



PRIVATISING GAS...

LEARNING FROM BUZBY

This month, the war of words turns to deeds as the unions launch their campaign to fight government plans to privatise the gas industry. From January 18, Labour party leaders will stand up to be counted with representatives of gas industry unions NALGO and GMBATU, and others with smaller numbers involved. Together they will address a series of seven mass rallies up and down the country preaching the gospel of public ownership.

After that, battle plans are being drawn up, but will certainly include ballots of members to hold the door open for guerrilla strikes.

The government has not yet set a date for privatising gas, but it will be this year. That means, it will be opposed in a climate of massive Tory majority in the House of Commons. In other words, a realistic campaign cannot expect to Kill the Bill, but must aim to change and amend the proposed legislation to protect a public service, and the rights of the people who work in the industry.

Which is why overt Labour party support for the unions, and its active participation in their campaign, will actually damage their cause. All it can possibly do to help is boost morale, for it is the first time NALGO, with 40,000 members involved in the gas industry, has co-operated with the party overtly like this. As a union it is not politically affiliated, and has refused to hold a political fund ballot to sanction support for Labour party funds.

But Labour party participation in the campaign will only confirm the convictions of the converted, those who are already against the privatisation of gas. And in this campaign, such convictions are a weapon as unrealistic as cavalry against tanks. The campaign has got to win support from people and groups who are not at present aligned to the cause of anti-privatisation if it is to have any effect on what will inevitably become law.

In such a situation, these crucial new allies to the union cause will be put off by the party political tie-up. If that seems hopelessly defeatist, it does reflect the lessons learned by previous campaigners against Tory privatisation schemes. Particularly British Telecom.

Then, the anti-privatisation forces in BT were convinced that the public must share their conviction that the sell-off of

public assets must be a bad thing. The union campaigners then had some questions added to a Gallup poll to test public opinion on the issue, and the overwhelming majority in favour of the principle of privatising British Telecom came as a severe shock. But that favourable verdict was hedged around with all sorts of ifs and buts.

The British Telecom campaign had started out as an attempt to stop the necessary legislation. But after the 1983 election, the Tory majority in the House of Commons made such an objective invalid. The union campaigners recognised that they must fight instead to change and amend the terms of the inevitable, although obviously they could not afford to shake the faith of the converted by seeming to have given up on the prime intention to stop the legislation altogether.

The campaigners in the old POEU, now renamed the National Communications Union, studied the ifs and buts expressed in that Gallup poll. And on the basis of what this told them, they set out to win allies from groups and organisations which were not the natural allies of Labour/union policy, but would be prepared to fight against a political act which would threaten some specific interest of their own.

With British Telecom this included rural interests, small businesses, and voluntary organisations. Rural interests stood to lose services as profit-seeking privateers cut loss-making services; small businesses feared their bills would rise astronomically and they would be squeezed; voluntary organisations were afraid that the poor and disabled would suffer if the number of telephone kiosks were cut, and the cost of installing phones rose.

Within the limitations of the inevitability of the legislation, the POEU carried out a successful campaign, winning redefinitions of the act and amending and changing the legislation as it was finally passed. They managed, in fact, to change the way the political campaign was conducted. This has been done in other campaigns against Tory policy decisions - like the GLC opposition to abolition, which the campaigners changed from the Tory argument of efficiency and finance to one of an attack on democracy.

There was another specific example of a union achieving this shift of ground for debate last summer, when the NUR ballot-

ted its guards on the British Rail Board's imposition of driver only operation. This was, from the Board's point of view, about the right to manage, and efficiency. From the guards' side, this was an attack on jobs - but the NUR successfully won considerable public support by stressing possible threats to travellers' safety.

Those who led the union campaign in British Telecom have already held meetings with some of the people who will be opposing the privatisation of British Gas. Their main advice is to identify where public sympathies will be touched, and avoid issues where the issue becomes one of straight political ideology. You can't change people's minds, they say, but you can change the way the campaign is presented.

But for Mr John Edmonds, the new general secretary of GMBATU which as 35,000 members in the gas industry, such advice will only confirm his experience.

John Edmonds led one of the few campaigns where the unions actually forced the government irrespective of its huge majority to withdraw, the attempt to sell off the gas showrooms. He also led the 1973 gas strike which forced the government of the day - Heath's admittedly much more vulnerable Tory administration - to negotiate when they had said they would not, make offers they had said they would not, and manipulate pension contributions to increase a pay settlement they had said they would not make.

John Edmonds has some advantages which the old POEU did not have. In GMBATU, he has a much broader base for spreading industrial action outside the gas industry. So has NALGO, and so has the biggest of them all, the 1.5 m strong Transport and General Workers, which has 3,000 gas industry members. Even so, all three would probably be wary of trying to extend any action they take, because support is not necessarily very strong for the anti-privatisation campaign throughout the unions as a whole.

And this is a campaign the unions need to be seen to win. If they don't kill the bill, they must be seen to change it fundamentally, to have safeguards written in on safety which will enhance the public perception of their case as the caring, human face against uncaring capitalism.

Jane McLoughlin