

# Trade unions: is the tide turning?

By John McIlroy

IS THE long retreat of the trade unions over? Is the 20 year *downturn* in working-class struggle giving way to a new period of *transition to generalised struggle*? Some on the left think so. 'Slow recuperation' is, they think, heralded by the recent signal workers' strikes, by a series of unofficial disputes in the Post Office and by the unofficial and unlawful action around the 'Sefton 2.' Taken together with a number of favourable wage settlements, such as the above-inflation two-year deal at Rover, these disputes, they say, are simply the most obvious manifestation of a growing 'hidden struggle' in the workplace. The *transition* is driven by 'bubbling anger' under the surface: an explosion of industrial militancy is possible.

Some support for the view that change is occurring and that a process of 'union renewal' at the grassroots is emerging does come from a number of industrial relations academics who examine — and in some detail — examples of workplace organisation. An obvious problem here is that we are dealing with a small number of case studies at a particular point in time. It is legitimate to ask how typical they are. How far can we generalise from them?

We are told in very vague terms that 'renewal' is 'possible', 'is always on the agenda', 'may be unfolding in the current period'. Renewal is usually posed in terms of more participative, democratic, workplace organisation. According to some accounts the stimulus is coming from state attacks, such as privatisation. These accounts have little to say about the relationship of the workplace to the wider union and, in common with the 'transition to an upturn' argument, largely eschew any integration of their thesis in an analysis of the general trajectory of trade unionism in the 1990s.

But such analysis has to be the starting point for any evaluation of where we are and where we are going. An examination of the evidence available suggests that the claims that we are entering into a period of transition to a more generalised militancy or witnessing any significant renewal of workplace trade unionism have to be treated cautiously. They are at best premature, at worst whistling in the dark.

The specific weight of the unions is continuing to decline. After an unprecedented period of retreat, there are few signs of the downward spiral being arrested. The membership of TUC affiliated unions fell by 6% in 1993-4, a year in which the economy was

moving out of recession. The longest, most significant decline of trade union membership in British history, sustaining itself since 1979 through recession and economic upturn has, in fact, gathered pace since 1990 after slowing in the late 1980s. Today only 6.8 million trade unionists, well under 30% of the labour force, are in TUC affiliated unions — compared with more than 12 million, well over 50% of the labour force, in 1979. The TGWU has fewer than 850,000 members in 1995, compared with 2.2 million in 1979. The implications of this in terms of representativeness, legitimacy, mobilisation and *power* need little underlining.

In Britain, periods of generalised militancy have gone hand-in-hand with periods of union *growth*, or occurred, as in the early 1920s, when unions were being pushed back from a highpoint of growth. If we are witnessing a transition to an upturn we might expect *some* reflection of this in membership figures.

What is also important is that continuing decline is increasingly driven not simply by its initial engine, unemployment and closure of unionised enterprises, but by:

- changes in the composition of industry and the labour force;
- failure to recruit sufficiently in new areas;
- derecognition of unions by formerly supportive employers;
- the decline of the smoke-stack industries;
- the rise of the service sector;
- the contraction of the public sector;
- the increase in part-time employment;
- the move towards smaller workplaces.

These and a host of other not easily

reversible factors make for a union-hostile environment.

Trade unionists have not been able to get into new industries, new sites, new jobs to recruit members and build the workplace organisation that moves anger and resentment bubbling below the surface into militant action. Simultaneously, they have been under attack in their traditional strongholds.

The closed shop, which covered 4 million workers in 1979, covers only between a third and half a million today. The most authoritative evidence from the government's *Workplace Industrial Relations Survey* demonstrates an increase in derecognition in the late 1980s and recent studies show that the trend has continued. A 1993 survey of 98 employers found that 25 had derecognised unions in the previous 12 months. Another survey found that nearly 60% of employers opening up new sites decided not to recognise a trade union.<sup>2</sup>

In these conditions the decline in the coverage of collective bargaining has been "stark, substantial and incontrovertible." The proportion of employees covered by collective bargaining arrangements fell from 71% of employees in 1984 to 54% in 1990 and the downward trend continues. With only 1 in 3 workers in a union and 1 in 2 covered by collective bargaining the drop in the number of shop stewards since the mid 1980s has been "substantial" and "widespread affecting workplaces of all types."<sup>3</sup> We have no specific figures on numbers of stewards but the proportion of establishments with any shop stewards dropped from 54% in 1984 to 38% in 1990. Not only are there fewer stewards but they

## Unions failing to attract youth

WHILE THE TGWU is the worst example of a major union in serious decline, others have been hit hard by membership loss. UCATT, for example, has been afflicted by both membership haemorrhage and financial crisis. It is literally collapsing into the TGWU. Like other unions MSF lost around 5% of its members, whose dues are deducted at source, as part of the 'sign-up' exercise required by Tory legislation. This has prompted cutbacks and a freeze on staff pay. Some of the retrenchment measures — a ban on foreign trips, stricter con-

trol of officials' expenses, a moratorium on employment of consultants — may appeal more to the membership.

What is of particular concern is the 'massive' drop in the numbers of young members noted in a recent TUC report. Between 1990 and 1993 the number of members under 25 years of age declined by nearly 40% from 1.83million to 657,000. The number of members under 20 fell by 63%. According to the report only 1 in 10 workers under 20 were in trade unions at the end of 1992.