

**Socialist
Organiser**

**Trade
union**

DEMOCRACY

SPECIAL The obstacles to the
fight for new leadership

Fighting for new policies and real control

OVER RECENT years, and especially since the 1979 general election, a struggle for renewal has been shaking the labour movement.

Learning from the experience of the 1974-9 Labour government, constituency Labour Party activists have fought for accountability of MPs to Party policy — to make sure the next Labour government bases itself on the labour movement to act against the capital-

ist establishment, rather than vice versa.

This fight for democracy — for Labour policies to be actually carried out — has gone together with battles for those policies to be really socialist.

Tony Benn's deputy leadership campaign took political issues into the trade unions as never before. But it also showed the size of the task to be done in the unions.

In many unions the membership had no voice — or it had only a botched-up 'consultation', like the TGWU. In NUPE it became clear that the official support for Labour democracy at the top had not been translated into any real effort to lead and involve the rank and file.

Now, with the Bishops Stortford deal, the top union leaders are

trying to put a stop to the struggle to transform the Labour Party.

They plead the necessity of unity to win the next election for Labour. But another Labour government like the last one is not much of an election-winning prospect. And above all it would not be adequate to what the working class needs in the present crisis.

It would predictably be a failure — and lead to the return of Tory reaction, perhaps in a much worse form than Thatcher.

Link

The strong link between the fight in the Labour Party and the fight in the trade unions could not be clearer.

Many trade unionists are drawing the conclusion that a fight for trade union democracy is necessary, linked with and parallel to the fight for Labour Party democracy. If MPs and Labour leaders should come up regularly for 'reelection' or election, then so should union officials.

The need for trade union democracy. At BL, eleven general secretaries stepped in over the heads of the Joint Negotiating Committee to fix a sell-out. AUEW President Terry Duffy boasted he was 'backing England'.

In the recent Ford pay dispute, as the disgusted convenor of the Swansea plant complained, a single phone conversation between TGWU full-timer Ron Todd, ACAS, and Ford, was enough to get the democratic strike decision of thousands of workers overturned.

The AUEW leadership have also recently flouted union rules to withdraw official support from the Laurence Scotts fight for jobs in Manchester.

And the women's movement has added a new dimension to the fight for labour movement democracy — demanding that the labour movement be transformed to suit the needs and interests of the doubly oppressed half of the working class, women at home and at work.

The fact that the fight for democracy and accountability must run hand in hand with the fight for a programme of socialist policies to arm the working class with a genuine answer to the bosses' offensive.

The so-called 'Alternative Economic Strategy' embraced by Benn and by many left wing opponents of the existing leaders of the labour movement rests both on divisive nationalism (import controls) and on the belief that it is possible to 'plan' the crisis-ridden anarchic capitalist economy.

To defend jobs, wages and working conditions, we need to take action on demands which start not from what capitalism can or might afford, but from the independent needs of the working class.

This means for instance fighting for cost of living clauses in pay agreements to protect wages against inflation; fighting for occupations, supporting strike and blacking action, and for work-sharing without loss of pay in opposition to employers' plans for

redundancy; and demanding the nationalisation of major industries and a crash programme of useful public works to create jobs at trade union rates of pay.

Such demands are consistently stifled and sabotaged by the present bureaucratic leaders who seek instead simply a basis to coexist with the employers.

Conference

With these points in view, Socialist Organiser together with London Labour Briefing and others is co-sponsoring on March 6 a conference on democracy in the trade unions and the Labour Party.

This pull-out marks the beginning of a series of articles in coming weeks around this theme.

Future issues of Socialist Organiser will carry further discussion including our suggestion for a platform of demands for democracy in the trade unions, as well as more reports on the particular problems facing militants fighting for democracy in other key unions.



CONFERENCE

Democratise the labour movement!

WHERE: Lanchester Poly, Priory St, Coventry.

WHEN: Saturday March 6, 11 to 4.30

INITIAL SPONSORS: Socialist Organiser Alliance, London Labour Briefing, Oxford Trades Council, Nottingham Labour Briefing, CPSA British Library Branch

DELEGATES: and observers invited from all labour movement organisations. Individuals also welcome. Credentials £2.

CRÈCHE: Available.

WRITE TO: Democracy Conference, c/o Socialist Organiser, 28 Middle Lane, London N8.

Coventry March 6

Trade Union Democracy Special



NUPE: A Nobody became General Secretary!

THE 1979 Winter of Discontent gave NUPE the reputation of being a union to be reckoned with — the union central in the 'low pay dispute' which helped bring the Callaghan government to rest.

Alan Fisher and the NUPE leadership were violently attacked in the capitalist press as the determined militants throwing the country into chaos in pursuit of the £60 minimum wage and 35 hour week claim.

Any NUPE member will tell you how far from the truth this was.

The leadership did everything possible to ensure that the action was contained to selective strikes which served only to demoralise the membership, who saw it having no effect on the employers while losing themselves wages.

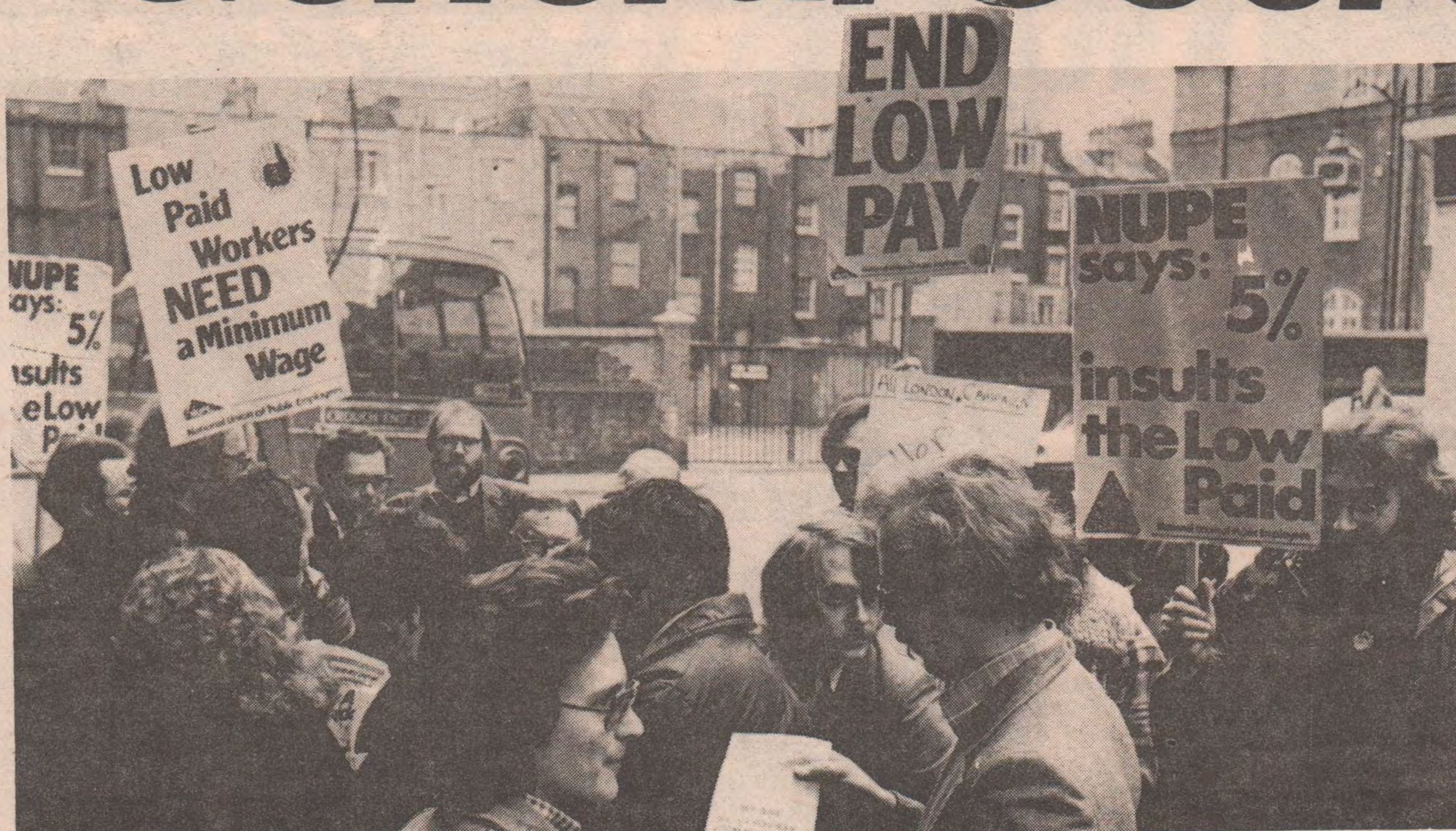
An all-out strike was deemed out of the question, even though this could have closed the country down.

The only section which won the claim was the only section to go on all-out strike for two weeks — the London Borough of Camden.

The NUPE leadership argued then, as they have argued since, that they are helpless 'generals without an army'.

They argue it is not their place to instruct the membership to act. They depict themselves as saddled with a non-militant membership, mainly women, many of them part-time, working in the caring sector, who think that 'strike' is a dirty word.

So, no lead is given and the membership are offered not a word of encouragement about how they could take effective strike action, or how emergency cover could be organised.



NUPE strikers press for the full £60/35 hour claim in the 'Winter of Discontent' — to be offered only partial strikes

Since that winter, in the face of a sustained attack devastating its members' jobs, pay and working conditions, the NUPE leadership has remained absolutely passive and stony silent.

In the first year of Tory rule they argued in the cuts conferences and demos that they chose to attend that the working class was only getting what it deserved in voting the Tories in.

NUPE's national policy was publicly declared to be one of 'low profile'. For a whole year the NUPE membership received no more than the odd

handful of glossy leaflets telling us nothing more than the now inevitable battle cry, 'contact your local press, write to your local MP'.

In the same period there was the massive November 9 demo against the cuts. NUPE produced thousands of lollipop placards declaring 'Stop Thatcher' — perhaps hoping that cardboard and printing ink would do the job, as they busily ensured that nobody in NUPE could do anything.

The executive had deeply buried the conference resolution on blacking

private hospital beds — leaving the path open to the massive privatisation of the NHS and use of its facilities which has gone hand in hand with the cuts.

Where a fight has been organised against these health cuts, it has usually been initiated without a shred of assistance from the NUPE officials and even its lay Executive members, and often in the face of downright opposition.

Struggles like the occupations of St Benedict's and St Mary's Hospitals have stood as beacons in the fight to defend the NHS —

but have been left isolated.

In what must be counted as Fisher's finest hour, he hid in an ante-chamber at St Benedict's to avoid the press gaze and to talk things over, while scab ambulances and security police dragged out terrified geriatrics from the occupation.

As the leading union of the local authority manual workers, NUPE obviously had a major responsibility to put pressure on Labour-controlled councils to adopt a policy of no cuts and no rate increases.

Yet Ron Keating argued at the Lambeth Conference

at the end of 1980 that it would be impossible to back those Labour councils that defied the government because (surprise, surprise) 'the membership won't fight'!

To Keating's embarrassment, however, the membership did fight last year in Coventry, where 4000 NUPE members took indefinite strike action against the Labour council's £2 million cut in services.

It was soon made clear who really didn't want the fight. Not one other branch of NUPE outside Coventry received so much as an official whiff of the strike.

The bulk of NUPE members heard of the strike only from the papers. When the NUPE London Division sent a cheque for £200, it was stopped by the executive!

NEC members were certainly to be seen on the picket line — but urging the women to return to work and to settle for a formula giving them 'only' a four per cent cut in wages.

In the end the strike was called off, with NUPE encouragement, for the sell-out deal of accepting ACAS arbitration.

Generally the NUPE Executive seems pretty apt at encouraging its members to accept wage cuts.

Admittedly, there have been information packs on what the four per cent 'rise' really means. A mass of leaflets has been circulated urging us to reject the four per cent. But there is no hint of what should be

done in order to win even the pathetic 12 per cent claim.

When the negotiators of the Labour-controlled Metropolitan Authorities offered seven per cent, the NUPE leadership emerged triumphant as if the battle were over and won.

It still has to go to the membership, but the vote is a foregone conclusion.

The 'left' image of NUPE received another severe blow in the past year on the question of its vote in Labour's deputy leadership election.

NUPE made much of how democratically they conducted the ballot. However, conference policy was to support the candidate that represented closest the interest and policy of the union — and that this should be decided by the membership. It was clear that only one candidate — Tony Benn — fitted this category and deserved Executive support. But in the midst of one of the most vicious smear campaigns against Benn, NUPE leaders kept silent.

Of course we can't expect elections, accountability or democracy to be too close to the heart of a NUPE bureaucracy which has just appointed a nobody — Rodney Bickerstaff — as the new general secretary, without the slightest consultation with the membership.

Bickerstaff has served five years as national officer for local government,

In this pull-out examines the 'left' union in elected, while the problems of 'democratic' union the right wing.

AUEW: Under the heel of full-time right-wingers

AUEW education officer Alan Hughes and research officer Trevor Esward were sacked by John Boyd in 1980 for helping assistant general secretary Bob Wright to prepare a critic-

al analysis of the union's record on the Prior Bill and the 1979 pay and hours fight.

Hughes and Esward had done the work in their own time, and the union's Final

Appeal Court supported them. But Boyd pressed ahead.

Here Alan Hughes discusses the way to fight back against Boyd's bullying.

IN 1972 the AUEW (Engineering Section), led by the Left in the persons of Hugh Scanlon, Bob Wright and Reg Birch took on the Tory Industrial Relations Act and virtually stood alone in the official Trade Union movement in its total opposition to the last major attempt by the Tories to cripple the organised Labour Movement.

The left leaders stood at the apex of a vigorous shop stewards' movement, willing to struggle in the defence of engineering workers' living standards.

Now in 1982, the same Union finds itself in its most desperate straits for many years, and the Left at its most disorganised. The AUEW has lost 200,000 members since 1979. The elected officials are dominated by a power-

ful Right Wing axis which meets regularly with Tory Ministers, top industrialists and Right Wing journalists under the name of 'The Group'.

Scanlon has joined the Establishment in the Lords, Birch has retired and Bob Wright is a virtual 'prisoner' in Peckham Road.

Shreds

The Left, still dominated by the Communist Party (CP), finds it difficult to win any elections, even with well-known candidates such as Derek Robinson. The shop stewards' movement, as a national progressive force, is in shreds!

Meanwhile, the Right enjoys such total control as to oppose local district committees as in the Laur-

ence Scott dispute and to ignore even its own supreme judicial body, the Final Appeal Court, when it sees fit.

How has this volte-face occurred in such a brief space of time? The answer is far more complex than just slinging mud at the fallen heroes of the Left.

The Right in the AUEW has been well organised, well financed, and given more media support than in any other Union. Apart from journalists such as Woodrow Wyatt and Bernard Levin, the AUEW Right has benefited from the attentions of groups such as Truemit and Catholic Action, which are shadowy organisations aimed at crushing the Left in the Unions.

The Right has captured the two major decision-

making bodies in the AUEW — the Executive Council of full-time officials and the National Committee of lay officials. This alliance of the executive and policy-making wings of the union, combined with subtle rules changes enacted in 1980, has led to the complete dominance of all the Union's functions by the Executive Council, President and General Secretary.

The consequences are this. By effectively appointing the women's seats on the National Committee the Right has guaranteed itself an inbuilt majority on this body. The delegations to the TUC and Labour Party now have to kowtow to National Committee policy (dictated by the full-timers on the EC) instead of casting their votes independ-

ently as in the past. All power over decisions among the Irish membership (both North and South) is now held by a Committee consisting entirely of full-time officers.

Because of the supreme power of these bodies, the rank and file checks of district committees and Final Appeal Court can now be overruled.

The effects are obvious. The AUEW leadership stands idly by as mass redundancies take place at Laurence Scotts and RL. The pay battle has been an abject surrender. At the TUC and Labour Party conferences the AUEW machine swung solidly behind the most reactionary policies and voted for the reactionary individuals of the TUC General Council and the Labour Party NEC.

There is a crying need for a strong Left offensive to capture district and divisional committees, to 'win back' the National Committee and to push strongly for Left activists in all full-time elections. This can be done but not until the dead hand of the CP is removed from the Broad Left alliance in the AUEW.

Oust

A new initiative is required in which a Broad Left, based firmly in the Left of the Labour Party, campaigns to fight redundancies, to step up the pay struggle and to build up a viable rank and file movement involving stewards and convenors and oust the tyranny on the Right.



The faces that launched a thousand Duffy confer at the TUC Congress

MARY ANN TODD
situation in an ostensibly
which no officials are
ALAN HUGHES describes
of the AUEW — a formally
union tightly controlled by

starting off as an
(appointed) Divisional Off-
in Newcastle.
is 38 years old —
ng him, under present
es, a clear run of 27
rs as leader of one of the
ntry's biggest unions.
is new deputy, replac-
Bernard Dix, is the
ally unknown and un-
ted Tom Sawyer from
Northern Division. He
is in his late 30s and
expect a long career
of worry about re-
tion

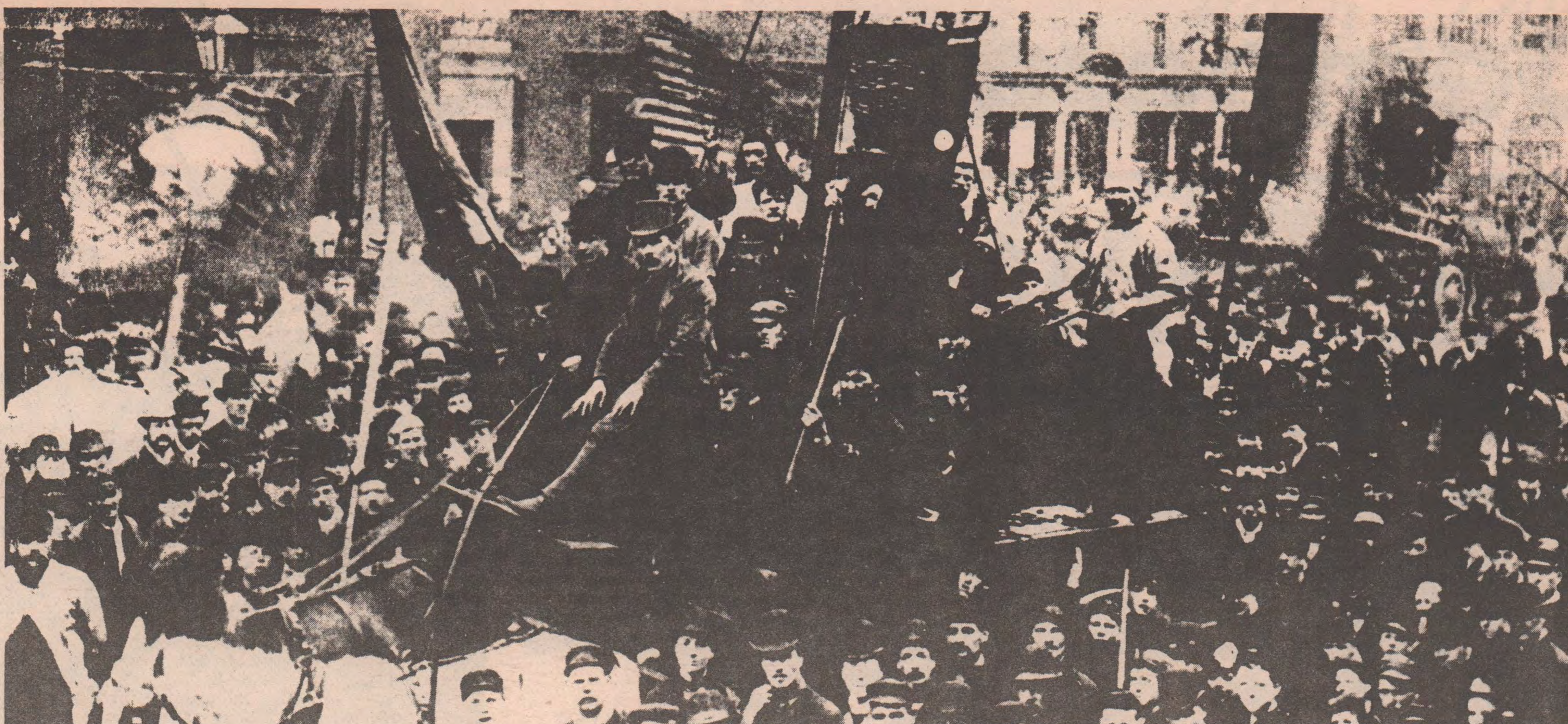
Docility

PE members have no
in the selection of any
their officials, all of
om are appointed over
r heads, and who are
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absis of dormant or
tially active branches
ch in turn are dominat-
by secretaries whose
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y commission payments
en almost equivalent to
econd salary).
ain losers in this set-
are of course rank and
NUPE members —
ticularly women workers
a little experience of
on struggles and often
isolated in small sect-
s or individual work-
es.

it is on these forces and
the fight for a pro-
me of demands to
et the needs of the rank
file as a whole that the
uggle for democracy in
PE must be based.



ell-outs: Boyd and



Mass struggles like the strike for the 'Dockers' Tanner' built the unions — but also build a solid base on which the bureaucracy arose

WILLIAM BOOTH
examines the rise of
a privileged, conserv-
ative layer of leader-
ship in the labour
movement.

THE BIRTH OF BUREAUCRACY

WHEN trade union mem-
bers struggle for better con-
ditions or decent wages,
they often face vicious and
reactionary employers, and
nearly always hostility from
the press and mass media.
They also frequently con-
front Government min-
isters.

But one other influence
nearly always stands be-
tween the workers and
victory. This is the trade
union leaders, the full-
time officials who so often
hold back the struggle it-
self, or in one way or an-
other prevent full success.

Why? And how can we
defeat these bureaucrats?

The first full-time offi-
cials in Britain more than a
century ago did not come
from the ranks of the poor,
but from the 'aristocracy of
labour'. They were often
said to embody in their own
persons the same prosper-
ity that they were supposed
to demand for their
members.

Many of these early lead-
ers fitted very easily into
the political establishment
of the time.

'Moderation'

George Howell, one of
the first Secretaries of the
TUC, was essentially a paid
agent of the Liberal Party.
His successor Henry Broad-
hurst was a minor member
of one of Gladstone's
Governments in the 1880s
— the peak of his ambition
was a meeting with Queen
Victoria at Windsor Castle.
He also received some
shares from friendly
employers.

As early as the 1870s,
meetings of the TUC were
feted by 'enlightened'
employers and town coun-
cils, and praised for their
dignified bearing and their
'moderation'.

As the union movement
grew more powerful, the
capitalist class took mea-
sures to ensure the leaders
stayed 'moderate'. John
Burnett, a distant prede-
cessor of John Boyd of the En-
gineers, was given the job of
setting up what was to be-



Will Thorne

come the present-day De-
partment of Employment.

The process of integrat-
ing trade union leaders
into the government mach-
ine took a big step for-
ward with the First World
War. Union leaders were
drawn into official admin-
istration and given enlarg-
ed possibilities for recruit-
ment in return for ensuring
labour's cooperation in the
war effort.

By the 1920s, no Govern-
ment inquiry, no local
administrative body, was
quite complete without
a 'workers' representative'
who received his expenses
and was helped to see the
other side that there always
is to every question.

In World War 2, again,
there was another big push
for closer links between the
union machinery and the
state machinery.

Craft

The early unions were
mostly craft unions of
better-off workers. In the
great general and industrial
unions, most of which got
going in their modern form
round the time of the First
World War, the full-time
officials sometimes had
built the organisations up
from nothing, and often
began with radical or even
revolutionary ideas.

Many of the main lead-
ers of this period served an
apprenticeship as fighters.

Thus Will Thorne, who
built the modern General
and Municipal Workers,
worked closely with Freder-
ick Engels and with Elean-
or Marx. Ernest Bevin, who
started in circumstances of
the direst poverty, was for a
time in the Marxist move-
ment, and then became a
leader of the Transport and
General Workers' Union.

What was it that trans-
formed Thorne into a weak
and ineffective MP and
member of the TUC Gen-
eral Council? What made
Bevin into a brutal and
authoritarian bureaucrat,
whose many services to the
ruling class were widely
acknowledged during the
celebration of the centenary
of his birth last year?

It was not just that
people like these were
bought off in some simple
way. They started off with
the clear aim of building
and maintaining powerful
organisations. They some-
times had to arbitrate
between sections of their
members who fought one
another instead of the
bosses.

They came to see them-
selves as reflecting the gen-
eral interests of their
organisations in ways that
the members themselves
might fail to appreciate.
They came to support col-
lective bargaining mach-
inery which tied their mem-
bers to procedures which
they were not necessarily
prepared to accept.

So it was that massive
unions like the Transport
and General and the NUR,
whose strength helped to
improve the conditions of
generations of workers,
at the same time became
remote from those very
members. This happened
even when their rules and
constitutions were on paper
quite democratic (and
sometimes still remain so).

The big general and in-
dustrial unions in particular
have created a full-time
'civil service' whose rou-
tines and activities have
drifted apart from the
members, linked to stable
organisations and fixed
bargaining procedures.
The individual official who

starts off with radical ideas
is quickly absorbed, unless
(exceptionally) a clear
understanding of and orga-
nised participation in
Marxist politics prevents
this.

Now trade union officials
have a standard of living, a
life style, and a set of atti-
tudes, that brings them
closer to the employers.
Like the pigs in George
Orwell's Animal Farm,
they come to resemble the
human beings whose inter-
ests they once opposed
more closely than the
fellow members of the
animal kingdom.

One other way in which
union officials grow remote
from their members is in
the possession of knowl-
edge and information not
available to the rank and
file.

There was a time when
the piecework system in
some cotton factories was
so complicated that Gen-
eral Secretaries of the weav-
ers' unions were appointed
by competitive examina-
tions. Nowadays, the great
complexities of legal and
other regulation of almost
all aspects of trade union
activity make it very diffi-
cult for ordinary union
members to keep up with
everything, especially
when they are not active in
the union all the time.

Higher

The trade union official,
on the other hand, rises up
the rungs of promotion
within the trade union
machinery, sometimes
showing sparks of militan-
cy to retain respect, some-
times having to stand in
elections to obtain a higher
position.

The official becomes
more knowledgeable in
confronting employers, and
slicker in dealing with the
gripes of his/her own
members. S/he becomes
more and more concerned
with industrial peace and
with keeping agreements
in ways that members may
not like.

There are results in

every generation against
the dead hand of bureau-
cracy. The syndicalist
movement at the beginn-
ing of the century argued
for greater militancy and
for unions covering individ-
ual industries, or even all
of the working class.

They had great influence
among miners, and also
among engineers who were
prominent in the shop stew-
ards' movement during the
First World War.

The defeat of the Gen-
eral Strike in 1926 was
followed by a period of
the consolidation of the
bureaucracy, and national
talks with employers under
such figures as Ernest
Bevin and Walter Citrine
of the TUC. Such discuss-
ions culminated in such
modern arrangements as
the National Economic De-
velopment Council, and
various 'social contracts'
and other agreements to
hold back wages.

During the post-war
boom, also, there were re-
volts from the rank and file
against the deals organised
between management and
unions. A new network of
'unofficial' industrial action
developed, often quite
apart from the established
trade union machinery.

The new shop stewards'
movements of the post-war
years were less influenced
by revolutionary ideas than
their predecessors, but
they were nevertheless
powerful and effective, pre-
paring the way for great
victories of the trade union
movement in the period
before 1974.

Since then there has
been a series of vicious at-
tacks on rank and file mili-
tancy, spearheaded by such
employers and Leyland,
and continuously supported
by such bureaucrats as
Terry Duffy.

This attack has included
the victimisation of mili-
tants and the erosion of
the rights and conditions
painfully built over
decades.

The stewards' move-
ment has been attacked not
only by direct repression
but also by the spread

downwards of the crumbs
from the employers' table.
The independence of the
stewards has been sapped
by free lunches, travel in
expensive cars and other
minor perks — often
accepted at first without
any dishonourable motive.

The maintenance of the
independence of trade
union representatives
needs a relentless battle.
To secure it is not simply a
matter of maintaining the
'purity' of the rank and
file, as some would have it,
it also involves a necessary
confrontation with the
bureaucrats.

It is certainly essential to
organise the militant rank
and file within the unions.
However, the rank and file
will not succeed unless it is
able to mount a challenge
to the bureaucracy.

The bureaucrats under
pressure can be forced to
fight — and they can be
replaced by more principled,
more accountable
leaders.

Challenged

The struggle for demo-
cracy in the unions is not
lost before it has begun —
and without that struggle,
the prospects for isolated
rank and file battles which
seek simply to ignore or
by-pass the official union
machine are very limited.

The bureaucracy must be
challenged by militants
who are conscious of the
issues at stake, who refuse
to be bought off, and who
are aiming at serious
opposition to the employ-
ers.

As Trotsky put it in 1938,
we "should always strive
not only to renew the top
leadership of the trade un-
ions, boldly and resolutely
in critical moments advanc-
ing new militant leaders in
place of routine function-
aries and careerists, but
also to create in all possible
instances independent
militant organisations
corresponding more closely
to the tasks of mass strug-
gle against bourgeois
society..."

Democracy Special



Fighting for representation for women

JO THWAITES argues that democracy must include women's rights



ONE OF the most striking failures of real democracy in the unions is the paltry number of women who are active at any level, from shop-floor right up to the national executives.

In many workplaces, even though the majority of the workers are women, there will be a male shop steward.

Many men say that women bring it all on themselves — if they won't vote for women as shop stewards, what can the union do? If women won't come to the meetings and participate in the union's activities, don't show any interest in the union at all, then it's because of their domestic responsibilities, or that women aren't interested in politics, or women are more conservative than men.

There are many time-worn excuses and 'explanations' — going back to the last century, when John Hendry, a Scottish Mill Workers' union organiser, said:

"Women broadly speaking, from a Trade Unionist standpoint, are bad subjects. This is due not a little to the dependent and subordinate position the woman has been so long taught to look upon as her proper place. She is difficult to get and being

got is difficult to keep".

In truth working-class women, being more oppressed than working-class men, are often more militant once they get into action. And that's closer to the real reason why women are oppressed in the unions.

Sluggishness

There have been very militant struggles led by women, like Lee Jeans, Royal Pride, Glencroft, and the Liverpool typists recently, and further back Trico, Grunwick, and Chix.

These struggles decisively squash any accusations of women's reluctance to fight. Indeed they highlight the sluggishness of the trade unions in backing those women.

It took the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers (NUTGW) six weeks to decide to give official support to the Lee Jeans women. 92 per cent of the membership of the NUTGW are women, yet there are only five women on an Executive of 15, and out of 47 full-time officials only nine are women. Men run a union that consists almost entirely of women.

Positive discrimination is often criticised as being patronising to women. It

is said women can get onto committees on their own merits and capabilities.

But surely there's a cast iron case for insisting that there should be a greater proportion of women in the leading bodies of the NUTGW. Out of 92 per cent of the union, there cannot be only five women capable of sitting on the Executive!

The consistent trend of trade-union routinism is always to give predominance to the most conservative sections — from the full-timers down through the older, better-off, more skilled, male, white workers.

These workers have more time, more confidence, more experience. They come to identify themselves with the union, and then, often, with the union machine. They resent — or at best are patronising towards — militant women who challenge their routines.

So often the trade union movement reproduces the same male domination as exists in the family and in capitalist society — stifling and repressing the energy and vigour of the more oppressed half of the working class, and strengthening the hand of the bureaucracy.

When you think of a

'typical trade unionist' or a trade union leader, the image which springs to mind is of a white, middle-aged, greying or balding, man (more or less corpulent according to how high he's got in the union hierarchy).

That might appear as a caricature, but the general image fits. You only have to go to a TUC conference for proof.

And most union officials are reluctant to change long-established procedures, to adopt the kind of changes that are necessary to make sure that women have a chance to get involved in the union. The stereotypes are self-perpetuating.

Represented

Despite all this women are joining unions at a much faster rate than men. But there has not been an equivalent increase in the number of women trade union activists, shop stewards, full-time officials, or executive members.

What efforts have unions made to encourage women?

NUPE, with 67 per cent of women members, now has five places reserved for women on its executive. That brings the percentage of women on its executive up to 31 per cent — still less than half of what it should be if women were represented properly.

Various white collar unions — TASS, NALGO, APEX, ASTMS — have set up Equal Opportunities Committees. Some unions have special training schools for women shop stewards.

The Yorkshire region of the GMWU has negotiated provisions with a few employers for workplace women's groups to meet during the working day.

But more is needed — all the way through the unions, from top to bottom. Women trade unionists have to see that they are needed in the union; they have to be encouraged to come forward and take an active part in the union.

Work-time

Providing creche facilities at branch meetings is a start, but not enough. Most women don't want to take their kids out with them to meetings at night. The most convenient time for women who have

responsibilities at home to attend branch meetings is during work time.

That is what unions should be fighting for nationally. That would be real encouragement.

Unions should encourage women to get together from different parts of the country and build up networks of contacts. All too often the problems women activists face — sexist attitudes from male trade unionists, lack of self-confidence and demoralisation — end up with the woman thinking there is something wrong with her, until she starts discussing the problems with other women and discovers that they are general.

The Women's Fightback conference on the unions should help.

Unions need to be won wholeheartedly to support and fight for a woman's right to work. As long as any male trade unionist believes that saving his job is more important than saving a woman's job, the bosses will be able to peddle reactionary rubbish about a woman's place being in the home looking after the kids, and sabotage any real fight against unemployment.

Women's lack of representation in the unions is usually lumped into the women's rights section in conference agendas. Since 99 times out of 100 it will be women who raise this representation, it is seen as simply a 'women's issue'.

But a fundamental part of democracy in any labour movement body is that the elected representatives represent the membership. When the vast majority of the representatives of the trade unions are men, with the Executives of some unions have no women on them at all, and 31 per cent of all trade unionists are women, there is something very wrong.

A big chunk of the working class — an oppressed and potentially radical and militant chunk — is being disenfranchised.

This is not simply a 'women's issue', but an issue that must concern all those who are fighting for democracy in the labour movement.

Women's Fightback Trade union conference



Coventry Council strikers

Time and again women trade unionists have come forward to fight the Tory onslaught on their rights and living standards. And each time they have run up against the limitations or outright treachery of the existing bureaucratic leaders.

And they have found a movement which has for decades ignored the issues and problems faced by women.

The March 27 Trade Union conference called by Women's Fightback is designed as a focus for a movement to change the unions and challenge their present leadership.

The conference is open to women either as individuals or as delegates from any group, workplace organisation, branch or women's group at local, regional or national level.

There will be an all-day creche. Workshops on various topics under main groups: Pay; public sector and the cuts; jobs; fighting sexism; racism and the Third World.

The conference fee is £3.50 (£2 for low-waged or unwaged non-delegates). Credentials from 41 Ellington Street, London N7.

MARCH 27

Socialist Organiser Alliance

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SOCIALIST Organiser fights to act as a real campaigning paper which can organise workers in the struggle for new leadership.

To do so we need consistent support and money. Socialist Organiser Alliance groups have been established in most big towns.

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