



The term 'unemployment' conjures up the 30s. That's part of the problem. It isn't the same in the 80s. So old-style movements also won't work.

The Age of Unemployment

A roundtable discussion

The participants in the roundtable are: Sid Clay, TUC organiser for the Northern Region; Sue Cooper, unemployed in Birmingham and formerly a Sogat convenor; Tricia Davis, co-ordinator of the Birmingham Trade Union Resource Centre and Communist Party Executive Committee (CPEC) member; Steve Hart, shop floor activist at Ford and CPEC member; Roy Rix, Trade Union Liaison Worker at a centre for the unemployed, and previously a GMBATU convenor in Leeds. It is chaired by Philippa Langton, secretary of Equal Opportunities Committee, South East Region TUC and CPEC. All participate in their personal capacities.

Let me start with some general questions. Firstly, what do you see as the main characteristics of mass unemployment today? Are there particular conditions which are of special significance when we are talking about the campaign around unemployment? And finally, who are the unemployed?

Sid Clay The day I was made unemployed the bottom dropped out of my world. Being an activist in a factory, with my whole life structured and geared to the factory, and then suddenly, virtually overnight, to be divorced from all that, left me with a tremendous feeling of social isolation. That is one of the main effects of mass unemployment. Moreover, you are faced with trying to exist on an income less than half you have been used to. So obviously it's going to separate you from a lot of activities, and this is one of the big problems. The last question is an interesting one. Who are the unemployed? As activists in the movement, we tend to overlook the importance of this question: the unemployed, in my experience, are not about to join the barricades, they are people with all sorts of problems. Many of them suffer from intense apathy, there are those at the bottom of despair. The unemployed are a broad spectrum of people.

Tricia Davis It is important to ask who the unemployed are because we — that is, the activists — talk about the unemployed as though they were a large homogeneous group. But the reality is that it is *people* who are unemployed, people with very different backgrounds, different experiences of employment and, therefore, different experiences of unemployment. To take that diversity on board is an important pre-condition for beginning to understand what the problem is and what we can do about it.

Roy Rix The most characteristic feature seems to be the inevitability of unemployment. Moving around the community like I do, people all seem to have this fatalistic attitude; if they are

employed then unemployment is just round the corner for them, and if they are unemployed, they don't see any prospect of jobs in the foreseeable future. The other characteristic is that they are not attempting, in any way, shape or form, to relate it to government economic policy. They just see it as part of a world wide problem.

Steve Hart There is another area we need to look at — voluntary redundancies. We say this about unemployment, what's just been said, and it's true, but when voluntary redundancy appears in a lot of places, the takers are there. In my plant voluntary redundancy over the last few years has always been considerably over-subscribed, in spite of what the unions have said about having nothing to do with it. Now one of the reasons is obviously the large lump sum payments. But another is that where I work is a bloody awful place to work. In the past, in the mid 70s, there was anything between a 25% and 40% turnover rate of labour. Now it tends to be the case that you only take voluntary redundancy if you've got another job or something else worked out. About a third of the people that leave, in my experience, take the money planning to set up small businesses — double glazing, decorating, mini-cabbing, domestic appliance shops. But in other cases, people just don't want to work any more in that situation. When it comes to a choice between extremely high productivity work on the production line and not working, some prefer to risk the dole. But let me raise another problem. In a sense, the very word 'unemployed' is wrong. Because for a lot of people, especially the young, it is wrong to define them in terms of work. Unemployment is the negative of employment, but for many people there's not much of a link with employment. The prospect ahead, for the young and women, is often no work within sight. They don't define themselves in terms of that lack of a job. That is something that underlies the whole problem of movements against unemployment.

Sue Cooper As a women I've been unwaged at times and waged at other times and I prefer not to use the term unemployed because it doesn't relate to my social situation. I've spent many years rearing children when I didn't consider myself unemployed, though technically I was, but I couldn't sign on and get any money. In a sense what we are seeing now is men becoming unwaged with the women, and experiencing the same social segregation that women have experienced for a century, a reserve army of workers to be called on when they are needed and dismissed when they are not needed. I was a shop steward where I worked and very active. You go from one extreme to the other, from complete activity to total non-activity and you have half the money coming in. I feel the major symptom of unemployment today is that people don't

perceive of any change — most people think it will go on forever. They see an end to work as they know it — that is traditional manual work — they don't ever see it picking up. They believe that computers will come in and take over, and by the time they are ready to take up waged employment again they will be out of the running, especially youth. I agree with Steve that with youth it isn't a question of being unemployed, it's a question of non-work. The term 'unemployed' relates to another era. Most youngsters today don't relate to the word unemployed — it's the norm to them. They'll be without an income and so they think about how they can wheel and deal, the black economy.

Sid Roy said that there's a fatalistic attitude to unemployment and people are not relating it to government policies. This is a very important point. It's a question of the labour movement losing the battle of ideas, and the June election underlined this problem. Despite all the issues facing the unemployed, many of them still, in their wisdom, voted Conservative. That brings out one of the fundamental problems we are faced with as a movement. How do we go about winning the battle of ideas with people out of work, people on low incomes, people on pensions and so on?

Do you think there are contrasting attitudes between different parts of the country where the experiences of unemployment are divergent, for example between areas with a tradition of long-term unemployment and other parts of the country, the south east and the Midlands for example, where this is quite a new thing? Does that make a difference to people's attitudes towards unemployment?

Sue Part of my family comes from an area in the north where there is a tradition of long-term unemployment and, compared with the Midlands, there is a sense in which people do lose confidence in themselves, in their ability to work, and in their role within the family structure, which is still very rigid. In the Midlands', from my experience, there has always been some long-term unemployment, though on a much smaller scale. I feel that the Midlanders' response much of the time is the black economy. They are finding their own alternative forms of income. Maybe that is because it is a big conurbation. They can get lost in it. They can do what they want in it and there is less chance of being found out so to speak. If they were a car mechanic at one time and the firm's gone bust, then they are taking on private jobs and undercutting the other car mechanics around.

Roy I want to take up the point Steve was making earlier on about people queueing up to get redundancy money. Let's take certain parts of the north of England, where the industry has been on short-time working not for a week or two but for months, and where they have been walked all over on the basis of rationalisation. Once you start putting people in that position, there is a certain weakening of resolve, the work becomes the last thing they would have opted for. I don't see it as surprising, therefore, that people in some basic industries are queueing up to take the money, especially given the amount. In mining and steel making, part payment of wages on top of redundancy payments between them represent quite a carrot to dangle in front of working class people. They have never had it as good. It is for many, Whether we like it or not, a form of early retirement. Now we have argued for early retirement for years and we have argued for lump sum payments so that people can enjoy their retirement. The problem now is that it means selling jobs.

Tricia Women, when they lose their jobs, are moving very

quickly into the black economy, into charing, into childminding, even taking in people's washing which is a thing that I thought had gone out in the 30s. It has probably been happening for longer in the north of England, but it's now started to happen in the Midlands as well. Because women's employment has been much more precarious, women are much more willing to enter that sort of black or informal economy. I find it very interesting, by the way, that some of the most militant struggles to save jobs are those by women workers in the service industries where they have got jobs that they care about and they feel are useful to the community, like school dinner ladies and school secretaries, occupations which have never been at the forefront of trade union militancy previously.

Steve It seems to me, certainly in the south east, that what happens to the unemployed is that after a period of unemployment they cease to see themselves, or be seen, as unemployed. In east



Tricia Davis



Sid Clay

London one in every four or five sign on. They are in the unemployment figures, but in reality the people in Hackney don't witness massive unemployment, they just see a massive chunk of poverty. There is little to differentiate between a single parent who is not working, the next door neighbour in the lousy council flat who has never worked, or the person next door who worked until he was 24 and then took redundancy and has not worked in the last four years. This becomes a morass of poverty in the inner city. This is one reason you don't get an unemployed movement as such, because in the 30s much of the unemployed movement was around benefits, yet today the unemployed share this problem with many others. My experience is that it is very difficult to get a fight at Ford on the basis of individual redundancies, but it is possible around for example the import control issue which is a real campaign against unemployment. It is not narrow and sectional as outsiders might see it, but involves a vision of our industry, and defending the productive capacity of the motor industry, and therefore our jobs. That links in with campaigning against unemployment, because people aren't so much interested in campaigning *against* unemployment, what inspires them is campaigning *for* employment, for a decent society in which they'll do decent and useful jobs.

Sid I'd like to come back on one or two points because we shouldn't be too negative about the situation. There have been some tremendous struggles against unemployment, going back to

the UCS through disputes such as Lee Jeans, Timex and so on. These are just the ones that hit the headlines, but every day there is struggle going on and I don't think that we should be negative in the sense that we're saying that there isn't struggle going on.

The best mobilisers of feeling around unemployment in the recent period have been the 1981 and 1983 Peoples Marches. These were both around a very basic demand for jobs. How successful do you think they were — and why was the first more effective than the second?

Sue The first march was more successful than the second because there was a larger number of youngsters involved. They were mobilised for the first one demanding jobs. But they got YOP and YTS, and they didn't like it. And the impetus wore off because instead of jobs they got exploitation.

Sid The positive side of the marches was that they drew people



Steve Hart



Sue Cooper



Roy Rix



Philippa Langton

into activity and that is important in itself. It led to local organisation in places where possibly they haven't organised before — reception committees, public meetings, socials, centred around unemployment. It showed the face of the unemployed across the country. It's unfortunate that we didn't get the publicity we should have got, but that's the fault of the media not the march. But nevertheless they were compelled to show some of it because it was such a big event. It involved young people in campaigning which is important because, as Steve said earlier on, young people are a major part of the problem. So from that angle it was a very positive and useful event. As for the weaknesses, the first was the lukewarm support of the TUC as far as the second march was concerned. They rejected it at first and had to be dragged in by the scruff of the neck at the very end as a response to the mass pressure that built up. A further problem was the failure of the Labour Party to grasp the importance of the second march, because the general election was called during it and the Labour Party virtually opted out, at least this was the impression I got from my own area. They failed to understand its significance. It might not have been a socialist march, but it was certainly an anti-Thatcher march, and could have been exploited in the campaign for the general election. But the major weakness was surely the failure to develop any permanent structure after the march to ensure that there is an ongoing campaign. To me the whole impact of the march is wasted unless we set up a structure to campaign continuously in the locality on unemployment.

Tricia I agree with Sid that we ought to regard the marches as a success. It is easy, when you are involved in organising marches and so forth, to underestimate their value. A lot of people became involved in politics, not necessarily party politics admittedly, but politics, through the marches. And a lot of people involved in politics in turn learnt a great deal from people who weren't involved in politics. We, in the Midlands, worked with the churches, community groups and so forth. I agree with Sid on this organisational problem. In the Midlands we do have an organisation which we are quite proud of and which arose out of the first march, but the majority of us felt that the second march didn't contribute towards that. It drained us of a lot of energy and was very hard work at a time when the movement is generally demoralised.

Roy We must differentiate between 1981 and 1983. The 1981 march was the first real initiative that had been taken on

unemployment. It had become a forgotten word. It had been relegated to the fifth page and a couple of paragraphs on the unemployment figures. The other thing it did was to nail the myth about the scroungers and workshy. The press started to treat the issue of unemployment in a different context. That was a very significant development. The other question to consider is whether YOP was a direct result of it. It is possible. And, for all its bad features, at least it represents a recognition by the Government that it had to do something. It didn't do it in the manner that we wanted, but that was partly the movement's own fault because it did not want to get involved, it did not want to try and determine how YOP and work experience could be operated in the workplaces.

Now the 1981 march did lead to something. In Yorkshire it led to the trans-Pennine march. East Midlands had its march. Even the TUC took an initiative, the Jobs Express, which it wasn't prepared to do at the time of the 1981 march. The 1983 march took place in an entirely different climate. The movement was at a low ebb. It was really difficult to mobilise the sort of support that you got in 1981. Let's take a typical example of the difference. When we marched into Sheffield in 1981, 20 odd factories stopped work and there were literally 20,000 people on that march. Two years later we walked past those same factories and they were empty, the lads and lassies had gone. Hope and solidarity had given way to a sense of despair and resignation. A further problem in 1983 was that the Labour Party attempted to use it as an electoral platform, and in many instances we allowed

them to do that. To a certain extent this took away from the breadth of expression. You went into towns and found the local Labour candidate as the main speaker. It was the Labour Party this, that and the other: it was a general election campaign and the argument was that a Labour government would solve all our problems. The political expression of the march got lost inside that electoral campaign. As a consequence, it certainly didn't have the same effect as that in 1981.

Steve 1981 for me was something that broke the cycle of industrial devastation, despair, demoralisation, and individualised response to unemployment. It said there was hope. It's as simple as that. That was the way it came across when you saw it on television. The people of Britain, with the Peoples March, were doing something about this issue that we were all very concerned about and it was the very simplicity of it that was capable of getting a terrific response. By treating it almost as a moral issue it transcended politics with a capital 'P' and became as a result the most intensely political activity imaginable. That was the greatest strength of it, that allowed it to reach parts that other politics don't reach. Precisely because it was new, because it was fresh, because it was the first step, it was able to do that.

A potential strength of the 1983 march was the involvement of the official movement on a much greater scale, but the movement was unable to grasp this newness, the refreshing breadth that was potentially there, and treated it like anything else. It's a truism that the official movement has not been able to tackle unemployment by its traditional methods. When, therefore, it treated the Peoples March in a rather traditional way, it just became another march, albeit a big and very important one, but nevertheless another march. The official movement, including my union, the TGWU, did a great deal, but somehow we weren't able to reach out in the way that 1981 did.

The Peoples Marches were, quite rightly, restricted to very specific demands but this nevertheless was a limitation. In this context, what kind of other initiatives should we be talking about? Let's start with the unemployed workers centres.

Roy There are all kinds of problems. It comes back to how the TUC sees its role in promoting initiatives on unemployment. They seem to have set up the centres very much as they did the 1983 Peoples March, with little idea of what they wanted to come out of it. As to funding, as I understand it, the TUC wanted affiliated unions to increase their members' dues by 2p a week to provide something like £12 million a year to make the centres financially stable, but the movement wasn't prepared to accept that sort of obligation. As a consequence they opted for MSC funding. Now one problem with MSC funding is the annual change in the centres' workers which means there is little continuity in the development of the centres. The other problem with MSC funding is the political constraints attached to it. Sid mentioned to me, before we started, a centre, for example, where trade union journals were classed as political and had to be taken out. In short, Tebbit and King are using the MSC to ensure that there are no real developments inside the centres. As a movement we've got to make our minds up as to what we want. There's not much point, in my opinion, in developing centres that don't positively reflect what the movement's all about. After all, if there is a fatalistic approach to unemployment and people don't see themselves, especially the young, getting jobs for years to come, where's the future of our movement going to come from, where are the new militants, the new leaders? We are always saying how important it is for our movement to be going

into action, to be mobilising people, to be supporting campaigns. Now you can't do that unless there is a continual progression of new ideas, new people coming into the movement, reflecting their experiences inside. And unless the centres have this sort of positive identification, not just on the basis of advice or social facilities but also campaigning, where is this link with the unemployed going to be made? But the TUC seems hostile to such an approach.

Sue I and a group of others were involved in the establishment of the claimants unions in the 70s. We chose the word 'union' because we saw ourselves as a group of people coming together to represent our own interests in the same way that trade unionists do. And although not officially recognised by the trade unions, they used to refer people to us all the time. Now until this discussion, I hadn't known about the MSC funding. But I've been wondering why the centres are so stagnant. That explains it. When you become unemployed, you are at the mercy of the state system, the benefit system, for your income and your livelihood, and you are always looking to see if someone is snooping, you are constantly at fear, you are under total repression. There's no other word for it. And the most political pinnacle of this system is the supplementary benefits system with everything that goes with it. Now it can be very mobilising, if you can get together and learn about your own experiences in fighting that system. But it is a fight, a real fight. It's just as much a fight as it is in a factory, getting yourself recognised or whatever. It's harder in fact. But how can you get that approach and fight if you are funded by the MSC?

Tricia Sue has raised quite an important point: it is not a question of giving or not giving welfare rights advice, it's how you do it. And that's one of the major constraints created by MSC funding of unemployed centres. I don't object to people being given welfare advice, but it's a question of enabling people to see the politics within welfare rights and enabling them to organise themselves. This question of the unemployed workers centres takes us right back to the beginning of the discussion, to who the unemployed workers actually are, who identifies themselves as unemployed? The only people who see themselves as unemployed workers in my experience are white men who have been active in the trade union movement. Now those people are important but they are not the only people who are unemployed. Women don't identify themselves as unemployed workers. The majority of black people don't identify themselves as unemployed workers. In my experience, we are not getting across to those people in the centres. To do this we've got to look at things like welfare rights, and how to develop them in a political way, and other services. One of the areas in which the women's movement has been most successful, in which it has managed to hold on, are those areas where it is giving a service, in pregnancy testing, women's aid refuges, child-care etc. That kind of politics was seen by a lot of people on the Left, in the 70s, as not real politics, it was seen as the ambulance service of capitalism. But in actual fact those kinds of activities drew a lot of women into the political arena. A lot of working class women came into the women's movement through such initiatives. They politicised them because they saw it was possible to take control of your own life, even in minor ways, to wrest a bit of power from the system.

Sid We've got to see the centres as they really are, and not expect too much from them. One of the major problems amongst the unemployed is apathy. And the centres have a function if for no other reason than to provide a focus for unemployed people, somewhere to go. It is not true too that the centres as a whole are not doing

anything or attracting people. I know a centre in my area in which 500 unemployed people attend every week on a regular basis. It's got weaknesses, but it carries out a whole range of workshop activity. Its purpose designs things for the community. I had the privilege, only the other day, of presenting on their behalf a trolley with a walking frame attached to a child who had spina bifida. They had designed and made it in the centre. All right, this is not going to solve the problem of the unemployed, but it is building important links with the community. And the centre is providing unemployed people with the things that they themselves want and are asking for.

One other point. We refer to the TUC as if it is some remote body out there. But we are the TUC and the weaknesses of the TUC are a reflection of the weaknesses of our movement. On every centre management committee there are three representatives of the TUC: they might come from the local trades council, but they are there as endorsed representatives of the TUC and should in some way be reflecting TUC policy within that management committee. Now I agree completely with Roy on what we would like. What I've spoken about is what we've got, and what we've got to be content with at this time. What we'd like is centres in which we could do much more. We need to do much more. But let's not look at the labour movement through rose-tinted glasses. I've sent out thousands of collecting forms for donations. I didn't get a single reply from the movement. We've got deep problems in the movement. When we talk about the centres we need, then we've got a lot of education to do within the movement to achieve that.

One of the differences with the 30s is the greater involvement of the trade union movement. But there are obviously serious limitations. What role can the trade union movement play on unemployment?

Steve A very basic role of the trade union movement is in relation to the alternative strategy. We have to win people away from the idea that the only future for jobs in Britain is, as Thatcher suggests, working in Macdonalds or at funfairs in Corby. We must project a different vision, the concept that we can win people behind fighting for a strategy that means jobs, that takes into account new technology, in a rather wider way, I would suggest, than we often think about it. Until we start talking about that kind of alternative strategy, then we are not going to get very far, people will accept the dead end of Thatcherism. The trade union movement must step up its work on this. A lot has been done, but mainly in committees and far too little at the shop floor level, where it gets a very good response when you open up the debate.

Tricia Can I add some practical things? Firstly, the trade union movement can offer its resources to unemployed people. In the Midlands, a very important part of our strategy has been to use trade union offices, telephones and cars, if of course we're allowed to. Secondly, the unions could organise their own unemployed rather better than they do. This means organising them not simply as individuals, but recognising that unemployed people, whilst they retain individual union membership, need some sort of representation within that union. Perhaps unions should consider having unemployed representatives on their committees, because it's very hard to be an individual constantly raising your own particular problem. Thirdly, they can offer their credibility. The unions retain, whatever their problems, the loyalty of vast numbers of working class people, and that is very important for any campaign around unemployment. Finally, what the unemployed lack is not ideas, but a cultural forum within which they can come together. This requires some appreciation of cultural politics by the unions.

It also requires greater recognition and respect for forms of organisation which are different from their own.

We would all probably agree that an unemployed workers movement along the lines of the 30s is inappropriate today. But is there a place for some form of unemployed movement today?

Sid The unemployed workers movement in the 30s played a tremendous role but it was isolated from the main labour movement. My main reservation about an unemployed workers movement is that it would tend to alienate the unemployed from the broad movement. Rather, what I would like to see is the development of a structure through the trade unions for the unemployed to have their voice. We don't have that now. I'm a member of the TGWU and I don't even have a branch to go to.

Steve I don't think the argument that an unemployed workers movement would be divisive and split the unemployed from the trade union movement is the problem. Our experience of autonomous movements is that if they have got the right kind of approach both they themselves and the wider movement will take up the issues in a much better way. The problem, however, is that we can't wish an autonomous unemployed workers movement into being. I would love there to be one, but when we are talking about the nature of unemployment and how people perceive their unemployment, I think we are getting close to the problem of why there isn't one. Something that effects four million people in such a deep way hasn't failed to develop simply because of lack of leadership somewhere or other, it's because of something fundamental to the nature of unemployment.

Tricia I agree with Steve about that. When we talk about autonomous movements, we are thinking of models like the women's movement and ethnic movements, but these come out of a celebration as well as an oppression. There isn't very much to celebrate about the condition of being unemployed. That makes it a fundamentally different kind of proposition. There are also difficulties in the sense that the idea of a national unemployed workers movement draws on traditions of the 30s, but conditions aren't the same now, we don't have the dole queues in the same kind of way. You've got a two-weekly signing-on system. The unemployed don't see each other in the same way. At this stage, we haven't got either the political or organisational framework to understand how those different experiences can be welded together. We've got to look to local initiatives to see if, within those, we can help unemployed people to find the space to start organising.

Roy We have got to stop talking about organising the unemployed. That's patronising. The unemployed themselves are quite capable of deciding what they want. Now I am loath to envisage an unemployed movement. To categorise the unemployed as being something separate from other sections of society is wrong, we want to see them as an integral part of society, using the resources we've got so they can take initiatives at a local level in their communities. The 30s movement was very much on the basis of means-tested benefits. Who is to say that this is not Thatcher's strategy; after all social security and supplementary benefits merge next year. There's going to be a whole series of new regulations that will restrict the ability of unemployed persons to claim benefits they are entitled to. This may lead to developments amongst the unemployed. But a key factor in this will be the willingness of the labour movement to respond in a positive manner rather than the negative stance we tend to adopt now towards something we don't control. •