



**1984 and the Shape of
Things to Come**
Chris Harman



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**The class struggle and the miners strike of
1984**

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Nineteen eighty four was a key year for the class struggle in Britain. It was dominated by the longest mass strike that Europe has ever known – the strike against closures in the mining industry. The government eventually succeeded in beating the miners, but only through using the biggest policing operation ever in any industrial dispute in this

country and paying out astronomical sums to enable the electricity industry to run on oil rather than coal.

The eventual defeat of the miners' strike, at the beginning of March 1985, followed three other very important defeats. The print union, the National Graphical Association, was beaten by the first serious attempt by employers to use anti-union laws to defend scab operations using new technology. The civil service unions and the TUC failed to beat off a government edict banning union organisation at GCHQ in Cheltenham. And the biggest rebellion in the car industry for some years at Cowley, Oxford and Longbridge, Birmingham was quashed using the newly passed law demanding ballots before industrial action.

The way in which these defeats shifted the balance of class forces towards the employers is shown by one simple indicator – the law. Until 1984 the major employers were very cautious about actually using the legal powers available to them under the Prior and Tebbit Employment Acts. Cases under the acts were few and far between, usually involved small maverick employers, and often never actually resulted in court appearances. Although the Prior law came into effect in 1980, it was not until the NGA case – in November 1983 – that any union was actually fined under it! In the early months of the miners' strike the ruling class at large was still so cautious about using the law that it applied pressure to make sure no-one sued the NUM; it was July before the first fines were imposed, even though much of the picketing was clearly in breach of the Prior and Tebbit Acts.

The picture since the autumn of 1984 has been very different. The issuing of injunctions by courts at the behest of employers has become almost a routine feature of industrial disputes. And so has the obeying of these injunctions by unions. What worried employers and

scandalised trade unionists in November 1983 now happens about once a week without anyone even noticing it.

The shift in the balance of forces towards the employing class has been accompanied by a sharp shift to the right within the official structures of the labour movement.

In the trade unions the broad lefts which seemed to be making such headway in the largest civil service union, the CPSA, and the major telecoms union, the POEU, have suffered split-offs to the right. The left-wing leaderships of the different areas in the miners' union have been at odds with each other and with the left-wing national leadership, and seem completely incapable of bringing to heel the scab leadership of Nottinghamshire. The very bureaucratic broad left which controls the TGWU has suffered a certain loss of credibility because of its failure to win the two dock strikes last summer, its failure to prevent mass scabbing on the miners' strike by unionised lorry drivers, and its defeat at the hands of the courts at Austin Rover.

Finally, in the Labour Party, the slide to the right which was evident before the miners' strike (the right wing getting a narrow majority on the national executive committee, the conference accepting the expulsion of the leaders of the Militant tendency) has turned into an avalanche since the defeat. The old hard left has split, with some of its most notable figures (first Meacher, Sawyer and Blunkett, and now Livingstone) going over to the Kinnockite soft left. Meanwhile, Kinnock does not even attempt to conceal the key role played in his front bench by hard right wingers such as Hattersley, Healey, Denzil Davies and so on, local parties are given *carte blanche* for expelling alleged Militant supporters, and there are even moves to use administrative action to break **Militant**'s hold on parts of the Labour Party Young Socialists (especially in Scotland).

A defeat – or rather a series of defeats – of very great significance has happened. The problem for socialists is to evaluate the scale of the defeat, what is likely to happen now and how we should respond.

The upturn of the early 1970s

In 1974 the Heath government was effectively forced out of office by its inability to beat the trade unions. Its Industrial Relations Act had proved completely ineffective in the face of an official boycott by most of the unions (even if only one major union, the AUEW, backed up its defiance by strike action) and mass unofficial action (in defence of the closed shop in Chrysler and Lucas, and against the imprisonment in Pentonville of five docks stewards). Its two attempts to impose wage controls were both wrecked when they ran into the resistance of the miners (in spring of 1972 and the winter of 1973-4).

Instead of shifting the balance of power on the shop floor towards the employers, its measures fanned the flames of discontent in industry. They did so because hostility to them provided a single, political focus for forms of industrial militancy that had not previously had an overt political goal.

During the 1950s and 1960s there had been a long process of depoliticisation of the working class in Britain. The Labour vote fell from almost 50 per cent in 1951 to 43 per cent in 1970. Real individual Labour Party membership fell by something like two thirds in the same period (so that by 1970 it was not more than about 350,000, with only about one in ten of those active in the minimal sense of attending

ward meetings or assisting in elections). The traditional left alternative to the Labour Party, the Communist Party, had suffered just as greatly: its nominal membership was still three quarters of the 1950 figure of 42,000, but the membership was much less active by 1970, with only about half paying dues, while the sales of its paper in Britain had fallen from about 80,000 to little over 20,000.

The largest manual unions (with the exception after 1956 of the TGWU) were controlled by right-wing Labour leaders – Jack (later Lord) Cooper of the GMWU, Sid Green of the NUR, Bill Carron of the ALU, Les Cannon and Frank Chappie of the ETU, Dai Davies of the steel union BISAKTA, Sid Ford of the NUM-while the largest white-collar unions, NALGO, the NUT and the CPSA were officially non-political.

In many industries the collaboration of right-wing Labour (or, occasionally, left-wing Labour) leaders with the employers, during a period of capitalist expansion and rising real wages, meant a very low level of industrial action: this was the case for most of the membership of the GMWU (the second largest union in the 1950s), BISAKTA, and the NUR, for hospital workers, for local authority workers (manual as well as non-manual), for postal workers, for telephone engineers, for seamen, for textile workers and for almost all white-collar workers (with the exception of those employed in engineering drawing offices). So, for instance, in 1971 there were only five strike days per thousand employees in public administration and defence, and insurance, banking and finance, 15 in professional and scientific services, and in gas, electricity and water, and 20 on the railways. This was compared with an average for all industry of 600 strike days per thousand employees! [1]

Things were very different in certain industries – especially the largest single industry, engineering. Here there were a great many strikes despite the disavowals of the

official union leadership. In 1971, for instance, there were six times the number of strike days per thousand workers in mechanical engineering as there were in the print and 25 times the number there were on the railways. And the figure for the car industry was, in turn, 12 times higher than the figure for mechanical engineering!

But such strikes did not necessarily represent a challenge to the right-wing national union leaders. For the overall strike figure was made up of a mass of small strikes, many going unrecorded, and each typically involving only individual sections in a particular factory. The key to them was the way workers in large chunks of engineering and motor industries had succeeded under conditions of full employment in turning piece work – a system of payment by results initially designed to increase the rate of exploitation – into a mechanism for raising wages, section by section, far above the rates negotiated nationally between the employers and the right-wing union leaders. Those who negotiated over the piece rates in the section – the shop stewards – could seem much more important to the shop floor workers than those who sat in the national union headquarters in London.

The result was that in engineering and motors, alongside the formal, national union structure dominated by the right wing, was another, informal structure, made up of more than a hundred thousand shop stewards. The stewards were not revolutionary. No more five per cent could ever have been members of the left reformist Communist Party, and research for the Royal Commission on Trade Unions showed that the great majority had ideas no different to those of the average worker – that is to the right of the ideas of many of the official union leaders. But the shop stewards were much closer to the workers they represented, usually facing annual re-election, earning the same wages, subject to the same

bullying from management and losing their jobs if sacking took place. And so there was much more pressure on the employers over pay and conditions from this system of stewards than from formal structures of the official union.

Until the mid-1960s shop steward organisation as such was mainly a feature of the engineering industry (including in this motors, shipbuilding and the craft unions in steel), and the building and construction industries. But there was a tendency for it to be copied for manual workers in other industries.

In two very important industries there was a pattern of unofficial action without a formal stewards system. In the mines, there was a level of strike activity, almost all unofficial, until payment by results was ended in 1966-70, as great as in the whole of the rest of industry put together. This was made up of a mass of strikes by particular sections of face workers which were often independent not only of the National and Area leaderships of the union, but even of the pit level leadership. [2] In the docks, the casual system of employment of dockers by the day meant there could be no permanent stewards. But it also led to innumerable disputes led by unofficial activists organising round dock gate meetings and capable of exerting enormous pressure.

Dealing with the shop stewards began to be regarded as a central problem by British capitalism as it came under increasing pressure on world markets. The press would regularly run front pages on 'shop steward outrages' at particular car plants (like Briggs motor bodies, later Fords, Dagenham, or the Morris Motors Assembly Plant, Oxford), two popular anti-steward films were made (*The Angry Silence* and *I'm All Right, Jack*), the leader of the AEU, Carron, would describe stewards as 'werewolves', and finally, in 1965 the Labour government set up the Donovan Commission specifically to look into the problem.

Donovan rejected a frontal attack on the stewards system or unofficial strikes through the use of the law. Instead, the report suggested a long-term effort to bring the stewards under the control of formal union structures and on increasing the importance of union full-timers in bargaining procedures (by moving to plant-wide bargaining rather than sectional bargaining, for instance).

This strategy was in line with what important elements in the ruling class were already doing when Donovan was published in 1968. In the car industry one major employer, Ford, already had a payments system. Measured Day Work, which did away with on the job bargaining between the stewards and management over job times, and after 1968 the other car firms such as Rootes (later Chrysler) and British Leyland followed suit. The National Power Loading Agreement had done away with payments by results in the pits and, with it, the major cause of unofficial strikes. And the Devlin report for the docks recommended replacing casual day-by-day organisation and instituting a formal system of stewards for the first time, as a way of decreasing the likelihood of strikes. Finally, there was a general move towards productivity bargaining in an attempt to increase output per worker.

The aim was to begin a long-term process to establish a climate in which management would be increasingly able to have the upper hand when it came to imposing new working conditions and speeds.

A section of the employing class did not like this softly, softly approach. They wanted legal measures to short-cut the process, nearly getting their way when the Labour government in 1969 published a white paper, *In Place of Strife*, recommending legal curbs on union activity. Labour retreated under pressure both from union leaders who feared the attack on unofficial strikes would damage them as

well, and from unofficial activists who organised the first political strikes for nearly half a century. But the Heath government soon set out to proceed where Wilson had faltered.

The result of this employers' offensive against strong, although non-political and highly informal workers' organisation, was the biggest and most political wave of workers' struggles since the 1920s. Attacks on full employment led to a very popular work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, and a number of factory occupations.

The attempt to enforce new anti-union laws meant that calls for protest action from the minority of activists associated with the hard left (the CP, the Labour left and, in rare cases, the revolutionary left) met with a response from much wider numbers of non-political union activists, producing official and unofficial one-day protest strikes in 1970 and 1971, and widespread unofficial action in support of the dockers in the summer of 1972, and preventing the dead hand of the union bureaucracy from maintaining control over what it hoped would be simply token protests organised from above.

At the same time repeated attempts by the government to hold down wages through incomes policies and wage norms (1966-9, 1970-71 and 1972-4) hit those sections of workers without informal stewards organisation and section-by-section wage bargaining hardest, encouraging them to engage in unprecedented forms of industrial action (in 1969 the teachers and dustmen, in 1970 the Pilkington's glassworkers, manual council workers and the Leeds clothing workers, in 1971 the postal workers, in 1973 the gas workers, the civil servants, the hospital workers). Far from containing shop steward forms of organisation, government action inadvertently encouraged its spread to whole new industries.

Under these circumstances, even the abolition of payment by results could backfire in the employers' faces. Because they were all faced with the same low wages, the miners could display a national anger over pay such as had not been seen for four decades in the unofficial strike movements of 1969 and 1970 and the national official strike of 1972.

New life was given to the left in the unions. The organisational structures of the Communist Party and the Labour left had declined in the 1950s and 1960s, as we have seen. But networks of political militants remained in many industries, capable of providing at least some degree of coordination and some focus for these struggles. The Barnsley Forum in the pits, the Broad Left in engineering, the joint sites committees (and later the Building Workers Charter) among building workers, the London Docks Liaison Committee and later the National Dockworkers shop stewards committee, were all formalised cases of unofficial organisation.

Alongside these there were informal networks – people who had been politically active together in the past and continued to know and influence each other. These networks were given new life as the struggle rose, and could themselves feed back into the struggle. This was shown when the activists of the Barnsley Forum took the initiative in the miners' strikes, when the convenors and stewards at Upper Clyde Shipyards tapped a massive reservoir of support, when the dock stewards led the fight over jobs that culminated in Pentonville, and when the Communist Party-led Liaison Committee for the Defence of Shop Stewards was able to call one-day strikes involving half a million workers against Labour's In Place of Strife in 1969, and the Tories' Industrial Relations Bill in December 1970.

These were exciting years for revolutionary socialists. Many sections of workers were in struggle. This attracted a

minority of the activists to revolutionary ideas. The International Socialists (the precursors of the SWP) could build 40 factory branches and see the numbers attending industrial rallies grow from about 700 in January 1972 to 2,800 in November 1973.

Even at the official level, the trade union movement seemed considerably further left than 10 years before. The left seemed in full control of the TGWU and the AUEW, and it had growing influence in previously right-wing 'non-political' unions like NALGO and the CPSA. The majority inside the TUC was no longer uniformly right-wing, and even called for token strike action on 1 May 1973.

However, there were three important limitations on the militancy of these years.

First, the defeat of the Tory government electorally in February 1974 was not due to any great shift to the left among the majority of workers. In fact, the Labour vote was actually down to 37 per cent (compared with 43 per cent in 1970). The Tories lost because their failure to win on the industrial front meant voters did not have confidence in them and deserted them for other parties (the Liberals and the Scots Nationalists), not that there was a swing to Labour. The new industrial militancy did not transform itself into political militancy.

Second, the swing to the left within the official structures of the trade union movement involved new faces in the bureaucracy, not a rejection of the idea of collaboration. Typically, left officialdom was quite prepared to go along with Labour Party schemes for more state funding of private industry, for productivity bargaining and for planning agreements involving government, industrialists and the unions. These ideas were accepted by many of those who made up the networks of political militants who had been so important in 1969-74. The limitation of their politics – its

basis in left reformism and Stalinism – had not prevented them fighting the fag-end of the last Labour government in 1969, or the Tory government which now followed. But these limitations would become all-important once there was a new Labour government backed by the left union leaders.

Thirdly, certain of the long-term goals of the ruling class in terms of control over stewards organisation did begin to reap fruit during 1969-74, despite the great upsurges in struggle.

For instance there was a big nine-week strike at Fords over pay early in 1971. This was a reaction against the effect Measured Day Work had in leading to lower wages than those of Midlands car workers still on piece work, but the existence of Measured Day Work then made it easier for Ford management to regain control of the shop floor within months of the strike, sacking a key steward, John Dillon, in Halewood. In some plants the weakness of the stewards' committee led to the election of a much stronger strike committee while the strike was on, but conversely, when the workers went back, power returned to collaborative bodies involving only the senior stewards – like the Joint Works Committees.

This was an ominous portent of what could happen in the rest of the car industry now that Measured Day Work existed there. Management could not prevent periodic rebellions by the workforce. But it could make it much more difficult for permanent unofficial organisation to survive.

There was only one option for the employing class if it was to regain the initiative in the spring of 1974. This was to retreat before the workers' movement, to buy off discontent, and then to work with the union leaderships to undercut the base of the militancy of the previous five years.

This was already recognised by the director general of the Confederation of British Industry, Campbell Adamson, in the run up to the 1974 election, when he expressed doubts about the Industrial Relations Act. His comments were disowned by many within the bosses' organisation, but these did not prevent the major sections of big business going along with collaboration rather than confrontation with the union leaders and the Labour government for a time. Typically *The Economist*, the major big business weekly, welcomed Labour's repeal of the Industrial Relations Act. It realised that the union leaders – including the Broad Left 'terrible twins' Jones and Scanlon – would be prepared to police their own memberships in return for such friendly government action.

The retreat of the employers in 1974 meant the collapse of the wage controls imposed by Heath, and a spread of strike activity among sections whose wages had been held down in 1973 – including traditionally non-militant groups like local government white-collar workers, nurses, bakers, lorry drivers, teachers – which came to a head in a 40,000-strong wave of strikes by lorry drivers, bus workers, dustmen, distillery workers and engineers in the West of Scotland.

But the new alliance of the government, the employers and union leaders was soon getting control over this wave of militancy. Jack Jones of the TGWU went out of his way to denounce the West of Scotland strikes, and they petered out without ever developing into a unified focus of opposition to the Labour government's policies.

The alliance was aided by something else – the way in which the world crisis that had begun in the autumn of 1973 was pushing up unemployment. In 1974 it rose 200,000. In the crucial car industry, it was already beginning to sap militancy, with the number of strikers dropping to half the

1973 level, and strike days plummeting by two thirds in Chrysler and by 85 per cent in Vauxhall. [3]

The union leaders pointed to the rising level of unemployment and the high level of inflation as evidence that 'chaos' lay round the corner unless workers collaborated with their bosses over pay and conditions.

Workers did not have the confidence to resist such arguments. They could have got it in two ways: if there had existed a widespread network of revolutionaries rooted in the factories and able to launch actions against the government/union leader/employer alliance from the left; or if there had developed mass spontaneous rebellion against the government's policies. Neither was present in 1974-5. The network of militants involved in the struggle of the preceding years still shared the reformist attitudes of the union leaders, and were not capable of initiating struggles around a different set of politics. And the struggles which arose spontaneously were not so large or profound to do so either.

In July 1975 the final deathblow was struck to the upturn of the previous years. The government announced a statutory limit of wages and the union leaders agreed to police it. Again it was the Broad Left leaders, Jones and Scanlon, who played the key role in selling this. The alternative, Jones warned, was 'the end of society as we know it'.

The two years which followed saw the largest decline in the living standards of employed workers in this century, and a very large drop in the number of strikes. Whereas there were 2,974 strikes involving 1,253,000 workers in August 1974-July 1975, there were only 1,829 strikes involving 591,000 workers in the next 21 months. The first phase of a downturn in the class struggle had begun.

The decline in the level of industrial struggle in the face of an incomes policy imposed by the government and the TUC was not a new thing. This had happened under the previous Labour government, between 1966 and 1968. However, this time there were two important differences which gave the downturn a more permanent character.

First, the role of the left union leaders in policing the policy removed an important focus of opposition to it – the left had been in opposition in most unions under the previous Labour government and had used hostility to the effects of incomes policy to boost its own electoral fortunes.

Secondly, the employers and the government used the lull in the industrial struggle to induce workers to accept measures designed to weaken the old shop steward structures – ending ‘mutuality’ (negotiation over things like machine times) in factories where Measured Day Work had already been imposed, removing leading stewards from the shop floor through participation schemes, formalising procedure agreements. Left wingers like Tony Benn remained in the government, helping it to sell schemes for workers’ participation in their own exploitation and even the disastrous 1977 productivity scheme in the pits. Under such circumstances, it was possible for leading stewards like Derek Robinson, convenor at Leyland’s Longbridge plant in Birmingham, to go along with the idea that their job was to help management make the plant ‘viable’, even to the point of denouncing a strike by his fellow toolmakers as ‘divisive’.

The importance of these changes was shown in 1977-9. There was a revival of industrial struggle. There were 449 strikes in engineering and another 212 in motors, involving 170,000 and 283,800 workers respectively. This compared favourably with the figure for, say, 1971 –with 488 engineering strikes and 241 in motors, involving 152,400 and 340,300 workers. There were more than ten million

strike days in the economy as a whole – not as high as the early 1970s, but as good as in the rebellion against the last Labour incomes policy in the late 1960s.

But the impact of the strikes was rather different. There is all the difference in the world between a sectional struggle which takes place in a factory where there is a network of stewards in other sections arguing in support of it, and a strike which is denounced by the other stewards as sectional. Then the section involved is easily driven in on itself, and none of the workers in the factory generalise from the struggle. Instead, both those involved in the strike and those not involved can draw quite reactionary conclusions (on the one hand that they are superior to other workers, on the other that all strikes are wrong). And some of the key strikes of 1977 were denounced in this way by the Broad Left union leaders and stewards who shared their politics – the Heathrow engineers' strike, the Port Talbot electricians' strike, and, most importantly, the Leyland toolroom workers' strike.

The lack of generalisation which came out of these strikes was shown by the way the government was able to isolate and then defeat the firemen in 1977-78. In spite of widespread public support for the firemen, the support from other workplaces was very weak, and the TUC general council was easily able to get away with refusing to back the strike.

Whereas the general shift of the unions under the Labour government of 1964-70 had been to the left (notably with the victory of Scanlon in the AUEW presidential election), the shift under the 1974-79 government was to the right (witness the victory of Terry Duffy in the engineering union).

The defeat of the firemen did not stop the build-up of resentment against the effects of the wage controls in other

industries, and the dam finally burst a year later with the 'winter of discontent'. A major strike at Fords was followed by very effective strikes of tanker drivers, lorry drivers, and local authority manual workers, and then by selective strikes in the hospitals and among civil servants. But the pattern of 1977 was not broken.

These strikes did not lead the class to rediscover its unity through struggle, but rather tended to leave untouched the existing divisions between different groups of workers. And in many of the industries most affected by the strikes, it did not take the employers long to regain control of the shop floor; at Fords the usual victimisations followed some months after the pay strike was over in the hospitals, the overall feeling was soon one of defeat and demoralisation.

The political beneficiary of the disillusionment with Labour that found expression in the winter of discontent was not the left, but Margaret Thatcher.

The reason lay in the way the trade union leaderships, the Labour government and the employers had worked together for six years to exacerbate the weaknesses of the trade union movement at its moment of victory in 1974: the way the swing to the left within the movement in the previous period had been a swing to a Broad Leftism that was willing to justify opposition to strikes and support for class collaboration under a Labour government, and the way the old 'informal' stewards structures were beginning, in part at least, to be separated from direct shop floor control.

Had there been a major left focus outside the government, then things might well have been different: some workers at least would have moved towards it as their separate, fragmented sectional struggles brought them up against the social contract. But no such focus existed. After their defeat in the Common Market referendum the Labour Left around Benn decided to put their own careers before any principles

and stay in the government. And although the non-Labour left could initiate powerful mobilisations around things like hostility to the Nazis (who in 1977 were themselves gaining from disillusionment with Labour as they ran third, ahead of the Liberals, in many elections), they could not break in to the key sections of the class.

The level of struggle held up through 1979. The newly elected Tory government felt compelled to endorse the comparability pay rises awarded to the various public sector groups who had taken part in the winter of discontent, the provincial printing employers were then forced to make substantial concessions to the National Graphical Association and, most surprisingly, the Engineering Employers Federation failed to win a set-piece battle with the new right-wing AUEW leadership over the national engineering settlement.

However, things changed radically from late 1979 onwards. The employers were determined to reap the rewards of weakened union organisation more rapidly than they thought possible on the basis of a continuation of the social contract, and opinion inside the Confederation of British Industry moved sharply in a 'confrontationist' direction. The same employers who had secretly welcomed a Labour government in 1974 as the only way out of a difficult situation for their class, were overjoyed at its fall in 1979. It had done all the dirty work of which they thought it was capable, and they felt they needed a government less beholden to the trade union bureaucracy to finish the task.

The first Thatcher government

Sir John Methven, the Confederation of British Industry's director general, reflected the mood of

much of the employing class when he told the CBI conference in November 1979:

‘Britain on the eve of the 1980s ... [is] poised between remorseless decline and real success, between disintegration and moral recovery’. In other words, if his class did not seize the time, they were sunk.

The new Thatcher government set itself goals which matched this mood. Its goal was not merely to hold the line against the gains which the trade union movement had made in the early 1970s, but to carry through a decisive shift in the balance of class forces such as had not been seen since the defeat of the General Strike in the 1920s. Its strategy for doing so involved three separate components.

Firstly they were to use monetarist economic policies, aimed at putting financial constraints on managers to shed labour, cut wage costs and increase productivity. In industry this meant refusing to intervene to protect firms from market pressures; in the welfare services and local government it meant using the ‘cash limits’ already devised by Labour to enforce cutbacks.

Then there was the Ridley plan – a series of carefully timed set-piece confrontations designed to break the power of key unions, starting in industries where the unions were thought to be weak, leaving the most powerful groups of workers, like the miners and dockers, until last.

Finally the law was to be used to weaken the ability of unions to take industrial action and, by threatening their funds, to persuade their leaders to cooperate more with the employers. As with the Ridley plan, the aim was a phased attack, with mild legal changes at first and then, as the

unions got tied up by these, moving on to more radical measures.

By 1979 the ruling class as a whole was happy to move on to the offensive. But once battle started, the deep splits between different sections of it which began to appear in 1976, now came to the fore.

One part of the Tory cabinet saw the 1979 election manifesto as simply involving doing more of what the Labour government had already been doing. After all, it was Callaghan and Healey who introduced monetarism to Britain, it was Labour that appointed Michael Edwardes as the hard-line boss of British Leyland, and it was Labour who forced the TUC into issuing guidelines restricting the number of pickets. These 'wets' feared that to go further than this would be to force at least an important chunk of the working class into extreme hostility to the system, breaking down the reformist traditions that had dominated for so long, so endangering the 'national fabric'. And they viewed any policy which simply decreed that 'uncompetitive' firms should go under as a danger to the whole of British industrial capital, since its survival for the previous half century at least, had depended on a deep entanglement with the state.

The Thatcher wing of the cabinet had a quite different view. For them British capitalism was weak precisely because of the concessions made in the past to preserve 'consensus'. They believed it was possible to undercut the hold of reformist ideas within the working class from the right, by an ideology of individualism, expressed in the drive to sell council houses and privatise nationalised industries. In their view, if firms went out of business, it was their own fault for being too soft on their workers.

It was a policy that at one level was extremely successful.

It located quite sharply the weaknesses in the working class movement and the degree of ideological disillusionment bred by 11 years of Labour government (and, often, half a century of Labour local government).

What is more, the Thatcherites never forgot the lessons of the Heath government: they never allowed the ideological fanaticism they needed to break from the 'consensus' politics of the wets to prevent concessions to the unions when concessions were necessary. Their first employment minister was the 'wet' Prior, and the man chosen for the eventual confrontation with the miners in 1984 was the last of the wets, Peter Walker. Even the most recent choice as employment minister, King, has gone out of his way to placate the TUC over little things (like allowing certain sorts of workplace ballots) as part of the price for clobbering the unions on the major questions.

And so they were able, successfully, to spearhead a carefully phased employers' offensive right across industry.

The most important attack, the victimisation of Derek Robinson, the convenor of the Leyland plant at Longbridge, laid a pattern that was followed again and again.

Longbridge was the plant where formalised participation procedures had been carried further than probably anywhere else under the Labour government. The plant leadership and Robinson in particular had insisted that the workers should do everything possible to make the plant competitive. The **Financial Times** was able to report how 'successful' the 'three level participation scheme' was. One example of its 'effectiveness' was 'the shop stewards' willingness to sign a joint recommendation to car workers to cut out disputes and boost productivity', as Cliff points out in his article in this issue of **International Socialism**. [4]

But participation not only had ideological effects. It also materially changed the stewards' organisation. As one

steward told **Socialist Review** in January 1980:

‘With the formalisation of participation on a wide scale, we had the growth of lower levels of bureaucracy ... there were at least 50 full-time stewards. The bulk of them never made any pretence of going on a machine on a section ...

‘It amounted to them not representing their sections at all. So even ‘the really good stewards who’d built up reputations who got elected to these posts ... were whipped away, shoved on the committee and destroyed ... It was very, very occasionally that any meetings were held where anyone really involved in participation spoke to blokes on the shop floor.’

No wonder Edwardes, the chairman of Leyland, was able to exploit both the ideological and material impact of the year of participation to the full, gaining acceptance of 30,000 redundancies, and successfully organising a direct ballot of the workforce over the heads of the stewards, and, finally, succeeding in sacking Robinson himself. [5]

The pattern was laid for innumerable struggles over the next five years. Management would, on each occasion, exploit the gap which had opened up between many stewards and those they represented to appeal over the heads of the unions to the mass of members. And when this looked like backfiring on them, they would then look to dirty deals with national union leaders to regain control of the situation.

This happened at Leyland itself at least four times in the next three years. In April 1980 at the Land Rover plant in Solihull [6], in October 1981 over a wage claim throughout the company [7], and in November 1982 over the sacking of Alan Thornett. [8] On each occasion it became clear that

there was a hard minority in the plants who really wanted a fight. The ferocity of the management attack enabled this minority to win majority support for a brief moment. There was no longer any strong current among the stewards ideologically opposed to action, as there had been in the social contract years. But the minority on each occasion found it could not hold the majority out in the face of a concerted management attack and desertion by the union leaderships.

The Thatcher government's offensive against the workers was helped immensely by the way they pushed up unemployment. Unemployment rose by about 250 per cent in three years. Output in manufacturing was down by 15 per cent in 1981 compared with 1979, and the workforce by 20 per cent. Firms would close down certain plants, and in the remaining plants they would use the argument of 'viability' to hold back wages and to push through redundancy and productivity programmes.

These were the most bitter years of the downturn for trade union militants. Each defeat bred a defeatism on the shop floor that paved the way for further defeats. To many workers it seemed that the only way to protect jobs was to go along with management's calls for closures, redundancies, increased productivity and still more flexibility.

The strike figures show just how bad the situation was. The number of strike days was a mere 4.3 million in 1981 and 5.3 million in 1982. In engineering and motors the situation was appalling. There were only 202 recorded engineering strikes in 1982 (less than half the 1977 figure), accounting for 484,000 strike days compared to one and a half million in 1977. In motors the number of strikes was only 143 (compared to 212 in 1977 and 241 in 1972) and the number of strike days only 551,000 (a third of the 1977 figure and a sixth of that for 1971). And the number of

stoppages classified as 'prominent' by the Department of Employment was down to 10 from 32 in 1977 and 46 in 1971. Also the 'prominent' strikes in engineering and motors were virtually all defensive battles, ending in terms favourable to management.

What was gained by management in those years is shown by the productivity figures. Between 1980 and 1984, output per person employed in manufacturing rose by over 20 per cent [9], as compared with less than 5 per cent between 1973 and 1979. The demoralisation and the weakening of organisation on the shop floor meant that the manufacturing employers were able to get away with continuing to reduce the workforce after output had stopped falling in 1982, and even in 1983 when it rose by about 2.5 per cent, employment still fell by 3.6 per cent.

The Tory offensive also required attacks on industries where traditions of militancy had traditionally been weaker. The first phases of the Ridley plan for dealing with the public sector had to be pushed through.

The first major confrontation, that with the steel workers at the beginning of 1980, showed that this part of the strategy was not going to be a push over. Management made a deliberately insulting wage offer in an effort to humiliate the main union, the ISTC. It calculated that all the union's traditions were of acquiescence. It had not taken national strike action since before 1926, the national leadership was very right wing, and there was little in the way of independent shop steward organisation or local branch initiative.

Yet the strike was extremely solid and militant, particularly in Yorkshire. There the proportion of workers picketing was higher than in any dispute in any industry since the 1920s. [10] The government found itself facing a harder fight than it had bargained for. The leader of a

delegation of chief constables that called on the home secretary, William Whitelaw, complained to the press about the problem of maintaining the policy of 'policing by consent'. One of the senior officers at the picket at Hadfields in Sheffield told, 'there was never any question of mass arrests. If we lock up 500 or 1,000, none of us had much doubt that there would be 5,000 there the next day and 10,000 the day after that.' [11] For the police chiefs, at any rate, the memory of the working-class victory at Saltley in 1972 was still more powerful than that of the succession of defeats in individual workplaces since.

This fed the scepticism of the 'wets' in the cabinet about Thatcher's approach. They referred almost openly to her industry minister, Keith Joseph, as the 'mad monk', and the **Sunday Times** could even write: 'after nine months in power, the Thatcher government is in a crisis from which there is no obvious escape.'

The sceptics were proved wrong. The onset of a second phase of deep economic recession meant that industry could make do with depleted stocks of steel. The fragmentation of the class which had been so encouraged by the years of social contract meant that other sections of workers did not automatically support the steel workers.

Scab steel streamed out of the non-striking private steel firms, and was carried through the gates of hundreds of factories by lorry drivers holding TGWU cards. [12] Even the left-wing leadership of the Yorkshire miners – who helped the steel workers' picket lines – did not call for the blacking of scab steel inside the pits. And in South Wales a leadership call for all-out strike action over the pit closures which would be associated with a run down of the steel industry was overthrown at a last minute series of lodge meetings. As local activists explained to *Socialist Review* at the time, the

leadership had just not put the effort into carrying the arguments to the rank and file. [13]

The steel workers held out for 14 weeks and, in the end, forced the Steel Corporation and the government to up their wage offer considerably. Perceptive commentators could describe this as no more than a ‘defeat on points for the steel workers’ or even a ‘partial victory’. [14]

But in the industrial climate of 1980-82, with the recession leading to a massive shrinkage of the market for steel, a limited gain on wages was not enough to produce a fightback over the much more political – and therefore, for a union with traditions as thoroughly reformist as the ISTC’s, difficult – question of closures and redundancies. The workforce of the industry was cut in half in the years that followed, and the sudden militancy of 1980 was all but forgotten.

Yet even the failure of the steel workers to break through did not mean that the Tories always had it easy on the industrial front.

They had to beat a quick retreat in 1981 when the same South Wales miners who had refused to strike alongside the steel workers a year before struck over the threat to their own pits and sent flying pickets out to other areas. [15] Howell, the energy minister, told the media he had not joined the government in order to commit *hari kiri*, and Thatcher agreed on a £400 million plan to keep pits open. In the same way, fear of the consequences held the government back from allowing port employers to impose compulsory redundancies and effectively ending the National Dock Labour Scheme.

They had more success with the railwaymen in 1982. They were faced in the winter months with a very effective series of one-day stoppages by ASLEF over the issue of ‘flexible rostering’ (imposing shift patterns that meant much harder

work). But they managed to put this on ice for several months until they had had a confrontation with the Broad Left majority on the executive of the main rail union, the NUR, over a pay deal which offered less than the rate of inflation in return for a wide number of productivity concessions.

An incredible sequence of events followed. The NUR executive called a strike. The union's general secretary Weighell, denounced the executive as a 'left wing rabble', considerable numbers of NUR members did not come out, ASLEF members continued to drive trains alongside the scabs, then, after two days, Weighell succeeded in persuading the union's conference to call the strike off. [16] Then, on the very next day after the NUR defeat, the Tories forced the ASLEF leadership into a corner, leaving it no choice but to call a separate strike of its own over flexible rostering. Finally, the TUC general council stepped in, ordering ASLEF to abandon the strike. The order was unanimous, with one of the best known 'lefts', Alan Sapper of the cinematograph technicians, delivering it to ASLEF. [17]

The Tories encountered similar resistance to their attempts to cut the living standards of National Health Service workers in the same year. The health service was hit by the biggest tide of militancy it had yet known, as a series of one-day and selective strikes gained the enthusiastic support of hundreds of thousands of ancillary workers and nurses. For a time the health minister, Fowler, seemed under real pressure. But the union leaders refused to even consider turning the selective and one-day strikes into an all-out strike until it was far too late, and the government ended up the victor. In the aftermath of the strike, it was able to go on the offensive, pushing through privatisation schemes to undercut wages, conditions and union strength.

The steel, railway and health service strikes all showed how the Tories' attacks on wages and conditions could provoke outbreaks of militancy among sections of workers who usually had low strike rates in the past. The same phenomenon was to be seen with selective strikes among civil servants (over pay, in the summer of 1981), by telecom engineers (against privatisation in the autumn of 1983), by teachers (in 1983) and by local government white collar workers. It was also to be seen in one very important industry where some groups of workers had very great sectional strength, but where all-out strikes were in fact few and far between: the print.

The increases recorded by these industries were not nearly sufficient to counter the downward trend in engineering and motors (let alone shipbuilding, which had been virtually decimated by the rundown of the industry). However, they did point to the way the government's attacks were creating a counter-trend in the class to (the predominant one of demoralisation and defensiveness).

The employers' assessment of Thatcher's first five years

Different sections of the employing class had differing expectations about the Tory government when it was elected in 1979. The divisions continued right through the government's first five years.

In 1980 at the time of the steel strike there was considerable feeling in the Tory cabinet and in publications like the Financial that the government's approach was misplaced. The same doubts were expressed a year later, after the retreat over pit closures, when the Financial Times

summed up the feelings of some sections of industry by talking of a thoroughly disorganised government'. [18] The Confederation of British Industry's conference that autumn was notable for the level of criticism directed at the government.

The division in the Tory Party was a relatively clean one between the Thatcherites and the 'wets', between those who thought British capitalism could be saved by a simple 'freeing of market forces' and those who still believed in the 'corporatist' approach which had emerged from the crisis of the inter-war years, combining state intervention to build up nationally important industries and collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy to control the workers.

But the divisions within the ruling class as a whole were much more complex: between those industrialists who wanted state intervention and those who didn't, between financiers who wanted to free themselves from what they saw as a national industrial base in irreversible decline and those who did not, between those who prioritised collaboration with the US and those who thought the only future lay in the creation of a European ruling class, between those who thought their own particular sector of the economy had an enormous amount to lose from any all-out confrontation with the unions and those who thought they had everything to gain, between those who saw the greatest danger as being the 'disintegration of the national fabric' into bitter class struggles, and those who believed their class would win such struggles.

But the most important single division was simply between those who thought the combination of monetarism and confrontation with the unions would restore the profitability and competitiveness of British big business and those who didn't.

That was why the argument was always most severe when the government became involved in industrial confrontations it might lose. But even when the employers' side was chalking up victories, two questions kept arising: was the price paid for the victories in terms of the damage done to manufacturing industry by the recession worth it? And were the victories permanent, or would they be quickly reversed once economic recovery began? Certain industrialists began to ask whether the government's talk of 'putting the fight against inflation first' did not really mean that they would never allow real economic recovery in case it led to a revival of working-class militancy. And if this was so, what sort of victory had really been won by the employing class? [19]

The employing class faced a real dilemma.

Looked at in one way, the Thatcherites had been resoundingly successful. In 1971 the chief constable of Glasgow had warned that troops might be necessary on Clydeside if the Heath government closed Upper Clyde Shipyards and destroyed too many jobs in shipbuilding; ten years later the manpower in those yards was being run down at breakneck speed with next to no resistance. In 1975 the Labour government had paid a massive bribe to keep Chrysler Linwood afloat because of the political consequences of not doing so; in 1981 the Thatcher government had no difficulty at all in simply allowing the plant's new owner, Peugeot, to shut it. The 'social fabric' remained 'intact' despite a level of unemployment which even the most right wing of the Tory politicians would not have dared contemplate ten years earlier. The Tories were even maintaining the political allegiance of much of the working class, as Labour's defeat in the 1983 election proved.

Yet looked at in a different way, its achievements were not all that great. To destroy one job in four in manufacturing industry and still fear pressure on wages was no great accomplishment. By the time of the 1983 general election the living standards of a sizeable section of workers were rising until they were equal to their 1974 and 1979 peak levels. [20] And this created pressures for higher wages from other workers – from those in the public sector whose wages had been held back by government edict and from those in the private sector who felt the worst effects of the recession were past. [21]

Even in the public sector, the government's successes were limited in 1983. It had held the line on wages for civil servants, teachers, steel workers, shipyard workers, and rail workers, but the step-by-step approach of the Ridley Report meant turning a blind eye to what happened among very powerful groups like miners, power station workers or dockers.

The miners had rejected a call for strike action over their national pay claim the previous autumn: many were still benefiting from the productivity scheme introduced to divide them in 1977. The level of organisation in the docks was weak; but it was strong enough for Tilbury dockers to gain considerably from their strike for parity with tally clerks early in 1983 and for the government to shy away from attacking the National Dock Labour Scheme despite pressure from the dock employers. The water workers showed at the beginning of 1983 that they too were powerful enough to get the government to pay over the odds. And even the railwaymen, beaten the year before, were still able to fight the government's demands over manning and productivity.

In the summer of 1982 **The Economist** suggested the government needed to cut wages by an average of about 20

per cent if it was to restore the rate of profit of British capitalism. All Thatcher's successes still left her a very long distance from achieving this goal. Indeed, she suffered from a paradox: one reason she had been able to win the general election of 1983 was because she could boast to many workers that they were as well off as they had ever been; yet that was the opposite of the goals she had set for British capitalism.

No wonder a government which had seemed so full of determination and purpose in its first spell in office seemed so directionless within a matter of months of winning a massive electoral victory. It had proved it could cut living standards and boost productivity while the economy was in decline. It had not proved it had a policy to cope with the economic expansion British-based big business needed to really build up its profits.

The assessments of the left

If the ruling class was thoroughly divided in its assessment of Thatcher's record, the great majority of the left was thoroughly confused.

Two completely different views of what was happening developed.

The first was based on super optimism. It set the tone for most of the Labour left in the period 1980-82, and continued to underlie the analyses of Tony Benn, of the Militant tendency and of **London Labour Briefing**, **Socialist Action** and **Socialist Organiser** right through to the end of the miners' strike.

According to this view, the working-class movement was undergoing a real radicalisation. The experience of the last

Labour government, it was said, had thoroughly discredited the Labour right, as could be seen by the constitutional changes carried at the Labour Party's Wembley special conference of January 1981. Workers' bitterness at Tory policies would automatically translate itself into support for a reinvigorated left-wing Labour Party.

So the **Morning Star** wrote after the Wembley conference: 'Saturday's decision ... was a major victory for democracy within the Labour Party. It was an equally decisive retreat for the party's right wing ... It is a momentous decision in the struggle ... to ensure a Labour government which carries out the policies of the Labour movement.' [22] **Militant** declared: 'Wembley was a great victory for Labour's ranks ... The block vote of the union delegations at Labour Party conferences will become a vital transmission belt for the demands of an aroused and mobilised working class.' [23] **Tribune** claimed the conference was 'a watershed for Labour Party democracy' [24], while **Socialist Challenge** (the precursor of **Socialist Action**) insisted, 'Wembley was a famous victory for the workers' movement'. [25]

Most of the adherents of this view did not change their analysis even when the breakaway of the Social Democrats and the formation of 'he Alliance in the spring and summer of 1981 cut deep into Labour's electoral support and drove the 'soft left' in the leadership to make common cause with the old right. Some (notably the former members of the International Marxist Group (Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali) argued that the defection of the SDP meant a strengthening of the Labour left to such an extent that traditional right-wing Labourism could not recover. [26]

The **Militant** too saw the gains of the right in the Labour Party (the narrow defeat of Benn by Healey in the deputy leadership election at the 1981 conference and the winning

by the right of a majority on the party's National Executive) as a temporary aberration. They insisted that if only the correct lead were given, the working class as a whole would display explosive militancy. As the Labour Party Young Socialists' NEC representative, **Militant** supporter Laurence Coates told **Socialist Worker**:

The shifts in the election to the NEC don't represent, in any way, a long-term shift back to the right. They don't represent the real mood of the ordinary workers in the Labour and trade union movement, but were the result of the undemocratic casting of the trade union block vote ...

Just look at what's happened in the last year alone. A one-day general strike, or even an all-out general strike, has been on the order of the day on a number of occasions. For instance, in the summer [of 1982] with the ASLEF dispute. It was only because of the betrayal of the right wing in the leadership of the TUC that it never took place. [27]

The focus of left Labour activity changed as the right regained its grip over the national party structure. The emphasis moved away from fighting for constitutional changes to trying to 'deselect' right-wing Labour MPs one by one in the constituencies, replacing them with left wingers, then to fighting to establish Broad Left control of certain unions, and finally to taking control of Labour councils which, it was believed, could introduce practical improvements in people's lives and so get them to identify with the left in its fight against the government.

Yet the drift to the right both in the country and in the party continued unabated. The left's candidate, Peter Tatchell, suffered a devastating defeat in the Bermondsey by-election of 1983 and the Labour Party got its lowest vote

since 1918 in the general election a few months later. In the unions the broad lefts were hardly more successful. The NUR broad left executive suffered the indignity of seeing the union's conference overturn its strike call in 1982. The POEU broad left split, with three of its members on the union's national executive voting with the right to end industrial action against privatisation. The CPSA broad left suffered a humiliating defeat in the union's executive elections in 1983, after failing to do better than the right wing had the year before in the campaign over pay, and suffered the defection of some of its leading members towards the right after regaining control of the executive a year later.

Against this background, it was not surprising that the optimistic view began to be challenged on the reformist left by a different, radically pessimistic analysis – Hobsbawmism – the argument that socialist, working-class politics was suffering an irreversible historical decline. Elsewhere in this issue of **International Socialism** Alex Callinicos analyses this phenomenon in detail, so we shall not discuss it further.

Suffice it to say that Hobsbawmism is not that difficult to pull to pieces. Its claim that the traditional working class is in decline is belied by the fact that there are still more workers in many core 'traditional' industries today (engineering, road transport) than there were at the time of the 1926 general strike. It tends to see white-collar workers as 'middle class' despite the fact that something like three quarters of them are on wages at or below the manual level, work under similar forms of discipline and come from similar home, educational and cultural backgrounds – in fact, that most of them are the daughters, sisters and wives of manual workers. It ignores the growth in the proportion of employed people unionised over the last three decades. It

does not mention one of the key factors underlying the loss in Labour's vote over the last 20 years – the experience of Labour in office. It fails to mention that the Tories' electoral victories are not because of any increase in the Tory vote (which is much lower than it was in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s), but rather because of the loss of Labour votes to Social Democrats and Liberals who trade in a consensus politics hardly different to the Labour right.

But the wide influence of Hobsbawmism, even among those of the Labour left who reject its political conclusions, does not lie in its analytical finesse. It lies in the way it fitted the mood of disillusionment among sections of the left when the super-optimistic hopes of 1979-81 fell apart in 1982-3. It provided an apparent explanation of what had gone wrong and a seeming way forward – to dilute, or even abandon one's socialist principles in an attempt to build alliances with the right.

Despite their opposition to each other, the super-optimistic view and the Hobsbawmite view had some things in common.

Neither was able to provide any real concrete analysis of the objective context in which socialists in Britain found themselves. The Hobsbawmites hardly even began to make such an analysis. The material circumstances of British capitalism hardly figured in their thinking (except for seeing 'de-industrialisation' as something workers and industrialists shared a common interest in opposing), while any attempt to relate workers' ideas to the fight over exploitation in the workplaces, and therefore to their material conditions of life, was denounced as 'economism' (except, of course, when it was the guru himself arguing that living standards higher than those in the 1930s meant the end of the traditional working class!)

The super-optimists often did start with some reference to the world crisis and the endemic weakness of British capitalism. But they then short circuited any attempt to see politics in terms of how this affected the lives and struggles of workers, and instead went straight on to assertions about how the movement was automatically moving forward in response to pressures on the class. There was no more need for the super-optimists than for the Hobsbawmites to look at what the crisis of the system meant concretely for different groups of workers, the exact ways in which capital was trying to restore its profitability, how this affected the working and living conditions of workers, how attempts to fight back were hamstrung by traditional reformist ideas and structures.

The lack of clear and scientific analysis on either side meant it was quite possible for many sections of the hard, super-optimistic, left to accept certain of the notions so beloved of the Hobsbawmites, so that only the Militant among the Labour left held out against the idea that the Labour left had to be built on the basis of an ‘alliance’ between workers and other oppressed groups through the existence of autonomous Labour Party sections that represented them; and almost all the hard left treated Ken Livingstone as an exemplary figure – even though both the practice and the theory of his GLC was based on a policy of building alliances across classes long before he capitulated to the Tories and the Labour right over rate capping. [28]

Above all, what the Hobsbawmites and the Labour left had in common was that without a concrete analysis of the state of the class struggle in Britain, neither could come to terms with the relationship between the minority of conscious socialists and the rest of the class.

The Hobsbawmites drew the conclusion that because the conscious socialists are a minority then the class can never

be won for socialism and the only way to change society lies in alliances with some of those who currently prop it up. The super-optimists drew the conclusion that the minority have to manoeuvre to establish control of certain existing bodies (Labour Parties, local councils, union leaderships) so as to act, from above, on behalf of the working class. When this happened, it was thought, mass support would lie automatically forthcoming.

Yet the reality of the years 1979-83 disproved both conceptions.

The Hobsbawmite position was refuted by, for instance, the mood from the beginning of the 1980s through to the spring of 1981, when the Thatcher government, far from having touched some new populist chord, was massively unpopular: Thatcher herself was, according to one opinion poll, the most unpopular prime minister ever. The Labour Party was able to organise a series of massive demonstrations against unemployment and to do very well in council elections even in the shires. The TUC was able to organise a People's March for Jobs which met with real enthusiasm, with token stoppages in some of the industrial areas it passed through. At that time left Labour speakers like Tony Benn did attract audiences bigger than anyone in the movement could remember in place after place.

The super-optimists' mistake was to fail to see how passive was the support of the majority of workers for Labour even at that high point. Labour did not have an organic connection with the main sections of the class, a connection mediated by hundreds of thousands of activists carrying its arguments into every part of every factory and housing estate.

And so even in 1980 when it came to doing things rather than registering vague concern about government policies through elections and opinion polls, the minority of activists

inside the class found themselves isolated. The South Wales miners voted 8 : 1 for the principle of striking over pit closures; but when it came to a call to take immediate action and to go out on strike alongside the steel workers early in 1980, they voted down their leadership and continued working. The mass of workers could be against the Tories in opinion polls, but when the media denounced a TUC day of action (with the **Daily Express** front page headline referring to the TUC general secretary as 'Lenin Murray'), only one trade unionist in ten responded to the TUC call. When it was a question of Scottish trade unionists protesting at unemployment, 100,000 marched; but only a matter of days later, the Talbot Linwood workforce (one of the most militant in Britain in the early 1970s) voted 2 : 1 to accept the closure of their factory.

The euphoria of the Labour left in 1980-81, with its meetings and demonstrations and conference victories was the euphoria of a minority which did not understand that you cannot achieve real gains against a powerful, entrenched ruling class without real forces – without the active backing of at least some of the most powerful sections of workers. Those who try to bend society to their desires without such forces at their disposal invariably end up themselves being bent out of shape by the powerful forces opposed to them.

This happened again and again to the super-optimistic left in the first half of the 1980s (that the Hobsbawmites tended to bend even more quickly is little consolation). At the highest level people like Michael Meacher or Ken Livingstone who had acted as standard bearers for the left ended up joining the soft left's alliance with the right against their former comrades. At a lower level, innumerable shop floor activists succumbed to the prevailing attitude that the way to get things done was to try to get control of part of the machine, whether through becoming a full-time convenor,

senior steward or branch committee representative, or through taking a job with the union. But as they moved off the shop floor into the union office they easily became as detached from the feelings of the mass of the membership as the old right wingers they displaced. They were not working alongside their workmates, putting across and testing the argument for militancy on a day-to-day basis, and so they simply could not judge what the real mood was. This did not mean they never called for action. Sometimes they did. But when they did not get an automatic response from the shop floor, then they would quickly jump to the opposite extreme and see most talk of further action as 'adventurism' which would put socialists like themselves in a dangerous position.

The phenomenon was not confined to the workplace and the unions. The activists of the Labour left found themselves in a very similar situation when they got control of a local council (or a well-paid job with a neighbouring council). This, they argued, was the 'realistic' way to build up support for socialist policies; but they were soon arguing that mass support did not exist to defy the diktats of the government and the judges.

Material circumstances initially fitted in with the super-optimist view; but soon the need to compromise and fudge meant Hobsbawmism of one sort or another was more appropriate.

Yet there were a few occasions, even in the grimmest moments of 1981-3 when the minority showed how it was possible to win the majority.

The pattern of workers' resistance 1980-83

The size of the minority in the class who were bitter and angry, and the problems they faced in winning

wider support, can be seen if one looks at some of the examples of fightback which did occur in the period 1980-83.

8 April 1980: Forty workers from the Rover body shop in Solihull, Birmingham march up to the convenor's office and demand a mass meeting over the question of 'kitting up allowances' (for the time it takes to get ready for work) which are being taken away as part of the Edwardes plan – approved in a secret ballot throughout Leyland by 8 : 1 the previous year. Despite the opposition of the convenor the mass meeting takes place and votes overwhelmingly to strike.

Within days five plants are out and 18,500 workers are on strike, with very enthusiastic picketing at Solihull itself. The right wing leadership of the AUEW oppose the strike, but the TGWU seems to support it and it looks as if it will spread still further.

But the factory leadership fails to organise the picketing adequately, and senior stewards at Longbridge refuse to hold a mass meeting to discuss support. Then on 17 April the general secretary of the TGWU agrees to accept the management terms and call the strike off.

At Rover Solihull the senior stewards decide, under pressure from the activists, to recommend continuation of the strike at a mass meeting – but are so far removed from the shop floor that they lose the motion 5 : 1. At two smaller plants, where the stewards are closer to the rank and file and the strike has been more tightly organised, Tyseley and Acocks Green, the vote is much more closely divided.

And just as Rover returns, the West Works at Longbridge votes to strike over the ending of toting-up time for welders and finishers under the agreement with TGWU:

The first to come out to the picket line was a group of West Indians who bounced out of the factory saying, 'We're all out now' and shaking everybody's hands on the picket. When a Rover 2000 came up, determined to drive through the picket line, they just grabbed hold of the car and physically stopped it from moving. And they just grabbed the front of a Mini and lifted it off the ground ... There was a real spirit of determination, a real feeling of hostility to the management, partly because Edwardes had been round there the previous week and been hounded off the shop floor ... But instead of the strike being spread throughout Longbridge by mass meetings in support, it was isolated by the officials and the works committee. They cooked up arrangements for a return to work.

[29]

14 May 1980: The TUC calls a Day of Action over the government's new anti-union laws. Only a million out of more than ten million affiliated trade unionists take action, and the call for action is not followed (or even often put) at many traditionally left factories in places like Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and South Yorkshire.

Yet in Glasgow there is a near general stoppage, and elsewhere a sprinkling of small and medium plants do stop. Meanwhile in the public sector there is quite widespread support from sections of teachers (40,000 taking action), local government white-collar workers and health workers, Fleet Street is stopped by NATSOPA (now part of SOGAT), with the union leaders ignoring an injunction from Express Newspapers (which the company then forgets about). Overall, the number out is probably as great as the last TUC

Day of Action, on 1 May 1973 – but the distribution of support is quite different. [30]

21 November 1980: What the press describes as a ‘riot’ takes place in the seat building section at Longbridge. A year before this section had been one of the most hostile to action in support of Derek Robinson. But now there is deep bitterness as management continually lay the section off in order to crack resistance to speed-up. By 24 November the Allegro lines are completely stopped and the Mini line nearly so. But the senior stewards move a resolution in support of a poor compromise in the last few minutes of a mass meeting and get a return to work.

Two weeks later 11 men are sacked for allegedly ‘causing the riot, leading the riot and causing damage to the factory’. There is a strike against the sackings in one of the car assembly plants over the Christmas period, but the unions get a return to work on 5 January while a joint union management inquiry is held into the sackings. When the inquiry leaves most of the men sacked, the TGWU joins the AUEW in accepting the sackings, and a mass meeting of the whole plant votes against further action. ‘There seems to be generalised support for the men, despite everything, but not the mood for all-out action’. [31]

1 July 1981: A wave of riots sweeps through inner city areas in England, starting with protests by black youth in Southall and Toxteth against racism and police harassment, but rapidly involving white youth as well. Further riots then follow in Moss Side, Manchester, Handsworth in Birmingham, Chapeltown in Leeds,

Highfields Leicester, Hackney, Wood Green, Walthamstow, Woolwich and in Luton, Bolton, Hull and a score of other towns.

However the riots start, they soon involve mixed groups of black and white youth fighting the police, breaking windows, looting shops, and in many cases burning down buildings, throwing petrol bombs and erecting barricades.

In each case the riots die down after at most three days. But the week shows how the impact of the economic crisis is creating pools of bitterness among many sections of younger workers which can easily boil over, leading to forms of action much more violent than those allowed for by traditional British reformism. Half those arrested in 1 he riots are employed; but there is no feeling of sympathy with the rioters among any substantial sections of organised workers. [32]

November 1981: The whole of British Leyland is closed by a strike over pay. One steward tells of the two weeks leading up to the strike.

‘I’ve never known the feeling as good and there didn’t seem anything the company could do right. There were probably two thousand of the workforce actually participating in the picketing. That’s out of a workforce of 14,500.’

But after the first day of the strike the unions stitch up a deal with the company, and workers at Longbridge and most other plants vote to accept it on the Tuesday. The steward explains:

‘You can see the effects of reliance on officialdom. So many of the arguments in relationship to strikes now revolve around the issue of whether it will be made official or not. It was a minority – although the size of the minority surprised me – accepted the argument that we go on strike and if the officials

hack us, that's a bonus. Many of the people say, what could we do, we didn't see how we could win when the officials had done this deal.' [33]

August 1982: The leader of the Fleet Street branch of the electricians union, Sean Geraghty, is summoned before the high court under the Tory anti-union laws for the branch's action in stopping the London editions of the national papers on a day of action in support of the health workers. Originally, the main printing unions, the NGA and SOGAT, had supported the call for the stoppage, but had backed off when faced with injunctions. But after visits by delegations of nurses, the electricians – a tight-knit, traditionally militant section – decided to go ahead. Demonstrations outside the court as Geraghty is tried show that the national press will stop if any serious action is taken against him. The judge imposes a small fine – which neither Geraghty nor the union branch ever has to pay, since an 'anonymous donor', reputed to be the head of a big printing company, steps forward. [34]

22 September 1982: Official TUC Day of Action in support of the hospital workers, and the number striking is much higher than in May 1980 and May 1973. The **Financial Times** gives a figure of two million, and even the **Daily Mirror** calls it a 'great day'.

The series of one-day sympathy strikes in support of the hospital workers begin unofficially, following the success of nurses in picketing out some Yorkshire pits. The example

gained real impetus with the Geraghty case. But there is no doubt that the official TUC call got many of the strikers out.

Even then the impact of the day of action is very uneven. Some areas like Glasgow are very good indeed; others like Birmingham are much weaker.

Hospital workers from the provinces who travel down to the London demonstration are literally dancing with joy on the way home. But the hospital workers' leaders are not prepared to build on the success of 22 September calling all-out action in the hospitals, and within days the enthusiasm is giving way to the beginnings of demoralisation. [35]

February 1983: National strike of water workers over pay. When the management use supervisors to keep the pumping stations going, workers in various parts of the country occupy the stations. But then the government agrees on a deal at the conciliation service, ACAS. This victory does not concede nearly as much as many activists want and they try to occupy ACAS. But they cannot keep the strike going. [36]

March 1983: Tilbury dockers strike over parity with tally clerks who work alongside them. The strike lasts six weeks, with the dockers throwing out a deal after a fortnight that their own stewards committee had accepted. But no attempt is made to spread the strike to other ports through picketing, and the strike is very passive. [37]

8 March 1983: Halewood closed by strike against sacking of assembly worker, Paul Kelly, for allegedly bending a bracket. Strike goes on for four weeks, costing the company £5 million a day. Ends without a

clear victory after Ron Todd of the TGWU does deal with the management for an inquiry into sacking. [38]

28 March 1983: Cowley erupts over management abolition of 'Washing up time' (arrangement by which workers leave line a few minutes early at end of each shift). There is an enormous bitterness at being treated 'like robots'. Stewards are taken by surprise by strike and by the militant mood of many young workers. Their confidence has plummeted so much in recent years that they don't know how to assert themselves now there is the opportunity of a real fightback. David Buckle, the 'moderate' Oxford TGWU full timer, succeeds in taking control of strike. Finally, after four weeks of 'the biggest revolt for seven years among the company's workforce', Terry Duffy, the right-wing leader of the AUEW and Moss Evans, the broad left leader of the TGWU, agree to sell the washing up time for an increase in the bonus. The stewards oppose the deal, but part of the union-management agreement is that the stewards are not allowed to speak against it at the mass meeting. [39]

7 April 1983: Workers at British Steel in Rotherham sent home alter resisting scheme involving new shift pattern and compulsory redundancies. They picket out seven other plants. Bill Sirs of the steel workers union makes the strike official at all the plants, but then uses the lack of enthusiasm for the strike at some plants and rumours of a 'return to work movement' as

an excuse for ending it in a deal which does nothing about the redundancies, but gives a pay increase. [40]

August 1983: Two thousand workers strike at the oil rig yard in Nigg, in the Scottish Highlands, in protest at management's withdrawal of refreshment facilities. The company sacks all the workers and only offers 1,600 their jobs back. It then tries to bus in scabs who have individually agreed to return to work. But mass pickets ambush the buses: 'The police had surrounded six pickets. These signalled to the rest of us that the buses carrying the scabs were coming, and just as they came into sight the whistle blew and 1,000 of us were waiting in the case park ran onto the road and blocked it. The police were helpless.' Workers win notable victory after a month on strike. [41]

October 1983: Vauxhall Ellesmere Port strikes solidly over pay and prepares to send pickets out to stop any General Motors cars coming into Britain. But mass meeting at Luton votes to stay at work and Ellesmere Port abandons strike after a week. [42]

THE EXAMPLES chosen here have not been representative in the sense of showing what happened in the typical workplace in these years. There the picture from mid-1980 onwards was much more one of acquiescence in redundancies, closures and low pay than of resistance. But they do show that when there was resistance some general features were very often present.

- i. In every case an active minority became very militant, often going well beyond the

bounds of traditional British reformist trade unionism.

- ii. It was not always the same minority. Different places struck in May 1980 and 22 September 1982, and the pattern was going to be different again with the day of action over GCHQ on 1 March 1984. Similarly the different revolts against British Leyland were by various groups of workers, with the whole combine only being shut completely on one occasion (and for one day only). The successive Tory attacks were producing a degree of generalisation among important sections of workers, but it was only a degree.
- iii. The militant minority in each workplace had very great difficulty in winning and holding the majority of their fellow workers, even when there was bitter anger at some action of management, in face of official union opposition. People had no recent experience of winning quick victories over management, and therefore expected any struggle to be long and hard unless they were promised official backing.
- iv. Even when there was official union support, a positive response from the majority of the workforce was not automatic. It usually depended on the degree to which activists in the workplace had been putting arguments and mobilising their fellow workers. Where

they had allowed themselves to become cut off from the shop floor (by past involvement in participation schemes) or had not found ways to communicate with the workforce in the face of management harassment, then employers were often able to exploit the gap which had opened up, with threats of 'back to work' movements and so on.

- v. Even when they backed action almost all the union leaders saw this as simply making a show of strength to the employers and the government to impress on them the need to resume collaboration with the unions. And so the leaders invariably called the action off before it got out of hand. This applied to the 'left' leadership of a union like the TGWU as much as to the right-wing leadership of, say, the AUEW.

This pattern did not always dominate. There were examples of struggles in which a small section of workers still had the traditions to hold together in the face of everything that was thrown against them: this applied to a small group of NGA members on the **Financial Times** who held out for nine weeks in their fight over pay, in the face of threats from the TUC and their own union, costing the company millions of pounds and winning a handsome victory. There were other cases in which militants had been

very careful over the years to keep close to the rest of the workforce, so maintaining a tight organisation through the most difficult period: this was what the leading stewards had done at the Greening factory in Warrington, so enabling the workforce of 365 to hold together for five months and beat a vicious management offensive.

But these exceptions were few and far between in the period mid-1980 to mid-1983. And the pattern was to be seen again, only on a much magnified scale, in the best-known struggles of 1983-84.

The shape of 1984

We are now in a position to see how the different elements came together which shaped the great class confrontations of November 1983-March 1985.

As we have seen, the main sections of the ruling class were well aware that their victories in the previous decade still had not rolled back the defences of the working class movement to such an extent as to carry through a real onslaught on wages, and there was considerable fear of workers gaining a new confidence to fight as industrial production picked up.

There were some signs by the summer of 1983 that these fears were beginning to be borne out. The number of strike days per thousand employees in mechanical engineering rose by nearly a third in 1983 and in 'other manufacturing' by 70 per cent. More than 60 per cent of the recorded engineering strikes were on pay. **Socialist Worker** could note in August 1983 that the reports it was receiving for its

industrial pages seemed to indicate that: ‘This year there are more strikes taking place during the holiday period of July and August than there have been for many years. And they have often resulted in at least partial victories, in contrast to last year’s catalogue of defeat.’ [43]

There were a number of notable strikes over pay in the months that followed – at Alvis in Coventry, at Rolls Royce cars in Crewe, at the Stanlow oil refinery in Cheshire, at Chlorides in Salford. But the trend should not be exaggerated. The total number of workers involved in disputes for the whole year was only 69,000 in engineering, 110,000 in cars, 44,000 in ‘other manufacturing’ and 543,000 in ‘all industries and services’. The number of strikes (as opposed to strike days) for the whole year was slightly down, even in engineering, compared with 1982. And some at least of the strikes which began by showing an offensive feeling over pay ended up, after many weeks, in outcomes that were demoralising for the workers involved (e.g. at Rolls Royce, Crewe).

There was enough pressure on pay to worry the employers. But there was not enough successful action to overcome the demoralisation among many groups of workers in manufacturing industry. And the feeling of the shop floor was certainly not strong enough to stop the rightward swing of the union leaderships: right-wing leaders like Frank Chapple of the EEPTU and Alastair Graham of the CPSA reigned supreme at the 1983 TUC, pouring scorn on the broad left leaders for being unable to mobilise their members and win victories to match their rhetoric, as the Congress voted to back the ‘new realism’ of collaboration with the government.

A clear division soon emerged within the ruling class on how to respond to this situation.

The majority tendency within manufacturing industry went for pay deals which were well ahead of the level of prices, with the hope of recouping the cost through increased productivity. Average earnings in the private sector rose by between 7.5 per cent [44] and 9 per cent. [45] By March 1985 the CBI was complaining: 'In aggregate earnings are rising more rapidly in the UK than elsewhere, and productivity is rising more slowly ...' [46] This happened without there being any great increase in the level of industrial struggle in the firms which gave the increases. Although there was a small increase in the number of strike days outside the mines in January to November 1984 (4.3 m) compared with 1983 (3.27 m), the total figure was still relatively small, and in engineering, where many of the high wage deals were, the total number of recorded strikes fell from 171 for the 11 months to 146.

Some companies did put up powerful resistance to wage demands, with about 15 per cent of manufacturing settlements in the second half of 1984 amounting to less than 4.5 per cent. As the CBI noted, 'there is continuing dispersion of individual settlements as these reflect individual circumstances'. But in many other places workers who pushed for wage increases found themselves pushing at an open door, with about a quarter of settlements being above 7.5 per cent. [47]

The sort of settlement which was possible was shown at Harvesters in Doncaster. The stewards there led a well organised wage campaign with two one-day strikes to show the company that the feeling existed among the workforce for a pay increase. Eventually, the management offered 10 per cent. [48] Most settlements were not for a figure as high as Harvesters. But many did combine three elements that were present in the Harvester deal – a wage figure well above the level of inflation (about 5 per cent), a deal over

more than one year, and flexibility and productivity clauses which, it was hoped, would enable the management to claw back some of the cost of the deal.

So for the engineering industry as a whole it was suggested in October 1984 that, 'There have been substantial increases in actual shop floor pay over the past year – well beyond last November's nationally-agreed 5.2 per cent increase in minimum rates and the apparently stable median of 5 to 5.2 per cent in settlements reported to the engineering employers' federation ... Indeed, some engineering surveys suggest a general movement in basic earnings, without overtime or shift pay, ranging from 8 to 11 per cent'. [49] Effectively, some companies were avoiding pressure on the wages front by allowing wages to 'drift' upwards on the basis of 'productivity', 'bonuses' and 'consolidation' factors. [50]

Overall, the strategy of paying over the odds on wages in return for flexibility and productivity had one great advantage for firms. It meant industrial disruption over pay was avoided for one, two or even three years, and that any strikes were likely to be over the detailed enforcement of flexibility and productivity conditions which the workforce had already agreed to in principle. This made it easier to isolate the section of workers striking from the rest of the workforce. So these deals tended to buy off trouble in particular workplaces, enabling management to postpone any confrontation until they felt things were more favourable to them.

But a strategy which was advantageous for many individual firms could create problems for big business as a whole. The relatively large wage increases in many parts of manufacturing in 1983-5 put pressure on firms whose managements for one reason or another (lower profits, government pressure, etc.) did not feel able to do such deals.

This was true within manufacturing itself in one very important section – the motor plants. While general engineering did not see any great increase in the level of bitterness or struggle in 1983-5, the motor industry did. In both Ford and Leyland there had been shop floor revolts against the increased work pressure in the early months of 1983 (the Paul Kelly strike at Halewood and the washing up time strike at Cowley), and Vauxhalls had come close to an all-out strike over pay. These struggles had all been aborted by the intervention of the union officials. But by the late summer of 1984 pressure was beginning to build up again. The number of car industry strikes rose from 90 in 1983 (first 11 months) to 148 in 1984, the number of strikers from 111,800 to 242,700, the number of strike days from 545,000 to 1,042,000. By September it was possible for activists in BL's Cowley plant to tell, 'the plant has been beset with disputes and stoppages in the last few weeks'. [51] Vauxhall workers walked out at all the company's three plants in mid-October against a 5.2 per cent wage offer. When they returned with an agreement of between 8.2 and 14 per cent [52], it seemed that the whole car industry was going to blow up. Workers at the recently privatised Jaguar plant struck against an offer of 21 per cent over two years. Then before the Jaguar strike was settled, the BL plants were out over pay as well. It did not seem that Ford would be able to settle without trouble either.

But the motor industry strikes died in 1984 as every revolt in the industry had died in the previous five years – the union leaders rushed to do a deal at Jaguar that gave the workers nothing new [53], and then caved in to the employers (backed up by the law) at BL – with a repeat of the old game of the AUEW (and the EEPTU) telling its members to go back, the TGWU holding out for a few days, and then getting its members back as well. [54]

The whole experience of engineering and motors in 1983-5 showed the advantages for the ruling class of pay for productivity/flexibility packages. It prevented the limited revival in industrial output translating itself into any great increase in industrial militancy in these key sectors. And it left management free to choose the timing for any further clampdown on the shop floor. But it also raised expectations about wages which could spread from some firms to others. And that meant it required the collaboration of union leaders to hold the line.

There were important voices in the ruling class who saw the disadvantages of this approach as far outweighing any advantages.

There had always been ideologically right-wing elements who did not like the tendency for the biggest industrialists to place so much emphasis on collaboration with the unions. While the main sections of big business were loosely grouped in the CBI, these tended to identify with the Institute of Directors. And there were always those the big boys called the 'mavericks' – the small to medium size firms who hoped their resistance to unions would enable them to carve out space for themselves at the expense of large, unionised firms.

Now there was another important factor at work as well – a government with plans to renovate British capitalism through 'market discipline' which had as yet failed to prove it could make a decisive breakthrough towards creating conditions for a new and higher level of profitability.

The result, from November 1983 onwards, were moves which ensured a high level of confrontation in certain industries just as the mass of manufacturing employers were following the very non-confrontationist approach we have just looked at.

The new offensive: Warrington, GCHQ and the mines

The first major offensive began in the most unexpected way. For some months a small strike of six skilled NGA printers on the **Stockport Messenger** had been slowly ticking away. The proprietor, a certain Eddie Shah, had successfully moved his papers to a new non-union printshop in Warrington. Pickets outside were getting nowhere until seven hundred or so NGA members from different parts of the country mounted a surprise mass picket on Wednesday 14 November and stopped distribution of the scab papers.

Shah, backed by the Institute of Directors, turned to the courts for help. He got an injunction under the Employment Act banning any picketing at Warrington by the printers he had sacked. When the picketing continued he went to the courts again, the courts fined the union £50,000, but the union refused to pay and continued with plans for mass picketing. The courts then imposed another £100,000 fine and sequestered the union's funds. And a massive police operation was mounted to ensure that the mass picket of the Warrington print works did not stop the distribution of Shah's papers. NGA members who went to Warrington now found themselves on the receiving end of the sort of police violence they had hitherto thought was a creature of left-wing imaginations.

Until then the main print employers had experienced how powerful the print unions, and the NGA in particular, could be. In 1978-9 the giant, Thompson Newspapers, had locked out its workers at **The Times** for nine months – and won

next to nothing. In 1980 the employers in the general print had tried to resist the unions' wage demands – and had lost. In 1983 one small section of the NGA membership had been able to bring Pearson Longman, owners of the **Financial Times** to their knees. It was not surprising that the established wisdom was the new technology could only be introduced into the print with union cooperation – a joint union-management scheme for this, Project Breakthrough, was already underway on provincial newspapers.

They put a lot of pressure on Shah to abandon his actions against the NGA, but Shah would not back down, and the NGA and TUC leaderships soon proved how right he was to stick to his guns. The NGA called off a strike which had closed Fleet Street completely after 48 hours, lifted the picketing at Warrington for seven days to allow 'negotiations' and then, when the TUC general council voted not to support its defiance of the law, backed down completely. The confrontationist wing of the ruling class had won a major battle, not only by beating a powerful union, but also by showing the rest of the ruling class that the new laws could be used to batter unions in a way not previously thought possible. [55]

The Thatcher wing of the ruling class felt immensely strengthened by Warrington. Five weeks after the defeat of the NGA the government announced that trade unions were to be banned from its secret communications centre, GCHQ. The decision stunned the main TUC leaders much as Shah's legal actions over Warrington had stunned the NGA. The largest civil service union, the CPSA, had recently passed under the control of the right. Its general secretary, Alistair Graham, had made one of the keynote 'new realism' speeches at the TUC. In desperation the civil service unions and the TUC promised the government a no-strike agreement at GCHQ if only they were allowed to continue to

collect membership dues. At the shortest meeting between any prime minister and any general secretary of the TUC in half a century, Thatcher told them she was not interested.

The TUC leaders stormed out of the meeting and angrily called for massive protest action, including strikes, for Tuesday 28 February. The right-wing leader of the GMWU, David Basnett, wanted 'all members apart from those involved in essential services, to stage a half-day strike'. Terry Duffy of the AUEW declared, 'We will be calling on all our members to support'.

What had looked previously as if it would be no more than local half-day and one-day strikes turned into a huge protest, with a very large number of workers joining protest strikes. According to one opinion poll, the protest even had the support of 20 per cent of Tory voters.

Support for the strike was very uneven. There was greater support for the stoppage in engineering and cars than for any similar call since 1973, with stoppages at Longbridge and Cowley, at Ford Halewood, at Talbot Stoke, at Vauxhalls in Luton, Dunstable and Ellesmere Port, at Cov-Rad, Jaguar and Masseys in Coventry, at GEC Trafford Park and Masseys in Manchester, at Rolls Royce in Glasgow, at Shardlow in Sheffield, at British Aerospace and Rolls Royce in Bristol. The strike was particularly effective in the cities of Glasgow and Liverpool. But there were also huge gaps in it. Fleet Street was closed – but because of a decision by the local branch of the AUEW, not by the big print unions. At Longbridge there would only have been a one-hour stoppage if socialists in two sections had not succeeded in getting them to strike, so closing the whole plant down. Buses in many cities, and most hospital and local authority manual workers did not strike, despite calls from their union leaders. On the railways there were stoppages on Southern and Western regions, with walkouts by guards in

Manchester and signal staff in Glasgow, but most workers ignored the call. In the mines it seems that the strike was confined to a few pits in North Derbyshire.

Although there would not have been one tenth of the action if the national union leaders – including the right-wing leaders – had not made the call, it was not these leaders who made sure particular groups of workers struck, but rather shop stewards, the workplace branches and in some cases simply ad hoc meetings of members who felt something had to be done.

The unevenness provided an important foretaste of what was to happen in the next big confrontation. Above all, there was one workplace the union leaders were careful to exempt from the strike – GCHQ itself. And, told by their own leaders not to take any ‘disruptive action’ in defence of their own rights, the great majority of the workforce caved into the government’s demands the next day and signed forms agreeing to leave the unions. Once again, this time in the face of very widespread opposition, the hawks in the ruling class had achieved a victory.

They did not waste any time at all on setting out to build on it. The day after the GCHQ strikes, 1 March, the Coal Board told the National Union of Mineworkers that Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire was going to close in five weeks’ time. And when there were protests at this, Coal Board chief Ian MacGregor made a speech in which he proclaimed his intention of shutting 20 pits and destroying 20,000 jobs within a year.

There can be no doubt that the Thatcherites were staging a deliberately provocative action. They had seen how easy the victories had been at Warrington and GCHQ and believed they could now win a similarly easy victory against the union which many people saw as the advanced guard of

the trade union movement since its defeat of the Heath government 10 years before.

They assumed that one of two things would happen. Either the leadership of the NUM would get cold feet and back down without a real fight, as the NGA and the civil service leaders had. Or the leadership would call for a fight which would rapidly collapse in face of an unenthusiastic membership. In either case, this most powerful of unions would quickly be humiliated.

The pattern of resistance in the pits

This is not the place to tell the story of the miners' strike. It has already been told at some length by Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons in **The Great Strike**. But there are two things worth analysing about the strike – the pattern of resistance from the miners themselves, and the pattern of solidarity they received from outside the pits.

The first thing to be said about their own resistance is that it was much greater than the Thatcherites expected. Statements by police chiefs in the summer of 1984 indicated that they had not expected their forces to be in the mining areas for more than a few weeks. Power supply figures show that the attempts to substitute oil for coal at the power stations did not take off in earnest until the autumn.

The Tories' optimism was based both on the ease of their victories at Warrington and GCHQ, and on the record in the mines in the two years since Arthur Scargill had been elected union president. Three ballots had been held on executive recommendations of industrial action – two over pay and

one over support for South Wales miners who were already striking against pit closures. On each occasion the action was decisively rejected. And then there had been a ballot for general secretary, with the left standing the well-known leader of the North Derbyshire miners, Peter Heathfield, and the right the virtually unknown John Walsh from North Yorkshire. Heathfield only won by the narrowest of margins. The union leadership certainly recognised all-out strike action was not going to be easy to win: it had avoided calling for such action this time over the union's pay demand, going instead for an overtime ban.

So why did the Tories miscalculate? What they did not take sufficient account of was something which had been apparent in the previous five years – the size of the minority which was bitter, angry and ready to fight if only it could get majority support. The minority had made its presence felt in the pits again and again in the previous two years, just as it had in engineering and motors. There were a growing number of unofficial strikes, arising out of arguments over bonus payments, productivity and managerial bullying at individual pits.

The aim of the national power loading agreement which ended payment by results in the pits in the late 1960s had been to reduce the industry's traditionally very high level of unofficial strikes. To some extent it succeeded: in 1971 there were only 135 stoppages in coal mining, involving less than one miner in ten; in 1977 the figure for stoppages had risen to 262, but still the number of miners involved in these was only 53,000. But in 1982 there were 403 stoppages involving 225,000 workers, and in 1983 355 stoppages involving 133,000 workers. In 1983 the number of strike days in the industry was up about 30 per cent, indicating that the strikes were getting longer and more bitter.

What was happening was that the productivity scheme which had tended to split the miners when it came to big national questions was also tending to create increasing militancy in all Areas and pits over local issues. The Coal Board was encouraged by the defeat of the union in the national ballots to put on pressure for increased productivity in each pit. There had to be fights if miners were now to get increased payments (for instance, for working in water) that used to be taken for granted and there was an appreciable increase in the level of harassment of miners by overmen and managers.

The result was a rash of disputes: in January 1983 at Maltby and Shireoaks in South Yorkshire over bonus payments, with members of the clerical and supervisory section of the union, COSA, picketing out the miners at Maltby; a fortnight strike at Manton on the Yorkshire-Notts border in February over incentive payments, a ten-day strike at the Selby complex in North Yorkshire in April, again over incentive payments, a strike of 200 miners in Silverhill in Nottinghamshire in July over bonuses, strikes in late August at Betteshanger in Kent, Westoe in Durham and Dinnington in South Yorkshire over management attempts to push up productivity, and a three-week strike at Bolsover, part of the Nottinghamshire Area, over 'wet money'. [56] Then in September came the biggest strike Yorkshire had seen for years, when miners at Dodsworth struck for the reinstatement of one of their number, George Marsh, who had hit an overman. Pickets spread the strike to 16 other pits in the Barnsley Area, pulling out 12,965 men, despite a vote against the strike on the Yorkshire Area council of 67-3. [57]

These strikes were often similar to those in the car industry – fantastic upsurges of militancy from young workers, but not accompanied by a level of organisation able to counter pressure from officials for a settlement. It was the

broad left deputy president of Yorkshire, Sammy Thompson, who argued the Manton men into returning to work (creating a bitterness which was being blamed by Manton activists 18 months later for the lack of local enthusiasm for the national strike) [58], it was the broad left secretary of the Notts miners, Henry Richardson, as well as the right-wing president, Ray Chadburn, who opposed the Bolsover strike [59], it was the left-wing Yorkshire Area officials who did their best to end the Barnsley strike over the Dodsworth affair.

The process of bureaucratisation at the workplace level was even older in the National Union of Miners than in, say, engineering or motors. In some places it existed even before the war, and nationalisation gave it a big boost. [60] It was accentuated by the ending of payments by results, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s there had been a counter-pressure to this trend. The Yorkshire Area leadership, for instance, was right wing and there were many left-wing activists in the individual pits who had learnt their militancy in the earlier period. They were organised into a formal network, the Barnsley Forum, which enabled them to contest the activities of the right-wing leadership, both through the union structure and by taking the lead in the strikes of 1969, 1970 and 1972.

The Forum was formed in 1967, by Arthur Scargill, the delegate at Wooley Colliery. Its monthly meetings in a Barnsley hall were soon attended 'by hundreds of miners who listened to speeches by Lawrence Daly, Michael McGahey, Emlyn Williams, Jack Dunn and others. For the first time many young miners heard arguments against pit closures, in favour of higher wages and a shorter working week'. [61]

The inner core of the Forum was made up of 'competent branch officials who until now had struggled in the isolation

of their own branches. They had never controlled the Barnsley Panel (i.e. official Barnsley district organisation of the Yorkshire NUM) but collectively they began to discover they could influence its proceedings. Within a short period of time they controlled it ...'

The Panel was in part, like the other broad left organisations of the time, concerned with electioneering. But it was also ideally placed to provide a militant focus for the bitterness that built up as wages were hit by the ending of payment by results.

So in the 1969 unofficial strike, the Yorkshire activists were able to form an unofficial strike committee that closed every pit in Yorkshire through picketing, and then put pickets on the road to the rest of the country, until 140 pits were strike bound. [62]

This method of organisation was central to winning the 1972 strike. Although the Yorkshire Area leadership was still in the hands of entrenched right wingers, the left-controlled Panels were able to take the initiative in organising flying and mass pickets.

Their success in 1972 enabled the networks of militants to go even further in the aftermath of victory and to win control of the official union machine in Yorkshire, with the election of Scargill as Area president and Owen Briscow as general secretary.

But in taking over the Area leadership, the left allowed the network of grass roots activists to dissolve into the bureaucratic machine at both pit and Area level. In some places this meant former militants taking over the positions of branch officers from old right wingers. In other places (particularly in many North Yorkshire pits) it meant live and let live arrangements between the old officials and the new Area leadership. In either case, it resulted in a structure of some eight Area full timers and 296 pit level officials [63]

who were paid by the Coal Board for doing union work full time, run by people who generally had left-wing politics, but who were not under any pressure to translate that politics into day-to-day industrial struggle.

Under those circumstances, the easiest way for people to hold on to their positions was to play down their own socialist politics when it came to talking to other miners at their own pits, to avoid difficult arguments. As one experienced militant wrote: 'A number of the militants from 1972 and 1974 are very demoralised. Some of them who were with me at Saltley gates were staunch left wingers but have changed their minds about it being possible to win any more.' [64] The Barnsley Forum ceased to meet, as what mattered came to be keeping on good terms with the Area wide machine, even when that meant stamping on struggles that flared up spontaneously, like the Dodsworth strike. As the left took control of the union machine, its own attitudes began to change. The officials began to feel that they played an indispensable role, not just for the workers they represented, but for the Coal Board as well, that they were somehow partners with the Coal Board management in running the industry. Thus, even at the height of the strike, Jack Taylor, the left-wing president of the Yorkshire miners could say, in an interview in **Marxism Today**, that in his view, MacGregor 'can't run a coal industry without the NUM ... The one thing they can't do is run a successful coal industry on their own.' [65]

With such attitudes, it is hardly surprising that the officials did their best to end strikes like Dodsworth.

What Thatcher and MacGregor forgot when they staged their provocations in March was that they were deliberately upsetting the very union bureaucrats who had been restraining the militant minority for the past year. The 1984 strike took off so rapidly in Yorkshire in its first week

because the Area officials were giving the go-ahead to the same young 'hot heads' they had condemned during the Dodsworth strike six months before.

The attitude of Thatcher and MacGregor towards the officials was not an accident. The whole argument of the Thatcherite wing of the government was that it was possible to control the working class without making the concessions to the union bureaucracy that had been made in the past. For them the whole array of consultation and review procedures that had to be gone through before pits could be shut were part of a larger obstacle to revitalising British capitalism, and therefore it was necessary to upset the union bureaucracies.

Something else was at stake as well. The miners' union leadership was a living reminder of the militancy of the early 1970s. They felt they could only purge the memory of that militancy – and therefore dismantle the collaborationist structures that had been used to buy it off– if they could inflict personal humiliation on Arthur Scargill and, if possible, split the miners' union into Area-based fragments.

Even a right-wing union leadership would have found it difficult to have simply bowed down before the calculated insult of Thatcher and MacGregor – after all, faced with similar situations, Bill Sirs had called the steel strike in 1980 and Len Murray for action over GCHQ. The left-wing national leadership of the NUM could avoid a light even less.

If all the pressures of recent years had been for Arthur Scargill to get trapped in bureaucratic procedures and to forget about the militant, rank-and-file trade unionism that had made his reputation, now the pressure pushed him back in a militant direction. The result was that he stood and fought in a way that no other trade union leader had in living memory. He did not cease to approach many issues in a very bureaucratic way (for instance, refusing to openly

criticise other officials when they blocked the sort of militant action he knew to be necessary). But he did give a fighting lead.

Things were rather different with the Area leaderships. British capitalism would want coal out of the most modern pits for the foreseeable future and would want to continue to do deals with the Area union leaders to control the workforce whatever the outcome of this particular confrontation.

At the same time, however, an immediate open retreat was very difficult for the leadership of the biggest and most important Area, Yorkshire. The memory of the early 1970s meant that there were large numbers of rank-and-file miners who wanted a fight.

The leaders of the main Areas, therefore, wanted to put on a display of strength sufficient to force the Tories and the Coal Board back to the negotiating table. But they did not see things in terms of a fight to the finish.

It was this interaction between the militant, active, mainly young, minority in the pits and the interests of different sets of officials that explains the way the strike developed.

Most of the Area officials would have preferred a strike which was organised in a completely bureaucratic way, with miners stopping work on their orders and then simply sitting back and waiting for the government and the Coal Board to agree to negotiate. Mick McGahey, the president of the Scottish miners, went as far as to tell his members to stay at home, taking a rest. And officials like Kim Howells, the South Wales research officer, never hid their distaste for mass picketing. But they soon discovered that the purely bureaucratic strike was a non-starter. Branch ballots in South Wales and Scotland went against action, as did later Area ballots in Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, with Derbyshire and Northumberland splitting 50 : 50.

It was only when the Area officials, however reluctantly, went along with at least temporary mobilisations of the militant minority that they succeeded in pulling the majority of miners into the strike. This happened very quickly in Yorkshire (where a strike over another issue had, in any case, already shut the South Yorkshire Panel), Durham and Kent. It happened too in Scotland and South Wales (where the officials reacted to the initial rejection of the strike call by organising a very high level of picketing, until all the pits were out).

The combination of official support plus mobilisation of the active minority was unstoppable in the North East, Yorkshire, Kent, Scotland, South Wales, and Derbyshire. It got these areas out so that even the weakest of them, Derbyshire, held firm for nearly eight months.

But the Notts leadership was far from enthusiastic about the strike. Two of the full-timers, Lynk and Prendergast, were hostile to it. One, Chadburn, went through the motions of saying he was in favour of it (no doubt thinking of his own future position in the national union). The fourth, Richardson, had been elected on a Broad Left platform, but had no organisation independently of the rest of the Area leadership and so went along with their calls for pickets from other Areas to keep out while a Notts Area ballot was held. This meant the ballot would take place under precisely the conditions which had led to the unfavourable votes in Scotland and South Wales.

The militant minority in Yorkshire did move across the county border, despite the resistance of their Area officials, forcing these officials to change their stance. And as Callinicos and Simons show conclusively, they did get a good response from substantial numbers of Notts miners. But the Yorkshire Area officials did a deal with the Nottinghamshire leadership to withdraw the pickets while a ballot was held.

The outcome is well known. Only twenty-six per cent of Notts miners voted to support the strike, and by the time the Yorkshire pickets returned, the majority of the Notts miners were so accustomed to scabbing that they scabbed for the rest of the strike.

By the early summer the national leadership understood it could not win the strike without doing some damage to big business, and the easiest way to do this was to stop steel through a campaign centred on mass picketing. At first the Area leaderships gave dispensations for the steel plants to keep going – partly due to their cosy relations with local ISTC officials – and when this brought on (hem the wrath of both the national leadership and the active, militant minority in their own Areas, staged a series of one-off actions which would never escape from their control, but never stop the steel plants either. They then used the failure of the blockade of steel as a justification for their claim that ‘mass picketing is an out of date tactic’.

The dead hand of officialdom had its effect again in the long defensive phase the strike entered in the summer. Now what matter was the basic job of holding the strike together – providing food, involving the majority of strikers in some degree of activity, however small, preventing outlying miners from getting isolated from the strike and falling under the influence of ‘return to work’ movements, ensuring pickets were large enough to deal with police attacks, moving pickets from the solid pits to those where cracks were beginning to show.

The officials were lacking when it came to all of these tasks. The Area officials were continually worried about things passing out of their own hands. They were worried petrol money for pickets would deplete their Area funds. They even tried to stop the most effective ways for individual pits to keep their food parcels and kitchens going, ‘twinning’

with other workplaces, because it was not under their control. They refused legal aid to those arrested during police attacks on mining villages. They ran down mass picketing just as the drift back to work at outlying pits made it most necessary.

But the ineptness and even treachery of most Area and pit level officials is not, in itself, enough to explain the problems the strike faced. After all, the 1972 strike took place while the national and Yorkshire Area leaderships were still in the hands of right wingers. Yet rank-and-file activists succeeded in taking control of that strike and leading it through to victory.

The difference was that in 1972 because the left was in opposition in Yorkshire, there existed a network of experienced left activists in the branches. The Yorkshire Area leadership may have wanted to block action in the unofficial strikes of 1969 or 1970, or in the 1972 strike. But it could not, for the network of left-wing activists had the base of support in their own pits to take action even if the leadership condemned it.

In 1984, by contrast, very many of the experienced left activists had moved on to full-time posts at the pit or Area level. There was no left-wing network left, either to exert some control on those who had won full-time posts, or to provide some direction for the enthusiasm of young miners thrown into activity by the strike. Only that could have increased the chances of pulling out Notts, built the momentum of the mass picketing of steel, and held the weaker Areas against the 'return to work' movements of the winter of 1984-5.

The miners' strike showed how the Thatcherite offensive could force union leaders into a corner, with little choice but to stage at least a token fight. It showed how a new, young, militant minority was being created in the class which could

lead to strikes taking on a level of militancy which was anathema to many of the official leaders. But it also pointed to the lack of a network of experienced socialist activists, independent of the officials but with enough experience to stand up to them and to provide direction for the new, spontaneous militants.

The government, the union bureaucracy and the strike

The 1 March announcement of the closure of Cortonwood was, for the Thatcherites, just one stage in a blitzkrieg attack on union positions that had begun three months before with Warrington. But the unexpected resistance the miners put up meant that the more general offensive soon ground to a halt.

The Thatcherite Institute of Directors wing of the ruling class wanted quick victories to show that they did indeed have a programme for dealing with the profitability of British industry. But they were still too wary to abandon the step-by-step strategy embodied in the original Ridley report. The miners' resistance meant they postponed action planned against other important sections of workers.

That became clear in the early summer. The refusal of the miners to give in meant that the miners' strike was, unexpectedly, still going on when the annual pay round for the public sector began. The Thatcherites soon showed how 'wet' they could be when expediency demanded it. Concessions were made not only to powerful groups like the water and power workers, but also to the postal workers, who had not taken national action since their defeat in 1971, and the rail workers, who had been battered with TUC help

only two years before. For all its ability to send thousands of police to the mining areas and to seal off the Notts border, the government was not so confident that it could risk any other group fighting alongside the miners.

How worried it was of this was shown in July when its scabbing operations to get coal and iron ore into the steel works provoked a national strike on the docks. As the pound fell to a record low, ministers insisted there were no plans to end the National Dock Labour Scheme, although the port employers had been pressing for such plans for some time. The same soft approach was applied where other groups of workers took action in solidarity with the miners. British Rail sent home workers who would not move coal trains, but it was careful not to sack them, in case that provoked strike action. Power station managements were equally cautious. No action was taken against workers in the Yorkshire power stations who blacked new supplies of coal; the policy seems to have been to avoid any confrontation which might lead to action by other power workers who were quite happily using scab supplies of oil. In line with this general approach both the government and the public sector managements refused to bow to Tory backbench pressure to use the anti-union laws themselves against the NUM. This they left to small employers and scab miners. [66]

While the government was playing it softly, softly, so were the major union leaders outside the mines.

At the 1984 TUC even right-wing union leaders like Gavin Laird of the AUEW and Basnett of the GMWU made resounding promises of support for the miners. They had been sorely offended by Thatcher's behaviour over GCHQ. She had effectively told them that she did not need them to mediate between capital and labour. They saw the miners' strike as an opportunity to make her eat her words. They wanted a display of support for the miners, providing it was

under their own tight control, to be removed the moment Thatcher recognised their worth. So they promised verbal – and some financial – support to the miners, while putting most of their efforts into trying to devise conciliatory formulae for ending the strike. They veered to the left, in words, at the TUC, yet six months later they were delighted when they were invited to Downing Street – for the first time since being shown the door over GCHQ – to put their names to a formula for ending the miners’ strike that even the most rabid right wingers on the NUM executive felt compelled to reject.

Some union leaders felt under more pressure from the Tory offensive than others. There is no doubt, for instance, that the TGWU leadership was upset by any idea of a threat to the Docks Labour Scheme. It saw a carefully controlled, bureaucratically organised national docks strike as the ideal way to impress on the employing class the need to take the TGWU leadership seriously. But the moment it became clear that it would not be possible to sustain such a passive, purely defensive strike in weakly organised ports like Dover not affected by the Dock Labour Scheme, it ended the strike for a compromise formula which solved nothing – as was shown six weeks later when it was forced into a second, much weaker, dock strike.

The TGWU’s behaviour was matched by that of the rail unions. Looked at superficially their record of solidarity with the miners was good. They ensured that the movement of coal by rail was reduced to a trickle of its usual figure. But when spontaneous strikes broke out against the Rail Board sending people home for refusing to move coal trains, the rail union leaders rushed to bring them to an end, with the unions themselves paying the minimum basic wage of those who had been sent home. And they gladly accepted the small improvements made in their wage offer, even though the

government's intention was clearly to leave the miners isolated.

Once the miners' strike had started, the government and the union leaders between them ensured that there was a relatively low level of struggle elsewhere in the public sector. The level of struggle in much of the private sector was already low because of the willingness of many employers to go for the pay and productivity/flexibility strategy we looked at earlier.

This was the background against which miners looked for solidarity in other industries.

Patterns of solidarity

Two things stand out about the solidarity shown with the miners during the 12 months of the strike: the fact that everywhere there was a powerful minority of workers who identified very strongly with the miners' case, and the fact that in very few instances did this minority win the majority of their fellow workers to take industrial action in support of the miners.

There are a number of indications of how large and committed was the minority who wanted to do something for the miners. There were large local 'day of action demonstrations' in a number of localities in May and June. There was the mushrooming up of support committees nearly everywhere during the summer and autumn. There was the proliferation of twinning arrangements between individual pits and workplaces, union branches and support groups. It has to be stressed that all of these activities took place on a wider scale than had happened with any other strike in living memory, including the successful miners'

strikes of 1972 and 1974. The only comparable example of solidarity on this scale was the campaign in support of the UCS work-in for jobs in 1971, and this tended to be confined to Scotland. Even the opinion polls reflected the size of the minority, showing about 35 per cent of the population showing some support for the miners, and around 12 per cent expressing uncritical support. This meant there were something like five million adults whole-heartedly supporting the strike – with quite a high proportion of these to be found among the ten million trade union members.

With such a sizeable minority of trade unionists wildly enthusiastic about the miners' strike, it is not surprising that the miners' leaders were greeted with rapturous applause at the TUC and Labour Party conferences.

Yet the instances of other workers taking industrial action in support of the miners can be counted on the fingers of two hands – the rail workers at Coalville, Shirebrook and Tinsely who refused to handle coal trains, the Sun printers who refused to print copies of the paper purporting to show Scargill making a Hitler salute, the Waterloo and Charing Cross rail workers who struck after the police had beaten up two of their officials on a miners' demonstration, the Sealink workers at Harwich who struck against the arrest of one of their branch officials on a miners' picket line, the South Wales dockers who blacked a scab lorry firm, the power station workers in Yorkshire and at Didcot near Oxford and West Thurrock who refused to use 'new' coal. Even the attempts at token strikes during the local days of action met a much smaller response than that seen with the official TUC calls in May 1980, September 1982 and 28 February 1984.

In the great majority of workplaces the minority who supported the miners were unable to deliver the industrial

solidarity which would have brought victory. How are we to explain this?

What was common to most of the acts of solidarity was that they were in industries – the railways and the print – which themselves had suffered defeats in the previous couple of years, but whose organisation had not been smashed.

A similar pattern seems to exist if you look at where the greatest support came for the day of action demonstrations and the workplace collections for the miners. As well as from the print and the railways it was from sections like local government white-collar workers (who were involved in defensive disputes in a number of localities in 1983-5), hospital workers (defeated in 1982), telecoms workers (defeated in 1983), teachers (involved in their own first serious industrial action for 10 years). In these sectors two things seemed to be happening. The experience of being on the receiving end of the employers' offensive was producing an increase in the sense of identity with other sections in struggle (although there were clear limitations to this: a special conference of NALGO effectively stopped financial donations to the miners, while a branch ballot in the CPSA went heavily against support). More importantly, some at least of the union activists were beginning to learn from the difficulties they had had in carrying the membership with them and were consciously setting out to strengthen the organisation within their own sections for future possible battles.

This points to something very important. The traditions of solidarity within the class were having to be rebuilt in the course of the struggle itself. In 1972 it had been relatively easy for miners to gain the support of other sections, in 1984 it was a much more difficult task. A network of militants able to carry the tasks of solidarity did not exist when the

strike began. Insofar as there were any networks in the unions, they were broad left networks: their orientation towards winning positions meant they very easily accepted the very separation of the activists from the shop floor which made it impossible to carry the arguments to each individual worker. In any case, the broad lefts were very weak when it came to numbers and influence in key sections of industry (so that neither the Broad Left Organising Committee nor the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions conferences had one tenth of the representation of key groups like engineers, car workers or dockers to be found at the big Liaison Committee conferences of 1970-71).

Yet if the networks did not exist, very large numbers of individual militants did. Some of these were very good indeed in collecting for the miners, raising hundreds of pounds a week from those they worked with. Like those involved in the strike itself, those who identified with it were of two sorts – new, enthusiastic people with little experience of trade union activity, and union activists of some standing. But exactly the same faults that beset the two groupings in the pits affected their supporters. The new people did not have the experience to confront, for instance, union officials or shop stewards in their own workplaces who were not organising for real solidarity, and, in any case, did not see why there should be any stress on workplace activity as opposed to street collections or holding fund-raising benefits. And many of the experienced trade unionists had become so absorbed by their own positions within the lower ranks of the official movement as to fail to carry the arguments down to the shop floor.

The huge gaps that existed in organising even the most minimal forms of solidarity is shown by the experience of Doncaster. This town lies in the heart of the most militant part of the Yorkshire coalfield and contains several well

organised factories. But when miners from one local support group went round the factories in the eighth month of the strike they found that though one or two had had one-off collections, none of them were holding regular collections, and they soon found this was not through any unwillingness of the workers to contribute.

The picture was better, but not so different, in Sheffield. In November joint delegations of miners and engineering union activists visited 102 factories. There were reports of weekly collections for the miners in only 38 of them, and factory gate collections in another six. At 26 the stewards said there had been 'donations' of money or food (indicating that the issue had not been taken to the shop floor), while at a dozen there seemed no support activity. [67]

So even in a traditional bastion of the left within the engineering union, on the edge of the Yorkshire coalfield, fewer than 40 per cent of factories were carrying through the basic routine of building solidarity on the shop floor, even after nine months of the strike.

After any defeat, it is always difficult to evaluate the relative importance of objective and subjective factors in bringing it about. The fact that both the private sector employers and the government were carefully holding back from confrontations (in the case of manufacturing industry, allowing considerable rises in real wages) while the miners battled it out did create objective problems for getting real solidarity. Yet the examples of the few places that did take action suggest that these obstacles were not always insurmountable – where there existed activists who had the understanding to carry the political arguments about solidarity on the shop floor.

The strike was by no means the walkover the government expected. At several points there was considerable pressure on Thatcher from within the ruling class to do a deal with at

least a section of the NUM left to bring it to an end. She held out against all the pressure; she may well not have done so had there been that little bit of extra solidarity in the workplaces. And it was not objective facts that prevented that, but the fact that certain political arguments (about building sectional strength, about not getting absorbed into the lower ranks of the union bureaucracy, about participation) had been lost among activists on the shop floor in the years before.

The politics of the miners' year

In March 1984 the left in the Labour Party was in headlong retreat. The attempts at resistance to the new leadership of Kinnock and Hattersley had collapsed. The attempts to mount campaigns against the expulsions of the leaders of **Militant** had come to nought. As one writer could put it in **London Labour Briefing**: 'Following Kinnock's accession to the leadership, the "win an election at any price" tide has been rising. Its corollary appears to be collective silence and a loyal desire not to rock the boat.' [68]

Tony Benn went along with the prevailing mood when he was selected as Labour candidate in the Chesterfield by-election: 'I see my job,' he told a press conference, 'whether in or out of parliament, to get Neil into Number Ten and Roy into the deputy leader's office.' Roy Hattersley insisted that he and Benn were 'totally united' on almost every issue. [69]

It seemed that the new slogan of the Labour left was Hobsbawm-ism without Hobsbawm. This extended across

to some of the entrists. Socialist Action told its readers that now was not the time to criticise the Labour leadership because of the mood for unity in the party! Even in Militant you would search in vain for any criticism of Kinnock by name.

Even in local government, the field into which much of the left had chosen to retreat, most of the left were careful to make it clear their rhetoric about defying the government would not be turned into action in 1984. In the March issue of Labour Briefing, Blunkett, the leader of Sheffield council, explained that though Liverpool council (very much under Militant influence) was intent upon defiance, the other councils would not follow suit.

The mood was changed profoundly by the miners' strike. The change did not take place all at once. At first much of the Labour left seemed inclined to treat the strike much as they treated most other strikes – to ignore it, since it was not relevant to the campaigns to get left councils and MPs. So, for instance, the April issue of London Labour Briefing did not mention it, and even Militant supporters seemed to regard discussion about the strike as a distraction from the question of building the left in the unions at the Broad Left Organising Committee conference on 24 March. At this time, it was still the case that Socialist Workers Party members were the only people in most localities raising the question of collections for the miners.

But things began to change rapidly in May and June. Something no one could remember ever happening before began to occur – Labour Party members and even whole local Labour Parties began appearing on the streets to collect for the strikers, forming support committees, and even began visiting picket lines. And MPs like Dennis Skinner and Tony Benn spoke at literally hundreds of support meetings.

The enthusiasm of the minority in the class – and especially of the active strikers themselves – was infectious. Literally thousands of people who had joined the Labour Party because they looked to some vague improvement in society (an end to nuclear weapons, less unemployment, greater equality for women) now began to feel that the miners' struggle represented the most important force for change. They saw in its rank-and-file activism a powerful real alternative to the tawdry compromises of Kinnockism. The sharpness of the alternatives was made even clearer by the refusal of the parliamentary leadership to come down on the strikers' side.

Those on the left who had been sliding to the right now slid back to the left again quickly. The same **Socialist Action** which only months before had warned people against opposing Kinnock now denounced him as a scab on its front page. The **Militant** newspaper moved notably leftwards in the summer months. Not only did it now criticise Labour leaders by name, it also began to criticise the left-wing leaders of unions like the TGWU for their failure to translate their words about action in support of the miners into deeds. The stress in the paper was now on industrial action (albeit in the limited form of a 24-hour general strike) rather than on 'the election of a Labour government with socialist policies'.

The new leftward surge reached its peak at the Labour Party conference in October. The mood spread out of the conference halls at fringe meetings where speakers argued that the miners' strike showed how valuable 'extra-parliamentary struggle' could lie. It no doubt influenced many of the left Labour councillors to pledge themselves to go outside the law in 1985, as they had not in 1984, to fight rate capping. [70]

Yet even the Labour Party conference left completely untouched the real levers of power in the party. Kinnock and Hattersley continued to dominate in the party's national executive and the parliamentary party. And the major components of the left, seeing party unity' as indispensable in electoral terms did not dare challenge them. They stood and cheered Arthur Scargill when he spoke to the party conference for the miners; but they cheered Neil Kinnock equally the next day, even though he denounced 'picket line violence' and called on both unions and local councils to obey the Tory laws.

There was another limitation on the left swing in the Labour Party. It took place not because of the power of the left in the party. but because of the attractive pull on the party membership of a struggle taking place outside the confines of the party. But by the time the party conference took place, that attractive pull was already in decline. The miners' strike had shifted from the offensive, when what came across to participants and observers alike was the power and confidence of workers on the move, to the defensive, when it was an increasingly hard battle simply to hold the strike solid. By November, among many of the striking miners a new sectionalism began to replace the confident, generalising, 'we shall win' attitude of the early summer; now a common view was that different groups of workers would never help each other, indeed, could not even be expected to do so.

And when it came to dealing with this problem, there was not a great deal the Labour left could do to help. The local Labour Parties might be involved in organising street collections, but their very structure means that they cannot act as a meeting ground where rank-and-file trade union activists can discuss how to build real solidarity. Significantly, when a Labour left grouping that had emerged

at the conference called a national conference of support committees, the 1,500 or so delegates attending included only a score or so each of such crucial groups of workers as engineers and car workers, rail workers, print workers.

The miners' strike had been a factor from the outside which provided an unexpected boost for the left in the Labour Party. When the strike ended, the collapse of the Labour left resumed where it had left off 12 months before.

The witch-hunt against Militant took on new life, as local parties began to get National Executive support for expulsions of unknown figures, as former left wingers in the Scottish Labour Coordinating Committee pushed through an inquiry into the Militant-dominated Labour Party Young Socialists in Scotland, and as the party leadership denounced a Militant-led strike of school students.

The Hobsbawmites, who seemed almost to have been in hiding for a year, suddenly re-emerged from their closet with new force to proclaim that the miners' strike had been lost because of mass picketing, the refusal to organise a ballot, and the failure to form 'alliances' with bodies like the church. An authoritative article in the Labour Party's magazine, the **New Socialist**, described how a large section of the left, led by people like David Blunkett and Tom Sawyer, was breaking with Bennism and linking up with Kinnock. It was committed to fighting the 'hard left' and was particularly resentful at the way people like Dennis Skinner had tried to 'bully' MPs into supporting the miners' strike.

[71]

Finally, the most symptomatic development was the sudden renegacy of Ken Livingstone. He was the hard left's best known leader next to Benn. He had been co-editor of **Labour Herald**, the hard left's 'alternative' to **Tribune**, he had stood on public platforms alongside Ernest Mandel and sponsored meetings for Gerry Adams in London, he had

been the subject of innumerable paeans of praise in papers like **Socialist Action** and **Socialist Organiser**, to former members of revolutionary socialist organisations like Tariq Ali he exemplified the new sort of Labour leftist who made it worthwhile joining the party. Yet two days after speaking to a massive demonstration over rate capping, he voted for the GLC to comply with the government's law. It was not long before he was resigning as an editor of **Labour Herald**, explaining to the press that he 'hated' other people on the paper.

At the time of writing the Labour left is in complete and utter disarray. The much-vaunted fight against rate capping is on the verge of collapse, the only question being whether a couple of councils hold out by themselves as Clay Cross did in the fight against rent increases in 1971. Right-wing MPs are sailing through re-selection conferences. The Bennites of 1981 are turning their backs on Benn. The **Militant** is under attack as never before. The only question is whether the hard left will at least hold out in terms of the arguments, or whether it too will collapse into Kinnockism and Hobsbawmism without Hobsbawm.

The omens are not good. In front of me is a copy of **Socialist Organiser**. Its headline is, 'after the local government results, fight for a general election. LABOUR CAN WIN'. It tells its readers, Neil Kinnock rightly called for an immediate general election. He should do more than just call for it, he should organise for it. We need a powerful campaign of meetings and demonstrations up and down the country – with speakers ranging from Tony Benn to Roy Hattersley'. [72]

The **Morning Star** is even worse. It may have split with the Eurocommunists and contain articles attacking Hobsbawm, but its front page stories repeatedly give the impression that the TUC and Labour Party leaders are

fighting in workers' interests. (For instance, after Neil Kinnock had joined in the media's demands for a new ballot in the TGWU, the **Morning Star** reported that he had spoken out against the ballot!)

The **Militant** has not gone nearly as far as this. But it too has toned down its criticisms of the Labour leadership, failing to attack Kinnock byname, but instead restricting itself to criticisms of 'hard right wing elements'.

It looks very much as if much of the hard left inside the party is set not only to lose its votes and its positions, but its principles as well.

Revolutionaries and defeats

There are two sorts of defeats workers can suffer. There are defeats like that which followed the 1848 revolution, the Paris Commune, the taking of power by Hitler in Germany, or the Pinochet coup in Chile. These set the workers' movement back years, or even decades, and when it re-emerges it has to start virtually from scratch.

There are other defeats which are best seen as interludes between battles. These are particularly prevalent after a period of working-class advance which has lost momentum. Then the employing class go on to the offensive against one section of the class after another, trying to wrest back what it lost not so long before.

This was what happened, for instance, in Britain in the 1890s (after the first flourishing of the 'new unions' of the unskilled workers) and the early 1920s (after the great waves of militancy and unionisation of 1910-14 and 1919-20).

Such periods of big defensive battles are in one way much less exciting for revolutionary socialists than the periods of upsurge of the class struggle that preceded them. When workers enter into struggle and organise for the first time, it is often possible for individual revolutionaries to lead large bodies of workers, giving expression to their newly awakened feelings. So in 1889 and 1890 a socialist like Tom Mann could lead a strike of many thousands of dockers, though he himself was a skilled engineer, and a middle-class socialist woman, Eleanor Marx, could sit on the executive of the (male) gasworkers' union. In the same way socialists of a more or less revolutionary hue like Tom Mann (again), Jim Larkin, James Connolly, and Noah Ablett could play a key role in the struggles of 1910-14.

Yet periods of upsurge like this are not always periods of ideological clarification for those involved. Revolutionaries can play a key role, but so can all sorts of reformists, centrists, charlatans and oddballs. So it wasn't Eleanor Marx but Annie Besant, a liberal do-gooder, who led the match girls' strike of 1888; the upsurge of union organisation in the mines in 1889-90 was almost all in the hands of leaders who were firmly wedded to the Liberal Party [73]; in Britain (as opposed to Ireland) the main source of socialist ideas for those involved in the labour unrest just before the First World War was the Daily Herald – dominated by the left reformist Lansbury and the maverick union leader Ben Tillet, and containing a strange mixture of Labour, syndicalist, feminist, distributionist, Christian socialist and pacifist ideas. [74] And the mass of the workers involved in the struggles of both periods continued to adhere to the political ideas espoused by the two bourgeois parties, the Liberals and the Tories.

Often it requires the 'whip of defeat' to produce a sorting out of ideas in the movement.

The 1890s show this very clearly. The years 1889-90 saw relatively short and extremely successful strikes which did not encounter any great deal of resistance from the employers and the police or hostility from the media. From the winter of 1890-91 onwards things changed radically. The employers took the initiative, deliberately provoking strikes like the Manningham Mills strike of December 1890 or the Hull waterfront strike of 1893, when their hand was strongest; or locking out whole sections of the class, as with the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire miners in 1893, the boot and shoe workers in 1895, the South Wales miners in 1895, the engineering workers in 1897.

There were a number of features about the employers' offensive reminiscent of the last year. It was accompanied by the use of police and troops: the centre of Bradford was under virtual military occupation by police and troops at the height of the Manningham Mills strike; two miners were shot dead in Featherstone during the 1893 pit lockout, and there were complaints in parliament about places like Wrexham and Somerset that 'this picture almost resembles an armed occupation of an enemy country. [75] Gunboats were also sent to the Humber during the waterside strike of 1893. Scabbing was encouraged on a massive scale, with figures close to the leadership of the Tory Party helping to sponsor a scab 'Free Labour Organisation'. [76] The newspapers made a great deal of noise about 'intimidation' by pickets. Individual companies began taking cases to the courts to get judges to amend the law so as to make life much harder for the unions.

But the very ferocity of these attacks by the employers and the state forced workers to organise a much wider solidarity than had been necessary in the upturn years.

During the Manningham Mills strike: 'Between three and four hundred women and girls and all the men on strike met

to organise collections for the strike funds ...' They collected every Friday in Bradford and the surrounding villages, and deputations were sent off to Lancashire and even Scotland. 'Social evenings, football matches, raffles were all used to raise money', and when the city magistrates banned strike meetings, 60-90,000 people joined in the protests. [77]

Again, the mines lockout of 1893 led to collectors going out into the industrial towns around the mining areas. The **Daily Chronicle** in London could record the formation of a 'women's national council' to support the women and children of the miners in their struggle for a living wage': 'Mrs Sidney Webb presided over an enthusiastic demonstration of women', the paper told on 8 November 1893, with its editorial adding, 'We hope the national council will speedily find branches springing up in every town in the kingdom'. [78]

The experience of confronting the state at first hand and of building wide networks of solidarity had an effect in the class which the successes of 1889-90 had not. It increased the interest of wide numbers of workers (as opposed to a few very talented individuals like Tom Mann or Will Thorne) in some of the basic things socialists were saying. The socialist organisations of the 1880s, the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, had stagnated and declined, despite the role some of their members had played in leading the new unions; when Keir Hardy first stood for parliament in Mid-Lanark in 1888 he got a mere 617 votes, yet in 1892 he was able to win the West Ham election. [79] And independent Labour politics took off in earnest in Bradford in the aftermath of the Manningham Mills strike. As one historian has noted:

'It is significant that the Independent Labour Party emerged out of a defeated strike in Bradford, and that the West Riding of Yorkshire, where trade unionism was weak remained for

years its strongest area of support. The growth of socialist politics in the 1890s represented less a political generalisation of industrial militancy than a reaction to defeat in the industrial struggle, a search for political solutions where industrial ones had failed.' [80]

The same growth of a certain sort of left-wing politics is found if you look at the record of the 1920s. In 1918-19, the working class may have been very militant, but the majority of workers still voted Tory or Liberal. But this changed as the employers and the state attacked them and they were forced to look towards forms of class solidarity. [81]

There was a rise in the average level of consciousness of the class, an increase in the number of workers prepared to challenge the established ideas about society and their role in it.

But there was a problem for revolutionaries in this politicisation. It did not come from a feeling of strength, but from a feeling of weakness. Socialists found that when they said certain things (about, say, the role of the police or the evils of big business) they got a ready hearing from their audience. But there was much less receptivity when they spoke about changing these things through workers' own self activity. For the immediate experience was that such self activity could not change things.

The great temptation for individual socialists was to abandon this element in their ideas in order to gain a wider audience for their other socialist arguments, to substitute socialism from above for socialism from below. This, for instance, was what a group of Leeds socialists did who had been in Socialist League alongside William Morris after the Manningham Mill strike. [82]

Again, in the 1920s, although the Communist Party doubled in size during and after the general strike and the seven-month mines lockout, the real gainer was the Labour Party, with many activists who had been close to the CP in its early days gravitating right into Labour's orbit.

If we look at the situation today we can expect both of the trends present in the 1890s and the 1920s to recur. The average consciousness of the class as a whole can move to the left, with a growing number of workers not only rejecting Thatcher, but challenging the idea that the police or the media are neutral. But at the same time, many of those who have been on the far left will be pulled towards the centre of the Labour Party, as the only 'practical' alternative to Thatcher.

However, merely to put things like that is not good enough. The 'trends' in fact involve many thousands of people arguing, debating, changing their minds, coining to terms with contradictory experiences, including the very powerful experiences of a year of an extremely high level of class warfare. Those who want to preach socialism from above have a very difficult problem of their own: whether they like it or not, they are stuck with Neil Kinnock, Roy Hattersley and a politics indistinguishable from that which was so disastrous to people for 11 out of the last 21 years, a politics which does not even have faith in its own ability to cope with any of the problems thrown up by a crisis-ridden British capitalism.

Even in the 1890s and the inter-war years, the move to the right of the activists was not a smooth, non-contradictory process. There were still sudden, bitter rows between them and the established right wing. People who had begun to move to the right would suddenly realise how disastrous were the compromises involved and lurch back to the left. There were splits to the left from formations which were

moving rightwards (the Cook-Maxton campaign of the late 1920s, the break of the ILP with the Labour Party in 1932), and even significant swerves to the left from people who had been on the right before (for instance, Stafford Cripps from 1932 onwards).

We have three advantages over the revolutionaries of the 1890s and the 1920s when it comes to relating to the arguments which will take place.

First, they were faced with competition from an idea – parliamentary socialism – that had never been tried before. We have had numerous attempts at it, and a good number of people know what a failure they were.

Second, they suffered from political deficiencies which we do not: Marxism in Britain in the 1890s was represented by a party, the Social Democratic Federation, whose leadership had not the slightest inkling of how the industrial and political struggle came together, concentrating instead on a strange mix of socialist propaganda and electioneering; the Communist Party of the mid-1920s was rather better than that, but was then completely skewed by Stalin's absurd line that left reformists are a variety of fascists.

Finally, in both periods, although British capitalism was under growing international pressure, it still had vast reserves of strength: it was still the ruler of the biggest empire the world had ever known and, even in 1926, the world's second industrial power. Today it is among the weakest economically of the advanced countries, facing a crisis that knows no end. This means we are unlikely to see the sort of relatively stable economic conditions that would enable reformism to re-establish its total hegemony within the Labour movement.

Conclusion

To understand the first five years of Tory rule, leading to the miners' strike, it was necessary to reject the assumptions of both the super-optimists and the Hobsbawmites. Each in their own way blinded the left to what was really happening, in terms of the balance of class forces and the way this reflected itself in the political superstructure of society. The blindness can be even more disastrous in the aftermath of the miners' defeat, as the Hobsbawmites make easy ground and the super-optimists seem unable to resist their advance, retreating into the bunkers saying that one day everything will be all right.

Yet if you look at things through the eyes of the employing class, you can very easily see that there is no reason for socialists to be completely gloomy. In the miners' strike, their victory was eventually achieved, but at an enormous price. Billions that were meant to go into tax cuts disappeared down the mines shafts.

The ruling class has emerged from the strike somewhat strengthened – it can rely on union leaders complying much more readily with the anti-union laws than before. It will find it that much easier to beat down resistance to the flexibility/productivity element in its pay deals. Particular groups of employers – for instance, the print employers – will use the increased strength to attempt to override union opposition in a way which was inconceivable 18 months ago.

But the central problem the government faced back in 1983 has not been solved. Its blitzkrieg has not been so successful as to prompt the private sector employers to reduce the level of wage settlements. The CBI can still report a certain 'hardening' of attitudes on the shop floor. And the widening gap between private sector wages and public

sector wages can still feed anger among the government's own employees.

The very sectionalism which enabled the government to fob off other groups of workers while it battered the miners is now rebounding on it, to its own disadvantage. Workers who did not identify over much with the miners in their strike do not necessarily feel beaten by the miners' defeat. So in the weeks immediately after the defeat there were continued strikes by teachers and spontaneous walkouts in post offices up and down the country.

Some at least of the very big employers are still discontented with the government's record. The head of ICI and the head of GEC both gave very vocal expression to their discontent in April. They want the government to do something to expand the economy, but the government is still afraid of the 'inflationary' (i.e. increased wage pressure) effects.

Yet it also shows no signs, for the moment at least, of resuming its blitzkrieg. It has not as yet put the boot in on the railways or the docks. It is almost as if it is afraid of another great, set piece confrontation after the way the miners' resistance upset its finances and its electoral timetable.

The impression it now gives, under these circumstances, is of a government which has lost its way, which muddles but does not achieve anything concrete for its class. It tries to solve its short-term budgetary problems by giant schemes of privatisation which might bring joy to those who make a quick buck in the city, but which do nothing to increase the competitiveness and profitability of industrial capital. It tries to compensate for its failure to attack wages directly by reform of local government, the rating system and the welfare slate. But it cannot avoid endless muddle there, because any thorough reform in the interests of big capital

threatens a hundred and one privileges and concessions that tie the middle classes and sections of skilled workers to it politically. Its time and its energy are frittered away on projects that do nothing to deal with the long-term decline of British capitalism.

All this is grist for the mill of the wets, the alliance parties, and the Labour leadership, as they wait in the wings with their own schemes for reviving the system on the basis of increased public expenditure and a compact with the union leaders to hold wages back.

Thatcher is faced, as she was in 1983, with a situation in which she is unlikely to be able to stand still for very long. She will be under pressure to move in one of two directions.

Either to move to a deal of her own with the union leaders, a modern version of the Mond-Turner talks which followed the defeat of the unions in 1926, or to resume the offensive, hoping to achieve the quick victories over other unions.

The first option would rely not just on the good will of the union leaders, but also their fear of the anti-union laws to police their members. With the militancy of the miners' strike out of the way and the debacle round GCHQ an increasingly distant memory, the leaders are in a mood to comply. They would love two or three years of industrial peace while they divert all anger with the government into electoral support for an increasingly right-wing Labour leadership.

But the option has inbuilt disadvantages, not just for Thatcher, but for her class. It would postpone, not resolve, the central profitability problem of British capitalism. It would not stop the pressure behind the upward drift of wages in parts of the private sector. And that would prevent the union leaders selling to their members any deal which seriously cut real wages in the public sector.

The path of straightforward collaboration with the union leaders may be an alluring one. But it is unlikely to sidestep the objective pressures for confrontation.

Significantly, it is in those advanced countries where collaboration reduced the class struggle to its lowest level in the past that it has suddenly flared up in the last couple of years, with the public sector strikes in Holland and Belgium, the metal workers' strike in West Germany, the near general strike in Denmark, the selective public sector strike in Sweden. The crisis of the world system means that national governments cannot afford the sort of terms the union bureaucracies have grown used to getting from negotiations. The bureaucrats cannot sell new deals to their members without at least going through the formality of appearing to take action. The peaceful deal with the employing class suddenly gives way to the bureaucratic mass strike.

This is effectively what happened with the NGA at Warrington and the TUC and the civil service unions over GCHQ. There were elements of it in the way the Area leaderships of the NUM responded to closures announcements last year. It is something we are likely to see again in the not too distant future.

This creates real potentialities for workers. They are mobilised as a class by order from above – but then begin to see their own strength and what it could achieve. An outlet for their anger appears which they never thought existed. Their mood can become the 'Here we go' mood of the young miners last year.

It is precisely for this reason that the union bureaucracy does its utmost to end the strikes quickly. It can often do so because of the inexperience of those roused to action for the first time, their lack of confidence in taking decisions themselves rather than merely obeying diktats from above, their lack of a political perspective on what is happening.

Even when the bureaucracy faces resistance to its eventual sell-outs, it is usually from isolated sections of workers who do not feel they can hold out by themselves. This was how the public sector strike in Belgium ended ignominiously in 1983. It was how the mass strike finally crumbled in Denmark earlier this year.

Yet there have been occasions when the bureaucratic mass strike, once called, has escaped from the control of the union leaders (for instance, May 1968). We saw elements of this in the miners' strike (although, unfortunately, only elements).

The extent to which this happens depends in part on objective factors – the previous experience of the mass of workers, the depth of their bitterness, the scale of the attack they face. But it also depends on a subjective factor – the extent to which there are militants in the workforce capable of standing up and arguing with their fellow workers, warning them of the danger of bureaucratic sell-outs, showing them in practice that they can carry the struggle forward without the bureaucrats, for instance by one strong, confident sector putting on pickets to prevent other sections returning to work.

In the struggle of the early 1970s there was a layer of stewards with reformist ideas who, nonetheless, had the confidence and the experience to take the initiative from the full-time bureaucrats because they themselves had led innumerable small, but successful, unofficial strikes. Within that layer there were networks of political militants, who had some understanding of how the industrial strength of their class could be used for political ends. In the big struggles, such as the campaign of solidarity with UCS, the campaigns against the union laws, the two miners' strikes and the strikes over Pentonville, the political militants were capable of involving the much wider number of less political stewards in action.

The layer of stewards with experience of successful unofficial action is much weaker and much less confident today. It is therefore much less willing to act independently of the trade union bureaucracy. But that is not the end of the matter.

A new network of political militants can be built. And it can be built without the political weaknesses (the hegemony of reformist and Stalinist ideas) that left so many of the militants of the early 1970s unable to face up to the temptations of bureaucratisation and participation in the social contract years.

Almost every strike that takes place throws up new, young, angry, spontaneous militants. Older militants are being forced in some industries too (like the print or rail) to learn some lessons from the defeats they have suffered and to take steps to strengthen their base on the shop floor. The flux of ideas created by the miners' strike and its defeat may now be leading many individuals to move to the right, but some are recoiling to the left.

Even at the level of official politics this is happening. Ken Livingstone's defection to the Kinnock camp has forced his former colleagues on Labour Herald to denounce him. The proclamation by the soft left of 'Bennism without Benn' has stung Benn himself into denouncing Labour's economic policy as containing 'violently anti-socialist elements'. [83] In the months ahead every section and every member of the old Labour left of 1980-84 is going to have to deal with the arguments.

The problem is likely to be particularly acute for the followers of **Militant**. Its support swelled in numbers both during the heyday of Bennism and when support for the rest of the 'hard left' began to ebb in 1983. It attracted support because, while offering socialists I lie same quick apparent gains as the rest of the left (with its two MPs, its influence on

the executives of major unions like the CPSA and the POEU and its hegemony on Liverpool council), it seemed more serious, more disciplined, more principled, more committed to building in the unions and more working class than the Bennites. What is more, it talked explicitly in terms of Marxism and even revolution (although it was careful to say this could be achieved ‘peacefully’ in Britain).

But the attack on the hard left is going to hit Militant hardest of all. Those who’ve switched from Benn to Kinnock will be out to prove their loyalty to the leadership by their vigour in attacking the **Militant**. Significantly, NUPE, the union whose representatives on the Labour Party NEC used to vote against attempts to expel **Militant** supporters, voted five to one in favour of the witch-hunt at its conference. **Militant** supporters lost all their positions on the executive of the CPSA – where one of their members was union president only two years ago – after the formation of a Kinnockite split away from the Broad Left.

Militant supporters are increasingly going to be faced with the bitter choice between sticking to their principles and risk losing more of the gains made inside the Labour Party and the unions in the last ten years, or moving to the right, dropping their criticisms of Kinnockism, in an effort to hold on to positions.

It is up to revolutionaries to intervene in these arguments, pointing out that there is an alternative to tailing behind the soft lefts as they in turn tail behind a rightward-moving Labour leadership. The alternative is to build the missing link, the network of political militants prepared to argue for action independent of the union bureaucracies.

We have to make the point that the hard Labour left, including the Militant tendency, is going to find things inside the Labour Party increasingly tough as the next election gets nearer and the pressure against rocking the

boat grows. Even in its own terms it will be increasingly ineffectual. Yet were it prepared to combine with the Socialist Workers Party to form an organisation independent of Labour, the opportunities would be very great indeed. Together we could form the core of the network of political militants that was so desperately missing in the miners' strike. The hard Labour left are going to be prevented from taking such initiatives by the threat of the witch-hunt. But together, outside the Labour Party, we could build an organisation of eight or ten thousand members, capable of gaining a following among many, many thousands of other shop floor activists. In electoral terms that might not amount to anything. But it could be enough to make the difference in terms of offering some sort of alternative leadership to that of the union bureaucracy in future industrial confrontations.

It is up to revolutionary socialists to intervene vigorously to put across the arguments for building such a revolutionary organisation. If sections of the hard Labour left do indeed join with us in doing so, that would be a great gain for everyone concerned. If, as seems more likely, they insist on continuing to imprison themselves in a rightward-moving Labour Party, then we in the Socialist Workers Party will have to do our best to build on the basis of individual recruitment. In either case we have to show, in practice, that the collapse of super-optimism does not necessitate a rush towards Kinnockism and Hobsbawmism.

Notes

1. Figures from the **Department of Employment Gazette**, June 1972. It is important to remember, however, that outside the mines (where all disputes tended to be recorded), the great majority of stoppages were not even recorded – they were mainly short and sectional.

2. Cf. Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, **Coal is our Life**.
3. D. Lyddon, *Demythologising the downturn*, **International Socialism 2:25**, Autumn 1984.
4. The full account of the Longbridge events can be found in Tony Cliff's article in the current issue of this journal.
5. **Socialist Review**, 1980:1.
6. D. Beecham & S. MacGregor, *Latest round at Leyland*, **Socialist Review**, 1980:5.
7. *Leyland, Down and then Out*, **Socialist Review**, 1981:10.
8. **Socialist Worker**, 16, 23 and 30 April 1983.
9. Figures from Incomes Data Services. The 1980-84 figures exaggerate how successful managements were. Firstly, in some sectors, rises in productivity were mainly to make up for falls in the previous period. Secondly, in other sectors, increased productivity was often a result of shutting down inefficient plant with low productivity, not of making the remaining workforce work harder.
10. **Socialist Review**, 1980:1, 1980:2.
11. *Tory headaches*, **Socialist Review**, 1980:3.
12. **Socialist Review**, 1980:4.
13. *The general strike that never was*, **Socialist Review**, 1980:3.
14. **Socialist Review**, 1980:4, pp.3, 9.
15. *Three Days That Shook the Tories*, **Socialist Review**, 1981:3.
16. **Socialist Worker**, 3, 10& 17 July 1982.
17. **Socialist Worker**, 10, 17 & 24 July 1982.
18. Quoted **Socialist Review**, 1981:3, p.3.
19. Quoted in D. Beecham, *Are the Tories finished?*, **Socialist Review**, 1981:11.
20. An Institute for Fiscal Studies report in March 1983 showed that real living standards of skilled workers were rising above their 1979 level after falling about 5 per cent below in 1981-81,

even if the living standards of employed manual workers were 20 percent down and semi-skilled workers about 8 percent down.

21. Fears that 'employees are beginning to see the changed circumstances' and that they would soon be 'testing' the productivity deals signed at the worst period of the recession, were expressed in the **Financial Times**, 14 August 1983.

22. **Morning Star**, 26 January 1981.

23. **Militant**, 30 January 1981.

24. **Tribune**, 30 January 1981.

25. **Socialist Challenge**, 29 January 1981.

26. Cf. the debate *Should socialists be in the Labour Party?*, **Socialist Review**, 1981.11.

27. **Socialist Worker**, 9 January 1983.

28. For example, see the interview in **Socialist Review**, 1981:6. For a fuller discussion of the Hobsbawm phenomenon and its consequences, see Alex Callinicos's article in the current issue of this journal.

29. **Socialist Review**, 1980:5.

30. **Socialist Review**, 1980:6.

31. **Socialist Review**, 1981:2.

32. C. Harman, *The summer of 1981: a post-riot analysis*, **International Socialism** 2:14, Autumn 1981.

33. **Socialist Review**, 1981:10.

34. **Socialist Worker**, 14 & 21 August 1982.

35. **Socialist Worker**, 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 October 1982 and **Socialist Review**, 1982:9.

36. **Socialist Worker**, 29 January and 5, 12, 19 & 26 February 1983.

37. **Socialist Worker**, 26 March, 9, 16, 30 April and 7 & 14 May 1983.

38. **Socialist Worker**, 26 March & 2 April 1983.

39. **Socialist Worker**, 9, 16, 23 & 30 April 1983.

40. **Socialist Worker**, 9 & 16 April 1983.

41. **Socialist Worker**, 10 September 1983.
42. **Socialist Worker**, 8 October 1983.
43. **Socialist Worker**, 20 August 1983.
44. CBI estimate for 1984.
45. Incomes Data Services estimate for manufacturing industry July 1983-July 1984, **IDS Report 434**, October 1984.
46. **Employment Affairs Reports**, March/April 1985.
47. **Ibid.**
48. **IDS Report 447**, April 1985.
49. **IDS Report 434**, October 1984, p 25.
50. Another factor remained of importance: some large engineering companies still use piecework systems for skilled workers (e.g. Lucas and GKN). 'The figures for earning changes in the Coventry area show that for skilled workers the piecework factor still predominates. The highest paying firms are those which retain piecework, or have only just abolished it' (**Ibid.**).
51. *Socialist Worker*, 8 September 1984.
52. Estimated value of deal from **IDS Report 436**, November 1984.
53. **IDS Report 436**, November 1984 and **Socialist Worker**, 17 November 1984.
54. **Socialist Worker**, 24 November & 1 December 1984.
55. **Socialist Worker**, 17 December 1983.
56. The account of these strikes is based on reports in **Socialist Worker** and on the statistics for 'prominent disputes' given by the **Department of Employment Gazette**.
57. **Socialist Worker**, 17 & 24 September and 10 October 1983.
58. In discussions with myself and Mike Simons when we visited the picket line.
59. **Socialist Worker**, 21 August 1983.
60. Dennis, Henriques & Slaughter, **op. cit.**
61. V. Allen, **The Militancy of British Miners**, pp 139-40.

62. Cf. the account by Arthur Scargill in **New Left Review** **92**, 1975.
63. **Daily Telegraph**, 4 May 1985.
64. Letter from Pete Beevers, **Socialist Worker**, 14 May 1983.
65. **Marxism Today**, October 1984.
66. There was one exception to this. Austin Rover management did use the anti-union laws very effectively against a strike over pay in November. They knew that two of the union leaderships involved, the EEPTU and the AUEW, were by no means enthusiastic about it. The mere threat of legal action was enough to get them to order their workers back. This caused the strike to collapse and the company was then able to ask for a fine to be imposed on the TGWU without the fear of its inflaming the situation in the car plants.
67. Details given in *Report of Sub Committee (miners dispute)*, 26 November 1984, No.28, Confed and AUEW District Committee (duplicated).
68. Keith Lichman in **London Labour Briefing**, March 1984.
69. **Socialist Worker**, 18 February 1984.
70. Pete Goodwin in **Socialist Worker Review**, November 1984.
71. P. Seyd, *Bennism without Benn*, **New Socialist**, May 1985.
72. **Socialist Organiser**, May 1985.
73. Cf. R. Page Arnot, **The Miners** (London 1949).
74. Cf. C. Harman, *The revolutionary press*, **International Socialism** **2:24**, Summer 1984.
75. Page Arnot, **op. cit.**, p.240.
76. Cf. John Saville's contribution in A. Briggs & J. Saville, **Essays in Labour History**, vol.I.
77. Cf. Cyril Pearce, **The Manningham Mills Strike** (Hull 1975).
78. Quoted Page Arnot, **op. cit.**
79. Cf. David Howell, **British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906** (Manchester 1983).

80. James Hinton in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), **A History of British Industrial Relations**.

81. For an account of the 1919-26 period, see Tony Cliff's article in the current issue of this journal.

82. Pearce, **op. cit.**

83. **The Guardian**, 23 May 1985.
