

# NO MORE THE WORKING CLASS

There is a very real possibility that Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government will be re-elected during 1983 for another five year term of office. This chilling thought is the starting point of *Paul Holt's* analysis of the prospects for 1983.

I am not about to pose the heart-warming suggestion that during another five years of the 1980's face of conservatism the revolutionary left will grow in strength. My recipe for these grim times is this. Serious political analysis of what is happening to the oppressed and exploited, grass-roots political activity and personal survival; in short, preparing to fight again when the situation changes in our favour. How can a revolutionary newspaper publish such pessimism?

It is important to be honest about the odds which are stacked against us right now. 1983 weighs heavier on those of us who were nurtured by the heady days of the late sixties and early seventies; generations whose formative experience was the 1930s or the 1950s are no doubt more resilient, and today's political youth have the enormous advantage of starting afresh. But everyone will agree that the Tory victory in 1979 was something of a surprise, and even those who weren't surprised have been a little bemused by the growth in popularity of a government which has made a virtue out of mass unemployment, a reduction in the standard of living, a dismantling of the Welfare State and an open avowal of nuclear weapons.

No-one can take any comfort from the Tory ascendancy being accompanied by Labour's fall. The right wing split, forming the Social Democratic Party, which I once thought might be a prelude to a socialist Labour government, now looks like being the final nail in Labour's coffin. The SDP can only take votes from both Labour and Tory. Even if it takes equal votes from both, the Tories' existing lead, plus the boundary changes, may well leave them as the majority party. The Tories may not win an overall majority, but the price of an Alliance Labour coalition would be proportional representation; and proportional representation would be too high a price for Labour, since it would eliminate the possibility of a pure Labour government for the foreseeable future. Labour would prefer five more years of a Tory government, voting with the Alliance from time to time to try and discredit the Tories, in the forlorn hope of winning in 1988.

The Labour Party today is a symbol of the decay of socialist thought and action. Even the Labour beacons behave with the desperation of fireflies at dawn. The Greater London Council is clearly making some excellent stands in its support for the Sinn Fein visit, its efforts to stimulate women's action, its assault on the Metropolitan Police and its attempt to employ "workers' planning" ideas to London's industry. Elsewhere Labour councils are trying to implement equal opportunities policies, stimulate co-ops, refusing to take part in phoney civil defence exercises and the like. Some Labour constituencies are throwing up Parliamentary candidates who are clearly an improvement on their predecessors.

But everywhere there is an air of imminent disaster. The councils seem to be fueled by the foreboding of death in May. The constituency parties don't appear to be arguing that left policies and

left candidates will win marginal seats; they seem to be saying 'if we're going down, let's at least go down as socialists with principles'. And throughout the Labour Party there lies the dead hand of the trade union barons. Professing allegiance to the "mass membership" of their unions and the Party they have deliberately and consistently sabotaged the gains made by the left in the constituencies two years ago.

The final indictment of the Labour Party must be Tony Benn's: *'Macmillan's 'Middle Way' (written in 1938) was well to the left of the Labour manifesto of 1979'* (Guardian 3rd January 1983). This is a crushing remark because the left in the Labour Party cannot justify their claim to be transforming it. Their manifesto for the coming election will not be much to the left of the last one. Outside the GLC, the sprinkling of left councillors are having little or no impact on city policies. The sprinkling of left MPs and candidates give us no more comfort. Michael Foot is right to claim that it is Peter Tatchell who has changed, not him, when we read Tatchell saying that he is committed to a democratic socialism which he defines as "parliamentary democracy" (Guardian 11.1.83). And Benn says that "much of the fault" of our "unjust society" "lies here... in Parliament" (Guardian 3.1.83). Gone is the rhetoric of mass action and social transformation; the left of the Labour Party is back in the parliamentary road to socialism.

Perhaps the Labour Left can be forgiven their reformism when we look at the state of the revolutionary left outside the Party. The strident posturings of the self-proclaimed vanguard parties is immunising young people from politics and re-charging the conviction of those who have departed from the far left sects for the "realistic" climate of the Labour Party. And the Communist Party, firmly ensconced at the right of the Labour left, cannot even sell the Morning Star to more than half its members.

Unfortunately, those of us who reject both the 57 varieties of Bolshevism and the Labour Party cannot point to an alternative with enormous conviction. *Big Flame's* orientation has always been to the various mass movements. We have consistently argued that immersion in the struggles in the workplaces, housing estates, women's, black and anti-imperialist movements will be the training ground for our own militants. We have said that these movements will, with the help of ourselves and other communists, develop into mass formations out of which an unified assault on the state can be launched. We now have to be brutal with our illusions. Not only have the movements declined in stature, but their communist currents have been depleted.

## What next?

One of the major tasks facing us now is to analyse why these movements have declined and what was wrong with our theory, which made us misunderstand the nature of the movements. This article is not the place to develop

a full explanation, but one or two points should be picked out. First we should be clear that the Trotskyist explanation for the decline - betrayal of the workers by the Labour Party/Trade Union bosses - is garbage. Then we should look again at the views expressed by the few BF comrades who left us to join the Labour Party last year. They were right to criticise BF for failing to analyse the nature of reformist ideology and institutions; we had just assumed that "the masses" would sweep them aside. And we should develop our views about personal life under the capitalist, racist patriarchy (the CRP): we should discuss the ways in which the CRP gets under our skin and undermines our ability to resist, imagine and grow. But I think the



Photo Chris Davies (Network)

most urgent task for the communist movement is to analyse the way that the working class has been transformed by the modern capitalist organisation of work. This was one of the starting points of BF's theory, and Gorz's "Farewell to the working class" is its most powerful development to date.

Gorz dispels the illusion (held to some extent even in BF) that

industrial workers are the standard bearers of communism. In postulating "the non-class of non-proletarians" as the source of socialist action he is directing our theoretical attention to the new social movements. What we have to do is to apply ourselves to a practical evaluation of these movements. It is important that we dispense with the idea that their progress towards commun-

# STEEL AND THE

"Don't Let Imports Sink the Steel Industry", cries an ISTC poster carried by steelworkers in October. The call for Import Controls (IC's) to save jobs is being voiced by MPs of all parties, TU leaders, many stewards and rank and file steelworkers. Thatcher, in her eagerness to get back to the 19th century, is opposed. Where does that leave us?

IC's will increase nationalist prejudice and make international solidarity even harder. They will put British steel workers in alliance with British steel bosses, defending British jobs. But even as a short term policy, the effect will be more redundancies.

The current demands for protection have been triggered by the deepening world recession, the collapse of demand for steel, job cuts and financial losses at BSC, the successful battle by US steel companies to limit imports from the EEC, and the growth of 3rd world steel production.

Steel consumption fell last year by 5% world wide, 8% in the West, 10% in Japan, 16% in the EEC, and 30% in North America.

Last Spring, US steel companies - operating at 40% of capacity - began a series of lawsuits claiming unfair competition from EEC imports, because European steel receives bigger government subsidies (and can

therefore be sold more cheaply) than American "free enterprise" steel. By October, EEC producers faced an ultimatum: agree to strict limits on quantity or face a 26% import duty on steel sold in the US. The steel trade war was part of a wider American attempt to regain economic and political power over Europe: the pipeline sanctions and the siting of cruise missiles are other examples.

In late October, the EEC accepted the US pact - overcoming objections from the largest European producer, West Germany. The pact, lasting to the end of '85, limits the EEC share of the US market to 5% on most categories of steel. BSC expects European producers to try to dump their excess steel in Britain. And in each category an export quota percentage has been fixed for each EEC country. In general, W. German and French producers are favoured.

In Britain the falling demand for

steel and the Government's cash limits for BSC have meant redundancies: the current level of 94,000 jobs is less than half the number employed when the Tories took office. Steelworkers have accepted short-time working, higher productivity, lower safety standards... to try to hang on. BSC workers at a South Wales tin-plate plant even made a case for privatising their highly productive operation as means of saving it! Though the government reprieved Ravenscraig (and the 4 other biggest BSC plants) before Christmas, the plans are to cut BSC down to 75,000.

In this context, the Labour Party and some leading Tories (Du Cann, Teddy Taylor) are endorsing Bill Sirs' demand for import controls. More important to us, many steelworkers also see ICs as the way to save jobs. We think they are wrong on many different levels.

Since 1976, the government has



Redundant steelworker outside Port Talbot Steel works. Photo Steve Benbow (Network)

ism is automatic. We should look carefully, for instance, at the precise role played by women (both those who identify with the women's liberation movement and those who don't) within the anti-nuclear campaign. The attitudes, politics and composition of the young unemployed who led the riotous uprising in July 1981 should be studied. And we should analyse the mass mobilisation of black people after the New Cross Massacre, and attempt to evaluate the role of the Race Today collective as the prime movers of that campaign.

All this is no more than a suggestion for self education. But that should not be a reason to condemn it. Our mistaken theory has not caused the decline in mass politics - but it has been a major impetus for many militants to leave the revolutionary camp altogether, and that has been a severe loss to the movements. No serious revolutionary action can take place without clear theory, and we have to lay down the basis for such action in the 1980s.

But we can't live by theory alone, and theory cannot be effectively developed in an arm-

chair. BF supporters should, in my view, prioritise work either in those campaigns where revolutionary ideas are still alive (eg some anti-imperialist campaigns) or in those small groupings of ordinary people where revolutionary ideas can be developed (eg some anti-police campaigns, some tenants' groups, some workplace groupings). Orthodox left activity (in trade unions, anti-nukes, etc) seems to me to be barren soil at the moment, and I have my doubts about those anti-deportation campaigns which have become dominated by white people, who seem more intent on professing friendship than politics.

Finally, I want us to stay alive. This means admitting it when we feel depressed and finding some other solution than rushing off to another depressing meeting. Each of us has our own antidotes (from cocktails to radio one and beyond) and these should be grasped without shame. The struggle for communism is 'out there' but it's also 'in here', and it's not about to reveal its solution. But Better Must Come.

expect the same even from Tony Benn.

But just suppose a left-Labour government was trying to implement a radical AES, mobilising the working class around demands for socially useful steel products like an expanded rail and bus service, combined heat and power stations, new building of council houses, schools and hospitals. Suppose the Government subsidised energy costs for BSC. Suppose workers in steel-using industry met steel workers to plan production levels. Suppose steel workers were vastly more organised to resist speed-ups, wage cuts, and rationalisation (all to be expected if BSC is supposed to be profitable).

Suppose the left government accepted that BSC cannot make a profit or even break even. Suppose, in other words, that the government attempted to legislate production for social need rather than for profit, and encouraged the development of working class power in defence of these plans?

The result would be an open struggle for state power, as capitalists in Britain and internationally fought for their lives. The effect of import controls in this situation would be to alienate the most important ally we would need - the international working class. We would be trying to make socialism in one country. We would lose.

## Planning

We are not "free traders" and after a socialist revolution it would be vital for steel workers to meet internationally to plan trade. These meetings can, and should, take place now as well. But within a mixed economy (still capitalist) they can't determine trading policy. Meanwhile, this side of a transition to socialism, we support the building of a national shop stewards network to co-ordinate resistance to any more closures and job transfers. Steel workers should make it as hard as possible for MacGregor and the government to lose another 15,000 jobs. A key demand to make is for a shorter working week with no loss of pay. The workplace organisation needed to fight the Tories' closures will come in handy when Labour's steel plant turns out to mean more control of wages.

It is encouraging that the South Yorkshire Action Committee Against Steel Closures and Redundancies has mobilised for a demo on Jan 29 not by calling for Import Controls, but for:

- \* Refusing to accept more streamlining to assist redundancies.
- \* Insisting that all manning levels are maintained.
- \* Actively obstructing the transfer of plant or manpower leading to job loss.
- \* Refusing to accept work transferred from other plants where jobs are being lost.

Don Brown (Manchester BF)  
Phil North (Sheffield BF)

# TEBBIT AND THE DOWNTURN

Our movement is, at least in part, in disarray. Defeat and retreat is the pattern. Some struggles against redundancy, wage cuts, victimisation, speed up or privatisation do succeed. But, for the most part, they do not. The depressing success of the Tories in undermining working class solidarity starts from mass unemployment, especially in the private sector.

Unemployment is officially at 3.25 million but according to Labour Research, is already at 5 million if properly counted. Far from provoking a massive response, the jobs massacre has knocked 1.7 million off union membership figures in the last three years. In that period, the National Society of Metal Mechanics, for example, lost 28,000 of its 50,000 members.

Fear of the dole is central to many of the defeats being experienced. But it is by no means the only factor. Some groups have tried to resist the employers' offensive. The Kinnell miners started a December pit stay-down. The failure to get Scottish area backing has made the NUM's militant posture look hollow. The NCB has wasted no time in putting the boot in elsewhere notably in Kent and South Wales. Fiery speeches by Scargill and McGahey were simply no substitute for mass involvement by the local membership. Miners are only the latest group that workplace activists hoped might begin a fightback. The ASLEF dispute was one that, if won, - and clearly it could have been - might have been a real shot in the arm.

And the health service dispute - for which many trade union activists outside the NHS worked hard - similarly was seen as potentially the beginning of the fightback. Local struggles against speed up, victimisation, wage cuts, redundancies and privatisation still take place daily. Any one of these could, in theory, provide the necessary shot in the arm.

In the private sector redundancies and speed up (often together) are the backbone of the employers' attack. Unfortunately there is strong pessimism amongst many workers about the chances of winning. In redundancies especially, the biggest struggle is often to argue that there is any chance of success.

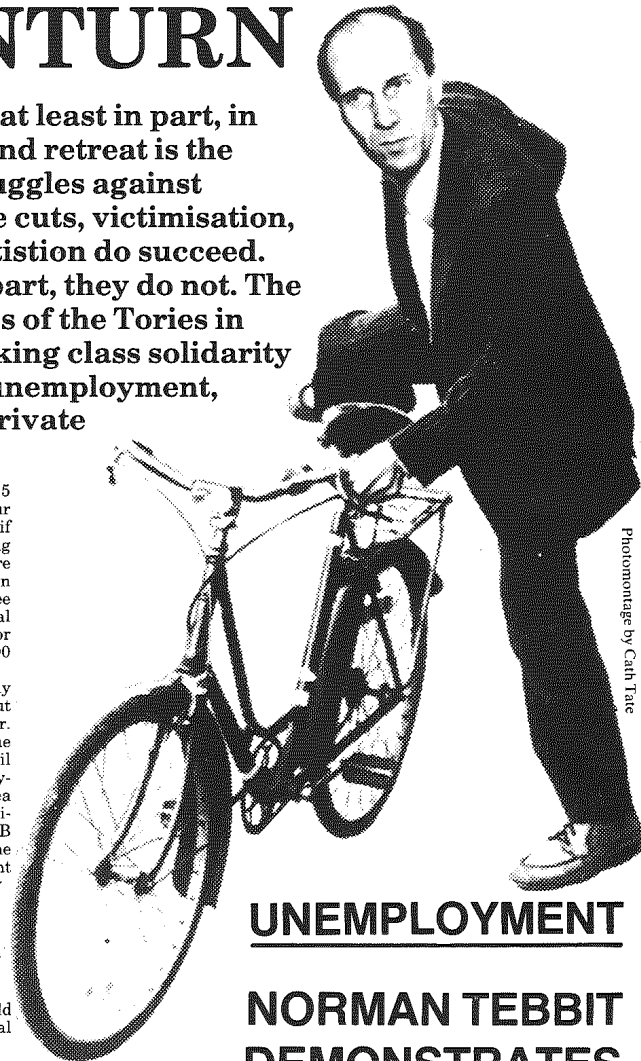
There are some successes often if incomplete: Lee Jeans, Gardners, AP Leamington, Maseys have all saved some jobs through mass direct action. But the overwhelming pattern is of accepting voluntary redundancies, seeking better terms and resigned apathy. Only where a determined effort is made *within* the workforce to resist has any success come.

The temptation for "political" shop stewards is all too often to try anything - lobbies, petitions, marches, social audits - as an *alternative* to mass involvement of the membership, rather than seeing community involvement as complementing preparations for an occupation. Time and time again this has been the pattern.

In the private sector, activists have battered down the hatches and hope to survive. The employers' productivity attacks are ripping up agreements over mobility, flexibility, rest periods and demarcation. The 39 hour week, for example, has often increased shift working, or simply meant 40 hours work done in 39.

Opposition to these attacks are met with redundancy threats. Opposition to partial closure plans are met (as at Timex, last month) with complete shutdown warnings.

In all this, the weaknesses of the existing trade union organisation has



Photomontage by Cath Tate

## UNEMPLOYMENT

## NORMAN TEBBIT DEMONSTRATES THE TORY ANSWER

been sharply revealed. Secret negotiations, undemocratic or non-existent section and mass meetings the "leave it to us" mentality of many stewards and officials - is proven to be woefully inadequate.

Where they can, most full-time officials hide behind a retreating workforce. Where a group of workers stands and fights, the officials hide behind the desperate state of most union finances or just openly sell out.

The battle against privatisation in Birmingham illustrated the problems. The manual refuse workers 'led' by hopeless officials and with no campaign of leaflets and meetings, and with a massive speed-up already accepted, voted to put in a tender to compete for their own jobs against private firms.

This disastrous "strategy" which involved accepting the Tory arguments about "inefficient council workers" has led to the loss of several hundred jobs, including compulsory redundancies - even though the council workers' tender won!

By contrast, 9,000 NALGO members stopped work at once when three social workers were sacked for blocking management consultants brought in as part of privatisation plans. NALGO stewards (or some of them) had worked hard to get such actions and were rewarded with a massive response. The full-time officials (in part responding to head office panic about the amount of strike pay involved) turned this into *selective* strikes. This move rapidly split the strikers from the passive supporters and the dispute was lost.

The impact of unemployment on public sector trades unionists has not been so severe as in the private sector. The strike pattern certainly shows this.

What is common to both is the shortcomings of existing organisations. The divisions, the apathy and often cynicism towards unions

amongst many members themselves is nothing new to Big Flame readers. What is new is the way that Norman Tebbit is trying to capitalise on it.

The latest green paper deals with:

- \* mass meetings - ballots are to be strongly encouraged or even mandatory - capitalising on discontent over railroading or sham democracy.
- \* political levy - replacing opting out with opting in - which will hit Labour Party finances and phoney block voting strengths.
- \* selection of officials - replacing appointments or ballot rigging with individual postal ballots.

The central aim of these measures is to further atomise union strength and mass democracy. They are a con. But they will get support amongst many trades unionist made cynical by the failure of unions to really involve all their members in decision making or to make their officials accountable.

We cannot win by simply defending what we have got. Unless we change the way we operate as trades unionists, we cannot challenge these arguments successfully.

Individual secret ballots plus mass unemployment are a dangerous combination. More than ever before the ideas outlined in our pamphlet "Organising to Win" are the only answer. To defend "our own little patch" is a recipe for failure. The answer to Tebbit's measures is mass involvement of the membership in struggle, not a few press releases denouncing Thatcher.

Roger Kline (Coventry Big Flame)

# E AES

been deflating the economy (cutting public spending, holding back rises in real wages, preventing any expansion in production). Though the Tories have deflated with a vengeance, they didn't invent the idea. The capitalist class as a whole demanded deflation in response to falling profit rates and rising wages, raw materials prices, and taxation to finance public spending. The Tories went on to use deflation as a way of intentionally increasing unemployment.

If a deflationary government, Tory or Labour, brought in import controls on steel, the immediate effect would be to decrease the demand for steel (and so lose jobs). Why? Steel users buy foreign steel when it is cheaper than British steel. So ICs raise the price of steel in Britain. This is passed on as a rise in the price of - and so a fall in the demand for - manufactured goods using steel. So the demand for steel falls. The government could compensate for the rising price of British cars (etc) by raising wages at home and lowering the exchange rate of the pound. But these are not deflationary policies. The Tories are unhappy with the falling pound, and as to wages... They would risk inflation.

## Expansion

But what if the government changed course and reflate (expanded) the economy, as Labour promises to do? To the extent that the Tories have deflated more than capitalism actually demanded, there is room for a capitalist government to reflate. This would increase the demand for construction work, transportation, etc. and steel use would rise.

The aim of ICs in this situation would be to make sure that the increased demand for steel was met by British steelmakers. As a member of the EEC, Britain can't individually play about with quotas or European imports. If Britain left the Common Market, it might try to increase control over the EEC (Western Europe is the source of 84% of UK steel imports and the main trading area for UK exports).

But unlike the US, Britain would lose this trade war. It is one of the weakest economies in Europe. The effect of ICs would be a massive retaliation against British exports. (In 1980, 'the refusal to enlarge textile quotas to £10m from Indonesia led to the loss of between £80m and £160m worth of British exports' - Socialist Review Dec '82).

In this situation, many capitalists would feel that they were being penalised just to preserve British Steel. (They would feel the same about price controls). They would revolt, and surely a Tory or right-wing Labour government would immediately change course. We would