

Beatrix Campbell explores the new trade unionism

Essential Service

Roger Poole is Nupe's chief negotiator in the ambulance dispute.

There is tremendous public support sustaining the ambulance dispute. Is that about the 'angels' factor?

Oh no. Public support for the nurses was there, but it was nowhere near as great as for this group.

Why?

Well, I think a lot of people have personal experience of the ambulance workers. They see that uniform, they feel confident, able to trust them. And crucially, the members themselves have been great spokespeople. I've never known another group of workers who've been suspended, had their pay stopped and yet turned up for work in their uniforms, smart, and answered every single call.

How far have you rethought what constitutes appropriate industrial action since the 'winter of discontent' in 1979?

We needed to rethink after 79 because the one group of people who were hurt in that industrial action were our people: ordinary working folk who needed the NHS.

The key to the ambulance dispute was when our members agreed to go to arbitration. We ought to have a pay formula for all emergency service workers; the police have one, the fire service have one. The secretary of state determines everything that goes on in the Whitley pay negotiating system. The one aspect he doesn't have total control over is Pay Review Bodies. That was why we wanted arbitration. We knew that we had to get to a third party to have this case heard, because we didn't only have a claim, we had a whole strategy for ambulance pay for the future. Our willingness to go to arbitration was one major plank in the campaign.

The other was that we said we would not affect the accident and emergency services. We could have won or lost the dispute within a week, quite frankly, if we'd had a total stoppage. The government would either have given in or we'd have been condemned by the world at large and driven back to work. We've been working throughout the 80s for a new industrial strategy for very low-paid workers in the public services. In the past it's been full-time trade union officials representing members. Now we're much more about members representing themselves.

The ambulance workers have been able to put their case in a way which other groups haven't, because other groups of workers have been more involved in setting up a picket-line,

maintaining the solidarity of the strike and being old-style macho trade unionists.

One other thing we've enabled the ambulance workers to do is to talk to the public about things that the *public* want. In the essential services - police, fire and ambulances - everybody understands that certain jobs are so crucial you can't really fight it out on the battlelines. And so a central part of our claim was to get a pay formula, so we would never have to take action again. And that's captured people's imagination.

So do you feel that you've managed to pre-empt the government's wish to ban industrial action in the essential services?

The government has been threatening for a couple of years now to stop strikes in essential services. Now the unions are saying, 'Listen, we don't want strikes'. But to avoid a strike we need a pay-determination system. The government is saying no.

I think their whole strategy on industrial action in the essential services is now up for grabs, because they always knew that if you banned strikes, you had to put some sort of pay determination in their place.

The profile of women in the union's propaganda has been palpable. But women are not a significant proportion of ambulance personnel. The emergency services are highly gendered.

The number of women in the service has grown over the last few years, though you're quite right, it's still very small. Out of the 19,000 ambulance crew staff, I would imagine that no more than 2,500 absolute maximum are women. OK, this may be an emergency service that looks macho when the blue lights are going and people are jumping in and out of crashed planes and trains, but it is essentially a caring service, and the values that women bring to a service like that are very, very important. Men find it much more difficult to get those values across on tv.

Talking about the macho image, does the paraphernalia of power, uniforms, brass buttons, military drill, bring self-esteem? The word 'discipline' is used, something we associate with masculinity, when in fact *all* of these services, including the police, take care of people.

The ambulance service is full of men, but even though they've got their uniforms and their epaulettes they know how to reassure an old lady having a heart attack. **How** can you disrupt this association between the discipline of the emergency services and masculinity?

'Discipline', in the nicest sense, is essential in a service like this: among the individuals in a team; between them and their colleagues in the other emergency services and in dealing with the general public.

What about the uniform?

The uniform is quite important to them. They have to be recognisable.

Can we talk about the unions' insistence on a comparison with the other emergency services? You've drawn a ring around the police, fire and ambulance services. Why?

Very simple. We expect all those workers to do things that we wouldn't expect any other worker to do. We expect them to go into the fuselage of crashed aircraft, we expect them to put their lives and limbs on the line. The fire service and the ambulance service had parity in 1986. We want that again this year.

But disasters are not typical of the work of any of the three services. What is the effect of constructing them in our imagination as disaster services, when most of their activity - though no less skilled - is of a different order? Don't you thereby devalue all those other activities - about 80% of the work - which the government represents as merely a taxi service?

We had to concentrate on the disaster side. But you are quite right. I think there is a danger that in doing so, the other side of the service becomes a soft side which can be sold off.

The government has plans to start privatising some of the out-patient services. I have no doubt that the next big struggle we will have on our hands will be privatisation.

One of the key words in your whole argument is professionalism. But a very important part of the work that ambulance workers do is like the work that home helps do. What about all those porters, home helps and cleaners for whom you can't mobilise the vocabulary of professionalism? Mainly women.

Well, let's divide those up. We actually did something for home helps. We had a regrading exercise in local government and reversed the situation where home helps were all at the bottom of the pile and refuse collectors were all at the top. Refuse collectors were 100% men and home helps were almost 100% women.

In the health service, we have a problem: 150-160,000-odd ancillary workers who've been the lowest of the lowest-paid for years. The way that we will care for those people **is**, by skilling their jobs.



Aren't they already skilled?

Well, I was going to alter what I said, actually: *recognising* the skills of their jobs.

They've got hidden, invisible skills. Doesn't 'skilling' imply that the union has accepted that in order to improve their living standards they've got to become something else? Isn't the problem that they're not valued?

Well, it's a bit of both. They're not valued now, but they also do need to be given opportunities, to have a career structure.

But Roger, you've got a struggle strategy for the ambulance workers. You've had one for nurses. I don't hear a struggle strategy for the ancillaries. Yet throughout the 80s these workers confronted privatisation, their pay and hours have been cut. Why haven't you developed one?

Because we've been spending a lot of time fighting privatisation. And all the energies of those ancillary workers have gone into protecting their jobs, rather than broadening their horizons.

But hasn't the devaluing of their skills made them more vulnerable to that privatisation?

I agree.

How significant is the nurses' dispute and now this one, in providing clues as to what kind of trade union Nupe is becoming? Are we going to see a new Nupe defined by professionalism?

The issues are still the same. This union is going to maintain itself as the union that really does campaign for low-paid workers. But the way we will campaign for low-paid workers will change.

Finally, what's guided the behaviour of the NHS managers in the present dispute?

Kenneth Clarke wanted this to be a winter of discontent. He has seen it as a political dispute and as his way of proving that he is some great macho leader.

The NHS managers are appalled at what the government's doing. I've not found one who agrees with the government. Practically all of them think that a pay formula would be sensible. If we'd had the pay formula since 86, we would have had around 4% extra over the past three years. For total industrial peace, for heaven's sake!

The significant difference between our strategy and the government's is that ours has been clear. And everybody has understood it. Nobody has known what the government is doing. We will do whatever we can to save Kenneth Clarke's face, providing he is prepared to meet our people's needs. •