



A new mood in the **British trade unions**

The British trade union movement suffered some major defeats in the 1980s, which led to a decline in militancy and membership.

Alan Thornett examines whether there is a resurgence of trade unionism and attempts to form a viable alternative to 'new Labour'.

The trade union movement in Britain suffered a series of major defeats in the 1980s at the hands of Margaret Thatcher's Tory government – the most important being the defeat of the yearlong strike of the coal miners. At the same time the Thatcher government introduced a series of anti-union laws aimed at stopping strike action or making it very difficult to organise legally.

The result of these two factors led to a decline in strike action to a 100-year low by the 1990s; the fundamental restructuring of British industry to the advantage of the employers and a decline in union membership from 13.5 million to just fewer than seven million. The reduction in membership, however, does not show the full extent of the damage. The loss of activists has been at a greater proportion than the loss of general membership.

All this has allowed an employers' offensive to take place. This has gone on unabated for over ten years and has resulted in the introduction of a range of new management techniques from short-term contracts, zero hour contracts, to the widespread use of agency labour (labour brokers). For

example, in the car factory where I originally worked in Oxford (which is now BMW) two thirds of the 3 000 production workers are agency labour.

Social partnership

At a political level the unions have adopted a social partnership approach. This stems from the view that it is no longer possible (or even desirable) to challenge the actions of the employers. Therefore, the name of the game is to work in partnership with them to ensure company profitability and hope this will result in more job security and even some share in the wealth created.

The result was a forgone conclusion: the employers took full advantage of social partnership to maximise profit, restructure employment conditions, 'down-size' the workforce or close down the factory – whichever suited them. The only result was to weaken unions even further.

The direct political reflection of the defeats of the 1980s and the introduction of social partnership was the rise of Blairism in the Labour Party. This is qualitatively different to previous forms of right-wing social democracy. It abandons all remnants of the reform

and welfare framework of the post-war consensus and totally embraces the market and the neoliberal agenda of the American right. It seeks to transform the Labour Party in something akin to the US Democrats. This process is not complete but is a long way down that road. The project is generally referred to as 'new Labour'.

New union militancy

When new Labour came to power in 1997 they kept all the Tory anti-union laws intact and set out to build a completely new relationship with the employers and distanced themselves from the unions. Thus by the end of the 1990s the trade unions remained in a very weak situation with employment conditions, in many ways, even worse than they were under the Tories.

In the past two years, or so, however, there has been a partial re-emergence of union militancy. It is modest, but it is important. It is reflected in recent strikes on rail where the Road, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) called a series of one-day strikes on different sections of the rail network over wage differentials – the difference between the wages of drivers and other

grades of workers, which had been widened by driver shortages. There was also a one-day strike on South West Trains (the rail network south of London) over the victimisation of a driver and militant trade unionist Greg Tucker. In each case there was very strong solidarity amongst the strikers.

Although in the end the RMT executive wavered and called the SWT strikes off there were successful settlements with Arriva North and Scot Rail in Scotland.

In London there is a movement amongst public sector workers for an increased London weighting allowance – given the cost of living in London. In the middle of March, 8 000 teachers struck and marched through London demanding higher London weighting – after voting by 86% for strike action. The demonstration represented a fifth of the total London teaching labour force. Demonstrations by other workers in support of increased London weighting are expected in the months ahead.

This militancy is also reflected in a recent big vote for strike action amongst postal workers against the privatisation of the Post Office. This has not yet been implemented, although thousands of postal workers have demonstrated and lobbied Parliament over the issue.

This shift is reflected in the election of more ‘militant’ general secretaries of a number of unions. Bob Crow, who has a long record as a militant trade unionist and comes from a Communist Party background, was elected general secretary of the RMT. He was elected in the face of a big campaign by the right to stop him. Mark Serwatka, on the far left, was elected general secretary of the PCS.

In each case union members were voting for the most militant option and against the old social partnership leaders of the ‘80s and the ‘90s. It is not a return to the militancy of the ‘70s, but is a welcome development, which can start to rebuild union strength. This new militancy is also reflected in a growing hostility to new

Labour and its privatisation agenda, which has been accelerated since last year’s general election and new Labour’s second term. Despite the disaster of the privatisation of British rail, privatisation is still being forced through on the London underground and into health and education. In fact new Labour has taken privatisation into areas the Tories never dared.

The new militancy is also directly reflected in the rapidly changing attitude of union members to the trade union political funds. A portion of union dues is supposed to be used for political purposes. These funds are the principal source of finance for the Labour Party – including new Labour today. Despite its systematic attack on unions, new Labour receives £8m a year from them in political donations. The question is now being asked why the unions should continue bankrolling a Labour Party that, in government, is not sympathetic to the unions.

The issue of the political fund is being directly connected to the fight against privatisation. The unions are giving millions of pounds a year to the very people who are forcing privatisation on them. The time is right for a re-look at political funds. Unions have begun to debate this issue. In the interim the GMB (general union) has massively cut its payments to the Labour Party as a protest against privatisation. UNISON (the public sector union) the FBU (fire fighters union) and the RMT are reassessing their payments to the Labour Party.

Socialist Alliance

Recently the Socialist Alliance (SA) – which has been the political response of the left to the rise of new Labour – called a trade union conference on the issues of the political fund and privatisation. It was a huge success with 1 100 activists attending. It was viewed as the biggest rank-and-file trade union conference in Britain for many years. The SA, an alliance of far

left organisations and individual socialists, aims to build a political alternative to new Labour. The SA approach at this stage is not to go for disaffiliation from the Labour Party. Disaffiliation in the absence of a viable alternative would further de-politicise the unions.

The SA is not in favour of trade union donations going to non-socialist/non-working class parties – such as the Liberal Democrats. It supports unions withholding payments to new Labour in order to fight privatisation or defend their members against the effects of new Labour policy. What is unacceptable is the current situation where huge sums of money go exclusively to new Labour.

Beyond the debate on the political fund, British unions need to build some level of militancy and win some important confrontations with the employers. There have been some partial victories but not enough to turn the tables on the employers. This needs to be stepped up now that a number of unions are led by general secretaries who are not in the mould of social partnership and are prepared in some circumstances to support and promote strike action. Already there has been a linking up of the public sector unions with a view to coordinated action against privatisation. The aspirations and the good intentions still need to be turned into action, to bring about real change.

The SA has triggered a process of unification between the unions and various other organisations. The rise of the Socialist Alliance indicates that there cannot be a separation between the need to rebuild trade union strength and the construction of a political alternative to new Labour.

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