

final stages. It is particularly significant because it challenges an important aspect of the Tory government's economic policy — the attempt to impose a public sector pay policy through the operation of cash limits.

The 500,000 civil servants are organised into nine civil service trade unions, most of which have only recently affiliated to the TUC.

The absence of a tradition of militancy among the civil service unions has been underscored by a common media projection of civil servants as being closely associated with the bowler-hatted image of the Whitehall mandarin. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The vast majority of civil servants occupy the clerical and middle managerial grades and are drawn from the working class. The incidence of low pay among civil servants is quite staggering. Over two-thirds (366,000) earn less than the average national wage and one-third (150,000) earn less than the official poverty threshold (£75 a week).

One of the obstacles that has prevented the civil service unions from a closer alignment with the labour movement has been the principle of political impartiality whereby civil servants are not allowed to be involved in the politics of the country. In spite of recent moves to erode the principle, the majority of civil servants are still in the 'politically restricted' category. It is interesting to note, therefore, that one effect of the current dispute may well be to draw the civil service unions closer to the labour movement because of the need for TUC support and because of the perceived overtly political nature of the Government's public sector pay policy.

The dispute began formally with the Government's announcement that the 6% cash limit would determine civil service pay in 1981. The usual basis for pay negotiations, the Pay Research Unit (a complex system of comparability), was ignored by the Government and the National Pay Agreement breached. Recourse to arbitration was denied.

Underpinning the dispute, however, is one of the most disastrous records of industrial relations policy pursued by any postwar government. What has particularly angered the union leaders has been the ignoring of all the negotiating and consultative procedures built up over the years, the imposition of policy through 'administrative action', and, what is now becoming apparent, the Government's calculated aim of destroying the trade union movement within the civil service.

The unions responded by uniting under one umbrella organisation, the Council of Civil Service Unions (CCSU), which

established forty area organisations throughout the UK to coordinate the pay campaign locally.

The main feature of the campaign so far has been the use of the selective strike strategy combined with the use of one-day strikes, whose purpose has been mainly to display a show of strength and unity and to provide moral support for the selective strikes.

The selective strike strategy is an interesting and rather distinctive development in white collar trade unionism. It has enabled the civil service unions to aim their action specifically at sources of government income: already some £5.5 billion, half the entire defence budget for one year, has been withheld from the Treasury. The selective strike also allowed the unions to maintain a pay campaign that largely managed to avoid hitting the public, and, in particular, the old, the sick and the unemployed. And finally it helped to overcome an important feature of many white collar unions, the inability to deliver all-out strike action at the early stage of a dispute.

A major disadvantage of the strategy has been that the length of the dispute has caused significant disaffection with the campaign among union members, manifested especially by the fall-off in the collection of the levy, which is so essential to fund the strategy. More importantly, in spite of its effect on government cash flow, the strategy has so far failed to bring the Government to the negotiating table. And that constitutes the present impasse.

At the time of writing the leadership of the most important and largest unions have recommended all-out strike action as the only viable method of struggle that now remains. The early results of the membership consultations indicate that the membership is not yet willing to back an all-out strategy. The Government will undoubtedly read this as a sign of weakness. Yet the consultative meetings have also shown that the civil servants are clearly unwilling to settle for 7%, the current offer.

The situation therefore remains ambivalent. The selective strategy will probably continue, with various forms of escalation, although a question mark must remain over the ability to levy the membership for funds sufficient to continue the action.

There is no question that the civil servants possess the 'industrial muscle' to win this dispute. The problem is encapsulated by one of Thatcher's 'asides': 'We'll see who is more determined'.

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## CIVIL SERVICE DISPUTE

The civil servants dispute with its employer, the government, now seems to be entering its