LESSONS OF THE POSTAL STRIKE

A Socialist Organiser pamphlet 30p
INTRODUCTION

A missed opportunity

By Peter Kedrowski (recycled)

B (case study of a small company)

Workers at Longford and
the Council

In September, P.K. Kedrowski's new book "A missed opportunity" was published. The book focuses on the missed opportunity for a small company to expand its business. The company, based in Longford, was on the verge of成功 when it was suddenly taken over by a larger company. The book is available at most bookstores and online retailers. For more information, visit the website A missed opportunity.com.
A wave of anger

Every fifth strike last year was a postal strike. There is a pattern to these strikes. They have been unofficial, mainly local guerrilla battles against a new, hard-nosed management intent on softening up the union, increasing the number of casuals and imposing new technology.

Management’s intentions are simple to understand: they want to increase the profitability of the Post Office to make its different sections ripe for privatisation. Because the Post Office is such a labour intensive industry — wages account for more than two-thirds of operating costs — their attack on wages and conditions, their drive for ‘speed-up’, is so important.

A look at some of the main disputes since 1985 makes the picture clear. Pete Keenlyside, a Manchester postal worker, described the situation faced in January of that year.

"Part of the agreement 1984’s UCW Postal pay claim was settled on was that all the outstanding issues such as a reduction in hours, longer holidays and the five day working week, would be the subject of further discussions between the union and Post Office management. Since then a series of meetings have been taking place and recently a special report was circulated to the membership which reported on the progress that had been made. This report will now form part of the agenda of a special conference called for March 4/5.

But any member reading the report, hoping to see what had been gained from all the discussions, would have got a very rude shock. Instead of listing any gains, the report lists a series of management proposals which, if implemented, would threaten the jobs and working conditions of everyone in the industry.

Proposals

What they want is:

• Compulsory productivity schemes in all offices. At the moment there is a voluntary scheme and many offices have refused to implement it.

• Constant workload assessment. In other words, constantly increasing the workload on the staff.

• Increased mechanisation and the introduction of new technology. The union have opposed this over the last few years because of the effects it will have on jobs. Existing policy is to demand a new technology agreement which would link its introduction to a cut in hours. Otherwise the introduction of inward code sorting and optical character recognition (machines which can read handwriting) could lead to the work of some grades disappearing overnight.

• Flexible staffing. This would lead to the creation of a new part-time grade and the ability of management to move staff where and when they wanted. It has long been union policy to oppose these.

• A new overtime structure which could decrease the amount paid for weekend overtime. At the moment anything over 12 hours is paid at double time.

In return for all this, they are prepared to offer us a lump-sum payment of £150, a promise that they will look at the possibility of introducing more five-day-week duties and security of employment if "there was full cooperation in any retraining and/or redeployment to other work areas".

And in the event of the union not wanting to take advantage of the management’s generosity, the Post Office board member for Personnel and Industrial Relations K.M. Young, had this to say: "We would still prefer to proceed with the union’s co-operation, but the union’s present response will force the business to proceed without it.""

The union leadership more or less got the free hand they wanted to negotiate these items at conference, held at the same time the miners voted to return to work. They were only defeated on two points when conference voted against any increase in part-time labour and against a compulsory extension of the IWM productivity scheme.

Management quickly tried to take advantage of this weakness. They were met by a militant rank and file and a craven union leadership. It was a pattern that was to be repeated time and time again.

At the beginning of April post office workers at the huge Mount Pleasant sorting office walked out. Socialist Organiser explained what happened: "They had struck against management attempts unilaterally to put the job-sla.shing OCR (Optical Character Recognition) machine into operation, suspending workers who refused to cooperate.

Management immediately used the Tory anti-trade union laws to get an injunction against action without a ballot at Mount Pleasant or any other post office.

The UCW leadership immediately complied and told their members to return. However, pickets kept out the overwhelming majority of both the night and following day shifts.

The action began to quickly escalate. On the night shift at the Basingstoke Post Office, management instructed workers to redirect Mount Pleasant mail to other offices. They refused and were threatened with discipline, but the management backed off when they stood firm.

Mount Pleasant strikers returned after they received an instruction from the UCW EC to go back immediately. Even in the middle of the action, the EC were making no secret of their desire to capitulate.

General Secretary Alan Tuffin complained that the Post Office were "exciting" the situation. If only they had waited another seven weeks, he moaned, he could have got all the proposals to slash jobs and conditions through the UCW Conference!"

Meanwhile the Mount Pleasant workers were told to keep working OCR.

Faced with a militant management, the union leadership’s collapse became comprehensive within a week. They cancelled the Mount Pleasant strike ballot, overturned the special conference decision on part-time workers and compulsory IWM, and concluded a deal with the Post Office which the Financial Times described as giving management "virtually everything it wants".
BACKGROUND

— as a prelude to privatisation. Yet those of us at the bottom who do all the work are forced to do long hours of overtime just to make ends meet.

Year after year we’ve accepted lousy wage deals, and now Alan Tuflin (on over £30,000 a year) wants us to accept one that will take us up to the princely sum of £113.26 per week.

The worst thing about this year’s offer is that the executive have caved in over the claim for a reduction in hours. Our basic week is 43 hours. It has been in force since 1965, and a reduction has been part of the union’s annual claim for 15 years’!

1987 was a year of guerrilla action as well. The anger in the offices was mounting — it had not been smothered by the EC’s defeatism and treachery.

There were around 90 disputes during the year. 25% were in Liverpool. In April the Liverpool West Derby office was out for 2 weeks over the victimisation of a worker. Other Liverpool offices took selective action in support.

The worker was reinstated. In May the UCW Conference instructed the Executive to withdraw from all trials and negotiations on RRP (Revised Revision Procedure), and to ballot for strike action if management tried to impose it. They also told them to negotiate 3 hours off the working week, and back up the demand with industrial action if necessary.

Conference tried to tie the hands of the leadership on the shorter working week demand by telling them to: get a deal by 1st September — if not, ballot for strike action; put any offer to a special conference; make the claim for all grades and not accept any strings.

2 months after the Conference the Executive overturned the decision on RRP, and instructed the branches to cooperate in introducing it.

On the shorter working week claim the leadership procrastinated as long as possible. What they couldn’t avoid the ballot on industrial action they held it with little information and no preparation. 53% voted for action. What happened next was predictable.

The shorter working week

Rather than prepare for confrontation the EC talked about 24-hour strikes and coupled this with a ‘scabs charter’ — telling branches to accept the diversion of work, the use of casuals and non-striking members to do the work of those out on strike. It was also said they would instruct branches not to take action if members were suspended by management.

At the beginning of December Glasgow, Edinburgh, Southend, Cardiff and London branches were called out on 24-hour strike. The response was very solid and the time good in the run-up to Christmas. But the EC immediately surrendered and called off the action on the basis of a deal with the Post Office. It was a blatant sell-out.

Before September the Post Office had offered an hour off provided it was self-financing. The new deal involved an extra ½ hour on the same basis! The ½ hours extra cost the Post Office, and wasn’t to be introduced until 1988 — for the parcels in September, and for letters even later. They agreed to look at increased flexibility. And they sold the IWM productivity deal with no new benefits for the members!

Action continued briefly in Cardiff against the suspension of workers who refused to do Cardff’s work during the 24-hour strike and against management’s use of casuals to cover the backlog. Meanwhile the Executive was cynically wrapping up the shorter working week fight.

Instead of calling a special conference they had a ballot on the deal, held after the key Christmas period. Pete Keenlyside commented on the result in February 1988:

“As expected, the leadership have managed to get a majority in favour of their sell-out deal on the shorter working week. But it was nothing like the majority they must have been expecting.

Out of 166,000 ballot papers issued, 108,000 were returned, with 62,778 voting in favour (57%) and 46,523 (43%) against.

The numbers of those voting ‘no’ is encouragingly high. Despite only 53% being in favour of strike action in the first place, despite the fact that Christmas had come and gone, and despite the complete absence of any campaign for rejection, over 46,000 were still prepared to take the issue further.

Had the deal been put to a special conference, or even to a branch ballot, it would have been rejected.

46,000 have shown that they want something different. We now need to build the sort of active rank and file organisation that can involve them in getting it.“

At the UCW’s 1988 Conference in May a vote of censure was overwhelmingly carried on the whole Executive for the sell-out.

How the job has changed

By Pete Keenlyside, Manchester Amalgamated Branch (personal capacity)

In 1971 members of the UCW (then called the UPW) went on strike for seven weeks. They returned defeated, sold out by their own Executive.

After that, most postal workers said they’d never do it again. Every time you got up to oppose some lousy pay deal or other, the cry went up ‘Remember 1971’. The membership are now more willing to take strike action. What has changed? A lot of the ‘old ones’ have retired. Some people have taken their place. But the main factor has probably been a reaction to the way the job has changed over the years.

In 1971 we worked just as long hours as we do now. But we certainly didn’t work as hard or under as much pressure. On the letters side, which is all I can speak about, things were conducted at a more leisurely pace. On the walks you had time to talk to people, to pop in for the odd cup of tea and get to know your customers.

If you were inside sorting, although the work was boring, there were ways of breaking it up. Staff could go for a ‘smoke’, chat to their mates or use some excuse to wander round the office for a few minutes.

And heaven help the gaffer that tried to get you to do something that wasn’t on your duty. Once the duties had been agreed with the union, that was that. You knew exactly what it was you should be doing almost every minute of your shift.

If it wasn’t written in the duty book, you didn’t do it. If the duty book said feed the horses (some had been around for a long time), then you disappeared for half an hour or so. In those days we worked but couldn’t afford to.

Not anymore we’re not — happy that is.

Then the Post Office made a loss but served the public. These days it makes huge profits. And that’s been done in the time-honoured way — by making the workers work harder.

The first stage was mechanisation. Before 1971 everything was sorted by hand. Then the Post Office came to the union with a scheme for creating mechanised offices. In future, letters would be faced, cut and sorted by machines. Instead of people, ALFs, SEGs and code sort machines would sort the stamp, sticker into the office. So in they came, to be followed by ever newer and faster machines such as OCRs (Optical Character Recognition) which can read handwritten script.

Now fewer workers sort more letters at a pace dictated by the machines and ruthlessly enforced. Marx’s description of a worker being a mere extension of a machine is a living reality in the Post Office today. No wonder they have difficulty getting people to work the machines.

Stage two was the productivity deal. We used to have a scheme were everyone got a lump sum payment every now and again if by any chance some savings had been made. Now we’ve got IWM (Improved Working Methods). This is a compulsory scheme and it operates on the basis of individual offices or even parts of offices.

To qualify for payments either the same number of staff have to do more work or, more usually, fewer staff do the same work. This has led to staff sel-
By Lauren White

Women in the Post Office

Women are a strong presence at the Post Office, and they have been for decades. They hold various positions, from clerks to managers, and are often the first face customers see when they enter a post office. The Post Office Department has a long history of employing women, and their contributions have been significant. In this article, we will explore the role of women in the Post Office and the challenges they face.

The Post Office has been a major employer of women since the early 1900s. In 1902, only 10% of the workforce was female, but by 1930, women made up 30% of the workforce. Today, women make up over 50% of the workforce.

Women have held many different positions in the Post Office, from clerks to managers. They have been involved in all aspects of the business, from sorting mail to managing post offices. Women have also been involved in the development of the Post Office, from the design of post offices to the development of new technologies.

Despite their contributions, women have faced many challenges in the Post Office. They have often been discriminated against and have faced gender-based discrimination. They have also faced challenges in terms of advancement, as they have often been limited to lower-paying positions.

In recent years, the Post Office has made efforts to improve the situation for women. They have implemented policies to address gender-based discrimination and have worked to provide opportunities for women to advance within the organization.

Women continue to be an important part of the Post Office workforce. They bring a unique perspective to the business and have contributed significantly to its success. As the Post Office continues to evolve, it will be important to ensure that women are included in all aspects of the business and that they are given equal opportunities to succeed.
THE STRIKE

How not to lead a strike

Right from the start Tuffin and the Executive did it all wrong.

The one-day strike, on August 31st, was badly prepared; in many offices the official call for strike action on Wednesday wasn't received until after the early shifts on Tuesday had gone home.

It didn't take a genius to work out that management might use the excuse of the 'backlog' to bring in casuals and redirect mail, so provoking strike action. Yet the Executive failed completely to prepare for this possibility; there was no attempt to set up a strike fund to sustain those who stayed out.

Nor was there any real attempt to use all the combined muscle of the postal workers to defeat DRAS (Difficult Recruitment Area Supplement). Engineers were not asked to join the action by the Executive — though in areas like Manchester they did — and when they did the Executive did its utmost to get them back to work. The C and CS (Counter Clerks) dispute over closures, backdoor privatisation and 5,000 job losses should have been linked up to the fight against DRAS. This would have strengthened and concentrated the union's forces.

But what did Tuffin and the Executive do? They postponed indefinitely the C and CS ballot result thus stopping the two sections of postal workers linking arms together against management.

And when C&CS came out on strike in Manchester and other places, the full time national official, Ernie Dudley, told them to go back to work and cross picket lines.

This failure to unite the union's forces is particularly criminal given the obvious danger presented by a management determined to go on the offensive and the Tory government's strategy of privatisation and splitting up the Post Office. If management and the Tories are allowed to get away with it now, united action will be even more difficult in the future.

Tuffin should have been on the TV every night putting over the basic arguments in support of the strikers and walkouts. Instead he spent most of his time waffling on about the need for the Tories to hold an inquiry into Post Office management. This is a strange idea indeed. Who else but the Tories does Tuffin think Post Office management get their orders from?

The Executive failed to act as the co-

Emergency cover

What should our attitude be towards 'emergency cover' during a strike? The issue came up in different ways during the postal strike — blood donor cards, money for flood victims and giro for claimants. In the healthworkers strikes earlier this year almost everybody agreed that emergency cover should be provided. Socialist Organiser supporters argued that this should be organised and controlled by the unions. But what about during a postal strike?

For a start no responsible trade unionist would want to risk the lives of working class people. But this would not help anyway, because it would cut right against the solidarity necessary to win. Emergency cover can only be a problem in a strike when it is abused by management. That is why it is essential it is decided upon and controlled by the workers themselves.

In 1971 striking postal workers opened offices to cash pensions and delivered urgent medical supplies. It was partly a public relations campaign, but also workers deciding who the strike hit and who it did not.

Why could something similar not have been done in the recent strike instead of, for example, turning a blind eye to scabs like TNT delivering bulk consignments of giro to unemployment benefit offices? To make this happen of course would require talks at all levels between the UCW and the other unions concerned (CPSA, NALGO, TOWU...). Such talks should be starting now.
The STRIKE

The strike in Liverpool
THE STRIKE

3 weeks of struggle

* Wednesday 31st August
One day UCW national strike in protest against Difficult Recruitment Area Supplement (DRAS). First official national postal workers strike since 1971.

* Thursday 1st September
12 regional and 2 London mechanised letter offices (MLOs) stay out on strike in protest at UCW members suspended for refusing to handle redirected mail, cross packet lines or work with casuals.
UCW leader Alan Tuffin offers to suspend any further official industrial action if Post Office management will agree to 'open-ended' talks.

* Friday 2nd September
At least one third of all Post Offices and sorting offices are now out as strike spreads.

* Saturday 3rd September
Strike still spreading. Post Office management drops its insistence on agreement in advance to some form of regional/bonus pay. They say they are now prepared to discuss whether to agree this kind of system.
Tuffin says that dispute over casuals must be settled at local level.

* Sunday 4th September
Virtually all foreign mail halted as strike bites. Informal secret talks begin between second rank UCW officials and Post Office management. The Tories hint at lifting the Royal Mail letter monopoly if the strike continues.

* Monday 5th September
Over half of Britain's sorting offices are at a standstill.

At least 45,000 workers involved in the strike action. All international post suspended indefinitely. Nearly all the West Midlands are out. Post Office management accept that the strike is solid in Scotland. Tony Benn calls on the Labour Party leadership to give full backing to the strike.

* Tuesday 6th September
Strike continues to escalate. 60 out of 80 MLOs now out. At least 75,000 UCW members on strike. It's revealed that the government are using scab haulage firm TNT to distribute benefit cheques.

* Wednesday 7th September
Tuffin calls for public inquiry into Post Office management. NUR executive urge railworkers not to work with casuals handling scab mail.

* Thursday 8th September
Strikers at Mount Pleasant in London receive threats from management that unless they sign an agreement to work normally, ie. handle scab mail, they will be suspended.
The strike is still spreading. Belfast is now the only MLO still working. Tuffin leaves the TUC to 'take control of the strike centre in London'.

* Friday 9th September
Union and management continue secret talks at a secret venue. Post Office talk of 'a basis for agreement'. Tuffin talks of 'progress'.
Meanwhile 2 pickets hospitalised in Liverpool as police attack picket lines. Mass meeting of over 1,000 in Preston votes unanimously to continue the strike.

* Saturday 10th September
Talks continue.

* Sunday 11th September
UCW Executive and management working out final details of the deal. Postal service virtually at a standstill. Strike is at its strongest. 150 million item backlog.

* Monday 12th September
The dirty deal is signed.
Tuffin describes it as 'a very successful agreement indeed — if not a victory — for the arguments we have been making'.
In reality the deal leaves UCW members in a worse situation than before the one-day strike on 31st August.

* Tuesday 13th September
Branches up and down the country vote to stay out. Even in Leeds where workers go back they also pass a vote of no confidence in Tuffin and the Executive.
Branches still out include: Liverpool, Manchester, Preston, Chester, York, Hull, Glasgow, Coventry and London.

* Wednesday 14th September
More branches go back with local agreements. Great confusion. London District Council can't reach an agreement on a return to work so London stays out. Liverpool rejects local deal and organises mass picket of local Post Office headquarters. Manchester votes virtually unanimously to continue strike.

* Thursday 15th September
The strike is weakening. London goes back. Mickey Hogan of the LDC shoves its shouldes and tells angry strikers at ECDO 'It's just one of those things'. Romford, the North West, Newport and Cardiff stay out. Glasgow go back.

* Friday 16th September
75 out of 80 MLOs are now back. Romford joins them. Royal Mail manager Cockburn attacks the Liverpool UCW branch for 'the worst industrial relations record in the industry'. Liverpool and the bulk of the North West stand firm.

* Saturday 17th September
600 Postal workers join the strike in South Wales after discussions following refusal to handle scab mail redirected from Cardiff and Newport which are still out.
Oldham and Hulme area to go back.
Talks continue in Liverpool and Manchester. Tuffin's hatchet man Alan Johnson takes charge of the negotiations the strikers back to work.

* Monday 19th September
Cardiff and Newport go back.

* Tuesday 20th September
Mass meeting in Manchester of 1,500 narrowly votes to go back. There is a lot of anger in the meeting at the idea of leaving Liverpool to fight alone. Stockport, which already has a deal, also goes back.

* Wednesday 21st September
Liverpool and Coventry go back.
OFFICIALS AND WORKERS' WAGE

The issue of wage disparity between officials and workers is a contentious one. In many organizations, the wage gap is often so significant that it leads to dissatisfaction among the workforce. The paradox is that while officials are perceived to have more responsibility and decision-making power, their wages are often lower than those of workers. This creates a sense of injustice among the employees, leading to reduced morale and productivity.

The problem is multifaceted. On one hand, officials often have more access to resources and opportunities for professional development. On the other hand, workers are typically the ones who carry out the day-to-day operations, which are often unseen and undervalued. The challenge is to find a balance that recognizes the importance of both roles while ensuring fair compensation.

One proposed solution is to align wages based on the actual responsibilities and contributions of each position. This could involve conducting job evaluations to determine the value of each role. Additionally, implementing merit-based wage increases for officials based on their performance could also help bridge the gap.

Ultimately, addressing wage disparity requires a comprehensive approach that considers the unique needs and contributions of both officials and workers. It’s about valuing the role each person plays in the organization and ensuring that their compensation reflects this value.
So Tuffin relaxes whilst his members fight. Well he can afford to on £35,000 a year — but the postal workers certainly can’t.

The last deal Tuffin negotiated some postal workers lost as much as £50 a week. Tuffin didn’t start off in life to be such a scoundrel. But over time, the habits, the routine, the lifestyle of a modern trade union leader can bend and shape even the best individuals. Union leaders start to behave and think like the managers who they spend more and more of their time with. Their first loyalty is to the union machine from which they derive their status, position and livelihood — rather than the flesh and blood human beings who make up the union in the real world.

Union leaders start to view the world as the professional negotiators that they are. Strikes and militant action become disruptions to the smooth normality of concessions, compromises and cosy chats with the bosses.

So it you are a full-time official separated from the rank and file then strong forces start to act on you.

Liverpool UCW branch secretary, Billy Hayes, has described the problem:

‘The pressures on any union official are great. He or she is under pressure to see the management point of view, and the greater the responsibility the greater the pressure.

‘One of the great strengths of the UCW is that by and large the vast majority of union representatives live under the same conditions as their members. They know the pressures of trying to make ends meet and the long hours have in harmonisation.’

Tuffin shares this basic view but he’s bright enough (and well aware of the anger of many postal workers) not to express it so bluntly.

Leaders of strikes who hold these views don’t lead strikes very well, their performance reinforces cynicism amongst the rank and file. So you get anti-strike union leaders leading strikes to defeat and thus appearing to prove to many more conservative, less active union members that strikes don’t work and fighting doesn’t win.

Union bureaucrats help to create, and thrive on, the passivity of the rank and file.

The national full time officials don’t, for the most part, rule the unions by a reign of terror. They combine bureaucratic control with attempts to incorporate, school and train union activists in their ways of operating and their view of the world.

Alan Fraser, victimised branch official in Basingstoke, explained: ‘All UCW branch officials attend educational courses. At these courses you will find members of the National Executive taking the classes. They go to a lot of effort to portray themselves as ‘one of the lads’. They will put £20 on the bar...

But when it comes to issues in the union they either treat you as a moron who wouldn’t, couldn’t and shouldn’t try to understand difficult issues or they spin a line something like this: ‘Yes, I know it’s bad, we tried to get a fight... I argued on the Executive but I lost, you know how it is, we’ve got to stay loyal to the union...’

At other times they will take advantage of the rank and file.

It’s through processes like these that the full-time bureaucracy hope to create a buffer between themselves and the rank and file, and neuter potential leaders of what they see as the biggest threat — an organised rank and file movement.

Even principled left wingers can become right wing bureaucrats if they take up positions and responsibilities in the union machine without possessing clear political ideas or without being willing to subject themselves to rank and file control.

For instance during the Basingstoke postal workers strike of 1983 over the victimisation of Socialist Organiser supporter and UCW branch official Alan Fraser it was officials with a left orientation, John Taylor and Gerry Casey, who broke the strike.

But it’s not inevitable that officials sell out. The situation is a complex one. The ordinary members don’t just let the leaders they deserve but on the other hand the rank and file are not simply a permanent militant force held back by a thin layer of corrupt bureaucrats.

What is decisive is how the rank and file of the unions organise to democratise the unions and turn them into effective fighting organisations with a clear political commitment to the interests of working class people.
What was missing

LESSONS
unions and called Labour Party supporters 'social fascists'. But it did not mean the end of rank and file movements - the trade union leaders remain unresponsive to the interests of their members and distant from the shop floor, rank and file movements are bound to exist.

The development in the 1980s followed the alliance between Russia and Britain in World War II. Once the alliance was made, the Communist Party led its members and its far greater proportion of rank-and-file supporters into the wartime Joint Production Committees.

Even then, however, there were rank and file organisations, initiated by Trotskyists, anarchists and others.

During the long boom which followed the war, rank and file organisations developed again (though not in proportion to the enormous increase in the number of shop stewards). Above all, Britain saw the development of numerous combine committees. These were, of course, different from movements like the Reform Committees and the Labour Unions Committees in that they based themselves on the stable factory level organisation and included all stewards (and only stewards) irrespective of their outlook.

The late 1970s and early 80s saw both a development of combine committees and the growth of politically militant rank and file groups. The Communist Party and, to a less extent, the Socialist Labour League (the forerunner of the notorious and lunatic Workers Revolutionary Party) played leading roles in organising these.

Taking advantage of the drift of the SLL away from the mass labour movement and from reality, and foreseeing the attempt by the Labour Government to try to police the trade union movement, the International Socialist group (now the Socialist Workers Party) initiated the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Shop Stewards, in the midst of the union elections. Later was the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, carefully cultivated by the Communist Party's Industrial Department, that emerged at that time as the most influential rank and file movement, playing a major role in defeating both Labour’s In Place of Strife and the Tories’ Industrial Relations Act.

Unions and politics

The political weaknesses of this rank and file movement expressed themselves in the fact that the Communist Party nor the International Socialists managed to give a clear political lead to the powerful shop stewards-based movement that smashed the Tory anti-union Industrial Relations Act.

The 1972 strike movement halted when the dockers, who'd been jailed under the Industrial Relations Act, were released. The Mine Workers' Movement driven on by a miners' strike, ended with the election of a Labour Government under Harold Wilson.

What was missing was a leadership which would have been able to take the movement forward, to bring down

LESSONS

The record of the Broad Left

The Broad Left in the UCW was formed in 1981. One of its first actions was to organise a highly successful conference fringe meeting in support of Tony Benn's challenge for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party. The meeting attracted nearly 500 people and the first ever political meeting ever at conference and for that reason attracted a lot of hostility from the then general secretary Tom Jackson.

So the Broad Left was formed at a time of political ferment in the labour movement, when the atmosphere was still on the offensive, when democratic changes had just been pushed through party conference and many Labour activists were saying 'never again' to a Labour government like that of Wilson and Callaghan.

It was a real opportunity for the left, before Post Office management's offensive had really started to bite and before the defeat of the hostile Basingstoke miners and printers and of Labour in the elections of '83 and '87.

But the tragedy is that this opportunity was wasted. The Broad Left failed to be warded off, to build up deep roots amongst rank and file postal workers and become a credible force.

How this missed opportunity can be seen by looking at three test cases for the Broad Left:

Case 1: The victimisation of Alan Fraser

In September '83, Basingstoke branch official, regional Broad Left organiser and Socialist Worker, Alan Fraser, was sacked from his job. There followed a week-long strike demanding his reinstatement which was supported by so-called left officials John Taylor and Gerry Casey.

It would be charitable to say the Broad Left was slow off the mark! Despite the fact that Alan was a leading member of the Broad Left, the Militant supporters in the Broad Left (who held the key positions) just did the absolute minimum, and even then had to be pushed.

There was no attempt to mobilise the rank and file to support the struggle over the issue. It took the Broad Left seven months to even send a list of questions to Alan for an interview in the UCW's own organ, Communiqué. The executive, on the other hand, acted a lot quicker: they produced a special branch circular, a BOB supplement and almost two pages of The Post to justify the victimisation.

Case 2: The shorter working week fight

In 1987 the Broad Left had a real chance to relaunch itself around the campaign for a shorter working week, the ex-ecutive's unwillingness to fight.

As Manchester postal worker Pete Kenneyide argued at the time:

"The most important job for activists in the union in the next three months is to stop this (sell-out) happening.

"What we need is a campaign - Post Office workers for the full claim' or whatever - which organises all those branches and individual members who are serious about fighting for the claim.

"It will have to prepare the membership for a massive lobby on industrial action, and prevent any attempt by the executive to sell out.

"Time is of the essence of this campaign now. The planning for it has to start right away, and after 11th January the campaign will have to begin in earnest.

"If it is to go to the ground, the left in the union will have to put other considerations and issues aside for one campaign.

But the left missed the opportunity. The

Broad Left was too slow to act - it agitated at the special conference but not seriously amongst the rank and file. It produced no public initiative to end the dispute, apart from a conference leaflet.

The executive yet again managed a sell-out.

Pete Kenneyide drew out the lessons:

"The tragedy of all this is that it could have been avoided. A rank and file organisation was there that would have mobilised members against any sell-out.

"It could have organised limited unofficial action while the negotiations were going on, and when the deal was announced, brought out enough people to force the executive to withdraw it. If the feeling of those members who I have spoken to is at all general, this would not have been impossible. No branch's meeting met at the moment and once again we are paying for this omission.

Case 3: The 1988 strike

This was a great opportunity for the Broad Left to make an breakthrough. As Socialist Organiser reported:

"About 60 people from branches throughout the country attended the UCW Broad Left meeting in Manchester on Sunday 11th.

"The meeting voted to campaign for much of the sort of policies Socialist Organiser have been putting forward, although it lost touch with reality when it agreed with a Militant-sponsored resolution that a minimum conditions for a return to work should be a £20 across the board increase.

"The meeting also went on for two hours before the dispute was discussed. "Even if the meeting had been better, however, 60 people isn't enough. We need hundreds if we are going to bring the executive under the control of the members."

The Broad Left suffered from the influence of supporters of the Militant. Their political approach is what can be called passive propagandism, i.e. they argue for things that in the abstract may be good ideas (that's what we call propagandists) but they don't relate that to action now amongst the rank and file to change the union (that's why we call it passive propagandism).

The crassest example of this was the way the Militant supporters passed a resolution for no return to work in the recent dispute unless management conceded a £20 across the board increase.

When at the same time none of them could seriously have believed that they could have argued that line and won it at their branch's next meeting.

Also, their activity is far more concerned with recruiting to their own tendency than building a genuinely broad-based and effective organised left in the union.

What the Broad Left should have been discussing was how to knit together the militant branches of the union to prevent a sell-out and to smash DRAS. But the Broad Left wasn’t really prepared for that kind of activism.

Ideally, the Broad Left should be a delegate-based body with real roots in the union rather than the combination of left groups and a few independent people.

In the aftermath of the strike we have a great, and possibly never to be repeated, opportunity to build a decent rank and file organisation in the UCW by pulling together the militant branches who stood out against Tuffin's treachery.
A model of strike organization

The first formulation of the organizational frame that would later become the NFWA was put forward by Bill Green, the labor leader who later became president of the Teamsters. Green was concerned about the growing power of the steelworkers' union and recognized that a new approach was needed. He proposed a model that would emphasize the importance of collective bargaining and the role of the union in protecting the interests of its members. This model was based on the idea that the union should be a powerful force in the workplace, with the ability to negotiate with employers and defend the rights of its members.

The NFWA was founded in 1963 as a result of this formulation. Its goal was to represent the interests of steelworkers and to negotiate with employers on their behalf. The union quickly became known for its strong bargaining power and its ability to secure significant gains for its members.

The NFWA's model of strike organization was built on a strong commitment to collective bargaining and the role of the union in protecting the interests of its members. This model was based on the idea that the union should be a powerful force in the workplace, with the ability to negotiate with employers and defend the rights of its members.
LESSONS

New battles loom

By a postal officer

UCW members on the delivery/sorting side of business are not alone in facing attacks, pay and conditions. Those of us in the counter and clerical staff grades also have a struggle ahead.

Girobank is being sold off to the highest bidder. There are obvious threats to those who work for Girobank and Post Office counters from asset strippers and the demands for 'more efficiency'. In the counters, parcel and letters businesses, clerical staff face loss of jobs through regrading and further demands for increased workload from a particularly vicious management.

At the time the counter business propose closing 750 Crown Offices (half the Crown Offices nationwide) with a loss of 5,000 jobs.

The Post Office and UCW have been aware of their industrial relations record following the 1971 strikes. Time and again the UCW leadership have caved in to the pressure from management. Union heads persistently argued we had to work together with management to secure the future of the business.

And, in 1983, the C and CS grades were recommended a productivity deal which lost us 1,500 jobs (according to union figures) in 1½ years.

Again, in 1986, the executive proposed a deal to accept part-timers and more flexible working practices to 'protect the Crown Office network by reducing costs.' They went so far as to produce a glossy brochure to put their case, including a letter from a Post Office board member echoing the executive's arguments.

The brochure urged us to exploit 'market opportunities' by becoming 'more competitive by reducing costs and prices' and by being 'more flexible and responsive to change.

All the time the threat of privatisation was used to stamp on militancy. None of this compliance has prevented the Post Office from coming back for more. Last year the Tories sent in the Monopolies and Mergers Commission to stitch up the counter business. They were to look for a way of increasing efficiency and standards of service without increasing costs, and to decide whether the counters business was operating against the public interest.

It was widely expected that their conclusions would not be good news for C and CS grades, yet all the decision got was a small mention in the News in Brief column of the Decembre 1987 issue of the union journal.

Now the report is out and those expectations have been fulfilled. 5,000 jobs are to be lost.

On top of this, the Post Office will look at who does what work with a view to getting it done cheaper, either by using more part-timers or by changing the grading structure.

The end product could be the near disappearance of higher paid full-time grades in parts of the business.

To begin with, the union responded to the threat posed by the MMC with sweet reason. It put submissions to the MMC explaining how the union bureaucrats could actually run the Post Office more efficiently and more profitably than the Post Office board.

Approaches were made to the Post Office for talks on the proposed closures, but the union was given the brush-off. The refusal of the Post Office to take part in negotiations finally spurred the UCW executive into action.

A ballot for industrial action was called for in September and a big effort made to get an overwhelming 'yes' vote.

There seemed little doubt that this was what would happen. But it appears that the executive wants a large 'yes' vote only as a bargaining counter with the counters management. They are p eeved that management won't talk to them. This is clear, both from the tone in the union journal and from remarks made by the union's executive member responsible for counters, Ernie Dudley.

There are real problems facing the C and CS grades in the coming battle with the Post Office.

Firstly, there is the executive's desire to use the 'yes' vote only to get back in to negotiations with the Post Office. This can only raise false expectations amongst the members that we can avoid industrial action. Once in negotiations, what will we negotiate? What is an 'acceptable' number of closures?

Second, there is the problem of isolation. During the dispute over DRAS, the executive pulled out all the stops to keep the C and CS grades at work. Not only this; they put back the C and CS ballot until the DRAS action was over.

If we are to be successful we will need the epower of the delivery/sorting workers alongside us. Or will they be told to cross our picket lines?

Last is the question of legality. The Post Office is now organised into four separate businesses: parcels, letters, counters and Girobank. The ballot on counters was back all C and CS grades in the Post Office. How will the union react if the letters business take out an injunction against its C and CS people going on strike over a counters business policy?

The fight against privatisation in Girobank is another case. Union policy is to oppose privatisation by all means to and including industrial action. Will the Girobank workers be left isolated; and if not, does that mean going illegal? We cannot allow ourselves to be picked off and we cannot allow ourselves to be used as cannon fodder.

Our jobs are at stake.

Privatisation: divide and rule

'Divide and rule' is the motto behind the Tory government's drive for privatisation.

Through privatisation they can chop big publics into pieces of trade unionism into separate enterprises with separate employers and separate negotiations.

Tory anti-union law will then ban workers in those separate enterprises from collectively bargaining with employers and separate negotiations.

The first steps in privatising a public enterprise are to squeeze up profitability — so that it will be saleable — and to chop it up into separate sectors which can then become separate private enterprises.

The Tories have already taken those first steps with the Post Office. Work rates have been speeded up and wages squeezed so that it is now the most profitable postal service in the world.

In 1981 Telecom was split off from the Post Office. Telecom was privatised in 1984 — and the spirit of increased pressures for lower wages and worse service has not stopped since then!

In 1986 the Post Office was split into four sections — Letters, Parcels, Couriers and Girobank. The Government is now privatising Girobank.

Parcels and couriers are on the Tories' list as possibles for privatisation. PIECEMEAL semi-privatisation is already on the agenda for Counters, through plans to shut a lot of Crown post offices and shift the business to more privately-run sub-post offices.

During the 1983 general election campaign, Margaret Thatcher said that Letters would not be privatised. There would indeed be problems from a Tory point of view in selling it off.

At present a letter to the next street in London costs the same as a letter to the Shetlands. Mail services for rural areas are subsidised from big city mail.

It would not be difficult for competitors to undercut the Post Office on big city mail. Then what would happen to the rural services? Post Office bosses say they would have to put the charge for a first class letter up to 75p to cover costs.

Now rural areas provide a lot of Tory votes — and a lot of customers for direct mail and mail order operations. So the Tories are hesitant about privatising the letter post.

Early this year, however, the Tory Centre for Policy Studies published proposals for gradual privatisation. First private companies would be allowed to compete for mail priced at 50p or above. (The present limit is £1.) Then they would be allowed to compete with the Post Office. Finally the letters business would be sold off.

Whatever their hesitations on detail, there is a consensus among the Tories' plans. It's time we had more than a piecemeal fight back.
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