
SOLIDARITY BETRAYED

This pamphlet tells the story of the Basingstoke post office strike of August 1983 – and the lessons of how it was sold out by the union officials.

The strike was against the victimisation of Alan Fraser, who was a leading member of the union branch at the post office and had played a big role in making the branch more active industrially and politically.

It was sold out by John Taylor and Gerry Casey, union officers who had a reputation for being on the left of the union.

Alan Fraser is a member of the Socialist Organiser Alliance, which seeks to organise a Marxist left wing fighting in an integrated way on all fronts – industrially, ideologically, in the Labour Party, in campaigns, in the women's movement, and in other movements of the specially oppressed. In this pamphlet, the Basingstoke Socialist Organiser group present their account of an important struggle.

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Solidarity betrayed



LESSONS OF THE BASINGSTOKE POST OFFICE WORKERS STRIKE

**Basingstoke
Socialist Organiser**

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Foreword

I have no doubt that Alan Fraser's sacking was a direct result of his activities as an effective trade union representative. It may only have been a coincidence that it occurred in the same week as this year's TUC conference, but nevertheless a parallel can be drawn between the shameful going-on in Blackpool by the UCW and other union leaderships and what happened in Basingstoke.

The TUC's decisions to hold talks with Tebbit over anti-union laws and to begin to weaken the links between the unions and Labour Party shows the same retreat before the Tories as did the UCW leadership in the face of Post Office management. It is in stark contrast to the fighting spirit and solidarity shown by the membership at Basingstoke. I remain convinced that if the UCW leadership had wanted to intervene in the dispute to save Alan Fraser's job, they were in a position to do so.

There are many lessons for all of us to learn from the strike. One is that we can no longer afford to have an isolated local leadership of a few individuals who can be picked off. Each member must play their part. Nor can we expect the UCW national leadership to fight our battles when they are totally removed from

what is happening at local level.

Despite our defeat, should a similar situation arise I have every confidence that it would be met with the same determination. I am equally sure that the lessons learnt by our membership will not be forgotten and we do not want them to be lost on the rest of the union either. For this reason the branch committee has produced a factsheet on the strike for circulation in the union.

Its conclusion well sums up our feelings.

"Alan Fraser was an effective local union officer, our members recognised Alan's determination, ability and compassion in defending his fellow workers. The sad fact is that the UCW has lost a fighter and our members have lost a comrade they will not forget.

"The message for us is clear -- our existing union leadership have sold us out. The way forward must be to launch a fight to bring that leadership to account. If need be we must replace them with a leadership that will truly fight for the needs of the members".

Ron Rodwell,
Secretary, Basingstoke UCW Postal Section
October 1983.

Background to the battle

FOUR years ago, following the election of the Tory government, Post Office policy began to change at a local and national level. A general crackdown on the working practices of postal workers started.

Basingstoke postal workers were not excluded from these new policies. The local UCW branch was at this time very weak, having a conservative leadership and very little membership involvement.

However, the sacking of a young postman in 1980 led to strike action by the postal workers at Basingstoke. The initiative in this was taken by Alan Fraser and Ron Rodwell. After four days' action in defence of his job, the postman was fully reinstated.

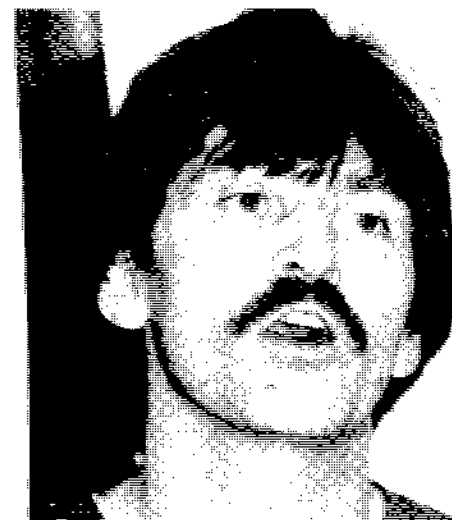
Following this dispute a new branch leadership emerged. Among this leadership were Alan Fraser (Postal Secretary) and Ron Rodwell (Branch Secretary). The new leadership carried through a change of local policy.

The first step was to introduce mass meetings held in the workplace during work time. This gave the membership the opportunity to discuss issues and formulate ideas and policy for themselves. The members began to develop an awareness of the tasks ahead.

Regular committee meetings were also introduced to encourage and develop the new activists who had taken up union positions. A regular bulletin began giving information on national and local issues. The new union notice board in the sorting office contained all correspondence between management and local officers, once again giving the members the opportunity of discussing the issues in full.

The branch took up affiliation to the local Labour Party, Trades Council and CND, with full delegations attending. The membership were beginning to turn outwards to the wider labour movement.

The response of management was an attempted crackdown. Harsh discipline on sickness, speed-ups and attempts to change agreed working practices were tried. This was backed up by an attempt to introduce a new productivity scheme (IWM) which had the



Alan Fraser. Photo: John Harris.

blessing of the UCW national leaders. The crackdown was resisted and met with little success -- the productivity scheme was firmly rejected.

In September 1982 management suspended a postman and tried to alter working practices once again. A 24 hour strike followed, demanding the lifting of the suspension. Management crumbled and reinstatement for the postman was won. Management had been trying to reduce the number of duties in the office. But after this second strike the union went onto the offensive and *more* duties were won by the members.

The increasing awareness developing amongst the members was demonstrated by their response to an address to one of their meetings by three GMBATU hospital workers during the NHS dispute of 1982. Postal workers took half-day strike action on the NHS Day of Action, with 70 postmen attending the hospital picket line. Strong links were developing between the local GMBATU (health) and UCW branches.

Shortly after the NHS dispute the first Labour Party workplace branch in Basingstoke was set up by activists in the Post Office. A new political consciousness was growing among the members.

The Broad Left connection

AS WELL as his activity as an activist in the workplace, Alan Fraser's role as South-East regional organiser of the Communication Workers' Broad Left had brought him to the attention of the union's national leadership.

A letter in July from General Secretary Alan Tuffin to Alan's branch confirmed the leadership's special interest. In it Tuffin attacked a circular issued by the South-East Broad Left which had criticised, among other things, the EC's failure to adequately consult the membership over the Labour Party leadership elections, and its failure to defend victimised militant Bill Willoughby.

The clear purpose of the letter was to intimidate Alan and isolate him as a 'trouble-maker' in his branch. The branch secretary's letter in reply, refusing the invitation to carpet Alan, must have come as a disappointment. It certainly confirmed that stronger measures would be needed if the union was to be rid of Alan Fraser.

Fear and paranoia have been the standard reaction of the Post Office union leadership to the emergence of the Broad Left. Its growth has been met by a mixture of witch-hunting and rule changes.

Set up from informal discussions in 1980, the UPW Broad Left got off the ground the following year. Gerry Casey, later to play an

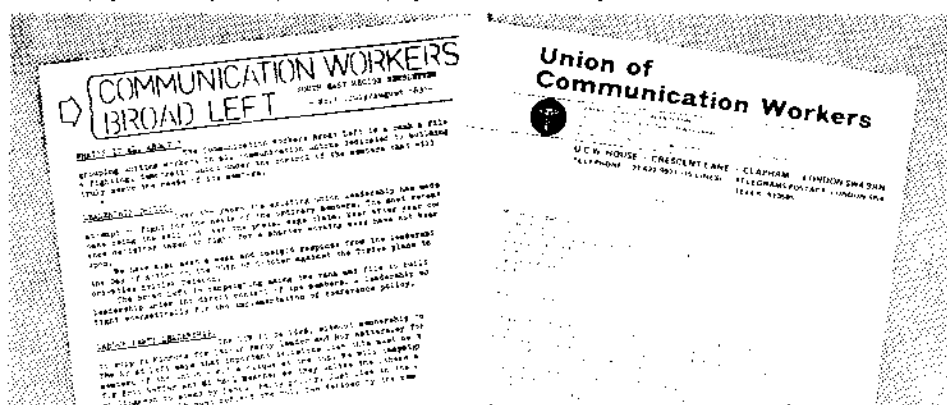
important part in Alan's victimisation, attended the founding meeting and was on the Broad Left slate for the National Executive Committee.

The Broad Left had a fairly successful initial period, mainly through promoting Tony Benn's candidacy as Deputy Leader. Despite attempts by the then General Secretary Tom Jackson to prevent it from taking place, over 400 delegates attended the Broad Left fringe meeting to hear Benn speak at the 1981 conference.

Ominously, in the Labour Party leadership debate at that year's conference, the future General Secretary, Alan Tuffin, made plain where he stood on attempts by the rank and file to organise independently. In his speech he pointed angrily to the growth of Broad Lefts in other public sector unions, notably the POEU and CPSA. He vowed that his union would not suffer the same fate.

The 1982 Rules Revision conference saw the Broad Left officially 'outlawed', it was prevented from using the union's name or meeting to discuss union business.

Regrettably, for this and other political reasons, the Broad Left has not flourished. Alan Fraser's victimisation is clearly seen by the union right-wing as another helpful deterrent to its development.



Union general secretary Alan Tuffin responded to a Communication Workers' Broad Left leaflet by inviting Alan Fraser's branch to put him on the carpet.

The causes of the strike

ON AUGUST 17 Alan received a notice of sacking from the Post Office management. The reason given for the dismissal was attendance - a total of fifteen days absent in the previous 12 months, nearly half of those as a result of a back injury.

The issue of absenteeism is taken particularly seriously by the Post Office. Such time off, for whatever reason, has long been used to discipline members of the workforce. Yet attendance records as bad or worse than Alan's are not that rare. Joe Payne, UCW Regional Secretary, commented that he had known many successful appeals in worse circumstances.

But the feeling among branch members was that the issue of attendance was not the whole story. Alan had played a big part in the growing militancy and effectiveness of the branch, and was thus a thorn in management's side. They knew, too, that there had been a string of previous attempts to discipline Alan unfairly,

including even falsifying evidence against him.

About a year ago Alan's signature had been forged on Late Attendance slips, for which he later received an apology. At the end of December last year attempts had been made to discipline him on trumped-up charges of leaving letters behind - again apologies were extracted. Dates were changed to add two additional days to his previous year's sick record.

There is little doubt that management's decision to put him on a six-day week of Sam starts was aimed at building up attendance irregularities. The general atmosphere of harassment and intimidation created by management was added to by frequent errors in Alan's wage packets.

Any doubts about the validity of management's reasons for Alan's sacking were soon removed by the reaction of the membership. To them it was a clear-cut case of victimisation for trade union activities. And they were prepared to back opinion with action.

The strike begins

FOLLOWING the sacking a mass meeting of 120 immediately voted to strike, with only one vote against. The strike began on Saturday September 3rd.

It was Monday before the Union of Communication Workers (UCW) Regional Office could be contacted, but the pickets had already convinced Sunday night's shift to join the strike.

On Monday, Joe Payne, Regional Secretary, urged the Regional Post Office to lift the dismissal on grounds of a procedural technicality. The management wouldn't comment at that stage but agreed that if there was a technical error they would back the lifting of the dismissal.

The branch had the second of what became

daily mass meetings, and the first strike bulletin was issued.

On Tuesday Gerry Casey, UCW Regional Officer, arrived. He had little knowledge of what the dispute was about, and admitted that his brief was to end the strike.

All-day three-way phone calls between Casey, UCW National Office John Taylor, who was at the TUC in Blackpool, and the Regional Post Office HQ, built up hopes. The mass meeting that day again voted to continue the strike.

The management agreed to the appeal being brought forward to Wednesday in Basingstoke. Casey told the strikers that he was confident of winning the appeal.

Hospital workers, members of GMBATU,

had for the second day joined the picket line, bringing with them a donation from the NHS hardship fund with a promise of more to come. The picket lines remained heavily manned from 4.30am until after midnight.

Other Post Offices in the area were now refusing to handle Basingstoke mail, and Securicor's union MATSA (a section of GMBATU) refused to cross the lines, thus bringing Giro to a halt.

The spirit on the picket line was high. As the appeal was heard on Wednesday, a second strike bulletin was prepared. But the confidence turned first to a sinking feeling and then to anger as the appeal was bungled by Casey. He simply went through the motions of defending Alan. He seemed to be under pressure. Manage-

ment went off to lunch giving no answer.

At 4pm the membership, having been kept waiting for three hours, were told by Casey that the appeal had failed.

He urged them to return to work and said that the only hope now was to write to Post Office HQ asking for Alan's job back on 'humanitarian grounds'.

The strikers denounced him for trying to sell them out, and again voted to stay on strike. From that point on picketing became even stronger.

By this point the stand taken by the members was drawing increasing support from other sections of the local labour movement, and a question mark stood over the further role of the national officials following the failure of the Casey sell-out attempt to break the strike.

Solidarity action

ALAN FRASER is a Socialist Organiser supporter. The local SO supporters group had backed up his work in the Post Office for some time. When the victimisation strike began, the SO group threw its full weight into organising and building support for the postal workers in the local labour movement.

The leading role in this was taken by the hospital branch of GMBATU, whose branch leadership contains several supporters of Socialist Organiser. GMB stewards won donations from hospital union funds and organised special issues of their branch bulletin to prepare for a pay queue collection which raised a further £64 for the postal workers.

Around this core of hospital workers, whose branch banner was on the Post Office picket line for the full week, delegations, donations, banners and messages of support were kept flowing from the Labour Party, Labour councillors, LPYS, Trades Council, NGA, other trade unions, plus full-time officials of GMBATU and NUPE. On Friday London UCW Broad Left supporters organised a delegation to the picket line of UCW members from Croydon. Several SWP members were also regular supporters.

This action clearly had a positive effect on the strikers by widening their view of the working class movement and stiffening their resolve to press on. Seeing the postal workers in struggle in turn had a strong effect on those



Post workers showed solidarity with health workers — and received solidarity in return. Photo: John Harris.

who supported them.

The links and solidarity which can be built through this type of action should be a standard part of any trade union struggle.

'Black Friday' - the strike is broken

THE NEWS that UCW Assistant Secretary John Taylor was coming from the TUC on Friday again raised hopes of union support.

Taylor had persuaded Regional Post Office management to hear the second appeal in Basingstoke. During the week Gerry Casey had been in touch with Taylor in Blackpool and Taylor had apparently been insisting that the strikers' best course was to stay out. On arrival Taylor admitted to the local branch officers that he was in no doubt that Alan was being victimised for his trade union activities. He went even further and pledged that he would get Alan's job back or escalate the action.

Alan and UCW Branch Secretary Ron Rodwell were left outside while three union officers, Taylor, Payne and Casey, negotiated. Alan told Taylor the bottom line as far as he was concerned was a temporary transfer, with guaranteed return to Basingstoke. Top line was immediate reinstatement in the Basingstoke office.

After four hours of talks Taylor returned with only useless formulas. Taylor had phoned three different Regions asking them to take Alan and was refused.

Then Taylor came out with an astounding offer — management were offering a buy-off of £6,000, and Taylor was insistent that Alan should take it. Here was someone sacked for straightforward absenteeism and management were offering them £6,000 to quit!

Alan took a principled stand and refused to take the money. This infuriated Taylor and he was sure he had spotted a weak link when he called in Alan's wife Angela (also an SO supporter) to persuade him to take the money. She told him to stuff it.

By the time the mass meeting took place Taylor's previous talk of 'escalation' had now been replaced by an all-out determination to bury the strike. Against the wishes of the strikers he insisted that all non-strikers left the meeting, including the UCW delegation from Croydon. With a left reputation to defend, Taylor wanted as few witnesses as possible to the massacre.

Whereas Casey had been a willing amateur Taylor was the professional. He did not disguise his hostility, attacking Alan's attendance record and saying there was no possibility of getting his job back. He added that if the strike did go on the national officials would wash their hands of it.

Even then the workers voted to continue their action. Claiming that the majority to stay out was not large enough, he demanded another vote. The local officials were confused by the sudden change, and with the members tired both physically and mentally a second vote narrowly overturned the first. It was the end of the road and they had to return to work.

Emotion, frustration and exhaustion broke, and as Angela Fraser finally reached the platform to say that if they had voted to continue they would win, many strikers broke down and wept openly. They knew they could have won.



John Taylor (second from left) during the Grunwick dispute

The UCW hit-men

John Taylor

JOHN TAYLOR made his name in the Union of Post Office Workers as a champion of the rank and file, often in defiance of the union's national leadership. As an organiser of the London District Council in 1977 he supported the unofficial blacking of Grunwick's mail by Cricklewood sorters.

This raised real hopes of victory in that marathon strike for union recognition. The Cricklewood workers' courageous stand was brutally sabotaged by UPW Deputy General Secretary Norman Stagg, who went so far as to threaten them with expulsion from the union and the sack if they did not call off their strike.

At the 1978 union conference Taylor supported a resolution condemning the Executive's action. Among other things Taylor said then was, "I believe that with strong leadership the members of the UPW are one of

the most loyal groups in the labour and trade union movement". And: "The only time our members will become divided is when we don't get direct leadership from the top". The irony of these words will not be lost on the UCW members in Basingstoke.

In Jack Dromey's book, 'Grunwick: the work as story', Taylor is described thus: "Taylor, whose power base in London was the Eastern District Office where he had worked as a sorter from the age of sixteen, was a tough and determined individual. Very much a militant within the UPW, he was a brilliant speaker and a rising star in the union, to whose National Executive Committee he had just been elected".

The ultimate betrayal of the Grunwick strikers at the hands of the TUC did have some uses: it acted as a stepping stone for both Jack Dromey (in the TGWC) and Taylor to further their careers and become full-time union officials. As a UCW Assistant General Secretary, Taylor was to use his 'brilliant' oratory to full effect at the Basingstoke Black Friday meeting, browbeating the strikers back to work.



John Taylor made his left-wing reputation at the time of the mass pickets outside Grunwick

Gerry Casey

GERRY CASEY has not always been a strike-breaker. As a Postman Higher Grade in Oxford Post Office he spent many years fighting for principle as an officer in what was a mainly right-wing branch. Often he was a lone voice, but he was not afraid to battle against the odds. And, when winning the argument mattered most, he was able to get solidarity action off the ground for both local and national disputes.

But the widespread respect for Casey in the Oxford labour movement was not just due to his record of integrity in the Post Office union. Casey was the left's candidate for President of the local Trades Council in a drawn-out struggle involving the TUC at national level, local bureaucrats, and the rank and file.

Stemming from a walk-out by some right-wing and Communist Party delegates at the 1976 AGM, the TUC held an 'enquiry' and reconstituted the Trades Council a few months later. Casey stood for President against careerist right-winger John Power and was defeated along with the other candidates on the left's slate in a highly polarised meeting. There then followed year after year of struggle by the left against a bloc of witch-hunting, dictatorial right wing and CP officers, who ultimately could only win a vote once a year - for their slate at the AGM.

Throughout this testing time Casey never wavered. With the left the target of outrageous abuses of democracy and red-bating he remained resolute and committed to the fight. Finally, in 1981, Casey was elected President.

Ironically, soon after this triumph Casey was also elected to the UCW National Executive as a Broad Left candidate, and the pressures of this national work led to his gradual withdrawal from Trades Council activity and, eventually, his decision for this reason not to stand for the Presidency in 1983.

The process of divorce from the base of the trade unions was a big factor in his subsequent degeneration. He became living proof of the power of a trade union apparatus to compromise those of even the highest trade union principle.

As one of the twenty-two lay members on the UCW executive he is removed from the workplace for the whole period of office and has dull, routine shift-work replaced by a cushy



Gerry Casey (left) in more militant days. Photo Socialist Press.

life. Petty perks and a diet of professional compliments swell you with a false sense of your own importance. Lost contact with the membership leads to lost confidence in the strength of the working class. Every concession you make whets the appetite of the bureaucracy to devour you: to make you become part of them and provide some superficial legitimacy for their crimes.

It takes more than trade unionism to resist this. In fact it is the limitations of mere trade unionism which provide the conditions for it to flourish.

Gerry Casey in 1983 is a far cry from the days when he was a predictable and fearless denouncer of bureaucracy. In 1976 he chaired a conference of the Campaign for Democracy in the Labour Movement and spoke out about attacks by union officials on democratic rights.

The report of his speech in Socialist Press reads: "Highlighting the fact that repression of democracy in the unions, while definitely growing as a threat to jobs and living standards of union members, is not new. Comrade Casey pointed to three previous instances where stewards had been victimised by management with the collaboration of union officials - at Ford Halewood in 1971, at Pilkingtons Glass works in St Helens and in Leylands Cowley Assembly Plant in 1974". Prophetic words, to which we might now add Basingstoke Post Office, 1983.

Lessons for the future - the struggle goes on

UNDERESTIMATING the ability of a union bureaucracy to betray may sound like a mere hackneyed old phrase, but it remains the most common epitaph for defeated struggles. The Basingstoke experience was different only because responsibility on this occasion lay not with the right wing, but with individuals regarded as being on the left of the national leadership.

Burying these left reputations is an urgent task. The UCW Basingstoke branch has set the right example by condemning the conduct of the national officials involved.

With the whole of the public sector under attack from the Tories and much of it threatened by privatisation, the victimisation of key militants, already a feature of the state-owned motor industry, is likely to increase. Defence in

such cases is never easy; the employer chooses the time and the issue and often simply getting action is an achievement.

Resisting sabotage from within the workers' own organisations is harder still. The only serious possibility of this happening is through the development of a political analysis of the labour bureaucracy, understanding why it can act so blatantly against the interests of the membership and convincing the rank and file to rely only on its own strength.

Organisation is important: the way Basingstoke UCW had gone about transforming the union branch from a fossil into a fighting unit is a model of what can be achieved. Equally the formation recently of a Labour Party workplace branch there provides another important vehicle for taking up the fight against the bureaucracy.

On a national level the Broad Left remains of central importance, though this is not to ignore its present limitations. Though the old-style, Communist-Party-dominated Broad Lefts have given way recently to more active, campaigning bodies, there remains far too much emphasis in the UCW on that same 'electoral machine' conception of a caucus. The way forward must be much more turned towards providing a lead in struggles and mobilising.

Above all is the continuing fight for democracy and accountability. All full-time officials should be subject to regular election and the right of recall and receive no more than the average wage of those they represent. The five year re-election rule, won recently after a Broad Left campaign, faces its first test with John Taylor due for re-election. It will provide a useful measure of how quickly and how much the lessons of Basingstoke have been learned.

Two pamphlets summing up the ideas of Socialist Organiser. 'Where We Stand' - 20p plus 15p postage. 'How to fight the Tories' - 10p plus 15p postage. Or the two together, 45p including postage. From Socialist Organiser, 28, Middle Lane, London N8.



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15. All full-time officials to be subject to regular election and right of recall. Implementation of the 5 year re-election rule is a welcome first step. Full time officials to receive no more than the average wage of the members they represent.
16. For the right of all candidates in elections to campaign for office and publish election addresses.
17. Full support for the democratic changes passed at recent Labour Party conferences. For the involvement of all Post Office/British Telecom workers in the Labour Party to build a mass membership, with workplace branches, and opposition to all witch-hunts and expulsions of socialists.
18. Labour to power on a socialist programme including the implementation of Clause 4.

To join the Broad Left, send £5 (cheques/POs made payable to 'Communication Workers' Broad Left') and a stamped addressed envelope to the Treasurer, Dave Perceval, 32 Huntly Road, London SE25.

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