

Thatcher, Major and the unions: Fighting the enemy within?

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When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 she had united the Tory party around the goal of breaking the strength of the British trade unions. This, the Thatcherites argued, was essential for the restructuring of industry and the restoration of British capitalism's profitability.

It was the third time in a decade that a government attempted to tackle this task on behalf of the ruling class. In 1969 Harold Wilson's Labour government launched a major attack on shop floor trade unionism. The proposals, *In Place of Strife*, were quickly withdrawn because of trade union opposition.

Edward Heath's attempt in the early 1970s was a spectacular failure. The Tories Industrial Relations Act (1971) and National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC) became the focus of mass industrial action in 1972 when five picketing dockers were gaoled. A wave of unofficial solidarity strikes forced the TUC to call a general strike and the dockers were quickly released. The anti-trade union legislation was crippled and the government never recovered from this defeat. It was virtually driven from office in 1974 by the second national miners' strike in two years.

Solving the Union Problem

The Tories had learnt a lot from their defeats in the early 1970s. Their battle plan was far more sophisticated than that of Heath. His attempt to tame the unions involved the introduction of one all-embracing piece of legislation, the Industrial Relations Act. The defect of this plan was that it attacked many union rights simultaneously. It created an easily identifiable foe and thereby risked arousing generalised working class opposition.

Thatcher's strategy was inspired by her ideological guru, Keith Joseph. His pamphlet, *Solving the Union Problem is the Key to Britain's Recovery*, explained why union strength was an obstacle to the capitalists. In particular it set out to destroy the power of the militants. As Joseph explained, the tactics used by rank and file leaders amounted to a 'militant's charter':

'As we would expect this 'militant's charter' . . . has bred militants, and driven moderates underground. Indeed we are now seeing militants increasingly taking over control from union officials . . . The national good can only be secured by changing the framework, the rules of the game, and then ensuring that everyone plays fairly by them.'

Changing the rules of the game meant attempting to smash the layer of militants and weaken the power and influence of trade unions generally within society at large and within industry. The Tories never tried to smash the unions altogether. Much of their legislation was aimed at weakening the unions as a force in society while simultaneously strengthening the power of the bureaucracy within the unions.

The timing and fine detail of the attack on the working class was laid down by Nicholas Ridley. Its execution was entrusted to a crop of loyal Thatcherites?Tebbit, Lawson, Brittan and Howe?who were quickly promoted to Thatcher?s cabinet in the early 1980s.

The trick was to avoid provoking a generalised response inside the working class. Top of the list was anti-union legislation, ?changing the rules of the game?, as Joseph called it. Instead of an all-embracing piece of legislation, the Thatcher government introduced anti-union laws on a piecemeal basis. Every two years a Bill was introduced to erode trade union rights, interfere with union organisation and outlaw effective action.

The process began in 1980 with a Bill attacking picketing and the right to take secondary action. Immunities in civil law were removed and the bosses were given the right to go to ordinary courts to get injunctions. This had the advantage of making the individual bosses, not the government, responsible for activating the laws and ordinary courts, rather than a special industrial court, responsible for implementing them.

Without question this opening shot was decisive. By targeting picket lines, something that the union leaders themselves were less than fond of, the Tories were striking right at the heart of effective trade unionism, at its ability to stop scabs and deliveries.

The response of the trade union leaders gladdened the Tories? hearts. Instead of mobilising all out action against this threat, the TUC limited its opposition to a lobby of parliament, an appeal to the good sense of ?senior policemen? (as TUC leader Lionel Murray said) and a ?day of action? on 14 May 1980. It was round one to the Tories?not by a knock-out, or even a points victory, but by submission.

In subsequent years new laws imposed pre-strike ballots, virtually abolished the closed shop, gave legal protection to scabs, made political strikes illegal, allowed bosses to victimise shop stewards deemed to have called strikes, and removed whole swathes of protective legislation from the workforce, including the abolition of the wages? councils. In 1994 they plan to grant outraged citizens, discomfited by a strike, the right to sue the unions involved for damages!

Using aspects of the laws, as well as encouraging the use of existing civil law, against sections of the working class, the Tories avoided a generalised confrontation with the unions. The price has been enormous. The printers, miners, seafarers and dockers have all been victims. Union funds have been sequestered, massive fines have been imposed and strikes have been banned or rendered ineffective.

All of this was achieved without any repeat of the 1972 nightmare for the bosses. They have been able to choose to use the laws, or not to, depending on whether circumstances were favourable to them. When the balance of forces was against them?in the early months of the miners? strike for example?they deliberately held back from launching legal attacks. When things stood more favourably for the bosses they have not hesitated to head straight for the courts.

One crucial result of this situation is that many workers are fearful that the laws may be used against them. This can weigh heavily when it comes to deciding whether or not to strike, whether or not to wait for a ballot, and whether or not to picket out other workers. Time and impetus are lost, the bosses are able to prepare, the officials are able to assert their control over the rank and file. Ballots are used to delay and derail action. Injunctions are cited as reasons for surrender. The threat of the laws, almost to the same extent as their actual use, has served the interests of the bosses. The new law to give bosses the right to selectively sack strikers is designed to increase the fears of workers and undermine any pressure for unofficial action.

But it was another element of the Tory approach to the unions which was decisive in enabling them to get away with this legal onslaught. They took on and defeated key sections of the working class, but in such a way as to ensure that they never had to fight on more than one front. This section by section approach was the cornerstone of the Ridley Plan. He identified sections of workers that the government should, in the short term, avoid clashing with because it would be vulnerable to their pressure. Other sections, in the face of which the government would be less vulnerable, would be targeted first. This list of targets included steelworkers, civil servants, health workers, rail workers, car workers and miners. While confrontations with these layers were underway the government would, in the words of the Ridley Plan, 'rig the return on capital to allow above-normal pay settlements in 'vulnerable' sectors, especially electricity and gas'.² In other words the Tories attacked some while buying off others.

Once again this strategy proved a winner for the Tories. Between 1979 and 1982 they challenged steelworkers, civil servants, health workers, car workers and rail workers. There was no shortage of willingness on the part of the working class to enter the fray against the Tories. The steelworkers showed themselves to be determined fighters, despite their right wing leaders and lack of militant traditions. When the Tories set about closing Corby steel works in 1979 they signalled that the butchery of the industry was their goal. Bill Sirs, an extreme right wing leader, responded by issuing all ISTC branch secretaries with a circular:

'Letters will be sent to Mr Callaghan, Leader of the Opposition and other Members of the Parliament to make representations for a public enquiry into the industry and to persuade the government to change their existing policy with regard to the industry.'³

Faced with this spineless opposition the Tories went for broke. They ordered British Steel to offer a 2% wage rise in a period where inflation was in double figures! This led directly to a three month strike, despite Sirs, in which the 'moderate' ISTC members set up strike committees, launched mass pickets, battled with police picket busters and attempted to spread action and win solidarity from other workers. But this strike, despite winning an increase on the original offer, was ultimately lost.

The steel strike, the first major struggle against Thatcher, could have been used to launch an all out offensive against the Tory attacks. Solidarity strike action, bringing forward other unions' claims and, above all, uniting the struggle in a general strike against the anti-union legislation, could have defeated the government and brought victory to the steelworkers and other groups. Not just over pay but over jobs as well. The union leaders would have none of this. The steel industry was slaughtered in the months and years that followed, as plant after plant closed.

The picture was the same in other key disputes. Defeats over pay or, as in the case of British Leyland, over the victimisation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) member and convenor of Longbridge, Derek Robinson, paved the way for massive job cuts and the overall weakening of the unions. Unlike the Tories, the working class movement lacked any sort of overall battle plan.

Each of the disputes in this period was carefully timed. Each was kept separate—thanks largely to the divisive sectionalism of the union leaders concerned.

In the health dispute of 1982 COHSE leader Albert Spanswick, when faced with the potential generalisation of the struggle, was quick to declare:

'We don't want people to take action to introduce a disorderly situation or bring the government down.'⁴

The isolation of these sectors contributed to the defeat of each of them. And the Tories followed through

these defeats with victimisations. After each strike militants were targeted and sacked. In the car industry shop floor leaders, such as Derek Robinson and Alan Thornett, were turfed out on trumped-up charges. The workforce were initially prepared to strike to get these leaders reinstated. Each time this happened the union leaders derailed the action by stitching up deals with the employers. A whole layer of militants found themselves outside the gates. Managers were re-asserting their 'right to manage' with a vengeance. As a boss at British Leyland, Dick Giordano, put it:

'We have discovered a cadre of factory managers who have gone back to managing. Mrs Thatcher has given management the environment to make changes.'

Recession and the Labour movement

Between 1980 and 1982 recession engulfed the capitalist world. This was the background to Thatcher's economic policy. The Tories were determined to allow the slump to rip.

They consciously aimed to drive out of business all the weakest, the least productive, least competitive and least profitable sections of British capitalism. Mass unemployment was used to frighten workers with jobs away from militancy.

A 'leaner but fitter' British industry was to be the reward for this austerity. The scale of the recession was enormous. Between 1980 and 1983, manufacturing output fell 20%, back to 1967 levels. In Britain's biggest firms, such as ICI, Lucas, GKN, British Steel and Leyland, survival was only ensured by the sacking of between 40 and 50% of the workforce. This massive shakeout destroyed thousands of jobs in the car industry, engineering, transport, shipbuilding, steel and textiles. In four years British Leyland shed 97,000 jobs. In the same period over half of the jobs in British Steel disappeared. Unemployment inched above the three million mark according to official figures. In reality it was in excess of four million at the height of the recession.

This had its effect on working class confidence and militancy. The threat of losing your job if you went on strike was very real. And all the time the Tories protested that they could not do a thing about it, because what was happening was the result of 'market forces'. It was certainly true that mass unemployment was a result of the blind market forces that are characteristic of capitalism. Its drive for profit meant that 'labour costs' had to be cut. Workers' jobs and livelihoods were sacrificed to its needs. But it is not true that nothing could be done about this.

The working class movement needed to tackle these problems by fighting back: by defending jobs and living standards through militant direct action; by recognising that for such action to be successful it was necessary to fight for totally different priorities to those of the profit system—priorities based on workers' needs not the capitalists' profits; by basing the fightback on a recognition that political questions were at stake and not flinching from a political confrontation with the government itself. None of this happened. The leadership of the labour movement accepted the rules of the capitalist game. It limited each struggle to isolated and sectional actions. It protested loudly that it was apolitical. It accepted—as it has done from the beginning—that capitalism itself was sacrosanct.

Abandoning the unemployed

This attitude was highlighted by the official labour movement's treatment of the unemployed themselves. With hundreds of thousands of workers being sacked there was a real chance to harness their anger by organising an unemployed workers' movement. Sacked militants provided a ready-made basis for such an organisation in every major town. Their initial pressure for action led the Labour Party to call two mass

demonstrations against unemployment. The TUC even gave grudging support to two 'People's Marches for Jobs' in 1981 and 1983.

Instead of seizing such opportunities to build a mass movement of unemployed workers, the bureaucracy moved to contain the anger of the jobless, to prevent them from forming any permanent independent organisations. They turned all the demonstrations, like the People's Marches, into passive protests under their strict control.

To get onto the People's March unemployed workers had to undergo a vetting procedure every bit as rigorous as a claims interview at a benefit office. On the marches themselves the 'left' agents of the bureaucracy, the CPGB, operated a police regime. Socialists were expelled from the march and sometimes threatened with physical violence if they challenged the undemocratic decisions of the stewards. Marchers were blocked from visiting workplaces and forging links with employed workers. Only the initiative of militants on the march, including members of Workers Power, ensured that workplaces, especially strikebound ones, were visited. On the 1983 trek the CPGB stewards, in line with a TUC edict, banned marchers from shouting anti-Tory slogans! The march was to be non-political. It was organised as a moral protest enlisting the support (which of course never materialised) of local businessmen, the churches, the Liberals and even the 'wet' Tories. Anti-Tory chants would alienate such 'friends' of the unemployed according to the CPGB and the TUC.

Despite the marches being turned into mobile prison camps, left wing marchers were able to win support amongst the unemployed themselves to the project of building local fighting organisations. Regional Job Centres were occupied to protest against high levels of unemployment. Workplaces were visited. Local demonstrations were held. Unemployed centres were set up. Once again the leadership moved in with its vast resources, its apparatus and its faithful followers in the CPGB to destroy the independence of such campaigns. In order to get government grants for unemployed centres they banned politics. The centres were to be used purely for the provision of 'tea and sympathy'.

A visible and militant unemployed workers' movement could have been built in this period. It would have been a valuable weapon in the struggle to defeat the Tories and the bosses. The TUC, soon with the backing of a Labour Party that had its eyes firmly fixed on the 1983 election, sabotaged the chance to build such a movement. They paid the price of this failure by suffering one of their most humiliating electoral defeats ever in 1983. Instead of rallying the working class to action against the Tories, Labour ran scared. Worse, it slavishly supported the Tories' savage Falklands war. The Tories followed their South Atlantic triumph with a crushing victory at the polls.

Preparing for Battle

As 1984 approached the Tories were gearing up for what they knew would be the key battle of the 1980s—a miners' strike. They appointed Ian MacGregor to the National Coal Board on an enormous salary with a brief to close down 'uneconomic pits' and provoke a strike.

MacGregor was a veteran of various US miners' strikes. He had assisted Michael Edwards during his reign at British Leyland. He was put in charge for a fight, and everybody knew it. Within two days of his appointment, in the autumn of 1983, the NUM called an overtime ban over its pay claim.

The Tories were already confident. Douglass Wass, then Permanent Treasury Secretary, admitted as much when he announced in early 1983:

'What has happened in shop floor behaviour through fear and anxiety is much greater than I think could

have been achieved by more co-operative methods.?6

Now they needed to test the likely response of the official leaders of the labour movement to a national showdown with the miners, regarded by all concerned as the natural vanguard of the British labour movement. They outlawed trade unions at their 'spy centre', GCHQ, and got away with it. The TUC called one 'day of action' and did virtually nothing to publicise it. In fact the response of ordinary trade union members on the day of action showed that there was a massive groundswell of anger at the Tories. All over the country hundreds of thousands went on strike and staged protest marches. But that was it. Nothing else was done. The pioneer of 'new realism', CPUSA leader Alastair Graham, would not call a strike in the civil service. The TUC fell into a sullen silence. It reminds itself of this defeat by staging a symbolic march past GCHQ once a year. But those who remained loyal to the union were sacked and trade unionism was successfully illegalised at GCHQ.

This boost to Tory confidence was supplemented by the TUC's response to the dispute in the print industry at the Stockport Messenger in 1983. A Thatcherite boss, Eddie Shah, decided to enter the history books as the man who tested the anti-union laws. He got an injunction against the print union, the NGA, to stop them carrying out 'secondary picketing' at his Warrington plant. Here at last was the chance to turn pious resolutions of opposition to the anti-union laws, passed at the 1982 special conference of the TUC, into action. Warrington became the scene of pitched battles between picketers and riot police. A national newspaper strike was threatened. Workers from all over the country flooded to Warrington to join the fray.

Despite the clear will of rank and file workers to fight the anti-union laws, despite the TUC's formal opposition to these laws, the trade union leadership gave in the minute they were faced with court injunctions against the NGA. The TUC general council voted to stay within the law and ordered the NGA to do the same. In two sessions it voted to stab the Warrington printers in the back. The attitude of the majority of the union leaders was summed up by the then leader of the AUEW, Terry Duffy. Speaking against both the mass picketing at Warrington and the spreading of the strike, a move that was gaining wide support amongst rank and file workers throughout the print industry, he declared:

'An escalation of this dispute would cause tremendous damage to the NGA and to the image of the trades union movement as a whole. It must be kept within the law . . . We will not support the NGA if they continue to break the law.'7

Not only was Eddie Shah being given the green light to use non-union labour in the print, but the courts were being given a clear message from Congress House that every anti-working class ruling would be obeyed. Bosses everywhere permitted themselves smiles of satisfaction. There was not going to be a repetition of 1972. The anti-union laws were not merely in place, they had been shown to work.

The time had come for the confrontation of the decade. Not only had the TUC majority refused solidarity to an embattled section of workers, but the left did not have the guts to act independently. The minority on the General Council who voted to support the NGA represented some of the most powerful sections of the trade union movement. Yet they would not break ranks with the right. They were prepared to play by the rules of the bureaucratic club and leave the NGA to its fate?their consciences intact because they had 'voted the right way' on the night.

The Great Strike

Thatcher was busting to have a go at the miners. Their defeat would be a blow to every worker. It would clear the path for the privatisation of the mines. The industry was declared unprofitable, a relic of the consensus years. It had to be pared down in order to make it an enticing prospect for private bosses.

There were political factors at stake for Thatcher as well. Not only was she after revenge for 1974, not only did she want to show to the 'wets' who had been connected with Heath that she was capable of completing the job he had abandoned, but she also wanted to avenge her own humiliation of 1981. In that year a premature attempt to attack the miners resulted in one of the most serious defeats she suffered at the hands of the working class. When closures were announced in South Wales the miners came out. Unprepared for a show-down on such a scale she carried out an uncharacteristic U-turn and found the money to keep the threatened pits open.

She was determined not to let this happen again. By 1984 the police, the courts, the NCB management and the Cabinet were all prepared. After Warrington and GCHQ she had the added reassurance that the TUC would not deliver vital solidarity when the miners came up against the law.

The military preparation for the miners' strike revealed another key element of the Tories' general battle plan. The Ridley Plan had as its overriding goal preparation for a show-down with the miners. Other sections would either have been previously defeated or bought off by the time the battle came. Coal stocks would be high and alternative scab transport would be ready. Social security payments to strikers and their families would be cut. On top of all of this the police would be ready to move into action in a way never before seen in British history.

The Ridley Plan called on the government to 'prepare a large mobile squad of police to uphold the law against violent picketing'⁸. This squad became a de facto national police force, heavily armed and co-ordinated through the National Reporting Centre. Its brief was to smash the picket lines of the miners, bar the movement of pickets and, as the strike unfolded, occupy and terrorise the mining villages. By 1984 the Tories felt ready to launch such an operation.

The year long miners' strike was a real opportunity to halt the Tory offensive. The miners themselves fought with a determination and heroism that inspired thousands to support them. They were met with brutal repression, vicious prison sentences and fines, the sequestration of their union funds by the courts. Thatcher demonstrated that she understood the class essence of the conflict when she announced:

'We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. Now we are fighting the enemy within. It is more difficult to fight but just as dangerous to liberty.'⁹

In a sense she was right. The miners' strike was a threat to the liberties of the capitalists. The profit system dictated that the miners be sacrificed so that their industry could be sold off to asset stripping privateers. The strike—with its demand for an end to all pit closures—was a direct challenge to the imperatives of that system. The capitalists cherish their freedom to maintain a monopoly of armed force. The strike pickets were a threat to the right of the police in this country to set up road blocks, terrorise villages and batter unarmed workers. The capitalists insist on their sole right to devise, interpret and impose laws in the interests of their class. The strike was a threat to laws that enabled a union to be stripped of funds, donated to it over decades by hundreds of thousands of workers, simply for acting in their defence. But it was a beacon of liberty for every worker.

Thatcher's victory over the miners was handed to her by the same TUC that had left the Warrington printers and GCHQ trade unionists to their fate. In 1980 David Basnett (then leader of what is now the GMB) had warned that the first round of Tory anti-union legislation would meet massive working class resistance:

'This law is likely to lead to a confrontation which will certainly not be of the trade unions' seeking. Solidarity is too strong a tradition to evaporate before a new legal maxim.'¹⁰

When the confrontation came solidarity, amongst the time servers who lead the big unions, evaporated without trace. Ray Buckton, a supposed left-winger, declared:

‘We cannot say what help, if any, we can offer.’¹¹

As the leader of the train drivers’ union ASLEF, he could have ‘helped’ by instructing his members not to move a single lump of coal during the strike. And, as TUC chairman at the time, he could have launched a struggle for a general strike against the use of the anti-union laws in the dispute. Instead he went along with Basnett who now warned:

‘You cannot allow a dispute like this to rumble on. It is disturbing our economy and it is disturbing our industrial relations.’¹²

The limits of left reformism

The Great Strike did not just reveal the treacherous role of the official labour movement leaders. It also demonstrated the inadequacy of the militant left reformism associated with Arthur Scargill in the unions and Tony Benn in the Labour Party.

Arthur Scargill was a very left wing trade union bureaucrat. His allies in the Labour Party, Tony Benn, Dennis Skinner and Eric Heffer, had led the movement for party democracy against the right wing in the early 1980s. Their radical rhetoric included a vision of a ‘socialist’ future for Britain. They embodied the hopes of many of the most militant workers for genuine, thoroughgoing social change.

But they also served as a brake on the action of such workers when it threatened to go beyond the limits acceptable to left reformism.

In the Labour Party, the Bennites had made peace with the centre and right as early as 1982 at the Bishop’s Stortford meeting. The struggle to make the Labour Party and its leaders more accountable to its working class base was sacrificed to ‘unity’ to achieve electoral victory.

They extended their loyalty pledge to the party’s new leader, Neil Kinnock. Throughout the year long miners’ strike none of the leading Bennites would openly criticise Kinnock for his refusal to give unconditional support to the miners or his repeated attacks on them for their ‘violence’?i.e. their attempts to organise mass pickets and defend themselves against a heavily armed police force. Benn refused to challenge Kinnock for the leadership of the party.

At the time thousands of left Labour Party members were involved in miners’ support groups. They were furious at Kinnock’s stance. Their support meant that a serious challenge to Kinnock could have got off the ground. For all their speeches in support of the miners they would not take the one action open to them?fighting the labour movement’s own enemy within. They wouldn’t mention his name, let alone risk a leadership contest with him. Judas Kinnock, as many miners called him at the time, lived on to invest his thirty pieces of silver in the reconstruction of the Labour Party as a safe, right wing bet for the bosses courtesy of the refusal by Benn, Heffer and Skinner to mount an organised challenge to him during the strike.

Scargillism

If Benn displayed the inadequacies of political left reformism, then Scargill was the personification of left reformist trade unionism. It too was found wanting.

Scargill was sincere in his desire to save miners’ jobs. He believed militant action was necessary to carry

through this defence, never making any secret of his belief that a strike would be necessary and that mass pickets would be crucial to the victory of such a strike. Yet he proved incapable of advancing a winning strategy.

Scargill has long believed that trade union organisation is the principal weapon the working class needs to effect the socialist transformation of society. By rousing workers to action over economic issues a union can pressurise a left Labour government into taking the necessary political measures against capitalism. Scargill's belief in the self-sufficiency of trade unions, and in the vanguard role of the NUM in particular, meant that his entire strategy centred on capturing the NUM's bureaucratic machine, not on restructuring it in a democratic fashion and ensuring that it was under the control of the rank and file. In his quest he mobilised the rank and file when he needed them as a pressure against the right. He did not attempt at any stage to break the power of the bureaucracy or challenge its divisive regional structures.

The result of this during the strike was to weaken the union's ability to fight. To have rallied the forces for a victory at Orgreave—the coking plant at which key mass picketing took place—it was necessary to openly challenge the regional bureaucrats. These leaders, including lefts like Jack Taylor of Yorkshire and Emlyn Williams of South Wales, deliberately directed their members away from Orgreave during the decisive battles. Further, to have organised defence of the picket against the massive presence of trained riot police, it was necessary to form disciplined defence squads from among the most determined of the miners and their supporters.

Scargill refused to do either. He put himself at the head of the picket and showed courage in the face of the police rampage. He is the only national union leader to have been arrested and hospitalised by the police during the 1980s. But while this speaks well for his personal integrity it was not enough to win.

It was clear from the start of the strike, given the government's preparations, that the miners were not going to win on their own. Mass solidarity action, linked to the fight for an all out general strike to defeat the anti-union laws being used to attack the NUM, was the only way to win. Scargill shied away from such a strategy since it would have brought him into direct conflict with his fellow bureaucrats.

The TUC Conference in the autumn of 1984 promised to support the miners. But—as one journalist observed at the time—the TUC may have written the NUM a blank cheque, but they conveniently omitted to sign it. Support was given on condition that the TUC control all actions in the dispute. Scargill then refused to attack them when they did not deliver the goods. Neither his 'allies' on the left like Ron Todd (TGWU) and Jimmy Knapp (NUR) nor his enemies on the right like David Basnett (GMB) or Len Murray and then Norman Willis of the TUC, were publicly named by Scargill as traitors to the NUM's struggle. Yet these men were tolerating widespread scabbing within their own unions while refusing to support the minority of their members who were endeavouring to deliver direct solidarity action.

Just as Benn put the good of Labour's electoral fortunes above a complete break with the right, so Scargill put the unity of the trade union bureaucracy above the interests of rank and file miners. On two occasions his acceptance of the rights of his fellow bureaucrats stopped him from using his own rank and file supporters as an active army fighting for solidarity and the spreading of the dispute.

The dockers came out on strike twice during the miners' dispute. The Tories were intent on scrapping the National Dock Labour Scheme, but only after defeating the miners. They were terrified of fighting on two fronts. This was therefore an ideal time to defend the scheme and demand its extension to all ports. The militant dockers wanted to enter into a joint struggle against the Tories and, as a leaflet from Kent miners put it, open the second front. Scargill, however, insisted that the dockers' dispute was their own and that Ron Todd, their leader, knew what he was doing. He failed to call for the unity of the strikers, for joint

pickets or for the dockers to link their demands to those of the miners. When Todd was bought off by the employers and ordered a return to work, Scargill failed to appeal to the rank and file dockers over the heads of their leaders. This would have entailed mobilising his supporters independently of the bureaucracy, violating the traditions of sectionalism and bureaucratic prerogative that cripple the working class movement.

All of these failings stem from the politics of left reformism applied to the trade union struggle. Left reformism will fight, but is fettered by the limits of its project. It will cajole its bureaucratic bedfellows but not break from them. It will mobilise the rank and file for its own purposes and under its control, but it will not organise them as a fighting force politically independent of the bureaucracy and committed to the thoroughgoing democratisation of the unions. Just as Benn's truce of 1982 paved the way for Kinnock's rise in the Labour Party, so Scargill's refusal to break with the right in 1984/85 enabled them to regroup and make him their prisoner in the NUM.

Underlying these 'tactical' concessions to the right is Scargill's deep seated opposition to the need for a new revolutionary party to fight for the leadership of the British working class. Scargill has many criticisms of the right wing leadership of the Labour Party but his strategy for socialism is based on the transformation of that party. Well before he became a national union leader Scargill argued:

'I think the ideal way that the working class can achieve working class power is to change the Labour Party; not in total because you can never transform a social-democratic party?it will always remain social democratic.'¹³

Scargill believes that Labour, despite its social democratic imperfections, is the vehicle for achieving working class power. For this reason he will not contemplate a split from Labour or the fight now for a revolutionary party. As a union leader he stuck by this principle of 'unity?'. But it is a self-defeating unity that benefits the right, because they know the left reformists dare not break with them. What is more it is a bogus 'unity?'. For it does not unite those who are prepared to fight, it does not unite the working class in struggle. Rather it unites the workers with those who curtail and sabotage their struggle. In order to win the fighting unity of the workers it is necessary to separate them from their treacherous leaders. Thus a revolutionary party is essential. Such a party would be a 'departure?' from the existing reformist Labour and trade union movement in the sense that it must organise separately for revolutionary struggle, must jealously safeguard its political and organisational freedom of criticism and action. But such a party would fight for its right to campaign within the mass organisations of the class, never turning its back on the millions of workers who remain under the leadership of reformism.

In contrast, Scargill's reformist strategy led to tactical and organisational conclusions which left him helpless in the face of the right and incapable of mapping out a road to victory.

The impact of defeat

The defeat of the miners had a profound impact on the working class and its struggles. It intensified the mood of retreat that had begun in the aftermath of the steel strike. When postal workers, teachers, shipbuilding workers and telephone engineers went into battle, they knew that the odds were stacked more heavily against them than if the miners had won.

In the five years following the strike yet more defeats were inflicted on key sections of the working class?the printers at Wapping, the seafarers and the dockers, as well as a host of smaller groups of workers. The process of destroying and dispersing the layer of militants continued apace. The effects on trade unionism at a rank and file level were telling. At Nabisco in Liverpool, the union, GMBATU (now

GMB), ceded full power over all working practices to the management for three years and acceded to 1,500 redundancies. At the Caterpillar Tractor plant in Leicester the union accepted that the wording on a strike ballot paper should be vetted by the management.

Productivity soared as the rate of exploitation intensified. A recent report revealed the general effect of the miners' defeat on the bargaining strength of trade unionism: the proportion of pay rises negotiated through collective bargaining between 1984 and 1990 fell from 71% of all deals to 54%.¹⁴

In the NUM a new right wing coalition was formed and succeeded in marginalising Scargill. He was prevented by his own delegation at the 1985 TUC congress from speaking against the anti-union laws. Across the trade unions membership levels continued to fall ? from the all time high in 1979 of 12.2 million to 8.8 million in 1986. That year saw the lowest number of recorded strikes since 1939 and the lowest numbers of days lost through strike action since 1967. But more important than these figures was the triumph of new realism inside the leadership of the trade union movement.

Prior to the miners' strike new realism had been the doctrine of the hard right inside the TUC around Alastair Graham of the CPSA, Hammond of the EETPU and Duffy of the AUEW. Now it was embraced by the dominant ?centre left? at Congress House?Willis (TUC General Secretary), John Edmonds (Basnett's successor in the GMB), Bickerstaffe (NUPE) and even Ron Todd, the supposedly left-wing leader of the TGWU. Their brand of new realism did not involve the open scabbing that became Hammond's trademark, but a concerted campaign to turn unions away from ?traditions of solidarity?, towards becoming service outfits, winning and holding members through their ability to offer financial packages such as credit cards, cheap mortgages and sweetheart arrangements with the bosses via single union deals. Where action was inevitable, new realism involved leaders trying to restrict it to selective or one day strikes, keeping all disputes strictly within the limits set by the anti-union laws.

This line of march was dictated by the bureaucrats' need to secure their own financial privileges and their position as negotiators, through maintaining their membership rolls. They advanced two arguments for their position. First, if the miners could not win, how could anyone else? This diverted attention from the fact that they had been the real architects of the miners' defeat by refusing to deliver the necessary solidarity.

Secondly, they argued, further action would damage the chances of getting a Labour government elected. This ignored the fact that Labour's poll rating had soared during the height of the strike (as it was to do during the peak of the Anti-Poll Tax movement six years later), and that Thatcher's victory over the miners ensured that the ruling class would do everything they could to secure her re-election. Of course, when she was re-elected in 1987, the bureaucrats merely decided that they had not been new realist enough.

The age of share ownership and popular capitalism led the unions, along with Kinnock's Labour Party, to adapt their thinking to the ?realities? of Thatcher's Britain, or rather to Thatcherism itself. They embraced whole chunks of Thatcher's ideology including acceptance of privatisation, (no commitment to renationalisation), getting the unions to look after small shareholders and so on. Under Kinnock Labour declared its commitment to most of Thatcher's anti-union laws and the unions agreed. The bureaucrats discovered quite early that the laws on ballots, for example, proved to be a weapon in their hands, giving them greater control over the actions of their members. The laws and the legacy of defeats had immeasurably strengthened the bureaucracy against the rank and file, despite weakening their political role in society as a whole.

Politics and the rank and file

The 1980s were years of defeat and betrayal. Thatcher gained a series of early victories. The Great Miners' Strike represented a watershed in British politics. The working class had suffered a strategic defeat. A powerful component of the vanguard of the trade union movement, the miners, had been defeated. The resulting attack on the industry has reduced the NUM to a small rump. Three or four million unemployed has become the norm. Strike figures have collapsed and trade union membership has declined dramatically.

The leadership of the labour movement played a decisive role in these defeats but why were the militants, the powerful shop stewards' movement, unable to prevent these defeats and sell outs? After all was not this the movement that smashed the Tories' anti-union laws in the 1970s and drove them from office?

The reason for this was that the militants have not been able to answer the crisis of leadership in the labour movement. Indeed, the rank and file militants who had led the struggles of the 1970s were part of the crisis of leadership. With the election of a Labour government in 1974 rank and file militants rapidly became politically disoriented. This was supposed to be their government. Yet through the Social Contract, a system of wage restraint agreed between government and trade union leaders, it was attacking their wages. Through participation schemes at work it was incorporating trade unionists into the process of butchering jobs.

The principal political organisation that influenced the shop stewards and convenors of this period was the CPGB. It encouraged workers to place their faith in the election of left bureaucrats, particularly Hugh Scanlon (AUEW) and Jack Jones (TGWU). Yet it was these self same leaders who policed the Social Contract on behalf of the Labour government, denouncing strikes against it in the car industry and at Heathrow Airport. Worse, the CPGB encouraged involvement in participation schemes, notably at Leyland where Derek Robinson enthusiastically participated in the attack on jobs. At Speke he sabotaged the fight to save the Liverpool plant on the grounds that jobs had to go to ensure the viability of the company as a whole. By these means the CPGB played a direct role in demobilising militancy and disorienting the militants. Its strategy, like Scargill's in the NUM, was confined to capturing positions of bureaucratic influence, not organising the rank and file as an independent force. It encouraged illusions in 'left' friends and had no answers when these friends betrayed.

As the 1980s progressed the CPGB saw its base in industry fall apart. Its influence within the bureaucracy dwindled. Its trade union arm, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU), which was a leading force in the struggles of the 1970s, played virtually no role in resisting Thatcher's attacks. It concluded from all of this that we had entered 'new times' and rapidly became chief cheerleader for those fleeing from class politics altogether. Today the CPGB—now renamed Democratic Left—is a fringe group, like those to its left that it once berated. Those who hark back to its earlier days of industrial strength have split into a number of fragments.

A significant number of trade union militants were repelled by the class collaborationist politics of the CPGB in the 1970s. Many turned to the International Socialists (IS), later renamed the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). They developed a base in industry, not as powerful as the CPGB's but strong enough to call a series of well attended National Rank and File Workers' conferences. Workers Power itself developed as a grouping inside the IS. We came into opposition with the leadership of this group not because of its orientation to rank and file workers, which was very healthy, but because of the politics it took to those militants. It failed to offer them a revolutionary alternative to the CPGB's bureaucratism or to Labour's brand of reformism.

The IS reflected another weakness of trade unionist politics—economism. This is a term Marxists use to describe socialists who believe that the economic struggle in the workplaces—over wages, conditions,

health and safety and rights?is capable of spontaneously generalising itself into a political struggle against capitalism. It reflects the existing struggles and demands of workers instead of attempting to direct them towards more advanced, consciously political goals.

The IS taught its working class militants to be the best trade unionists. So far so good. It did not add, however, that they had to be revolutionary communists, providing answers to the various political problems posed by capitalism. It rejected outright the need for a programme of demands that could act as a bridge between existing struggles and revolutionary goals?what we call transitional demands. Although in this period it organised significant numbers of rank and file workers, it limited their horizons to the economic struggle. It taught them to fight this struggle harder, generalise battles over wages and conditions and through that generate a political outlook.

The problem with such economism was sharply revealed in 1974 when Labour became the government. The IS saw the early years of its reign as a honeymoon, after which a new explosion of wages struggles would shatter illusions in reformism. This failed to understand the political nature of the illusions workers had in reformism.

These could not be conquered by a generalised wages offensive, but by workers consciously breaking with all aspects of the reformist programme. They had to be overcome by a party with a political alternative to Labour, a programme, that answered key questions, such as where the money for public spending was to come from, how capitalist productivity drives could be combated through a fight for workers? control, how the strength of the state needed to be resisted by workers? defence guards. For the IS this was not the job of the party. The party was merely the glue that stuck the existing militants, with their existing methods of struggle, together. It was a purely organisational view of the party, not a political one.

In this sense IS economism was little better than the non-party syndicalism that many workers of the period spontaneously developed. Syndicalism, like economism, was hostile to the bureaucracy and oriented to the rank and file. Many militants believed that socialist advance could be carried through by the trade unions themselves, without a party. They believed that the economic struggle could be generalised to the point where the unions themselves would move against capitalism and replace it with their rule.

For Workers Power?and this was a key element of our disagreement with IS?trade unionist politics, whether syndicalist or economist, did not meet the needs of the layer of militants who were willing to organise a struggle against the bosses? attacks. A revolutionary programme?and a party to fight for it?were indispensable to transform militancy into a conscious fight against capitalism. The failure of the left to generate widespread support for such a programme, and to utilise the struggles of the 1970s to build such a party, were to cost the working class dear in the years that followed.

When Thatcher came to power rank and file workers could look to no alternative political leadership to that of the bureaucracy, no alternative programme to that of sectional trade unionism. Faced with a carefully planned assault, with wide ranging political consequences, they were unable to transcend the limits of trade unionism.

On the introduction of the anti-union laws, a clear case of an attack on all workers, there was no class wide response. Every two years a new law went through. Despite the fact that Tebbit candidly described his 1984 bill as ?the most devastating thing ever to hit the militants?, no rank and file response to it was forthcoming.

The same crisis of direction manifested itself when it came to solidarity action. The fierce battles in steel and in the mines were not matched by the spread of action in support of the strikers.

Underlying these failures was the inability of militants to overcome the limitations of a purely trade unionist view of the struggles: the idea that these battles and laws did not affect their section and therefore they should keep out of them; the idea that their disputes were non-political; the inability to advance a convincing alternative to Thatcher's economic policies. Where rank and file initiatives did develop, as with the National Rank and File Miners' Movement, they withered on the vine as no clear political alternative to the reformist bureaucracy emerged. Nor could it emerge spontaneously.

The new period of crisis and the Tory offensive posed new problems which required new answers. Only if a rank and file movement had been built on the basis of revolutionary communist politics could the difficulties have been overcome and the crisis of leadership amongst the rank and file resolved. For only revolutionary politics could explain the real nature of the Tory attacks and their class wide significance. Only revolutionary politics could pose the need for a unified response to the threat of the anti-union laws through a general strike to smash them; explain the threat of the new police methods and the workers' defence squads needed to defeat them; pit the priorities of the working class on jobs, wages and conditions against those of profitability and productivity. In the absence of such politics the defeats were inevitable.

Service unionism

By her third election victory Thatcher had achieved a series of significant victories over the trade union movement. The battles of the late 1980s and early 1990s were to be very different from those fought by the NUM and the Wapping printers.

The 1988 Employment Act imposed compulsory postal ballots for all union elections and effectively abolished the closed shop. While the TUC was eventually compelled to expel the scab union EETPU in 1988 for its continued poaching and its refusal to accept TUC arbitration in inter-union disputes (but not, significantly, because of its strike-breaking record!), it was in no mood to organise resistance to the Tories' continuing onslaught. Their attention switched to developing new realism into a fully functioning system of union organisation.

The age of service unionism was born. This was a specific response to the economic boom of the late 1980s. The boom had created a climate of expansion and optimism. Working class attitudes had supposedly been transformed from concern with pay and conditions into concern with credit cards, cheap holidays, individual rights at work and litigation. The unions sought to offer such services as a means of winning new supporters. They replaced the schemes for workers' participation that they had pushed in the 1970s with schemes for collective share ownership. A 1988 TUC document urged:

Forms of financial participation such as employee share ownership plans, or the British Airways unions' attempts to organise collectively individual employee shareholdings, must be developed to allow employees to participate financially in their company, influence decision making and be insulated from the worst risks of share ownership.¹⁵

Commenting on the impending dock strike of 1989 Bill Morris, now General Secretary of the TGWU, attacked the dockers for not being modern enough and insisted that the unions had a new role to play. He told Marxism Today:

We have missed opportunities because we've limited our horizons purely to pay and conditions and not thought with sufficient vision about the future and what role we want to play.¹⁶

Correct! Except that Morris did not envision the unions playing a political, socialist role beyond the limited horizons of the past. On the contrary, along with Edmonds of the GMB and Bickerstaffe of NUPE, the new

crop of trade union leaders envisioned a role of service provision for individual members made easier through the establishment of single union sweetheart deals in new industries and a national framework of partnership with the employers. This was in keeping with Neil Kinnock's ideas of 'partnership' as the keystone of Labour's economic strategy. It led the TUC to go ever further in presenting itself as a vehicle of class collaboration.

In 1991 Norman Willis issued a new year message:

'Now is not the time for class warriors to be locked into an historic conflict over the allocation of fast-disappearing spoils which will only destroy their own and their colleagues' jobs.'¹⁷

Instead, using exactly the same words as Bill Morris, he called on trade unionists to work with their bosses to 'get the wheels of industry turning'. To prove their commitment to this the TUC agreed, at its 1990 Congress, to proposals from Labour's employment spokesman Tony Blair to accept the need to retain the Tories' anti-union laws. And in 1992 the TUC invited the director of the Confederation of British Industry, John Banham, to address Congress. Only Arthur Scargill and a handful of delegates walked out during this unprecedented, albeit symbolic, act of class collaboration.

Inevitably the drift towards service unionism called into question the TUC's own role. Towards the end of the 1980s it began to function almost exclusively as a clearing house for inter-union disputes. The spread of single union deals and the disgusting spectacle of 'beauty contests' enabling companies to select which union was most appropriate for a particular plant meant competition became fierce. The GMB, MSF, AEU and TGWU found themselves squabbling for recognition rights on greenfield sites. Keith Jones, the TGWU's research officer in South Wales commented:

'I can't see any greenfield site ever agreeing again to sign agreements that are not single-union deals.'¹⁸

Like the EETPU scabs the other unions were ready to offer forms of no-strike deals in order to win recognition. While the EETPU was prepared to offer a guarantee of not striking the other unions were prepared to offer deals in which a formal right to strike would be maintained, but an exhaustive arbitration procedure would render the exercise of that right highly unlikely. A GMB single union deal with NEK Cables specified:

'It is specifically agreed that no strikes, lockouts, slowdown, stoppage of work or departure from normal working practices or any other form of industrial action whether by the company, the union, or the employees will take place whilst the grievance, dispute or difference is being investigated either in the domestic situation or in the stages of procedure.'¹⁹

This was a no-strike deal in anyone's language. The major unions were accepting management's terms in order to win recognition. Worse, they went along with the introduction of new work practices that served to undermine collectivity in the workplace. In addition to Japanese-style cosmetic practices of shared canteens between management and workers and the obliteration of different uniforms for workers and supervisors, the unions accepted more fundamental changes involving productivity deals, individual contracts, flexible working and the abolition of shop stewards. They degraded the workforce by collaborating in management 'hearts and minds' campaigns. Massey Ferguson workers were sent out for a day in the country to drive the tractors they made. This sort of thing became common across the engineering industry as a means of integrating the workforce into the management's quest for quality. This was no altruistic attempt to eradicate alienation. It was a calculated policy of class collaboration that the unions encouraged. It got workers to identify more with the firm and its products than with their own collective class interests.

The fruits of this are evident at what was once one of Britain's most militant car factories, Longbridge in Birmingham. In 1994 shop stewards have been drawn in to imposing work discipline. Together with the managers they promise workers 'empowerment' through team working and involvement in company decisions. The team system ensures total flexibility, which in turn ensures continuous production. Team leaders are drawn into competition with each other to maximise productivity.

This deal, agreed finally in April 1992, has transformed Longbridge into a model of how Japanese techniques can be reproduced in British owned factories²⁰. While in 1977 seven per cent of workdays lost were due to strikes in 1991 this was down to 0.0001%. Longbridge does not have a single union agreement, but the new system is a product of the single-union craze of the late 1980s and the unions' willingness to accept Japanese working practices as the price for recognition. It proves that whether or not the AEEU gets its way and makes what it calls 'single table bargaining' the norm in industry or whether multi-union bargaining remains widespread, the pressure of competition will force more and more firms to push through Japanese style work practices.

The TUC itself has little role to play as far as the architects of the new service unionism are concerned and its future is up for debate. Playing a trade union 'ACAS' role in inter-union disputes does not warrant the amount of funds and resources directed by individual unions towards the TUC. They certainly see no role for it as a 'general staff' of the labour movement intervening in disputes of its affiliates with the power, exercised only once, to call on the whole movement to act, as in the 1926 General Strike.

John Edmonds has set the tone of debate with his call for the scrapping of the TUC's policy departments and the transformation of Congress House into 'a centre of excellence on the workplace environment?', providing information on training, pollution and, increasingly, on the European connection. Under Edmonds' scheme all campaigning was to go, but a legal and management advice office were to be developed. Congress would take place every two years with reports rather than motions and 'set-piece debates'. Clearly, one service not on offer to the movement was union democracy

Numerical decline and merger mania

Despite these efforts to turn themselves into go-getting, modern outfits the unions failed to stop the rot. The downward spiral that began in 1980 continued. From 1948 union membership, and with it influence and power, grew steadily. From 1980 both began to dip. The bureaucrats consoled themselves with the thought that this was simply due to unemployment. The boom would see a recovery in membership, providing they could appeal to new workers with their range of services and a conciliatory image. But it didn't happen.

True, a number of unions, notably those in the public sector, registered a rise in membership during the boom years. But overall the trend was down. Between 1986 and 1990 over one million new workers entered the labour force, but during the same period union membership fell by 600,000. And during the last recession things got worse. Membership continued to fall and union density (the proportion of unionised workers in the labour force as a whole) fell to 33% in 1992, a seven per cent fall in two years. This is the lowest figure for trade union density in Britain since 1940. Two thirds of the British working class are unorganised. And all the TUC unions can come up with are worn out phrases about economic partnership with the employers.

An organising drive on a massive scale was called for in the years after 1987. The unions needed to prove their value to workers as organisations that could defend their pay and conditions. Services would be a useful bonus, but without a decent wage and a secure job such services would be useless for the great mass of workers. Had the unions been able to show their value to new workers as basic self defence

organisations, they would have recruited heavily. But an organising drive on this basis would have required hard work, extensive resources and a commitment to struggle. These qualities were few and far between in the ranks of the bureaucracy.

Instead the bureaucracy turned to another means of shoring up their organisations? expansion through merger. From the late 1980s to the present day the labour movement has undergone a profound transformation. In place of numerous disparate unions based on either profession or industry, a handful of vast, general unions have come into being. These have the advantage for the bureaucracy of being so sprawling in the range of workers they include that national struggles are unlikely, while at the same time the number of members ensures the continued financial viability of the union, and hence also of the bureaucrats themselves. In addition they provide a financial base for the service project that remains dear to the hearts of the principal players in the TUC.

In 1988, eleven union mergers took place involving 675,000 workers, the second highest total since records began. By 1990, twenty TUC unions covering four million workers were involved in merger negotiations and John Edmonds was predicting the age of the 'super unions', four or five of which would organise most of Britain's union members by the year 2000.

Initially unions like the TGWU and GMB swallowed up small craft unions in textiles and the construction trade. Increasingly though, mergers were carried out between bigger and bigger unions. MSF was born from the merger of ASTMS and TASS. The NUS and NUR fused to become the RMT. The post-Wapping print unions decided to form the GPMU from the NGA and SOGAT. The electricians were brought in from the cold through a merger with the AEU to form the bastion of the far right in the TUC, the AEEU. And now the overwhelming majority of public sector workers are covered by one union, Unison, created through a merger of NALGO, NUPE and COHSE. Rumours about a fusion of the TGWU and the GMB are rife.

These general unions are like federations covering a wide range of workers from different industries. They do not provide adequate vehicles for class struggle and solidarity. Though the interests of the various sections represented are the same when viewed historically or from the standpoint of necessary political action, a battle over cleaning jobs is unlikely to see solidarity action from Water Authority officials. Yet these workers are now in the same union. The reason for this is not that the union leaders believe that the principle 'one big union' is a rallying cry for action, but because for them several big unions are a means of preserving their own power base.

The spread of general unionism has not involved an end to sectionalism, but has raised it to a higher level. Now different departments of the same union cannot even call on each other to take solidarity action. General unionism remains far removed from the correct principle of industrial unionism? one industry, one union.

Failing the Nurses, Seafarers and Dockers

The pre-occupation of the bureaucrats with remodelling their organisations along new realist lines did not prevent trade unionists from struggling against the third Tory government. But it did have a profoundly damaging effect on those struggles.

The boom created the conditions for a mini pay revolt. First in line were nurses. Sick of low pay and unsocial hours nurses moved into action in early 1988. Underfunding of the NHS meant that their wages had been kept low while other sections enjoyed double figure increases. Young nurses exploded into action, without the blessing of the bureaucracy. A series of strikes broke out, from Manchester to London. This was a golden opportunity to revive the entire working class movement. The nurses' case was self-

evident, their cause popular throughout the working class.

Health workers struck in February 1988. Alongside them workers from Vauxhall Motors, the fire service, the construction industry, local councils, teachers and civil servants struck in solidarity. A general strike was on the cards for 14 March as Dunlop, Massey Ferguson and rail workers struck in response to Cohse's call for a day of action.

But the bureaucracy disseminated all the wrong lessons from the miners' strike. They feared the law. They were terrified of the nurses' militancy. They were desperate not to have hospital workers on strike since they feared that any harm to patients would be blamed on the unions. Instead of capitalising on the mood of anti-Tory anger that swept the working class, they confined all action to one day strikes and downplayed these in favour of a protest campaign enlisting the support of doctors, public figures, bosses and especially the nurses' scab outfit, the Royal College of Nursing. This struggle culminated in a mass march at the end of which militants from the NHS threw the bureaucrats off the platform and held an impromptu rally. But it did little to shift the government. Thatcher returned with a divisive regrading scheme that stratified pay in the health service, took the steam out of the fight and weakened union organisation in the NHS. Within a few years the internal market and Trusts were introduced in the NHS with hardly any resistance.

At the same time the union leaders signalled their willingness to allow the Tories and the bosses to complete their task of undermining those sectors whose organisation remained powerful enough to disrupt profits. The seafarers union was effectively smashed during the P&O dispute of 1988. The unions agreed to abide by court rulings barring them from calling a national strike in support of 2,000 seafarers in Dover sacked by P&O. Sam McCluskie the NUS leader began the dispute declaring his willingness to go to jail rather than give in to the courts. But as soon as the courts seized the union's funds McCluskie gave in. The Dover strikers were left isolated and after a long struggle were defeated.

A year later the dockers, who like the miners had been part of the militant trade union vanguard of the 1960s and 1970s, were smashed when the Tories moved to abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme. Ron Todd was then still leader of the TGWU. He began by making clear that there would be no dock strike outside the framework of the law. When dockers, led by the National Port Shop Stewards' Committee, called for action as soon as the scheme was abolished, Todd ordered them back to work. When he heard their decision to act he announced:

What they can do is to go ahead with some sort of activity but it will not have the blessing of the executive council . . . I do not believe the area we are going into is in the interests of the dispute or the union. 21

The effect of Todd's betrayal was catastrophic, weakening and isolating the key militants and leaving them open to victimisation. It also served to demoralise the bulk of the rank and file. They began wanting to defend the scheme, but when it appeared that their union was hesitating because of threats from the courts, the mood of anger ebbed away. Hesitancy and worry about preserving jobs in the ports after the abolition of the scheme came to the fore. When a strike was finally called it was too little too late, despite the efforts of militants from Liverpool, Tilbury and Bristol. Todd's delaying tactics worked to the benefit of the government and the strike was quickly and ignominiously defeated.

Todd earned praise from Kinnock for this, for showing 'real leadership in keeping dock workers out of the government trap'. The trap, however, wasn't the courts. It was the determination of the government to get the scheme abolished. And Todd, while he saved TGWU funds from court sequestrators, fell into that trap completely. He didn't have to pay the price. It was dockers who found that the ports were now open, once again, to casual labour, low wages, hazardous working and non-unionism. The militants were systematically sacked, solely because they were militants. Forty workers at Tilbury were sacked and

individual contracts were imposed on the workers taken back. A TGWU official reported that, at Tilbury:

?All forms of collective bargaining were discontinued and all trade unions de-recognised.?22

The management implemented work teams, quality circles and the imposition of their own health and safety representatives in place of those from the union. In Hartlepool docks workers suffered a £5,000 pay cut over the year.

Limits of unofficial organisation

While the dockers were being sold out, new militants were coming to the fore in a series of struggles that became known as ?the summer of discontent?. Like the nurses? dispute of the previous year, these struggles were over pay. Specifically they were against a government public sector pay policy of 7%, representing a pay cut with the official inflation rate at 8.3%.

On British Rail, London Underground, local government, bus companies around the country, a number of engineering factories and in the BBC, pay strikes took place over the summer of 1989. In addition to these official actions, unofficial strikes occurred amongst steel erectors in the construction industry and on the North Sea Oil Rigs (leading eventually to the formation of the new union, the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee). NALGO threatened its first ever national strike.

This wave of disputes revealed three things:

Firstly workers still had the ability and will to fight. For some this was no small revelation because for the previous four years the labour movement had been subjected to a diet of articles from Marxism Today, lectures from Labour and trade union leaders and propaganda from the bosses? press, all stressing that strikes were a thing of the past, that the working class had ?disappeared? and that the class struggle was a nineteenth century concept. Rail and BBC workers, undaunted by such learned advice, struck and the 7% pay policy was breached. The first significant partial trade union victory against the Tories since the 1983 water workers strike was achieved.²³

Secondly the working class retained the capacity to improvise and develop unofficial organisations to suit their immediate needs. On London Underground NUR and ASLEF members began their struggle under the direction of an unofficial committee of line co-ordinators. Steel erectors organised a series of ?wildcat? strikes under the direction of their own rank and file strike committee. The oil workers, neglected by the official unions, set up the OILC and achieved an impressive degree of solidarity across the network of North Sea rigs.

Thirdly neither wage militancy nor improvised unofficial organisation were, in and of themselves, sufficient to break the stranglehold of the trade union bureaucracy. Instead of the summer of discontent linking the pay strikes with the struggle of the dockers, instead of the unions forging a united front against the bosses and the government, the militancy was frittered away by union leaders. In each case the union bureaucracy used the militancy of its members as a means of pressurising the bosses into taking it seriously. It refurbished its role as a negotiator, as a force to be reckoned with by the bosses. Once it had achieved this recognition it ensured that each dispute either remained at the level of isolated days of action, proving its ability to police and control the rank and file, and it settled for pay deals well short of the claims originally submitted.

A new pay norm of 8.8% was established after the BBC strike. Immediately the bureaucracies of other unions pointed to this and queued up to take their cases to ACAS, confident that they could win 8.8% for their own members, proving, at the same time, their sense of responsibility to the bosses. NALGO even

went to ACAS before making good its threat to strike.

The lesson was clear. The bureaucracy remained in control and did what it has always done? sold out or sold short the workers it represented.

Even where unofficial organisation developed it had no answer to the control of the bureaucracy. Such organisation did not automatically threaten the officials. Indeed in the cases of the OILC (prior to establishing itself as a union in its own right) and the line co-ordinators, the bureaucracy was happy to use the unofficial bodies as a means of exercising pressure on the bosses while at the same time washing its hands of unofficial action, thereby protecting the unions' funds from seizure by the courts under the anti-union laws. In the case of the steel erectors' stewards' committee it steadfastly refused to break from sectionalism and link up with other building workers.

Unofficial organisation proved that the rank and file could be organised. But such organisation is not an end in itself. Unless it is won to political independence from the bureaucracy and to a revolutionary communist political alternative to reformism it cannot fundamentally challenge the bureaucracy. The summer of discontent revealed the potential of a new layer of militants, and the potential for organising them. But it did not realise this potential, and could not without the leadership of a revolutionary party. This meant that in the next round of struggle the new realist bureaucracy was not only intact, it was still in control. It proved capable of co-existing with unofficial organisations and then integrating the militants into the apparatus (this was most noticeable in ASLEF) or dumping their organisations when they became a hindrance (as happened with the OILC).

Emerging Tory crisis

By late 1989 the crisis in the ranks of the ruling Tory government, which eventually led to Thatcher being deposed as leader in late 1990, was apparent for all to see. A well publicised row between Chancellor Nigel Lawson and Thatcher over economic policy and Europe led to Lawson's resignation. Even the formerly pro-Thatcher Economist magazine was forced to comment that Lawson's successor John Major was carrying through a policy that would produce 'a memorably dreadful 1990'.

The recession had begun. Unemployment started to rise. Growth slumped to 0.75%, its lowest level since 1981. Major himself commented that '1990 may not be an easy year'. Boosted by the tremendous unpopularity of the Poll Tax, Labour rose dramatically in the polls, notching up a 13% lead in opinion polls in November 1989. Thatcherite dogmatism seemed to offer no solution to the new economic crisis. A mood for change grew throughout the country. But it was finally consummated by the overthrow of Thatcher, not of the Tory government.

With the late 1980s 'economic miracle' evaporating before people's eyes, with the government in growing disarray over economic policy and Europe and with the hated Poll Tax provoking growing protest and opposition in Scotland and then England, the trade unions could have dealt the Tories a death blow. The Tories needed to make the workers pay for the recession but were uncertain and divided amongst themselves.

Two sections of workers lined up to take on the bosses and the Tories? the engineers, fighting for a 35 hour week, and the Ambulance workers fighting against the 7% pay norm. Both disputes had the potential to win decisive victories, coming as they did on the heels of the summer of discontent. But both were carried through in a manner that ensured the bosses and the government would be let off the hook.

Drive for 35? settle for 37!

During the boom there had been a very serious shortage of skilled workers. In the private sector this placed the biggest organiser of skilled workers, the AEU, in a very strong economic bargaining position. To a large extent the AEU, along with smaller skilled unions, used this to ensure that real earnings increased significantly in the manufacturing sector. In 1979 the AEU decided to recommence a campaign for a shorter working week that it had begun in 1979. Then it had settled for 39 hours. In 1989 it again declared it would fight for a 35 hour week, but across the engineering industry it settled for 37 to 37.5 hours. In itself this achievement was a partial victory and it revealed the continued strength of the unions in the manufacturing sector. But more important than the partial victory was the character of the dispute itself. Bill Jordan, an extreme right winger with strong business union leanings was determined to run the dispute on model 'new realist' lines.

First he ensured that there would be no possibility of generalising the dispute across industry by linking it to pay struggles. His officials at Ford worked hard to get the workers to settle their pay claim before launching the 35 hour week campaign. Ford, despite repeatedly rejecting union demands for the 35 hour week, was to be exempt from the campaign. The AEU's very own pet Stalinist official, Jimmy Airlie, declared that the 35 hour week was 'a key element of their [Ford unions] claim?', before overturning an 81% vote for strike action and settling for a two year pay deal. A similar story was repeated at Vauxhall. From the outset, some of the best organised and most militant sections of the AEU were taken out of the 'drive for 35' campaign.

Second, Jordan was determined to keep the strike highly selective. All engineers contributed to a strike fund, but only certain plants, seven initially, were to be called out on strike. These selective strikes actually split the workforce. There was no guarantee that victories achieved in strikes at targeted plants would be extended to other firms. Jordan sanctioned local deals from the start. When the employers at British Aerospace conceded a 37 hour week, the AEU settled without having achieved agreement from other members of the Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF). By April 1990, after over six months of such selective action, only 66,000 engineers had won a cut in hours. A trickle-down effect did result in more settlements but the end result of the campaign was a profoundly uneven victory, with many workers who had loyally contributed their money to the strike fund reaping no real benefits.

Equally important in understanding the scale of Jordan's treachery is that the local deals he authorised cut the working week by two hours, but only in return for agreements that productivity would be maintained at the 39 hour week level. So even if the working week was cut, engineers would have to work much harder. Not only did this involve more intensive work, it also involved giving up all sorts of hard won gains. Demarcation was increasingly undermined as part of a deskilling drive. Flexible working was introduced across industry. Productivity deals became the norm. The union 'won' a 37 hour week for a section of its members at the same time as giving up important work practices that had previously made the work tolerable.

This was all part of the new realist game plan—the profitability of industry was not damaged by the AEU's campaign. This was a gift to management. In return for a two hour cut in the working week they were able to get rid of restrictive work practices that had blighted their profitability for years. They got the assent of the unions for a productivity drive.

The final aspect of Jordan's campaign that was designed to set the pattern for future industrial disputes was the marginalisation of the strikers themselves. The centralised system of strike pay, which ensured that some strikers were better off on strike than some of their working brothers and sisters, certainly alleviated the hardship of going on strike. Fair enough: only the Tories want to see strikers going hungry. But by keeping this system in the hands of the bureaucracy, Jordan made sure that there was no focus for

involving strikers in the collection and distribution of the money, no focus for using the dispute as a means of appealing for solidarity from other workers, no focus for appealing to other engineers to join the strike. By combining this with the open refusal to organise picket lines, mass meetings (beyond one at the beginning of a strike in a targeted plant) or strike committees, Jordan deprived militants of any means of challenging his control. The mass of workers were kept entirely passive.

By all of these means Jordan maintained his influence within the union, claiming credit for the partial victory and demonstrating how a strike could be run on new realist lines. The bureaucracy were in control, the militants were marginalised, 'sensible' bargaining was able to proceed and there were no scenes of disorder as a result of picket lines. Here was the new realists' alternative to the great miners' strikes.

Public opinion

The ambulance pay dispute of 1989/90 added another dimension to the new realist strategy. The leaders wanted a dispute that did not hurt anybody! They were terrified of the bourgeois media, of charges of bullying, of holding innocent people to ransom. Their answer was not to lay the blame where it belonged, on a government that was running down the service and cutting real wages. It was to avoid alienating 'public support' at all costs.

This involved the usual recipe of selective action, 'responsible' agreements with management and no picketing. But more important, even than this, for the new realist leaders was ensuring that all industrial action was strictly subordinated to an appeal to 'public opinion'. This was increasingly regarded not as a way of building support for industrial action, but as an alternative to it. That was the significance of the ambulance dispute.

The dispute lasted from September 1989 to March 1990. Like the AEU dispute, action was kept selective. The chief bureaucrat involved, Nupe's Roger Poole, sabotaged every attempt by militants to get an all out strike. He was determined to limit the struggle to an overtime ban and occasional 'days of action'. His goal was not win the full claim but to get the employers to ACAS.

In league with Norman Willis of the TUC, he staged the dispute as a public relations exercise. Solidarity was discouraged in favour of what Willis called a 'direct appeal to the public as a whole'. NUPE paid professional lobbyists to approach Tory MPs instead of using its money to fund strike action. Militants in Manchester who took all out action were stigmatised by Poole almost as viciously as they were by the Tory press.

According to one Manchester NUPE official the crews 'talked considerably about strike action. But I told them it was against union policy.'²⁴

Poole was effectively overseeing a 'no strike deal' during an industrial dispute. The only strike Poole endorsed was the sad spectacle of a three day hunger strike outside the Department of Health's office. Management suspended ambulance workers for operating the overtime ban. Poole used them as martyrs, but refused to consider strike action in their support.

After six months most ambulance workers were thoroughly demoralised by this excuse for a campaign. They voted massively to accept a two year deal granting the ambulance workers a 13% increase. In other words a yearly increase within the governments 7% pay norm!

The many attempts to get action off the ground had been successfully countered by Poole. He told the world how it showed the value of using public opinion instead of strike action. This was his contribution to the evolution of new realist strategy.

The contrast between the cravenly moderate policies of the trade union leaders and the mass Anti-Poll Tax movement which swept the country at the conclusion of the Ambulance dispute could not have been more striking. A mass campaign to break the law and force the Tories to retreat was extremely popular. While the new realists preached restraint and demanded their members remained within the law, the anti-Poll Tax movement put the final nail in Thatcher's coffin and destroyed the hated tax.

The strategy of the new realists was to lie low until the expected return of a Labour government. In the year leading up to the election they worked overtime to prevent industrial action. Where pressure for action existed the bureaucrats used ACAS as a means containing it. They became the great arbiters. In 1992 strike figures plummeted to their lowest level for 100 years, but ACAS had its busiest ever year, dealing with 60,000 cases and receiving a staggering 467,000 enquiries and requests for assistance, primarily from union officials.

People Power and the pits

Labour's humiliating defeat in April 1992 altered the political scene. The Tories returned to power but with a reduced majority and a divided party. Workers, lulled for almost two years into the belief that a Labour government would soon come to the rescue, now began to stir. Small scale struggles broke out against the effects of the continuing recession immediately after the April general election. Growing anger began to make itself felt in action.

Of course a return to the offensive could not take place overnight. The character of the trade union struggle in the early 1990s, small scale, localised and fragmented action over sectional issues, remained the dominant feature of the economic class struggle throughout the spring and summer of 1992. But it was being accompanied by a growing mood of desperation amongst workers, a mood of 'enough is enough' coupled with the realisation that now there was no Labour government on the horizon.

All that was needed was a spark, a spark that could ignite the mood of anger into a mood for action. The renewed offensive against the miners, when the Tories announced that they intended to close 31 pits in October 1992, provided that spark.

Less than six months into their fourth term of office the Tory government found itself in a complete mess. Its economic policy was in tatters after the collapse of the pound and Britain's enforced exit from the ERM. This re-opened a struggle in Tory ranks over integration into Europe prompting a Thatcherite anti-EC rebellion. Then, after announcing a policy of 'going for growth', Major's government announced the pit closures and a 1.5% pay limit in the public sector. Perceiving this weakness, and enraged over the pit closures, working class anger exploded. Two massive demonstrations in London, with one on a work day involving thousands of striking workers, a Tory backbench rebellion and an evident public outcry led to a temporary climbdown by the government.

All of a sudden a general strike seemed possible. Everywhere militants found that it was easier to win arguments than at any time since the 1984/85 strike. Everybody seemed to be anti-Tory and the TUC had called a national demonstration - its first since 1988 - which trade union branches and workplaces the length and breadth of the country responded to. A quarter of a million took to the streets. The NUM decided to call a strike ballot. Other sectors of workers began to look to ways of linking up their struggle. Every weekend demonstrations were held. The tide had turned. Or had it?

The great anti-Tory revolt of late 1992 was systematically demobilised by the trade union leaders. Instead of calling their ballot for all out action the NUM retreated into calling a ballot, alongside the rail unions, for one day strikes five months after the announcement of the pit closures. Instead of calling a general strike

the TUC called on everybody to switch their lights out for five minutes just before Christmas.

The new realists were not only still in control. They had absorbed many of their old opponents into their ranks. Arthur Scargill, who had led the 1984/85 strike as a militant class battle, obediently followed the orders of the TUC who forced him to repeatedly call off days of action which he had declared under pressure from rank and file militants. All the talk was of 'people power', of demonstrations not strikes, of appealing to the British people as a whole, of a public relations exercise, not industrial action, or, where industrial action was deemed necessary, of selective action, of one day actions. Scargill stated:

'Now we have got the support of the British people, we must not underestimate the power of the movement. People power can change this insane energy policy.'²⁵

'People power' meant the abandonment of a perspective based on workers' action, action that was more possible in the autumn of 1992 than it had been for years. The anger was squandered, the movement dissipated. Where a quarter of a million marched in October, barely 10,000 marched to protest the closures in February 1993.

But these events did not have exclusively negative results. The huge demonstrations and the protests rekindled a sense of the trade unions as a living working class movement. They gave militants a renewed confidence. They encouraged action by sections of workers. Even the traditionally timid bank workers' union, BIFU, staged strike action during this upsurge. Important disputes flared up across industry and battles in the public sector loom over jobs, cuts and pay. Much remains to be played for. But every militant needs to understand why, in the first round, a golden opportunity was missed to smash the Tory offensive and leave Major's government in ruins.

New realism has many faults. We have outlined them at length in this article. But what it does not lack is a coherent political world outlook. This outlook is reformist. It is based on the belief that capitalism is not inherently an obstacle to the fulfilment of working class needs, merely that it is badly managed. Managed properly, the reformists believe that capitalism is a workable system that can benefit workers. In return for the free market workers are treated fairly and in a socially responsible way by a benevolent state. The form that reformism takes differs in different periods. Labour's old commitment to state intervention and a welfare state corresponded to a particular period of capitalism. Today, in the aftermath of Thatcher, Labour has modified its reformism in favour of co-operation between government and private industry combined with an 'enabling state' and a strictly delimited social provision for welfare spending. But the content is unchanged—workers are to be reconciled to the existence of capitalism. In order to carry through this reconciliation, workers have to be harnessed.

New realism is a particular form of this brand of reformism in the trade union field. It is a form of class collaboration modified by the changes wrought by the Thatcher years. It is a modern means of containing the spontaneous struggles of workers.

In keeping with this political outlook, new realism is also a strategy for rebuilding a role for the trade union bureaucracy within industry and the state. By proving both their commitment to capitalism and their ability to contain working class struggles, the bureaucracy aims to present itself as a necessary component of a well functioning capitalism. The scabs and right wing, principally the AEEU, do this through a form of business unionism. They become directly embroiled in enforcing work discipline through direct collaboration with management. The service union wing (which dominates the TUC in the shape of the GMB, the TGWU and, increasingly, the unions that comprise Unison) do it through mobilising the social weight of the members they recruit through the provision of services as a pressure for reforms from the bosses and the state.

Left trade union reformism, the vestiges of which reside in the NUM, is different from both of these species in that it champions a degree of independent working class action. But it has no alternative world outlook to the new realists. It is bereft of ideas beyond reformist ones, and these tie it to the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. It toes their line because it cannot conceive of an alternative to them.

Moreover, experience over the last thirteen years has proved to the left trade unionists that they cannot survive without the support of their fellow bureaucrats. In 1984/85 Scargill carried left trade unionism to its limits. It failed as a result of those limits. Thus it emerged from the 1980s battle scarred and weary. Its dependence on the rest of the trade union bureaucracy grew and grew, to the point where it actually blended with the new realists.

The unions today

The real lesson of the years of betrayal and defeat is that reformism, in its new realist or its left forms, is incapable of fulfilling the real needs of working class people. It is increasingly incapable of defending even the most basic economic interests and elementary organisations of the working class.

In the trade union struggle, as in all spheres of the class struggle, it is necessary to transcend reformism. This does not mean extolling the virtues of militant economic struggle in and of themselves, important as they are in the class struggle. It means embracing a political outlook that provides an alternative to the politics of new realism.

The new realists argue that militant economic strikes alienate public opinion. That is how they justify their campaigns for 'people power'. Our answer is not to spurn the importance of winning broad support for working class struggles. But we recognise that serious and sustained support from the working class, and even sympathy in the form of financial donations to strike funds from sections of the petit-bourgeoisie, will be won not by displays of weakness but by demonstrations of strength. Weakness, failure and compromise positively encourage cynicism and despair, giving added force and conviction to the oft-repeated refrain that 'it won't get you anywhere'.

Marxists alone can explain the relationship between the distinct layers of 'the public', a body which is stratified into two principal classes with irreconcilable interests. Thus we can demystify the concept of 'public opinion'. The opinion we want on our side is that of the working class, the class that can translate support into action that can win. If we can at least neutralise sections of the lower middle class in the process, well and good. But bourgeois public opinion, the 'commonsense' purveyed by the capitalists in their TV, radio and press propaganda, we have neither the hope nor the desire to win. Any strategy tailored to this public opinion will be doomed before it starts, because it is relying on the goodwill of a seasoned, battle trained and unscrupulous enemy.

Only by winning such an argument amongst workers can we break the hold of the new realists. In short, we need to win the argument for revolutionary communist politics as the alternative to reformism, to new realism.

This is not simply a question of winning a battle of ideas. There is a material contradiction between the interests of rank and file workers and the actions of the new realists. It is a contradiction that produces trade union militants, people who want to organise to fight and are hostile to the bureaucracy's obstruction of that fight. It is a contradiction that provides the basis for organising militants against the bureaucracy as a step to winning them to revolutionary politics.

The 1970s saw that contradiction reach a sharp point. Militants were organised, not only in a shop

stewards' movement but also in rank and file organisations. Generally, these organisations were tied to either the bureaucratic CPGB or the economistic SWP. Neither organisation could resolve the contradiction and win the militants to a consistently revolutionary strategy and organisation. But at least then there was an identifiable layer of militants based on an extensive network of strong workplace organisations. The years of defeat have played havoc with that network and have severely weakened workplace organisation. Militants have themselves become ever more dependent on the bureaucracies that they once fought almost as hard as the management.

While by 1989 there had only been 100 instances of the anti-union laws being used, a Labour Research survey found that over two thirds of the workforce in 53 plants felt threatened by the laws and wanted to avoid action for fear of falling foul of them. The result of this is that rank and file militants have to rely on the legal departments of their unions much more, giving the bureaucrats at the centre greater leverage in any potential disputes.

Similarly, deals such as at Rover Longbridge have transformed stewards. Some have become team leaders, identified more with productivity drives than with defending workers. Some have become instruments for imposing management discipline. Where shop stewards have retained their traditional role as front line union organisers management have attacked the privileges won in the 1970s that enabled them to play this role to the full. The 1990 Workplace Industrial Relations Survey showed this to be the case across a number of industries. One example cited was the Post Office, where stewards have seen much of their facility time chopped by management and their right to be consulted before the introduction of changes in working practices severely curtailed. One UCW steward recounted his experience of this process:

'The men still treat me as the old Roger Weston but my status has changed among the managers. For example, they tended to ask me before they made any radical changes to shift patterns. Now it's more individuals coming to me to say that their shift patterns have been changed and can I sort it out for them.'²⁶

Worst of all, there is plenty of evidence that union bureaucrats have turned a blind eye to management attacks on shop floor organisation because they perceived an opportunity to strengthen their own direct negotiating positions as a result of weaker stewards' organisations. The role of CSEU bureaucrats in blocking attempts to get senior stewards into negotiations with GEC management is a case in point.²⁷

The revolutionary alternative

The bosses are forever writing obituaries on the trade union movement. Its decline, they say, is terminal and that makes them very happy. But they are slaves to their own propaganda. Even though union density is down to 33% and membership of TUC affiliated unions has fallen below the 8 million mark, Britain remains heavily trade unionised compared with a number of other major imperialist powers, notably France and the USA. Obituaries are 'to say the least' premature.

But putting a resounding plus where the bosses put a minus will do little to guide us in the struggles ahead. Yet the SWP fall right into this trap. They responded to the autumn 1992 upsurge positively, pointing out that the mobilisation for the big demos took place largely through existing trade union organisations. But the weakening of the unions 'both in overall size and in the degree and nature of workplace organisation' was written off as unimportant. The labour movement was simply a 'sleeping giant'.

The SWP forgot their own previous gloomy 'downturn' perspective once they thought the upturn was starting. It was a case of things getting back to normal. The unreconstructed economists heaved a sigh of

relief and declared that the problems facing the working class could be reduced to overcoming the inconfidence that had developed during the 'downturn'. A new mood of confidence would simply wake up the sleeping giant.

This optimism can be justified only insofar as it is necessary to combat the bosses' lies that the unions are finished. But unless it is combined with a more sober assessment of the balance of class forces it will severely disorient militants. If nothing had fundamentally changed as a result of the Tory victories why did the autumn upsurge not produce a rolling strike on the scale of 1984/85 in the coal fields? Why did Scargill feel obliged to throw in his lot with the TUC and thereby help demobilise the mass upsurge?

The reason is simple. The balance of class forces has been shifted in the bosses' favour over the last decade. Moreover, this shift has been accompanied by a very significant growth in the power of the union bureaucracy relative to shop floor militants. Taken together these factors have weakened trade unionism in the sense that they have weakened militancy. To ignore this, as the SWP do, is dangerous. It ignores the new tasks that face trade union militants as a result of the shift in the balance of forces against them.

Of course the Tories have not permanently or fundamentally destroyed trade unionism. But that was never their goal. They talked of breaking the 'ball and chain' (Tebbit) of the 'trade union veto' (Lamont), to allow management to restructure industry and services on a profitable basis. They were faced with the unresolved task of breaking 'trade union power', by which they meant the power of shop floor militants to restrict management's right to manage. They set their sights on attacking trade union power, shop floor militancy, in order to 'redress the balance in industry' (Thatcher) not in order to destroy trade unions themselves.

To a considerable extent they succeeded. This is the truth that has to be faced up to if we are to rebuild trade union strength. The SWP do nobody any service by refusing to face up this. The task we face in the 1990s, a task that will be made possible precisely through upsurges such as that of autumn 1992, is to win the new layers of militants that are being forged today, in industry and services, to the task of rebuilding shop floor organisation and militancy. But precisely because of the nature of the crisis, the nature of the attacks and the politics of the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party, the tasks of regrouping militants into rank and file organisation, of rebuilding the strength of shop stewards' organisations, of unionising the vast sectors of the workforce who are today unorganised, are inextricably tied to providing a political alternative to trade unionism pure and simple: a revolutionary communist programme and a revolutionary communist party.

The limits of spontaneous militancy were revealed between 1972 and 1984/85. Such militancy had no answer to the machinations of the Labour government, to the attacks of the Tories, to the arguments of the new realist bureaucrats that they had to obey the law, that they must not fight with the police on picket lines, that they must accept the need to rely on public opinion and remould the unions accordingly. And having no answers the militants went down to defeat after defeat.

The class struggle will ensure that new militants are created. But they must learn the hard lessons of the past. They must be won to a relentless fight against the bureaucracy, to militant rank and file organisations, to unions that are democratic and based on the need to wage the class struggle to defend working class interests, and to a revolutionary communist programme and party. That is the only way to build a working class alternative to the politics of the bureaucracy. We need the politics of revolutionary hope to defeat and replace what Arthur Scargill, when he was still fighting the new realists, rightly called the 'politics of fear'.

Footnotes

- 1 Sir Keith Joseph, Solving the Union Problem is the Key to Britain's Recovery, London, 1979
- 2 Quoted in, The Crisis of Labour, p128, David Coates, Oxford 1989
- 3 ISTC Branch Circular dated 2/11/79
- 4 For a full account of this crucial struggle see, Red Pulse (a special edition of the Workers Power, health workers' bulletin, produced during the dispute) October 1992
- 5 Quoted in the Financial Times, 23/7/81
- 6 Quoted in the Times, 31/3/83
- 7 Quoted in The Evening Standard, 28/11/83
- 8 Quoted in Coates op cit p128
- 9 Thatcher's famous remarks were made during a speech to the Tory backbench 1922 Committee in July 1984. This widely reported speech exposed the Tories' early claim, that the strike was simply a trade dispute between the Coal Board and the miners, for the lie it always was. In line with the military flavour of her speech she appointed a special 'war cabinet' of trusted ministers and friends outside parliament, with the goal not only of smashing the strike, but also of smashing the NUM through the sponsorship of the scab organisation that was to become the bosses' union, the UDM.
- 10 Quoted in Tribune, 18/1/80
- 11 See Workers Power, 30/8/84 and 12/9/84 for further details on the TUC's treacherous role.
- 12 Quoted in New Statesman, 24/8/84
- 13 Quoted in New Left Review, No 92, July/August 1975, p31
- 14 A paper from David Metcalf of the LSE, to the national Institute of Economic and Social Research, quoted in the Financial Times, 8/4/93
- 15 Quoted in the Financial Times, 13/1/88
- 16 Quoted in Marxism Today, June 1989
- 17 Quoted in Labour Research Facts Service, 10/1/91
- 18 Quoted in Labour Research, November 1989
- 19 ibid
- 20 At the time this deal was agreed Longbridge, like the rest of the Rover Group, was British owned, though the Japanese firm Honda did have a 20% stake in the company. In January 1994 the German car giant, BMW, bought the Rover Group.
- 21 See Workers Power Nos.117 to 122 for further details on how the bureaucracy sabotaged the last opportunity dockers had to defend the National Dock Labour Scheme.
- 22 Quoted in Labour Research, July 1990
- 23 In 1983, after a strike over pay, Thatcher had given in to water workers. This unusual retreat by Thatcher was consistent with the Ridley plan. The government was vulnerable to the pressure of the water workers and at the time was prepared to buy them off so that a battle could be prepared with other sections of workers, notably the miners.
- 24 Quoted in the Morning Star, 30/12/89
- 25 Quoted in the Morning Star, 17/11/92
- 26 Quoted in the Financial Times, 24/9/92
- 27 See pp43-58, Remaking the Working Class?, Bruce Spencer, Nottingham, 1989

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