

THE PEOPLES MARCH FOR JOBS

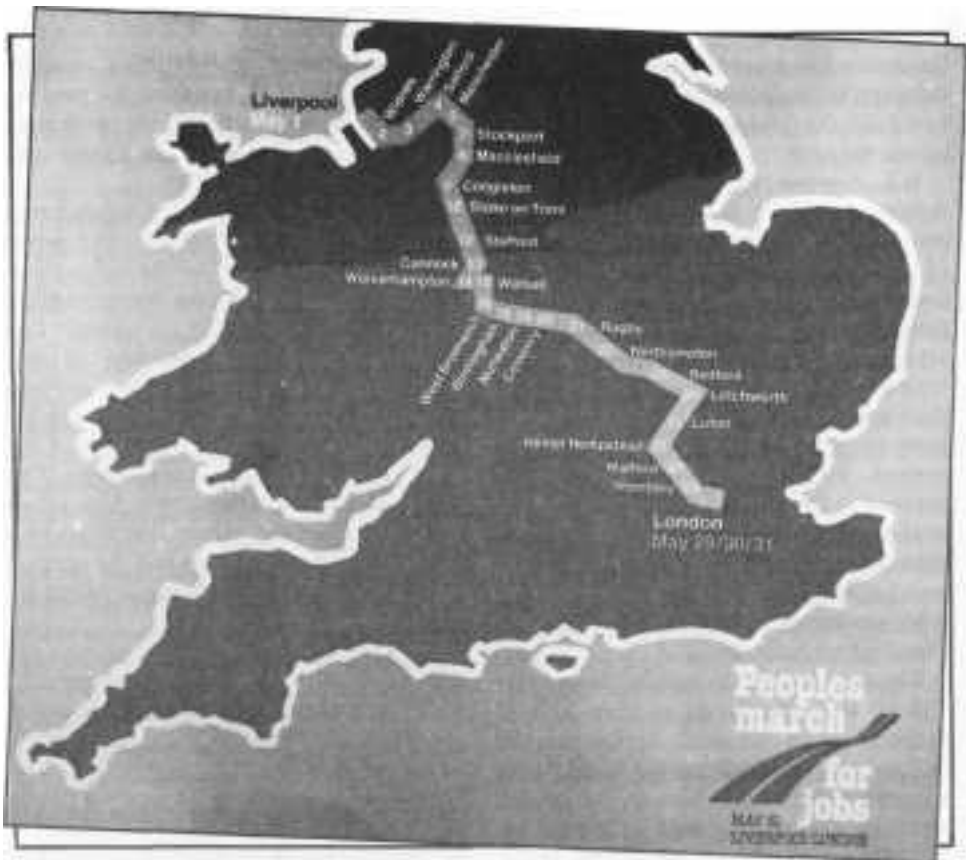
The last few years have seen a dramatic transformation in the economic environment. The last vestiges of the long boom have disappeared to be replaced by full blown recession. Full employment has been buried — not just economically, but politically by Thatcher and the monetarists. For the first time since the thirties, large scale unemployment is now an overriding feature of the labour market.

The process started in the late sixties, gradually gaining momentum in the seventies, but it is only in the last year or so that the full nature of the change and its impact has come to be realised. And it is not about to go away. All indications are that large scale unemployment will beset the British economy throughout the eighties — short of a very radical change in the orientation of government economic policy.

A growing awareness of the gravity of Britain's economic situation was a factor in Thatcher's election in May 1979. It was time to get to grips with things. If there is one issue since then — and notably over the last 12 months — which has begun to shift the tide of opinion it is unemployment. Now it is generally seen not as an individual but as a social problem. And the Tories have suffered the consequent anger and disquiet.

The political effects of unemployment, however, remain open-ended, as history demonstrated in the thirties. Much will depend on the effectiveness of the Left's response. Such a response is not easy precisely because mass unemployment is a new phenomenon with far reaching consequences. The trade union movement, for example, has hitherto developed its

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strategy and practice in conditions of relative full employment. Now it is very different: financial pressure, falling membership, lower morale and less industrial clout. While action against unemployment requires rather different forms of struggle to, for example, the wages fight. It is thus taking the labour movement time to find the appropriate forms of response.

The Peoples March for Jobs being held this month looks, in this context like proving something special. The basic details are well known. Organised by the three regional TUCs (North West, West Midland and South East), it has now sprouted two legs, one from Liverpool and the other from Yorkshire, which will converge and march together on London.

The basic aim of the March is to focus national attention on unemployment and the need to do something urgently about it. The message is that unemployment harms people, the economy and society. As such, it has very broad appeal. The conception of the March is to unite around the trade union movement the widest possible sections of people. Unemployment affects not only the trade union movement, but the whole of society. As such, it is perhaps the first attempt by the labour movement to organise a *national* campaign which seeks to mobilise and involve not only its own ranks but many other sections as well.

Already the March has attracted a diverse range of offerees. The trade union movement is of course heavily involved. The young

unemployed will march in large numbers. Women's organisations, community groups, ethnic organisations and the church are an integral element. Labour councils, notably in the West Midlands, are playing an important coordinating, facilitating and financial role. The Co-operative Movement is providing resources and assistance. A range of well known sponsors from all walks of life indicate the breadth of feeling expressed by the March. While the cultural events along the route of the March, including the big rock concert in Brixton's Brockwell Park, will appeal particularly to young people — and demonstrate that the labour movement has learnt from the experience of the ANL and CND.

The Peoples March offers much. If successful, it can focus national attention on the issue of unemployment in a quite new way, thereby further undermining the Tories. It can intensify discussions around what kinds of policies are needed to make a serious dent on the unemployment problem. Finally, it can give confidence to the labour movement at a time when it needs it most: a massive, creative and broad March initiated by the labour movement will be a pointer to new forms of unity and alliance in the struggle against recession.