



# Trade Unions and the Recession

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Few members, activists and leaders in the trade union movement can now doubt that they face the most severe problems and the most hostile political and economic environment for fifty years. In manufacturing industry, the continuing decline in output and investment has been accompanied by rapidly increasing unemployment and widespread factory closures that starkly reveal the extent to which the deindustrialisation of Britain has developed. In the public sector, expenditure cuts and the more stringent financial control mechanisms have already undermined the job security and living standards of workers and threatened the social wage of all working class families. Restrictions on the legality of traditional trade union methods of organisation and expressions of solidarity in industrial disputes have been introduced in the Employment Act. More anti-union legislation has been promised, no doubt to encourage the more aggressive and concerted employers' strategies against workplace trade unionism that have developed in many sectors.

These major attacks on jobs, living standards and trade union rights have given rise to relatively little industrial militancy at the workplace. Trade union acquiescence and demoralisation have been more widespread than active resistance or mobilisation and where significant trade union victories have occurred, they have not provided the focus or stimulus for widespread struggle (for example, compared with the impact of the UCS workers' victory and the miners' wage militancy in the early 1970s). At national level, while the TUC has developed a coherent alternative economic and industrial strategy, union leaders cannot believe that it commands the support and commitment of the mass of their membership at this time. Equally, while the Left views the struggle for power and the attempt to extend democracy within the Labour Party as a crucial stage in the longer term political advance of the labour movement, such activity almost inevitably appears as a short term diversion away from a more sustained opposition to government policies. It is presented as such, not just by the mass media obsessed by the internal conflicts of the labour movement, but also, of course, by the right wing leaders in the Parliamentary Labour Party and in major unions.

This depressing view of the trade union response to the current crisis of British capitalism is not altogether surprising. World economic recession and the specific economic and political strategy of the Thatcher government that emerged from the disillusion and defeat of the Wilson-Callaghan administration, scarcely provide a congenial environment for trade union advances. However, it is an oversimple and one-sided perspective. A closer analysis of recent developments in trade union organisation and practice — one that explores changes in workplace organisation, industrial struggles and the role of the TUC — does not lead obviously to more optimistic

conclusions. It does, however, identify important variations and contradictions in trade union practice and suggests that their resolution over the next few years is by no means predictable. Alongside the immense difficulties facing a weakened trade union movement is a growing awareness of the need for new strategies, the organisation to sustain them and the recognition that previous patterns of sectional workplace struggles and limited political engagement will be insufficient in the 1980s.

The focus of this article is therefore much more limited than recent contributions to *Marxism Today* that have analysed the emergence and nature of Thatcherism and the preconditions for a broad labour movement alternative strategy.<sup>1</sup> Its starting-point must be the dramatic transformation of the material and ideological context of trade union organisation and practice that have been generated by economic recession and changes in management and government policies. The central argument is really about the scale of the changes needed if trade unions are to successfully defend their members' jobs, standards of living, working conditions and trade union rights: it concerns the limitations of collective bargaining under mass unemployment.

## SHOP STEWARDS AND WORKPLACE TRADE UNION ORGANISATION

Trade union history in Britain shows a changing balance between the organisation of narrow sectional interests and broader patterns of solidarity and expressions of common purpose. However, in the postwar period of full employment, it can be argued that British trade unionism strengthened its base in the workplace and resisted attempts to develop more centralised or co-ordinated activity. In contrast to most other comparable trade union movements, workgroups and their shop stewards developed considerable autonomy from official trade union structures. For the well organised groups of manual workers, in key sectors of manufacturing, the policies of their national unions or the TUC were often viewed as an irrelevance or even a constraint on their workplace activities.

By the mid 1960s, the contradictions of workplace trade unionism should have been apparent to the Left. First, it was obvious that wage struggles developed largely in isolation from one sector or another. Indeed, within many parts of manufacturing industry, the involvement of shop stewards and workgroups in fragmented bargaining, often based on the negotiation of piecework prices and bonuses, meant that the limits of trade union solidarity scarcely extended beyond the section or department in which they worked. At the same time, there were important examples of the emergence of joint shop stewards' committees at plant level and the possibility that

parochialism would be further reduced by the development of company-wide combine committees.

Second, it was often argued that workplace trade unionism was largely economistic in its orientation — it expressed a primary focus on wage movements and differentials and little concern with wider political issues. However, in addition to providing a secure base for the improvement of living standards by resisting wage restraint policies, workplace trade unionism also involved a continuing challenge to managerial prerogatives at the point of production. It emphasised the defence of protective work practices and facilitated resistance to piecemeal management plans for rationalisation and government policies for productivity bargaining.

Third, while the emergence of independent shop stewards and workplace organisation exposed major conflicts within individual trade unions, as well as various forms of inter-union competition, it provided an essential basis for wage struggles given the predominance of right wing leadership in many unions for much of this period. If the fragmentation of workplace union organisation prevented more co-ordinated trade union policies, then it also discouraged the corporatist inclinations of national leadership. Or to express the point more positively, it eventually encouraged a more decentralised and democratic pattern of union policy-making by emphasising the close contact between trade union members and shop stewards.<sup>2</sup>

The sectionalism or parochialism of workplace trade unionism can thus easily be understood and justified in terms of the political and economic conditions in which it developed in the 1950s and 1960s. It is more difficult to identify the most significant changes in trade union organisation and practice in the last decade or so, and to analyse the problems facing shop stewards in the vastly different conditions today. This is partly because the recession has had an uneven impact on trade union organisation in different sectors (and only a very recent effect in some areas) and also because the 'centre of gravity' of the British trade union movement has been shifting from manufacturing and nationalised industries to non-manual workers and the public service sector, where workplace organisation is often a recent and less visible phenomenon.

It is clear that the involvement of trade union leadership in the pay restraint policies of the last Labour government had a considerable impact on workplace trade unionism. The role of TUC leadership in the design and implementation of the 1975-77 incomes policies was inevitably a major factor in the demobilisation of shop stewards' initiative and the decline in wage militancy, already undermined by the rapid increase in unemployment at that time. What is less widely understood and less often discussed within the labour movement is the impact of employers' strategies on shop steward organisation.

### Employers' strategies and shop stewards

In key sectors of manufacturing industry, management has been successful in reforming collective bargaining structures and wage payment systems in ways that have undermined the source of shop stewards' power — however limited and fragmented — that caused them so much concern in the late 1960s. As the most recent large scale survey shows, multi-plant firms, often in highly concentrated industries with significant foreign ownership, have developed much more sophisticated industrial relations strategies. These have included a decisive move to single-employer bargaining, a more systematic application of work measurement and job evaluation techniques and the introduction of more formal disputes procedures at the place of work.<sup>3</sup>

The impact on workplace trade unionism and shop steward organisation has been profound. In larger factories especially, and for white collar as well as manual workers, shop stewards have become involved in more complex organisations. It is clear that management

had the most important influence on these developments — through their support for more formal closed shop and check-off arrangements, facilities for time-off for union duties and the development of joint consultative and health and safety committees. The number of full time shop stewards probably quadrupled in ten years and many became involved in more hierarchic committee structures.

To oversimplify a complex, variable and contradictory development, management 'sponsorship' of shop steward facilities and procedural arrangements emphasised formalisation at the plant or factory level (firmly resisting most multi-plant committee claims for recognition) and often encouraged divisions or distance between senior shop stewards and their members. In a worsening economic environment, it became possible for corporate management to bypass the joint procedures they had earlier encouraged with little fear of collective or co-ordinated resistance.

These changes have not emerged from a consistent, planned or co-ordinated 'employers' offensive' in manufacturing industry. The evidence suggests that they have resulted from government intervention — especially incomes policies and employment legislation — and the increasing concentration of British manufacturing industry. If the development of more specialist industrial relations management has been the most pervasive influence on the formalisation of workplace trade unionism, we can also see how the struggles of shop stewards themselves, and the attempts in many trade unions to reform official structures and encourage the involvement of shop stewards in policy-making, have often led in the same direction. Thus, while the close proximity between union members and shop stewards, sustained by their daily involvement in developing and defending the custom-and-practice of the workplace, may have been fractured, it is apparent that many convenors and senior stewards are now more closely involved in official trade union structures. The dangers of incorporation of shop steward leaders, by management and national union leadership, coexists with a more substantial basis for trade union solidarity.

These changes in shop steward organisation have been most dramatic in large manufacturing companies — especially in the engineering industries — where trade union wage militancy and other expressions of trade union consciousness offered the most obvious resistance to managerial power in the more favourable economic conditions of the 1950s. Related developments have, of course, occurred in parts of the public sector and elsewhere. In many of these cases, the shop steward organisation sponsored by management or union leadership (often both), in situations where workplace organisation had been less developed or non-existent, is inevitably more fragile. It has, however, resulted in more decentralised bargaining, more democratic union policy-making and, as the increasing conflict in local government and the health service shows, less predictable patterns of trade unionism in the 1970s.

### Impact on resistance

How have these changes in workplace trade union organisation affected the fight to protect jobs, living standards and trade union rights in recent years? First, it must be recognised that the ability to

<sup>1</sup> See especially, articles in *Marxism Today* by Martin Jacques, October 1979, Andrew Gamble, November 1980, and Bob Rowthorn, January 1981, and the more extended analysis of Sam Aaronovitch, *The Road from Thatcherism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1981.

<sup>2</sup> For a more theoretical and detailed consideration of these developments see Richard Hyman's, 'The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism' in *Capital and Class*, 8, Summer 1979.

<sup>3</sup> William Brown (ed), *The Changing Contours of British Industrial Relations*, Blackwell, 1981.

protect jobs through collective bargaining at plant or factory level is extremely limited.<sup>4</sup> Union negotiations typically attempt to avoid compulsory lay-offs by reducing overtime, limited sub-contracting, reducing the age of retirement, limiting new recruitment and agreeing to work-sharing and short-time working. Such policies attempt to protect the jobs of existing union members, but cannot slow down the reduction of job opportunities for school leavers and others in the community. In the more exposed sectors of the economy they have

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not been successful, even in terms of preventing redundancies. In such cases, the most visible trade union activity is the negotiation of compensation for redundant members; some involvement in the procedures for selecting workers to be laid-off; and exploring the possibility of redeployment or re-training.

The encouragement given by the TUC for negotiations to centre on demands for a reduction in working hours — the campaign for a 35-hour week — has been partly successful. The autumn 1979 national engineering stoppage was obviously crucial to the development of a genuine and widespread campaign, but while this dispute revealed an enthusiastic trade union commitment to the demand, it also generated a very strong and co-ordinated employers' resistance. The settlement embodied a limited, but important trade union gain, and there is now evidence that government and CBI exhortations to employers to resist reductions in working hours is not producing the desired concerted response. This is one area of struggle where collective bargaining, and the changes in workplace trade union organisation outlined above, can have an important impact on the defence of jobs if the momentum for a broadly based campaign can be sustained.

Active opposition to large scale redundancies and plant closures, has not occurred on a substantial scale; initial opposition has rarely been sustained for a long enough period and the few isolated examples of lengthy resistance have not been successful. The ability of union officials and activists to mobilise members for industrial action to preserve jobs has, of course, been undermined by redundancy payments. The attraction of compensation, especially for skilled workers, could be easily understood while reasonable prospects of alternative employment existed. However, the fatalism and defeatism encouraged by 'voluntary' redundancy over the last decade has made it more difficult to mobilise resistance in the current, deteriorating employment context.

Sporadic attempts to mobilise industrial action to prevent total plant closure raise even more fundamental questions about trade union organisation, ideology and power. Ten years after the historic example of the UCS work-in, it is difficult to identify more than a few cases of successful resistance to proposed plant closure that have had long term tangible benefits for the workforce and community. Even the best organised factories face enormous difficulties when corporate management is convinced that the impact of recession makes closure inevitable or desirable.<sup>5</sup>

#### New forms of co-operation and struggle

It is in this area that the changes in shop steward organisation assumes most importance. A more effective resistance to job losses and factory closures clearly demands a broader basis of union organisation than the workplace trade unionism that spearheaded the wage militancy of the 1960s. It depends upon more active inter-union co-operation, a

closer involvement of shop stewards in community and political organisations and a strategy that links the problems of individual factories to the challenge of increasingly concentrated and, invariably, multi-plant corporate management.

It can be argued that the organisational base for such resistance now exists in many companies — however embryonic and fragile when set alongside the scale of the problems posed by corporate management in declining industries. The necessity of multi-union, multi-plant shop stewards' combine committees is now more widely accepted at all levels in the trade union movement. Examples of policies that go beyond the co-ordination of pay struggles to the analysis of investment policies, corporate strategies and the development of alternative workers' plans have emerged from the motor industry, aerospace, rubber and chemicals, power engineering, machine tools, ship-building and other sectors — and these initiatives are now more widely discussed and understood by shop stewards. Furthermore in Coventry, Newcastle, Liverpool and elsewhere, shop stewards' committees have developed a more substantial involvement in trades councils and other forms of local political organisation and mobilisation, and have emphasised the need for broader political movements to support their bargaining activities.<sup>6</sup>

It must be recognised that many of these positive developments in shop-floor organisation have grown out of the defeats and weakness of workplace trade unionism in recent years. They point to the ways in which trade union organisation and political involvement must be further developed, and with an increasing sense of urgency, given the vulnerability of isolated plant-level shop steward organisation and the evidence that the recession has provided the opportunity for senior managers to undermine the activities of the relatively few established combine committees that earlier promised more sustained resistance in some sectors.<sup>7</sup> It is to these wider struggles that we now turn.

## INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLES

As the impact of government policies on jobs, living standards and trade union rights has become more direct, it can be argued that the potential for more extensive and co-ordinated resistance has been created. Recent experience suggests that this argument needs careful qualification and the danger that trade union strategies at sectoral level might develop in an isolated and fragmented way should be confronted directly.

Dealing first with the attack on jobs, it is no longer true that the impact of rising unemployment is largely concentrated in non-union or weakly-organised sectors of the economy. However, the burden of unemployment remains unequal — the dole queues still contain a disproportionate number of the oldest and youngest workers, the unskilled, those with poor health and others from ethnic minority groups. More important, deindustrialisation inevitably generates greater job losses in private and publicly owned manufacturing industries that are most exposed to international competition.

Turning to the public service sector, it must be remembered that job losses remained relatively small until well into the second year of the Thatcher government. Earlier rounds of public expenditure cuts had more impact on employment in the construction industry and on the quality of social services. The most recent cuts in local and central government will obviously have a much more drastic effect on employment — though even now, the impact will be very uneven in its effect on different departments, services and groups of workers.

The obstacles to the development of a more effective resistance to job losses at industry or sectoral level — and to the co-ordination of such strategies — can be easily stated. In the public service sector, the problem of job security is a relatively recent one and the strength of workplace organisation limited. In trying to mobilise widespread

support to resist hospital closures and cuts in social services, trade unions have faced predictable hostility from right wing politicians and newspaper editorials (especially since the 'winter of discontent'), but they have not received consistent support from other sections of the trade union movement. In manufacturing industry, we have already discussed the way in which sectionalism and factory consciousness in well organised sectors inhibited the development of industry-wide organisation or initiatives. The attack on jobs in the motor and steel industries shows that even when trade unions are able to develop the organisation to resist job losses in a more co-ordinated manner and to develop alternative policies for their industries, activists still face formidable problems in involving other groups of workers in their struggles.

### Wage militancy

Turning secondly to wage militancy — or its relative absence — two features of the last two years' bargaining should be emphasised. First, despite the alarming decline in output and employment, the living standards of workers, *on average*, were not reduced until very recently; there was a growth of real disposable income of around 2% between 1979 and 1980, for example, and reductions in real wages only began in the middle of 1980. The costs of recession have clearly been borne by the unemployed rather than the majority of employed workers so far.

Second, and just as important for the argument here, there seems to be increasing variations in the pay settlements of different groups. At the time of writing, pay rises in the manufacturing industries are averaging 8-9% (with very low settlements in exposed sectors), around 10-11% in private sector services (such as banking and finance) and between 7 and 13% in the public sector. Higher settlements have been reached in some of the nationalised industries, while in local government, the health service, education and the civil service, settlements have rarely exceeded 7%. These variations, largely reflecting the labour market position and industrial strength of different groups, provide some explanation of the limited extent to which the few major wage struggles have been able to generate support from other groups.

Is the low level of wage militancy a temporary phenomenon or does it suggest that trade unionists have made a decisive shift in their real wage expectations as a result of their weaker labour market position?

The answer to this question will depend very largely on what happens in public sector pay bargaining — just as the history of incomes policies (even the electoral prospects of governments) in the 1970s were crucially affected by the wage militancy of miners and public service workers. The experience of the last ten years also shows that it is possible to sustain policies that discriminate against public sector workers for a number of years (1970-3 and 1975-78), but with the strong likelihood that accumulated grievances, distorted relativities and the rejection of traditional criteria of comparability will lead to industrial unrest and large pay settlements designed to catch up lost ground.

### Cash limits

In most respects, the imposition of cash limits in the public sector has had a very similar impact to the pay norms of earlier incomes policies; the apparent management flexibility to raise prices, reduce employment or services to influence the level of pay settlements is extremely limited and virtually absent in the tax-dependent public services. However, within the nationalised industries, it is obvious that ministers have built into the cash limits on the external financial requirement quite different pay assumptions, and ones which are based on a calculation of the prospects of successful industrial action. For the last two pay rounds, the vast difference in the treatment given

to the British Steel Corporation and the National Coal Board illustrates this new development clearly.

It also suggests that for some time, at least, the government will be able to discourage a more concerted resistance to wage cuts across the public sector and where isolated major confrontations occur, to make a virtue out of the intransigence of ministers and an unwillingness to make significant pay concessions. Alan Fisher argued in this journal that the leadership and activists in NUPE calculated that industrial



action in local government and the health services offered little prospect of an increased pay offer above the 6% cash limit this year.<sup>8</sup>

Although the civil service unions have faced and largely overcome similar problems in sustaining their programme of industrial action for more than twenty weeks — government hostility, the low morale of members faced with increasing job insecurity and the negative impact of industrial action on other workers and their families — their eventual settlement was not much above the government's original offer. The civil service strike may yet prove to be a watershed in the development of trade union solidarity and militancy in this sector, but

<sup>4</sup> The argument is developed by Sam Aaronovitch in his May 1981, *Marxism Today* article, 'Unemployment — Halting the Slide'.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Tony Lane's discussion of the struggle at Dunlop's factory in Speke indicates many of these problems in *Plant Closure: The Trade Union Response*, (eds) Al Rainnie and John Stirling, Newcastle Upon Tyne Polytechnic, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> See *State Intervention in Industry: A Workers' Inquiry*, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> The most publicised example is, of course, that of British Leyland: see the interview with Derek Robinson in *Marxism Today*, March 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Alan Fisher, *Marxism Today*, March 1981.

it also highlights the problems posed by Thatcher's public sector pay strategy; one that has elevated calculated and selective hostility against 'weaker' unions to the major focus of the policy.

Inevitably, the last few years have emphasised the *links* between wage militancy, the fight for jobs and the defence of protective working practices. Government calculations of the industrial power of

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trade unions (including the ability and willingness of national leaders to mobilise membership) are clearly revealed in the contrasting experiences of the steel and coalmining industries. The thirteen week strike in the steel industry in 1980, while partially defending the living standards of steel workers in employment, largely undermined the prospects of co-ordinated trade union resistance to massive job losses and reduced manning levels. In South Wales, the workforce has been halved in 18 months, the man-hours needed to produce a tonne of crude steel reduced from ten to five and the ISTC's *Plan For Steel*, brushed aside by the government-backed corporate plan.

The decisive action by the NUM earlier this year, in contrast, forced the government to relax the cash limits on the coal industry to avoid an escalation in pit closures. This impressive display of leadership and rank-and-file commitment provided a rare and positive example to the rest of the trade union movement at a time of widespread demoralisation. Whether the example can be easily emulated is doubtful — the unique industrial and political strength of the NUM and the way in which it is perceived by Conservative ministers, suggests not. It is also apparent that the Cabinet was not persuaded to alter its policies by the force of argument or alternative policies of the NUM, but by the fear of the political consequences of a prolonged dispute with coalminers and the impact this would have on working class mobilisation in some areas.

### Employment Act

In the third area of government attack on the trade union movement — the legal restrictions embodied in the Employment Act and its associated Codes of Practice — there should be no assumption that the law will affect only particular sectors of the trade union movement. Obviously some groups of workers are more dependent on secondary action, picketing and the defence of the closed shop than others, but the legality of most forms of industrial action, expressions of solidarity and forms of trade union organisation will be threatened by the new law.<sup>9</sup> Two points of comparison with the 1971 Industrial Relations Act are worth consideration. First, the absence of any new legal machinery — such as the National Industrial Relations Court and the Register of Trade Unions created in 1971 — has probably made it more difficult to focus attention on and opposition to the new law this time.


Second, the Industrial Relations Act was rendered largely ineffective by the unwillingness of most employers to use its procedures, albeit in response to the widespread mobilisation of the trade union movement based around deregistration and non-cooperation with the NIRC. In the absence of such concerted trade union opposition and in the very different economic and political situation of the early 1980s, it would be foolish to assume that major employers will be so reluctant to seek legal injunctions this time. There is a distinct danger that the main purpose of the new law — to weaken trade union resistance to attacks on jobs and living standards — will not be fully understood in parts of the movement. In this area,

as in others, activists should be demanding a more forceful and co-ordinated campaign from national leadership and the Trades Union Congress.

### THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS

A brief discussion of the changing role of the TUC in the last decade raises many difficulties, but also suggests some broad conclusions. In evaluating its capacity for supporting workplace and industrial struggles. Quite clearly, the TUC enjoyed a significant increase in its internal authority over affiliated unions in the 1970s. The co-ordination of resistance to anti-union legislation involved Congress House in extensive propaganda campaigns, training of full-time officials and the crucial decision to *instruct* unions to de-register under the Industrial Relations Act. The Chequers and Downing Street talks with Heath in 1972, and the more sustained involvement with Labour Party representatives in the TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee since then, encouraged a more detailed and expert development of policy and in the annual *Economic Review*, the most coherent and programmatic set of trade union demands that had been developed for a generation. From 1975, senior General Council leaders were also involved in new forms of 'representative government' — tripartite state agencies with executive, as well as advisory, functions. Throughout the period there was an extension of TUC services to affiliated unions — especially shop steward education — and potentially important organisational innovations, such as the development of Industry Committees and an embryonic regional structure.

These important developments pale into insignificance in the minds of activists when set against other TUC leadership policies in



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the mid and late 70s; namely, the operational involvement of the TUC leadership in the pay restraint policies of 1975-77, at a time of declining real wages and increasing unemployment. The capacity of the General Council to influence the bargaining policies of affiliated unions depended on its ability to impose trade union demands on the Labour government. From the middle of 1975, TUC demands were delayed, diluted or rejected by the Labour government. Although the accommodation between many union leaders and the Cabinet survived in some form into the 'winter of discontent', well before the 1979 election, TUC leadership expressed an uncertainty, fragmentation and disillusionment that was far removed from the image of partnership in the corridors of corporate power of a few years earlier.

### Decline in influence

If the TUC was already being written off as a significant political force before the last election, then the main thrust of the Thatcher government's economic policies so far provides a further limitation on TUC activities and influence. By rejecting a formal administered incomes policy, the government avoids the need to negotiate the terms of TUC mediation between the state and organised labour. Monetarism, public expenditure cuts and deindustrialisation are designed to outflank rather than confront trade unions, as Andrew Gamble argued in this journal, by creating a slow demoralisation, defeatism and division.

TUC leaders cannot believe that their analysis of Britain's problems and their policy prescriptions will have any direct influence on the Thatcher government's strategy. Thus, the TUC must be judged in terms of its role in protecting and adapting trade union organisation and services, creating a more substantial consensus and commitment to alternative policies within the movement and campaigning to mobilise more effective resistance to government policies. These issues have already been discussed at two consultative conferences and are outlined in the General Council Report to the 1981 Congress — *TUC Development Programme*. It is important that they provide the focus for a widespread discussion in the labour movement.

First, though detailed figures are not yet available, most TUC affiliated unions will have lost membership during 1980-1. In the main general unions and others with large sections in declining manufacturing industries, the reduction may be 10% or more, thus signalling an end to a decade of the most vigorous period of trade union growth in postwar Britain.

Membership decline poses two obvious problems for the movement — there will be a serious limitation on the resources available for the development of services and campaigns and there may be a self-interested scramble on the part of larger unions to attract into amalgamations smaller unions that have become financially insolvent. Mergers between some of the hundred or more TUC unions should, of course, be welcomed if they are based on principles that support common interest, encourage economies of scale and minimise conflicts within, as well as, between unions. At present there seems to be a grave danger that this will not be the case if some proposed mergers take place, and it is unlikely that the TUC will be able to do anything about it.

### Campaigning approach

The second broad area of concern raised in the consultative conferences centres on the way in which policy is developed and economic and social priorities determined within the TUC. The problem is to avoid centralisation of decision-making in the hands of a few General Council members by developing much wider processes of consultation and involvement in the movement, without losing the facility for decisive action. At the same time, more effective

mechanisms must be developed to enable the General Council to determine priorities that command the confidence of activists while retaining credibility in negotiations with a future Labour government. Given the diverse occupational and industrial interests of TUC membership and the continuing political divisions within the General Council, these problems remain formidable ones. For this reason, the *TUC Development Programme* concentrates on ways in

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which the TUC can develop a more effective campaigning role to promote trade union policies and provide a focus for more active resistance to government policies.

After the relative failure of the TUC Day of Action in May 1980, the People's March for Jobs, organised by the TUC's regional councils, can be judged an outstanding success and an encouragement to plan further lobbies, demonstrations and political activities to concentrate public attention on the impact of unemployment. Exclusion from Whitehall naturally increases the attraction of Trafalgar Square for trade union leaders, but the momentum and political impact of such campaigns will only be sustained if the more widespread, popular revulsion against government policies can be mobilised by a more effective TUC regional organisation.

The emphasis on the importance of the regions and an active campaigning role for the TUC is a major and positive initiative that needs widespread support from activists. Plans for a new collective bargaining information bulletin, including material on job security and new technology, more extensive membership education programmes (with special emphasis on young workers, new members, women and ethnic minorities) and the extension of the network of unemployed workers' centres are evidence of the extent to which the TUC has recognised the vastly different context in which its work must now be conducted.

### Perspectives

Any survey of the response of the trade union movement to the current economic and political crisis in Britain is bound to draw attention to the major difficulties facing members and activists. The depth of the recession in manufacturing, the attack on the state sector and the calculated political hostility towards trade unions and working class families exhibited in most of the policies of the Thatcher government, cruelly expose the limitations of collective bargaining in defending jobs, living standards and working conditions.

However, the uncertainties and contradictions in government policies and the evidence that Britain's capitalist class lacks the self-confidence and cohesion to mount the kind of offensive that some Cabinet ministers would like to see, provides the opportunity for the trade union movement to move beyond the demoralised and stunned acquiescence that followed the last election. There are already indications that new forms of organisation, more effective campaigns and mobilisation and broader political alliances at all levels of trade union activity are developing to exploit this opportunity. Many of the most positive changes have resulted from piecemeal initiatives and recent defeats, but they provide the basis for a more substantial Left advance if they form the focus of widespread discussion and action in the trade union movement.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the new legislation and the dangers it poses, see Roy Lewis and Bob Simpson, 'Striking a Balance?' — *Employment Law After the 1980 Act*, Martin Robertson 1981.