Postal workers can win

By a Manchester postal worker

AFTER two weeks of standing still it looks like the postal dispute is once more gathering pace after the CWU Postal Executive finally agreed to call more strike days.

The decision of the Postal Executive last month not to name any further days of strike action for the time being was a mistake. The decision was no doubt taken for the best of motives — the need to consult the Branches and to take stock of the progress of the negotiations.

Nevertheless, the effect was to give the impression to the members that the industrial action had been put on the back burner and that some deal was in the offing. Much of the momentum that had been built leading to the first 24 hour strike was lost and many branches are going to have build it up again.

What made things worse was that an explanation of the Executive’s decision and the reasons for it didn’t reach the members for two days. This allowed the media and management to peddle their propaganda. In many offices management circulated leaflets urging staff not to take further strike action as “the dispute is virtually over”. It’s probably just as well that no-one believes anything from management these days.

We call ourselves a Communications Union. No Executive meeting about the dispute should be allowed to finish without an agreed statement being drawn up and immediately faxed to Branches. That way our members will be the first to know what’s going on instead of the last.

There is a huge amount of support for our stand among our members, the wider labour movement and the public. They are sick and tired of seeing working people pushed around by arrogant and bullying bosses who think they can do what they like. They want to see our side win for a change. With their help we will.

Thirty years of fighting for workers’ liberty

OUR tendency will celebrate its 30th anniversary in October 1996.

And to mark this milestone in our history we will be holding a conference in London on Saturday 26 October.

We have also republished What We Are And What We Must Become, the founding document of our tendency.

What We Are And What We Must Become is available for £2.50 plus 36p postage from AWL, PO Box 825, London SE15 4NA (cheques payable to “WL Publications”).
New Labour is nothing new

There is absolutely nothing new in New Labour, New Life for Britain. Tony Blair’s pre-manifesto election programme is a handful of concrete commitments and a mountain of waffle. New Labour, New Life for Britain positively bristles with the banal. In 10,000 words we get a compendium of all the orthodoxy of mainstream capitalist economic thinking—save and invest not tax and spend, low inflation and interest rates, financial prudence, Ministers to save before they spend, etc. etc., all of these mantras reinforced by the desire to be "internationally competitive."

Now, apart from the Keynesian interregnum of World War Two and the post-war boom, these goals have underpinned the financial policies of British governments since the discovery of the Americas if not before. Nothing new here.

Nor is there anything new in New Labour, New Life for Britain’s dream of an end to class conflict and struggle. The document opens with a set of pious wishes for social peace that belongs right at the ideological heart of "Old Labour."

"We should not be forced to choose between state control of the economy and letting the market do it all; between higher levels of tax and spend and dismantling the welfare state; between a society that denies enterprise and one in which we step over bodies sleeping in the doorways..."

It is in this kind of concept-throwing, trying to be all things to all people that Ramsay MacDonald would have loved.

The second aspect of New Labour, New Life for Britain is the programme for government. It will put Blair on a collision course with the labour movement.

The key policies are to be set out on a little postcard to be sent to every home that people are asked to keep and refer to in order to check the progress of the government.

"Keep this card and see we keep our promises. New Labour’s first pledges are to:"

- cut class size to 30 or under for 5, 6 and 7 year olds by using money from the Assisted Places Scheme;
- fast-track punishment for persistent young offenders by halving the time from arrest to sentencing;
- cut NHS waiting lists by treating an extra 100,000 patients as a first step by releasing $100 million saved from NHS red tape;
- get 250,000 under 25 year olds off benefit and into work by using money from a windfall levy on privatised utilities;
- set tough rules for government spending and borrowing; ensure low inflation; strengthen the economy so that interest rates are as low as possible.

This is extremely limited and some of it is deeply reactionary.

It is surely utopian to believe that real improvements can be made into the NHS waiting lists without increased investment, or that $100 million can be saved from NHS bureaucracy if the next Labour government keeps the purchaser/provider split which is the lynchpin of the new health market bureaucracy.

The proposals on youth unemployment are equally cautious. No real jobs are to be created. Instead, youth will be forced onto either a revamped version of the old Community Programme, or sent to work in sweatshops and McJobs for very little money.

New Labour simply means tighter policing of the labour movement by the state regulating the reserve army of labour. The aim is to keep down everyone else’s wages but boost profits and help achieve the much vaunted "international competitiveness."

This anti-working class drive of New Labour, New Life for Britain is further strengthened by Blair’s proposals on the trade union laws: "The key elements of the trade union legislation of the 1980s — on ballots, picketing and industrial action — are much needed."

This is all perfectly logical. Thatcherite economics required a Thatcherite framework of union law to hold down its victims and stop them resisting.

And resist they will. The overarching commitment to public spending is enough to mean that Blair simply will not be able to meet any of the basic aspirations for homes, schools, hospitals and jobs which will bring him to office. Conflict with trade unions and public service users is inevitable. As it is with students who are going to face the imposition of a fully-blown loans system and the end of the last vestige of free higher education.
A “peace process” without the IRA?

By Jack Cleary

Sinn Fein got its best-ever vote (15.5%, 116,000 votes) in the recent Northern Ireland elections to select the negotiators for the “all-party talks” that began on 10 June. But Sinn Fein is not represented at the talks.

This is unfortunate, but it is not all that surprising: the Provisional IRA’s refusal to call a new ceasefire and thus — before the mid-June Manchester bomb — gain admission to the talks. Provisional Sinn Fein/Provisional IRA campaigned incessantly for all-party talks during the ceasefire (August 1994—February 1996) and explained its breakdown in part by frustration at not getting “all-party talks”.

In fact the PIRA has not resumed full-scale military action, yet when the talks were due to begin, it would not make the gesture of a new ceasefire to secure admission to the talks. How is this to be explained?

You have to understand what the PIRA/PSIRA meant by “all-party” talks. They meant that the British government should steamroller ahead with talks that would for certain be boycotted by most or all Unionists if Sinn Fein took part in them without prior PIRA “decommissioning” of some or all of its armouiry — something that was unthinkable for the PIRA. The real demand was for Britain to proceed without the Unionists, and at the stage after that, coerce them.

The Unionists probably would — even after the elections — not be in these “all-party” talks if Sinn Fein was. Blowing Sinn Fein out of the “peace process” the PIRA’s bombs were perhaps a prerequisite for the talks that are now going on. That they go on with the Unionists present means for Sinn Fein that they are a move in the wrong direction.

The ceasefire was for PIRA/Sinn Fein always based on the gross misunderstanding of Sinn Fein to Fenian Gaeltacht, with Irish America. Sinn Fein to CFB, the British government to coerce the Unionists into accepting some variant of the United Ireland that the PIRA regards as its bottom line.

This was a fantasy. As long ago as February 1995 the London and Dublin governments publicly knocked it on the head by publishing proposals for progress in Northern Ireland based on a Council of Ireland, resting on the twin pillars of Dublin and (Catholic-Protestant power-sharing) Belfast governments.

With their tokenistic resumption of military action in London’s Dockland last February, the PIRA moved out from under this fantasy.

They have made no effort to get in on the current talks because they know that they cannot conceivably get even the minimum they want there. They know that they will split if some of them negotiate and settle for anything less.

They may split anyway, though it is impossible to know how much the Adams “peace faction” is really at odds with hard-line militarists, and how much of the ostensible division between “peace process” people and “militarists” is a mere charade, a theatrical division of labour, with Adams playing “soft cop” to the PIRA’s “hard cop”.

The whole recent practice of PSFI/PIRA fits perfectly into the strategy of combining the “Armalite and the Ballot Box”, which they have followed for a decade and a half now.

Their appeal for a Sinn Fein vote as a vote for peace paid off handsomely in the election: a percentage of those who voted for them for that reason must now feel betrayed. So many of the mainstream bourgeois nationalists in the south, those who in the last two years have tried to seduce Sinn Fein away from militarism.

But outside the “peace process”, where can PSFI/PIRA go? The answer depends on what happens in the negotiations now going on. If enough of the representatives of both communities can agree on a basis for Catholic-Protestant power sharing, and proceed to set it up, then the political role of both communities can be isolated.

Despite their big recent vote there is a great deal of Northern Irish Catholic hostility to the PIRA. Progress towards institutionalised power-sharing may be possible.

And the Protestants? When in 1973 the “centre” of Northern Ireland proceeded to do what Britain wanted and set up a power-sharing executive, there was mass Protestant opposition and it fell before the Orange general strike of May 1974. Opposition is likely to be a great deal less now; Orange fear of a Council of Ireland is probably less.

Therefore there may be a chance of progress towards a power-sharing executive. Despite all the criticism socialists would have to make of it, that would indeed be progress.

The monthly survey

Portrait

Billy Hutchinson

Billy Hutchinson was only 40, but he has already served a life sentence in a Northern Irish jail for a sectarian murder.

He recently stood for election to the Northern Irish Assembly under the banner of the Progressive Unionist Party, but he was not elected. We interviewed him when he came to Islington to debate with us at workers’ Liberty 79, where his presence provoked a peacefulicket of protest by a coalition of Trotskyists groups.

He was 13 years old when "The Troubles" came to Northern Ireland in 1969, and eighteen months later the Provisional IRA launched their military campaign.

After 1972, when the Protestant-Unionist majority in Stormont Parliament in Belfast was abolished by Britain, there was a rash of protest strikes. It was then that Billy Hutchinson and many others like him got drawn into para-military activities, with the Ulster Volunteer Force.

In the three years after the abolition of Stormont there was a holocaust of over 300 killings of Catholics picked at random. Hutchinson had a labour movement background, his father having been in the Northern Ireland Labour Party. But all such questions were pushed into the background by the eruption of the IRA’s war, which was seen as an attempt to force the Northern Ireland Unionists to abandon their own identity and submerge in a Catholic-controlled all-Irish state.

Billy Hutchinson illustrated for us how wide the gap between Protestant and Catholic workers in Northern Ireland was, even for people with his labour movement background as a child he went with his father on a visit to a Catholic home and was frightened at the sight of the numerous pictures of saints and gods on the walls, something typical of Irish Catholic homes. All he’d ever seen in Protestant homes were pictures of the Queen.

Ten years ago, he said, he might have considered himself a Marxist, influenced by “the Workers’ Party”. Now he’s “Old Labour”, in a Northern Irish context. The PUP has the now-jettisoned British Labour Party’s socialist Clause Four in its constitution.

What was the sense in indiscriminate assassinations of Catholics? To generate pressure on the Catholic community to get them to extricate the IRA he replied. In fact it had the opposite effect as such things always do: it made Catholics feel dependent on the IRA, as the IRA campaign drove Protestants into reliance on groups like the UVF. He thinks that the Protestants/Unionists had a right to defend themselves in the best way they could and still have; however the violence of the “70s was too “unfocused” and indiscriminate. He said he hopes it will not come to violence again.