

Left- Horizons

TUC leaders have failed to defend workers

A century and a half of meetings of the Trades Union Congress are celebrated this week in Manchester. This city is a fitting venue, since the very first meeting of the TUC was held there in 1868, convened by the Manchester and Salford Trades Council.

Since its inception, the TUC, as the umbrella organisation of the British trade union movement, has been uniquely placed to represent the interests of workers as a whole, to campaign on their behalf and to support individual trade unions and groups of workers struggling to defend or improve their living standards. But it is questionable, to say the least, as to whether or not the leadership of this august body can be said to have deployed anything like its true potential in the interests of workers, most notably in the last few decades.

The British working class has suffered its greatest squeeze in living standards in over a century and there is seemingly no end to austerity as we look further into the future. Public services like education, health and local government have been cut to the bone and all the social gains that the working class achieved in the immediate post-war years have been eroded or extinguished altogether. Added to this, the Tory government has introduced the most swingeing legal restrictions on the right to strike, forcing unions to face extremely difficult obstacles in postal strike ballots, while at the same time denying unions the right to hold work-place or on-line ballots.

In the workplace, most of the benefits that workers have enjoyed in the past, like sick-pay, holiday-pay, maternity rights, safety measures and other rights, were won by the trade union movement. They were not handed down by

philanthropic employers or caring governments, but as a direct result of campaigns and the struggles of the unions. But many of these rights are now under threat and for millions of workers forced to use fake 'self-employment' as the only means they have of getting an income, these rights barely exist at all.

Plague of exploitative employers

Young workers in particular are suffering from a plague of exploitative employment practices that have become common in the past ten years. While there has been a decline in trade union membership from a high of 13 million in 1979 to just over five and a half million today, what is left of the current membership is heavily skewed towards the public sector and older workers. One in five jobs are 'professional' jobs but 40% of trade union members are these days. You are twice as likely to be unionised if you have a degree than if you have no qualifications at all.

Around one in every four workers are trade union members (the proportion is greater among women workers), but among young workers that figure falls to only one in eight. Young workers are disproportionately represented in the private sector, in services and in the 'gig' economy, where trade union membership is lowest and where wages and conditions are extremely poor. Across the economy as a whole, the decline in trade union membership is without doubt the most significant factor in the inability of workers to maintain their living standards and rights at work.

But it must also be true that ***had the trade union movement fought with greater determination and***

resolution in recent decades, then not only would union membership be higher, but living standards would have been better protected. It is little short of astonishing that at a time when there have been record cuts in living standards, there has been minimal resistance, at least when measured in terms of strikes. Last year, according to data from the Office of National Statistics, there were the lowest strike figures since records began in 1891, with only 33,000 workers involved in strikes.

We will not join in the shrill, personal condemnations of union leaders such as we get from the ultra-left sects, but it is clear that over many years the TUC leadership has failed in its elementary duty to protect the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers in its ranks. Too many leaders are too comfortable in their positions. They are isolated from their members by a higher standard of living, protected by a democratic deficit in the union organisation and informed more by a bubble of media journalists and the 'twitterati' than by their own members. For these leaders, anything that smacks of 'militancy' is rocking a leaky boat.

There are a few notable exceptions, but barring these, most of the leaders of the biggest unions have not been prepared to fight for their members as they ought to. When it comes to the recruitment of members, it should be elementary that the best way to recruit to a trade union is for that union to be a militant and active organisation that is seen to be fighting for its members. One of the reasons for the alienation of young workers must be the perception that the unions in general are not really fighting for them.

The TUC still has huge social and economic power

TUC headquarters, Congress House, is good at producing reports, information and data about how workers are exploited and how workplace conditions are undermined. But when it comes to campaigning, unfortunately, there is nothing but hesitancy, timidity and half-measures. Take the comments of the general secretary, Frances O'Grady, this week, on the issue of the four-day week. Faced with the threat of new technology and the subsequent erosion of jobs, she has called on the TUC to be ambitious. "I believe", she says, "that we can win a four-day working week, with decent pay for everyone". But *when* does she think the trade unions can win this prize? In her comments, she says, "this century". It is extremely limited "ambition", to think that workers can move to a four-day week some time in the next eighty years! The early pioneers of the trade union movement – those who **fought** for the nine-hour day and then for an eight-hour day – must be spinning in their graves.

Yet the TUC still has enormous potential power, despite its numerical decline in the last thirty years. It has fifty affiliated unions, with over five and a half million members. In the big strike movements of the French workers in 1968, ten million were on strike at the peak, despite union membership being only a fifth of that. The TUC only has to lift its little finger and it can generate a demonstration of more than a million on the streets of London. If the TUC set itself the task of campaigning for a four-day week *now*, it could use that one issue to double or treble the membership of the unions in a measurable period of time.

The TUC could conduct a sustained and widespread campaign among its constituent members to educate, raise awareness and improve organisation; to begin a series of demonstrations and lobbies around the issue of a four-day week, not as a means of 'letting off steam' but as a preparation for ramping up a campaign further. In discussions with constituent unions, the TUC could identify key sections of workers, in order to support them as pioneers in a direct struggle, through strike action if necessary, to achieve the shorter week. After those workers, others could be supported, and so on, until a four-day week becomes the norm. Not least, the TUC heads could engage in direct negotiations with the Labour leadership about a four-day week being included in the Labour manifesto for the next general election.

The TUC could gain enormously in membership, influence and concrete gains for its members if it engaged in a militant and determined fight on a four-day week and on other issues.

- **For a four-day week, without loss of pay**
- **For an end to fake 'self-employed' jobs**
- **For an end to zero-hours contracts**
- **For full workplace rights for all workers, young and old**

Britain is an enormously wealthy country and were it not for the fact that the system rests on greed, profit and exploitation, it would be possible for the economy *now* to give workers a four-day week, without loss of pay. The TUC leadership needs to see itself, not like a huge talking shop, like the United Nations General Assembly, but **as the general staff of an army** that can be deployed to fight for improved lives for its members. That was the purpose for which the trade union movement was built in the first place and for which the TUC was founded a century and a half ago. That purpose must be central in the minds of trade union members today.

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