

Now is the time to fight for free trade unions!

IN Britain now almost everything that gives power and punch to trade unionism is illegal. No matter what the issue is, no matter where justice in a dispute lies, the law does not recognise the right of one group of workers to take solidarity strike action in support of other workers standing up to an entrenched employer. Such action is illegal. *Effective trade unionism is illegal!* So it has been for the last 16 years. So, if Tony Blair has his way, it will remain.

Blair has pledged that a Labour Government will not cut the web of Tory anti-union legislation which enmeshes and immobilises the British trade unions*.

Most of what the Tories have done against millions of working-class people simply could not have been done unless they had first disabled effective trade unionism. Anti-union legislation was the prerequisite for most of the things the Tories have done. The welfare state and the NHS could not have been cut down as they have unless trade union rights had first been cut down.

For 18 years the unions have been demonised and stigmatised. Tory and right-wing Labour propaganda about the alleged faults of the trade unions before Thatcher tied them down became part of the official folklore of Tory Britain in the '80s and is still being peddled today. It is scarcely contradicted any more. Yet, you need only to look at the way things have gone a decade and a half in a relatively prosperous Britain without effective trade unionism to understand that this is a case of the victors writing partisan propaganda into "history". This is a case of the murderers telling you what a terrible creature their victim was. The truth is the opposite of the Thatcherite and Blairite myth.

The trade unions, and the labour movement gathered around the trade unions, have, in Britain as elsewhere, been one of the great civilising forces in society. Effective trade unions stand as a bulwark against ruling class drives to grind down workers. Their removal as an effective force promotes and unleashes ruling class barbarism. If you doubt it, look around you at what so many years of unchecked Tory rule have done!

The unions banded together the downtrodden and the oppressed and made them into a force capable of defending themselves and asserting themselves against the powerful and the wealthy. They forced callous rulers who never faltered until their victims combined to challenge them to concede basic human rights, civil rights and employment rights to those who, atomised and disunited, had seemed to them a mere rabble, unworthy or recognition as full human beings — as people with

needs and rights that a civilised society should take account of, no matter what that meant for profit margins and for capitalist tax liabilities.

The trade unions did this and much more, despite being led by a layer of officials who were often more akin to a section of the middle class than to the working class.

Today, when almost two decades of Tory anti-union legislation, has much reduced their prestige and political influence, that layer of union officialdom is cowed and house-broken. They have so little fight in them that they do not kick up a stink either against the Tory anti-union laws or a protest against Blair's pledge to the bosses that a Labour government will not repeal any of the key items in the armoury of anti-union legislation which the Tories will bequeath to a New Labour government.

When anti-union legislation has existed in the past it has been repealed by incoming progressive governments. Even the Liberals in 1906 honoured their party's pledge to undo the legal effects of the infamous Taff Vale judgement. (For five years it had made trade unions legally liable for any damage done to an employer during a strike.) When in 1927 the Tories banned solidarity strikes in revenge for the 1926 General Strike, which was called in solidarity with the miners, the Labour Party pledged itself to repeal that legislation, once it gained a Parliamentary majority.

In 1945 it did.

Blair's New Labour will do less for the trade unions than the Liberals did in 1906! Indeed, some New Labour leaders have said that a New Labour government might on coming to power legislate to ban public sector strikes!

It is one way of measuring what they are and who they intend to serve in

government. But it is not cause for surprise. Blair and his friends are, in their own way, Thatcher's children. They model themselves on the Tories they are trying, gang against gang, to displace. It is, however, cause for surprise and shame, and cause for anger, that the trade union leaders do not insistently campaign for trade union rights in Britain. That they do not make their support for Blair conditional on New Labour being at least as progressive on the question of trade union rights as the Liberals were back in 1906!

Campaign for free trade unions? TUC General Secretary John Monks, official leader of the entire trade union movement, is currently campaigning *against* trade union rights: he says he is for compulsory arbitration in the public sector, and for confining the use of the strike weapon to very extreme circumstances! That is his response to New Labour's threat to make public sector strikes illegal.

Monks is even backing a formula that requires 50% support from the workforce before a union can be recognised. In some sectors that would make it easier for anti-union bosses to dere-

* See the briefing in the survey section

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cognise existing unions! The only thing that the union leaders are demanding from a Blair government is legislation to make it easier for them to collect union dues.

Trade union action such as that which has recently shaken France, Germany and Belgium would be illegal in Britain! Britain, where the working class built the world's first mass working-class organisation 160 years ago, now has the least liberal trade union laws in Western and Central Europe. Trade union leaders with even a tincture of self-respect, or of respect for their members, would campaign for trade union rights equal to, say, those which French workers enjoy.

Why don't they? There is no mystery about that either.

Many of the trade union leaders are comfortable in a situation where the rank and file is legally pinned down; where they have the excuse of "legal impossibility" to justify their own well-heeled and luxuriously provided for inactivity.

Without the active compliance of trade union officialdom the anti-union laws would anyway not have so tight a grip. Bickerstaff, Morris and Edmonds police the anti-union laws for the Tories. They are nearly always the first to argue against action and solidarity. That was the role envisaged for them by the peo-

ple who drafted those laws.

What can be done?

Despite the official trade union leaders and, where necessary, against them and in defiance of them, now is the time to make a renewed effort to break the legal shackles on effective trade unionism. Labour, even New Labour, is likely to be more vulnerable to working-class pressure than the Tories ever could be. If the rank and file of the trade unions set up a sufficiently strong demand for it, some of the trade union leaders can be forced to move on this question.

The fight to win back free trade unions in Britain now is nothing less than the fight to restore to the working class the legal right to defend itself and the right to act in its own interests where it is strongest, at the point of production, that is where it can choose to act at will without waiting for some self-serving politician to call an election.

Now is the time to make a new push against the Tory anti-union laws which, after May, if Blair becomes Prime Minister will become New Labour's anti-union laws. **The labour movement must tell a New Labour government in the loudest voice possible: restore free trade unionism in Britain!**