

The rank and file movement we need

WE can prepare for the new period ahead by learning the lessons from what has gone before.

The experience of the betrayal of the miners in 1984-5 and again in 1992 provides the clearest examples of the kinds of problems socialists face in the unions today, but also the possible solutions.

In 1984-5 the miners fought a bitter, year-long battle for jobs. They were left isolated and betrayed when the TUC refused to organise for the kind of solidarity action — a general strike — which could have stopped Thatcher in her tracks and changed the whole of recent British political history. The miners were defeated but unbowed. Eight years later, after two election defeats for Labour, and a gruelling war of attrition in the pits the Tories set out to destroy the coal industry. In October 1992 they announced the closure of more than three quarters of Britain's remaining pits. There was an explosion of popular anger. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in central London in support of the miners. Even Tory voters and the Chief Constable of South Yorkshire said that Arthur Scargill had been proved right about the Tories' ultimate plans for the pits.

The ranks of the labour movement started to muster in support. There was more than a glimpse of what a genuine, well co-ordinated fightback could achieve. But all that energy, hope and solidarity was wasted! Why? Because the existing multi-million-strong mass labour movement is led by people who do not really want to fight the capitalist system.

The TUC did not call any serious solidarity action for the miners, and the Labour leaders accepted the essence of the Tory case for pit closures.

Dislodging from power the people who did that and empowering in their own movement the rank and file of the mass organisations of the working class — that is one of the central tasks facing socialists today.

If we don't succeed in this task, then there will in the future be as many repeats of the betrayal of the miners as there were precedents for it in the past.

That's why the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and our predecessors have argued long and hard for the formation of an open, democratic and genuinely broad based, rank and file movement in the trade unions and across all the unions. With such a rank and file movement we could

force the union leaders to fight and where they refuse, replace them. This is not a question of abstract sloganising but a sensible and practical policy.

In a workplace we may find one in a hundred who will accept completely the need for a socialist revolution and who is prepared to devote a large part of his or her life to working for it. That is an important beginning — but it's not enough if we hope to do more than spend all our time patiently explaining and trying to convince people about basic socialist ideas.

ALONGSIDE the convinced socialists there will be many who may not be fully convinced socialists, but who will agree to work with us on immediate issues like militant struggle over wages and conditions, free trade unions and the defence of the welfare state, and join us in a fight for union democracy, and against such things as racism and sexism. We need to organise these militants.

We also need a national organisation, pulling together the militants across industry. Otherwise the national union leadership always has the advantages over the local groups of activists.

Right now, the key dividing lines in the unions are: are you for or against organising strike action to defend jobs and conditions and halt the destruction of our public services? And are you for or against strategy of industrial and political action to win free trade unions and repealing the anti-union laws? It's as simple as that. And we can win a majority at every level of the unions for an audacious militant answer to those questions. On this basis serious Marxists can start the work of reinvigorating the unions.

The best example in history of such rank-and-file organisation is the Minority Movement of the 1920s. Initiated by the Communist Party, at its peak it led one million workers. It was formed in a period similar to today — after a series of setbacks for the working class.

The engineering workers had been heavily defeated in a lock-out in 1921-2. Trade union membership was falling. But the then revolutionary Communist Party did not give up — they went out to organise the rank and file and prepare the future.

The same thing could be done today. A start has been made with initiatives like the Campaign for Free Trade Unions and Socialist Trade Union Alliance, a loose co-

ordinating body to unite the different rank-and-file groups across the unions.

Given the very serious class-wide attacks that the New Labour government are now engaged in — like the public sector pay freeze, and Blair's commitment to keep the anti-union laws — unity is an imperative necessity. If it is possible, and it is, then we must fight to win it! Class-wide attacks require a class-wide response. If the left can not and does not unite across the unions to press for a fightback, then what hope have we got of forcing the official leaders to unite and lead a fightback?

We are helped by other political developments. The collapse of the old Stalinist systems in Eastern Europe has opened up the possibility of new re-alignments on the left and the ending of old, outmoded, divisions.

With the fall of the old police state regimes in Eastern Europe, the views of people who formerly were in or around the Communist Party are in flux. Their god Stalin, is dead, once and for all, and the attempt by Arthur Scargill to re-unite them in his SLP has won few takers. Many will either drop out of the struggle, or become open right wingers, but a minority will be looking for serious socialist answers. It will be easier to convince them of these if we can find a framework for common activity.

THE old divisions between the broadly "Trotskyist" trade union left and the "Stalinist" left are no longer justified. A new unified left-wing movement can be created — if it is based on immediate class-struggle unity for the fight against the bosses and Blair. But unity will not work if it is confined to cynical electoral stitch-ups, involving some in unprincipled diplomatic silences about central working-class issues like trade union democracy.

This new chapter in British politics makes possible the winning of the bedrock workers' movement to a model of effective, militant and political trade unionism. It will be based on a rejection of the TUC's mainstream's dogma of "social partnership" between bosses and workers.

If the left fails to address these tasks then the whole working class will be driven further back, what's left of the welfare state will be destroyed and the prospect of the emergence of a real mass socialist alternative to Blair's New Labour will be greatly diminished.