

SOLIDARITY e-Newsletter

Campaigning to Break the Unions from 'Social Partnership'

<http://solidaritymagazine.wordpress.com>

PO Box 1219, Swindon SN3 2WA

No 10

April 2004

*The emergence of a new generation of trade union leaders, identified in the media as "the awkward squad", has produced a debate in the unions about the significance of these electoral defeats for Blairite candidates, and what it means for the future of the unions. Two recent publications which analyse these developments are: **Andrew Murray's** book, "New Labour's Nightmare – The return of the awkward squad"; and **Martin Smith's** pamphlet, "The awkward squad, New Labour and the rank and file". **Martin Wicks** examines some of the issues raised in these publications.*

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the election of a series of candidates to top union jobs on a left ticket reflected a general trend, these individuals themselves are a very mixed bunch indeed. They are to varying degrees critical of the Blair government, reflecting the very deep conflict between the unions and the government, but they do not reflect a homogenous grouping with a common outlook or programme. Lumping them together with a journalistic label does not tell us a great deal. The election of these individuals reflected the deep dissatisfaction of the membership with unions which have swallowed the 'partnership' poison and their lack of success in the face of an employers' offensive. Of course, we can only welcome a situation in which, as John Edmonds said, a Blairite doesn't stand a chance of winning an election for trade union office (ASLEF being an exception, and a warning). Even Jack Dromey of the TGWU had to remodel himself into a (not too convincing) critic of the government.

The election of leaders more critical of the government, some of whom are more responsive to the membership is a step forward. But, of

course, it does not add up to a transformation of the unions.

The election of Derek Simpson in Amicus was a revolution in miniature, in a union which had (in its EEPTU component) assisted Murdoch in organising a scab workforce at Wapping when 5,000 workers were sacked. The recent EC election has seen 23 candidates on the left wing Amicus Gazette/Unity slate being elected out of 48, confirming the trend to the left, although there remains a great deal to do to break the grip of the bureaucratic machine.

Some of the "awkward squad" such as Rix and Serwotka were rank and file activists, outside the central union machine, whilst others were long time members of the apparatuses. For instance, as Matt Wrack pointed out in issue 10 of **SOLIDARITY**, FBU leader Andy Gilchrist, although on the left politically, was a candidate of the union machine. The defeat of the Firefighters' dispute suffered under his leadership is a salutary reminder that the election of left talking leaders, even ones more genuine than Gilchrist, cannot in itself transform the unions.

Socialists have long debated how the unions can be radicalised and democratised and what forms of organisation are necessary to strive for change. There has, in the past, been a debate on the merits of a 'rank and file' approach as compared with the building of 'Broad Lefts'. However, the alternatives to the 'Broad Left' approach have tended to be marred by the sectarianism of the organisations of the 'far left'. The initiatives of the Socialist Labour League (All Trades Union Alliance) and the International Socialists (Rank and File Movement) involved broader forces to begin with, but both ended up as organisations under the control of the

dominant organisation. Later, in the case of the Broad Left Organising Committee, it was the Militant which exerted organisational control. Whatever the differences in these cases, they reflected a sectarianism which was rooted in the fact that these organisations considered themselves as ‘the party’ in formation, a sort of alternative leadership in waiting, and the organisations they launched were subordinated to their own interests; vehicles for recruitment rather than a means of uniting activists working to transform a union.

Whilst many years of defeat have knocked some of the sectarian arrogance out of these groups, it does not mean that they have broken with the methods of sectarianism, which tend to place their own interests above those of the working class. As we shall see, Martin Smith’s pamphlet illustrates some of these unresolved problems.

Broad Lefts and ‘rank and file’ groups

The perspective of the Broad Lefts of the 1960s and 1970s was essentially to win positions within the official union structures. If it conceived of making the unions more radical, it had no conception of transforming them, of breaking the grip of the trade union *bureaucracy* which dominated them. Martin is right in pointing to the fact that many a left union bureaucrat used these organisations to climb the greasy career ladder and then proceeded to break from their base of support. The classic examples of these types were Hugh Scanlon (AEU) and Jack Jones (TGWU), elected as left candidates, but who were later the architects of the Social Contract which was a means of assisting the Wilson and Callaghan governments in holding down wage demands.

To this Martin Smith contrasts what he describes as “*the rank and file strategy*” as if there were only one. Rank and file organisations differ from Broad Lefts in a number of ways, he says. “Firstly they are organisations based around workplace delegates who are subject to account by the workers they represent.” Secondly they are based in the workplace “where workers are strongest”. They cut across the sectional divisions found inside the workplace. “They are highly democratic and accountable organisations.”

This is a complete abstraction. I am not aware of any organisation, currently existing within the unions (or over the last 20 years for that matter), where you have “organisations based around workplace delegates who are subject to account by the workers they represent.” Perhaps this is an aspiration. In any case Martin confuses different types of rank and file organisation.

He looks at the experience of some of the organisations which the CP led in the 1930s, including one amongst London bus workers. This sort of organisation was rooted in the immediate demands of the members in their job. That is not at all the same thing as a broader organisation which is built at the level of a union and relates not only to national or international struggles, but the internal struggles within a union. Of course, the two may be connected, one may lead from the other, but there is no template which can be applied to all unions, religiously to be followed. Rank and file organisations connected with the workplace can be episodic things, out of which, of course, activists develop experience which broadens their outlook and leads them to more generalised political activity. But these differ from more long standing organisations built around a wider platform. Within the NUT, for instance, there is the fairly influential Socialist Teachers Alliance which has existed for more than 20 years as an organised force.

‘Pressure the leaders to fight’?

Martin illustrates his conception of a “rank and file strategy” and the trade union bureaucracy, by use of a quote from former SWP leader Tony Cliff. This is the idea of the bureaucracy “balancing” between the employers and the workers.

“It holds back and controls workers struggles, but it has a vital interest not to push the collaboration with the employers to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent. For the official is not an independent arbitrator. If the union fails entirely to articulate members’ grievances, this will lead eventually either to effective internal challenges to the leadership, or to membership apathy or organisational disintegration, with members moving to a rival union. If the bureaucracy strays too far into the bourgeois camp it will lose its base. The bureaucracy has an interest in preserving the union organisation

which is the source of their income and their social status.”

From this it follows that the role of rank and file organisation is to ‘pressure the leaders to fight’. Although Martin correctly states that we should not put our faith in any section of the union bureaucracy we have to disagree with this theory of ‘pressuring the leaders to fight’. Workers who want to strive against a particular grievance or to win certain demands, will press their union to agree a ballot and to endorse strike action (unofficial action is another source of pressure). It is true that a full-time official can either facilitate and support industrial action, or obstruct it and undermine it. To that extent the members will always have to pressure their leadership, to pursue industrial action through the official channels of a union, though the decisions are usually taken by collective leadership bodies, be they Executive Committees or in some cases, like the PCS, a disputes committee makes a recommendation to the EC.

But trade union bureaucrats develop the most sophisticated methods of undermining struggles, or even utilising them as a safety valve. The sad example of COSATU in South Africa comes to mind, where under pressure from the union ranks, in the face of a policy of privatisation, the bureaucracy has used ‘general strikes’ (usually one day strikes) as a safety valve designed to prevent a political break with the ANC government.

When a union apparatus endorses say a ballot for industrial action, the vote is won, and the action begins, the principal for socialists is striving to win membership control of the action. In any case what is critical is the level of organisation and consciousness amongst the membership. A trade union leader who responds to the interests and demands of the membership can make a big difference, of course, but it is the members on the ground, who determine the outcome (depending on the objective circumstances). Our main task is organising the members to struggle.

Martin illustrates this ‘pressure theory’ by way of a quote from a Firefighter in ‘Red Watch’ (a publication produced by the SWP), who wrote:

“Tony Blair put pressure on Prescott, Prescott put pressure on the TUC, the TUC put pressure on

Gilchrist and Gilchrist just buckled – at no point did he send the pressure back the other way.”

In fact Gilchrist was hardly likely to “send pressure back the other way”. The main problem was that the Executive buckled in the face of Gilchrist’s position. To expect Gilchrist to “send the pressure back the other way” would be to have illusions in the man.

The Cliff quote, by the way, which predates (I believe) the long series of defeats which the unions suffered, and the development of ‘social partnership’, was written in a period in which the unions were very strong. It is also wrong in one respect. Some union leaders did “push the collaboration with the employers to a point where it makes the unions completely impotent”. Witness the example of the EEPTU and the AEEU under Jackson. Or think of the experience of “business unionism” in the United States where union leaders sold jobs and conditions of service on a grand scale, leading to a catastrophic decline of union membership.

The ‘downturn’

Martin is certainly right when he says that “...a rank and file electoral challenge is not a matter of promoting an individual to change the union from the top. Instead it has to be part of a strategy to encourage and promote working class self-activity.” But the method of the SWP has been prone to the building of fronts; that is organisations which they control rather than a united front of activists across a range of groups and members of none. One of the weakest sections of the pamphlet is that of the experience of the precursor to the SWP, the International Socialists, which built ‘Rank & File’ groupings in the 1970s. According to Martin, in a very superficial explanation, this movement was “stillborn” because of the small industrial base of the IS and because “the confidence of the rank and file was subsiding – first under Labour and the Social Contract, and secondly under the vicious anti-union onslaught undertaken by Thatcher.”

In fact these groups, which initially had the involvement of forces broader than the IS were wound up as part of Cliff’s famous and tendentious ‘theory of the downturn’. Elsewhere Alex Callinicos has given the game away by

explaining that *the SWP decided to close them down*. If they had been genuine rank and file groups the SWP would not have been able to make such a decision. They would have had to discuss such a step.

The SWP rationalised that it was impossible to build rank and file groups in the given circumstances. There had been a debate in the SWP over the need for these organisations to be open and not controlled by the IS. But they were turned into front organisations. Some of the leading figures in these groups were expelled by the SWP for refusing to wind them up.

For socialists in the unions, in order to build a base in the workplace and the wider union, it is necessary to carry out consistent long term activity over many years. You have to do this under all conditions, good or bad. The argument that conditions precluded building rank and file organisation was nonsense. Objective conditions impact on what results you are able to achieve, but activity in the workplace and wider activity in each union, necessarily requires collaboration with a wide range of activists with whom you might have only limited agreement. The extent of this collaboration may vary, may be informal or episodic, or it may develop into long term organisational collaboration, but in any case you cannot simply abandon it on the basis of the latest 'theoretical' elaboration. This has to be ongoing long term activity, whatever the conditions.

Democratising the unions

Martin's conception that the main division in the unions is "between the rank and file and trade union leaders" is too simplistic. Perhaps that is why he concentrates much of his attention of the so-called "awkward squad" and *completely neglects* the structures of the unions he discusses, especially the executive committees. No union is just its national leaders and the 'rank and file'. It is a complex of structures which socialists have to *strive to democratise, from top to bottom*. As Matt Wrack explained in issue 10 of **SOLIDARITY**, the lack of membership control of the FBU Executive Committee was crucial in the loss of the recent dispute. The Executive allowed Gilchrist to play the role he did.

There are other structures, of course, all the way down to the branch level. For socialists the key principle is striving for *membership control at every level*. How this is organised may vary from union to union, of course. We have to deal with the concrete situation in each union. In the CWU, for instance, Executive members are not involved in national negotiations. This has often meant that the national officers have not been working under the control of the Executive. In the FBU, Executive decisions are not even recorded and open to membership scrutiny, so that some EC members have said one thing to the people they represent and done another thing in the secrecy of EC meetings!

You can trace a bureaucratic machine all the way down to the workplace level. This is not simply constituted by a social layer with privileges, but by the politics and orientation of a particular union. For instance, in the 1960s and '70s the strong shop stewards movement which existed in the car industry and engineering, was largely independent of the union machines. However, with the defeats of the Thatcher period and the adoption of 'partnership', shop stewards, instead of often being the most class conscious and combative of union members, were more likely to be time servers whose function was to impose the interests of the company on the workforce. The whole apparatus at that level was subordinated to the agenda of the company and 'success' in the market place. There were obviously some exceptions to this, but not that many.

Part of the explanation for the unofficial action in the Post Office is precisely the activity of local reps, individually and collectively, who have never been sold on the 'partnership' with the Post Office, and in the case of London have built a network of activists.

Jewel in the crown?

Martin Smith's pamphlet deals with the experience of the SWP's efforts to build rank and file organisations in a number of unions. The jewel in the crown of "the rank and file strategy" is presented as the 'Post Worker' group in the CWU. It sounds impressive, apparently selling 10,000 copies of its publication, an editorial board with a range of political views and affiliations. However, we can be forgiven for a certain scepticism in relation to these assertions. At the Florence

European Social Forum we had the spectacle of Martin Smith attempting to speak on behalf of 'UK Postal Worker' at a trade union meeting, despite the fact that he is an SWP full-timer. Yet there was an SWP comrade, a member of the CWU executive, who was present. John Rees personally told me that Martin was editor of Postal Worker "because they have political confidence in him". Members of other organisations as well? We remain to be convinced that this is more than a creature of the SWP. We are not decrying the work of the comrades but it is clear that many activists will not become involved with Post Worker precisely because they see it as a creature of the SWP.

Transforming the unions?

The main weakness, however, of Martin's pamphlet, which reflects the SWP's conception of a "the rank and file strategy", is *a complete absence of any discussion of strategy for transforming the unions*; for striving to break the grip of the bureaucracy on them. This is connected to their particular conception of "the party" as the vehicle for socialist transformation of society. It is true that a trade union cannot be a socialist organisation in the sense of an organisation comprised only of socialists. It necessarily is open to all workers. It is an organisation of self-defence, which strives for the immediate material interests of the working class in a workplace and industry. Its political development depends on the level of consciousness of wide layers of the membership. Trades unions can be obstacles to the struggle against capitalism, or they can be crucial points of support for the struggle for a new society. Given their social weight as mass organisations of the working class, socialists ought to struggle to break the unions from the control of bureaucracies which have made their peace with capitalism, and strive to turn them into fighting organisations under the control of their membership. Of course, this will only be possible if the majority of the members support such a course, something we are miles away from currently.

We cannot say whether we will be able to transform the existing bureaucratised unions, or whether we will have to build new ones. Experience will determine that. In any case it would be illusory to imagine that we could build a

new workers party with socialist aims and methods unless there was a political radicalisation amongst the ranks of the unions. What is necessary for socialists in the unions is not a "rank and file strategy" which pressures leaders to fight (and leaves them in the saddle), but a political strategy which strives for democratisation of the unions, membership control of them, independence from the employers and the state, and today especially, a working class internationalism which connects up with the anti-globalisation movement. Unions cannot be a substitute for mass parties and socialist organisations, but such organisations are unlikely to be built (at least with a mass base of support) unless there is a transformation of the unions into organisations which have an anti-capitalist orientation and which act according to a class outlook which builds the widest cross union solidarity and tackles issues associated with social conditions of workers where they live as well as where they work.

Trade Union Bureaucracy

In his book, "Return of the Awkward Squad", Andrew Murray completely fails to deal with the issue of the trade union bureaucracy. This reflects the Communist Party's historical view of changing the leaders of the unions rather than seeking to transform them, not only in their outlook but in their dominant methods of operation.

Politically, Andrew says much which is correct. He criticises the pragmatism and reactive approach which has dominated the unions in Britain. "The vice that has beset the British labour movement for a century and more has been pragmatism, a denying of politics and a lack of perspective beyond bread-and-butter issues."

He says:

"...the sometimes exuberant militancy of the early 1970s was only unevenly reflected in a deeper political understanding. Winning higher wages through strike action does not in itself lead anyone to seek alternatives to the capitalist system."

"...in the absence of a clear lead towards an alternative perspective, the trade union movement lost considerable ideological ground to the Tories."

He is certainly right when he says:

“For the great majority of trade unionists, including some left wing leaders, the economic struggle was an end in itself. Challenging capitalist power structures would have required a *political* leap which was scarcely contemplated let alone attempted.”

He identifies three issues in particular that demand attention:

- The need to organise millions outside the unions, which must include an alternative to the discredited ‘social partnership’ model;
- The imperative to insure equality in the movement for women and black people;
- The requirement for a new approach to internationalism in an evolving world economy.

“A more general vision of the role of the labour movement in society and the development by the movement of social, economic and political alternatives by the world as it is, can only rest on progress on these questions.”

In other words he understands the necessity of the trades unions linking their everyday activity to the struggle for a new society. However, there is a gulf between this and the existing bureaucratic unions which have made their peace with capitalism, even with their more radical leaders.

Even worse, these new left leaders, ably assisted by their ideological guides in the Communist Party of Britain, are to defeat New Labour within the Labour Party’s structures by apparently combining with people like Robin Cook and others who previously went along with Blair, to create some variety of ‘real Labour’? Defeating New Labour means:

“...bringing centre-ground Labour figures like Robin Cook, Frank Dobson, Glenda Jackson and Peter Kilfoyle into a ‘reclaim Labour’ alliance with the unions and the left on a policy which, initially, would need to focus on a very few key questions – peace, defence of public services and elementary measures of an egalitarian nature.”

So the socialist aims are left hanging in the air as disembodied aspirations which will have to wait for better days.

Unofficial action

Martin Smith’s pamphlet paints a picture of a general trend towards unofficial action. This is partly true, but in some respects it marks wishful thinking on the part of the SWP. The unofficial action at Heathrow was an important development because it was carried out by a group of workers who had no experience of it previously. In the case of the Post Office, there is more of a tradition of such action (undermined by a couple of years of ‘partnership’). In the main centres of the industry there is a tradition of not moving mail emanating from an area where there is strike action.

What was new in the CWU was the unofficial ballot organised in the London Region around the London Weighting issue. This organisation based largely on the reps in the Region was able to force the union to call the official ballot.

To equate the “unofficial action” in the FBU with this trend is to misunderstand what happened. The action was the result of...pressure from FBU HQ. In fact some areas were reluctant to carry out this action because they knew that the union apparatus was cynically manipulating the membership for its own ends rather than being serious about organising action. This fact was reflected by the not so secret campaign of Gilchrist to get a yes vote in the referendum on ‘staging’, despite the fact that he could not get the EC to call for a ‘Yes’ vote, whilst they did not have the will to call for a ‘No’ vote.

In the case of the CWU the unofficial action was able to block the offensive of the management. Insofar as the management was forced back into the procedures it was a victory. But it was not the sort of victory which changes the balance of power between the union and the management.

Class consciousness

The militancy of the 1960s and 1970s was in part a product of full employment, but also of a rudimentary class consciousness amongst wide layers of the working class; an instinctive understanding (largely based on experience, of

course) that the worker and the boss did not have interests in common. However, the limits of this consciousness, meant it was found wanting when faced with political questions, and especially when the state (and government), which had reached a sort of 'historic compromise' with the unions at the end of the war, launched a class war against them.

The defeats which the working class suffered in the Thatcher era and after, led to a decline in class consciousness. The severe weakening of the unions meant that workers could not rely on collective organisation to defend them in many workplaces. They were left to their own devices, their own ingenuity. Moreover, younger generations of workers were not incorporated into the unions in the way that they had been in the past.

In those sectors of the economy where 'partnership' became the norm, the unions were often indistinguishable from the management, identifying their interests with the 'success' of the company. The independent interests of the workers were abandoned. Tony Woodley, in an interview in Andrew Murray's book makes the following scathing comment:

"I think there is a real sense of disappointment amongst members of the trade unions are less principled than in the past and do not seem to stand up and battle for people's interests as in the past – that they become almost irrelevant.

Working people out there, because of the partnership principles which have been adopted over the last decade and a half, purely to give the unions the chance of increasing membership, because of the single union, almost no-strike deals, feel that we have become part of the management structure. And if that view is coming from people who are already in unionised workplaces, then I have to ask myself, what do people who have never been in a union feel about us?"

Woodley calls for "an end to concession bargaining" yet he was one of its foremost practitioners in the motor industry.

Although some of the 'awkward squad' have said harsh things about partnership, it is a big overstatement to refer, as Martin Smith does, to "its rejection of partnership with the bosses".

There has been no clean break with partnership, and no ending of partnership deals. In fact the only union which has a policy of opposition to 'social partnership' is the RMT.

For instance, in Murray's book we read Derek Simpson saying the following:

"...in a sense social partnership is not finished – its finished only in the sense of being something beyond what already existed, which is normal negotiations. We've always had partnerships – you sit down and negotiate wages...he wants to make a profit, we want more wages. That is what I mean by partnership."

What's in a word? Confusion reigns here. Simpson is saying that partnership is...collective bargaining!

Socialists in the unions have to strive for a clear understanding of the need for a *clean break* with the whole partnership agenda and the development of consciousness that the interests of the working class are opposed to those of the employers.

At the same time 'militancy' itself is no solution. Militancy can be entirely sectional and self-interested, rather than an expression of class consciousness which recognises the broader interests of the working class as a whole and seeks to support all those oppressed by capitalism. The development of a new layer of class conscious trade union activists is necessary to rebuild working class organisation from the ground up. The class consciousness that is required must be based on an understanding not only of the reality of life in the workplace, but the need to rebuild a tradition of solidarity between different groups of workers, the defence of the wider interests of the working class (e.g. defence of social gains such as council housing, the NHS and so on), and opposition to all forms of oppression which divide the working class.

Finally, one of the things which we believe is missing in this situation, is a network of union activists, on a cross union basis, which could serve as a forum for discussing their struggles and learning from the experience in other industries and unions. Whilst many activists know their own union very well, too often we are not

well enough informed about developments in other unions.

Today, the problem we are faced with is the development of a new layer of class conscious union activists who strive, in their workplace, and their union, to break them from any alliance with the employers. In the 1960s and '70s class consciousness was often limited to a narrow vision of conflict in the workplace. Today, the development of such a consciousness has to take on board the realities of capitalism in the period of 'globalisation', and the need for an international perspective for the interests of the working class. It has to take on board an understanding of the forms of oppression which capitalism meets out to the most oppressed sections of the working class, women, black people, and increasingly the super-exploitation of migrant labour.

Conclusion

Martin Smith concludes the pamphlet by saying that in the struggles to come:

"The role the new union leaders play and the confidence of the rank and file are going to be two critical factors."

The conception of "organising the rank and file" is however, too crude. It is true that the approach of socialists must begin from the widest possible involvement of the membership. The organisation of the ranks is connected with the development of control over all elected positions, from the shop steward upwards. This requires a conscious challenge to the "service" ethos, which developed in the wake of the defeats of the 1980s, and the reassertion of the *collective* interests of the membership and wider working class interests.

To say, as Martin does, that the development of bureaucracy is in the very nature of trades unions, is a recipe for passivity unless we develop a conscious struggle to break the grip of the union bureaucracy on our organisations. 'Pressure' from the workplace, whilst necessary, is insufficient. In each of the unions we need concrete aims to democratise them (which will obviously vary from union to union). Membership control is the other side of the coin of radicalisation of the unions, their independence from the employers. *In the last analysis it is only the mobilisation of the membership which can open the way to*

transforming the unions into fighting organisations which are points of support in the struggle against capitalism. Winning elections at every level of a union is a necessary part of the struggle. But the best of individuals in leading positions, with the best will in the world, cannot substitute for a conscious and active membership which understands that *they* have responsibility for building their organisation; that it is a collective endeavour and not one left to other people.

The organisational means of mobilising the membership will vary according to the circumstances. Broad Leftism provides no solution because winning positions within the bureaucratic apparatuses is liable to lead to even good individuals being tamed by the apparatus or their being isolated and defeated. But 'rank and filism' in the form of a vehicle controlled by and in furtherance of the interests of a single political organisation, be it the SWP or any other organisation, will fail to unite those forces within a union which want to transform it into a fighting organisation under membership control.

There is no substitute for creative thinking which connects these long term aims with a concrete situation in a particular union or industry. In the early 1990s the launching of the Campaign for a Fighting and Democratic Union in the RMT provided a good example of how a campaign rooted in the union structures (in this case it won the support of 36 branches and District Councils) could gain more resonance than an organisation which simply brought together 'the left'; members of the various left groups. The impetus for the launching of this campaign was the failure of the Knapp leadership to face up to the threat of privatisation, and a cynical manoeuvre which produced a series of cuts in the union, which had democratic implications, after the deadline for resolutions to the AGM. (There was no facility for emergency resolutions.)

Unfortunately the campaign's development was blocked by leading figures in it who wanted it to be a self-selected group rather than one which brought together representatives of the supporting organisations. They wanted to exclude people who they considered as 'ultra-lefts' (some of them were). Yet anybody who could be delegated from their branch or District Council was a legitimate representative, whatever their politics.

In a very recent parallel, the emergence of the 'Brunswick group' in the FBU was based on the idea of bringing together members and representatives from the union Regions which opposed the deal which wound up the strike. There have been tensions between this group and the SWP's 'Red Watch' which presents itself as 'the voice of the rank and file'. However, not unnaturally those FBU activists opposed to the existing leadership and their sell-out of the dispute, recognise the need for a campaign which unites all those forces opposed to the deal, whatever differences they may have. Hence the launch of the new Grassroots FBU, attempting to unite all those who want to defend the service against cuts and to 'reclaim' the union from bureaucrats who are unaccountable. We do not know how Grassroots FBU will develop, but it is an initiative rooted in the material circumstance of the membership and connecting with their consciousness. Many of the FBU activists are new and have no wider labour movement experience.

Building 'rank and file' groups which are at the service of a particular political group, will not serve to unite the membership in a struggle to 'reclaim' a union. A political organisation has every right to produce its own publications in a particular union or industry. But presenting these as 'the voice of the rank and file' is crass and will not fool people.

On the other hand, building groups which seek to win elections, whilst failing to develop an active and politically conscious movement of the membership, will lead only to disappointment in leaders who are not connected with and accountable to the ranks. It is necessary to combine challenging the bureaucracy on the electoral terrain with building a movement based amongst the membership which seeks to radicalise the unions and to democratise them from top to bottom.

The views expressed herein are those of the author. If you would like to comment on them please e-mail:

martin.wicks@btinternet.com