

## 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. •

*Steve Hart*

## Vanessa Redgrave

In January 1937, at the Old Vic, Laurence Olivier stepped forward from the curtain-call following a performance of *Hamlet* to announce: 'Tonight a great actress was born. Laertes has had a daughter.' The baby was Vanessa Redgrave.

Olivier's announcement was less prophetic than with hindsight it appears: Vanessa's father, Michael Redgrave and her mother, the actress Rachel Kempson, came from families whose theatrical connections stretched back to the actor/managers of the early 19th century. It would have seemed more strange if Vanessa had *not* chosen to go on the stage (she herself favoured ballet and studied under Marie Rambert).

What Olivier could not have predicted is that 'the golden child' who grew up in a cosseted upper-middle-class environment in the very heart of the British theatrical establishment would, together with brother Corin, espouse revolutionary politics. Sister Lynn chose self-exile in the USA and embraced weight-watchers. But Vanessa's dogged loyalty, commitment and perseverance, not to mention

**'Vanessa's loyalty, commitment and perseverance have marked her out as more than a middle-class rebel in search of a cause'**\*

her financial generosity to those causes she espouses, have always marked her out as more than a middle-class rebel in search of a cause.

For many years a member of the central committee of the trotskyist Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) - she twice stood for parliament as a WRP candidate, losing her deposit each time - Redgrave remained loyal to party leader Gerry Healy after he was accused by other party members of 'seducing at least 26 members of the party'. Last year

she set up a new grouping - the Marxist Party - and also discovered a new-found enthusiasm for the USSR in general and Mikhail Gorbachev in particular.

Some, particularly the US press, have attempted to dub her as an 'English Jane Fonda', which is entirely to miss the point. Vanessa is not a collector of causes, those she supports are dictated by her politics.

At 51 she remains a controversial figure, acclaimed on the theatre and film pages as 'the greatest actress of her generation' and either villified on the front pages as a dangerous left-wing lunatic or dismissed as a mere figure of fun.

She continues to arouse strong emotions. In a well-publicised case which followed the Boston Symphony Orchestra's cancellation of her 1982 contract, due to threats of disruption by groups hostile to Vanessa's support for the PLO, a US appeal court ruled last year that Redgrave had every right to be the nightly target of 'vegetable projectiles' if she so wished and that her contract should have been honoured.

Previously there had been objections when, she was chosen to play Auschwitz survivor Fania Fenelon in the film of *Playing For Time*, and for her role in *Julia*. Only last year *The Sunday Times* published allegations that money donated by Vanessa to nuclear disarmament activists had been used towards the escape of Soviet spy George Blake from Wormwood Scrubs.

Over the years her relationship with the media has deteriorated. During the 1960s she could be found relaxed and smiling on the Simon Dee show; by the late 70s she had become a reluctant and difficult interviewee, secretive about her private life and unforthcoming about politics. The latest journalist to do battle, Duncan Fallowell, apparently



Vanessa Redgrave as Nora Melody in Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch Of The Poet*, currently at the Comedy Theatre, London

had to sign a letter in advance promising not to ask about politics; when Melvyn Bragg was dispatched to interview her for *The Guardian* to mark her 50th birthday it was clear that the art of acting was the only item for discussion.

Those who have been lucky enough to get an interview tend to use words about her like 'prickly', 'tense' and 'tortured'. But you also get the impression that they find her strangely intimidating and that she inspires a kind of reluctant awe.

'Why do they pillory her? She keeps her politics separate from her art, why can't they?' says Simon Relph, producer of the 1985 David Hare film *Weatherby* in which Redgrave starred. Vanessa's determination to compartmentalise her life into 'acting' and 'politics' is part of the problem. She would do well to wise up to the maxim that the personal is political.

There are suggestions that Vanessa is aware of some of her own contradictions. She is reputed to have said: 'I

choose my roles carefully so that when my career is over I will have covered all our recent history of oppression'. In a recent interview she declared: 'If we want to understand anything of now, we have to understand the history which produced it.' It will be interesting to see if her autobiography, which she is currently writing, attempts to separate a lifetime dedicated equally to art and politics.

Her return to the British stage in recent years has given audiences an opportunity to witness a great actress in performance. Her luminosity apparent in roles like Rosalind and Imogen at Stratford in the early 60s persists, but her talent has matured and developed. Over the last two years she has been a great Madame Arkedina (in *The Seagull*), a desperately tragic Mrs Alving (*Ghosts*) and a splendid Cleopatra. On stage she reveals all; offstage she remains a very private public person.

Lyn Gardner