning — but not enough if we want to do more than just make propaganda for socialism. There will be many more people who may not be fully convinced socialists, but will agree to work with us on most immediate issues like militant struggle over wages and conditions, union democracy, combatting racism and sexism. We need to organise these militants.

This is the familiar stuff of everyday local work for every socialist in the trade unions. But it needs to be more than local. Otherwise the national union leadership always has the advantage over the local groups of activists.

So we need a national organisation pulling together the militants across industry. The best example history has yet provided of such an organisation is the Minority Movement of the 1920s, which at its peak led one million workers. It was formed in a period similar to today, after a series of setbacks for the working class. The engineering workers had been heavily defeated in a lock-out in 1921-2. Trade union membership was falling. But the then-revolutionary Communist Party did not give up and give in — they went out to organise the rank and file.

Brian Pearce tells the story of that movement.

Excerpts from 'Some past rank and file movements' and 'Early years of the CPGB'

The regrouping of the militant forces took place under the guidance of the Communist Party, working mainly through what was called the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, headed by Tom Mann.

The RILU fully understood at this time that there could be no question of forming new unions in Britain, nor was there much to be gained by campaigning for affiliation of existing unions to the RILU. The South Wales Miners' Federation, where the 'Reform Committee' elements were strong, declared for affiliation in 1921, but retracted when threatened with expulsion from the Trades Union Congress.

Under the guidance of the RILU, com-

munists began working, industry by industry, to rally the workers on the basis of specific programmes related both to the problems of the given industry and to the actual structure of the trade union machine.

In sharp contrast to the attitude taken up in a later phase (1929-31), the fact that many workers had left the unions, either through fear of victimisation in a period of slump or out of disgust with the betrayals by the bureaucrats, or for other reasons, was not seen as the end of the trade union epoch, justifying militants in turning their backs on the unions. On the contrary, 'Back to the unions!' was one of the slogans of the British Bureau of the RILU, coupled with 'Stop the retreat!' which was a call to end the policy of surrender to the employers' offensive. *All Power*, the Bureau's paper, had a circulation by the end of 1922 of 12,000.

Rank and file organisations, known as 'minority movements' — from a complaint by some bureaucrat regarding 'the minority of troublemakers' — were brought into being anew among the miners, the engineers, the transport workers and other sections, and these were eventually, in 1924, gathered together into the National Minority Movement.

The founding conference

In August 1924 the first annual conference of the National Minority Movement was held, with 200,000 workers represented.

The conference called for the setting up of factory committees, as a stage towards industrial unionism and an instrument of workers' control, and for further work to develop the trades councils as local centres of militant leadership.

Of particular importance, however, was the resolution calling for a strengthening of the powers of the TUC General Council in order to enable this body to lead the entire mass of trade unionists in a common struggle such as a general strike. The

resolution warned:

"It must not be imagined that the increase of the powers of the General Council will have the tendency to make it less reactionary. On the contrary, the tendency will be for it to become even more so. When the employing class realise that the General Council is really the head of the Trade Union movement, much more capitalist 'influence' will be brought to bear on it...The reactionaries desire a General Council which will check and dissipate all advances by the workers. We of the minority movement desire a General Council which will bring into being a bold and audacious General Staff of the Trade Union movement. We can guard against the General Council becoming a machine of the capitalists, and can really evolve from the General Council a Workers' General Staff only by, in the first place and fundamentally, developing a revolutionary class consciousness amongst the Trade Union membership, and in the second place, by so altering the constitution of the General Council as to ensure that those elected thereon have the closest contact with the workers."

The call for increased powers for the General Council had been an element in Communist policy since 1922, and from the beginning the necessity of associating such an increase of power with an increase of control from below had been stressed. The communist fraction at Trades Union Congresses worked steadily in this direction; e.g. it was they who secured that the General Council's annual report should be issued to delegates seven days prior to Congress, instead of, as previously, when they took their seats.

The successes achieved by the National Minority Movement in connection with the strike wave of 1924, which was on a bigger scale than that of 1923, stimulated a reaction on the part of the trade union bureaucracy. This took two forms. The bureaucracy as a whole, hitherto lukewarm, compared with the 'politicians', on the question of excluding communists from the Labour Party, quite suddenly became galvanised into support for MacDonald on this issue — hence the decision of the 1924 Conference of the Labour Party attempting to close the door on individual membership by Communists. Part of the bureaucracy, however, while in no way linking up with the Minority Movement, began to adapt themselves to the increasingly Left mood of the workers by striking Left-wing attitudes, more particularly on international questions such as relations with the USSR. The initial response of the Communists was to welcome this latter development as a reflection of the more militant mood among the workers, while guarding against the attribution of too much practical significance to it. Thus, Campbell, in the *Communist Review* of September 1924: "It would be suicidal policy, however, for the Communist party and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on what we have called the official Left wing". The transformation of the trade union movement was still the main thing; "The formation of workshop committees will provide a necessary means of counteracting the bureaucracy." And Dutt, in the *Labour Monthly* of October 1924: "A Left wing in the working class movement must be based upon the class struggle, or it becomes only a manoeuvre to confuse the workers". The editorial in the *Communist Review* of November 1924 was far from starry-eyed about the

new 'Lefts'.

On the trade union field we find the Left wing in the main representative of the smaller unions, e.g., Purcell, Bromley, Hicks. In previous years such unions played a very small part. But the increased activity of the masses has made it possible for them to gain prominence and ultimately position (in the General Council) by expressing 'Left' sentiments on a number of popular subjects, eg. Soviet Russia...

'All power to the General Council'

On the initiative of the newly emergent Lefts among the top leadership of the trade unions, the Trades Union Congress of 1924 decided to send a delegation to the USSR. The delegation visited Russia in November-December 1924 and issued its report in February 1925. A paean of praise for the Stalinist regime, this report was written by the delegation's expert advisers Harold Grenfell, AR McDonnell and George Young, and the Labour Research Department's *Monthly Circular* for March 1925 remarked of it that 'the Report is in no sense to be taken as work of critical Marxism, or even as something written from the normal trade union outlook. But just for this reason it is likely to have a special appeal to middle-class readers'. Another important aspect of the report can best be illustrated by means of an excerpt from the article 'Stalin: Slanders and Truth', by C. Allen, in the *Communist Review* of January 1950:

The trade union delegation that visited Russia in November 1924 recognised the bourgeois character of Trotsky. "Trotsky, who only joined the party just in time to take a prominent part in the October Revolution represents liberal nonconformity (in other words, capitalism — C.A.) as against die-hard communism". (Russia, Official Report of the British Trades Union Delegation, London, 1925, p.15).

The group of British trade union leaders who issued this report — Purcell, Hicks, Bromley, Swales — about the same time began to make speeches in favour of unity between the trade unions of the USSR and of Britain as a step towards international trade union unity. Very rapidly thereafter the entire work of the British Communist Party came to be redirected so as to concentrate on support for this group of trade union leaders in their work for Anglo-Russian unity, any demands and activities which might antagonise them being abandoned or played down. This change of orientation did not bring about Anglo-Russian unity or any other good thing — it led through the betrayal of the General Strike to the Arcos Raid.

The keynote for the new period was sounded in the editorial in the *Communist Review* of March 1925; "The immediate task before the whole trade union movement in this country is the realisation of the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee". Lozovsky, leader of the Red International of Labour Unions, wrote, in

The World's Trade Union Movement (English edition, April 1925) that "the plan of the Right wing is falling through. The British representatives and particularly Purcell, have already gone far beyond the line marked out for them by the Right-wing leaders of the Amsterdam International", and, while noting that the Trades Union Congress had rejected the communist-sponsored 'unambiguous' resolution on international trade union unity, had 'made up for that' by endorsing Purcell's proposal that the General Council try to bring the various trends together: this was, comparatively speaking, a step forward. The speeches of Tomskey, leader of the Soviet trade unions, which were published in English, radiated confidence in Purcell and Co. R P Dutt's Notes of the Month in the *Labour Monthly* of May 1925 were devoted to the question of the working class movement's attitude in the sphere of foreign relations, especially Anglo-Russian relations, and throughout the succeeding twelve months that journal was dominated by the question of Anglo-Russian trade union unity and allied matters.

The implications of this switch of attention quickly showed themselves. In the article by P Braun on 'Problems of the Labour Movement', in the *Labour Monthly* for June, international trade union unity and the need for increased powers for the General Council were put in the forefront, factory committees being mentioned almost as an afterthought — and they were to be set up 'with the backing of the General Council'. At the second annual conference of the National Minority Movement, in August, stress was laid on the granting of full powers to the General Council, with only a brief and vague reference to "obligation... to use that power to fight more effectively the battles of the workers", contrasting with the careful indication of the need to develop the control from below, lest the General Council use any increase in its powers to betray the workers, which had been a feature of the previous year's decisions. Dutt's Notes of the Month in the *Labour Monthly* for September left nothing to chance, stressing the need for increased powers for the General Council without even a formal warning or qualification. The helpless trailing behind Purcell and Co. to which the Communist Party was now reduced found pitiful expression in Dutt's Notes of the Month in the *Labour Monthly* for November, where he tried to explain away the fact that Purcell and Co., those great Left-wingers, the darlings of the Kremlin, had not lifted a finger to prevent the excluding of the Communists from the Labour Party when this was reaffirmed at the Liverpool conference in 1925. They had "failed even to attempt to put up a fight"; the trouble was that they lacked "self-confidence" and "to overcome this weakness" was "an essential task for the future". Wagging his finger, Dutt told these future betrayers of the General Strike that they had... "acted very foolishly". At the enlarged plenum of the Comintern executive in February 1926, George Hardy could cheerfully answer foreign comrades who wondered whether the campaign for 'All Power to the General Council', unlinked with a struggle for democratising the unions, and with factory committees still 'music of the future', might not prove misconceived, by saying: "Should they use that power

wrongly, it only means that we have got another additional task before us of forcing them in the right direction, which direction they must ultimately take."

This political misorientation was the reason why, in spite of Red Friday and all that followed, the fiasco of the General Strike could nevertheless occur. It is heart-rending to observe how strongly the tide was running in favour of the Communist Party in the latter part of 1925 and in the opening months of 1926, when one knows what was to come. The arrest of some of the communist leaders in October 1925 evoked a wave of protest and indignation that dwarfed the reaction to the 'Campbell case' of the previous year. In spite of the anti-communist decision just passed at Liverpool, the Miners' Federation headed the list of protesting organisations. While Wally Hannington was in jail he was elected to the executive committee of the London Trades Council. Every weekend great marches to Wandsworth prison took place, to cheer up the 'class-war prisoners' with revolutionary songs. The *Annual Register* for 1925 records how the widespread agitation for the release of the Twelve culminated "in a great demonstration at the Queen's Hall, London, at which some Labour MPs ostentatiously used language which they held to be seditious in order to provoke the Home Secretary to have them arrested". A petition for the release of the prisoners secured 300,000 signatures. Among those who stood bail for the Twelve during their trial were Lady Warwick and G B Shaw. MacDonald was provoked by all this to write to *The Times* asking, "What good is it our fighting Bolshevism if it is to be manufactured by the Government?"

The leaders of the CPGB both underestimated the workers and overestimated the 'Left' trade union leaders. "Not one of us as we emerged from Wandsworth [three weeks before the strike began — BP] thought there would be such an event" as the General Strike, writes J T Murphy, who was one of the Twelve, in his autobiography. And, on the impact of the sell-out by Purcell and his associates, the editorial in the *Communist Review* of August 1926 declared: "This treachery, unexpected and fatal, was greater than the certain and expected treason of Thomas". Throughout the international communist movement the calling off of the strike came as "a surprise and a shock".

The wrong path

In the early phase of the Minority Movement great stress was laid on the need to make trades councils directly representative of the workshops instead of merely consisting of delegates from trade union branches which were often remote and unrepresentative, to secure the restoration of the trades councils' representation in the Trades Union Congress, and in every way to strengthen the element of rank and file control in trade union structure, so as to ensure that the unions functioned for the purpose they had originally been formed to serve.

"The task of the Minority Movement was to make the unity of the trade union movement a real one, to build up the shop and local organisation which should be able to control from below this great mass machine, to fight at every step the apostles of 'civil peace', and uniting the workers, organised and unorganised, on the widest possible front in their everyday economic struggles, build up such a rank and file movement as should make impossible a repetition of 'Black Friday'."

Unfortunately, although the Minority Movement became an influential centre of propaganda and a ginger group which injected new life into many trade union branches and trades councils, and thereby forced the trade union leaders to put themselves at the head of strikes and to make various 'Left' gestures, as in 1917-20, it did little in practice to establish the workshop and factory committees of which so much was said. In the main it proved able only to spread the idea and urge it upon the official leadership.

The root of the trouble here was probably that the transformation of the Communist Party on to a factory-group basis "was only begun in earnest towards the end of 1924" and by 1 May 1925 there were only 68 communist factory groups, embracing a mere 10 per cent of the party membership. By the time that the political driving force in the Minority Movement had organised itself sufficiently to begin setting up new kinds of mass organisations in the factories, the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee had come into existence, and the Stalinist leadership of the world communist movement had decreed that nothing be done that might disturb the goodwill of the 'Left' bureaucrats. At the party congress in May 1925 a Sheffield delegate observed:

"A J Cook's speech at the recent miners' conference was completely out of tone with the speeches he had previously been making [ie. before he had been elected to the secretaryship of the Miners' Federation, with Minority Movement support]. After we have praised and said nice things about these Left-wing leaders, what will the masses say about the Communist Party when these leaders fail them? We must give the necessary qualifications to our support of these Left-wingers."

A Glasgow delegate warned of the need to be suspicious of certain trade union leaders who were acquiring an easy reputation for 'Leftness' through prominence in the movement for international trade union unity. Pollitt replied that there was "just a little danger of overstressing this point...The Russian trade union leaders are interested, leaders who have proved their worth to the working class movement and in whom we have complete confidence."

The end of this road was the betrayal of the General Strike, with the Communist Party and the Minority Movement unable to do anything against it but protest and call upon the traitor leaders to mend their ways. It revealed "the weakness of a Left which could only make propaganda, and which was not so firmly organised in the factories and localities that it could take the lead in action." A hint of realisation that the movement had been shunted onto the wrong path in 1925-26 appeared in Wal Hannington's pamphlet *What's Wrong in the Engineering Industry?* published by the National Minority Movement in 1927, where he wrote, after urging the need for a change of leaders in the unions:

"To those who say 'We have seen leaders turn before and what guarantee is there that they will not continue to do so?' we reply, the Minority Movement must be strong enough inside the unions not only to make leaders, but to break them, if and when they reject the policy upon which they were elected."

But Stalinist policy remained unchanged right down to the end of 1927, and the decision not to resist the TUC General Council's ultimatum to trades councils to disaffiliate from the Minority Movement virtually killed it.

"So died the Minority Movement, much as the General Strike had died. Ernest Bevin and his colleagues had called off the General Strike to avoid open warfare with the government; Harry Pollitt called off the Minority Movement to avoid open warfare with the TUC and many executives of trade unions."

Ultra-left decline

Thanks to the policy imposed upon it by Moscow from the spring of 1925 onwards, the Minority Movement had done just enough to incur the resentment of the bureaucracy without acquiring the power to fight back effectively. The bureaucracy was able very thoroughly to combine its proscription and bans with the employers' victimisation of militants in that black period of the British working class movement which followed the General Strike, and so to stamp out the Minority Movement for most practical purposes. For all its weaknesses and opportunist errors, the Minority Movement of 1924-7 had been a genuine expression of a trend in the working class, with real roots in the masses and a relationship to the traditional organisations of British Labour.

Between the end of 1927 (Fifteenth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party) and the middle of 1929 (Tenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International) a change of policy was put through in the international communist movement which caused British Stalinists in their industrial work to take off into realms of fantasy and adventure, not to mention crime and treason to the working class. This episode is largely responsible for the attitude of reserve and suspicion towards anything calling itself a 'rank and file movement' which is sometimes met among old trade unionists who are by no means bureaucrats.

The original Minority Movement based itself on affiliation by trade union branches, district committees, etc; individual membership was treated as transitional until the individual concerned had won his branch to affiliate. It was careful to emphasise that it was not an anti-union movement but on the contrary expected its supporters to work for 100 per cent trade unionism wherever they had influence, and could point to many an achievement in this respect. One of the last expositions of the movement's purpose before the entry into what the Stalinist jargon called 'the third period' is found in a pamphlet by Fred Thompson

called *Maintenance for Dockers*, published by the Transport Workers' Minority Movement in 1928.

"The Minority Movement is an organisation of militant trade unionists who, realising the extent to which the present leadership have committed themselves and the unions unreservedly to class collaboration, have banded themselves together to restore the original purpose and fighting spirit on which the trade unions were founded, to secure a new leadership with a policy based upon a realisation of the class struggle, and a complete reorganisation of the trade unions on lines that will admit of this policy being given effect to."

From mid-1929 onward for a period of over two years, this approach was replaced by a totally different one. Not merely was the Minority Movement in its new guise uninterested in winning 100 per cent trade unionism, it declared the trade unions to be cracking up and on their way out, and a good thing too. Not merely did it turn away from the task of winning trade union branches for militant policies, it deliberately sought to **exclude** branch officers from strike committees and rank and file ad hoc committees of all kinds.

Special 'red' trade unions were created and then launched by their communist leaders into 'prestige' strikes, the need for which was not understood by the members (though these affairs looked impressive in the periodical reports to Moscow), so that militancy was discredited among those sections of the workers closest to the Minority Movement.

It was of this period in Stalinist industrial policy that Trotsky wrote (in *Communism and Syndicalism*, 1929) that:

"...the struggle for the party's influence in the trade unions finds its objective verification in whether or not the unions thrive, whether or not the number of their members increases, as well as in their relations with the broadest masses. If the party buys its influence in the trade unions only at the price of a narrowing-down and factionalising of the latter — converting them into auxiliaries of the party for momentary aims and preventing them from becoming genuine mass organisations — then the relations between the party and the class are wrong."

The Communist Party was showing "an adolescent tendency to make itself master of the working class in the briefest time, by means of stage-play, inventions, superficial agitation, etc.": nothing good would come of "political hysteria which does not take conditions into account, which confuses today with yesterday or tomorrow".

Characteristic of the 1929-31 period was a growing disparity between slogans and achievements. During the Bradford woollen strike of 1930, for instance, the Minority Movement shouted to bewildered workers about 'the struggle for power' — but proved incapable of setting up a single independent mill committee. While the Red International of Labour Unions demanded that the movement become "a real mass organisation based on dues-paying collective and individual membership", setting itself up as an alternative trade union centre to the TUC, the tactics of frenzy were in fact resulting in the isolation and even expulsion of those groups which had retained some mass influence from the General Strike period (eg. the expulsion of the Mardy lodge from the South Wales

Miners' Federation).

Arthur Horner himself eventually spoke out within the party against what was happening: "Artificial strike committees, really Minority Movement groups, were set up as alternatives to the lodges, without mass contact, resulting only in our isolation...The revolutionary movement was effectively bankrupt from every angle." For this statement he was, of course, reprimanded and removed from the leadership of the Miners' Minority Movement. The shouting to the workers to come and be led, with a general strike as 'the next step', grew louder and shriller, especially as the international Stalinist leadership kept impatiently contrasting the poor showing of the Minority Movement with what was happening in Germany (where the Nazis were now a substantial and growing force) — there, forsooth, "all mass movements are conducted under the leadership of the party".

Those who criticised the suicidal tactics of the 'third period' were dismissed as 'Trotskyist yellow-bellies', just as those who had criticised the opportunist errors of the previous phase had been 'Trotskyist wild men'. After the damage had been done, and without, of course, any acknowledgement to those who had been right at the time, Wilhelm Pieck admitted on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, in his speech of July 26, 1935, at the Seventh Congress of the CI, the justice of these criticisms:

"The most glaring example of sectarianism in the trade union movement

was provided in Great Britain, where in the face of the sharp attacks of the Right members of the General Council and the vacillations of the Left trade union leaders the communists adopted [in fact had pressed upon them by the Executive Committee of the CI — BP] such clumsy and sectarian tactics that the Minority Movement actually fell to pieces.

"Adopting the course of independently leading the economic struggles, the communists, as a result of former Right mistakes and the inadequate organisational consolidation of the Minority Movement, transferred their main work from the trade union groups to individual members and from the trade unions to the unorganised workers, and set up their scanty forces against the whole trade union movement.

"These mistakes were aggravated by the fact that the communists regarded the Minority Movement as the nucleus of new trade unions and discontinued recruiting workers to the trade unions, issuing appeals to join the ranks of the Minority Movement. It must be borne in mind that these mistakes were committed by our comrades in a country where the reformist trade unions possess the oldest traditions. Under such circumstances the communists were found to become entirely isolated from the trade union movement, and the Minority Movement collapsed. It is only with great difficulty that our British comrades, having realised their mistakes and correspondingly altered their trade union policy, are managing to regain their influence in the trade union movement."

... "God help us unless the government won."

By 1926 the Tories had laid careful plans to deal with the General Strike. The timidity of the trade union leaders helped their plans along.

A 'Triple Alliance' of miners, transport and rail workers had been agreed during the war and was revived in the early 1920s. The government was afraid of the threat posed by such a mighty trade union force.

But in April 1921 the rail and transport unions deserted striking miners — on what became known as 'Black Friday' — and after that the unions were on the retreat. Not until 1925 was there a big turnaround on the industrial front.

The Tories were ready for confrontation when it occurred. In 1925 they established the OMS — Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies — to break any major strikes. It consisted of middle-class Tories, students (then an overwhelmingly conservative group) and the pre-Mosley fascists. On the eve of the General Strike it had 100,000 members.

88 Voluntary Service Committees were set up. A Special Constabulary was created to enlarge the police force. The armed forces were mobilised to guard the docks, railways and telephone exchanges.

Troops armed with gas were moved to the capital and the industrial centres.

Faced with all this, the TUC did little to prepare. The Samuel Commission Report, published in March 1926, proposed to cut wages of the miners, though not by as much as the mine owners wanted. It also, more tentatively, suggested longer working hours.

The miners' union rejected these proposals, but the TUC continued to negotiate. JH Thomas, who was by then a Labour MP, commented: "When the verbatim reports are written I suppose my usual critics will say that Thomas was almost grovelling, and it is true...I have never begged and pleaded like I begged

and pleaded today..."

Thomas, who played a particularly treacherous role during the General Strike, later reassured the bosses: "I have never disguised that in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us unless the government won," insisting that the General Strike was no such challenge.

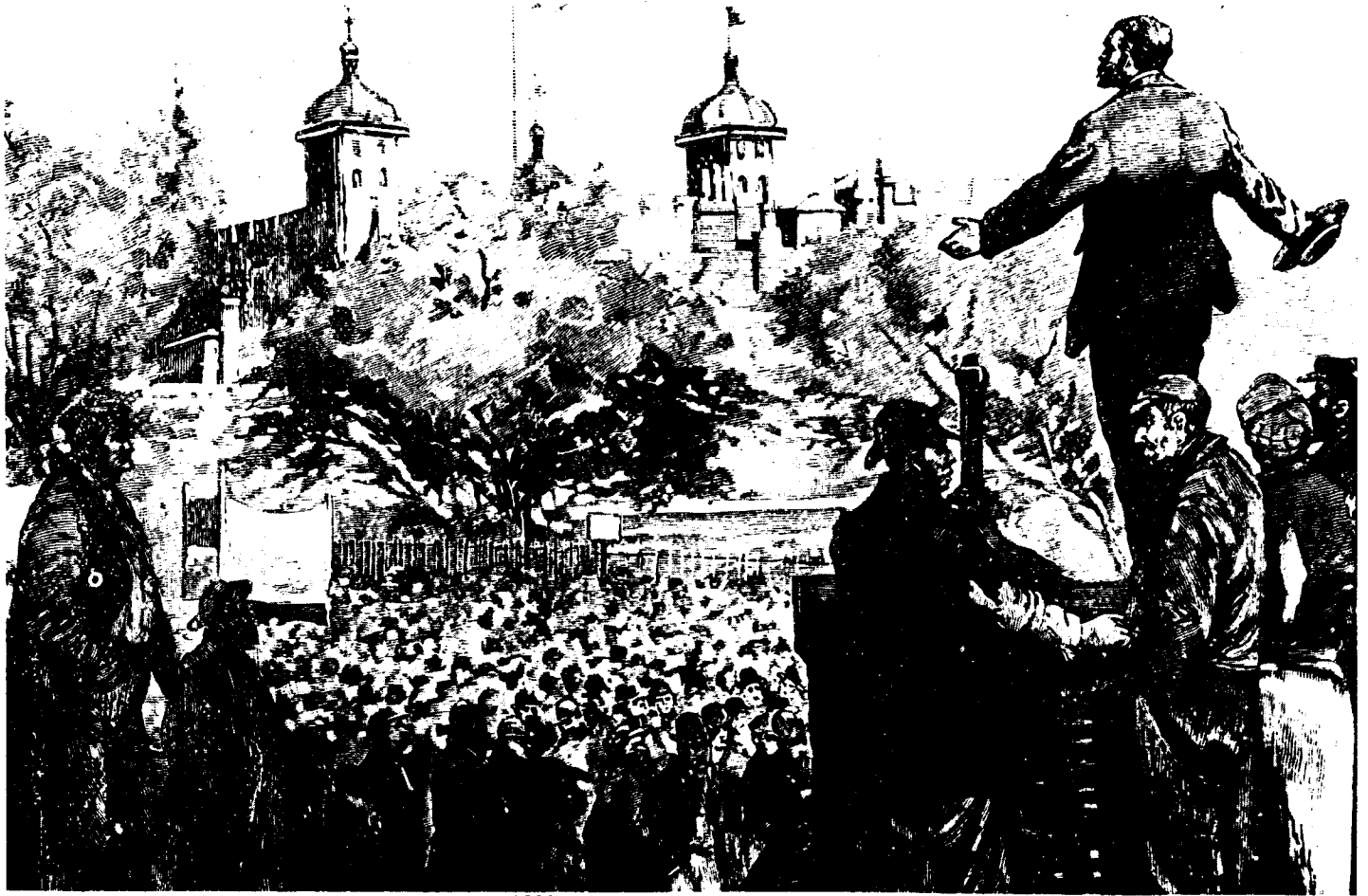
The Labour and TUC leadership was completely outwitted by the Tory government and the mine owners.

The left trade union leaders, meanwhile, were involved in an 'Anglo-Russian Committee', set up to build support for the beleaguered USSR. For the young Communist Party, which was of course centrally involved, it was seen as a good opportunity to spread their influence.

Unfortunately, the pro-Russian stance of left union leaders (the 1920s equivalents of Ron Todd) was really a cheap way of getting radical credentials on faraway issues while they were selling out the workers at home. The CP's alliance with them on the Anglo-Russian Committee could not be allowed to outweigh the organisation of the rank and file in the General Strike.

Yet that is what happened. The labour leaders sold out the General Strike, abandoning the miners despite growing support for the strike. The left leaders were, at best, acquiescent. And the CP did not criticise the left too sharply for fear of splitting the Anglo-Russian Committee. It is that disastrous policy that Brian Pearce examines in this article.

The General Strike was a very serious defeat. The TUC General Council called it off without any guarantees for the miners. As Charles Duke of the Municipal Workers said: "Every day that the strike proceeded, the control and authority of that dispute was passing out of the hands of responsible Executives into the hands of men who had no authority, no control, no responsibility, and was wrecking the movement from one end to the other."



John Burns, one of the dockers' leaders, at Tam Hill, 1889

By John O'Mahony

The National Dock Labour Board registered all port workers and guaranteed that dockers had a basic minimum fallback wage, whether there was work for them or not.

The Dock Labour Board was made up of representatives of employers and workers in equal numbers. It was set up by a Labour government in 1947 to give dockers some minimal security in employment.

By its nature port work is not steady or constant. Ships come, unload, load and go. Often there are gaps in between.

Before 1947 dockers were hired and fired twice a day, morning and midday, for half a day at a time, as the bosses needed them. Even in good times there would always be a pool of unemployed dockers. In bad times the pool would swell enormously. Anyone could go and get a job on the docks, without training — in a trade that was extremely dangerous and accident-plagued.

The foremen would stand in the hiring pens, or on waste ground, with tallies to give out indicating that a man was hired, and gangs of dockers would mill around them. Fist-fights between competing dockers were common and normal. So was graft and corruption. The foremen had immense power over the dockers.

They could squeeze the dockers for money in return for hiring them. They could do deals with publicans to pay out wages in their pubs, thus ensuring good trade.

Poverty, crime, demoralisation, were the results of this system.

The rise and fall of the National Dock Labour Board

But the workers fought back. They began to organise trade unions. A hundred years ago this year the dockers began to fight back as trade unionists, with the strike in London — led by Marxists like Tom Mann and John Burns — for the "docker's tanner". (The demand was for a minimum wage of sixpence an hour in old money, 2½p in today's. An average male wage was then around £1.20 a week.)

The union began to discipline the dockers around the idea of solidarity — that they would stand together to better their conditions. It also conducted all sorts of subsidiary struggles — for example, the struggle against having wages paid out in pubs, which was a good system for the publicans and their foremen friends but not so good for a lot of children hungry because there was no money afterwards for food.

Substantial changes were won by the union, slowly and painfully. The level of working class consciousness among dockers became high.

London dockers struck in 1920 to stop a British ship, the *Jolly George*, from sailing with a cargo of guns for the Polish army which had invaded the revolutionary USSR. In 1936, dockers — a lot of them Irish — trooped to join those in the East

End of London who fought the police trying to clear a way for fascists to march into the Jewish quarter. That was the battle of Cable Street.

1947 marked the really big change — the National Dock Labour Board. The dockers had fought their way to the point that the Labour government set up a system guaranteeing them a small basic wage *at all times*. Registered dockers would get this money even when there wasn't work, provided they turned up twice a day to have their books "stamped" (proving availability).

The system was to be jointly administered by the union — the TGWU — and the bosses. The union had 50 per cent of control over hiring and firing. This made most dockers' jobs very secure.

It was not socialism, but it was a long way up the scale of social evolution from the days of drunken and starving men fighting each other for a few hours' ill-paid and dangerous work.

How far the dockers had come was emblemised by the fact that their one-time leader Ernie Bevin, general secretary of the TGWU, was one of the strongest ministers in the 1945 Labour government.

Yet there were problems too. The TGWU was then the bulwark of the right

wing in the British labour movement. It was enormous, undemocratically run, bureaucratic.

It took to the job of helping run the docks in the spirit of the Stalinist bureaucrats who took over Eastern Europe about the same time — except that the TGWU officials did not have the power of an authoritarian state at their beck and call.

They never recognised strikes. TGWU officials organised strikebreaking against unofficial strikes. They could threaten militants with the sack if they did not toe the union line, which would normally be the NDLB line.

For example, in 1954 the entire branch committee of the union in Manchester was hauled up before the General Secretary, Arthur Deakin, who told them to toe the line or he'd have them sacked!

In 1955, 16,000 dockers in Manchester, Liverpool and Hull left the TGWU and joined a small London-based union, the National Association of Stevedores and Dockers. The NASD was called the "blue" union, after the colour of its cards; the TGWU was "the white". The "blue" dockers called it "the greatest jail-break in history".

The Dock Labour Board and the employers stood by their friends in the "white" union, and refused to grant the "blue" negotiating rights. This was fatal, in an industry where conditions changed so much from ship to ship, hold to hold, and cargo to cargo that a price had to be negotiated for each job, sometimes more than once.

There was a long strike for recognition which failed. The immediate result was divided trade union organisation on the docks, and soon afterwards non-unionism made its appearance. Yet militancy did not decline. On the contrary, it grew.

Dockers' militancy was enormously, almost effortlessly, effective in the '50s and '60s and '70s. In Glasgow and Liverpool there was a system known respectively as "spelling" and "the welt", under which it was custom and practice — under the eyes of the foremen, and with their agreement — for half of a gang working a ship to do the first four hours of a shift, and then do what they liked, while the other half did the second part of the shift.

Dockers had the power to shut down the country.

But things were changing. The cargo-handling techniques in the ports were very ancient, little different from ancient Rome — vast armies of men humping cargoes on their backs.

A technological revolution in the 1960s changed all that. Now cargoes were packed into giant containers in factories or special depots, and unpacked in other factories or depots. Dockers just had to roll the giant containers on and off specially designed ships.

This meant the end of most dock jobs over a period of decades. On average, containers can be handled in one-tenth of the man-hours of old-style cargo.

Containerisation gave the bosses a great weapon against the dockers, and at the same time a strong incentive to reorganise the ports.

The 1964 Labour government appointed a Royal Commission under Lord Devlin to investigate strikes on the docks, and then implemented the Commission report to 'decasualise' the docks.

Dockers were to be taken into permanent employment with a particular employer, instead of being hired out for

some many half-days by the Dock Labour Board. They would therefore lost a big part of the control the union had over hiring and firing through the Dock Labour Board.

The Dock Labour Board would only be the fallback employer for a pool of unattached dockers who did not have a regular employer.

At the time such practices as "spelling" and "the welt" would go. Thus — so the bosses hoped — the docks could be modernised, with fuller bosses' control that had existed on the docks for twenty years.

And the dock labour force could be more easily cut down over the years, as modernisation took place.

What happened next is one of the most tragic — and representative — experiences of the British working class in recent decades. It summed up the whole story of how we were beaten, and how the great

"The hyper-militant dockers had no real alternative to the reorganisation except a defence of a status quo increasingly made impossible by technological change"

working class militancy of the '60s and '70s gave way to the present Thatcherite reaction.

Here were the most militant workers in Britain. They had tremendous solidarity. In certain ports a docker had only to run down the quay shouting "Everybody out", and the men would come out to hear what it was all about.

The day-to-day struggle for wages and good conditions had taught them that solidarity was the best way to protect themselves.

The employers were trying to carry out an open and drastic revolution in the ports, openly revoking the elements of workers' control won over decades of struggle. The workers had the strength to stop them.

But the bosses had decisive advantages: a conniving right-wing Labour government; the trade union officials, who supported the Devlin proposals; and, above all, the fact that the hyper-militant dockers had no real alternative to the reorganisation except defence of a status quo increasingly made impossible by technological change. The charge of "Luddism" (backward-looking opposition to new technology) was a potent one in the mouths of both Labour politicians and trade union leaders.

Yet the dockers' answer should have been obvious and clear-cut: *increase workers' control and modernise on that basis*, using the advantages of modernisation to benefit the workers. Most dockers wanted the nationalisation of the ports,

and most wanted to expand workers' control rather than give full control back to the bosses.

But there was simply no force on the docks with the organised strength to lead that sort of fight. The "white" union was as bureaucratic as ever. The various left-wing groups were weak and often unclear.

The Communist Party had a lot of influence, but they trailed behind the "white" union bureaucrats — who, until 1970, still banned communists from being union officials. The major Trotskyist group with influence in the ports — the Socialist Labour League/Workers' Revolutionary Party — was rabidly sectarian and incapable of serious work. *Workers' Fight*, the other Trotskyist group active then, had two dockers in Manchester.

So there was no coherent fight back. Dockers were split up and confused by offers of better money. Attempts by an ad hoc rank and file committee to organise a national stoppage were defeated.

In the autumn of 1967, Manchester, Liverpool and London struck against Devlin, but it wasn't enough. The conditions were substantially bettered by the strikes; but modernisation proceeded and the dockers' jobs bled away.

The next big turning point on the docks came in 1972. Alarmed at the loss of jobs on the waterfront, dockers began to picket warehouses outside the dock areas in which containers were filled and unpacked by cheaper non-Dock Labour Board labour. But Edward Heath's anti-union laws had just come into effect. Such picketing was forbidden.

In July 1972 five dockers were jailed for refusing to obey a court order to stop picketing. Immediately a wave of protest strikes spread over Britain. A quarter of a million workers stopped. Crowds marched to Pentonville Jail, where the dockers were held. For a few days there was uproar. The TUC decided to call a one-day general strike from the following Monday. The government caved in, and released the dockers.

The anti-union law remained on the statute books, but it was crippled. Labour repealed it in 1974. It was a tremendous victory.

The dockers won a victory, too — the Jones-Aldington agreement. The temporary unattached "pool" was abolished; the government would pay the employers a subsidy to compensate them for hiring surplus labour; and the government would also offer large pay-offs for dockers quitting their jobs.

After that, the docks got quieter. Mechanisation was pushed through. The number of dockers declined dramatically, year after year. There are now fewer than 10,000 registered dockers. In the early '50s there were over 80,000. As late as 1972 there were still 43,000.

As Britain's trade has shifted towards Western Europe, ports like Liverpool and Manchester have declined. Previously small ports outside the Dock Labour Scheme — notably Felixstowe and Dover — have become important. On the eve of the abolition of the Scheme, over 20% of trade came through non-Scheme ports, worked by 3000 dockers.

This year they did it. The Tory anti-union legislation was used to cripple the strike action that the dockers took to defend themselves and the dockers, who for decades had the power to make governments tremble, went down to a tragic defeat.

Trotsky on trade unions

In this extract from the Transitional Programme of 1938 Leon Trotsky — one of the organisers of the Russian revolution, leader of the Red Army, and of the Left Opposition which fought Stalin's totalitarian regime in Russia — sums up the Marxist attitude to the unions.

In the struggle for partial and transitional demands, the workers now more than ever before need mass organisations, principally trade unions. The powerful growth of trade unionism in France and the United States is the best refutation of the preachments of those ultra-left doctrinaires who have been teaching that trade unions have "outlived their usefulness".

The Bolshevik-Leninist stands in the frontline trenches of all kinds of struggles, even when they involve only the most modest material interests or democratic rights of the working class. He takes active part in mass trade unions for the purpose of strengthening them and raising their spirit of militancy. He fights uncompromisingly against any attempt to subordinate the unions to the bourgeois state and bind the proletariat to "compulsory arbitration" and every other form of police guardianship — not only fascist but also "democratic". Only on the basis of such work within the trade unions is successful struggle possible against the reformists, including those of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Sectarian attempts to build or preserve small "revolutionary" unions, as a second edition of the party, signify in actuality the renouncing of the struggle for leadership of the working class. It is necessary to establish this firm rule: self-isolation of the capitulationist variety from mass trade unions, which is tantamount to a betrayal of the revolution, is incompatible with membership of the Fourth International.

At the same time, the Fourth International resolutely rejects and condemns trade union fetishism, equally characteristic of trade unionists and syndicalists.

(a) Trade unions do not offer and, in line with their task, composition and manner of recruiting membership, cannot offer a finished revolutionary programme; in consequence, they cannot replace the party. The building of national revolutionary parties as sec-

tions of the Fourth International is the central task of the transitional epoch.

(b) Trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20 to 25 per cent of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better-paid layers. The more oppressed majority of the working class is drawn only episodically into the struggle, during a period of exceptional upsurges in the labour movement. During such moments it is necessary to create organisations ad hoc, embracing the whole fighting mass: strike committees, factory committees, and finally, soviets.

(c) As organisations expressive of the top layers of the proletariat, trade unions, as witnessed by all past historical experience, including the fresh experience of the anarcho-syndicalist unions in Spain, developed powerful tendencies towards compromise with the bourgeois-

"The trade unions of our time can either serve as secondary instruments of imperialist capitalism for the subordination and disciplining of workers and for obstructing the revolution, or, on the contrary, the trade unions can become the instruments of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat."

(L D Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*, 1940)

democratic regime. In periods of acute class struggle, the leading bodies of the trade union aim to become masters of the mass movement in order to render it harmless. This is already occurring during the period of simple strikes, especially in the case of the mass sit-down strikes which shake the principle of bourgeois property. In time of war or revolution, when the bourgeoisie is plunged into exceptional difficulties, the trade union leaders usually become bourgeois ministers. Therefore, the sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership in the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organisations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of trade unions. If it be criminal to turn one's back on mass organisations for the sake of fostering sectarian fictions, it is no less so to passively tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised con-

servative ("progressive") bureaucratic cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution.

During a transitional epoch, the workers' movement does not have a systematic and well balanced, but a feverish and explosive character. Slogans as well as organisational forms should be subordinated to the indices of the movement. On guard against routine handling of a situation as against a plague, the leadership should respond sensitively to the initiative of the masses.

Sit-down strikes, the latest expression of this kind of initiative, go beyond the limits of "normal" capitalist procedure. Independently of the demands of the strikers, the temporary seizure of factories deals a blow to the idol, capitalist property. Every sit-down strike poses in a practical manner the question of who is boss of the factory: the capitalist or the workers?

If the sit-down strike raises this question episodically, the factory committee gives it organised expression. Elected by all the factory employees, the factory committee immediately creates a counterweight to the will of the administration.

To the reformist criticism of bosses of the so-called "economic royalist" type like Ford in contradistinction to "good", "democratic" exploiters, we counterpose the slogan of factory committees as centres of struggle against both the first and the second.

Trade union bureaucrats will as a general rule resist the creation of factory committees, just as they resist every bold step taken along the road to mobilising the masses.

However, the wider the sweep of the movement, the easier will it be to break this resistance. Where the closed shop has already been instituted in "peaceful" times, the committee will formally coincide with the usual organ of the trade union, but will renew its personnel and widen its functions. The prime significance of the committee, however, lies in the fact that it becomes the militant staff for such working class layers as the trade union is usually incapable of moving to action. It is precisely from these more oppressed layers that the most self-sacrificing battalions of the revolution will come.

From the moment that the committee makes its appearance, a factual dual power is established in the factory. By its very essence it represents the transitional state, because it includes in itself two irreconcilable regimes: the capitalist and the proletarian. The fundamental significance of factory committees is precisely contained in the fact that they open the doors if not to a direct revolutionary, then to a prerevolutionary period — between the bourgeois and the proletarian regimes. That the propagation of the factory committee idea is neither premature nor artificial is amply attested to by the waves of sit-down strikes spreading through several countries. New waves of this type will be inevitable in the immediate future. It is necessary to begin a campaign in favour of factory committees in time, in order not to be caught unawares.

April 1938

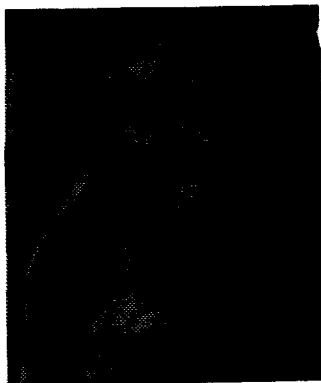
workers press

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FOR ALL TRADE
UNIONISTS**



Leaders of the ATUA clockwise: Thornett, Parsons, Powers.

The REAL dossier of Reg Parsons



A sectarian caricature

The lessons of the All Trades

Union Alliance

By Thomas Carolan

One of the most important efforts to organise a rank and file movement on the model of the Minority Movement was made by the 'Healyite' organisation in the 1950s and '60s.

The 'Healyite' organisation, variously named the Socialist Labour League and the Workers' Revolutionary Party, is now scattered into at least a dozen pieces, some of them very crazy. But in the late '50s it was one organisation, and the nearest thing to Trotskyism in the British labour movement.

In 1958 — at the very start of the prolonged wave of strike militancy that would continue for two decades — the Healyites got 500 people, many of them shop stewards and quite a few critical supporters of the Communist Party, to a rank and file conference. From the mid '60s they maintained a 'rank and file movement', known first as the 'Oxford Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions' and then as the 'All Trades Union Alliance'. It was the only nationally-organised attempt in that period to compete with the Communist Party in industry.

But it was a vicious sectarian caricature of a rank and file movement. Like the Minority Movement before it, it was crippled politically and then organisationally by the political instability of the organisation which had the leading role within it.

In the '60s the SLL-WRP became a very sectarian organisation, denouncing everybody else on the left as 'scabs' and so on. It was more interested in conducting a war of literary denunciation against the Communist

Party than in unity with Communist Party militants to pursue the class struggle, for example against the Devlin proposals on the docks in the late '60s.

The SLL-WRP had become a strange cult around an all-powerful and all-knowing leader, Mr Gerry Healy. Its politics depends on the brainstormings or calculations of advantage made by Mr Healy. So did the politics of the ATUA.

The result was that the ATUA militants were often a force for disruption rather than class struggle unity. For example, the ATUA's leader, Alan Thornett, was told to spread the story at the Cowley car plant (in Oxford) where we worked that some other Marxists there (members of the IMG) were 'police agents'.

And the ATUA had strange politics. They proclaimed themselves the only Marxists and revolutionaries, but in many ways were quite right wing. When the press was being hysterical about the big anti Vietnam war demonstrations of that time, the Healyite militants took their newspaper into the factories denouncing the demonstrations as a 'middle class circus'.

The ATUA soon lost any ability it ever had to unite a broad range of class struggle militants. To be in the ATUA you had to agree to 'build the party! The combination of weird politics and sectarian organisation is evident, for example, in this passage from the SLL daily *Workers' Press*, reporting the ATUA conference in October 1972.

"Over 2,000 workers from all major industries voted unanimously at Birmingham yesterday to build the revolutionary party in Britain..." The main speakers were SLL secretary Gerry Healy and ATUA secretary Alan Thornett. According to the report, "Gerry Healy warned that the Tories' move into the Common Market in January meant that the working class would face an attack from a most reactionary pro-fascist conspiracy of monopolists".

By 1974, the guru Healy had gone mad, believing a military-fascist coup in Britain was only a matter of days away. He was losing his grip. He expelled the then public figurehead of the ATUA, Alan Thornett, for consorting with supporters of the French Trotskyist group known as 'Lambertists'.

The ATUA and the WRP fell apart. Healy became even crazier, and in 1976 sold the WRP to the Libyan and Iraqi governments. In return for large sums of money he would support them, and get his organisation to spy for them in Britain on dissident Libyans and Iraqis and on Jews.

It was perhaps not impossible for the ATUA to have benefited from the break with the SLL-WRP, by its leaders regrouping a movement free of Healyism. In fact that proved impossible, partly because the ATUA never had an autonomous life and neither did its leaders.

The ATUA had three figurehead leaders — John Powers, who went over to the right wing of the Oxford Labour Party in the late '60s; Reg Parsons, who went over to management and became a witch-hunter in the early '70s; and, finally, the best of them, Alan Thornett.

All these figures were to a decisive extent 'manufactured' leaders, built up by the organisation's real leaders, spoon-fed with ideas, told what to do from day to day. They had to have a base, of course, and some speaking skills and 'presence', in order to function, but they did not have the ability — and, in two cases, not even the sustained political will — to lead a movement.

They were to genuine rank and file leaders what studio-made pop stars like Jason Donovan and Kylie Minogue are to real singers.

After Healy went mad in 1974, Thornett had the ball at his feet, but did not know what to do with it. And Healy set out to wreck the organisation if he could not control it. With great press publicity, he demanded back from Thornett £4,000 advanced to him by the WRP, thus trying deliberately to give an impression to Cowley workers that Thornett was corrupt.

Thornett grouped a sizeable group of former WRPs round himself, and called some industrial conferences under the name of the 'Campaign for Democracy in the Labour Movement'. The conferences were quite well-run, and reasonably democratic, free from the worst ranting of the Healyites — but both the organisation and its influence dwindled for lack of a leadership able to work out an adequate political orientation.

Essentially it came to nothing more than a small and loose personality cult, modelled on the WRP, but without its crazy vigour and with Thornett in Healy's clothes, which didn't fit.

Thornett himself was sacked from Cowley in 1982, where he was a driver. He neglected to renew a Heavy Goods Vehicle licence and was stopped by the police. Anyone else would have been reprimanded, but the company took the chance to sack Thornett. It was a sad measure of the decline of what had once been the main base of the ATUA that there was not even a token strike to protest at the victimisation.

Thornett made some efforts to build something better, collaborating with *Socialist Organiser* for a period; but by the mid-'80s he and his group had collapsed into *Labour Briefing*.

Thornett writes some strange articles in *Briefing*. During the 1989 docks dispute, for example, his leading demand was for the TGWU to defy the law. No doubt a successful struggle would have clashed with the law. But to *start out* with that call was to demand that the TGWU do to Thatcher what the whole labour movement has not yet succeeded in doing.

Thornett has also published a book of memoirs, whose reliability can be measured by the fact that he presents his experience at Cowley as if the SLL-WRP were just a shadowy force off-stage, rather than the organisation whose leaders guided him day by day, and whose often crazy politics he peddled daily with their paper in the plant. He can't draw any lessons from the real experience of the ATUA because he can't give a halfway accurate account of it.

The story of the ATUA is a sad story. The figures the SLL-WRP claimed for the ATUA were always inflated, and its conferences were filled more with raw young people than with active trade unionists. It was, nevertheless, the only attempt to build a national militant movement of trade unionists in the days of the great militancy of the 1960s and early '70s.

THE LEFT AND THE UNIONS

'Militant' and the unions

When the Broad Left Organising Committee (BLOC) was first set up in 1981 many trade union activists were excited by the prospect of a major regrouping the left in the unions.

Trudy Saunders (CPSA DHSS HQ) describes how they became disappointed

BLOC's first couple of conferences were large and relatively lively. The platforms were heavily dominated by Militant speakers but many other socialists turned up. It looked promising.

But soon BLOC became nothing more than a signboard for Militant rallies. It ran no campaigning activity. In late 1983 thousands of activists mobilised to support the NGA print union picket lines against Eddie Shah in Warrington. It was a crucial test battle for the Tory anti-union laws. BLOC took no initiative at all.

In 1984 a BLOC conference coincided with the start of a miners' strike. The conference passed a bland resolution of general support for the miners, and then for the whole year of the strike BLOC did **nothing** beyond issuing one leaflet and calling one lobby of the TUC.

When a Mineworkers' Defence Committee was formed to unite and organise activists its first conference attracted over 1,000 labour movement activists, it was Socialist Organiser and Briefing who took the initiative, not BLOC. BLOC played no role at all.

Where is BLOC now? Nobody knows. It has shown no signs of life for some time. From the thousands of activists who were attracted to BLOC when it was launched Militant has created something even more lifeless than the Communist Party's old Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions.

Before the 1980s, the old trade union Broad Lefts were usually dominated by the Communist Party, which was a very bureaucratic organisation (and is now two very bureaucratic organisations — one trendy and right wing, the other pro-Moscow.) The Broad Lefts were never active, democratic rank and file movements: they were machines for winning elections. Today's extremely right-wing leadership of the electricians' union, the EETPU, dates back to a big scandal in 1961 when it was proved that the previous CP leadership had rigged elections to keep control.

By the early 1980s the old Broad Lefts had largely died away and been replaced by new ones, dominated by Militant. Some of these are still more than Militant fronts, and other socialists, like Socialist Organiser, are often involved in them. But it is an uphill struggle to stop Militant stifling even the best of them; and they are just as much electoral

machines as the old Broad Lefts.

Militant looks to capturing the apparatus of the trade unions and devotes lots of energy to winning elections in them. In itself, this is reasonable and necessary; but Militant look no further.

Socialists need to democratise the trade unions, and fight to replace bureaucrats with a new fighting leadership. Elections are important — it makes a difference whether a union is led by Eric Hammond or Arthur Scargill.

But the key to transforming the unions is the rank and file itself. A socialist policy tries to develop the confidence and organisation of the rank and file. So while fighting to replace old, right wing leaders, we have to build a **rank and file movement** that can, to a degree, act independently of the officials. The lack of such a rank and file movement across the unions was one of the reasons the miners' strike of 1984-5 was lost: when the TUC refused to do anything to help the miners, those activists who did want to do something had no means to build solidarity.

The Broad Lefts could have helped build a rank and file movement. They didn't because Militant had no interest in fighting for that. **Just like the CP before them**, they did not represent a fighting leadership in the unions. The Broad Lefts they dominated were either largely lifeless front organisations seen as recruiting grounds to the Militant or, where they did have life, were electoral machines.

The jewel in BLOC's crown is the Broad Left in the Civil and Public Servants Association (CPSA). This Broad Left is large and used to be quite active and lively; but now it does very little outside of union elections. A Militant motion of BL conference in 1987 argued: "... the priority must be the re-election of the Broad Left NEC".

That year Militant supporter John Macreadie had his election as General Secretary ruled out by the CPSA. Macreadie took the CPSA to court — at a cost of £20,000 — violating the principle of trade union independence from the courts. He never consulted the Broad Left — and then had the nerve to ask the BL to pay for it. He lost both court case and re-run.

Militant frequently oppose the extension of union democracy. For example, they are against the annual election of full-time officers like Macreadie, who is now Deputy General Secretary for a five year period. Militant say five years is short enough...

In the late seventies the left in the union argued for individual ballots at workplace meetings, Militant opposed this by supporting the old system of branch block votes.

Militant's reasoning was simple, they feared that extending democracy in the union

would weaken their influence so they opposed it, "we can't allow the right wing" was the argument. They put their own short-term **sect interests** above basic union democracy.

Militant see the Broad Left as their property. When a policy was passed by the Broad Left that the leadership disagreed with, committing the BL to fight for action over the sacking of trade unionists at GCHQ, Militant supporters who are Broad Left officers just ignored it. They even refused to put out a Broad Left leaflet explaining the policy. A fine example of commitment to rank and file control and workers' democracy!

Broad Left conferences are like Militant rallies, with guest (Militant) speakers who even intervene in debates on contentious issues.

The BL have controlled the CPSA Executive twice. They did so in 1982-3 — and their record matched against the class struggle was not impressive.

The big battle during the period of office was by DHSS workers in Oxford and Birmingham against job cuts. They organised no mass pickets or demonstrations.

In 1987-8 Militant were no better. The NEC under their control failed to organise any strike action against YTS, although sporadic strike action was already taking place. They stuck to producing a few glossy leaflets.

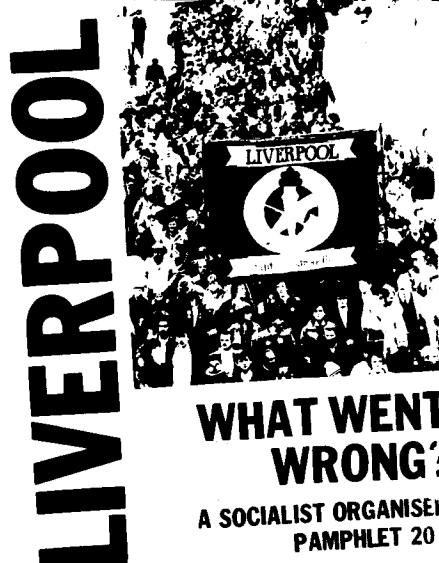
They failed to hold a Labour Party affiliation ballot, although it was conference policy to do so, because the Treasury threatened to stop the deduction of union contributions at source. There was no campaign against the Treasury, or even an attempt to find ways round it.

The NEC failed to call out civil servants on the one day strike over the NHS on 14 March 1988. John Macreadie (who is the CPSA delegate of the TUC) called on the TUC to have a one-day strike instead. The TUC **should** have had a strike; but Militant's policy was just a posture.

The Broad Left National Committee did not meet for **four months** after the NEC victory, and never consulted the BL about its actions.

As a result the BL were effectively paralysed as a serious rank and file organisation in the vital period of the 1987 pay claim. This paralysis allowed the right-wing to step in and do their best to sabotage the ballot for all out strike action. The BL lost that ballot and the seeds were sown for the return of the right to power in the union in 1988.

The defeat at the '88 conference was rationalised by Militant as a mere 'lull before the storm'. We'll be back next year they vainly boasted. Tragically the BL's inactivity over the last few months makes that prospect



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unlikely.

Militant ran the DHSS Section Executive from the early 1980s until 1988, when they lost it to the right wing. They ratted on BL and Section policy to fight the Fowler Social Security Reviews (1986-87) by refusing to ballot on strike action — for fear of the courts.

They refused to spread limited (but successful) action against Limited Period Appointments (casuals on fixed contracts) brought into the DHSS to implement the Fowler Reviews.

Now the DHSS looks set to lose 15,000 jobs. The new right wing leadership which won't fight, was voted in on backlash against Militant.

BLOC had had little presence in any of the big battles of the past few years. In the 1988 NHS dispute, Militant bureaucratically strangled the shop steward's structure that health workers were creating. Militant wanted the whole thing co-opted by BLOC. Failing that, they weren't interested in building the rank and file organisations needed to go forward.

In the biggest of all recent battles, the miners' strike, Militant could have played an important role via Liverpool — and failed. They had little involvement in miners' support groups (usually setting up separate ones with only themselves in them).

They played stupid games with the vital slogan of the general strike. If the labour movement had mobilised its full force alongside the miners, they could have won — and much more could have been achieved. Militant called for a one-day general strike only, hardly enough to win.

Militant never understood one of the most important lessons of the miners' strike — the role of women. Women Against Pit Closures

— the organisation of women in pit communities — showed how politically powerful an independent movement of working class women could be, fighting as part of the labour movement.

Militant tried to reinterpret WAPC according to their own theories, but never very convincingly. For Militant had always opposed the 'autonomous' organisation of women, or other oppressed groups. Their support for WAPC (and other groups, like Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners), was always at odds with their general policies. They had always argued that such organisations, and Black Sections were 'divisive' (although for a very brief period, in 1977-8 they had built a 'black section' of the LPYS — the Youth Section of the Jamaican People's National Party — under their own control, of course).

In the 1970s Militant were vehement enemies of 'feminism'. And for years they refused even to discuss lesbian and gay rights.

In 1974 there was a big strike by Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester, demanding equal opportunities for training and promotion. The white workers and their notoriously racist union officials opposed the strike and scabbed on it.

Militant blamed the strikers for splitting the workforce, and delivered many lectures on the need to win over the white workers. In fact the Asian workers had tried that and failed, partly because of the bureaucratic strangling of their union branch.

In a preview of Militant's scurrilous attacks on the Liverpool Black Caucus, Militant justified their line on the strike by diverting the argument into denunciations of a radical black lawyer who was helping the strikers.

Bureaucratism, routinism, self-centred smugness and tunnel vision: those are the hallmarks of Militant in the unions.

Socialist Worker

PAPER OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS



Socialist Worker and the Rank and File

By Jim Denham

Why would anyone in their right mind be at all interested in the history of the Socialist Workers Party's industrial work in the 1970s? Actually, it isn't such an esoteric matter as you might think; as one leading SWP theoretician put it in 1982: "Ours has been the only serious attempt since the 1920s to build a national rank and file movement in Britain (perhaps in the world). There are important lessons to be drawn from its failure."

That might be a slightly exaggerated and factionally too smug and self-flattering view (it ignores, for instance, the experience of the Socialist Labour League's industrial work in the late '50s and '60s) but it is certainly true that a lot of important lessons can be learned from the SWP and its ill-fated 'National Rank and File Movement'.

In the 1950s and '60s the SWP (then called the International Socialists) had been a very loose discussion club with little or no working class implantation. But in the mid-1960s and early '70s the IS began to tighten itself up and simultaneously made a vigorous turn to the industrial working class. To their credit, the IS at least recognised the central importance of the industrial struggle — unlike many 'revolutionaries' at the time who looked for 'new mass vanguards' and 'red bases' amongst students, vegetarians and people with stripped pine kitchen units. These are the people who now publish *Socialist Action* and those who now control *Briefing*.

IS's biggest 'turn to the class' came in response to the enormous wave of industrial militancy that blew up around the Heath government's Industrial Relations Act and its succession of incomes policies. Dockers, engineers, health service workers and, of course, the miners, took militant and often overtly political action in the face of the Tories' attacks.

Between 1972 and 1974 over 200 occupations of factories, offices, shops and shipyards took place. Finally, in February 1974, the miners forced Heath to call a general election ("Who rules Britain?" was Heath's unofficial slogan) which the Tories ignominiously lost.

The Birmingham-Oxford strike, 1982

"Our executive is supposed to be so left wing. We've even got a President who supports the dreaded 'Militant' tendency.

"But they're all piss and wind as far as I can see. They never wanted this strike, and they've given us no real support up to now."

That was the comment of a CPSA picket in Birmingham to *Socialist Organiser* (2 December 1982) during their three-month strike over jobs in October-December 1982.

The CPSA executive for 1982-3 had a Broad Left majority. But that Broad Left executive tried three times to end the strike with a compromise — twice failing, eventually succeeding. They did nothing to help spread the struggle. Kevin Roddy, a Militant supporter and then President of the union, made one of the attempts to end the strike in person.

The basic argument of Militant and their co-thinkers was that this was the wrong time and wrong issue for a fight. Better keep the union's powder dry for the 'big one' — the 1983 pay fight.

In this way they subordinated the class struggle to pre-ordained schemas worked out by a pre-ordained leadership. Instead of seeing the job of socialists as starting from and helping to develop the real struggles of the rank and file, they demanded that the rank and file fit into the schedules of the socialists.

80 DHSS workers in Oxford, nearly 1000 in Birmingham, struck to demand increased staffing. The background was increased pressure on the workers from two directions: both from the lengthening dole queues (meaning more work), and from the Tory government's determination to cut civil service numbers.

On October 27 Kevin Roddy proposed in

Oxford a deal which gave Oxford and Birmingham (between them) 52 extra posts temporarily — in return for CPSA nationally ending its overtime ban and ban on casuals, and promising no strikes on cuts or staffing. The deal was rejected unanimously in Oxford and 427-26 in Birmingham.

On November 19 the CPSA NEC again recommended the same deal — only slightly changed. Rejection was unanimous again in Oxford, 520-23 in Birmingham. The CPSA NEC began to do something, calling a one-day national strike on December 3.

But at the CPSA Broad Left conference on November 27, a motion to condemn the NEC for recommending acceptance was defeated. The motion, moved by *Socialist Organiser* supporter Penny Barnett and backed by the Oxford strikers, also called for extending the struggle to an all-out national strike.

On December 9 a national meeting of CPSA DHSS delegates voted for a proposal from Oxford to recommend an all-out national strike from January 17. A CPSA special conference was planned for January 12. The strength of the struggle was making itself felt despite the Broad Left.

But then the government retreated slightly — and the NEC used the Christmas break to sink the struggle.

Just before Christmas the NEC voted unanimously to accept a new offer, increasing the temporary extra posts to 100 and withdrawing the demand that the CPSA end the overtime ban and promised no strike action. The NEC cancelled the strike call and the special conference and ordered the strikers back to work.

Evidence was that top TUC and Labour Party leaders were central in engineering this deal. The CPSA Broad Left leaders went along quietly.

The experience of the struggles of the early '70s also taught many militants a lot about the inadequacy (and sometimes downright treachery) of the trade union bureaucracy. The main 'left-wing' grouping in the unions at the time, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) was completely dominated by the Communist Party and was almost entirely preoccupied with winning official positions and acting as a cheerleader for the left-wing of the bureaucracy.

It seemed like the ideal time to launch a rank and file movement that would link up militants across the industries and organise independently of the officials where necessary. In March 1974, IS called the first 'National Rank and File Delegate Conference' with the avowed aim of taking 'the first step' in building a national rank and file movement. It was a limited success in terms of numbers: the organisers claimed that about 450 delegates registered (although the only vote counted showed a total of 271, with abstentions uncounted). However, even at this early stage, many of the weaknesses that ultimately led to the failure of the whole project were apparent. One non-IS delegate wrote at the time:

"Taken all in all it was very much an IS conference, despite an elaborate pretence that it wasn't. Rank and file papers not controlled by IS were not invited to sponsor the conference, and therefore had no voice in the Organising Committee which, so far, remains unselected and is obviously selected by the IS leadership."

In other words it was basically a 'front' — or as the IS/SWP guru Tony Cliff described it, a 'conveyor belt' whose main intention was to draw militant trade unionists into IS. At about this time Cliff and the IS leadership were developing a grandiose plan to transform IS into the Socialist Workers Party, which would eventually displace Labour as the main political party of the British working class.

The ambiguous, unprincipled and fundamentally sectarian nature of the relationship between the Rank and File Movement and the IS/SWP was to dog the project throughout its existence, and eventually led to a lot of good militants (including many IS workers) giving up on it.

The other central weakness of the entire project was also apparent at the first conference: though dominated organisationally by IS, the whole affair was narrowly apolitical. The main official resolution was a general statement of militant trade unionism, which studiously avoided such 'difficult' issues as nationalisation, workers' control, international solidarity or women's rights. Even the issue of racism was scarcely touched upon. An amendment from Stanton Steelworkers (supported by *Workers Fight*, a forerunner of *Socialist Organiser*) raised the issues of workers' control, nationalisation, racism and women's rights. *Workers Fight* commented afterwards:

"Most indicative of the control of IS, as well as the politics of IS, was the incredible rejection of the Stanton amendment. It is scarcely credible that, without IS's urging, a conference of militant, politically oriented rank and file trade unionists would have opposed the inclusion in the 'programme' of a rank and file movement of demands for nationalisation. As for the voting down of the section on racism, this is scarcely to be understood except in terms of crude IS factionalism, a refusal to be 'corrected' by another tendency."

A second conference, in November of the same year, was slightly larger (49 shop stewards' committees sent delegates) but otherwise pretty much a repeat performance of the March event — with all the same problems very much in evidence. But after that came...nothing.

SWP theoreticians have since tried to explain away their failure by arguing that the 'objective situation' made building such a movement impossible: "In the wake of the Social Contract, industrial militancy collapsed — the number of working days lost due to strikes in 1976 was the lowest since the 1950s.

At the same time the world recession caused unemployment to soar, climbing above 1.5 million in 1977. This was not the environment in which the NRFM could flourish..." (Alex Callinicos, 1982).

This is, at best, a lame and mechanistic excuse for the failure of the project. There is no mechanical relationship between working class militancy and boom or slump. How the class reacts to these circumstances is determined in large part by its own immediate experiences (which in the mid-'70s were of unprecedented levels of militancy and success) and by the state of its organisations.

For example, the slump at the end of the '20s pushed the British working class down very badly, because of its defeats in the General Strike of 1926 and after. But in the USA the same slump had the effect — after the initial shock had worn off — of helping to spark the working class for the first time into a magnificent and successful drive to create mass industrial trade unions.

Callinicos' 'explanation' for the collapse of the NRFM is no more than an excuse for the IS's failure to give coherent political answers to the difficulties posed by the Wilson government and the Social Contract ('pure' militancy was no longer adequate — if, indeed, it ever had been). It is also a retrospective 'justification' for the fact that the IS leadership dropped the movement because it was not delivering the hoped-for level of recruits — in other words, the worst kind of cheap skate opportunism. So the NRFM was quietly dropped and the IS/SWP moved on to another wheeze — the 'Right to Work' campaign.

In fact, rank and file groups and papers (most, but not all, controlled by IS/SWP) continued to exist and even flourish in a number of industries (notably engineering) throughout the '70s: what was lacking was any overall national movement.

There was, in fact, a third National Rank and File Conference held — after more than a

three-year gap — in November 1977. This came in response to a series of militant revolts against the Social Contract — notably at British Leyland, Heathrow, Port Talbot steel works and in the fire service.

The 1977 conference was actually bigger than either of the 1974 conferences, but again the sectarianism of the SWP led the initiative up a blind alley: this time in the form of a crazy substitutionist call for a 'day of action' (organised by the NRFM!) in support of the firefighters on 7 December. Predictably, the strike call was a total flop and, once again, the NRFM was quietly dropped, its corpse to be formally buried in 1982.

But this failure was not inevitable. As noted above, it stemmed from the narrow sectarianism and inadequate politics of the IS/SWP. If, for instance, the proposal for a 'day of action' had been put as a demand on the TUC, all evidence is that an impressive campaign could have been built around it. But then, the SWP always has had difficulty working out how to deal with union leadership: at times (as in the SWP-controlled 'Engineers Charter' in the early 1980s) they seemed to argue against having any leadership and even against shop stewards having time off the job and access to telephones!

The mechanistic 'explanations' now pedalled by the SWP leaders for the failure of the NRFM parallel their similar 'explanation' for the SWP's decision to turn its back upon almost any serious union work in the 1980s.

According to the politics of Tony Cliff's 'downturn theory', no rank and file movement could be built, no major victories were possible and nothing much at all could be done beyond 'brick-by-brick' building at shop floor level (around issues like health and safety) until an economic 'upturn' came along — a position remarkably similar to that of Len Murray in the early '80s.

This premature acceptance of defeat, this crazy depressive pessimism, led to some

Was this "too political"?

This is the amendment that IS opposed at the March 1974 Rank and File Conference on the grounds that the ideas on fighting racism and a charter for women's rights were 'too political'.

This conference pledges itself to fight against racialism and religious sectarianism. We advocate campaigns to recruit immigrant workers to trade unions (using leaflets in the immigrants' own languages, etc.) We fight against any discrimination at work or within the unions (including social clubs). We fight for full equality in pay, conditions, status, grading, training, further education, access to skilled jobs and promotion opportunities, in support of any demands black or immigrant workers make for educational and special religious rights (holy day paid leave, right to wear religious dress, turbans, etc.) Against all immigration laws and controls or discriminatory legislation against their offshoots, the contract labour system, voucher system and deportations. For the physical defence of black workers under attack. For automatic official endorsement of industrial action by black or immigrant workers against instances of racialism whether they are in the minority or not.

We stand for the expropriation without compensation of the key branches of industry and finance, transport, distribution

and land. Likewise the expropriation of the most parasitic capitalists. We stand for the nationalisation of all enterprises that cannot meet the requirements of their workers. We advocate the placing of all such nationalised or expropriated enterprises under direct workers' control. We fight for workers' control over work conditions, over hiring and firing, over the actual aims of production and distribution in factories and branches of industry both as an advance within capitalist society and as a school for socialism — the collective ownership of the means of production by the working class organised as the ruling class. We demand workers' factory inspectorates with full legal powers. We demand an end to business secrecy — "open the books" — giving workers the right to investigate and expose publicly the operations of the capitalists, not just in one firm or branch of industry, but in all their financial and state connections. We oppose all schemes of participation where workers, instead of being responsible solely for the well-being of their class, take responsibility for profitability and work discipline.

For a charter of women's rights, including: We fight for full equality in pay, conditions, status, grading, training, further education, access to skilled jobs and promotion opportunities, equal state benefits, abolition of the separate category of women's jobs, 24-hour free state-run nurseries, special medical and hygiene facilities where appropriate, time allowances for women with family responsibilities to be fully paid by management. To offset the insecurity of seasonal, term time and other casual and semi-casual occupations, we demand full pay with a guarantee of re-employment. We demand free contraception and abortion on demand.

bizarre results, like the denunciation of miners' support committees as 'left-wing Ox-fam' for the first five or six months of the miners' strike!

There have recently been some signs of the SWP trying to get its act together again in the unions and to rebuild its old credibility amongst militants. SWP members have even started standing for shop stewards' positions again. But given the lousy reputation the organisation has won for itself (thanks to years of zany antics in the unions) it seems unlikely that it will ever regain the standing it once had, or rebuild any sort of rank and file movement.

Perhaps the biggest disservice the SWP has done the labour movement is to have discredited the very notion of 'rank and file-ism' amongst many militants. The term is now tainted with organisational sectarianism, narrow economism — indeed, full-blown syndicalism for most practical purposes in the unions — and a tendency to avoid the question of the union leadership.

All these faults did, indeed, characterise the IS/SWP's version of rank and file-ism. But they are all faults of the IS/SWP's politics — not inherent features of a serious rank and file orientation that takes as its starting point the needs of the class struggle and not the immediate organisational advantage of a particular sect.

Trotsky's criticisms of the Comintern's union work during the crazy 'Third Period' days of 1930 could equally well apply to the IS/SWP.

"What we are obliged to do is not to close our eyes to facts in the name of pitiful schemata, but to see the course of economic development as it really is and to work out trade union tactics on the basis of facts...for the Comintern...tactics consist of periodic zigzags and strategy is the arithmetical sum of the zigzags."

A broken spring...

As long as five years ago, when *Workers' Fight* was part of IS, we proposed that IS should take as one of its major objectives the building of a Rank and File Movement. We saw it as necessary, and incidentally a way of building an organised periphery around IS, rather than the approach of the IS leadership of direct mass recruitment into the organisation itself of people with, often, little political education and only a vague idea of what IS was.

Five years later on, IS has anything up to 4,000 members recruited on this loose basis, without selection or tempering and with little education other than the demagogic catch-cries of the IS leaders. Long ago this method of building the alleged 'revolutionary party', which leaves no method of leadership open to the IS leaders except internal manipulation and demagoguery, had destroyed any real internal democracy inside IS.

It is this organisation that now seeks to build a rank and file movement. It is probably inevitable that any such movement would be dominated by some political tendency. The question is, which tendency with which politics. The trouble with this movement is that it is IS, with its tallist, line-of-least-resistance politics that is dominating.

Nevertheless, on balance (and its discrete manipulations last Saturday notwithstanding), IS's domination so far is a political and not a bureaucratic domination. So far, that is.

Leon Trotsky once said that a revolutionary conception without a revolutionary will is like a watch with a broken spring. A rank and file movement led by the politics of IS also has a broken spring. It is the job of revolutionaries to fight to instal a new spring — that of Marxist politics.

From *Workers' Fight* August 6 1974

Direct action and politics

Jack Cleary reviews 'Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma', by A Y Badayev with an introduction by Tony Cliff, published by Bookmarks.

Tsarist Russia did not have parliamentary democracy. One of the basic political demands around which the workers' movement in Russia — perhaps the most consistently revolutionary workers' movement that has ever existed — organised was the demand for a democratic parliament on the model of the British or French parliaments.

After the defeat of the 1905 revolution, a feeble mockery of a bourgeois parliament, the Duma, was set up. It had no real power and was not democratically elected. For example, the workers elected their deputies in a special group (*curia*), and a worker's vote was worth only a fraction of the vote of various other social classes.

This Duma bore all the marks of its origin as a reactionary substitute for the democratic parliament demanded by workers and middle class alike, of something imposed by the vicious Tsarist reaction.

What should the attitude of the Russian workers be to this Duma? When it was first imposed the Bolsheviks boycotted it: there was still a chance to fight for something better, and not to boycott it would be to lend it authority and thus help the Tsar to set it up. But the revolution continued to ebb. Nothing better was likely in the period ahead.

So Lenin concluded that the working class should use the Duma as a platform from which to agitate and make propaganda which would help drum up the forces that could eventually go beyond the Tsar's feeble and hobbled parliament. Most Bolsheviks, however, did not agree. Lenin was virtually isolated in the Bolshevik ranks, and in uncomfortable agreement with the less revolutionary wing of the workers' movement, the Mensheviks.

But events — the continued decline of the workers' movement itself among them — converted most Bolsheviks to Lenin's view. And thus you got the paradox that the most consistently revolutionary party in history participated as fully as it legally could in the Tsar's reactionary and counter-revolutionary counterfeit of a parliament, and put it to good use as a labour movement platform. Lenin later commented that if the Bolsheviks had not known how to do such things there would have been no Russian workers' revolution in 1917.

Six Bolshevik deputies were elected to the Duma in 1912, and Badayev was one of them, and his book is an account of their work until 1915, when they were tried and sentenced to Siberian exile for life. It is a day-by-day account of the parliamentary fraction of the Bolshevik party as it immersed itself in the newly-revived Russian labour movement. Acting as one of a number of party bodies, subordinate to the party, the parliamentary fraction used the Duma platform to support workers in struggle and to give workers a political lead.

Badayev's account is an inspiring report from one part of the political front of the many-fronted class war waged by the

Bolshevik party, on the economic and ideological fronts as well as the political front.

This combination of different fronts of struggle was the essence of the Bolshevik party as a revolutionary workers' party — this, and not any formal organisational rules, for Lenin's organisation changed frequently, in line with changing conditions of legality and illegality, etc. It allowed the party to link flexibly with the spontaneous workers' movement in all its phases, whether of flow or ebb, militancy or exhaustion.

The struggle in the Duma was the main political front at that time and in that place. The Bolsheviks knew that it was necessary to be able to function on every front of the class struggle, and that otherwise the less revolutionary wing of the labour movement, or the bourgeoisie, would occupy the political space. And thus the Bolsheviks went into, worked within, and told the workers to orient politically to, the bloody-handed Tsar's reactionary Duma.

Almost as arresting as the self-linkage of the Bolsheviks to the reactionary Duma is the incongruous publication of this book by the British Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). The SWP thereby commits a dangerously self-exposing act of piety or commercial calculation (or both). It is as if Alexinsky or Bogdanov, Lenin's leading Bolshevik opponents on using the Duma, had published a pamphlet in favour of it!

Most of the time the SWP fights shy of propounding basic principles of any sort and of binding itself by them. It makes no dogmatic principle of anti-parliamentarism such as certain syndicalists and ultra-left 'council communists' do. Nevertheless, in what it writes and says about current politics there is a sub-text of dogmatic anti-parliamentarism.

It goes far beyond the necessary revolutionary socialist stress on direct action, on the primacy over parliamentary jousting of activities which involve workers directly in struggle for their own economic and other interests; it *counterposes* such direct action to parliament.

Parliament, concern for parliament, involvement in parliament, wish to win parliamentary elections — these are bad, these are necessarily and properly the terrain of the right wing and the soft left. Left-wing politics cannot win elections, at least in normal times, therefore concern for elections drags you irresistibly to the right.

Propaganda against parliament is central to the SWP, and even though it is never rigorously codified or even consistently expounded, they are in practical politics unconditionally hostile to parliament. For example, much that they say about the Labour Party, and the condemnation they make of socialists who are in the Labour Party for being there, is grounded on denunciations of the Labour Party for its involvement in parliament. They even explain the dirty dealings of Militant in Liverpool by the Labour Party's involvement in parliament.

If you focus on parliament — so the argument goes — then you must subordinate the class struggle to electoral considerations. So fight parliamentarism!

But in practice that means leaving parliament — and effectively, most of current politics — to the Labour Party right and soft left. The SWP focuses on industrial struggles and socialist propaganda for a future society. In the proper place of politics, the place filled by traditional Marxist parties and also by the Bolshevik party with *limited political objectives* — in that place the SWP puts the demand: 'build the SWP'.

It seems revolutionary and radical, but it isn't at all. It means abandoning the broad labour movement to others. The workers, perforce, will wind up accepting the answers that 'the others' give to the immediate political questions — like what to do about the Tories and what to replace them by, *now*.

This is a version of 'economism' (one of the one-sided predecessors of the Bolsheviks in the Russian labour movement) superficially 'Leninised' by the focus on 'the revolutionary party'.

The 'Economists' wanted to organise the workers, make socialist propaganda, organise a socialist party — and leave the political struggle against the Tsar and his system to the rising Russian bourgeoisie. They had the theoretical excuse that they expected the replacement of the Tsar to be not workers' power (because the working-class was too small and industry was too weak) but a bourgeois-democratic regime.

If the SWP would accept the analogy they would say: yes — and we expect the Labourites once more to be the government and each time to expose themselves, until they fall apart.

The problem is that you cannot separate out the Labour Party from the labour movement like that. The labour movement has to be revolutionised from within, and because the 'politics' of the SWP means leaving that movement to the right and soft left it is no politics at all as far as the labour movement is concerned. Throughout the years of bitter struggle by the left in the Labour Party, the SWP sat on the sidelines, sourly commenting. If the Bolsheviks had done the analogous thing in Russia, then there would have been no workers' revolution. There would have been a liberal or socialist-reformist labour movement at one pole, and a small 'maximalist' Marxist sect at the other, impotent and irresponsible, though very self-gratifyingly irreconcilable and r...r...revolutionary.

The SWP's contradictions are shown up in the introduction by Tony Cliff, which takes as its task to square the SWP's practice with the radically different practice which Badayev records. From paragraph one Cliff sets out to show that for the Bolsheviks "Parliament was never the central focus on political activity", and stresses that Badayev "shows the role the Bolshevik deputies played in the industrial struggle of the workers". True as it stands, but the *deflation* of the work of the deputies to that of auxiliary to the industrial struggle is a deflation of politics.

Industrial struggle alone *could not* be a central focus of 'political activity'. Whereas the job of Marxists, of those who want to build a revolutionary party according to Lenin's real model, is to link and combine the different fronts of the class struggle and integrate them into a strategy, Cliff is no less restrictively one-sided than the one-sided parliamentarians of the British labour movement.

Cliff says that the British labour movement, with its parliamentarism, is the pure antithesis of Bolshevism. Not so, or not quite. One-sided, a-political or pretend-political, syndicalism is the real opposite of British parliamentarism, both in logic and in the history of our movement. Bolshevism is distant from both, yet it subsumes both and transforms them into a qualitatively higher unity.

You would never think from Cliff's picture that the central political slogan of the Bolsheviks throughout this period was the demand for a fully governing, freely elected parliament, a slogan that remained central until *after* the October Revolution.

Socialists in the Lenin and Trotsky tradition would quarrel not, of course, with Cliff's positive emphasis on direct action, but with his one-sidedness. And with his a-historical history: for example, he makes much of the class composition of the Bolshevik Duma fraction, who were metal and textile workers, and then neglects to mention that the leader of the Bolshevik deputies, "the metalworker Malinovsky", was a police spy (shot by the Bolsheviks in 1918).

He belabours Eric Heffer for his views on parliament, accusing him of downgrading direct action, especially during the great struggles of the early 1970s, when the general strike was on the order of the day. He attacks Heffer for not advocating a general strike.

Well, though IS (the predecessor of the SWP) did advocate the general strike on and off after 1970, the record shows that in July 1972, when a quarter of a million workers struck spontaneously against the jailing of

five dockers under the Tory Industrial Relations Act, and the TUC declared a one-day general strike, forcing the government to release the five, IS *didn't* dare call for a general strike at the point when it mattered.

The depths of nonsense are reached when Cliff endorses (from the left) the ultra-right-wing claim that working-class industrial defeat can be electorally good for Labour, citing the steady growth of the Labour vote after 1926, which culminated in Labour being the biggest party in the House of Commons after the October 1929 general election.

The fact, of course, is that there is often a zig-zag pattern. Blocked in industry, the class turns to politics. Blocked in politics by a Tory government, as in the '50s, or frustrated by a right-wing Labour government, as in the '60s, the class turns, if employment and other conditions are favourable, to industrial struggle.

To say that one of these things is 'bad', to condemn the turn to politics because it isn't the 'pure' industrial class struggle, and implicitly to identify it as necessarily right wing — as Cliff does — is both stupid and defeatist.

Defeatist, because it is a central fact of working-class life that we experience industrial defeats, and that there is a limit to what can be achieved by industrial gains unless the workers 'go political'. Short of generalised industrial action — a general strike — leading to revolution, no amount of



pure industrial militancy can generate a socialist solution. The great merit of Bolshevism was that it linked up the industrial militancy of the Russian working class with revolutionary politics.

That being so, to 'insist' on the movement remaining on one, industrial, plane, and snobbishly to reject and disdain the other, political, plane — which is what Cliff does in the guise of rejecting Parliament — is to rule out real development of the real working class in the world as it is.

Cliff substitutes 'the party' for politics — or tries to, for of course 'build the party' can't and doesn't substitute for real politics. It is toy-town politics. The terrible consequence of toy-town Bolshevism is that the right and soft left have the arena of working-class politics left to them by default of the Marxists.

You might say that Cliff's formula is 'boom-time Trotskyism'. When the workers are on the up and up then we have a role — when they are down we have no political role, except to help to rebuild on the small, local issues and to make general socialist propaganda, and the right and soft left come in to their own.

But even this is incoherent. For the workers were very much on the up and up in 1973-4. We took on the Tory government, challenged its authority, and panicked Heath into a general election which he lost. **It was**

then that the right and soft left came into their own.

For they had the political wing of the movement; and the workers needed politics. The workers, however militant, had no governmental alternative to the Labour Party — and thus the great and successful industrial push against the Tory government resulted in a Labour government... which soon demobilised the industrial militancy.

That experience brings out the real essence of the matter for socialists as it is posed in principle and in British reality: the political struggle and the industrial have to be integrated and for socialists to be able to integrate them they have to do more than build an organisation — though that is irreplaceable — they have to win the ideological battle, against both the straightforward versions of ruling-class ideas and the more subtle versions we get within the labour movement which tie the workers to the bourgeoisie.

One of the central ideas of the latter sort is of course the notion that you can get socialism through parliament. But one of the sources of this false idea is that you can get some things through parliamentary politics. We cannot defeat the idea of socialism through parliament by counterposing to it not different politics *in parliament and everywhere else* but 'pure' industrial struggle. The SWP's a-political, or pretend-political, syndicalism and talk of 'building the revolutionary party now', is no substitute for engaging wholeheartedly in such 'parliamentary politics' as the fight to return a Labour government now.

True to its trimming, hovering and eclectic politics, the SWP will opportunistically say 'vote Labour' on election day — otherwise it would risk isolation. But that is only the election-time version of its routine abandonment of politics to the right. Indeed, at election time it is more glaring. In 1979 Paul Foot put it like this: 'For the next three weeks I am a very strong Labour supporter'.

The working class needs a revolutionary party. But such a party will not be a small propagandist apparatus, a small machine counterposed to the existing labour movement. A party is a party if it can minimally perform a certain range of activities, including conducting itself in all the affairs of the working class — which means all the political affairs of society, for these concern the working class, and if the working class does not have socialist answers it will accept the answers of the bourgeoisie.

The SWP cannot even perform the basic fulcrum activity of the revolutionary party which conditions everything else, including its conduct in the industrial struggle — the ideological battle.

The early Christians lived in daily expectation that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. It would be the end of the world, and the Kingdom of God would come into being instead.

Then as the decades passed they began to lose faith in the imminence of the Second Coming — and of course they never thought that they could do anything except pray to bring it about. So they turned instead to the belief that 'for now' the Church was the visible Kingdom of God on earth.

So too with the socialists who substitute for the Marxist work of political struggle within the labour movement the building-up of their own organisation. 'The party' becomes their Kingdom of socialism on earth.

Worse than the Christians, they regress from the Marxist belief in struggle on all fronts to a helpless waiting for the 'millennium', which for them is the revival of the industrial militancy of the '70s. (In this way they parallel earlier Marxists who waited paralysed for decades for the Great Slump to come back to radicalise the working class).

Hope for a millennium is comforting. It is especially comforting in periods of disappointment, setbacks and defeat, like that we are going through. But it is in its essence a turning away from the root of socialism — the working class in the whole range of phases and concerns of its struggles.

By Eric Heffer MP

Nowadays Neil Kinnock and the Labour leaders always try to avoid taking the side of striking workers. They fear being 'tainted' by association with trade union militancy.

They refuse even to commit themselves to the repeal of the Tories anti-union laws.

This is short-sighted nonsense!

One of the big things to remember is that we fought the Tory Industrial Relations Bill [1972-4] consistently in the House of Commons, and we gave total support to the workers in the struggles against it, **during the period it was law.**

And nowadays they say if you do that then you are bound to lose support!

In fact it was **precisely** the mobilisation of the workers in the factories and on the streets, against the Industrial Relations Act and in the great victorious miners' strike of 1972, and the **reflection** of that magnificent movement of the working class in the struggle we put up in the House of Commons, which led to the victory of the Labour Party in the February 1974 general election.

If we hadn't fought against the Industrial Relations Act of Heath, if instead of fighting we had surrendered — then we would have lost and lost without a fight at that.

There is no question about it. **You only get the support of the working class when you actually show them that you are determined to support them and lead them in their struggle.** That's as true now as it was then.

This watering down of socialist policies by the Labour leaders, this backing away from the necessary struggle, this acceptance of the agenda which has been set by the Conservative Party — it doesn't, and won't, win us support from workers in the trade unions.

It has the effect of **confusing** them and **demoralising** them in the face of the enemy.

These are the things that have to be stressed. What we must say is that all the anti-trade union legislation of the Tories — all of it! — has got to be repealed. **All of it, every single bit of it, without exception!**

There should be no question about it, the decision made at the last Labour Party conference was quite wrong on this issue. We must say that clearly too.

I was very disappointed in the TUC. The TUC passed a very good resolution about the Tory anti-union legislation, but they didn't vote at Labour Party conference for the ideas in their own resolution! Even the T&G itself backed away on it.

Now we've got to make certain there is a real fight within this movement to commit the next Labour government to get rid of all that viciously hostile Tory trade union legislation.

If a Labour government should refuse to get rid of it, then we must say plainly that what they are doing is helping capital to keep the workers disarmed and shackled and hamstrung in the struggle.

The labour movement must tell the Labour leaders that it is just not good enough for a Labour government to act as the disarmers of the working class. We must tell them **now.**



The Tories can be beaten!



Eric Heffer

Our attitude to breaking the law is one of the decisive questions in the labour movement now, because the Tories are using the law as naked class law to hamstring workers in struggle. We saw them use it recently against the dockers.

People have to be prepared to make a stand against bad law. There is no other way.

That is what history tells us, and not only the history of the labour movement. You can read about what happened during old disputes inside the church, for example. Baptists at one stage refused to pay certain taxes, and many of them went to prison, but in the end it was all dropped.

People said: "This is a rotten, lousy law. It is unfair, it is oppressive and we do not adhere to it, or accept it." They won!

If the whole trade union movement said: "We will fight and we will support the fight of all those who are making a stand", and if we had done this over the last period, then I think there would be a different situation now. But over the last 10 years the climate has changed sharply against us because on each occasion when

they should have taken a stand and made a fight of it the unions backed away.

Of course the Tories can be beaten! If there was a fairly general action by the working class movement right through the land, a big mobilisation — yes, of course we would win!

But you have to fight for that. You have to convince people that it is necessary and possible. And people will only be convinced it is necessary when they can see clearly what is happening to them under the Tories.

Many who feel it don't see it clearly enough. They try to dodge it, and avoid the uncomfortable conclusion. They try to make the best of things.

Of course, people grumble: "Well, I don't like it, it's terrible living in what begins to look more and more like a slave society, in the sense that workers and trade unionists are being forced to do things they wouldn't usually put up with if they didn't have the full weight of Tory class law against them". You hear it all the time. But still they accept it — because they can't see a clear alternative, or because the alternative they see is a very unequal struggle, in which even Labour's leaders don't support them.

If workers could say: "We're not going to have it!" and know that they would have the support of the whole labour movement, from the TUC to the Parliamentary Labour Party, behind them then it would be a different story. The whole scene could be transformed.

The lead given — or the lack of a lead — by the official labour movement is vital. It can make all the difference.

That is why it is so important that the left steps up and wins the fight to commit the official labour movement to support all workers in their struggle against the Tories and the employers.

And we must win the fight to commit the Labour Party to demolish the prison wall of punitive anti-union legislation which the Tories have built around the labour movement in the last 10 years. We can do it!