

productivity swindles, blue eyes management, "sell your soul to the company store". Even millions of miles away from the faintest echoes of class struggle, the bureaucratic "suits" in the corridors of Congress House recognise that in practice HRM for many is about nothing more than implementing redundancies, casualising the workforce, reducing wages and re-asserting management's right to manage. It is often associated with an intensification of work, and a deliberate strategy to derecognise off limits the influence of trade unions (*TUC, Human Resource Management — a Trade Union Response*, p3).

But, the TUC claim, this is bad HRM, counterfeit HRM, far from the full shilling. It represents a betrayal of real HRM of which the TUC bureaucrats, not management theorists or management practitioners, are the true custodians. Really true HRM is about an integrated strategic offensive to rip up workers' controls, introduce a new "enterprise culture" and establish "the world class workplace". In this, the TUC believes HRM theorists are right. Where they go wrong is in failing to see that this project is doomed unless it involves the unions in a new deeper collaboration with management:

"For too long our industrial relations system has focused on conflict resolution rather than the quest for common ground... a renewed emphasis on competitiveness and quality services (requires) a genuine attempt to build social partnership between trade unions and employers" (*ibid* p20).

Unions should no longer act as fire-fighters resolving problems for management at arms length — the role the TUC prescribed in the past. They must now act on "the common ground" as more direct agents of management in implementing the full programme of HRM. In return, employers will eschew the low-cost, cheap labour, non-union, sweatshop model in favour of a "European model where unions disseminate market values in return for high wages, quality welfare measures, a civilised working environment, a pride in product and an intermeshing with management. British capital must compete with Germany not with Taiwan."

The problem with this is that it flies in the face of the current state-employer consensus. This is masked by an intensifying hostility to unions and a developing offensive against them in the workplace as well as in the corridors of power. A partnership with the unions is far from the mind of Major or even Blair. Employers by and large do not want the unions as partners. As yet, EU legislation is far from strong enough to change this. If employers wish to introduce HRM they do not generally want the unions' help in doing so. They want rather to marginalise workplace organisation. The TUC's approval is thus essentially utopian. It also helps to disarm resistance.

HRM and social partnership must be rejected and the struggle for independent trade unionism firmly counterposed to what is, for all the funny verbiage an attempt to forge a new business unionism. ■

## Headbang with a Blairite

### Against the stream

By Sean Matgamna

MANCHESTER UNITED and Tony Blair, these are John's gods. When you rubbish Tony Blair in John's presence, the decibels soon rise and the neighbours get to know about it.

John would shoot himself before he'd vote Tory, but he hates trade unions almost as much as he hates the Tories.

For a long time John used to work on the roads, stripping and laying down tarmac, but, 50 now, he has been crippled for the better part of a decade with back trouble and hardened arteries in his legs. Years waiting for an operation, he could still joke with me about it.

"Wasn't I going along a footpath to the hospital and I saw this feeble old lady out of the corner of my eye coming up behind me. And then she sped past me!"

His wife is typical of a whole layer of the working class now, holding down three low-paying, part-time jobs.

Bearing his afflictions with stoicism and bravery, John has spent years stiffly propped up on a special chair, watching sport and current affairs on TV — one of his prize possessions is a Sky TV satellite dish. He is very well informed. Passive in front of the TV, he is saturated with the wisdom if not of the ages then of the TV pundits. He knows. He knows that Labour can't win without Blair and Blair's policies.

John, a relative of mine by marriage, is a good hearted man who is not always consistent. He backed the miners, for example — maybe on George Orwell's principle when he sided with the anarchists in Barcelona in 1937, though he had no time for them politically: "When I see the workers fighting their natural enemy, the police, I don't have to ask myself which side I'm on".

John's hostility to unions comes from both his background and work experience. The son of a small farmer from the Irish midlands — one of the surplus younger sons who, like the daughters, get nothing because the farm must be passed intact to the oldest son — he came to this country at 16 and worked for many years for non-union firms on "the lump".

John likes an argument. He argues blusteringly, in an old-fashioned and highly dramatic Irish country style, voice rising frequently in indignation and histrionic outrage. He'll loudly and aggressively mark off a stance, maintain his front and then retreat with a laugh and a grin that expresses human-being-to-human-being concern, but still challengingly, giving nothing important away, waiting for your counter 'punch'. He makes up for his immobility in vocal vehemence!

I don't like a headbanging argument but I like John, and, staying with them for a few days in February, I wrangled with him, evening after evening. Courtesy!

I gave him the February *Workers' Liberty* and he hated it. That evening when I came in he said, voice rising in the good old style "Labour? You don't support *Lab-our!* It's the *Tor-ies* you support. Ye might as well, any-

way!"

You don't criticise the party you support. And you don't disagree with the leader. John, like a lot of people in the labour movement and Labour voters outside it, is strong for loyalty. If you back a party, you back it; you praise its leaders — as John's family would praise Fianna Fail and its leaders. As John would praise and defend Manchester United. Politics and football have a lot in common.

I couldn't, it seemed, budge him. I'd say: "What about policies; what is the point of a Labour Party if it is indistinguishable from the Tories?" He would reply "That's the only way they'll win! They've got to, now! People won't vote for them otherwise." He thought it a good thing that the curbs on the unions would, if Blair can keep them, continue. "Sure, they were *ruining* the country!"

After three or four evenings of friendly and sometimes not so friendly headbanging like this I tried a sneak attack. I led him into talking about what he wanted, what he would like to see done — about the National Health Service, unemployment and so on. Naturally, he, who knows from bitter experience what has happened to the health service, wants the NHS fully restored. He wants people to have jobs, young people — his daughter is 17 — to have a proper education. In fact he wants a lot of the immediate things *Workers' Liberty* wants.

Now I said: "But John, how can you square this with your support for Blair and the other Labour Tories?" I was surprised by the answer.

"Of *course* - se I can! Labour will restore the health service!"

"No they won't — unless the left forces them to."

"Of *course* they will! This is Labour — the *Lab-our* Party. Blair knows what he is doing. That's what Labour is *for!*"

Blairism is all just a game, a manoeuvre, to down the Tories!

After that it was just a bit of 'hard pounding' and a mopping up operation.

Finally forced to discuss issues, he said — and this is important though I won't pursue it here — that if Labour in office proved to be like I said the Blairites want it to be, then he would have to start voting "independent".

John, of course, with his ardent desire to down the Tories, his reflexes of blind loyalty to the Labour Party as it is, whatever it is, his inattention to policy detail, and his saturation-level diet of media propaganda is not, despite his background, untypical of many Labour voters and even of some Labour Party members. Like him, vast numbers of such people have an inner vision of 'Labour', and ignore the "details".

I was reminded of my arguments with John when last week I saw an opinion poll in the *Times* reporting that 51% of those asked expect Labour to improve Welfare State services and, despite Blair's frantic signalling to the contrary, that 11% expect Labour to reduce unemployment. They have, and — despite what Blair says — will continue to have, high expectations of Labour.

Just as a very large percentage of Labour voters in a recent *Telegraph* poll backed Clause Four when the pollsters explained to them what it was, many such people can be got to back the left now, if we make them think about the issues. They will oppose and can be got to fight a 'pink Tory' Blair government.

It is out of such contradictions and the struggles they will generate that the labour movement will renew itself. ■