



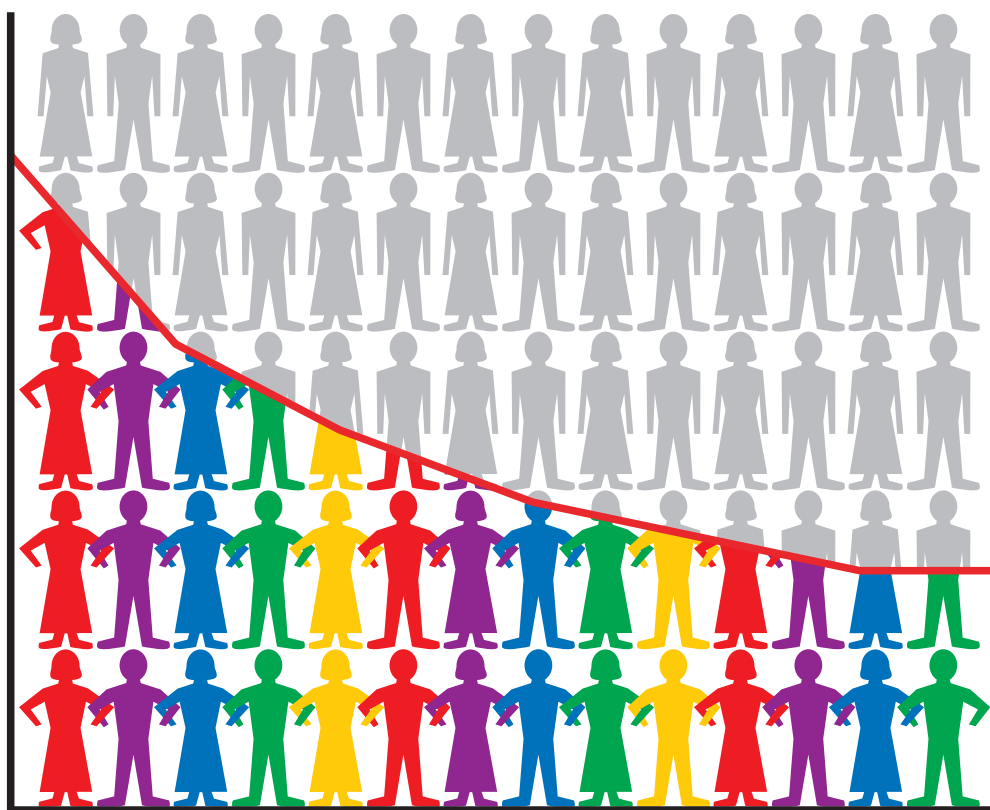
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radical feminist green

Perspectives

No 6 / SPRING 2004 / £2



1979

2003

TRADE UNIONISM IN BRITAIN

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

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EDITORIAL

ROOTS OF RENEWAL

Democratic Left Scotland's recent AGM in Stirling brought together individuals from across the country. All are involved in making sense of and challenging contemporary political reality. Our organisation draws primarily from the socialist, feminist and green traditions, while remaining open to other ideas. The Stirling event reflected this. Some attending were members of the Labour, Green and Scottish Socialist parties, although most were more closely at home with our articulation that "there is more to politics than parties." The atmosphere was one of open debate and enquiry. Whilst we are unashamedly revisionist, we do not believe that history is dead.

Other balancing tricks are important – civil society and party politics, reflection and activity. The left can not afford the luxury of ignoring the realities of the present political landscape – the bloody mess that is Iraq, developments in Europe, the increasing symmetry between Blairism and neo-liberalism and the contradictory performance of the Scottish Executive. In addition we retain a responsibility to develop a transformatory politics that both improves and fundamentally alters today's conditions. Easier said than done!

At this year's STUC conference we were pleased to work with Engender to organise a fringe meeting looking at Sexing Up Economic Growth. This gave light to a feminist perspective that takes a different view of work-life balance than that proposed by First Minister Jack McConnell. We were pleased that Alf Young of the *Herald* took part in this debate. We now require to do more to connect these ideas with the workplace agenda. With civil service workers and many nursery nurses still in dispute we should be asking questions about what kind of society as well as what sort of economy we want.



We should be asking questions about what kind of society as well as what sort of economy we want.

In this issue of *Perspectives* we parallel the STUC's launch of the "Unions Work" campaign with an article that gets under the surface of the present reality. We publish Gregor Gall's hard look at the historical and contemporary position of trades unions because we want the future to be positive. Building the movement will require energy and enthusiasm. It will also involve having a clear understanding of where we are now.

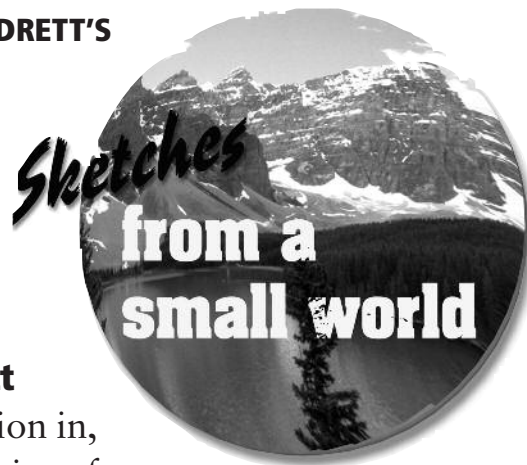
Mike Arnott and Eurig Scandrett locate our debates in a European and global context. Our failure to stop the war is having horrific consequences for the people of Iraq. Opposition to the war and its aftermath however is creating a new global public opinion. The World and European Social Forums are a response to imperialism and its drive to war. If another world is possible it means constructing an alternative that is relevant to the local, the workplace and the worldwide. Erik Cramb reminds us that politics is an individual, as well as collective, experience, whilst Frank Reilly takes a characteristically wry look at management through the lens of Scottish football.

Our debate on what can be retained and developed from the socialist tradition is joined by three more contributors; Isobel Lindsay, Richard Leonard and Ray Newton respond to the key debate carried in our last issue. (More responses are welcome.) Democratic Left, with others, is planning an autumn conference on Revisiting the Socialist Tradition, which will take the discussion forward. Its function will not be to rehearse old clichés about the left being correct on everything, nor will it be an occasion to wring our hands and surrender to capitalism. It will be about contributing to the future direction of radical ideas and action.

Stuart Fairweather
Convener, Democratic Left
Scotland



EURIG SCANDRETT'S



In a specially extended column, **Eurig Scandrett** reports on his participation in, and assesses future directions for, an event that this year attracted 120,000 participants. Overleaf, **Mike Arnott** writes on what's happening in Scotland to attract support for this autumn's European Social Forum in London.

THE WORLD **SOCIAL** FORUM

In January I participated in the fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, a stimulating and fascinating experience I shared with some 120,000 activists from all over the world. I was with colleagues from Friends of the Earth International, representing countries as diverse as Colombia and Uruguay, Nigeria and South Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia, Australia and England.

The World Social Forum started five years ago in Porto Alegre in Southern Brazil as an alternative to the World Economic Forum, in which the leaders of the capitalist countries and multinational corporations gather annually in Davos, Switzerland. The Porto Alegre Workers' Party government had been experimenting with grassroots democracy and participatory budget setting and now provided the opportunity to host the various people's movements, community activists and non-governmental organisations who were, in different ways, trying to build an alternative to globalised neo-liberalism.

In Mumbai, much diversity was in evidence. South Korean farmers marched alongside Bangladeshi

Children marched against child labour, European left-wing intellectuals mingled with Dalit women's groups, Gujarati Gandhians with Malian Marxists.

fisherfolk in opposition to the WTO and its devastating impact. Adivasis (India tribals) with traditional feather headdresses and bows and arrows, linked up with landless Brazilians to demand land reform. Women organising against male violence, from Japan, North America and India, joined forces. Radical Latin American priests rubbed shoulders with exiled Tibetan monks. Children marched against child labour, European left-wing intellectuals mingled with Dalit women's groups, Gujarati Gandhians with Malian Marxists.

BUILD ANOTHER WORLD

What was all this for? The World Social Forum has deliberately avoided agreeing a platform or a manifesto for alternatives to neo-liberalism. It provides a space where the diversity of activists and movements can debate, share experiences, organise international campaigns and start exploring how to build another world. It is sometimes accused of being a talking shop, but that is what it excels at – talking about former, current or future action. It is the sharing and

reflections of people active in campaigns, solidarity actions or small scale alternatives and grassroots development. Much of the activity took place in the six plenary halls and over 100 workshop rooms, constructed especially for the event out of wood and tarpaulin and rigged out with lights and ceiling fans. But a great deal also occurred in the open spaces where marching, dancing, banner waving, street theatre, drumming and singing was in evidence, resulting in a carnival atmosphere of political optimism.

Some of the workshops I attended give an indication of the range. A workshop on ecological debt was led by campaigners from the creditor nations – that is countries of the global South whose economies, ecology and public health are damaged by the current and past actions of the rich Northern countries. Whilst the debt from the North to the South far exceeds the financial debt going the other way, ecological debt is excluded from policy initiatives on international development or debt amelioration. Following the workshop a meeting of those

activists working on ecological debt took place to take forward the long campaign to raise its profile to policy level, and then those European nations involved met separately to share experiences of working on the issue in debtor nations. This campaign is very much at the early stages and sharing across the globe, led by ecological creditor nations, is essential if ecological debt is to mean anything.

I also attended a workshop organised by the Our World Is Not For Sale group, of which Friends of the Earth is a member. This international campaign against neo-liberalism and privatisation was influential in achieving the derailment of World Trade Organisation negotiations in Cancun, by operating both inside and outside the razor wire – in the NGO section of the summit, lobbying respective national governments, and in the streets raising the temperature in the demonstrations and actions. Whilst the group used the opportunity to plan the next wave of actions against the neo-liberal project, the workshop was an opportunity to keep other activists informed of what is happening, and to share in the celebration of the medium-sized success.

CORPORATE CRIMES

A plenary session on corporate accountability informed participants of what is happening in different parts of the world in bringing multinational corporations to account for the destruction they are causing. Inputs from India, Burma and South Africa and from international groups Greenpeace and Amnesty International told stories of corporate crimes and debated the prospects for the new UN Human Rights Norms for Business. The workshop on the same issue shared stories of inspiring, successful or ongoing campaigns trying to make corporations legally, morally or democratically accountable for their actions. Friends of the Earth International is collecting a “tool box” of actions against corpora-

A practical instance of action for corporate accountability, which I and others from international groups joined, was a march and demonstration to the Mumbai headquarters of the Dow Chemical company, alongside the survivors of the Bhopal gas leak.

tions, from shareholder action to stakeholder subversion, from legal suits to illegal civil disobedience.

A practical instance of action for corporate accountability, which I and others from international groups joined, was a march and demonstration to the Mumbai headquarters of the Dow Chemical company, alongside the survivors of the Bhopal gas leak. On the night of 2nd–3rd December 1984, 25,000 people died overnight from contact with poisonous gases which leaked from the US owned Union Carbide agrochemical factory in Bhopal. Over 800 thousand were disabled or made ill and their children continue to be affected. Twenty years later, victims and their families have received little, and in many cases no compensation, still less justice for the crime of the multinational. Union Carbide has since been taken over by Dow, who refuse to accept any liability. An Indian warrant for the extradition to face criminal charges of Warren Anderson, the American chairman of the company at the time, has been ignored by the US government.

BHOPAL MASSACRE

As a young student, I remember the Bhopal massacre being a shocking turning point in my own political consciousness. I was honoured to be able to join the survivors and in a small way support them in their struggle 20 years on.

The World Social Forum was thus inspiring and educating. It involved tentative discussions and concrete campaign plans. Participants brought stories of struggle and ideas for a better world. The Forum will not make a better world, but can reinforce the belief that, as their slogan has it, “a better world is possible.” The builders of that better world are those who participated, and the groups, movements, colleagues and constituencies to which they belong. Next year the Forum returns to Porto Alegre, and another year’s actions will be reflected on in the process of building.

WHERE TO NEXT?

Parallel to the fourth World Social Forum was an alternative, or rival event by the name of Mumbai Resistance. MR were very much in evidence through their slogans painted on walls, in some cases as much in opposition to WSF as neo-liberalism. The WSF press conference emphasised that MR participants were welcome in WSF but some groups were not able to organise events if they could not adhere to non-violence. Others have noted the involvement of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), and other groups which adopt Maoist tactics of armed insurrection from rural areas. A further factor is the style of politics which we might call “old left”, which MR adopts, seeking to adopt agreed resolutions and plans of action, rather than creating space to discuss and organise self-directed action. All these may be true at least to some extent, but it is easy to write off MR as ultra leftists, I think the reality is more complex.

SPLIT DIVIDING GRASSROOTS

I and others from Friends of the Earth International attended a pre-Forum meeting with Mumbai Resistance organisers and Via Campesina, the international farmers union with which FoEI has been collaborating in anti-WTO work. Via Campesina are involved in both WSF and MR and were concerned that the split was dividing grassroots people’s movements. Indeed there were popular movements of workers, farmers, fisherfolk, peasants, indigenous peoples and other subaltern and oppressed groups in both events. However, WSF also included many NGOs who were not opposed to, or even colluding with, neoliberalism and with whom MR were not prepared to co-operate.

Moreover, the participation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) through its affiliated unions and organisations (political parties are excluded from direct participation in the WSF) antagonised some popular movements

who are in conflict with the CPI(M). CPI(M) forms the government in West Bengal and tolerates some of the privatisation and inward investment which is being rolled out throughout India. Whilst not being in a position to assess the decisions made by the CPI(M) government and the options available to it, it is easy to see how fisherfolk evicted by deals with multinationals might have difficulties joining the same forum against neo-liberal globalisation.

There is also a legitimate debate as to whether the WSF, in its efforts to offer a space for political learning and action, is missing an

opportunity to adopt a position on particular issues which could help build a more united movement. It should be relatively easy to take a stand against the US war against Iraq, and indeed other issues, without becoming a Fifth International which some might want.

Achin Vanaik, in *New Left Review*, argues that Indian social movement politics is less mature than that in Latin America, that the “micromovements” which are a significant feature of the past few decades in India, are being played out against a left drama transposed from former times, parties with uncritical adherence to Mao’s

There is also a fascinating dynamic of social movements, in which new forms of movement are responding to the changing political economic conditions as they apply in different contexts.

China or Stalin’s Russia. Neo-fascist governments welcoming neo-liberal reforms, which India is currently experiencing, were a feature of the 1970s and 80s in Latin America. However the distinction between participants in MR and WSF is not as clear cut as might outwardly appear – some groups did or could participate in both and the division between the two could have been drawn somewhere else. It is perhaps valuable that the two took place in the same city at the same time, and that discussions between some organisers of each continued throughout.

DEBATE OR ACTION?

There are certainly questions ongoing within the WSF International Organising Council, including whether to remain a space for debate or to start taking a stand or at least co-ordinating action. There is the issue of whether to continue to meet annually, each time expecting a bigger number than before, and tying up a larger number of international activists in its organisation. How much can the IOC remain open, flexible and participatory, and vulnerable to bias and opportunism? Already there have been moves to prevent any more European NGOs joining the IOC because their preferential access to international travel already biases their participation.

There is also a fascinating dynamic of social movements, in which new forms of movement are responding to the changing political economic conditions as they apply in different contexts. The hegemonic struggle between influence and incorporation is played out in new and different ways constantly, and as the diverse movements increasingly meet up globally, questions are again being asked about with whom we are allied, for what, and who do we identify as enemies.

■ *Eurig Scandrett is an environmental activist and a member of Democratic Left Scotland’s national council.*

THE POSSIBILITY OF ANOTHER WORLD SHOULD, AT LEAST, RAISE A SMILE

Party – all welcome

Date: October 15th to 17th, 2004

Location: Alexandra Palace, London

Well, it’s not the way you’d advertise your standard political event. However, the Scottish Mobilising Committee for the 2004 European Social Forum (ESF) in London is keen to emphasise the enjoyment potential of what will be one of the major landmarks for the UK democratic movement next year.

So far, interest in the ESF has been expressed by trade union branches, the Scottish Socialist Party, Greens and Church organisations. Sidestepping the sometimes negative vibes associated with the organising process for the ESF, the committee is focussing on maximum participation from north of the border, not just from the trade union movement, NGOs and the Scottish left, but from local groups, community organisations and individuals.

With the event attracting possibly 50,000 anti-globalisation protestors, environmentalists, socialists, anarchists, anti-racists, debt campaigners and more, it will act as a draw just for the networking potential, let alone for the agenda of hundreds of seminars, workshops and plenary sessions.

With guests possibly including Nelson Mandela, Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy, it will be a magnet for many in the UK who have seen anti-globalisation forums taking place across Europe and the World and have just been itching to get involved closer to home.

The committee hope to have a website and e-mail address up and running soon (watch this space) but in the meantime, anyone interested is asked to write c/o 141 Yarrow Terrace, Menzieshill, Dundee DD2 4DY or e-mail dundeetuc@hotmail.com. Donations to ‘Scotland ESF 2004’ would also be welcomed.

Mike Arnott

European Social Forum Scotland Steering Committee

TRADE UNIONISM IN BRITAIN

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

While the decline in trade union membership over the last two decades may have bottomed out, an effective strategy is still required if unions are to grow again. **Gregor Gall** assesses the options.

Trade unions in Britain currently exist in a period of transition. There are still signs of the dark days of the 1980s about but there are also indications of significant positive changes and possible encouraging pointers to future developments. The most useful way to examine where unions are today is to begin by examining the current situation and then to set this in a historical context. Following from this, credible characterisations of the current situation and where the unions might be heading can be made.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY: THE UPSIDE

The hold of the rightwing on the national leaderships of the unions has been severely depleted by soft and hard lefts. Together with existing left-leaning national leaderships, the vast majority of major, high profile and strategically placed unions are now left-led. Alongside this, lay national executive committees have followed this left trajectory following recent elections. Existing right formations in unions are no longer so open and confident in their agenda, and are often notable by their denunciations of both rapacious employers and a deliberately unresponsive Labour government. Indeed, the speed of the rightwards move by the Labour leadership has meant that the old

The vast majority of major, high profile and strategically placed unions are now left-led.

right has transmogrified into a criticising form of social democracy *à la* Roy Hattersley (for example, John Edmonds and Doug McAvoy). The left national union leaderships now organise as a caucus on the TUC general council and have used the opportunity of the TUC's strategic review to openly criticise the TUC leadership's "partnership" approach. An important part of this left trajectory has been the increasing questioning of the political allegiance of unions and that of their political funds. Where democratisation and disaffiliation have been rejected, unions have implemented reduced funding and a policy of "best value" where more exacting assessments are made of what their money buys. Politically, unions are now more popular than at any time since 1979. Successive opinion polls have demonstrated that clear majorities believe the pendulum has swung too far in favour of employer, unions are "good things" in wielding the "sword of justice" (as opposed to representing "vested interests") and that unions are not powerful enough. Moreover, unions have constituted the most effective opposition to the Blair Labour governments, putting the official opposition parties in the shade.

In industrial terms, the decline in absolute membership has been halted. In 1998, the first increase was

recorded, followed by annual increases in 1999 and 2000, then falls in 2001 and 2002, and then another increase in 2003. Union density in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the north-east of England remains significantly higher than in other regions in Britain. Since 1995, when it became clear that Labour would win the forthcoming general election and implement its promise of statutory union recognition, over 2,600 new recognition agreements have been signed, covering 1.1m workers, and union derecognition is almost unheard of now. Unions have increasingly adopted an “organising” approach based on members setting the agenda in the campaigns to gain new recognition agreements. Concomitant, the number of recognition campaigns running is at least twice the number of new agreements gained and the nature of new recognition agreements is overwhelmingly traditional, i.e. not partnership agreements. The tranche of new recognition agreements and the increase in the size of the public sector workforce has countered further retrenchment of unionised jobs in manufacturing so that the absolute number of workers whose pay is covered by collective bargaining has also witnessed the halting of decline in 2000. This was followed by two falls in 2001 and 2002 but then an increase in 2003. Allied to these developments, the decline in the annual number of strikes since the late 1980s has bottomed out and the number of days “lost” to strikes and the number of workers involved has increased each year since 1999. The number of days “lost” and the number of workers involved in strikes in 2002 were also the highest since 1990. The number of strikes which are unofficial, as a percentage of all strikes on an annual basis, has increased to around 40%, indicating some resilience and vibrancy in workplace organisation.

The results of the strikes and industrial actions have not continued the trend of rout and retreat that dominated in the 1980s. The FBU’s industrial action of 2002–2003 represents a relatively rare event of the last decade, that is, a clear defeat for a major, high-profile strike. The dominant outcome, ranging from the signal workers in 1994 to the postal workers’ national and semi-national strikes in 1996, 2001 and 2003, has been of favourable compromises. The decade of defeats for strikers in the 1980s amongst large, high-profile set piece battles has not continued into the period of the last decade. Neither too has a huge and seemingly endless number of smaller, bitter and defeated long strikes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similar long and drawn out strikes in the last

There is little evidence of these new leaders working together in a collective and effective way outside “forums of the few”.

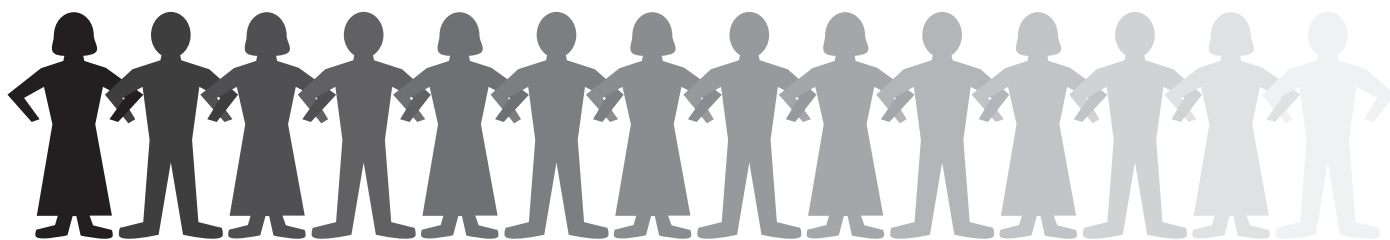
decade have existed at a far lower frequency. These have been balanced by success of some public sector and ex-public sector workers in strikes.

Alongside these developments, we have also witnessed the relative decline in the pervasiveness of the idea of “partnership” as an ideological current in the union movement despite its promotion by the TUC, and the downfall of single union, “sweetheart” deals as the panacea for the troubles of unions. Finally, national unions have begun to engage with the development of extra-workplace trade unionism such as community unionism and with wider progressive social milieus such as the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements or community campaigns against closures.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY: THE DOWNSIDE

So there are clearly a number of forward-moving developments that can be identified over the last decade. The salient question then becomes what significance and portent for the future to attribute to these. The task of doing this must be carried out with regard to a number of other observations and the identification of other phenomena in order to set in context the former developments. Whilst the “sensible squad”, the antithesis of the so-called “awkward squad” of new leftwing union leaders, has recently won the leadership of two of the rail unions, what is of greater significance is the political and industrial diversity amongst the “awkward squad”. This concerns attitudes towards not just affiliation to Labour, political funds and European integration but more crucially over how much pressure to exert on Labour and how to do this. The majority of these new leaders is more concerned with making withering criticism on Radio 4 and behind the scenes lobbying, and while these are necessary, they are not sufficient, leaving only a minority to advocate mass mobilisation and extra-parliamentary campaigning. Consequently, and despite the co-ordination within the TUC general council and at Labour conferences, there is little evidence of these new leaders working together in a collective and effective way outside “forums of the few”. And therefore, there is also no significant evidence of the unions being able to lever out of Labour the concessions they want on revisions to the statutory union recognition, ending the two-tier workforce and so on.

This relates to a further point. Currently, there exists a considerable gap between the political and industrial struggles *within* unions, where political



TRADE UNIONISM IN BRITAIN – RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT



advances are not in the main the result of industrial advances (such as lessons emanating from strikes deepening collective and militant consciousness). Indeed, the political advances are, in the main, an expression of a relatively passive rejection of collaborationist strategies as opposed to a more active endorsement of conflictual and militant strategies. These political advances towards the left and the attendant politicisation lower down the unions also emanate in large part from developments outside workplaces and trade unionism itself such as the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements. Another notable feature of the continuing dominant rejection of “new” Labour ideas is the absence of a widespread replacement by a coherent set of other alternative left-wing ideas. While it would be naïve to expect revolutionary socialist ideas to dominate, it could reasonably be expected that a left-wing social democracy agenda embodied in a new Alternative Economic Strategy would emerge. It has not.

Despite the RMT’s move to open up its political fund to other progressive parties, nine of the biggest ten unions are led by general secretaries who are firmly of the “Reclaim Labour” position or have never questioned their unions existing affiliation to Labour or are not affiliated to Labour. They comprise 5.4m of the TUC’s 6.7m affiliated members. The only exception is the PCS by dint of its leading officers but the issue of political affiliation has yet to be raised in a widespread manner here. The RMT has 63,000 members. Of those unions who have reviewed, or are to review, the affiliation of their political fund, only the FBU, out of Unison, BECTU, TSSA and CWU, may in any way be said to come close to disaffiliation or democratisation. The FBU has 52,000 members. It can be inferred from this discussion that there are specific characteristics about the RMT and FBU which more easily predispose them to these moves, namely, being small, relatively homogeneous unions with public sector/ex-public sector based memberships and having already been left leaning for a considerable period of time. The stimulus of recent experiences (reversal of renationalisation pledge, bitter strike defeat) has coalesced around these longer standing characteristics. This suggests that the prospect of other, and major, unions moving towards RMT/FBU positions is not likely in the short- or medium-term. Consequently, the emergence of small-scale union support for the hard left is likely to remain exactly that, small scale.

Turning to the industrial struggle, one of the stark features of the strike activity is that the overwhelming majority of it has taken place in the public and ex-public sectors (for example Royal Mail, railways, buses, councils, hospitals and fire service). Strike activ-

The emergence of small-scale union support for the hard left is likely to remain exactly that, small scale.

ity of any magnitude in the private sector is becoming increasingly unusual. Strikes generally are characterised by being discontinuous actions of one-day strikes or at most a series of one- or two-day strikes. Continuous, or indefinite, action is very unusual as is strike action by an entire workforce, for normally workers are selectively involved. Consequently, annual movements in strike activity (days “lost” and workers involved) are heavily affected by single large strikes. Another indication of the current nature of strike activity is that the strikes continue to be dominated by action that is defensive (*against* management’s demands, *against* wages offers and reductions in conditions) rather than offensive (*for* workers’ demands, *for* higher pay rises, *for* restricting management control and gaining influence over the organisation of work).

The location of strike activity reflects the distribution of membership across the sectors of the economy. The vast bulk of union members work in the public sector, with public sector union density being 61% and private sector union density being 19%. The considerable achievement of the new recognition agreements, most of which are in the private sector, has not altered this. For example, and despite some notable exceptions, call centres remain overwhelmingly non-unionised. This overall situation in the private sector is unlikely to change as the annual number of new recognition agreements continues its decline after its 2001 peak. Unions were able to secure new recognition agreements from employers by using their stock of strong cases. Now that these have in the main been used up, unions are finding the going hard to build up another tranche to go forward with, particularly where the remaining targeted employers are the “harder to crack” cases. Increasingly unions’ efforts are meeting with greater degrees of anti-unionism in the form of suppression (for example, victimisation) and substitution (non-union works councils). Post-recognition, a significant number of employers who reluctantly conceded union recognition are engaging in what U.S. unions call “bad faith” or “surface” bargaining where they endlessly string out and delay negotiations so as to render them meaningless. Furthermore, the failure rate for recognition campaigns is 60%, so to get two deals unions are, in effect, having to run another three unsuccessful campaigns. Therefore, non-unionism and employer unilateralism is the dominant system of the determination of wages and conditions in the private sector. But of equal significance is that the organising capacity of unions in terms of financial, ideological and organisational resources is far less than the scale of the task facing them.

These “negative” features provide a sobering downside to the “positive” developments outlined earlier. This indicates that the positive features do not form a one-way traffic. Rather, they are contested and counter-balanced by other developments. Of course, the key point is how to understand positive recent

developments and their relationship to the possibilities of furthering their development. But before this can be done, consideration must also be given to the existing, longer-term trajectories of trade unionism in Britain. This adds another important corrective.

THE DIMENSIONS OF DECLINE

The decade of the 1970s constitute the seminal point of reference for a socialist analysis of the state of trade unionism today. Union membership stood at 13.5m, representing 55% density, in 1979. By consecutive annual decreases until 1998, it now stands at 7.4m, representing 29% density, in 2003. The growth in the size of the labour force has meant that a fall of 45% in absolute numbers represents a 48% fall in union density. Nearly 50% of workers have never been union members at any time, and only 11% of workers aged 16–24 and only 25% of workers aged 25–34 are members, signalling an ageing membership. In 1979, there were 500,000 union workplace representative like shop stewards. Today, there are some 230,000. Workplace union organisation has been severely weakened in most places and atrophied elsewhere. It is being held together on a “care and maintenance” basis by a small handful of individuals in each workplace. The vibrant networks of inter- and intra-industry shop stewards no longer exist in any meaningful way. The major exceptions to this pattern are a number of workplaces in the public and ex-public sector, like Royal Mail, hospitals, civil service, local government councils and the railways. Membership participation in unions is low, whether judged by voting in internal elections, attending meetings or reading newsletters. Most members see their membership in a passive way and as a form of instrumental transaction for insurance; they pay their dues and expect service in return without themselves becoming actively involved in protecting their interests. The question they pose is “what is the union doing for me?” rather than seeing that “we are the union”.

The percentage of *workplaces* covered by union recognition has fallen from 64% in 1980 to 42% in 1998 while the percentage of workers in workplaces with union recognition has fallen from 66% in 1983 to 47% in 2001. Collective bargaining coverage has fallen from 70% of workers in 1984 to 41% by 1998. Some 3m workers are “free riders” – benefiting from collective bargaining without being members while 1.7m members are not covered by recognition. Strike activity, by and large a key measure of workers’ collective confidence, has fallen from 2125 strikes in 1979, with 4.6m workers involved and 29.4m days “lost” to 146 in 2002, with 0.94m workers involved and 1.32m days “lost”. The only major blip on this downward path was the 1984–1985 miners’ strike. Occasional large strikes like those by the postal workers in 1996 and the local government strike in England in 2002 have merely and temporarily made a slight dent in this decline. Looked at another way, while the level of

Nearly 50% of workers have never been union members at any time.

strike activity for 2002 represents a 50% increase on 2001 by days “lost” and 2000 by days “lost” represented a 106% increase on 1999, the number of strikes has not risen above 300 per annum since 1991. Neither has the number of days “lost” per thousand risen about 30 per annum since 1991. By contrast, the 1980s saw days “lost” at between 2m–5m per annum (save 1984) and the number of strikes fluctuated between 700–1500 per year. Apart from 1984 with the miners’ strike, the 1980s, 1990s and today are dwarfed by the 1970s where six of the ten years recorded in excess of 10m days “lost” per year and all years experienced more than 2,000 strikes. Furthermore, solidarity strikes, the hallmark of combative trade unionism, are almost unheard of now, apart from those in the Royal Mail. And unofficial strikes have fallen from 95% of all strikes prior to 1980 to 40% of all strikes today.

IN TOTO

The sum total of historical and contemporary contextualisation suggests three points. First, the positive developments identified previously are built on foundations that indicate the continuing relative weakness. Second, and related to this, the positive developments are themselves quite frail and potentially superficial. Third, unions are still on the margins – they have not yet outflanked the danger of marginalisation. A number of categorisations of the last decade and the next few years for the state of trade unionism are then most credible. The main ones can be outlined as follows.

First, an unevenness in a tentative and protracted process of industrial and political union revitalisation, where there is diversity across sectors and unions as well as within unions (horizontally, vertically). There is the unsatisfied demand of 4.4m workers for union representation and union recognition. However, ability to recruit and organise these groups is made difficult by the depleted numbers of stewards, full-time union officers, and high costs of recruitment. Lessons from, and movements in, strikes, bargaining settlements, internal elections and union organising permeate slowly across the union movement, with only a sizeable cumulative positive effect being noticeable after a number of years.

Second, the deepening of contradictory tendencies within trade unionism, where there continues to be no dominant overall response to the weakening of trade unionism and no overall strategy towards revitalisation, reassertion and growth. The tendencies towards assertive actions, political radicalisation and industrial conflict are matched by those tendencies towards passive reactions, neutered political criticism and conser-



TRADE UNIONISM IN BRITAIN – RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

vatism, and industrial cooperation. This is a situation of stagnation and stasis.

Third, current trends merely indicate the bottoming out of the downward path of decline. The main tendency is to manage the decline. If this path continues, and is neither challenged nor interrupted, the prospect is of an “American nightmare” of 15% unionisation with the private sector effectively non-union, and no matter how ineffectual, organised labour’s political representation continues to be provided by the more progressive of the neo-liberal parties: Labour.

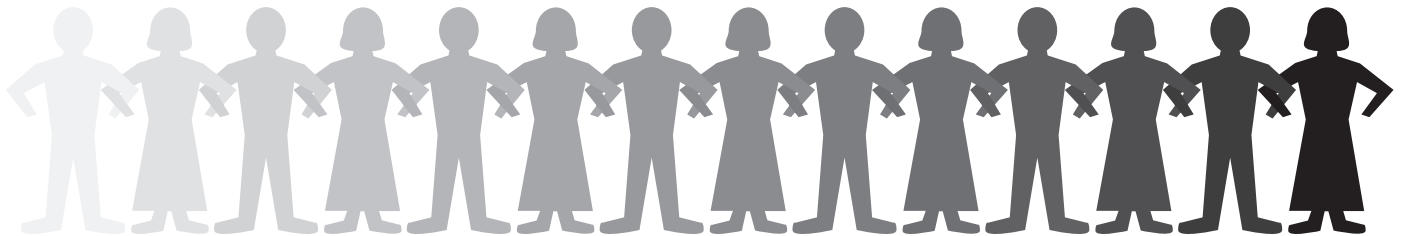
Fourth, current developments represent the rearranging of the existing forces of trade unionism to the left without a significant growth in the absolute or relative size of these. Consequently, the left dominates but in a period of depleted power and action, suggesting that if unions under left leadership cannot break out of this encirclement by hostile forces then the

Current trends merely indicate the bottoming out of the downward path of decline. The main tendency is to manage the decline.

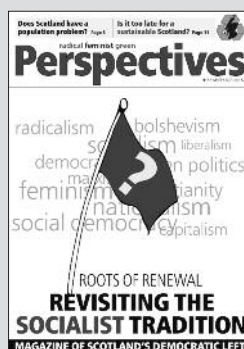
window of opportunity for the left and revitalised trade unionism will be lost for some considerable time to come.

All those on the left need to turn their attention and efforts to making sure that the first scenario is the more likely outcome in the coming years. In particular, the union movement needs to find some quick and effective ways of linking up with all those young and younger people who could be the union activists of the future and who are able to get others to join. They may come from the array of milieus that campaign for social justice (anti-war, anti-globalisation, pro-environment) and which are active in a voluntary, altruistic way in their communities. Together with existing union activists, these people just may have the power to turn the union movement around.

■ *Dr Gregor Gall is Reader in Industrial Relations at the University of Stirling.*



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DISABLED PEOPLE: DISTURBING PEOPLE?

Erik Cramb is encouraged by a recent publication to move beyond the traditional social and theological view of disability as loss, and argues that the challenge society has to face is to find ways of accepting the gifts disabled people have to offer.

I was speaking at a business leaders' dinner in Edinburgh earlier this year. In introducing me the chairman said, "I despise disability, therefore I admire the way Reverend Cramb has overcome his to such an extent that we know him, not as a disabled person, but as a person of great abilities, even if he does support Partick Thistle ... de dah, de dah, de dah."

I was faintly disturbed by the introduction – not about the Thistle bit, you'll understand, because absorbing such patronising nonsense goes with the territory. It was something else, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

The introduction did in fact represent where I was at the time in my understanding of my disability, that is, yes, I am a person with a disability, but please look at my abilities which are far more important and much more defining of who I am.

That understanding represented quite a journey from denial to acceptance.

CLOSET CRIPPLE

It is possible to be a "closet cripple", at least to yourself. You can – at the level of my disability – live as though it did not exist and drive on to compete with everybody else. It was the way I had been brought up by loving parents and with the benefit of a good education, my disability was reduced to more of an "inconvenience" than a "handicap". It was only much later I was to learn of the battle my par-

I was over 40 years old, married, with five children, with a career before I began in any real way to acknowledge I was a person with a disability.

ents had to fight to get me into an ordinary Glasgow primary school because the education authority wanted to send me to the perversely named "Normal School", a special school where "crippled" and "daft" children were sent for their "education". Normal was exactly what I strived to be, but not that kind of "normal".

Believing you were "normal", just like everyone else is one way of coping with the difficult days – the dark nights of asking "Why me? Why should I be different?" I was over 40 years old, married, with five children, with a career before I began in any real way to acknowledge I was a person with a disability.

I received a document entitled *A Church of All and for All*, published in August 2003 by the disability network of the World Council of Churches, that is a challenge to move from the traditional social and theological view of disability as loss, as something that illustrates the human tragedy, to disability as a gift of God. It poses the questions:

- Is disability really something that shows weakness in human life? Is that in itself a limiting and oppressive interpretation? Do we not have to take another, more radical, step?
- Is disability really something that is limiting? All human beings have limitations. Is not disability a gift from God rather than a limiting condition with which some persons have to live?

Disability as gift? Is that really possible? It is certainly not an easy conclusion to imagine for any who have endured the dark night of "Why me?" Am I now expected, or am I being challenged to take this "disabled" part of me, this withered arm and weakened leg and say this is a special gift of God? No, it's not that, for it would be just as daft, unbalanced or false to put what was once denied or resented or loathed upon a pedestal in life. No, this is about recognising "all of me" as gift. That the "gift" that is me, is "gift", not in spite of my disability, but including my disability.

BEHIND WALLS

This WCC document reminds us that until relatively recent times people with disabilities (especially mental disabilities) were actually kept behind walls, in institutions. Although now out in the community, many people with disabilities still find themselves isolated. "There are walls of shame; walls of prejudice; walls of hatred; walls of competition; walls of fear; walls of ignorance; walls of theological prejudice and cultural misunderstanding."

Most of us have been, to varying extents, marginalised by the attitudes and actions of society. Most disabled people have experienced some deprivation in their standards of living and employment opportunities. We can quickly become victim to discriminatory social trends. Market economies, for example, lead the way in encouraging abortion.

DISABLED PEOPLE: DISTURBING PEOPLE?

All of that is self evident to any person with a disability or to anyone close to them. It is a straightforward record of our experience.

“We have come to an acceptance of our disabilities by diverse routes,” say the document writers, “and have found that we have been assisted or hindered in our acceptance by the quality of medical care or education we have received.” I have often thought that had it not been for our National Health Service that, as a matter of right, without question of cost, gave me in my infancy the best possible available treatment, and our education system that saw me through school and university, instead of being a net contributor to the economy for over 40 years, I would have, had I lived this long, been a continual cost upon the economy. Maybe at every “healing service” prayers of thanksgiving should be offered for the social foresight of the post war Attlee government, together with prayers that such foresight be recaptured in our day.

Neither the churches, nor indeed the Left, have been prophetic voices against the oppression and exclusion of people with disabilities. We are not here just to be “looked after” by those with a social conscience or “healed” by those with a religious

People with disabilities disturb ... human notions of perfection, purpose, reward, success and status.

bent. The challenge to society is to find ways of accepting the gifts we have to offer. “It is not a question of meeting half way, but of full acceptance.”

WE DISTURB

People with disabilities disturb – again, particularly people with learning difficulties. We disturb human notions of perfection, purpose, reward, success and status; we disturb notions of a God or a society which rewards faith and virtue with health and prosperity. We can be slow, noisy, messy. The responses to this disturbance can be pity or disgust or banishment or fear. In any event, disabled people are rarely given any meaningful place in society.

For people with disabilities the relationship between care and disability and between healing and disability is both ambiguous and ambivalent. Healing can bring joy and relief. Being cared for can bring security and comfort. These things though can also bring pain, frustration and serious self-searching questions about purpose and worth.

As we understand it now, the document says, “God wills the acceptance and inclusion of each in a community of interdependence where each supports and builds up the other, and where each lives life according to their

circumstances and to the glory of God.” To put that into non-religious language it means that a truly healthy society “wills our acceptance and inclusion and the honouring and fulfilment of our gifts and talents by giving them a place.”

At the beginning of the 21st century sectors of the population who are unable to compete or to perform at the levels that society demands are diminished, resented, ridiculed, despised or, in truth, discarded. “Among them we find a high proportion of people with sensorial, motor and mental disabilities. We find them living in any of the great cities of the world; men and women of all backgrounds, colours, cultures and religions, who because they have a disability, live in abject poverty, hunger, dependence, preventable disease and maltreatment by those who are ‘able’.”

As I and my colleagues challenge the church to see us for the gift we are, I hope we can also challenge society, particularly the Left where we still have some hope our voice might be heard and our perspective valued, for without our voice and perspective life for all will be immeasurably impoverished.

■ *Reverend Erik Cramb is Co-ordinator of the Scottish Churches Industrial Mission.*

radical feminist green Perspectives Circulation manager

Perspectives is looking for a volunteer to develop and monitor circulation of Democratic Left Scotland's quarterly magazine. This will probably require a couple of hours per week on average, though this can be flexible within the quarterly production cycle, and attendance at **Perspectives** group meetings every three months. Out of pocket expenses will be re-imbursed.

For further information, or to express interest, please contact Democratic Left Scotland's office (address and phone details on page 2).

WHAT'S YOUR POINT CALLER?

Frank Reilly phones in from the shrine of St Martin.

How many column inches are churned out bemoaning the state of football in Scotland? And how many of them have even had any pretence of a proposed solution? “Out of despair hope is born” – and that’s where we’re at, just “hoping” that somehow it will all turn out okay in the end. (A bit like the mother of a young Elephant Man “hoping” her son would grow into his looks – it doesn’t look too promising.)

But let’s not be too disheartened, we’re still home to Celtic, incredibly, the 4th best team in the world according to the latest rankings and even more incredibly the 18th richest club in the world. I don’t know much about corporate finance but how come the 18th richest club in the world with an annual income of £61m could only afford to spend £300k on players this season? I feel really sorry for teams well below Celtic in Deloitte’s rich list – like Porto, for

example; I haven’t been following their results but they must be really struggling this season.

So why then does St Martin want to hang around in the Scottish game that is now almost (and I’m being kind there) beyond parody? Or maybe he doesn’t intend hanging around? I think you’ll find he’s lost a few inches off his star jumps from the dug out recently – something’s bothering him. It may be that he’s just moved into the acceptance stage of imminent baldness and he’s understandably a bit low as a result. I suspect it may be something deeper than that.

O’Neill’s stock is at an all time high and the smart move would be to get out now. But will his decision be determined by hard-headed rationale – or deeper influences? There’s no doubt that being raised on a heady cocktail of Celtic (hard and soft “c”) myths and legends has had a profound effect on him. Walking away from

the “Potato Bowl” will be a tad more emotionally demanding than saying goodbye to Wycombe Wanderers or Leicester City.

Personally, thanks to the lure of automatic entry to the group phase of the Champions League, I think he’ll stay another season, then off to Manchester United (and there’ll always be enough tricolours at Old Trafford to assuage any guilt about betraying his heritage). This is contingent, of course, on the board at Celtic Park releasing sufficient funds for O’Neill to acquire the six new players he feels he needs (and he can be comforted by the fact that this is still four less than Rangers need – give Klos credit where it’s due).

It may not feel like it for the clubs left trailing in Celtic’s wake this season, but I think it’s important for the rest of Scottish football that O’Neill stays. There aren’t many (any?) other aspects of the Scottish game that draw envious glances from England and elsewhere but the fact that one of the most highly rated managers in Europe chooses to ply his trade here gives us some much needed credibility.

And besides we have to move away from tribal rivalries. From Belfast to Baghdad to the Broomloan Road we’re told tribalism has to be eradicated – it’s a very bad thing (the work of “evildoers”). Nationalism, however, is to be celebrated. How tribal values have any less worth or can lead to more trouble than the concept of the nation state (which has caused more bloodshed than anything other than Christianity) is beyond me. But we can play along in a sporting context and get passionately involved in the European Championships this summer even though Scotland aren’t there. Not in a negative rooting against England kind of way; I for one will be rising above that kind of bigoted narrow-mindedness – and will be cheering on Stan Petrov’s Bulgaria!

■ *Frank Reilly is our occasional football commentator.*

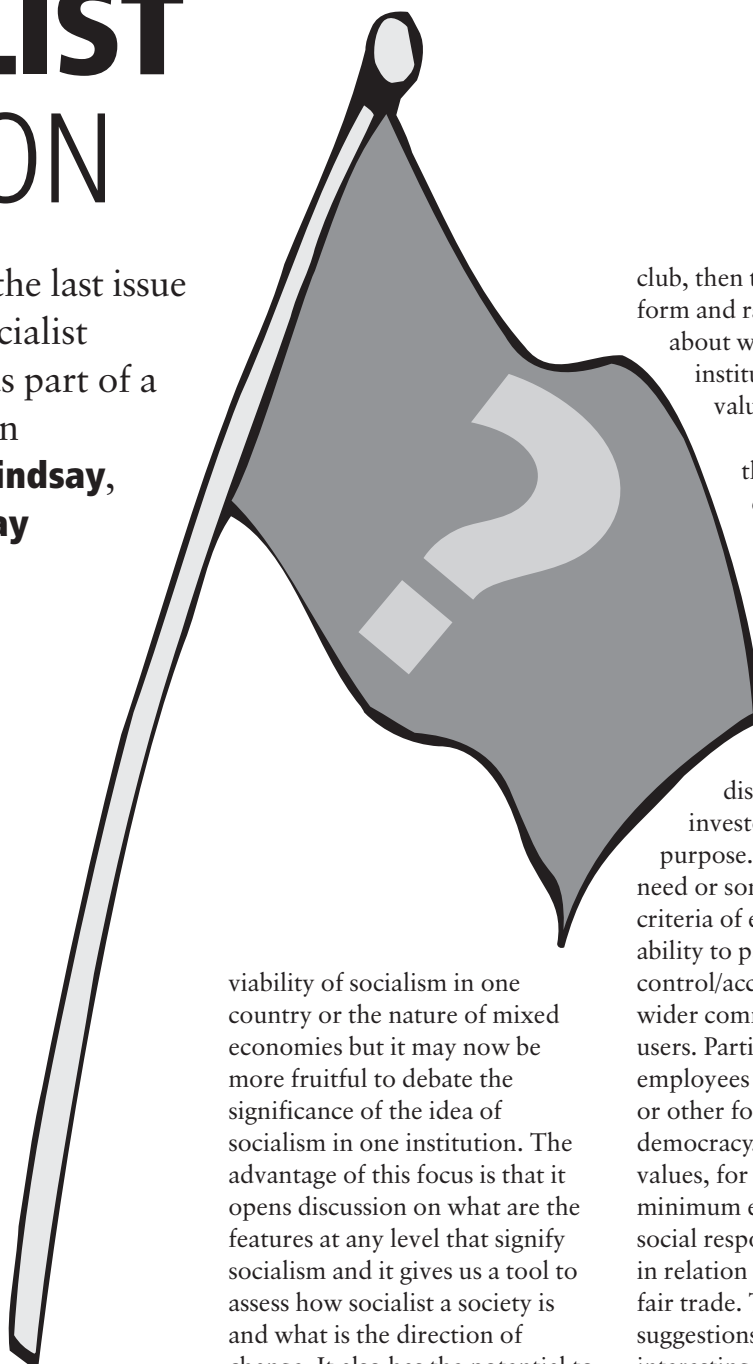
ROOTS OF RENEWAL — REVISITING THE **SOCIALIST** TRADITION

David Purdy's article in the last issue of *Perspectives* on the socialist tradition and its future as part of a radical politics has drawn responses from **Isobel Lindsay**, **Richard Leonard** and **Ray Newton**.

David Purdy's discussion stimulates ideas around language, perception and substantive change and the extent to which they inter-relate.

We have in the past used language to describe overall societal systems – socialist, communist, capitalist, social democratic and variations of these. We have not given sufficient thought to naming organisations/institutions as socialist or capitalist and defining the qualities that would form the basis of this categorisation. The “mixed economy” concept of social democracy fails to clarify what balance of institutions and structures of control constitutes social democracy and at what point a system ceases to be social democratic. Definitions related to the size of the public sector have become increasingly problematic with the growth of contracting out and with the increase in the voluntary or “not for profit” sector.

Historically the left has engaged in intense arguments around the



viability of socialism in one country or the nature of mixed economies but it may now be more fruitful to debate the significance of the idea of socialism in one institution. The advantage of this focus is that it opens discussion on what are the features at any level that signify socialism and it gives us a tool to assess how socialist a society is and what is the direction of change. It also has the potential to shift public perception. If people start to see socialism not simply as concentrated state power but as a set of values that characterise the National Health Service, the education system, a charity delivering services for the disabled, a community sports

club, then this gives it a concrete form and raises central questions about what are non-socialist institutions, what are their values.

What are the factors that might come into the definition of socialist institutions? This is a constructive area of debate that would be good to open up on the left. Some that come to mind.

Service – providing not profit-distributing to private investors as the primary purpose. Access on the basis of need or some socially-agreed criteria of entitlement not on ability to pay. Standards of control/accountability to the wider community or to service users. Participation rights of employees either through unions or other forms of work democracy. Significant egalitarian values, for example maximum and minimum earnings. Acceptance of social responsibility, for example in relation to the environment and fair trade. These are just some suggestions. It would be interesting to see how much consensus there would be around a classification system of this kind. Being considered a socialist organisation would not imply a rejection of private-market-based organisations for many purposes. Oxfam could be regarded as a socialist organisation while being

prepared to work with capitalist corporations to encourage greater corporate social responsibility.

There is a vacuum on the left both in political philosophy and in coherence in applied policy. Yet there is also a sense that the tide is turning. After over two decades on the defensive, we do need to show more confidence in reclaiming our language and shifting perceptions.

■ *Isobel Lindsay lectures in the Department of Government at the University of Strathclyde.*

There is too much grey managerialism in the world of politics today. I fear that David Purdy's rather depressing conclusion (*Perspectives* Winter 2003/4) is that the only alternative to this is *green* managerialism.

In fact many people are still striving for socialism in our time. Many of us want a socialist society rather than the knowledge economy to be the next epoch. We continue to have a cause, a sense of history and a vivid conception of the future we want. The empirical experience of actually existing socialism over the last century has informed, but not diminished this purposefulness.

Putting forward the vision of the socialist society, honestly conceived and solidly grounded in experience, principles and today's conditions is vital. But that means we need *more*, not less, utopianism. That's why the illuminations of thinkers from William Morris to Andre Gorz are so important. Not because they have all the right answers, but because they challenge orthodoxy, present credible utopian socialist alternatives and they inspire.

The inexorability of the forward march of Labour has been questioned on the Left for a very long time. Nye Bevan put it well when he described progress not as a spiral "rather a kind of zig-zag movement." But whilst the forward march of labour may not

be inevitable it is certainly desirable.

We need a renewal, *not* of social democratic traditions, but of democratic socialist traditions.

And that renewal must recognise the extra-Parliamentary as well as the Parliamentary road to socialism: practical socialism from the root up, because socialism will not be achieved by legislative means alone. That's why the trade union movement remains vital as an agent of participatory democracy itself and as a bridge from the labour movement to other social movements.

There will be no progress without democracy. An extension of political democracy: the state must be more democratically owned and controlled, but an extension of economic democracy too.

Just as it was wrong a century ago that political power was exclusively linked to the ownership of property and to gender, so it is wrong today that economic power is linked so tightly to the ownership of shares and to masculine gender. Breaking this link is a fundamental prerequisite for winning a classless society, for changing the status of the worker at work and for securing economic equality for women. And it is only by shifting the balance of economic power that our social, ecological and democratic aspirations can be realised.

There is no shame in believing that there is a better future for the planet and its people: that we can build the caring society, free from inequality and fear, where the whole economy is a social economy, every job a green job, where the welfare state isn't just a couple of government departments but the philosophy of government itself, a society where governance is participatory not paternalistic.

Let's nurture the roots of socialist renewal by consolidating the ethical and democratic foundations of the movement. Let's be evangelistic, egalitarian

We should also realise that there has been an over-estimation of the role of rational argument in policy making and an under-estimation of all the factors that make human behaviour difficult to predict.

and utopian. Let's not be afraid to think the impossible, and raise expectations. Otherwise we'll remain trapped in the fog of managerialism, green and grey.

■ *Richard Leonard is a GMB organiser and former chairperson of the Scottish Labour Party.*

David Purdy has produced a brilliant summary of where we have come from but we are now living in a post-modernist period of individualism, uncertainty, fragmentation, violence and Americanisation.

It seems to me that we should also realise that there has been an over-estimation of the role of rational argument in policy making and an underestimation of all the factors that make human behaviour difficult to predict. We have yet to understand what makes us human. We have the power to act responsibly towards our fellow human beings but there are powerful drives to survive and procreate, along with other complex emotional impulses that are often in conflict with our longer term thinking and aspirations. Perhaps we should also remind ourselves that individuals, especially men, have a greed for power and the means to hold on to it and this applies to leaders of the left as well as the right.

My conclusion, therefore, is that there is an inherent contradiction between our heads and our hearts and between the short-term action which is deemed to be necessary and the longer term objectives deemed to be desirable. It seems to me, therefore, that Democratic Left should spell out in detail what we mean by democracy and power with a realistic appraisal of the human condition in order to be more effective in developing policies for a better Scotland.

■ *Ray Newton is an Edinburgh Democratic Left Scotland member.*

People and politics

In Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, there is widespread disillusionment with politics. The mainstream parties have lost touch with ordinary people and issues are trivialised and distorted by the media.

We are continually told that “there is no alternative” to global capitalism. Yet this is doing untold damage to our environment, our communities and the quality of our lives, while millions of people remain poor and powerless because the market dominates our society and we do too little to protect and empower them.

Democratic Left Scotland is a non-party political organisation that works for progressive social change through activity in civil society – in community groups, social movements and single-issue campaigns – seeking at all times to promote discussion and alliances across the lines of party, position and identity.

Political parties remain important, but they need to reconnect with the citizens they claim to represent, reject the copycat politics that stifles genuine debate and recognise that no single group or standpoint holds all the answers to the problems facing our society.

We are trying to develop a new kind of politics, one that starts from popular activity – in workplaces, localities and voluntary associations – and builds bridges to the world of parties and government, on the one hand, and the world of ideas and culture, on the other.

What does Democratic Left add?

Our approach to politics is radical, feminist and green.

Radical because we are concerned with the underlying, structural causes of problems such as poverty, inequality, violence and pollution and aspire towards an inclusive, more equal society in which everyone is supported and encouraged to play a full part, within a more just and sustainable world.

Feminist because we seek to abolish the unequal division of wealth, work and power between men and women and to promote a better understanding of the intimate connections between personal life and politics.

Green because we believe that our present system of economic organisation is socially and environmentally destructive, and that a more balanced relationship between human activity and nature will be better for us, for our descendants and for the other animal species with whom we share the planet.

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Membership is open to anyone who shares our general outlook and commitments. Whilst many of our members are involved in a range of political parties, others are not.



For copies of the DLS pamphlet, "There's more to politics than parties" or to get membership information, please complete the form.

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