

A TALE OF THE FACTION'S POLITICS:

The dispute on the TUC

Carolán.

Smith says in IB 80 that:

"Carolán... argued that the role of the TUC in the NGA dispute was weak but progressive. I argued that it was wholly negative and much worse than in the 1970-74 period..."

And Cunliffe in IB 78 denounces:

"our failure until after the 'Black Wednesday' betrayal to offer any analysis of the TUC leaders in the NGA dispute..."

Now the first thing that must be said is that Cunliffe/here present^{and Smith} their accounts of a real dispute that did take place in a sauce of shameless lies.

In paper no.157 my article described the TUC's behaviour as:

"timid, fearful, cowardly, and in the circumstances grossly inadequate... pusillanimous even by the TUC's own standards... we cannot rely on the TUC leaders".

The next paper, still before 'Black Wednesday', stated: (in an article by J. McIlroy)

"The union leaders are trying - successfully, so far, this week - to take the issue off the streets and into the negotiating chamber..." The TUC had "helped the dispute not a hair's breadth or an iota... the TUC wants to use this dispute to strengthen their links with the Tories, not allow it to disrupt them"

And more of the same. Not condemn the TUC? What do Cunliffe/and Smith want us to do - organise a posse to go and string them up outside Congress House?

What Cunliffe wants, and what he is trying to do with his lies, is to make the strongest possible case for Smith against us on the TUC by lyingly caricaturing what we said. Or rather, what he and I said in the paper.

Even Cunliffe's caricature hardly justifies Smith's denunciation. Smith writes that I saw the whole record of the TUC on the NGA dispute as progressive! Look back at the paper. We called Len Murray 'King Rat' and headlined: 'Fight back against betrayal'. Hardly the way you describe people who you think are playing a progressive role...

It would be better to explore the real differences that do exist. What are/were they?

THE TUC EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE'S DECISION

On November 29 the TUC employment committee (EPOC) voted to give the NGA 'all support possible within the law'. On December 2 the TUC General Council unanimously approved this recommendation, but on the same day the NGA (probably pressurised by TUC leaders) called off its pickets in Warrington.

On December 10 the NGA National Council called for an (unlawful) national print stoppage on December 14. On December 12 EPOC voted 9 to 7 to adopt "a supportive and sympathetic attitude to the entirely predictable official decision" by the NGA to strike. Len Murray publicly condemned this EPOC decision; the NGA on December 13 dsuspended its strike call; and on December 14 Murray got the TUC General Council to overturn the EPOC decision.

I wrote an article for paper no.157, shortly before the December 2 General Council meeting. I took for granted and said (see above) the general truths about the treachery of the TUC bureaucracy which are part of our ABC. As well as that, I tried to assess concretely what was happening at the top of the TUC, what processes and interactions were going on there in face of the implacable Tory attitude towards their TUC collaborators.

To this task I brought two ideas. A belief that I had to pay close attention to what the bourgeois press was reporting about divisions in the TUC, and assess it. And a general theory of the Marxist movement, no less basic than the thesis that the TUC leaders are a distinct and alien bureaucracy - namely, that when the bourgeoisie attacks the labour movement at a fundamental level, so that the interests of the labour bureauracy are threatened as well as the rank and file's, then the bureaucrats will at least make gestures towards fighting back. These gestures may trigger a bigger rank and file explosion than they bargain for, and that in turn may force them to go further than they would choose to go.

For example, in July 1972 the spontaneous strike in response to the jailing of five dockers under the Industrial Relations Act - a movement which released the dockers and forced the TUC to declare a one-day general strike - was partly prepared for by 18 months of TUC agitation against the Act, feeble though official TUC policy was.

Sometimes the bureaucrats will not fight fundamental attacks on the labour movement - Germany. Sometimes they will - Spain. Even if they do, you can't trust them. If these ideas are not true, then much of what Trotsky did in the 1930s, calling for united fronts against fascism in Germany and France, was fundamentally mistaken and wrong in principle.

The TUC bureaucracy is not one homogeneous mass, always and invariably reactionary.

Now if you look at the minutes of the fusion discussions, you will find me saying that. I often got the impression from the old WSL press that they saw the bureaucracy as such a homogeneous group. I don't think that Smith and Jones have a coherent theory to that effect, but they certainly have an implicit position.

MAKING AN ASSESSMENT

In the course of assessing the divisions in the TUC and EPOC I wrote a passage in the article for paper no.157 which made a positive but clearly qualified assessment of the EPOC vote to support the NGA. I noted its weakness

and inadequacy and lack of commitment to hard support for the NGA. At the same time I noted that within their careful bureaucrats' jargon and the declaration of support "within the law", they were in fact, in the real world of conflict and strife, declaring timid TUC support for the NGA which was breaking the law.

Much better would have been a full-blooded policy such as we advocated. But I was assessing what was happening at the top of the TUC - the slow, conservative movement representing 11 million workers, with its wretched leadership who would more usually have been expected to condemn the NGA than to give it even timid support.

I thought something was happening at the top of the TUC. According to Marxist ABC notions about the dual character of the bureaucracy, I expected at least some flicker as the Tories seemed poised to destroy a trade union for the first time in over 150 years.

The task was not just to blindly and unintelligently repeat rote truisms about the bureaucracy, but also to assess what was new, what was growing and developing and changing.

THE PAPER'S COVERAGE

But after a minute's discussion with Cunliffe I agreed to cut the passage on the progressive aspects of the EPOC decision. Working at top speed on the paper, you write things down and then make a critical assessment and ask for other people's reactions. I was aware of the danger of being defocused from the immediate issues of fighting against the TUC's call to stay within the law, by a longer-term assessment of implications of the EPOC stand. After a brief discussion I agreed to 'play it safe' and delete the passage which Cunliffe thought gave the TUC too much.

So when Cunliffe raises this, what point is he making? For the sake of the argument suppose I made an error in the draft of the article. I agreed to change it. I was reasonable in responding to the point of view of the other editor, and we published a jointly-agreed article.

Such changes after discussion among collaborators occur all the time. Trying to assess something new, you are always likely to make mistakes. I have not claimed that I don't make mistakes, nor do I ask anyone to follow me blindly or set me up as a prophet in competition to Smith. So, even if my error were greater than it was, where is the big deal?

The big deal is that Cunliffe had to deal with the fact of Smith's politics on the TUC (see below).

'NOT PART OF A DEVELOPING SITUATION'

Moreover, I was not fundamentally mistaken in the idea that shifts and processes were going on in the TUC.

The next EC meeting took place on December 11 - after the NGA had called off the picketing, but had also (on December 10) called a one-day print strike for December 14.

Smith insisted that it was all over with the struggle. (Cunliffe was not present). Smith put down a resolution that the NGA's decision was "a serious retreat which puts the whole struggle in jeopardy". When the other EC members indicated that they agreed, he added a clause: "... and we don't regard it as part of a developing situation".

The next day EPOC voted to adopt "a sympathetic and supportive attitude" to the strike. Len Murray publicly denounced EPOC, saying that it was putting the TUC in danger of legal action. The General Council on Wednesday 14th was persuaded by Murray to reverse the EPOC decision. The TUC leadership was openly and bitterly split. We ourselves started agitating for a recall TUC.

And our duty does not end with saying, 'Blame the leaders'. The TUC leaders have been selling out for many decades - in Britain since around the turn of the century. If it had been left to the trade union leaders, then the struggles of the '50s, '60s, and '70s would not have happened. It is an irreplaceable part of our politics to call on the rank and file to act - 'if the leaders won't lead, the rank and file must'.

In words, this is common ground, and you would expect Smith and Jones at least not to need us to tell them this. Nevertheless in December Smith argued polemically for exclusively denouncing the TUC. He said that our insistence on calling on the rank and file to act independently was "an SWP binge". In fact, if you confine yourself to denouncing TUC leaders as scabs whose trade for 80 years has been scabbing, and don't call on the rank and file, you are left with passive propaganda.

BACK TO HEALYISM?

I'm not sure that I understand the whys and wherefores of all this. Smith is certainly capable of analysing nuances and recognising shifts in the bureaucracy if he puts his mind to it.

There was an element of accident in it. Smith is a subjective man who often announces "fundamental differences" to whatever we say and especially to what I say (Cunliffe inverts the relationship here, when he writes about "Carolyn making a point of taking a different line from Smith on anything and everything"). It was, I think, also true that a general pessimism about the prospects of rank and file action expressed itself for Smith incoherently in an opposition to calls on the rank and file (which opposition then, by way of reflex factionalism and the desire to generalise, became denunciation of our supposed 'Cliffism').

But there is more than accident to it. And Smith is partly right to relate it to the old disputes of the '60s.

He is wrong about Workers Fight and the supposed SWP/IS influence on us. We related to the rank and file long before we joined IS. For example, I helped organise the national movement against the Devlin plan on the docks in the late '60s (I was on the national strike-organising committee), and helped lead the strike in Manchester against Devlin.

But it is Smith here who lapses back to the SLL trade union politics of the '60s, which focused heavily on the union leadership, and whose stock-in-trade on everything, from the CP to the LP to the TU tops, to other far-left groups, was propagandist denunciation (frequently dishonest).

CONCLUSION

I want to express myself in measured and cool terms as much as I can, but if I am to write the truth as I see it, then only word fits what Smith was saying and writing about the labour movement in the NGA dispute and soon after. That word is not 'wrong', or 'mistaken', or 'badly informed'. The word is silly.

In part its origin is in Smith's petulance and subjectivism. He bitterly resented not being treated as the giver of the law on these matters, (and not only on these matters, where he might be thought to know more than most of us on the EC). He probably found that our resistance to his prostrate pessimism set up painful internal conflicts and contradictions within himself, too.

His general posture towards us is that of hatred (I'm still choosing my words carefully) and die-in-the-last-ditch factionalism. Whatever I say, he has a strong personal urge to contradict and deny. That is a big part of the explanation of such childishness as the amendment that there was no longer any "developing situation".

But such behaviour, such subjectivism, such consistent self-righteous silliness, is possible only because in Smith is still very much in the grip of

his Healyite basic politics.

As in every field, these are now overlaid with all sorts of empirical adjustments made over the last decade. They have not been replaced by any coherent alternative ideas. Thus the utterly one-sided 1960s Healyite Third-Period-style denunciation of the bureaucracy as a fixed, immovable caste remains of Smith's faded but intact fall-back set of ideas when the exigencies of his factional competition and his own subjectivism force him back on it.

CONCLUSION

In terms of basic slogans and political line, throughout the NGA dispute we had a clear position, substantially different from (and better than) that of any other far-left groups, which was unanimously agreed. At most Smith's differences - rationally understood - were differences of nuance. It should have been an excellent opportunity to recreate some unity in our ranks. In fact it led to the most bitter divisions.

The unhappiness of Smith that he was not allowed to lay down the line of the EC and of the paper on these matters was probably vented against Cunliffe in the form of criticism of the paper. This seems to have been the last straw that broke Cunliffe's back for work on the paper.

For the line of articles such as in no.157 was Cunliffe's line too. If, as he himself records, I changed the article in response to his criticism of an aspect of it (and I also agreed to a headline he put on - 'TUC weak link in solidarity'), the implication must be that he shared editorial responsibility for the result. Relations on the paper never took the form of me pulling 'majority' rank on him. He was perfectly free to try to mould the paper's coverage. When he finally wrote an article himself on the TUC (in no.159), there was no problem at all about it being printed.

Cunliffe was caught between, on one side, the EC and paper position on the disputed questions, and on the other Smith and Jones. He says in his lying piece about his departure from the paper:

"Even the working agreement we used to have on industrial questions appears to have collapsed, with Carolan making a point of taking a different line from Smith on anything and everything".

There are a great many implications here. Agreement is seen only as agreement between me and Smith: Cunliffe himself, the joint editor of the paper, does not enter the scene as someone who might disagree. And Smith's position is seen as the baseline. If others agree with Smith, we are all right. If they don't, it is a matter of them "making a point of taking a different line".

Cunliffe's own solution if he found himself in conflict with Smith would be to defer. But since we wouldn't (on important issues), he was trapped in the middle. So the bludgeoning of Smith and Jones broke Cunliffe's back. He got out, covering his tracks with specious 'good' reasons to disguise the real reasons. A whole range of problems, discussed elsewhere, drove Cunliffe away from the paper: but the final blows came from Smith and Jones as a by-product of the dispute on the TUC.

The dispute on the TUC also sheds light on a number of other aspects of the organisation.

a) Every comrade can see clearly that what Smith and Cunliffe say about our line on the TUC is blatant lies. Read what appeared in the paper. They are shameless liars on this question. Don't trust them on anything else.

b) Cunliffe more or less explicitly demands that we defer to Smith on industrial affairs. What if the paper had reflected the prostrate pessimism and demoralisation of Smith last December? The leading committees, editors, etc. must function according to reason and argument. The organisation cannot afford a system of deference such as Smith, Jones and Cunliffe want to set up.

c) aAs well as catching themselves out as liars, Smith, Jones and Cunliffe show themselves on this question - one of those on which Smith and Jones have the best claims to knowledge - to have acted as charlatans. Of course everyone makes mistakes, says silly things when irritated or hurt, etc. But serious people do not play games like Smith and Cunliffe are playing on this question.

d) Finally: Last December and January the 'worker leadership' took their stand in the organisation on a series of ultra-pessimistic assessments and on a one-sided, essentially non-Trotskyist, conception of the bureaucracy.

Events since - the February 28 day of action and the miners' strike - have decisively shattered what they said then, in factional-recoil against us, about the industrial/political situation. They were utterly wrong; and at some points Smith, for reasons of his subjective approach to politics, was utterly silly.

Serious people would try to learn some lessons from that. But Smith, Jones and Cunliffe haven't. Political accounting? Not from this 'worker leadership' - who demand that we should defer to them politically and especially where anything to do with industry is concerned. Under pressure of their factionalism, they prove that they are not politically serious or stable people.

