

NOTTINGHAM EXTRA

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Fighting talk in Forest Fields

ON APRIL 23rd, I went to hear Sharon Atkin speak in support of the Wapping print workers at a meeting called by Nottingham East Constituency Labour Party. I was interested in what the print union speakers had to say, but, as a party member in Nottingham East, I also wanted a first-hand look at our combative new prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC for short, thank goodness). I expect to be doorstepping for her at the next general election, and I don't want to rely for my impressions on the Evening Post (no, I don't buy it: I see it at work like everyone else).

As PPCs go, Ms Atkin is more P than most - one of thirty-one Lambeth councillors surcharged and removed from office for failing to set a legal rate. Unless this gets sorted out before the general election, Ms Atkin will be bankrupt and unable to stand, and I shall be doorstepping for A.N. Other instead.

Moderate city

That should make my job easier, according to Richard Tresidder, the Evening Post's municipal correspondent. Although Mr Tresidder quotes nothing so boring as evidence, he assures us in an article on Ms Atkin on March 26th that "Nottingham is a moderate city with an electorate willing to reject a left-wing candidate".

Now the Post has problems here, because this doesn't entirely square with its regular attempts to label most Labour councillors in Nottingham East as "hard left". Well, somebody must have elected them (a majority of the voters, perhaps?), even Cllr Richard McCance, who (Mr Tresidder again) "shocked some colleagues by telling voters in his electoral address he was a homosexual" (interesting that the electorate were less shocked than Cllr McCance's colleagues), so where exactly is this "willing" electorate ready to reject a left-wing candidate?

Before getting back to the print workers and Ms Atkin, it's worth pausing a while over Mr Tresidder and his municipal correspondence, if only to marvel at the veritable thesaurus of ways of referring to the anonymous Labour councillors and ex-councillors ("moderates" to a person, of course) who slip him their not always twenty-four carat mugs of information.

His 26th March piece about Ms Atkin was relatively restrained. "Questions were being

asked" about the selection, he told us, and "moderate Labour Party members were showing concern", though, as no names were given, we had to accept Mr Tresidder's definition of a "moderate". Personally, I experience this as a credibility gap. Would you buy a definition of moderation from the Evening Post? (Labour Party policy is not to talk to the Evening Post. Perhaps a moderate is any Labour councillor who will talk to Richard Tresidder.)

But this was a monument to sacred fact compared with Mr Tresidder's 18th April article headlined "Council bid by city Asians", a piece notable for its undercurrent of racism (it was a space invaders story, basically), its minor illiteracy (common enough in the Post nowadays - I put it down to not employing NUJ members), and no less than thirteen expressions (in a shortish article) indicating either speculation or an unidentified source. Journalists do, of course, use confidential sources, but isn't this just a little bit ridiculous?

In the course of the article, things were "said to be" or "could be" or were "thought to be" (twice); there was "speculation that" and it was "understood that" (three times); and we were told that people "may" or "could" or "could have to" or were "expected to" or, conversely, "cannot expect" to.

The message is clear. If you want the facts, read the Evening Post.

And illiteracy? Well, Mr Tresidder isn't illiterate. He's written a very good book for the Civic Society on Nottingham pubs. Perhaps it was the typesetter or a sub-editor (do they still have them?) who substituted "prominant" for "prominent" and "tow the line" for "toe the line" (a metaphor from water-skiing, perhaps).

Average meeting

But to return to Sharon Atkin and the print unions. It was an average sort of Labour Party meeting. Five on the platform, nineteen in the audience, three of them selling newspapers (Socialist Action, Socialist Organiser and, yes, Militant). The Forest Fields Community Centre is a converted school with a few bits added on, freshly brilloed, bricks clean and pink like John West salmon. You'd have thought something communal would have been happening there on a Wednesday night, but except for a few kids scuffling and BMXing round the cars parked in the yard we had the place to ourselves.

The meeting started half an hour late. Three people had been and gone by then, one in a fruitless quest for the constituency secretary; but apparently the unions hadn't known about it till very late, and the local SOGAT man had only found out that morning, so he came without preparing a speech. Nobody bought a newspaper. Most just shook their heads. Ms Atkin had the best line ("I've already bought one").

In the chair was Hassan Ahmed, king of the space invaders, according to the Evening Post article ("thought to be making a bid to topple city Labour councillors in at least two inner city seats").

Structural boom

I had difficulties with Mr Ahmed. Maybe it was where I was sitting, but there are some large rooms which have a type of sympathetic vibration which, hit precisely, transforms deeper voices into an almost indecipherable structural boom, as if the building were talking back in a bricks and mortar language of its own. Mr Ahmed hit the Forest Fields Community Centre's acoustic with some skill, so that from where I sat I could hear him very well but couldn't make out anything he said. This meant I was never quite sure who was being introduced.

The first speaker, whoever he was, was from the London NGA, sharp and metropolitan with glasses like office block windows and the sort of fluent, metallic, glottal-stopped delivery which gets northerners picking at their woad. He told us that this was not a dispute about new technology. The technology was at least ten years old. It was a dispute about de-unionisation, and it was vital for the whole Labour movement to back the unions, because if Murdoch got away with it, there were plenty of other employers waiting to jump on the bandwagon.

Fooled the unions

Mr Ahmed and the structural rumble then introduced a fiercely indignant white-haired SOGAT woman with an acidic line in sarcasm. She described how the Wapping plant had been built at St Katherine's Dock on the site of two nineteenth century warehouses which had preservation orders on them but mysteriously got burnt down; how Rupert Murdoch fooled the unions into thinking the plant was for a completely new newspaper; how the police unscrupulously protected News International at the expense of pickets and local residents; and how she herself had not actually gone on strike - she had left the old premises at the end of a normal working day and not been allowed into the new premises.

She also told some horror stories about new management practices against the non-union workforce: about compulsory sixty-seven hour weeks and someone dismissed for exchanging remarks about the weather with pickets.

The third speaker, with an oversize mac, which he didn't remove, and trilby, which he parked on the table, should have starred in "The Front Page", but he turned out not to be NUJ but SOGAT. SOGAT, he said, was one of the oldest unions in the world. It had a two-hundred year history ("and we can prove it"). Now it was being crucified by sequestration orders and a blatantly anti-union judge. He hadn't been paid for four weeks. If they used the 'phone, they'd be prosecuted. But the principle was more important than the consequences. They were going to fight.

And so to Sharon Atkin, SRN, PPC, surcharged, disqualified, ex chair of the Labour Party's Black Section, bête noire of the Evening Post (an entirely honourable position).

The camera usually lies about politicians. Caught in mid speech with their mouths open, most politicians look strident and humourless - the sort of picture of left-wing politicians newspapers prefer (compare the regular Post mugshots of our local Conservative MPs - all very responsible and composed). When not orating, Ms Atkin looks friendly and smiles a lot. She is very nearly square, not tall, but broad, almost as broad as long, a solid, reassuring figure as an SRN, you would think, and solid, reassuring and certain, very certain, about her politics.

Slap in the mouth

Ms Atkin clearly does not like being in the same party as Neil Kinnock. Neil Kinnock is opposed to Black Sections and much else that Ms Atkin is in favour of. Ms Atkin is one of those who use "Kinnock" as an expletive. Her first comment after her selection was that it was a slap in the mouth for Neil Kinnock. (Doorstepwise, I'm working on that one.)

She speaks fluently. It was the sort of speech which, but for the need to breathe, would happily have been a single sentence, a very adaptable, all-purpose kind of speech, a 100 metre dash through issues current on the left. With a shift in emphasis, it would do equally well at a miners' rally, an anti-apartheid demonstration or a selection meeting.

Scargill and the NUM were right. Their defeat led directly to Wapping. Why wasn't Kinnock on the picket lines? Why wasn't the party leadership supporting councils being victimised for carrying out socialist policies? A previous speaker had quoted the song, "Britons never, never shall be slaves". Well, Ms Atkin came from a family of slaves, and they had learned that if you wanted something you had to fight for it.

How the Nottingham East activists must have hugged themselves when they got Ms Atkin! What a lot of shit is going to be stirred!

I think I've got my doorstep patter worked out. Labour is a pluralist party. A broad church. Not like some we could mention.

We don't all have to agree with the leader. It's our party as well as his. (Though, of course, it's his party as well as ours.) Shouldn't councils protect services and stick up for their principles against dictatorial, centralising governments? Aren't councils elected too? Etc.

On to question time, Or rather, this being the Labour Party, floor speech time. I am always impressed by what confident speeches people make from the floor, how poised, how eloquent, how definite about what to do next, how familiar with party and union procedure, with taking the campaign back to union and party branches, with mobilising opinion, with passing resolutions (lots of resolutions). But the most telling speech wondered how people, especially black people, could be persuaded to support workers on papers which consistently published stories which were racist, sexist and anti working-class.

That was a problem, the platform agreed.

So what can we do (apart from passing resolutions)? Don't buy the Times, Sunday Times, Sun or News of World. (How many of us do anyway?) Leaflet houses in your own area to tell people the truth about the dispute (leaflets available from the unions). Join the picket (details from the unions).

And so, after dropping some coins in the envelope at the door (for the sequestered reps' bus fare back home), out into the Forest Fields twilight.

Forest Fields has changed in recent years. Not so long ago, believe it or not, it always elected Tory councillors. This, I was told by a geography teacher (and Labour Party member) from the old Forest Fields Grammar School, was because Forest Fields people were "aspiring". Why, he didn't know, but they were, and one form their aspiration took was to vote Conservative.

Different colour

Aspiring people do vote Tory, of course. Why else are the Tories so keen on selling council houses? When people buy their own council houses, they paint them a colour as different from the prevailing housing department colour as possible, they put in Georgian doors, carriage lamps and bottle glass windows, they put white painted lampposts and cartwheels in the garden - and they vote Tory (though, interestingly, some recent research suggests that council house buyers are usually Tory in the first place).

There isn't much of that kind of aspiration left in Forest Fields - but there aren't many council houses. Nowadays, it's Alternativeville, classic ground for the GLC-style rainbow coalition of minority groups, blacks, gays, lesbians, and enough of the old-fashioned working class to give a glow of authentic radical pride to those who live there and not Sherwood or Arnold. There is radical macho, street credibility in living

in Forest Fields. Nobody queries your left credentials if you live in an artisan terrace with an Asian beer-off on the corner.

But that is far too cynical. There is genuine street life in Forest Fields. As I walk to the bus stop, people linger in the doorway, in the street, in the corner shop, pop in and out of each other's houses. A Sikh youth deposits copies of the Nottingham Trader on doorsteps. Idleness, or for some other reason? Surely the letter boxes aren't sealed up against racist attacks? Not in Forest Fields. I try one. It lifts easily enough. A dog rasps angrily in the hall. Somehow, the litter of Traders reinforces the feeling of community. Somebody might open the door at any moment and pick one up. These are not suburban fortresses Chubb-locked for the night. At any any moment a door might burst open to reveal some incarnation of the Forest Fields spirit, ethnicity, proletarianism made flesh, spontaneously erupting into the life of the street.

Atmosphere

I like the atmosphere round here. It reminds me of the Meadows where I was brought up. It's back to the womb. These narrow streets and shoulder to shoulder houses, like rows of packets on a corner shop shelf, enclose the passer-by, reassure with their closeness. They don't hold themselves back like suburban houses behind front gardens and hedges (carried to excess in areas like the Park and Mapperley Park, where the houses retreat so far behind high walls and fences that they are not a presence but an absence - it's all walls and trees). Where better for minorities, the excluded, to feel included?

Ms Atkin and Forest Fields seem made for each other. ●

Footnote on the glottal stop (the throat sound replacing "tt" when Cockneys say "gotta lotta bottle"). Racism and snobbery lurk in unexpected places. The 1973 Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary says the glottal stop is "often substituted for 't' by careless speakers of English, esp. in Scotland" - i.e. many Scots can't even pronounce the name of their own country! But why pick on the Scots when the glottal stop is so common in southern English? Well, Chambers is based in Edinburgh, and the editor is Miss A.M. Macdonald M.A. (Oxon.) - an upwardly mobile, Anglicised Scot? What Chambers means is not "careless" usage, but "working-class" or "dialect" usage. Class and racially biased notions of linguistic "correctness" are important ways of reinforcing the social order. But Scots and Cockneys speak the way they do because they are Scots and Cockneys, not because they are linguistic litter-louts. However, enlightenment dawns (slowly). In Chambers 1983, the same passage reads: "sometimes heard as a careless substitute for 't' in English". Still the high moral tone, but at least no racial slur!

Mushroom loses its magic

(This is an edited version of a statement sent to the inquiry into the dispute between Mushroom Bookshop and a former member of the Mushroom collective, Chris Cook. By the time most people read it, the inquiry will have announced its findings, but some of the points have a wider relevance, and the information about the local book trade may be new to some readers.)

I HEARD ABOUT THE MUSHROOM dispute late and at second-hand. An acquaintance, not by any means an alternative type but not unsympathetic, reported, goggle-eyed, that the place was obviously falling apart. The staff were arguing heatedly in front of the customers. One of them had said it couldn't go on like this, they were neglecting their customers, she couldn't stand it any longer, she'd have to get out.

Only later did I learn that it was because Chris Cook had resigned (or been forced out, depending on your point of view) after a long series of arguments culminating in her opposition to a decision not to stock two violent anarchist magazines.

Flower-power

I was horrified. Mushroom is one of the best things to have happened in Nottingham in the last twenty years, and, to the outsider, everything seemed to be going well. From a tiny shop on old Arkwright Street, apparently just a hangover from flower-power and the sixties (the name said it all) and with a future as bright as the condemned premises, Mushroom has gradually expanded to a point where it is almost indispensable to the radical community in Nottingham. Certainly, it is the only local bookshop with a serious selection of radical/alternative literature.

For an alternative enterprise to be as successful as this in a capitalist market is an impressive achievement. In some quarters, there may even be a tendency to be complacent about it, to assume that Mushroom is so well-established that everyone can take time off for yet another bout of the internal blood-letting so disarmingly familiar on the left.

The truth is very different. Good though its performance has been, Mushroom has benefited from a number of external factors, most of which no longer apply.

The most significant has been the exceptionally bad phase which the commercial book trade in Nottingham went through recently. In particular, Sisson and Parker, for many years the only 'real' bookshop in Nottingham, deteriorated so badly that many customers, including large ones, like schools and libraries, completely lost confidence and took their business elsewhere, including

Mushroom.

Eventually, Sisson and Parker were taken over by Pentos, a national chain owning Dillons and Hudsons bookshops and Athena Galleries; but Pentos themselves were in severe financial trouble. In Nottingham, they closed Dillons on Bridlesmith Gate (originally taken over from Bux, itself a failed Nottingham alternative venture), lost the contract at the University Bookshop (now run by Blackwells), and attempted to recover financially by delaying payment of publishers' bills, to the point where several major publishers refused to supply - hence the long delays so infuriating to customers. (As a small publisher, I even had to take Pentos to the small claims court to get payment for books sold through the University Bookshop.)

At the same time, W.H. Smith were devoting most of their energy to expanding their non-book operations (remember Craftsmith?), and had almost ceased being a serious bookshop, concentrating almost entirely on best-sellers and popular non-fiction (books on gardening, cookery, pets etc.).

Thus, fortuitously, there was a large gap in the local market not just for alternative books but for serious books of any kind.

This gap Mushroom was able partly to fill, despite its out-of-centre location - and here it had another piece of luck in the unforeseen trendification of Hockley. From being stuck in a low-rent backwater, Mushroom suddenly found itself on the edge of a humming style-conscious street scene.

Property values

But there is a price to pay for these windfalls. Literally a price in the case of the last. When an area revives, so do property values and rents. Where do Mushroom go when the rent and rates go through the roof? Are there any comparable, low-rent, not-too-off-centre premises? Will they do anything like as well if they have to move to a more distant location?

Even more ominous is what is happening in the rest of the book trade. The capitalist market never stands still. Unless a business rides its luck intelligently and plans for the future, it can be left stranded as abruptly as it was once buoyed up. And Mushroom is not well placed for the kind of ruthless competition which is currently developing in the book trade. Among other things, it is not a true commercial enterprise. If it were unionised, it would be blacked for paying low wages. If it were not all voluntary and done for the noblest of

reasons, we should probably be condemning it as a good old-fashioned grinder of the faces of the poor. Mushroom is the South Korea, the Taiwan, the Philippines of the book trade. Its wage costs would be a capitalist entrepreneur's fantasy. Mushroom only get away with it because it's themselves they're exploiting.

In theory, this ought to mean increased competitiveness. In practice, it means Mushroom's profitability is deceptive, based on low wages and with little margin for a downturn in trade. It could certainly not retrench by cutting wages.

And a downturn is what is most likely to happen. Indeed, I assume it already has. The book trade nationally is in a very fluid, competitive, expansionary mood. In Nottingham, the signs of this are apparent even to a casual observer. New bookshops have opened and existing ones have been revitalised. Pentos is on its financial feet again. Sisson and Parker has been refurbished and renamed Hudsons, with a record department and an Athena printshop in store. Smith's is back in the business of bookselling. It has vastly extended its stock, especially in paperbacks (nationally, a 44% increase in floorspace for paperbacks since 1982), and is in an aggressive phase of expansion - Websters had barely opened in Nottingham before the Bowes and Webster group was taken over by Smith's to provide an upmarket end to their operation.

Prime site

Penguin, another aggressively expanding organisation (it has recently acquired Michael Joseph, Hamish Hamilton and Sphere), is setting up its own bookshops throughout the country. Penguin bookshops don't only sell Penguins, and the Nottingham shop, in attractive premises on a prime site, and with a radically-orientated stock, is obviously a threat to Mushroom.

But commercial bookshops are a threat to each other, let alone Mushroom. Just as Penguin will have affected Mushroom, so Websters have affected Penguin, as a Penguin representative conceded in the Christmas 1985 survey conducted by The Bookseller, the journal of the book trade.

And all of them will be sweating if a Waterstone's opens in Nottingham. Waterstone are the newest and most spectacular of the chain bookshops. They have four branches in London and one in Edinburgh, and are about to open in Norwich and Bath, and probably in Newcastle and Brighton as well. What's new is that they open seven days a week, mostly until 10 pm, that they employ mostly graduates, starting at £6,000 a year (the highest starting salaries in the book trade), and that they occupy vast premises on the prime sites with vast stock to match - described in The Bookseller as 'far in excess of those of any of its direct competitors. By comparison with many of them, Waterstone

shops are veritable book palaces bursting with good things to buy'.

Time, I think, for friends of Mushroom to go down on their knees and pray that Waterstone's don't come to Nottingham. They may well be joined by the staff of Hudsons, Penguin and Websters, even perhaps W.H. Smith.

Room for manoeuvre

Threatening though all these rivals are locally, they are only small components of enormous national and, in the case of Pentos, international corporations. They have financial backing and room for manoeuvre entirely denied to Mushroom. An instructive example is John Menzies, a down-market W.H. Smith in the Broad Marsh Centre which closed a couple of years ago. But John Menzies hasn't closed, only its Nottingham retail outlet has closed. Headquarters is in Edinburgh, but in Nottingham alone, John Menzies still controls a substantial part of the newspaper wholesale trade, and has bought Woolston Books, the vast library suppliers just down the road from the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

That's how capitalist companies operate. When times get tough, they regroup, reorganise, reorientate, take over, are taken over. Most of all, in one form or another, they tend to survive, or at least they are predisposed to survive, whereas alternative organisations seem mostly predisposed to self-destruct.

Consider. The alternative community in Nottingham nourishes a fragile, exotic little organism like Mushroom; by good fortune as well as good management it flourishes - and then comes the irresistible urge to destroy, to smash, to quarrel, to stand on principle, to take up positions and postures and poses, to preen and pride oneself on one's purism and integrity - to wreck the whole bloody thing rather than ruffle the smallest of one's holier-than-thou feathers.

Broad approach

Considering the broadness of Mushroom's approach, which goes well beyond its immediate political sympathies (Marx in an anarchist bookshop!), it would be ironic as well as catastrophic if it fell victim to the enduring talent of the left (perhaps the greatest talent we have) to bring comfort to the common enemy by sinking our teeth into each other.

The absurdities multiply. Local anarchists are reported to have said they would be no more worried by Mushroom closing than by W.H. Smith. Well, setting aside the unassailable stupidity of the remark (refusal to make distinctions is an infallible sign of political cretinism), there is certainly no need to worry about W.H. Smith. Nor will W.H. Smith be worrying about the Nottingham anarchists. Smith's have just completed their

second century, and look well set for their third.

If the left had half their persistence!

The most hopeful sign is that both sides have agreed to an independent inquiry by a mutually acceptable panel. I base my comments mainly on the information sheet issued by two members of the panel, John Waller and Rachel Adams, which is intended to offer an impartial view.

Ultimate arbiter

It seems clear that, despite the leaflet's necessary efforts to put the best interpretation on Chris's actions, her aim right from the start was to close Mushroom by whatever means came to hand (and there is something grotesquely comic as well as appalling about a group of anarchists voluntarily entangling themselves in the Dickensian web of the law because they can't settle a dispute by applying their own principles among themselves: the state as ultimate arbiter in an anarchist dispute - well, well!). How else explain the claim for £15,000, later raised to £17,500? (Now we are told it was only a starting point for negotiation - in the same way a kick in the teeth might be regarded as a starting point for a conversation.) And how else explain the refusal to release money from the building society account (the cause of the legal action)?

I particularly liked Chris's idea that the other four members of the Mushroom collective should resign. This is an intriguing new perspective on democracy. On this basis, anyone can join in. Me, for example. I have even less title to Mushroom than Chris, never having been a member of the collective, so I am in an even smaller minority - minus one, could we say? - which gives me an even stronger claim to Mushroom.

The more I think about this, the more I like it. After all, as regards revolution, social change etc., this is very much the position of the entire left. It would solve all our problems of winning power as a minority group - except, I suppose, that carried to its logical conclusion, the whole country would end up being run by some sub-sect of a Trotskyite sub-sect, organised around a newspaper with a circulation of one.

Absurd, but I think it shows Chris's true position. It confirms my view that at the root of the argument is Mushroom's success. While it was small it was pure; once it began to expand and attract a wider clientele, by definition something must have gone wrong. It attracts straight customers as well as radicals, anarchists, the alternative community. It must have compromised. It must have sold out. Three boos for the majority. Down with everybody. Small is beautiful. If everybody disagrees with you, you must be right. Unpopularity is the guarantee of principle.

From time to time, I used to recommend

Mushroom to colleagues at work who had found it difficult to order books from Sisson and Parker and had previously regarded Mushroom as a sort of hippy grotto. They were impressed by the service. They also browsed, and were exposed to ideas they would never otherwise have come into contact with.

This is an important point, I think. If alternative ideas are ever to win converts beyond the ghetto, it is important to make contact with a wider audience, to establish points of similarity, sympathy and agreement. I know this is branded in some quarters as compromise, as selling-out, but I see it more as extending the boundaries. If people once realise that some of their own ideas are not so remarkably different from those of people they have been told are extremists, then they will be willing to examine other radical ideas with a more open mind.

But please, when it's all over, amicably we hope, could Mushroom be asked to draw up a watertight agreement between all members of the collective which is legally binding (to make it unnecessary in future for anyone to resort to law); which covers all eventualities, however improbable; and which doesn't rely on the perpetual good will and saintliness of everyone concerned. No doubt Mushroom have already reached the same conclusion.

Finally, perhaps the whole rancorous affair will almost have been worth it if Mushroom can now organise itself to survive for even a quarter as long as W.H. Smith. ●

BARBAROUS ERRORS

TWO ERRORS OF FACT crept into the last issue of Nottingham Extra (is it possible?). (1) In the article on policing the coal dispute, I said Cortonwood was in West Yorkshire, whereas everyone knows it's in South Yorkshire. (2) In the Sneinton article, I described Mr Tom Huggon as clean-shaven. This is a gross libel. Mr Huggon is as hairy as Moses. I cannot think why I ever said otherwise.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, ONLY one person wrote in to identify the quotation in the local history article. Actually, considering the obscurity of the quotation, even one is surprising, but thank you, Ian Juniper. No, it wasn't the late Terry Duffy. It was Gareth Stedman Jones in "Languages of Class" - Gareth Stedman Jones, labour historian, of King's College, Cambridge (a well-known proletarian institution).

IN THE NEXT ISSUE, I HOPE to include articles by other people as well as myself. There is a lot to be said for writing and editing your own magazine (I rarely fall out with myself over policy, for example), but I can see that may be a personal view.

NOTTINGHAM EXTRA is written and published by John Sheffield, 2 Ampthill Rise, Sherwood, Nottingham.