

# Discussion

## **The Unions: caught on the ebb tide**

Jim Fyrth



The furore around one part of Tony Lane's article has obscured its real value and weaknesses. The decay of old industrial areas and the dispersal of industry into suburban and rural areas without strong union traditions (the same problem arose and was at length overcome in the 1930s); the spread of multi-plant enterprises and the growth of workplace and sectional bargaining do all create real problems. So do the changed balance between white collar and manual unions and the failure of unions to reflect the importance of women in the labour force. It was a pity that Tony Lane's statement of these problems was couched in difficult language and included the rather trivial comments on BR breakfasts and the rest which set so many in hot pursuit.

Marxists would expect serious discussion of the way changes in the structure of industry affect the labour movement. Ever since there have been trade unions they have continually had to face problems arising from the changing technology, organisation, structure and location of industry. Union changes in organisation and outlook, to deal with these problems, have always lagged

behind the changes in industry and have come about only through struggle and conflict of ideas in the labour movement itself.

New developments always contain contradictory features. The dispersal of industry has a positive as well as a negative side. Industrial concentration did create 'fortress' areas of working class organisation but it also divided Britain into two nations geographically, in one of which the labour movement could not rule. Dispersal alters the balance (even though there are still 'colonial' areas in our islands) and I have rejoiced to see demonstrations against Tebbit, against education cuts and supporting health workers even in my native Dorset. Contrari-wise, the great gains of shop steward organisation and local bargaining, which involve some half-million lay officers in day-to-day union work, do weaken the necessity of workers thinking in industry-wide and class terms. Will Paynter is not the only one to notice this and it is significant that the most important of recent class struggles have been where national bargaining is still more important than local (railways, hospitals, mining, steel, fire service etc).

It is, surely, the aim of Marxists to face these contradictions and solve them in a way **that** carries the whole movement forward. Tony Lane gives no indication of this way and his analysis is inadequate. (Though that is no reason why he should not have made it and included all the points he thought relevant.)

He nowhere, for instance, mentions multinational companies, which control some half of British manufacturing and are not just another example of multi-plant firms. The problems they create for unions **are** becoming very clear: anti-union managements running down and closing plants (eg, Ford's Thames Foundry), turning of British plants into assembly lines for parts made abroad and many others. Unions are not yet equipped either in their structure, their links with foreign workers or their research information and education services to deal with these problems. But, on the positive side, British workers are being forced to overcome their insularity. Building organisation across frontiers has become as urgent as setting up combine committees and contains greater pitfalls. The weakness on trade union internationalism is being emphasised and this is a political as well as a trade union matter.

### **Political consciousness**

Indeed the question which Tony Lane, his critics and supporters have all missed is the most important — the low level of *political consciousness* and the dominance of trade union reformism both among shop stewards and their members. For a number of years I have spent a good deal of my time with workplace representatives from railways, London Transport, the printing and foundry industries and some public services. Most are devoted to their unions and members, make sacrifices, get shot at from both sides and give up a lot of time to the job. But this does not alter the fact that over half of those I have met this year supported the Falklands war, that a significant number voted for Thatcher and that a majority have right wing views on race, women in industry and unions, 'scroungers' and 'law and order'. Many supported incomes policies and a number support union curbs, until convinced otherwise. Few read the *Morning Star* or other left papers: The *Sun*, *Express* and *Daily Star* are the most popular. There is a clear gap between the minority of left-wing stewards I meet and the devoted trade union majority. In turn the stewards themselves feel frustrated at what they call the 'apathy' and even anti-unionism of many of their members, except where their immediate interests are touched.

Anyone who accuses me of 'slander' must first explain why opinion polls show such support (including 50% of skilled workers) for this terrible government and indicate a majority of trade unionists supporting incomes policy and union curbs: or why once left wing unions have fallen to the right. (Please note: reporting these things is not supporting them. I wish I were wrong.) So why is this and what is to be done?

Ron Bellamy (*Morning Star* 6/10/82) seems to say that because imperialism is in decay there is no objective basis for reformism (and with it possible corruption.) Why then does it survive? In fact, from the mid 50s until at least the mid 70s there was plenty of scope for winning concessions by workplace bargaining, and ways could often be found round incomes policies. Hence the Heath attack on workplace organisation. In those years the standards of millions of workers rose as rapidly as at any time in history (cars, mortgages, TV, foreign holidays etc). At the same time there was disillusionment with Labour politics and lack of sympathy with what workers took to be communism. The TUC did launch a great wave of trade union education, but this was for training shop stewards in their job and was devoid of politics — though that has changed considerably

with the crisis and the efforts of those involved.

### Media

Tony Lane underestimates the influence of the media in a climate so objectively unfavourable to socialist politics. Workers are not taken in by a *Sun* attack on their own industrial action. But the capitalist domination of all communications since the war (compare the press read by trade union activists in the 30s and today) has systematically trivialised issues, launched vendettas against individuals such as 'Red Robbo' and Ken Livingstone and, most important, drowned political thought in a flood of laugh shows, soap operas, bums'n tits newspapers, space invaders and the rest. In the absence of any left offensive what was to be expected? (And this is not to denigrate the enormous efforts and successes of individual struggles and high point demonstrations, nor the advances of the women's movement, CND and others.)

The greatest responsibility for reversing these trends must lie with the Communist Party. No other party can raise the political consciousness of trade union activists in a way that can advance the whole class. (The Labour Party has never been interested in political workplace trade unions and the

ultra-left is divisive, romantic and elitist). But many in the Party see winning political leadership in the unions mainly in terms of organising to win elections for leading posts: While this is necessary, without the political conviction of trade union members, the Right will always have the advantage in its organising.

Besides tackling the problems which come from the changes in industry noted by Tony Lane, the labour movement must have its own press, have access to the media and find ways to counter the effects of hostile propaganda. There must be trade union education which deals both with immediate political questions (alternative economic strategy, defence of rights etc.) and with fundamental questions of class, capitalism and socialism.

But, above all, there must be workplace groups and branches of the Communist Party carrying on steady political work, linking with Labour Party workplace groups where these exist, selling the *Morning Star*, rank and file journals and pamphlets, issuing their own leaflets and broadsheets, discussing political questions day by day and building unity around political campaigns. Otherwise those now wallowing in the political Slough of Despond will never climb out and take the British road to socialism.

# "It's a great weekly fix"

Ken Livingstone on the New Statesman

"In the struggle to turn slogans into policies, the New Statesman has become a vital source of information for the Left. It's a great weekly fix for all of us who need a regular input of reliable facts and figures."

**New  
Statesman**

The Voice of the Left.

News, analysis, commentary, books & arts.

