

The Downturn: New mood, same politics

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In 1988 the 'new mood' joined 'the downturn' as one of the stock phrases in every Socialist Workers Party member's vocabulary. The new mood was the silver lining to the dark cloud of the downturn. Pauline Smith explains why the change in perspective has not led to any fundamental change in the SWP's practice.

The SWP's political method consists of tailing the existing level of consciousness and struggle at all times. It is one of the features of what Lenin called 'economism'. In the period of recession and defeat, when workers' spontaneous militancy had been seriously undermined by unemployment and the anti-union laws, the SWP developed the 'downturn perspective' was the result.

It saw the SWP, whose hallmark had been the rank and file movement tactic, become consistent opponents of rank and file organisation. SWP members resigned their stewardships and sang the same funeral hymn over every defeated strike:

'We can only fight for the little things, tea breaks and toilet rolls. At the same time we can make propaganda for socialism?.'

In the last few months, though, the tune has changed.

As a new mood of militancy really has gripped sections of workers—in Vickers, Jaguar, the post, the NHS and some sections of local government—the SWP's line became more and more at odds with workers' willingness to fight. SWP members in Lambeth NALGO for example argued strike action was impossible, argued against it, only to find it taking place within days.

The fact that the 'new mood' was discovered in 1988, with 1.86 million strike days in the first seven months compared to 3.18 million in the same period last year, reveals the 'turn' for what it is. It is more of a tonic for the troops and a correction of overzealous pessimism than a serious analysis of the situation and the tactics needed.

Further evidence of what the 'new mood' means can be gleaned from reports of the SWP's recent conference:

'Our job is to take the struggle as far forward as possible. That means starting from what the rank and file can do because that has an impact on the trade union leaders?.'

The health dispute is a clear example of what this means. In February and March, when thousands struck on days of action and ancillaries and nurses were in dispute together the 'new mood' was not even a twinkle in Tony Cliff's eye. So the SWP opposed the call for an all out strike.

The resurgence of action in the NHS, coinciding with the 'new mood' schema at first prompted the SWP to issue a national leaflet calling for an all out strike. With four hospitals on indefinite strike it looked like an

all out strike was something the rank and file can do?. By the time the first national rank and file meeting took place the SWP had not only dropped the call for an all out strike but voted against it in their union branches.

As always they had begun from trying to guess the level of workers' consciousness, not by fighting for what was necessary. In the nurses' dispute the suspension of the appeals procedure, the problem this creates for the work to grade and the intransigence of the Tories mean that only an all out strike will win.

But to get an all out strike nurses will have to build it from above and below. As well as trying to spread and consolidate the action on the ground they will have to mobilise to force the leaders to call an all out strike. For this they need rank and file organisation on a national scale. But even a national strike committee proved too far ahead of workers' for the SWP.

The SWP's attitude to the new mood of militancy is only a fine tuning of the do-nothing position of the last three years. It also embodies their sterile and one-sided view of relations with the union bureaucracy.

Against some of their members, who argued against placing any demands on the officials, the SWP have argued that workers must place demands on the bureaucracy at the same time as spreading the action from below. But from Frickley to the post and the NHS they have refused to spell out how these demands are to be focused against the leadership.

Why? Because only an organisation of rank and file militants, the minority whose ideas on the issues of the day are ahead of the mass of workers, can effectively fight against the bureaucrats, to take control of the action and replace leaders who betray with those who will fight.

The bankruptcy of the SWP in the fight against new realism in general could not be better illustrated than by its recipe to rebuild the strength of union organisation from the bottom up?. It calls for shop stewards, regular meetings, solidarity etc. All well and good, but it says nothing about how to wrest control of the unions from the present pack of traitors.

There may be a small but important change in workers' ability and desire to fight. But the SWP's new mood? perspective holds no answers to the vital question it poses: how to turn the anger into action.

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