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Britain

Trade union "Broad Lefts" increase co-ordination

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Fred Leplat reports from a ground-breaking conference of left currents across the trade union movement.

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On Saturday 1st February, almost 200 delegates and visitors attended a conference called by a steering committee of various trade union "broad lefts". Most came from the teachers unions, the Communication Workers Union, Unison (the union for health and local government workers), the Civil and Public Services Association, the printers GMPU and the union for technicians, the MSF.

Many had a long experience in the unions as shop stewards, branch secretaries, regional union leaders and some as national executive members. The aim of the conference was to set up a co-ordination between the broad lefts to push for specific demands such as the re-introduction of a minimum wage.

For far too long, the left in each union has been, through necessity, concerned with the affairs of their own union. The unrelenting attack from employers and the Tories combined with the union bureaucracy's total inaction has placed the unions in crisis and forced the left into retreat. Membership of unions affiliated to Britain's Trade Union Congress (TUC) has dropped from 9.8 million in 1985 to 6.9 million today. The number of strike days has decreased even more sharply from 6.4 million in 1985 to 415,000 in 1995 - the lowest level in over a century. Youth have little interest or possibility in joining unions. Membership for the under 20s is just 6%. Union membership is now concentrated amongst older workers in the privatised utilities such as telecommunications or rail and in the remaining public sector.

On the defensive

Over the last two decades, the unions have faced a triple challenge; from the economic crisis, from employer offensives and restrictive legislation. To raise productivity, employers have reduced the work force. There is now mass unemployment in Britain, with 3.1 million people out of work yet defining themselves as "ready to start a job." Those new jobs created are without security and often part-time. There has been extensive privatisation of whole industries such as the railways and telecommunications, while other industries, such as mining, have virtually disappeared (it is expected that there will only be 12 coal-mines open by the year 2000). Where there is still no outright privatisation in the health service, an "internal market" has been created to allow "market forces" to determine "value for money".

The employers' offensive has brought about dramatic changes in working conditions through flexibility, team-working, performance related pay and temporary contracts. To maintain recognition, some unions have agreed to single-union deals at the expense of any control over working conditions, even renouncing strike action in favour of compulsory arbitration.

One reason why the employers have been largely successful in these offensives has been the support business has received from government through successive anti-union laws passed since 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power. Picketing and solidarity action is now criminalised. Postal secret balloting for any form of industrial action is a legal requirement. The calling of official strike action is such a lengthy and complicated process that unions are easily victim to injunctions from employers over technical breaches of balloting procedures.

The removal of other legal rights such as wage councils that set pay levels in certain industries, and the lengthening qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims, have strengthened the employers' hand. But most extraordinary is that it is no longer possible, in Britain today, to have a legal strike for union recognition.

Responsibility for the defeats of the last two decades lies firmly with the leaders of the unions and the TUC. This is not to minimise the problems that the unions face but to assert that there is another way forward. The current trade union leadership has failed to organise any effective resistance. It has allowed individual groups of workers to remain isolated when they have taken action and refused to generalise struggles or organise effective solidarity. The long running strikes by the Hillingdon Hospital workers and the Liverpool dockers, both out for over 18 months, unfortunately confirm this.

National attacks by the employers have not been countered by campaigns of national industrial action. With the threat of the anti-union laws, union leaders and un-elected officials are more likely to consult a lawyer than union members.

Unity in action

The broad lefts have different traditions, experience and political outlook. Some, like in the TGWU, are by invitation only and organise only to secure elections. Others like the Socialist Teachers Alliance are open and have given as much priority to campaigning activity as to gaining elected positions. The STA takes up both issues of immediate concerns to members as to the broader political issues raised by government attacks. As a result it may soon be in a position to win a majority on the teachers union national executive.

Despite these differences, the union lefts generally agree that it is through action that the union is built. Experience shows that workers join the union when industrial action is organised to oppose a management attack. Yet the majority of union leaders and the TUC are turning the unions into welfare organisations providing cheap travel or credit cards, and rely on the law or the European Union Social Chapter protection.

Another common thread through the "broad lefts" is the fight for democracy in the unions. This means supporting the right for branches and members to take industrial action when necessary, for officials to be elected and accountable, and for the decisions of national union conferences to be respected and implemented.

Here we go

Finally the union lefts believe that it is necessary to prepare the ground now for a fight with a New Labour government on some key issues such as against wage controls and for a minimum wage set at a decent level, or for taking back into public ownership the privatised utilities and providing the funds necessary for a welfare state that actually meets the needs of the working class.

Recent New Labour statements have made it clear that it will keep to the Tories' economic framework for the next two years, that there will be no repeal of the anti-union laws, and that the spirit of privatisation will remain. A recent five-year agreement at Blue Circle Cement has been hailed by New Labour as the way forward. In exchange for a no-compulsory-redundancy agreement, the union agreed to total flexibility and pay rises determined by arbitration. A few weeks later, Peter Hain, Labour's employment spokesperson, stated that a Labour government would bring back employment security where it could, such as in the civil service, in exchange for flexibility.

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With the forthcoming general election and the possibility of a Labour government after 18 years of Tory rule, a new political situation will arise. A Labour government may well enjoy a honeymoon period while workers breathe a sigh of relief after 18 years of the Tories. But there are already expectations that a Labour government should mean a change, however small in particular over pay and a minimum wage, and proper funding of health and other welfare services.

After years of seeing pay eroded, an ever increasing gap between the rich and poor, and obscene pay rises to the directors of the privatised utilities, a two-year pay freeze managed by a Labour government coinciding with continued cuts to meet the convergence criteria of the Maastricht Agreement could lead to a collision between union members and a Labour government. It is in such a context that this co-ordination of the union lefts, although small now, could develop into a real alternative leadership at the head of a wave of industrial action pressing for some minor concessions from a Labour government.