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T&GWU's Ron Todd shares the platform with Neil Kinnock, Stoke, Nov 84.

• THE NEW TRADE UNION LEADERS

Perhaps the single most important, far-reaching and long-lasting trade union reform this Government will be seen to have introduced will not be the restrictions on picketing, or secondary action, or even the statutory relaxation of the closed shop, significant though all these changes are. What may well be the most crucial shift is one of attitude: the relationship between trade union leaders and their members.

Now encapsulated practically in the pre-strike ballot and executive election provisions of the Trade Union Act, this has been a central theme of the Conservative administration, hammered home time and again by ministers in speeches and interviews: yes, that's what the TUC says, but what do the TUC's *members* say?

It's a hard change for many unions to try and rebut. Though they try to recruit new members, and take their subscriptions from them when they've been successful, many unions with poor membership records then virtually lose them; the computer-based record systems of TASS on the left and the EEPTU and AUEW on the right are praiseworthy but relatively isolated examples of unions taking up properly the responsibilities with which collecting dues implicitly charges them.

This gap between leaders and members so adroitly identified and capitalised upon by this Government has taken its sharpest and most practical form in the coal dispute. In the NUM, a key element of the strike has been the refusal of more than a third of the miners to accept the instructions of their leaders without being consulted in a ballot. In other unions, the sight of TGWU leaders emerging from yet another co-ordinating meeting to pledge full and active support for the miners while lorry drivers' - in many cases union members - drive coal straight through the

picket lines has become commonplace. In both cases ministers point with glee to the undeniable fact that the progenitors of these actions are not the employer, not the Government, but union members: the dog will clearly not accept any longer being wagged by the tail.

This changed relationship is the crucial challenge for the new wave of trade union leaders now taking the centre stage of the union movement. But who are they? And can they live up to - or live down - the shadows of their forbears?

As Raymond Williams has argued conclusively in another context, the very repetitiveness of ideas of bygone Golden Ages shows how illusory they are, but it is now a central tenet of modern trade unionism that the passing of Jack Jones at the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon at the AUEW left a vacuum in trade union leadership which their successors, Moss Evans and Terry Duffy, together with David Basnett of the GMBU, have been unable to fill.

But in fact a rash of new faces about two years ago did produce clear talent: for the Left, Rodney Bickerstaffe of NUPE and Jimmy Knapp of the NUR, and for the Right, Gavin Laird of the AUEW, Alistair Graham of the CPSA and Alan Tuffin of the UCW.

Now a further wave is breaking - and the sheer scale of the changes marks how decisive a shift may be in progress. At the pinnacle of the movement, Norman Willis has taken over as TUC general secretary from Len Murray, now en route to the Lords. Burdened as his first task in the job with the miners' dispute, Willis is generally judged to have done well with it - or at least as well as it's possible to do - mostly keeping his head down in public, trying to do what he can in private. His single public foray, in a speech in South Wales, led to shouts of treason taking the chilling physical form of a dangled hangman's noose. Ironically, this single instance has brought more favourable mail into Con-

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gress House for Willis than any other secretary.

Behind Willis are other key changes in the unions, perhaps most notably at the TGWU on the left and the EEPTU on the right. Significantly, members of the TGWU last year rejected a candidate seen, rightly or wrongly, as centralist and autocratic. The man they chose instead, Ron Todd, takes over from Moss Evans at the TGWU's biennial conference in Bournemouth in the summer faced with a single task: stopping the rot. With membership down by half a million in a union whose huge industrial coverage inevitably pulls it all ways at once, Todd's difficult job is to try to regain the TGWU's authority, while losing none of its activists' - if not quite members' - involvement. Jack Jones did it, but as one of Todd's opponents said at the time: 'There's not a Jack Jones amongst this lot - including me.' The EEPTU has just seen Frank Chappie blazing his continually controversial path by also taking a peerage. Eric Hammond, his successor, has already in his first 100 days in the job, to some extent out-Franked Frank: threatening to take the EEPTU into the CBI, successfully recommending his power station members in a ballot to not take action in support of the miners, applying for Government money to fund the union's postal ballots and so risking suspension from the TUC.

They're far from the only new and important changes. Bill Sirs has just passed the steelworkers' reins over to Roy Evans, less flamboyant but perhaps more stable. The tough and able Tony Dubbins has just taken sole charge of the legally battered NGA. Also in the print, Brenda Dean has become the first ever female general secretary of a major UK industrial union as Bill Keys heads towards retirement. At 34, newly-appointed Peter Davies of a small BT union, the Society of Telecom Executives, is the youngest ever trade union leader. In the NUM, Peter Heathfield has as expected shown himself to be an intelligent, steady and firm general secretary. In UCATT, Les Wood is about to give up his seat to Albert Williams.

Potential changes due shortly include finding a successor to Terry Duffy at the AUEW (likely to be Bill Jordan from the Midlands), to Bill Whatley at USDAW and a bitter and probably publicly bloody fight for the top job if the merger goes ahead between the two largest civil service unions, the CPSA, led by Alistair Graham, and the SCPS, where Gerry Gillman is expected to step down this year. In the slightly longer term - though in each case that hasn't stopped the succession battles getting under way - are looming changes in ASLEF, ASTMS, GMBU, NUJ and POEU.

With unemployment showing no signs of scaling down, and union finances consequently remaining tight, unions have to go looking for members - and in the current climate, that means proving to potential recruits that the leader-members relationship is different. Last year's TUC strategy document picked up the Conservatives' challenge on the trade union gap. Though the 'new realism' has mostly been sunk by a combination of insensitive Government policy, on such issues as GCHQ, and its leading proponents' apparent willingness to provide joining-the-SDP or talking-to-Government ammunition to its opponents, that challenge still remains. So far virtually alone among the major unions, NUPE is showing that it can be met within a left-wing perspective, pushing up its attendances at branch meetings by moving them away from the room above the pub to places and times where the union's many female members can attend, and timing and limiting agendas - all of it reinforcing the union's socialist policies, not diminishing them. The task for the new union leaders, whatever the political complexion of themselves or their unions, is to match that example and beat the Government at its own game.

Phillip Bassett