

FABIAN SOCIETY

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# Natural allies: Labour and the unions

*Martin Upham & Tom Wilson*

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# Introduction

Labour's links with the trade unions could become a source of strength, provided that major reforms take place. But the real issue is not whether the unions have a right to wield power in the Party but the use of that power.

**L**abour's union links have been the subject of sustained criticism. It has been argued that the unions are a declining force and that an organic alliance with them contributes to the Party's decline by restricting its appeal.

There is a long-held view that 'politics' should not be brought into the unions nor the unions into politics. Critics single out union practices, or alleged practices, suggesting that the use of the block vote for example at Party Conference projects an unacceptable picture of Labour to the world. At this point in the political calendar, with the reports of the Review Bodies in and changes under way in the Party structure, many of these criticisms gain a new sharpness. Hopes are being entertained that the recruitment of a million-plus individual Party members will erase from the public mind unfavourable images associated with the phantom millions of the block vote.

Following a decision at the 1988 Labour Party Conference to review the balance of votes between unions and constituency Labour parties (CLPs), the National Executive Committee (NEC) issued a consultation paper which broadly endorses the principle that voting should reflect financial contribution – the 'Kitson formula' long favoured by the Transport & General Workers' Union (TGWU). This would reduce union strength from almost 90 per cent to around 75 per cent of Conference votes. More radically the GMB general union has recently proposed reducing the union vote to just under 50 per cent.

Labour's Policy Review has been grappling with another theme: the Party's response to perceived changes in society and the economy during the last ten years. If it is accepted that we have entered an age when all phenomena are (or will be) consumer (and therefore market) driven then the outlook for producer-based organisations seems restricted. If Labour seeks to build a new individualist political persona it cannot afford the collectivist or corporatist identities of the past. A

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putative Prime Minister, the argument runs, has to show that he will not be bossed around by the unions, and he might as well make a public start now.

Yet the unions and those who advocate their continued integral Party role have defences in depth. Some union leaders have offered self-criticism of their union's heavyweight Party roles in the past; nevertheless it is difficult to imagine them achieving a complete self-denying ordinance, as when the French aristocracy foreswore its feudal privileges in the early months of the Revolution. Union leaders will continue to use power to take positions on the Policy Review. The 1989 Conference may yet witness the paradox of the block vote carrying policies which downgrade union influence in the Party against objections from CLPs.

Such a dual track approach – abrogating a high Party profile while continuing to play an important internal role – may gain increased support as a soft option. But would it survive hostile scrutiny? If unions are to have a role within the Labour Party it should be a source of strength not embarrassment.

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# Unions in decline?

# 1

If unions were in serious decline it would be reasonable to argue that Labour might suffer from the link. But by any standard, unions are surprisingly healthy.

Total union membership in 1987 was 10.5 million, down 2.7 million, or 20 per cent, from the 1979 total of 13.2 million. However, the proportion of the employed workforce in unions (density) fell only from 58.4 per cent to 50.2 per cent, less than in any other recession this century, and leaving the UK in line with other industrialised countries.

Most membership loss can be attributed to the loss of jobs in highly unionised industries. Conversely, there is rising density in the new industries and occupations of the eighties. More women, white collar professional, and service sector employees are joining unions. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU) have grown substantially while the local government unions NUPE and NALGO have remained largely stable, despite major job losses.

Overall membership loss has now bottomed out. The latest figures for all unions show a decline between 1986 and 1987 of only 120,000, or 1 per cent, the smallest since 1979. There remains a good base for expansion in the new service sector industries like retailing or finance and, to a lesser extent, hotel and catering.

The Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (WIRS) of 1984 showed the same proportion (73 per cent) of workplaces with

Table 1.1: Union density of employees, 1985 (%)

Denmark	98
Sweden	95
Finland	85
Belgium	84
Austria	61
Norway	61
Australia	57
UK	52
Ireland	51
Italy	45
West Germany	42
Canada	37
Netherlands	37
Switzerland	35
Japan	29
France	28
USA	18

Source: John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, Verso, 1988

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unions as in 1980; the same 64 per cent level of union recognition; a large decline from 23 per cent to 18 per cent in coverage of the closed shop; the same 80 per cent level of check-off arrangements; a fall from 70 per cent to 65 per cent in workplaces with manual shop stewards, but an increase from 63 per cent to 67 per cent in non-manual stewards; with an overall increase of shop stewards from 317,000 to 335,000. These are indicators of stability, not organisational decline.

### *The me generation?*

Are unions in decline because Mrs Thatcher has undermined the value of collectivism? As Table 1.2 shows, the British are still great joiners of organisations which require sacrifice, money and time where strength of numbers can deliver benefits, to oneself and others.

Continuing strong support for taxation to fund social provision also exposes the myth of a Thatcherite culture-shift towards individualism. If a cultural belief in collectivism continues, British trade unionism is clearly in no great danger.

Table 1.2: **Membership of voluntary organisations 1981-86 (000)**

	1981	1986
British Red Cross	112	88
Friends of the Earth	1	28
Conservation Society	5	4
Mothers' Union	210	188
League of Hospital Friends	475	470
Gateway Clubs	50	60
Women's Institutes	378	347
NSPCC	100	255
National Trust	1,046	1,417
National Trust Scotland	110	145
Townswomen's Guilds	155	150
Ramblers Association	37	53
Rotary Clubs	60	63
British Legion	937	858
Royal Society for Nature Conservation	143	179
RSPCA	39	23
RSPB	441	506
St John Ambulance	77	60
World Wildlife Fund	60	106

Source: Social Trends, 1988

## *Structural decline?*

It has also been suggested that unions have been weakened as employers move away from 'core' (full-time permanent) employees, towards 'peripheral' (temporary, part-time, contracted etc.) employees. The WIRS demolishes this thesis: 8 per cent of establishments used out- or home-workers in 1980; only 4 per cent did in 1984. Freelance workers actually fell from 24 per cent to 14 per cent; agency temporary workers declined from 22 per cent to 18 per cent; while employees on short-term contracts declined very slightly from 20 per cent to 19 per cent.

Are Labour voters and trade unionism in terminal decline due to the inexorable rise of non-manual work, green-field sites, smaller workplaces, women employees, and a move to the South away from Labour's geographically strong areas? Precisely these arguments were used in the forties when booming car factories were held to be unorganisable because the work (then) was often temporary or part-time. Again, in the sixties, it was argued that technological advance would make every worker a technician whose only care was to own a Ford Cortina and a television set. Reviving the argument that the changing composition of work means a move to individualism away from Labour or union values, has no more force today than 20 or 40 years ago.

Very similar patterns of work co-exist in the USA and Canada, yet while union density has declined in the USA to below 20 per cent, it has risen in Canada to over 40 per cent. UK experience is far closer to Canada as unions like BIFU, the RCN, MSF and USDAW continue to recruit the workers of tomorrow.

## *Fewer strikes?*

Much of the *apparent* decline in trade union strength lies in the declining number of strikes and, significantly, of media interest in industrial relations generally. In the seven years before 1980, 17,521 strikes lost 80 million working days. In the seven years after 1980 there were 8,792 strikes, which lost 61 million working days. The number of strikes may have almost halved, but their size has almost doubled.

Many have been major defeats: civil servants (1981); NHS and rail (1982); telecommunications and printing (1983); miners (1984-85); teachers (1985-87). Successes like water (1983) or the car industry (1988) have been relatively few. There is certainly a growing reluctance to take industrial action.

Strikes, however, are a very partial index of union strength. Union membership grew steadily in the 1950s when there were practically no national disputes. The 1980s, when membership has been falling in absolute terms, have seen many strikes. Strikes are, in any case,

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outside the lifetime experience of most employees who nonetheless find benefits in unionism.

For many union members there has been little reason to strike. Between 1979 and 1985 average real earnings rose at just under 4 per cent per year: three times faster than the growth of earnings in 1973-79. Nor is there much evidence that the 'rate of exploitation' increased markedly. Indeed, between 1979 and 1985, annual earnings growth exceeded productivity growth by an average 1.5 per cent. The rise in earnings is now 9 per cent; *someone* is negotiating these increases. Rumours of the unions' death have been greatly exaggerated.

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### *Leaner but fitter*

There is little evidence too of significant employer offensives or disaffection from members. A recent survey confirmed this view, finding little evidence of a roll-back (*Labour Research*, 1988).

In March 1989 Norman Fowler, the Secretary of State for Employment, hurriedly announced that he was to introduce a new Employment Bill to become law in 1990 (making six in 10 years). The justification offered was the finding of a survey he commissioned in January 1989 that the closed shop covered 2.4 million workers, some half of whom are covered by the pre-entry closed shop. If accurate, this finding contradicts the only result from WIRS which showed faltering union influence. Given the scale of the Tory assault, this persistence of union organisation is remarkable.

In early/mid 1989 there were disputes in process or pending in the docks, railways, tubes, buses, BBC, local government, civil service, car industry and further and higher education. As long as there is a capital/labour conflict, there will be unions which will act. If the unions have not collapsed after ten such years as the 1980s, they are hardly likely to do so in the relatively more prosperous 1990s.

Indeed, there is an alternative scenario. The unions enter the 1990s strengthened by skill shortages (especially among the young), rising earnings, rationalisation through mergers and, perhaps, a leadership newly legitimised by periodic elections under the auspices of the 1988 Employment Act.

There are also the fruits of organisational changes introduced in the 1980s. Leaders are consulting their members more freely than before. Many have devised new methods of recruiting a changing workforce (with growing success). And they are undergoing the biggest wave of mergers in their history.

Unions are not in decline and therefore Labour need not suffer automatically from its links with them. But as unions change, so should the links.



# Expert fund raisers

# 2

The Thatcher decade has highlighted the fact that organisation, pay and conditions of work are political issues. At the same time, the Labour Party has asked for far more money than ever before from its union affiliates. They have responded by substantially increasing their campaigning resources, increasing the proportion of members affiliated and tripling the political levy.

**I**n 1979, 54 unions were affiliated to the Labour Party on a total of 6.5 million members representing 84 per cent of the 7.7 million political levy payers. By 1988, 36 unions were affiliated on 5.8 million members, representing 105 per cent of their 5.5 million levy payers. Though the number of levy payers fell with general membership by 2.3 million, or 29 per cent, affiliations fell only 0.7 million, or 11 per cent. Affiliated unions increased affiliation levels to the maximum possible (or even beyond) at the cost of very much higher affiliation fees.

Meanwhile, affiliation fees have soared from 28p per member in 1979 to 70p per member by 1986, a real increase of 83 per cent. Income to the Party from unions reflected these double increases. It rose from £1.82 million in 1979 to £4.04 million in 1986, a 55 per cent increase in real terms at a time when unions had lost over one in four levy-paying members. A comparable rise in CLP income kept the share of national Party income from unions roughly stable: 80 per cent in 1980 and 77 per cent in 1986. In 1988, Conference recommended for the first time that unions fix their levies at around three times the affiliation fee.

The Party share of unions' levy income has remained remarkably consistent since unions themselves were also increasing their own levy income. In 1979, the average levy per member was 58p. By 1986 it had soared to £1.87, 155 per cent in real terms. As a proportion of total union subscriptions, the levy was still comparatively low, but rose substantially from 3.9 per cent in 1979 to 5.3 per cent in 1986. By contrast American unions spend around 10 per cent of their total income on

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comparable political purposes.

Overall, despite the 29 per cent fall in levy payers, there has been a rise of 61 per cent in Party affiliates' real levy income. Just under £4.5 million was gathered in 1979, rising dramatically to £10.25 million in 1986.

Since the proportion of unions' levy income destined for Labour Party coffers has remained (despite all the turbulence of changing fees, levies and members) almost exactly constant at 40 per cent, it seems that unions are determined to keep the same share for their own political purposes. Of course most unions give a great deal more to the Labour Party in support for constituencies, sponsored MPs, special projects and in other ways (for example, help to MEPs, councillors, and in regional affiliations). Levy income is also saved up for general elections. Nonetheless, those demands could not account for the whole of the remaining political fund income.

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For example, trade union donations for the 1987 general election totalled £3.7 million. Had they been saving all their 'surplus' funds since 1983 the available cash would have been rather more — around £15-20 million. Support for the 132 MPs sponsored between 1983 and 1987 would have cost around £700 per MP per year, or £4,000 in an election year at most — though many unions sponsor at less than these agreed ceilings. Regional affiliation fees are rarely more than a few thousand pounds per year.

### *Non-party political activity*

This non-party political income is not wasted. Far from retreating from political campaigning (the intention of much of the Conservative legislation) and leaving political campaigning to the Labour Party, the unions have done the exact opposite. The return to 'free collective bargaining' after 1980 was an earthquake in the bargaining system. Far from involving less political activity, the demise of incomes policy and the Conservative Government's attack on unions and the public sector have stimulated a surge in political campaigning. Battles over anti-union legislation, privatisation, local authority and NHS cuts, compulsory tendering, cuts in nationalised industries' spending, and a host of other issues, have all demanded ever-growing political resources.

Unions have raised their profile in a broad span of campaigning bodies. Trade union CND, for example, had (in 1988) 744 local union, 97 trades council, 79 regional union and 34 national union affiliates, triple the levels of the 1970s. The same increased union involvement occurred, broadly, at Amnesty International, Anti-Apartheid, War on Want, the NCCL, Chile and Nicaragua Solidarity Campaigns, and so on. Political awareness and experience has grown among union activ-

Table 2.1: Unions and Labour Party, 1979-1986

	1979	1986	change(%)
Political levy per member	58p	£1.87	+155
Levy payers in Party affiliates	7.7m	5.5m	-29
Cost of Party's individual membership	£1.20	£8.60	+540
Union affiliations as % of levy-paying members	84%	105%	+21
Affiliation income from unions	£1.82m	£4.04m	+55
Total union affiliated members of Party	6.5m	5.8m	-26
Trade union affiliation fee (annually per head)	28p	70p	+83
Total levy income to Party affiliates	£4.49m	£10.26m	+61
Party affiliation fees as % of levy income of Party affiliates	40%	39.5%	-0.5
Average yearly union subscription	£14.75	£35.52	+141
Levy as % of subscriptions	3.9%	5.3%	+74

Source: Labour Party

ists and, perhaps, members. The proportion of all Party affiliated union members paying the political levy actually rose between 1979 and 1987, albeit only slightly, from 81 per cent to 83 per cent – at a time when unions were widely being castigated for their apparent political impotence and the legitimacy of any political role for unions whatsoever, was being widely questioned.

### *The political fund ballots*

The 1984 Trade Union Act forced unions to ballot its members on whether or not to have funds which could be used for political purposes. Every union which already had such a fund voted to retain one, while many unions voted to establish a fund for the first time. Indeed, only the First Division Association of top civil servants (perhaps working on the least favourable terrain of all) failed to establish a fund. The 18 new political funds recorded majorities as impressive as the established fund unions, with average turnouts of around 60 per cent and an average 'yes' vote of 75 per cent.

Most of the unions setting up new political funds, and the vast majority of members involved, were either in the public sector, or had recently been. Almost all campaigned on a 'business as usual' strategy – quite unlike the 'voice in Parliament' theme of the earlier ballots for old-established political funds. It may be argued that 'business as usual' suggests no change in political awareness among new fund unions. Yet almost all these unions have suffered from government attack. Significantly it is white-collar private sector unions like BIFU which have chosen not to set up a new fund, as their experience has not

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yet shown them the need.

This equally strong endorsement of the need for political funds, in both Labour Party affiliates and non-affiliates, underlines the generally heightened awareness of the need for political activity in defence of union members' interests. The ballots were votes against the distinction between the industrial and the political: votes in recognition of the political dimensions of work.

### *State aid*

In the 1970s there was some discussion about state aid for political parties. Many saw this prospect as an answer to Labour's perennial shortage of funds. Others, less disinterestedly, hoped state aid would free the Party from dependence on union cash. Interestingly, such discussion has lapsed. The account above shows the astonishingly resilient ability of the unions to raise political funds for their own purposes and on Labour's behalf. This reinforces the political argument that political parties should be able to command enough popular support to raise their own funds.

Our analysis shows that financial support for Labour among unions, and among the millions of levy payers who have continued to pay increased subscriptions and voted to keep their funds, is as strong as ever. Labour does not need state aid for financial reasons because it has not lost union support. Nor, as we argue below, should it seek state aid for political reasons, to escape dependence on the unions.

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# Local, regional and national ties

# 3

Union links with Labour go much deeper than national block votes. Local and regional ties are equally important.

**A**t constituency level, affiliation rules vary. In general, union branches are allowed one delegate for the first 50 members, and one for each 50 thereafter up to a maximum of six. The cost is usually between 3p and 6p per affiliated member, with a minimum of £5. In some areas, like the Potteries or old mining seats, particular unions are allowed very much higher ceilings, since they are (or used to be) almost alone. For example, in one area three small craft union branches, each with five members, can each send one delegate; while large general union branches, affiliated on 90 members, can only send two. The cost of affiliation in one constituency can be half the cost in the CLP next door. Often unclear rules deter potential local affiliates.

Affiliation procedures vary between and within unions. Some unions' branches will be automatically affiliated *en bloc* and paid for by regional office. Others will have to find out which constituency (or often more than one) is appropriate and affiliate by themselves. Some unions adopt a halfway position, affiliating a branch if it asks, but not if it does not. Some only approve affiliation if the branch appoints delegates.

Not surprisingly, the result is chaos. Few activists (union or Party) fully understand their local rules. A 1986-87 Labour Party survey showed that in those unions which do not affiliate *en bloc*, between a third and a half of all branches affiliate themselves to one or more local party. Of those, however, only half appoint delegates, most of whom are less than assiduous attenders of Party meetings. An estimated 4,500 union members are active delegates from their branch to their local party, rather less than eight to the average CLP. The vast majority of these are in London, the Midlands or the North. As there are probably some 200,000 shop stewards, branch committee members or other varieties of union activist in Labour's affiliated unions, this means that less than one in 40 union activists is a Party activist.

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The recently-introduced mass membership proposals should improve local links. New union members joining the Party are now able to join at £5, half the normal subscription. Many CLPs may experience an influx of new union members which will strengthen local union/party relationships.

The impact on local party organisation could be interesting. For example, it is likely that the first wave of new members will be active trade unionists, accustomed to political debate and meetings' procedures who may have strong views, for example, on pay or union laws. The impact at national level is likely to be less (at least in the short term). Even if the new rules meant that CLPs doubled in size, most would not thereby qualify for more delegates to the Labour Party Conference (since they are now so far below the minimum of 1,000 members). The domination of Conference by union block votes would hardly be altered.

Workplace Labour Party branches have not been a success. They were designed as a recruitment and discussion forum but strong divisions between unions over how much influence they should be given and fears of entryism obstructed any real constitutional link to CLPs. Over a hundred were initially set up, but few remain. Union members cannot be expected to play their part in the Labour Party without full rights to a voice and a vote.

### *Regional ties*

Many of the Party's 11 regions have equally complex and variable rules on the number of delegates union affiliates are entitled to. Affiliation fees vary as do regional executive structures. Worse still, few unions' regional or divisional boundaries coincide with Party boundaries.

The Welsh Regional Executive, for example, has 42 members, of whom 14 are from the trade unions. Even the three sub-committees have 26 or 25 members each. In line with national rules, there is a seat reserved for the County Associations of Trades Councils (even though many unions not affiliated to the Party nationally are affiliated to local trades councils).

Many unions whose regional boundaries straddle two or more party regions concentrate mainly on only one region where they are able to exercise some influence. Even though the total annual income from unions to each regional party rarely exceeds £10,000, regional party finances are so stretched that even small sums can have a major impact. A small group of officials from the big unions can often command a majority on regional party executives. Their influence on local party organisation, appointments, finances and campaigns is considerable. Very rarely is it matched by similar influence within constituencies.

## *National ties*

National rules are much clearer. Each union, each CLP and each affiliated society is entitled to one delegate (and thus one vote) at the Labour Party Conference per 1,000 affiliated members or part thereof. In 1986, for example, one CLP had three votes, 31 had two votes, and 601 had one vote. Total CLP votes were thus 666, representing a notional 666,000 members. However, actual membership was only 297,364. Meanwhile, the 43 unions (affiliated in 1986) had 5,832 votes, representing 5,778,184 affiliated members. Socialist societies had 65 votes, representing 57,762 affiliated members. Although this arithmetic seems to add up to complete union domination over the Labour Party, the reality is very different.

Local selection of Parliamentary candidates limits the vote of affiliated bodies like unions and socialist societies to a ceiling of 40 per cent. National selection of Leader and Deputy also limits the union and other affiliated organisation vote to 40 per cent. Both these minority limits involved unions giving up a previous majority. The 1981 Wembley Conference agreed that, when choosing Party leaders, each MP's vote would equal 19,000 union votes and each CLP's vote would equal 6,850 union votes (on 1987 affiliation levels). Unions may control 18 of the 29 NEC seats but far from controlling the Party they have given up much of their previous power. This is not the only example of unions agreeing to reduce their power. Against this background it is less surprising that in 1982 the TGWU (with ostensibly the most to lose) tabled the Kitson proposals to reduce unions' Conference voting power to the benefit of the CLPs.

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# 4 The block vote

The block vote has changed radically over the eighties, becoming more concentrated as the recession has forced more union mergers. It must be reformed – not abandoned – in order to take account of new circumstances.

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In 1980 there were 54 unions affiliated to the Labour Party; in 1986, 43; in 1988, 36. By 1990 there may well be only 30, or even fewer. The average block vote has risen by over a third between 1980 and 1986 from 118,000 to 161,000. In the decade before 1980 the number of unions affiliated fell by only 13 from 67 to 54, although the number of members affiliated rose from 5.5 million to 6.4 million. But, while the following eight years saw only a drop in members affiliated (down to 5.8 million), the *number* of unions affiliated fell by 33 per cent. The 1980s have seen the rate of mergers among Labour's affiliated unions almost double.

In reality, the degree of concentration is even greater. In 1985, for example, the AEU affiliated in five separate sections, although four of them were components of TASS and voted *en bloc*. The TGWU had three sections and GMB two sections whose voting record varied little.

Mergers which have taken place since 1987 have continued this trend, assuming that sections of the same union continue to vote similarly. The merger between APEX and the GMB puts their combined strength at 741,000, just behind the AEU, though the AEU affiliation level has been reduced.

Some dominance by a few big unions is not new. In 1956 six unions had 3.7 million votes — more than half the total. Of the 87 unions then affiliated on 5.6 million members, the top 12 had 4.3 million votes. By 1976 the number of unions needed for a majority at Conference had slipped from six to five. In 1987, the top four unions had a total of 3.46 million well over the 3.2 million needed for a majority. It is entirely conceivable that by 1996 the largest three unions will have a majority.

But the temporary coalitions and alliances forged between unions over different elections and issues at Labour Party Conference are far more complex. Although the bottom 20 unions are small, the middle rank cannot be so easily ignored. Their support is crucial unless, as



very rarely happens, complete harmony prevails among the top four.

It can be argued that the system has happily existed for a long time in much this form. The original Labour Representation Committee was founded on the model of a multitude of small, roughly equal-sized unions, rather like the 19th century nonconformist churches. But that structure did change relatively quickly: in 1908, 176 unions affiliated on 1.1 million members; by 1920 the number of unions had shrunk to 122 while affiliations had soared to 4.3 million, predominantly from the giants. After the Second World War, the pattern was largely set until the early eighties with for example, the TGWU holding a minimum of 13 per cent of the vote. The dominance of a few is not a recent phenomenon.

### *Changing system*

Although the Party has always been dominated by the larger unions in recent years, the system is changing fast. A theoretical dominance by five or six unions is very different from dominance by a theoretical three or four. Agreement is potentially far easier.

Such agreement is all the more likely since the big unions now share certain common features. Of the 1986 big six, four were substantially or wholly public sector, five were predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled. Three had a majority of women members, while two of the other three had above average women membership. Only the AEU and the boilermakers section of the GMB represented the old aristocracy of labour, the craft union. Both are declining. None of the big six have a large white-collar membership. These common interests may make agreement easier.

For example, after decades of argument, the Labour Party Conference agreed on a statutory minimum wage in 1986, finally overcoming strong previous opposition from the craft unions and craft members within the TGWU. Both this increasing homogeneity and increasing concentration (themselves the products of the recession) have helped highlight the block vote. The issue cannot be fudged. The Policy Review will remain incomplete without a review of the way in which policy is decided at Conference.

The block vote itself is not an uncontroversial system within unions. Although it is used in union confederations like the Trades Union Congress or the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, it is not used by some large unions themselves, such as the AEU or NUR. Other unions, like NUPE, hold individual votes for some issues and block branch votes for others. Its problems are generally recognised, but it is argued that unions are representative democracies; each tier within the organisation must therefore be represented as a whole.

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But concentration has made the problem of crudity far worse. And the argument for treating branches, region, districts, or even unions, as whole units has become weaker with the technological improvement, or potential improvement, in union internal communications.

There are other factors tending towards individual votes. First, there is government funding for individual postal ballots, and the introduction of compulsory individual postal ballots for union election and strike ballots, which has increased the general use of ballots within unions.

Second, there is the Party's own policy in favour of individual ballots before industrial action and for union elections. The 1986 ACAS annual report said: "Although precise figures showing the proportion of employees voting in (strike) ballots are not available it is our impression that turnouts have generally been high with votes of some 75-85 per cent being the rule....it is our clear impression that employers and trade union officials are coming to see ballots before industrial action as a permanent part of the negotiating scene".

These figures are far higher than those of the past. Average turnout in the forties and fifties was around 10-20 per cent for election of national officers or delegations. In general secretary or presidential elections, turnout was sometimes much higher, though in general still low. Ernest Bevin became General Secretary of the TGWU in 1921 on a 35.6 per cent turnout. Ron Todd's two elections in 1986 were on turnouts of 39 per cent and 43 per cent. These figures are larger than the average turnout in council or Euro elections, larger too than member participation in choosing the average constituency delegate to Labour Party Conference. When unions wield their block votes it is no longer (if it ever was to any great extent) at the whim of a general secretary. It is in accordance with established policy, democratically agreed by the active participation of very large numbers of members.

But this is precisely the problem. The greater the quality of democratic involvement, the more apparent the crudity of the block vote in representing the outcome. Thus in 1981 NUPE balloted all branches (recording individual votes) and found a 55:39 per cent split between Denis Healey and Tony Benn in Labour's Deputy Leadership contest. All NUPE's votes went for Healey. The TGWU took soundings which resulted in seven regions for Healey and three for Benn, but all the TGWU vote went to Benn. Furious controversy followed. The attention given to these two unions obscured the procedures in some smaller ones, where the mode of decision taking was never questioned. The more union internal democracy is extended and improved, the greater the argument over an aggregate result.

The problem is fundamental. Is the Labour Party a federation of completely autonomous constituent bodies? Or is it a mass party of individuals, whose allegiance is to Labour's values, not to their consti-

tuency or union, which are simply channels through which they have become party members? Though this ambivalence has long existed in the Labour Party's constitution the balance must be clearly defined.

The Labour Party exists, *inter alia*, to represent working people's interests. Those interests cannot be exclusively defined by Party members who will inevitably be a relatively narrow base even if membership reaches a million. Unions also represent Labour and their members should have some influence. The question is how much?

Influence is partly limited by the need for unions to agree affiliation, and to have a political fund. Voting within unions is further limited to participating levy payers. Beyond that the limits are defined by the balance of votes at Conference. That balance is analogous to that which a Labour MP strikes between representing constituents and being accountable to his/her CLP.

The idea of such a balance may seem messy, a typical Labour fudge; it might well be easier to secure agreement in a unitary party but the value of that agreement would be reduced. The Labour Party's federal structure is an expression of devolved democracy and collectivity. The block vote should be reformed but to abandon it (and thus unions' place in the Party) would be to reduce representation of working people and lose an element of democracy.

### *Reform of the block vote*

The TGWU/Kitson proposal would apportion union votes *pro rata* to their cost. Thus in 1989, when Labour Party members paid (full fee) £10, and unions affiliated on £1 per member, this would make each constituency vote worth 10 union votes. The effect at Conference would be that CLP votes would rise to around 25 per cent, their share of party income. Setting aside technical problems, eg over thresholds, comparable time periods, and reduced-rate party members, this would obviously give party members much more influence. But again, like the GMB proposal to have two equal voting blocks (CLPs versus the rest), this could simply exacerbate the difficulty for unions of voting with a single voice. With a greater chance of deciding policy, CLP voters would have a greater incentive to challenge the legitimacy of union votes.

More radical proposals have been mooted, such as Aneurin Bevan's idea of allowing unions to affiliate only at constituency level. This would give unions an incentive to work hard in constituencies – they would have no national vote, except insofar as union activists reflected national union policy. Others have suggested moving to union affiliation only at regional level.

These are not realistic prospects while so much of the Party's income derives from national union affiliation. Nor is it reasonable to deny national unions the right to speak with a national voice.

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Another idea frequently mooted is to reduce the block vote over time as individual union members join the Party. But, even if 20,000 union members join per year as current indications suggest (which would be a major achievement and substantially boost membership), it would take some 15 years to reach parity with CLP membership today. And if the Kitson proposals were adopted, it seems likely that if the numbers of union members in the Party grew substantially there would be calls for either the full rate to be restored (the £5 scheme is for three years initially) or only half voting rights. That could mean it would take 30 years to reach voting parity.

In fact, unions currently have far more than voting parity with CLPs. Restoring relative voting strengths to their present levels through increasing individual union membership would increase CLPs four times their current size. One million members (a lower target than this) would take 50 years to reach at the current rate of progress.

The block vote is thus not likely to wither away. Reforms are needed now which retain the principle of union influence, but improve the quality of that democracy. The NEC consultative document of June 1989 suggested adopting the Kitson proposals for financial parity which is both equitable and understandable. But much more is needed:

- the NEC should issue guidelines on union political decision making, just as for CLPs. For example, they might set out the way ballots should be held, how all candidates for election should receive a fair hearing, how policy issues should be discussed, and so on. Not all issues should be automatically decided on a ballot. Some policy issues demand discussion and may, therefore, be more appropriate for decision at branch meetings. The NEC might decide which;
- where a minority of union members is sufficiently large, perhaps over 20 per cent, a union could be asked to split its vote proportionately. Turnout among union members could also be a factor;
- unions could be monitored to ensure they did not affiliate over their number of levy payers while being perfectly free to affiliate under. They could be asked to submit an annual report to Labour Party Conference describing their political activity, communications with levy payers and union Party members, campaigns, ballots and so on, or at least in so far as it related to the Party.

These proposals do not constitute unwarranted intrusion on affiliates' private affairs. Some guidance by the Party is accepted already – for example that the levy be three times the affiliation fee. As with any other affiliated organisation or CLP, the Party has a right and duty to monitor any of its constituent sections. The block vote should stay, but it should be split where sufficiently clear cut and important.

# Educate, agitate, organise

# 5

Unions have traditionally supported Labour in several ways. But there is now a need for greater focus to be given to joint campaigns and reform of the rules on sponsored candidates.

Union help in Labour's election campaigns takes a variety of forms: some small unions simply empty their available political funds in solidarity; others selectively channel their money, people or facilities to where their members or sponsored candidates are. Non-affiliated unions like NALGO or the RCN have taken up campaign themes that echoed (or prefigured) Labour campaign themes. The history and structure of the Party make this unsurprising; the public, which identifies Labour with the unions, finds it unsurprising too.

And yet the last 10 years have seen a paradox. While the union drive in Labour's support has become more sophisticated, strenuous attempts have also been made to distance the Party, in public eyes, from the unions. The 1987 election campaign, much praised for its professionalism, largely excluded unions at the national level. Yet more union officers were involved in helping with the campaign than ever before. The campaign plans, determined much earlier in the year, left little space for the union dimension. But in the campaign itself, both nationally and locally, union help was probably greater for Labour than it had been on any previous occasion. Recent history helps explain this apparent paradox.

The shock of the 1979 election defeat, and growing change within unions, convinced many that the support of working people must be revitalised and reorganised to put Labour back in power. Trade Unions for a Labour Victory (TULV) emerged, somewhat informally, to meet this concern. In the early 1980s all affiliated unions, with individual lapses from time to time, put resources into organising through TULV to campaign for the next election in advance. Sharp political conflicts between them (a major affiliate formally withdrew at one point) did not prevent a concerted union effort, and the first national attempts to identify where it should be directed. For all TULV's shortcomings which emerged during the ill-starred 1983 campaign, it took union coordination onto a new plane.

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Introspection in the months following the 1983 election did not generate any unanimity that TULV should continue. But the Trade Union Act 1984 presaged a more urgent problem than the next general election, the defence of affiliated unions' political funds. The brilliant success of that defence (contrary to many internal Party forecasts at the time) has been allowed to be forgotten, even though it represents one of the few success stories for the movement in a decade of defeats.

TULV played no formal part in this period; it moved to the sidelines so that a new organisation, the Trade Union Coordination Campaign (TUCC) could focus all minds on the immediate problem. TUCC too had its problems, but these were eclipsed by its successes in providing a central bank of resources and argument, which met the needs of the hour. Accusations that it was a right-wing front proved unfounded. It was wound up in 1986, having achieved its highly specific purpose.

TULV had shown how to bring professionalism into unions' political campaigns; the TUCC proved that the unions could be galvanised to beat off a highly specific challenge. Both were replaced by a new organisation: Trades Unionists for Labour (TUFL) intended to extend TUCC's campaigning drive to return Labour to power at the coming general election.

Shortly afterwards, the Party also established its first ever Trade Union Liaison Office. This had some limited success in helping to build up the number of liaison officers in constituencies. The NEC report to the 1988 Conference noted that there were over 400 in post, an increase of 25 per cent, in the wake of the election campaign. The trade union office also produced a bulletin for CLPs and union branches, which had a circulation approaching 20,000.

However, these were limited gains. Efforts to include more employment-related issues in Party campaigns, or to substantially improve union/party organisation at regional or local level, proved far more difficult. The structure of Party headquarters being primarily geared to constituency work did not readily adapt to servicing union demands.

The election campaign of 1986-87 saw far more precise planning than 1982-83, with TUFL activities organised around the Party's target list of seats, and individual unions clearly aware of their responsibilities in, and commitment to, individual constituencies. A central lesson of the political fund ballot campaigns had been the need to build up a network of shop or office organisers among the membership, and this was applied to the pre-election campaign. During the campaign itself, the TUFL office and the Party's trade union liaison office were merged at the Walworth Road election headquarters. In the field, TUFL was a major part of the campaign.

TUFL has been the most far-reaching effort ever made to gather union votes for Labour. But though the slump in the Party's support among trades unionists was reversed, the rise in the Labour vote

among trade unionists from 39 per cent to 42 per cent was very small. TUFL continues, but it is not clear that a consensus exists as to its role in the future. Lacking the explicit focus of the political fund ballots other issues can show the need for union political activity. For example, local authority elections, 1992, green issues, privatisations or health and safety for employees and the public. Without union/party political campaigns being developed around these issues (which may well affect some unions more than others) there is a danger of a vacuum developing for TUFL due to:

- no clear conception of what else TUFL (or some successor organisation) can do beyond what was done in 1987;
- no immediate organising need which will refresh and revive the spirits of union political campaigners;
- a perceived desire to distance the Party from the unions.

If nothing is done Labour could enter the 1991 campaign with much less committed union assistance than in previous elections. Perhaps the best way to revitalise union and TUFL activity would be to use the Charter of Rights for Employees contained in the People at Work Policy Review Group report as the focus of campaigning activity. This would not only improve union/party organisation in the run-up to the next election, it could also avoid the policy and campaign vacuum which, in 1987, allowed the Tories to exploit 'winter of discontent' propaganda.

## *Sponsored MPs*

The system under which MPs are sponsored by affiliates, the 'Hastings agreement', is now over half a century old. The proportion of MPs who are sponsored is rising but this is due to the decline in marginal seats. There are major problems including:

- unclear or downright hostile public perception of sponsored MPs' links with their unions;
- out-of-date financial limits (90 per cent of constituency election expenses, but only approximately £700 per year to the constituency in 'peacetime');
- little incentive for unions either to pool resources or sponsor candidates standing in marginal constituencies.

There is widespread agreement that a drastic overhaul of the system is required to remedy these problems, but the prerequisite is a clear rationale for the sponsorship system in order to avoid charges of tame MPs, or constituencies which 'belong' to a union. Originally, heavy concentrations of industry in particular towns (mining or steelmaking)

left no one in doubt as to the value of those employees' unions having a voice in Parliament. As employment is now far more diverse that argument is weaker, except perhaps for the general unions.

But it remains reasonable for a Labour candidate to seek support from a union or group of unions as a means of demonstrating commitment to the rights of employees in general. Far better that the interest-group lobbying of MPs (not only inevitable, but essential in a pluralist democracy) should be carried out openly and with financial support going to the CLP, rather than, as with so many Conservative MPs, discreetly, and by personal reward.

Other practical reforms, going beyond the statement of principle, should include: changing financial thresholds of support to encourage support for marginals; beefing up permissible levels of support for CLPs between elections; allowing joint union sponsorship which could include support for jointly-funded agents, eg in new towns; and extension to cover European elections and local authorities.

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# No albatross

# 6

Why don't more union members vote Labour? What can Labour and its affiliated unions do to persuade them? Can Labour only begin to rely on the votes of union members when it starts divorce proceedings?

**M**uch has been made of the fact that fewer than half of union members actually vote Labour. The last election showed a small improvement of 3 per cent in the union members voting Labour (up from 39 per cent in 1983 to 42 per cent in 1987). But in fact this trend could be far more significant, since the change in composition of union members over the period (eg more white-collar members in the South) might well have been expected to produce a fall. To have made any gains is a major achievement.

How much does union membership matter to voting intention? Crude arithmetic wrongly suggests that union membership adds around 10 per cent to propensity to vote Labour. Union members are also more likely to live in the Midlands or North and less likely to be professional or white collar. Each of those factors also adds significantly to the propensity to vote Labour. It is not clear which comes first.

On the other hand, there are union-associated factors operating in the reverse direction. For example, 73 per cent of union members own their home, against only 66 per cent in the whole population. Only 20 per cent rent a council home, compared to 27 per cent overall. Yet home owners are less likely, and council tenants more likely, to vote Labour.

For activists their union membership is naturally important, but for the majority of union members it is probably less significant than housing, occupational status, or community. It probably adds around the 5 per cent which a recent Fabian pamphlet cautiously suggests (*Labour's electoral challenge*, D Lipsey, A Shaw, J Willman, Fabian Research Series 353, 1989). The unique asset of the link could arguably be used far better, to greater electoral benefit.

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## *Is the union / party link a deterrent?*

Labour is, broadly, seen as the party of working people and, therefore, naturally associated with the unions. That close association is well understood and accepted. But questions which suggest 'control' (often in highly pejorative language) get a predictably negative answer. Thus in August 1985 MORI found 59 per cent agreed with the statement "some people say that the trades unions would dominate a future Labour government". In June 1988 a poll carried out by Harris for the *Observer* indicated that 30 per cent of all non-Labour voters said the Party was "too controlled by the unions" (see Table 3.1).

Harris conduct the same poll monthly and have found the link consistently unpopular at around the 30 per cent figure. For comparison, other major obstacles to voting Labour are: disunity 28 per cent; defence 20 per cent; leader 18 per cent; damage economy 21 per cent.

Such questions are not only emotively worded, but also misleading, since they imply a division between the Party and the unions. Constitutionally the unions are an integral part of the Party, which can hardly be independent from, or 'dominated by', itself.

But for most of the public the Labour Party means Labour politicians. And it seems clear that the majority of the public want their politicians to be, in some sense, independent. This was borne out in a 1985 MORI poll which found only 30-40 per cent of union members wanted their political funds to be used primarily to sponsor Labour MPs. The Harris poll of June 1988 found that 27 per cent of non-Tory voters cited "too controlled by big business" as an obstacle to voting Tory. There is as much hostility to company links with MPs as there is to union sponsorship.

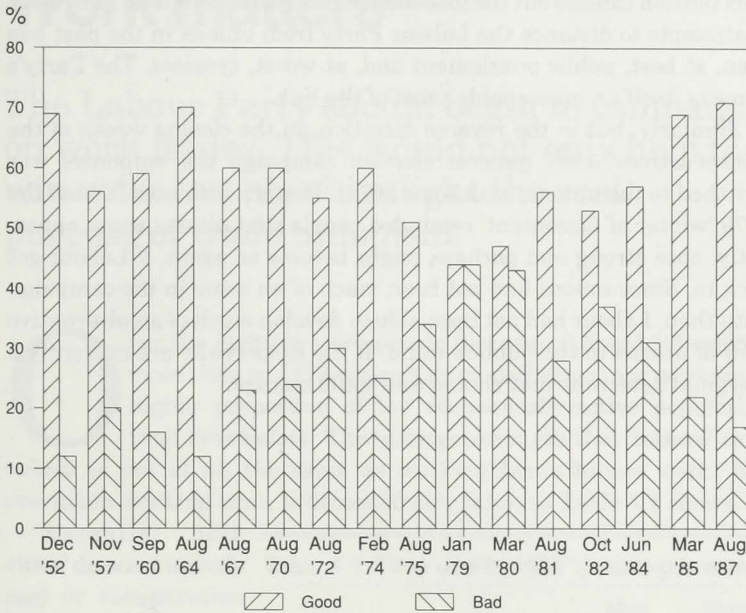
However, a MORI survey taken immediately after the 1987 general election found different responses. It asked 1,300 people who had not voted Labour to say what might change their minds. Only 5 per cent said "reduce power of trade unions in the Party". That figure fell slightly to 4 per cent among C2DE, and rose slightly to 7 per cent among ABC1 voters, but was never any higher. By comparison, 30 per cent said they would never vote Labour; 20 per cent said change defence policies; 14 per cent said

Table 3.1: **Non-Labour voters who say the Party too controlled by trade unions (%)**

Tory voters	37
SLD voters	33
Male	27
Female	32
18-24	24
25-44	29
65+	28
AB	32
C1	35
C2	34
DE	19
North	31
Midlands	28
South	29

Source: Harris 26 June 1988

Table 3.2: Do you think trade unions have been/are a good thing?



Source: Gallup

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get rid of left-wing policies; 10 per cent said change Labour's leader. Most polls agree that unions rank way behind unemployment, health, education, defence and the economy in polling saliency.

Taking a longer-term view, MORI found in 1977 that 67 per cent thought "the Party should not be so closely linked to the trade unions". Though the same poll found that 76 per cent agreed "trade unions are essential to protect workers' interests". A Granada TV poll by MORI in 1985 found 55 per cent thought "trade unions should not be involved in party politics" (31 per cent disagreed) while no less than 91 per cent thought "trade unions are essential to protect workers' interests" (5 per cent disagreed). If there is ambivalence over union/party links, there are fewer reservations over unions themselves.

Yet it can also be argued that Labour has been getting the worst of all worlds. Attempts to uncouple the Party from industrial disputes have not been lacking in recent years, most famously during the miners' strike. The Labour Party leadership also avoided too close an identification with the printers (1986-87) and the seamen (1988). What did this strategy achieve? There was no significant shift in the proportion of the electorate identifying Labour with the unions; the only tangible outcome was a great deal of bitterness on the part of those involved, who looked for stronger support.

Distancing exercises of this kind are bound to fail. For there are

always union and Party members who do thus identify themselves. This tension cancels out the intended public relations effect. The result of attempts to distance the Labour Party from unions in the past has been, at best, public puzzlement and, at worst, cynicism. The Party's name is itself an inescapable proof of the link.

Similarly, but in the reverse direction, in the closing weeks of the Conservatives' 1987 general election campaign the emphasis was switched to the unions, with some effect. Posters with scenes from the 1979 'winter of discontent' reminded people that unions were, apparently, once strong and perhaps might become so again, if Labour got back in. Since unions had not been much of an issue in the campaign until then, Labour had not been able to develop much of an alternative view of unions in the public's mind. If the links really are currently a marginal deterrent that should and could change.

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# Work matters

# 7

The Labour Party should begin to campaign on work issues. This would not only help to win votes but also highlight the real purpose of trade unionism.

Over the eighties more people (between 0.5 and 1.5 million more than in 1979 depending on definition) are working, a higher proportion of the economically-active population than ever before. The widespread myth that 'leisure' time (which is not at all the same as working hours minus work) has overtaken working time, is demonstrably false, as Table 4.1 shows.

'Essential activities' does not include rest or recuperation after work. For those with physically or mentally demanding jobs 'free time' may not be anything more than slump-in-front-of-the-telly-time.

Table 4.1: Time use in 1982 (hours per week)

	Men	Women
Employment and travel	45.3	40.7
Essential activities (eg cooking, etc)	23.7	33.5
Sleep	56.4	57.5
Free time	42.6	36.3

Source: *Leisure Futures*, Autumn 1983, Henley Centre

Meanwhile more women are doing the 'double shift', travel to work areas have grown, overtime is rising, and several surveys have shown the growing pressure of work and stress in the eighties. Male participation rates are falling slowly, due to earlier retirement, while female participation rates are rising steadily.

Leisure or consumerism, shopping or watching videos, are major aspects of most people's lives, but they are fitted around work — they do not displace it. Work in the eighties has become more important in more people's lives than ever before. Several surveys have shown that domestic, unpaid, child-care work is also rising. Political parties ignore work issues (paid and unpaid) at their peril. It would be doubly foolish for Labour to do so, since it remains recognised as the party of, and for, working people.

Several polls underline the saliency of paid-work issues, though there is lamentably little opinion research. The 1986 British Social Attitudes Survey found, for example, that 52 per cent thought the Government should reduce pay differentials, and 77 per cent thought

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the income gap between rich and poor was too large. Trade union members were more concerned than others about low pay. Party polls show that among 'soft' or ex-Labour voters the Party's most appealing union/employment policies were: protection against unfair dismissal, training, women's rights, and the statutory minimum wage. Most surveys agree that in order of importance to the general employed public, job security comes first; wage comes second, but alongside issues like hours, pensions, health and safety and physical conditions at work. A long way behind these come issues like holidays, sick pay, union/management relations, labour law, profit sharing or participation generally.

Naturally, there are great differences between employees. NUPE, for example, has 74 per cent women members. MORI found the main concerns of NUPE members were low pay, privatisation, health and safety, cancer screening, more rights for part-time workers and more equality for women. Bottom of the list were issues such as fewer hours or longer holidays. Full-time male manual workers would probably answer very differently. Non-manual workers would probably put more emphasis on career development issues.

These themes were not prominent in the 1987 general election campaign. Speeches on employment rights do not get the same media attention as those on defence. The Labour Party chose not to highlight its policies on pay and rights at work. If this was due to the low importance initially attached by most voters to industrial relations or work issues, that in turn partly reflected the fact that few politicians from any party mentioned such issues.

There are structural reasons behind these campaigning choices. Labour has a low profile on union or work issues because the existence of unions and the TUC as separate organisations independently representing the interests of working people, has kept the Party largely off the unions' patch. Allied to that was the almost unique British tradition of 'voluntarism' in which the law was supposed to keep out of industrial relations.

Voluntarism has gone. Most unions now believe that a comprehensive legislative framework is here to stay. Not only that, Labour has, for the first time and with strong union and TUC support, proposed a charter of minimum statutory rights covering a wide range of collectively-bargained items which would apply to all workers. In 1987, rising living standards for those in work meant that pay (apart from the low-paid) was an issue generally favourable to the Government. In 1989, with inflation, earnings expectations, and strikes all rising, the picture looks very different. As ever, most disputes are about conditions or management practices as much as pay. Those issues will not go away and voters will expect Labour to face them firmly, with clear and well-presented policies which are positively campaigned for.

## Labour's strategy

Labour should use employment issues both as potential vote winners in themselves, and to show the real purpose of trade unionism, which is to advance members' interests rather than, as popularly presented, to leave the dead unburied. This strategy would pre-empt Tory attacks, make an asset of the links and reinforce the reasons for the continuing popularity and legitimacy of unions.

Such a strategy would be no instant panacea. Labour would have to show equal, perhaps more, concern to help working people who are not in unions. Not only would this avoid the allegation that Labour was 'biased towards its paymasters', but it would concentrate help on those who probably most need it: the low paid, young, ethnic minority, part-time or women workers who are least likely to be organised. The best way to help them might be, *inter alia*, to help them join unions.

The strategy should also demonstrably aid efficiency and competitiveness. Labour's concern for working people is not in doubt. The ability to combine that compassion with long-term prosperity and job security remains to be proven. A statutory minimum wage would have to be clearly costed to rebut allegations of profligacy. Better health and safety would have to be shown to reduce sickness, absenteeism, and avoidable disasters like Zeebrugge and King's Cross. Ending discrimination would have to be shown to increase the pool of talent and experience available to employers. None of this is necessarily very difficult. The cost-effective and moral arguments can go side by side.

On some issues, of course, they do not. Full-scale industrial democracy would probably slow up decisions and may well reduce profits (although in an era of rapid technological change, workforce participation is increasingly crucial). A minimum wage will be cost-effective over time but in the short run will cost money. Labour's policies on work will not invariably raise efficiency, but often will. The strategy should show that such policies are not adopted simply in obeisance to union diktat or through incompetent philanthropy, but because they are fair and make organisational sense. The Charter of Rights for Employees would be an excellent starting point.

Finally recent studies have shown that women are concerned with issues like flexible hours, holiday rights, a statutory minimum wage, combining paid and unpaid work, and not being penalised through loss of employment rights (like maternity leave or unfair dismissal) simply through working part time or for less than five years. The Charter of Rights for Employees explicitly meets those concerns. Women voters are also more likely to be repelled by the apparently macho, undemocratic, nature of unions' links with Labour. That concern too would be met by our proposals for reforms of the block vote and greater openness within union political decision making.

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# 8 Conclusion

Unions are not in decline and have much to contribute to the Labour Party. Their ability to raise cash and organise for political purposes has been enhanced, not weakened, by the experience of the Conservative years.

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**W**hen the constitutional links between Labour and the unions are examined, the emerging picture flatly contradicts the received wisdom about the union/party relationship. The unions, far from seeking to dominate, have given up large areas of majority control.

Greater organisational visibility for unions means greater political visibility. It is time for the Party to stop running scared of this. An anti-union campaign has been a feature of the Conservative drive in the last five general elections, and there is no reason to believe that the next one will be any different; early reactions to the People at Work document or the Delors Social Charter give a foretaste of what is to come. It is both impossible and wrong in principle for the Party to loosen its association with unions.

Overt distancing may actually contribute to the problem. Evidence for the belief that unions harm Labour's prospects, popular though it may be among journalists, is mixed. Actual union influence on electors is marginal and changeable.

Work issues are crucial for Labour. A focus on work addresses issues of concern to women, the principal victims of society's tendency to undervalue (and frequently not to pay for) so much of it. It also strengthens Labour's electoral platform in the central area of the economy where the next election will be won and lost.

Our recommendations are as follows:

- the Charter of Rights for Employees at the core of the People at Work Policy Review Group, should be made the focus of a major campaign to publicise Labour policies on work, both paid and unpaid, and the issues which connect them. In so doing, it would positively promote Labour's attitudes to unions;
- the campaign should also stress the vital importance of employee



involvement in successful organisational change and technological development, ie the future direction of the economy. This should be one of Labour's strongest claims to a more successful economic policy;

- the campaign should highlight issues of particular concern to women, paid workers and potential voters, such as flexible hours of work, full employment rights for part-time or temporary workers, and a statutory minimum wage. Well-publicised reform of the block vote will also appeal to women put off by the macho authoritarian image of the union link;
- the campaign should provide the focus for TUFL and individual union activity to persuade more union members to take out individual membership of the Labour Party and build up local and regional union/party links;
- the Labour Party and affiliates should use the heightened profile of union/employment issues to demonstrate their commitment to the place of unions as autonomous bodies within the Party's overall structure and principles;
- a code of conduct for unions should be drawn up setting out a broad framework of democratic principles governing, for example, candidates' rights, fair hearings, open meetings, and secret ballots where appropriate, ensuring that the widest possible consultation takes place within a union's tradition and rules;
- the block vote is the legitimate expression of unions' collective decision making and should stay. However, where the NEC felt the issue was of sufficient importance, 'recorded votes' could be called for among affiliated unions to reduce the blunderbuss effect of the block vote. Such votes would be cast within the Party (eg at Conference) proportionate to numbers within the affiliated union voting for or against (and perhaps reflecting turnout) where certain agreed thresholds were passed, eg minorities over 20 per cent;
- the Hastings Agreement should be drastically revised, so that it efficiently meets unions' desire for parliamentary representation in regions where they have an interest, while satisfying the Labour Party's need to direct scarce resources to where they are most needed.

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## Natural allies: Labour and the unions

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It is commonly assumed that trade unions are unpopular and in decline. As a result, there have been growing calls for the Labour Party to break its links with them. Not only would this allow the Party to adopt a new individualist, consumer-oriented identity, it would also end the embarrassment of the block vote, with its millions of phantom voters.

Tom Wilson and Martin Upham review the evidence of the last ten years and conclude that although unions have shrunk somewhat since 1979, they are certainly not in terminal decline. 52 per cent of the employed workforce are union members and throughout the 1980s, unions have succeeded in increasing the living standards of their members. Unions are still an important force in society for whom political representation is a legitimate need.

However, the recent years of mergers has affected the relationship between the unions and the Labour Party. In 1980, 54 unions were affiliated to the Party but six years later, there were only 36. The four biggest unions now command a majority at the Party's Conference; should the mergers continue, by 1996 only the votes of the biggest three will be required for a majority.

The authors believe that these developments require reforms to the block vote system including:

- guidelines on the procedures that unions should adopt in making political decisions;
- asking unions to split their block votes to reflect the opinion of their members;
- ensuring that unions do not affiliate more than the number of levy payers.

They argue that Labour's links with the unions could be a source of strength. The Party must, however, give a greater focus to work issues. It should mount a campaign, centred on the Charter of Rights for Employees, which would not only win votes but also stress the real value of trade unions.

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