

TUC annual conference

The decline and decay of Britain's trade unions

By Chris Marsden
20 September 2005

This year's annual conference of the Trades Union Congress was a gathering of the politically desperate.

The trade unions face a continuing loss of membership that is threatening the very survival of the TUC. In 1979, the trade unions had a combined membership of 13.7 million. Today it is hovering around 6.5 million. The British Chamber of Commerce estimates that around 300,000 employees have left the trade union movement in the past eight years.

One way that the bureaucracy is attempting to secure its own future is by a series of mergers to form bigger organizations. The latest involves Britain's three main unions, the Transport & General Workers Union, General Municipal and Boilermakers, and Amicus—itsself a product of previous mergers. With over two-and-a-half million members, this represents around 40 percent of total TUC membership. This alone renders the TUC increasingly redundant, even as far as the bureaucracy is concerned.

But in the long run mergers will not save the individual unions concerned either. As TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber himself cautioned, the proposed merger would not deliver "a single extra member.... In 2001, Verdi was formed as Germany's largest union with around 3 million members. Now four years later their membership numbers have fallen to around 2.5 million."

The European Industrial Relations Observatory notes that before the latest mergers, the forerunners of Amicus had lost over 80,000 members since 1999, and the TGWU 46,000. It comments, "Union merger activity is largely a defensive strategy in a context of overall decline.... The election of a Labour Party government in 1997 promised a brighter future for the union movement. However a failure to return to significant levels of membership growth, despite near-full employment and the introduction of new statutory recognition laws, means that further 'defensive' merger activity is likely."

The fact that neither full employment, nor the election of a Labour government, has produced any reversal in the declining fortunes of the trade unions is not hard to explain.

In the first place workers—particularly in the growth areas of the economy in the service sector that are characterised by extremely poor pay and working conditions—will not join unions because of their pro-business policies. And secondly, one of the biggest problems facing the trade union leaders is justifying their alliance with a government that has levelled constant attacks on working people as it has set out to enrich its corporate backers.

The trade union bureaucracy is faced with mounting difficulties in its efforts to suppress opposition to the ongoing erosion of living standards and working conditions. After years in which industrial action was at historic lows, last year saw a significant rise in the number of days lost to strikes to almost a million. This was almost double the figure recorded for

1993. The Office for National Statistics said 904,000 days were lost in 1994, involving almost 300,000 workers—again double the 1993 figure.

This does not mean that the trade unions are no longer suppressing strikes. The actual number of stoppages during 2004 fell to 130, the lowest figure on record. And only 12,400 days were lost through strikes between January and March 2005, in 18 stoppages involving more than 10,000 workers.

The long-term picture presents an even more devastating picture of how the unions have prevented the emergence of opposition to corporate management and the government. During the 1970s, an average of 12.9 million working days was lost annually. Thanks in part to the 1984-85 miners' strike, the figure remained at 7.2 million in the following decade. This was despite the trade unions' best efforts to uphold the Tory antiunion laws, embodied in the 1980 Employment Act that—amongst other things—banned secondary action.

By comparison, the average number of days lost per year between 1994 and 2004 was just 560,000.

Nevertheless, large strikes in the public sector—an area where workers find themselves in direct struggle against the Labour government over such issues as 100,000 civil service redundancies and a fresh round of privatisations—shows that the unions are sitting on a well of anger that could yet find explosive forms. That is why, when asked by the BBC why the unions could not persuade workers to join them, the head of the TGWU Tony Woodley replied candidly, "Because we seem in their eyes we've been too close to the gaffer, too close to the government."

Nothing that the TUC did at its conference last week should alter this entirely correct appraisal.

The week began with a demonstration outside Brighton's conference centre by sacked Gate Gourmet workers, the Heathrow catering company that supplies meals to British Airways. The summary dismissal of the 670 workers sparked a 24-hour sympathy strike by over 1,000 BA baggage handlers, bus drivers and ground staff that paralysed the airport.

It was the TGWU that came to the rescue of Gate Gourmet and BA by instructing its members to abide by the antiunion laws, thus isolating the striking workers and leaving them powerless against their employer.

The September 12 demonstration epitomised the consequences for working people of both the trade union leaders' pro-corporate agenda and its alliance with a Labour government that has left Tory antiunion laws unchanged. Those protesting outside did so after the TGWU had accepted the redundancy package demanded by Gate Gourmet and created the conditions where 300 strikers and 400 who continued working have accepted the loss of their jobs. The company has stated repeatedly that it will not accept back those it deems to be "militants" and "trouble-makers."

It is because the trade union tops feel so politically exposed that this

year saw them mount a show of opposition to the government over its retention of the antiunion laws, pensions policy and other issues.

That same day, the assembled functionaries unanimously supported an emergency resolution from the TGWU and the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) supporting the 667 redundant workers. The motion called for the government to enact a trade union freedom bill, endorsing “lawful supportive action,” protection for workers starting from their first day at work and a cut in the notice required to hold a strike ballot.

There was a truly pathetic quality to this effort by the TUC to declare its bona-fides as a defender of working people. They know that there is absolutely no chance of a Labour government passing such a piece of legislation. So the very next day the union leaders were reduced to expressing their dissatisfaction with a speech by Chancellor Gordon Brown making this fact clear.

Brown is widely tipped to replace Tony Blair as prime minister and constant efforts are made by the pro-Labour newspapers to portray him as more in tune with traditional Labour values. His September 13 speech to conference gave a lie to such claims.

The chancellor spoke of “Tony Blair and I,” before warning the Brighton conference that there was “no hiding place” from globalisation and the need to be competitive against China and India.

He pledged that within two years the government would implement its pre-election pact with the trade unions, the “Warwick Agreement,” promising such measures as better holiday provision, safety at work, improved redundancy payments, extended collective bargaining and the creation of a new employment rights agency. But that was all the “jam tomorrow” on offer.

He continued, “At no point since the industrial revolution has the restructuring of global economic activity been so dramatic; at no point has there been such a shift in production, Asia moving from the fringes to the centre of the new world economic order; and at no point in our whole history has the speed and scale of technological change been so fast and pervasive. For me, nothing in the next years is more important than preparing and equipping our nation for meeting and mastering these global challenges ahead.”

This meant the trade unions working with business and government. “Today I issue an invitation to the TUC and trade unions here, as well as business, to enter into a discussion with the Treasury and the government on how a more skilled, more adaptable and more enterprising Britain can make the right long-term decisions and succeed in the next stage of the global economy,” said Brown,

Though he took pains to deny that this meant a “race to the bottom” with China, this is exactly what is on offer to the working class as it is asked to accept wage rates and working conditions that are competitive with those in Asia. Above all, it demands that the trade unions police their members effectively. Brown insisted that “we need stability in our industry policy, stability in industrial relations.... And at every time we must act to tackle the risks to stability and growth.”

After his conference speech, Brown was more explicit still when he told Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News, “There will be no return to the old failed conflicts of the past, or the disorder or the secondary action of the past.”

Blair underlined Brown’s message at a TUC dinner that evening. “It would be dishonest to tell you any Labour government is going to legislate a return to secondary action. It won’t happen,” he said.

Neither would there be any state intervention to protect public sector pensions and manufacturing jobs. Trade unions had to find solutions “based on reality” and realise they were operating “in a market in the same way as everyone else.”

“What you don’t need is another round of publicity about the usual demands on the Labour government met with the usual refusals,” he continued. Planned reforms to public sector pensions would go ahead.

China and India “will impose a competitive pressure on us that it is pointless to question. It is reality. So let us face it and work together in partnership. The alternative is no alternative at all. It is a decision to decline,” he warned.

Before Brighton, several trade union leaders had declared that Blair must go but Brown would only secure their support if he had different policies on offer. Woodley said, “I do not want more of the same. I do not want Blair 2.” But that is exactly what is on offer.

The next day’s conference was dominated by threats that government plans to raise the public sector retirement age to 65 could provoke a strike involving 3 million workers in 13 unions. And once again, Blair’s pensions chief Adair Turner told the TUC Congress that there would be no retreat by government.

Notwithstanding the bureaucracy’s present militant rhetoric, the trade unions have proved themselves incapable of defending the most basic interests of their members, let alone the millions of workers who are unorganised. This is not simply the result of a few corrupt leaders, though the social position of the bureaucracy as a well-paid caste of functionaries ensures that its loyalties belong fully to the ruling class.

The globalisation of production—wielded as a bludgeon by Blair and Brown—does indeed lie at the very heart of the present impotence and political degeneration of the trade unions. In the past the trade unions were able to secure certain concessions from the employers through industrial action and collective bargaining because this was considered a necessary price to maintain production within facilities that were essentially rooted within a national economy. Right up until the 1970s, even multinational companies tended to develop national production platforms as part of their global empire.

The past quarter of a century has seen an unprecedented global integration of production within companies and the development of massive new productive capacity in areas such as China and India by truly transnational corporations. The global mobility of capital coupled with the creation of an ever lower international benchmark for wages has fatally undermined the trade unions, which take as their point of departure the existence of the profit system based on private ownership of the means of production and are organisationally and programmatically rooted in the nation state. They can no longer reconcile a defence of the profit system, on which the privileges of the bureaucracy depend, or their commitment to the success of the “British economy,” with a struggle to secure better working conditions and social reforms. Instead they have become little more than a management police force charged with imposing wage cuts and speedups in the name of remaining internationally competitive.

In order to not be set against lower paid workers in other parts of the world and to combat the threat of plant relocation and other forms of outsourcing, British workers must adopt an entirely new political perspective—socialist internationalism. The only way that British workers can defend their jobs is in an alliance with workers in China, not in a contest with them that only serves the interests of the employers. The globalisation of economic life presently appears only as a threatening development for working people. But it lays the most powerful basis for uniting the international working class in a common struggle for a new economic system based on production to meet the essential social needs of the population for decent jobs, housing, education, health provision and pensions.

Such a political turn can only be made in irreconcilable opposition to the trade union bureaucracy, whether this or that bureaucrat is advanced as a left or not. But workers will also face a direct conflict with the Labour government, which will mobilise the police and the courts to suppress any movement against the employers with the same ruthlessness and disregard for legal and democratic norms it has shown in its warmongering in Iraq.

The working class can no longer tolerate the efforts of the trade union

leaders to maintain the unchallenged political domination of the Labour Party. The transformation of Labour into a right-wing instrument of the corporate elite is complete and cannot be reversed. It is not a question of Blair going or what must be demanded of Brown—or anyone else for that matter. Working people need their own party—a genuine socialist and internationalist party—that defends their interests against those of big business. Without this there will only be more Gate Gourmet-style defeats and further attacks on social and democratic rights—jointly imposed by the TUC and the Blair government.

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