

At the last election a minority of trade unionists voted Labour.
Relatively few trade unionists are involved in the broader campaigns of the Left.
How do we set about changing that situation?

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Unions in Search of their Members

Much discussion has taken place on the left about the extent of the decline in the Labour vote amongst trade unionists. After two massive defeats at the polls, the TUC is conducting a re-examination of policy and strategy that looks like shifting our whole movement to the right. This is in line with the theory that the unions should reflect the political views of the membership. The Left are not supporting this trend but could easily allow it to happen simply by not having an alternative. So how should we react to the decline in class and socialist consciousness? How should we organise to give leadership? What can be done to ensure that the limited number of left activists in the unions co-ordinate their efforts to greatest effect?

Policies not enough

The lessons of the experience of the Labour Left over the last five years must surely be that policies aren't everything. We can have the most progressive and well-thought policies and lose. If that aspect of the 'Labour's lost millions' debate can be taken as read, then perhaps we can

get down to a serious look at how to put things right. To start reversing the decline and reviving class and socialist consciousness poses some questions of a fundamental nature. How can the leadership of all major unions be won to left policies? What steps are needed to persuade and give confidence to the average shop steward? Where do we direct our efforts so as to convince workers to support the policies and, more importantly, get involved in action?

There appears to be a consensus emerging on the Left that carrying resolutions and getting left leaderships elected is not enough. If it was correct in the past (and we can argue about that) this strategy is accepted as inadequate today by wide sections of the union movement. It is generally accepted that the 'old style' left leadership could only operate against a background of strong trade union discipline (closed shops were only part of that discipline). Now that discipline is breaking up there is a crying need for massive campaigning amongst the people as a whole to win them to progressive policies. Leadership and policies have an import-

ance only insofar as they assist in this campaign. By winning the ideological battle with mass campaigning and agitation it follows that policies will be strengthened and the leadership will follow.

However, in recognising the need for a major shift in the emphasis of trade union work towards popular campaigning we

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must also be aware of its pitfalls and limitations. If we are to direct shop stewards and trade union activists into campaigning as opposed to the steady slog of more traditional trade union activity, then we must be sure that it will work. An assessment of such a strategy requires an examination of where it has been successful in the broader political arena.



Some weaknesses

If we take CND as being the most successful mass campaigning organisation this decade, we can learn a great deal. The obvious lesson is that a dynamic organisation, with modern and imaginative techniques, can achieve results. Many organisations, including trade unions, could be more effective if they adapted to the modern world, appealed to people across classes and channelled their finances away from bureaucracy and into campaigning. If this is correct then the Left in the trade union movement should be arguing for a reallocation of resources — the enlargement of our press, publicity, research and education departments.

Without really challenging this analysis the doubt still remains. This doubt comes from CND's acknowledged weakness — lack of mass trade union involvement. Whilst some 27 unions are affiliated (a tribute to the old-style left activity) few local union banners can be seen on demonstrations and local meetings are largely middle-class gatherings with only token trade union involvement. The failure of CND to gain mass trade union support and the hostility that greets the issue at hundreds of branch meetings and workplace shop stewards committees must cause us to at least hesitate before channelling *all* our efforts into mass campaigning.

Similar problems to those of CND can

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be found in the women's movement, black organisations, anti-racist campaigns and others; the middle-class base, the failure to build roots in the trade unions and the growing evidence that it's just as difficult to raise these issues at work as it was years ago. And the more successful these campaigns get the more those involved bemoan the failure of the trade unions to respond and the more impatient they become for trade unionists to take industrial action! So we come to a dilemma. Our strategy results in considerable success on a political level but trade unionists are not being won at the same speed. The dilemma could prove disastrous if as a result of discarding our old style and methods, we allow the TUC to force the movement along a 'non-political' course. Rank and file apathy, shown towards radical campaigns, could be used as an

excuse for national unions to do nothing, and in many cases distance themselves from the campaigns. And the temptation of people at work seeking solutions to problems outside the workplace and via campaigns unconnected with work could divide politics and work in a dangerous way.

Building working class support

If the weakness in campaigning is that the

Rotherham, 1980



working class can be left behind then the question of work within the trade union movement becomes crucial to the overall strategy. However, strong our impatience to 'go public', 'win people to socialism' and build the mass movement' necessary for change, that question — of working class support — must force us to take one step at a time. And for those who, as with the Communist Party, see the working class as actually leading the struggle, a pause before each step will be required.

We should constantly be asking those three questions mentioned earlier about the role of leadership, how to motivate rank and file activists and how to get to the

membership. Without challenging the overall change in direction that the Left is taking, there is still a case for specific strategies being developed for our work in the trade unions. And if we accept that the overall socialist context of our labour movement's policies was due to good organisation then we must not be so dismissive of past practices. They were remarkably successful in winning for socialism the largest and most united trade union movement in any comparable capitalist country. In criticising past practices we should maintain some pride in our successes. The answer lies not in a total change in direction but the adapting of old and tried practices to meet the changed situation that we all recognise. Again the question of how we organise returns. Some proposals are required.

No matter how weak the trade union support for progressive policies and campaigns, it would be even weaker without left leadership (TGWU and NUPE activists are much more committed to CND than their counterparts in the

AUEW or EEPTU). So the work that has always gone into winning broad left control at national executive and national officer level in the unions must go on. In fact, it is more essential today, because the right wing are better organised. And we're talking about the numerous boring meetings that trade unionists have to involve themselves in for months before and during elections. We must be prepared to see the importance of this work and not denigrate it as narrow and irrelevant. It is, and it always will be, essential.

What is correct is that we demand of that leadership the radical campaigning necessary to win mass support and that the

leadership does not divorce itself from the rank and file. And we should also ensure that those tedious meetings do more than simply act as election caucuses and that they develop a political function. In recognising the need for such changes, we must also see the need to strengthen left organisation in individual unions and the movement as a whole.

Motivating activists

What advice should we be giving to an active trade unionist — Labour, Communist or left thinking militant? It should not escape the notice of the Left that many militant trade unionists are not involving themselves in the work of the labour movement outside the workplace, for example in trade councils, the Labour Party, the Communist party or even in many cases their own trade union branch.

This is a serious problem which we must recognise and tackle in an organised manner. Again, traditional left strategies may have something to offer. The emphasis of trade union educational work always has been directed at shop stewards. This had its weaknesses, not simply because the message did not seem to be getting back to the membership, but because not all shop stewards were trained. But during the 70s tremendous advances were made, and they need defending today. Our strategy, however, should now be to inject much

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more in the way of political education into shop stewards courses and developing similar work amongst trade union members.

As we have talked about political education for many years, for some the results seem very poor and so it is correct to review our approach. In fact it is a key responsibility of the Left in every union to discuss and plan the provision of courses



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for stewards. In doing this exercise, most unions will be seen to be allocating a totally inadequate sum of money. A few unions spend a lot, but often on residential accommodation or on expensive hotels. Whilst weekend schools have a role, the priority must be to reach the majority of stewards at courses organised during the working day.

And it is not just the quantity of courses that needs challenging, but the content as well. One of the big failures of TUC courses (the main source of training for most unions) is that they have taught the skills needed to operate under consensus management conditions. Now that conditions have changed most shop stewards are unable to adjust and are without the political understanding that would enable them to regroup their scattered troops and fight back. From now on, every course must deal with this problem. Every valuable minute of time off (which is harder to obtain than ever) must be used to equip shop stewards with the organising skills, the experience of campaigning and the confi-

dence to go back to the workplace and mobilise the membership.

Turning the tide

As part of our stewards' training programme, our approach to branch and stewards' committee meetings and our general style of work, we have to face the challenge of turning militant trade unionists into socialists. This can only partly be achieved by discussion. Crucial to political development is involvement in *action*. Somehow, we must get away from simply saying 'attend your trades council' (which may put people off, more than involve them) or 'join the Labour Party' (which may be a larger step than an active trade unionist is prepared to take). More important is to involve shop stewards in any activity that attracts them. Some will have organisational abilities and enjoy an official position. Others will be talkers, or writers, or people that enjoy making a physical contribution, such as distributing leaflets. With the variety of skills and preferences that exist within our movement, we should



TUC-organised demonstration for NHS pay claim.



Port Talbot, 1980

be able to motivate people to action. If we take the time to listen and tune into the mood of those being elected at today's workplaces, we will again attract people to involve themselves in the wider movement. If we don't we'll 'leave the working class behind'.

The break-up of the closed shop, the media success in dividing left leaders from their members, the replacement of traditional industries by newer, more dispersed units of production and the deadening effect of unemployment, have all contributed to a loss of support from trade unionists as a whole for their unions. A major challenge confronts us as the Tory anti-union legislation bites deeper into our flesh. A gaping wound has opened with the failure of the NGA to win the Messenger

dispute. The law changing the rules of contracting out to contracting in for the payment of the political levy could see the labour movement's life blood ebb away as the extent of our failure to convince our members is shown up in a dramatic reduction in Labour's finances.

But, of course, that is only if the movement accepts defeat. What is certain is that we cannot accept this pessimistic outlook and that we must persuade our

people to take political action. This can be done and it may well be that by forcing the movement to justify political contributions from trade unionists the Government will do us a service, indirectly, with their forthcoming trade union bill. It would be a mistake, though, to see this campaign as the only one, or even the most important one to occupy the Left in the unions. Trade union loyalty derives from class consciousness rather than party loyalty and much more immediate in terms of priorities is the development of that class consciousness that existed in the older manual industries amongst today's radically changed working class. And that can only be done by developing trade union activity and organisation, almost from scratch in hundreds of workplaces, industries and

services that have so far learned little or nothing about the history of their class and its organisations. A gigantic task indeed for a movement that's been through five years of demoralising retreat.

The politics of trade union work

To argue for a massive effort to be made to bring trade unionists into the struggle is not to deny the need for a more campaigning style of politics. Whether you're a miner defending your pit, a hospital worker fighting privatisation, or a shipyard worker desperate to save your community from the effect of a yard closure, the need for a broad and widely supported campaign of a political character is obvious. It's no good relying on industrial action, supported by a loyal trade union workforce, to win battles

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that are clearly part of a much wider onslaught on the working class and our communities. Those communities must be mobilised and a broad alliance built up if victories are to be achieved.

But when we mount our campaigns — as we must in ever increasing numbers and strength — let us not forget the campaign that is necessary at work. And if some on the Left seem preoccupied with their trade union work, with little time left for wider political activity, it is important to understand the extent of the task they face. Provided that left trade unionists are guided by an understanding of the overall task it is not only legitimate but essential that they should make their trade union work a priority. It is the job of the political parties to understand the problems faced by trade unionists and to influence how they tackle them. In this way, the working class will not only be part of the broad democratic alliance that will eventually defeat Thatcher and her policies, it will go on to lead that movement in the direction of progressive political change. D