

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 centered 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