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# Trade Unions: Left needs New Year resolution to stiffen fight for new leadership

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**In a New Year message, TUC (Trades Union Congress) General Secretary Brendan Barber called for a national debate about top pay, bemoaning the fact that boardroom pay has more than doubled since 2000, whilst it has barely risen for the rest of us. It might have been better if he had recalled the words oft repeated by the legendary Irish workers' leader James Larkin, "The great appear great because we are on our knees: Let us rise".**

For the sad fact is that the gap between top and bottom has widened as working class organisation has been allowed to wither. Instead of looking at remuneration committee reform, as Barber does, the TUC would be better off getting its own act together.

Despite new "rights" to recruit members granted by the New Labour government and new "organising" drives by the unions to exploit them, overall membership of unions has barely risen. Historically, over 5 million union members have been lost, and the proportion of the workforce covered by collective agreements is woefully low (under one third of workers, less than half of previous figures). Official figures for industrial action are at their lowest for a century.

This is not due to some abstract change in society, nor can it be put down merely to the industrial defeats and law changes of the 1980s. It is a direct result of the path followed by the TUC. For instead of confronting the challenges laid down by Margaret Thatcher, the TUC bowed down before them.

Whilst, in the political arena the Labour Party was moving ever rightward, first from social democracy to a form of social-liberalism under Neil Kinnock, and then into pure neo-liberalism under Blair, the TUC itself undertook an ideological metamorphosis, shying away from organising solidarity action, dropping even the token campaigning against unemployment it had taken up in the early 1980s.

It adopted a three pronged approach: at the political level, accept the changes in the Labour Party and keep quiet, in the hope that sooner or later a Labour government would be elected; at an industrial level, embrace the concept of partnership in the hope that stronger businesses might eventually reward their workers; and for individual members offer better personal services (credit cards, discount shopping etc.) in place of grass roots organisation.

The position that this bankrupt strategy has left us in demands a root and branch rebuilding of our movement.

## First responses

The election of a set of more militant general secretaries in a series of unions over the last five years was the first expression of a general recognition of this need for change. But it has become clear that, with only two or three exceptions, the so-called "awkward squad" is not even that gauche.

While one or two smaller unions have begun to build themselves on the basis of a more militant perspective, the larger unions have responded by proposing mergers and by investing in a recruitment strategy which seems to aim more at using their numerical strength to hegemonise existing organised sectors at the expense of other unions rather than strengthen their existing organisation or organise (or reorganise) unorganised sectors.

Even where organising moves do seem more positive, as with the cleaners campaign organised by the "T & G" (Transport and General Workers' Union), it is not clear how much of the left rhetoric and use of militant methods is not in fact covering over new forms of "partnership" and single union deals at the exclusion of others.

# Breaking with Labourism

What is called for is a more fundamental break with Labourism, political and industrial. It is necessary to develop alternatives to each of the TUC's bankrupt three strategies. At the political level, the wait for a Labour government soon became, when we had one, a wait for a second term (when Labour would have a freer hand!) and has now become a wait for a second Prime Minister.

But of course, Gordon Brown will be no different to Blair. Indeed, it is clear that most of the current domestic policies that have been so disappointing to the trade union leaderships are actually Brown's not Blair's. Over and above whatever level of success the left-wing candidate, John McDonnell, may achieve in his challenge for the Labour leadership, the battle inside the unions has to be centred on building a serious political alternative.

The conference on political representation called by the RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport) union a year ago was an important first step. But the RMT has failed to develop the initiative. Instead they have followed the line of their general secretary Bob Crow; that the first stage is to revitalise the industrial grass roots of the trade unions, and only then would it become possible to build a new political force. Having been bitten by the bad experience with Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party in the early 90s,

Crow's position is perhaps understandable. But it is still wrong. Despite the good work the RMT has been able to do with its parliamentary group - far in advance of what was ever achieved in the days when the union was allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party - the failure to develop the discussion has proved costly.

The RMT has moved backwards - right-wingers blocked with supporters of Tommy Sheridan to cut off the union's affiliation to the Scottish Socialist Party.

We have to open up the discussion on what sort of political alternative is needed inside the trades union movement. The RMT should also be pushed to restart its debate, as was formally agreed at its last annual conference.

The organising committee that came out of the (Respect-led) Organising for Fighting Unions conference has an important role in promoting the discussion we want. It is planning to hold a series of rallies around the country and as well as promoting practical campaigns it should be stressing the need to build a broad socialist political alternative.

It is not enough merely to proclaim the need for a new party to the left of Labour. It is important that we have a living example of such an alternative, so despite all the problems that go with its current conception we need to build Respect as best we can.

But at the same time we need to recognise that for many people Respect cannot be THE answer, and we must therefore be prepared to be flexible in putting together a new party. If we are to overcome suspicions about acting as outriders for predetermined (revolutionary) dogmas we need to build a framework which encourages genuine cooperation without entrenched ideological position-taking.

For that we need to build an avowedly socialist party, going beyond being a coalition between (revolutionary) socialists and others, with a clear socialist programme and a democratic structure which encourages the ability to

learn and develop and build its own independent leadership.

# Rebuilding in the workplace

At the industrial level the TUC's "partnership" ideology has gone hand in glove with a fatalism which argues that if you don't cooperate with the bosses they will just outsource (privatise, contract out, move abroad etc.).

Of course, however much partnership has been entered into, companies have gone ahead with their plans in any case, whatever the impact on their worker-partners.. But this climate of fatalism allied to the deadening effect of the anti-union laws does mean that the industrial situation is extremely difficult.

It would be wrong to invent a movement or struggle which does not exist, and we should be wary of those who over-glamourise. We cannot just call struggle into existence - the movement will only respond when it is ready. But there will always be some struggles, and we need to encourage the green shoots that do exist.

On the one hand we continue to see a number of small local disputes breaking out. Often these have been led by groups of workers with little or no experience. It is vital that we build a system of solidarity which can rapidly respond to their needs, giving practical assistance in fighting their immediate bosses and in overcoming the dead hand of their own union bureaucracies.

In this task both the Organising for Fighting Unions structure and the nascent National Shop Stewards Network have a role to play. On the other hand, we face, particularly in the public sector, a series of national issues, over pensions, privatisation and cuts, which need to be faced up to. It is clear that the existing union leaderships, whilst having to appear to oppose these attacks on their members, with few or no exceptions have no desire to enter into any of the necessary battles.

We have to fight to turn the rhetoric into action, whether through immediate internal fights inside the unions over pensions and privatisation, or by supporting broader campaigning, as in defence of the National Health Service (NHS). The anti-union laws clearly present an obstacle to this, as much because they centralise power in union leaderships as because they frustrate the taking of timely action. But the experience of postal workers and others shows that organised workforces can take action outside the legal framework - and that even within it a committed union can take effective action.

It is important that the anti-union laws are fought, with the Trade Union Freedom Bill an important propaganda part to such a campaign. But it can only be a part. For some the Bill is a way of highlighting their supposed powerlessness and a way of avoiding confronting the existing laws. But no amount of good work in parliament can escape the simple fact - that the anti-union laws will only be done away with when they have been broken industrially.

It is of course not possible to isolate the political and industrial fronts from each other. We need to promote a fightback at all levels - building anew a grass roots movement across the unions, building a fighting culture in each union, which means fighting for control of each union and demanding organisation at the top, with serious left coordination at the level of the TUC.

Credit card trade unionism and the personal service culture of the TUC played on the clear difficulties in maintaining grass roots organisation, under an offensive from the bosses. But we should not exaggerate the problems that exist.

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The biggest problem was that union leaderships were not prepared to invest real power in their members. A strong local shop stewards movement needs to be consciously built. In a climate of defeat this is no easy task. Only a real upsurge can present the basis for building a movement to approach those of previous generations. But that does not mean we do not have concrete tasks we need to take forward now.

The National Shop Stewards Network presents a forum for discussing how to proceed and for developing our movement. We need to encourage cross-union coordination between existing grass roots bodies, shop stewards committees etc. aiming to build a network of activists capable of delivering practical solidarity action. At the same time this means pushing to improve the conditions in each union for the development of independent grass roots activity. As Barry Camfield of the T&G said (cynically) at the RMT conference, "we need to change the centre of gravity towards shop floor representatives". Through this practical experience we have to fight for workplace reps to recognise the need to look beyond their own immediate concerns.

The two committees established at the RMT and Respect led conferences have started to work. The National Shop Stewards Network committee is looking to organise its conference in May next year. It wants to engage with the existing trades councils movement as a valuable cross-union resource in building for the conference around the country over the intervening months.

As well as producing propaganda outlining the practical benefits a network can bring it has recognised the importance of building active solidarity actions now, particularly in the face of the number of key national developments in the civil service and wider public sector around job cuts, attacks on pension rights etc. in the new year.

The Organising for Fighting Unions committee also wants to promote practical solidarity and is aiming to organise a series of regional rallies in the coming weeks. The basis exists for organising the OFU at a local level around work on the aims of the OFU charter - promoting existing campaigns around NHS etc, as well as the planned trade union delegation to Venezuela.

The National Shop Stewards Network, whilst aiming to be a rank and file body, is necessarily operating within an official framework, reliant on official trade union support in the first instance. It needs rapidly to develop wider support and sponsorship to give it an independent financial and organisational base.

In the opposite sense, Organising for Fighting Unions is effectively reliant on the trade union base of the SWP. Question marks arise over how the regional rallies will be organised. We need to fight for an inclusive practice. Again, the real solution to overcoming the perception of domination is to build the OFU at a broader level, involving the wider forces of Respect and beyond.

Whilst they have different remits and distinct objectives, the two bodies need to be seen as complementary. It would be tragic if what was to develop was two mutually antagonistic fronts, a union-based caricature of Respect and the Campaign for a New Workers Party.

The OFU has to be more than a cheerleader for the SWP and/or Respect's immediate concerns. It has to engage in broader practical work and debate. We should be in favour of setting up local groups where that does not cut across existing organisation of trades councils etc. Such local OFU committees should also see as a priority building for the NSSN conference.

The NSSN needs to be taken up through existing bodies at all levels where we can. We should also look to set up conference mobilising committees, with OFU support.

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It has been argued that, in the absence of a real new radicalisation in the trades unions, the National Shop Stewards Network cannot succeed. And that we have to rely on the forces that have emerged in recent years - through the anti-war movement, represented by Respect.

It is true that the Network will be limited by the lack of a real upturn, but that does not negate the need to build such a body and the valuable role it can play. At the same time others have argued that it has to address immediately the question of political representation.

But to force the issue would threaten its basis at this stage. We have to have more confidence that political questions will be thrown up, around the issue of the anti-union laws, building opposition to them practically as well as around the Trade Union Freedom Bill campaign, for instance, which will provoke a debate for which the Network can be a natural forum.

But having said that, those who write off the Organising for Fighting Unions initiative, arguing that only a modest approach based on the existing level of syndicalist consciousness will succeed, are equally wrong. They may be right to point out the sectarian problems of a lot of previous and current organisation of the trade union left and to point to the need to adopt modest but meaningful demands and not impose one's own shibboleths on "broad" organisations: but they are wrong to think that this is sufficient.

There has to be a challenge, not just to the bosses/government agenda but to the everyday trade union way of thinking and doing things. We have to make the argument to link the "industrial" and the "political". We need to understand the limitations imposed upon us - but engage in the process of building a solution, as part of a general plan to rebuild the trade union movement.

*This article was written for **Socialist Resistance**, a monthly newspaper published by British supporters of the Fourth International and other socialists.*