

Union Vision

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A new axis

I enjoyed John Lloyd's article 'The Sparks are Flying' (March MT) His analysis of Fleet Street and the issues confronting the print workers helped people to develop a wider understanding as to the nature of the problems and will develop support for the dispute.

Of interest were John's points regarding the build up to the next general election, and the possible scenarios springing from the current developments within the trade union movement, and his challenge to the movement about what it offers in place of Hammondism.

We have reached an historical moment which coincides with the trade union movement reaching a watershed. The recent announcement that Norman Tebbit and Margaret Thatcher will write the next Conservative party general election manifesto is a clear indication that the Tories intend to make the trade unions a major issue.

How trade unions respond in this situation will be decisive to the outcome of that election. They can either get their act together with a positive contribution around policy and strategy, or fail to do that and end up assisting the return of a Tory government.

In reality and after six years of Tory rule, the trade union movement has experienced many major setbacks and defeats, and they have not been able to respond effectively against the all-round Thatcher attack upon them.

The government is floundering on industrial, economic and employment policy. There are sharp divisions within the Tory party expressed over the sale of Westland and British Leyland, and further illustrated by the resignation or sacking of 17 ministers in the past six years. But the Tories are still in office. Norman Tebbit in last year's Disraeli lecture predicted that the Tories will be around in the year 2000 and beyond. The key to this confidence is a vision, a long-term strategy of knowing the shape of society they want to see, linked with an immediate package of policies and a determination to win.

In contrast the trade union movement has no such vision; it fails to address the

need for long-term strategy, has no shape to what it wants to see and lacks any credible, coherent alternative to Thatcherism both in the short and long-term in response to the government's all-round package. It has no concept of the politics of changing people's thinking. This lack of strategy denies the movement the ability to address today's problems effectively, and it ends up clinging to outdated practices, presenting itself as a divided movement, which allows the Tories to decide the political agenda.

To be effective in the build-up to the election, unions must begin to set the agenda, develop their own moral authority which in turn will help unions from a defensive and sometimes entrenched position. This entails transforming the way of conducting politics and the political practise of the trade union movement. Political posturing, and glorious opposition will not deliver.

In this respect, and linked to the need for struggle must go an ideological struggle. There needs to be a confrontation with the ideas that have dominated and bedeviled the trade union movement.

On the one hand there is the Militant Tendency alliance, and the recent cluster of the Campaign Group of MPs, the Communist Campaign Group and the *Morning Star*. All offer a narrow and sectarian approach, one that lacks strategy, and has no concept of broader alliances outside the trade union movement.

On the other hand are the forces ranged behind *new realism* and around which we are experiencing attempts to bring centre stage of the trade unions reformist policies. These policies breed passivity, a feeling of not being able to do anything, of waiting for the return of a Labour government, and of being opposed to struggle, viewing it as an electoral liability.

Neither position is helpful. Not only do they divide the movement, but they become locked into a right-left conflict which completely fails to address the concerns of the British people.

But there is another way, and that responsibility rests with the broad Left of British politics. There is an urgent need for this tendency to assert itself. Important in this respect is the Labour Coordinating Committee, and a whole host of personalities like Bickerstaffe, Sawyer, Knapp,

Livingstone and Blunkett.

This is still an emerging group with problems of cohesion and coherence, and lacking in confidence, but crucial to winning the centre ground of the trade union movement.

The recent election of John Golding to the post of general secretary of the National Communications Union, discussions on a merger between APEX and TSSA, and proposed amalgamations of the civil service unions are aimed at strengthening the right wing. The right wing are hopeful that Jordan will win the AUEW's presidential seat, especially after his announcement of merger plans with the EETPU if elected.

The EETPU's recent withdrawal from the brink in accepting the TUC decisions about its conduct at Wapping, was in recognition of these developments, which point to the formation of a new axis.

There can be no doubt that this formation is preparing for this year's TUC and Labour party conferences with a strong determination to undermine the Left and its policies, and in particular influence the Labour party manifesto in the direction as John Lloyd describes, of a new kind of trade unionism.

The Left of Britain's unions must not be caught, as on previous occasions, responding to the initiatives of the right wing. This entails unions consciously building up a bloc of social forces united by common concerns, and thus beginning to isolate the government and depriving it of its allies, and of the support which it has derived by integrating popular themes into its own ideological system. The trade unions in order to succeed must combine the interests of other social groups and democratic movements with those of its own interests.

Such an approach means commitment to an immediate programme, one that is radical and transforming, which creates the opportunity not just for changing people's thinking, but also the generation of mass popular struggle. The Left of British trade unionism has not got a record of successes around this approach, but it is now the challenge and if it does not rise and assert itself when Kinnock knocks it will have nothing to offer. If the broad Left does not assert itself over the dominant tendencies of sectarianism and reformism, then Kinnock will not knock.