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Britain

A tale of two conferences

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Within a fortnight two important meetings of rank and file trade unionists have taken place in London. There were a number of similarities between the conference called by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) on October 28, which attracted 250 delegates, and the one called by Respect on November 11 attended by 600 delegates.

Both, from different points of view, sought to address the crisis of political representation created by the march to the right of new Labour. Both promoted the Trade Union Freedom Bill - initiated by the Institute of Employment Rights and backed by the TUC.

Both sought to address the situation in the unions since the defeat of the miners and the imposition of the anti-union laws. Both addressed the issue of the neo-liberal offensive and the relentless attack on the public sector. Both elected a steering committee at the end of the day to take their projects forward.

Both, however, were predominantly far left in composition and gave someone like me, who has been around for a long time, the feeling that I knew far too many of those present. Neither drew in any significant new and fresh young forces from the unions - which probably says as much about the current state of the unions than of the conferences themselves.

Why were there were two conferences and not one united event? This was in part at least because these two conferences approached the crisis of political representation in very different ways. In fact they were coming from opposite directions.

The RMT conference, with more than a touch of syndicalism, and heavily influenced by RMT General Secretary Bob Crow who made the keynote speech, proposed the launching, after a conference next year, of a national shop stewards network. This, while useful at the industrial level, avoided the urgent issue of working class electoral representation that presumably would come at a later second stage. The word "Respect" was never mentioned - only indirectly hinted at by a couple of speakers from the floor.

The proposal for a network should be welcomed. The problem it faces, however, is that it is out of kilter with the situation in the unions. There is no radicalisation taking place in the unions themselves on which such a new development can be based.

The massive expansion of the shop stewards movement in the 1960s and 1970s was based on both an industrial and political radicalisation in the unions. Today's conditions impose a material limitation on what it can achieve. The approach of the Respect conference was around the need for a new party to the left of Labour in the here and now and how such a party can help to strengthen the struggle in the unions.

This approach had the strength of being based around a real political radicalisation - one which has taken place against the war and against the betrayals of new labour. The debates now are around the character of such a party, how should be build and developed, and how it can be linked to trade union struggle.

An important (though limited) debate emerged in the first session around the anti union laws. In left-wing lawyer John Hendy's keynote speech on the Trade Union Freedom Bill, he spelled out in the starkest terms the situation of the unions under Thatcherite (now Blairite) anti trade unions laws.

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Controversially he argued that these laws effectively ruled out any form of solidarity action and there was nothing the unions could do. His example was the situation of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) at Gate Gourmet - a catering company at Heathrow Airport - which sacked its entire workforce at a minutes notice two years ago. The union failed to defend them and they are still sacked.

Hendy argued that TGWU had had no alternative other than to accept the situation because it had been rendered completely powerless since solidarity action - the only answer - was illegal under the anti-union laws. This concedes the ground to the trade union leaders who avoid confronting the law and ignores the strong position the unions were in at Gate Gourmet when they had BA planes grounded.

Hendy went on, again in the starkest terms, to spell out the wider effects of the anti-union laws not just in terms of the huge decline in trade union membership but in a collapse of those covered by collective agreements. He said that at the time Thatcher came to power 78% of the workforce were covered by collective agreements, this was now down to 33%. This, he said, was the biggest such decline in history. He might have added that the quality of those agreements which are left have suffered a similar decline.

His message was that this shows the crucial importance of the Trade Union Freedom Bill. Indeed it does. But there is a problem. Whilst the Bill is a very good way of raising the issue there is no chance whatever of even its modest proposals being enacted. At best it would take a mass movement to get any of it enacted and the TUC is not about to organise one.

The only challenge to all this came from Ted Knight (previously the left-wing leader of Lambeth Council) and to a lesser extent from Rob Finlayson a shop steward from Fords in Dagenham. Knight said in effect that there was no Parliamentary answer to the anti-union laws but that they would only be destroyed when they were effectively defied. Rob Finlayson said that we needed to discuss what we would do when the Bill was defeated - since that would be the inevitable outcome.

In the session on Who Speaks for Trade Unionists, Valerie Wise (daughter of the late left Labour MP Valerie Wise) gave a graphic description as to what had led to her recent decision to leave the Labour Party - she could not stand it any longer. She realised that this posed the issue of whether she should join Respect. It was a decision she was still pondering but had not yet made.

The speech of the day, and the one which most adequately spelt out the task the conference - the indivisibility between the industrial and the political - struggles - was from Mark Serwotka, left-wing General Secretary of the PCS, the government workers union. He explained out the need for a political alternative as a component part of regenerating the unions.

He strongly welcomed the conference, saying that he was pleased that it had been organised on a non-sectarian way and people like Dave Nellist had been invited to speak.

He said he supported all moves towards a new workers party but the importance of Respect was that it existed in the here and now and had won a seat in Westminster and on local Councils. He said it was for this reason that he would urge people who were not members to join.

There were a number of guest speakers in addition to Dave Nellist. Left Labour MP John McDonnell spoke about his current campaign to stand for the leadership of the Labour Party against Brown once Blair resigns - and not in the session on political representation because of his other campaign commitments. Jorge Martin from the Hands of Venezuela campaign - who was invited because one of the practical proposals from the conference is a delegation to

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Venezuela.

Was it a useful day? Well the speeches from the platform were too long and the opportunity for discussion from the floor was too short. There were a lot of over-optimistic speeches from SWP members (who comprised towards half of the conference) which bore little relation to the actual conditions in the unions.

On the other hand off-message voices were heard - and, unlike at the RMT conference, the proposals at the end were open to amendment and there was a limited debate at least around the issue of affiliation to the Labour Party. And it is always useful for trade unionists to get together and discuss.

The main problem was that having brought 600 trade unionists together, the conference lacked direction. It was focused around a minimal Workers Charter, - which it has to be said was strengthened by the amendments agreed. What it failed to do was get to grips with the real conditions facing activists in the workplaces and how to build a left party as a necessary part of building and strengthening the unions.

It is true that the RMT approach of avoiding the issue of political organisation will not work. But Respect needs to do put a lot more work into building itself in the trade union left - because Respect without a trade union base will not work either. As Mark Serwotka argued the industrial and political arenas are indivisible in today's conditions.