



Ford strike: Sign of a renewed confidence in the unions

Ford For Thought

Industrial correspondents have had a new spring in their step over the last few weeks: the seamen, pit deputies, health workers and Ford manual workers have, temporarily at least, given them some traditional business. Does this mini-wave of industrial disputes signal a turning point in the unions' fortunes and an end to the dark days of the early 1980s?

The measure of union strength has shifted signi-

ficantly since the 1970s. Union power is not so much a question of whether unions can and will exert their muscle through industrial action. These days it is much more about whether they can keep pace with changes in the labour market, to ensure they are rooted in the growing, developing parts of the economy. On this longer-term measure, several factors suggest there are grounds for renewed con-

fidence, albeit limited.

The recent falls in unemployment, combined with more concerted union recruitment drives, have led several unions to declare their first membership gains since the late 1970s. Union members, especially in larger companies, are enjoying strong earnings growth. The annual increase in average earnings has risen to 8.25%, fuelled by increases in basic settlements as well as productivity and overtime earnings. Overtime working is at the highest level since the start of the decade and skills shortages, though nowhere near as high as in the 1970s, have risen since the early

1980s, especially in the south-east.

These factors suggest employers' demand for workers is rising while the union recruitment figures suggest unions may be manoeuvring into more of a position to exploit that rise.

A further development has been the unions' accommodation to the government's trade union legislation. At Ford 88% of manual workers voted for strike action; pit deputies voted by more than 90% for industrial action. Unions have become adept at using ballots in negotiations; they feel more confident with the backing of a ballot, and in strategic negotiations there seems to be a greater willingness to take industrial action. The level of strikes has started to rise from a 50-year low.

All these are indicators of a renewed assertiveness and confidence among unions. In the long run it is these kinds of factors which will determine the position of the unions. But the current disputes do have their significance.

The ferry dispute was fuelled with an air of desperation. It was as much a sign of the NUS's fundamentally weak position as a signal of strength: an attempt to defend the last remaining sector of the British merchant fleet. But it was a success in one respect: this was the first really significant case of a union being taken to court under the secondary picketing legislation and escaping relatively unscathed.

The pit deputies' pay dispute with British Coal has fundamentally also been a matter of survival. The subtext to the dispute is that the corporation wants far-reaching changes to the deputies' role and working practices. As it is, the corporation has offered to have the pay dispute settled by independent binding arbitration. That may in itself be a union victory, but the long term plans will remain.

What these two disputes suggest is that, while unions may have regained some strength, employers will still

set the agenda for change and the unions by and large lack a strategic view of what they want to achieve. This is clearest in the two disputes which could be really important: Ford and the health dispute.

One of the dangers of the Ford dispute for the unions is that they have never been clear about exactly what they wanted from the negotiations. The shop floor threw out the union leadership's recommendation to accept a three-year deal after the company improved its pay offer. Had that deal been accepted the British unions would have signed a three-year agreement for a little more money, while the West German unions had, in addition, won cuts in working time and the American unions had won an employment security programme which introduced a moratorium on plant closings and guarantees that employment would be maintained at 107,000 till 1990. The Ford unions may be strong when judged by ballots and industrial muscle; but as yet there is a lack of strategic vision to determine what the unions are going to win from the company's drive for change.

The health dispute naturally extends itself into a broader political debate, because health is such a moral issue and the NHS commands such loyalty. The unions have shown greater strength, they have put the government on the defensive. But again the strategic aims of the action are unclear. If the nurses, especially in the RCN, are bought off with a higher pay award, leaving the largely-forgotten, low-paid ancillary workers in their wake, the action will dissipate. The government's long-term plans for a transformation of the service might be limited, but it would still command the political agenda.

This might mark the end of a decade of retreat for the unions; it does not mark their resurgence as an economic, social and political force. •

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