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JUGOSLAVIA

THE ROAD TO RIO

POST ELECTION
REALITIES

TRADE UNIONISM

60p

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MARXIST

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JUGOSLAVIA

Jugoslavia is a multi ethnic federal state that is being torn apart by its internal contradictions, there can be no dispute about that, and perhaps some violence was inevitable, but what was already a tricky situation has been made even more complex by interference from outside.

Slovenia was allowed to secede from the Federation without a great deal of fuss, so why the trouble in Croatia and Bosnia?

The answer, as everyone knows, is that the latter two regions are multi ethnic in composition, so that problems were bound to arise when the creation of an independent state was placed on the agenda by the majority ethnic group.

It stands to reason that the ethnic minorities would insist that the new state should be representative of their interests as well as those of the majority, and, if a civil war were to be avoided, those views would have to be taken into consideration .

In the event, the Serb minorities awoke one morning to find that a new state was being constructed 'over their heads'. Given the fact that Serbs constituted a majority in the then existing Jugoslavia, their 'relegation' to minority status within this new state must have been hard to accept, but whatever the rights and the wrongs of the situation it was a domestic affair and should have been left to the people concerned to sort out among themselves.

At this stage the EEC took the decision that it would 'recognize' intending break-aways as independent states.

This was, in effect, gross interference in the internal affairs of the Jugoslav state, a member of the United Nations.

CIVIL WAR.

From the very beginning, the fighting in Jugoslavia has been entirely concerned with affairs within the borders of that state, therefore it can only be described as a civil war, and was, at first, accepted as such by Douglas Hurd and Lord Carrington. The change came when Genscher said that Germany would go it alone in recognizing intending break-aways if the EEC did not recognize them collectively. The other EEC members caved in under this German threat.

It was then that the violence in Jugoslavia escalated. The separatists held siege to Federal army barracks, and the army

fought to get its arms and personnel out.

The action of the EEC was the spark which led to the present spate of blood letting. It is arguable that without its interference the ethnic groups involved would have been encouraged by economic necessity to continue to build on the economic relations established during the post World War Two period, relations which were manifest not only in the improvement in living standards compared with pre-war, but also in the improved social relations between ethnic groups, but, be that as it may, the situation was certainly made worse by outside interference..

Now, moved by a fear that other states in Eastern Europe will be destabilized if the civil war in Yugoslavia continues, the U.S and the EEC are, in effect, demanding that the Federal army disarm the Serbian 'irregulars' who, it is admitted, have been strengthened by desertions from the Federal Army which by all accounts does not always respond to instructions from either the Government in Belgrade or its own General Staff.

The truth seems to be that the situation in both Croatia and Bosnia is now completely out of control, with both the Federal Army commanders and the Serbian Government in Belgrade dissociating themselves from the Serb irregulars.

But this is not enough for the imperialists because it leaves Serbia as the strongest military force in Eastern Europe outside Russia, and one that is the hands of 'communists', to boot.

The sanctions are only partly aimed at restraining the Serb 'irregulars'. They are also aimed at bringing about a change in Government in Belgrade, and 'cutting Serbia down to size'.

If sanctions do not work, the imperialists are in a fix. On the one hand they still want to play the role of world policeman, but on the other, some of the more sober minded military men and politicians are cautioning that it is beyond their military capability. One has only got to remember that it was mainly the Serbs who, by means of guerilla warfare, tied down as many German Divisions as did the Allied Fifth and Eighth Armies in Italy during World War Two.

Military intervention cannot be entirely ruled out, but if it does occur, it will signify that imperialism is running out of options and is beginning to over-reach itself, a pre-cursor to its eventual defeat.

THE ROAD TO RIO

When the Earth Summit was first mooted in 1987, it raised high hopes that such issues as ozone depletion and climatic change would be coupled with finding solutions to the immediate environmental problems facing most Third World countries, such as desertification and the lack of clean water. In short, it was to integrate environment and development.

Five years later, when the Summit is due to take place, the contradictions between the rich capitalist countries and the impoverished Third World ones are impossible to conceal.

When, in the pre-Summit negotiations, Third World governments proposed a ban on the export of hazardous substances, wastes and industries, all the major industrialized countries objected.

Developed industrial countries place most emphasis on 'saving the rain forests', the destruction of which is said to contribute to global warming. The fact is that their destruction does not in itself do any such thing. They simply act as 'heat sinks' which absorb carbon dioxide.

The industrialized countries are only concerned to preserve the rain forests so that they can continue to spew out carbon dioxide, a by product of the continual economic growth demanded by the capitalist system.

Western governments are insisting that any new funds that they give for projects agreed at the Earth Summit must be channelled through the Global Environment Facility, a new body under the management of the World Bank, which they control. This new organization lends only for what it determines to be 'global issues', so that ozone depletion, which is due to over-consumption by the few is regarded as a global issue, but desertification, soil erosion, lack of clean water, which affect millions of people in the Third World are regarded as local problems.

There are no proposals on the agenda to control the activities of big business, yet it is the transnational companies that are mainly responsible for the global crisis. For instance, their activities account for fifty per cent of all emissions of greenhouse gasses and they are the chief beneficiaries of the inequities of world trade.

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POST ELECTION REALITIES

Now the show is over, the Coroner's Reports from the Labour and Liberal Democratic parties have yet to be issued, but several things seem to be clear. One is that substantial numbers of those earning over twenty thousand pounds a year prefer to have the money in their pocket than give to the government to spend for them. Another is that people with mortgages have more confidence in the ability of a Conservative Government to reduce interest rates. A third is that most people seemed unable to see any difference between Tory and Labour economic strategy, in which case, stick with the party with the best record of running capitalism.

On the Health Service, the claims and counter claims about the changes have left most people in a state of confusion which makes them dubious about their value, but, as yet, insufficiently convinced of the need to actively oppose them.

On the whole, the Tories were more realistic than the other two parties about future prospects. Lamont stated that there would be limited room for manoeuvre with regard to either tax reductions or increases in public expenditure. Major hoped that further tax cuts would be possible, year on year, but refused to make a commitment. This came over as a more honest approach than that of Labour which made promises on an assumption that economic growth would be sufficient to cover them.

It seemed to be quite widely appreciated that if that economic growth did not materialize, a Labour Government would either have to renege on its promises, or increase taxes, and many of those who perceived that they would, in those circumstances, be paying extra tax, decided to take no chances.

TAXATION

Those who argue that it was the mildly redistributive aspect of John Smith's tax proposals which lost Labour the election should give thought to the class position that they are adopting. All methods of taxation have a class aspect, and any change which benefits the poorer sections of the working population should be welcomed by anyone who claims to be socialist.

If there is a strong bias against such redistribution by higher income earners, then attention must be turned to overcoming that bias. Some people will be moved by appeals to their social

conscience, others may have to be intimidated by the prospect of greater social disorder.

The question of redistribution of income through taxation policy cannot be brushed to one side or deferred until the next Election. The Tories are committed to transferring the burden of social spending from the richer to the poorer. Reductions in the rate of tax benefit the rich disproportionately, whereas increases in tax thresholds benefit the lower paid disproportionately. It is a class issue. The move from direct to indirect taxation is also a class issue. an increase in VAT weighs most heavily on those with lower incomes.

The Tory pledge to reduce the rate of tax, and its 'promise' to maintain the National Health Service are at odds with each other, and the latter 'promise' can only be kept if it is to be funded by increases in VAT.

For both of the major parties, indeed for all practical purposes, increased taxation of company profits is out of the question. In present circumstances, the number of small companies going bankrupt would increase. In the case of big corporations, it not so much a question of increasing the nominal rate of taxation but of enforcing payment of taxes already due.

GOVERNMENT BORROWING

In the period between 1946 and 1979 the crunch, (between the income and expenditure of governments), was avoided by the government of the day making up the difference by borrowing from the Banks. It made it appear possible to be able to both keep the cake and eat it, so that increasing expenditure on social services did not require a redistribution of current income, but the inflation which resulted began to de-stabilise the system - hence Thatcherism. Monetarist policies worked for a few years, but eventually unemployment began to increase again, and the deterioration in the social services made the Tories more vulnerable electorally. This, coupled with her attitude towards Europe, made it necessary for the Tories to replace her.

Since her demise, public spending has increased again, but this time the amount needed to be borrowed by government was partly offset by income from the continuing sale of national assets. Now, that income has all but dried up. Unless economic growth is resumed very soon, drastic decisions will have to be made about

reducing government expenditure.

Early on in the election campaign John Major spoke of the present time as being 'the most competitive climate we have ever known', and that is undoubtedly true.

The U.S government has warned the Group of Seven that they cannot look to the United States to stimulate the world economy by increasing imports. The German and Japanese governments are taking a similar line, so the outlook remains bleak. One of the consequences of that is the crisis of Social Democracy. With the 'option' of increasing government borrowing to finance current expenditure being virtually ruled out, Social Democracy's claim to represent a 'middle road', ('Capitalism with a human face'), is no longer tenable. It is no accident that Social Democratic governments are now as rare as 'Communist' ones. Everywhere, reaction is on the move, and the reason is that capitalism in crisis provides no easy options.

Capitalist competition has certainly stimulated technological progress, and increased the productivity of labour by increasing the ratio of constant to variable capital, but it can only continue to do so as long as costs can be made to fall faster than prices, thus ensuring that the rate of profit can be maintained. The situation has now been reached, on a world scale, where the rate of profit on capital in general has fallen. Over the past twenty or thirty years in particular, this 'crunch' has been avoided because favourable terms of trade (to the industrialized countries) has meant that the cost of living of the people of those countries has been kept down, and the profits of the transnationals enhanced, while the conditions of the mass of the people in 'the third world' have deteriorated in inverse proportion.

There are, of course, exceptions. China, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, have succeeded in establishing thriving capitalist regimes, which, rather than providing markets for goods produced in the 'old' capitalist countries, are now competing with them on world markets.

It would be premature to speak of the imminent collapse of capitalism as a world system, but its dominance by western capitalism is now drawing to a close.

The notion that the collapse of Brezhnev-style socialism has ushered in a new era of world wide peace and cooperation reflects a desire on the part of Bush, Major, and their like, that there will be world wide cooperation between states on conditions laid down by them, but the reality will be dictated by the nature of

capitalism. Neither the U.S.A. nor Britain, nor France have any intention of giving up their nuclear weapons. Who are their potential enemies now? Japan is steadily increasing its 'Self Defence' forces. Against whom is it preparing to defend itself?

ECONOMIC GROWTH, PRIVATE CONSUMPTION, AND SOCIAL COSTS.

The economic limitation is that there is a tendency for the rate of profit to fall as the ratio increases. This has been counteracted to a certain extent by the ability of capitalism to extend its markets, and reduce unit costs by increasing the volume of production world wide. The depth and geographical scope of the present slump indicates that the tendency for the rate of profit to fall is reasserting itself in a very acute fashion, hence John Major's statement.

The method proposed by one or other of the political parties may be successful in the sense that British industry may grab a bigger share of the world market, but, by its very nature it can only be temporary. In the nature of capitalism, other nations, (those with lower production costs), will come to the forefront in the game of leap frog, and in the process, productive capacity expands at a faster rate than the market.

The car industry provides a good example. Capitalists on a world scale invested vast sums of money into that industry, production expanded, but now saturation point has been reached. Furthermore, ecological considerations which demand a reduction in carbon dioxide emission point to the need to cut car usage.

The automobile industry has been the engine which has driven post war economic growth. Proof of this can be seen in the number of people employed directly and indirectly in that industry, and that as soon as sales began to flag, the capitalist system ran into deeper and deeper trouble. America provides the clearest example of the tremendous boom in post war car production and to knock on effects of the recent downturn, so, in this respect at least, what is good for ecology, is bad for the system.

The ecology factor was secondary in Marx's day, but now it is the decisive one in the sense that it places absolute limits on the volume of production of material goods.

Any political party in an industrialized country such as Britain which does not face up to this reality, is deceiving the people. The difficulty for vote gathering parties is that policies which

seriously take it into account are vote losers.

For example, the internal combustion engine is the greatest single cause of global warming, but what party is calling for curbs on the production of cars and lorries? Besides being a vote loser, reductions in the number of cars and lorries produced on a world scale would increase the internal contradictions of the capitalist system, and which of the 'constitutional' parties is going to advocate such a course of action?

It needs to be remembered that demand for a particular group of products at a particular time has provided the spur for a new round of industrial expansion. The demand for cotton piece goods towards the end of the eighteenth century sparked off the industrial revolution. The demand for means of mass transportation of goods provided the impetus for investment in railway and canal building. The development of the internal combustion engine made possible the development of fast means of personal transportation which provided the spur to the capitalist expansion after World War Two.

It was widely hoped that the computer, 'information', industry, the so called Sunrise Industries, would provide the spur to a new phase of economic expansion, but after only a few years the market is saturated and the search for new gimmicks is getting desperate. There is not only surplus production capacity but also a surplus of 'information' in some applications, i.e. more information is being gathered than can be usefully handled.

Huge car makers like General Motors, and the computer giant IBM have announced plans for big reductions in their workforce over the next five years.

Although the major political parties will not campaign for a reduction in the number of cars and lorries on the road, the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties are opposed to big road building programmes and, in a general sense, in favour of an extension of Public transport. Traffic congestion in big urban centres is now so acute that it cannot be ignored, but Authorities are reluctant to take draconic measures for fear of incurring the wrath of the motorist organizations. Opposition to further road building, (except perhaps some by-passes), will help bring matters to a head.

The higher levels of consumption made possible by industrial development has served to distract attention from its deleterious effect on the natural environment, but this can no longer be ignored, and the costs of repairing damage done in the past, and

reducing it currently, will have to be paid. The longer the clean up is delayed, the bigger the bill.

It is said that this cleaning programme will absorb many workers who would otherwise be unemployed. That may be so, but the other side of the coin is that it will tend to add either to manufacturing costs or to social costs, which, as far as the consumer is concerned, amount to the same thing

Reclamation will save materials, and that is a good thing, but the process requires the expenditure of labour, thus tending to put a brake on the continuous reduction in costs, the process which enabled world capitalism to reduce prices, increase profits, and expand the market, in the post-World War Two period. During that period, capitalism seemed to have overcome the long term tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Now, that law is reasserting itself with the prospect that the crisis of capitalism will deepen dramatically.

This is not just a matter of academic interest. It is a matter of having a political perspective.

The signs are already apparent. The improvements in Health and Social Services which were made during the earlier post war period are now being clawed back, not only in Britain, but in every capitalist country. The major centre of controversy between the three major parties in the run up to the recent General Election was about the level of taxation and the quality of the Health Service.

The Labour Party fudged the issue by claiming that the improvements it promised would come out of future economic growth. In the first place, the consensus among the 'experts' is that even when growth occurs it will not be anything like the post war average. This is coupled with the expectation that unemployment will remain high, therefore the social cost, the cost on the Exchequer, will be greater than at any other time in the post war period. This means that the issue of how the national income is divided will become more acute, and the storm centre is likely to be the National Health Service because people are aware that at some time in their life they may require expensive medical treatment, and a high proportion believe that they will suffer if the provision of health care is left to market forces.

Tax allowances for those who take out private health insurance is intended to be back door privatization, but many of those who have taken out private health insurance are finding that the gloss is being taken off it by the introduction of clauses

which exclude them from certain kinds of treatment.

Pressure on the Exchequer under a restored Tory Government will inevitably lead to reduced expenditure on the NHS and welfare provision in real terms, (allowing for inflation) or increases in the rate of VAT. This much is inevitable even without the Tories' qualified commitment to reduce the rate of income tax.

As with the Poll Tax, such measures will be seen by the mass of the people as unjust. This will provide opportunities for the Left to rally opposition.

There are other matters around which the Left can unite. The need for comprehensive fuel and transport policies. The exposure of the effects of privatization. Privatization has certainly not benefited consumers, nor will it benefit the national economy. Profits made by the privatized gas and telephone industries are being invested abroad in order to increase profits, not re-invested in industry in Britain.

COAL - ECONOMICS, AND ECOLOGY.

The decision of the Companies running the electricity generation industry to build gas fired stations rather than coal fired ones is dressed up as concern for the environment, but the only concern is profit. Gas is, at the moment, cheaper than coal, but the decision reminds us of that taken in the late fifties to opt for oil firing because it was cheaper. Short term considerations took preference over long term ones. The decimation of the British coal industry as the result of the decision to turn to gas, coupled with the importation of cheap coal is another example of how market forces favour short term profit at the expense of longer term interest.

Although no one in the Establishment, including the leaders of the major political parties and trade unions, will openly admit it, Arthur Scargill and the NUM leadership were right when they predicted that unless there was a change of government policy the coal industry would be reduced to a fraction of its former size, but it is doubtful whether even they expected any of the Super Pits like the one at Selby to be hit.

Entering the fight to keep pits open presents problems for conservationists because of the fact that coal burning is a big factor in Global Warming, and that much of the coal mined in Britain has a high sulphur content.

Taking the second point first. The sulphur can be washed out and reduced by already existing, but more expensive burning methods. The production of carbon dioxide by coal burning is, unfortunately, unavoidable, and it is here that Greens find themselves in a quandary.

What needs to be recognized is that it is politically impossible in the short and medium term to completely stop using coal as a source of energy, even taking Britain alone. Renewable sources of energy are, as yet, insufficiently developed to fill the gap, and for most thinking people, nuclear power is a matter of solving today's problems at the cost of creating even bigger ones for future generations. There is also the problem for the capitalist class intent on seeking for cheaper forms of energy, that nuclear power will become dearer, not cheaper in the quest to make it 'safer' in order to make it more socially acceptable.

The ecological ideal of matching energy usage to renewable energy resources is unlikely, for both scientific and political reasons, to be achieved in the immediate future. The technology is not currently available to meet consumption at present levels, and any political decision to reduce the level of material consumption would run into massive opposition because it runs counter to people's expectations, therefore, hydrocarbons will continue to be used, although hopefully to a lesser degree.

The question of what happens to Britain's coal reserves, is, therefore, of great political importance. It does not make sense to destroy coal reserves, for who knows, sometime in the future, science may find ways of utilizing coal in an ecologically friendly way. Then, even if it is possible to sink new pits, the cost will be tremendous.

Ecology and politics can be brought together through the formulation of a comprehensive energy policy that is based on both a reduction in energy usage and maximum use of domestic resources.

Although it may pay the electricity generating companies to import Australian and Nicaraguan coal because they are cheaper than British deep-mined coal, two other things need to be taken into consideration. One is that calculating the ecological impact of the energy required to transport foreign coal from its country of origin to its point of use, must also be included because it is total energy use that matters. The second is that as the crisis of the world capitalist system deepens, relations between states will become less stable as the people of each country give first

priority to the resolution of their own domestic problems. This is already being politically expressed in the resurgence of nationalism, which, despite the fascist connotations, can, in present circumstances, be a progressive force insofar that it expresses a desire to take political decision making closer to the people.

The other side of the coin is that the present pattern of trade may be disrupted, so it would be extremely unwise to be more dependent than necessary upon external supplies of either manufactured goods or raw materials.

Where does all this leave the Left in Britain?

The result of the General Election is likely to lead - particularly among the young - to disillusionment with the Labour Party. One measure of this is the Local Election. These results may not reflect the slow death of the Labour Party, it is too early to say that.

But the Labour party in opposition has been seen to abandon ideals wholesale for electoral reasons and still cannot win at the ballot box. It is unlikely, given the economic realities to which Labour as a capitalist party has to pay heed, that a charismatic figure will emerge on the left wing and climb many rungs on the Party ladder.

By the next election a generation of people will have grown up experiencing only a Tory Government in office. The room for manoeuvre on 'social spending' will have further narrowed by then. What will the loser have to offer as its election slogan? Please give us a chance?

Marxists have a duty to try to prevent this disillusionment from becoming inertia, particularly among the young. Those who voted Labour with the best of motives, to change the power structure or the social division of wealth in Britain, to make Britain 'a fairer place', may grow despondent at any type of political activity.

In the past, the working class was a far more homogenous group, better able to identify its class position in the 'social order'. The dilution of working class values and the disintegration of its economic organizations - the trade unions - makes it harder for Marxists to intervene in class struggle.

On the other hand, the problems of the 'Capitalist World Order' will affect a growing number of people who are becoming increasingly concerned about the welfare of the Planet and our own activities as a destructive force for change.

The Left should focus on ecological and social issues by developing policies that will counterpose the long term interests of the majority to the short term gains offered by the Tories and their pale pink shadows in the Labour Party.

This does not mean that we reject the concept of class struggle as central to our politics, as the Communist Party did before its demise, but that we conceive it as a process of uniting the many against the few in pursuit of clearly defined economic and political objectives.

What are the principal questions to which the Left should address itself?

How to reduce unemployment within the context of a nil growth economy.

Can this be achieved without national economic and political determination

How should this struggle be conducted within the context of EEC membership?

How can this be linked with the struggle for economic self reliance in the Third World.?

Whose interests are served by GATT?

An industrial policy for Britain.

An energy policy for Britain.

A transport policy for Britain.

What political forces can be mobilized to achieve these ends.?

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Furthermore, there is a suspicion that, under cover of 'protecting our common future', Western governments are seeking to obtain even greater control over the natural resources in the countries of the Third World.

The Western propaganda machine is exceedingly skilful at manipulating people's desires and aspirations so that they will direct their energies into channels which benefit the capitalist system.

Marxists have a duty to bring the class aspect out into the open in order to prevent this, and also to help people understand how the ecological crisis is intensifying the problems of capitalism.

TRADE UNIONISM

Thirty years ago British trade unions appeared to be riding high. Their national leaders were members of Quango's, they were welcomed in Downing Street, and were included in the Honours List. In short they seemed to be firmly established in what George Woodcock, one time General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, called 'the corridors of power'.

At shop floor level, the non commissioned officers of the trade union movement, the shop stewards, wielded a great deal of influence and it was a foolhardy manager who tried to introduce new working practices without first consulting the stewards in 'organized' factories.

Yet in the space of little more than a couple of years after first taking office, Thatcher had the trade unions on the run, and the entire trade union movement suffered a defeat when it stood aside and allowed the forces of the state to defeat the miners.

It is not the prime purpose of this article to figure out the reasons why trade union resistance, (with the honourable exception of the NUM), collapsed so easily. Its purpose is to look at the situation as it is, restate some fundamentals, and suggest ways of breaking out of the straight-jacket imposed by the Tory anti-trade union legislation.

Those left-wing Tories who have found a home in the Liberal Democrat, and Labour parties excuse the restrictions on the right of workers to combine on the grounds that legislation has also been enacted which limits the rights of employers. It sounds plausible to liberal ears, but it does not hold water in the real world where class power determines actual 'rights'.

THE STATE AS A MEDIATOR

The Marxist maxim that the state is an instrument of class power does not exclude its role as a mediator. The purpose of the state is to ensure conditions of peace and tranquillity within its borders on terms which meet the interests of the ruling class, therefore, to that end, it seeks wherever possible to moderate social contradictions.

Legislation which restricts the activities of employers can be divided into two parts; one is concerned with regulating competition between them, the other is concerned with regulating relations between employer and workers.

All modern capitalist states practise some form of regulation of 'market forces', of regulating relations between capitals, because it is recognised that, although competition is essential to the system, untrammelled competition is destructive.

THE STATE AS AN ORGAN OF CLASS POWER.

The regulation of relations between employers and workers is in an altogether different category because it is concerned with the power relationship between two classes whose basic interests run counter to each other.

From the earliest days, employers have sought to restrict the right of workers to combine, but despite many setbacks their resistance has been overcome. Trade unions were, in the first instance, formed in defiance of laws which forbade workers to combine in pursuance of their common interests, but, as the result of constant political pressure, a law passed in 1874 provided that no action taken by a group of workers in the course of a dispute would be punishable as a conspiracy unless it was already a crime when committed by one person acting on his own. The Taff Vale judgement of 1901 was a set-back because it ordered the Railways union to pay damages to the Taff Vale Railway company because it had lost money as the result of a strike called by the Union. In 1906 the trades Disputes Act was passed. It reversed the Taff Vale decision and provided that trade union funds were not liable for actions for damages if, by calling out its members on strike, it had persuaded its members to break their contracts with the employers.

That position was gradually undermined by legislation enacted by both Tory and Labour governments in the post World war two period which, as a sop, included some benefits to workers such as the right to a period of notice, compensation for 'unfair dismissal', (assuming that it could be proved to the satisfaction of a Court), but each one went a stage further in making the rules of trade unions and the actions of both unions and members subject to legal restraint. For instance, the concept of an 'unfair industrial practice' defined by law, was introduced.

That was the situation until the series of anti combination laws passed by Tory governments after 1979 when the legal fruits of over two hundred years of working class struggle and individual sacrifice were taken away with hardly a whimper from the Labour party and trade unions.

At the 1991 T.U.C Congress, Arthur Scargill was treated with

derision when he sought to gain support for a motion to get Congress to call for a repeal of those pieces of Tory legislation. A sad commentary on the degeneration of the British trade union movement.

The question is, how should the working class respond?

Applying 'Mao's Paper Tiger' maxim to the situation, we should be contemptuous of anti-working class law strategically, but take it fully into account tactically

What does this amount to in practice?

Firstly, it means that we must reject a legalistic approach and work to get workers to reject it also.

A legalistic approach means workers are enjoined to 'accept the law of the land' and confine their activities to trying to change it by parliamentary means.

Of course there must be a struggle to change the law in this respect, but if workers are quiescent, it will never be changed.

Should the working class be mobilised to work for the return of a government pledged to repeal them? The answer is clearly 'yes', if that option exists. The problem is that none of the political parties which stand a chance of forming or participating in a government in the near future are willing to make it part of their political programme. Furthermore, the T.U.C itself is unwilling to campaign on the issue, let alone put pressure on the Labour party to include it in its election manifesto.

The degeneration of the trade union movement can also be seen in the internecine struggle between unions to obtain sole negotiating rights in newly established factories. As soon as it is known that a new plant is to be opened, different trade unions make approaches to the management in order to obtain sole negotiating rights in the plant, even before any workers have been engaged. The trade unions are in competition with each other in their capacity as sellers of labour power, thus negating the very purpose of trade unionism.

In a buyer's market such as obtains at present, the employer virtually dictates the terms of employment and the union which secures the contract agrees to police it. That is the reality.

Single union agreements made at top level obviate the need for traditional methods of recruitment and place the workers in the plant concerned under the direct control of national officers. Loss of membership means loss of job, and union officials are the enforcers of agreements about which the workers concerned were never consulted.

This brings us to the question of 100% trade unionism. As a general principle, if workers in a particular plant decide that they will not work with non unionists, they should be supported. But if a trade union decides, without prior consultation with the workforce, that only union members shall be employed, it should be opposed.

The first strengthens the potential power of the workers vis a vis the employers, the latter strengthens the power of the trade unions over the workers because it strengthens the position of the national trade union leaders as the sole sellers of labour power.

Closed shops, i.e. ones in which a worker must already be a member of a particular union before he can obtain employment in it are relics of craft unionism which are detrimental to the organisation of workers as a class.

Historically, trade union organisation has been initiated by workers themselves in the plant in which they are employed, but, whereas in the early days the link between the membership and the union officials was the branch, the growth of the shop stewards movement has changed much of that, (in most trades anyway).

SHOP STEWARDS

The role of workshop representatives, (lay members, not paid union officials) was enhanced in the face of strong opposition from union officialdom. One of the leading figures in the early days of this struggle during the first World War was the late Willie Gallacher, that fine example of a communist, who recorded the struggle in his book 'Revolt on the Clyde'.

What became known as The Shop Stewards Movement was, (and still is), looked on askance by those in the trade union establishment who see shop stewards as a threat to their authority.

Their difficulty lies in the fact that shop stewards are employees of the firm, not the union, therefore, provided that the steward is capable of doing the job that the firm pays him for, and maintains close links with his members in the plant, and reasonable relations with the management, there is nothing that union officialdom can do but come to terms with shop stewards.

On the other hand, the position of the shop steward is a tenuous one. If he is to really represent the interests of his members there will often be times when his relations with management will, to put it mildly, be strained and the temptation for management to find some excuse to sack him is very strong. What the management must take into consideration when thinking

of going along this road is (a), the standing of the steward with his members, (will there be trouble if he is sacked?), (b) the relationship between the steward and the officials and committees of the union, and (c) what kind of character will take the place of the existing steward. If the existing steward has been consistent (not necessarily compliant), there is a tendency to stick with the devil they know.

Trade union officials and committees at the different levels vary, according to their political complexion, in their attitude to both stewards in general and particular stewards. Therefore, each shop steward must always bear in mind that he is an accredited representative of a particular union and must therefore avoid a situation where both union and management find common cause to get rid of him.

The official trade union cannot be written off because union recognition provides the steward with a semi 'legal' framework in which to operate and it provides a link with the wider world outside the particular factory without which the steward can become parochial in outlook.

It therefore follows that the shop steward must be actively concerned with the political (in a broad sense) complexion of the various union committees and paid officials and work to influence, and where necessary, change them.

This is a matter of helping members to learn from their own experience, who is for, and who is against them, so that when elections for official positions are held they are knowledgeable about the issues and the candidates.

Shop stewards are the heart of the trade union movement because they are closest to the membership. Those who would weaken or destroy the shop steward as an institution are enemies of the working class.

It was the shop stewards, through negotiations at factory level, not the trade union officials, who were mostly responsible for the increased wages and improved conditions in the post World-War two period.

Meanwhile the top trade union leaders, with a few exceptions, became imbued with the desire to be accepted 'in the corridors of power', and became increasingly isolated from their own rank and file, who, for their part, felt that these 'leaders' were simply encumbrances and turned away from trade unions rather than become involved in changing them.

However, the very successes of the rank and file movement

led by the shop stewards, led, in some cases, to the adoption of incorrect forms of leadership, and an over-estimation of the potential of economic struggle at factory level.

In the years between the early 1950s, and the late 1970s there was, (in Britain), a fairly sustained rise in income levels, recessions were shallow and short lived, and the general perception was that a golden age had been reached in which 'money grew on trees'. The production industries were considered to be the place for the 'not so bright', the overwhelming majority of students seemed to be 'studying' the 'social sciences', and the level of income was seen to be in inverse proportion to any involvement in material production.

During the earlier part of that period it was a buyer's market in which the price of goods could be easily jacked up to meet increased costs of production. Expansion of the mass production industries, (cars and trucks, for example), occasioned a vast increase in the proportion of semi skilled-workers in the labour force who were (are) less conservative than time-served skilled workers. They soon recognized their importance in the production process and rapidly gained the ascendancy in terms of trade union influence at workshop level.

This new leading strata of the working class was less political than the 'skilled' strata in the sense that they were less responsive to the appeals of Labour Party politicians and Labour-oriented union officials. It signalled the beginning of the end for the ideological domination of the Labour Party over the trade unions at workshop level. That was the positive side. The negative side was a growth in the belief that everything could be achieved by trade union action.

In the early years this was given credence because, compared with pre-war experience, victories were fairly easy to come by and there was less bitterness between strikers and management because both 'knew' that they would have to get on with each other after the dispute was settled.

The 'easy victory' syndrome had the effect of artificially enhancing the power of the shop steward to the extent that some saw themselves as a law unto themselves. They assumed the power to call strikes without consultation with those they were supposed to represent, a situation which those members went along with as long as the victories were easy. But as the economic situation changed and the victories became less easy, some stewards, particularly in large factories carried on in the old way and fr

themselves isolated from the people they were supposed to represent so that when the management took action against them, often with the connivance of the union officials, some of the members, influenced by the anti-shop steward propaganda barrage by the media, were not unhappy about their departure.

Meanwhile, workers employed by Local Authorities became 'militant'. Although they were traditionally worse paid than industrial workers, they had greater security of employment. 'You never get sacked from a job on the Council'.

Their militancy was largely based on the spurious belief that this security was god given, and that Local Authorities had bottomless pockets. Furthermore, they, along with most workers providing 'services', were not subjected to the discipline of factory life, and displayed some of the weaknesses of the lumpen proletariat, the main one being lack of concern with 'doing a good job'. Labour controlled Authorities were the easiest targets because Councillors always had a mind to the fact that the trade unions are the Labour Party's chief paymaster. (The fact that the Tories make great play of this does not make it any less true). As the level of service fell and that of Rates rose, the perception that the unions were at the bottom of it increased.

In one sense, the existing situation suits most trade union executives because their members are less 'troublesome'. Prior to 1979, when recalcitrant members chose to take industrial action in pursuit of a dispute with their employers without prior permission from the union executive, the only things that the latter could do was to deny them strike pay, and appeal to them to 'go through the procedure'. Now they can advise them of the financial consequences of 'going against the law'.

One point needs to be made clear however. Not all trade union officials, or all the committees at the different levels within each union, were, or are, tarred with the same brush, but the class conscious ones are now a smaller minority, and more hamstrung than ever.

The majority of workers are not yet convinced of the need to actively challenge the modern version of the combination laws, but this apathy will change to frustration as economic and other workshop pressures increase. In the meantime, work needs to be carried out to wean workers away from reliance on the law.

Except where the rules of a trade union exclude people from membership on account of race, colour, religion, the rules, and their interpretation, must be a matter for the members alone.

If members feel that the executive is wrongly interpreting the rules, that should be a matter for the National Conference to decide. If one particular member feels aggrieved by a decision of the executive, he or she can resign from that union and join another one. If a member feels aggrieved by a majority decision taken by a mass meeting of workers, too bad, that is democracy at work. If a judge finds a loophole in the rules of a Union which weakens its ability to discipline errant members, then the Union should change its rules accordingly. There should be a TUC agreement which binds all member unions to resolve all inter-union disputes within the union machinery, and to expel unions which 'go to law' on that issue.

In the present economic and political climate, workers will incline towards 'going to law' to take advantage of laws which are supposed to protect them from 'unfair' dismissal, and that must be understood, but the current trend of 'going to law', should not be encouraged. The position that trade unionists should work for is one in which workers at factory level exert direct pressure on their employer to reach a settlement that would be better, (even marginally), than could be expected in a court settlement. In that way, trade unions make use of the law, instead of being subservient to it.

A similar thing applies in cases of industrial injury. Where a cash settlement is involved it is probable that a better settlement can be obtained in court than in direct negotiations, but it is not necessarily always the case.

The Health and Safety legislation can provide a basis for workshop agitation and action to compel the employer to really abide by the spirit of the legislation, rather than wheel and deal through legal channels.

We make a distinction between simply 'going to law', and using existing laws to underpin union activity. The former usually strengthens the influence of bourgeois ideology; whereas the second can be a means of raising the political consciousness of workers by involving them in a process aimed at changing the law in favour of the working class in general.

Demands for a minimum legal wage, or for a statutory limit on working hours, are progressive political demands because they aim to place limits on capitalist exploitation, thus restricting the room for manoeuvre of capitalists as a class. But unless those demands have mass backing, any legislation in that field will be ineffective because workers will connive with their employers in

order to circumvent it. That does not mean that every single worker must be enthusiastic about it, but it does mean that significant numbers of organized workers must be so enthused that they actively seek to enforce it.

Of course, legislation which has the objective of improving conditions of work, or the environment, ie. laying down safety standards and placing limits on the emission of dangerous substances into the atmosphere, must be welcomed, but it must be recognized that they will only be enforced if workers accept the responsibility for it. Most developed capitalist countries can point to progressive legislation of this kind that has been adopted, but how much of it is being put into practice is a very different thing.

In short, in addition to the usual economic struggle, political work must be carried out, firstly in order to get the necessary legislation enacted, and secondly in order to ensure that it is enforced.

One of the weaknesses of factory based organization is the tendency for workers to regard 'their' factory as their world in terms of struggle. Combine organization is an improvement, but it only helps raise consciousness to that of the Firm. What is needed is a form of organization which assists the development of class and political consciousness. This can be provided by -

TRADES COUNCILS.

These are composed of representatives of trade unions at different levels on a geographical basis, and have the advantage of cutting across inter union divisions in much the same way as shop stewards organizations in the factory.

At a recent meeting of the South East Region of the T.U.C it was concluded that there is a strong feeling among affiliates that TC's have a vital role to play in building a stronger trade union movement. This is a very positive development.

The official trade unions will try to keep them on a tight rein, but that can be overcome, and the possibility is that, in the course of time, they can be turned into really mass organizations with their roots in the factories.