

The legacy of Jack Jones 1913-2009

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Jack Jones, who has died at the age of 96, cut a very different figure from many of today's union leaders, writes Dave Stockton.

Born the son of a Liverpool docker in 1913, he was unemployed during the depths of the Depression before working on the docks himself. He fought against Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and then joined the International Brigades to fight Franco's fascists in Spain where he was seriously wounded in 1937. When he retired, in 1977, he refused a peerage and donated a £10,000 gift from the union to pensioners' organisations. Both as general secretary and after his retirement he lived in an ordinary council house in Peckham, a working class district in south London, and died in a local care home.

There is, however, a darker side to the story. Jones was also the main trade union pillar of the Social Contract adopted by the Wilson-Callaghan government. Although this promised a "fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people" it actually led to the biggest cuts in social spending in fifty years, lowered workers' real wages and greatly weakened the shop stewards' movement.

In this extended obituary, Dave Stockton examines Jack Jones' career from a local union organiser to the leader of Britain's biggest union, from champion of the shop stewards' movement to the architect of its defeat, and finds a flawed legacy.

Jack Jones rose to the position of regional secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) in the Midlands after the war. Despite the grip of the right wing on many union executives, a new leadership was beginning to develop at shop floor level. These were the shop stewards, directly elected by the rank and file workers and instantly recallable by them in shop meetings. Between 1945 and 1968, two million working days per year lost were through strikes. They were usually of short duration and limited to a single workplace or section and it was the stewards who led them.

In car plants like Ford Dagenham or Austin's giant Longbridge plant (with 25,000 workers), shop stewards' committees became powerful bargaining agents. Jack Jones was one of the union officials who actively supported the role of shop stewards in the TGWU against a right wing leadership that was bitterly opposed to shop floor independence.

Under Harold Wilson, Labour returned to office in 1964 with a programme for state intervention to promote capitalist development of industry - pushing for mergers and modernisation. He said he was opposed to "restrictive practices on both sides of industry" but it was on the workers' side that he concentrated his fire - and his main target was the "unofficial" strikes led by shop stewards. He set up a royal commission under Lord Donovan to investigate the shop steward phenomenon.

In Place of Strife

Donovan concluded that pay and conditions should be brought back under the control of the full time union

officials. Shrewdly, he realised that the strength of the stewards was that they were shop floor workers themselves, directly under pressure from their workmates and getting the same pay. He proposed an apparent concession, allowing stewards facility time away from the workshop on union business, which would bring them closer to management in overseeing the national agreements.

Most union leaders would have been happy to see such a development but Wilson decided to go further by also introducing legal restrictions such as a compulsory 28-day "cooling off" period before a strike could be called. These were promoted in a White Paper, "In Place of Strife" by Barbara Castle, the Minister for Labour. This divided the union leaders between left and right. On the left, Jack Jones was, by now, a key figure. He had a long record of defending the shop stewards in their disputes and had identified himself with the Broad Left, a current that drew in the left of the Labour Party as well as the membership of the Communist Party within the unions. It was thanks to their support that he was elected general secretary of the TGWU in 1968. Together with Hugh Scanlon, the successful Broad Left candidate for the leadership of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW), he led the opposition to the government.

Within the labour movement, opposition to Wilson was centred on the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) within which the Communist Party played a leading role. Its influence can be seen from the strikes and mobilisations it was able to call: on 27 February 1969, 150,000 stopped work on Clydeside and Merseyside, on May Day there was strike of 250,000, with a 20,000-strong demonstration in London and other cities.

Kill the Bill

The pressure on the TUC General Council from these mobilisations stiffened opposition within the Labour Party, too. James Callaghan led a Cabinet revolt and Wilson was forced into a humiliating climb down and lost the succeeding election (1970). Politicised rank and file militancy, led by shop stewards, had won its first victory. More were to follow.

The new Tory premier, Edward Heath, took over most of Castle's anti-union proposals but toughened them up by creating a special enforcement court, the National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC) that would have powers to fine and sequester the funds of unions. His Industrial Relations Bill also outlawed the closed shop, and forced unions to register with a Registrar as a condition for retaining legal immunities from prosecution. Collective agreements would be regarded as legally binding contracts. The NIRC could impose ballots before strikes and a 60-day cooling off period. Scabs could not be expelled from the union if the NIRC considered their treatment unfair.

The TUC lefts argued for non-cooperation with the law, hoping to make it unworkable, while the rights argued that the government had a democratic mandate - once the law was passed it had to be obeyed. The LCDTU, however, continued to mobilise the shop stewards' movement against Heath's proposals. Its conferences, with up to 2000 delegates from shop stewards' committees, called "days of action" like that in October 1970 when 250,000 workers struck under the slogan "Kill the Bill." Whilst these protests did not kill it, they politicised and brought together an identifiable movement of the rank and file.

The UCS dispute

The TUC rejected strike action against the Bill in December 1970. Instead, it decided on passive resistance - unions were to refuse to register with the NIRC and not to appear before it.

The years 1971-72 saw the first serious recession since the war. Unemployment climbed from 657,800 in December 1970 to 1,621,200 in February 1972. The government made it clear that it would not intervene to save "lame duck" companies and the number of bankruptcies and closures mushroomed.

The first big battle was at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) which announced the closure of four yards, sacking some 6,000 workers. The UCS shop stewards, led by CP members Jimmy Reid and Jimmy Airlie, decided on a "work-in" rather than a sit in. A 16-month campaign of strikes and mass demonstrations eventually forced the Tories to guarantee the yards stayed open. Though 2,000 jobs were lost, UCS was a major victory for the working class, divided the Tories and encouraged 200 other occupations.

In January 1972, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) called out 300,000 miners in their first national strike since 1926. In the coalfields, the strike was total and pickets turned their attention to big users of coal such as power stations. Jack Jones immediately instructed TGWU drivers not to cross miners' picket lines. Wherever the miners' "flying pickets" appeared, lorry drivers refused to pass them and so too did rail workers.

Saltley Gates

The decisive battle came at the Saltley Coking Depot in Birmingham when 10,000 striking engineers joined Arthur Scargill's 700 miners and forced the police to close the gates. Home Secretary Reginald Maudling later described the government as "wandering around the battlefield looking for someone to surrender to." The government was forced into a humiliating climb-down: they had initially offered the miners 6 per cent, now they offered over 20 per cent.

That victory spurred other workers into action. In March, 25,000 engineering workers in Manchester occupied 30 factories in pursuit of their wage claim. But the dockers' dispute in defence of jobs was the most politically explosive. The NIRC ruled that dockers, who were picketing container depots, were violating the Industrial Relations Act. In June, three London dockers were threatened with prison for picketing the Chobham Farm container base. Some 35,000 dockers struck unofficially in support of them and the charges were suddenly dropped.

Then, in July, the NIRC ordered the removal of pickets from an east London depot. When the pickets ignored the court order, five dockers were arrested and sent to Pentonville prison. The entire dock labour force came out on unofficial strike and dockers picketed out the Fleet Street newspapers under the slogan, 'Five Trade Unionists Are Inside - Why Aren't You Out?' Within four days, some 250,000 workers were on unofficial strike and Jack Jones successfully proposed that the TUC General Council call a one day general strike. The same day, 26 July, the Law Lords released the dockers.

Docks strike

A national dockers' strike began the next day but this put power back in the hands of the officials. After three weeks, Jack Jones struck a shoddy deal against the wishes of the rank and file dockers. At the press conference in Liverpool, when he refused to come outside and explain himself to an 8000 strong demonstration of dockers, a group of them burst into the room, tore up his papers and poured a jug of water over him.

The limits of the left leaders were now clear but, while the rank and file were outraged at their sabotage, they had no means of seizing the leadership themselves. The CP, still by far the strongest force on the left, resolutely opposed any serious criticism of Jones. Indeed, the LCDTU went into rapid decline after a conference where delegates were denied the right to put amendments to the CP's motion because the chair feared that the Trotskyists, members of the International Socialists and the Socialist Labour League (SLL), would gain a majority.

Social Contract

Meanwhile, Labour's leaders were re-building their links to the unions. A TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee produced a "Statement on Economic Policy and the Cost of Living" which first floated the idea

of a "Social Contract" between Labour in government and the unions. The Labour left, figures like Michael Foot and Tony Benn, also played an important role by drafting Labour's Programme 1973, which pledged to bring about a "fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families". The programme was accepted by that year's party conference at which the left received strong support from Scanlon and Jones.

As 1973 drew to a close, the stage was set for a final titanic conflict as the miners lodged a pay claim that would wreck the government's pay policy. This time, however, the union leaders minimised rank and file control by signing a deal to support the miners by refusing to move coal supplies. A government attempt to intimidate them by imposing a three day week on industry, which they thought would make workers turn on the miners, failed miserably. As the lights went out, popular feeling was against Heath.

He decided on the desperate ploy of calling an election on the theme "who rules Britain, the government or the miners?" Heath thought the right wing leadership of the NUM would force the miners back to work for the election period but the miners stayed out and, with regular power cuts, gave the strong impression that whoever did rule Britain, it was not Edward Heath.

The massive official support of the other unions made it clear that if the new government tried to use force it would be met by something akin to a general strike. On 28 February 1974, about two million normally Tory voters abstained and others voted Liberal. Labour's vote also fell, many of its voters still distrusting the party after the 1964-70 government, but it still had more MPs than the Tories. However, Wilson had no majority until after a second election in October.

Manifesto

Labour's election manifesto was the most radical since 1945. It repeated the pledge to "bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families." Many of its promises were a direct result of Jack Jones' pressure, especially the pledge to substantially increase pensions and raise them annually in line with the average wage. The setting up of an Arbitration and Conciliation Service (ACAS) was also his idea.

The manifesto promised to expand the mining industry, nationalise North Sea oil and gas reserves and bring them "under full Government control with majority public participation." It pledged to introduce strict price controls, repeal the Tories' Housing Finance Act, which had forced up council house rents, launch a public sector house-building programme and, "redistribute income and wealth". It also committed itself to "socialise existing nationalised industries" and "make power in industry genuinely accountable to the workers and the community at large." However these policies were presented as part of a "social contract" that also included an incomes policy - pay restraint.

New Jerusalem

In 1974, many militants genuinely expected Labour to take at least these first steps towards what they thought of as socialism. Jack Jones talked of the arrival of the "new Jerusalem", with no intended irony. The working class had just won some of the most momentous battles since the 1920s. It seemed as if the balance of power had been irreversibly shifted against the bosses and that now a series of major reforms would begin to hem in capitalism, slowly but surely undermining it.

In fact, Wilson was buying time to prepare a counter-attack and it came in the summer of 1975. Britain's economy was particularly badly hit by the world recession of that time and inflation approached 30 per cent. A sterling crisis engulfed the British economy. The pound lost a third of its value, creating a massive balance of payments deficit. Unemployment doubled, reaching 1,129,000 at the end of 1975. The IMF had to be called in and demanded a massive series of cuts.

Labour's manifesto had promised a referendum on the EEC. Wilson now used this as a weapon against the left. The left campaigned vigorously for a No vote but Wilson and the majority of Cabinet opposed and won the vote by a large margin. Wilson moved quickly. Benn was removed as the Minister for Industry and shunted into the Department of Energy. Jack Jones had said he would not stand for it if Benn were moved from Industry. In the event he did nothing.

Now the Social Contract was transformed into plain old wage restraint. Wilson turned precisely to the "left" union leaders, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, to sell it to their members. By July 1975, Phase One of the pay policy was in place, implemented by the "left" Michael Foot at the Department of Employment. This deal was "voluntary" insofar as the union leaders agreed to it. It was presented as a short-term measure (in Wilson's weasel words "giving a year for Britain") but it became the cornerstone of Labour's policy. In 1976, there was a 4.5% limit, in 1977, 10%. The Economist estimated that real wages were cut by 7%.

Skilled workers had been hit particularly and this led to a revolt in the spring of 1977. At British Leyland, tool room workers struck for eight weeks. At Heathrow, Ford's and in British Steel, other skilled workers followed suit. A conference of 1,700 stewards, largely from engineering, voted against the third phase of the social contract. In each case the union leaders acted decisively against the rank and file. Scanlon and Jones personally intervened on the side of Leyland management against the tool room strikers.

Worse was to follow when the fire fighters launched a strike against the phase three limit. The TUC refused support because, "the government is not likely to be deflected from its present course of action". Left to fight alone, the fire fighters were defeated by a Labour government that used troops extensively to scab on the strike.

Such victories made Wilson's successor, Jim Callaghan, and his right wing chancellor Denis Healey, overconfident. They pressed on with another round of pay restraint despite opposition from both TUC congress and the Labour Party. The "winter of discontent" of 1978-79 saw a massive strike wave involving millions of workers, which smashed the 5 per cent limit. This effectively destroyed Labour's credibility as a party - but in the absence of a leftwing alternative Thatcher rode to power with a clear majority.

Legacy

The key problem of these years of tumultuous class struggle was that when struggles reached a national level, the union leaders simply took over and the rank and file militants had no answer to this. Where struggles became objectively political, left union leaders like Jones and Scanlon were at a loss. For them, politics was entirely about elections. They thought the only democratic way to change a government was by an election and that unions had no right to bring down a government by strikes. Politically, for Jones the only way forward was a Labour government, so the unions had to make almost any sacrifices to get or keep a Labour government in office.

While Jack Jones was neither the first nor the last union leader to sell out strikes, his betrayal was not because he turned his back on the principles that had guided his early career. Rather, it was the inherent contradictions of those ideals that led him to side with Labour against the workers. His politics never went beyond the strategy of electing a Labour government to transform society by gradual reforms. To keep Labour in office he was prepared to sacrifice his own rank and file members. In turn, that not only destroyed jobs and cut living standards but also demoralised and confused the crucial layer of shop floor activists and laid the basis for the Tories' return to power in 1979. Thus, Jack Jones' legacy includes both Thatcher's government and Blair's New Labour, though he opposed both.

The key lessons for us today of Jones' career and the great struggles of the 1970s are clear. Union

leaders, even those of a radical persuasion, need to be under the control of a powerful and organised rank and file movement, able to act with the officials where possible and without them where necessary. At the heart of this we need to create a new workers' party, one able to criticise the vacillation of left leaders like Jones, and to give an alternative to the political programme of relying on Labour to reform capitalism: a party committed to directing workers' resistance towards the revolutionary overthrow of the system. In the crisis unfolding today, the lessons of Jones' life can help arm militants with a strategy to win.

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