

Breaking the pattern of defeat

Tom Willis takes a look at who's fighting back in the unions and who's standing in their way

TODAY THE postal workers are, the strongest and best organised obstacle in the way of the employers' offensive. One third of all strikes now take place in Royal Mail, Parcelforce and Post Office Counters. The background to this is a relentless drive by management to exploit changes in sorting technology in order to increase their control over a much reduced and less secure workforce. The immediate burning issue is the future of the second delivery: the bosses want to scrap it and make more workers part-time.

The recent Scottish postal strike, for example, wasn't just a magnificent display of inspiring trade union solidarity in which tens of thousands of postal workers across the whole of Scotland came out in defence of just five of their number. Nor was it just the largest illegal and unofficial strike since World War Two (when all strikes were banned).

It was also a strike which spiralled out of the control of the national CWU union leadership to an extent that General Secretary Alan Johnson had to perform some impressive acrobatics to get back in the driving seat.

And it was a strike that broke out of the pattern of the recent period. It was a strike which, by the logic of the struggle itself, was transformed from a defensive into an offensive battle.

What started off as a local dispute became, by the forces it set in motion, a full-scale confrontation. If it had been spread to England it could have put a halt to management's offensive and secured the second delivery on a permanent basis, perhaps even a reduction in the working week.

This view is held by a significant minority of the militants involved in the strike, and received a sympathetic hearing when put to the Edinburgh mass meeting which eventually called off the strike after all management attempts at victimisation and demotion to part-time status had been abandoned.

Another important element in the Scottish strike was the role played by younger militants and activists. Nearly all the key organisers, apart from the very top, were under 35. The significant thing here is that people under 30 have not been shaped and traumatised by the defeats of the '80s in the same way that older generations have been. It is a sign that the movement is beginning to replenish itself out of the ranks of the youth. The tragedy is that there is no drive at all by

the official apparatus to organise the great bulk of the youth stuck in dead-end "McJobs."

The Scottish postal strike of 1995 does give us reason to believe that the movement is climbing out of the trough dug by the defeat of the miners in 1984-5. It is important, however, to keep things in context and perspective.

The dominant pattern remains one of isolated and often defeated sectional battles in which the official leadership suffocates enthusiasm and prevents generalisation.

The train drivers' dispute last year was a prime example. RMT which organises the majority of railworkers but a minority of drivers, started a "campaign" for a yes vote for action over pay. ASLEF, the drivers' craft union, then followed suit.

Unfortunately, the majority of the RMT Council of Executives were not able to get past the obstruction of general secretary Knapp and his apparatus. The strike ballot lost. The left on the RMT Council of Executives failed to take on the entrenched bureaucracy. They seemed to believe that because they were the majority on the executive they were really in the saddle.

"An important element in the Scottish strike was the role played by younger activists not traumatised by the defeats of the '80s"

This weakness was described by a WL railworkers' leaflet for a meeting of the loose RMT left caucus, CFDU:

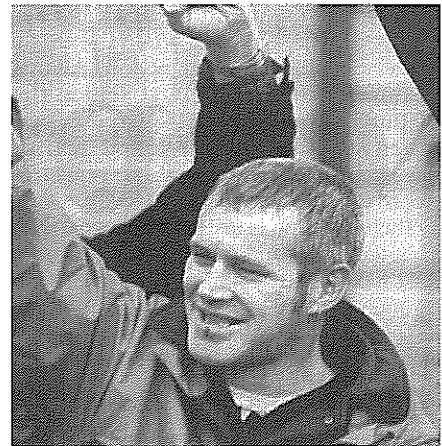
"We all know the stories about how last year's pay ballot was lost. The sabotage from full timers. The lack of information. The leaflets hidden in cupboards at Unity House [union HQ].

ES strike at the crossroads

By a CPSA Employment Service Executive member

AS WL goes to press 20,000 civil servants in the Employment Service are balloting for a series of regional strikes and for all-out indefinite action.

The dispute is over pay but most ES workers see it as about more than that. They are angry about staffing levels and the threat to jobs represented by the introduction of the Job Seekers' Allowance. The JSA will also force ES workers into direct conflict with claimants, who they will be expected to



"What we have to face up to is that this kind of sabotage by Knapp and his friends is inevitable. What's more, the defeat of the pay ballot paved the way for the right's victory in the Presidential election.

"The only solution is for the CFDU to build accountable, democratic, campaigning structures which can act independently of the HQ campaign. In other words, we need to build a serious rank and file movement."

While the RMT ballot went down, the ASLEF membership voted for action. Two absolutely solid one-day drivers' strikes followed. They shut down the rail network completely.

With the tube workers in both RMT and ASLEF due to open up a second front, things were looking good. But that wouldn't last.

An AWL tube driver takes up the story:

"On the eve of the first co-ordinated BR and tube strike for years, ASLEF's Lew Adams stuck the boot in — on the workers.

First, the BR dispute was called off without any gains and with the action absolutely solid. Not surprisingly, this deal was thrown out by the ASLEF membership. But Lew was not to be stopped. He took the ballot mandate and went straight into new talks with BR where he managed to scrape together a new deal, at least as bad as the old one. This time the members did not get the chance to ballot. The executive had already accepted the deal for them.

"At the same time the ASLEF head office messed up the technicalities of the London Underground ballot. The courts ruled against the union. The

police to an even greater extent.

The ballot is a real opportunity to escalate the action, even though it was originally called by the national CPSA leadership in order to scupper the dispute. They had hoped to force the pace of the dispute in an artificial way and stop proper preparation.

Members are now faced with two alternatives on the ballot paper — both of which they can vote for. This means there is a chance of rescuing the situation.

If the ES workers do vote yes to action it will be a clear sign that, despite their rotten national leadership, CPSA members still have the will to fight.

dispute then went on the back burner while ASLEF re-balloted. When the ASLEF drivers again voted for action, Adams did the obvious thing and settled the dispute without any gains whatsoever. When ASLEF members rejected this in a ballot, Adam signed up a three-year productivity deal instead!"

There was still reason to hope that, with a left-wing local and national leadership, the RMT tubeworkers could make a major breakthrough.

The tube dispute flared back to life with the announcement of the third 2:1 ballot victory from the RMT. It was a tragedy that the RMT leadership eventually called off the action with only limited gains — an hour off the working week, and postponement of the "make or buy" [contracting out] review on

all lines apart from the Central and Jubilee for two years.

A recent successful victimisation dispute on the Northern Line shows revived confidence among tubeworkers, and the ASLEF betrayal has not taken all the fight out of the BR drivers.

Last month saw a magnificent display of direct action from drivers on South Eastern Trains (Charing Cross, Cannon Street, London Bridge), who simply refused to take out stock with serious safety problems — several carriages had already de-coupled from one train in transit. They used part of the Tories' own anti-union laws, the 1993 TURER Act, which allows workers to stop unsafe jobs.

The establishment of this principle opens the door to similar stoppages if management breach safety regulations in their attempts to

defeat sectional strikes by railworkers, for instance, guards and senior conductors.

The SE Trains action also vindicates the line argued by WL railworkers during the 1994 signal workers' strike, when we called on traincrew and track workers to stop the job over safety. It shows that even laws designed to shackle the unions can — in certain circumstances — be used against the employers.

Outside the post and the Tube, the most promising signs are among the most Fordist of Fordist workers: the Ford Motor Company and General Motors.

Both great corporations have seen British workers regaining muscle and bargaining strength as a result of global changes. The result is, that with offers rejected in postal ballots and short sharp walkouts to underline the point, a major battle is possible at either.

The crisis in Britain's biggest union

By a UNISON health activist

THE turn-out in the election for UNISON's General Secretary last November was not unusually low for union elections, with some 25% of the union's members taking part.

Though Rodney Bickerstaffe, the candidate from the union machinery won, he did very badly against a challenge from the right. With some 150,000 members backing him, Bickerstaffe won less than half the votes, while Peter Hunter, a former Tory and prominent anti-abortion campaigner in the old NALGO, got over 90,000, almost 30% of those cast.

Given that there was almost no obvious campaign for Hunter, where did these votes come from, and why? The reason doesn't lie with Hunter's views — either those expressed vigorously in the past, or the slightly milder version put out in the General Secretary campaign.

It lies with the way UNISON was formed, and members' dissatisfaction with what it has become — a bureaucratic leviathan incapable of providing the basics that trade unionists expect from their organisation and inaccessible to ordinary members.

UNISON appears to be a "left union" over Clause Four in the Labour Party, the national minimum wage, and other issues, but the union's own structures have fallen into decay. Many branches are not functioning, the new structures have handed control of disputes to full-timers who seem incapable of organising, and opportunities to defend wages and conditions have been squandered — as in the health service — because the machinery does not respond to the

members.

In last year's NHS pay dispute, after six months of campaigning against local deals, the union leadership recommended accepting local pay. In the absence of a well-organised rank and file campaign for the full claim this offer was accepted by a huge majority.

A WL health worker explained: "The deal institutionalises local pay bargaining, with the sweetener of any 'losers' in bargaining getting their pay topped up at the end of the year to a 'going rate'. It was offered by NHS bosses only on condition that the staff side recommend acceptance — which they have done.

"The basic effect of the deal will be to formalise the drawn-out bargaining structure that appeared accidentally this year; unions submit claims to national machinery, which then produces an offer that requires union members to go to their local employer for a local offer... and so on, and so on. There will be an extra round a year later, as unions and management decide what the "going rate" for the past year was."

Meanwhile the potential for a serious fight-back in local government in 1995 never developed. Despite a serious drive by the powerful Newcastle UNISON branch, the biggest and most effective merged branch in the country, to group together activists in UNISON and the other public sector unions behind the idea of a day of action coinciding with the Budget, not enough momentum was built up.

The RMT ballot for national action on pay went down: manoeuvring by the UNISON leadership ensured that no clear policy for national action got through the union's annual conference.

What the drive from Newcastle did produce, however, was a moderately well-attended UNI-

SON national demonstration — proof that despite bureaucratic inertia and passivity a real desire for a national fightback exists amongst broad layers of the rank and file.

Despite the lack of a national lead, important local battles can still be successful. The last six months have seen partial victories by Sheffield and Southwark library workers and Liverpool residential social workers.

But the ineffectiveness of UNISON's national machine has been illustrated by their failure to build a high-profile national campaign against the spiv contractors Pall Mall, who are in a bitter and protracted wages and recognition fight with a group of mainly Asian women cleaners and catering staff at Hillingdon Hospital West London. Even the cumbersome and ultra-bureaucratic GMB managed to do more for the Burntall strikers than UNISON have done for the Hillingdon women.

Bickerstaffe is blamed, quite rightly, for his part in letting all that happen. The lessons the official left, in the leadership of the union, will draw are likely to be the wrong ones — to "tone down the politics" but tighten up control of the already creaky machine. The rest of the left, at the rank and file level, may draw the wrong conclusions too — bluster about small sections of the far left being "the alternative".

In the election, Militant Labour member, Roger Bannister polled some 55,000 votes, just under 20% on the Campaign for a Fighting, Democratic UNISON (CFDU) platform, and the SWP managed to get over 10,000 votes (4.5%) for a candidate standing — at least for a while — under their own name.

These votes — while a substantial minority — are part of the "protest vote", representing the other half of the ex-NALGO backlash against the machine in UNISON. In terms of solid rank and file support for a real alternative to the way the union is run they don't add up to as much as their backers would claim.

If the left in UNISON is serious about taking stock of what has happened, then we need to build a united front to defeat the threat from the right in the union by rebuilding its structures and democratising them. A genuine broad left needs to bring together the activists and branches who backed Bickerstaffe the embryonic UNISON Labour left and the CFDU, around defence of public sector jobs and services against any government, including through national industrial action. Bring activists and branches together to organise and rebuild a union which shows every sign of falling down around our ears!

Firefighters move towards national action

Mick Shaw (London regional chair FBU)

THE London Fire Authority are setting a budget on 22 February and they are considering a proposal to axe 645 London firefighting jobs.

This would involve closing four fire stations — Barbican, Downham, Shooters Hill and Manchester Square — and taking a fire engine away from 22 other stations. The fire authority comprises of one rep from each of the 32 London

boroughs plus the City of London. Labour has 24 of those so this is an overwhelmingly Labour controlled authority. The Labour Party's attitude: "Our hands are tied, we've got to do it."

The FBU is looking to get the authority's spending limits increased. That's the main focus at the moment: to come up with additional spending.

If they go ahead with cuts on this scale we're going ahead with ballots for a series of nine hour strikes across our four different shifts.

Liverpool have currently suspended their dispute. I think they're looking to co-ordinate with other groups elsewhere. Surrey, Essex and Tyne and Wear have asked our FBU executive for permission to ballot on action against cuts.

There is broad support for taking action.

The fruits of New Realism

THE fruits of the TUC leadership strategy since the miners' strike of 1984-5, of "new realism" i.e. avoiding a struggle at all costs, include:

- A fall in union membership from over 50 to under 30% of the workforce.
- The lowest number of strikes this century.
- Loss of workplace trade union power with the increased marginalisation of shop stewards in relation to both management and full time officials.
- A trade union movement increasingly centred on an "aristocracy" of relatively well-paid, better-educated and more secure public-sector white-collar workers.
- The failure of the unions to organise new sectors and to recruit youth and part-timers.

The experience of rank and file activists and the results of academic surveys all point to the same conclusion: the power and presence of trade unionism has declined.

The number of workplace reps increased, despite the decline in total members in the late '80s, but it is now on the wane. The percentage of workplaces with shop stewards has dropped from 54% in 1984 to 38% in 1990 and continues to fall.

The power and scope of workplace trade unionism is also in decline. Across every sector, management are on the offensive against the rights and bargaining powers of stewards. This offensive has been particularly sharp in those areas where privatisation and contracting-out has been used to smash up "mutuality" (the joint control over the organisation of work) amongst groups of ex-public sector blue collar workers — the bins, direct works, cleaning and portering, the gas, water and electricity utilities and the buses. The war against union reps is now at its most vicious in the railways.

The flip-side of the attack on stewards has been an increase in the powers of full-time officers relative to the rank and file, and in particular closer control over stewards in local negotiations. This control has been reinforced by the workings of the Tory anti-union laws, which are designed to make the officials police the rank and file.

Acquiescence to the laws by the trade union apparatus has now been followed by acquiescence to the neo-liberal "modernising" tendency in the Labour Party. Apart from general statements assuring the bosses that there will be "no return to the '70s", the Labour Front Bench has not been keen to spell out what they will do about the legal shackles imposed on the unions by the Tories. Nor have the union leaders been keen to put them on the spot.

Communication Workers' Union (CWU) activists got a glimpse last summer of the kind of deal that is likely to emerge from a document written for the most self-consciously Blairite union baron, Alan Johnson. It starts by denouncing CWU conference pol-

The anti-union laws

DECISIVE in generating the shift in the balance of power in the workplace have been the Tories' anti-union laws.

Laws against strikes and picketing in Britain are now harsher than anywhere else in Europe. A strike is now legal only if:

- It follows a postal ballot
- The employers are given seven days notice of any action and an accurate and up to date list of everyone balloted.
- It is not in support of any other group of workers, even including people who work side by side with you but are technically employed by another company.
- It is not for a "political" purpose.
- It is not to re-instate someone sacked for engaging in an unofficial or illegal strike.

icy of support for solidarity action and repeal of the anti-union laws as "dangerous and wishful thinking". "No Labour government will reinstate the closed shop, mass picketing or unballoted industrial action, and the movement must not ask them to do so."

Instead the CWU leaders propose keeping 95% of Thatcher's anti-union laws, and the great bulk of Major's laws as well. They want only:

- abolition of the 3 yearly re-recruitment sections of the 1993 Act;
- repeal of the repudiation sections of the

1990 Act;

- repeal of the ban on union disciplinary powers of the 1988 Act;
- creating a right to strike without fear of dismissal (but only after a postal ballot);
- replacing the legislation which requires seven days' notice of ballots and a further seven days' notice of taking subsequent action which may be authorised, with fair procedures which do not preclude properly conducted workplace ballots;
- removing the discriminatory powers which allow employers to pay trade union members less than non union employees for work of equal value.

All forms of secondary and solidarity action would remain illegal. Basic solidarity, such as the highly popular CWU practice of refusing to handle diverted mail during strikes, would remain illegal. And any local union rep who organised such action would still be open to legal attacks and the threat of the sack.

Such a deal could well form one component of a broader framework of class collaboration that Labour Party modernisers could offer the trade union leadership.

Tony Blair's waffle about the "stakeholder economy" offers the bureaucracy the prospect of some level of involvement in tripartite (unions-employers-government) structures including the Low Pay Commission, which will set the level of a minimum wage. This approach could also be extended to employers' contributions to compulsory second private pensions, in exchange for a wage freeze and a no-strike pledge.

JJ Food: organising the unorganised

THE JJ Food dispute in Tottenham, North London, recently ended with the workers winning their case at an industrial tribunal.

Warehouse workers and drivers had been locked out by their employer — who supplies food to burger bars, schools, etc. — for joining the TGWU. Union density and organisation in this sector is extremely low, but it was a particularly militant, conscious and determined bunch of strikers. How many disputes see the strikers singing the Internationale?

The union activists and many of the rank and file strikers in the JJ Food dispute come from the more politically conscious sectors of the Turkish and Kurdish migrant communities. They have a sense of trade unionism and working-class politics which you tend to find in Britain today only in certain sections of industry — the mines, docks, railways, parts of engineering.

These traditions didn't fall from the sky; they were consciously created through struggle. In the docks, for instance, and in the rise of the new unionism at the end of the 19th century, a big role was played by small groups of socialists.

Today it is difficult to see how the form of trade unionism preached by a John Edmonds or a Garfield Davies is going to provide the intellectual and moral dyna-

mite needed to break open some of the non-unionised sectors. No one is going to take to the picket lines — never mind the barricades — because they've got fire in their bellies after hearing a speech by Roger Lyons on how the unions can re-invent themselves for the 21st century by taking on the functions of a building society and a YTS scheme.

It's a bleak reality, but it has to be faced. The key to breaking into new sectors lies with the revolutionary left, defined in a very broad sense. We can hope for, at best, encouragement from some bureaucrats who've got an eye on increased membership income, and protection from a limited right to union recognition that may be granted by a Blair government. But today's bureaucracy is about as likely to take the lead and the initiative in organising the unorganised as the old craft unionists of the 1880s were.

The other issue the JJ Food dispute highlights is the organic link between trade unionism and the Labour Party.

The most effective form of solidarity the strikers received — apart from donations to keep them going — was political campaigning to get Labour (and Tory) controlled councils to scrap contracts with the company.

Organising the rank and file

THE Alliance for Workers' Liberty and our predecessors have always argued for an open, democratic and genuinely broad based, rank and file movement in the trade unions and across the unions.

Such a movement would put a self-liberating instrument into the hands of ordinary workers: with such a rank and file movement we could force the union leaders to fight and where they refuse, replace them. If you want to see why a rank and file movement is necessary you just need to look at what happened to the miners during the great strike of 1984-85. Again, in October 1992, hundreds of thousands of people came out on to the streets of central London to support the miners. The ranks of the labour movement started to muster in support. But all that energy, hope and solidarity was wasted!

The TUC did not call any serious solidarity action for the miners — not even the most legal, orderly protest — and the Labour leaders accepted the essence of the Tory case for pit closures. Dislodging from power the people who did that and empowering the rank and file of the mass organisations of the working class — that is one of the central tasks facing socialists today.

In order to deal with the bureaucracy we need to understand them. The working class does not develop power and wealth organically, as part of society it is destined to supplant and outgrow. Its nearest organic equivalent to the intellectual and political representatives which the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie threw up is the trade union bureaucrat.

But these bureaucrats (like all workers who have not made a conscious break to socialist politics) are dominated, more or less, by bourgeois ideas: indeed they are a major channel for the consolidation of bourgeois ideas in the working class. In addition, the officials normally earn considerably more than the average in the trade they represent. They adopt a different petty-bourgeois mode of life and grow away from working-class life. Over time the bureaucracy has developed into a distinct stratum of the workers' movement, though not a separate class. It is an unstable social layer which develops out of the working class and then finds itself as a negotiator between the working class and capital.

The bureaucracy and the capitalists work together to maintain the system. The bureaucrats' relationship to the working class is parasitic. The bureaucracy needs the working class, the working class does not need the bureaucracy.

As the trade union bureaucracy develops, trade union democracy declines. This inevitably generates movements of the rank and file against the bureaucracy, but not necessarily a rank and file movement. A sustained, co-ordinated and organised movement generally requires a political backbone.

In a workplace we may find one in a hundred (at present) who will accept the need for a socialist revolution and be prepared to devote a large part of his or her life to working for it. There will be many more who are not fully convinced socialists, but will agree to work with us on immediate issues like militant struggle over wages and conditions and to join us in a fight for union democracy and against racism and sexism. We need to organise these militants.

This is the stuff of everyday local work for every socialist in the trade unions. But it needs to be more than local. Otherwise the national union leadership always has the advantages over the local groups of activists. We need a national organisation pulling together the militants across industry.

The best example so far in Britain such an organisation was the Minority Movement of the 1920s, which at its peak led one million workers. It was formed in a period similar to today, after a series of setbacks for the working class.

The engineering workers had been heavily defeated in a lock-out in 1921-2. Trade

"We will need to do more than go back to old-fashioned workplace industrial militancy though that must be the beginning of all wisdom for us."

union membership was falling. But the then-revolutionary Communist Party did not give up — they went out to organise the rank and file. They went out to prepare the future.

The same sort of thing could be done today. Already the conditions exist for starting to unite the rank and file across the unions. Several key unions already have fully formed and influential Broad Lefts and rank and file groups: CWU, NUT, USDAW, RMT, GPMU, CPSA, PTC, and UCATT. Other unions — TGWU, AEEU and even GMB — have loose groups and UNISON has a potentially strong but divided left. All these groups should be linked together through a single co-ordinating centre.

The Socialist Teachers' Alliance are trying to call together representatives from different broad lefts and rank and file groups. Such meeting could at least set itself the modest task of setting up a cross-union co-ordinating committee. It would help knit together the activists, share the experience and pool the resources of different left forces in the unions.

Such a body could take industrial disputes seriously in a way that the TUC does not and by its bureaucratic nature can not. It could

provide information and organise collections and speaking tours for workers in struggle. It could provide a framework for organising solidarity strike action. Right now, its central unifying initiative would be a campaign for a one-day public-sector strike against the Tory attacks. It could intervene into the policy debate inside the TUC and Labour Party.

A cross-union co-ordinating centre could not, of course, avoid difficult political questions. It would have to provide answers to the burning political questions of the movement like, for instance, how to fight racism and fascism. But it would debate out these questions in a tolerant manner and give space to minority opinions.

It would not try to "inject" politics from the "outside" but would try to draw out the political logic of the class struggle.

For instance the fight for jobs implies all kinds of questions: who pays for the shorter working week? How do we plan a recovery and direct resources to social needs? How do we break capitalist resistance to measures which seriously challenge their power?

Such a political agenda would require a willingness on the part of union activists — particularly in the public sector unions — to work with and build a campaign like the Welfare State Network which draws together the users and providers of services.

We will need to do more than go back to old-fashioned workplace industrial militancy though that must be the beginning of all wisdom for us. Take the anti-union laws, for instance. Some groups of workers, like the Scottish postal strikers, can hope to defy the law and win isolated victories but to hope to wipe away the anti-union laws through unofficial action and mass defiance without having to bother with politics is foolish. We are faced with an established and solid framework of law, policed by the trade union bureaucracy. For the root and branch removal of the anti-union laws we will need to fight for the election of a Labour government and the enactment of a charter of workers' rights, to establish the right to join the union, to strike, to take solidarity action, and to picket effectively.

Such a fight will involve a battle to democratise the Labour Party and the trade unions on which it rests. It will require protracted struggle and political determination. Exactly the same applies to any attempt to reverse CCT and privatisation.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty will do everything it can do to turn this perspective into action. If you want to find out more about our activities across industry and the unions, then come to our Industrial School in Manchester on 24 February.

● AWL Trade Union School: Manchester Town Hall, Saturday 24 February, 11am-5pm, creche available. Speakers from post, rail and many other disputes plus eye-witness from France. Phone: 0171-639 7965.