

strike-days for any year since 1926 — and by far the highest number of workers involved in strike action for decades (over 4½ million — twice as many as in 1968, nearly three times as many as in 1972). The first four months of 1980, with the steel strike, had strike figures running at a similar level.

Since May 1980 strike figures have suddenly plunged to the depression levels of 1976 and lower. The number of new stoppages in 1980 was the lowest figure since 1941 and strike-days in July to November were the lowest since 1966.

But there is another side to the picture. and the Edwardes-led offensive can be defeated.

Slump

The downturn in industrial militancy is obviously a product of the slump but its scope and depth are not part of some inevitable, automatic process. The slump conditions put weapons into the hands of the bosses and it becomes more and more difficult to win *despite* the existing trade union leadership. Experiences like the fiasco of the TUC's 'Day of Action' in May 1980 — largely a result of the half-hearted way it was organised — inevitably disillusion militants and dampen militancy. The call to get rid of the Tories is normally popular — but the cynicism people in the labour movement feel about the last Labour government means that, despite the transformation in the Labour party, few look forward with much hope to a successor which will solve their problems. This too dampens down industrial combativity.

The picture does not however show what the SWP is inclined to theorise: a fundamental, qualitative weakening of working-class organisation.

Potential

Inevitably a slump takes its toll, and this slump, together with the Tory policies which deepen it, has taken a specially heavy toll.

But there is still tremendous explosive potential. A major struggle, or of course, even a mild economic revival, could release it. One can confidently predict that even a mild economic recovery will unleash a new round of struggles.

In the first place, the downturn in strikes was not entirely spontaneous. There was a sharp and sudden turn-around between April and July. (April: 155 strikes beginning, 744,000 strike-days. July: 67 strikes beginning, 177,000 strike-days). It was not because of a sudden turn for the worse in the economic situation, or a dramatic defeat. It reflected a conscious decision by the trade union leaders.

May 14th, for the TUC, was an embarrassing left-over commitment from the winter's militancy. And after that they took the decision to put struggles on the shelf and wait for better days.

Indeed, the TUC policy on jobs is now *consciously* one of throwing its weight behind a particular section of the capitalist class. As the *Economist* puts it, "The TUC is relying on the Confederation of British Industry and Tory backbenchers to force its economic prescriptions on the

government: lower interest rates, selective import controls and a measure of inflation". A survey by the London Chamber of Commerce showed that 60% of firms favoured import controls, and in a circular to all branches the TGWU has said: "Trade union negotiators should join with employers in joint campaigns... against specific import penetration."

Weak

Instead of working-class action for the right to work — based on work-sharing under workers' control with no loss of pay and a policy of nationalisation without compensation — we are told to team up with the bosses (against workers abroad) and propose a policy of nationalism mixed with economic nuttiness.

At a time when closures, cutbacks and short time are escalating, this failure to fight on jobs must weaken the fight on all other fronts, in particular the wages fight, the fight against racism and the fight for full equality for women.

Of course, the downturn in strikes is not just the product of some conspiracy by union full-time officials against a rank-and-file otherwise red-hot for a fight. The bureaucrats' reasoning, that in the present slump strikes are on a hiding to nothing, and it's best to sit tight and salvage what we can, is accepted by many, perhaps most, workers.

But it would be equally wrong to think that the bureaucrats are just faithfully reflecting the workers' mood. The bureaucrats actively help to create the mood of pessimism which they then 'reflect'. And even when the rank-and-file's mood is defeatist, it is *not the same* as the bureaucrats' defeatism. A shop steward may be bitterly angry at the bosses' attacks, but s/he feels that, with constant threats of sacking and closures and no prospect of any real support from his or her top union leaders for a thorough-going battle now is not the time to fight. What about a top official? He or she may well be vexed by the bosses' and government attacks — though seeing them less in class terms than as a disruption of the desirable friendly relations between management, government and unions. He or she aims to preserve as much as possible of these friendly relations — perhaps occasionally using rhetorical threats of 'civil disorder' and the like to try and twist the bosses' and government's arms. He or she 'calculates' that any fight is best postponed — but, unlike the shop steward, the top union official has the direct possibility of rousing an organisation of thousands of workers, a force which can actually turn the tables and upset the calculations. The bureaucrats at national level could rouse the working class and have a good chance of defeating the Tory offensive.

Sackings

The TGWU and AUEW leaders had that possibility over the BL pay settlement. And they deliberately sabotaged a fight. The sackings at Longbridge were the direct result.

But many demonstrations — especially the May 14th Day of Action — have shown that a militant minority exists, willing and eager to fight the Tories with industrial action. On a smaller scale, but with great

courage, the struggles at Brixton and Gardners have given the same message. So has the anti-cuts conference called by the Lambeth labour movement on November 1st.

When other workers see a winnable immediate cause, they will then rally to that minority. Victory or defeat then depends on how well-organised, how politically clear, and how independent of the trade union bureaucracy that minority is.

If the working class is cowed by the slump, that does not mean that the Tories' programme of drastically weakening trade union strength has won out. The Left still has every chance of mobilising the labour movement to stop them. To do that, we must work tirelessly to organise rank-and-file militants; to develop them into a force which, while not isolating itself by premature confrontations with the bureaucracy, is capable of offering an independent lead when necessary; and to arm those militants with policies that can guide and generalise an effective class response to the bosses' attacks, especially work-sharing under workers' control with no loss of pay and automatic inflation-proofing of wages in line with a workers' price index.

The generalising, political slogans are vital. For it is probably a fact that the economic slump does seriously close off the perspective of limited sectional economic struggles until the start of some economic recovery. The point is to fight instead for generalised struggle, not (as with the TUC's calculations) for no struggle at all.

Struggle

Many workers are well aware of the need for generalised struggle, and have been acting accordingly — on one front at least. For, although industrial direct action is the regular and indispensable lifeblood of class struggle, it is not the whole of it. There are many other important forms of class struggle. And workers have been taking up one of them by moving into the Labour Party in significant numbers and trying to get control over the party leadership and ensure that there is never again a Labour government like 1974-9.

That struggle cannot be a substitute for, or independent of, the industrial direct-action struggle. But it is important in its own right. It also has important *implications* for the industrial direct-action struggle. For the workers' willingness to take direct action against the Tories must partly depend on how much of a perspective they can see for a real alternative to the Tories.

And there is a direct rebound from the Labour Party democracy struggle onto the struggle for democracy in the unions.

So revolutionaries must strive to give a lead on this front of struggle, too: by drawing workers into the Labour Party, organising the left on the broadest basis to win Party democracy, and arguing for Marxist politics.

We also need a perspective which ties together the different fronts of struggle: a fight for a workers' government, a government totally independent of the capitalists, basing itself on the organisations of the working class that in their breadth and depth most express the will of the workers to establish their own power.