



The trade union movement
faces a completely new challenge

Interview with Alan Fisher

Could you tell us something about the character of NUPE, the categories of people it organises, the proportion of women, its growth pattern over the last twenty years?

The union now has close to 700,000 members and all are engaged either in local government, where a majority of our members are employed, in the National Health Service, which is the second major group, or in the water industry or the universities. Those are the four service areas in the public sector from which the NUPE membership is drawn. Of these, local government represents something like 400,000 of the 700,000, with about 150,000 in the National Health Service and the rest divided between water and the university field where we organise the non-teaching staffs. Most of our membership is amongst manual workers. We organise the blue collar workers of the public service rather than the white collar workers, who are in another union, NALGO, which has the majority membership in this area and is about the same size as we are.

The union has grown very substantially. In the mid-1930s we had something like 13,000 members, in the sixties 150,000-200,000 members, with the union's growth matching the expansion that has taken place in the public sector. At 700,000 we are now the fifth biggest union. A big factor in NUPE's growth, which has perhaps distinguished us from other unions with which we compete, particularly the general unions, is that we've tried to take advantage not only of the economies of scale of a big union and the resources which they give but also the economies of specialisation. We have specialised in the areas in which traditionally local government was the main employer: local government itself; the hospital service, which broke away from local government in 1948; the water industry, a large part of which was taken out of local government in 1974; and the universities, which have always been on the fringes of local government activity. We have grown in the local government area because we have offered a specialised service.

This rapid growth has been mainly among women . . .

Yes, one of the big areas of growth, certainly since the end of the war,

has been amongst women members and this has partly been because of the very large growth in the National Health Service and the even larger growth there has been in women's employment in local government. For example, there has been the development, particularly in education, of things like the school meal service. In the social services the number of home helps has grown from 10,000 to over 120,000 over the last 15 years. These have been the big growth areas of women's employment and it's in those areas particularly that NUPE has recruited. We are now the union with the biggest women membership of any trade union in Britain.

Does that confront the union with any special problems or advantages?

Yes, I think it does confront the union with problems. A big problem has been getting the involvement of women in the activities of the

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union — we have been very conscious for some time now that for a union with about two thirds of its members who are women, we have not seen women playing the kind of part in the activities and the affairs of the union which one would expect given their weight of membership.

We have attempted to develop programmes which would be of particular interest to our women members including laying on educational courses. We have tried to encourage workplace meetings since a lot of our women members are married and have domestic responsibilities which makes it difficult for them to take part in union activities. We have developed a number of very large all-women branches in which we've got women stewards and women officers of

The interview was conducted by Martin Jacques.
The transcript was typed by Kate Bainbridge.

those branches, which is almost revolutionary in trade union terms. But it has brought a large number of women into active involvement in the affairs of the union. We have also made a provision, which again I think is almost unique in the trade union movement, for the separate election of women to the union's executive council where we have 5 women's seats which are a guaranteed form of involvement for women at that level.

There are also problems in that many of the women in the union are part-time workers, their jobs are therefore more vulnerable and in present circumstances we are finding that a lot of the redundancy that is occurring is amongst women, especially part-time women workers.

Having so many women members we have also been conscious of the problems that women have in general as well as at work. We have been in the forefront of the fight for greater rights and equality for women. We have taken on broad issues like abortion which in days gone by would not have been seen as trade union issues. We have seen these issues as being very relevant to our union and we've argued within the TUC and outside that there is still an enormous amount of discrimination against women.

NUPE has been involved in a long campaign for equal pay and we were successful in achieving it for our women members — some earlier, some later. In the white collar section of our membership it was possible to obtain it very much earlier. For manual workers it was achieved during the 1970s.

That is not to say that we're satisfied that we've got equality because we find in our services that women tend to do those jobs which are in any case lower paid — as for instance in the domestic employment, cleaning and the catering services. Another problem we've always had is in nursing which, as a predominantly female profession, is grossly underpaid because originally women worked on a voluntary basis and have spent years in trying to catch up with what would be a reasonable reward for the quality of the work, training and skills involved.

NUPE was involved in major industrial action at the end of the 60s and the early 70s, but it was not until 1978-9 that most sections of NUPE were involved together in industrial action. This was against the Labour government's 5% pay policy in what became known as the 'winter of discontent'. What's your assessment of the 'winter of discontent' and NUPE's strategy then?

The union decided in 1978 to campaign very positively on the issue of low pay. It was the end of the period of the social contract during which the trade union movement had either gone along with or acquiesced in government pay policies. We came out of that period into what was then said to be a period when we were going back to free collective bargaining. We identified as our objective the achievement of a minimum wage of £60, which at that time was two thirds the level of national average earnings.

We campaigned very widely for it amongst our own membership. At the Labour Party Conference a resolution was carried in favour of the £60 minimum and actually doing something about it, and a similar resolution was carried at the TUC.

We were, to say the least, disappointed when we were told at the end of that year that we were to have only a 5% wage increase in line with the government imposed limit. Such government policies ran totally contrary to those which had been adopted by both the Labour Party Conference and the TUC Congress. In other words the Government deliberately confronted the trade union movement: it denied both the right to free collective bargaining and any attempt to move towards doing something for lower paid workers. Indeed such a percentage increase gave least to those who needed it most and most to those who needed it least, which is in the nature of percentage increases. We therefore found ourselves on a collision course with a

Labour government.

I think the effects of industrial action were quite profound. It certainly did not assist the Labour Party when it came to fight the general election in May 1979 — there is no doubt at all about that. It's true that as a result of our action we did achieve certain improvements not only in the actual pay offer, which eventually was close to 10%, but also in establishing the Clegg Commission. The Clegg Commission was an important body because it gave us for the first time the opportunity of making accurate comparisons between the earnings of those in the public sector and those in the private sector. In the event it was a failure because it only compared low paid jobs in the public sector with low paid work in the private sector. As a result, the Clegg Commission did not satisfy any objectives with regard to low pay.

The Labour government, by its attitude, put itself on a collision course with the trade unions. There was a complete breach between the trade union movement and the Labour government and, when that happens, and history proves this over and over again, then the days of a Labour government are numbered. This happened in May 1979 and caused the return of a reactionary Conservative government which has in fact destroyed what good that Labour government did. There is a very important lesson to be learned here. Unless there can be understanding between the trade unions and the Labour Party, either in office or out of office, then it's likely that we shall continue to suffer from reactionary right wing governments.

The Thatcher government has now set cash limits at 6%. How will the union respond to this new challenge?

Well, we are of course back where we started. This time it's a 6% increase in pay, last time we were being offered 5%. So we have a repeat performance — but in a very different situation. Because when the Labour government was in conflict with the trade unions, the number of unemployed was only just over a million, whereas it is now over the 2 million mark and is clearly likely in 1981 to rise to somewhere nearer 3 million. For this reason there is a reluctance on the part of trade unionists to engage in the same kind of action against the Tories that was taken against the Labour government. They believed, rightly in this event, that by taking action against the Labour government they would get a better offer. I don't think anybody believes that if action is taken against this Government at the present time there would be any prospect of achieving similar results. Certainly as far as local government is concerned, where pay negotiations are now taking place, it would be difficult to see similar action being taken because of the very real pressure that the Government is imposing on local government, the loss of jobs that has already occurred in the municipal services, the prospect of further losses, the lower level of morale and the hostile character of the Government.

The Government's approach is to say that we're having free collective bargaining in Britain but at the same time to impose incomes policies on particular areas of the public sector, and to impose different policies on different parts of the public sector. The miners have gone through with a 13% pay settlement; the workers in the nationalised industries have been told that they can have what they can get; gas, water and electricity at the moment seem to be in the 8% region; while the public service area, the National Health Service and so on have been told that it's got to be 6%. The criterion seems to be the bargaining strength of the group concerned. So those who work in the public service, in local government and the health service, where it is most difficult to take industrial action, as we found in 1978-79, without incurring a great deal of hostility, are offered the least. While those who the Government think are stronger are offered more. It is

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perhaps an illustration of the way in which this Government thinks: it understands only one argument, the argument of strength.

So, we have got a difficult situation in the public services at the present time — the problem of taking any kind of action that would be effective in a situation of high unemployment and demoralisation. It's unique in the experience of many workers to see the present levels of unemployment and to have a government which they know is totally hostile to them as workers and to the trade union movement. We are facing what in my experience is one of the most difficult periods we've had in the British trade union movement. Our ability to respond to and defeat the plans of the Government is a very real problem at the present time.

Ever since the late 70s government policy — Labour and Conservative — has been to restrain, or reduce, public expenditure. We have talked about the wages side. But there's another aspect to it, namely redundancies within the public sector. NUPE, from the late 70s, realised the importance of arguing for the public sector as part of the defence of jobs. How successful do you think NUPE's campaign to defend jobs and the services was in that period and then subsequently?

I think there are two distinct periods in relation to public expenditure cuts. When the last Labour government got into economic difficulties, it sought to cut public expenditure in order to balance the budget. The union, in response, campaigned, in my view very successfully, within the labour movement, against what was taking place, though it didn't prevent the Government pursuing what were essentially monetarist policies. Towards the end of the last Labour government, from 1978-9, we got over our major problems and we were in fact seeing very small increases taking place in public expenditure. But now with the present Government there is a total obsession with cutting the public sector borrowing requirement. This means reducing the aid given to the public services and to the public sector. It means cutting the amount that one gives to nationalised industries. It involves cutting those areas of the public services which the government either supports completely such as the NHS and the civil service, or supports largely, for instance local government. In order to get the public sector borrowing requirement down, to achieve what they would describe as control of the money supply, they have continually cut, cut and cut again and done it several different ways. In particular, there has been a severe attack on local authority expenditure. This is posing problems not only in the employment area, but also in the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory obligations and provide the services which the community requires. This has been particularly apparent in housing which has been the hardest hit of all local authority areas. The joke—if it can be a joke—is that the policies are not working because the public sector borrowing requirement has gone up dramatically and is at the moment out of control. The main causes of this are the level of unemployment and the demands of the nationalised and other industries into which they've had to put money. These have gone up far more than was anticipated. As a result, government expenditure has become greater and not less as it intended. Now the only way that they can go ahead is by cutting further and further and if this happens I believe it will be quite disastrous for the economy and for the country.

In this new phase with the Thatcher government, the cuts have been resisted not only by NUPE and the public sector unions, but also by a number of Labour councils — notably Lambeth, South Yorkshire and Lothian. What is NUPE's attitude towards the stand taken by these councils?

There are, at the moment, very different stands being taken by many different local authorities and we've found great difficulty in identifying a common approach to the many problems that local government is confronted with. We've all seen the recent figures for the revised system of rate support grant which the Government has decided to introduce and quite astonishingly this has had in some cases a much worse effect on Tory controlled authorities who have been the good boys and tried to conform than it has had on some Labour controlled local authorities who are now told that they are within the Government's spending limits. The problem about local government is to get a common policy given that local authorities all have their own separate and different problems to deal with when it comes to the question of cutting costs.

Our attitude as a union is that where cuts are being made which we believe are indefensible then we have been prepared to take action. We don't believe the suggestion made by Lambeth that we should call on all local government workers to take universal strike action to bring down the Government is either realistic or likely to be effective. The idea that there is some method by which the trade union movement can take action — certainly if confined to local government, especially those places where there are problems such as Lambeth — to bring this Government down is wrong. It is not going to be the way in which we're going to defeat the present Tory government.

So, as a union, we've had to be pragmatic in our approach. We've had to deal with situations as we have found them in the local authorities. We have reached different solutions in different circumstances. Some of these have involved industrial action, some have involved negotiations, and some have involved supporting local authorities in one way or another. We have sought to mobilise our membership and also to work jointly with the other unions, which has been very effective in most cases.

We've argued that local authorities confronted with difficulties should raise the rates and not go for cuts in public spending. They should increase their rates so that they can continue to maintain services and most Labour controlled local authorities have gone along with us in doing that. And we have tried to mobilise public opinion to persuade councillors that they ought to stand up to central government. And, with other unions and the TUC, we've argued against the Government's policies. At the moment we are fighting on the front of educating people. It's a long battle — getting people to understand the importance of the public services and the need to maintain them. At this point in time there is little possibility that we will be able, through industrial action, to influence or pretend to support Labour controlled authorities. We are doing, at the moment, all that we feel able to do. The situation can of course change and we could in future see much more dramatic action by the trade union movement on some of these issues.

For many years there have been attempts to establish a much bigger private medical sector in Britain. We are now beginning to see the growth of privatisation in local government services. How real a threat do you consider this to be?

I think this is a very serious development. Certainly in the NHS we are seeing an extension of private medicine. A very interesting report produced by an American firm of consultants came out recently which said that private medicine would never be profitable for private enterprise in Britain unless the private medical services could depend

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on the NHS to provide a lot of the specialised care which the private sector finds too expensive both to develop and maintain. We have therefore to defend the NHS and to prevent the incursion of the private medical sector into the NHS.

We have to persuade some of the unions not to make agreements with the employers which deliberately encourage the growth of private medicine. We have got to make certain, particularly where we have got Labour authorities, that licences are not issued for the development of private hospitals and land is not made available to them wherever that can be avoided. But the battle to defend the NHS and limit the area of private medicine is going to be a difficult one given the character of the present Government.

In local government the great danger is the contracting out to private enterprise of services which have in the past been regarded as public services, such as refuse collection and cleaning. Previously such jobs have been done by local authorities on the basis that these were services that the community needed: they were not for profit making, they were there because people needed them. If we give them to the private contractor then of course the interest then changes. They will be seen as a way of making a profit and the motive for the existence of the services will change. This will have a harmful effect on both those who work in the service and the consumer. Moreover, if the local authority runs down their services, then at the end of the



contract, they will be at the mercy of the private entrepreneurs that have entered the business. A further objection is that if work is put out to private contractors, then there will be no one the consumer can complain to. At least they can now complain to the council.

There is a problem here though. Part of the Tories' appeal at the last election was that they talked about giving people greater freedom, greater control. People all too often don't see services as their own. They are someone else's. Have you given any thought as to how we win back the ground in making the case for the public provision of services?

I think there are three ways we've got to make improvements. First, we've got to tackle the question of rates. People don't like paying rates. The present rating system is totally regressive: it's totally unsatisfactory. We've got to get rid of it and a Labour government had better say so. We ought to have a local income tax which would be a much fairer system. One of the reasons why people don't like local government is because they find that rates are very unfair. It is based on rateable values of properties and has nothing to do with the income of the people who are required to pay them.

Second, we've got a big job to do in explaining to people what

services local authorities provide. Many people don't know what the services are that they are paying for. They don't realise that their rates finance education, they think that comes out of taxation. We've got an educational job to do here.

Thirdly, we've got to make sure that local authorities are not bureaucratic. This is a great danger with the large local authorities that we've got at the moment. We have to try and break it down into something which people can relate to, which is not remote.

I think we've also got to develop a lot of new ideas for municipal enterprise — you could call it 'municipal socialism', which was very important to the pioneers of the labour movement who saw local government as being very relevant to the community. That means developing, particularly with the Labour Party, a lot of new ideas about what the local authorities could be doing, the ways in which they could use their existing services far more effectively than they do, the ways in which they could be providing the kinds of services that people need. This would mean reversing the trend towards more restrictive legislation for local authorities which has been apparent over the years. The whole basis of the new rate support grant is to exercise much more effective central government control over local government. We, on the contrary, have got to make sure local authorities are allowed to extend their activities into other areas which would be relevant to the community.

But certainly a key problem is the lack of democracy. Local authorities must relate to the community directly, while those who work in local government must have a much bigger say in decision making. There has been much talk about industrial democracy but we see very little of that practised in local government.

I think these are the ways in which we would see people become much more sympathetic to the idea of the extension of public ownership and public control — through the municipalities, through municipal socialism, rather than seeing it come about as a result of the traditional forms of nationalisation.

Earlier you stressed that we haven't seen anything like the present Tory government since the war, a government determined to undermine many of the labour movement's postwar advances. This has put the trade union movement very much on the defensive. It has found it extremely difficult to respond to the challenge that has been thrown down by the Government.

Yes, I think that the trade union movement is now confronted with a situation which they've never had before — certainly not in the last 40 years. They are finding it difficult to develop effective policies which will influence what the Government is doing. They are also finding it difficult to mobilise the unions in a way in which effectively opposes government policies — or indeed has the potential of defeating the Government itself. This is partly, I think, because the workforce and the trade unions in general have become somewhat demoralised. There is also a certain amount of fear at present particularly in the areas where we've seen massive redundancies.

Under these circumstances, with 2.5 million unemployed, we might have expected people to be demonstrating on the streets. Ten years ago we might have anticipated social unrest in such conditions. The fact that we haven't is partly because many workers have been cushioned by redundancy payments and also because now a lot more women work compared with the 1930s, which means two incomes coming into the household rather than just the one breadwinner. The other lesson though is that those who think that unemployment is necessarily going to inspire the working class to revolt should look at the way in which things went in the 1930s. We had exactly the opposite. There wasn't social unrest in the 30s. In fact what we tended to see was a move towards the right. There weren't Labour governments, there were Conservative governments.

So the task we are facing is not an easy one. We are trying to mobilise trade unionists. We had May 14. And the Labour Party had its very successful demonstration in Liverpool that began to show that there was the strength of feeling amongst working people. The attempt now is to go out to other places — to Glasgow, Newcastle and Birmingham where we shall be campaigning during the spring of this year. It's a question of the TUC having to go out and inspire a campaign rather than moving with a campaign which is already there and this is a very worrying feature at the present time because one can only mobilise a strength which already exists. To create it against government policies is a much more difficult thing.

As part of its approach, the TUC is doing a very big job in education to try and get the message across that there are alternative policies, that there are different ways of doing it. People think that what is happening now is inevitable — that you have to go through a bad period before things get better. And we also need to persuade people that there are things that they can do.

The Government, however, is in difficulties. Despite their pledges, public expenditure has actually increased. Their policies have so totally failed that they are having to change them. Not so much because pressure from the trade unions has convinced them that they are wrong—but because of the inevitability of the circumstances they find themselves in.

I also think, by the way, that the trade union movement sees now more than ever the need to work with the Labour Party to ensure that the policies of the Labour Party and subsequently a Labour government are policies which the trade union movement believes in, which is what the debates on Labour's constitution and the leadership question are all about. More and more people feel that the only way in

which we shall succeed is not by trying to force this Government out of office but by seeing that the Labour Party stands for policies which people will believe in, which people will be able to identify with. More and more there is a turn towards political solutions rather than trade union and industrial solutions to the problems that we are confronted with.

The last election not only saw the return of a reactionary Tory government but also the lowest Labour share of the vote since 1931. How can we restore Labour's popular support and begin to reverse the long decline which has taken place — and what role can the unions play in this?

First of all, the unions can do it through the TUC-Labour Party liaison committee which has the job at the moment of hammering out policies with which both can identify and which will be attractive to people at the next general election. The next area is of course the influence that the unions have over the Labour Party Conference — because at the end of the day the unions have a greater say in what happens at Labour Party Conferences than the constituency parties or the parliamentary party. Likewise the unions must exercise their influence in other areas like the National Executive Committee. We must develop policies and win popular support for those policies.

The unions can play a role here — we've got 12 million members. We ought to be able to influence them directly in political thinking. At the same time the Labour Party's got to build up a mass party again based on people who believe in the socialist ideal and the policies of the party. Hopefully, on that basis, we will be able to restore the vote that Labour gets in percentage terms nearer to the figure it obtained in 1945 than the figure it got in 1979. •