



Does the signal workers' dispute indicate the return to generalised struggle?

Photo: John Harris

bargain over a narrower agenda: "Fewer issues were subject to joint regulation in 1990 than in 1980... the reduction in bargaining activity overall has been substantial."⁴

Stewards today are far less likely to negotiate over recruitment, working conditions, deployment of labour and staffing levels. Restriction of the scope of bargaining and the restoration of management prerogative underlines important changes in workplace organisation. Where it still exists it often looks very much like it did in the mid 1970s, with facilities, offices and time off for stewards, and regular meetings with management. In fact, its impetus has often changed.

What the left emphasised in the past was the drive of workplace organisation not only to increase wages but also to achieve 'mutuality' and *control over the organisation of work*. What was seen as distinctive in key industries was the *independence* of shop stewards not from management alone but from the union bureaucracy too. Today, weakened workplace organisations are on the defensive and more dependent. Management has regained a measure of control and "in many workplaces such an enhancement of managerial prerogatives in redirecting labour has been accompanied by more direct labour intensification."⁵

Evidence and experience demonstrate that workers are working harder. Stewards often still participate in discussions over change at work, reorganisation of production or the introduction of new technology. But their involvement increasingly smacks of consultation over management decisions rather than negotiation, and not at all of a developing workers' control such as characterised some workplaces before 1979⁶. Moreover, full-time officers are more involved than in the earlier period, have closer control of stewards and directly represent members to a greater extent⁷.

Collective bargaining has become more decentralised with national agreements replaced by formal local agreements and greater emphasis on individual contracts

and performance-related pay. There is more management control than in the steward-driven local bargaining of the pre-1970s period.

Often this has come hand-in-hand with privatisation, CCT and LMS. It has sometimes been part of the deployment of Human Resource Management (HRM). In HRM employers take a more strategic approach and try to integrate the exploitation of labour with other corporate functions. They emphasise the business as a common enterprise and seek to capture the commitment and creativity of the workforce for management goals, by way of employee involvement, greater flexibility, team working, quality circles, and new communications and production techniques. While shop stewards have often had to confront this aspect of the employers' offensive, it has been in a partial, fragmented way. In most cases employers have not sought to *co-opt* shop stewards but have tended to *marginalise* them. The HRM approach overall has been less prevalent than a retreat from traditional collective industrial relations to individualised management and the reassertion of management prerogative⁸.

In these circumstances, average earnings, perhaps surprisingly, have remained buoyant, staying ahead of inflation for most of the last decade and constituting a continuing problem for state and employers. Even in 1994, as the underlying increase in average weekly earnings declined, it remained a point above the inflation rate. But, of course, that is a token margin, particularly when related to increases in tax and national insurance. Moreover, wage increases have been financed by intensification of labour and concession bargaining, and by increases in productivity. Profit has remained buoyant. Overall, the working class has paid through sustained high levels of unemployment, continuous insecurity and periodic job loss. Averages hide the fact that while some have won others have lost.

Certainly, the strike statistics give little support to those who theorise the

Unions buckling to business unionism

PARTNERSHIP WITH the union leaders and with shop stewards is one possible response available to the state and capital. It is usually related to specific economic and political conjunctions and, broadly, to the situation where the working class is strongly organised and militant. This approach characterised the period from 1940 — particularly the period from 1961. Since 1979 the state — and slowly but surely the employers, have deployed an alternative policy: using state power and unemployment to weaken the unions, delegitimise and divide them and progressively undermine both the necessity and the material basis for collaboration. The union leaders in the 1990s are not wanted on board by Major and only very much below decks by Blair. There is no big job for them to do, no concessions available for them. A weaker more fragmented movement means their policing function is less necessarily effective. Even in their own party, the Labour Party, their role is being qualitatively transformed.

Yet, even now, after a decade and a half of attrition, their response is not to seek, in no matter how small a way, to turn the tide, organise action against the Tories, begin to build a new unionism. Instead they seek a variety of new bases for more limited collaboration — such as works councils. And they are willing to pay the price of partnership. The left TGWU, RMT and ASLEF have recently piled in with the GMB, taking a stake with Costain and German multinationals in a bid to build part of the channel tunnel rail link. GMB boss John Edmonds declared: "We have been invited to participate and to contribute money because the companies recognise that working together is better for business and employees."

As the *Guardian* [20 February] observed: "There is a political dimension to the proposal, since it shows that the unions in transport are willing to embrace privatisation at a time when Labour is renewing its railway strategy and is under pressure to support nationalisation."

Who needs Clause Four when business unionism is available!