

THE TRADE UNION CASE against the electricians' union, the EETPU, is now overwhelming. It is, in brief, that the union assisted News International over some six months to supply its members to the NI plants at Wapping and Glasgow, knowing that they would be called upon to do work which had been the preserve of the print unions and being forewarned that at some point they would be called upon to cross picket lines.

The two officials who helped organise the recruitment, Mick Scanlon in Southampton for Wapping and Pat O'Hanlon in Glasgow for the Glasgow plant, could scarcely have done so over so prolonged a period - a period during which the plants became increasingly controversial - without the authority of the national leadership. It is just not credible that the operation happened, as it were, through a series of misunderstandings - no more credible, indeed, than the more famous misunderstandings which afflicted senior civil servants on the phone lines between Downing Street and the Department of Trade and Industry over revealing the solicitor-general's advice on Westland.

The audacity of Rupert Murdoch the NI chairman, in seeking his freedom from the Fleet Street unions in one bound has thus been paralleled by the electricians. In securing for Murdoch his most essential commodity - labour - they have played an indispensable role in the breach of Fleet Street's defences against change and against the rapid demanning which new technology, fully used, is bound to bring on existing titles. Further, they may have

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the unions for decades

dealt a crippling blow to a redoubt of the Left: Fleet Street unions have, in recent decades, generally thrown up a leftist leadership, with strong Communist influence: once the unions' power to stop change and demanning is vitiated, then the Left's strength among branch officials is likely to decline also. The 'Wapping effect' is likely to be profound.

Let us complete the indictment. The Murdoch papers are, in every country where they are printed, but perhaps especially in the UK, a friend of the Right. The *Sun* and the *News of the World* are (especially the former) brilliant exponents of

**The Murdoch coup has been long in the planning. But for its success it depended on the collaboration of a new-style unionism in the shape of the EETPU.**

# THE SPARKS ARE FLYING

John Lloyd

right-wing popular journalism. *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* retain much in the way of good reporting, but in editorial stance have been loyally pro-government on most issues.

Further still: many on the Left see News International's actions as the cutting edge of a more general attack on trade union rights made possible by the legislation which prohibits secondary action. By the simple expedient of creating a separate company for the Wapping plant, NI has made all action by the printworkers secondary: while all action taken by SOGAT and National Graphical Association workers elsewhere, together with supportive calls for action made by Ron Todd of the transport workers, and the blacking of *Sun* bingo cards by the Union of Communications Workers, is either already, or is likely to be, the subject of legal action. The print unions have played the dispute very largely by the book in holding a ballot for strike action: in doing so, they have forced the company to rely, more openly and vividly than in any other dispute, on the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts. In that respect at least, these acts are more obviously under test than at any time since their passing into law - including during the 1984/85 mineworkers' strike.

## **The electricians' ground**

But the electricians are not fighting on that ground: indeed, by their decision to accept the TUC instructions of February 5, they have at once closed off further action against them and rendered opposition to what they have done impotent. The case against the electricians is in TUC terms unanswerable, and was barely answered. But it is not the main point. The union is attempting to create a new kind of trade

unionism and in doing so is prepared to act in a way which breaches the canons of the labour movement. Since this is likely to remain a large part of reality, it had better be understood without cant.

One element of the electricians' case, made before the TUC on February 5, was that the print unions had reduced Fleet Street into a situation of such anarchy, such resolute refusal to change in any way, that change had to come in a rush. In its 32-page, 16-appendix document presented to the general councillors, it said that 'the pressure for change in national newspapers has now proved irresistible. The development of improved production processes by newspaper industries in Japan, the US and Europe has meant that the gap between their production costs and those prevailing in Fleet Street have grown ever wider, and with it has grown the financial incentive for management to introduce the latest production processes . . . Fleet Street proprietors are now pressing to introduce the sort of radical changes which in other countries have been spread out over the past 25 years'.

That is true: as newspaper publishing in more and more of the centres of the advanced countries came to take advantage of the new (actually steadily ageing) technology, so London's print houses came to seem more and more antediluvian, as well as less and less profitable. The kind of profits available to the owners of a national press still as popular as the British one is with its readers, if they could cut out overmanning, are simply mouthwatering: Eddie Shah pointed them up when he announced he would make profits on a national print run of only 300,000-400,000.

The newspaper owners had to combat

labour practices which were their own creation. In the two great waves of circulation and advertising battles in the 20s and early 30s, and again in the later 50s and 60s, print unionism was granted first a privileged then a very highly rewarded place. In the second of these, wages accelerated sharply as the print officials found they could almost always gain more money from managements whose brief was, ultimately, to give in rather than lose papers.

The official (Newspaper Publishers Association) figures for earnings in the Fleet Street print last year were: £200 for unskilled clerical workers; £275 a week for semi-skilled workers, as machine assistants, copy readers and distribution workers; and £474 a week for skilled men, as linotype operators, compositors, process workers, engineers and electricians; for many of these workers, a working week is no more than 25 hours, often less. However, this is probably a steep underestimation of the earnings of the highest paid: a skilled linotype operator, for example, can usually expect some £800 a week. Further, those who have had entrepreneurial flair have invested their savings and spare time in businesses, or drive cabs: the result is that those on already high incomes have

been able to make them much higher, while at the lower end of the labour market, the wages are moderate. There has been some evidence of widespread tax evasion.

### the 'Wapping effect' is bound to be profound

Among journalists, wages start at around £14,000 a year and rise for senior journalists to around £40,000: a median salary would be between £20,000-£25,000. On top of this, most journalists are at least eligible for expenses fiddles: claiming on false bills, or false travel, or false 'tip' fees. Companies vying for newspaper attention will offer a range of free entertainment, free travel and discounted cars, often for no hard and fast return. On the popular newspapers in particular, though by no means exclusively on these, the working week is in practice as short as the printers.

#### Even hiring and firing

It is not perhaps necessary to add that there are many hard-working and honest printers and journalists, and that even those who are not are far from alone among workers in their propensity to fiddle the

inland revenue or the company or both. But the conspicuous consumption of Fleet Street has for long excited the envy of others: while the privilege enjoyed by Fleet Street workers has been fiercely defended by the unions for decades. Newspaper owners, always willing to pay up, to buy newspapers in trouble and to profit by each other's distress, were the worst possible advertisement for a disciplined industrial relations framework.

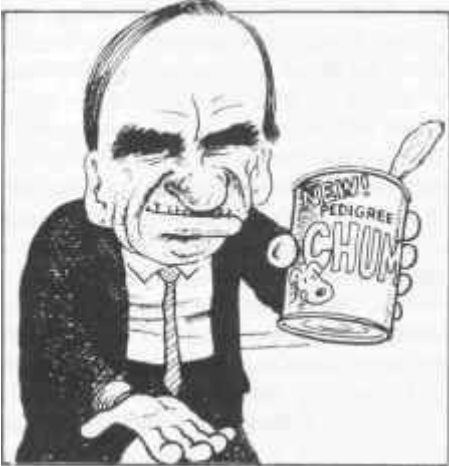
The ultimate indignity for Fleet Street managers was that they had lost control of the basic disciplinary tool, hiring and firing. All national newspapers - except, now, the News International titles - have to accept as printers whoever the print union offices assign to fill 'vacancies' - though often the vacancy is more nominal than real. This has turned out to mean that the labour pool is often defined as family and friendship networks - contributing to the close-knit nature of the Street's print-rooms, but effectively excluding all women and all but a handful of non-white workers. Since the employers had no control over their labour forces, they simply could not enforce, even if they wished to, the terms of the sex equality or race relations legislation.

News International, in smashing its way



out of this world, has cleared the way for the creation of a new kind of labour market: EETPU officials have not been slow to stress that women and blacks are now working on the Wapping composing floors. The NI strategy, refined over a period long enough to be anticipated by the print unions, has smashed a system about which the question has to be asked: how much was defensible?

The question is not simply rhetorical. Naturally, what is always worth defending is employment itself: its lack reduces men



and women to poverty and impotence. But that defence has never been able to rely on simple moral assertion: it is part of a war of position, a matter of judgement as to when to advance, when to retreat. In Fleet Street, it has been clear for many years that the cost structure would sooner or later have to be tackled: and it has also been clear for many years that newspaper managements were willing to pay a very high cost to tackle it.

#### A wise union strategy

In 1976, managements and print union general secretaries produced a Programme for Action, which gave the unions a large measure of control in a package which sought to introduce new technology, phased early retirement and voluntary redundancies and decasualisation of the industry. The programme, produced under the chairmanship of Bill Keys, then general secretary of SOGAT, warned, terribly presciently, that 'rejection (of the programme) will result in . . . compulsory redundancy for workers with little or no advance warning. No government aid will be available to workers or unions. New forms of printed communication utilising new technology, if necessary printed abroad, will compete more and more successfully with a diminishing range of

British newspapers'.

It was flung out on a ballot: National Graphical Association members, representing the high earners, voted it down by 3,778 votes to 889; Natsopa members (now part of SOGAT) were evenly divided, rejecting it by 4,598 to 4,296. The *Financial Times*, poised to lead Fleet Street into the new technological age, scrapped its plans and has remained with hot metal to the present day. It seemed like a victory for a rank and file too street-wise to accept the compromises of a national leadership which did not understand the realities of power in Fleet Street: but not so. The programme was right: in the nine years since its rejection, the pressures for change which it might have channelled into joint control continued to build up until they exploded into the burst of management prerogative which was Wapping. The tactic, or rather as it seems the reflex action, of holding on to every gain, every privilege, every unworked shift and unearned overtime payment, has resulted in the loss of all for the 5,000 printers at News International and perhaps for many more at other newspapers than need have been affected.

Here is one reason why nearly all the journalists have trudged through the gates of Fortress Wapping: because few felt the print unions had merited their support. The *Sun* journalists were particularly vociferous in this regard, citing the printers' actions in working through - and hence rendering useless - their strike action nearly two years ago. However, all of this, though true enough as far as it goes, is ultimately self-serving: the journalists went into Wapping to protect their jobs. At least as privileged as the print workers, they now have the extra advantage of being required in roughly the same numbers as now to produce their newspapers, where the printers are not. The fact that the middle-class journalists should find themselves on the top of the heap when the working-class printers find themselves on the bottom has added an extra twist to the strained relationships which have always existed between them as groups, and which neither side have cared to do much about, even when rational self-interest pointed to the wisdom of doing so.

#### The longer-run style?

If, therefore, the great breakout from Fleet Street was the only course left to a rational newspaper owner concerned to maximise his investment, does it not make sense to a rational trade union leader concerned to

maximise *his/her* investments to recognise that, and take advantage of it? Eric Hammond and his fellow EETPU leaders have long evolved an approach to trade unionism which uninhibitedly uses business methods where other union leaderships do so only half-heartedly. He has surveyed the modern labour market, and seen that any union which expects to continue to prosper, even to *exist* in an environment which is likely to continue to be hostile, must positively capture members in areas hitherto considered taboo. One part of that is an assault on the non-unionised high-tech industries of the M4 corridor, South Wales and 'Silicon Glen' in the Scottish new towns: a new frontiership which has attracted no plaudits from the labour movement, though perhaps it should. The other part, now notorious, was an insistence that electricians 'follow the electron' - that, where an industry passed from the mechanical to electronic phase, electricians should lay claim to it. It is this - rather flimsy, in the case of Fleet Street - justification which has been given for the assumption by the EETPU of the job rights at NI: but whether flimsy or not, it is clearly rational behaviour by the union's publicly displayed canons.

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NI has acted in a classic fashion: just how companies are 'supposed' to act during a recession. Behind the protection of the employment legislation, it has used the need of people to work as a lever against those who presumed they had rights to jobs. The workers supplied by the electricians were largely unemployed; the drivers hired by TNT to distribute the titles - some 1,000 - were largely out of work; the members of SOGAT, NUJ and others who continued to work knew that chances of another job were remote. In some cases, electricians, printers and journalists have refused offered jobs: but they have been all but knocked over in the rush. The EETPU has, up to a point at least, collaborated with this: but those unions whose leaderships have inveighed against the electricians but whose members are working at Wapping can in practice do no better.

The TGWU has accepted into membership, through the closed shop at TNT,



some 1,000 new members to which it has not been slow to issue cards, and whom it had not attempted to discipline. Its officers, trying to persuade people who have just taken a well-paid job after months on the dole to give it up again, have had little stomach for the task. The NUJ executive is hardly likely to expel its entire NI membership. Once again, the EETPU is frankly taking advantage of a situation in which other unions can only flail about impotently. In doing so, we can see the union's guiding philosophy at work: one which must be understood by the labour movement at large. For it may well be that it is more in tune with long-run trends in the labour market, and even with the emerging positions being taken up by the Labour leadership, than anything else on offer.

#### Market-based unionism

The EETPU, under its present leadership, has managed to develop a coherent approach which might best be called *market-based* trade unionism. This means two things: first, an acceptance of a largely market economy in an active way - a commitment to harmonious industrial relations through the famous (and misnamed) no-strike agreements, and a stance at local and national level of encouragement to go-ahead, profit and growth orientated managements as the best guarantors of employment for the union's members.

The second is an acceptance that trade unionism itself, for the present at least, operates in a market place in which the normal anarchy associated with such a 'system' prevails. When trade unionism was powerful after the war until the end of the 1970s, and when the society was much more responsive than it is now to the influence of corporate forces - the government, big (British) business, the TUC - then the kind of stability, not to say stasis, imposed by the Bridlington Agreement (you don't poach from me and I won't poach from you), could prevail. Now, such stability is gone: stasis at the TUC, a series of doomed attempts to recover a tripartite consensus, has meant only precipitate de-

cline in relative and absolute terms: the unions now, on any count, organise little more than 45% of the nation's workforce, compared to nearly 55% at their peak in the late 1970s. It is the age of catch as catch can: and none has entered into this age, none shown itself to be so seized of the necessity to behave as a post-Thatcherite trade union, as the EETPU.

Central to this market-based behaviour has been the ability to act on the sober realisation that, as far as trade unions are concerned, the boss is boss again. Recession and the employment legislation have produced managements generally capable of resisting most union demands (though they have not, much to the government's and the CBI's grief, managed to screw down real wages) and of effecting real changes in work practices and in productivity. It is harder and harder for unions to motivate their essential cadres, the shop stewards: though they remain in place, and often retain considerable power, the evidence appears to point to behaviour much more compliant, much less self-confidently militant, than in the 60s and 70s. In such a climate, unions can gain little by the use of muscle, more by collaboration. Most unions, in practice and at local levels, do so: the EETPU makes a positive virtue out of it, elevating it to a new principle. In a market environment, the union has sought to present itself as the most saleable union commodity around: the one most able to offer the best deal to employers as much as to workers. It promises, as far as it can, strike-free environments, a co-operative and enthusiastic workforce and union officials who will understand and co-operate with management's point of view. To its members, it offers an end to class war rhetoric and practice, greater say over their workplaces through the extension in industrial democracy it seeks in those companies where the 'no strike' agreements operate, and - also in these companies - a single status, all-

mucking-in-together working culture deliberately copied from the Japanese.

#### And stock market advice . . .

Further, the nature of the union/member relationship is explicitly being altered. As the EETPU faced possible suspension by the general council (it is a measure of the union's present power that that expulsion is likely to remain always putative: a general council which does not take leave of its senses is *never* likely to expel the EETPU in today's environment), it unveiled with great publicity a package of

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benefits for its members - everything from car insurance to stock market advice. Here was market unionism with a vengeance! Here was a union leadership treating its members, all filed and cross-filed on a computerised list, as a marketplace in its own right. Here, too, was a craft union turning its back on the class-based rhetoric of the past 20 years, and returning to the practices of a century before, where the first viable unions, collectives of cautious, careful, respectable, relatively well-to-do craft workers (who would nevertheless fight for their rights when they felt they had to), put cautious and careful men in their London head offices charged with guarding their funds and providing financial benefits. But of course it was more than that too: for where these benefits were an early form of welfare state, the EETPU is a late form of mail order catalogue-cum-financial advisor: it has recognised that though it organises workers as producers, it can also serve its members as consumers.

We can see that the EETPU leadership has a quite different model of its membership than that which some at least of the Left have held for many years: it is a model of a man or woman who sees work as the provision of a living, who may be induced to take a greater interest in it if he/she is led to believe that in doing so employment security will be enhanced; a model of a member whose interests are family, home and possessions, and who will engage in a number of financial transactions which the union can both help him/her and help itself in providing. It is as far removed from the model of class struggle provided by Arthur Scargill as it is possible to be in one movement - yet Scargill, with his customary acuity, recognised the threat (the EETPU has its eyes on the Union of



Democratic Mineworkers) and issued a list of the considerable benefits open to a member of the National Union of Mine-workers. The EETPU has not just come to terms with the market: it is positively revelling in playing the market game.

This style has attracted a great deal of detestation from the Left. But the Left has yet to prove that it has a coherent alternative: and most of all, it has yet to prove so in the face of a challenge not so much from the EETPU - which it can and does ritually dismiss as a group so eccentric and evil-natured that serious dialogue hardly needs to be entered into. It has to prove it in face of a challenge from the only people who can guarantee the unions at least a little better days, the Labour party leadership.

### **Kinnock's productionist crusade**

In recent months, Neil Kinnock has clearly shown that he has learned the necessary lesson of any Labour leader in his position: drop the socialism, at least for now. Faced with a centre grouping in the Alliance which often betters Labour and Conservatives in the polls and will certainly not have sunk to insignificance come the next election, he has two choices. Either accept the route mapped out by Arthur Scargill and Tony Benn for a fundamentalist socialism whose radicalism will come to be seen by the mass of people as essential simply because of the scale of the devastation wreaked by Thatcherism; or attempt to re-occupy the centre ground with the Labour party pledged to a reformist programme of national industrial regeneration with such goals as public ownership or industrial democracy, very firmly on the longest of long fingers.

In his speech to the Industrial Society in January, Kinnock talked of an industrial culture modelled explicitly on that developed by the Japanese. In an interview with Brian Walden on *Weekend World* on February 9, he agreed that redistribution came second to production, that income differentials would remain wide, that only the top 3 or 4% of income earners would suffer large tax increases and that measures to produce greater degrees of equality, while desirable, would have to wait until the nation proved it could afford it. When Walden tentatively proposed, as a role novel for him, Franklin Roosevelt, the US president who moulded the New Deal to assist the US up and out of the depression, the Labour leader sprang at the description and hung it enthusiastically round his neck. As John Biffen, among the shrew-

dest of the cabinet, has noted: the Kinnock/Hattersley leadership has returned in style to that preferred by Harold (now Lord) Wilson in the second half of the 60s.

Now much of what Kinnock says sounds fine when left in the abstract: few apart from the harder Left would wish to disagree. But when these ideas come off the page and the television into real life, we begin to see that life in Kinnock's Britain could be, or should be, at least as exciting as it is supposed to have been under Mrs Thatcher. In embarking on a productionist crusade whose slogan is efficiency, productivity and output, and whose role model is the Japanese, Kinnock must preside over technical and industrial change much more far-reaching and more dynamic than the relative failure which has characterised the 'Thatcher revolution'. For Thatcher, in trying to let the market shake British industry into a world role again, fell foul of the apparently chronic conservatism of the bulk of British industrialists. Rather than expand to meet new markets, they have cut back and continued to cut back to core profitable activities. In none of the important industrial sectors - cars, ships, steel, computers, telecommunications, microelectronics, chemicals, machine tools, consumer and household electrics, office equipment, heavy vehicles, industrial machinery, aerospace - has UK performance been consistently good: in some it has been consistently bad (cars, telecommunications and computers are obvious cases). To turn round some, let alone all, of these sectors will represent fearsomely difficult jobs and require a

### **in such a climate, unions can gain little by the use of muscle, more by collaboration**

dedication and effort from management and workers which will take some creating. Above all, it will need as an indispensable, but far from sufficient condition, a collaborative style of industrial relations which - as the Japanese one seems to do - subordinates almost all economic struggle to the needs of the company and above that, the needs of the country. The only union which has even begun to face up to the challenge which Kinnock now poses is the EETPU.

### **A fearful symmetry**

The Benn/Scargill route would see the

state act as the major engine of growth, through direct ownership of the commanding heights, with the remaining private sector facing increasing curbs on its freedom to manoeuvre. It would seek to stimulate industrial expansion behind import controls, and introduce a large measure of workers' control at enterprise level and beyond. There is nothing in the programme which has not been the stuff of most left manifestos for decades: it is unquestionably nearer in spirit to party policy as expressed in conference resolutions, to say nothing of that venerable battleground, clause four.

By contrast, the new Labour approach must very largely take for granted the given structure of ownership and control; cannot afford, in its dash for growth and efficiency, to become bogged down in battles over nationalisation of much more than a very few of the privatised corporations - and even they may not pass back wholly into public hands. It will have to rely on the management it finds, and that means it will have to attempt to keep the industrial peace. A middle way between Benn and Hammond is unlikely to be practicable.

Few in the Labour movement appear to have grasped the fearful symmetry between the fiery left-winger from Bedwellty and the cold-eyed right-wingers perched out in Bromley who are presently beating out the tempo for the British trade union movement. Neither of them have cared to make it explicit: but if it is not made explicit all round long before the next election, then the inevitable consequence will be that a hard-pressed labour movement will look to Kinnock and Hattersley to provide a period of respite, find that something quite different is expected of them, then see that movement collapse in on itself once more in a welter of recrimination and charges of betrayal. Far from respite, a Kinnock-led government will, on its own emergent programme, require from the unions the exercise of industrial leadership which none of them have ever attempted and which they will find hard to come to terms with. For it will mean precisely that collaborative approach which they have bitterly criticised in the EETPU, coupled with the willingness to assume much of the responsibility for a Labour programme which promises little in the way of extra consumption and a lot in the way of extra work.

For some 20 years, from the mid-60s to the mid-80s, the British trade union movement has found it convenient to maintain

