

# Workers ***ACTION***

No.17

Summer 2002

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## The honeymoon's finally over



## Trade Union Special



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## Workers Action – what we stand for

Workers Action is a Marxist tendency in the labour movement.

In the present situation, after two decades of defeats, with strike action at a very low level and a leadership all too happy to accommodate to the pro-free market climate, Workers Action believes that the most important task is a struggle to renovate the existing labour movement, politically and industrially, so that it can fight effectively in its own interests.

This means a struggle in the labour movement as it is, with all its problems and weaknesses. Most workers continue to support the Labour Party in elections or by union affiliation. At present, attempts to get round this political fact by mounting electoral challenges to Labour are, in most cases, futile and sectarian, and are likely to lead to greater demoralisation. Most importantly, they represent an abandonment of any serious political struggle against the Labour leadership. Workers Action supporters are therefore active in the Labour Party as well as the trade unions and political campaigns.

Capitalism condemns millions to exploitation, poverty, disease and war, so that when its leading international bodies meet, they have to do so behind lines of police. However, Workers Action believes that the relative importance of the anti-capitalist movement over the last few years is a sign not of the strength of the left, but of its weakness and marginalisation. The new free market world order is based on 20 years of defeats for the international working class. Protests outside the conferences of organisations such as the WTO are important, but must not be a substitute for building a socialist leadership in the working class.

Workers Action supports all progressive national struggles against imperialism, without placing any confidence in the leaders of such movements. Neither bourgeois nationalism, nor petty-bourgeois guerrillism, nor religious fundamentalism can advance the interests of the oppressed workers and peasants. We are for the building of a socialist leadership on an international scale.

The collapse of Stalinism in 1989, compounded by the move to the right of the Labour Party and the European Socialist parties, has resulted in an ideological crisis for the left. Some, like the SWP, deny that such a crisis exists – indeed, they claim that this is the best period for a generation in which to fight for socialism. Others question whether the socialist project, fought for by the working class and its allies, is still viable. Workers Action believes that it is, but that to rebuild a fighting left relevant to the concerns of workers means rejecting the methods of sect-building and self-proclaimed vanguardism.

However, Workers Action has a non-dogmatic approach to this crisis of the left. We see it as an opportunity to evaluate critically many of our previously held conceptions in the light of experience. Marxism is a critical ideology or it is nothing. Socialists cannot march into the 21st century with their programme frozen in the 1920s.

If you are interested in joining us or discussing further, write to us at PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX or e-mail us at [workers.action@btinternet.com](mailto:workers.action@btinternet.com)

# Editorial

## Trade unionism revives

It is clear that something significant is going on in the British labour movement when trade unionists once again become a favourite target of tabloid journalists. After a decade or more in which they were dismissed as a largely harmless irrelevance, union 'lefties' are once again in the firing line for editorial writers of the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. Stories with headlines like 'Return to Chaos' (in the *Sun*) liken present disputes to the Winter of Discontent, 'when rubbish piled up in the streets and shop stewards decided who should be admitted to hospital'. And the recently elected left-wing general secretaries are described as 'The Six Most Dangerous Men in Britain', recalling the relentless vilification of Arthur Scargill, 'Red Robbo' and the like.

It is not hard to see why the bosses' propagandists are rattled. In the same week, 750,000 local government workers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland took a day's strike action over pay, and a relatively little-known left-winger ousted Tony Blair's favourite union leader. As if to emphasise the point, leaders of Unison, the GMB, the CWU, the RMT and the T&G attended a conference organised by the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, in order to announce their intention to help 'bury New Labour' (in the words of the once studiously 'moderate' John Edmonds). Such developments are merely the starkest illustration of longer-term trends, whereby the unions have begun a steady recovery from the nadir of their fortunes in the 1990s, when their capacity to act independently seemed lost indefinitely.

Throughout the 1990s, the level of strikes in Britain remained at an historic low. Long-term unemployment, the anti-union laws, the employers' offensive and the capitulation of union leaders had done their work. Tony Blair was able to win support for his policy of 'social partnership' – effectively, identity of interest between employer and workforce, on the employer's terms – less because of any general ideological conversion than because there seemed to be no viable alternative. The developments of recent weeks have made it clear that this is no longer the case. The local govern-

ment strike on July 17 was hailed by Unison's Dave Prentis as the biggest stoppage since the General Strike, involving both manual and clerical workers and shutting down local services altogether in many areas. That one day's action will mean that the number of working days lost in stoppages in July 2002 will probably be greater than for the whole of 2001.

But even before this, there had been a sharp upturn in industrial action, with 210,200 working days lost in the first four months of 2002 – a 38 per cent increase on the same period in 2001. Major flashpoints have included the separate rail strikes involving South West Trains, Scotrail and Arriva in the North of England; the successful shut-down of the London Underground over pay; a day's action by London school-teachers; and the office safety dispute in the Department of Work and Pensions. And the increased militancy is not an overnight phenomenon: 2002 will be the fifth consecutive year in which the level of action has increased. Underpinning this is a modest revival in union membership. Twenty years of decline ended in 1997 and there has since been a gradual recovery, with 7,550,000 workers now belonging to unions – a greater number than in 1995. Nevertheless, talk of a return to the 1970s is a little wide of the mark, considering that in 1979 union membership was more than 13 million. And even though the number of strike days is certain to top one million this year, that is still a tiny fraction of the nearly 30 million recorded in 1979.

What adds weight to the gradual revival of membership and combativity is that it is combined with a shift towards greater political assertiveness at the level of the bureaucracy, partly through the election of a new generation of leaders further to the left than their predecessors. The electoral manifestation of union members' disaffection with the quiescence of 'new realist' bureaucrats began in 1998, when (then) SLP member Mick Rix ousted Lew Adams as general secretary of Aslef. In isolation, this may not have seemed too significant, since rail, along with post, has traditionally been more militant than other sectors and Adams had increasingly been seen as

too close to the rail companies. But Mark Serwotka's unexpected election as general secretary of PCS in December 2000 resumed a series of electoral victories for candidates clearly to the left of their predecessors, including Billy Hayes in the CWU, Jeremy Dear in the NUJ and Bob Crow in the RMT. This pattern continued in June, when the 'left-leaning' Tony Woodley beat Tony Booth – the candidate known to be favoured by Downing Street – in an election for deputy general secretary of the T&G. Woodley has a chequered past in terms of his willingness to organise a fight in defence of the car workers he has represented, but he campaigned on the basis that the union should take a more independent line from the government and his election was seen as a setback for Blair. This means that the two frontrunners to succeed Bill Morris (who also favoured Booth) – Woodley and Barry Camfield – are both regarded as being on the left. Early in August, Patrick Sikorski was elected deputy general secretary of the RMT, replacing Vernon Hince.

The most spectacular election result, however, has been Derek Simpson's victory over Sir Ken Jackson in the ex-AEEU section of Amicus, which Jackson initially sought to challenge in the courts before being persuaded to drop it by his friends in Downing Street. This result is particularly significant for a number of reasons. Amicus is the second-biggest union in the TUC and the Labour Party's biggest union affiliate (since only part of Unison is affiliated). Moreover, the unfinished AEEU-MSF merger had hitherto seemed likely to result in the creation of an impregnable bureaucratic machine, custom-built for the right wing to operate, which could render the left ineffectual and make a significant section of the organised workforce safe for social partnership. Sir Ken Jackson's stewardship seemed to provide a guarantee of this outcome. The AEEU lacked a strong, well-organised left opposition, and the formidable bureaucratic apparatus swung into action to guarantee Jackson's victory. Simpson was not a high-profile figure, came into the contest relatively late and was never expected to win. The result suggests that no bureaucrat is now safe, and Blair is left without a reliable ally in the trade unions.

Along with the change of leadership has come a new readiness, in some Labour-affiliated unions, to ensure that the link with the party should benefit both sides, and that anti-union policies will result in reduced financial support. The RMT, under Bob Crow, has taken this furthest by establishing a new group of parliamentary supporters who agree to abide by the union's key policies.

The advent of a new left leadership in several unions has been accompanied by a greater assertiveness on the part of the more mainstream bureaucrats. Dave Prentis of Unison, for example, is not significantly to the left of his predecessor, Rodney Bickerstaffe, but he has adopted a tougher stance towards the government over issues like PFI, as has John Edmonds of the GMB. Both unions have taken their campaigns in defence of public services into the public arena, rather than relying on cosy chats with ministers. Only time will tell how serious they are in their 'left' rhetoric, but by challenging the government so publicly they build up expectations among their members which they may be

called upon to fulfil.

There are grounds, then, for optimism about the prospects of a sustained challenge by the unions to further attacks on jobs, services and workers' living standards. But one should be more cautious than much of the far left, which sees recent developments as proof that the whole working class is seething with resentment towards the government's entire programme, and that the socialist movement is on the point of gaining several million new recruits. This misjudgement is reflected in the demand of the Socialist Alliance that the political funds of Labour-affiliated unions be redeployed in favour of other parties, candidates and campaigns (with the Alliance itself seen as the worthiest beneficiary). The belief that union members' willingness to resist threats to their own interests will necessarily be translated into support for an organised political alternative to New Labour illustrates the extent to which the most politicised section of the vanguard has become detached from the remainder of the class. However, in its greater assertiveness, the mood of the union membership at large now seems closer to that of the left activists than it has been for several years. Moreover, this is both reflected in and reinforced by the presence of a number of key bureaucrats who are (ostensibly) prepared to stand up to the government. There is an opportunity here for a united campaign, built simultaneously through all the major unions and taken into the Labour Party, around a set of focused demands: reversal of the government's privatisation policies; abolition of poverty pay; repeal of the anti-union laws. The ability of the organised left to grasp this opportunity in the coming months will speak volumes about its capacity to lead the struggle for socialism in the future.

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# Call Labour to account!

Rather than reduce their level of affiliation, trade unions should use their influence inside the Labour Party to change the government's policies, argues **Neil Murray**

Reports indicate that the Labour Party is currently £6 million in debt. This comes about through a combination of the withdrawal of funding (mainly, though not only, donations) by the trade unions over recent years and a decline in business donations, in part because, since disclosure became compulsory, the donors have no great desire to be accused by the media of 'buying favours'.

The media are always keen to equate union and business monies to the Labour Party, but there is a big difference between donations, and affiliation money, given by unions which are an integral (though autonomous) part of the party and those from outside encouraging certain policies.

The relationship between the unions and the Labour Party has become a key issue in politics today. For the left and many union activists, the question being asked is how does it fit into a strategy of fighting for policies in the interests of the working class? For the Labour Party bureaucracy (and the bourgeoisie), it is a question of whether the union-party link any longer serves a purpose for them.

## Unions become more critical

Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, but particularly since Labour's second victory in 2001, most unions have become scathing about the policies of the government. Their members have increasingly been hit by privatisation, the failure to lift Tory restrictions on industrial action, etc, but free rein has been given to the bosses to carry out 'wealth creation'.

While union leaders initially expressed elation at the election of a Labour government, and attempted to persuade their members that they should share this, the mood has shifted through the critical to almost outright opposition.

This has come about through a combination of factors: the frustration of union leaders with the fact that the government pushes ahead with its right-wing policies regardless of criticism (initially expressed in quiet asides); pressure from activists and the rank and file; and the election of several new general secretaries much more critical of the relationship than their predecessors.

While much is made of the election of a 'new generation' of union leaders, it should not be forgotten that some 'old hands', like John Edmonds of the GMB and, to a lesser extent, Bill Morris of the T&G, have also become extremely critical, as has Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, who defeated the left candidate to win the election.

The defeat of Sir Ken Jackson by Derek Simpson in the election for general secretary of the Amicus AEEU section – and, under the terms of the merger, general secretary of Amicus overall – means that Blair effectively has few allies left among the upper echelons of the big unions, with the notable exception of Doug McAvoy, general secretary of the unaffiliated NUT.

Despite media hysteria, particularly over rail strikes and the recent action by local government workers, this opposition to government policies has yet to be expressed in widespread industrial action.

Without knocking the significance of those strikes which have taken place, especially that of local government workers, the largest single strike since 1926, it is important to bear in mind that most union leaders continue to be reluctant to call strike action, and, although they have climbed from their all-time lows, the total of days lost through strikes is down from almost 30 million in 1979 to less than two million today, while trade union membership, although on the increase, is still only

Dave Prentis, Unison general secretary, at the After New Labour conference on July 18



7.5 million, compared to 13 million in 1979.

The criticism of government policies has primarily been expressed verbally, in policy statements and, significantly, in the withdrawal of funds from the party. Several key unions, led by the GMB, have now withdrawn most of their donations to the party, and some, particularly the CWU and RMT, have gone further by reducing their level of affiliation.

The decisions of the RMT's annual general meeting provoked much speculation in the media about the future of the union-party relationship. Not only did the RMT decide to reduce donations and reduce its affiliation to a level which would permit it only two instead of 12 delegates at Labour Party conference, it also decided to cease the sponsorship of the constituencies of several MPs (including Robin Cook, John Prescott and Frank Dobson) and establish a new group of MPs prepared to campaign on key issues such as rail renationalisation and union rights. This was misreported by the media as the union giving money to the new group of MPs. In fact, a trust fund has been established, overseen jointly by the new group of MPs and the union, to be used for the purpose of campaigning. Prescott was so incensed at this decision of the union to campaign for its own policies that he resigned his membership, although this 'principle' does not stop him holding on to a union-subsidised flat along with his several other residences.

The decision of the unions to cease making donations to the party, which are essentially used to fund policies and campaigns against the interests of union members, and that of the RMT to withdraw financial support to the constituency parties of MPs who slavishly follow government policy, is to be welcomed. However, the wisdom of reducing affiliation is questionable, since this restricts the ability of the union to fight for its policies within the party, at annual conference and through representation on the NEC and National Policy Forums. In effect, because the proportion of votes for the trade unions at annual conference is set at just under 50 per cent, this *increases* the voting strength of those unions unwilling to challenge Blair.

On the left, much has been made of the fact that at the RMT AGM a motion to disaffiliate immediately from the Labour Party was only nine votes short of a majority. It is said that the only way Bob Crow could head off such a move was by the reduction in the level of affiliation. However, a decision on disaffiliation would have had to go to next year's rules revision conference and could not be implemented immediately. More to the point, a better way for Crow to forestall such moves towards dis-

affiliation would be to argue for *strengthening* the RMT's input into Labour Party policy-making at every level. He could have given a lead on this by saying he would take up the Labour Party's kind offer for him to become a member, an offer made when he became general secretary which he turned down at the time.

### The limits of union opposition

The vocal and financial opposition of union leaders to the government's policies is obviously welcome, if overdue. They should be encouraged in this, but at the same time the left and union activists have to recognise its limitations and organise independently to take opposition forward.

Despite the opposition of union leaders to policies like PFI and privatisation, this has rarely been expressed in motions and votes in Labour Party structures. For example, when a motion opposing any further privatisation was moved by *Tribune* editor Mark Seddon and Mary Turner of the GMB at the March NEC, only the representatives of the GMB and RMT, of the union delegates, opposed the move to refer it to the Policy Commission (or, in other words, the waste bin). Indeed, Prentis defended the actions of his union's representatives at Unison's Affiliated Political Fund conference. As for John Keggie of the CWU, he missed both the March and January meetings of the NEC, at both of which the issue of Post Office deregulation came up.

Equally, most union leaders have been reluctant to propose action to actually resist such policies being implemented. While Unison, T&G and GMB are now taking action in support of the pay claim for local government workers, the NUT has so far refused to sanction any further action on the London Weighting claim. The CWU leadership has swallowed whole the need for 'industrial peace' in the Post Office, following the Sawyer enquiry which was jointly sponsored by the union and management into unofficial strikes last year, despite management wanting to push through 30,000 redundancies and far-reaching changes in working conditions even in advance of full deregulation. In the manufacturing sector, redundancies have gone through time and again with little attempt at effective protest by the unions. The picture is similar across most unions — action, when eventually ratified, is limited in its scope, and often its locality. Arguments to spread action in support of those affected are rejected. 'Political' industrial action — illegal under the Tories' anti-union laws — against PPP, deregulation, etc, is not even contemplated.

It should not be forgotten that, throughout most of the history of the Labour Party,

most unions have been the protectors of the Labour leadership, both in and out of government, against the left. They have defended it both at the level of policy and on the ground by thwarting or limiting action against anti-working class policies. It has only been under intense pressure from the rank and file that they have organised industrial action against the policies of Labour governments.

Indeed, the union leaderships must take their share of the blame for both the current policies of the government and the state of the labour movement. Having failed to mount effective resistance to the union-bashing policies of the Thatcher governments in the '80s (such as organising industrial action in support of the miners in their 1984-85 strike), they willingly assisted in the march to the right by the Labour Party which followed these defeats. Moreover, most union leaders aided in the destruction of party democracy which now makes it so difficult for them to make the party change course.

This traditional backing of the union bureaucracy has led to Labour governments often being described as the British bourgeoisie's 'second team'. When support for the Tories breaks down, they have been able to rely on Labour governments to restore stability, and often to push through measures that the Tories have been unable to, because of the backing Labour receives from the trade union bureaucracy.

What is different about the current situation is that, despite having been party to installing the 'New Labour' circle into power, the bureaucrats are now discovering that the neo-liberal programme is going too far. It has not only alienated many trade union activists, but has also endangered the bureaucracy's base and therefore its material privileges. Trade union bureaucrats know that union members are usually lost when privatisation takes place, and loss of members means loss of income, the thing dearest to the hearts of union leaders.

In the current situation, in so far as we can make common cause with union leaders against the government's programme we should, and we should use that opposition to build support among the membership. But we also have to be aware of the limits union leaders put on that opposition and that even the most left of union leaders will often turn against those who elected them.

### That overdraft

The Labour Party's current overdraft of £6 million is not unique. After fighting the 1997 general election it had an overdraft of £10 million. The difference is that, at that time, membership was rising, the un-

ions were more than happy to pump money into the coffers, and business was queuing up to donate to a party it recognised as willing to carry on where the Tories left off.

How things change. Five years on, membership has halved, with people becoming disillusioned with the policies being pursued by the government and their inability to challenge those policies because of the lack of internal democracy. Many unions and their activists feel the same way, and

business is scared of the allegations of sleaze.

Despite the claim on the left that Labour has somehow become a straightforward bourgeois party, like the Tories, it still depends to a large extent on the unions for its funding. The drying up of donations from the unions is going to make it much harder to pay off this overdraft than previous ones.

In this situation, the Labour Party machine is looking to pass the burden on to

individual members, in so far as they can't convince union leaders to reverse their decisions. At the party NEC meeting on July 23 a proposal on increasing individual membership subs was agreed, although this has to go to conference for ratification.

This should be rejected at conference, CLPs should adopt the same attitude as most unions and refuse to pay for the mess which Blair and his acolytes have created with their policies. Before we shoulder the financial burden we want to see a change

## No blank cheque for New Labour – make the link work!

The following statement is being circulated to bring together those who want to make the case for critical Labour Party affiliation. To add your name to the statement, or for more information, contact [petefirmin@gn.apc.org](mailto:petefirmin@gn.apc.org) or write to PO Box 2378, London E5 9QU.

The Labour Party was formed by the trade unions, and those trade unions remain an integral, though autonomous, part of the Labour Party at every level.

The sight of a Labour Government acting against the interests of trade unionists – privatising public services and attacking us when we take industrial action – makes us believe it is time for affiliated trade unions to act collectively and assert our voice within the Labour Party.

Too often our representatives on Labour Party bodies (National Executive Committee, National and Regional Policy Forums, Regional Boards, etc) fail to reflect trade union policy in motions and votes. Significant financial contributions in addition to affiliation fees are given to the party, especially at national level, regardless of whether the campaign or candidates oppose key union policies. MPs promoting policies in conflict with those of the sponsoring union are given support.

We call for a campaign to give trade unions an effective voice for our policies in the Labour Party, based on the dual principle of maintaining affiliation fees in full and renewing trade union participation at every level of the Labour Party with representatives who are accountable to their trade union members, who promote policies in the interests of trade unionists and who refuse to subsidise the anti-union policies of an unaccountable Government.

Initial signatories (all in a personal capacity):

### CWU

Pete Firmin, Political Officer, West End Amal branch, Chair, Brent Trades Union Council; Bryan Harrod, Political Officer, South & East Thames Amal branch; Mick Houghton, Branch Officer, CWU West London branch, President Ealing Trades Council; Linda Kietz, Chair & Political Officer, CWU West London Branch; Mick Kyriazopoulos, Political officer, N/NW London branch; Sam Neave, Political Officer, Mount Pleasant branch; Gerry Ryan, Branch officer, London City West branch; Paul Stygal, Secretary and Political Officer, London East branch; Alan Tate, Secretary, London Region Political Committee; Archie Taylor, Political Officer, South & East Thames Amal branch; Colin Tull, Eastern Region Political Officer, Political Officer, Northern Home Counties branch; Lee Waker, Political Officer, East London Postal branch; Tom Walker, Branch Secretary, Northern Home Counties Postal branch.

### Fire Brigades Union

Mick Shaw, National Executive member.

### RMT

Jeff Slee, President, South East Regional Council; Diana Udall, RMT representative, London Region Board, Labour Party.

### GMB

Terry Scott, Lewisham Borough Councillor, Lewisham Deptford CLP; Dave Statham, President, GMB Holborn Branch, Trade Union Liaison Officer, Brent East CLP; Pete Turner, Secretary Hammersmith & Fulham Trades Union Council, and President GMB Fulham 1st branch.

### T&G

Jimi Adefiranye, Lewisham Borough Councillor, Lewisham Deptford CLP; Danny Considine, prospective shop steward, Leighton Hospital, Crewe and Nantwich CLP; David Harris, committee member 1/1347 branch, Brighton; Kevin Flack, Secretary 1/427 Branch; Richard Hughes, Branch Secretary, 5 / 610 ACTS (North Staffs Voluntary Sector) branch.

### Usdaw

Andy Walker, Usdaw, prospective Labour candidate, Redbridge Council.

### Amicus-MSF

Ian Malcolm-Walker, Secretary, Derby General Branch; Roger Stevens, Secretary, North & West Kent branch.

### Ucatt

Sean Cullen, Secretary, Harlesden branch.

### Unison

Andrew Berry, Deputy Branch Secretary, Islington Unison, London Region, Local Government Executive; Jacqui Brown, Unison Housing Association Branch Political Officer, member London Region Political Committee; Mike Calvert, Assistant Secretary, Islington branch, Convenor, Social Services Shop Stewards Committee, Islington Unison; Gwen Cook, Political Officer Hammersmith & Fulham Unison, member London Regional Political Committee and Hammersmith & Fulham CLP; Luci Davin, Publicity Officer, Camden Unison; Simon Deville, Secretary, Unison Voluntary Organisations Branch; Richard Forth, APF Officer, Birmingham branch; Valerie Graham, Unison, Chesterfield Borough Councillor; Ian Griffiths, Education Convenor, Lambeth Unison; Patrick Hall, Unison, vice-chair Leeds Central CLP; Philip Lewis, Shop Steward, Camden Transport Services, Depot Staff Section; Camden Unison APF Officer; Terry Luke, Islington Unison retired members secretary; Dorothy Macedo, Unison representative, London Region Board, Labour Party; Jon Rogers, Secretary, Lambeth Unison; John Stewart, Publicity Officer, Unison Voluntary Organisations branch; Bob Wood, Unison, Secretary, Leeds Central CLP; Peter Woodward, Branch Chair, Lambeth Unison.

This statement is also supported by Labour Party NEC members Mark Seddon (editor, *Tribune*) and Christine Shawcroft.

in policies. Unions should be persuaded to vote against the increase, otherwise there has been little point in them stopping donations if they are merely going to ask others to take up the slack.

### Strange bedfellows

Sections of the left, organised in the Socialist Alliance, have been pushing the idea that union branches should be able to decide what political party to fund. They hope that they can persuade some branches to put their money into the Alliance. They call this 'democratisation' of the political funds, when in fact it amounts to a fragmentation of the funds. Rather than democratise the union structures by which they have an input into the Labour Party, and pressing for the accountability of union representatives, they concentrate their efforts on at-

tempting to win (with little to show for it) a change that can only distract from this.

In fact, after a little success last year, such as the Fire Brigades Union conference deciding that a rule change should be considered this year, there has been no further movement in the Socialist Alliance's direction. FBU conference endorsed an executive statement which rightly pointed out that moves to fund other parties would lay the union open to expulsion from the Labour Party. Unison conference, which last year called on the executive to conduct a survey into members' views on the workings of the political fund, this year censured the executive for its failure to do so, but there is no indication that there would be support for funding other parties rather than simplifying the Byzantine structures of Unison's political fund. CWU conference

agreed to maintain affiliation while cutting donations.

Now, the Blairite think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, has come up with a similar idea. The IPPR was asked by Labour chiefs to consider the future of party political funding as a response to mounting public concern about corporate donations and their possible impact on government policy. The IPPR envisages a scenario whereby individual union members and branches provide the money for Labour. There are those in the party hierarchy who would rather not have to negotiate with union leaders or run the very occasional risk of losing a vote at party conferences.

Socialist Alliance supporters need to consider why there is so much similarity between their proposals on unions' use of their political funds and those of the Blairites. If the party bureaucrats are keen to reduce the role of the unions, is it a good thing for sections of the left to be arguing for the same thing?

### Where now?

We are entering a period of a substantial challenge from the unions to the policy of the government. This is being expressed both through an increase in industrial action *and* a willingness of union leaders to challenge these policies through the structures of the party. Rather than walk away from this (on one leg), the left has to throw its weight behind it, taking up delegate positions in party structures and helping to build the opposition, at the same time as building action, where necessary against the wishes of those union leaders.

WA

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# Right-wing coup in PCS defeated

Richard Price

On July 31, the left in PCS – the main civil service union – won a major victory in the High Court in London. In the case taken by Mark Serwotka and Janice Godrich, the union's general secretary-elect and president, the judge ruled that the attempted coup by outgoing general secretary Barry Reamsbottom and his so-called 'Moderate' supporters was unlawful. Mark Serwotka has been confirmed as general secretary with immediate effect and Janice Godrich's constitutional powers have been upheld.

'Unprecedented' is a word the left press tends to use too easily. But there are scarcely any precedents in the last 70 years for the events that have taken place in PCS since May. Desperate to cling to power, and to prevent Serwotka from taking office, Reamsbottom and the right-wing majority on the union's NEC attempted to subvert the most basic norms of trade union democracy.

The Moderates attempted to hang their unconstitutional coup on the legal peg that the election for general secretary in 2000 had been held too early, at a time when there wasn't a vacancy. However, much of Reamsbottom's evidence submitted to the court consisted of his claim to have saved the union from a 'plot of Communists, Trotskyists and careerists'. The court was singularly unimpressed with Reamsbottom's evidence and found in favour of Serwotka and Godrich on every point. Reamsbottom was refused right of appeal except as an individual on the grounds that since he was now neither a member nor an employee of the union he had 'no standing in the union whatsoever'!

## Reamsbottom's humiliation

PCS was formed in 1998 from a merger of two unions – CPSA and PTC. As part of the merger arrangements, the new union inherited two general secretaries, one from each union, who were to serve until retirement at 55. At PCS conference in 2000, however, a motion calling for an election for general secretary was passed, and this decision was subsequently ratified in a membership ballot by 62,751 votes to 2,178. Reamsbottom entered the contest, but failed to get the 50 branch nominations necessary to get on the ballot paper, despite frantic efforts on the part of right-wing officials. On the eve of nominations closing, he withdrew from the contest to avoid humiliation.

Reamsbottom then signed a legal agreement, the terms of which were, if anything, generous to an official who had yet to be elected to any office in PCS. In return for an undertaking not to challenge the result of the election, Reamsbottom was allowed to serve a further 18 months until May 31, 2002. Meanwhile, Mark Serwotka, a rank-and-file activist, won a famous if unexpected victory, defeating the centre-right Membership First

candidate, Hugh Lanning, by 40,740 to 33,942.

During Serwotka's 18 months as general secretary-elect, the union's campaigning agenda began to revive after years of neglect and sabotage by Reamsbottom and the Moderates. Where the right wing had acquiesced to the introduction of performance pay and the break-up of a single national pay structure into over 170 different bargaining units, and even come out in favour of privatising parts of the public sector, efforts were finally made to bring a degree of co-ordination to pay bargaining across departments. After a long decline, the union's membership grew by 30,000.

## Shadowy right-wing forces

But as the accompanying articles in this issue suggest, the former CPSA and now PCS Moderates are not simply another right-wing trade union grouping. There is a growing body of evidence which points towards their acting on behalf of – and perhaps being funded by – shadowy pro-NATO forces outside the union.

For instance, in May 1998, Reamsbottom attended a conference of the New Atlantic Initiative (NAI) in Istanbul, along with such luminaries of the labour movement as Michael Portillo, Norman Lamont and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Officials and supporters of NAI include Margaret Thatcher, Donald Rumsfeld and Henry Kissinger, the well-known war criminal.

Reamsbottom is also an executive member of the Trade Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding, along with former CPSA president Kate Losinska and that other keen student of trade union democracy, Sir Ken Jackson. TUCETU is the continuation of the Labour Committee for Transatlantic Understanding, a body set up with money from the US Congress and NATO, and its brief appears to be to defend the British-US 'special relationship' within the trade union movement.

Last year, the PCS NEC attempted to gag Mark Serwotka from speaking out against the war in Afghanistan in a personal capacity – only for a motion defending Serwotka's right to free speech to be carried overwhelmingly at the union's biennial conference in May this year. Reamsbottom, in contrast, is referred to in NAI and TUCETU material in his official capacity, without any authority from the union.

Indeed, the defining feature of the Moderates is their rabid Cold Warrior mentality. They defend every infringement of union democracy by virulently denouncing their opponents as Trotskyists and Communists, to the extent that in the warped universe they inhabit, the centre-right Membership First group – some of whose Inland Revenue supporters actually supported the Moderates'.



coup – are seen as allies of the far left! The Moderates are the do nothing tendency. They don't run any campaigns, they sign up to 'partnership' agreements with government while their members are under attack, they don't oppose privatisation, but they do oppose any meaningful struggle to restore national pay bargaining. In the recent long-running Department for Work and Pensions health and safety dispute they surpassed themselves by carrying out active sabotage, supplying management with detailed information on strike funds.

### To the right of New Labour

There is of course nothing 'moderate' whatsoever in such an outlook. The Moderates are even further to the right than Blairism, and therein lies the difference with Ken Jackson and the AEEU right wing. Although Jackson also sits on the TUCETU executive, he is an integral pillar of the New Labour project. He might have been prepared to chance his arm and attempt to sit out the result of the leadership contest, but 10 Downing Street saw this as a fix too far – one that threatened to undermine the credibility of New Labour itself.

Reamsbottom in contrast is far less of an asset, with the reputation of being a particularly mediocre and embarrassingly crude operator. Despite his protestations of Labour loyalty, he is far less integral to the Blairite project, and consequently more off the leash. As for the political affiliations of many other leading Moderates, it's anyone's guess. Pretty rich for a grouping that on the one hand has attacked Mark Serwotka for supposedly hiding his political allegiance from the membership of PCS, while on the other red-baited him for publicly supporting the Socialist Alliance!

In April this year an article in the *Economist* gave clear indications that Reamsbottom didn't intend going quietly. If the Moderates won the NEC elections, they would attempt to keep Reamsbottom as general secretary until 2004 and sideline Mark Serwotka. At its biennial conference in mid-May, PCS delegates – in spite of a barrage of legal threats from Reamsbottom – overwhelmingly approved a motion which 'endorses the decision of the outgoing NEC to enter into a legal agreement under which Barry Reamsbottom ceases employment with PCS on 31 May 2002 and instructs the incoming NEC to uphold that decision'.

A week after conference, and eight days before his scheduled retirement, Reamsbottom convened a meeting of the NEC. Non-Moderate members of the NEC were not informed of the meeting or its agenda until shortly before it took place. At the start of the meeting, Reamsbottom flourished legal advice that claimed that the gen-

eral secretary election in 2000 (whose validity he had never previously challenged) was 'unlawful' and that he should remain in office until 2004 – which would be seven years since he had been elected to anything. The Moderate/Inland Revenue Membership First majority then proceeded to remove newly-elected president Janice Godrich – a member of Left Unity – from the chair. Following scenes of uproar, the right wing reconvened alone, and removed all opponents from NEC sub-committees. Mysteriously, the union's computer system crashed for 36 hours.

Like a tinpot dictator, Reamsbottom then instructed PCS Headquarters staff not to do any work for either Mark Serwotka or Janice Godrich, and commandeered the union's journal, *PCS View*, removing articles by both officers. In their place, Reamsbottom inserted a red-baiting editorial claiming – shades of Ronald Reagan invading Grenada – that PCS 'has been saved in the nick of time from the clutches of the Far Left'. Headquarters staff were bullied and threatened with disciplinary action and dismissal.

### Dual power in PCS

The union was then plunged into a bizarre version of dual power, with members receiving conflicting circulars from Reamsbottom, claiming still to be general secretary, and Serwotka, legally obliged to describe himself, pending the result of legal action, as general secretary-elect. And just when we thought Reamsbottom didn't have a sense of humour, he magnanimously offered Serwotka an out-of-court settlement on the basis of re-running the election – the election that Serwotka won fair and square and in which Reamsbottom wasn't even a candidate!

Reamsbottom has repeatedly claimed – via the NEC election results – a higher mandate than that of Serwotka. Unsurprisingly, Reamsbottom has neither reason nor arithmetic on his side. Serwotka and Godrich are in fact the only officials elected by the entire membership, the NEC being elected by two different electoral groups for admin and executive grades. Moreover, while NEC members were elected on an average of around 7,000 votes, Serwotka won almost six times this figure. Meanwhile, the defeated candidate for general secretary, Hugh Lanning – who opposes the Moderate coup – won over twice the votes garnered by Reamsbottom on the last occasion he was elected to anything back in 1997.

Reamsbottom's coup was also neatly timed to halt an independent inquiry into malpractice in the NEC elections by – you guessed it – the Moderates! Nor is this the first time the Moderates have been accused of malpractice. In September 2000, barrister

Antony White conducted an inquiry into unauthorised use of PCS membership data in the previous NEC elections, and found that 'the inevitable inference is that an individual or individuals acting on behalf of the National Moderate Group gained access to the PCS membership database, extracted information about members' names and workplace addresses, and took steps to cover their tracks by deleting the extraction programme and output file'.

At a further meeting of the NEC in June, a move by the Moderates to suspend existing NEC standing orders failed to get a two-thirds majority, and the right walked out after delivering a prepared statement threatening their opponents – for the umpteenth time – with legal action if they failed to comply with Reamsbottom's instructions.

### Moderates still control NEC

At a victory rally on July 31, Mark Serwotka stressed that although activists should celebrate the victory, the real task was to implement the policies decided at conference and that far more important than his position as an individual was the union's struggle against low pay and privatisation, to restore national pay bargaining and to defend the public sector. Drawing attention to the strike by British Museum workers that week, he pointed out that there were PCS members employed at this major national institution who earned less than £10,000 per year. A quarter of PCS members earn less than £12,700 per year, while 80 per cent earn less than the average non-manual wage. Whenever the next NEC elections take place, he urged activists to ensure that the Moderates never again controlled the leadership of the union so that they could subvert the union's internal democratic procedures.

The left in PCS has won an important battle but it has not won the war. While the outcome of the court case is likely to discredit the Moderates in the eyes of many members not identified with the left and further deepen the open split within the Membership First group, Serwotka and Godrich face ongoing trench warfare with the right-wing majority on the NEC. At the next NEC meeting scheduled for September 3-5, the Moderates are likely to attempt to push through a change of standing orders to reduce the powers of the president. They also want to appoint deputy general secretaries who would sit on an Establishments Committee, which would replace the general secretary's role as the official responsible for the appointment of full-time officers. The Moderates are also likely to seek membership referenda in an attempt to overturn the policies adopted at conference to re-establish annual election of the NEC and annual conference.

# Backing Barry: the Nato publisher and the PCS coup

Dave Parks and Greg Dropkin

The attempted coup in PCS by former general secretary Barry Reamsbottom has been widely reported. It may have looked like a fit of pique by a man who could not bear to hand over power, despite the democratic verdict of the union membership. But there is a lot more to this story than Mr Reamsbottom's ego. He is a Vice-President of an organisation peddling US influence within the British labour movement and publishing NATO pamphlets. Its Director briefed MPs and the media during Reamsbottom's election campaign.

Two weeks before the Moderates gained control of the PCS National Executive Committee, the *Economist* (11 April) explained:

'Mr Blair's main hope that the left may not consolidate its hold hangs on the outcome of the biannual national executive committee elections, due on April 25th. If the Moderates win, the plan is to keep Barry Reamsbottom, the outgoing general secretary and a Moderate, in the job until 2004 and sideline Mr Serwotka.'

But whose plan was it? A week later, and while the election was still on, an extraordinary circular [see next page] was issued by Peter Robinson, Director of the Trade Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding (TUCETU).

And who are the TUCETU? Journalist David Osler and investigative publisher of the *Lobster* Robin Ramsay spilled the beans soon after Labour took power. Osler's material is summarised in this excerpt from Ramsay's 1998 essay 'Uncle Sam's New Labour':

'An older and more direct expression of American influence within the wider British labour movement is the Trade Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding (TUCETU). TUCETU is the successor to the Labour Committee for Transatlantic Understanding (LCTU), which was set up in 1976 by the late Joe Godson, Labour Attaché at the US Embassy in London in the 1950s who had become an intimate of the then leader of the party, Hugh Gaitskell. Organised by two officials of the NATO-sponsored Atlantic Council, TUCETU incorporates Peace Through NATO, the group central to Michael Heseltine's MoD campaign against CND in the early 1980s, and receives over £100,000 a year from the Foreign Office. TUCETU chair Alan Lee Williams was a Labour defence minister in the Callaghan government, before he defected to the SDP; director Peter Robinson runs the National Union of Teachers' education centre at Stoke Rochford near Grantham. In the mid-1980s Williams and Robinson were members of the European policy group of the Wash-

ington Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

'Among the senior union and Labour Party figures on the TUCETU's 1995 notepaper were Doug McAvoy, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers; CPSA general secretary Barry Reamsbottom (a member of the Successor Generation Project discussed above) and president Marion Chambers; Lord Richard, Labour leader in the House of Lords; former trade union leaders Bill Jordan (now head of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the CIA's chief cold war labour movement operation),\* Lord (Eric) Hammond, and Lord (Frank) Chapple.\*\*

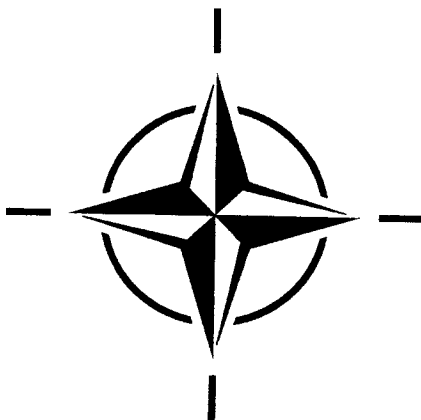
'The Atlantic Council/TUCETU network provided New Labour's Ministry of Defence team. Defence Secretary George Robertson was a member of the Council of the Atlantic Committee from 1979-90; Lord Gilbert, Minister of State for Defence Procurement, is listed as TUCETU vice chair; Dr John Reid, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, spoke at a TUCETU conference; and MoD press office biographical notes on junior Defence Minister John Speller state that he "has been a long standing member of the Trade Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding". Peter Mandelson has written a (very dull) pamphlet for TUCETU based on a speech he gave to its 1996 conference.

'In other words, the people round Blair, the key New Labour "project" personnel, are all linked to the United States, or the British foreign policy establishment, whose chief aim, since the end of the Second World War, has been to preserve the Anglo-American "special relationship" to compensate for long-term economic decline.

\* On which see, for example "The AFL-CIA" in Frazier (ed.) and Peter E. Newell, "The International Centre of Free Trade Unionists in Exile" in *Lobster* 31.

\*\* These paragraphs on TUCETU are taken from David Osler's "American and Tory Intervention in the British Unions since the 1970s" in *Lobster* 33.'

What else has the TUCETU been up to? TUCETU leaders starred in the May 1998 'Congress of Istanbul' organised by 'The New Atlantic Initiative' of the American Enterprise Institute. Topics included 'Getting Capitalism Right' and 'Broadening the Atlantic Perspective: The Politics of Oil, Water, and Pipelines', while guest speakers included former Tory ministers Michael Portillo and Michael Howard, along with Richard Perle and Lane Kirkland (AFL-CIO). TUCETU Director Peter Robinson chaired a session called 'Looking Ahead: Do Current Atlantic Institutions Suffice?'



TUCETU Chairman Alan Lee Williams, billed from the Atlantic Council of the United Kingdom, helped out with a Defence and Security Roundtable: 'After NATO Enlargement: What Next?'

Which brings us back to NATO. Jamie Shea is their current Director of Information and Press. His NATO biography mentions previous jobs as Spokesman of NATO and Deputy Director of Information and Press (July 1993 to September 2000). From January 1991 he was Deputy Head and Senior Planning Officer, Policy

Planning Unit and Multilateral Affairs Section of the Political Directorate, NATO, plus Speechwriter to the Secretary General of NATO, Drafter of NATO Ministerial communiqués and policy planning of Ministerial meetings.

His prolific writings include:

- *NATO's Future*: Pamphlet published by the Trade Union Committee for Transatlantic Understanding, London, June 1989.
- *Coping with Disorder in Europe*: Pamphlet published by the Trade Union Committee for Transatlantic and European

Understanding, London, June 1993.

So where does that leave us? In April, Peter Robinson briefed MPs and journalists during Barry Reamsbottom's fight 'to ensure moderate control and direction' of PCS. He circulated an article from the *Economist* which stated that if the Moderates win, 'the plan is to keep Barry Reamsbottom . . . in the job until 2004 and sideline Mr Serwotka' and told colleagues 'Any support you can provide in your own area amongst AEEU and PCS members will be appreciated'.

Peter Robinson's organisation promotes the US-UK Special Relationship and NATO.

PCS organises workers at GCHQ.

Coincidence? We don't think so.

■ This report was published on July 5, 2002, on LabourNet UK at [www.labournet.net/ukunion/0207/pcs2.html](http://www.labournet.net/ukunion/0207/pcs2.html)

### Trade Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding

Incorporating the Labour Committee for Transatlantic Understanding

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**Director:** Peter Robinson

Please reply to: C/o Cringle Lodge, Stoke Rochford, Nr Grantham, Lincolnshire NG33 5EF  
PR/ap/tu  
18th April 2002

Dear Colleague

Re: PCS and AMICUS (AEEU) Elections

Sir Ken Jackson and Barry Reamsbottom together with their moderate colleagues are once again fighting elections to ensure moderate control and direction for each of their unions.

Ken is standing again for his current post as general secretary of the AEEU and Joint general secretary of AMICUS. Barry's moderate group in PCS is endeavouring to secure a majority in the current executive elections. As TUCETU Vice Presidents it's important that we give them both as much support as we can.

I enclose Ken's flyer for Branch nomination and a copy of the Moderate PCS Election lists together with an article from last week's *Economist* for your information and use.

Any support you can provide in your own area amongst AEEU and PCS members will be appreciated.

In view of other recent trade union leadership and executive elections it is vital that we do all we can to reinforce the moderates' role in these two vitally important unions.

Please do all you can to help.

Best wishes,  
Yours sincerely  
Peter Robinson  
Director

Circulation:-  
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## Book Bargains

A few copies of the following books are available at bargain prices:

**Year One of the Russian revolution**, Victor Serge, 456pp, Pluto Press, £6.50

**Britain, World War 2 and the Samasamajists: The Secret Files**. Ed. W Muthiah and S Wanasinghe, 259pp, Young Socialist Pub, £6.00

**The early homosexual rights movement (1864-1935)**  
J Lauritsen & D Thorstad, 121pp, Times Change Press, £5.95

Prices include post and packing to mainland UK destinations

Workers Action, PO Box 7268, London E10 6TX



# Origins of the Moderates in the CPSA

The following is an extract from *Cold War and Class Collaboration*, a Socialist Caucus pamphlet first published in June 1984 whose unnamed author is **Paul Flewers**

The CPSA bureaucrats and right-wingers reacted sharply to the rise of the left in the union during the early 1970s. The Redder Tape group, initiated by the International Socialists and supported by other leftists including, for a short while, the Communist Party, soon came under attack. General Secretary Bill Kendall set about the IS, complaining that 'they do not aim to change the policies of the trade union movement - they aim to destroy it'.<sup>1</sup> The attempts to discipline leading leftists under the notorious union rule 9.4 which proscribed unofficial groupings came to nothing and this particular rule was soon expunged from the rulebook.

In September 1977 the newly-elected right-wing CPSA NEC voted not to confirm the appointment of Terry Adams to an Assistant Secretary full-time post. The reason given by the right wing was 'that he was involved in duties far removed from those normally required of a section secretary'.<sup>2</sup> It was obvious, however, that he was being lined up for the sack because of his support for the Militant tendency in the Labour Party. The NEC, faced with a strong membership response and 172 motions supporting him and his appointment at the 1978 conference, saw what way the wind was blowing and suddenly decided to confirm his appointment.

The rise of the left in the CPSA led to the right-wingers working openly as well, and the National Moderate Group emerged. Although it would be a slight exaggeration to say that its entire activities consist of frantic red-baiting, it's not far off the mark. The Moderates' figurehead, Kate Losinska, a veteran anti-communist married to a right-wing Polish émigré reputed to have connections with the Pilsudski-ite Polish Government in Exile, embarked upon her task with great fervour.

Some of Losinska's extensive interviews and articles are revealing. Her first major foray was in the *Reader's Digest*, writing as the President of the union, no less, along with such notables as Frank Chapple and Brian Walden, then a right-wing Labour MP. Here she explained how revolutionaries were taking over the civil service, blockading mail and government papers, holding up parliament and starving the Post Office and armed forces 'of vital funds'. She bemoans the fact that 'our hard-pressed security services' are having a hard time dealing with the Trots.<sup>3</sup> The primary allegiance of the Moderates is to the British state.

Like her predecessors Mrs Losinska is quite happy to have spooks sniffing around her union. In another interview she told the same Mr Walden that she didn't want ran-

dom security checks on individuals, 'I want checks for everybody as a matter of routine'.<sup>4</sup> She then delves into psychology. What, asked Mr Walden, makes militants tick? She replied:

'In the first place most militants are loners. They don't get their satisfactions or make their mark down the avenues that most people tread. . . . Their politics are a product of a serious personality defect.'<sup>5</sup>

Back in the President's seat in 1983 she wasted no time in sounding off once more about the supposed infiltration of the left into the civil service, especially in the Department of Employment.<sup>6</sup> This outburst was due to the discovery of the Socialist League 'moles' at the British Leyland Cowley works.

Much of the CPSA right wing's propaganda is crude red-baiting. Half-truths, rabid scare tactics and downright falsifications are thrown together into a melange which is remarkably monotonous and clumsy, not to mention clichéd. For example:

'The Broad in Broad Left is a misnomer. They are in fact a narrow, sectarian group dominated by Trotskyists (i.e., Militant Tendency) and Communists, who are more concerned with furthering the ideals of Lenin, Marx, Trotsky and Revolutionary Socialism, than YOUR INTERESTS.'<sup>7</sup>

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In 1978, the CPSA National Moderate Group was forced to admit that it had received financial assistance from a group linked to a far right army officer, who had organised a private paramilitary strikebreaking force during the massive industrial unrest of the period.

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Just like the Conference Campaign Committee of the late 1940s the CPSA Moderates proclaim that they are dedicated only to the interests of the members and not to political factions or parties. Nonetheless most of their publications are concerned with the politics of their opponents! A leaflet supporting John Ellis, the right-wing candidate for the Deputy General Secretary post in 1982, featured '10 good reasons' for voting for him. Here's three of them:

'John Ellis is a staunch opponent of the Trotskyite Militant Tendency which controls the Broad Left group in the CPSA and is currently causing such damage throughout the Trade Union movement.

'John Ellis believes in honesty in elections unlike others especially those extreme left members of the Trotskyite Militant

Tendency who hide this fact, claiming only to be members of the Broad Left group in the CPSA.

'John Ellis is keen to work side by side with newly-elected General Secretary Alistair Graham who also with the support of the Moderate Group beat off the same strong Trotskyite challenge.'<sup>8</sup>

Some of the right wing's propaganda is inaccurate to put it mildly. A leaflet from late 1978 claimed there were four members of the Socialist Workers Party and one member of the Workers Revolutionary Party on the CPSA NEC.<sup>9</sup> There were, respectively, one and none. In 1976 they claimed that the Revolutionary Communist Party had 'infiltrated' the union 'from the top to the bottom'.<sup>10</sup> The original RCP split up in the late 1940s, today's RCP wasn't formed until May 1981. The union was, therefore, 'infiltrated' by a non-existent organisation! But such inaccuracies count for little. The right wing can always count on support from such areas as the Ministry of Defence, Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The defeat of the left in the 1983 CPSA NEC elections was due to judicious red-scare tactics, mainly over CND and Labour Party affiliation, in those areas. The votes for the left did not decrease. The author of this pamphlet has had personal experience of the remarkable effect the distribution of a few *Daylight* leaflets can have in mobilising right-wing members against the left.

The nearest thing to a state-run witch-hunt in the civil service since the Radcliffe affair was the Brixton dole strike of 1980. The various facets of this dispute fitted together too neatly for it to have been an accident. The Brixton Unemployment Benefit Office had enjoyed a lengthy history of militancy and the Department of Employment senior management – possibly under instructions from above – decided by early 1980 to teach it a lesson. Two branch officers, Richard Cleverley and Phil Corddell, both members of the Socialist Workers Party, were disciplined and then sacked.

The state itself played down the issue, a DE newsletter commented later on that:

'It is not the case, as has been claimed, that they were dismissed for carrying out trade union activities; the Department's objections to the absences [from work – PF] that occurred were simply that they were unauthorised.'<sup>11</sup>

However, the CPSA had adopted a new voting system and a right-wing NEC was widely predicted. Leading right-wingers Kate Losinska and Charlie Elliot had complained in the *Daily Telegraph* on 21 April about the strength of the left in the civil service. Having set up the whole business,

the state stepped back and hoped that the right wing would be elected and do the dirty work. They were and they did.

The newly-elected NEC scabbed on the dispute and were proud of it. Authorising meagre activities to give the impression that it was doing something positive, the CPSA leadership showed its true feelings when the branch came out on 30 June on unofficial strike. It 'deplored' the strike, considering the strikers to be acting 'out of misguided loyalty'.<sup>12</sup> The strikers refused to be cowed. CPSA General Secretary Ken Thomas hit back with a circular which must rate as one of the most scurrilous seen in the history of the union:

'It is important to understand that the Brixton Unemployment Benefit Office Campaign for Trade Union Rights (one should always be suspicious of bodies with lengthy high-sounding names) has managed one way or the other to use some of our Area Committees in a completely unconstitutional way. They have bamboozled money out of our members and branches, trading cheaply on natural trade union loyalty for the underdog.'<sup>13</sup>

We had the 'calculated and callous exploitation of a trade union issue by a small faction', the dispute was 'exploited by some whose trade unionism is suborned by their political aims', and 'this union of ours has to grow up and stop indulging in schoolboy politics'. Not surprisingly DE management cited this dreadful circular at length in its newsletter.<sup>14</sup>

The unofficial strike had put a lot of pressure upon the DE and this plus the publicity it was getting forced the DE to reinstate the sacked members. But the NEC wasn't finished yet. Not content with condemning the unofficial action it established a sub-committee to investigate the mass picket of Brixton dole on 13 August. The NEC was presented with a report recommending that disciplinary action be taken against two CPSA activists. The NEC decided that 'long, drawn-out disciplinary proceedings' would in this case be counterproductive but threatened to discipline 'CPSA Branch Officers who brought the union into disrepute by participating in unofficial activities prejudicial to the union'.<sup>15</sup> This implied that those who had taken unofficial action had 'brought the union into disrepute'. If anyone had been 'prejudicial to the union' it was the scab leaders.

More ominous was that the NEC was pleased with the report of its sub-committee 'and were extremely grateful for the detailed information contained in it'.<sup>16</sup> Now, who could have supplied the information? None of the strikers or anyone who had supported the strike would have told

the NEC anything. It could only have been supplied by the police who harassed and arrested the pickets, the press which maintained a barrage of distortions during the strike, the miserable gang of scabs or DE management. The Brixton dole strike in all its details shows beyond a shadow of a doubt just how disgracefully a right-wing union leadership can act. The powers that be could not have failed to have noted this for future cases.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Red Tape*, February 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Daylight*, April 1978. *Daylight* is the very glossy organ of the Moderate Group.

<sup>3</sup> *Reader's Digest*, February 1976.

<sup>4</sup> *Time and Tide Business Guide*, 7 July 1978, reprinted in *Daylight*, November 1978.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> 'Infiltration by the militants has been rampant. It is snowballing and the so-called safeguards built into the appointments system seem ineffective.' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 August 1983).

<sup>7</sup> *Daylight*, April 1982.

<sup>8</sup> *Daylight* leaflet, February 1982.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Moderate Cause', leaflet, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> *Daylight*, Autumn 1976.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Employment GPU (!) *Newsletter*, September 1980.

<sup>12</sup> CPSA circular, 3 July 1980.

<sup>13</sup> CPSA circular, 21 August 1980.

<sup>14</sup> DE GPU *Newsletter*, September 1980. DE management had circulated the CPSA circular of 3 July 1980. London Region Staff Minute no.20, supp.1, dated 21 July 1980, says 'a copy of this circular is attached for the information of any officer who has not already seen it'.

<sup>15</sup> CPSA NEC *Bulletin*, January 1981.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

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# Big business and the Moderates — open the books!

This article by **Dave Osler** originally appeared in the Socialist Caucus journal *Rank & File* in 1995

Is the Moderate group in the CPSA supported by any forces outside the union? The recent discovery that the CPSA is affiliated to both the Jim Conway Foundation (JCF), which is indirectly financed by leading Conservatives, and the Trades Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding (TUCETU), a group with close links to the US Embassy, re-opens an old and somewhat intriguing question.

There is a long history of outside backing for the CPSA right. In the fifties, a reactionary grouping called the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists was instrumental in ousting communists from what was then the Civil Service Clerical Association.

Again in 1978, the CPSA National Moderate Group was forced to admit that it had received financial assistance from a group linked to a far right army officer, who had organised a private paramilitary strikebreaking force during the massive industrial unrest of the period.

Given the track record of the secret state in the National Union of Mine-workers, it is inconceivable that the Thatcher government would have sat back while Trotskyists built a strong influence in a key civil service union in the eighties.

Industrial Research and Information Services, a big business-funded grouping which secretly gave hundreds of thousands of pounds to right-wing trade unionists, paid close interest to CPSA affairs.

So who are the JCF and TUCETU? JCF purports to be a legitimate trade union body offering a wide range of research and education services. But *Rank & File* has established that it draws the bulk of its funding from a charitable trust with a long track record of giving money to intelligence-linked anti-communist activity. Trustees include two former Thatcher government ministers.

CPSA general secretary Barry Reamsbottom, President Marion Chambers and former President Kate Losinska are listed on the headed note-paper of TUCETU, joining other top trade union right-wingers such as Paul Gallagher and Bill Jordan of the AEEU, former Labour defence minis-

ter and staunch NATO supporter John Gilbert MP, and two officials of AFL-CIO, the American TUC.

On May 10, TUCETU organised a joint forum at the House of Commons with the Atlantic Council of the UK. The main speaker was a former Tory defence minister, Sir Dudley Smith. A letter sent from TUCETU director Peter Robinson to the CPSA also notes:

'I am hopeful that through the good offices of Dan Turnquist, the Counsellor for Labour Affairs at the American Embassy, we will have an opportunity in the near future of meeting the current American Ambassador, Hon Admiral Crowe. I will keep you posted.'

There has been a long line of American intelligence-backed organisations oriented to the right of the unions and the Labour Party, all using the words 'Atlantic' or 'Transatlantic' in their titles. These date back to 1960, when the Labour Party briefly adopted a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

The CIA obviously wanted the policy reversed. The simplest way to achieve this was to influence British union officials. At that time the unions controlled 90 per cent of the votes at Labour conferences, which in those days really did make party policy.

*Rank & File* has tabled questions under the powerful US Freedom of Information Act asking for full details of TUCETU and contacts between British trade unionists and the Embassy's Counsellor for Labour Affairs. Undercover ruling-class activity in the labour movement has been taking place ever since the now-defunct Economic League was established in the wake of the Russian revolution to draw up blacklists of trade union activists.

More direct intervention can be traced back to the fifties, with the launch of a group called Common Cause, which exists to this day. This group linked 'better-dead-than-red' military men and Tory right-wingers with union officials under fire from the rank-and-file left.

Common Cause established a trade union front, under the name Industrial Research and Information Services (IRIS), in 1956. Thirty-year-old government papers, made public for the first time last January, reveal that in

1963 the Tory government gave IRIS £40,000 (equivalent to £500,000 in today's money) from the intelligence budget, with the stated intention of influencing elections in unions where Communists had a base. IRIS got almost as much again from the private sector, including oil company Shell and motor manufacturer Rootes.

The move was personally sanctioned by the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, after he was approached on IRIS's behalf by Lord Shawcross, a former Labour cabinet minister.

Directors have included former general secretaries of NALGO, NAS/UWT, ISTC and the old seafarers', agricultural and woodworkers' unions, frequently linked as members of the TUC general council, as well as a second former Labour cabinet minister, Ray Gunter.

In the seventies, IRIS was joined by TRUEMID, the Movement for True Industrial Democracy. TRUEMID was initially financed by Colonel David Stirling, the founder of the Special Air Services, who at this time was also working on plans to establish a private paramilitary strikebreaking force. The general secretary of TRUEMID, Bob Matthews, was a former CPSA assistant secretary and MOD section secretary. Three other ex-CPSA activists also took paid posts at TRUEMID: J. 'Chalky' White, former MOD section chair; John Whale, who had been on the DHSS section executive; and Martin Humphries, a former DHSS area secretary in the West Midlands. As well as this overlap of personnel, Losinska was forced to admit that TRUEMID lent money to finance the publication of the Moderates' newsletter, *Daylight*. This flatly contradicted earlier statements from the Moderated group that it received no money from outside the union.

TRUEMID attempted to influence union elections. One of its documents, which leaked to the press, contained detailed instructions on how to mobilise passive supporters for meetings. This was vital in the period before postal ballots, when voting papers were only made available through union branches.

TRUEMID is thankfully long defunct. But IRIS was busier than ever

in the late eighties, when Militant tendency was at the peak of its influence in the CPSA. IRIS – traditionally oriented to blue-collar unions – suddenly began to show strong interest. Its newsletter *IRIS News* reprinted CPSA election results in full, with extensive commentary openly backing the Moderates.

By this stage, most of IRIS's money came through a charity called the Industrial Trust. This body was established by Tory and Labour peers, and raised up to £147,000 a year, handing the bulk over to IRIS.

Among the companies intervening in their employees' unions through tax-deductible charitable donations were Allied Lyons, Bass, Boots, BP, Cadbury Schweppes, Cunard, GKN, Glaxo, Grand Metropolitan, Guinness, Hanson, ICI, Metal Box, NEI, P&O, Rugby Portland, Scottish and Newcastle, TI Group, Unilever, United Biscuits, United Newspapers and Whitbread.

IRIS probably had more ready cash than every union Broad Left in Britain put together. Here was a well-funded organisation, in business to fight the left in union elections, and known to have followed CPSA affairs.

IRIS wound itself down in 1992, believing that the collapse of Stalinism and the defeats suffered by the working class in the eighties meant the end of the red menace.

■ David Osler is the author of *Labour Party plc: New Labour as a Party of Business*, to be published by Mainstream Publishing in September 2002.

## Bookshop Libel Fund

The Bookshop Libel Fund has been set up to raise financial support for two left-wing bookshops in London, Housmans and Bookmarks, both of which face heavy costs in court cases brought against them by individuals criticised in anti-fascist journals sold in the shops. It is also campaigning for a change in the law to stop bookshops being targeted in this way.

Donations should be made out to 'Bookshop Libel Fund' and sent to:

**Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London  
N1 9DX. Tel: 020 7278 4474**

**Bookmarks Bookshop, 1 Bloomsbury Street, London  
WC1B 3QE. Tel: 020 7637 1848**

On-line credit/debit card donations can be made at  
[www.apoogee.com/Housmans](http://www.apoogee.com/Housmans)



## Unison conference

# The left edges forward

**Simon Deville**  
Secretary, Voluntary Organisations  
Unison

Against the background of growing militancy around the government's privatisation agenda and with a national dispute about pay and a London wide-dispute about London Weighting, you might have been forgiven for expecting Unison's annual delegate conference to be filled with lively debate. It turned out to be a fairly uninspiring affair, with much of the week being taken up with guest speakers and video presentations. This meant that few motions were actually debated. Conference is ordered around timetabled motions, and the rest of the agenda is slotted in once conference has finished these. Most days, conference was not even getting through the timetabled agenda which meant on the last day delegates were so fed up that most motions were voted on after just one speech to introduce it.

Despite the rather dull nature of conference, however, there are clear signs that the left has made some gains, is less isolated, and that the union as a whole is more prepared to involve itself in industrial action. London Region has traditionally voted fairly solidly with the left, but it was noticeable this year that the left was winning consistent support from a significant minority of delegates in regions such as Scotland and North West, which have traditionally voted overwhelmingly with the right.

In addition to this, the union leadership has been forced to move progressively to the left over the last few years. While it was able to pose as Blairite immediately after the 1997 general election – despite the fact that this infatuation was never requited – this position has now become completely untenable in Unison as in most other unions. From uncritical support for New Labour, the Unison leadership have moved to a position of 'let us negotiate behind the scenes' to their current position of open criticism of the government. Formerly, Unison's NEC said it opposed privatisation but welcomed Best Value; last year it decided that maybe Best Value was privatisation after all, but that Arm's Length Companies offered a way forward; this year the NEC seems happy to oppose privatisation by whatever name the government could think up for it.

Of course, this stance is for consumption by the union ranks and is contradicted, for example, by the fact that Unison's delegation to Labour's March NEC voted to refer Mark Seddon's anti-privatisation motion to the dustbin of the Policy Review Commission, but it does show that the leadership is aware of the need to present a more radical face to the members. It is also clear that this isn't just for show – there are genuine and clear differences between the union leadership and New Labour. The

leadership also seems emboldened by the fact that industrial action is winning the union both support and new members, and the Defend Council Housing campaign has just scored an impressive victory in Birmingham.

This made the debate around privatisation quite unifying, with the main difference between left and right being whether or not to call a national demonstration. Traditionally, the right wing is instructed by conference to organise a demonstration, decides instead to hold a rally where balloons are handed out, and then argues at the following year's conference that no one attends demos nowadays as shown by the fact that only 100 people turned up to the rally. Despite there having been several large and lively anti-war demonstrations attended by thousands of young people over the last year, the NEC was able to convince conference that no-one would be interested in a demo. However, this was a rather small tactical difference in terms of the much broader agreement on the need to oppose privatisation.

Likewise, overall consensus was reached over the main thrust of the motions on fighting racism and fascism, defending asylum seekers and opposition to the war. The NEC did get its way, however, when it came to affiliation to various different campaigns. The first debate over affiliation came up over the Anti-Nazi League. Black Members' conference had called for the union to affiliate in 2000. The Black Members' national executive over-ruled its own conference and opposed affiliation. This was presented to conference as being the wishes of Unison's black members, and won the support of conference. Obviously the right wing was helped by the fact that the ANL doesn't have any democracy and is a front for the SWP, but that wasn't really the point. Having set this precedent, right-wingers were able successfully to oppose affiliation to any organisation that the SWP has anything to do with on the basis that they need to see audited accounts, find out about the democratic structures and so on. With the motion calling for affiliation to the Stop the War Committee, the NEC supported it 'with qualifications' – the qualification being no affiliation until audited accounts have been seen. Needless to say conference floor does not have the opportunity to agree or disagree with the qualifications since it only votes on the actual wording of a motion. Stop the War needs to think tactically about the best way to pursue this issue without letting Unison off the hook.

The other main issue was regarding the political funds. Unison's 2001 conference had instructed the NEC to organise a review of the political funds, which it did.



**UNISON**

nothing about until March this year, far to late to get any feedback by this year's conference. Lambeth and Bromley branches, together with the London Region, submitted a motion of censure of the NEC for failing to carry out the conference decision. Whilst it didn't actually establish new policy it does keep the pressure on the union leadership to carry out this review. At the same time there is a great deal more agreement on the left about a desired outcome of this review, namely that there should be a single political fund that is accountable to conference, that union delegates to the Labour Party should be man-

dated to fight for union policy, and that the union is able to support candidates other than Labour if it so chooses. This position seems to have the broad support of most of the left with the exception of the Socialist Party, which is arguing for a third political fund.

Another minor victory for the left was during the rules debate on a rule change to debar NEC members from expressing personal views to the floor of conference when they disagree with the rest of the NEC. The NEC shot themselves in the foot when they tried to pre-empt the debate by placing a gagging order on NEC member (and SP

supporter) Roger Bannister in the debate. The Chair of conference put this to the vote and the floor roundly rejected the top table, setting the tone for the debate and the subsequent vote on the rule change.

Whilst there were no major victories or defeats for the left, the left is far less marginalised than it has been for a number of years, conference is less polarised and there seems to be more of a mood for a fight across the spectrum of the union. Whether this mood can be carried across to the broad ranks of the membership remains to be seen in the coming months.

## Tired of waiting

**Mike Calvert**  
Assistant Secretary, Islington  
Unison (in a personal capacity)

A recent report commissioned by the Greater London Assembly says that public-sector workers in London should be paid up to a third more than those elsewhere to compensate them for working in the capital. The findings back up the claim by Unison, the GMB and the T&G that what is currently paid in London is far too little.

The huge rises would match premiums paid to staff working for private companies in London, said the report, which was drawn up by a panel consisting of people from the public and private sectors, from trade unions and from academic bodies. It recommended an end to the fixed payments, which vary hugely: £6,000 for police officers throughout the capital; just over £3,100 for teachers in inner London, £2,000 for those in outer London; and for nurses, £3,200 and £2,500 respectively.

Instead, the panel recommended that the 300,000 public sector employees in London – about a fifth of the capital's workforce – should receive London weighting payments proportionate to salary, comparable to those paid in the private sector. That would mean 37 per cent extra in inner London, or 33 per cent once the extraordinary earning power of the City was removed, and between 11 per cent and 15 per cent for outer London.

Bill Knight, chairman of the panel, said: 'Whether you work in a bank or as a nurse, you occupy the same seat on the tube and have the same need for a roof over your head, so it's fair that your London weighting should bear a similar proportion to your pay.'

However, the report pointed out that even if these increases were paid, it would not solve the problems of first-time house buyers in London, and that more affordable housing was needed.

The battle for higher London weighting began in earnest earlier this year when all Unison's local government branches were balloted over industrial action in pursuit

of a claim for an annual allowance of £4,000. The response was an emphatic 'yes'. Why, at what the government would have us believe is a time of economic growth, do we find close to a million workers in London prepared to go on strike?

The reason is that the cost of living in London has skyrocketed while salaries have remained almost static. Property prices are rising at over 16 per cent a year. Teachers and health staff under 30 cannot afford to buy even a small flat. Thanks to the annihilation of council housing by the Tories and New Labour, there is no decent public housing to live in and rents in the private sector have rocketed. The Rowntree Trust reports that new house construction is at its lowest level since 1924!

Young people are forced to live at home with their parents (the average age of a first-time buyer is now 34 compared to 29 three decades ago), share crowded flats, or spend hours commuting. At the same time, more and more investors are buying properties which they then rent out to the poor – the richest 10 per cent are turning themselves into a rentier class.

One in five council workers earns less than £5 an hour, and two-thirds get paid less than £13,000 a year. Some council workers take home as little as £7,000 a year, equivalent to an hourly rate of £3.64, which is below the legal minimum wage. No wonder that seven out of ten council workers say they have considered quitting in the last year, according to an NOP survey. Many would be better off working in McDonald's.

In May, June and July we have seen thousands of public service workers in London demonstrating against the cost of living in the capital and for higher London weighting allowances. What's needed now is a unified campaign by all the unions representing low-paid workers and an ongoing programme of industrial action.

# Council workers on strike

**Andrew Berry**  
Deputy Secretary, Islington Unison  
(in a personal capacity)

On July 17, up to 750,000 council workers took strike action, as Unison, the GMB and the T&G joined forces to demand a basic wage rise of six per cent or £1,750, whichever is the greater. The employers' 'final' offer was for three per cent with no flat rate element.

Council workers' wages have fallen in comparison to other workers over recent years and the three per cent offer was made at the same time as some of the lowest paid workers in the NHS were offered 6.5 per cent. Two-thirds of staff in local government earn less than £13,000 per annum. The plight of non-teaching council staff has had little of the media coverage given to the police, nurses or teachers. Nevertheless, it is clear from public reaction to the picket lines and from the numerous TV and radio polls that the strike action is widely supported.

For Unison members in London local government branches, this was their fourth day of strike action, the national pay claim running alongside a claim for £4,000 London weighting. When London weighting was introduced originally, the main part of the calculation was over the cost of housing. We have seen house prices rise by an astonishing 18 per cent in London over the last year with little being done to alleviate the crisis. London saw for the first time all three local government unions on strike over London weighting. It was a very successful day and was described by some as the biggest strike since the 1926 General Strike. While this may be an exaggeration, the strike was bigger than the 1979 winter of discontent, being the first time blue- and white-collar workers in local government have been out together on a national strike.

The rally in London was addressed by a number of officials from other public sector unions, including general secretaries Andy Gilchrist (FBU), Bob Crow (RMT) and Paul Mackney (Natfhe). There were no general secretaries from any of the three unions involved in the dispute, which may express a possible snub of the London weighting claim, but senior officials from

all three unions did speak. Heather Wakefield from Unison said we needed 'further action, further action and further action'. Jack Dromey from the T&G spoke, and Paul Kenny of the GMB accused Unison of stealing the march on them. His comment did not get much support and many members of the GMB and T&G were annoyed that their union had not been out for the previous days over London weighting. Two lay members spoke, one was a temporary worker who had joined Unison that day and had not crossed the picket line, the other was a classroom assistant from Islington who was scathing of the government for not dealing with low pay.

The left should be arguing for the unions to hold out for a decent settlement and not the 3.5 per cent that has been unofficially floated by unnamed sources inside Unison. At the time of writing some newspapers have reported that the employers' side may be prepared to increase their offer to four or even five per cent through Acas. The London leadership of Unison has made it clear that both the national dispute and the London weighting dispute are linked and both reflect a struggle against low pay. Indeed, the London employers have linked the two. However, there are attempts in Unison to separate the two disputes to avoid paying out strike pay. We have been able to link the disputes because the GMB and T&G were striking on both issues, but a committee of the NEC has said that in future we cannot have a strike over two issues. Unison's national leadership has even talked of suspending the London weighting dispute. It is worried because the dispute in London is led by the left who will attempt to see the campaign through against a leadership which will be tempted to settle the national dispute if a few more crumbs are offered. The left must insist that the membership be fully consulted before any offer is accepted.



# Anger over pay and pensions in telecoms

Charli Langford

Connect, the Union for Professionals in Communications, represents about 19,000 members, a little over 70 per cent of whom work in BT, the rest in Guernsey Telecoms, Kingston Communications, Vodaphone, etc. Historically in BT it represents 'professionals' – managers, but also computer programmers, financial and traffic analysts, salespeople and other workers whose skills mean they can get a wage at a managerial grade. In other companies it can represent workers at any grade.

The left-right division exists in Connect, but unlike in larger unions there is little overt fighting between the two camps. The non-BT membership is relatively new and generally does not have a history of being in a union; the BT membership has been around for longer but has little history of struggle – BT used to be a 'good' employer and while BT management grades have experienced a relative decline in pay and conditions over the last ten years, they are still about average. There has therefore been little movement towards a trade union response to attacks on pay. The left has argued for pay campaigns but has made little attempt to show what form such a campaign could take. The centre-right – which has always controlled the executive – has accepted the need for a campaign, but has organised only the bare minimum of activities.

## Pay deal

However, this now looks set to change. A survey organised by the NEC appears to show that BT has reneged on the pay deal agreed with the union. A very large number of staff have had zero per cent pay rises, and information coming from management suggests a move to make tiny pay rises the norm in future, with people getting larger bonuses instead. This is a big attack on conditions, because pay rises are consolidated (which means that this year's increase becomes part of the base pay for calculating next year's rise) and bonuses are not. Pensions are also based on consolidated pay and therefore will be less if pay rises remain tiny. Management are proposing that share options be part of the bonus system. Since the BT share price has been in free fall for nearly two years – from £15 to less than £2 today – this is to add insult to injury.

At the Connect conference on June 10-13, it was clear that the membership are more unhappy with pay than they have been for many, many years. There is a widespread feeling that if the union cannot get a better pay deal, then there is little point belonging. This is motivating the executive and officers of the union, whose salaries come from membership subscrip-

tions, and they are likely to put some effort into a campaign for better pay. But BT is unlikely to be moved until the membership make a realistic threat of industrial action and the role of the left now has to be to promote such action and to build membership confidence to take that action.

## Pensions

The other big question at conference was pensions. Many companies closed their final salary schemes to new entrants some years ago, but earlier this year Iceland and Ernst & Young decided to terminate their final salary schemes altogether and move existing scheme members onto annuity schemes. Such schemes typically require a worker to contribute about five times as much for the same pension as a final salary scheme offers. The new, privatised BT has shown itself very quick to follow the worst practices of the market, so union members are very worried about this development – to the extent that conference passed a resolution committing the union to action 'up to and including strike action' to maintain the existing final salary schemes.

The third factor on pay was a sudden and very clear realisation among delegates that the BT world was changing. With the growth of call centres, Connect has recruited some call centre managers. These people are on average salaries of £19,000 – less than half the scale maximum of most other members – and are compelled to work unsocial hours and unpaid overtime. This was a salutary demonstration of BT's aim on pay.

## CND affiliation

Connect has for a long time been affiliated to CND. At conference the left put up a gentle motion calling for Connect to publicise the activities of CND within the union, which didn't even mention that it had ignominiously failed to do this during the Afghanistan war. The executive explained that despite being affiliated to CND the union had its own position on such issues, and in this case it wasn't sure that it was wrong for Britain to join with the United States in attacking Afghanistan. The resolution fell, with about eight per cent of delegates in support.

In summary, the union is facing a more difficult situation with BT, the most important employer it deals with, than it has at any time before. The threat of losing members through inaction is pressurising the centre-right leadership to do something. There is space for the left to take a lead in a campaign centred on pay but also relating to pensions.



## Defend St Paul's Way NUT!

**Dave Gay, St Paul's Way NUT**  
(personal capacity)

An earlier version of this article appeared in the teachers' bulletin *Class Action*. Since it was written the threat of suspension has been lifted 'for the moment' from the teachers at St Paul's Way School. It seems clear that the purpose of NUT general secretary Doug McAvoy's threat was not to seriously carry through any disciplinary action but to ensure that NUT action in solidarity with other public sector unions does not spread. As militancy grows, it is going to be more important than ever that there is co-operation amongst public sector workers.

On June 12, NUT members at St Paul's Way School in Tower Hamlets defended a fundamental trade union principle: we agreed not to cross a picket line organised by Unison members striking over their London Allowance claim. Almost 40 teachers (not all of them NUT members) honoured the picket line and stood on it in solidarity with the Unison strikers. Our action deepened considerably the impact of the strike with the school being closed to students for two days.

Following our principled stand, NUT members at SPW are now under attack from the union's bureaucracy. We have received a three-page letter from Doug McAvoy threatening us with disciplinary action for having ignored the union's 'advice' about the Unison strike and for having breached the notorious Rule 8. (Rule 8 has rarely been used and concerns taking industrial action without proper authority from the NUT.)

McAvoy's letter includes a questionnaire. NUT members are asked whether they attended the union meeting that resolved to respect Unison's picket line and how they voted at the meeting! They are also asked if they participated in the picket line and whether they were approached by any other NUT member about the decision of the union group. The letter *instructs* members to respond to it. McAvoy's intention is clear: he hopes to undermine the collective resolve of the NUT group and by so doing lay the ground for a witch-hunt of activists at the school.

Needless to say, we will be responding to the letter as a union group, not individually. We took our decision collectively and stand by it. We represent the traditions of principled trade unionism, not bureaucrats like McAvoy. Over the coming weeks we will be mounting a vigorous campaign on behalf of the SPW NUT group, demanding that the

union drops any disciplinary action against us. We are calling on all trade unionists (not just NUT members) to support and get involved with the campaign.

There has been an extremely positive response to our campaign so far with the overwhelming majority of trade unionists we have spoken to being incensed by McAvoy's attack on us. The issue has been raised at several meetings already, including a Public Sector Alliance meeting, a London Reps meeting and the Socialist Alliance Trade Union Conference. Petitions have been distributed at these meetings and ELTA is now circulating them to all NUT branches. Several Unison branches have also taken petitions, including Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Camden.

As well as defending SPW NUT, it is essential that NUT activists raise the question of joint action with other public sector unions and honouring picket lines. The proposed national strike on July 17 by the main public sector unions presents us with a key test. We should be arguing in our NUT groups now to show real solidarity with this strike by agreeing not to cross the picket lines of the unions involved.

## Anti-union laws in action

Below is an excerpt from an article on the NUT web-site by general secretary Doug McAvoy in which he explains why NUT members should cross picket lines during the council workers' strike.

'It is possible that schools may be picketed on the day of the strike. The three teachers' organisations have not favoured picketing of schools by their own members, but respect the right of other unions to take a different view. Pickets should not prevent members of the NUT, NASUWT and ATL from attending work if their schools are open. Members of our three organisations have not balloted for action on this day and any refusal to cross picket lines by members of ATL, NASUWT or NUT would not be lawful action. We would be legally required to repudiate it. Repudiation would leave members without the protection of their union in the event of disciplinary action by the employer.

'The purpose of any picket should not be to persuade ATL, NASUWT and NUT members not to enter school. Any such persuasion should be directed only at members of the unions taking lawful action on 17 July. Some pickets may simply want to inform you of why they are taking action. The three teachers' organisations are naturally sympathetic to their cause, which we share. You should explain this advice to

any pickets who try to persuade you otherwise and explain that members of the ATL, NASUWT and NUT will not undertake work normally undertaken by members of GMB, T&G and Unison involved in industrial action.

'This guidance applies in the event of future strike action organised by GMB, T&G and Unison in pursuit of their pay claim.'

## A summer of disappointment

**David Lewis**

In what has become an annual ritual, the Association of University Teachers is on the verge of accepting without a fight a pay offer of 3.2 per cent for a 30 per cent claim.

In words that will undoubtedly have the New Labour education apparatchiks shaking in their shoes at the prospect of the anger that will be unleashed in senior common rooms (once the summer vacation is over), the AUT general secretary, Sally Hunt, told the press in July that 'we are deeply disappointed with this offer'.

While the unions in other parts of public sector are doing at least something to rattle the government and the employers, the AUT is conducting a 'consultative' ballot on whether members are prepared to accept a 3.2 per cent offer or take industrial action to improve it.

The national leadership has stated that it 'could not recommend acceptance of the offer to members'. But it is not exactly opposing it, either. The ballot paper carries the following message: 'If you vote YES, AUT will reluctantly accept the offer. If you vote NO, you are committing the AUT to ballot the membership on serious, disruptive industrial action in which you will be expected to participate.' In other words, the national AUT is telling members to vote no at their peril.

The leadership of the other main university union, Natfhe, is taking the same cowardly line. One of the reasons offered by the two academic unions is that the non-academic unions, Unison, Amicus, GMB and T&G, have accepted the employers' offer. But this is just a fig leaf, as the main activities in the universities are the teaching and research carried out by academic staff.

With this kind of lead, the prospect of rejection is low and the most favourable conditions for a campaign of industrial action in concert with the other public sector unions will be thrown away.

## Budget gave Labour a boost

Dear comrades,

So what lessons, if any, can be drawn from the May local elections?

The first thing to note is the Conservative result. The breakthrough that some people predicted was not forthcoming – indeed, the result was worse than under William Hague in similar elections! Why? Certainly, the usual reason pointed out – the Tories being seen by many as unelectable – has some truth in it. However, this is only limited – after all, these were local elections and not a choice of national government. The claim that the Tories couldn't win an election is probably over-optimistic.

But perhaps more important is that Labour was able to recover somewhat from a bit of a slump in the polls – why was this? Well, firstly, contrary to the belief of many on the far left (or indeed on the hard right of the party/SDP in the 1980s) the Labour Party has a remarkable durability as an electoral force. Every attempt to destroy it (MacDonald or the SDP for example) has ended in disaster and whilst it retains its nature as the mass party of the organised labour movement in Britain this situation is unlikely to change.

Additionally, the effect of the budget should be analysed. This was the clear political reason behind Labour achieving what was, nationally, a *relatively* good result. So why would the budget help boost Labour's poll? Mainly, it can be seen as showing something that is in fact contrary to all of New Labour's political thinking. The budget raised direct taxes, yet far from obliterating Labour at the polls as Mandelsonite logic would have suggested, it showed the public more willing than it has been claimed to accept tax rises, if they are linked directly to improving public services. The traditional social-democratic argument that Thatcher and Blair were never right on the political effects of taxation has been proven at least partially correct. (And hurrah for that!) What's more, it opens up a chance for a broader discussion on economic and public sector policy, as has to a large extent been taken up by the reawakened trade unions, especially following Gordon Brown's recent further announcements in this area.

However, Labour should not get too complacent. This budget was extremely

short-sighted and apart from reaffirming the principles of certain sections of NHS policy, had little for socialists to commend in it. Rightly, the 'After New Labour' conference condemned the linking of PFI and other such 'reforms' to the extra money. Essentially, it is a big gamble and may well only have short-term benefits, especially as it has alienated (as we increasingly see) the trade unions. It is based on a false and potentially suicidal political strategy. One of its core problems is similar to that of the Kinnock-ite tax-raising proposals argued against by much of the left at that time, such as Ken Livingstone in his 'Labour for the Nineties'. Whilst some have seen this as an 'old Labour' budget, its flaw is that it isn't redistributive in the correct sense. Instead of taking from the capitalist class, the budget's primary effect will be to further squeeze the higher echelons of the working-class and its potential allies in the middle-classes.

And that is why it is such a risky strategy. If the NHS is not seen to improve directly from these increases, and reasonably quickly, Labour's boost in the polls may well be short-lived. This remains a distinct possibility as New Labour's policy on the NHS is at best confused and at worst highly dangerous to its whole public ethos. PFIs and other changes in the structure are dangerous halfway houses which could lead to an increasingly demoralised workforce (the strikes against PPP on the tube are a warning to the government here) and an increasingly varied service. Labour will be punished for this in the next general election. What's more, the cost of Bush's war plans if we go along with them (and Brown has, interestingly, increased defence spending) and any substantial slowdown in the economy could also tighten the situation further.

Also of some interest in the local elections were the BNP's results. There is no comparison to the rise of Le Pen but that doesn't mean the left should have a dismissive attitude to it. A strong anti-racist movement based on broad principles and unity is needed. The Labour left must be a key force in this and not leave it to the SWP. Their handling of the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers shows this. Whilst some local campaigns (Brent seems one notable example) have managed to do good work in the community and build broad alliances with various political forces within and without the Labour Party and trade unions, the Socialist Alliance dominance of the Committee leaves it open to be prioritised and de-prioritised purely according to the SWP's latest recruiting plans. Furthermore, a political analysis of the BNP's success based on more than just

'working class apathy and disillusionment' (which can be rectified just by building a proper left group, apparently), taking into account a variety of cultural, social and political changes in the last 20 years in Britain and the subtleties of the BNP's approach, must at least be attempted.

Finally then, what can be said of the results of the Socialist Alliance in this election? As has by now become expected, and as Workers Action has understood, the SA themselves were once again 'dizzy with success', to use one of Stalin's better phrases. The only result that had any effect was in fact in Burnley where a small but reasonable SA vote let in the third BNP councillor, who beat Labour by three votes. Where the left did get in, with Dave Nellist and Ian Page retaining their seats, they were not Socialist Alliance candidates and had a local base from their time as representatives of the Labour Party.

So what conclusions shall we draw? The SA, comrades, is a dead end. Europe's labour movement and traditional centre-left and left forces are crying out for a new, perceptive and potentially popular set of ideas to coalesce around – far better to help contribute to that. With a few notable and honourable exceptions, Britain's 'Marxist' groups were conspicuous by their absence at the successful trade union/Labour 'After New Labour' conference in July. It is up to those of us who still support the Labour orientation to look at these developments and revive both our theory and practice – firstly by developing a correct understanding of the politics of the united front.

**Matthew Willgress**

*Labour Left Briefing* editorial board member (in a personal capacity)

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# Communists and the Labour Party 1927-29: a sense of déjà vu

Richard Price

Mention the term 'Third Period Stalinism' and many on the left think they know the territory. The trouble is, most know the history of the 'Third Period' of the Communist International from 1928-33 only in the most general terms, and that usually amounts to knowing that in Germany, the KPD denounced its Social Democratic opponents as 'social fascists', thereby sabotaging any prospect of united front resistance to Hitler. Third Period Stalinism is today seen almost universally as a bad thing – even by today's shrunken Communist Parties<sup>1</sup> – and therefore as an epithet it is applicable to only the most case-hardened sectarians.

The problem is that the increasingly Stalinised Comintern did not arrive at the wilder shores of sectarianism in one leap. By the early 1930s, the Comintern's frenzied attacks, not just on 'social fascists', but on 'anarcho-fascists', 'liberal fascists', 'clerical fascists', 'left social fascists', and of course 'Trotsky-fascists', suggested that almost every other political tendency beyond its own ranks supported or was conniving at fascism. But to arrive at this lunacy had taken a series of shifts, the study of which is highly instructive and of far more than just historical significance.

For two years from 1927 to 1929, the Communist Party of Great Britain was caught up in a set of internal struggles whose central issues sound remarkably contemporary over 70 years later:

- Was the Labour Party now simply a third bourgeois party?
- Should Communists be active in the Labour Party?
- Should they attempt to build a bridge to the Labour left?
- Should trade unionists pay the political levy?
- Should they fight for political funds to be controlled locally?
- Should socialists fight for trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party?

In fact, to compare these debates with debates underway within the left today – and particularly within the Socialist Alliance – needs no laboured analogy. Nor is this meant as an insult to Socialist Alliance comrades. The CPGB in the late 1920s was a party whose members remained dedicated to the victory of revolutionary socialism – if anything, they were impatient for its victory. But the mistakes made by the party in this period echo down to today, not least because they have been repeated in one form or another by many who consider themselves Trotskyists. The struggle in the CPGB over the 'new line' marked both the last genuine political struggle within the party, and at the same time the decisive period in which the party was finally Stalinised.

Attempts by the right-wing Labour leaders to take action against Communists being active in the Labour Party gathered strength in the period running up to the General Strike. The Liverpool Conference of the Labour Party in autumn 1925 reaffirmed the previous year's conference decision proscribing Communists from being individual members of the party, although they could still operate as delegates of affiliated trade unions. However, as many as 100 divisional and borough parties resisted the edict and by the end of 1926 some 1,500 Communists were still active as individual members. On the strength of this resistance, the National Left-Wing Movement (NLWM) was launched in December 1925, uniting Communists, Labour and ILP leftists, and trade union militants.

At its second conference in September 1927, 54 local Labour parties sent delegates, claiming to represent 150,000 members. For the small CPGB, this represented a considerable achievement. Its own membership, which had stood at only 5,000 in 1925, risen slowly to 6,000 by April 1926, and then grown rapidly to 10,700 by October that year under the impact of the betrayal of the General Strike, had fallen back to 7,400 by 1927. Yet through the NLWM, and its widely read paper, the *Sunday Worker*, it exercised an influence well in excess of its modest size. What-

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ever its limitations, it demonstrated – as Trotsky would subsequently teach his own British supporters – that such a tactic can act as ‘the lever of a small group’.

### Origins of the ‘new line’

The CPGB’s Ninth Congress in October 1927 essentially reiterated the line towards the Labour left that it had developed up to that point. However, internationally, the line of the Comintern was about to shift abruptly. A month later, Trotsky and the Left Opposition were expelled from the Russian party. Having smashed the opposition by arrests and exile, Stalin executed a sharp turn to the left, embarking upon forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. Just as Stalin exaggerated the danger represented by the kulaks, so as to justify the civil war in the countryside and the repression against oppositionists, so internationally a ‘war danger’ imminently threatening the Soviet Union was cooked up to bring non-Russian Communist Parties into line.

The theoretical underpinning of the left turn was provided by a new periodisation of the class struggle since 1917. The ‘first period’ had been one of revolutionary upsurge following the October Revolution; the second had been characterised by a retreat under the slogan of the united front; the ‘third period’, now opening, was one of a ‘renewed offensive’, in which Europe ‘was obviously entering into the period of a new revolutionary upswing’.<sup>2</sup>

Translating this into a viable perspective for the national sections of the Comintern proved everywhere a daunting task, and Britain was no exception. The working class had been forced back onto the defensive in the wake of the defeat of the General Strike and the subsequent employers’ offensive. Strike days, which had totalled 162,233,000 in 1926, fell to 1,174,000<sup>3</sup> the following year.

The first indication of a shift of the Comintern’s line in Britain came in the form of a telegram from Moscow received in October 1927, shortly after the CPGB’s Ninth Congress. It gave notice that its attitude to the Labour Party was up for reconsideration. Two months later, at a meeting of the Presidium of the Comintern, it was proposed to withdraw the slogan of a Labour government, and instead call for a ‘revolutionary Labour government’.<sup>4</sup>

This implied criticism of the British party’s line – despite its lack of basis in reality – fell on fertile ground. The defeat of the General Strike had been followed by aggressive anti-Communist campaigns in both the Labour Party and the unions. Thus, although the party’s influence over left-leaning Labour Party members and mili-

tant unionists had grown, it was in an overall context of retreat, and it had failed to translate into the growth of the party’s membership. Indeed, by March 1928, it had fallen to 5,500. Much of the initial debate concerned the NLWM, the leftists seeing it as a barrier to building a revolutionary movement, rather than a bridge.

### Struggle in the CPGB

Two tendencies emerged within the party. An increasingly vocal minority, including Palme Dutt, Harry Pollitt, J.T. Murphy, Robin Page Arnot and the MP Shapurji Saklatvala, claimed that the Labour Party was no longer a workers’ party of any sort, and that it had been transformed into the third bourgeois party. Most of this minority also wanted to abandon the CP’s stance of advocating affiliation to the Labour Party.

The majority included such leading figures as T.A. Jackson, J.R. Campbell, Willie Gallacher, Wal Hannington and Andrew Rothstein, and stood by the existing line, claiming support from Lenin’s writings such as *Left Wing Communism*.

At a meeting of the CP Central Committee in January 1928, Campbell’s thesis defending the majority line was carried by 17 votes to 6. Both wings of the CC were represented at the enlarged Ninth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), held in Moscow in February 1928.<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Gallacher put up a vigorous defence of the majority’s views, with Gallacher warning of where the minority’s logic would lead: ‘... if [Labour] is a third bourgeois party, and we have to start fighting it now along the whole front, we should not wait till the election, we should start now. And the first thing to be done is to go to our comrades in the trade unions and say: “Withdraw from this third bourgeois party.” Instead of the party going forward in the fight for affiliation, we ought to advocate the withdrawal of the trade unions from the third bourgeois party.’<sup>6</sup>

However, faced with the ECCI’s support for many of the minority’s positions, the majority retreated, and a left-leaning resolution was passed unanimously. It claimed that the Labour and trade union leaders were ‘endeavouring gradually to convert their organisations into auxiliary apparatuses of the bourgeois State and the employers’ organisations’; it called for a ‘strenuous fight’ against the selection procedures for Labour Party candidates, and urged local parties ‘to call new Selection Conferences’; it committed the CPGB to ‘come out more boldly and more clearly as an independent political party, to change its attitude towards the Labour Party and

the Labour Government and consequently to replace the slogan of the Labour Government by the slogan of the Revolutionary Workers’ Government’.<sup>7</sup>

While this was clearly seen as a victory for the leftist perspective, it stopped short of endorsing several of the minority’s positions. In spite of the rhetoric about a ‘Revolutionary Workers’ Government’, nowhere did the resolution clearly define the Labour Party as a purely bourgeois party. It also declared it ‘inexpedient as yet’ to withdraw the tactic of applying for affiliation to the Labour Party. And it rejected the proposal to abstain in the forthcoming general election in constituencies in which there was no Communist candidate.

In an introduction to the report of the Plenum’s British Commission, Campbell adopted a tone of ritualistic self-criticism. The Central Committee had ‘underestimated the extent to which the bureaucracy had succeeded in consolidating its influence in the Labour Party and rendering all left-wing work in that body impossible’.<sup>8</sup> But the differences were glossed over, rather than resolved, and the extent to which the party was saddled with a set of contradictory policies was soon exposed in its confused relationship with, and intervention into, the Cook-Maxton campaign.<sup>9</sup>

The campaign was launched in June 1928 with the publication of a manifesto issued under the signatures of miners’ leader A.J. Cook and the left-wing Clydeside MP Jimmy Maxton of the ILP, although it was apparently written by Maxton, John Wheatley and Willie Gallacher. Interestingly, the manifesto declared that the Labour Party was ‘no longer a working class party but a party representing all sections of the community’.<sup>10</sup> The campaign, despite its revivalist style and confused politics, did evoke a considerable response among workers. Although the CPGB had played a significant role behind the scenes in launching the campaign, rising leftism within the party led the leadership to issue a statement which described the manifesto as ‘nothing more than the effort to create a pseudo-left opposition in the parliamentary Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, resulting in diverting the workers from the real struggle’.<sup>11</sup> At a rally in Glasgow, CP members demanded that Maxton call for Ramsay MacDonald’s expulsion from the Labour Party: ‘If supporters of the new line had a strategy for intervention in the campaign, it was to provoke the Labour Party right wing into expelling the left, thereby providing the Communist Party with an anticipated influx of recruits’.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, which opened in Moscow in

July 1928, the Third Period received something approaching an official launch by Bukharin, who would shortly become one of its most prominent victims. Belief in the rapid growth of revolutionary consciousness among workers, fuelled by an ever-deepening crisis of capitalism, became an article of faith, and the failure of perspectives to materialise was attributed in section after section to the failure of leaderships to implement the ultra-left turn with sufficient rigour.

### The political levy

In the CPGB, the debate extended to the political levy. The resolution of the Ninth Plenum had called for control of the political levy at local level 'in order that it may be possible to finance any candidates the rank and file of the branch may approve'.<sup>13</sup> Back in Britain, the party leadership felt obliged to warn members that if implemented, the policy could lead to legal action for misappropriation of funds. Some members responded by proposing that trade unionists should cease paying the levy – a position that Trotsky had compared in *Where is Britain Going?* to strike-breaking,<sup>14</sup> without any disagreement from the CPGB which had published the book as recently as October 1926.

In November 1928, the Central Committee of the CPGB passed three resolutions that highlighted the contradictory, halfway house it now occupied. It unanimously agreed to drop the demand for the CPGB to be allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party, and to call for trade unions to disaffiliate from it. By 15 votes to two it advocated continuing to pay the political levy, with the aim of controlling it locally at a later date, while by 13-4 it voted to continue to support the NLWM.

The response of the ECCI, received shortly before the CPGB's Tenth Congress held in Bermondsey in January 1929, was more cautious, opposing both dropping the CP's affiliation tactic and the call for trade union disaffiliation.<sup>15</sup> By the time of the Bermondsey Congress, membership had fallen again, to 3,500 – less than half of what it had been at the outset of the 'new line' little more than a year before. The leftists, urged on by Moscow, shrilly insisted that the NLWM and the united front orientation it rested on were the main obstacles to masses of radicalised workers streaming into the party. A motion to disband the NLWM was passed against the wishes of the majority of the leadership by the narrow margin of 55-52 – a result so close that it was referred back to Moscow for further consideration. Shortly after the congress, the CP members on the National Committee of the NLWM carried a vote

to dissolve the movement and urge its members to join the CP.

Delegates to the Tenth Congress also voted by 100-22 to continue paying the political levy, even if it was 'only in order more effectively to work for the breakdown of this bourgeois party'.<sup>16</sup> On dual unionism, the congress 'resolved to support breakaway unions where the left wing was threatened by right-wing leaders who were not supported by a majority of the membership'.<sup>17</sup>

On March 23, 1929, the Central Committee of the CPGB voted by 18-5 in favour of abstaining in the forthcoming general election in seats where there was no Communist candidate. Workers in such constituencies should spoil their ballot papers by writing 'Communist' across it. When the election was held on May 31, the CPGB fielded 25 candidates, who polled a total of 50,000 votes, or 5.3 per cent of the vote in the seats it contested. It was widely regarded as a poor performance,<sup>18</sup> barely more than the 41,000 votes it had won in 1924 when it had contested only six seats. A key extract from the party's election manifesto *Class against Class* – the name by which the 'new line' was known publicly – is reproduced after this article. As is characteristic of ultra-leftism, it combined wishful thinking (the idea that the Labour leadership had exposed itself 'completely' while in government) with abstract maximalist propaganda (the programme of the 'Revolutionary Workers' Government'). The conclusion was that Labour had become 'the third capitalist party'.

### The triumph of ultra-leftism

Although the wheel had already turned sharply to the left, the majority of the CC was still unconvinced by the full rigours of the ultra-left line, and even intimated it might reconsider the dissolution of the NLWM. In contrast, Moscow wanted to turn even more sharply to the left, and the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI in July 1929 singled out the British section's leadership for criticism, calling for 'an active fight against the right deviation' and for such deviators to 'submit implicitly to all decisions of the Comintern and its sections, and actively carry them out'.<sup>19</sup> The Plenum marked a new phase of the 'Third Period', one in which the Labour leaders and the Labour government began to be described as 'social fascist'.

Since the ECCI made a special point of calling for an 'energetic struggle' against the left wing of social democracy, any hope of rescuing what remained of the party's influence in the Labour left was out of the question. The *Sunday Worker* – whose cir-

ulation had reached 100,000 three years before – was allowed to fold. Communist influence in the trade unions was also shrinking in most industries, and the Minority Movement held its last annual conference in August 1929.

By the end of the year, membership had fallen even further to 3,200<sup>20</sup> as the internal struggle grew in the frantic attempt to find a leadership capable of consistently applying the ever more ultra-left line coming from Moscow. The ECCI intervened to bring forward the party's congress, which was now billed as an emergency congress and held in Leeds from November 30-December 3, 1929. Summing up the results of the congress, Brian Pearce writes that it 'registered the final, total triumph of the "New Line" in deeds as well as words, with guarantees in the form of changes in the leadership'.<sup>21</sup> Only 13 of the 30 Central Committee members elected in January were re-elected.

The congress's main resolution pulled no punches in its ultra-leftism, denouncing the Labour government as 'social fascist' and spelling out the classic sectarian formula of the 'united front from below': 'The tactic of the united front from below is the most effective means of winning over the Left workers, and, at the same time, exposing the "Left" reformist leaders, the most dangerous enemies of the workers.'<sup>22</sup> In a message to the congress, the Presidium of the ECCI topped even this by speaking of the 'fascization' of both the Labour Party and the trade unions.<sup>23</sup>

In two years, the CPGB's role in the organised labour movement had been all but destroyed. Much of the blame can be laid at the door of the Stalinised Comintern, although, as I have tried to show, there were also domestic pressures arising out of the difficult conditions after the defeat of the General Strike that fuelled the mood of desperate ultra-leftism.

### Third Period Trotskyism

At this distance, and under very different conditions, what is striking is how this period holds up a mirror in various ways to almost every group on the left in recent decades and today. It is as if Trotskyist groups are doomed endlessly to repeat the tragedy of the CPGB as farce. The path to discovering that the Labour Party is simply a capitalist party is a well-worn one, most recently trodden by the Socialist Party.

Calling for an abstention in seats other than those contested by 'revolutionary' candidates has a similarly long and ill-starred career, from Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali of the IMG in 1970, via Spartacism, to Arthur Scargill's Socialist



Labour Party and some of those active in the Socialist Alliance at the last general election. Nor is the Socialist Alliance's elevation of standing against Labour to the level of a principle new; it was first voiced by Robin Page Arnot in 1928: 'In order to express the antagonism against the Labour Party in the sharpest way, the principle must be that we put candidates wherever we can.'<sup>24</sup> Page Arnot also anticipated by over 70 years the Socialist Alliance's justification for splitting the vote in this year's local elections in Burnley and letting in the BNP: '... this argument of "letting the capitalist candidate in" is wrong... This is an argument which should not be put forward in our discussion here.'<sup>25</sup> Like Page Arnot, the Socialist Alliance brushes aside the issue of splitting the vote, even if the outcome is the victory of a fascist. The main issue, they argue, is to build the Socialist Alliance's base – from which it flows logically that which party actually wins seats is a *secondary* issue.

On the trade union-Labour link and the political funds, the Socialist Alliance – even if it is split internally between several different positions – is all too clearly travelling the same road as that taken by the CPGB in 1928.

Attempting to 'build the party' by trying to engineer the expulsion of Labour leftists was tried by the SWP in 1991, when it campaigned for Labour Party members to tear up their membership cards and sign an 'Open Letter' that committed them to building 'an independent socialist alternative to Labour... outside the Labour Party'. Not surprisingly the stunt failed to make any lasting gains. And the SWP's preference for operating through party-controlled front organisations like the Anti-Nazi League and Globalise Resistance owes not a little to the CPGB's politics after it liquidated genuine mass organisations like the Minority Movement and the NLWM.

Even the (current) CPGB/*Weekly Worker's* attempt in the 2001 general election to commit Labour candidates to left policies in return for critical support was first proposed by Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt's minority document from January 1928.<sup>26</sup>

The prize for the longest running and most committed continuation of Third Period politics would in the past have gone to Gerry Healy's WRP, which by the late 1970s had abandoned even the pretence of electoral *tactics* in favour of demanding a Workers' Revolutionary Government – by happy chance a straightforward reshuffle of the CPGB's Revolutionary Workers' Government slogan of 1929. Sheila Torrance's *News Line* is in this sense a worthy successor, with its crazed belief

in imminent revolution being driven forward by economic catastrophe, and its fetishisation of a daily paper without even modest support. Another Healyite fragment, the Socialist Equality Party (formerly the ICP) has for years insisted in impeccable Third Period style that left reformists are much the most dangerous enemies of the workers' movement, while the trade unions, it discovered some years ago, are no longer workers' organisations at all.

It is, then, deeply ironic that all these avowed opponents of Stalinism should have endlessly repeated the sectarian mistakes of the CPGB from 1927-29, and created a weird and wonderful 'Third Period Trotskyist' hybrid. One angle relatively unexplored by writers from the Trotskyist tradition is the extent to which Trotsky's own writings from the mid-1920s have nourished this strange offspring. Certainly his emphasis on criticising the role of the trade union 'lefts' – Purcell, Swales, Hicks and Cook – before, during and after the General Strike was somewhat one-sided, and not always balanced by stressing that the only route for the CPGB to reach a mass audience lay in united front activity along the lines of the NLWM and the Minority Movement. The core of the first British Trotskyist group – the Balham Group – were comrades who in 1929 had thought that the problems of the CPGB lay in not applying the 'new line' consistently enough.<sup>27</sup> They were won to Trotsky's ideas in 1931 as a result of his writings on Germany rather than those on Britain.

In contrast, Trotsky's advice to his British supporters in the 1930s often showed far greater tactical awareness and understanding of British conditions, together with a deeper understanding of the dangers of sectarianism. All too often, latter-day Trotskyists have drawn the conclusion that the essence of revolutionary politics lies in demarcating themselves at all costs from the 'lefts', in the hope that the process of convincing reformist-minded workers can be achieved via a shortcut.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf., N. Branson's official *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, p.17: 'This new line – which came to be known as "Class against Class" – was a disaster. It alienated former allies, and made it much harder for the Party to recover lost ground in later years.'

<sup>2</sup> H. Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB from its Origins to the Second World War*, Pluto, 1976, p.72.

<sup>3</sup> This equates approximately to the level of strikes in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Branson, op. cit., p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 1 of B. Pearce, 'The Communist Party and the Labour Left 1925-1929', in M.

Woodhouse and B. Pearce, *Essays in the History of Communism in Britain*, New Park, 1975, pp.193-197 contains extracts from contributions made by Campbell, Page Arnot and Gallacher.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.198-201.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Dewar, op. cit., p.80.

<sup>9</sup> See B. Pitt, 'The Cook-Maxton Campaign', *Workers News* No.12, Oct-Nov 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Branson, op. cit., p.33.

<sup>12</sup> Pitt, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Pearce, op. cit., p.200.

<sup>14</sup> L. Trotsky, *Writings on Britain Vol. 2*, New Park, 1974, p.101.

<sup>15</sup> This contradicts the view that 'almost always the CPGB itself stood to the right of the Stalinist majority in the International' – J. Hinton and R. Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early Communist Party*, Pluto, 1975, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Branson, op. cit., p.34.

<sup>17</sup> Hinton and Hyman, op. cit., p.48.

<sup>18</sup> This was nonetheless more than three times better in percentage terms than the Socialist Alliance polled in 2001.

<sup>19</sup> R. Groves, *The Balham Group*, Pluto, 1974, p.22.

<sup>20</sup> It may have even fallen below 3,000 – cf. Branson, op. cit., p.48.

<sup>21</sup> Woodhouse and Pearce, op. cit., p.191.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.203.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.192.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.194.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>26</sup> Branson, op. cit., p.25.

<sup>27</sup> See S. Bornstein and A. Richardson, *Against the Stream*, Socialist Platform, 1986, Chapter 3; Groves, op. cit.

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# Class against Class

Extract from the Communist  
Party of Great Britain's  
programme for the 1929 general  
election

## The Communist Party

The Communist Party is the Party of the working class, in fundamental opposition to all other parties. It is a part of the Communist International, the international workers' party, leading the workers and oppressed toilers of the world, the vast majority, in the world revolution. It declares that the social contrasts of increasing wealth in the hands of the rich, side by side with the increasing misery and poverty of the proletariat, cannot be eliminated within the framework of capitalism. It proclaims that the organisation of the economic life of this country and of the whole world, the abolition of war, the freedom of small nationalities, the liberation of the colonial masses, the end of the capitalist dictatorship, the building of socialism, are impossible, unless the working class overthrows the capitalist class and becomes the ruling class.

The Communist Party therefore is the deadly enemy of capitalism and capitalist parties. It has as its aims the leadership of the working class in the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of a *revolutionary workers' government* as the means to the establishment of a Communist society in which the means of production will not be the private property of the few, a society which will not be based upon profit but on labour, will not be based on class division, will eradicate both imperialist wars and class wars, and abolish poverty for ever. It regards the struggle for a revolutionary workers' government in Britain as part of the international war of the classes which can only end by the establishment of a World Federation of Workers' and Peasants' Republics.

## The Means of Conquest

Basing itself therefore on the interests of the working class and the oppressed toilers, the Communist Party is not a mere parliamentary party, but the leader of the workers in the class war in all its forms, whether it manifests itself in strikes, elections, demonstrations or other forms. Recognising that the working class can only conquer capitalism and become the ruling class by the creation of its own instruments of power (i.e., workers' councils, composed of delegates from the factories and the mass organisation of the workers), and the impossibility of the working class capturing and utilising the capitalist State apparatus for the exercise of its own class power for the building of socialism, it participates in elections, in parliamentary action, in all forms of political activity as the means to the preparation of the working class for the act of imposing its will, i.e., exercising its own dictatorship over the

capitalist class preliminary to the building of socialism and the elimination of classes.

The political power of the capitalist class is exercised, not merely through the parliamentary institutions, which it modifies or discards according to the advancement of oppositional opinion within them but through its own class control of all institutions, by its own officers of the Army, Navy, Air Force, police force, law courts, press, schools, church. It is only possible to conquer this class domination when, through the breakdown of capitalist economy and the sharpening of class relations, which inevitably follow, the majority of the workers are prepared forcibly to throw off the capitalist class control in all phases of social, industrial and political activity, and themselves take control of the factories, mines, workshops, railways, etc.

The manner in which the everyday struggle of the workers against the capitalist class culminates in the fight for power was clearly seen in the General Strike of 1926. Although the strike was generated by the efforts of the working class to defend their economic conditions the action itself brought the classes face to face with the question – which class shall rule in Britain? The capitalist class answered with the suspension of parliamentarism and the mobilisation of its military forces ready to answer with war in the streets. The working class led by the leaders of the Labour Party intent on the welfare of the State was unprepared for so decisive a battle. The working class was defeated. Nevertheless, it is thus that the fight for power comes for which the working class has to prepare.

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When the working class has power it can build socialism. With a revolutionary workers' government, exercising a working class dictatorship and operating a real workers' democracy, the working class can solve the economic and social problems of this country and liberate hundreds of millions of oppressed peoples. With power in the hands of the workers, the pathway to socialism is as clear as daylight. A revolutionary workers' government, having conquered the capitalists, would not have to seek their consent to nationalise this industry or that. It would, under the leadership of the Communist Party, at once proceed to socialise the economic life of this country, and, for the first time in history give the working class, i.e., the great majority of the population, equality of opportunity, control over their daily lives and power to build the future.

### The Communist Party and the General Election

The Communist Party, therefore, enters the General Election with a view to furthering its fundamental aims outlined; to reveal to the working class the nature of the present crisis, to expose the sham of parliamentary democracy maintained by the Tories, Liberals and Labour alike; to send as many Communists as possible to Parliament in order to carry the working-class fight into the institutions of their class enemies; to mobilise the workers for the Revolutionary Workers' Government. Three parties – Tory, Liberal and Labour – appeal to you in the name of the 'NATION'. One Party – the Communist Party – appeals to you in the name of the working class. No Party can serve two masters. No Party can serve the 'Nation' so long as the nation is divided into two warring classes – one which owns the wealth and one which produces the wealth and does not own it. No Party can serve the robbers and the robbed at the same time. To speak of the 'Nation' when it is thus divided is camouflage to hide their support of the robbers because the great majority of the nation belongs to the class which is robbed. The Communist Party is thus the only Party of the workers, the oppressed.

### The Tory Party

The Tory Party is the party of the landlords, the big industrialists and financiers. The basis of its policy is upon the preservation and extension of the private ownership of all wealth, land, property, all the means of production. It is the party of imperialism. It is the party of Mondism.

Its record is one of class oppression, war preparation and rationalisation at the expense of the workers. As the governing

party, it has been responsible for passing the Miners' 8-hour Act, leading the frontal attack on the trades unions, both in the General Strike and the Trade Union Act, which weakened the unions, deprived them of the rights of collective participation in politics, detached the Trade Unions of State employees from the organised trade union movement and helped the middle-class leadership of the Labour Party to exercise their Party dictatorship over the unions.

### The Liberal Party

The Liberal Party is just as much a Party of imperialism and financial capital as the Tory Party. The differences between the Tory landowners and Liberal manufacturers which used to exist 80 years ago have long since disappeared. Even the Liberal textile manufacturers, who pioneered the Free Trade campaign because they wanted cheap cotton for their mills and cheap food for their operatives, gave up this plank during the war. The Liberal, Labour and Tory Parties today keep up the game of 'Opposition' only in order to make the workers and poorer middle class believe that salvation will come through Parliament.

The Liberal Party is one of the masks which the British capitalists wear in order to swindle the workers. It led the British Imperialist forces into the war of 1914-18, and agrees with the Tory Party on the need to maintain the Empire as the instrument of colonial exploitation. Its leader, Simon, is chairman of the Commission appointed by the Tory Government to devise improved means for the subjugation of India. It opposes universal disarmament as proposed by the Soviet Government. Its leader, Lloyd George, was responsible for the Black and Tan regime in Ireland. It was party to the Versailles Treaty and is a supporter of the capitalist League of Nations. It is a supporter of the Dawes Plan and the Locarno Pact. It also is a 'Mondist' party.

### The Labour Party

This Party is the third capitalist party. It lays claim to the title of Socialist Party, but has nothing to do with socialism. Whatever associations it has with the working class are due to its development as a parliamentary wing of the trade unions, now turned to account as the means of subordinating the trade unions to its dictatorship on behalf of capitalism. It rejects working class politics and exploits the workers' organisations for 'national politics'.

The Labour Party 'in principle' stands for the nationalisation of the banks, land and industry by purchase, i.e., State capitalism, but relegates in practice even this 'principle' to the far distant future. Mean-

while it is prepared to advocate the development of rationalisation of industry. A common ground is thus provided in its programme for the co-operation of Tories, Liberals and Labour. The Labour programme says (*Labour and the Nation*, pp. 15, 16), 'They,' [the capitalists] 'will be well advised to begin by setting their own house in order – to modernise their organisation, improve their technique, eliminate waste and apply more intelligently the resources which science has revealed.'

### The Parties of Capitalist Violence

The policy of these three parties can be summed up as 'Empire and Mondism'. These are the parties which shriek about bloodshed and violence and civil war. They are the voters of war credits, the builders of armies and navies, the creators of air forces, the organisers of armed police (all officered and controlled by the propertied class). They are waging a perpetual civil war against the workers and call it 'social peace'. They wage war abroad and call it 'international pacification'. They speak of disarmament, but only as the means of

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scrapping obsolete weapons and equipping themselves with more deadly weapons. They all agree to 'outlaw war' as the means to legalise it. They are three parties of capitalist violence, of poison gas, of bomb throwers, of the most efficient killing machines known to man. Their outcry against violence is hypocritical. They are not against violence on behalf of the capitalists, but only against violence on behalf of the workers against the capitalists.

### **Our Changed Attitude to the Labour Party**

Prior to the formation of the Labour Government in 1924, the Communist Party, although the leaders of the Labour Party were as treacherous then as now, advised the working class to push the Labour Party into power whilst sharply criticising and exposing the leaders of the Labour Party. Today this policy is no longer possible for the following reasons. The situation of 1929 is entirely different from that of the years prior to the General Strike and the Labour Government of 1924. In the years immediately after the war the Labour Party, in spite of its anti-working-class leaders, was forced by the pressure of the workers into action against the Tories and Liberals, e.g., threatened general strike against war on Russia, demand for a capital levy, repudiation of Versailles Treaty, big working-class action on wages and hours of labour, etc. The Labour Party also had not yet become a closely-knit party with a single discipline. It was a federation of trade unions and parties offering facilities for criticism from within and a means of struggle for our Party to battle against the middle-class leadership and to strengthen the working-class forces within it.

The Labour Government exposed the Labour Party leadership completely. It proved the Communist Party criticisms to be correct. The 'Minority' Labour Government was nothing more than a coalition with the Tories and Liberals. The Labour leaders 'led' the General Strike only to betray it in the face of the challenge of the State. The General Strike raised the question of class power – which class shall rule in Britain. The Labour Party leadership of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress were against the struggle for power. They stood for capitalist power against working-class power. They co-operated with the Tories in the defeat of the General Strike, but from within. They denounced the General Strike and propagated against it. They developed the offensive against the Communist Party and the revolutionary workers who stand for the working-class struggle for power. They tied the trade unions to the Tories and Liberals

under the banner of Mondism and transformed the Labour Party from a federal organisation to a single party with a capitalist programme under the banner of 'Empire and Mondism'. It is now no longer possible for the Communist Party or the trade unions to bring pressure to bear on the Labour Party from within. It is a completely disciplined capitalist party.

The Communist Party, as the party of the working class, must of necessity therefore explain to the workers in deeds as well as words the completely changed situation,

and set before the workers the means of advancing to socialism.

These are the reasons for the Communist Party's exposure and denunciation of the Labour Party as the third capitalist party, and why it puts forward its candidates against the Labour Party and selects its leaders for especial challenge.

Class is against class. The Labour Party has chosen the capitalist class. The Communist Party is the party of the working class.

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