workers power

Unshackle the unions: from Tory laws and bureaucratic traitors!

18-19 July 1992

For a rank and file movement

The organisers of today's conference expected to be meeting in the first months of a Labour government. Their main activity in the last 12 months was the circulation of a statement calling for the repeal of the anti-union laws and the collection of signatories to this statement. That was it! Now they have planned the conference to ensure that the Socialist Movement's Trade Union Campaign stays a passive pressure group.

The big question for anybody who wants to unshackle the unions from the Tory laws is: how do we do it?

Those who placed all their emphasis on the answer, "elect a Labour government", are now devoid of solutions.

And yet the way to smash the union busting laws has always been clear. Once upon a time it was even clear to the trade union bureaucrats who queued up to hand in cheques to a fighting fund and declare their willingness to go to jail.

We can smash the anti-union laws by *defying* them and organising cross union *solidarity action* wherever they are used against workers in struggle.

Every strike today faces the threat of the laws. Every shop steward who calls for action faces the threat of court action. The recent dispute at Armthorpe shows the reality of the laws. Branch officials were barred by the courts from carrying out their trade union duties.

The only way to deal with this situation is to challenge the laws in action. The strikes of the Joint Sites Committee in London since the general election are proof of this. They have defied the laws completely, and they have won. But more is needed.

To beat the Tory laws workers also have to unshackle the unions from something else: the cringeing and pathetic bureaucrats who, under the banner of New Realism, have led defeat after defeat.

The New Realist strategy is responsible for the year on year fall in TUC union membership, for the decline of union density and shop floor representation. Their only answer is to merge the bureaucratic apparatuses of the unions to ensure that - even if the membership is dwindling - their bureaucratic privileges will remain intact.

Does this weekend's agenda measure up to the task of reversing these trends?

Useful though it is to discuss the experience of new management techniques and caucus with trade unionists in the different sectors it is not enough. We need to be discussing a co-ordinated campaign to turn the unions into the fighting, democratic organisations that can stem the retreat and fight back against the Tory laws.

If a talking shop is all the "left" can muster then the Tories, set to launch a new wave of anti-union laws, can rest easy. Yet that's what today's conference looks set to be.

Why?

Because the Socialist Movement and its trade union campaign see their job solely as pressurising the Labour Party. The "Unshackle the Unions" campaign

. . . not a talking shop!

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was a pressure campaign to get Tony Blair and Neil Kinnock to modify their position on the anti-union laws. With a Labour government the campaign planned to apply pressure through resolutions and petitions to get Kinnock to repeal the anti-union laws.

Despite the fact that Labour lost, despite the fact that we face a new round of attacks, the organisers have decided to carry on regardless. They cannot envisage the campaign as being anything more than appendage of the Labour Party.

The furthest the Socialist Movement Trade Union Campaign has gone in endorsing any active intervention amongst rank and file workers is to recognise the importance of "Broad Lefts" and call on its supporters to work in them. Yet every Broad Left in existence has proved useless for the purpose of organising the rank and file and taking on the bureaucracy. In the face of anti-union laws, attacks on public sector pay, privatisation and job cuts the Broad Lefts across the unions have failed. In some cases they have become a playground for the SWP and Militant's game of bureaucratic manoeuvring against each other and have shrunk to little more than caucuses for these organisations.

In NALGO today the Broad Left hasn't issued a single piece of propaganda calling for action on pay.

On the rail the Broad Left has no independent strategy to fight the impending privatisation.

In the most dramatic case of all, the Broad Left in the CPSA, despite twice winning control of the executive in the union, either led struggles to defeat or betrayed them. The result is that in this bastion of the Broad Left the right wing are once again in control. They were able to convince the membership to accept the latest round of Tory attacks whilst the pages of Militant trumpeted "great advances" in union elections.

The reason for the weakness of the Broad Lefts lies in the strategy of electoralism. They see rank and file mobilisation as secondary to capturing the official union machine, and they regard that union machine as sacrosanct, refusing to democratically transform it from top to bottom. Like the Socialist Movement Trade Union Campaign itself the Broad Lefts see alliances with left bureaucrats, regardless of the willingness of those bureaucrats to take action, as the way forward. They unite all "class struggle" or "left" elements in one campaign, even if the "class struggle" credentials of the bureaucrats are based on wind and words rather than action.

The left in the unions is in a pitiful state. The official left in the bureaucracy has never been weaker. The Broad Lefts are in disarray or a state of mesmerised passivity, unsure what to do now that the Tories are back in. A massive rethink is needed. If today's conference is to prove at all useful it must begin that rethink. But it needs to begin its work at a totally different starting point.

The victory of the Tories means a new round of attacks. Sections of workers recognise this and have begun to organise and take action. The Joint Sites Committee is an excellent example of this happening. Militants have got together, laid their plans and taken effective action. Education workers in Lambeth put aside their traditional union rivalries and organised a Joint Trade Union Committee, composed of rank and file workers. The result was a two week all out strike that forced the council to withdraw its threat of redundancies.

In the oil industry, in the teeth of management and bureaucratic witchhunting, rank and file workers have built an industrial union, the OILC.

On the underground in London workers have come together in the Tube Workers Action Group to try and break free from the deadening hand of the RMT and ASLEF officials and organise against the coming sackings.

In the NHS small steps have been taken to form rank and file action committees to stop hospital closures. One day strikes have been organised, backed up by demos, despite the bureaucracy's attempts to fob the workers of with a far off "day of action".

Much more needs to be done. But these stirrings of the rank and file point the way forward. They are enormous advances on the tired old recipes of Broad Leftism, of pressurising a future hoped for Labour government, of pinning your hopes on the good graces of a left official.

They need to be built upon so that militants within and across industries can be united into a RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT, consciously pitted against the bosses, the Tories and the bureaucrats.

Such a movement must be dedicated to class struggle policies, to democratic rank and file control of the unions, and above all to action.

Workers Power believes that building such a movement will be no easy task. The reason for this is that we recognise that building a rank and file movement, itself committed to rebuilding workplace organisation across British industry, requires a new brand of politics.

Throughout the 1980s we witnessed defeat after defeat. We saw the elements of rank and file organisation that existed in the 1970s, crumble in the face of Thatcher's offensive. This was not because workers were unwilling to fight. The miners, the dockers, the seafarers, printers and countless other workers proved that workers will fight.

The real reason was that these struggles were misled by reformist and Stalinist bureaucrats. Adherence to the politics of Labourism and Stalinism blinded many militant trade unionists to questions beyond the sectional interest of their own group of workers.

That political crisis of leadership in the British working class can only be resolved in the fight for a revolutionary workers party.

The rebuilding of workplace organisation and the creation of a rank and file movement will be carried out by people who understand this need.

The coalition of Labour left and self proclaimed Trotskyist groups (*Socialist Outlook* and *Socialist Organiser*) who organise the Socialist Movement spent the last decade fantasising about a Socialist Labour Government, transforming the Labour Party, and Labour "taking the power". Anybody who tries to spout this kind of nonsense after Labour's fourth defeat, its rapid rightward evolution, its determination to lessen the union link, should be laughed off the platform.

We say to every militant at this conference who agrees with our aim of building a rank and file movement - draw the conclusion: become a real revolutionary socialist, join the fight for a revolutionary party, join us. ■

We urge conference to discuss and adopt the following resolution:

Conference recognises the need to commence work in drawing together the elements of rank and file resistance to the bosses' and Tory offensive so as to begin the work of building a rank and file movement in Britain.

Conference understands that the key tasks of such a rank and file movement will centre on:

* fighting the dominant right wing bureaucrats in the unions who are sabotaging almost all effective action;

* placing no reliance on any section of the bureaucracy, no matter how left they talk, but recognising the need to put such bureaucrats to the test of action;

* fighting to transform the trade unions into class struggle organisations under the democratic control of the rank and file, through the regular election of all officials, the recallability of all officials and the payment of all officials at the average rate of the workers they represent;

* fighting every aspect of the bosses' and Tory offensive, in particular building for direct action against the onslaught on the public sector and against the anti-union laws;

* rebuilding workplace organisation across industry to organise the fightback.

Conference resolves to approach all existing rank and file union organisations (JSC, TWAG, OILC etc), strike committees, joint union committees etc., with a view to calling a rank and file conference in the autumn, open to delegates from all genuine rank and file organisations and trade union bodies. This conference will take resolutions and amendments on all issues connected with organising the fight against the bosses, the Tories and the trade union bureaucracy.