

'cumulative recuperation' of the rank and file. For what we are again seeing is continuing significant *decline*. The underlying decline in the number of strikes, working days lost and workers involved, from the mid 1980s accelerated in the 1990s. By the turn of the decade the number of strikes was running at 25% of the 1970s average and by 1993, with just 211 stoppages — the lowest number since records began — at 10% of the average of the 1970s. Moreover the strike had become a phenomenon largely restricted to the public sector.

As with other areas of union activity industrial action has been increasingly moulded by the 'success' of the Conservatives' "employment legislation" as one part of an unfavourable economic and political environment. A *Labour Research* survey published in September 1994, for example, showed "a sudden and significant change in employer tactics with renewed interest in using the law." More injunctions were being targetted against individual union representatives. Injunctions and threats of injunctions continued to influence union policy and constrain effective workplace organisation. The recent campaign over the check-off and the energy and

resources shop stewards had to devote to this issue demonstrates the continuing problem.

No snapshot of the state of the industrial struggle can conclude — as *ersatz* syndicalists do — without some estimation of the position of the union leadership and the wider political position which, the semi-syndicalists forget, *interacts with rank and file militancy*.

The 1994 reorganisation of the TUC has produced an erosion of democracy and confirmed the weakening and balkanisation of the labour movement. The relaunched TUC has now moved decisively against independent struggle-based, *class* trade unionism. It has firmly adopted a European-influenced business unionism. It seeks to appropriate HRM for its own purposes of collaboration and to turn independent workplace organisation into an adjunct of personnel management in supervising the workforce. It aspires to obliterate the conflict between capital and labour in a new social partnership. This is reflected in TUC attempts to link up with the employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry, and yet again to impress upon the government the useful

role the union leaders could play in facilitating Conservative objectives. They have presented Tony Blair with a blank cheque in relation to the General Election. It is expressed in a variety of smaller ways too — through the spending of £20,000 on the design of a new logo, the appointment of consultants such as Liberal Democrat Des Wilson, and the licensing of shop stewards by the state and employers through the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications into shop steward training.

The new, explicit, collaborative pitch — Conservative ministers now address TUC conferences! — has produced some resistance in left unions such as the TGWU and UNISON. Yet, while there has been increased factionalism in the unions, the credentials of many of the Broad Lefts bear little scrutiny — except as broadly based "jobs for the boys coalitions." The TGWU is a good example: the practical policies of the BL reflect a spectrum from the soft left rightwards, with a dash of Stalinism. With its bureaucratic approach, it is focused almost entirely on internal elections.

Across the movement, the new business unionism is making important gains. A clear reflection of this is the attempted reorganisation of internal union relations. The model is managerial: full-time officers increasingly recast as managers diagnose the 'wants' of members conceived as individual, passive *customers* rather than as active participants in a collectivity.

The 'modernisation' of the Labour Party has downsized the formal and informal role of the union leaders. There is little doubt that if Blair wins at the special Labour Party conference at the end of April they will, after the dust has settled, accept the revision of Clause Four just as they accepted the 1993 changes. For them, the coming period will be one of 'heads down, don't rock the boat', 'anything for a Labour government'. All of this is not irrelevant to the grassroots struggle. It is intensely bound up with it: it reflects and reinforces its present weaknesses.

The present period and the future

SET IN a proper framework of analysis, the argument that we are in a new period lacks substance: the cases it points to are encouraging, but, carefully weighed, only straws in the wind. There are still significant strikes, still successful strikes, still examples of strong, democratic, workplace organisation. But workers have suffered years of reverses, mass unemployment, a hostile environment, poor leadership. This has taken its full toll. In terms of any *general political assessment*, we are still on the retreat, still fighting a defensive battle. A turning of the tide will in all probability require a changed political situation. It will take time. The tendencies of decades cannot be transformed in a few months. And it is a little incongruous to find those who held that the big battles of the early 1980s and the Miners' Strike occurred in a down-

The TUC way forward

THE TUC response to the crisis of trade unionism is to urge that membership and strength can be acquired by convincing employers that unions can play a managerial role in increasing efficiency, productivity and profitability. EU legislation can force management to make the unions their partners. Unions should positively embrace human resource management, flexibility, quality circles, team working and the rest rather than taking a strategic critical approach which recognises that under the civilised veneer these are techniques to increase exploitation and marginalise unions, not support them.

Works councils is the name of the TUC's latest flame. Under EU directives companies employing more than 1,000 workers and over 150 in two member states must establish a works council. These bodies will involve all employees. Union and non-union. Their powers are purely consultative. In some cases in the current perilous situation something might be made of these bodies. It is certainly correct to try to exploit and maximise the impact of EU initiatives. But the TUC's approach is uncritical, far from the method of tactical probing of these institutions from an independent base. The TUC miseducates by advertising works councils as an important channel for providing workers with a voice in decision making, in the context of 'partnership with enterprise.' This is something employers have no intention of con-

ceding and something works councils have no power to make them concede.

Our way forward

WE START from the reassertion of gritty unpalatable realities: conflict not co-operation; antagonism of interest not partnership; militancy not modernism; the movement not simply the workplace; class collectivism not individual self interest; the continued reality since the 1984-5 miners' strike of a period of working class retreat and union decline. We are not part of a team with employers and managers the workers we are part of a team opposed to the employers whose interest are ultimately irreconcilable with ours.

The realisation of this philosophy in practice requires the construction in the workplace of a consciousness of collectivity incarnated in independent steward committees. Starting from militant pursuit of every grievance and injustice in the workplace the new shop stewards will wear their ultimate correction in organisation across the enterprise and industry and up the union beyond the workplace. They will see progress as ultimately bound up with wider structures of power whose confrontation requires political action.

We see the need to penetrate and transform the existing labour movement, not work councils. We do not perceive new 'upturns' doing the job for us. We have to do it; patiently rebuilding workplace organisation on a new basis, as an organic part of reconstructing socialist policies in the workplace and in the unions and revitalising the Labour Party. It is only in this light that recent industrial conflicts provide opportunities.