

## British Perspectives - Industrial Perspectives

The Tory government's drive to weaken the trade unions has continued without respite. But, though pressing ahead with putting anti-union laws on the statute books, the main thrust of these attacks has not been through the courts but on the shop floor and in the hard-line, uncompromising stance it has maintained in the many industrial confrontations with its policies. The fact that Thatcher remains in office and the ever lengthening dole queues shows that this approach has paid off.

Yet the last year has seen several major opportunities to defeat the government wilfully squandered. Two of them, the ASLEF 'flexible rosters' strike and the NHS pay fight, represented by far the most serious threat to Tory rule since the steel strike. Their defeat and Thatchers victory may well have cleared the way for the government to remain in office until they call an election and have certainly improved the prospects of another Tory government following. In the ASLEF and NHS disputes we saw from Thatcher boldness, commitment and resolution; from the TUC and the union leadership at national level only timidity, vacillation and ultimately sabotage. Despite the courage and tenacity shown throughout by the rank and file, these qualities proved unable to compensate for a failure to develop sufficient organisational and political independence to win control from the hands of the bureaucrats.

### ASLEF betrayed

The national strike by ASLEF against flexible rosters and in defence of the 8 hour day had come after a series of limited stoppages earlier in the year had forced the British Rail Board to back down. But the Tories were seeking to generalise the methods used by Edwardes at BL and a decision was taken to impose the new working conditions unilaterally and tie this to a threat to sack those who strike. The ASLEF Executive, under the dual pressures of an employer prepared to smash the union and a membership that saw a major principle being breached, called an indefinite strike. The response was strong enough to resist the most high-powered media/management strikebreaking barrage seen for many years. What it could not do was survive the strikebreaking efforts of the TUC.

The NUR leadership, though itself going through a leadership struggle against the long-time domination of the right-wing, instructed its members to work normally. Though the ASLEF stoppage was solid, from the start the Executive was compromised by the weakness of its position in the period leading up to the strike. Amongst the membership militancy increased as the effectiveness of picketting became apparent, especially the use of the flying picket to counter the limited scabbing and link up with other groups of workers such as the miners and health workers. These measures to cement the strike came, significantly, from the rank and file; the leadership of the union was virtually paralysed throughout.

In London the unity which developed between several strike committees centred on the Kings Cross depot was of major importance. Not only did it quickly take on the responsibility of basic organising for significant sections of the union, it provided us with a qualitative input through our single ASLEF comrade with a respected record and leadership position in the Kings Cross branch. This connection allowed us to have some influence within the most advanced group of militants, notably in the political line of a statement from these strike committees calling for the preparation of a general strike if the sackings were implemented. Pledges of such action



were being made when the sell-out came. Just as in BL the TUC moved in to support the employer, in this case the BRB against the train drivers. The ASLEF EC, despite some individuals on becoming radicalised by the experience of betrayal, had no perspective for continuing the strike under these conditions. Had they done so in the face of the TUC condemning any support, their stand together with the impact of mass sackings would have rallied substantial forces from the rank and file and may well have sparked a movement of considerable size largely outside the control of the national union leadership.

It is instructive to examine the role of the national trade union lefts during this dispute. Apart from the vacillation and eventual prostration of ASLEF leader Buckton, the TUC sub-committee which actually took the scab decision did so unanimously under the chairpersonship of leading left Alan Sapper. At the subsequent full General Council meeting, which we vigorously lobbied to the acute embarrassment of the TUC lefts and the CP who had come along to spectate, the decision on ASLEF was ratified without dissent. This collapse of their influential friends in high places brought a diplomatic silence from the CP leadership both at the time and since.

Since the defeat over flexible rosters there has been stiff and effective resistance in the most militant depots to the new work schedules being introduced. At best this can only be a short-term opposition but it does auger well for the next major battle over One Man Operated trains. Besides this is the question of the whole future of the railways in their present form with the Tory-commissioned Serpell report speculating on reducing the rail network to a mere fraction of its present size.

#### NHS workers sold-out

The marathon NHS pay battle saw the left bureaucrats play a seemingly different role. Compared with the brazen right-wing positions of CoHSE leader Spanswick, newly-elected NUPE General Secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe had the scope to appear credible even to many militants and there is no doubt he did develop some relationship with the rank and file. Yet from as early as June NUPE had a conference policy of all-out action and therefore had the key to victory. It was not until October that that policy was even considered by the NHS unions as a whole: this after the mass action of health workers and solidarity from other sections had died down. NUPE tamely went along with the bogus improved offer negotiations, the acceptance of which ended the dispute.

The period July to September saw tremendous displays of militancy from the health workers, uneven as it was both regionally and within the NHS unions. But it was the breadth of supporting action - sympathy strikes and secondary picketting - which the NHS struggle inspired that reflected a very advanced level of class consciousness and put a new dimension on their action. Health workers had shown before their ability to fight against low pay but never previously had there been such a spirit of support for their cause as that which swept through virtually the whole of the trade union movement during those months. The industrial workers were in the forefront, the miners being among the first to respond to appeals from the NHS rank and file for support.

Contained in these actions was a readiness to defy the existing and proposed anti-union laws. The Fleet Street electricians stood firm against the combined efforts of the print bosses, Frank Chapple and a High Court injunction and despite the precedent being set of the Prior law being used the courts were effectively forced to climb down in front of what would have been wide-scale industrial action



had the sentence against Sean Geraghty been severe.

September 22nd was the most extensive workers action since 1920 with 2 million or so on strike. The decision shortly afterwards by the TUC NHS committee to go for Regional Days of Action and the fiasco of the November 8th transport strike signalled surrender by the whole union leadership. The NHS leaders tactics of limiting the action to Days of Action, and then often not clearly strike action, with long delays in between sapped the workers fighting capacity and ensured the dispute dragged on. Attempts to organise local all-out action failed. The 'unity' now made so much off by the bureaucrats was positive only to the extent it unified the rank and file, where important gains were made in workplaces and by area strike committees. The negative side was the use of unity to hold the action at a level acceptable to the weakest and most conservative unions and the reactionary RCN whose members constantly rejected settlement offers. If, instead, there had been bold leadership from the unions at decisive points the most class conscious RCN members could no doubt have been won away from this dead-end organisation to genuine trade unionism.

Our intervention in the pay fight centred on the policy of all-out strike action, with emergency cover, to win the full claim. Our core of NHS comrades, though quite small and spread over a wide area, included a number of mainly women comrades with an important base in their unions and a history of struggle. Through the Health Workers for the Full Claim caucus we attempted to draw around us the best militants and provide a consistent counter to the bureaucrats. Our attempts to involve other left groups in this initiative met with little success. The IMG maintained a token presence, largely under our pressure, and Workers Power saw it, typically, as a polemical platform against us. HWFC did provide an important vehicle for our work which we were able to use to good effect, particularly at the NUPE and CCHSE conferences, and we drew into activity many important activists. The 8 HWFC bulletins we produced and the series of national meetings held was the only attempt made anywhere to provide rank and file national coordination. One opening in this context was the NHS shop stewards meeting in Sheffield in October which drew 200 people and at which we had a strong presence. It is far from clear whether this has a future but some longer term organisation may emerge from it which we should be in a position to relate to. In spite of the very good work that our comrades did, we did not win new recruits from the struggle. This may yet still happen as we retain contact with several potential members. A priority now for our NHS comrades is to combat the inevitable demoralisation among the militants by drawing out for them the political lessons and preparing for the battle in front. The next period will bring an escalation in closures, cuts in services and jobs and the drive towards privatisation. The Oxford RHA proposals give a glimpse of the Tory NHS of the future.

### Privatisation

The Tory's commitment to 'free enterprise' makes the whole of the public sector vulnerable. The cutting edge of their anti-nationalisation policy has been privatisation, essentially selling-off and contracting out nationalised industries and municipal services to private capitalists. Thatcher's hit-list includes British Airways, British National Oil Corporation, British Telecoms, parts of British Rail and, in time, probably BL. The attack on local authority jobs and services is seen most acutely in Tory-run councils bringing in private operators for dust collections and breaking up DLOs. Resistance has been sporadic and largely unsuccessful. Wandsworth dustmen were defeated after a 7-week strike, forced back by a combination of sacking threats and manoeuvres by full-time union officials.



Ironically, their defeat came straight after NUPE and GMWU conference decisions of support. Elsewhere local government workers have taken action, notably the 900 NALGO members in Birmingham who struck in November and resisted several sell-out attempts from their leaders before being forced back after failing to gain majority support from the branch membership for an all-out strike.

The biggest display of opposition organised nationally has been a one-day national stoppage called by the POEU and other BT unions against the privatisation of British Telecoms. The setting-up of Project Mercury under BL-supremo Michael Edwardes gives the capitalists a free-market alternative profits bonanza at the direct cost of jobs, services and trade union rights. The POEU is faced with virtual devastation and with it sections of the CPSA and UCW yet no union in the public sector has anything remotely resembling an adequate programme to defeat privatisation. An urgent priority for us must be to win support for policies in these unions based on complete non-cooperation with attempts by employers to contract out services, in particular by refusing to tender for contracts in competition with private companies and organising resistance based on blacking, strike action and sympathy strike action. Given the diversity of the attack and risk of fragmentation and isolation, an across-union public sector alliance must be developed at all levels of the unions to coordinate resistance. We need to formulate concrete proposals and initiatives to draw together militants disorientated and demoralised by defeats and the lack of national direction but prepared to fight.

#### Union rights under attack

Against a background of legal and shop floor attacks on the trade unions struggles which begin as attempts to improve or defend pay and conditions increasingly tend to become fights to defend union organisation itself. Employers tactics are more and more to simply sack workers who strike. Rulecan, Air India and Arlington House follow this trend. Newer groups joining unions for the first time, usually the low-paid and often blacks, demand recognition and are given the sack. As in the late 70's with similar disputes, many of these recognition struggles involve the TGWU and as in past years its attitude has been almost entirely one of doing the absolute minimum to support (in one case nothing at all) and above all avoiding any attempt to mobilise its vast membership. In a union which boasts one of the leftist leaderships in the TUC and which has taken a number of important policy decisions, this attitude of tokenism and betrayal is the day to day practical reality of the army of unelected TGWU full time officials. The most damning illustration of this can be seen in the long-running Air India strike at Heathrow. The TGWU has a huge membership at the airport controlling many essential services including aircraft refuelling which could rapidly win the strikers demands yet it has not been used. The serious defeat of the well-organised and militant Heathrow Ramp workers earlier last year arose from a similar failure.

This unwillingness to rouse the trade union membership, to alert workers to issues at stake and prepare for action in defence of their interests is what the Tories have been banking on in proceeding with their anti-union legislation. The TUC leaders have not let them down. their usual pedestrian routine has hardly been disturbed by even the thought of Tebbit's knife at their throats. The April 1982 Special Conference adopted, without the possibility of amendment, the bald minimum of what could be passed off as a defence policy. Union Day in June was for handing out leaflets, specifically not strike action (though many thousands struck anyway). Over Sean Geraghty, solidarity from Congress House was a deafening silence. Behind demagogic declarations from some about being ready to go to jail, the bureaucrats



strategy all along has been 'responsible' avoidance of anything smacking of direct action. The basis of this is the presumed eventual repeal of the laws by a Labour government. As an election gets nearer this will increasingly dominate the TUC's thinking. Quite apart from the bankruptcy of this perspective even if a Labour government committed to complete repeal were guaranteed, there is at the least a serious possibility that the next election will produce nothing of the kind.

Nor have the Tories by any means completed their plans. The new Tebbit Green Paper proposes measures to destroy the unions' links via the political levy with the Labour Party; implementing this would almost certainly require the mandate of an election victory. However much the Tories rely on the corruption and undemocratic methods of the union leadership they are not above using this in their propaganda against the unions. The bureaucrats gross, managerial lifestyle and distance from the membership together with their general lack of accountability, used to such good affect by the bosses, is turned against trade unions as a whole. Sleight of hand is then used to put bureaucrats in the same bracket as the revolutionaries, brand them as an 'unrepresentative minority' and further Tebbit's reactionary and fraudulent crusade to 'put the unions into the hands of the members'.

Despite their do-nothing approach the TUC have nevertheless got allies in the Communist Party. The CP-controlled LCDTU, trading on an ill-deserved reputation from past anti-union law struggles, has added a little rhetorical spice to the TUC's 8-point plan and not a great deal more. The two conferences last year were lightweight, depressing affairs tailored to the left of the TUC General Council (3 of them CP members) who over Tebbit are virtually indistinguishable from the right wing. We have attempted to organise a fight back by initiating the Mobilising Committee in Defence of Trade Union Rights, launched from the April 3rd Trade Union conference. Based initially on the need for strike action to defeat the Tebbit Bill and for the TUC to break off links with the Tories (a demand over which the CP vacillated and only supported when it was passed by the TGWU), the Mobilising Committee anti-Tebbit propaganda, leaflets and bulletins including around Union Day and the TUC conference in September which heavily voted down a 'break links' resolution. In some places such as Hull and Manchester it has made useful links with trade unions. In addition through Reg Race we attempted to bring together various rank and file TU bodies and others to establish a broad anti-Tebbit organisation. A successful meeting was held which included a delegation from S. Wales NUM and representatives of numerous Broad Lefts as well as the LCDTU. Despite a further meeting being planned and a conference proposed so far no more has come of this. We need proposals on this work to cope with the new situation.

#### The trade union rank and file

Closures, redundancies and defeats have inevitably taken their toll of rank and file organisation. So too have victimisations where every successful sacking makes union organisation harder. Nothing can compensate for a defeat but at a time when sell-outs expose the bureaucrats and shake workers' confidence in their traditional leaders Marxists with an understanding of reformism and stalinism can make qualitative gains by emerging as the best fighters under these harsh conditions.

While real problems do exist, so do opportunities, particularly when other tendencies have largely given up consistent union work. It is well known that the SWP's superficial 'downturn' diagnosis has led



them to completely abandon their Rank and File group work and retreat into a sterile 'build the Party' propagandism. We must guard against any similiar tendency in our own ranks. Extending our influence at the base of the unions must include looking for openings which allow us a dialogue with activists. There has been a rapid growth of union left caucuses over the last few years and we have correctly sought to work within these bodies. Such Broad Lefts, by whatever name, now tend to differ quite radically from the old, AUEW-style, CP-dominated versions of a decade or more ago. They are now usually much more politically open and by no means confined to passive electioneering. Our perspective has been to orientate them towards day to day problems and struggles and in particular union democracy. In CoHSE's Group 81, we have with few comrades won significant authority with a woman comrade standing for the general secretaryship with the caucus supporting her nomination. The NUT's STA has also brought us real influence among many left teachers. In other, longer established Broad Lefts like the TGWU our progress has been slower but gains have been made there too. Not that these groupings should be seen as either a panacea by themselves or still less as counterposed to our internal fractions. It is the case that in many Broad Lefts the influence of the CP or Militant severely limits their usefulness. Examples of these would be the NUR and to a lesser extent the POEU, but the shake-up in the NUR following Weighell's demise and the privatisation threat looming before the POEU means work there is vital. In the CPSA, where new BL President Roddy has played a scab role in the DHSS strikes over staffing levels, we have set about organising a Socialist Caucus against such capitulations. The continuing fear the right wing have of such groupings may be seen from the heavy bureaucratic attacks made on them by the UCW and IRSF leaderships. Our ability to work effectively as revolutionaries in this milieu is dependent on our internal trade union structures working properly. Some union fractions have begun to operate really well but much more must be done to get others functioning on a consistent basis.

Levy  
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