

## Sparking Off Trouble

The leadership of the EETPU electricians' union is universally presented as modern and forward looking. However, like no other union, the collective psychology of the leadership - a mixture of the bloody-minded bully and innocent victim of the conspiracy - stems from its past, and particularly the cold war.

Anyone trying to understand the union - and its now annual assertions of independence from the TUC General Council - needs to read *All Those In Favour*, an account of the EETPU communist corruption trial put together by CH Rolph and the former *New Statesman* editor John Freeman. The book, a condensed version of the 1961 trial, describes how Frank Haxel, Secretary, and Frank Foulkes, then President, rigged ballots in the fifties on behalf of the Communist Party to secure the election of communist leaders and thus control of policy. As John Freeman wrote in the preface: 'In years to come students of British social history may remember the case of Bryne and Chappie v Foulkes and Others in the same way as we refer today to the Taff Vale judgement and even the trial of Oscar Wilde; first for its importance in the casebook of trade union law and second for the total collapse of individual reputation with which it ended.'

The exposure of the biggest fraud in trade union history was a bruising affair. It was achieved with pertinacity and at some personal cost for men like John Byrne, the union's future general secretary. However, it allowed Chappie, a left-wing socialist, according to Freeman, but more importantly, a convert from communism, to take gradual control. Over a few years the power of the annual conference, the election of full-time officials and the district structure were whittled away.



Frank Chappie: Driving force behind a self-perpetuating oligarchy

As an article of faith the union leadership came to disregard the views of activists in favour of the opinion of the moderate silent majority. That majority expressed its opinion once every five years in the elections for the general secretary and executive council. Increasingly, members of the executive did not come from the lay membership, but from the cadre of full-time officials appointed by the executive, a grooming process which inevitably led to the development of a self-perpetuating oligarchy of like-minded attitude. Most dissent, whether it was from left-wing branches, other union general secretaries or sceptics in the press, was dismissed by raising the bogey of communist conspiracy. No opposition could be taken at face value: communists or their fellow travellers lay behind all criticism. The extent to which this near-McCarthyism was a device to defeat opposition or a genuine reflection of the leadership's fears is unclear.

As a result, the EETPU became self-consciously different from other TUC affiliates, almost to the extent of being isolationist. At the top level there was a sense of the union being apart from the TUC mainstream, uniquely democratic and uniquely bat-

tle scarred, whilst on the shopfloor members showed a bullish sense of craft which had to be defended from the threat represented by the mass of unskilled workers.

With the election of Eric Hammond in succession to Chappie, the language of the cold war became increasingly redundant, but the union's willingness to face down its enemies and assert its independence remained dominant. More and more, the union's executive saw its role as some kind of far-sighted prophet derided by its contemporaries. As Hammond proudly tells his union's conference delegates: 'We are the future.' On a succession of issues - acceptance of state money for ballots, the leadership of the miners' strike, the regular election of union executives by postal ballots, the political damage caused by the London Labour Left - the electricians claim with arguable justification that their heresies have become today's orthodoxies. Such change, they believe, has only been secured by the blunt language and nerve which had always stood the leadership in good stead.

Yet

some point two or three years ago, Hammond could probably have made his peace with the TUC, as he was pressed to do, both in

private and public. He could have accepted that the battle for new realism inside the party and the unions was largely won. As a result he could have presented the importance of strike-free deals - a mirage under British industrial relations law - far less aggressively. Similarly the union could have accepted that a common solution was required to the TUC's loss of membership and cancerous competition for single union deals caused by the emergence of four or five general unions.

However, Hammond did neither. The strike-free deal was portrayed as indispensable to the future productivity of British industry, even though most industrial relations academics do not foresee them spreading beyond a few tightly defined



**Hammond: Future heretic?**

industries. On inter-union competition, Hammond outlined a Utopian solution that all unions should hand their members to the TUC so that they could be reorganised along industrial lines.

Probably two things stood in the way of any rapprochement. First, the union faced a drawn-out and increasingly embarrassing investigation over its role in the recruitment of labour for News International. The investigation remains unresolved. Secondly, the electricians' collective leadership, proud of its independence and its roots, has become psychologically almost incapable of compromise. Conflict in a Manichean world has been almost a way of life.

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