

Labour And The Unions

John Lloyd's pessimism about the prospects for trade unionism in Britain goes too far. His conclusion that the permanent decline of trade unions dictates a loosening of links with the Labour Party is, therefore, based on a false premise.

The environment *has* changed. The decimation of manufacturing, mass unemployment, privatisation, increased international competition, Thatcherism's ideological and legislative attack on collectivism, the restoration of management authority and restructuring and differentiation in the labour market - none of these can be underestimated.

In leading-edge companies like Ford, the introduction of flexibility, breaking down traditional demarcations and restrictive practices, have drastically reduced 'first line' trade unionism, ie, the shop-floor control over the labour process. On top of these developments, Lloyd is correct to highlight the challenge posed by human resources management - a far-reaching attempt to change the whole culture of employment in the direction of individualising worker relations with the employer, breaching worker solidarity, and the identification of the worker with the company.

But Lloyd's comparison with the doomed Scottish clans: 'Unwilling, in the main, to change', is grotesque.

The remarkable feature of British trade unionism recently has been the resilience and adaptability of the grassroots in the face of adversity, and the growing readiness of the whole movement to face up to its own transformation.

The Ford strike is an illustration. Using Thatcher's anti-union legislation on balloting to fully legitimise the strike, winning the productivity arguments and exploiting Ford's extensive international integration, the unions, on the basis of shopfloor

feeling, were able to force a retreat from one of the world's most powerful companies. Moreover, the settlement guaranteed substantial shopfloor input in the detailed process of change.

The ripples of the Ford settlement will be widely felt. Restructuring and modernisation will now have to be negotiated. Coherent strategies involving reduced working time, investment and training, as well as pay, will become of increasing significance as unions show their ability to win in the conditions of tomorrow rather than yesterday.

Unions are also grappling with the diversity of conditions in the labour market. Even 10 years ago nurses in unions were the exception, today they're in the forefront of a broad imaginative trade-union based campaign for the NHS.

The TGWU 'Link-up' campaign specifically addressing part-time and temporary workers is another example of unions addressing new trends in the labour market, and empowering the powerless.

Certainly those who await the return of the pendulum and the old certainties in the movement will have a long wait. But the struggle to reform, transform and modernise in the light of the new realities requires a more, not less, political approach. A strategic vision which seeks to build a unity across a fragmenting labour market, which is capable of responding to the needs of production and a modern economy rather than economic oppositionism, which can create a new legislative framework, which can prioritise equal opportunities and positive action, which can build alliances around the unions, is of necessity political. Facing up to realities with a militant strategic vision holds prospects of success.

Rather than heeding Lloyd's advice, Labour would be wise to seek ways to strengthen its links and identification with the unions and their members. •

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