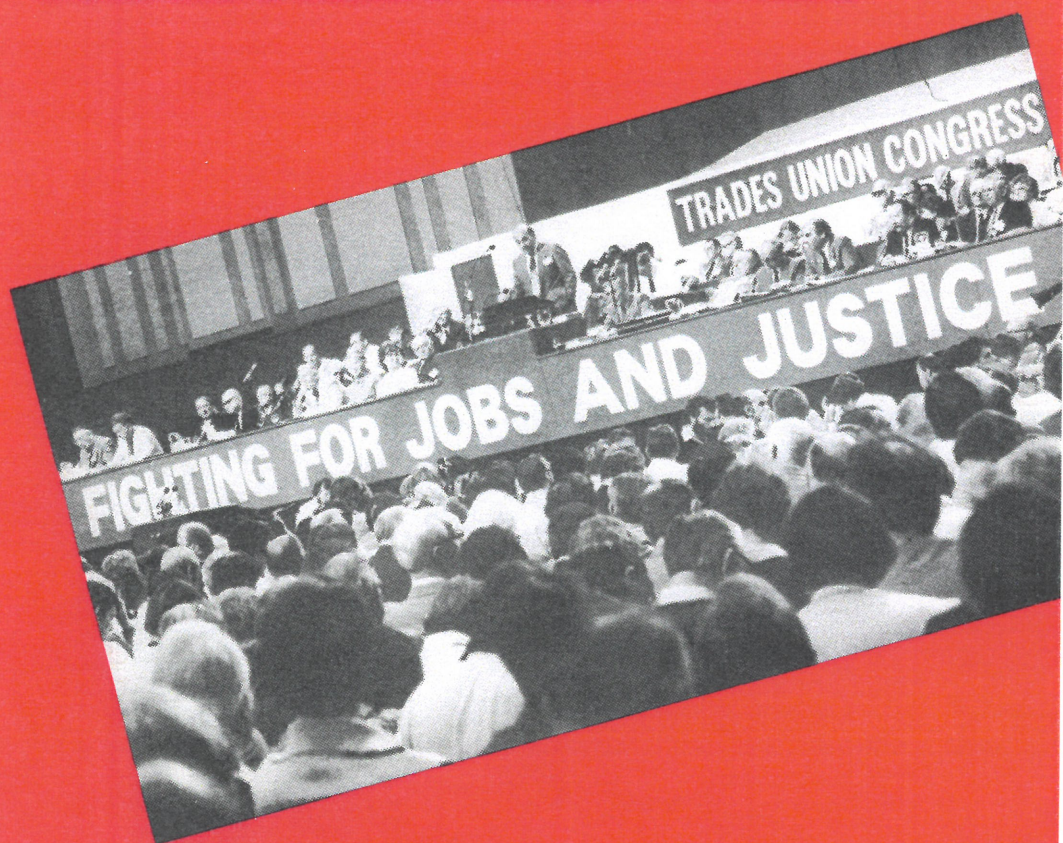


TRADE UNIONISM: A STRATEGY FOR THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES



TONY BENN

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Introduction

It is an honour to be asked to deliver this Lecture in memory of George Woodcock, whom I knew over the years and for whose statesmanship I had a high regard. His own Lecture, with which this series began in 1968, repays study today. For in that Lecture he surveyed the achievements of the Trade Union movement over a century-and-a-half that followed the repeal of the Combination Acts; the centenary of the TUC itself, and he did so at the end of two decades of full employment brought about by the war and the post-war boom.

His Lecture came just before the conflict over 'In Place of Strife' had surfaced, when monetarism was seen as a weird Chicago cult and before the Conservative leadership had gathered at Selsdon Park to plan their counter-revolution which ended with Mr Heath's removal from office, after a battle with the miners.

In the last 15 years, a great deal has happened to the trade union movement which calls for a fresh analysis of the strategies open to it.

The argument in outline

This Lecture looks at some of the changes that have occurred in the economic, industrial and political situation within which the unions operate, and looks at the possibilities that lie ahead for safeguarding the short-term and long-term interests of the membership of the unions, and the interests of their families and the communities within which they live and work.

My conclusion can be briefly stated at the outset — and it is this: That the deeper the economic crisis into which we are sinking, the greater will be the threat to the jobs and living standards of working people; the greater the likelihood of an erosion of our democratic institutions in this country; and hence the greater the need for the trade unions to rebuild their strength and to adopt an explicitly political strategy of campaign to correct the underlying causes of the crisis; and the greater the need to develop industrial responses which maximise their chance of winning support for their work.

The campaign for legal status

Trade unionism grew out of the need to protect working people from exploitation by their employers and from oppression imposed on them by unjust laws passed by parliaments from which the working class was excluded by the narrow franchise. The Combination Acts made trade unionism illegal and its pioneers liable to prosecution, conviction and imprisonment.

These particular legal restraints have of course been repealed. But in saying that we should not fall into the trap of supposing that the threat posed by the law to trade unionism or trade unionists has gone. Quite the reverse. The new employment legislation recently enacted, though skilfully drafted, was intended to make practices necessary to maintain effective trade unionism illegal — for example, in restricting some forms of picketing and sympathetic action.

I have deliberately interposed this contemporary reference into an historical account because it is important to realise that the struggles of long ago to legitimise trade unionism are now going to have to be fought all over again; and we can no longer afford the luxury of liberal illusions that the bad old days are over and progress is inevitable, however slow. The bad old days are not over. They are coming back again and progress, far from being inevitable, is now being put into reverse.

The campaign for the vote

To resume the 19th century story, we know that the right to organise industrially was soon seen by the Trade Union movement to require a parallel development in parliamentary representation, which explains the support given to the Chartists. Working class men, and the unions which represented them, were still obliged to operate within a framework of law which they were not permitted to influence through the ballot box.

This struggle for the vote, first sought for by men, and later by women through the Suffragettes, took a very long time before it reached its final success with the extension of the franchise to every man and woman at 18, which only came into effect a mere 13 years ago in the June 1970 General Election.

But here again we must be careful not to close that chapter of effort by recording another unqualified victory for commonsense and fair play in the best traditions of Britain. In fact the sovereignty of the electors through parliament and a complete adult suffrage to make and unmake the laws under which we are governed, and to impose or repeal the taxation which we pay, which was what the Chartists and the Suffragettes fought for, actually lasted less than three years from

the date when it came into full effect. For on 1 January 1973 Britain became a member of the Common Market under the control of a Commission operating under the Treaty of Rome, which makes and unmakes laws and imposes taxation without the authority of the Members of Parliament we elect.

In short, the battle for the franchise was first won; and then, within months, some of the crucial powers that made that franchise worth having were being subtly spirited away to others who are not subject to our ballot box democracy.

The campaign for Labour representation

Now to return to the history again.

The trade unions, when armed with legal status, and having achieved a vote for their members, reflected on how they could use their newly won power to improve the lot of those members. They decided to set up a Labour representation committee which they did in 1900. Ramsay MacDonald explained its purpose in these words in 1903:

It originated in the desire of the workers for a party that really understands and is prepared to deal with their grievances, and has grown to its present strength by the systematic attacks in the Press and the Law Courts upon combined Labour and its funds. It is the workers' reply to the aggressive action of Federated Masters and Trusts.

But upon this conflict between Capital and Labour neither a Liberal nor a Conservative Ministry can be trusted to stand by the workers. The nation is called upon to settle economic and industrial difficulties for which neither of the old political parties offers any definite or satisfactory solution.

This committee secured the election of Labour men as Members of Parliament and in 1906 the Labour Party itself was formed to consolidate that work.

At that time MPs received no salaries and the early Labour MPs were sponsored financially by some unions, which made it possible for them to give up their normal employment and serve in the House of Commons. That support has continued ever since in varying forms.

But here again we can see an interruption to the illusion of unending progress from generation to generation, which is so widely propagated by the establishment. For the next stage of government legislation against the trade unions seems likely to be a counter-attack upon the financing arrangements under which the unions affiliated to the Labour Party collect and disburse a political levy raised from the membership.

There is at present, of course, a provision under which trade union

members may contract out from paying the political levy if they wish to do so. Unlike business companies which are free to make unlimited donations to the Conservative Party, or other right-wing organisations without providing any facilities for contracting out to their shareholders or customers who are conscripted to pay for the political activities of the Right, the unions are now likely to be required to substitute a contracting-in provision which the Government hopes and believes will strangle the political work of the unions through the Labour Party.

The campaign for socialism

Another achievement of the trade unions was to adopt a socialist perspective for their political work through the adoption of socialist aims in many of their own rule-books and the acceptance of socialist objectives as set out in clause 4 of the 1918 Labour Party Constitution.

But these aims which inspired successful campaigns for full employment and the welfare state, and which brought the unions into partnership with successive governments as a recognised estate of the realm, are also being reversed by the policies of mass unemployment, the erosion of the public services and the whole-scale policy of privatisation.

The trade unions today — fighting for survival

I have set out this history of gains and losses in this form because it is a necessary background against which the future work of the Trade Union movement has to be seen. In describing the setbacks I do not intend to suggest that no progress has been made, for that would be wholly wrong too.

The Trade Union movement is immeasurably stronger than it was 50 or a 100 years ago. It is well organised and well financed. It has many members in the white collar, technical, scientific and managerial grades, as well as the old skilled, semi-skilled and manual grades. It is still involved directly in many aspects of public policy making and policy implementation. It has valuable international links and important educational programmes.

But when all that has been admitted and taken into account, it is also true that the Trade Union movement today is fighting for its survival in the most hostile economic and political environment it has faced for many decades, and none of its past achievements are free from a direct counter-attack which, were they all to succeed, could seriously harm, if not actually cripple the unions in their task of representing working people.

The unions and consensus politics

Before turning to the strategies which are now open to the unions to recover the position, it may be helpful to consider how it was that these setbacks came about.

In 1940 when the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, Ernest Bevin, became a member of Mr Churchill's war-time Cabinet as Minister of Labour, the Trade Union movement, as a whole, entered into a close partnership with that government and became, in that sense, a part of the British establishment, both feeding in the aspirations of its members to the highest levels in the state, and helping to see that those coalition policies were carried into effect. Churchill, the old Liberal, found nothing strange in that relationship, nor did anyone seriously question its continuation into the post-war Labour Government headed by Mr Attlee.

The success of the coalition policies in the formulation of which Keynes and Beveridge had played a significant part, brought Britain through the years of reconstruction with full employment, the health service, comprehensive social services, and a large public sector which secured massive investment in our basic industries.

The defeat of that government in 1951 and its replacement, first by Churchill and then by Eden and Macmillan, did not involve any major departure from the consensus policies of the war-time and post-war governments. Indeed, so successful were these consensus policies that in the 1959 General Election Harold Macmillan won a landslide victory under the slogan 'You have never had it so good', implying that welfare capitalism was working so well that a trade unionism aspiring to socialism was out of date and could be consigned to the museum.

The unions and Labour revisionism

As a Conservative slogan it was brilliantly successful, but that sort of thinking was not confined to the Conservatives. The Labour Party under Hugh Gaitskell accepted a great deal of that political analysis, and so did many of his contemporaries in the TUC leadership. Thus, a praetorian guard of right-wing union leaders rallied round a right-wing parliamentary Labour leadership to suppress socialist activities within the movement.

With a revisionist party leadership and an increasingly non-political trade union leadership, the stage was set for a retreat from socialism.

The union leaders were invited to join the NEDC and many were appointed to the boards of the nationalised industries and other government bodies. The television screens showed them going in and

out of ministerial offices and No.10 Downing Street to be consulted about how the economy should be run.

Labour, under Harold Wilson, was elected to power on the basis of a national plan with which the trade union leaders were intimately involved. For a time it seemed that the Labour movement had at last come into its own inheritance and further advances were certain to be made in the future. But the high hopes of 1964 did not last for long. Despite a huge parliamentary majority of almost a 100, secured in March 1966, the honeymoon did not last. A seamen's strike and an economic crisis followed, the national plan was dropped and a statutory incomes policy was introduced.

'Stop' followed 'Go' and the Wilson Government made the Donovan Report on the Trade Unions the launching platform for 'In Place of Strife', which was published early in 1969 and led to a head-on collision between the government and the TUC. Industrial militancy on the shopfloor would have made TUC co-operation unworkable even if it had been forthcoming. The following year Wilson was defeated by Heath who sought to solve the problem by an Industrial Relations Act and a further statutory pay policy upon which he, in turn, foundered in February 1974.

Again Labour returned to power, this time with a 'social contract' which, within 18 months, had evolved into another pay restraint policy, culminating in the so-called winter of discontent which brought Mrs Thatcher to power.

The collapse of welfare capitalism

But these were not the only factors which threw the unions onto the defensive. For successive bouts of deflation, Common Market membership, and the intervention of the IMF and the cuts in public expenditure upon which the world bankers insisted, led to rising unemployment worsened by the wider world slump. Thus the explicitly socialist ingredients of the post-war consensus which had created welfare capitalism could not be afforded and were progressively whittled away.

In the last few years this process has accelerated under the policies of the present Government which has launched a three-pronged attack upon the unions which the Cabinet has correctly identified as the main obstacle that stands between their objective of restoring Victorian capitalism and its realisation.

The present attack upon the unions

The attack upon the unions is much more political than economic in its motivation. Whatever the attractions there may seem to be in

describing it as monetarist, it is in practice a carefully orchestrated political campaign to weaken labour, strengthen capital and undermine the unions and the ballot box as instruments for achieving greater social justice.

Unemployment which is designed to weaken the bargaining power of workers has been deliberately created and there is clear evidence that it has had precisely the effect that was intended. Anti-union legislation has been drafted to render industrial action ineffective, and if enforced it would certainly succeed in doing so.

But perhaps the most powerful anti-union campaigns of all have come from the mass media, including Fleet Street, the BBC and ITN. They have perfected techniques of distortion in describing industrial disputes that have proved signally successful in shaping public opinion. The unions have been presented as undemocratic, subversive and greedy and their role as the protectors of working people over the whole range of their lives, from health and safety to compensation, have been completely ignored.

At this moment, in early 1983, there is evidence to suggest that the Government strategy is succeeding so far and the political implications of this situation are beginning to surface.

The reappearance of right-wing extremism

Ideas associated with Mussolini and Hitler which most people thought had been banished forever in 1945, seem to be coming back. This passage from *Mein Kampf* reads like many leading articles in our daily newspapers, or might even appear in a Cabinet minister's weekend speech without sounding out of place:

“In the course of a few decades under the expert hand of social democracy, the Trades Unions movement grew from being the means for protecting the social rights of man into an instrument for laying national economics in ruins. The interests of the workers were not going to count at all with the promoters of this object. For in politics the use of economic pressure always permits extortion, when one side is sufficiently unscrupulous and the other has sufficient stupid sheepish patience.

By the beginning of this century the Trades Union movement had long ceased to serve its earlier purpose. With each succeeding year it fell more and more under the influence of social democratic politics and ended by being used merely as the battering ram for the class war.”

There are those — and I am one of them — who believe that if the attack on the unions were to be pressed home as completely as the Conservative Party would like, our political liberties would be gravely undermined.

Weaknesses within the Labour movement

It would not be fair to attribute everything that has happened to the power of capital or its political and parliamentary and media representatives. For the Labour movement itself must bear some of the responsibility for what has happened. The trades unions and the Labour Party are now paying the price for neglecting to defend their own role and for failing to maintain a sustained programme of political and socialist education. It could also be argued that the objective factors which have contributed to the weakening of Labour should have been studied more carefully and a more radical response should have been developed and advanced by Labour. For example, the challenge stemming from the growing internationalisation of capital, from the impact of new technology, and from the obvious failure to re-equip our old industries and move quicker into new ones, were often under-estimated or left too tamely to market forces to sort out for us.

There was also a failure to reform state capitalism within the nationalised industries, some of which proved bureaucratic and insensitive to the demands for reform by their employees and their customers.

The Labour movement, as a whole, was slow off the mark in recognising the urgent demands by women for real equality of treatment, and not always as sensitive to the problems of discrimination experienced by blacks.

In particular, some within the trade union and parliamentary leadership looked with suspicion upon the re-emergence of socialism within their own ranks and with outright hostility to the clamour for greater democratic accountability.

Trades Unions for a Labour Victory

The establishment of Trades Unions for a Labour Victory, which began innocently enough as a project to help Labour candidates in the 1979 Election, has now developed in a way that poses real problems both to the unions and to the Party.

TULV is a limited liability company set up under the Companies Acts with a board of directors chosen from amongst the general secretaries of affiliated unions. It acts as a broker between the elected National Executive Committee of the Labour Party and most of its affiliated unions, negotiating the level of affiliation fees to be paid from the political levy and providing funds over and above that for purposes which it — TULV — thinks appropriate. Thus the NEC, 18 of whose members out of 28 are in any case elected by union votes at Conference, is supervised financially, and to some extent politically,

by a board of directors who hold that office without any specific elective authority and with no constituency to whom they are explicitly accountable beyond their general responsibilities as general secretaries to their own union conferences.

This new organisation is hardly known and little understood by either the union membership or by the constituency parties, but it has tended to divide the industrial and political wings of the movement at a time when their unity is so necessary to both. If, as seems possible, the constituency parties decide to set up their own organisation in parallel, it will be necessary to bring both sides together at local, regional and national level.

But despite these difficulties, the constituency parties and the Broad Lefts within the unions are successfully maintaining their pressure for socialist policies and greater accountability that would be beneficial to working people.

The need for a new industrial and political strategy

The time has now come when the Labour movement, as a whole, must begin to develop a combined political and industrial strategy to protect what has been achieved, to reverse the trend to the Right, and to begin to rebuild a more democratic and egalitarian society.

This means that we shall have to recreate an effective progressive alliance, bringing the industrial and political wings of the movement closer together.

The rebuilding of trade unionism

The basis of that alliance must be a campaign to reconstruct our industrial strength by recruiting actively for membership of the trade unions themselves, by doing so around clear and legitimate demands that are simple and relevant to those that work, and the best form of political education has always been the experience of struggle itself.

It is at the very moment when the wage claim goes in to the employer and is rejected that workers learn where power lies under capitalism and the pressing of that claim, whether it involves a withdrawal of labour or not, breeds unity, collective leadership and confidence which Labour must have if it is to survive. So too do the formulation of wider claims upon the system itself.

Solidarity around clear demands

When people band themselves together and demand an end to low pay jobs, or homes, or schools, or hospitals, or better pensions, or peace, then the movement grows in strength.

The people's march for jobs in 1981, and again this year, the campaigns against education cuts or for the National Health Service, the pensioners' charter or the Greenham Common women, have all shown us how to mobilise in pursuit of our aspirations. But to be really effective, these struggles need to be linked together and to be mutually supportive. That is what solidarity is all about. It is no good seeing each campaign as a separate campaign and then picking which ones you will support and which ones you won't.

Because in respect of all the ones that I have mentioned and every industrial dispute, those who are engaged in them are all fighting our battles and if any are lost we each lose.

Class consciousness and struggle

That is what class consciousness is all about.

I believe that the erosion of the strength of working people and their organisations over the last generation can be largely attributed to the decline of class consciousness and the neglect of the role of struggle in the achievement of even the most modest demands. For the simple lesson of our history is the everything working people have gained has come through struggle, and if we stop struggling they — that is the establishment — take it all away again.

The repeal of the Combination Acts, the extension of the vote to men and later to women, the acceptance of full employment and welfare policies, were not volunteered by the people at the top as an act of grace and favour. They were wrung from a reluctant bunch of top people who even then only conceded the minimum they could get away with: they hoped by a limited tactical retreat to defuse and divide the campaigns for real justice which they knew would build up if they tried to hold on and make no concessions.

Britain has the cleverest ruling class in the world and its survival, more or less unscathed, in a world full of successful revolutions, proves that. While the French and the Russian working class leaderships stormed the barricades and brought their aristocrats down, some British working class leaders leaped over the barricades and became aristocrats themselves.

Trade union amalgamations, union democracy and the shopfloor movement

The need for unity in the face of the growing monopoly of capital explains the trend towards trade union amalgamations which will help to move us nearer to the old syndicalist objective of industrial unionism. The dangers of bureaucracy and centralism that might flow from having larger and larger unions can be counteracted by moves

towards greater democratic accountability within unions, a process which is already in train as a result of membership pressure.

This natural and inevitable internal process of change stands in sharp contrast to the Government's desire to impose their own legal constraints on how the unions organise their own affairs, which would not, and should not, be acceptable in any voluntary organisation.

The next development which is already well advanced is the establishment of joint shop stewards' committees, bringing together representatives of all the unions working in a factory and through combine committees bringing together all the work places in a firm or industry. The Lucas Aerospace initiative shows what energies and talent such a development can release. It is here, at the smallest unit of industrial organisation, that political activity needs to develop.

Work place branches of the Labour Party, which have long been discussed, need to be established as quickly as possible to provide a forum for political discussion that can feed the experience of those at work directly into the Party and its policy making.

Trades councils, district parties and regional co-operation

The need to revitalise local democracy is widely recognised in an age when so much power is moving to the centre, or is being internationalised and exercised secretly and without any real connection with those whose lives are most directly affected.

This trend to centralisation has developed in industry, finance and government and can best be reversed by building strong local organisations and by establishing links between them. The break-up of the old trades and labour councils which took place in the 1960s was, from that point of view, a great mistake. If the Labour movement is to be effective at local and regional level, there must be very close links between the unions, the district Labour parties and Labour groups on local authorities which, together, can form a nexus around which other community action groups can rally.

The re-emergence of municipal socialism in London, Sheffield and the West Midlands, is an indication of what can be done on that basis. And the renewed pressure for real devolution in Scotland could only work if the same partnership operated there. In this way the industrial, political and local interests of working people can be advanced against the pressures from capital.

Trades unions and the next Labour government

This concept of partnership between the unions and the Party has been developing at national level since the TUC/Labour Party Liaison Committee was set up in 1972. It took two years of hard work after

the 1970 defeat for this committee to be brought into being, but it has been meeting regularly now for 11 years.

Its first statement issued in 1973 was called 'Economic policy and the cost of living', and from it came the social contract upon which Labour returned to power in 1974. The social contract was intended to be a pledge to work together across the whole spectrum of the policy. It is a tragedy that after the referendum defeat in 1975 and the economic crisis which was engineered thereafter, the social contract became little more than a cover for an incomes policy that ended disastrously in the so-called winter of discontent and which preceded another defeat for Labour.

But since 1979 the TUC/Labour Liaison Committee has resumed its work and has published another important document called 'Economic planning and industrial democracy' which has carried the argument a great deal further. Our new partnership represents a break with the past. It will be based not only on democratic planning of the economy but on the extension of control by workers through their trade unions. This is the point of difference between Tory and Labour approaches to economic policy and planning. The Tories are determined to govern without the unions. The price is mass unemployment and a deliberate strategy to undermine union power.

By contrast, the Labour approach is not to restrict the power of the workers in relation to employers, but to promote the maximum possible development of this power to allow new forms of economic control. Labour will establish new statutory rights for workers and their representatives in joint union committees, and a strong National Planning Council with sectoral committees to channel and develop workers' own plans and priorities beyond the individual enterprise into the economy as a whole.

As workers extend collective bargaining over investment decisions at company level, they will play an increasing part in the allocation of resources between investment and consumption. This means that they will assume a new responsibility for planning incomes as an aspect of the production process. Past incomes policies have restrained wages in favour of profits, which have not been directed into investment. Our new approach will enable workers themselves to control the use of resources for investment.

Their decisions will be reflected in a National Economic Assessment of the prospects for growth, employment and income. This Assessment will offer no scope for across-the-board pay norms or guidelines. It will be firmly based on the extension of collective bargaining at all levels of the economy.

The partnership we propose between the Labour government and trade unions will give rise to a 'new politics' in the Labour movement.

It will no longer be a question of whether 'our team' can manage the economy better than 'their team'. Political activity will be linked for the first time to the everyday economic activity of working people.

The success of our drive for full employment, industrial revival and social justice will be dependent upon the initiatives and creativity of workers themselves. We see a radical extension of collective bargaining as the indispensable basis of economic planning and socialism.

At the other end of the scale the unions would be involved in collective bargaining over all the main areas of policy making, through the legislative programme, the Budget, cash limits and industrial strategy. This concept marks a sharp shift away from the idea of imposing pay norms which were rigid, unfair and unworkable.

Thus, the real nature of that partnership will be seen to have a very different feel to it than it has had in the past.

New forms of industrial action

But the evolution of a political strategy for the unions must extend into new patterns of industrial campaigning.

The damage done to the unions by the media attacks upon them should not be underestimated, and must be counteracted. These have been effective in part because the media are mainly financed by advertising which is tax deductible and hence is largely controlled by the business community. Reforms designed to achieve a more pluralistic media which would allow a wide range of views to be expressed through radio, TV and the press, will require legislation.

Meanwhile, the Labour movement needs to reorient its own activities and money more directly into campaigns that will get its case across to the public, and this process has already begun. In this connection, it has to be recognised that a withdrawal of labour as the ultimate weapon in the armoury of the trade union movement can easily be misrepresented as being directed more against the public than against the employers with whom the unions are in dispute. For example, the ASLEF drivers and the Health Service workers were widely criticised for endangering the transport and health services of the nation, when in fact they were engaged in trying to defend those very services. And with the leaked Think Tank report which forecast the end of the NHS as we know it, and the Serpell Report which would destroy our rail system, it has dawned upon the public that it is the Government and not the unions which are threatening these services.

The strike weapon is essential as an instrument of last resort, but there may well be a case for developing new forms of industrial action which would make this clear. For example, an offer by the unions to

run the railways without pay if the management would agree not to charge fares during a dispute, would clarify the issues for the travelling public and provide a glimpse of what a really socialist transport system could be like. If, as is virtually certain, the management refused such an offer, then the responsibility for the stoppage would clearly be seen to be theirs.

In the same way, the provision of emergency cover as decided by the unions in the Health Service dispute marked a significant move towards workers' control and it would only be one small step beyond that for the Health Service employees to take over full responsibility for the administration of the service from the chief executives of the health authorities in a future dispute, maintaining all those services, but under *their* supervision. It should also be possible for more selective action to be taken in some disputes which focus the effect upon some customers but not others. If, for example, in their campaign against privatisation, workers in British Telecom concentrated their stoppage on the City of London rather than on the general body of telephone customers, the effect would be far greater.

This is the technique used by capital to get its way in that wage cuts redundancies and closures occur at individual plants and thus attack the employees in them, without alienating the community. And similarly, when the bankers demand cuts in public expenditure, they do so by insisting upon supervising the economic policy of the Government which is nothing less than 'Bankers' Control'.

The importance of international Labour links

To be effective against the internationalisation of capital and to contribute to the development of policies for detente, disarmament and peace, the Trade Union movement will need to strengthen still further its international work. Two priorities suggest themselves.

The first is the need to bring together trade unions, representing members in all the plants owned by international companies, to plan joint strategies that can be pressed in the interests of all the employees worldwide. Some attempts have been made in this direction. There is much more to be done. This would not only protect workers from the loss of jobs through the export of capital to low wages areas, but would help to build trade union strength in the developing countries to which the multinationals may move their work.

The second priority should be to heal the breach caused by the breakaway of the ICFTU from the WFTU in the post-war years. It is gravely damaging to the cause of Labour for the world trade union movement to be divided on Cold War lines. If ministers from East and

West can meet at the UN; and if multinationals can sign technical and trade agreements with the Communist countries, unions should be able to confer together on a regular basis.

Disengagement from government and the redeployment of trade union effort in future planning

To be effective, the trade unions now need to consider a redeployment of their own work programme.

The present Government have greatly curtailed consultation with the unions, and the number of trade unionists holding public office has been considerably reduced. But the TUC is still on the NEDC and other senior union officials do serve on tripartite bodies.

In the face of Government hostility, it has been argued that the trade unions should disengage completely, but that view has not prevailed at the Congress. It still however remains the most effective way of bringing pressure to bear on the Government and further consideration should be given to it.

However, an even stronger case for disengagement can be made by arguing that if all the time and effort put in by the trade unions in working on public bodies was available to develop specific Labour movement policies and initiatives, the membership would benefit far more directly. The Lucas Aerospace plan idea, if developed at the top level of the unions, could give much greater strength to the concept of workers' initiatives.

The unions and political action

It must now be clear from the argument as it has developed that effective political action is going to be crucial if the unions are to realise the historic aspirations of their founders. Non-political trade unionism has proved a failure and Labourism, without a socialist perspective, was not able to rise to the challenge confronting our people.

The Labour Party was created by the unions and they must have a significant part to play in the revitalisation of the party in terms of its organisation and its socialism. But this cannot, and should not, stem from the top but from a greater diffusion of trade union influence at every level in the party.

Locally the trade unions are already the largest and most effective community groups and they can and should work with other such groups and with the women's movement, the ethnic and other community groups, including those campaigning for peace and the environment — all of which should be able to rely upon support from the unions and the Party. And the deeper the trade unions become

involved in local Labour Parties, the easier it will be to tackle the thorny problem of the balance between the union and constituency votes at Annual Conference.

No sensible socialist wants to see an attack upon the block vote which recognises the role of the unions. But Alex Kitson, Assistant General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, has proposed a new way of calculating the relative financial contributions of trade unions and constituency Labour Parties which now give the latter only 8 per cent of the vote at Conference, to a better balance.

There will certainly be other reforms we shall need to consider.

The one redeeming feature of the new Register is that it has revealed the enormous range of socialist groupings which operate within the Party. Once we have stopped the practice of expulsions, and re-admitted those who have been expelled, we can see from the Register how rich is our inheritance of ideas and interests.

Conclusion — The Challenge to Labour

There is not much to say in conclusion. Despite the immense pressures under which trade unions are working, and the apparent setback to socialism which we have experienced in recent years, I want to conclude by reaffirming my commitment to and faith in the future of both.

For as the public learn by bitter experience the price that has to be paid in unemployment, poverty and inequality, for the policies that seek to exorcise socialism and cripple trade unionism, they will turn again to the working class movement to lead us out of the crisis and towards a fairer society and a safer world.

The analysis and the proposals that are set out in this Lecture are intended to show how we might best prepare ourselves to respond most creatively to that appeal to us when it comes, as it will do, sooner than most people may yet realise.

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