



The Broad Lefts

***What
they
are and***

ANDREW WIARD (REPORT)



***what
they
must
become***

Socialist Organiser

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The Broad Lefts

What they are and what they must become

THE Broad Lefts Organising Committee was formed in 1981, and has representatives from some 20 Broad Lefts.

Its March 24 conference, however, is not based on delegates from Broad Lefts, but on a general appeal for delegates to all trade union bodies.

The new Lefts

The name Broad Left used to mean narrow trade union caucuses, often semi-clandestine, dominated by the Communist Party and very much focused on trade union elections. Over the past few years a whole new generation of quite different Broad Lefts has developed.

These new Broad Lefts are much more open, more democratic, and more left wing. The biggest political force in them is usually Militant rather than the Communist Party.

But not everything is different. Like the old Broad Lefts, the new ones have tended to be much better at organising for trade union elections than at organising for direct struggles.

In the CPSA and the POEU, the new Broad Lefts have won majorities on the National Executive. But the CPSA Broad Left helped to brake, rather than lead, the Oxford and Birmingham DHSS dispute in 1981 (it argued that militants should 'keep their powder dry' for a 'bigger struggle' later); and the Broad Left majority on the POEU Executive fell apart when the POEU came up against the law in its fight on privatisation.

Conference secretary George Williamson explained the aims of the conference in an interview with Militant on February 10.

"We have now set ourselves on a whole new direction — into building the Broad Left movement throughout the trade unions nationally into fighting, campaigning organisations.

"The BLOC took a decision to launch a campaign around a national rally . . . with a central aim of demonstrating the collective strength of the left in the unions . . ."

The word "rally" is worrying: will there be provision for the serious discussion that is needed on the experience of the Broad Lefts? Also worrying is the lack of indication of any future campaigning activity for BLOC. Despite the big possibilities it could have had, BLOC did nothing round the NGA dispute and has made no initiative on the anti-union laws.

The SWP

The Socialist Workers Party is also mobilising heavily for the conference. They say: "Many of those addressing the conference . . . will argue that it is of key importance to get left-wingers onto union executives . . ."

"But in the absence of a strong, well-organised rank and file they can only lead to defeat . . . The conference will provide the opportunity to convince militants who do want to fight that rebuilding strong organisation in the workplace is the only way forward."

In line with these ideas the SWP abstains from activity in the Broad Lefts. Its approach is, unfortunately, a mirror image of the trade union electoralism of some others on the left.

Basics

The truth is that both a firm orientation on rank and file basics, and a constant struggle to renew the trade unions' leadership at every level, and a fight to sharpen up left wing sentiments into precise policies, are necessary.

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The CPSA Broad Left

THE Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) is the largest trade union organising among civil service staff.

It encompasses clerical and typing grades in the Civil Service proper, in so-called "fringe bodies" (such as the British Museum and British Library), and public sector areas such as the Civil Aviation Authority and National Girobank. Currently, the union has some 190,000 members, organised in over 1,000 branches.

There has been an organised left current in CPSA for some time; but the first open grouping was "Redder Tape" in the early 1970s. Although "Redder Tape" was later to shrink into a Socialist Workers' Party 'front', it originally drew in not only other revolutionaries but also members of the Communist Party and the Labour left.

INTRODUCTION

By Mike Grayson

At that time, CPSA's constitution included a section saying that "the organisation or participation in the activities of unofficial committees or similar bodies which seek to influence the policies or electoral processes of the Association, shall be deemed detrimental to the interests of the Association." "Redder Tape" basically ignored this, and the section was deleted from the Constitution at the union's 1976 Conference. Soon after this, the Broad Left proper began to organise.

At present, the Militant Tendency are the dominant force in the Broad Left, with the Communist Party a declining influence. The amorphous "Labour Left" grouping

links together those to the right of Militant. The "Socialist Caucus" (which includes Socialist Organiser supporters) organises the non-Militant 'hard left' within the Broad Left. The SWP have remained outside the Broad Left, and for some time kept up the "Redder Tape" group until this was wound up along with the SWP's other union fractions.

The Broad Left submits a slate for the union's annual elections of President, two Vice Presidents and National Executive Committee (the slate is drawn up at an Autumn Conference, open to all paid-up Broad Left supporters). The Broad Left is opposed by the right-wing "Daylight" group, headed by Kate Losinska, the current (May '83 to May '84) President of CPSA.

Martin Thomas spoke to Stephen Corbishley — a long-time leading activist in the CPSA Broad Left, a member of the CPSA National Executive Committee in 1979-80, and for many years a member of the CPSA British Library branch.

How did the Broad Left start?

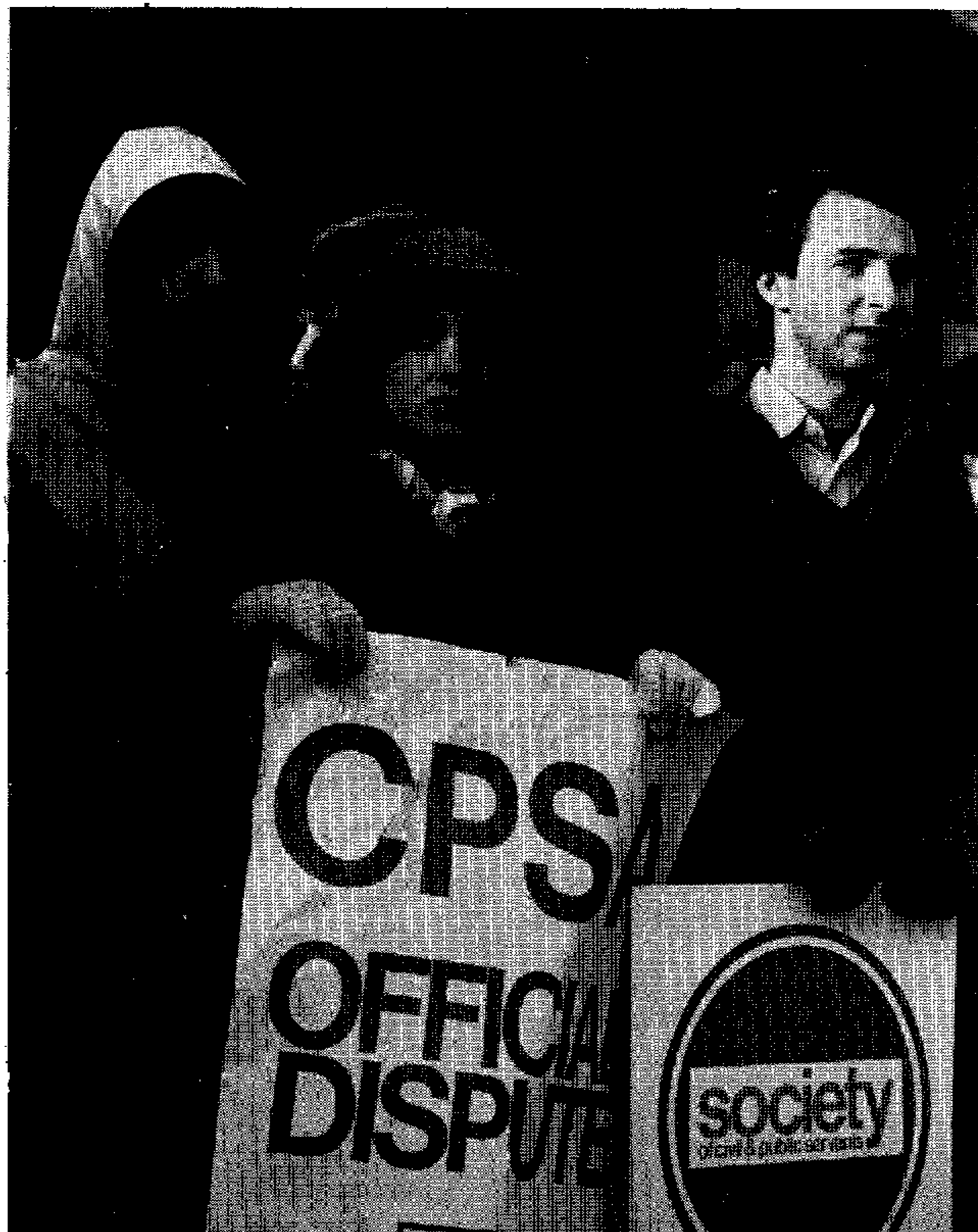
There had been a Broad Left of some sort in the CPSA from the mid-'60s. It consisted of certain full-time officers, plus some other individuals selected by the full-time officers, with vaguely Tribune left aims.

The main concern it had was to increase the number of left wing full-time officers, and to see if the balance on the Executive could be changed.

The first real moves for an open Broad Left occurred in 1977. A conference was held in Manchester. A constitution was established, drawn up by people including Stuart McLellan, who was then in the International Marxist Group, and Peter Colman, a Communist Party member.

A lot of the impetus for forming an open Broad Left was due to the pressure from Redder Tape — a grouping led by the Socialist Workers' Party, which had done good work, but by 1977 was dwindling thanks to the SWP's sectarian turn. People like myself and others in the Socialist Caucus were involved in the Broad Left almost from the very beginning, though we still maintained membership of Redder Tape.

The other impetus was that there had been a swing to the left in the 1976 execu-



DHSS strikers, 1982

tive elections, which had then been lost in 1977. So people wanted to organise for electoral victories, and the only way to do it adequately was to do it openly.

The original constitution of the Broad Left was highly democratic. It centred

round annual Broad Left conferences where every member could attend and vote.

Militant were there at the beginning, but were nothing like the force that they became later on.



Public sector cuts pursued by Thatcher left the Broad Left NEC in disarray

And the Broad Left began to gather strength very rapidly after this public launching?

Yes. From 1977 it grew enormously. It increased its strength on the DHSS and Department of Employment Section Committees. It began to make some inroads even into sections like the Ministry of Defence. And it began, very rapidly, to drain away the energy from Redder Tape.

The pay battle of 1979 gave the Broad Left a big boost to its credibility as a campaigning organisation. The pay campaign was organised and run by the right wing, but almost all the major branches involved were left wing, and left wing activists found their standing greatly enhanced. At the 1979 conference the Broad Left won one of its most stunning victories. It wiped out the right wing in the executive elections.

But from then on the Broad Left organised primarily around elections. And Militant became more and more dominant within the Broad Left.

Also after the 1979 conference, the gap between policy decisions made at the Broad Left conference and the policies pursued by the Broad Left members on the NEC began to grow.

On the question of cuts, which was the first gauntlet thrown down by Thatcher, the Broad Left NEC was in considerable disarray. It ended up with no effective policy, leading no serious struggles. There were a few struggles in the DHSS, but they were initiated by the rank and file, and the Broad Left NEC spent more time trying to control them and hold them back than developing them.

What were the main political forces involved in the Broad Left in 1977-79?

The Communist Party had more influence then than it had now. Militant were a force, but not the dominant force that they are now. The Broad Left also had a large number of independent revolutionary socialists, many of whom were in the Socialist Caucus.

The Socialist Caucus was more influential then than it is now, as some elements have since drifted rightwards into the "Labour Left" group. Stuart Maclellan was the national secretary of the Broad Left.

Some SWP members attended the first Broad Left conference, but as the SWP moved deeper into its phase of sectarianism they were forced to withdraw.

And what were the sections of the membership where the Broad Left won influence? On what issues?

It grew very rapidly in DHSS, and in the Department of Employment.

There is evidence to show that some people joined the Broad Left in order to get elected to the section executive committee. But most of the people who joined were genuine left-wingers; and the atmosphere that if you wanted to get on in the union, then you had to join the Broad Left, evaporated after 1979, when the branch block vote was abolished.

At that time the factional differences inside the Broad Left were not so great. It was held together by a common struggle against the right wing on issues like pay and union democracy.

Pay was the main issue that the Broad Left campaigned on. One of Redder Tape's most successful campaigns had been for an end to the Pay Research Unit system of setting civil service pay by comparison with rates elsewhere. The Broad Left took that up and fought hard on it.

It also fought hard on the question of union democracy. It campaigned for election of officials. Despite Militant's opposition, the Broad Left supported the Campaign for Union Democracy, which argued for replacement of the branch block vote by individual ballot at workplace meetings. The women's question figured very little in the early days, and many other questions like racism were left to individuals.

But then, after a Broad Left majority was elected to the executive in 1979, there was an increasing divergence between the Broad Left membership and the Broad Left people on the executive?

In the early stages of the cuts, myself, Norman Jacobs (Labour Left), and Ray Alderson (an untypical CPer) were very much a minority among the Broad Left NEC members in trying to hammer out a full programme to fight the cuts. Militant were an influence for toning the whole issue down, and they actually made some of the deals with the full-time officials for a much more restricted campaign.

The Broad Left conferences and the Broad Left rank and file had very little say in how the Broad Left members behaved.

How did the Broad Left rank and file feel about that?

The hard left grew in influence in the DHSS, which was the most militant section. But the Broad Left conference in 1979 was very quiet.

Militant had a sizeable influence by then. Between them and the Communist Party they were able to block any serious criticism of what the Broad Left NEC had done.

Why had Militant grown in strength?

Being a relatively large, well-organised tendency helped. They encouraged their supporters to join the civil service, especially DHSS.

The structure of the CPSA is such that an activist could very quickly gain a branch position. The turnover in many sections was so great that the average life of a branch secretary was no more than two years. So two or three years after someone had started in the civil service they could be holding a senior position in the union branch.

The atmosphere of the block vote also helped Militant. Starting from a strong position in DHSS, particularly the Newcastle Central office, they were able to draw people in.

And why didn't the revolutionary left grow more?

The revolutionary left was fragmented and small in hard-core numbers.

If the SWP had joined the Broad Left in 1977, and taken a serious Marxist approach to the question of organising in the union, things might well have been different. In fact Militant had a sort of vacuum created by the SWP's refusal to move in.

As for ourselves — at that time we were confined to one branch, outside the crucial sections of DHSS and DE, with no influence in the rest of the union.

Militant also grew from the reaction to the defeat of the Left in the 1980 executive elections. That defeat seemed to justify their opposition to the abolition of the branch block vote.

What other effects do you think there have been of the change from the branch block vote to workplace individual ballot?

I think it delivered the 1981 all-out strike vote, over pay. Other CoCSU unions didn't go along with CPSA, which refused to act unilaterally. They went for selective action. The ordinary members saw a connection between voting for people for the NEC, and a call from those people for strike action.

It also gave us the election of full-time officials. That principle was won at the 1980 conference, by a narrow margin. By 1981 the vote for the constitutional changes to implement the principle was overwhelming.

The new system affected the Broad Left, too. Now that we needed to campaign for individual votes, the Broad Left had to begin to organise itself, as it never had done before, at branch and area level. Previously the Broad Left would just organise a caucus around an area committee, and seek to win branch block votes by winning over branch officials.

It's had some good effects. Some previously right-wing branches, like for example Kate Losinska's, are now dominated by the left.



Charlie Bill at demonstration, London, October 1979. Militant have swung already into line with some demands of the women's movement

But while the Broad Left has been forced to turn to the rank and file members for electoral campaigning, that has not been matched by moves to do the same on non-electoral issues. Those have remained at the level of the committees.

It would be difficult to argue that there was a causal connection between the move to workplace ballot and the rise of women's rights issues in the CPSA. But they did happen in parallel.

Has the rise of the women's rights issue had any effect on the internal balance in the Broad Left?

Not really. The new "Labour Left" group in the Broad Left, formed after the 1983 conference, has tried to co-opt the women's issue as a weapon against Militant, who have been quite sectarian and backward on the issue.

But it hasn't changed the overall balance inside the Broad Left. Militant have swung into line with some of the demands of the women's movement.



Kate Losinska

You had a Broad Left majority again on the National Executive Committee in 1982-3. What was the experience then?

The 1982 victory did kill off the idea of returning to the branch block vote system.

It was, however, an NEC that failed. The Broad Left were kicked out again in 1983 because by then the right wing had got more organised and increased the turnout in their areas of strength.

The new "Labour Left" also came out of the failure of the 1982-3 NEC. It was helped into being by a group of full-time officials at the union headquarters. Despite the protestations of some individuals and the good intentions of others, its aim was the narrow one of breaking Militant's dominance in the Broad Left and creating a Broad Left which could co-exist happily with the full-time officials.

The hard left attempted to raise questions inside the Broad Left about the record of the NEC. But we have a situation at the Broad Left national conferences now where there is no real debate. There are so many resolutions, and it is so clearly divided up on factional lines.

Have there been any proposals for accountability of the Broad Left executive members to the Broad Left?

The only form of accountability is at the national conference.

There was an idea that the Broad Left officers should attend the Broad Left NEC caucuses. The trouble with that is that most of the Broad Left officers were also on the NEC themselves.

But I think it should be implemented.

There's another problem about the NEC.

A slate for the NEC has to cover all the sections. Thus in some sections the Broad Left list includes people who are left wing only in the sense that they will refuse to vote for the SDP. They hold a Broad Left card only in order to get elected.



Demonstration in Birmingham by DHSS workers over staffing dispute, December 1982, supported by Jeff Snooker MP (left, foreground)

If it comes to that, wouldn't it be better to have the Broad Left supporting candidates who are not in the Broad Left, rather than having NEC candidates who are formally members of the Broad Left but not really?

There is a Broad Left rule that we should not support any candidate who is not part of the Broad Left.

But is it right? Is it better to have a Broad Left that deludes itself, or to have a Broad Left which is really a Broad Left and then maybe supports other people critically?

It would be a difficult debate in the Broad Left.

Is the Broad Left still growing?

I think so. I'm not sure of exact figures. I think there are about 700 members.

But the main problem in the Broad Left at the moment is that it has little based in branches and workplaces.

How could that be changed?

I think you would have to find some way in which workplace groups were given a status inside the Broad Left — almost like workplace branches in the Labour Party.

Workplace groups have been tried, but often they reduce down to a caucus around the branch committee.

So what's the balance sheet on the Broad Left over six years?

You have to judge it by its record in control of the NEC in 1979 and 1982, and you have to say that the Broad Left has failed.

The 1979 and 1981 strikes showed its potential. But the real proof of the potential that was wasted was the Oxford/Birmingham DHSS strike in 1982. That is the marker of where the Broad Left failed.

The only rank and file strike during that period which won was the Brixton Unemployment Benefit Office dispute over victimisation. But that campaign was organised by the hard left (i.e. SWP & Caucus) with many of the Broad Left dragged along kicking and screaming.

Why did the Broad Left have that attitude to these struggles? Could it have been different?

I think the SWP had a lot to do with it. They were a substantial force in the CPSA. But they failed to relate to the Broad Left, and that gave ground, credibility and authority to those people who wanted to make the Broad Left primarily an electoral machine. And now the SWP themselves are no longer a force in the union. Redder Tape has been wound up.

Things could have been different in the Broad Left if the orientation to the rank and file in the branches and the workplaces had been pushed much sooner. Things could have been different if there had been a higher level of political debate.

We've got to make the Broad Left orient more to the workplaces, and organise so that when struggles arise in those workplaces there is a network of militants to support them. And we've got to get a serious political debate into the Broad Left.

We need a clear analysis of where the Broad Left is, and, I think, a bit more sobriety about what our possibilities actually are. The Broad Left has suffered from being focused on victories which in fact exist mainly on paper.

I don't think we have taken sufficient account of the gap between the people who hold union office, even at branch level, and the rank and file.

If you hold a branch position in the CPSA, you can be away from your office for the equivalent of six months in the year. And when you're away from your office, you're on a different living standard. For example, someone travelling from Hull to London three times a week on CPSA business will get £100 in expenses on top of travel costs. And in the DHSS, being away from the office means that you are away from appalling work conditions and stress. Faced with the alternative of going back to that stress and a lower living standard, or trimming politically, a lot of people will trim.

What comparisons would you make with other unions, for example the POEU?

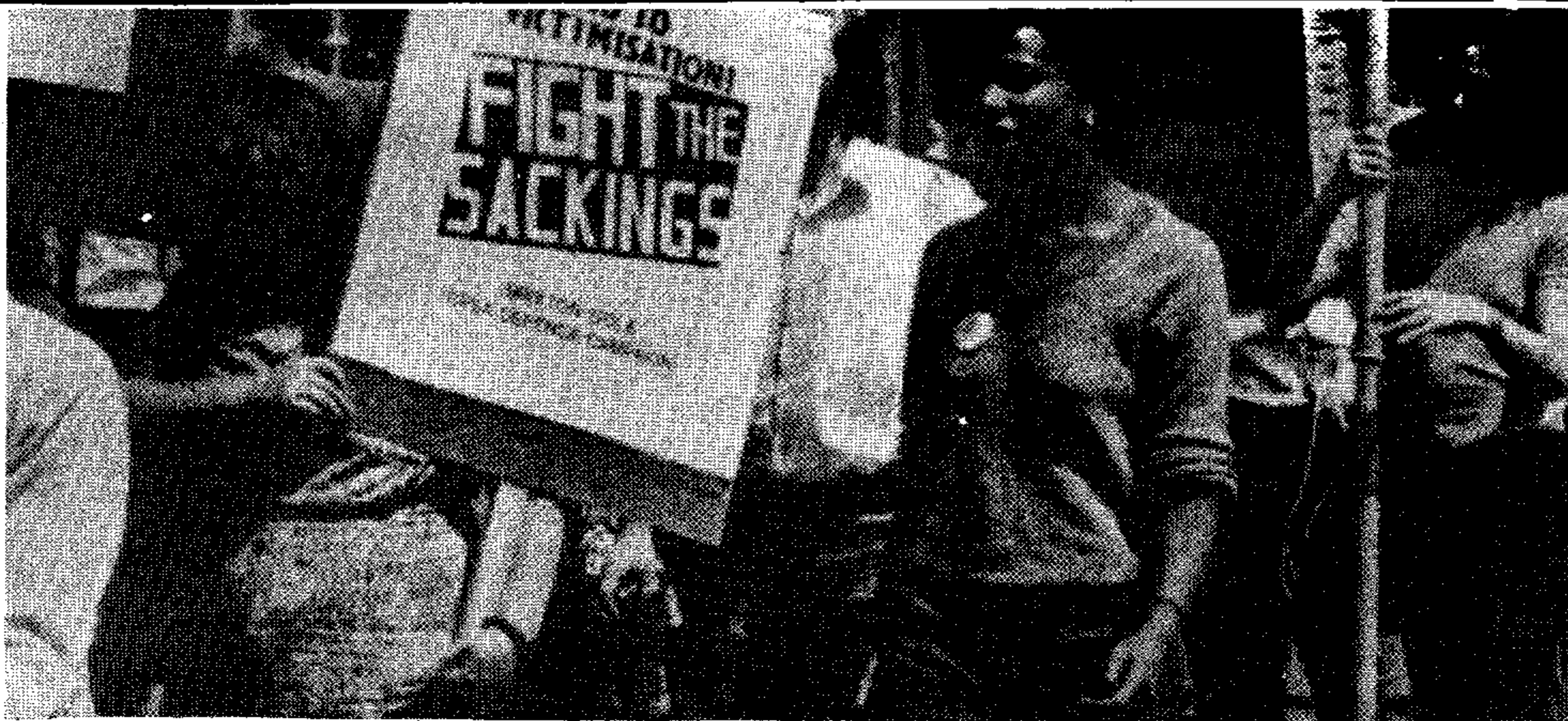
I think the POEU Broad Left is better in terms of an open political life. The problem seems to be that they operate so much by consensus — a spirit that you shouldn't rock the boat by pursuing arguments too sharply.

The POEU Broad Left is less factionally divided because it is more difficult for a particular faction to recruit rapidly there. To become a branch officer in the POEU, you've got to be an experienced worker. You can't walk into branch positions quickly as you can in the CPSA.

I'm not supporting the idea of activists having to serve a "probationary" period before they can be allowed into Branch positions, but I think the position in CPSA explains in part why Militant have been able to build their influence rapidly.

CPSA and POEU are very different unions. But one lesson that certainly applies to both is the need for much more political clarification inside the Broad Lefts. A lot of revolutionaries inside the CPSA Broad Left have been making trade union decisions first, with political decisions coming second. I suspect I've done it at times. But it drags you into a routinism where positions in the union loom larger than the basic class struggle.

Another lesson which is common is the need for a serious rank and file orientation.



Day of Action demonstration in Brixton, June 1980, in support of the two victimised CPSA branch officials

BRIXTON DOLE, 1980

IN May 1980, two CPSA activists, Phil Corddell and Richard Cleverley, were sacked at Brixton dole office, for union activities. Unofficial strike action, with heavy support from other Labour and trade union activists on the picket line, eventually won their reinstatement.

The Brixton dispute highlighted the strengths of the left in CPSA, but also pointed to some of its weaknesses.

Militant, then the rising star in the Broad Left, were sceptical and dismissive. On August 15 they wrote that the decision by the Brixton branch to come out on indefinite strike was "premature and tactically unsound". Going on from opinion to prophesy, Militant predicted: "In isolation, however, they [the strikers] will become demoralised by the lack of progress, and bitterly drift back to work."

Unfortunately for this would-be Nostradamus, less than a fortnight after, the strikers were indeed back at work . . . having won the reinstatement of Corddell and Cleverley.

Although the victory was not a complete one — the two victimised militants were reinstated at other London offices, not at Brixton — the unofficial campaign had achieved a memorable success. For the first time in the union's history, a dispute had been won by action that was entirely run, funded and supported by the rank and file . . . in the face of attempted sabotage by the leadership and the media.

The Socialist Workers Party played a positive role in the dispute. But they continued to refuse to enter the Broad Left and fight against the growing electoralism there. They compounded their sectarianism by deciding to run Phil Corddell for CPSA President against the Broad Left candidate. (He decided to leave the Civil Service, however, before the election took place).

The struggle began with the sacking of Phil Corddell, CPSA Branch Secretary at Brixton UBO.

Phil had received a disciplinary penalty for attending a picket of CPSA's National Executive during the 1979 pay campaign. This was followed by a major penalty for putting his name and office address to an Anti-Nazi League advert. The final penalty leading to his dismissal came for his attendance at the TUC lobby against the Corrie Bill in February 1980.

Phil's dismissal was soon followed by that of Branch Organiser Richard Cleverley for attending both the above demonstrations, and for returning to work one day late after taking leave.

To most CPSA activists it was clear that the true reason for the sackings came from political motives: Corddell and Cleverley were both members of the SWP and had worked to build an active and militant CPSA branch.

CPSA's 1980 Annual Conference took place not long after Phil Corddell's victimisation, and *unanimously* resolved:

"This conference fully supports Phil Corddell, Branch Secretary of DE Brixton Branch, who has been summarily dismissed from the Civil Service. It recognises that this has occurred because of his full support for CPSA policies against the cuts, against racialism and in favour of women's rights. Conference instructs the NEC to give full support for industrial action within his office, branch and in the CPSA as a whole in order to achieve his reinstatement."

But the role of CPSA's official leadership in the matter became steadily worse. A national "day of protest" was sanctioned in June, followed later by three days of official strike at Brixton itself. After this, the members were to return to work and trust in the Appeals Board and the negotiating skills of the full-time officers.

The rank and file at Brixton voted to take unofficial strike action from Monday June 30. Donations began to pour in rapidly from other branches where there was 'Broad Left' or SWP influence; delegations from all over the country visited the picket line, and speakers were sent out.

In an "all members" circular dated July 3, Ken Thomas (at that time the General Secretary of CPSA) responded by declaring that the National Disputes Committee had met the previous day, and "deplored" the unofficial action.

Thomas accused the Brixton branch of "bamboozling" money out of other CPSA members. Another union official insisted that the small number of CPSA scabs crossing the picket line should attend the weekly strikers' meetings and take part in the votes on whether to continue the unofficial strike!

In July, the police decided to implement James Prior's 'six pickets' 'guideline'. As there were three gates, this meant only *two* pickets at each entrance! All other pickets were forced to stand on a patch of waste ground opposite the office.

MPs Reg Race and Stuart Holland, who had attended the picket line, were told to keep their noses out — not only by Prior, but by Ken Thomas and Len Murray.

But civil service activists responded by turning up en masse for the pickets — and the dispute was won.

The following May, at CPSA's next Annual Conference, a motion was submitted congratulating the unofficial strikers, condemning the NEC's half-hearted attitude and congratulating "all those other members and branches who supported the strike either by physical presence or donations". Despite the fierce opposition of Ken Thomas and the right wing, the motion was carried on a card vote, by 108,457 to 71,340.



JOHN HARRIS

On the picket line

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 (no. 111, December 2 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 ended 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 POEU Broad Left

By Ricky Houston

The POEU covers BT engineers throughout the whole of Britain. The vast majority of POEU members work in BT, and most of the eligible workforce are members. The two major grades are the T2A and the Technical Officer (TO) grade (more skilled and relatively well paid). New technology will threaten directly the jobs of the TOs (it is estimated that the System X exchange could do away with 8 out of 10 exchange jobs).

There has been a slight and very small breakaway of some TOs to a new, consciously right-wing, union EOTA, which has declared it will never strike and which is highly "craft conscious", deriding all other grades of workers in BT. There was a previous breakaway in the 50s. The main significance of EOTA is as a symptom of a highly developed "Craft consciousness" among some of the POEU membership.

The Broad Left's main base of organised support is amongst the big city branches especially in London, but there has been a shift leftwards in some rural areas in the past few years.

The union has little history of militancy. The only major industrial struggle conducted by the POEU before 1983 was the 1978 fight for a shorter working week.



Pickets (this page and facing page) outside the main telephone exchange in Coventry, October 1983, awaiting the arrival of British Telecom senior management who were inspecting the installation of new System X equipment.

The build-up to the 1983 conference

By spring 1983 the paper campaign led by the right wing against the Tories' Bill was seen to be failing. The Bill was moving into its final stages, and it was stopped short of becoming an Act only by Thatcher's decision to call a General Election in June.

During Spring 1983, the right-wing called the first industrial action against the Bill. Many on the left saw this as a token gesture (though they obviously supported it). The right wing wanted to restore their credit as branches were forming proposals and mandating dele-

gates for the 1983 Conference in June.

Instructions were sent to branches to get levy cards prepared for an imminent commencement of the levy. In fact the levy never began under the right wing's leadership.

Engineers were called out in the City area of London and the Westminster branch. There were some differences between the branches and the NEC on who should be called out.

But in May, following a letter from Michael Foot, then leader of the Labour

Party, the NEC called the action off in Whitehall. The 1983 annual conference were to hear later from the Westminster Branch Secretary that Whitehall's telecom service had been in real danger of collapse.

The message that jobs were under real threat if BT were privatised got home to the mass membership — especially those in the highly "unprofitable" rural areas where the right wing had had loyal support in past NEC elections.

The official campaign against the Bill was widely seen to be failing.

The 1983 Annual Conference

The Conference in June 1983 was a major turning point for the Broad Left. A shift to the left was fairly predictable, but what actually occurred was stunning.

As Socialist Organiser reported at the time:

"In a dramatic shift which surpassed all our expectations, the POEU Conference swung to the left with all the weight and intensity of the demolition crane's cast iron hammer. For the first time since 1948, and in the most crucial period the union has ever faced ... delegates cheered and leapt to their feet as each successful Broad Left candidate's name was read out.

"The final results were 13 Broad Left, 9 of the right, and one non-aligned.

"At the Broad Left meeting on the Monday evening, the mood was ecstatic. Some comrades were moved to tears. Speaker after speaker gave commitments at the meeting that the newly elected National Executive would ensure the maximum trade union democracy possible, and urged that the rank and file keep up the maximum pressure..."

The major decision of the conference was taken on the Monday, in the debate on privatisation. A proposition from London North Central Internal branch radically changed the POEU's stance.

The Conference overwhelmingly committed itself to:

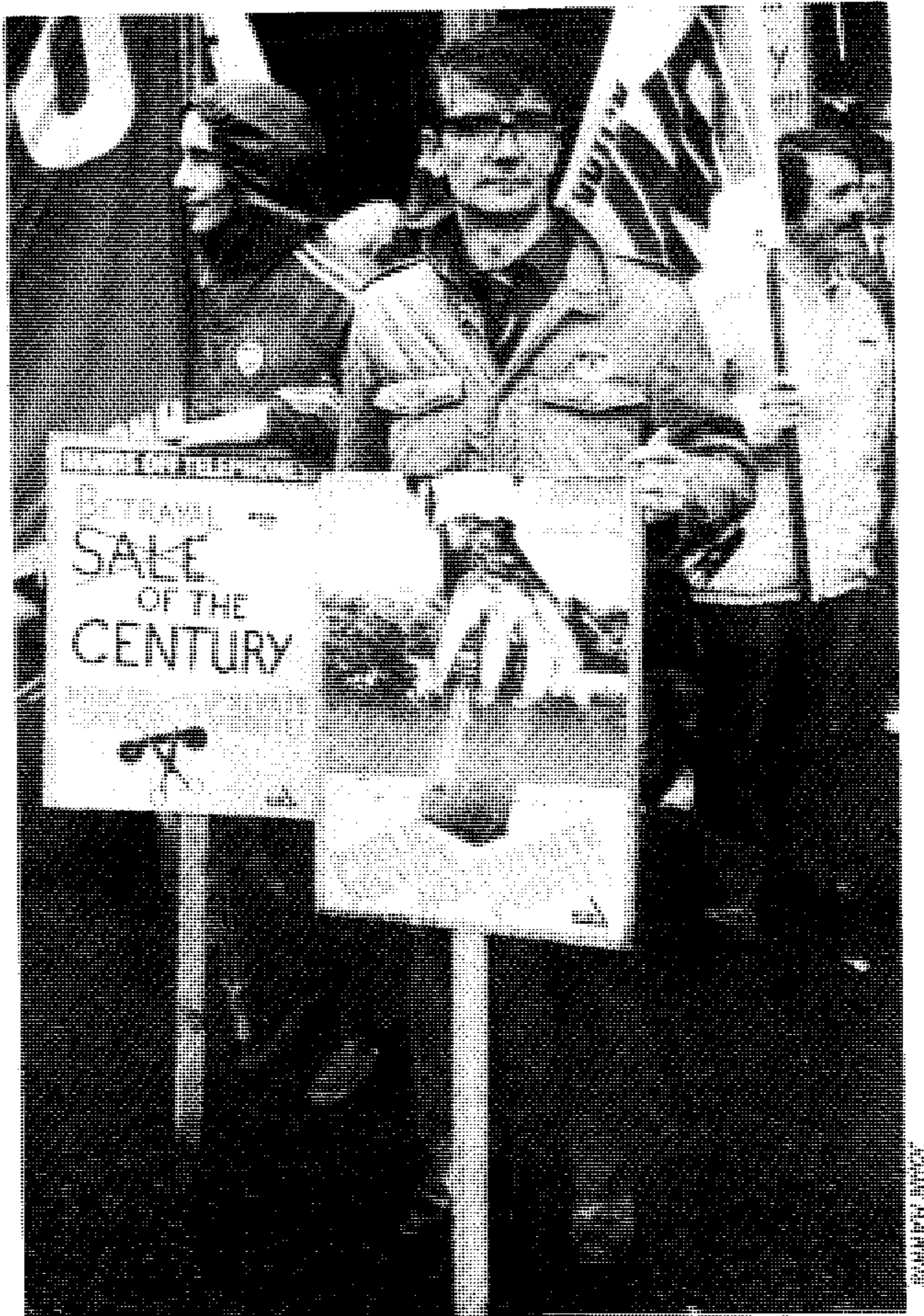
"immediately embarking on a campaign of industrial action in the event of a Tory Government being elected at the June 1983 election which announces its intention to privatise BT." A motion of no confidence in the right wing's Industrial Action Strategy Committee was carried.

The Broad Left now had a majority on the NEC and were committed by the Conference to fighting the Privatisation Bill through industrial action. Two days later the Tories were re-elected in a landslide majority.



Bryan Stanley

But the right wing were still firmly established in the Union Head Office, Greystoke House, through General Secretary Bryan Stanley and the full-time paid



union officers. They also retained a number of active supporters in many branches.

Mainstream

On the last day of the 1983 Annual Conference, the Mainstream declared war on the newly elected NEC.

Fairly soon a £1.00 industrial action levy was introduced to sustain industrial action which began in London North Central area. BT had instructed POEU members in the branch to interconnect some lines for the privately owned Project Mercury into the BT network.

This instruction had been expected for some time and the branch (a left-wing one) had prepared well for it.

POEU members were suspended.

Management grades, mostly members of the Society of Telecom Engineers which the previous right wing POEU leadership had attempted to combine with the POEU, scabbed.

There were no pickets stationed at the building where the scabbing took place. It was a multi-user building, other firms used different floors, and management brought from other areas were indistinguishable from users of the building.

In retaliation the POEU called other engineers out.

Those called out or suspended were sustained on average take home pay from the levy. A decision was taken to extend the blacking action to secondary action against specific equipment which Mercury's backers, Barclays, Cable & Wireless and B.P. used. Action was restricted to the London area except in one instance where POEU members in Aberdeen were involved.

The radicalisation of the members involved in industrial action was shown by the fact that at the POEU's Special Conference on Privatisation in September the Aberdeen branch called for an extension of the secondary action against Mercury's financial backers.

But at the top all was not well.

The right wing in the POEU

THE last time the POEU had a left majority on its Executive Council (NEC) was in 1948. The right wing was in control from then until June 1983.

The right wing maintained control through a secret organisation, the Bloc, which was forced out into the open with the emergence of the new Broad Left in 1978/79.

The Bloc's public face became the *Mainstream* faction. They issue leaflets at the annual conferences and occasionally throughout the year to POEU branch offices, in the same way that the Broad Left does. The right wing is based not only on right wing NEC members and full-time officers, but also on a large number of branch officers.



John Golding

The POEU right wing is with the rest of the labour movement's right wing. For instance, the POEU Political Officer is John Golding, a leading witch-hunter in the Labour Party. The POEU's legal advisor is Lawford's, a company linked both to Frank Chapple and to the SDP.



Frank Chapple

Bryan Stanley, POEU General Secretary, moved the TUC resolution in 1982 guaranteeing all unions with 100,000 or more members a seat on the TUC General Council — a move by the right to gain and maintain a majority on the General Council.

The POEU right wing should not, therefore, be underestimated. When a left wing majority was elected onto the NEC, with a radical change in policy it was certain that the right wing would use every trick in the book to regain control.

Mass action

The right wing was willing to fight tooth and nail against mass action. Mass action challenges the whole political philosophy of the right wing. Their philosophy is that of an elite working from above to change society, to obtain better conditions for the people they represent by a gradual transformation. This political philosophy that could obtain some measure of benefits for ordinary people in the post-war boom, but at a time of capitalist depression it cannot even promise to restore full employment.

Fear of mass action does not only affect the right wing. Mass action can also make the left fearful. If the mass action fails, and the members turn on those who led them into it, then life can be hell! There is a pressure to avoid risks. And the pressure on a shop steward from the mass membership can be at least as great as the pressure felt by the bureaucrat in the Union offices.

Right wing full-time union officials have also learnt what manoeuvres to use to strike, or sabotage a newly elected left wing, in much the same way that the Civil Service could ruin a left Labour government. The right wing depends on passivity, indifference and apathy in the mass membership, but they also help create it.

The left depends on mass activity, and increased democracy. Years of the organisational and political dominance of the right wing make it a tough task for the left to maintain control in a union once it has obtained it. But the fact that the left has been elected shows that a shift has occurred, and that there is a possibility, given the correct tactics and policy, to build on that and transform the situation.

The right wing's campaign

The build-up to 1983

THE Tory plans to privatise telecommunications were already being hatched during the 1979 General Election Campaign.

In 1981, an Act was passed which split the Post Office into two distinct corporations: the Post Office, which retained the postal and delivery service, and British Telecom, which covered telecommunications provision.

The Post Office is heavily labour intensive, although new technology is being introduced where it can be. BT is becoming a highly capital-intensive industry with a much reduced labour force. At present it employs around 245,000. Job losses have been threatened. The highest public estimate for the coming years is 100,000.

BT promises "super-profits", especially in the sector servicing big business. That is the sector where the greatest changes have been made in technology and it is the biggest-paying telecoms customer.

A year after the 1981 Act, the government announced its intention to privatise BT.

The POEU Broad Left campaigned for industrial action against the Bill to "split" the Post Office. The Broad Left said that the split would mean BT and the Post Office arguing for different conditions, rates of pay, etc., for POEU members in the divided businesses. This was to come true.

The Broad Left also pointed out that the split would lead to privatisation of telecom.

The right wing, who controlled the POEU's campaign, maintained a campaign of petitions and parliamentary debate against the Bill. At one point they called for a lobby of Parliament, but when they discovered that huge numbers intended to join the lobby they hastily wrote to branches telling them to keep the numbers down. Appearing "reasonably and responsible" to Tory Ministers, Fleet Street and old Peers was a central plank of the right wing's campaign.

Broad Left-dominated branches took up the Broad Left campaign with some success at conference. The 1980 annual conference carried Proposition 346 unanimously "to vigorously oppose by all available means, including industrial action, any attempt to interfere with or break the Post Office monopoly".

The 1981 Act also broke the monopoly that PO telecom (now British Telecom) had over telecommunication provision and service. Some monopoly rights were maintained, such as the right to provide the initial telephone, but privately owned companies could now set up their own business in competition to BT in the profitable trunk network. One private consortium Project Mercury was formed, with the aim of providing a competitive trunk network. Using the latest technology in a highly profitable arena, it could decrease BT profits, and increase pressure for BT to reduce labour costs via job and wage cuts.

Project Mercury is a consortium of Barclays Bank, Cable & Wireless and B.P., but even for them the cost of investment would have been too great without interconnections to the national BT network.

1982 Annual Conference

At the 1982 Annual Conference a composite proposition to begin a campaign of industrial action, leaflets to the public and an appeal for wider labour movement support was "talked out" by the right wing. However, the right wing leadership did "black" Project Mercury interconnection, as per existing Conference policy.

The slogan of the POEU as a whole was "Public Service, not Private Profit". A campaign of parliamentary lobbying, petitions and "prayers" brought together all the unions representing workers in BT through the British Telecom Union Committee (BTUC).

The central message was the "moral" argument against big business hoping to make large profits, the scandalous sale of a successful public enterprise, and the likely loss of jobs.

Bryan Stanley stressed the "reasonable" attitude of the BTUC unions citing the growth of service provided by BT in terms of phones and service provided in a 10 year period alongside the virtual stagnation of the size of the workforce! Capitalist private enterprise was denounced, but capitalist state enterprise whitewashed. The POEU's propaganda was based on the "madness" of the Government's proposals.

A central plank of the union's official policy which was later to become a factor in holding back industrial action — was "the need to hit big business but spare the public".

The fight was seen in terms of winning public opinion, rather than mobilising industrial power against the government.

Left wing branches circulated other branches.

In October 1982 the right wing leadership called a one day strike for October 20. Support for the strike up and down the country was solid. Only a small number of POEU members defied it. The strike was in the middle of the same week that other public sector unions also held one day strikes against Tory government policy. Significantly, the TUC did not co-ordinate the strikes and have them all on the one day. Far better for Murray and Co. to have one day stoppages every day of the week than build a public sector alliance.

Selective action

During the 1978 struggle for a shorter working week the POEU had developed a successful tactic of selective action. A small number of members at key points such as the Stock Exchange would strike and be maintained on full pay by a levy of the rest of the POEU 133,000 membership.

The Broad Left began campaigning for "the immediate introduction of the levy and selective industrial action". This tactic was almost certainly the only one possible for the immediate commencement of industrial action in the POEU, given its history.

The POEU and nationalisation

NATIONALISATION is often seen by labour movement activists as a part of the welfare state or as a socialist measure.

But telecommunications were nationalised in Britain by Tories and Liberals. Similar measures were taken in other countries by similar governments. No socialists then.

The reason for state ownership was the nature of the industry. Capitalism needs an efficient system of telecommunications as a basis for other industry.

State ownership was especially necessary early this century, when telecom equipment was prone to breakdown, and the service could be seriously disrupted by a strike in a single company.

Today the equipment is more robust. Localised industrial action may take some time before it bites. If scabbing can be effectively organised, a localised dispute can be contained and a reasonable service maintained. Equipment can be re-aligned by scabs to maintain service to high priority customers at the expense of less important (less profitable) custom.

This actually happened in the POEU's recent industrial action campaign, during the lock out at International Services in London.

BT management successfully contained the localised industrial action which the POEU used as their weapon in the fight against the Tories' plans to privatise BT. They struck a deadly blow at the union's Achilles Heel.

But that Achilles Heel need not have been exposed. At various times in the dispute there were opportunities to cover the heel with a steel plated boot.

In 1982 the Broad Left began campaigning for a Special Conference against the Bill to privatise BT, which was going through its various stages in parliament. However, this campaign was limited to sending Broadsheets to all POEU branch offices and to Broad Left supporters. It was not the policy of the Broad Left to campaign with Broadsheets, etc., throughout the mass membership. Individual supporters were left to their own devices as to how they would campaign in their area for support for Broad Left policy.

The Broad Left demand was for a Special Conference which would debate the strategy of how to defeat the Bill. The right wing's campaign was a rehash, albeit on a grander scale, of the earlier effort on the 1981 Act.

Among labour movement activists, both right and left, support for the POEU's fight against privatisation was reflex. This was a fight in defence of a nationalised industry against greed-driven profiteers! But rather than make a labour movement orientation central, the POEU made it secondary. Instead the abstract "public", in some mystical fashion, was seen as the major influence on Tory policies!

One-day strike

A growing number of branches did take up the call for a Special Conference against Privatisation in 1982 and 1983.

Following the election of the Broad Left NEC majority, the national organisation of the Broad Left virtually disappeared until the September conference. The only Broadsheet issued in this period was at the Special Conference itself. Copies were sent to Branch offices — arriving the day before the September Special Conference.

Special conference

In an abrupt change of Broad Left practice no fringe meeting was organised the night preceding the September conference. Such fringe meetings, organised for delegates, had always been a focal point for Broad Left organisation. Nationally known speakers were usually on the platform.



John Golding poster, October 1981

The Broad Left Broadsheet that appeared at the September conference was fairly vague although one major point was made — the danger of isolation. It argued that "directly involving only a small proportion of the members in action breeds isolation. Any strategy we develop needs to compensate for this . . . we must match these by gaining the highest level of involvement possible amongst the membership."

How this was to come about was never stated, indeed some supporters of the Broad Left even argued that paying the levy was involving all the membership, and this was all that was necessary!

A very small minority within the Broad Left argued against the military-type tactics of hitting specific targets, but limiting the numbers involved in industrial action by paying exorbitant rates of strike pay. The strikers received average take-home pay, so it was impossible to have more than a small minority taking action.

This was justified with the argument that because of the nature of the industry, specific targets, big business especially, could be hit while sparing the public. But it didn't work.

Without a radicalised and angry membership the employer and the union's right wing could exploit the situation. They were to do so in November.

BT took a very soft line in terms of disciplining members involved in industrial action before September, and relied on the effects of propaganda. But if they hoped that the union's right wing would secure a shift in policy at the Special Conference in September back to the old policy of petitions, they were wrong.

However, even before September, some developments had taken place on the NEC which were ominous for the future.

The Broad Left national organisation had virtually collapsed though in some areas the left were still working away, especially in London.

Witchhunter-general John Golding was not renominated by the POEU for a seat on the Labour Party NEC. This was a blow for the labour movement right wing. Hard lobbying by the rank and file of some of the NEC lefts was needed to secure this vote.

And the NEC did not make any statement, either publicly or within the union journal or letters to branches, as to why Golding was denominated. They were clearly reluctant to take the politics to the mass membership.

The argument was that the fight against privatisation and Project Mercury must not be derailed by the right wing at the Special Conference in September.

Some individual supporters of the Broad Left did write to the journal in support of the NEC decision, but it did not carry the same weight. And in fact the right wing was able to use the issue to attack the left. They successfully obtained a censure vote against the NEC majority at the September Special Conference — a move which only reinforced the conservative sentiments among some Broad Left NEC members.

A majority of the POEU membership was left thinking that John Golding had done a marvellous job for the POEU. They also retained illusions in the right wing full-time officers and the TUC. This factor was to prove fatal a few months later.

Some of the NEC members, supported by the Broad Left, had a conception of relating to the union membership and the Broad Left organisation which accommodated to the right wing among the local branch officers and national officials — a method of operating by manoeuvring which was based upon the need to "stay in power".

Smart footwork at and before conferences in order to gain and maintain a majority was seen as primary. Campaigning for "dicey" issues among the rank and file was avoided.

Such methods inevitably lead to the pre-existing order reasserting itself.

However, at the September Special Conference at Wembley, the Broad Left still seemed in control. The conference overwhelmingly endorsed the NEC strategy: vaguely defined selective action under the control of the Industrial Action Strategy Committee of the NEC, now left wing controlled. A huge number of specific proposals were remitted. The NEC extended the initial part of the agenda, but curtailed that section which contained proposals calling for more aggressive and militant industrial action.

Before the September Special Conference the industrial action had concentrated mainly upon the blacking of Project Mercury. Indeed, the levy had been ended, a majority of the NEC thinking it was difficult to justify its continuation when such a small number were on strike.

Following the September conference the situation changed, for the most part due to a change in BT's policy. A work to rule in International Services was brutally broken by BT. In a midnight raid on the buildings they threw everyone out, using private security staff and police.

Scabs

The levy recommenced.

BT began organising scab labour — management grades — in the locked-out exchanges.

Members in some other areas in London were called out in retaliation. While the dispute escalated in London, the rest of the country was involved only to the extent of levy collection. Some areas encountered some resistance to payment but on the whole the money came in.

However, levy collection eventually becomes routine. The danger grew that the members taking action in London would become isolated.

A minority of the left called for spreading the action outside London. But the calls fell on deaf ears. London was the hub, and the only area where the mass membership were getting angry and radicalised. The difficulty of spreading the action outside London was compounded by the strangling effect of the policy of paying average take home pay. A noose tightened around the POEU's neck with every additional member either called out on strike or suspended by BT management. The union's response was limited in advance.

Attempts to call a national overtime ban were stifled by the method employed by the NEC to find out "the mood of the membership".

Early in June the problem of how the left were to "transform" the union had already been discussed.

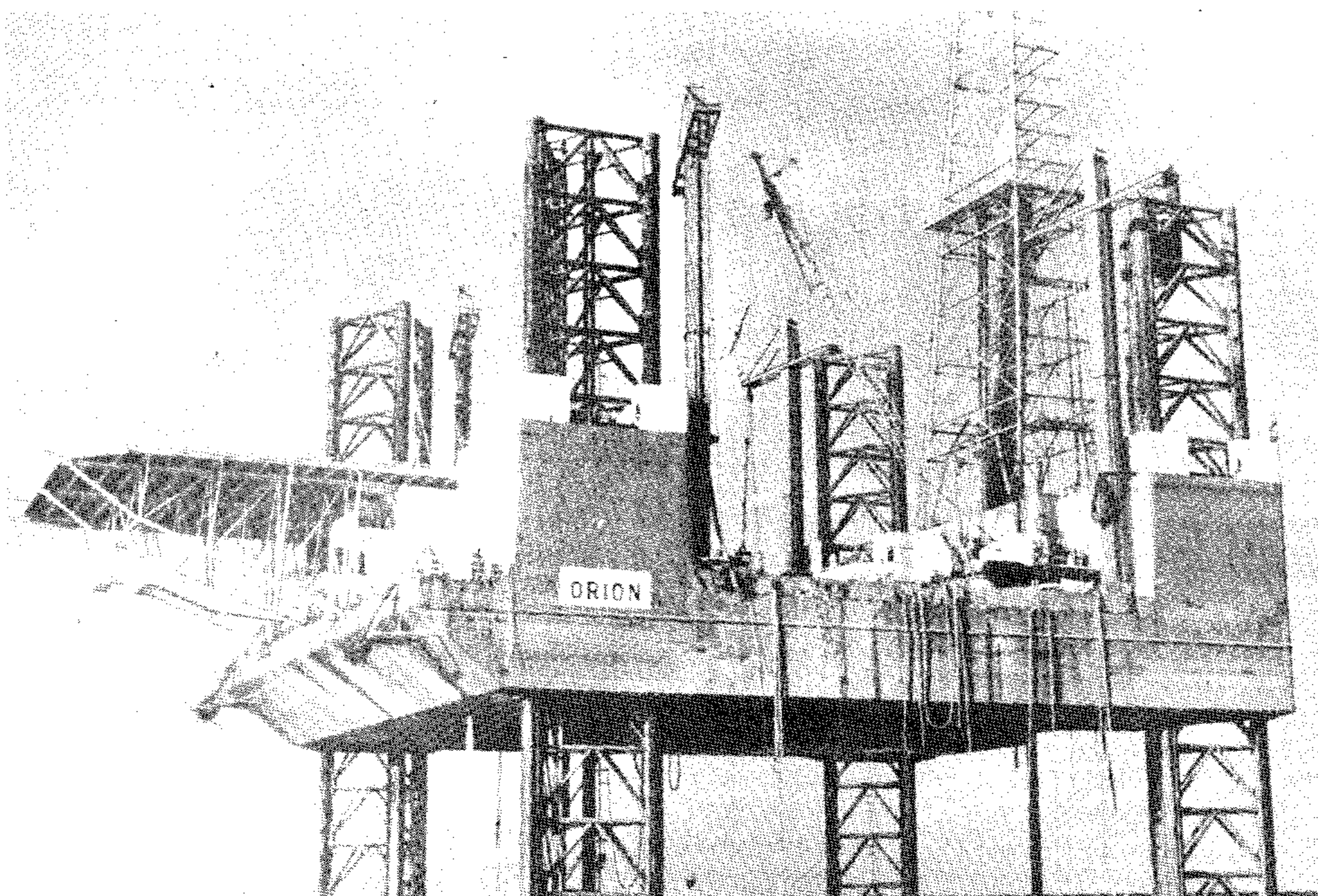
Councils of war

How would the NEC deal with the right wing full-time officers in Greystoke House and the local branch officials who still remained loyal to the Mainstream? How would they transform the attitudes of the mass membership?

One suggestion put forward in the London Broad Left was to turn Union Regional Councils (URCs) into councils of war. URCs are bodies upon which Branch Secretaries sit. The proposal was for the 23 strong NEC to visit the URCs who would have not only the normal delegates but also committee and branch reps (the POEU equivalent of shop stewards) present.

The proposal was never put into practice. When a move by the NEC to establish the feasibility of a national overtime ban was eventually undertaken, only normally constituted URCs met.

Furthermore, some of the Broad Left on the URCs argued that an overtime ban would hit the public! As a result no overtime ban was called.



Communication lines to North Sea oil rigs were hit by selective action by Aberdeen POEU members

The Privatisation Bill and opposition

A small minority of the Broad Left, including supporters of Socialist Organisation, argued against the selective action.

We said that it was becoming evident that management were able to contain the disruptive effects of the industrial action, thanks to the level of technology and effective scabbing. Also, the task facing the POEU, defeat of the Privatisation Bill, demanded preparation for a full confrontation with the newly-re-elected Tory government.

Privatisation is a central part of the Tory's strategy to increase the ailing profit rates of big business, to break the power of the unions in the public sector and to defeat the labour movement in Britain.

For the POEU, and other unions in BT, defeat of the Privatisation Bill could only be accomplished by a mass mobilisation of the labour movement to defeat the government.

Considering the political climate at the time that was not an easy task. But it was possible — though not by selective action!

The selective action tactic was elevated into a principle by the Broad Left NEC and the majority opinion of the Broad Left activists. Why?

The problem flowed from an unwillingness to confront political issues, and to confront the attitudes of a rank and file with no history of militancy.

Rather than risk becoming unpopular — a risk that had to be taken in order to argue out issues and confront the right wing and build a campaign equivalent to the task — selective action against big business and the government became the be all and end all.

Within the Broad Left, Socialist Organisation, Socialist Action and Militant supporters all formally held the belief that all-out strike was necessary. By far the most influential were Militant, whose leading supporter Phil Holt was on the IASC. Though supporting an all-out strike policy in the abstract, they failed to make the break from selective action when it mattered.

At an October Broad Left national meeting, which overwhelmingly rejected the all-out strike policy, it was Holt who led the arguments in defence of the NEC's tactics, summed-up by a remark from one London leading Broad Left activist as 'we're playing chess and management are playing draughts'.

Out of all the POEU branches where the Broad Left were dominant, only three raised the policy of all-out strike action publicly in the union, either at conference or through letters to other branches.

After the lock-out at International Services, BT consistently took a harder line. And the weakness of the selective action with strikers sustained on average take-home pay by the levy was exposed.

Management began what was termed "Operation Black Hole" — they sacked as many members as possible in the dispute to bankrupt the strike fund.

Management began "bussing" members from different areas to scab on suspended or striking members. The union membership stood firm even though refusing to cross a picket line meant instant suspension. But the POEU NEC was faced with a dilemma. The funds could not sustain the swelling numbers of suspended members at full pay.

To counter "Operation Black Hole" and safeguard the selective action policy, some restrictions on blacked work were lifted, some picket lines were lifted and only those at the most crucially selected "targets" were maintained. Some EOTA members scabbed, as did management.

Initially "bussing" was limited to the London area but it soon spread to the areas surrounding London. In Aberdeen a telex exchange serving the North Sea oil industry was called out. On a number of occasions the exchange equipment was on the point of collapse. STE said they would scab if the exchange did collapse. But then the POEU NEC sanctioned other POEU members to go into the exchange to rescue it in the nick of time!

In terms of the POEU's strategy, the counter to Operation Black Hole was a success. But from another way of looking at it, again only a minority opinion, it missed a golden opportunity to escalate the fight.

The NEC had every excuse to call an immediate national overtime ban, to spread selective action to every major city, to call lightning strikes and to move away from the crippling policy of paying full take-home pay. The bussing showed clearly how involvement in industrial action was radicalising branch members and local branch officers even in consciously right wing branches.

No criticism of the NEC was to be heard from the Broad Left broadsheets. The success of the union's counter to Operation Black Hole was proclaimed in the broadsheets which appeared for November's reconvened annual conference.

Part of the reason for this was that the Broad Left itself was in a quandary. There was no distinct "line". Criticising the right wing when they controlled the NEC was easy, but criticism of the new left wing NEC was not.

Not every supporter of the Broad Left supported everything the Broad Left on the NEC were doing. But the predominant view was that having got a Broad Left NEC for the first time in years, we shouldn't criticise them. Maintaining that Broad Left majority on the NEC was primary, and "anyway we'll win the fight".

Then in October Project Mercury applied to the courts for an injunction under Tebbit's law against the POEU's blacking action.

After Mercury announced its intentions, BT threatened some suspended members with the sack. If they refused to "work normally as directed by BT management", they would be dismissed. POEU members were told to sign statements saying they would work normally. The POEU NEC told members to sign them on the grounds that they had no legal status.

The sacking threat was timed in tune with Mercury's attempt to get an injunction. On legal advice, supposedly to create the best conditions for the court hearing, the POEU NEC called off all secondary action against Mercury's backers.

This decision alarmed some Broad Left supporters who saw tailoring industrial action to legal considerations as a weakness. But again this was a minority view and the prevailing mood was faith in the Broad Left on the NEC.

In a surprising judgement, the judges ruled in favour of the POEU. BT did not sack anyone, but they increased the numbers being threatened with the sack. The POEU's reconvened annual conference was due soon, in November, and BT made public statements pledging withdrawal of the sacking notices if "sense" prevailed and the action was called off.

Project Mercury appealed against the court judgement. The hearing was due to take place during the week of the POEU conference.

The court result produced a mood of false-confidence throughout the union. In the official Campaign News, it was presented as not merely a victory — but a victory *because of the POEU's responsible attitude* in calling off the secondary action and *presenting a good case* to the judges.

The POEU NEC, Broad Left dominated, was effectively telling the membership that the courts were impartial, that Tebbit's law was impartial, and that provided the POEU could make a good case everything would be roses. This was a serious political error.

The Broad Left Broadsheet handed out at conference had the same line. "The Mercury court decision was due in no small measure to the Executive's "tailored" action . . ." It also praised the union's counter-strategy against Operation Black Hole.

Although the Broad Left Broadsheet also said "We must have no illusions about the 'justice' of legal judgement in trade union affairs", and also argued for spreading the action, the dominant tone of it was praise for the actions of the NEC up until then.

The November conference

No surprise, then, that the vast majority of delegates at the November conference had faith in the NEC's method of fighting. It was not a conference full of angry delegates, or lobbied by busloads of angry members out on strike.

Project Mercury was seen falsely as a different issue from privatisation. The vast majority of delegates were under the illusion, sustained by both the NEC and the Broad Left, that the union would win again in the courts at Mercury's appeal hearing.

The central point is that the conference was like that — creating conditions wholly unfavourable to defying the NEC should they retreat if Mercury's appeal went against the POEU — because of the way the Broad Left majority on the NEC had conducted the campaign up until then.

And the Broad Left did not criticise the NEC.

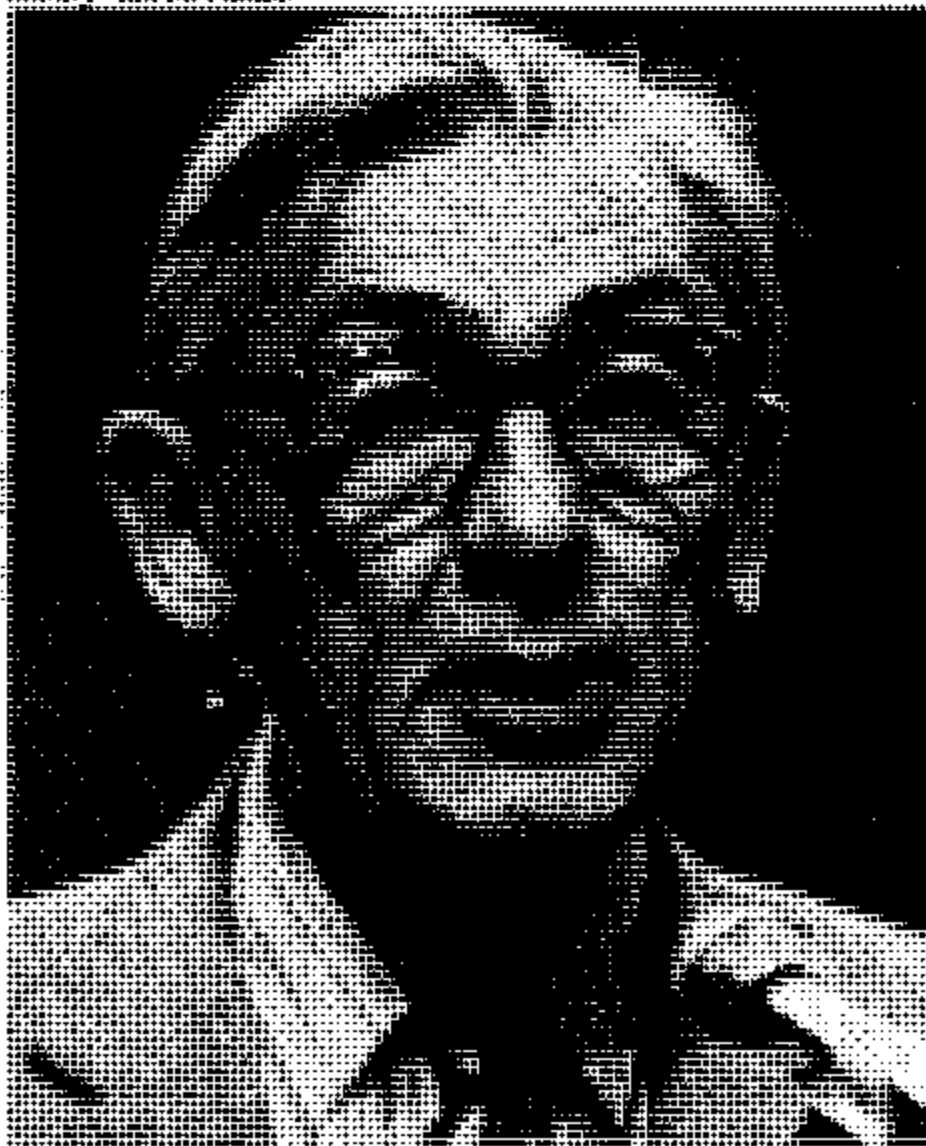
The right-wing, the TUC, the Mercury injunction and the collapse

The determination and ability of the right wing full time officers in Greystoke House was shown clearly at the November conference.

Just previous to the September Special Conference, Bryan Stanley, General Secretary, had proposed to the NEC calling off all the action because he believed the POEU would have injunctions brought against us. Even other full-time officers attacked him. The vote was overwhelmingly against Stanley.

Now that the real thing was here, the situation was dramatically different.

Delegates to the November conference were handed two ominous letters as they arrived.



JOHN HARRIS

One was from Len Murray, general secretary of the TUC, replying to Stanley. From the introductory paragraph it was evident Stanley had asked a leading question:

"Dear Mr Stanley, Thank you for your letter of October 26 asking whether the POEU would be contravening TUC policy if they decided to obey an injunction which might arise from an appeal to be made by Mercury next Monday . . .

"Congress has not decided that any union obeying an injunction would be contravening policy . . .

It pointed out on behalf of the General Council that "there is no question of the TUC setting out to break or encourage members to break the law."

The recent TUC Congress had carried a motion reaffirming total opposition to the legislation and the decisions taken at Wembley: it rejected an amendment to the motion to pursue a policy of non-compliance with the legislation.

The other letter was from POEU legal advisers, Lawfords, laying down on what the legal consequences of a breach of an injunction would be.

The union's President made a curious remark in his opening address when he said he might request the Standing Orders Committee for time to make a personal statement which "had nothing to do with the NEC."

By midweek the appeal judgement had been given — in favour of Mercury. The NEC was to meet that evening to give a statement to conference the following day.

The Broad Left also had a fringe meeting that evening. It was enormous. It was all set to lobby the NEC for defiance of the injunction, but was derailed into going to a right wing faction meeting instead.

In the course of a five-hour meeting of the NEC, they voted to comply with the law. Four of the five Broad Left-supported NEC members caved in.

The statement presented next day stated "The NEC has decided to abide by the injunction . . .

"5) The rules of the Union do not require members, officers and staff to carry out unlawful instructions.

6) TUC policy is that a union should not break the law by defying a decision of the courts."

The conference by a substantial majority voted to endorse the NEC statement.

Even had the NEC voted to defy the injunction, the full-time officers might well have split publicly from the NEC and stated that they would not defy the law. Although in the event the NEC recommendation was crucial to the vote, the full-time officials could still have swung the conference into abiding by the injunction.

Such were the consequences of the way the issue had been fought up to then.

And yet on the following day the conference voted unanimously, in falsely jubilant mood, to continue the privatisation fight.

Only a few months later all industrial action was called off, and the campaign led by the Broad Left on the NEC became a repetition of the right wing's. Members in some central London branches went back to work isolated under very bad conditions.

The Broad Left in December decided to take the four off the Broad Left slate for the NEC elections in 1984.



ANDREW WIARD (REPORT)

POEU mass protest outside British Telecom HQ in London, October 1983, against lock-out by management.

Conclusion

Some conclusions can be drawn from the POEU Broad Left experience for left wing activists throughout the trade union movement in Britain.

When the right wing are in the leadership of a union it is all too easy to ritualistically denounce their every move. Changing from being an opposition within the union to gaining control of the leadership is a great step. It poses new problems but also greatly widens the potential to organise and lead a fight — to tackle the problems that the union faces and to transform the union into one capable of winning a fight even given the "objective" starting point that the vast majority of union members are not hotly champing at the bit to defeat management or the government.

Electoralism

For any such union caucus, electoralism, the practice of struggling to gain leadership positions, is necessary. But when it becomes, however subconsciously, the exclusive or major priority, it can lead to fatal errors.

Within the POEU Broad Left, although there were divergent views, the prevailing opinion was that for the sake of 'unity', the newly-elected Broad Left candidates to the NEC were beyond accountability, despite the fact that the majority of the NEC took some decisions that either required intensive lobbying or were criticised in some quarters.

This approach also meant an unwillingness to discuss politics. For example, the POEU NEC did not explain why Golding was de-nominated. The politics of why the POEU and the labour movement right wing were a danger to the rank and file fighting for their needs were never taken to the membership. Some would argue that this

was a peripheral issue, but in this context, it is clearly central.

Right-wing

The role of the right wing in the sell-out over the Mercury injunction cannot be overstated. Even if the left wing NEC had said to the conference "defy", there is every reason to believe the right wing full timers would have split. And the vast majority of "ordinary passive" members have well established illusions in the right wing full-timers, in the TUC leadership, etc. A whole-hearted vote to follow the NEC would have been far from certain.

"Dicey" issues are avoided by those holding to pure electoralist practice precisely because they fear that to confront well established prejudices among the mass membership may make them unpopular.

Risks

But risks must be taken. Otherwise only small, relatively unimportant gains will be made and on the critical, major issues, the management will win. This in turn, ironically, leads to the very opposite of what is intended by the electoralists — they are voted out the next year.

But electoralism also acts as a pressure on the Broad Left from within — to stifle political discussion.

When a situation demands the utmost clear thinking, anything which inhibits political discussion within the Broad Left, inhibits clarity. Members elected onto the NEC become unaccountable and a law unto themselves. Wrong policies can be held and supported.

What this can lead to was shown at the national Broad Left meeting between the September and November conferences. In

the midst of the union's campaign of industrial action the first issue at that meeting was deciding the slate for the next year's NEC, relegating discussion on the campaign — and any examination of the record of present executive members — to the afternoon.

Widely divergent views on the anti-privatisation fight were held within the POEU Broad Left. Some believed that selective action would win and anyway the rank and file were incapable of rising to the level of militancy required for wider action. Some ignored the importance of the membership's consciousness, others held that to be very important, that all-out strike action was necessary, and so on.

But there is a limit in how far you can go with consensus. Opportunities for political debate are vital to clarify Broad Left opinion and policy. Structures need to be developed which enable discussions to take place, for decisions to be made and for accountability to operate.

Without such structures, endless discussions can take place with no clear policy adopted which means they become merely talking shops. Militants drawn to the Broad Left can become confused, discouraged and disillusioned.

Leadership

The Broad Lefts need to be transformed into groups capable of analysing and fighting for the correct policies and holding a leadership which stands on a slate, to accountability to that slate. Otherwise we may win union elections, but we will never develop the sort of left wing groups within the unions that are capable of providing leadership at every level of the union and adequately rousing the mass membership to their own defence.

This pamphlet discusses the experience of two of the most important of the new trade union Broad Lefts, in the civil service clerical union CPSA and the telecom engineers' union POEU.

These Broad Lefts have built powerful oppositions to the old right-wing leaderships. Yet, the pamphlet argues, they have been inadequate.

A detailed account of the POEU's struggle against privatisation of British Telecom and against Project Mercury since the Broad Left got a majority on the union's National Executive Committee in June 1983 concludes: "For any trade union caucus, electoralism, the practice of struggling to gain leadership positions, is necessary. But when it becomes, however subconsciously, the exclusive or main priority, it can lead to fatal errors..."

" 'Dicey' issues are avoided by those holding to pure electoralist tactics... But risks must be taken. Otherwise... on the critical, major issues, the management will win..."

"The Broad Lefts need to be transformed into groups capable of analysing and fighting for the correct policies and holding a leadership to accountability..."

And a survey of the whole history of the CPSA Broad Left concludes by stressing "the need for much more political clarification within the Broad Lefts" and the need to combat "a routinism where positions in the union loom larger than the struggle."

"Another lesson which is coming is the need for a serious rank and file orientation".

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